

PRIDE OF THE BEAST



K. B. FORREST

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BY

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Pride of the Beast
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ISBN: 1-55410-821-7
Cover art by Anzu

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Published by eXtasy Books
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*To Sarama, the Bitch of the Goddess, and her
latest incarnation, Dixie Mae F.*

CHAPTER ONE

A Xwaresmian Village c. 500 BCE

As it moved around his face, the soft breeze wafted the smell of terror up to his nose. The odor scared Artavan because he thought it came from his own body. Artavan heard Tork sniff slightly and then snigger. Shame filled him, but only for an instant. The smell became suddenly stronger until the sickly-sweet odor of a rotting corpse made him fight the impulse to vomit. This smell did not come from him. A rustle of branches made him turn to the river again, and he saw it—her. The fluid movements were that of a lithe girl, but the hag by the riverbank was ancient. She held aloft the thing that they’d come to save.

It was the liver of the infant that his master’s wife Bania, had given birth to that morning. The demon was an Als. This ancient monster could steal away the liver of a newborn, causing it to

waste away. It only had to wash the stolen organ in river water. The child would soon die and the Als could feed on the mother's grief for years.

Artavan trembled fiercely as he saw her turn her face toward them. Her mouth was a dirty slash in her long, angular face. It was her eyes that made his breath stop. They burned bright red, like the coals he poked at in the fireplace. She could see them. Maybe she smelled their terror, but he was frozen. He felt like the stone statues he'd seen before the cave of the great gods of Urartu.

"Boy!" Her nose moved like that of a great dog. "You smell. You smell like a he-fox. Hasn't anybody ever told you that a man who looks upon an Als will be marked? Don't you know that if a child is ever produced from your loins, it will belong to me?" She threw back her head and cackled a phlegm-choked laugh.

His lips trembled and Artavan whimpered. He forgot every other thing as he gazed upon the dark red blob that shimmered as she held it. Her tongue darted out as if to taste it, but she bent over and carefully placed it on a forked stick. Once rinsed in river water, she could devour it. She began to lower it carefully, but then picked it up with her hand as she looked around like a frightened animal.

Tork moved so swiftly that Artavan couldn't focus on him until he had the vile demon's arm

twisted over her head. She shrieked like a goat being slaughtered by a careless boy. His hands moved finally, and he covered his ears. The shrieking reverberated inside of his head until tears dripped onto his rough linen robe.

"Artavan!" Tork cried gaily. "Look at this! You shouldn't miss this one!" He began to tickle the old demon's ribs and she shrieked now between torture and laughter. The baby's liver dropped from her hand, but it disappeared in a puff of red-brown smoke before it hit the ground. In a fit of rage, the Als demon kicked wildly, but Tork continued to laugh as if it were a wonderful game.

"No man has ever been able to hold me, you animal! You stinking beast! What are you that you hold me? Are you an evil wizard or mage?"

"No, old woman. I am only Tork of the House of Mehr the Great."

"You stinking evil beast! You wicked mage! Let me go!" Her shrieks were barely recognizable as words.

"Well Lady Als, I think you are the one who smells." He pinched his nose with one hand and held her further away from him to show how disgusted he was. He held her over the river and laughed gaily as she wailed in terror.

"How about a bath?" He held her by her wizened arm and dangled her closer to the water.

Suddenly she slipped from his hand in her

frenzy of terror. Tork grabbed wildly at her arm, his peals of laughter dissolving as he saw what was happening. As her flailing feet touched the river water, steam shot out of her body and filled the air with an even greater stench. Tork pulled her out of the water, but the deterioration of her body had begun.

"You confounded monster," the demon rasped. "You've killed me! I've lived for a thousand years and no man dared do what you have done! Don't you know that an Als can't touch water? You... you..."

She could not go on. A thick, dark red liquid began to pour from her mouth and dissolve into steam. The smell was putrid. Artavan turned and vomited. He was still heaving dryly when Tork placed a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"What's this?" He wiped a tear from Artavan's cheek. "You're even crying for her. You are truly simple."

"I'm not crying, stupid! I got smoke in my eyes when she started to dissolve," Artavan yelled, his voice pitching too high.

"Hey! Be respectful!" Tork suppressed a smile, but Artavan smirked.

"Oh stop it, Tork. So now you're putting on airs! It's not like you're really any better than I am. We're both foundlings, only you had the luck to be taken in by Mher!"

"Mehr the Great," Tork corrected him.

"Yeah, you really had some bad luck, but you know, if you'd have acted less crazy, maybe Mehr would've taken you in too. After all, he's helped many poor people."

Artavan sulked. "I don't care. I hate everyone in the village. They're all as mean as penned he-goats!"

"Even me?" Tork looked hurt.

"I like you Tork! Y... you're my friend, right?"

"Sure I am, Artavan. It's just that as kids, we played like naked wild animals. Now I'm a lord, and you are..."

"A dumb slave, huh? So now you want me to act as if you're so great. We both know that... that's just not right! Why do I have to be like this? Aren't we going to be friends forever, like we promised each other?"

Tork looked down.

"Look Tork, I have to get back to the house before they notice I'm gone. I just want to be alone for now."

"Hey, Artavan, come on..."

"I... I just don't want them to beat me again. You know what that scarecrow Nogard the Stingy is like. I wish I could work for Mher the Great. Have you mentioned to him that he should buy me?" Tork ignored this question.

"I'm hungry! Let's kill a deer! You will cook it

for me." Tork's eyes were gay again, the evil Als and her death forgotten.

Artavan looked at him and forgot his anger. Tork was what Artavan imagined the god of war looked like. Every part of his hard body was beautiful, even the scars that cut across his arms. That unruly hair on his head that stuck out in all directions made Artavan love him more.

"I can't! I'll get beaten; you know that!"

Artavan instantly felt guilty. Tork licked his lips and mounted his horse. Artavan took his hand and he pulled him up onto the magnificent creature. Artavan's rough clothing touched Tork's bright new garments and he was ashamed. The dirty gray color was so apparent beside Tork's expensive clothes.

"No problem! I'll eat when I get back to the estate."

Artavan could hear his stomach growling, even over the sound of his own famished gut.

They rode on in silence until they neared the farm of Artavan's master. He held Tork tighter as he anticipated having to leave his presence and reenter the world where he was but a dirty and useless louse. He wished that he could be noble like Tork.

Artavan closed his eyes for a moment and imagined Tork returning to the magnificent estate and being served a royal feast. The table would be

laden with fine breads like the ones he once saw at a wedding. He thought he could guess at how wonderful they would taste. His mouth watered at the imagined sight of meats browned by master cooks. Sweets of all sorts would grace the table.

Artavan had tasted an occasional sweetmeat Tork brought him, but once in his life he'd gorged himself on honey. At the time, he'd never tasted anything sweet. A shepherd boy who was taking out goats to the summer pasture once dared Artavan to stick his hand into a hive of wild bees. He told him that if he did, and was successful in stealing the honey, he would share it with him. Artavan had never tasted anything sweet, but he'd seen the faces of those who had. They seemed to be entranced. Artavan climbed the tree, but even before he came near, hundreds of bees were stinging him. He reached the hive and tore at the small opening. He licked his hand and was shocked. At first, the taste was so foreign that he recoiled, but then he saw why people seemed so blissful when they tasted sweet things. He was by now covered with bees that stung him all over, but he began stuffing the hive, bees, and all into his mouth. The shepherd boy cried out in dismay, but Artavan finished eating the beehive, and the bees stopped pestering him. He was beaten when he returned home, and he was swollen for a week afterwards from the stings.

Suddenly he was jostled in the ribs.

"Is this close enough? I don't want the dogs to bark." Tork nodded toward the house of Artavan's owner and he finally opened his eyes.

"This is good." Artavan slid down off the horse. "Remember tomorrow! We'll meet again at the river."

He nodded distractedly and Artavan watched him ride away, waving as he turned back. The moon still shone over the stark fields where many hours before the women labored all day harvesting barley and putting up the straw for the cows and horses. Artavan shivered remembering the Als demon and wondered if any other demons looked down at him from trees or peered up at him from their holes. In this part of the world, they were always hearing stories about demons. Some were told by roaming bands of Scythians who lived their entire lives on horseback, others by people from the vast and busy cities like Nineveh or Ecbatana.

He sometimes wondered about demons. Sometimes people whispered about him being one of them. His hearing was very acute and he sometimes spied on them as they muttered charms when he passed by them or looked upon their fair children. They made the sign against the evil eye, and sometimes Artavan winked at their children, causing mothers to scurry away and hide them.

He knew he was no demon, but he thought that if he were really a demon, he'd like to be a big, hairy, dangerous creature that consumed whole cows. Maybe then he'd finally have enough food. He started in a daze toward the rough house. It was fashioned in the shape of a yurt, and was built off the side of a small hill so that some of it was actually under earth. That kept them warmer during the harsh winters.

He thought of Tork. He was on every girl's mind since his young wife had died. He was wealthy, handsome, and brave as well. Artavan loved him, but Tork was unaware of that. No matter how Artavan hinted, no matter how much he stared at Tork with love, the man never got the hint. He remembered Tork's words with an aching feeling. Artavan wasn't ready to treat Tork as a noble. They had been familiar for their entire lives.

Artavan sighed deeply. He felt cursed. He had no home and no family. People said he was a devil, for both men and women became smitten with him. He was pretty, but that could not change the fact that he was feared as a demon. His hair was the color of reddish honey and had grown so long as to reach the ground. He kept it in a knot on the top of his head, but whenever it tumbled down his back, women cursed their luck that they couldn't grow such hair. His big eyes were framed by long dark lashes and fine

eyebrows, and his mouth was strong, yet delicate. Although he wore the robes of a slave, dingy and dirty, he always smelled of rose.

He knew Tork would never love him even if he were as beautiful as people said he was. Tork found no love for other men. So he dared not hope. Few people had seen them together. The wicked ones complained that Tork shouldn't associate with a dirty slave.

Artavan wished that Tork would want him, even if it were for a moment. He thought about what it would feel like to have those strong arms encircle his chest, and how the soft kisses would become filled with passion as he would press his mouth down hard on Artavan's.

Artavan couldn't remember a time when he didn't love Tork, but lately his love had changed from the adoration of a younger boy, to something tinged with passion. He had found himself thrilling at Tork's touch. Somehow, whenever Tork's body came into contact with his, a sweet longing filled him. He wondered if a man felt this way for a woman. He wondered if women longed for Tork as he did.

It was very late now and he'd risked so much to save Bania the grief of losing her new baby, but he wondered why he'd helped that mean-spirited woman. No, he had to keep reminding himself that he was helping her poor innocent baby, not

her. He'd heard from the witch Astraputi about the danger. That morning he'd been sent to her mountain lair to fetch herbs to soothe the new baby in the case that it became colicky, because there was nobody besides Artavan who wasn't afraid of the terrible wolves that roamed the area. Witch Astraputi had eyed him and without him having to say anything, she spoke words that chilled the pit of his stomach.

"I smelled you coming. Hello! Oh creature not like me!" she rasped. "I know why you come. A child has been born. A male child. I can smell that even though you have not touched it. Hearken, oh boy-man! An Als, the thief of infant flesh, will come tonight. The baby is her due because evil Nogard the Stingy, its grandfather, committed the vile offence of killing a pregnant cow because it had kicked him. The Als will come and take the child's life-blood unless you do something. I am ordering you, oh male creature! That child mustn't die tonight, because it will be a full moon. Such an act will cause a drought for the entire next year."

"What is an Als?" Artavan had asked stupidly. He'd heard the women speak of this demon, but never really listened. There were so many demons!

"Als? The Als? This she-demon comes on the first night of a baby's life and takes the liver from

its body. She brings it to the river and once she washes it in that river water, she is able to consume it and the baby will waste away."

"What can I do? How can I stop it? Should I tell Nogard?" He asked a torrent of questions.

"No, boy-man! He cannot stop this creature because he has invited it by his evil acts. That son of his is no better. He dips his dirty twig into half the girls in this village and the other half he covets. You alone can stop this creature."

Artavan's mouth worked, but he could say nothing at first. "Can... can Tork help me?" he stammered. "Tork is pure of heart,"

The witch laughed loudly. "Yes, I know of this man. He is not exactly what you think. Pure of heart you say? Pure indeed! You are a stupid lad, but yes, this man Tork can assist you in this odious task. There is only one way to kill the Als. You cannot dissuade it by any other manner. It must die!"

"How? How can I kill it," Artavan asked.

"How do I know?" she laughed hoarsely. "You are the expert!"

She would say no more. She didn't give him the herbs either. Artavan didn't know what to do, so he ran off to seek Tork's help. He'd been away for an entire day now, and he knew he was in for a good beating.

Artavan knew the witch had been mad to

expect him to save Bania's baby. He smiled. Bania would never know what he'd done—how he'd saved her baby. Even if she did, she'd still hate him, he thought, and beat him with her frail little fists whenever she had the opportunity. It didn't bother him much. He'd never had any other kind of life. It was a good thing that he was as tough as shoe leather.

CHAPTER TWO

The house was quiet and dark when Artavan finally returned. He made one last attempt to straighten his rough clothes. They smelled of Tork's horse now. His sensitive ears heard the sound, but his mind couldn't register its source. He was scared. He opened the door warily, but the man was too quick. Nogard the Stingy, the patriarch of the household, grabbed Artavan by the hair and pulled him in. He spoke in a low voice roughened by lust.

"Like a tomcat smelling a she-cat in heat, you are. How many filthy tavern whores did you bed tonight, boy? Tell me how you poked everyone, even the dogs!"

His lascivious stare angered Artavan, but he was still terrified. Nogard ran a coarse finger from his neck to the top of his shirt and Artavan pulled away as his hand grabbed for his crotch. He knocked over a crock and Nogard cursed loudly when the old woman of the house cried out

gruffly.

"Who is there? Who is there? Husband? Do you hear it? Thieves!"

"It's nothing love, just this tomcat coming home from his mating. I'll boil him alive for his whoring, I swear by the gods!"

Artavan heard Bania's baby squalling now, as Nogard grabbed him by the neck. He pulled him toward the door as if he were a dirty rag. Nogard was known for dragging servant girls into the barn, but Artavan was strong. Perhaps that was part of the reason why he'd never thought to use him for that purpose. The other reason was that everybody thought that Artavan was possessed of evil powers. Tonight, however, Nogard was very drunk; even the thought of demons couldn't dissuade him. Artavan's legs were weakened by terror as Nogard dragged him along unresisting. He pushed the half-door of the barn open with his back and the cow lowed softly. Artavan could see every detail—every speck of hay that floated in the air. He saw the decaying food between Nogard's teeth and the crumbs of old food in his beard as he came closer and flung him onto a pile of moldering hay.

He fell splay-legged and dazed. Artavan knew he was not allowed to resist, and he was stiff with fear.

"Take off those filthy rags, for I will beat you,

servant," Nogard rasped.

Artavan looked around him desperately as if he could escape, but there was no place to go.

"Do as I say, or I will fetch the other man-servants," Nogard threatened.

Artavan untied the rough robe, but held it over his private area. Nogard ripped it away and Artavan was terrified, as he lay there exposed. He had never been touched by anyone before in that way, and the thought of what Nogard would do to him made his vision go blurry. The drunken man launched himself at Artavan, desperate with lust, and he saw the shriveled brownish thing that now protruded slightly from the fold of Nogard's crude pants stiffen. His fetid breath entered Artavan's lungs and he gagged. Nogard was unable to control his thrusting pelvis as he came at him.

Artavan couldn't think. It just came naturally to him. He raised his legs before Nogard was on him, and the soles of his bare feet firmly contacted his chest. Nogard grunted and his mouth opened with a mixture of surprise and fury. Propelled by fear, Artavan's legs pushed him and he was launched back. For an instant, he saw Nogard's legs leave the floor as his arms wheeled madly, and then his head struck the wall with a sickening dull thud.

The mare reared in her stanchion and whinnied

as Artavan's pulse beat in his temples so that he heard her as if she were miles away. Nogard's chest rose as he took in a deep breath, but he exhaled it as a shivering sigh. Frothing drool dripped into his beard and blood ran from his left ear. Artavan's sensitive nose picked up the scent and he somehow knew Nogard had breathed his last. The thing between his legs remained stiff, as if he were still alive.

The mare made desperate sounds of frenzy that brought Artavan back to his senses. The mare's sharp kick on the stall door propelled him out of the place. He grabbed his robe and quickly dressed as he closed the door, and by habit, returned the wooden plank to its place to lock it. Another kick and he heard the stall door splinter. Artavan stood for a moment in the dark of the barnyard. It was preternaturally quiet, or was it that his ears had been deafened by shock and fear?

The mare seemed to quiet down. She couldn't break down the barn door; it was too big and heavy. Artavan began to make his way to the house as if he were being led to his execution. He knew he had to go back. It was better to die in the village he knew, than to be eaten by the monsters outside of the village. If he only had a great sword like Tork did! He would kill the demons and escape. Maybe he could find another village and begin life there—but no. He didn't have a sword.

He opened the door and slipped in. The house was quiet aside from the soft snores coming out of wife of Nogard's room. Her real name, he'd heard the women say, was Rasagana, but nobody ever called her that. The baby wasn't crying anymore.

Artavan crept to his cold place far from the hearth fire. It was where potatoes and squash were stored for the winter. The spot stayed cold, but above freezing. They made him sleep there because he could shoo off the mice and rats that might come to gnaw on the roots, and he had to pick out the rotten ones and feed them to the chickens. He lay down on his rags, which were discarded burlap bags too holey to hold anything, and he thought of Tork and if he would wonder why he hadn't come to meet him as he'd promised. He'd never make it there, for he'd be dead, clubbed to death and thrown into a ravine. Nobody could save him now.

Even though he had been thrown away by his parents like the useless rags he lay on now, he knew Tork would mourn for him. Artavan's first memory was only walking out of the woods alone. He hadn't been crying—he had smelled food. Artavan was only a scrap of a child, barely walking, but soon he had a goat by the neck, and was trying to bite through its tough hide when its frantic bleating brought out the farmer and his wife.

They had beaten Artavan off the goat and the farmer had let him share scraps of food with his dogs for a few days before he sold him to another farmer who tried to civilize him with harsh beatings. He was to be a house servant because he was pretty, but he never could do anything right. He'd break crockery, tear his clothing, and forget the wife's instructions. People thought he was mentally feeble because it was years before he even learned how to speak. Only Tork could communicate with him, and nobody else cared. Finally, they'd sold him to Nogard for almost nothing. He used him as a shepherd. Artavan was useful in that job, because he was fearless. When he'd lead the sheep and goats to the summer pastures, never could the wolves eat them. Artavan never allowed that, for once in a while he'd eat one himself on the sly.

The servant women of the house said that Nogard was raising Artavan so that he could "use him like he uses the sheep." When they said this, they raise their upper lips in disgust, as he'd seen rams do when they sniff the other's bottoms. Artavan knew that some people used boys like that, but nobody had ever touched him.

"He's a devil," they said. "Keep away from him, lest he bewitch you! It is sorcery, for no ordinary boy can transform himself into a beauty, as if he were a noble woman!"

Now he'd killed his master. Nobody would ever believe him that he'd never meant to do it. Bania, the wife of Nogard's favorite son, Atmacharu, and mother to the new baby, hated him, because he'd been there long before she arrived as a new wife. Atmacharu had been a spoiled, selfish, and cruel boy. He'd become an even worse man. Artavan was about nineteen-years-old now, he figured, just younger than Atmacharu.

As a young daughter-in-law, Bania knew she would be mistreated and forced to work hard. She would be forced to shoulder the load her mother-in-law was eager to finally rid herself of. After all, he'd heard the other girls say, the thing that keeps a wife sane is that she knows that if she has sons, they will one day bring home a daughter-in-law who will relieve her of most of the household work.

Bania was the daughter of a wealthy farmer who owned eighteen cows. She always thought she'd be married off to a better family, but her father had given her to Atmacharu because he owed a debt to crafty Nogard the Stingy. Bania was angry when she'd learned that Nogard had no proper servant women because of his stinginess. Ohdana, their only real servant, was very old and almost blind. She was only tolerated because of her raunchy jokes. Two other women

were shared by the other farmers for the tasks of weaving and grinding grain, but the work of cooking and cleaning fell upon Bania.

The reason why Bania hated Artavan was simple. When she learned that he was owned by Nogard, she thought that although dirty and clumsy, he could be cleaned up and made to wash and cook. She was certain that she could train him, but he had no mind for that sort of thing. She would beat him and call him a gourd-head, but he refused to change. Her weak blows did nothing to persuade him. Killing wolves, now that was something he could do well. He was a useless cook. Cooking made him ravenous. When the smell of food assailed him, he would lose his reason and sometimes fall upon it despite her beatings. He was never full. They fed him so little. He thought that he could lie on his rag bed now and contemplate his short life, but the heart is treacherous, and the body is weak.

* * * *

Artavan found himself awakened from a profound sleep by the keening cries of women. They must have discovered Nogard's corpse. He shivered and tried to push deeper into the pile of rags, but it was useless. It would soon be over.

He sat on the rag pile and waited for the men to

come and kill him, but they didn't come. He got up quickly and glanced about. Soon the women of the village joined in the wailing as curious men milled around. Artavan went back to cower in his corner until finally Nogard's widow appeared before him. He averted his eyes because he was certain she would fall upon him for killing her husband.

"Gather many good potatoes; we must make a fine stew to share with the mourners. Nogard, my dear husband and your generous lord, the patriarch of this household, is dead. He was killed by that worthless mare he bought from blacksmith Jeru when he was trying to..."

Artavan froze as she peered at him.

"Indeed, was that you who came in late last night, or was I dreaming?"

"Yes... that is-no. You must have dreamed it, Lady Nogard. I only checked on the sheep a few times as is normal. I saw nothing amiss," he lied as his gut churned with fear.

She regarded him with suspicion and scratched at the wart near her nose. She hadn't been crying, he noticed; but her chest heaved with the exertion she'd undergone.

"Get out there after you bring the potatoes, and clean the barn. I won't allow my son to handle that evil mare again. No! Imagine if she went and killed him! From now on, you handle that beast!"

She left him alone. His breath came in gasps as he watched her broad back recede. Other voices came to him. It was Ohdana speaking to another very aged woman.

"Yes. Nogard's wife found him. He was finally killed by his own lust. I tell you, men are ruled by unseen things we women cannot imagine. They found him exposed like an old goat. It was apparent that he'd gone into the mare's stall and tried to couple with the mare again, but the powerful beast kicked him in the chest. He was thrown against the stall door, which shattered, and he landed with his best friend still hanging limply from the opening of his pants." She cackled madly and the other old woman joined her.

"Oh that we can't do like that. I'd have kicked my husband many a time. When that pervert was so aged that he could hardly hold in his piss, he still wanted me to pleasure that part of him."

Ohdana laughed and continued. "Wife of Nogard is furious. I heard that old master Nogard's chest was caved in - all the bones broken like so many twigs. What a horror!" Ohdana laughed hoarsely as she paused in her story.

The other voice asked, "So she will have the mare killed for its transgression-for murdering her husband?"

"No, no!" Ohdana was laughing again. "She

was cursing Nogard, that worthless husband, not the mare. That beast is valuable! She was angry at Nogard, who never could be satisfied with her. He needed sheep and mares and whatever else he could molest. I think he'd have taken his pleasure with a knot in a tree, or an overripe melon! Life will be better for all of us without him, although that cur of a son of his will be no better, I'll wager."

Her coarse laughter made Artavan's hair stand on end. Artavan's heart beat with terror and wild joy all at once. So they didn't blame him—they didn't even suspect that he was the culprit! His stomach growled and he wondered at the body. Even in the midst of such horror, it felt a mundane thing like hunger!

He looked around to make sure that he was alone and then began to sort potatoes, quickly stuffing the small ones that he could safely consume whole into his mouth, while he gathered the best for Nogard's widow. He felt no remorse for killing Nogard.

He never remembered being outside of the village, Taranakirt, and its outskirts. Sometimes people came from neighboring villages, but they were regarded as outsiders. He was afraid of what the others said about the world beyond. Surely there were man-eaters, monsters, ghosts, and even evils he couldn't begin to imagine. They were

secure in their town, where the nomad wild people never stopped long enough to burn their huts. He'd heard tales about Persian armies that stretched so far that one could not see the end of them. Once a runner came to the town and told the men that Cyrus the Great, a god-like king, had ordered that every town and village send a representative with offerings. The villagers ignored him. They were too far away from that fabled city and its armies. Artavan wondered what it would be like to see such a city. *How much bigger would it be? Maybe it is as big as ten or twenty of our villages*, he thought happily.

Today the village was stirred by excitement over the death of an important member. Artavan felt a warm feeling, perhaps pride, that he'd been the cause of such jubilation, but he was also afraid. Everyone was having fun, it seemed. The women of the village helped the widow and Bania to wash the corpse and wrap it in a shroud made from the rough flax that had been rejected for garments. The men then quickly threw him into a hole and buried him without observing any ritual. He wasn't a priest or mage, so there was no use in ceremony apart from ensuring that no meat remained in the house in case his ghost came back, but that was simple. Nogard was so stingy that he never kept excess food in the house, especially not meat. The house was washed and the barn was

painted with symbols that would prevent a ghost from returning. His death had been violent, so surely he'd be back to make trouble, they all said.

At last, there was food for all. The funeral feast was a happy event for everyone. The villagers lined up with bowls made from clay and even large leaves. Widow Nogard was grumbling that her stock would be depleted because of this funeral feast. More than a few had suggested that she slaughter a sheep—for hadn't her husband been important? Didn't he deserve better? However, she'd only agreed to add a few onions to the soup, which was really quite thin after it was diluted so that it could feed so many. Artavan got some of it, but only after everyone else was full. Dinshard, the cobbler, said that he ate like a starved wolf, but Artavan didn't even look up to curse him. The slight taste of salt in the soup was tantalizing and delicious.

People were waiting for the village elders to install Nogard's son, Atmacharu, as the new head of the household. They waited only because the new lord of the house would have to pass out the small, but delicious sweets made from the milk of a cow, a goat, a sheep, and a mare, all of which had to be the mothers of a firstborn male. The confection was sweetened with honey gathered in the spring – a rare treat. Widow Nogard complained loudly that her entire stock of honey

would soon be gone if people kept dying. Artavan had no hope of being able to taste the treat, but he wanted to watch the expressions of sublime pleasure on the faces of those who did.

Soon the ceremony began and he sidled up close. The elders made way for a priest who was dressed in the robes of the elect. He had hurried over from another village in the hope of getting a big reward for his services. Artavan supposed that nobody had informed him that wife of Nogard was stingier than her husband had been.

The priest made Atmacharu and Bania stand together with the baby and he circled their heads with an egg three times. This was supposed to make them fertile. He broke the egg on the ground, and then he pushed Bania away a bit and asked if the baby was a male. When they said yes, he smeared oil mixed with burnt camphor around its eyes and on its head. It began to squall.

Atmacharu offered the first of the sweets to the priest, who took it with a cupped hand and touched it to his forehead before popping it into his mouth so as to avoid touching saliva to his ritually cleaned hands. Artavan started when he saw the priest make a sour face and spit the sweet to the ground. A moan rose from the now hushed crowd, so that the irritating sound of Engoda, the village soothsayer, caught everyone's attention.

"You needn't tell me that you taste a bitter lie!"

he cried. "The Lie is the enemy of both the gods and man. Nogard was killed not by a horse, but by a cunning beast. Did nobody, even the elders, notice that the barn door had been latched from the outside? How could that be if Nogard had been alone? This stinks of sorcery!" He roared as he looked into Artavan's frightened eyes.

"I have seen the signs. I, who travel to far off places, have heard the tale of a beast that emerged from the woods. This creature, mothered by wild beasts and fathered by a sorcerer..."

Artavan only heard parts of what he was saying. Terror made his ears ring.

"...death and destruction... before he couples ...before he..."

Despite his terror, Artavan saw Rochan, a shepherd boy, take advantage of the distraction to dip his hand into a basket of the milk sweets and shove a handful into his mouth. He didn't seem to think the sweets were bitter. His face looked radiant. Everyone knew that the unimportant villagers only got one sweet, at most. All eyes turned toward him as he smiled and grabbed another handful. At this, the crowd of villagers swarmed forward, eager to get some sweets before Rochan consumed them all. They pushed the soothsayer aside and some beat him when he attempted to stop them. The crowd fought over the sweets and some baskets spilled.

“Disaster! I portend horrible things!”

He squealed as someone stepped on his prone body to reach the overturned baskets. All the while Artavan saw his beady, furious eyes on him. He knew.

CHAPTER THREE

Artavan rushed to the stream, but he couldn't feel free from the soothsayer's hot stare. Nobody had followed him. He supposed they would hear the truth as soon as they quit fighting over the sweets. Village people loved intrigue and they especially loved to hear about witchcraft and sorcery. That meant that there would be a killing to entertain them.

Tork will know what to do.

They were supposed to meet at high noon at this spot today. Artavan wondered if he would remember. He'd often forgotten their meetings, and sometimes he'd been set to some task that took longer than he expected. Sometimes he had to spend time with Torkanu, his four-year-old son.

Tork had been married to Mehr's daughter, Simriti. She'd died giving birth to Torkanu, who had been too large at birth for her to bear—at least

that's what Tork had told everyone. Some people spread rumors that Tork had killed her because she was disobedient. Artavan never believed those tales, but Tork never displayed much emotion when he recalled her in front of others, except to note that her death had been a waste.

He shivered at the thought of the soothsayer and looked around him. It was such a wonderful, beautiful day! Birds flitted in the trees and the heat was not yet oppressive. The thought that he would die soon made everything seem too beautiful to bear. Every detail shimmered before his eyes and he began to sob as he realized how much he'd missed in his life. He didn't want to say goodbye to the beauty of the world and embrace the shadows of death. A soft touch on his shoulder made him start violently.

"Artavan! What's happened? Are you looking for me? Were you afraid I wouldn't come? I wouldn't forget!"

It was Tork. Artavan looked up with glazed eyes and wondered how to tell Tork that he had become a murderer. Artavan sobbed uncontrollably as he stood not knowing how to react. He hugged Tork's waist tightly.

"I ... I ...oh the gods! I killed Nogard, my master! I didn't mean to. I'm so scared! You believe me, don't you?"

"By the gods, is this meant as jest?"

"No ... I mean, yes, I did kill him, but it was a terrible accident. He was mad at me and he ... well he tried to ..."

"Are you sure you didn't just dream it? You couldn't have done that! You're just a kid!"

"No I didn't dream it...and I can't go back to his house now, Tork. His ghost will seek me; besides, the soothsayer knows. What will happen to me? They'll kill me—can't you save me?"

Tork appeared to think and then he said with much pomp, "I am Tork, the defender of the weak, the shelter of the despairing! Of course, I'll protect you. In the shade of my massive arms you and many others could take shelter and rest in safety."

Ardavan smiled wanly at Tork's imitation of Mher the Great's haughty speech. "I'm sure they'll come after me. What will we do?"

Tork's arms dropped to his sides as he seemed to think, but then he scratched the back of his head and smiled so broadly that his eyes looked like gay, overturned quarter moons.

"I don't know! Do you want to come with me? Mehr the Great has sent me on a mission to the village of Ratakirt. It seems that there's a giant bull that broke away from the herd as a calf, and has grown up wild. It has somehow grown into a monster and returns to harass and even kill people. Some say that he eats people instead of grass! I promised that I would take care of it. I bet

you would be happy to see the feast it would make. We could eat the whole bull and nobody would care! I will build a huge spit and you can cook it for us!”

Artavan began to drool and he swallowed hard. Imagine getting all the meat one could eat! His problems forgotten, he nodded dumbly and Tork extended his heavily muscled arm. Artavan grabbed it and Tork pulled him up onto his horse, which skittered about, unhappy to have another man on his back.

Tork was dressed in leather armor emblazoned with the bright orange insignia of the House of Mehr. He had washed and perfumed his hair with rosewater. Artavan took in a deep breath of that intoxicating aroma. He felt like the most fortunate man in the three worlds as he sat there with his arms around Tork’s hard body, but despite his joy, worry made Artavan’s gut clench. What would become of him? It was illegal for Tork to take a slave wanted for murder, even if he did pay a ransom. But maybe Mehr the Great would finally agree to buy him.

Artavan imagined what he would do if he could actually live at Tork’s estate. Could he be a caretaker for Torkanu, Tork’s son? No. He couldn’t even serve as a house servant, because he was so stupid and clumsy! He would probably fall on Tork’s delicate little boy and kill him, or

perhaps he would forget to feed or bathe him. The housedogs would certainly eat the poor child under Artavan's bumbling care! He thought he was indeed useless. Perhaps, Artavan thought, he could ask Tork to leave him far from the village so that he could run away from his new master, Nogard's son. But then he could never again see Tork.

"Tork, what will happen to me? I'm afraid to go back to the house of Nogard ... that is Nogard's son."

"Don't worry. I'll think of something." Tork smiled gaily.

"I killed a man!" Artavan groaned. "I can never return."

* * * *

They rode on like this until the sun began to dip low in the sky. Artavan was afraid, but he was also was happy for the opportunity to have held Tork in his arms for so long, although they spoke little. The horse shied when a bird flew straight out of a bush, but Tork was able to control it with his enormous strength.

"We're very close to where they said the bull ranges. I can even smell it, can you?"

Artavan did smell bovine odor and this raised the hair on the back of his neck.

"Don't worry Artavan; bulls are completely blind at night."

"I'm not worried about that, but it's not night yet and bulls aren't blind at night anyway. In fact, I know that bulls even attack wolves that come to the herd at night." Artavan was reluctant to correct him, but he knew well about bulls. He was a herder, wasn't he?

Artavan was so hungry thinking about the roasted meat they would have after killing the bull that he sighed and continued to tremble. Tork seemed flustered at his outburst, but he straightened his silk tunic, smiling broadly.

"Well here's a great place to stop. There's water and plenty of grass for my horse. It looks as though the gods smile upon us today. But what shall we eat?" He put a hand over his growling stomach.

Tork's horse pawed the earth nervously and Artavan became jumpy as well. The stream must have been a drinking place for the bull and its herd, if it had one. As they approached, Tork leading the reluctant warhorse, they saw a huge pile of manure. Tork reached down, took up a semidry clod of it, and held it to his nose, breathing in deeply.

"He's here all right. Look at this! He made a big pile! Must be a huge bull!" He said this with simple admiration.

"T...Tork. What weapons do you have besides your sword? I need to hold a weapon too, in the case that this monstrous bull comes while we sleep."

"Artavan! I have my mace, but I doubt you could even lift it, much less wield it against a mad bull! I love having you here, but please don't get in the way!" He seemed to consider something, and then smiled.

"I have only one sleeping blanket. We'll have to sleep together!" He took a step forward and grabbed Artavan's arm, pulling him closer and brushing the hair from his face. "You are so worried! Don't you think I can protect you? You have always been like a little brother to me. I won't let the bad bull hurt you, and I won't let the villagers hurt you either. Now, can you calm down?"

Artavan blushed and he was struck dumb. His heart was full of joy and gratitude.

Suddenly Tork tensed and Artavan immediately sensed a powerful force. He didn't know what it was, but it felt like a crushing energy that pushed against his chest.

"Artavan! Climb that tree, quickly! Can you do it? Here, I'll give you a boost!"

"He's coming." Artavan moaned.

"Artavan! Do it! Get out of my way!" Tork cried.

Just then, the wall of foliage to their left parted and they saw the iridescent shine of gray eyes so fierce that they made them freeze. A gagging sound came out of Artavan's throat as Tork tried to push him to the tree. He stood transfixed. The beast's head was enormous. The thick horns were blunt, but wide across a head like a buttress. The bull snuffled deeply and he saw its moist nose quiver. It took another two steps out and they saw that it wasn't all black, as it had appeared.

The bull casually swiped its huge head at a fly that landed on its broad shoulder and Artavan saw its rough tongue. It had a black face with pendulous ears that were at least two feet long. Its head was so blocky that its eyes seemed to be depressed into mounds of flesh. The huge hump on its back was also black, as was its fleshy, long dewlap, but its body was a deep reddish color that made it appear even fiercer.

It raised a mighty hoof the size of a small millstone – the type they used at Nogard's house to grind peas. It pawed the earth. Artavan had been holding his breath, but it now came out in a whoosh. As he inhaled desperately, he smelled the reek of fermented grass on the bull's breath. It belched noisily and he looked over at Tork and then back at the eyes of the great bull. He couldn't tell if the eyes were furious or benign, so deeply were they set in his head.

"Out of my way, Artavan! He's a monster! He'll kill us both if you distract me!" Tork yelled.

There was no time—the bull moved with amazing speed. Tork pushed Artavan away and lifted his heavy mace. As the creature approached, he swung the mace and it contacted the massive head with a loud thunk. Artavan expected to see the bull keel over dead, but it shook its head, catching Tork's tunic. Artavan screamed a barking, rough oath as Tork was thrown against a tree, which bent with the force of the blow.

"Tork!" Artavan screamed as he ran toward the panic-stricken warhorse. Although this horse had been through countless battles, something about the bull frightened him. Artavan was trying to reach the sword still on the saddle. Tork moaned, then jumped to his feet, and retrieved his mace. The horse reared again and came down, catching Artavan painfully on the shoulder. He saw black for an instant.

The bull was headed toward him now, but he saw Tork strike it almost comically from behind. It bellowed as the mace made a meaty, slapping sound when it hit its flesh. It turned furiously, lowering its head. Tork swung with terrific speed, but somehow the monstrous bull felt nothing as its head contacted the mace with an awful, hollow sound. Tork tried to swing again, but the bull managed to butt him. The bull had lowered its

head so that Tork's waist was pinned between the deadly horns and the tree. Artavan thought the horns had become stuck in the wood of the tree, but the bull suddenly backed up again.

Tork grabbed the horns and leapt onto the bull's back. This enraged the beast, which began to buck wildly. He held onto the horns, but as the beast lifted its rear and rocked onto its front hooves, Tork fell heavily, the breath whooshing out of him. The bull sniffed Tork, its big hoof catching the cloth of his tunic.

"Run!" Artavan yelled at Tork, who tried pulling his tunic free. *If the bull gores him!*

Artavan ran toward them with no weapon but his fury. The bull turned its angry gray eyes on him. Artavan flung himself at the animal, but it was as solid as a rocky mountain. He pummeled it, but it was as when Bania beat him with her frail fists—it felt nothing.

It tossed its head and Artavan was flung away like a rag. The giant hoof moved and Tork rolled out from under it. As the beast rushed Artavan, Tork grabbed it by the tail, and he was on his face in an instant, being dragged and bumped through mud and manure. Artavan only saw the horns as it advanced making thundering sounds as its giant hooves beat the earth. He screamed, but the bull stopped suddenly and fell to its knees.

CHAPTER FOUR

Artavan looked at Tork, who put a hand to his chest as if in pain. Artavan felt it too. The force Artavan had felt earlier became stronger, and he suddenly realized that it hadn't come from the great bull. Even the bull could feel the powerful force that pressed upon them, and it remained on its knees as if frozen. Artavan felt the force strain at his eyeballs and at the inside of his head. Something inside him felt as if it were trying to burst forth. His breathing had ceased and his head pounded. He looked up at the sky, as they all did now. Even the stupid beast gazed up as drool and froth ran from its mouth.

First it was only a strange light in the sky, but soon they became aware of two human shapes, one huge and one smaller. As they came closer, Artavan saw that they both had their arms crossed over their chests in a belligerent posture, but their legs were suspended casually, one foot pointing the toes down and the other leg bent lightly at the

knee as if they were just taking a giant step. They were floating down from the sky as if they weighed nothing, but he could see that they were indeed substantial.

Fear of death from the bull was replaced by a sense of wonder and exhilaration. The power they emanated almost hurt him, but at the same time, there was something about them that Artavan found captivating. The bull seemed frozen in place. He was sure that the men controlled it now, for it didn't even move a muscle. Tork stared with his mouth open, and for an instant Artavan wondered if he too, was under the spell of the heavenly men, but then Tork sniffed. He could also smell their distinct odors. The enormous brute, who seemed older, smelled sharp and exciting. Artavan wondered if he was the little one's father. The smaller man – Artavan really couldn't tell if he was a man or a boy, smelled dangerous.

Artavan was mesmerized by the sight of these two beings, and he stood in awe. The big one, who was bald, smiled a menacing grin. His face was cruel. Each of his features was almost handsome, but put together they presented a fierce visage. His strong white teeth seemed to want to crush them. His eyes were somewhat small, but his nose was large, however not completely ugly. It was his cruel smile that held Artavan captive. He wanted

to look at the smaller man, but found it hard to tear his eyes away from the big brute.

Artavan finally stared at the smaller of the two. His hair was somewhat long, and as he floated down, it stood on end and waved like a plant in the river. His large, beautiful eyes were set into a strange face that even while grinning viciously, had brows knit with annoyance or anger. His nose was perfect in shape and although his lips were set in that menacing smile, they too, were exquisitely formed and rosy in color.

The big one's hard, muscled body was clear even from where they stood. He, like his smaller companion, wore boots, although his appeared rougher. The younger one's boots were made of soft leather, it seemed, for they creased gently.

Their costumes were stranger yet. Artavan had never seen such clothes, if you could call them that. The big one was almost naked except for his armor, which was so finely made that it seemed to be of the gods. Indeed, Artavan thought them to be gods. The big one held a huge mace over one shoulder, but the other one carried no weapons of any kind. The smaller man wore fine golden clothing under his shining armor. It stretched over his strong muscles. Artavan could see that this was no boy. The big man's rumbling laughter frightened him out of his reverie. They were quite close to them now and Artavan felt their power

like a vise on his heart.

The large man was surely the leader, Artavan thought. He seemed to be looking at him, but his eyes drifted to Tork and stayed there. He appeared to be angered by Tork, who stared like a village idiot.

"Hey you! We've come to get you."

His thundering voice made Artavan cringe. He was addressing Tork rudely.

"Respond! The Dark Prince of the Pahlavans demands an answer!" the monstrous man roared.

"I'm Tork!" He smiled gaily now as he scratched the back of his head.

Tork always did this when he was nervous.

"Who are you?"

"You don't remember? Can't you feel it? You fool!" the big man growled.

His deep voice resonated in Artavan's heart. He was truly a dark prince, Artavan thought with a cold shudder. The younger one spoke now and Artavan almost laughed, despite his terror. His voice was deep, gravelly, and menacing. It was even deeper than the big man's voice. It held the unmistakable lilt of a taunt with every word. Artavan had imagined that he was a boy with his smooth, delicate face with its slightly pointed chin.

"Calm down Drujo," he said to the big one.

Artavan thought that the young man was very sassy to be addressing his prince in that manner

until the burly man answered, "Yes master."

"I am Devdata, the prince of the Pahlavans. This is Drujo." The young man pointed to the big man with a tilt of his chin.

The big brute's chest swelled with pride.

"He is the commander-in-chief of the Pahlavan armies."

Devdata's frown deepened now. Artavan's jaw was slackened when he heard this. The big man was huge, whereas the Prince couldn't have been that much taller than Artavan, who wasn't small, but he was a head smaller than Tork, and the big stranger who called himself Drujo, was two heads taller than Tork!

"I have bad news for you, oh fellow Pahlavan," he paused his grave speech, but Tork had no comment; he only smiled happily as was his wont.

"What's wrong with you? Have you no memory? What have you become?" the prince asked angrily. "Where is your pride? You present the aspect of a simpleton; not the warrior you should be. Even if you have forgotten everything, a warrior cannot forget his pride!"

"I am not your friend! I know not whom you seek, but I am not that man. I am Tork, the defender of the weak and the hope of the hopeless," he answered in a foolish-sounding imitation of Mehr the Great's speech.

The two men laughed, throwing their heads

back in uncontrollable mirth.

"You must have been injured."

The big one, Drujo, finally gained control of his laughter. "Did you get hit on the head?"

"You are a Pahlavan warrior, like us. You must have guessed that you are far different from the ordinary creatures of this world! Don't you love to fight?" the one called Devdata asked.

Tork seemed to be shocked. "No! I don't love to fight! That's...that's evil! I fight for what is good. I will only fight to help people; otherwise, I'm a peaceful soul."

"Help people!" The lummoxDrujo sputtered as his shoulders shook with suppressed guffaws.

The young prince smiled crookedly.

Artavan was maddened by his gestures, which were so slight, yet seemed to be full of meaning.

Even though they were nearly touching the ground now, they had remained suspended. Now their feet touched the ground with a light tapping sound. Artavan's mouth was gaping, and he now saw that the Dark Prince, as Drujo had called Devdata, was staring at him. He sniffed and cocked his head.

"Who are you?"

His voice thrilled Artavan with its rough depth and he giggled. He immediately regretted it and looked to the ground.

"Do you dare mock the prince of the

Pahlavans?" The brute Drujo barked at Artavan.

"No sir, I...I only..."

Tork suddenly stood between the strange men and Artavan ready to battle. "I don't know who you are, but I know you are evil-both of you!" Tork tried to thunder, but his voice rose an octave. It didn't seem to embarrass him though.

Drujo looked at Prince Devdata.

"Are we evil?" he asked with what seemed to be almost child-like sincerity.

"Well..." came the gravelly-voiced reply, "maybe just a little."

The prince smiled smugly.

"Tork! So that is the name you use?" Prince Devdata was now serious again. "We have come from another dimension. So do you. Long ago, you were sent here to save your life. You were but a child, but we Pahlavans are powerful from birth. Many children were sent to other places at that time, because I hoped to save our race from extinction at the hands of the evil sorcerer Angraminyu.

"This evil sorcerer used our race for many centuries to do his evil work, but finally we became too powerful and he feared this growing power. My father, King Danuraj, the most powerful and noble of the Pahlavans, led a revolt against Angraminyu when I was a lad. He and many other brave warriors were killed, and I, the

prince, was enslaved by the sorcerer, but I escaped.

"He's been hunting us for years now. In the course of that hunt, he discovered my trick of sending Pahlavan children to other dimensions, and he's killed them all, getting to them before we could. Of the children, only you Tork, remain. I know it's you because I sense the presence of a Pahlavan. This is the last chance we have to destroy the sorcerer, and even if you are addled, you *will* help us! You will follow my orders. It is because of me that you are alive."

Tork only stared and scratched his head again.

"So you claim that you sent me here when I was a child? How can I believe that? You're nothing but a boy-man yourself!"

Prince Devdata actually growled deep in his throat like an animal.

"Tork!"

Drujo needed no further prompting. He appeared ready to attack. The prince was stern now.

"Do you wish to test my strength?" Prince Devdata smiled his crooked smile at Tork. He looked at the bull and gestured with a gloved hand. The huge beast was galvanized immediately, and looked at the two men, bellowing deeply. It was a sound that made Artavan's teeth chatter. Devdata put his arm out

with his palm facing the raging bull and it began to run, head lowered in attack. Artavan screamed for him to run, but it wasn't necessary. A tremendous flash of pure blue light shot out of the palm of his hand, and the bull flew back against the trees. It fell on its back with all four legs outstretched like a bloated corpse.

He had killed the giant bull without even touching it! When Artavan's ears finally stopped ringing, he heard their rumbling laughter.

"You monster!" Tork screamed shrilly. "You are a fiend from the lower regions! A...a beast!"

"I am a powerful elite Pahlavan warrior. You are also a Pahlavan. You have the power within you, Tork! But maybe you're too dim-witted to realize it." The Prince seemed furious.

Tork smirked and nodded as if it were finally sinking in. "Yes. I am surely an elite warrior, but I won't be persuaded to serve the likes of you. I serve no one!"

Artavan broke in, "but Mehr the Great..."

"Quiet, Artavan! I am set to inherit Mehr's holdings. Surely, you must have heard this. He has no son and heir. I have been groomed for this bright future, and I won't serve foreigners. I will serve no man! These men have just admitted that they have no palaces and no armies. They are beggars."

Artavan was shocked, for he hadn't heard that

Mehr had actually declared his intentions of making Tork his heir, although there were rumors...

Tork looked down at the shorter prince. "Say, since you are poor and without an army, why don't you serve as my retainers? I would pay you well."

"You idiot!" Drujo towered over Tork with his fists poised.

"Then you'll die when the sorcerer Angraminyu arrives, and that will soon. He'll kill you as he has killed the others. We have to stay together, for the magical power is in three. We three can defeat the sorcerer!" Prince Devdata stamped his foot and the earth shook slightly.

Artavan sensed the truth of his words and the concern in his voice; despite his mocking tone, but Tork was adamant. He continued to shake his head in disgust and disbelief.

"If you are so great, why don't you just kill that sorcerer?" Tork asked.

"It's not as simple as you seem to think. He hides behind his magic. I could defeat him were it not for that." Prince Devdata's face was hardened by Tork's question. "We have a certain degree of magic ourselves, but it requires the presence of at least three mature Pahlavans to defeat the magic of the Sorcerer Angraminyu—and one of them must be me. We have learned this much, and so he

fears us now. He must not allow us to work together, for it will be his downfall."

"I think you lie, fiend." Tork laughed. "You accuse that man of sorcery, but then you admit to being a sorcerer too. I'll have nothing to do with vile sorcery! Your story is false. You fly in the sky by sorcery and you want to corrupt my pure soul. I won't fall for such tricks! I won't come with you. I have my own followers. Why would I ever become a follower of yours? Perhaps if you had asked with a trifle more humility, I may have considered helping you. Perhaps you should serve me. I am more powerful than the two of you combined, and my strength is real, not sorcery," Tork bragged.

"You've killed that poor bull by magic, not by your strength. I'm a man of power, not deceit. In fact, I have been credited with saving the world on several occasions." Tork finished his speech, and brushed hair from his face as if to call attention to his handsome features.

"Drujo! Pound some sense into him, but don't kill him. We might still be able to use the moron," the prince growled.

"Yes master. I will show him the kind of power he wants to see, since he is ignorant in our ways."

In a flash, the giant man landed a punch on Tork's face and he hit the body of the slain bull with a loud slapping sound. Tork sprang up

angrily and launched himself at Drujo. It seemed impossible, but he contacted the brute with an incredibly violent barrage of punches and kicks. Drujo returned them casually, as if he felt nothing; in fact, he smiled and seemed quite pleased. He finally dismissed Tork with a monstrous kick that sent him sprawling again.

"I'm impressed." The huge man wiped sweat off his expansive brow. "You must be one of us, although you are still weak and puny!"

"Weak? I'm the strongest fighter in the world!" Tork jumped up indignantly and flew at Drujo again. The big man smiled and gave Tork a nonchalant kick in the chest that sent him high off the ground.

Artavan ran at Drujo and attacked him with his bare hands, beating him as he had the bull. He smiled and slapped Artavan in the back of his head. He fell heavily and the man picked him up by the back of his garment, as if he were an interesting variety of insect, while his arms and legs wheeled madly. Artavan arched his back and grabbed at his big nose and Drujo cried out. He felt the heat of Drujo's breath, but he had him. Artavan was used to catching unruly bulls and rams in this manner, holding them by that delicate area inside the nose, between the two nostrils. Drujo couldn't dislodge him and Artavan saw the young prince throw his head back in

uncontrollable laughter.

Finally, that mountain of a man punched Artavan's belly and he let go, falling to the ground. Drujo brought his big foot down on his chest and began to crush it. Artavan refused to scream, although the pain was terrible, rather he struggled to raise his head. He pushed Artavan's head down with his hand, but Artavan bit him hard. He screamed in pain and started to crush Artavan's head as if it were an overripe melon. Artavan kicked like a wild goat, contacting Drujo's shins painfully. He growled angrily.

"Drujo!" Prince Devdata yelled sharply. "Let the boy go. He amuses me greatly. I have never seen such a creature. He exhibits great pride and strength, considering he isn't one of us. Do you see that he refuses to cry out in pain?"

Artavan had fallen very close to the Prince and he sniffed the air like a wolf. Devdata's eyes were glazed with some emotion he couldn't identify.

Drujo growled deeply, but Artavan felt the pressure of his foot lessen.

"But master, we don't need this one, and I have never been so attacked by a mere human. Why can't I have the pleasure of killing him?" he asked sulkily. "Aren't you hungry? His flesh will be good and soft. I will cook him using my special sauce!"

Drujo drooled in anticipation and Artavan's

heart thudded in his chest.

“No, control yourself, Drujo!” Devdata said in his deep voice.

Artavan looked up at him and he looked away. From this angle on the ground, he could see by his heavily muscled legs and his impressive chest that Devdata was no boy—he was a powerful warrior, albeit a rather short one compared with his servant.

Even through the haze of pain, Artavan had to appreciate the shape of Devdata’s body. There wasn’t a flabby muscle on him. Even his neck was corded with hard muscles and he saw scars wherever his skin was uncovered. It finally dawned upon Artavan that the Prince was more powerful than Drujo, his giant companion. That was why the big one feared and respected him. Artavan had heard of pampered princes far to the distant east of their village, but in this land princes only remained in their positions if they could overpower their jealous opponents. It must be the same for the Pahlavans, but it still made him wonder. The power he felt emanating from Devdata was no ordinary strength. He radiated an actual internal power that hummed and was almost visible. How else could he have killed the bull with such a bolt of lightning?

Artavan never thought much before speaking, so he asked, “Are you a god, Prince Devdata? You

must be a god! We would have offered you a sacrifice to strengthen you against the demons who oppose you. Why didn't you just ask us? What do you require? We will collect the offerings and burn them for you! Our gods sometimes demand many oxen to be sacrificed and burned for them. I will pillage a town and get the required animals!"

Momentary shock passed over Devdata's face and then he widened his crooked, vicious grin and laughed low and rough. Artavan saw a look of hunger on his face and realized that all this talk of eating boys and oxen had fueled his appetite. "I'm no god," he said finally. "The gods are weaklings compared to me."

He didn't seem to realize how improbable his boast sounded, Artavan thought.

"And so is this sorcerer Angraminyu more powerful than the demons and the gods?" Artavan asked boldly, ignoring his comment. "Why don't you join with the other gods and get help? Surely, they would be willing! Otherwise you can attack the gods and force them onto your side!"

Devdata gave him a stern look and Artavan was frightened.

"Good thinking boy. I like that, but we Pahlavans do not ask help of anyone, not even the gods," he said darkly. "And anyway, we can

defeat him, but we must have at least three mature Pahlavan warriors to counter his magic. Three is a magic number. If there are at least three Pahlavans in a battle against him, they will be able to summon the power, especially when we are accompanied by the warrior dog Sarama. Now there are only three of us left in the universe. Just three of us, and the Pahlavan dog. If something should happen to one of us, we could still win, but with only two of us, the Sorcerer's magic will...will..."

Tork had stood, apparently recovered. "You blaspheme the gods! How can you claim to be better than them? You demon! The demons always try to say they're better than the gods. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Don't you know they'll punish you?"

"Let them try!" The proud prince tossed his head haughtily.

Artavan wanted to touch him, to feel the texture of his clothing and armor. He so wished he could be like a god and discard own his filthy gray clothing. He wished he could fly like them too. He got off the ground and struggled to his knees. Artavan's hand reached out to touch the prince, but Drujo stamped his foot and glared at him.

"You want more?" The giant laughed, and then he kicked Artavan again.

Prince Devdata's frown deepened. "Leave him

alone. I like his spirit."

Drujo seemed disappointed when he heard the Prince's orders.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Artavan suddenly sprang up and grabbed the monster's neck. Drujo shook him off, and then picked him off the ground by one foot.

"I said leave him be!" Devdata approached menacingly and Drujo let Artavan fall to the ground heavily.

Devdata took hold of Artavan by the arm and shook him as if he were a naughty child. He held him so that Artavan felt his feet coming off the ground. Artavan's hair had tumbled loose and Devdata grabbed a fistful, bringing it to his nose.

"And as for you," Devdata said to Artavan, "Calm down and stop attacking Drujo." He laughed as if he found the situation very funny. "Are you a warrior? You must be of warrior blood. Who is your mother?"

Artavan didn't move his body at all. He felt absorbed by the Prince's eyes. "I...I am a warrior," he lied. "My mother is a princess among the wild Scythian people. We eat our enemies and devour their brains so that we may use their skulls as vessels to drink from!"

The Prince threw back his head and roared with laughter. "I like you. That is a good custom! What is your name?"

"I am Prince Artavan, and this is my good friend, Tork the Great. He too, has many armies."

He heard Tork bellow with angry surprise. "Artavan! What has gotten into you? Are you insane?"

"Well Prince Artavan, I am happy to make the acquaintance of another prince. Why is it that your attendant is dressed like that, and you are dressed in rags?"

"I have disguised myself for a mission, but I have completed it now. I would like to offer you my services in finding what you seek. Please allow me." Artavan's blood pulsed crazily through his head.

Tork tried to pull Artavan out of the Prince's clutches, but Devdata kicked him in the gut.

"Artavan! You are bewitched! You will come with me, and we will leave these demons to their own wits," Tork shrilled.

Devdata frowned as he looked Tork over. "I feel that you have extraordinary power. It's a shame that you're a simpleton."

"Now do you believe us? Do you understand our power?" the big one shouted.

"Well, not really. Anyway, I have a duty to my people. Even if I were a Pah...Pa ...whatever you call yourselves, my life has been pledged to help these poor humans." Tork pointed to Artavan. "Can't you see? I even deign to protect this boy,

who is addled. He is the village idiot, but I have befriended him."

"Where is the dog—the one we sent with you," Devdata demanded ignoring him.

"What dog? I don't even remember being sent here, if that's even true. What would you want with a dog anyway—unless you're considering ...say, do you eat dogs?"

"What?" Devdata shouted. He sniffed the air again and seemed to consider.

"How could a dog help you against this sorcerer... Angra... what's his name again?" Tork asked, smiling.

"You fool! The dog is sacred to us!" The Prince continued to shout.

"A stupid dog? Here you go, Artavan can be your dog, since he seems befuddled and bewitched by you." Tork smiled happily and patted Artavan's head as if he were a mutt.

Tears stung Artavan's eyes and he fought against them. He knew he had spoken like a total fool. He knew that Tork was right, but never before had Tork treated him like a slave! They had always been friends—equals... almost. A sob tore from his chest. He looked up and saw the prince grinning at him. Devdata sniffed the air again and Artavan was suddenly self-conscious.

"Where is she, that dog?" Drujo yelled in frustration.

"Probably dead, I would guess. Don't you know dogs have short lives? The bitch probably got beaten to death!" Tork spoke with confidence. He smiled at Artavan and tilted his head gaily. "Isn't it so, my servant?"

The two strangers looked shocked.

"No! It's impossible that she is dead! We'll seek her out. She may be masking her true power. Remember, if you don't join us, Angraminyu will kill you. You'll be dead, do you hear me?" Devdata shouted.

"I'm too powerful. He wouldn't stand a chance!" Tork brushed his hair away from his face proudly.

Devdata struck Tork's face with a sudden blow that Artavan's eyes couldn't really follow.

Tork got up slowly and walked toward Artavan.

"Come Artavan, I've done all I could. These rude men are starting to make me angry, and as a matter of honor, I never allow myself to be led by base emotions! Let's leave before I'm forced to give them both the beating of their lives."

Devdata released his grip on Artavan, who couldn't decide what to do. His heart was torn. He really wanted to stay with the Pahlavans. Artavan looked over at the bull's carcass. "Can't we eat first?"

Both of the Pahlavans burst into laughter. "The

humans here are interesting," the Prince said. "You, the servant of Prince Artavan! I warn you that if you lay a finger on that boy, I will personally kill you and make a drinking vessel from your skull."

Tork snorted angrily and pulled Artavan onto his frightened horse. He seemed angry, and why not? Artavan knew he had done wrong, but secretly he thrilled at the attentions of the prince. He felt an insane joy when Devdata had addressed him as a prince, even if he had insulted Tork.

Artavan could still hear the laughter of the strangers, but he also thought he could feel their disappointment. They had come all the way to this place from their far off kingdom hoping to find the last of their race, but instead Tork had rebuffed them. He would try to convince Tork to return, he decided.

CHAPTER FIVE

The men didn't try to stop Tork and Artavan, who began to move in the direction from whence they'd come. Artavan was tired and it was getting dark. He turned often to see if he could catch a glimpse of the two strangers, but the trees obstructed his view, and then they were too far from them. Tork was silent, and Artavan dared not speak. He had never before feared Tork's wrath, for they were true friends, but now...

"You insolent dog! Were you so frightened that you would make up such a mad tale just to save your skin? Were you going to fool them into thinking I was you? That I am the servant? I am sickened!" Tork spoke in clipped, angry tones.

Artavan was silent, but his throat felt choked with grief at Tork's meanness. Something about the proud prince had emboldened him, and he hadn't really thought before the words tumbled out of his mouth. All of his dreams of being a lost prince had sprung up in his mind as if they had

been real while he had been standing before the prince of the Pahlavans. Finally, Artavan swallowed and asked, "Do you think that sorcerer will come after us?"

Tork chuckled mirthlessly. "He won't come after us. He may come after me, if he's under the same illusion as those strangers are. Don't worry about yourself. I won't let you come to harm as long as you start behaving. Besides, you are of no importance to him. They seek some bitch, but I doubt that she even exists." He was quiet for a while.

Artavan felt more perverse than ever. He was angry with Tork and angry at his own fate as a slave. "I wish I were that dog," Artavan ventured boldly. "I would help them defeat the sorcerer!"

Tork's shoulders began to convulse and suddenly he roared with laughter. His horse took some uneasy dancing steps as he reacted to the outburst. Artavan let his arms go limp by his sides. The feel of Tork's body was suddenly unpleasant.

"Artavan, that's what I love about you. You're a source of endless amusement. You're like my little son, Torkanu. Sometimes he makes believe that he is a king, or a wild Scythian. I love to laugh at his antics. I guess that's why I like you so much! Imagine saying that you might like to be that dog!" He doubled over laughing. "You are a

wretched slave boy, but you maintain your sweet childish imagination. I just don't understand why you don't imagine yourself as a king or a queen or some such thing. Instead, you wish to be a dog!"

Artavan said nothing. Soon they came to a clearing and Tork leapt off his horse and tied the reins to a tree. He took his sword and cut down a stout green branch. "Bend over and I'll whip you."

Artavan had been beaten many times, but never by his dear friend. He could take a beating from anyone, but the insult and pain inflicted by someone he loved, and had been so familiar with, tore at his heart. Tears sprang to his eyes and he looked at Tork with disbelief. Tork averted his eyes.

Slowly Artavan turned away as Tork began to beat him about the legs and back. He refused to cry or scream. He kept telling himself that it didn't even hurt as badly as Bania's beatings.

Finally Tork stopped. He was panting heavily, but managed to ask, "So, Prince Artavan, where is your demon prince, the one who vowed to save you?"

Artavan said nothing, but he began to prepare a fire. He stood at attention as Tork rested himself and warmed his hands.

"What do you say we sleep here, Artavan? What is the matter? You look so dismal! I feel a lot better now, so don't worry on my account," he

said with a broad smile. "It really wasn't your fault at all. I take the blame for this incident. You see, all this time we have been friends. Oh the simplicity of children! Now you see where this has led. You believe that you are equal-nay, better than me. It is because I didn't distance myself from you."

"But we're friends!" Artavan cried.

"We *were* friends. You don't seem to understand. Our lots in life are fixed by the gods. Your lot as a servant is your punishment for being what you are, and perhaps what you have been, if you believe we have lived before. My good fortune is no accident. I've been blessed by the gods because of my good deeds and good thoughts. As children we ignored our stations in life, but now we must act according to the customs of society as ordained by the gods."

Artavan looked away, but his pride kept him silent.

"It's time to sleep." Tork sounded normal now, as if nothing had happened.

Artavan spread out Tork's bedding, and then helped him as he removed his outer clothing. He felt awkward treating his friend like a lord all of a sudden. Tork lay down, and Artavan, with no bedding of his own, turned to look for a tree to sleep under.

"Come Artavan, I'm cold alone here," Tork

called out.

Artavan stood there, wondering if he should flee. They had slept together many times as comrades, but Artavan didn't like the sound of Tork's voice. Suddenly his friend was unfamiliar and frightening. The gay sound of his voice was tinged with anger and hatred.

"Remove those rags though. I don't want to smell," Tork added. "Hurry! I'm cold. It is the least you can do."

Artavan removed his ragged clothing at last and slid into the bedding with Tork, who pulled him close. Artavan's loins trembled and he tried to roll into a ball, but he could feel Tork fumbling to remove his loincloth with one hand. Artavan felt him rubbing closer. Tork's cock groped him between his legs, and his breath quickened.

"I ... don't want that! We've never done that! I will stay and make you warm, but I don't want that!" Artavan moaned.

"Oh? You think that I haven't noticed the way you look at me? Do you think I haven't seen your vulgar desire to be possessed by a man? Listen Artavan, I know you all too well. I'll finally give you what you wanted, but don't think that you've become my lover. I've done this with countless servant boys, and it is high time that you be taken by me."

Tork fell silent as he drew Artavan's trembling

body close. He could feel Tork's hot breath, and his roaming hands. Artavan scrambled to rise suddenly, deciding that he'd rather die than do this, but Tork gasped and held him by the neck.

"How dare you try that?" Tork growled in a menacing voice. "Who do you think you are? You will do as I say!"

Artavan tried to pull away, but Tork held him in a vice-like grip. Suddenly Tork took him by the arm and roughly turned him over, pinning him painfully with one arm twisted tightly behind his back. Artavan felt his loincloth ripping and he cried out in fear.

"I... I'm sorry Tork! I... please! No!"

Tork said nothing, as he straddled the squirming Artavan and spread his legs apart by force. Artavan screamed as Tork tried to force himself into him.

Artavan felt a blow to his head and for a moment, darkness overcame him, but Artavan was strong, and he began to thrash wildly. Tork twisted his left arm so that Artavan felt as if it were being ripped off. Tork pushed hard against his buttocks, but Artavan clamped shut so that he screamed in frustration and he was unable to penetrate. Artavan twisted suddenly and Tork yelled in pain as his cock bent. He grabbed Artavan's arm and punched him first in the chest, and then in the gut. Artavan crumpled to the

ground in a blinding flash of pain, and he rolled himself into a ball, awaiting the next blow. It never came. He looked over to see Tork settling back into the bedding.

"You wanted that, Artavan! You approach me in lust, but then you think that I can hold back? Do you know that you can hurt a man by doing that? Now I will have pain in that area until the pressure is released. Get over here and take care of my pain! If you're too squeamish to allow me to enter your body, then do this thing with your mouth or at least with your hands!"

Artavan began to sob and curled himself into a tighter ball, refusing to listen.

"Fine," Artavan finally heard him say. "I will bring you back to the village and let them kill you!" Tork whined. "You have displeased me greatly, and I'll have to consider what I'll do to you. Anyway, for now, be grateful that I'm mild-mannered and calm."

After a few moments he added, "I think it'd be wise to take turns watching for danger. I battled that awful brute, so you'll take the first watch."

Artavan sobbed softly, wondering where the wonderful Tork of his imagination had gone. Was Tork really a cruel man, just like everyone else? Why had he hated Artavan for being scared? Artavan felt his tidy world of right and wrong, where Tork had reigned as the king of good,

dissolving. He listened now to the sounds of Tork relieving his swollen penis under the blanket. After a very short time, he heard a warbling cry, and the man was snoring at last.

He thought about the two strangers and wondered where they were. He hoped that they were safe from the sorcerer they feared. Everyone was afraid of sorcerers. He had heard that a sorcerer could point a small bone at a man and kill him instantly. They were known to sicken people by some process. They could also help someone in the case that another sorcerer was trying to harm the person.

He shivered in the growing dark, and wondered if the sorcerer had turned Tork into a monster. Yes, that had to be it. Tork had never behaved in such an awful manner before. His Tork was funny, mild-mannered, and kind. This new Tork was a deranged monster. Artavan sobbed hopelessly. He tried again and again to convince himself that Tork was now possessed, but small occurrences started to creep into his consciousness. He remembered incidents he had brushed off and imagined that Tork wasn't aware of his sometimes rude behavior. Now he wondered about Tork's delicate wife. Had Tork killed her as people claimed?

As cold made his limbs stiff, Artavan imagined himself as a proud warrior. He would be mounted

on a monstrous warhorse and his armor would glint in the rays of the early morning sun. His proud bearing and obvious strength would make men shudder. He would hold a radiant sword in an ornate scabbard hung over his shoulder and his clothing would barely cover his powerful limbs. He allowed himself to relish this image as he sat far from Tork. Artavan imagined that Tork would gaze upon him with love and respect. Tork would see him as an equal, but Artavan would never again be friends with him. A tear rolled down his cheek, followed by another. His stomach hurt from the blow, and the place where Tork had poked him so violently was sore, although he hadn't been penetrated. He felt a stab of hatred for the man who now slept so peacefully while he shivered. It was a hatred so unfamiliar that it hurt him physically.

Artavan found a large stone to sit on and stared into the inky darkness of the forest. He heard the horse shifting and nickering. Many hours passed in this way, and he was nearly asleep, his eyes heavy, and sometimes he was aware of having come out of sleep, even though his eyes were still open.

Artavan was startled this time, not by a noise, but by a lack of sound. The forest was profoundly silent. He peered into the thicket on all sides. The darkness had become absolute and he felt the rock

he sat on with his hands just to assure himself that he wasn't floating away into the night.

Then he saw it. The two eyes that stared at him were an iridescent yellow-green that shone in the night. They didn't blink, but seemed to regard him with such malevolence that they struck him dumb. He was helpless to tear himself away from those eyes until he heard a soft sigh from Tork's direction. This released Artavan from their spell and he yelled, "Tork! Wake up! There's a monster!"

Artavan's eyes left the sight of those eyes for only an instant, but then they were gone. Some light from the coming dawn spread out over the landscape, but his eyes remained fixed on the spot. Tork was suddenly shaking him by the shoulders.

"Wake up Artavan! It's only a dream!"

"No! I wasn't dreaming! I swear by the gods! There's something out there!"

Tork smiled indulgently. It was the smile of a father who wants to reassure his child that the ghosts and monsters that hide in awful corners away from the hearth are gone. He wiped a lock of hair from Artavan's face and sighed.

"No Artavan, don't be silly. I would've heard it. Besides, my horse always alerts me to danger, especially animals or... monsters. Horses are very clever, you know." He smiled widely and then

looked around himself. "Looks like he may still be asleep. See, he never even woke up. You're acting very strangely, young man."

Artavan jumped to the ground from his big rock and ran toward the spot where he'd seen the terrible eyes. There was nothing there but some freshly broken branches. He tasted the sap on one and it was fresh.

"See, nothing there. Am I right?" Tork asked confidently. "Artavan, you had a bad nightmare, but I will point out that you shouldn't have been napping. You should've stayed awake, or informed me that you were overcome by weakness and needed sleep. I trusted you..."

"Where is the horse?" Artavan asked in a voice laced with panic.

"Oh, I guess he'd be where I left him." Tork looked about, but the horse wasn't there.

"He must've gotten hungry and gone after better grass." Tork smiled. "Which reminds me, I could eat a flock of sheep!"

He looked well rested. Artavan felt faint and slightly sick with a mixture of exhaustion, anxiety, pain, and hunger. The monster eyes had been there. This he knew. Now he was afraid that they had lost Tork's horse to the beast.

"Let's try and find your horse, Tork. He couldn't have gone far."

"Now that's better. I bet you got scared by

those bad men yesterday, but don't worry. I've fought many men far more formidable than them," Tork boasted. "You saw how I defeated them, so that should put your mind at ease."

Artavan couldn't help but become angrier as he realized that Tork was acting as if nothing had happened between them. Here they were talking as if Tork hadn't just beaten him and almost raped him.

"Tork, do you really think you defeated them? They were powerful! They would've killed us both had they wanted to."

"Dear, dear Artavan, you see, I let them think that they were defeating me because I know the hearts of such men. They're so full of pride that they'd have wanted to fight unto death. Do you think I'd let you see me kill someone? No, no! I had to think of you and your delicate sentiments." Tork tossed off his head and looked about.

They found a stream to drink from as they searched for the lost horse. Artavan was exhausted and starving for food.

"See, we're still following its hoof prints! Dead horses don't walk, you know," Tork crowed. "I didn't want to say this, Artavan, but you must realize that you should've been awake. Had you been alert, my dear horse would never have run off to seek more grass. Why, you were sleeping so soundly that a herd of wild horses could've

kidnapped him to become their leader, and you would have slept through it. But why should I complain? It's silly to give a boy such a responsibility, am I not right?"

"I was awake, Tork! I swear I was, and stop calling me a boy. I'm almost twenty years old."

"Are you, then? You act like a small boy. You're foolish and impudent. I've beaten you only once, and very mildly, but if you push me, I'll whip you. It'll be good for your spirit, for a servant must know his place."

"I saw it, I swear by Mithra's crooked member!" Artavan cried.

A quick slap made Artavan land on his rump. "Boy! I see my folly in allowing you to become so close to me. Now you feel that you can speak so impudently, even blaspheming the gods in my presence!"

Tork rolled his eyes and scratched his head. "Lying is bad, you know, and you're a liar. Now let's continue our search and hope that we come up with something soon."

They walked on for quite a distance, and Tork finally stopped and slapped his forehead. Artavan looked around, but the prints had ended abruptly.

"It disappeared, Tork! It must have been taken by the horrible monster that I saw—the one with the yellow-green eyes. It flew up into the air with the poor thing and ate it! Maybe it had babies to

feed.”

Tork held his hand up imperiously for silence. “Don’t you see the obvious truth? Have you forgotten our flying visitors? Doesn’t it occur to you that those evil men played a prank on us? They can fly, you see, and it’s possible that they led the poor horse here and then flew away with him.” He looked sad for a moment. “They flew away with my poor faithful horse so that they could slaughter it to feed their fiendish hungers. They did this to try and provoke me, but I shall never be tricked into needless violence!”

Artavan hadn’t considered that the strangers could’ve done such a thing. *But what about the eyes? Those couldn’t have belonged to either of them. They were reptilian eyes. Maybe Tork was saying all of this because he was really afraid of the Pahlavans. Yes, that might be it. He claims not to want to fight them because he’s afraid!*

“But Tork! The eyes I saw! They were monster eyes. I’m sure they belonged to a dragon or maybe another kind of demon! Those strangers were mean, but I saw their eyes!”

Tork rolled his eyes. “Precisely my point. Whatever you saw was certainly a dream, but as for those men, they are demons. Did you see how the smaller one kept that evil grin on his face, even while he killed that poor bull? Yes, the eyes I saw were those of a demon, but they were in his face.

In the face of that stranger!"

"Tork!" Artavan yelled as he stamped the ground. "You just refuse to believe me!"

"Artavan, it is said that slaves are to be regarded as children. I don't know why I even try to reason with you. To make matters worse, even though you're a boy, you're lacking in even the skills that make even a female tolerable. I haven't rebuked you or beaten you with a stick for the thing you did—for sleeping during your watch. I haven't chastised you for foolishly being impressed by the evil strangers, but please don't try my patience!"

They walked for miles and Artavan tried to argue with Tork, but he wouldn't believe his story. After hours of searching for the horse, Artavan started to doubt himself too. He was exhausted from lack of sleep and from hunger. His fear was numbed by fatigue.

"Well, I'm convinced. Those awful demons, those...those monsters must have killed and eaten my faithful horse. He was a good and brave animal." Tork smiled at some fond memory. "If he had to die to satisfy someone's hunger, I wish it had been mine. He loved me enough to make that sacrifice!"

"That really doesn't sound like something they would do!" Artavan knew he didn't even sound convincing to himself.

Tork looked at him for a long moment and then brightened. "I know! Your desires have been stimulated by that big, balding brute! I'm right, aren't I? Baldness is strangely attractive to some boys, I've heard, because it recalls them of their fathers. I know how it is; do not try to fool me. You want to defend him because you like him! No problem, I understand."

He smiled as if he now understood. Artavan wanted to kill him. Instead, he unclenched the fist he'd made and put his hand down by his side.

"No, I don't like that guy Drujo," Artavan almost whined.

"Oh well, you even remembered his name! I'll bet you do really like him very much. Women and some perverse boys like bald men, as I've already noted. I couldn't remember either of their names. See what I mean, Artavan? You can't help yourself!" He smiled as if he understood everything about Artavan and his intentions.

Now both of Artavan's fists clenched and unclenched. He had beaten up many a loud-mouthed shepherd boy. He wasn't afraid to use his skills to shut that mouth up, but then he considered what would become of him, a poor slave with no master.

"Let's look for food; I'm hungry now that you mention it." Tork was already drooling.

Artavan hadn't mentioned it, and he felt queasy

with the thought that Tork would have eaten his own horse. Riding horses were different from herd-beasts. Most warriors would give up their lives for their horses!

"Very well, we'll look for food." Artavan looked around for signs of game. "We should be able to track down a deer or some other herd beast."

They looked for hours, but game seemed scarce. Besides, Artavan had never hunted before—at least not for wild game. He'd fished and even, although he was ashamed to admit, sometimes killed a domestic animal to satisfy his great hunger. They were both famished. Finally, Tork flopped down in frustration.

"Didn't the women teach you how to find roots and seeds and then make them into tasty breads and savory vegetable dishes," he asked drooling. "Are you of no use to me at all?"

"No," Artavan answered as rage pushed aside his fatigue. "Can't you just find some game? I thought all warriors like you could easily find and kill a variety of animals and birds to be cooked into luscious roasts."

Tork gave him a warning look, and Artavan averted his eyes. He hated being a slave more than ever, now that he was away from Nogard's house. They sat there for a long time before they finally got up and started to search for food again. They

found the stream again and Artavan was about to catch a large frog and swallow it whole, when he saw some small fish darting in and out of the plants that waved in the water. He followed the stream until he came to a rather large pool. He knew there would be good fish there.

“Look! We can catch fish!” Artavan yelled.

Tork looked at Artavan confused. “How can we catch them? Should I try to hit them with my mace? I never tried such a thing...”

“No, just watch me!” Artavan crouched near the bank.

He pulled out his knife and waited quietly. Tork watched for a while and then settled down for a nap. Artavan felt confident. This was how he ate when he went to the spring pastures with the sheep and cows. He watched fat fish moving lazily until he had memorized their patterns. They seem random at first, but they weren’t-not completely anyway. He poised himself above the water and in a flash, his knife pierced the water and he speared a large fish.

He pulled it out quickly and waited for the water to settle again and for the frantic movement of the fish to die down. Soon he had another and then another. It was a nice pile of fish, even if he did have to share them. After gutting them, he wrapped the fish heavily in wild grape leaves and laid them over a layer of smooth rocks in a hole

he'd dug with his larger knife and a large piece of flint. He put another layer of flat rocks over the fish parcels and then started a fire. Tork slept through it all. Artavan wished he'd helped, for they'd have had twice as many fish to eat. Seeing him asleep made Artavan groggy and he finally fell asleep. Before long, Tork was shaking him by the shoulders.

"Artavan! Wake up! I'm dying of starvation and I smell something good."

Artavan took a stick and pushed aside the burned out coals. The fish were done perfectly. Tork fell upon them instantly like a starved dog. For a moment, Artavan watched in shock, as Tork stuffed his face. Artavan got only one half-eaten fish, so he licked the leaves.

"You see, Artavan, why you must never blaspheme the gods? The gods are smiling upon us, thanks to me," Tork said as soon as the food was gone and he could talk. "They even prepared a meal so we wouldn't starve!" He wiped bits of fish from his face and licked his hands. "As long as you are with me, you will be taken care of. The gods love me because I love my fellow man!"

Artavan dared not mention the truth to Tork. They started to walk again and Tork began to sing a merry ditty that got stuck in Artavan's head even after Tork stopped in his tracks and stared at him as if he had three heads.

"What's that?"

He finally noticed that Artavan had been carrying his sword the entire time they had been wandering in search of the horse. Tork had swung his heavy mace over his shoulder, but he'd abandoned the sword, so Artavan had taken it. Actually, he'd had it all night, hoping to use it if he needed to protect them from wild animals. Artavan stood stiffly, refusing to answer.

"Artavan, what are you doing dragging around that heavy sword? You look absurd! I never asked you to carry it for me."

"Why?" Artavan asked. "If someone attacks us, at least I can defend myself!"

Tork smiled broadly and indulgently. "I can protect you, dear boy! Remember, I am the most powerful warrior in the whole world. Besides, although no one can see your offense, you know that it is against the law for a servant of such a low-class to even carry a weapon for his master."

"Well what if I were alone? What if you had to relieve yourself and..."

"You can come with me. That's a good solution now, isn't it?" Tork said brightly. "You've turned out to be quite the lascivious young man! Have you no shame? Now hand it over!"

Artavan was filled with rage. He looked at Tork and put his hand on the hilt of the sword as if to draw it. His mind was darkened with anger as the

welts on his body reminded him of the beatings, and as the pain in his rear reminded him that he'd almost been raped. He would keep the sword and find the strangers, even if he had to kill this gaping donkey. He wanted to hold the beautiful thing; besides, he liked the feel of it. The sword seemed part of him now and he took pride in being able to defend himself. It was better than the heavy stick he used for herding. He'd cudgeled many a wolf, but it would be exciting to cut one to ribbons. He shifted the sword's weight on his shoulder and smiled at the thought.

"You may carry it for me as long as nobody sees you. I wouldn't like to see you punished for doing such a thing," Tork grumbled finally.

* * * *

As night fell, they found a place to stop and rest. Artavan had been up the entire night before, and he was on the verge of unconsciousness. He shivered, but soon he was asleep, curling his body around the sword. Again, the intense quiet brought him out of his deep slumber with a start. The darkness was solid around him and he wanted to call out in fear, but he was dumbstruck. He didn't see Tork, but he scanned the dark woods. The eyes were there again. They were hungry eyes—the yellow-green eyes of ... of a

dragon. It had to be a small dragon, for the eyes would have been at Artavan's waist, had he been standing. Artavan felt for his sword and managed to stand, although his knees were knocking. It was all he could do. He had intended to approach the creature, but fear rooted him to the spot.

He finally heard rustling and saw the eyes coming closer. Fear mixed with a strange sense of purpose as he moved his sword into position and took a deep breath. Artavan advanced now and realized that he was eager to confront the creature, be it demon or animal, imaginary or real. It was his chance to prove to the world that he could be a warrior!

He held the sword firmly, but waited. A rattling sound came from the direction of the thing. As Artavan approached it, in the light of a quarter-moon he saw now that it had the shape of an enormous lion with a long mane almost touching the ground. He'd never seen anything like it, but he knew it was something like a lion. He had to admit that the only lion he'd ever seen was the hide of a dead one a traveler had brought to the village the year of the three-moon drought. He'd described the creature in detail, and if he was right, this animal was much different.

It bared huge yellow teeth at Artavan, but it didn't roar or growl; instead, a long red tongue flicked in and out of its mouth. It was the tongue

of a serpent or a dragon, he was sure. It moved into the clearing and Artavan saw its entire body now. It had only two front legs, and it dragged behind it a long, heavy tail, as if its hind-legs had been absorbed into it. Yellow-green scales, much like its eyes, gleamed from its back all the way to the end of its tail.

Because it had only two legs, Artavan expected it to be slow, but it moved with the speed and grace of an adder. He swung his sword with all his might, but it only clanged on its teeth as the creature advanced. He was sure that his attack had at least startled the thing, but instead he was knocked back against a tree by the unexpected solidity of his opponent. He bounded back, swinging wildly, but the monster's tail whipped out and tripped him. Artavan landed heavily, but tried to roll, although he felt great pain where he had been burned by the sharpness of the scales. His sword was on the ground and the thing took advantage of Artavan's shock to wrap its horrible tail around his legs. Then it began to drag him toward its mouth. In a flash, Artavan's victorious entry into the world of a warrior seemed to be destined to end in his ignoble death.

Artavan was dragged closer and it now opened its maw to take in his head, but his hands went to its eyes. He remembered the time he'd nearly been killed by a large male wolf. He'd dug his

fingernails into its eyes until it howled with pain and ran back into the woods. The scars it left him with decorated his chest and arms still. Now Artavan jabbed at the lion-dragon's eyes with his thumbs and it screamed a mewling, half-human cry as it released him and began to writhe like a snake that had been run over by the wheel of a wagon loaded with bags of grain. Artavan shot up and grabbed his sword. He ran it through the monster's chest and he was astonished that it had breasts like a woman. It had no fur on that part of it, and Artavan saw blood gush out of the mortal wound and over the hilt of his sword. He was still staring at it as it writhed in its final death agony, when suddenly Tork appeared and gave it a tremendous blow with his mace. It moved no more.

"Artavan! Are you unharmed? Oh the gods! At least I woke in time to save you from this horrible monster! Poor boy, you must be hysterical with fear!"

Artavan only stared at the beast he'd killed.

"What a horrible creature! It was trying to carry you off, probably to feed its young. Look!" Tork yelled into the night. "It's a female"

Artavan pulled out his sword slowly, perversely hoping that Tork would notice that he'd already killed it, but he said nothing. Artavan took hold of the dragon's tail and held it out. No,

it wasn't a female. It had the large male genitals of a cat-like creature. It smelled terrible!

"Ho! Don't touch it, Artavan! Have you gone mad? They often spring back to life, these monsters! I'll examine it."

They both noticed a slight movement in its belly.

"Oh the gods!" Tork cried out. "I told you it's a female. See there, it's pregnant."

He grabbed the sword from Artavan's hands and stood over the beast as he sliced its belly lengthwise. It did indeed appear that there was something in its belly, but what rolled out was a young man. The man was dressed in noble attire and had the face of a highborn person. They looked closer and saw the poor man shudder and then breathe his last.

"What a deception she was planning! She was to give birth to her hideous young in the form of a human, so that he could walk among us undetected. It would have been the end of the world, surely!" Tork gasped. He took in several breaths and puffed out his chest. "Again I have saved the world. Artavan, now you have seen with your own eyes. It is through these acts that I have come to be branded with greatness. It is ..."

"Tork," Artavan broke in. "It wasn't pregnant. I'm no stranger to anatomy. I've seen the innards of many animals, and I say the young man just fell

out of the creature's belly. That male monster ate the man." He felt quite a bit of pride saying this.

"Tork! Stop!" He screamed when Tork suddenly raised his sword.

"No! For the gods I will cut the head from this obscene body and you will see the blood of a demon!" he intoned with great seriousness.

"Look! Can't you see? That is the stomach of the beast!" Artavan used a stick to open the cut in the beast's belly. "That poor young man was a victim!"

CHAPTER SIX

They both turned suddenly when they heard a grunt. "This is one of the monsters that Angraminyu has sent to kill you," the young prince growled in his gravelly voice.

"He's found you already," the big, bald one said, nodding. "We warned you that he wouldn't just allow you to leave. He's only toying with you now."

"My question, is how did they find you?" Devdata looked them over with suspicion. "How is it that the Sorcerer knew what we've kept secret?"

"You lie! No doubt you sent this creature to kill me," Tork declared.

Devdata put a hand near Artavan and pulled back his robe to his chest. "What is this?" He ran his fingers over a particularly cruel looking welt.

"I had to fight the dragon monster! He whipped me with his tail many times, and then finally I killed him!" Artavan said, mixing the

truth with his lie. He didn't want to admit that Tork had beaten him.

Tork stepped in front of them and raised his hand to slap Artavan, but Devdata caught it in one big hand. He began to crush it until Tork was screaming for mercy on his knees.

"Please release my servant." Artavan spoke with as much disinterest as he could summon.

"Very well," Prince Devdata grunted.

"You demon! Don't you see that this demented boy is lying? I killed the dragon monster, and as for the boy's injuries, I beat him for telling lies!"

"Oh—you beat him when I warned you not to lay a finger on him?" Devdata asked with malice.

Tork didn't answer. He got up and brushed himself off.

"Where were you?" Drujo asked him.

"What do you mean? I was sleeping before the dragon came."

"Oh... really." Devdata looked at Tork with suspicion.

"I killed the dragon so as to save this worthless mad child, Artavan," Tork answered defiantly.

"Well, well." Drujo shook his bald head. "That was a very powerful creature and only one of us could defeat it, but don't become too confident. Angraminyu is only testing us."

"Go away!" Tork cried shrilly. "Just go away and leave me alone! I have defended this world

for as long as I have lived, and despite whatever pain I must suffer, I will always be the savior of my fellow man! You have no way of understanding what I am, or what I do. I am goodness and I am the hope. The monster is dead because of me! I fear no sorcerer! I fear no monster, and I don't fear you!"

Artavan didn't want them to go. Now he knew that the men had spoken the truth. There was a sorcerer and he was trying to kill them. He decided that whatever happened, he would stay with the Pahlavans.

"I think we should find food and eat," Artavan suggested.

The men looked interested at this. He turned toward them.

"Since you can fly, bring some of that good bull meat, if the wild animals have left any," Artavan demanded of Drujo.

They looked puzzled.

"Well the bull you killed, Prince!"

They both laughed again. "We ate all of it," Devdata said almost shyly. "We were hungry."

Artavan believed him, but he was astonished. He didn't appear to be lying, but how was it possible? These men weren't normal, this he knew. No normal man can fly, but eating a huge bull in one day? He felt admiration.

Devdata sniffed the air and moved closer to

Artavan, sniffing deeply. He backed away, wondering if what Drujo had said before was true. He wanted to eat Artavan! Maybe they were part of the fabled man-eater tribe. Maybe the Prince was hungry enough to eat him. He took another few steps away from them, but the Prince followed and placed a hand on Artavan's shoulder. He turned him around and looked at him with interest.

"Who are you?" the Prince asked again. "You seem different from the other. Tell me more about your people."

"I'll go kill a deer, and we can talk later." Artavan didn't want to answer that question.

"Drujo! Go kill an animal for him," the Prince ordered. "I find humans to be quite amusing. I wish to examine him."

Drujo frowned, but obeyed. Artavan watched him with wonder as he launched himself into the air, looking down upon them before he headed east.

"Go away, both of you!" Tork almost sobbed. "I will have to punish you once I recover from my awful fight with the dragon. Do be gone if you wish to be spared an ignoble beating!"

"Tork! Your behavior is not befitting a Pahlavan warrior! It's interesting that this young human seems to have much more sense than you do, and he is a mere mortal! Boy! How did you

kill the dragon?"

Artavan stuttered in response, but finally he regained his voice. "I have seen many of these monsters in the woods where I hunt animals." He lied although he felt like a perverse fool. "I tracked him by his eyes, and then I dealt him a might blow with my sword."

"Lies! Lies!" Tork screamed.

"Be gone at once!" Devdata ordered him. "I wish to converse with this, my fellow prince. I would kill you at once if it were not that you are, besides us, the last Pahlavan. If we didn't need you, I tell you I would have killed you as soon as I saw you!"

Tork began to slink into the woods.

"Continue," Devdata ordered Artavan.

"Well, the dragon ate my horse, so I had to get my revenge." Artavan crossed his arms on his chest and looked upwards.

The Prince looked at him quizzically and then burst into laughter. "You've done that? Well, well, I'll have to consult with you when I see another monster I don't recognize." Devdata the prince stared until Artavan felt uneasy and he shifted his eyes, trying to avoid him.

"I wish to hear more." Devdata came closer.

Artavan looked at the prince as he spoke. The hair that tumbled over his shoulders was glossy black, and some of it curled over his forehead. His

eyebrows were delicate, but very dark. Artavan was ashamed that he was so excited by Devdata's broad chest, narrow hips, and muscular arms and legs. He stared as if he could take Prince Devdata in altogether. Up close, his costume was even more glorious than he had thought. Artavan reached for his chest and stroked him.

"You are a god," Artavan stammered, not caring that it might anger him.

Devdata tossed his head. "I'm not a god; I'm a Pahlavan warrior." He broke off, looking away. He turned his attention to Artavan again, pulling up his rags and looking at the welts. His face was a mask of fury at the sight of the purplish-red swellings.

"I like the wounds!" Artavan cried. "It just shows that I won a hard battle!"

Devdata held his chin and brought him close. Artavan was overcome with shyness and tried to look away, but he didn't step away from the Prince. Slowly he brought their faces closer until their lips met. It was Artavan's first kiss. He felt faint with the joy that coursed through him as the Prince ran his tongue over his teeth hungrily. Artavan didn't resist when that tongue pushed past his teeth and ran over his palate. He'd never felt such exquisite sensations, and he gasped repeatedly.

"Breathe through your nose," the Prince

murmured as he attacked Artavan's lips in earnest. He put a big arm around him to hold the boy from falling over as he devoured him with his mouth. Finally, he looked down at Artavan with an impish grin. "Have you never kissed before?"

Artavan straightened. "Yes. I have many wives at home, you see. And many children too."

Devdata smiled. "Really? How old are you?"

Artavan knew better than to continue, so he changed the subject even though he longed to touch him again. Artavan's hands itched to feel those hard muscles and to touch his angry, taunting lips again.

Presently Drujo appeared in the sky, landing near Artavan and roughly depositing a deer on the ground. Artavan quickly bent over it, examining it for wounds. Its neck was broken, but its skin was unblemished.

He gasped at Drujo. "What did you do? Did you run it down and break its neck with your bare hands?"

He smiled mirthlessly, but Artavan saw pride in his eyes. He realized then just how dangerous that man was. He returned his attention to the deer. It had to be gutted, so Artavan removed his coarse, heavy sash and bound the deer by the hind legs. He then threw the end of it over a tree so that he could hoist it up. The men watched as he pulled the heavy carcass up, never offering to

help. Artavan took out both of his knives and began the job of gutting and skinning it.

When he was done, he admired the flawless hide of this beast and realized he'd never seen such a deer in these parts. It had delicate hooves, but there was long fur that started above each hoof. The fur was dense and at the chest of the creature, there was a clump of long, soft fur that pleased him greatly.

He started to fashion an enormous spit to roast the deer over the fire. Artavan lifted the speared animal with great difficulty, and tottered under its great weight, but he refused to ask for help. Then he saw the Prince motion subtly with his pointed chin for Drujo to help. He lifted the carcass without difficulty and set it over the forked sticks Artavan had set up on either side of the fire. He arranged the burning logs and the roast began to emit a mouthwatering fragrance as it cooked.

Artavan took a sharp flint and began to scrape the skin, which he found to be wonderfully soft and full. He quickly gathered bark from the Aranda tree, which is used for curing fresh skins and he rubbed it carefully and then scraped it again. All the while the Pahlavans watched with the curiosity of small boys. Every once in a while, one of them leaned closer as if trying to understand what Artavan was doing. He continued to work silently.

When Artavan was satisfied that no flesh or fat remained on the hide, he set it in the sun to dry. He longed for it to be dry. Suddenly Prince Devdata held his hand out toward it, as he'd done to the bull, but this time a weak flash came out of it. Artavan wanted to scream for him to stop it—to stop destroying his lovely pelt! Instead, he watched dully as the prince ruined it. When the flash died down and he could see again, Artavan rushed over to pick it up, wringing his hands in despair, but it hadn't been destroyed! It was as soft and supple as if it had been tanned in wood-ash lye for two months and then dried slowly with much kneading. He rubbed his face in it and smelled it deeply. He was delighted.

Artavan looked over at the pair, but neither smiled now. The prince walked over to him and grabbed the rough garment he wore, ripping it off Artavan's body. He had a look of disgust on his face as he tossed it into the bushes. Artavan covered his private area with his hand, but Drujo wrenched it away and looked him over curiously after tearing off the loincloth as well.

"He is like us. He has little hair and it is of a light color, but he has the same organ we have. I thought they might be different." Drujo sighed, and then he effortlessly lifted Artavan and sat to examine the rest of his body. Artavan yelped as the big man spread his buttocks and grunted. He

was thrown down presently.

Artavan was naked, but what shamed him the most were the cruel welts on his body from Tork's beating. He looked up at Drujo defiantly. "That dragon sure whipped me with his tail!" Artavan tried to look proud, although his heart beat wildly.

"Get dressed with that skin," Devdata ordered him. "I can't stand the sight of your apparel."

Artavan's face flushed with embarrassment.

"Those garments of yours were horrible," Drujo agreed. "Why would you wear such things? You should dress that Tork character with those. Whatever your mission, you need not go about in disguise now."

Prince Devdata motioned to the deerskin with his chin.

"Put on a decent garment." Devdata sniffed the air and his mouth opened slightly as he seemed to concentrate.

Artavan rushed over, forgetting any hint of shame and sat before the deer hide with his legs bent under him. He rubbed it all over his body now, reveling in its softness and fragrance. Then Artavan rolled on it just as a dog rolls on some disgusting thing it delights in. The Prince finally smiled, but the ogre Drujo drooled and leered. Artavan ignored him and began to drape the skin on himself, trying to figure out how to wear it.

"Knot the legs over one shoulder," Devdata

suggested.

He did, but he realized he needed a sash, so he tore down a supple vine and used it. Later, he thought, he'd find a long animal tail and use that. Then he remembered the lion-dragon's body and began to run in that direction.

"Drujo, go fashion the boy a fine sash from the tail of the slain monster!" Devdata ordered, as if guessing his thoughts. "Prepare it as I have done this one. I will be amused if he decides to roll on it," he said in a taunting lilt.

Artavan was willing to roll on it if it turned out as his hide had. He wanted to thank him, but he just smiled and began to tend to the roast, which was fragrant as it cooked.

When Drujo returned, Artavan saw that he'd only taken a strip of the scaly skin, which shone like gems. He remembered then that it had been no ordinary lion's tail, but a huge, serpent-like thing. Like the deerskin, the strip of tail had been cured and dried beautifully. Artavan wanted to hug Drujo, but his leering eyes stopped him; and then there was the smell of the roasting deer. He tied the sash around his waist distractedly and then ran toward the roast. They followed him silently.

Parts of the meat were done cooking, and Artavan decided that it would be acceptable to begin to take strips of it. He cut off a big chunk

and took a hungry bite of it before handing it to the prince, who took it in an almost delicate manner.

Artavan made to give Drujo a hunk of meat, but he reached over and tore a half-cooked leg off the roast with astounding strength, and he fell upon it like a wolf. Just then Tork appeared, sauntering out of the woods.

"What have they done to you Artavan?" he cried. His eyes were red with anger. "Oh the gods! You're nearly naked! Did they... did they...?"

Artavan tossed a hunk of meat at him and he caught it with ease. All concern for him dissolved as Tork began to eat it greedily. For a while, nobody spoke as they glugged themselves. Drujo and Devdata even ate parts of the meat that seemed uncooked. They ate until they finally felt satisfied. In his life, Artavan had never before eaten until he was full, so this was a strange sensation.

Drujo cracked a large leg bone and sucked at the marrow. He looked sleepy. It had been a silent feast. Even Tork ate with abandon and said nothing. With his full belly and new garments to cover his body, Artavan no longer felt like a slave. Even if they were demons or fiends, or whatever Tork thought them to be, he'd never experienced such bliss as he felt when they'd eaten like a pack of wolves.

Everyone stretched out on the grass except for the Prince. He seemed satisfied to stand there with his arms crossed over his chest, looking off into the distant horizon. As Artavan tried to fall asleep, he remembered the feel of Devdata's lips. He wondered about more. He wanted to feel Devdata's body close to his. He wanted to feel him inside. The sweet sensation caused by these thoughts kept him up for some time.

* * * *

It was a glorious morning when Artavan opened his eyes to Tork's loud voice.

"Artavan! Wake up! What are we doing here consorting with these rogues? We've got to move on!" Tork spoke urgently as he shook Artavan's shoulders. Artavan looked over to the Prince and he stood in the same spot, still regarding the horizon as if he'd never moved all night.

"No!" Artavan cried. "That dragon was proof of their story. There *is* a sorcerer and he is out to get us! We have to..." Tork shook Artavan so hard that his teeth rattled.

"Don't you see, you simpleton? They sent the evil lion-dragon just to fool us!"

"Stop it!" Artavan yelled and pushed him over so that he landed on his bottom. "I believe them. We've got to help find the dog they seek. Together

we can all defeat the Sorcerer. Tork, use your head! Haven't you seen how powerful the Pahlavans are? Don't you see that anything they fear must be awful beyond belief?"

"Well I defeated and killed their so-called powerful lion-dragon! Maybe they're not as strong as you believe. I think they're liars."

"I believe them and I'm going to stay with them. You can go home if you want, Tork."

Tork smiled indulgently. "No, no. Rather you go home. There's no need for you to become involved. You need to go home and get some decent clothes on. I'll wager these men don't even want you here if their story is true. You'll get in the way." He looked over at the prince, who ignored him. "You don't want the slave around, do you?"

"Call him something respectful," Artavan warned Tork, "like Prince of Princes, or the Dark Prince of the Pahlavans! Don't you see he's royalty?"

"Nonsense! They could be beggars for all you know, or even robbers. Besides, he is very rude. I told him to call me Lord Tork, but he ignores me."

"Fool!" Artavan shouted. "Don't try to bring up another issue. Beggars and robbers can't fight as they do. Maybe they're gods, so close that cave you call a mouth!"

Tork started incredulously.

Prince Devdata's mouth curled into a crooked smile. "That's right. You have spoken the truth. If only Tork were as intelligent."

"Sir," Tork intoned furiously, "this boy here is my slave. He is a slave because he is stupid, therefore he cannot be intelligent." He walked over to Artavan and raised a hand as if to slap him in the face. Artavan balled his fists and Tork instead continued his speech. "You see, he is slave. I do with him what I wish. He will not continue to accompany you. I desire that he return to face judgment, for you see—he is a murderer! He killed his last lord."

Devdata regarded Artavan with curiosity. "You did that?"

"Yes Prince." Artavan stared at the earth in shame.

"Very well. I have decided that you will indeed accompany us on our mission, if that is your wish. To think that you have already proven your manhood in such a noble manner." Prince Devdata had a twinkle in his eye.

Artavan beamed and Tork sputtered in rage. "You have no claim over him!"

"Neither do you," Drujo roared.

The prince slowly looked over at Artavan and sniffed the air. He closed his eyes for an instant and seemed to consider something.

"The boy shall accompany us," he said

decisively.

"You have no say in the matter," Tork yelled.

"Silence, Tork!" The Prince shouted. "Go wash yourself and act like a warrior. Have you no pride?"

Tork was about to retort when he saw Drujo glaring at him and flexing his muscles. He appeared eager to pound Tork again. Tork obeyed.

Artavan set off to bathe after Tork had retreated. He walked to the pool they'd used earlier, stripped off his beautiful deerskin, and jumped in. He played happily in the water, rinsing his mouth and washing his long hair. As he broke through the surface after chasing fish, he saw the Prince staring impassively.

"Come in and swim with me!" Artavan called. "The water is so cool!"

His frown deepened slightly, but he began to undress. Artavan tried not to look, out of respect, but soon he felt an arm encircle his chest. He dared not breathe as he felt the caress of warm lips on his neck.

He could feel the Prince's erection poking his backside exploringly.

"Have you never done this before?" Devdata asked when he noticed Artavan's tenseness.

"No sir. I believe that when I love someone deeply, I will understand and be ready," Artavan

said with a trembling voice.

"Oh, what about your many wives?" Devdata asked. "You do nothing with them? You do not enter them?"

"I... uh... that is to say," Artavan sputtered.

"Never mind, I like your spirit, human. Perhaps it isn't good for me to try your soft body in this way just yet." Devdata stepped back. "Here, will you touch my swollen member? I've had no release for some time."

Artavan turned, blushing all over and gently held the Prince's cock, stroking it softly under the water. He was very careful and respectful, but Devdata looked dissatisfied and impatient.

"You certainly have never done this before, have you?" Devdata laughed. "I'll show you how it is done." Artavan stepped back fearfully, but Devdata put his arms around his chest as he turned to flee. As if he were a rag, the Prince dragged him to a shallow spot and sat the blushing young man on his lap.

"Have you never done this while alone? Do you not pleasure yourself?"

Artavan was speechless as the Prince began to rub him, expertly applying just enough pressure so that Artavan was arching his back and kicking as the waves of pleasure nearly drowned him. Devdata milked him until he was faint and limp.

"That's the proper way to do this thing." He

then lifted Artavan out of the water and set him down under a big tree. "Next time you will return my favor."

Devdata took Artavan's head on his lap and ran his fingers over his lips and nose and then his eyes. Then he lifted Artavan's head and kissed him again. Artavan trembled with anticipation when Devdata nibbled his neck, lapping his chin with his silken tongue.

"Prince! I want to know more about you and why you came here."

Devdata looked disappointed, and he delayed by kissing him again. Artavan sighed and put his arms around Devdata's neck. They sat like that for a moment before Devdata began to talk.

"I was the one who ordered that the Pahlavan children be sent to other dimensions to avoid the extinction of our race, for I knew that one day the Sorcerer Angraminyu would want to destroy us all. Angraminyu kept me as a pet, thinking that because of my youth, I would become his faithful servant. He laughed at my childish antics; I would smash things in my rage and he thought that this was cute. Even at that young age, I hated him and what he had done to our people. Far from becoming his pet, I was becoming his avowed enemy.

"The Sorcerer Angraminyu thought that because he had taken away my father, my throne,

and my freedom, that I would be his servant. He didn't count on the pride of our race. He could take away everything from me, but not my honor!

"I served him well as I grew, killing thousands of people, and destroying countless cities under his cruel orders. However, I knew what he could never know. Sometimes it drove him wild with anger as he tried to delve into my mind and steal its secrets with his sorcerer's skills. He could never read my mind because my pride stood as a shield against him.

"One day he overstepped my limits by trying to force me to touch my head to his feet. I'd been willing to bow at the waist, but this was too much for me. The powerful sorcerer Angraminyu took me by my hair and tried to push me to the ground while his court laughed, and to his great surprise and fury, he was unable to do it. Never before had anyone been able to resist him. He then called upon my own Pahlavan troops to cut me to pieces, but they had learned well. They feared death at his hands, but they feared me much more.

"Thus Angraminyu finally learned of my true strength and in his anger, he destroyed every Pahlavan except for me and the commander-in-chief of my armies, Drujo. We were too fast for him. Our army put up a tremendous fight and many of his faithful troops were destroyed. I thought that we had him beat, for his troops were

no match for the Pahlavans. Finally, he had to join the fray, and with his black sorcery, he was able to defeat our armies. I ordered Drujo to retreat, and we've been seeking the exiled Pahlavan warrior-children since then."

A tear that looked like a brilliant cut diamond shimmered in his eye, but he wiped it away angrily. Artavan hugged him closer and began to weep.

"Don't cry." Devdata's voice was gentle now. "I didn't tell you all of this to hurt you."

"I just feel sad for you. I can't imagine suffering like that," Artavan sobbed.

Devdata ran his fingers through Artavan's hair and finally said, "Maybe you can."

"Is Tork really a Pahlavan like you?"

"Mmm..." Devdata sat him up and began to kiss him deeply again, so that Artavan forgot his question. He lay in Devdata's arms until he fell asleep.

* * * *

Devdata set him down gently although the hunger in his loins was making him hard. To be so close, and yet have to abstain was killing him. The boy's body was well muscled, but his neck and face were so soft. His hands wanted to touch him again in that place, to feel his shuddering as he came, to

see the shock of pleasure that coursed through him. He longed for those eyes to open again and then he could see the undisguised desire mixed with childish delight and shyness. He looked down on the gentle face and decided that it was better to wait. The boy needed a lot of reassurance, and Devdata knew that he wasn't very good at that. In a way, he thought, it was his first time too, for he had never before been in love.

* * * *

Artavan reclined under the tree, weak with pleasure, until he felt a kick to his side.

"Have you become mad? How dare you expose yourself to me in this way? I will in no way take part in this filth! Remember, Artavan, the beating I gave you when you last tried to force your lowly self upon me!"

Artavan rolled over and retrieved his deerskin robe, his pleasure forgotten. He ran back to the camp and gathered a few items including the sword. Tork tried to take it from him by force, but Artavan pushed him in the chest and bared his teeth.

"You have indeed been possessed by a demon. You are no longer my dear slave—one I allowed to come close to me although you are low! You are a beast! A prideful beast!" Tork bellowed.

The two Pahlavans came to watch the exchange. They were silent until finally Devdata spoke.

"Shut up, Tork! We must try to guess where the dog is. That is our mission. Come if you like, or die like a fool!"

Tork scratched the back of his head, his merry eyes lighting up. "You do not seek a dog, a bitch. It's a girl you seek, isn't it. Is she beautiful?"

"She is a dog. A bitch. She is beautiful because she is powerful," Devdata growled.

"Nonsense! A fighting bitch? You jest, for sure!" Tork had his hands on his hips, looking amused.

Devdata's smile looked mean now.

"Where would such a dog reside?" he addressed Artavan. "You must know! Where do the female warriors go to train? Tell me boy!"

Artavan held his hands over his ears to block out his roaring voice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Artavan was thrilled that the Prince had addressed him, and he wanted to be helpful. He didn't want them to leave, so he pointed to the west, toward the fabled city of Kimrit. He nodded silently.

"That is crazy!" Tork pointed out. "This slave knows nothing of cities, for this is the very first time he has left the small village of his master. Can't you see that you are asking a mere servant? I have traveled to many lands, and I know that there is no such place where female warriors go to train."

"They go to Kimrit!" Artavan knew he was uttering a perverse lie, but he couldn't stop his mouth. "The female warrior dogs go to Kimrit, where there are great palaces and..."

"Artavan!" Tork screamed in disgust. "Are you mad? Why do you lie? What has possessed you..." He turned toward Devdata. "Have you charmed this poor boy who used to be healthy?"

What have you done to him? Now he is dressed like a beast and follows you two as if you were a pack of wolves!"

The Prince smiled. "Let us set out immediately. This young man is a prince, Tork, you should therefore show respect for him."

"Listen here, little demon, you have no authority over us. Try to understand. To the west of us lie the kingdoms of the Sogdians and the plains where the wild and dangerous Massagetae live. If you can pass through the Caucasus Mountains, you will find the lands of the wild men we call the Scythian Paralatae. They will kill you and make your skulls into wine goblets, and your scalps they will use to fashion cloaks. As for women out there..."

"There are female dog warriors there," Artavan cried, remembering what he'd heard a Greek say about the Scythians. "The women there fight just like men, in fact, they are feared more than the men."

Tork was seething with anger. "Enough of your madness, Artavan! You two go back to your lands and leave us alone!" He struck out at Artavan's face, but he ducked and glared at him.

"We will go to the lands where dog women fight," Devdata intoned evenly. "You can go back, Tork. We need only three Pahlavan warriors to fight the sorcerer Angraminyu. When we find the

dog, she will be the third, although she is a beast. You may go and run away. Say goodbye to your master, Prince Artavan, because when the Sorcerer finds you, you will be killed."

Artavan moved to Devdata's side and observed that his nose sniffed the air momentarily. He didn't turn to Artavan, but stepped closer to Tork and crinkled his fine little nose.

"I will go with you only because I have vowed to protect Artavan, my slave." Tork reluctantly agreed.

Drujo was eager to leave. "Master, these two can't fly," he pointed out as Prince Devdata was preparing to launch himself off the ground.

"I'll carry the boy. You take Tork," the Prince ordered.

"No! Never! I won't allow such a thing. Artavan! Come right over here and get away from that demon. He means to kill you when he is in the sky and I can't help you." Tork's face twisted in indignation, but again Artavan moved closer to the prince.

"Well Tork, you think I need to trick you? I could defeat you without any help from Drujo. Even he has defeated you. Don't be a fool," Devdata snarled. "Besides, I have taken a fancy to this human. If you dare strike him again, you will answer to me."

Tork was furious. "You will not take my slave. I

will take him back as soon as he comes to his senses. For now, I can see that he is bewitched! Anyway, I walk on my own, and I will discuss it no more."

Devdata was growling deep in his throat. Artavan thought he sounded like a wolf. "Very well, we will walk like a herd of helpless deer." He grunted with disgust and started to walk with his proud shoulders thrown back and his massive chest forward.

They set out for the west and Artavan felt consumed with guilt. He'd just lied so that Prince Devdata would stay with them. What would happen when they discovered that there was no place where female dog warriors train and that Tork was the one telling the truth? Even worse, Artavan thought, what if he caused them to be killed because of his lies? He felt miserable, but he was so attracted to the Pahlavans that he refused to confess.

The Pahlavans were untiring, but Artavan refused to complain. He didn't want to be a burden, so he trudged on even though his legs were screaming with pain. They walked for the entire day until they reached a large plain. Artavan hoped for more game, and the Prince must have thought the same, because he ordered Drujo to go and find a large deer or antelope. Drujo appeared to be deeply frustrated by the

slow pace and seemed bursting with energy and irritation as he took off.

Artavan began to build a fire. Tork complained about his aching feet, but soon he left without another word.

"So this is the path toward the place where women warriors go?" Devdata asked, looking deeply into Artavan's eyes. He leaned closer and sniffed his face slowly. Artavan reddened, remembering the Prince's hands on his body. Artavan found Devdata's scent intoxicating, and he sniffed him back. Artavan stammered finally and Devdata frowned deeply. Devdata moved closer and took Artavan's face into his two big hands.

"Tell me what you are, boy! I sense something about you."

Artavan was frozen. He felt one of Devdata's hands move down to his crotch. He blushed furiously because he'd been hoping to hide the fact that he was erect. Artavan cursed the fact that men couldn't hide their desire; at least he couldn't! Devdata pushed aside the deerskin and Artavan was exposed. The Prince seemed undisturbed, but Artavan remembered Tork's wrath.

"You like me?" Devdata asked.

"I... I... yes. I'm sorry for being so rude!" Artavan bowed deeply, and he heard the Prince's laugh.

"I want to hold you." Devdata lifted Artavan off his feet for an instant. His legs were limp with shock and they bent when Devdata settled him to the ground. He bent over him close, as if inviting a kiss. Artavan closed his eyes tightly and began to kiss Devdata inexpertly. He tried to imitate the kiss he'd received, but Devdata soon took the lead and they were holding each other close. Artavan was drunk with desire. His deerskin had ridden up so that his erect cock rubbed on clothing until he felt Devdata pull away his covering. The thrill of the feeling of Devdata's nakedness on his belly made Artavan's eyes spring open. He saw a shadow and looked up.

"There's Drujo!" he cried, pulling away. A large form was descending from the sky.

"He's got no game," Artavan mused, as he got closer. "I wonder why he's returning."

Devdata's face went rigid for a moment and then he turned to Artavan. "That's not Drujo! That is Rangohar, a henchman of the sorcerer Angraminyu. Hide boy! There is no way he could have found us unless we were betrayed."

Artavan realized the real danger of the situation in the urgency of Devdata's voice and he ran, hiding behind a large stone. The man floated down in front of the prince, his arms akimbo and he said sternly, "So Prince Devdata, we've finally caught up with you. Believe me, if it weren't for

orders from the great Sorcerer Angraminyu himself, I'd kill you on the spot. You've been such a headache for us. As it is, the Great Sorcerer has sent me to tell you that his anger against you is sated. He has killed your entire race, save for the two, whom you are trying to find, yourself, and that ogre Drujo. He has ordered me to tell you that he will take you back as his servant. He realizes with his great omniscient vision into the mind, that you Pahlavans are not ordinary creatures. He realizes that to be haughty, rebellious, and bellicose are qualities you are born with and cannot be changed.

"Lord Angraminyu appreciates your service; however, and has decided to spare your worthless life. The only thing he asks is that you submit to wearing this attractive bracelet with his insignia on it. It will distinguish you as his, even when you forget your bloodthirsty self and disobey him. Do not be afraid, it only lets him know where you are."

He finished this speech and held out a glimmering bracelet. Artavan was instantly attracted to its beauty; besides, there was something that drew him to it. Devdata laughed bitterly and although Artavan could only see him from behind, he knew he now wore his crooked, smug smile. He stood as defiantly as ever, his arms still folded over his muscled chest.

"One thing I can say for Angraminyu is that he is clever," Devdata said in a taunting voice. "Only a bracelet, is it Rangohar? It's not a device for his wicked spell binding, is it? I have seen this before. Once you get that bracelet on a person, he will be controlled. No matter how strong he is, the magic in that cursed thing will compel a man to act according to the will of Angraminyu. You go back and tell your master that I'll be bound by no one. I am the Prince of the Pahlavans and I bow to no one, especially a lowly cretin like him!"

"Still hurting over that, are you? Well I'd watch my tongue, if I were you, young man, but Lord Angraminyu has promised not to make you bow to his feet again. Mind you, we will expect that you treat him and his officers with respect, even if that is a difficult task for a little wild bull like yourself." Rangohar stood prettily, his braided hair glowing.

He dangled the cursed bracelet before the prince and smiled a very charming smile. Artavan saw that this was no ordinary man. Although he was enormous in size, he had a well-proportioned and handsomely muscled body. He didn't seem to have the hardness that the Prince exhibited, but this made him seem cultured and intelligent. He had the lovely face of a woman, except that it was more angular, and his voice was gentle and persuasive, almost prissy; despite his obvious

dislike of Devdata. Artavan was especially attracted to the lovely plait of hair that hung down his back. It shone by itself, but was also enhanced with strings of jewels.

Devdata stood firm, but his shoulders tightened. "You can take that and hang it over Angraminyu's skinny neck. I take no orders from a deformed worm. I am a prince. I am royalty, while he is a drunken slug. Go tell him that I order him to drown himself in a puddle of loose excrement!"

"Well then I will clamp it on you by force!" the messenger Rangohar said in his sweet voice. "You are no match for me, Devdata; you never were. I'd kill you dead, if it weren't for the Master's orders; but mind you, I will now enjoy beating you within an inch of your life. When I have my way with you, I will force this thing over your hand and you will mewl like a newborn puppy. I will carry you back to Master Angraminyu in this condition, and you will bow deeply to him. You will be forced to kiss my feet, for you will be my menial servant."

Devdata laughed mockingly. "You know nothing about us Pahlavans, Rangohar. The more we fight, the stronger we become. The more we suffer beatings, the more we gain in stamina. I have fought many a battle for your worthless master while you sat in perfumed baths, lacquering your nails and rouging your soft

cheeks."

This seemed to enrage Rangohar, whose eyes became bloodshot as they narrowed dangerously. "Let me see how you've improved then, you puny child!"

Now Artavan almost flew out of his hiding place. Prince Devdata began to growl and he arched his body slightly, muscles bunching and bulging. He cried out in a deep, angry voice. To Artavan it seemed like the sound of extreme effort, pain, and rage. A nimbus of a blue color sprouted from his body and grew in intensity. He was soon surrounded by a swirling mass of energy. He panted with his mouth open for a moment before beginning to laugh, a sound that was low and menacing.

"You've increased in power since we last saw you, young prince. But you're still a tiny, weak creature compared with me."

He didn't at all seem surprised by Devdata's appearance. Artavan was fascinated, but he was more frightened than ever. Devdata's hair waved in the maelstrom that emanated from his body and he glowed with a preternatural internal light.

"Your pride will be your downfall!"

Saying this, Rangohar rushed at Devdata; who sprang into the air. Rangohar appeared surprised by this and lost his footing. Taking advantage of his lapse, Devdata brought his clasped fists down

on the bigger man's neck. Rangohar fell to his knees and roared, a sound that seemed incongruous with his soft face and gentle voice. Devdata landed and rammed a knee into his face and Rangohar flew back with a crash as he felled several trees. He spat two perfect white teeth onto the ground. Blood ran from his nose and mouth, but he laughed.

"I only toy with you, Devdata. You have your fun for now. You are such a spoiled child!" Rangohar's voice was much deeper than it was before, and Artavan found that he was trembling in fear.

At this, the Prince punched Rangohar's head from the side, and when he fell, he grabbed hold of his ankle and flew up into the air. Artavan couldn't believe he could lift the huge man, but he did, and now began to wheel him around. He was dizzy watching the scene and he cringed when Devdata let go and flung Rangohar against a stone outcropping, which became ruptured with deep cracks. Rangohar was enraged when he staggered to his feet.

"Well, well," Devdata taunted, "you aren't so strong after all."

Rangohar stood straight and a high-pitched scream began to emanate from him. It was the shrill cry of a demon. Devdata began to laugh at Rangohar's performance. Artavan shuddered with

fear. Devdata's laughter was quelled when he saw the change that was taking place. The beautiful man was transforming into a hideous creature. Rangohar's body grew knotted muscles that pulsed like writhing purple snakes under his skin and his size increased greatly. His head, which was covered with lustrous hair, sprouted rough warts and ugly, bloody fissures as his face flattened and broadened until his gray, squash-like nose was set between two reptilian eyes and a lipless, hideous mouth leered at the fair prince.

The talons on the ends of the creature's gnarly hands grew out long and thick. They were cracked and yellowed with age. He screeched, seemingly in pain as horny toenails tore out of his delicately embroidered slippers. He smacked his big beak-like mouth finally and spoke. His voice had thickened into a phlegm-clogged, ragged croak.

"Now Prince, see if you can defeat me. I told you that I was toying with you."

Devdata smiled. "My power was so great that I forced you to transform, Rangohar. I've never seen you do that before." He laughed again. "You're afraid of me, aren't you?"

There wasn't a hint of worry in his voice. His body was still bathed in the strange blue effulgence.

"You still have the chance to surrender," the thing that used to be Rangohar said, holding out

the gleaming bracelet toward the prince on one of his yellowed, hooked fingernails. "Come! I know you have too much pride to admit defeat. I cannot guarantee that I won't kill you now if you try my patience. In this form, I may not be able to resist devouring a dainty morsel like you. Come, surrender and I will tell no one about it. I will tell them that you came back by your own freewill. You can continue to boast and crow like a little rooster. No one need ever know. "

Artavan was shocked when Devdata began to extend his hand. He wanted to scream to him to run, to get away from the monster, and to refuse the charmed bracelet, but he was frozen with terror.

The thing wore a hideous smile on its face now. "You are intelligent, Devdata. You are the most intelligent high general in our army," he tried to coax in that frightening voice. "Welcome back."

Devdata approached the monster and it held its hand outstretched, the bracelet dangling from a deformed, horny fingernail. Devdata shot forward suddenly, grabbed hold of the fiend by his wrist, and then kicked its massive, trunk-like legs out from under it. The monster bellowed in shock, but scuttled up as quickly as a scorpion. His eyes darted from Devdata to the area behind him, as if looking for someone. Artavan thought he was trying to spot Drujo. How he wanted Drujo to

appear and help!

It may have been a ploy, because he shot forward with frightening speed and gave Devdata a tremendous kick in the chest that sent him sprawling. The monster Rangohar fell upon him, raining blows on his face with such violence that Artavan felt the earth beneath him tremble. For a moment, Devdata looked stunned, but then he began to match the monster blow for blow. He fought with a look of exquisite pleasure on his face, and Artavan realized that he really enjoyed fighting. He was tiring after a short while. Rangohar's transformed shape was just too much for him.

With a roar of anger and triumph, Rangohar punched Devdata in the stomach with a blow that made him double over, spewing blood before he fell on his face. Rangohar picked up his limp body and threw him into the air, as he sprung up over him. He clubbed the helpless prince in the back of the head, causing more blood to spurt out of his mouth and nose. A scream was clogged in Artavan's throat. The monster again lifted the prince, who looked like a rag doll, and he tossed him onto the large, smooth boulder behind which Artavan hid, watching.

"I will stomp your face, fair Prince, until it will be as ugly as mine is now. Then I will force this bracelet over your hand and make you

Angraminyu's slave forever," he told the unconscious prince. "You were right to be wary of the Master Sorcerer's tricks, but now you're finished. Finished because of your pride!"

Saying this, he soared into the sky, obviously planning to come down on Devdata's face with his horny toenails and hideously calloused heels. Artavan jumped from his hiding place like a small lizard and wrenched Devdata's limp body from the stone just as the devil was about to land. Rangohar hadn't time to stop, and he came down hard on the stone. Artavan heard a sickening crunch and for an instant, stared into the eyes of the creature. Artavan registered his hatred for him, as well as his surprise and intense agony. His scream of pain sent Artavan scurrying, his heart thudding in terror.

Artavan began to drag the Prince's body, gripping him under the arms. As he rushed into the forest, he saw the monster rolling and bellowing in pain. He saw a white femur bone, slimy with blood, protruding from his malformed leg. His arms wheeled madly as his sharp screams rang out again and again, ending mewling sounds.

Artavan ran, heedless of the branches that slapped his face. He was like a senseless beast running from a forest fire. Finally, when the burden of the Prince's heavy body became too

much for him, he dropped Devdata to the ground. He stirred and stiffened.

“Get your hands off of me!” Devdata rasped. “I don’t need your help. Don’t you see? I was just about to beat him. You let him get away!” His head lolled to the side as he fell unconscious again.

Artavan moaned. Everything he’d ever loved had been taken away, and now the only person who had returned his love was near death. He had been sobbing so hard that his chest felt as if it would burst, but he steeled himself to continue as far as he could.

Artavan wasn’t too concerned that that the monster Rangohar would follow, because he was sure that both of his legs were broken, but he still wished he could find Tork and Drujo. He finally stopped and set Devdata down, straightening his legs and arms and then took off his deer hide and balled it up to make a pillow for him.

He felt guilty as he stood over Devdata wringing his hands. Artavan finally was able to touch Devdata’s soft clothing and fine armor as he undressed him. It was a grim task to search for his wounds, and even grimmer a task to figure out how to help him! He didn’t appear to have any broken bones, which was a surprise considering the vicious beating he took.

His fine clothes were torn, revealing the gashes

on his heavily muscled biceps and shoulders. His chest was also cut, and Artavan had to use moss to staunch the bleeding. He saw numerous old scars on his body ranging from healed nicks and deep scratches, to grievous slashes and wounds. He was truly a warrior, Artavan thought. Devdata's face was swollen and badly cut, making him wonder if he would ever recover his smug smile. There was really no part of him that had been spared.

Artavan wrung his hands again, not knowing where to begin. He needed water to clean his wounds and to wipe the blood off his face. He couldn't bear to see the blood smeared all over it, and he was especially concerned about the nosebleed that wouldn't stop. He could find some blood staunching barks to scrape and mix with moss. He could stop up Devdata's nose with these, he thought. It was dangerous to leave him alone in this condition, but he had no choice.

Artavan sniffed the air and decided to follow the scent of water that his keen nose discerned. They had passed numerous pools and springs and he knew water was nearby. He felt confident that water was near as the plants began to change subtly, so he ran off and collected his mosses and bark and found a turtle shell for a drinking vessel. When he returned, blood had soaked Devdata's chest and face. Artavan shrieked and dropped the turtle shell he'd filled with water.

It would be too much to clean. He threw up his hands in despair, but then carefully lifted Devdata's naked body, and taking note of the spot where he'd left his pelt and the torn and bloody clothing and armor, he set off for the creek he'd found. After nearly breaking his neck when he slipped on the bank, he finally set Devdata's limp body into the water and washed him. His head lolled and Artavan had to make sure he didn't drown him. He was alarmed that he didn't shiver with the cold of the water. Maybe he was already too far near death to feel it. Artavan began to weep bitterly.

It seemed to Artavan that building a fire to warm him was the best thing. He swung the heavy body over his right shoulder and with Devdata's arms dangling down his back, he set off, hoping to find his way back to the clearing where he'd left their things. He carried Devdata back with great difficulty to the opening, where he found everything as he'd left it. Artavan hadn't even set him down when his head jerked up as he suddenly smelled Tork. He must have been trying to find them.

Tork rushed over and frowned, waving his arms in surprise.

"What? What are you doing, Artavan? The outsider...who hurt him, or is he dead? Oh the gods! Where are your clothes? Where are his

clothes? Why is he in your arms?" He eyed Devdata and then Artavan suspiciously. "Artavan, have you gone mad?"

"Clear a spot—quickly!" Artavan called out ignoring him.

Tork stood there gaping at him and he glared back.

"Do it Tork!"

He moved reluctantly, but obeyed.

"I have to cover him!" Artavan croaked as he set the prince down as gently as he could. He laid him down, placing moss under his head as a pillow. Devdata mumbled softly. He growled and Artavan thought he heard him groan, "I'll finish you..."

Artavan began rubbing Devdata's body vigorously as Tork stomped up and down angrily. Tork stopped suddenly and brightened.

"Lucky! Look, we have our opportunity now, Artavan!" Tork fumbled with the sword that still hung over Artavan's otherwise naked shoulder. "We will finish him off and deal with the other one later."

Artavan realized that he meant to kill the unconscious prince. He wrestled with Tork for a moment and then he balled up his fist and struck Tork in the face. Tork backed off, one hand on his nose. Artavan's aggression shocked him.

"How could you consider such a thing, Tork?

Where is your sense of honor? Would you kill a defenseless man?"

"This man is a danger to the entire world, not just to you! He is an evil man, Artavan. Can't you see? Look what he has turned you into!"

Artavan glared at him viciously and Tork shut up for a moment. He continued to rub the Prince, whose skin was bluish and clammy.

"Artavan! How dare you touch that naked man? Cover him." Tork bawled.

Artavan looked around frantically and grabbed the deerskin he'd left. He covered Devdata with it.

"Thank you, Tork, that was a good idea."

"Tork's lip curled in disgust and he snatched up the skin and threw it at Artavan.

"Cover yourself first!"

"But the Prince—he's cold! I can't let him get cold!" Artavan yelled.

"Artavan! You shame your house!"

"I have no house, Tork! And I don't care anyway. If you don't like what I'm doing, then turn your big, stupid gourd-head!"

"You're supposed to love me, Artavan. Or was it just lust for my body that caused you to plant your hot lips on me without permission? You had better obey me, or I will beat you senseless, and then kill that monster you are protecting!"

Artavan put on the deerskin because he didn't want to risk Tork hurting the Prince, but he was

fuming as he began to consider the Prince's condition. Devdata's injuries were grievous and Artavan silently wept as he worked, stuffing moss into his wounds. Despite the terrible damage, he had to appreciate this warrior's fine body. It was as impressive as he'd thought. He arranged a bed of the moss he'd collected and looked at Tork. He had his extra tunic tied about his waist.

"Give me that!" Artavan pointed at Tork's tunic.

"What? That's mine and it is a fine piece of clothing fit for a noble!"

Artavan said nothing, but he lunged at Tork, battering him in the face as he straddled him.

Tork threw him off and scrambled for his mace, but Artavan, already in a state of near madness, drew his sword and held it before him. Tork stopped and stood firmly, with his hands on his hips.

"Artavan, you are mad. It is a sin to kill a madman, what to speak of an addled child, so I will forgive you for now. Beware, for I have my limits."

Artavan turned and began to lift Devdata onto the moss bed he had made.

Tork snorted angrily. "Artavan. I will tell you a wise tale. There was once a story about a girl who went into the forest and found a pretty baby lion cub. She brought it home and begged her father to

allow her to keep it. He did because he doted on her, putting it with a bitch that had just had puppies," he began with one of his instructional stories.

"Yes, I know. And then it grew up and ate them all. He's not an animal, Tork!"

"Indeed he is. He's a beast, but worse than an ordinary beast. He is filled with overweening pride and one day he'll grow in strength and kill us all. That's why I say, kill him first. As the man should have dealt with the lion cub, we should deal with him."

Artavan eyed him with cold fury. "Now we must cover his body. Give me your blanket."

"I won't, for I need it to sleep on at night."

"Well then give him the tunic off your back, Tork. The Prince will get cold. A man injured that badly will become cold easily."

Tork stood angrily, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "I'm cold too."

Artavan began to reach for his sword again and Tork quickly stripped off his tunic and handed it over sulkily.

"Well, wrap the blanket around yourself if you're cold," Artavan suggested.

"I'm hungry!" Tork finally moaned.

"Tork, you go and find firewood while I gather kindling and stones around the campsite."

"Ho Ho! So now, I am the slave and you the

master? I see you have indeed gone mad!"

Artavan was exhausted, but he stood his ground. Tork slunk back into the forest.

"Dog! How could you offer your body to that demon?" Artavan heard Tork complaining as he stormed off.

The Prince moaned and moved slightly. Artavan grabbed the turtle shell he'd found by the pool and filled it with fresh water. When he touched it to Devdata's lips, he drank a little without opening his eyes. He was still again and Artavan worried. He began to rub Devdata all over his body again, remembering that when Nogard's mare was sick, he made him rub her body for hours. He said it would stimulate her to recover. Artavan rubbed Devdata with determination, but he remained pale and motionless.

Soon he smelled rain in the air and large drops began to fall on the leaves around them. Artavan looked around and found no way to shelter him. He was cold himself and shivered. It was at this point that he conceived a deep hatred for the sorcerer Angraminyu. He would kill him someday, Artavan swore, after they found Devdata's dog. These were the two promises he swore to keep as the drops of rain fell faster and they became drenched.

He pulled the prince closer to the fire and

began to feed it more and more wood. He couldn't allow it to go out, even if the rain became heavy. Why hadn't Drujo returned? Artavan was worried now. *Has the Sorcerer gotten him too?*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Artavan was exhausted and sick with worry for the Pahlavan prince who had somehow become his ward. He held his head in his hands and finally turned back. He froze when he saw Devdata sitting up. He raised a trembling hand to his head and felt a particularly large lump.

“Prince Devdata!”

Devdata smiled weakly, his face again taking on the angry frown that had been lessened by his unconsciousness. Artavan rushed over as he tried to stand on wobbly legs.

“Don’t touch me!” he growled, but the crooked smile remained. “You have Tork under control, I see.”

“You heard all of that? I didn’t mean to...it’s just that he wanted to kill...I...”

“Enough! I would have smashed him if I were you! Why do you apologize?” His voice was low with pain.

Artavan wanted to support him, but he was

afraid of upsetting the proud prince. His knees suddenly buckled and Artavan ran over, lifting his heavy body and setting him on his bed of moss again. His eyes fluttered and he groaned.

“Water!”

He rushed over with the turtle shell and carefully lifted Devdata’s head so he could drink. He held Artavan’s hand with the shell and took hurried drafts.

“More! Boy, how can you expect me to use this thing for drinking? Have you no skulls for drinking vessels?”

“Skulls? Do you mean you would use the skull of some animal to drink from? I never...”

“Or the skull of your enemy...why not?”

Artavan could see he was in pain. His head lolled again.

Artavan ran to the stream, looking around for a dried skull as he made his way hurriedly through the brush. He found none, so he returned with the turtle shell, half empty because of his frantic trip back. Devdata was conscious again and sat up with his help. His hand went to his shoulder and rubbed it.

“Where are my armor and garments?” He seemed to suddenly be aware that he’d been undressed.

“I washed them. They’re drying now, but they are mostly in shreds. You just rest...”

"No! Fetch them at once, boy!"

"I'll get them, but only if you lie down and rest for a while. It's still too soon..."

"Boy! This is no joke!"

"Well then I'll leave you naked." Artavan swiped off the rabbit skin with which he'd covered Devdata's privates.

"Have it your way then!" Devdata tottered up as naked as the day he was born. "A Pahlavan warrior needs no one."

Artavan blushed and then scurried off to get Devdata's armor and clothing. He grabbed them off the tree and ran back to him. Devdata relieved himself and let Artavan dress him. Finally, he sat with his head against a big stone. The movement had exhausted him, but miraculously, his injuries seemed to be healing. Artavan stared and suddenly it dawned upon him that he too, had always been regarded as extraordinary because he healed very quickly. His master could beat him one day, and the next day, there were no signs of welts. Even the bruises from Tork's beating were totally gone now. But the Prince was remarkable even then, for his grievous wounds seemed to be healing already. As he marveled at this, he saw Devdata listlessly grab a handful of weeds and begin to stuff them into his mouth.

"Stop it, Prince Devdata! Please! I'll get some food for you." Artavan wondered if he would

have eaten the leaves anyway, or if it were just his way of indicating that he wanted food. He was proud and angry and he wouldn't ask for a favor if he could help it.

Artavan ran to the brook and speared fish frantically. He only collected three medium size fish, but he immediately wrapped them and stuck them under the coals of the fire, and then returned to the water and speared two smaller fish, but he could see no more and didn't think the prince could wait.

By the time he returned, also bringing water, Devdata was trembling. Artavan knew that he was fighting the pain of the wounds he'd suffered. He took the water wordlessly as Artavan held the turtle shell to his lips. Then he pulled three of the cooked fish out and unwrapped them before Devdata. He looked at them for a moment, and then looked away. Artavan opened the first with his knife and carefully separated the fragrant white flesh. He began to push it into the prince's mouth, but his teeth closed against him. He held a morsel of the fish under Devdata's nose, allowing the fragrance to waft up to him. His will to resist Artavan's offering broke down and Devdata grabbed his hand and ate from it. He turned to the fish, ravenous.

"Slow down or you'll swallow a bone." Artavan tried to put a restraining hand on the

Prince.

Devdata shook him off, so Artavan helped by opening another plump fish and separating the flesh from the bones. Devdata drooled in a not so prince-like manner and ate with both hands.

“Take some, boy!”

Artavan went to the fire and returned with the rest of the fish. He ate slowly, wanting that Devdata eat all that he could so that he’d heal. When it was all gone, he lay back again. Artavan arranged some of the hides under his head and he grunted. His eyes fluttered and sleep overtook him. As he lay dressed in his damaged armor and shredded clothing, his strong hands on his massive chest, Artavan saw his angry face relax a little.

Artavan thought about his tragic story and tears fell from his eyes. The thought of a prince without a land, without people to rule, made him sad. The fact that his people had all been killed was devastating, but he’d never lost his pride. Hadn’t he said that no one could take away a Pahlavan’s honor and pride? Artavan wished so fervently that he could be like Devdata. He’d never known pride, being a slave and a servant, not a royal prince or warrior. He looked at his arm and flexed it. The Prince was grumbling in his sleep.

“Train...I will train and grow strong...I will

defeat you...I'll finish you..." He twitched and his hands formed fists.

He even fights in his dreams.

His muscles ached from carrying the heavy prince and from all of his other exertions. Artavan snuggled near the Prince and hugged his body for warmth. He was soon asleep.

* * * *

What woke him up was the light tap he now recognized as the sound of a Pahlavan warrior landing. A loud thump followed and he jumped up as if someone had poked him with a firebrand.

"Drujo! Drujo! Thank the gods! You're back!"

Drujo motioned to a creature that looked very much like a deer. He'd flung it near the fire. Artavan felt for Devdata's hand, as he had been doing whenever he woke up, but it was cold and limp.

"Drujo! Prince Devdata has been grievously injured by a monster!" He sobbed convulsively as he tried to say that he thought Devdata might have finally died. He had seemed to be improving, but now he looked ashen. "I...I...think he might be..."

Drujo looked over at Devdata with curiosity and poked him with the toe of his boot. The prince was paler than ever and Artavan thought then that

he might have died from his wounds.

"Who has done this?" Drujo boomed.

"I think his name was Rangohar. He looked really beautiful, but then he became a horrible creature and hurt the Prince!"

Drujo looked shocked and then peered at Devdata. He held a big hand over Devdata's forehead, not quite touching him. He frowned deeply.

"His energy is almost gone! He'll be dead soon. One of Angraminyu's minions! So he finally got to the Prince!" He abandoned Devdata's listless body and stood in front of Artavan, staring.

Artavan began to wail. "No! No! He can't die! I won't let him die! I love him!"

"You really wanted him, didn't you?" Drujo's crazed grin made Artavan's mouth dry and speechless. "This is your doing! Never has Prince Devdata acted like this. You have bewitched him, and that is the cause of his weakness. I have raised him like a father, and never before have I seen him become enamored. For a warrior, weakness is death."

Artavan felt weak with horror at Drujo's words. Could it be true that this was all his fault? He sobbed hopelessly as he tried to turn and run back to Devdata's side, but a giant, powerful hand grabbed him by the neck and swung him back. Drujo took the back of Artavan's head into his big

hand and pushed his face against his own; which meant that he was lifted off of the ground several feet, his arms and legs flailing.

Drujo rasped, "You want some of me before you die? Is this what you wanted from the Prince? I'll give you your desire, and then I'll kill you so that Devdata will no longer pine for you. Perhaps then he can retrieve his cock that he apparently left between your chops!"

Drujo forced his fat tongue into Artavan's mouth, but he bit it. Drujo screamed, but he didn't release Artavan. He held him by one arm as he cried out in agony. Artavan's deer hide fell away and he struggled like a naked baby bird. He lashed out with his foot and Drujo groaned when it contacted his stomach. His eyes were red with fury as he shook Artavan painfully.

He flung Artavan to the ground and stepped on him with one heavy foot. Artavan struggled like a wild cat and Drujo lost his grip for a moment. Artavan scrambled for Tork's mace and lifted it over his head. He brought it down on Drujo's shoulder and he roared. Artavan swung again, screaming, and the mace came down on Drujo's knee as he tried to deflect the blow.

"I am a warrior! Boy! I will kill you now and eat you! You have bewitched my prince, and for that I can never forgive you!"

"No! You horrible, ugly son of a blind ass and a

drunken whore! The Prince will kill you if you hurt me, and he will toss your worthless carcass into a deep ravine or maybe we'll just eat you; that is, if you have any good meat under your skinny hide," Artavan blustered.

Drujo seemed shocked at his bold words, but he recovered quickly and laughed. "Nice! You must be learning something from him!" Drujo pointed at Devdata.

Drujo paused and then looked over at the Prince. His face contorted and then his eyes took on a glazed look. He began to speak as if in a trance. "You will die now Prince. I will kill you."

"But you once called him 'master'" Artavan screamed. "He is your prince; the Dark Prince of the Pahlavans, you called him!"

"He's weak now. He succumbed to a delicate creature like that Rangohar. Now I'll finish him. He's always been like an annoying flea to me. I only called him master out of respect for his father. Now why should I want to keep this little creature around me? This tiny brat is no match for me!"

"Rangohar was a monster! You just don't know how it was," Artavan countered, but it seemed like a weak argument now.

Drujo's face looked blank and his eyes flitted from Devdata to the surrounding forest. Artavan suddenly saw the thing that glittered on Drujo's

heavy wrist. He started to warn him, but Drujo began to approach the Prince, his arm outstretched as if to destroy him with the kind of blast Devdata had used against the bull. Artavan screamed and ran toward Drujo with his mace raised over his head. Drujo turned suddenly and kicked him. Artavan was flung with such violent power that he only realized it when his body struck a stand of trees. His limbs were numb, but his head blazed with unspeakable pain. He tried to will his body up, but it refused to move. *My prince!*

“Prince Devdata! No! No!”

Drujo turned from Artavan with an evil grin and approached the man who’d ruled him as the prince of the Pahlavans.

CHAPTER NINE

Artavan's eyes were streaming with tears as he watched Drujo approach Devdata. The giant stood over the still body and looked back at him with a wicked smirk.

Then suddenly, Devdata's hand shot out and grabbed Drujo's stout ankle. He cried out in alarm, but then roared a challenge.

"You! I thought you were almost dead!" Drujo shouted.

He tried to kick with his other leg, but Devdata pulled the leg he held onto out from under Drujo, who fell like a mountain peak struck by a bolt of lightning. Drujo recovered instantly and rose into the air a few feet. He smiled and then kicked the Prince on his delicately pointed chin. His head jerked back violently with the force of the blow, and blood dripped from the side of his mouth, away from the taunting grin that had now become so familiar to Artavan.

"Drujo, wake up! You are under a spell, do you

hear?"

Spitting to the side in disgust, the Prince looked at Drujo, his face flushed and alert. The look on his face wasn't one of terror. Rather, he appeared saddened.

"How stupid you are to fall for such a trick. I suppose I have to beat the sense back into you. I'm disappointed at you." He smirked even as his frown became set and he crouched slightly into his fighting stance. His hands were fisted and Artavan saw the muscles of his body bunch.

Drujo laughed loudly. "You have become weak because you've given in to feelings warriors never should bother with! How can you say you're a prince when you are besotted with a human? Look at you! You're weak now—as weak as a kitten! I can sense it."

"Fool!" Devdata growled, "I've learned to mask my power. Have you forgotten, Drujo; a good beating only makes a Pahlavan stronger—that's if it doesn't kill him!"

Drujo looked uneasy for an instant, but then he charged at Devdata, screaming out a battle cry that made Artavan's ears feel as though they'd burst. Devdata met him with a tremendous punch in the belly that seemed to almost come through his back.

It was amazing to see the bigger man double over.

The Prince now wove his fingers together and struck Drujo in the back of the neck, and he fell to his knees. Drujo's eyes bulged, but he rolled over and onto his feet like a cat. Bellowing like a bull, he charged again and this time Devdata sidestepped him in a motion so fast that Artavan's eyes perceived it only as a blur. The Prince seemed to be tiring now.

"Drujo! You treacherous moron! Snap out of it! You promised my father..."

Drujo recovered quickly and kicked the Prince as he leapt into the air. Despite his enthusiastic bravado, the Prince had almost exhausted his meager energy stores. Yet, Artavan could sense that Drujo was afraid of combating the Prince hand-to-hand. He was planning to launch a light attack. His rumbling laughter froze Artavan's blood.

"Your father is dead now, Princeling. You will soon join him if the gods allow the likes of you to join real warriors in that last dimension."

Devdata just stood there, smiling a brutal grin. A bright series of flashes emanated from Drujo's hands, but a nimbus of blue light was forming around Devdata, as he seemed to absorb the blasts.

Exhausted finally, Drujo whined, "Master, I've been cheated! I couldn't help myself! You can't do it! There are only three of us now; surely, you can

calm your liver enough to allow me to explain! Master! You need me!"

Devdata extended his hand, which was now covered with a powerful blue glow.

"No! You can't! Not after all the service I've done for you and the King, your dear father! Son, please listen to me, Master...I'm your..."

Prince Devdata casually let loose a flash that lit up the sky. Artavan saw nothing for a moment, and then something small hit the earth in front of him, followed by a massive thump as Drujo's body hit the earth.

"Look Prince," Artavan cried. "Look what fell from him!"

Devdata approached and kicked the thing. It was a bracelet almost identical to the one the monster Rangohar had tried to force onto his wrist. It was the cursed bracelet that could force anyone to obey the Sorcerer Angraminyu.

"Prince! He was under a spell."

Devdata looked away. "I knew that, and for that reason I allowed him to live. I know he couldn't help himself. He has never been too bright, so I can see how he could have been tricked. He may even have taken it with the misplaced notion that he was helping me."

Artavan was naked, injured, and he couldn't move his limbs. Devdata straightened Artavan's body lovingly, but his eyes showed concern. Fear

coursed through Artavan as he realized that he would die. He saw Devdata wipe at his eyes before he finally turned and lifted Drujo and set him on the bed of moss he'd just risen from. He looked exhausted and grieved.

"He was my nurse."

"Is he...is he going to die, like I am?" Artavan sobbed.

Devdata looked surprised. "I wouldn't let you die!" He approached Artavan and turned his limp body face down.

"Oh! That hurts!"

"Stop it! Don't move, I'm fixing you." He pushed hard on Artavan's backbone. Sensation had returned and it hurt him! He felt a popping sound and his arms and legs regained feeling. Artavan turned over painfully and saw a tear drip from Devdata's eyes, but he wiped at it angrily. He seemed embarrassed.

"Drujo will live, but I wonder if I can forget his harsh words." He fell silent now.

"Drujo was possessed by evil!" Artavan reminded him.

"Yes, that is true, but it may have just loosened his tongue. I suspect he has seen me as a weakling and a burden. He was a great friend of my father's." Devdata covered Artavan with the deer pelt as darkness began to settle over the forest, and he held the trembling boy until he calmed

down enough to sleep.

* * * *

"Artavan! Get up, you lazy thing! Look! I've caught a big, fat deer for our repast!" It was morning when Tork finally blustered into the camp.

"Tork!" Artavan moaned, rising to his knees although he was still in pain and dizzy. His head began to spin as he stood, and the world went dark.

Artavan felt himself in someone's arms as he came out of his swoon, but he was too weak to move. He could hear the two arguing, and from the rumble of the Prince's voice so close to him, he knew who held him.

"Hello! You're tired of playing dead, are you?" Tork pointed to Devdata.

The Prince growled.

"And what have you done to my servant? What has happened here? It looks as if a storm hit! Say, what is that? Have you killed your friend too, or is he asleep?"

Artavan felt himself being lowered to the ground and he opened his eyes to see Tork shaking Drujo by the arm.

"You did this? To your own friend and servant? How could you?" Tork cried, his voice rising to a

near shriek. "You're an evil child! An evil, spoiled..."

Devdata growled again. "I'm not a child, Tork. I'm much older than you, fool! I happen to be..."

"Have respect for your elders, you brat!"

Devdata strode over to Tork and punched him in the face. Tork landed on his bottom with his legs splayed.

"See what I mean? You're a hotheaded spoiled little imp and if I were your father I'd..."

He broke off as Devdata slapped his face.

"Stop that Tork! I'm in no mood for your raving. We are in a position of weakness now with Drujo..."

"Thanks to you! Now you had better promise to control your anger! You see what happens when you lose your temper and fight for no reason? I hope you're ashamed of yourself! That poor, dear man!"

Artavan snorted a laugh. Tork had always been one to put on a show, but this was ridiculous. *As if he cared about Drujo!*

The Prince turned away angrily.

"Tork!" Artavan barely whispered. "Tork, listen! This is no time for scolding the Prince. Drujo tried to kill me! He wanted to kill me because he was under an evil spell. I fought him off, but he got the best of me. You should thank Prince Devdata for saving my life!"

"You didn't really fight with Drujo, Artavan. He is a giant of a man and very powerful. I can't believe that even he," and he pointed rudely to Devdata, "could have fought such a man. What you should say is that you struggled as best you could. I understand your plight."

"Tork!" Devdata yelled. "Why do you insist on calling this boy weak? He fought bravely. Now shut your mouth, which is just like the flatulent rear end of a horse! We will have to hurry and find the female Pahlavan dog. The Sorcerer Angraminyu will make another move soon. He's fond of sending his minions—Rangohar was one, but by far the least horrible of his monsters. We will head west, as the boy has told me that this is the place where female dog warriors go."

Tork looked toward Artavan with a sarcastic grin. "Female dog warriors, huh? What a fantastic tale you've invented. The only thing more amazing is that you have found somebody gullible enough to believe you. So let's try to imagine...there is a place where dumb dogs line up and train with weapons?" He doubled over laughing. "Perhaps you are such a dog. There is no such place, Devdata! I've told you that Artavan knows nothing of such things. He is a village slave and a simpleton.

"This is a big place." Tork continued his speech as if he were addressing a crowd at the market-

square. "We have many kingdoms and lands, as I have explained. How can we ever find this fabled dog? What will she look like? We don't even know what she looks like, do we? If your story is true, and you sent her off when she was a puppy, then how do you even know what she looks like now? Mutts tend to change, and become even uglier as they age."

Devdata seemed to think. "I don't know, but I will sense her power. She is as powerful as the best of us, for she is one of the Pahlavan elite."

"We'd better eat since we have a fire built and the game is killed." Devdata finally said. He put an animal skull filled with water up to Artavan's mouth. "Drink!" He arranged Artavan's covering gently. Then he left him and approached Drujo, who was now stirring.

"My Prince," he moaned. "Did I dream it? Have I betrayed you?"

"It was the fault of the Sorcerer Angraminyu." Devdata looked away.

Artavan sat up and watched as Drujo stood awkwardly, and then with shaking knees, bowed before the prince.

"Get up! I will never allow a warrior to bend for another. We shall eat, and you will recover."

Artavan began to stand. He wanted to prepare the meat.

"No! You rest for now. We will allow Tork to

prepare the food!" Devdata stared hard at Tork. "Where have you been, Tork?"

"That is no affair of yours." Tork actually busied himself preparing the game. Devdata looked at him with suspicion, but said nothing.

They fell upon the roasted deer, not one of them looking up or speaking until they were done. After eating, all of them felt better. Artavan even prepared some meat for drying while they rested. They also prepared the hides for bedding. Artavan gathered the dried meat and wrapped it in one of the hides. The other he wore along with his original pelt. Before long, they were ready to leave. Artavan felt more confident now that they had a supply of food and warm skins. The men avoided looking at each other or talking. When they finally set off, Tork started north on a deer path, but Devdata continued west.

"Tork!" Artavan called out. "Come this way."

"Why? I won't follow him. Why should I?"

"Because you're going the wrong way!" Artavan yelled as he continued to walk alone, away from them.

He refused to turn and answer, so Artavan followed the Prince. Finally, he heard branches cracking behind him, and he knew that Tork had decided to follow. Artavan smiled and felt happy. They had food, and water was plentiful in this land. He thought that he would like to live like

this forever. Well yes, forever, if it hadn't been that they were being pursued by a mad sorcerer bent on killing them!

As they walked, Artavan occupied himself with daydreams. In one, Tork was being dragged to his death with one foot caught in a stirrup and his fine warhorse dashing mindlessly away. Then he imagined Tork choking on a large piece of meat, his face becoming purple as the air was cut off. In another, he saw Tork carelessly falling on his sword, piercing his chest while blood poured from his once merry mouth.

Artavan looked ahead and saw the Prince's shoulders moving convulsively and he was alarmed at first. *Is he choking on his tongue? Is he having a fit? Surely, he should have rested for longer. He's still so weak, but no, he's laughing. Maybe he can see inside of my head! I am sure he is laughing.* His neck was red.

Artavan blushed at the thought, but soon Devdata got over his fit of laughter.

CHAPTER TEN

By the end of the third day of walking, Artavan's feet were sore and he was becoming very afraid of his ruse. They were chasing phantoms, because he was leading them nowhere. What if Devdata lost his chance of finding the Pahlavan dog just because he was leading him astray? He whispered these thoughts in his mind because he was afraid that the Prince had the ability to read his loud, bumbling mind, yet in a way, he wanted him to know.

They were approaching clear land, and from where they stood, there was a small, parched village made up of rough huts. It seemed that these people were nomads by the way their dwellings were so poor and hastily assembled, but they hadn't the trappings of nomads. Instead of horses, the animals that grazed around them were boney sheep, goats, and cows. It seemed that the animals grazed brown pastures, while just beyond them lay verdant plains. It was a strange situation,

but Artavan decided that they should take advantage of the services they might find there.

"Maybe we can trade some dried meat for salt and bread!" he cried when he discerned the shapes below them.

"No, boy. We must hurry! The Sorcerer is sure to attack soon—it's been too long!" the Prince growled.

"We will stop at the village," Tork declared, grabbing Artavan by the elbow. "Go on alone, Devdata, if you're so scared."

The Prince flared in anger and stood with his fists clenched at his sides, as if he were about to attack.

Artavan stood between them. "The Prince is used to making these kinds of decisions, Tork. Besides, he knows that evil sorcerer and his tricks."

This only made Tork more stubborn and angry. "We'll go to town now." He held his nose up haughtily.

Tork set off toward the village, dragging Artavan along, and this time, it was the proud prince who was forced to follow. As they approached, villagers began to pour out of the huts. They noted that the people hadn't been tending their fields nor doing their work. These people were dressed in rags and their faces were gaunt with hunger.

“Warriors! Warriors!” a small boy yelled as he skipped down the dusty path.

“Here to help us? Thank the gods!” a woman shrieked. She held a small child whose cracked lips and jaundiced eyes looked like those of a very old man.

Soon they were surrounded by people, some calling them their saviors, and some calling them gods. They kept their distance from Devdata, whose hostile stare and posture must have frightened them, and from Drujo, who scowled fiercely, but they jostled Tork and Artavan as they crowded around. Tork finally gave up his grip on Artavan’s arm and held up his hands in an attempt to quiet the crowd.

“Greetings, villagers! What ails your crops and pastures?” Tork asked over the chatter of their voices.

Devdata just frowned fiercely and stood with his arms folded over his chest. Drujo looked as if he wanted to eat some of them, despite their emaciation. He seemed interested in the younger women.

“Help us!” they cried as one.

“Help us! There’s a dragon who’s stolen the red-colored cows that are sacred to us. Now he keeps them sealed in a cave and we experience drought, even though the rest of the land sees a year of plenty.”

"Yes, he speaks the truth," another man called out.

"We have moved our village again and again, but no matter where we go, everything we touch dries up and turns brown like dust," an old man groaned.

"Please help us! You're our only hope!"

"We are starving to death!" A woman pushed forward a skeletal child with dark lines under its eyes. "Our children cannot thrive. Even when we feed them, the food leaves their bodies unused."

"This is a waste of time, Tork." Prince Devdata stood with his back to Tork. "It is just a distraction." Drujo nodded vigorously.

Artavan stepped closer to him and whispered. "But wouldn't you like to fight a real dragon?" He was enticed by the thought himself. There was a flicker of interest in Devdata's dark eyes, but his mouth remained down-turned.

"Imagine fighting a great dragon! We would be able to fight a colossal battle against a worthy foe. We could kill the dragon and I'll wager that they'll give us a fat steer to eat. Wouldn't you like fresh meat?"

He grunted in affirmation and Artavan was filled with excitement. Tork was talking to the headman of the village, who was pointing to a small mountain not too far off.

"So dear warriors," the headman was saying,

"we will reward you with gold or beautiful garments. If you want food or women, we can arrange for that too—whatever you like."

Tork was smiling and nodding. Drujo now seemed interested, especially at the mention of women. Tork was now pointing at Devdata as he spoke animatedly. After a while, the headman walked over to Devdata, who still stood defiantly with his massive arms still crossed over his chest.

"Sir, oh prince of a distant land, please fight the dragon with the brave warrior Tork. He has told us about you, and we hope to satisfy your desires. If you help him to defeat the great dragon, I will offer you twenty virgin girls. You can take them all in one night, if you so desire."

Devdata snorted and stared off at the mountain, refusing to answer.

"The Prince wants nothing of the sort," Artavan proclaimed hotly. He was furious that Tork had given them the impression that the Prince wanted girls.

"He only wants a steer to eat and that is all. He has a vast kingdom, countless horses, and unlimited gold and jewels. His kingdom rivals that of the gods. Even the great demons fear his armies." Artavan boasted on his behalf, although he knew no such thing. "He's preoccupied with his own dangerous expedition right now, so hurry and tell us what you want for us to do." Artavan

was trying his best to feign officious speech.

Tork stepped between the headman and Artavan, and he puffed out his chest saying, "I am Tork, the defender of the weak, the hope of the hopeless!"

Artavan had heard this speech so many times, but it seemed hollow and stupid now. Even so, Tork looked magnificent in his orange robes with the insignia of the house of Mehr the Generous on them.

"Gather around and tell me your woes!" Tork cried.

Devdata sniggered.

"Where is this dragon," Tork called out, "for his life is shortened now that I am on my way!"

There was astounded silence for a moment and then cheers broke out.

"Tork! Tork! Our lord!"

"May the gods smile on him!"

"May he have hundreds of stout sons!"

"May his fields produce much barley!"

"Long may he live!"

He was blessed from all sides as the villagers looked toward the heavens and gave thanks for the hero who had come into their midst. Tork looked toward the mountain and began to march with determination and without another word.

"Stop, kind warrior," the headman cried out.

Tork stopped in his tracks, one foot suspended

above the ground. Devdata, Drujo, and Artavan were still standing in the crowd of dirty people.

"Yes. Stop!" an ancient woman called in a voice as dry and old as a snakeskin. "Son, you cannot hope to find the dragon, for it is a sly beast and as ancient as the oldest stone on the top of Mount Hara Berezaity."

"I can find it!" Tork said confidently. "I hear that dragons smell terribly. I'll just follow its scent." He scratched the back of his head and smiled so that his eyes looked like upside down half-moons.

"No son, you will never find it like that," she croaked.

"Well what kind of beast is it then?" Tork seemed to be humoring her. A small conceited smile curved his fine lips.

"I will tell you the story of how the dragon came to be. Listen well, for your life may depend on it." The old woman took a shuddering breath and began her tale. "Before the creation of these three worlds, Ahura Mazda, the lord of what is orderly, for there was neither good nor evil then; looked upon the vast light that was his realm and he was pleased. However, at one point he noticed someone spying on his light. It was the lord of disorder, the great Ahriman. The lord of order, the great Ahura Mazda, knew that equally powerful Ahriman would be envious of his realm. He

decided that they must battle each other as soon as possible, lest Ahriman become too strong.

“Ahura Mazda, being polite by nature, first asked the lord of disorder, his enemy Ahriman, to join with him and create an orderly world. Ahriman answered ‘No! Whatever you create, I vow to sully and destroy!’

“Ahura Mazda created this fair world with matter, a substance which is his alone. This world was to be the prearranged battleground. Each lord gathered his army for the fight. Ahura Mazda created beings with matter, something only he possessed. Ahriman was furious and he raged. He wished to have matter too, but he was a being with control only over subtle energy without form. Wise Ahura Mazda knew that Ahriman had powers so great that they could easily destroy his creation, but Ahriman was so blinded by rage that he couldn’t see them.

“Ahura Mazda created a lump of matter and formed it into a creature so horrible that it grieved him deeply. He let loose this creature, but it was harmless. Ahriman saw this beast and was pleased. He said, ‘Ahura Mazda is a fool, for he has produced this wondrous creature and now I will steal it for myself.’ He imbued the creature with his own chaotic subtle energy and it raged.

“This was how good and evil came to be. That evil creature formed by Ahura Mazda became the

source of all evil. We call this creature a dragon. Vile xrafstars: snakes, scorpions, destructive insects, harmful beasts, and poisonous plants – all that is evil comes from it. Its venom went into the ground and caused all poisons that arise from plants and minerals.” She grew silent.

Devdata looked shocked. “Woman! Why did this...this Ahura Mazda do such a thing? Why did he make this dragon? And is this the same dragon with which we must do battle?” His rumbling voice boomed in the silent assembly.

“Dear son, oh beautiful warrior, he did this because it gave evil a form that we can battle. Had he not done this, Ahriman, the lord of disorder, would have loosed upon the world creatures with no material form. They would be able to enter the body and mind and there would be no way to repel them.” She reached over and pinched one of his cheeks and he frowned and reddened deeply.

“Your father is proud of you, dear Prince. You grow in power each day.” She reached up and touched his muscular shoulder. She had to reach, for she was bent and short. The Prince stared at her in shock.

“How do you know all of this? Who are you?” Devdata seemed perturbed.

“These things have been set in place even before you were born. I am Kanka, the witch. Your father was a dear...yes, a dear friend. Indeed, the

King, your father, knew that he would die, but before he did, he made me promise to do this. Why do you think I have told you the story of Ahura Mazda, who arranged for a place and time to battle the demon Ahriman? Their battle will come at the end of time. Your father, with my help, arranged for your final battle with the Sorcerer Angraminyu. You were destined to come to this place, and to take this task of killing the sorcerer in his form as a dragon. The story these people have told you is only a cover for the real truth. The sacred cows are heavenly cows. If you cannot save them, the entire world will soon look like this village does, for they bring the dawn, and they represent the waters given by the gods in ancient times."

She paused and ran a withered hand over Devdata's cheek. "You are so like your father. Would that I were a young lass again, beautiful and comely, for I would bed you, such a man." She sighed deeply and Devdata gave a surprised grunt, while Drujo fought to control his mirth. She pulled on his shoulder and he bent for her. She planted a kiss on his blushing cheek.

"No son," she continued. "You asked about the dragon. That dragon first created by Ahura Mazda was pushed deep into the earth—the middle of the earth, by the first king of the world, Yima. Many smaller dragons came from this original monster."

She looked at Artavan and at the brilliant belt at his waist. He realized that she must know it was from a dragon.

“Not all dragons are of equal strength. The dragon that you must battle is very powerful, for it is the direct offspring of the first dragon. It is ancient and wily, but the worst thing is that it has harbored the soul of your mortal enemy, the Sorcerer Angraminyu. Nobody has been able to defeat him because his soul is in the body of that dragon. If his body is killed, he can take another. That is why he has hidden his real form—his dragon form. The only one who can find the dragon is the one whom your father has protected for so long. I have cared for this creature since time immemorial.”

They all gasped and Devdata’s eyes grew round with amazement. He grunted again and looked from the old woman to the mountain, his fists clenching and unclenching. The old woman seized one of his hands and kissed it gently.

“I will give you that creature who will help you find the elusive dragon. It is a creature who has been the enemy of the dragon from the beginning of creation. It has been waiting for you. When the great Ahura Mazda created the world, he wished to populate it. He created a being, neither male nor female, and he named it Gayomard. You must know that no sex existed at the time. Even the two

great spirits were free of the designation. That came later.

“This Gayomard was egg shaped, like the world itself. Ahura Mazda created another being that resembled a bovine creature. Ahriman attacked these two fair beings and sickened them with diseases created from the venom of the dragon. They both died and were the first creatures to do so. Before they died, they spilled their seed onto the fertile earth. From Gayomard sprang all humanity, and from the bovine creature came all animals, birds, fishes, and plants.

“One creature alone came from a mingling of the seeds of both Gayomard and the bovine creature. This creature was intended to be the close associate of humankind and the guardian of the animals.” Her voice lowered as she finished her speech and they listened with bated breath. They were going to see this creature!

In Artavan’s mind, he envisioned a large creature, half-man and half-bull. It had an enormous head with thick black horns and frightening eyes. Its cloven hooves and massive hairy legs were attached to the powerful, hairy torso of a man. He imagined it with a golden crown and a staff in one of its gigantic hands. He shuddered at the vision he’d created and gave an involuntary gasp.

The ancient woman looked up at Drujo, and

then at Devdata and Tork. Then she glanced at the people gawking at them. All of a sudden, the villagers began to flee. They scurried, some tripping and scrambling up to continue running in terror. They ran back to their huts, the closest ones filling with anyone who could fit, and the doors slammed shut. The crude openings that served as windows were quickly filled with straw or burlap.

Artavan began to tremble and listened for the pounding footsteps of the gigantic creature. He imagined that it would loom and glower at him before it spoke its ancient message. Would it look like the terrible bull Devdata had killed, or would it be far worse? Yes, he decided that a half-man half-bull creature would be frightening indeed. He held his breath and looked at Tork. His eyes were frightened and he held his mace tightly in both hands. Devdata's eyes narrowed, but he continued to stand defiantly, with his arms still crossed over his chest. Drujo was as still as a mountain.

The old woman bent down to the large straw basket on the ground by her gnarled feet and with a flourish, lifted a dirty rag off the top. They saw a small head pop out and Tork let out a shriek. A medium-sized black dog popped out and regarded them for a moment, and then with a low, gargling sound, it began to run wildly around them, weaving back and forth, as it barked sharply.

Its wild eyes didn't focus on them until in shock, Artavan dropped his roll of rabbit furs. With a yelp it pounced upon them, first rolling on them. It grabbed two of them in its long mouth and shook them violently. They could hear its upright ears flapping as its snout held them fast and it shook its nappy head again and again.

"Where is the beast, old woman? Tell me!" Devdata demanded. "What is this small creature which is running around as if it were possessed by a demon?"

They all began to look around thinking, like him, that this was a distraction. The dog leapt up at the deerskin that was Artavan's only covering. It held onto it with its powerful jaws, while its front paws dangled in the air and its back paws danced on the ground before him. He grabbed at Artavan's sash, the one made of dragon skin, and it came loose. He yelped as he was almost disrobed.

All the while the old crone simply watched, unsmiling. Tork was finally galvanized and he held his mace over the dog's head. It growled deeply before it let go. It ran in three tight circles and then attacked Tork's richly embroidered shoe. He did a small dance of terror and the shoe fell off. The dog ran off with the shoe in its mouth and Tork roared with anger.

Devdata and Drujo threw back their heads and

laughed. The dog ran over to Devdata and dropped the shoe at his feet. Tork was bounding over, livid, but Devdata picked up the shoe and threw it far. This seemed to delight the dog, who raced after it, claws tearing at the ground. Soon it returned the shoe, but refused to put it down as it pranced in front of Devdata, as if inviting him to wrestle for it. Tork waved his arms wildly, trying to grab at the shoe, but the dog was too fast. Tork swore and grabbed again, this time getting hold of it, but the strong dog shook its head and they heard the shoe tearing.

Artavan began to laugh now too, forgetting the bull creature. They all laughed until tears came from their eyes. The sight of Tork as he chased the small black dog with nappy hair and its short tail was so funny that they all forgot about the creature that was supposed to appear. Finally, Tork sat down and pounded the earth in frustration. Artavan too, sat on the dusty ground, and the dog ran onto his lap in such a rush that she hit his chin so that his teeth clashed together. It rolled and turned before settling down, looking at Tork with bright, curious eyes.

The old woman smiled and touched the top of Artavan's head with a crooked hand. "The creature likes you. This is Sarama, the daughter of Gayomard and the bovine creature. It is Sarama, the Pahlavan warrior."

The dog looked up at her and cocked its long head. Their mouths fell open. "This...this is the giant half-man half-bull creature?" Artavan gasped. "Where are its horns and hooves?"

Devdata was serious again. He looked over at Drujo and they nodded. "It is she. It is the dog warrior, the Pahlavan Sarama!" They both put a fist to their hearts and bowed.

"How can this be?" Artavan cried. He hadn't moved closer. "What do you mean, old woman? This seems to be an ordinary dog!"

"And you seem to be an ordinary man," she almost cooed.

Artavan could see something flash in Devdata's eyes and he knew that they had finally found it. The dog licked Artavan's face and Tork glared at it. Artavan hugged Sarama to his chest and looked up at Devdata. Finally, they were complete. The Pahlavan dog was with them at last.

"You cur! You miserable monster!" Tork said between clenched teeth. He looked at the old woman as if he'd heard nothing. "Where is the beast that will help us? Where is the creature created so long ago?"

"This is she, oh handsome warrior. Be calm and take her help. For the pain she has suffered in helping us, Ahura Mazda has given her the boon that she can enjoy every moment of her life in play."

"But I thought that this creature would be powerful. I thought that it could help us to defeat the dragon. This is a silly, witless dog. Just see how it plays."

Devdata was already walking toward the mountain and the dog Sarama jumped off Artavan's lap, where she had just nestled into again, and ran to him, capering at his feet. Artavan scrambled to rise and follow them, but first he fetched Tork's shoe, for the dog had abandoned it now. It was torn and wet with saliva, but still serviceable. He tossed it at Tork, who glared at him again.

"This will end badly," he screamed after them. "You all need to take my lead on this, but instead you're set on following a crazy black bitch and a man who looks to be no more than a spoiled child! Look at them! Fools!"

Tork reluctantly followed them, limping for a while to show them that the dog had injured his foot. Somehow Artavan knew that the black dog, Sarama, was leading them, despite the way she cavorted after insects and shot forward after birds. Sometimes she grabbed a leaf, tossed it into the air, and then tried to catch it with her long snout. He felt lighthearted watching her, and soon found himself running ahead with her and tossing his head in joy.

"Boys like him. They can't take anything

seriously," Tork complained. "You there!" he called to the Prince, "don't you see the folly in this? We're following a stupid dog. We may never arrive at the correct spot."

"Quiet, Tork! Don't you sense the power? This is the warrior dog Sarama. Now we have only to confront the dragon. That dragon is the Sorcerer Angraminyu! I've heard rumors about the old witch, but this is the first time I've actually seen her. I believe her because she knew my father, the king. She knew everything about me. Isn't that enough proof for you?"

"You just wait. I'm telling you, I think we should go back to my abode and get help from Mehr the Generous. He will help us gather a large army," Tork cried. "If what you say is true, no scrappy black dog can save you. Even if it's a special dog, we better get help from an army. It's foolish to take such a risk. Dragons are not easy to kill, you know, even for me."

"Tork, we are Pahlavans, and we fight alone. We need no army. Don't shame our race with your cowardice!" The Prince folded his arms over his chest.

Tork stormed on and Artavan felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I was right to trust you. You led us to the Pahlavan dog Sarama."

He turned Artavan around and stared into his

eyes, so that he was desperate to look away. "How did you do it? How did you know to find her here in this place? What power do you hide from me? You are no ordinary man, are you? Who are you boy? The witch said that this was all prearranged, yet you knew to lead us here. Have you got something to do with the witch?"

Artavan gulped loudly. "I went to see a witch before you met us. She said I would have adventures and find out about myself, but that's all."

"Oh...perhaps it was the same witch. Was her face the same?"

Artavan's mind went blank as he tried to conjure the face of the witch. Now it seemed that he couldn't remember either witch's face. "I don't know."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Every now and then, the black dog sniffed the ground intently and howled. Artavan squatted down and said, "Sarama, where is it? Where's the dragon?" She scampered off. It was hard to tell whether or not she was serious about finding the dragon, or if she even understood her task, but Artavan trusted her.

By the end of the day, she'd led them to a wonderful place with a small cave behind a pristine waterfall. Prince Devdata tried to peer through the water. Sarama bolted through the water and Artavan followed, concerned that she might be eaten by the dreadful monster, for he thought that this might be the cave of the dragon. Devdata yelled and then followed him.

"Are you crazy, boy? You could have been killed." He quickly surveyed the inside of the cave.

Water dripped from Devdata's hair onto his face. He looked around and grunted. The cave was

solid rock, and actually somewhat dry in the far end of it.

"Is this the cave of the dragon?" Devdata called out. "Drujo, do you think this is solid?"

Drujo grunted, and pounded the rock with a fist. "My Prince, it seems safe."

Tork was yelling on the other side of the water, but nobody could make out what he was saying, neither did they care. Sarama seemed satisfied with the place. She began to run in and out of the water and Artavan followed her, his long hair becoming soaked. The water was wonderfully cool and he opened his mouth, swallowing large gulps of it. He suddenly froze as he considered that if this were the cave of the dragon, he might just be drinking its venom. The cave seemed shallow, but what if it were a trick?

"Do you suppose this might be some of the water the dragon is hoarding?" Artavan asked Devdata. Drujo thought the question was very funny.

"Nobody said that he was hoarding water, Artavan! Where do you get such notions?" Tork called out as he stood just outside of the cave, refusing to get wet.

Artavan was offended. "Well those people said that the dragon has their sacred cows and that's the reason for the drought. So I say he is hoarding water!"

Tork laughed as if the idea were ridiculous. Artavan was angry that he'd dismissed the idea, and all of the men seemed to be laughing at him now. Artavan glared at Tork and then ducked back into the water, then he popped his head back out, gasping and struggling as he gripped his own neck with one hand, the arm of which was obscured by the water. He remained half under the cascading waters for an instant, and then with one final yank, he fell back into the cave, laughing convulsively. Tork hesitated for an instant and then finally burst into the cave swinging his mace.

"Artavan! Have these evil men and his black-hearted dog addled your mind?" Tork glared when he saw Artavan laughing and rolling on the ground.

Devdata and Drujo were laughing and Sarama ran in excited circles.

"This is no time to jest. We have a serious mission to perform. Artavan, if I have to, I will beat some sense into you. I wasn't in favor of bringing a stupid slave along!"

Artavan was suddenly angered beyond anything he'd ever felt before. He crouched and then flew forward and tackled Tork, hitting his ankles with such force that he fell backwards. It was now Devdata who was laughing uncontrollably. Artavan scrambled up and sat on his chest before he could recover. Tork grunted in

disgust and he slapped him hard.

"Don't you ever hit me again, Tork! I'm no little slave boy, and you're not such a great hero!"

Tork pushed Artavan off and rose to sit, red-faced and furious. He looked at Artavan, shaking his head sadly. "Where is that servant who respected me, Artavan? Before you met this man," he said, pointing to Devdata, "you were a nice boy. I, being generous, never considered your low rank. I never thought myself above associating with a mere servant, but now you've begun to think too much of yourself. Don't forget that for a servant and slave, striking a noble is an offense punishable by death. Besides, I am the great Pahlavan these men came to this world to find. Without me, they have no chance of defeating the dragon sorcerer. If you irk me, I shall leave. Then what shall they do?"

Artavan hugged Sarama to him and looked up at Devdata, who still seemed amused. "Is he really a Pahlavan, Prince Devdata? Do I have to listen to him?" Sarama cocked her head as she sat by the Prince's feet like a wet black rag.

Devdata took Artavan's chin in his hand. "We shall talk later."

Tork seemed satisfied with this, and he began to look about and feel the sides of the cave. "We will spend the night here." He appeared to be pleased when nobody challenged him.

"I'll catch fish." Artavan looked into the pond created by the falling water, but he saw no sign of any life. The water was clear to the bottom. "Look! There isn't even a plant in sight and there aren't any fish either."

Everyone peered into the water, even Sarama, who lapped at it. They noticed that in the short time they'd been in the cave, darkness had begun to fall.

Devdata and Drujo remained quiet. Sarama whined softly and Artavan picked her off the ground and hugged her to him. She trembled in his arms and he ducked his head past the waterfall again to look into the growing darkness. The water no longer seemed pleasant. It was becoming cold and he thought about the deer hides and rabbit skins that were still in a heap on the other side of the waterfall. Artavan set Sarama down, not wanting to wet her again, and began to step through the water.

"Stop, Artavan! Where do you think you're going now?" Tork grabbed his upper arm.

"The skins, Tork, we need the skins to sleep on."

"I'll get them." Tork grabbed his mace.

Devdata stood in front of the cave opening. "Tork, I think you should stay here. Darkness has fallen too quickly and I suspect something is going on. Sarama seems to feel safer here, so we should

follow her example."

"What? I didn't take you for that big of a fool! But you are following a foolish dog." Tork was using his best imitation of a mocking voice, and with a flourish, he turned, and then they were watching his blurry form on the other side of the water.

After several hours, Tork returned with a bemused look on his face, and Sarama growled at him.

"What happened? Why did it take you so long to get the skins?" Drujo demanded. "What happened out there?"

He looked at them strangely. "What do you mean? It only took a moment!" Tork smiled and scratched the back of his head looking merry.

"Tork, you were out there for too long!"

He smiled. "Dear boy, I needed to attend to personal matters."

Artavan blushed and took the skins without another word. He spread them on the ground, taking the least for himself. Drujo and Devdata stood there stiffly and refused to sleep. The sound of the water crashing from the falls was comforting. Beyond it, there were no sounds of the night. Either they were drowned out in the noise made by the water, or there were no noises. Within seconds, Artavan was asleep.

* * * *

Artavan felt rough arms encircle his chest and his breath quickened. He hugged his own arms over his chest, but hands pushed them away and held them on either side of his face. He felt greedy lips grazing over his forehead and then taking his lips. He moved his head from side to side, but he couldn't escape. He felt like he couldn't breathe. The tongue pushed past his teeth and encircled his own tongue passionately. He tried to pull away, but he felt the weight of the man shift, so that he pressed down hard on him.

Artavan felt his own cock responding to the insistent hot one that bore down on him. The cool of the outside air caressed the parts of his body that were exposed, but the rest of him felt on fire. Together their bodies began to move, rubbing hot flesh against flesh until he could no longer bear it. His body stiffened and the liquid between them made their bodies slide against each other. The man groaned in pleasure, and with his hands, he lifted Artavan's hips as his cock slid beneath him. Artavan felt himself hardening again, but he struggled now as it pushed against him. Fear choked him as the mouth closed over his to stifle his scream.

"Wake up! You're dreaming!" Devdata shook Artavan. Sarama was licking his mouth frantically

as he mewled in terror. Devdata knelt close to him and asked softly, "Are you afraid of Tork? Did he do something to hurt you? I sensed you were dreaming of him violating you."

Artavan was instantly embarrassed. He could feel the wetness between his legs, and Sarama sniffed him, as if to affirm it. He was relieved when a sound took their attention off him.

"I hear something outside!" Drujo stood alert now.

It was profoundly dark, and now Tork was sitting up too. Devdata was standing with his face toward the wall of water. They heard the thin cry of a maiden over the sound of the falls. Sarama growled deeply. She'd woken up with her wiry fur tousled. Around her face, her fur stood up in matted bunches, but she was alert, her shining eyes staring at the water.

"It's a girl!" Tork cried merrily. "It sounds like a maiden in distress!"

Devdata sniggered. "I wouldn't be so sure of that, Tork."

The girl cried out more distinctly this time. She was weeping.

"Let's call her in here." Devdata called out. "Woman, come here, beyond the waterfall." His rough voice echoed in the cave.

Her cries quieted for an instant and then she began to weep again. "Help me! Please! Oh come

out and help me!”

Tork began to rush out.

“Stop!” Devdata ordered him sharply. “Don’t fall for this trick. We don’t know who that person is!”

“You coward!” Tork swung his mace from one shoulder to the other. “You never wanted to go on this mission. You wanted to ignore the calls for help from the poor villagers, and now you would let this poor woman suffer! Have you no shame? How is it that you call yourself a man?”

Devdata was growling now, his brow knit with anger. Tork smiled and called out to the woman. His voice took on a syrupy sweetness that made Artavan feel slightly disgusted.

“Do not fear! I am Tork, the defender of the weak, the succor of women lost in the forest!”

“Tork!” Drujo called to him. “Listen to the Prince. Sarama is also suspicious of this thing. What if it’s a spirit of the forest?”

“Silence, fiend!” You know nothing of the honor that compels me to protect the weak.”

“Make her come in here, Tork! Don’t you know that a demon can’t cross water? Call her in. We will know if she is a demon if she refuses!”

“I don’t believe in such children’s tales.” Tork was making his way toward the entrance of the cave. “After all, you came past this water and you are a little demon!” He laughed merrily and

charged out into the night.

They stood there and listened to the tinkling sound of laughter from the woman and the deeper sound of Tork's laugh. They seemed to be talking for a long time, and then their voices faded. Tork never returned. They perceived the arrival of the morning long before the darkness lifted in the cave. It had been silent for hours. Now Drujo spoke.

"I will see if Tork still lives."

Artavan leapt up and gathered the skins. He held them and Sarama in his arms as they left the cave and walked into the bright morning. They looked around and saw that the soft, light green grass around the edges of the waters was trampled. They followed the Prince, but saw no trace of Tork.

"Where is he?" Artavan wondered.

Sarama struggled from his arms and began to run and they rushed after her. Devdata didn't question her authority. Soon she stopped, growling deeply. In a lovely clearing full of fragrant flowers, lay Tork in the arms of a beautiful woman. Artavan ran the rest of the way, but Sarama held back, now barking her disapproval.

"Tork! Where have you been?" Artavan took in the scene, feeling uneasy.

The woman looked up and they saw radiant

dark eyes staring at them from a flawless face. Her hair tumbled down her back in gossamer black waves. Drujo was drooling as his arms went to his sides suddenly. Tork looked up at them groggily and smiled.

The woman was the first to speak. "Dear warriors, I was very cold and he was warming me."

"She was lost in the woods, Artavan! I had a duty..." Tork brushed leaves from his tousled hair.

"What is your story, woman?" Devdata growled.

The poor woman cringed away from him, her frightened eyes full of tears.

"Tell me!"

The woman began to sob and Tork jumped up to confront Devdata.

"Watch your tongue when addressing a noble woman, little so-called Prince, or I'll have to teach you how to behave!" Tork tried to thunder, but his voice was a little too high in pitch.

"What are you?" Devdata roared at the woman. "Sarama can smell you and she affirms my suspicions. You lie!"

Tork leapt to his feet and charged at Devdata with his mace over his head. He looked like a drunken elephant. The mace hit Devdata on the shoulder and he slumped. Tork raised it again and

tried to bring it down hard on the Prince's head, but he caught it in his bare hands and wrenched it away. Tork's momentum was such that he rushed past the Prince and hit a tree. He recovered in an instant and swung around to face Devdata, his body swaying like that of an enraged snake. All the while, the woman sobbed helplessly and wrung her soft white hands. Tork charged again and tried to run his head into Devdata's stomach, but Drujo caught Tork by his hair and shook him, and then tossed him by the base of a tree.

Drujo licked his lips and leered at the woman. "Answer the Prince's question!"

She sobbed more, but finally composed herself enough to speak. "Please don't harm me. I am Rania, daughter of a noble named Tripurasura. My father has a great estate in the town on the opposite side of this mountain. I am in this condition because of my own folly." She lowered her head in shame. They waited silently for her to continue.

"When I was only twelve years of age, I was playing in my father's orchard with my friends and our nurses. I picked a fine apple and took a bite. There was a worm in it, but I wasn't afraid as the other girls were. I didn't scream and run to my nurse, but instead I examined the small creature. This tiny worm appeared to wear a miniscule crown on its head. I squealed with delight and ran

home to show my doting father. I demanded to keep the worm in a crystal bowl where I fed it tiny morsels of apples. Within a month, it had filled the bowl. I loved the creature because it still wore a golden crown, which expanded as it grew.

“My father indulged my fancies, despite the warnings of mages, for I was his favorite child and only daughter. My seven older brothers also doted on me. Sometimes they brought sweet fruit and honeycombs for me to feed to the growing worm. Every year the worm grew bigger and bigger, and ate more and more. Finally, my father had to order workmen to construct a huge pool for it to lie in. It ate prodigious amounts of food, and it came to demand only the best. My father was loath to deny anything I asked for, but others in the household grumbled. Last year he had to construct an even more gigantic pool for the worm, and even I began to wonder when it would stop growing.”

“Woman!” Devdata shouted. “Do you expect us to believe such a wild tale? A worm? Have you gone mad? A worm indeed!”

She shrieked in despair and Tork put a protective arm around her. She glanced at the Prince with frightened eyes, but he scowled at her fiercely.

“Let her finish! You know nothing of our world! You admitted that you were from some

other dimension or something!" Tork frowned and continued. "I knew a man who owned a two-headed cow, and it is said that a woman gave birth to a dog with a child's head many years ago in a neighboring district. It is called sorcery!"

The woman continued her tale. "Well, as I was saying, the worm seemed harmless other than that it ate so much food, but then something happened a few days ago. We'd noticed many of the servant girls disappearing one by one over the months. Nobody suspected the worm, but one day the worm was audacious enough to snatch up the female child of my eldest brother even before his eyes. My brother took his sword and fought with the creature, but it swallowed him and my fair niece. The alarm went through our compound and my six other brothers fell upon the vile creature, but they all lost their lives.

"Seeing this, my father had the servants pour oil into the pool and set it on fire. I don't know if the worm died, for I was beaten and pushed into the woods by my angry kin, who blamed me for bringing disaster to our pleasant household."

She paused for breath, and as if it were all too painful to recall, she fainted. Tork ran to her and gently lifted her head to his lap.

"Poor dear woman! See Devdata, and you've managed to vex her even more! Poor woman has lost everything! Now she's alone in this cruel

world!"

The Prince spat in disgust and seemed unmoved by her story. Meanwhile, Sarama still growled and kept her distance. Artavan surmised that the girl must carry the evil scent of that horrible worm on her, and maybe that was the cause of Sarama's distress.

Soon the woman's eyes fluttered open and she clutched at Tork.

The Prince sniffed the air like a wolf and made a sour face. "What do want to do with this...this so-called woman, Tork?"

"I would like to kill and eat her," Drujo muttered.

"Don't talk like that about her, you rude beast! She can never go home. I'll bring her to the abode of Mehr the Generous and perhaps I'll wed her!" Tork stood with his chest puffed out, and the woman clung to him.

"You will abandon the mission to kill the dragon?" the Prince asked.

Tork pondered the question. "Well, I suppose I can't do that, can I? I've vowed to kill the dragon and I shall do so. We will approach the place, and dear Rania can stay a safe distance from it with Artavan to serve her needs, that is, if I can trust him now to keep his budding lust in check."

"No! This...this man," Devdata pointed to Artavan, "he wishes to fight the dragon along

with us."

"Yes! Yes, Tork! I want to fight!"

"What ideas have you put into his head?" Tork glared at Devdata. "He's a slave, not a warrior. It's improper and totally ridiculous. It's..."

"Silence, Tork!" Devdata spoke in a royal-sounding voice, which made Artavan shiver with delight. "Prince Artavan will make the decision, not you." He put an emphasis on the word prince.

"I will fight!" Artavan shouted with pride.

"What about the giant worm?" Drujo smacked his lips. "We should find it and kill it. We can roast it and it may prove to be rich and fatty."

The girl whimpered and hid her face in Tork's broad chest. "Please...I just can't go back there!"

"Have no fear! I am Tork, the defender of the..."

Devdata cut him off angrily. "Tork! Stop your foolish talk. We will kill the so-called worm after we take care of the dragon."

"You're not my lord, little prince of some place I'll wager doesn't even exist!" Tork cried attempting to imitate the fine art of taunting one's enemy, something the Prince excelled at.

Devdata turned his back on the pair and took Artavan by the elbow possessively. They began to trek further on, not waiting for Tork to follow. The dog Sarama ran ahead of him, occasionally looking back and growling. When Artavan

glanced back, he saw that Tork was actually carrying the woman in his arms, as he followed them.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Artavan sprang awake to find himself in the dense darkness of a moonless night. It had been a long day of walking and finally they had found a place to rest. From the place where Tork was bedded down with the beautiful woman, a short distance from them. He heard melodious laughter.

Devdata and Drujo stood listening.

"It sounds as if they are coupling." Drujo leered into the dark.

"Perhaps, but let's not forget the tricks of the Sorcerer Angraminyu. It's been on my mind since we met that woman, that she's connected with him." Devdata frowned.

"I'll spy on them!" Artavan bravely offered.

"I'll do it!" Drujo smirked hungrily, but Devdata held him back.

Artavan reached for his sword and after swinging it over his shoulder, he began to creep closer. Sarama crept on her belly by his side, her

teeth bared in a silent snarl. As they got closer, Artavan could make out their words clearly.

"Rania, you're so beautiful that I can't bear it!" Tork spoke in a wheedling little voice.

Artavan had crawled close enough so that he could see them now. Tork was dressed only in the long silk shirt he wore under his tunic and the bulge in his crotch area was unmistakable.

"Please, Rania, I'm just like a little boy, I can't wait," Tork whined.

"I am an innocent girl." She spoke in a deeply sensuous voice. "I can't give myself to a man I haven't married. Do you think I'm that sort of girl?"

She purred this in such a voice that Artavan doubted her innocence. She was dressed in a fine silk shift that had been concealed by her rich dress, which was now thrown to the side. Her hand moved suggestively from her well-formed breasts to her crotch, which under the fine, almost sheer material appeared like a dark triangle. Tork was inflamed. His eyes roved over her desperately.

"I promise! We'll marry as soon as we return to the estate of Mehr the Generous!" he said urgently.

"But I can see by your eyes that you love the slave boy—the one you call Artavan. He is comely and you may change your mind. If you do, then

my honor would have been sullied for nothing. I will have to remain unmarried and no man will ever have me. Why can't you wait?" She absently ran a delicate finger over the dark triangle. She pressed the middle of that spot and threw her head back so that her lovely throat was exposed. She swallowed and moaned a little.

Tork seemed crazy with lust and Artavan saw some movement between his legs. "I'll be yours forever. I swear! How can you think I would love a slave? I never have. It was only that I felt sorry for him because he is so besotted with me. You see, he's desperately in love with me, but he has the body of a work mule and the manners of a drunken tavern dog. How could I ever love him?"

"He isn't so ugly," she purred. "In fact, I see that the Prince wants him, but he's afraid of you. Yes, the Prince fears your power, but I know how men are; after all, I have...had seven brothers. You will have your way with me and then you will fight with him for the love of the slave Artavan." Her voice caught as if she were about to sob, but her hands cupped her full breasts and she pushed them closer to his drooling mouth.

"Never! No never! I shall love you until the end of time." Tork tried to sidle closer to her, the lump between his legs bobbing slightly as if to affirm his statement.

"Well, maybe." She seemed to be considering.

"Maybe I will believe you, but you must allow me a token of your sincerity."

"Anything you say." Tork's voice rasped in desperation.

She lifted her gossamer skirts and fell to her knees on Tork's blanket. The glimpse of her nakedness must have astonished him, because his eyes glazed over in bliss. She ran a hand under her bodice and threw her head back as she touched her lovely breasts. Tork gasped and the sweat ran from his eager face. He seemed reluctant to break the spell he was under by touching her. The lovely woman had her back turned to Artavan, but he saw the shift slip over her head. Her back was lovely and straight and it culminated in plump, rounded buttocks. She seemed as beautiful as a statue of the goddess Anahita.

"It's a token of my love for you, just to remind you of your promise. No man has ever taken me, so heed me well. I expect you to be mine forever, as you have promised." She stood again with her perfect hands covering the place between her legs as if she were shy.

Artavan felt Sarama's stout front paw jab at his foot and he was startled out of his own trance. Tork lifted his shirt off and stood naked. He put a tentative hand on her shoulder and she dropped to the blanket, her legs spread slightly. Tork mounted her instantly, but she held him back.

"Your promise," she sighed.

"Yes! I promise. Anything! Oh the gods! Anything!"

She put both hands over her private area and raised her hips slightly. She groaned and her hands moved away, a beautiful golden bracelet now between them. It had materialized magically, and it was the identical one that the monster Rangohar had tried to force onto Devdata, and the same that had caused Drujo to go against his prince and master. Artavan let out a stifled shriek and the woman's eyes found him immediately. She smiled triumphantly in his direction before desperately grasping Tork's eager hand. He thrust his pelvis toward her body as she moved up to receive him, but her attention was on slipping the cursed bracelet onto his wrist.

Sarama was on her in an instant, biting her hand and shaking it like a rag. The woman sprang to her feet, and Tork was thrown to the side with his manhood still thrusting as if he were a dog overcome at the sight of another pair of dogs coupling. She shrieked in a rough voice, and with amazing strength threw the dog against a tree. Sarama fell motionless and Artavan screamed again, this time in fury. He parted the brush with one arm and unsheathed his sword.

"No Artavan! No!" Tork screamed. He still lay on his back, but he managed to turn his face

toward the woman.

She ran to him and hugged his chest as if terrified. She helped Tork to sit up and clung to him like a helpless girl, all the while rubbing her hot body over him. "Save me! Your jealous Artavan means to harm me because you love me and not him!" Tork scrambled to his feet and held her.

The bracelet was on the ground near the unconscious dog. The woman followed Artavan's gaze and she smiled slyly.

"Help me, Tork! Please take me away from these horrible people!" Rania wailed as Tork put a protective arm around her. "That awful man who calls himself a prince wants to kill me because I didn't choose him and he's sent this raging slave to do me harm. Please, oh husband to be. Save me and yours will be many a strong son!"

"No Tork, you don't understand! That bracelet she was trying to put on you was the same one that the monster Rangohar tried to put on Devdata. It's enchanted and will cause you to become Angraminyu's slave." Artavan shouted at Tork, who shook his head in disbelief.

"Artavan, you will leave us alone. Shame on you for coming at such a time to dirty your heart watching the coupling of two in love. Have you no shame? You are like a cow that comes to watch another cow mating with a powerful bull. You

come and try to push the two apart, hungry for attention of your own." Tork's face was now twisted by self-righteous rage.

The awful woman looked so beautiful, but her eyes revealed her evil intent. In them was stealthy purpose.

"Now look. I'll put on my clothes and you'll stand there and be calm." Tork spoke in his most patronizing voice.

As soon as he tried to let go of her, she covered her breasts with one arm and her pubic area with a delicate, long fingered hand. After covering himself with his shirt, Tork took a few steps to retrieve her shift.

As Tork turned, she leapt forward to where the bracelet lay near the still form of Sarama. Before her hand touched it, Sarama sprang up and bit Rania's hand three times in quick succession. She screamed and twisted her body as if a snake had struck her. It was a heart-rending cry at first, but soon it took on a deep resonance that was punctuated with the unhealthy crackling of phlegm from her throat.

She turned her smiling face to Artavan and he saw that her lofty forehead had become squat as deep lines formed on it. Her nose kept growing so that it looked like the end of a fat, white worm. Her purplish tongue stuck out of her mouth as if it could no longer fit, and her teeth grew pointed

and fierce. Her hunched back made fracturing noises as it grew and her lovely breasts became long and pendulous, with gray nipples the size of a man's thumb. Her knees turned backwards like those of a chicken and the toes of those hideous feet became three-toed claws.

She stomped around as if getting used to her new form. Artavan fearfully took a few steps back. He saw that a row of spines had sprouted on her back and her skin was now the green of a rotted gourd. Tork fell to his knees in fear, but recovered and tried to step back. At once, the monster reached for him and held his head in her hand as if it were a soft melon. Tork screamed and she kissed his open mouth. It looked like a kiss at first, but then she thrust her hideous, fat tongue down his throat, choking his terrified screams.

Artavan ran at her and grabbed hold of one of the slimy spines on the back of her head. They had already grown to the size of horns, but were still rather soft. He dug his fingers into it and with all his might, he yanked it back. A cracking sound melded with her instantaneous scream of pain and rage. She dropped Tork and grabbed Artavan by his long hair with a hand that was thick with warts and calluses.

He was wrenched off his feet and thrown against a large stone. Before he could recover, the thing had him by the hair again, shaking him. His

sword was out of reach and because the long-armed creature held him at a distance, he couldn't reach her with his desperate kicks. He looked at the monster and saw its gleaming, dripping maw masticating on something. Suddenly it spit a wad of sticky, greenish sputum at him. He dodged it, but in doing so almost broke his own neck, saving it the trouble of killing him. He screamed as he saw the tree it hit begin to dissolve into a molded heap.

This mobilized Tork and he ran to the sword, lifting it inelegantly as he posed to strike. When he attacked the monster-woman's head, it only bounced, and the shock of it made him drop the sword, which then ricocheted in Artavan's direction. The thing stretched its tongue out toward him, but he swung and caught the sword as it tumbled toward the ground. Whooping with excitement, Artavan held it with both hands as the creature continued to shake him by his hair, his legs dangling off the ground.

Its chomping jaws worked with a sloppy slapping sound and he knew it was working up some more of its corrosive phlegm. Pursing its scaly lips, the monster spit a large, quivering mucoid glob at Artavan. His instinct was to hit it with the flat of the sword. The substance was strange. Instead of splashing onto the sword, it remained in one piece and was batted into one of

the demon's eyes. She dropped Artavan and began to bellow, running in tight circles of panic. He aimed and missed its head, instead cutting a large chunk off its shoulder. She seemed not to notice, so bad was the pain in her eyes. The second time his aim was better and her head fell. After running in several more circles spurting huge gouts of blood, the body finally landed on the ground. It continued to twitch spasmodically. The thing gave several intense spasms and seemed to finally die.

A slurping and sucking sound began and they both spun around to look at the corpse. The head had stopped moving and was leering at them from under the shade of a large fallen log. The body, however, was moving again. The wound on its neck was pulsating now, and every once in a while a whitish thing poked out. This made the sucking noise. The body was slowing swelling up and had become almost clear like a pig's bladder Artavan had once seen the cobbler's sons playing with, having filled it with air.

"Let's get away!" Tork managed to blubber.

Artavan was too terrified to utter anything but a few strangled croaks as he backed away, his eyes riveted on the now rapidly bloating corpse. Suddenly, the body burst, spewing slime and blood in all directions.

Its blood and guts weren't corrosive, but they

were disgusting. Artavan wiped at the mess with his arm and saw that the body had not totally disintegrated. The white thing that had poked out of its neck had expanded, bursting the body. Now the creature had so grown that they could almost touch it. A sloppy slurping sound came from it. Before them was a pale thing, a worm—a giant, fat creature writhing senselessly. A delicate golden-filigreed crown was attached to one hideous end of it, and it dug into the pliant white flesh of the thing. He could see that the creature was more of a grub because of the vestigial legs that ran the length of it on both sides. Undeveloped eyes under a layer of skin added to the terrifying appearance of the thing.

The monster appeared not to have a mouth at first, but it was working at something, judging by the chomping sounds coming out of it. Suddenly it opened a huge mouth adorned with two sets of sharp yellow teeth. The mouth stretched spasmodically as if trying to gag up something.

“Run!” Tork croaked.

Artavan turned to flee, but one of the undeveloped legs reached out and grabbed him. The chitinous claw on the end cut into his leg and he screamed, but he struggled free of it and ran away, following Tork.

They were only about twenty paces from the worm, which began to wriggle madly toward

them. Drujo appeared suddenly from the darkness of the tree line and he extended his palm with a grunt of disgust. A strong blue light shot out from it, and instantly the creature began to thrash wildly. They heard a crackling noise as the fat from its body began to ignite and a roaring fire filled the pit it had made while writhing. Now a hideous bellowing sound rent the air as it burned.

"I'll wager that it won't be fit to eat." Drujo called out to Devdata, who now also stepped out of the shadows. He spat with disgust as the rancid smell of burning fat assailed their noses.

The worm reared its giant head one last time and the crown flew off and toward the Prince. It had shrunk to the size of his head from the enormous thing it had been. As if possessed with a will, the crown tried to land squarely on Devdata's head, but he avoided it deftly and caught it in a gloved hand. Artavan stared in horror.

The shadow of apprehension crossed Devdata's face. He seemed to be struggling with the crown, which was now shrinking and trying to attach itself to his wrist. Drujo made to help him.

"No Drujo! Don't touch it! It's enchanted! Don't forget what happened before!"

Artavan understood immediately. It was a spell sent by the Sorcerer Angraminyu and the Worm-monster was only another of his minions. Sarama appeared and began to bark sharply.

Artavan sprang forward, but Sarama bit him, stopping his progress. Devdata fell to his knees struggling. His face was red and he growled as he fought with the crown, which had clearly become one of those cursed bracelets. Sarama began to lick Devdata's hands and the Prince fell back as the bracelet suddenly disappeared. Looking up, Artavan saw the gold of it sparkling as it rose and then suddenly it shot into the sky and was gone. Devdata's hand and wrist were lacerated and red. Sarama continued to lick him as if his blood were delicious.

"That was another of the Sorcerer Angraminyu's attempts to kill or capture us." Devdata grunted as he allowed the dog to lap at him. He even turned his hands to allow her to lick both sides.

Artavan was a little repulsed at the sight. "Why does Sarama lick you so?"

"She broke the spell of the cursed bracelet with her saliva. That is one of the powers of the Pahlavan dog." Devdata didn't look up, but finally he petted Sarama's head tenderly.

"That woman...I'm so heartbroken...I loved her and..." Tork began to weep.

Devdata glared at him, but his voice was rather kind. "Tork, I haven't blamed you, so why do you waste your time in regret? You're a Pahlavan warrior. We allow no such sentiments to cloud our

fighting abilities.”

“She couldn’t cross the water.” Drujo reminded him. “There are signs. You must always trust the first instinct of danger, but in your case, she enchanted you before you had the chance to suspect her.”

“Yes,” Devdata continued, these kinds of creatures are expert in finding one’s weaknesses.” He looked off into the woods and sighed. “He has a sense of humor, the Sorcerer Angraminyu. This worm creature was one of his most disgusting creations.”

Tork seemed angered at the suggestion that he had weaknesses, but he held his tongue. They began to walk away from the awful place, which stank of roasted grub. It seemed to Artavan that eyes were on them as they moved through the trees, Sarama barking ahead of them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I think you can see my point now.” Tork had stopped in his tracks. We have to seek help. I understand your pride, but I have allies who will help us, if, that is, I ask them.”

Devdata stared at him, but Artavan thought he might be considering the idea.

“Mehr the Generous, for he is, indeed, generous, will do anything for me. I am his son, for all intents, and I know he loves me.”

Tork must have sounded convincing, although Artavan was very suspicious now.

Drujo grunted and slammed his fist at a tree, which shook as if it would fall. “You think we should go all the way back to your village? No!”

“That’s right, we continue.” Devdata still appeared softened to the idea, however.

Tork approached Artavan and put a hand on his shoulder. Artavan was repulsed. Tork smelled awful. Maybe it was the influence of that worm-demon, he thought.

"Artavan, tell them. You know how great Mehr's armies are."

"They're humans, so why depend on them?" Artavan cringed inwardly, realizing that he too, was just a human.

"Rightly said. Let's move on!" Devdata turned, and the discussion was over.

* * * *

At the end of that long day Artavan's excitement over the worm incident had waned. Troubling thoughts eroded his dreams of becoming a real warrior. He wondered if his dreams were just filler for his gourd-like head, after all. Tork hated him now, he was sure, and Devdata seemed more aloof than usual. As they prepared to take their rest under a canopy of bright stars, Artavan was chilled with the thought that Tork was, in the true sense, lost to him, even as a friend.

It was a strange thought, Artavan mused, but he had, at one time loved Tork. They'd been orphans together for some time, until Mehr the Generous had taken Tork as a son. *Maybe I'm still jealous.* He was happy that Tork hadn't been devoured by the worm-monster, though. He remembered when Tork had first noticed him. Artavan was chasing a calf that'd gotten himself lost in the woods. This calf was a little less than a

yearling, but it was swift. Tork was taking a shortcut through the woods and he was spooked by Artavan's sudden appearance, his crazy hair blown into greater disarray than usual, and his clothes torn from the brambles. Tork always seemed jolly, but since allowing Artavan to join him on his adventure, he'd become a very different man. Now Artavan sat on a skin gazing at the Dog Star. He prayed that the god Tishtriya, who lived on that star, would make him a great warrior, and that he would return Tork to his normal self, not that that was so much better. He petted Sarama's head and she looked at him and whined, her ears flat against that long head of hers.

Troubled as he was, sleep still overcame him. Artavan dreamed of flying as the Pahlavans did, when he felt a tickle on his cheek. He brushed it away, thinking that Sarama was again taking advantage of him and trying to lap at his drool. Soft kisses made his eyes open wide. Tork leaned over him with his eyes shut tight as he again lowered his pink lips to Artavan's, whose wild mind tried to think. *Why is he doing this?*

He breathed down into Artavan's face and it felt like the soft breeze of the summer, but it smelled like the reek of a rotten ball of cheese—like one that had been infected by a *yatu's* curse. He shook Tork's shoulders.

"Tork! Tork! Wake up! You're dreaming." Artavan whispered urgently. He didn't want Devdata to see them like this. Tork suddenly pressed his lips against his mouth with such force that he couldn't dislodge him. He wrapped arms as strong as snakes around Artavan's body and hugged him close. Artavan felt that he could no longer breathe as the heavy weight of Tork's body pressed down on him.

Artavan struggled like a wild ass, legs and arms flailing, but Tork seemed as heavy as a boulder. His vision began to darken when suddenly Tork started back with a yelp. Sarama had his left ear in her mouth and was shaking it as she would a rabbit. Artavan took in a great heaving breath and looked on as Tork rolled in pain.

"Sarama! Leave him!" Artavan screamed. He wondered what had become of Devdata, now that he needed him.

Sarama suddenly released Tork and ran to Artavan, but her lips were still curled in a snarl. Tork's face was transformed. He looked so innocent as he clutched his ear and wept. Artavan lost all fear, anger, and reason as he rushed to him.

"Tork, let me see it! I'll fetch some moss!"

"I'm sorry Artavan! I thought you wanted me as much as I wanted you," he sobbed. "What's become of you?"

Artavan was too shocked to answer. *What had*

gotten into Tork? First, he was mean and beat me, and hates me... He ran and got moss, which he stuffed around Tork's wound. He finally tied this to his head with a vine. Tork hugged his body and looked down like a child who's been chastised. Artavan shivered as he looked down at the transformed man, who was usually so arrogant and even malicious lately. He told himself that Tork's roughness was due to the fact that like most men, once desire had clouded their minds, they had no control. At least that's what he'd heard old woman Ohdana say.

"Artavan, I've wanted you since the first day I saw you. Now I know that you love someone else, and my chances are over. I blame myself for being so shy that I couldn't confess my love to you earlier."

Artavan stiffened. Tork's speech was really out of character. He never spoke like this. He would never have said such a thing. Certainly, no dog bite would make him cry and be so submissive! Artavan didn't answer him, so Tork walked to the bed of skins with his head lowered and curled into a ball, probably sucking his thumb, Artavan thought with a little contempt. He sat there near Tork until the sun rose slightly through the trees, too afraid to close his eyes.

He stared as Tork finally rose and stretched with a smile on his face. The wad of moss had

apparently fallen off.

"How is your ear?" Artavan asked sheepishly.

"My ear?" Tork put a hand on one ear and then the other.

"Yes, does it still hurt? Let me take a look."

"Are you mad? What is it about my ear?" Tork brushed his hand over both again, looking puzzled.

Artavan ran over to him and grabbed his ear, but it was perfectly sound. There wasn't a scratch on it! He went cold all over.

"Don't you remember last night?"

"Last night? My dear Artavan, you do indeed have vivid dreams!" Tork leered in a manner Artavan had never seen him do before. He would have thought he was mad were it not for the fact that Sarama eyed Tork with suspicion. Her hackles were raised and Artavan could see that she wanted to have some more of those tasty ears. Devdata and Drujo seemed to have left to hunt already, for they hadn't showed up. This worried him.

"I'm hungry!" Tork declared.

"Yes, I am too." Artavan imagined Sarama snacking on crusty, crunchy, roasted ears and that made him even hungrier.

We should go catch us some game, Tork. I think Drujo and Devdata must already be hunting."

Tork smirked. "Since you think you're a warrior, why don't you bring back the game?"

"I will. You dig a proper fire hole and prepare a large spit. Place large, smooth stones in the bottom of it as you've seen me do, and then start a fire. Here's a flint." Artavan tossed the rock to him. "Make haste as it needs to be burning steadily when I return." He turned to enter the woods.

"No! I can't do all of that. You do it, Artavan. Such work isn't befitting a noble."

Artavan noted that he had regained his characteristic peevishness.

"Fine, then I'll kill the game and cook it as well." Artavan paused and looked Tork over, deciding that he had, indeed returned to his normal obnoxious self. "But you'll get none of the meat."

Tork seemed to consider it, and then turned without a word and left. Artavan decided to prepare the fire, but his mind nagged him. *How had he recovered so soon? Had it really all been a dream?* Thinking that Tork would want him seemed like a dream, but at the moment, a rather unpleasant one.

Artavan had just finished his work when he heard a light tap and Sarama began to yip and bark in a frenzy of joy. Devdata grinned savagely but without mirth. Drujo joined him presently.

"Where have you been? Why didn't you inform

me that you were leaving?" Artavan knew he was speaking rudely, but he'd been so worried, that it didn't matter now.

Devdata didn't respond to Artavan's scolding, but he pointed. "There's a great city not far west of here. We spotted it, but there doesn't seem to be any activity. I think it may be another of the Sorcerer Angraminyu's tricks. I may be mistaken, however, I believe we should check it out. Where's that buffoon Tork?"

"He went hunting. Prince, he's acting stranger than usual. I just wanted you to know." Artavan hesitated uncertainly. "It was really odd."

"He's coming." Devdata looked off into the woods, and soon Tork appeared out of the morning haze and dropped a deer-like animal at Artavan's feet. Tork's reddened eyes frightened him and his smile made Artavan feel cold.

"I did it!" Tork stood proudly in front of Devdata. "I used my immense power to strike it dead. I can do that to any enemy of mine! What do you have to say, my little friend?"

Devdata eyed the body of the animal.

Tork had apparently tried to make it look as if he'd broken its neck, as Drujo had done, but an arrow had been pulled out of its eye. Still, it was impressive, Artavan thought.

"I was able to do that as a three year old." Devdata had dismissed him, and Artavan saw that

Drujo smiled at the sight.

At this, Tork tried to imitate Devdata, spitting in disgust.

This made Artavan angry. "You act just like a male puppy who has just discovered how to lick his balls! Don't be so proud! The Prince can actually destroy the sun if he so wanted to. Anyway, you can't even cook or make a fire." Artavan felt better having said this, but Tork smiled.

"My dear Artavan, you shouldn't envy me so much. You've also gained great skill, for now you're the world's greatest liar and the most foolish buffoon." He bowed slightly and then glared at Devdata, who seemed unmoved.

Artavan took his knife and cut into the shoulder of the deer. The meat was solid, but it stank of boiled urine. He knew the smell of it, because a man who called himself a Greek doctor once boiled urine and said it cured the lump that forms on the neck of a person before they fall ill and are unable to digest food. He gagged. "It's a bad animal. Perhaps an old male."

The Prince wrinkled his nose in disgust as Tork cut a large piece and bit into it, although it was uncooked.

"It is edible," Tork said. "The bad taste comes from the fact that it's a female in her time of the month."

"That's stupid! Female deer don't taste bad anytime of the month!" Artavan used a tree branch to spread the legs of the beast and he pointed out the testicles. "See. If you had such old balls, you too would smell and taste like a pot of boiled piss aged for a month! That is how it is with male creatures. It was probably so old that it didn't even run from you."

"You can think that way? You can think of eating a man?" Tork screamed.

"If a man were tasty enough, yes, I would!" Artavan screamed back.

Drujo was beside himself with laughter. He held his belly and threw back his head.

Devdata wasn't amused. "Enough! We go to the city – the Bronze City."

"The Bronze City?" Tork cried out like a braying ass.

Artavan smiled.

"Yes. I believe that's what it is. There's an old myth, which even Pahlavans know of. Your earth is said to have a magical city with a wall of bronze. It's supposed to be a place of riddles. If one falls for the deceptions there, it means certain death. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I have never before seen such a massive wall of bronze."

Artavan listened to the Prince's story in awe.

"We'll have to start immediately, because it's some distance from here. Although there's a risk

that this is one of the Sorcerer's tricks, I feel that we may gain some clues. However, it's of utmost importance that we act with caution."

Artavan was surprised that Tork asked no questions.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was some time before they finally spotted the front of the outer wall of the silent Bronze City. Artavan could see why the Prince had called it that. The walls, the buildings, the parapets—all of it shone like polished bronze.

“What is this?” Artavan cried when he saw it, for he had never before seen a city.

“Silly!” Tork replied. “It’s an empty city! I hear and see no people, no braying asses. Why did we come to this place? You there!” He called out to the Prince. “Hello! What’s your purpose in bringing us here?”

Devdata didn’t even look at Tork, but now he approached the massive gate. He put a hand on the lock, and it broke open with a loud pop. The gate swung open, and Artavan screamed in horror as he took in the scene. The streets were full of people going about their daily lives. He saw men driving oxen hitched to carts, vendors standing and sitting in their shabby stalls. He saw a woman

with a small baby at her breast and even a boy picking the pocket of a passing man. The thing that made him scream was that they didn't move at all, for they were skeletons. It was as if they had been caught in an instant in time, and frozen there.

The carts pulled by skeletal donkeys were full of the dried remains of the goods they once carried. The clothing of the people hung off bones, which were somehow still suspended, as if frozen in the task they were last performing. A breeze ruffled their tattered clothes and Artavan finally took a breath of the moldy air that stank of death. Tork also seemed to be stunned by what he saw. Nobody spoke. Even Sarama sat quietly, and she finally scratched his leg, requesting to be picked off the ground. Artavan could feel her body's tremors.

"What can this mean?" Tork finally asked.

Drujo stood silently.

"It's as I thought. The sorcerer Angraminyu must have left this as a message for us, or worse," Devdata said in a soft growl. "It could be a trap!"

Tork paled. For a moment, Artavan saw real fear in his eyes, but soon they were clouded over. Artavan didn't want to move, lest the skeletons fall into a heap, but the brave prince began to make his way through the crowd, careful to avoid the bones of the dead. He was headed for the beautiful palace building. Artavan followed with

Sarama refusing to walk on her own. She snuggled into his arms and he had to bear her heavy weight.

At the great gates, he saw the bones of guards still standing at attention. Artavan had never been in a building bigger than the houses of his village, so he was afraid. *Will the walls and ceiling collapse on me?* He shuddered as he fought with the instinct to run away from the terrible, stifling building. When Devdata pulled him into the building, Artavan cowered with his arms over his head, thinking that the ceiling over him was falling. Sarama held onto him with her claws clamped over his shoulder and her short hind legs wheeling for purchase. He held her again and they walked on.

Artavan was amazed, despite his fears when he saw the lavish interior. Beaded and embroidered cloths hung from the vast walls and the few rays of sunshine that were able to enter the great cavernous hall danced off of them. He saw skeletons of what he imagined were once lovely maidens holding their needlework or stringing now dried flowers. Their ornate dresses still looked beautiful, although there were ugly spots where dripping decay had spoiled them. Artavan swallowed hard against the nausea welling up in him.

He saw men in gorgeous raiment caught in the

act of striding proudly through the halls, some with trays containing scrolls and some with precious gold vessels in their hands. He saw groups of men sitting casually before checkered boards made of marble with ornately carved figures on them. Some skeletal hands held small precious stones used for games of other sorts, he realized.

Tork and Drujo followed Devdata, who seemed to know where he was going. Maybe all palaces were alike, Artavan thought, and he imagined Devdata seated on a throne among his loyal subjects. They soon entered the room, where thrones more elaborate than Artavan could have imagined, filled the enormous space. He gasped when he saw the magnificent king and queen who were seated there. The king had noble looking bones and he was dressed in rich velvets beaded with pearls and precious gems. The train of his cape swept out in front of the throne making it possible for them to see the glorious gems that studded it. The queen was similarly decked out, but her robes were even lovelier. While the king's robes were a rich dark purple, the queen wore blood-red robes of brocade and satin. Her hands were folded demurely on her lap and on the bones of her fingers, Artavan saw rings of incredible beauty.

The room was deadly silent, as Artavan dared

not even breathe in the face of such a sight. He looked toward Tork, and followed his eyes to a great chest of gems opened at the right side of the king's throne. His fists clenched and unclenched, as he seemed to consider what to do.

Artavan glanced toward Drujo, whose mouth twitched as he also took in the treasure.

"No Drujo!" Devdata seemed to know what was on his mind. "There's a message here for us." The Prince spoke with gravity. "Indeed it's a trap as well. What do you see, human?" Devdata looked at Artavan.

"I...that is...I see that people are dead."

"What does it mean?" Devdata persisted.

Artavan thought for a long moment. He was stunned that Devdata was asking him, the most moronic soul on earth. "I think that this city was rich once, and even though there are still jewels and gold here, they're worth nothing because there are no souls here."

"Yes." The Prince seemed to approve. "I think that this place was a poor city. Did you notice that outside the palace, although the streets were shiny with bronze and even the shacks were made of this valuable thing, they still appeared to be poor? It looked like everything had been plated with bronze. This palace here seems well appointed, but beneath all the jewels and brocades is shabbiness."

"I don't see that," Tork said angrily. "Don't you see how beautiful everything is?"

"It is the Sorcerer!" Artavan said suddenly. "It must be that he offered these people gold and riches, but he took their souls."

Devdata nodded. "He offers great riches and sometimes he'll threaten. He does whatever he can do to convince a person to follow him. The king and queen that sit there have nothing. They're surrounded by the vast wealth, yet they have nothing."

Tork finally approached the casket of gems and thrust both hands into them, allowing them to slip through his fingers as he grunted in appreciation.

"Tork! No!" Artavan screamed, but Tork's eyes were glazed over in the passion he felt. He pulled at his sword and struck Tork's arm with the flat of it, but Artavan instantly saw the room transform. The room was bustling with people running here and there, performing their duties as the king and queen looked on. The queen smiled at Artavan, and held a jewel-encrusted hand up before her face.

"Beautiful, aren't they? Yes, I can see it in your eyes, but mark this, warrior, it is but an illusion. There was a time when we had a good life. Our kingdom was prosperous in the way of a good town. We had plenty of cattle and crops and the people willingly paid tribute to the throne. We

had no jewels, however, and my husband, the king, pined for that sort of luxury. One day a devil dressed as a mage came and promised him great wealth, if only he would allow him to be his advisor.

“First he himself went to the king’s kitchens and cooked dished that were so delicious that the king shared none of them with anyone, not even with me. Slowly I came to know that these dishes were made of the brains of our subjects. Yes, that evil demon would demand that the townsfolk give up a man one day, a woman the next and then children, were also eaten. Even when I informed him, the King was unable to give up these meals.

“Finally he asked the demon to give him the jewels and gold he had promised. That wicked creature told my dear husband that the jewels would be had if he split open the heads of the important members of the town and even those of our retinue. At first, he was alarmed, but then the demon demonstrated. He took a sword and split open my maid’s head, and we saw jewels tumble out. They were jewels of such a striking brilliance and size that even I forgot my horror at the killing. This went on for many days until we filled many a chest, as you see here. Finally, the demon convinced the king that the most precious gems would be found within the skull of our son, the fair prince.

"Do you know what happened next? Yes, my greedy Lord took the innocent boy and split his head open, but only his brains poured out as the child died screaming. All of these gems and gold became rotted festering brains in various states of decay and we became as you saw us—foul skeletons hoarding what appear to be jewels. We're the poorest city in the world because we lost our souls! Hark wild-man! Fear illusion! Don't trust what you see, but trust only your heart!"

At this, she fell silent and the room transformed back to that awful state it had been in. Artavan started in terror when Tork wailed in fear. His hands were covered in the vilest of blood and decayed matter. He shrieked and held his hands away from himself as if he wanted to leave them far away. Finding no way to wipe the vile stuff, Artavan tore at one of the figures in the room and pulled a sash off and threw it at Tork, who wiped at his arms desperately. The skeletal figure collapsed and others began to crumble around them, raising a vile stench and thick dust.

They ran, stepping over skulls and other bones, until finally Devdata grabbed Artavan, who still held a terrified Sarama, by his arm and pulled him as he flew over the gate. Drujo had lifted Tork by the hair and had done the same. Sarama was frothing at the mouth in her excitement. Drujo threw Tork down. Tork landed in an undignified

heap, but he lost no time in beginning to rub dust frantically on his arms as he whimpered in horror.

"Let's run to the creek we passed back there!" Artavan suggested. "Bathe until you can wash off the stench!"

"We'd better watch him!" Drujo rubbed dust on his hands too, as if even touching Tork's hair made him feel dirty.

Devdata hadn't said a word, but he grabbed Artavan cruelly by the arm and they were off following Tork. He lifted off into the air momentarily, and then he dropped Artavan from quite a distance off the ground. Artavan somersaulted to what he was sure would be his death, but he was able to recover as Sarama broke his fall. She was remarkably uninjured, but Artavan reasoned that she was, after all, a Pahlavan. He stayed well back as he watched Tork rub his arms with the muddy roots of plants growing near the stream. His gibbering had died down somewhat now, and his thrashing also ceased.

"What did you see?" Devdata was staring at Artavan.

He felt oddly reluctant to tell him. "I don't know."

He only grunted and stared at Artavan. "What did you see?"

Artavan sat suddenly, with Drujo and Devdata

looking down at him with knitted brows. He tried his best to recount the words of the Queen, and they grunted from time to time. Artavan had been thinking that he wouldn't be able to retell the story properly, but they seemed to understand.

"That was refreshing! You should try that water." Tork wore a big smile now.

"Tork!" the Prince bellowed. "What is wrong with you? Have you already forgotten what happened back there? Have you forgotten the horror of what you just saw?"

"Calm your liver," Tork ordered imperiously. "It wasn't so bad. Those jewels had been left over a bowl of meat that rotted after all the time it had been left there. I should have taken some of the gems, but frankly, I don't need them—at least not enough to wash off the nastiness. Say, what shall we eat?"

"There were no gems!" Devdata cried. "They were an illusion!"

"Yes, Tork, I saw them dissolve into decay!" Artavan added.

"Oh yes, and you also see many things with that gourd-head of yours. That doesn't mean that it's true. Artavan, I'm glad that our relationship never went anywhere. You're far inferior to me in intelligence. The fact is that you're no better than a beast." Tork smiled indulgently.

Artavan expected the Prince to say something,

but he just stood there eying Tork suspiciously. Drujo flexed his arms dangerously. Artavan was disappointed that they said nothing. They made camp there, within view of the glittering city, and Artavan was uneasy. He refused to eat any of the game Tork caught, but he caught a number of fish. Sarama dug roots, which he wrapped in leaves and baked under the coals. He shared these with Devdata, Drujo, and Sarama, but Tork never asked for any. Artavan examined himself with wonder. Had all of this happened? Why had he been chosen to see the vision of the Queen? Why did he alone, hear her speech?

When it was dark, Artavan tried to cuddle with Sarama, but she was edgy and wanted to sniff around. He didn't bother with her because he had an idea. He was sure that Devdata and Drujo were flying off at night reconnoitering, so that the next day they would be able to make some kind of educated guess as to where they should go. That had to be how he found the Bronze City, and that explained his absence the night that Tork had made his advances on him. Artavan was angry for several reasons. For one, he was left alone with Tork. *Didn't they see the strange changes in Tork? Hadn't they seen how Tork had been unable to admit that the gems had actually been an illusion?* Secondly, Artavan worried that leaving alone would expose the Prince to dangers, not that he could save him

from anything.

He stayed awake, determined to catch them in the act of leaving, but in a matter of a few minutes, his heavy lids closed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

They had traveled from the time that the moon was a sliver, to its waxing to a half-moon when Sarama seemed to become enlivened, and they suspected that they were nearing the cave of the dragon. As they advanced up the mountain, the landscape became more beautiful. Butterflies and dragonflies flitted from one flower to another and the fragrance of those blossoms made Artavan's head float. Often they passed crystal-clear streams fed by springs whose waters were sweet. They moved in near silence, their breaths taken away by the beauty.

They were moving closer to the lair of the dragon, but Devdata and Drujo seemed optimistic. Devdata was never anything but very serious, but still his step appeared lighter as they made their way up the mountain. Artavan was enjoying himself. The thought of being on a mission with real warriors made him happy, but sometimes, when he caught Devdata looking at him, he

wished they could be alone. It had been some time since he had been able to feel Devdata's strong arms around him.

They soon reached an area riddled with caves, which had to be the place of the dragon. They ate in silence and then went to bathe. Artavan took off his lovely dragon skin sash, hung it over a low branch with his deerskin, and sauntered over to the stream quite naked.

The cool water soothed his nerves, but he was disappointed that Devdata hadn't wanted to bathe with him again. He'd wanted to pay him back for the pleasure he owed him. He wanted it very much. When he was done, he put on his deerskin and knotted the legs over his shoulder as Devdata had taught him, and then reached for the sash, but it was gone. He looked around. It hadn't fallen to the ground, so he began to walk in search of it. In a shady copse of trees, he spied the form of Sarama. She was lying on the ground on her stomach with her legs thrown behind her as she did when she when she was enjoying a good bone. She was so engaged in her task that she didn't turn to look at him as her head worked with crunching sounds.

"Sarama!" Artavan screamed when he finally reached her. An angry shriek followed when he saw what she chewed.

"My sash! Sarama, you bitch! You daughter of a

crazed boar pig and a she-ass with diseased parts!" He panted in anger and misery. "That was mine! It was the only beautiful thing I've ever owned!"

He began to weep desperately as he said this. As Sarama looked up at him with her beady, blank eyes, he saw the glistening dragon scales in her mouth. Half of the belt had been devoured and it had been torn nearly in half.

Artavan wailed in grief and fell to the ground with his legs bent under him.

"May you die from those poison scales! May you choke on my beautiful sash!"

Artavan wept uncontrollably and soon both Devdata and Tork came over and stared.

"She's done only what comes natural to her." Devdata put an arm around Artavan.

"She ate my beautiful sash!" Artavan cried angrily. He kicked his legs like a spoiled child as tears ran down his face.

"Don't be foolish Artavan! You've become her friend, and friends take such liberties."

Artavan knew he was acting like a foolish child, but he prized the sash. It was the only memento he had of his fight with the monster. He loved Sarama, but his heart raged with anger at her betrayal. They gathered their things and left the camp, and he saw Sarama leading them, the sash dragging from her mouth. Artavan was still

furious, but he was also embarrassed that he'd acted like a brat instead of a proud warrior. He hung back sulking, even though he hated himself for it.

When twilight was upon them, they were about to stop when Sarama ran ahead, gargling in anger. She approached the mouth of a cave they hadn't seen a second before and she dropped the sash to bark. The sound she made was urgent and insistent. She lifted up the sash in her mouth again and flew into the cave without looking back.

Artavan was the first to race in after her. The inside of the cave was profoundly dark. He saw nothing behind him or in front of him, but he could hear Sarama's gargling growl and he followed, not caring where he stepped. The floor of the cave was slimy and he slipped several times, landing once on the palms of his hands and knees. He gasped as he pulled himself from the foul slime that smelled worse than a grave.

The quiet of the cave reminded him of the night when he'd seen the lion-dragon beast. Artavan wondered why he didn't hear Devdata and the others, but the silence was dense. He could only hear Sarama's low, urgent growl. If it hadn't been that his feet were touching the slimy, cold ground, he would have thought he was floating in a void.

He finally entered a room that resounded with the noise of dripping water. In the far distance, he

heard the distressed lowing of cows. He had found the place. He began to tremble violently as the enormous head of a dragon lifted off the ground, illuminating the room in an eerie glow.

The dragon's huge head swayed like that of a snake. The eyes were as red and as luminous as ruby stones and it had pupils that were slit like those of an owl. The scales on its head were a lustrous red-purple that gradually melded into blue purple as they moved down his long and graceful neck. The front legs seemed too small for the hulking body that reared up on massive legs, but they seemed capable of speed. The claws of the beast seemed to be made of crystal or diamonds and they infused the room with light.

Sarama ran to Artavan and dropped her chewed sash at his feet as if to entrust him with its care before she lunged at the dragon, barking furiously. He drew his sword and ran behind her, hoping to save her from her rash act. When she reached the feet of the dragon, she barked at it and nipped its shining claws ineffectually. Artavan raised his sword and brought it down on the leg before him, for he could reach nothing else. Although he summoned all his strength for this act, the sword simply bounced off the thick hide and he lost his footing on the slimy floor of the lair.

Without a pause, he leapt up and again flew at

the dragon. This time his sword cut into the scaly skin. Blood as luminous as light dripped to the ground accompanied by a roar that almost made him soil himself with fear. The huge beast spread diaphanous wings that seemed to be made of flexible crystal studded with gems, and moved them, fanning up a slight, fragrant breeze in the dank room. For a moment, Artavan hated himself for injuring this monstrous, yet beautiful beast. The creature seemed to be regarding Sarama and him without real fear, and it had yet to defend itself. Artavan backed up, encouraged by its lack of response, and struck again. This time he cut another gash in its horny skin and the beauty of its blood stunned him for a moment until he felt one of the small front feet grasp him by the neck.

It quickly drew Artavan to itself and he was so shocked he didn't even struggle at first. He looked into eyes that glowed, but seemed to him to be calm and without rancor. He wanted to reach out and touch the lovely scales. When it opened its mouth to swallow him, Artavan saw that its teeth were made of the same luminous material of which its claws were fashioned. He felt its hot breath and braced himself for death.

Sarama launched herself from the ground as the creature bent over Artavan and she bit its tongue with a garbled growl of victory. The creature dropped Artavan and roared furiously as

crystalline blood the color of liquid rubies spilled forth covering Sarama, who tried to shake the tongue as she would the small animals she would catch and kill. Bracing her short legs on the dragon's scaly lips, she shook her head with its covering of wiry fur with a frenzy.

The dragon used its small front feet to awkwardly grab Sarama and squeeze her. Artavan realized the brutal strength it possessed as bones crushed in the dog's body making popping noises and tearing the skin wherever the mighty crystal claws dug in. With a groan, the little dog went limp at last and the dragon shook her as if in revenge. Finally, it threw Sarama's torn and bloody body to the ground in front of Artavan. It hit the ground with a wet slapping sound that tore him from the sight of the sparkling, beautiful dragon. Artavan screamed long and loud in anguish he'd never before felt as his dear Sarama lay torn open before him.

Before the scream had died in his throat, he saw Devdata fly into the chamber to confront his evil enemy. The creature moved against the wall and seemed frightened for a moment, but then it made a low honking noise and its tail crashed against the stone floor noisily. Artavan saw that the tail ended in several upright scales that seemed as sharp as cut gems. It was long and the dragon used it with amazing speed, swiping at the Prince.

Devdata began to extend his hand as he did when he would use his magic to sear a creature, and it lit up in a marvelous blue light. Artavan fervently hoped that the dragon would fall dead as the giant bull had, but instead, it lashed at the Prince, making a severe gash from which sprang a torrent of blood. The blue glow died instantly and he was defenseless. Devdata extended the other hand as he leapt into the air to avoid the creature, but his blast of light seemed only to enrage it. Again and again with cries of effort, he struck at the dragon with his deadly lights, but it only weakened a little and the cave filled with its angry roars.

Giving up on that form of attack, Devdata flew directly at the beast and began to pummel it with his mighty fists. He looked like a small, annoying insect as he fought it, but the dragon roared as bloody scales fell from its wounds. Artavan moved back to avoid them, but the sharp scales fell onto Sarama's body, cutting her more as he moaned in abject fear and grief.

The dragon defended itself with its swishing, deadly tail and its sharp claws and teeth. Soon Devdata was covered with grievous wounds and blood, both his own and that of the dragon. With a massive effort, the Prince punched the dragon in one of its ruby eyes and it bellowed in pain as the eye streamed down its face in a gelatinous

cascade. Waving its small paws in a fury of pain, it caught Devdata and shook his body violently. He looked like a rag as his head snapped back and forth and the creature threw him to the ground and put a crushing paw on him. Artavan saw it compressing him and he screamed.

With a shriek only a Scythian could muster, Drujo entered the room and raised his mace, striking the dragon between the eyes. It made a sound almost like a bell. The dragon staggered back and Artavan ran forward to drag forth the body of the Prince. The dragon stamped about in pain, but then quickly caught Drujo by the neck and began to strangle him. For a moment, the cave was silent. Drujo's body writhed, but his breath had been cut off. His mace whooshed through the fetid air almost silently before it left his now limp hand and clashed to the floor.

As Artavan looked at his Prince, his heart seemed to fill first with anger, then with light. A radiant orange light started to glow from his head. It suffused his entire body, which seemed to swell. With a mighty shout, Artavan burst off the floor of the cave, Drujo's mace in his hand. The shining mace struck the head of the creature. It fell momentarily, and thrashed about, but soon sat up and swatted Artavan with its strong tail. He responded by smashing the end of it with his mace. Scales cracked melodiously and it screamed

with pain.

Artavan continued to beat at it and his lovely orange effulgence made him look like a god. The dragon swung its tail again and this time knocked Artavan against the wall of the cave violently, the mace landing far from him. It poised itself to strike again, when a strong blue flash burned its face, and it began to stumble about in agony, its bellows deafening him.

"Artavan," Devdata groaned. "Do it...do as I have done...it's the only way to defeat..."

Artavan leapt to his feet and extended his hand with a look of desperate concentration. Sparks flew from it and a bright ball of orange light swirled around his hand and blinded him for a moment, but he flung it at the dragon that began to burn with a fire that was smokeless and pure. It screamed piteously as it died and the large chamber echoed even after it lay in a pile of transparent ashes that looked like chipped gems.

Artavan ran over and lifted Devdata's limp arm. He was covered with blood and shards of scales from the dragon. His eyes slowly opened and he took a few shuddering breaths.

"You did well, Artavan. You killed the Sorcerer Angraminyu. You are the Pahlavan we sought."

"But Tork..." Artavan cried.

"No. It was never Tork."

Glittering tears decorated his eyes and fell like

solid diamonds. "I'm proud of you. I know that for you, an earned honor is a true honor. Now go see if Drujo is breathing."

"My prince! Will you live?" Devdata was unconscious again, and Artavan knew he wouldn't answer.

He began to sob, but he did as he was told.

"Drujo!"

Drujo's shoulders shuddered and Artavan thought the big man was taking his last breaths, but he was laughing.

"But you're hurt!"

"If I die, at least I have gotten my revenge against the Sorcerer Angraminyu. Finally, I can face Prince Devdata, even if in the next world. I am laughing because I never guessed that it was you! No wonder the Prince loved you."

Artavan ran back to Devdata sobbing hysterically. The man he loved lay before him like a limp rag doll. Dragon scales had cut him all over like huge knives, but when Artavan pulled some of the large pieces of scales out of Devdata's body, some broke off, and were swallowed up by his gaping wounds. Artavan was horrified and alone as his comrades lay about him.

He thought that although Drujo was seriously injured, he might live. Artavan was so grieved by the sight of Devdata that he moved away from him, crying out in the madness of grief. Finally,

Artavan inched over to Sarama's lifeless body and stared. She'd fallen with her front paw extended before her and her body stretched out as she lay often when she relaxed. There was a grievous wound on her abdomen that had cut her open so that the contents of her stomach spilled out over the ground. Artavan gasped and fell to his knees when he saw the pretty, glittering yellow-green scales of his sash amidst the contents of her stomach.

His heart broke as he remembered his harsh rage and angry words. In a rush, Artavan saw Sarama tumbling over her own big, clumsy feet as she chased a butterfly and leapt after a bird that shot out of a bush. He remembered how she would find a spot that pleased her and deep groans of delight came from her throat as she rolled repeatedly, scratching her back with satisfaction on the rocky ground.

Artavan remembered her single-minded contentment as she feasted on the food he cooked. They would gnaw on bones together while Tork grumbled about dogs being dirty. Her warm body at night snuggled close to his chest always made him feel special. He'd gotten so used to her, even in the short time they'd been friends. In the mornings, she'd been a lazy riser, insisting on stretching every muscle of her long body before taking a step off their bed of deer hides.

He remembered how she loved to sport in the waters, her long muzzle damp, and appearing longer as she poked it in and out of the water as bubbles of air burst to the surface. He used to incite her passion to attack by poking her with his feet under the water, pretending to be a fish.

In Artavan's mind, he saw her cheerfully leading them that morning, the chewed sash in her mouth. Now he thought she might have known that she was leading them to her death in this cave. She was, after all, a very special creature. His sobs tore at his chest and he gave himself to weeping, as he never before had. His tears fell on her dead body and he beat his chest in misery. She'd saved his life. She'd given her life bravely so that he could live! And to think that he had been the one who'd rejected and scorned her in the last hours of her life. She'd lived for countless years since the seed of the original bovine had combined with that of Gayomard, the first human, to produce her, but now she was gone from this world leaving him a miserable shell of himself.

Artavan's sash was still nearby and he picked it up and rubbed its roughness over his face as he wept. Over this worthless bauble, he'd given up his faithful Sarama's love. Sarama was dead and soon his Devdata would be dead too. He would bury them together. The thought was more than he could bear and he wailed inconsolably, his grief

stricken cries echoed in the silent cave.

As Artavan beat his face and tore at his hair, he thought he saw Sarama's paw twitch and her eye roll slightly. The debris near her slashed belly seemed to quiver and move closer to her. The intestines that coiled out of her belly began to move back into their place. A bright red corona of light began to emanate from her body and as it grew, he had to turn around and protect his eyes from its splendor, as it seemed to explode with the sound of a million small bells.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Artavan was still trembling with terror when he felt Sarama's raspy tongue licking his face. He kept his eyes shut, savoring the illusion. It would dissolve soon, he thought, and he would have to mourn her again, but it didn't. Artavan opened his eyes and shrieked. The creature before him darted back as if frightened, but then made the gargling bark he so remembered from Sarama.

Before him, she softly flapped gossamer red crystal wings as she hovered with her front paws hanging bent on her chest. Her nappy black fur had been replaced for the most part by brilliant red-purple scales that shone like gems. Her belly was covered with the yellow-green scales of the lion-dragon whose tail had supplied the sash she'd chewed. Her erect black ears were velvety, as was her muzzle and face, but the rest of her was a riot of brilliant, gem-like colors borrowed from both of the dragons. She retained her too-long dog's body, but she now had the graceful wings of

a dragon.

Sarama made noises deep in her throat the way she used to when she was frustrated, and she went to licking Artavan's face again. From there, she went to all of his injuries, licking them intensely. They began to heal before his eyes. He looked at them and felt them with his fingers. She'd healed them!

Artavan ran to the limp form of the warrior-prince Devdata, and she flew after him, licking at the back of his neck. She understood Artavan's anxiety for Devdata and began to work on him, attacking the most severe wounds first. Soon his eyes fluttered, but he didn't forbid her to lick. It was as if he knew what she was and wasn't surprised.

"An Aralez..." he groaned. "She has become an Aralez! I'd heard the stories, but...but..."

She licked at his mouth when he said this, and he grew quiet again. Sarama scratched at his chest when she was done with one side and Artavan turned him over, understanding that she wanted this. His terrible wounds left deep scars, but they only joined the many that crisscrossed his heavily muscled body. As Artavan looked on in wonder, he saw an ornate pattern glow purple-red from under the skin of Devdata's chest. It faded, but Artavan could still see it. At last, Devdata stood unsteadily and tested his limbs. He and Artavan

smiled, and Sarama barked. She flew over to Drujo and began her work again.

"She is an Aralez." Devdata looked at her in awe. "I suspected it when she licked my hands and freed me from the cursed bracelet. She broke the power of the enchantment with her magical saliva.

"Yes, an Aralez can cure a nearly dead Pahlavan with its licking. Aralez means the 'licker of Ara.' Long ago there was a virtuous ancestor of ours named Ara. He was undefeatable as a warrior and he was the most handsome of all Pahlavans. One day he humiliated the Sorcerer Azdahak, by defeating him in a game involving logic. The Sorcerer sent his powerful sister to fight with Ara, and she killed him in a fair fight, for she was the stronger of the two. As his body lay on the tower waiting for the birds of prey to devour it, the mourners saw a creature fly up there and begin to lick the body. They thought that it was an unusual bird sent by the gods to dispose of his noble body, but shortly he rose and joined them.

"From that day on, only a few times has this creature been sighted. I believe that Sarama was the same creature. She might have concealed her form for our benefit, or there may be a way that a Pahlavan dog can become an Aralez. Considering her age and lineage..." He paused and touched his chin in thought.

Artavan didn't care how she'd become an Aralez. He took hold of Sarama and hugged her new and beautiful body to his chest in pure joy. Devdata took one of Sarama's paws into his big hand. The nails on her paws were like glittering diamonds, and when she barked, they saw that her teeth were the same. These things she had taken from the dragon, but she still appeared to be an awkward, nappy dog underneath it all. Artavan was overjoyed. Drujo looked on with respect and wonder.

Just then, Tork ran into the cave. "Looks like the dragon got away. But look at the jewels!"

"Those aren't jewels. That's what is left of the dragon." Drujo pointed to the large pile of shining gems.

"He died?" Tork stared greedily at the incredible heap of jewels. The rubies, emeralds, amethysts, sapphires, and diamonds cut into lovely gems twinkled beautifully in the dark of the cave.

"We killed him." Devdata was watching Tork, whose eyes remained fixed on the jewels.

"What? But I wasn't here! I...uh...I was securing the area. You needed me. You needed the three Pahlavans, right?"

Devdata and Drujo were smiling at Artavan, but he looked to the ground shyly.

Devdata put a hand on Artavan's shoulder. "He

is the third Pahlavan, Tork, not you. I knew this all along, but I wanted to test him to see if his strength could be summoned by his courage alone."

"No! You're wrong. That just can't be. I'm the most powerful warrior in the world!" Tork sputtered. "He, that lowly slave, can't be a Pahlavan!"

"It's true. Now we are finally free from the Sorcerer's curse." Drujo puffed his chest and gave Artavan a blow to his back, which almost knocked him over.

Artavan straightened himself, still stunned that he was really a Pahlavan. *Me! Not you Tork!*

"Enough of this nonsense." Tork seemed unimpressed. "We killed the dragon, so now it's all over, isn't it?"

Artavan saw a cloud passed over Tork's eyes. "The problem is that we didn't save the cows! Who will believe that stupid story of yours about a dragon? I bet you're just saying all this so that you can claim the treasure. How can you have fought a dragon? I see no dead body, and why are you all unhurt? So now we must go back to the village and inform the people that we have failed to find the cows. I should have gone in after those cows – it's my fault! You probably scared them off, if they were ever here at all."

The Prince didn't bother to reply. Drujo smiled

viciously, and they followed him outside the cave.

"Who gave you the sword?" Tork asked suspiciously.

"I don't know—it was the same one you gave me, but it seems to have changed." Artavan ran a possessive hand over it. He hadn't noticed it before, but now the sword was pulsating with energy.

"I gave you?" Tork tried to bellow. "I would never give you a sword. You can't even lift my sword, yet you insisted on dragging it about like a child who wears his father's stout boots, tripping and laughing foolishly! Indeed, you stole my sword, so return it this instant!"

"Moron!" Artavan yelled into his face. "This isn't your sword at all. It's a gift the giant dragon gave me after I defeated him. He was a god and he gave me special powers! He said that I'm a real warrior from this day on, and this special sword is the proof."

Devdata nodded sagely, although Artavan detected a smile.

"Lies!" Tork screamed. "You've become a consummate liar! I don't know what I shall do with you. First, you claim to have killed your master Nogard, then you claim to have beheaded a stag, and now you are Pahlavan invested with special powers by a dead dragon. Artavan, you've gone mad." Tork made to grab the sword, but

screamed as his hand was singed.

Artavan snorted in disgust and spit on the ground as he'd seen Devdata do. "Believe what you want, Tork, but you have your proof. Even you can't touch my magical sword!"

Tork opened his mouth so wide that Artavan saw the back of his throat, and Devdata and Drujo threw back their heads to laugh.

"I'm beginning to understand what Prince Devdata sees in you, boy!" Drujo smacked Artavan in the back roughly again, but this time he managed to only sway a little.

"Silence, you! Artavan, you will thenceforth not be allowed to call me Tork. That is too familiar for a slave."

"Sorry. I like to call you by your name, because Tork means 'stupid' in our Pahlavan language," Artavan lied confidently.

Devdata didn't contradict him, and Drujo roared with laughter. Tork's face reddened with fury.

"That settles it then." Tork seemed determined to take charge of the situation. "Artavan, throw away that sword! It must be enchanted, because I couldn't touch it."

"Can you touch it, Artavan?" Drujo asked him.

"Don't!" Tork tried to grab Artavan's hand.

"I've already touched it." Artavan put his hand on it tentatively and drew it out. It felt good in his

hands and he felt a power rise through it and into him. A faint golden light seemed to emanate from it and it felt light, yet powerful in his hands.

Tork gulped. "It's enchanted, no doubt about it."

The Prince reached out and Artavan handed the sword to him. He hefted it and smiled.

"It's good."

"See, that demonic prince can touch it! That proves my point, for he's evil. Artavan, can't you see?"

"I touched it, Tork. Am I then evil?" Artavan asked mockingly. "Besides, Devdata isn't evil. He's our friend and prince."

Tork's lip rose in a sneer that was most uncharacteristic for him, but he seemed to catch himself and smiled. "Artavan, oh Artavan! What am I to do with you? Yes, you can touch the enchanted sword, but probably because you have committed the offense of insulting your lord. Have you learned nothing?"

Artavan had a sudden vision of swinging the sword at Tork's neck. Blood spurted out and pumped in time with his heart as he ran and ran in tight circles like a chicken that had been decapitated by a farmer's wife. He smiled and put the sword away. Drujo and Devdata shook and heaved with laughter.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tork sputtered in a rage, but suddenly he stopped and turned toward the treasure. The shining heap of gems attracted Artavan too, but then he remembered the words of the Queen of the Bronze City.

Tork was already running for the jewels.

"No! Tork no! Remember what the queen said? Those are what's left of the Sorcerer Angraminyu's corpse. Those are cursed. That's what the riddle was about. If we take those, something bad will happen." Artavan looked from Tork to Drujo to Devdata.

"Liar! You want to save the treasure here and then come back to claim it all for yourself. Artavan, you are so sly, but your lies have become so outrageous that nobody will believe you again! Am I not right?" Tork's eyes blazed madly.

"Prince, perhaps he's right. We've lost our kingdom. Perhaps it's right that we take it and build an army. We won't have Pahlavans, but

there are others who are powerful." Drujo put a hand on Tork's shoulder and suddenly heaved him to the side. Tork hit the wall and screamed angrily.

"Enough! Drujo, have you not learned from all we've suffered? Have you no sense?" Devdata glared at Drujo, who eyed him angrily.

"But the Sorcerer is dead! How can he harm us?" Drujo was shaking with fury and lust for the gems.

"It's clearly a trick. The riddle of the Bronze City was meant to be solved here, and Artavan has solved it. Somehow, we must assume that those gems hold something of the Sorcerer's influence. He won't be defeated so easily, of that, I am sure. He has always used riddles to defeat his enemies." Devdata snorted in contempt. "Think about it, Drujo."

"But Prince! Why would he have left us a clue? Why wouldn't he have let us fall for his trap?"

"Drujo, Angraminyu has always done this, since the beginning of his evil existence. He teases people by giving them the riddle, and if they can't solve it, they die. So far, few have broken his riddles. Artavan, you are surely a powerful Pahlavan, for you solved it."

Tork stood and brushed himself off. "That's fine with me, if you want to believe that tale. I for one, will take my treasure. I deserve it!"

"Don't!" Artavan's eyes filled with tears. He knew this mistake would cost Tork his life.

Tork removed his outer tunic and tied the arms into knots, and then he used his belt to secure the neck opening as they watched.

Artavan pleaded with him as Tork began to fill his tunic with the brilliant gems. When his pockets were full, and he could hold no more, he swallowed as many jewels as he could, before he stood ready to leave. Tork began to make his way out of the cave, taking a last look at the remaining gems. "I'll return soon for them. You there, Prince, you'd better not change your mind and expect me to share this treasure. You all had the chance to take some, but you chose to listen to an addled boy."

* * * *

"It was him all along wasn't it, my Lord?" Drujo took a longing last look at the jewels, which shone brightly, as if calling to them.

"Yes. It was he. He has been betraying us. Tork was reporting to the Sorcerer's minions and that was how they seemed to know our every move. I fooled them by making Tork believe that he was the third Pahlavan. He probably pledged not to

join the fight, so Angraminyu the Sorcerer thought we would definitely lose. I told you we were too clever for him," Devdata explained.

"Shouldn't we punish him?" Artavan cried in rage. "He even had them take his horse so we would think it was dead!"

"Let's see what he gains first." Devdata held him back. "In a way, I feel sorry for him now. The Sorcerer Angraminyu is a devious, evil creature. We've defeated him, but I doubt he's finished."

When they reached the outside of the cave, they saw that Tork was struggling with his load.

"Say, you once offered to carry us as you flew. I would like to take advantage of your offer now. Please return me to the estate of Mehr the Generous." Tork set his load down and panted.

"What! You dirty village dog!" Artavan was furious.

"Come now, you needn't be vulgar. Aren't we friends still, Artavan? Had it not been for me, the villagers would have killed you for what you did. Have you no gratitude?"

Artavan was about to draw his sword when he felt Devdata's hand on his shoulder.

"We might do that for you, since it seems that in your greed, you've taken far more than you can carry. Besides, I'll make no secret of this. I want to keep an eye on you. I want to see what happens to a fool who would take cursed treasure. I wonder

how you will die. It should be amusing." Devdata's cruel smile made Artavan shudder.

"Whatever you say. I don't believe in foolish tales. Please carry me to my estate. I will reward you richly." Tork's hands moved over the treasure. "I am trusting you, after all. You could kill me and take the gems. I know that, but I'm sure you pride yourself in keeping your promise. Please promise not to harm me. I'll give you Artavan, my slave."

Devdata nodded. "I agree. Artavan, I'll teach you how to fly the way I can, but it will take much work. For now, I'll carry you."

Artavan was happy that he would finally experience being in the air. He even forgot about Tork's rude words.

"But will I have to touch that contaminated man?" Drujo backed away. "Those cursed jewels...they may harm me!"

Devdata looked around. We'll use the hides we sleep on. We can tear enough to make a rope, and wrap that around Tork's chest. You can hold the end of it, far away enough so that he doesn't touch you."

Drujo nodded, but his face was a mask of rage and disgust.

Artavan and Sarama led the way back to where he'd dropped the hides, and Drujo fashioned a long rope with them. He threw the end to Tork.

"Secure yourself well, because if you slip and fall, I won't save you."

Tork hurriedly tied the rope around his chest and took up his bag of gems.

Suddenly Artavan felt a strong arm around his waist and his feet left the ground. He was disoriented by the sound of air whooshing in his ears and he looked down to see a panoramic view. He was a bird looking down from the sky as they passed trees that looked like round, green mushrooms, and he saw the trails made by deer. Artavan saw a deer running as if frightened by large birds. He looked at the arm that held him. The blue of Devdata's clothing shone in the early morning sun, but he saw how battle damaged it had become. Through some of the tears in the fine fabric, Artavan saw healed wounds, some of which had been terrible. His legs dangled and he wished he weren't so big. *Devdata will surely tire soon of lugging my big body!* But they flew on and on until Artavan felt them slowly descending.

Drujo threw down the rope as they neared the ground. Tork tumbled down and screamed as jewels flew from his sack. He wordlessly collected them as Artavan stared at the area.

"This is the place," Artavan yelled. "This is where the village had been."

"No! How can you say that?" Drujo asked. "There's no village!"

They looked around, and the spot where the dusty village had been was now a verdant field of lush grass speckled with exquisite flowers, but they knew Artavan was right. He recognized the place at once by observing the strange rock formations he'd noticed before. He ran into the beautiful field and found what he sought. It was the basket in which the old witch had kept Sarama.

Artavan gazed at it, and Sarama approached and sniffed. She too, recognized it. "The village is gone! This is the spot! See the basket?"

Drujo looked around and sighed, as if he regretted having to agree. "So where are they all? Why is it so green now?"

"The village people, who were they?" Artavan asked. "Were they the Sorcerer's people?"

"I don't think so. That old witch Kanka, who gave us the dog Sarama, she meant to help us." Devdata put a hand on Sarama's head, and she turned to lick it. "She said this was all part of a plan. I think she was a friend of my father's."

Tork was annoyed, but he stayed with his gems. "Hey there! I thought we were going back to my estate!"

"Shut up, Tork!" Drujo looked about to kill Tork.

Sarama gargled a complaining bark and looked at Tork with her ears back on her long head and

the whites of her eyes showing. Her mouth was slightly opened so that the crystalline teeth shone.

"I feel the same way!" Artavan called to her. Sarama flew up and licked his mouth lightly.

"We haven't finished our work here," the Prince said suddenly. "And Artavan, you have unfinished business too. This Tork person believes you're a slave. You must win your freedom, and then we'll leave."

Drujo grunted and nodded, but after a moment, he spoke. "You killed the man who thought he owned you, and if his son has laid claim to you, simply kill him as well." He considered the matter for another moment and then added, "Why did you not kill the entire family and take their holdings?"

"Yes," Devdata agreed with Drujo. "We shall return to the village and kill this owner of yours. We can raid the village and kill them all if need be. I feel a bit tense and a little senseless violence would improve my mood." He looked into the distance.

Drujo's eyes twinkled a bit.

"We'll rest here for the night," Devdata declared, although Tork complained.

They killed a deer before setting out for the village, and ate in silence as usual; each of them so caught up in the frenzy of filling themselves that nobody looked away or spoke. Sarama had rolled

in a pile of deer intestines, and Artavan was a bit disgusted. He decided that Aralez or not, she would have to take a bath.

They were soon asleep; however, and Artavan didn't bother to carry out his threat. The moon was high when Artavan awoke to a raucous noise. Sarama had snuggled to his chest and was snoring loudly. He jerked spasmodically as the musky goat-like odor of the intestines she'd rolled in reached his nose.

"Sarama! You...you savage!" Artavan cried. Devdata was still standing in his place and a smile crept over his face.

"You! I'm going to give you a bath; you dirty dog!" Artavan ranted.

"Does she smell?" Devdata came closer.

It was then that Artavan realized that the Prince was no less a savage than Sarama. His clothes hung in ragged strips and his armor was quite broken in places. Artavan sniffed the air about Devdata as he stood with the dog under his arm as if she were a bundle of rags. Her eyes were still full of sleep and she made no move to protest.

"Prince, you have no servants now. Even Drujo seems to have forgotten to care for you. There's nobody to bathe and dress you, so you better do it yourself!" Artavan smiled disrespectfully. "You haven't bathed since the incident with that ugly Rangohar!"

Devdata grunted in deep surprise and looked down at himself. "I'm...I'm not smelly!"

"You are! Prince Devdata, go bathe!"

He balled his fists by his side and shot Artavan a murderous look. He grunted angrily. "All right, then, what do I do?"

Artavan started to laugh, throwing his head back.

"Stop laughing at me, boy!" Devdata screamed, and Artavan's laughter ended abruptly. "I'm a warrior, not some dainty palace boy! And I'm not a pampered prince either. Do you think Drujo bathed me?" He was growling loudly and Artavan was now frightened.

"Well he was your nurse," he ventured.

"He doesn't bathe me! We're both warriors and we bathe when we have time to, or maybe if we need to."

"Well you need to!" Artavan said boldly.

Devdata spit angrily and stalked toward the water. Artavan followed holding Sarama as she began to struggle.

"Well?" he growled, suddenly turning. "Are you coming to watch?"

"No, I have to wash too, and Sarama needs to have a bath."

"You wash everyday boy! Now you will harass the poor dog?"

Artavan pushed Sarama's squirming body into

Devdata's arms and he dropped her instantly. Sarama almost hit the ground before her wings flapped and she was hovering over them.

"That's...that's awful! You wretched beast!" Devdata turned to head for the creek.

Artavan jumped up and snagged Sarama by the tail as she spread her crystalline wings. Escape was impossible. He would bathe her against her will if she insisted on rolling in smelly things. He washed Sarama, all the while watching Devdata. He was awkward undressing, and leapt into the water self-consciously, as if he could sense Artavan's eyes on him. His body was superb. Artavan loved the way his hard muscles were scarred by the many battles he'd endured. Sarama struggled as Artavan dunked her to wash her muzzle, and she almost slipped from his arms. As soon as he finished, he waded to the spot where Devdata stood in waist-deep water.

The moon shone in the water, making the ripples of the waves he made shine like an effulgence that proceeded him as he moved slowly. Artavan remembered his promise to Devdata. He remembered what the Prince had taught him, and he remembered his promise to return that favor. Devdata stood in the waist deep water, ignoring Artavan as he progressed through the cool water. He approached from behind and wrapped his arms around Devdata's waist. He

moved down, putting his hands over the thing that awaited him with intense expectation. Artavan kissed his neck and nibbled him as he began to stroke his cock, moving slowly as he encircled the scrotum lovingly and held him firmly.

"I want to be with you forever." Artavan spoke into Devdata's ear, nibbling at it. He felt the muscles tensing as he worked and Artavan knew he'd learned his lesson well. He carefully, but firmly attended to Devdata until suddenly he bent at the waist and cried out, as Artavan had never heard him do before. He turned now and took in Artavan's lips.

"I never thought I would love. I wanted only to hate after my father was killed. I wanted to fill myself with rage when I saw my people cut down before my eyes, and the gods cared not for our plight." Devdata held Artavan's chin in his hand. "You taught me to love and to laugh. I cannot forgive you for what you have done! Drujo is right—you have changed me with the power of your love."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Artavan woke early and approached Devdata, who seemed never to need to sleep. “You smell sweet and look fresh.”

Devdata’s face immediately darkened. “What! Do you think I’m some sort of maiden? Do I look like a variety of flower or something? I’m a warrior! You’d better get used to my smell, if you don’t want me to leave you behind!”

Artavan sulked as he rolled up the little bedding that was left and tied it with a strip of skin.

“Well! What is it now?” Devdata growled. “Hurry up! I’m eager to smash someone’s head in. Maybe it will improve my mood. Which way is it – this village of yours?”

“If we go back to the spot where you first met us – where you killed the big bull; it’s about five hours on foot following the small river to the east. We’ll see a small range of hills and then a plateau. I’ll be able to point it out when we get closer.”

* * * *

Soon Artavan recognized the crescent-shaped field ahead of them. It was one of Atmacharu's fields. Tzando the Ancient walked slowly through the green crop. He was the only one who dared cross the field in that manner. The boy left to guard the field sat lazily on a large stump and he waved to the old man lethargically.

"Is this it? I sense that you are fearful," he heard Devdata yell.

"Yes...go toward the end of this field." Artavan was embarrassed that he was still so fearful of his village.

They landed in a wooded spot, and Tork once again dropped some of his precious load. Without thanking Devdata or Drujo, he turned to leave. He hesitated and looked back. "You must come and visit me. I'll show you how real nobility lives. Farewell, my friends!"

Artavan sneered at him, then he set Sarama on a tree branch. "She should wait here for us. The villagers will be alarmed by her appearance. Um...should we let Tork leave like that?"

"She'll wait here," Devdata agreed. "You won't need her. As far as Tork is concerned, we'll check on him later, when we're done with your problem. Don't try to put it off, Artavan."

"But what if somebody sees her and hurts her?" Artavan gasped as a vision of the villagers roasting his poor dog over a spit shot into his mind like a poisoned dart.

Devdata laughed. "She is an Aralez. Isn't that enough for you?"

Artavan's hands were shaking now. Sarama struggled out of them and flew up into the tree, perching there like a big, clumsy owl.

"Drujo! You stay with Sarama. I know your fondness for destruction, but this is Artavan's fight. It wouldn't do for you to destroy the village before he can deal with those people who lay claim to him."

Drujo grunted, but his disappointment was apparent. He cracked his knuckles. "Smash their heads for me then, boy!"

Artavan tried to smile, straightened his back, and trudged ahead silently. Despite his terror, he was thrilled to hear Devdata's footsteps behind him, so light, yet powerful. As they passed the mill outside the village, a man with a team of oxen stopped, his mouth gaping. He didn't seem to recognize them, but Artavan knew he was Loka, who had a farm east of the village. A group of young boys cavorted behind them now, jeering. Artavan knew them all. Suddenly Hondar, the oldest, a big lug of a young man joined them. Artavan's blood sang in his ears as he yelled,

"Artavan! It's the slave boy of Nogard the Dead! I hear he ran away from Atmacharu. And now here he's with a stranger!"

A few men joined them, and some began to call out to him.

"Hey! Look at them! It looks like Artavan the Slave fancies himself a warrior! He dares to carry a sword!"

"You! Turn around! Hey little weakling!" They called out to Devdata.

Artavan turned halfway to see Hondar, his huge body hulking over Devdata, who refused to turn and face him.

"Hey you! Answer when I address you, or I'll beat you with a millstone!" Hondar yelled as the men roared with laughter. Artavan knew that he really could lift a millstone.

Hondar peered over, close to Devdata's shoulder. Suddenly, without turning, Devdata's fist shot back over his shoulder and struck Hondar's face. He flew into the crowd backing him up, and spit a tooth out of his bloody mouth. He looked about to attack, but then seemed to consider it.

"Look ahead, Artavan," the Prince muttered when he gaped.

Artavan turned and they walked on in silence. The men and boys behind them spoke in hushed tones now. Soon they entered the square where

the village well was located. Word spread and people were pouring out of their crude dwellings and from the fields.

Devdata and Artavan stood before the well and let them congregate. Soon the crowd parted and Engoda the soothsayer hobbled over, followed by the village headman and Atmacharu. Artavan folded his arms over his chest as Devdata always did, except for the fact that he did it to keep his hands from shaking violently.

"It was as I warned," Engoda began. "The two beasts who appear in the guise of humans...from the forest they came—bringing bad luck and destruction...bringing evil and man-eating...they come from the sky to a land not theirs..."

"Shut up, fish spawn!" Devdata commanded. His gravelly voice was low and full of menace. The soothsayer fell silent and moved behind the burly headman.

"Who's made a claim against this man, Artavan?" Devdata spoke with a princely air of authority.

Atmacharu stepped forward, a leering smile damaging his otherwise handsome features. "This boy is my slave, purchased by my dear father. He's committed the crime of killing his lord and master, my father. The crime of a slave killing a master is punishable by death—a death of the most painful sort! I've lost a father and this boy

has further bewitched my farm. My cattle have been eaten by wolves and my crops fail. My baby son has turned yellow and cries with fever! Obviously this boy is a sorcerer and should die."

Atmacharu's speech was followed by cheers from the crowd, and demands for blood. "If you think you are his master now, then make amends!" Atmacharu stared down at Devdata. "Surrender him now and pay the blood money owed to me." He looked eager now and stepped a little closer to the prince, who stood his ground. "You are responsible now! You pay the blood-money and watch him die; otherwise, die with him!" Atmacharu finished his speech and looked around the crowd for approval. The bloodthirsty villagers eyed Artavan eagerly.

"Kill him! Kill the sorcerer boy!"

Engoda the soothsayer was emboldened by this and he stamped his heavy walking stick on the ground. "Purify the village! These two are beasts! Beasts who walk on two legs! Beware the ancient curse!"

"I am Prince Devdata of the Pahlavans." The Prince's voice thundered with authority. This man is Artavan, a warrior. He's no longer yours, nor is he a slave. If you wish to take him, then you can fight with him and back your reckless claims with muscle. A warrior never surrenders! If you have a fight with him — finish it now!"

Me? Fight Atmacharu? Artavan thought in a horrible rush. *Is he mad?* His knees knocked together and his sword felt too heavy on his shoulder. Artavan thought Devdata would fight for him, but he was wrong. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest and a proud, defiant look on his face. Artavan was thrilled that Devdata had called him a warrior, even through his terror, but would his joy be short lived? Would he shame the Prince? He felt his face drain with terror, but he smiled. Artavan straightened his shoulders and looked Atmacharu in the eye.

Atmacharu snarled, "Don't be so brazen, you stinking slave! You think you can fight with a free man?" He flexed his beefy arms.

He was no weakling, despite his reputation for indulgence. He had to work in the fields like any other farmer.

"You donkey raping son of a one-eyed diseased whore!" Artavan growled. He pulled back his shoulders and tried his best imitation of Devdata's cruel, mocking smile. "You talk too much, Atmacharu. I think you're afraid. Now then, arm yourself, for it will seem less shameful if I lop off your head rather than pound you to death with my fists. At least your grieving wife and friends can then say that I was lucky and only caught you unaware!" Artavan tossed his head as he tried to ape Devdata's arrogant speech. He heard a low

chuckle from Devdata and it fueled his reckless pride.

Atmacharu roared with laughter, but took the spiked club that the headman offered him. It was the kind that Artavan used to use to arm himself against wolves. Artavan smiled because he was well acquainted with the weapon. A man nudged Atmacharu and handed him a large chattaka, a deadly sharp instrument used something like a scythe. Artavan's sword seemed small in comparison, and he hesitated to draw it. Atmacharu put down the club and twirled the chattaka expertly. He laughed cruelly as he noticed the look of fear on Artavan's face, and other men joined him; but only until he drew his sword.

Artavan's hands no longer shook. The sword radiated power, and shone like lightening in that midday sun. He felt a vibration moving from it to his hands and then arms. Even his shoulders felt stout and strong. Artavan smiled again and took a step toward him. For a moment, Atmacharu just stood staring, but then he roared furiously and shot forward toward Artavan, his chattaka swishing through the air with the hiss of an angry snake.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Artavan ducked out of reach of his first intended blow and he tottered unsteadily. He could hear Devdata chuckle. Atmacharu's second strike almost caught him on the left shoulder. Being lithe and quick, Artavan was avoiding him, but this was not the way to fight. He reasoned that he could wait until Atmacharu tired, but when he chanced a glance at Devdata, he glared his disapproval. Artavan's moment of distraction was what Atmacharu was looking for. The sword flew from his hand as Atmacharu struck again. He was lucky that the blade missed him, but the heavy wooden handle hit Artavan's shoulder. It went numb from the blow and Atmacharu smiled hideously. Artavan was barely standing, just waiting for the ugly weapon to lop off his head, but the lout kicked him in the stomach instead. Artavan fell sprawled on the ground, and Atmacharu stomped a hobnailed boot onto his chest and roared triumphantly.

The crowd cheered his victory and Artavan turned his head. Devdata looked sternly at him. Artavan imagined the excited crowd falling on the prince and tearing him to pieces. He knew the people of his village very well. Before the tears even had a chance to sprout in his eyes, he grabbed Atmacharu's foot and twisted it savagely. He fell to the ground and Artavan leapt for his sword. One of Atmacharu's friends lunged for it and his hand reached it before Artavan's did. He screamed in anguish as the hot metal seared his fingers. Artavan grabbed the sword and raised it awkwardly over his head. He could see fear in Atmacharu's eyes for an instant, but when he saw Artavan hesitate, he leapt up and grabbed his club.

He made to smash the top of Artavan's head, but he was too quick. *Kill him!* Devdata warned him in his head. *Kill him now, before he recovers!*

Atmacharu swung again, but this time Artavan parried it with his sword. It nicked the shoulder of Atmacharu's tunic harmlessly, and he laughed again. This made him angry! Artavan lunged at him, swinging the sword in an expert arc that ended with a bloody river that followed the course the sword made. Atmacharu's head landed in the crowd and there was panic as it was thrown aside, but then there was stunned silence for a long moment. Artavan looked at Devdata and he

smiled slightly, but his brow, as usual, remained furrowed.

A scream rent the air as Bania ran to her dead husband's body. She began to shriek and pandemonium broke loose. The blacksmith grabbed the chattaka and swung at Artavan, who slapped his hard face with the flat of his sword and he ran off holding his hands over it. Artavan turned to see two farmers attack Devdata with their hoes. He took each by their greasy hair and threw them into the surging crowd. Artavan was hit hard on the back of his head by a rock and he responded by picking up a barrel of potatoes and fiercely flinging it into the melee. Artavan sheathed his sword, for he didn't really want to kill anyone else, and he began to box his attackers about the face and head. He was enjoying himself finally. It was this type of brawl that he was used to.

A stout farmer he recognized as the brother of the midwife came at him with his face knotted into a hideous grimace. He launched himself at Artavan bodily, expecting to knock him to the ground. Artavan dodged him and he hit a tree trunk and didn't get up again. He finally lifted the mace after braining a man who lunged at him with it, and Artavan began to beat men about the legs and buttocks as he laughed crazily. Devdata had picked up a pole and was beating men

senseless while a grin of satisfaction beamed from his face.

Soon the men bold enough to attack them had been subdued and the rest of the village stood at a judicious distance and looked at them gravely.

"What do you want?" The headman's son stood before them humbly. "We're prepared to give you gifts and honor you if you agree to leave us. Now that Atmacharu is dead, we have no claim on you, Artavan the Warrior. Please leave this place and take with you the demon you have brought along. We beg your mercy."

"I have no quarrel with you." Artavan spoke as evenly as he could manage. "I just wanted you all to know that I'm a free man and not a slave. I was never a slave, you see." Now the idea for another of his wild tales sprang into his head.

"I am the prince of a wild band of Paralatae Scythians. I was mistakenly left behind because I was trying to find a pony that belonged to me. Being but a baby, I was abducted by a farmer and sold to vile Nogard, who planned to molest me. Even as an infant, I had vowed never to allow a lowborn villager to touch me, so I killed him. I admit to this, but I did it to defend my honor. That's why I refuse to be called a slave. I came here to prove that to you, although I had no need but my pride!" Artavan's head was spinning with some emotion he'd never felt before.

The villagers looked somewhat relieved and many stirred now. They began to bring offerings of all kinds. Even Bania brought honeycombs. Artavan wanted to say he was sorry, but instead he said, "Bania, do not grieve. You are now the head of your household. You're rich now, as you always wanted to be. Why not hire servants like you always wanted? You no longer have to watch that lout of a husband frolic with young girls while you work hard. Maybe I've helped you."

She looked uncertain, and tears still dripped from her eyes. She began to turn, but then said, "I know why you killed Nogard. He abused me too, even though I was his daughter-in-law." She sobbed for a few minutes. "I don't even know who the father of my son is. I'm glad Nogard is dead, and I'm glad his son, my so-called husband, is also dead. Atmacharu was just like his father! He used every girl he could, even though he had me, and I'm beautiful and noble compared with them."

"Don't cry. You don't need them. As the mother of the only male in the house, you will rule now!" Artavan tried to encourage her.

"I thank you, but I just hate it that you can stand there and look so good. You're no longer a slave and you look very handsome. Please take me as a bride!"

"Don't look at me!" Artavan looked off angrily. "You go tend to your new household and become

wealthy again!"

She stood uncomfortably for a moment, and then placed flowers by Devdata's feet. He shifted and looked away.

"Let's get out of here," he said in disgust.

They began to leave, but the headman's son approached them again.

"Oh Lords, how do you wish us to load up the offerings we've brought? Will you require a pair of oxen and a cart?" He kept his eyes to the ground in humility.

Artavan knew they could afford no such thing, so he turned to address the crowd.

"I, Prince Artavan of the Paralatae, declare this the festival of the Pahlavans! It must be celebrated with great amounts of feasting and merrymaking in accordance with the excess the gods have granted. Feed the poor and the animals of burden as well, and your village will be blessed with plenty in the years to come!"

A man approached them. "The offerings, my Lords! Please take our offerings!"

"We warriors need nothing of these things. Please enjoy these and tend to the men who've gotten their heads smashed for their arrogance. Beware, for if you mistreat the weak and helpless, we shall return!" Artavan was beginning to enjoy this!

People turned to the goods and began to banter

excitedly. The headman was roused from unconsciousness and he began to make arrangements to distribute the feast without so much as a question. They heard cries of happy children and the loud orders issued by the women as they walked away. Artavan smiled and walked proudly away with Prince Devdata at his side.

“Artavan, do you know why I insisted on returning to this place?” Devdata stared at him knowingly. He didn’t wait for Artavan to answer. “I know what was in your heart. Although you defeated the mighty Sorcerer Angraminyu, you still feared the stigma of being a slave. This has cured you. You’ve faced your greatest fears, and now your heart can be at peace.”

Artavan hugged him close as tears poured from his eyes.

“Uh...Artavan...your stories...”

CHAPTER TWENTY

“I hope that Tork has found his way back to the estate safely,” Artavan said to distract Devdata.

“Who knows? He’s a fool. He should’ve listened.”

Artavan considered for a moment which way to go as they left the excited villagers behind. He wasn’t exactly sure where the estate of Mehr the Generous was located, but he knew the general direction.

“We must first get Sarama, and then continue on to the place of Mehr.” Devdata muttered as if reading Artavan’s mind.

They began to walk in silence. When they reached the tree Sarama was dozing in, she flew down to them and licked their faces in a frenzy of recognition.

Devdata sniffed her face critically and grimaced. “All dogs are the same.” He walked off, with Drujo demanding to hear the details of the

fight.

After Sarama calmed down and Artavan had told his story, Devdata turned to him. "Alright, boy, you did well, but next time don't put on such a show! You should kill swiftly and efficiently. Now let me haul you to the place where Tork resides."

Artavan was thrilled at his criticism and eager for a ride up in the sky again, so he didn't argue. He really hadn't meant to put on a show, but it was better than admitting that he'd been scared. Before long, he was directing Devdata to the outskirts of Mehr the Generous' estate. Devdata dropped Artavan several feet from the ground. He fell in an ungraceful heap, but he grinned.

They walked again, and Artavan made Sarama wait in a tree. He almost suggested that Devdata stay in the tree with her, because now Artavan knew that he liked to start trouble, but he was too shy to confront Mehr the Generous alone. Going with Drujo would even be worse!

"So why do they call him 'Generous?'" Drujo asked.

"He likes to help people in distress. It's said that nobody leaves his presence without feeling satisfied. I heard that he once even married one of his nephews to a blind girl, because her father complained that she had no suitors."

"So then why did you not ask him to kill that

man who enslaved you?" Drujo scratched his bald head and peered at Artavan.

"In this land, people see nothing wrong with being a slave, aside from that they wouldn't like to be one," Artavan explained.

Drujo grunted in revulsion. They walked on until they were finally approached by two men on horseback. They wore the lovely orange silk robes of the House of Mehr.

"Welcome. Are you friend?" A fat man on a huge warhorse looked down at them.

"We need to speak with Tork. We would like an audience with Mehr the Generous too." Artavan tried to sound humble, so as not to upset the men, but Devdata looked disgusted.

"The warrior Tork has returned from a great adventure. He has single-handedly slain a terrible dragon," the short one said in a singsong voice. Devdata and Artavan looked at each other. Artavan was shocked, but Drujo growled softly.

"It is true," the fat one added. "He killed the legendary monster Bull of Ratakirt! He has told us in detail about how he wounded a monster by the name of Rangohar, and he also slew a man-eating dragon with a lion's head and the tail of a dragon! Now he's preparing for another adventure, but we don't know much about that." The man's eyes widened as he recounted the lies he'd heard. "He's returned with a huge treasure—the gems of the

dragon!"

Artavan was stunned. *How could Tork take credit for things he didn't do? Tork hadn't even seen the dragon, what to speak of kill it! And the other things were stupid lies!* "Can we see him now?" Artavan tried to suppress the anger he felt.

"Maybe. Follow us, and perhaps you will be in time for the noon meal." The fat one allowed saliva to drip from the left side of his small mouth.

They hurried after the horsemen in silence. Soon they were passing lovely gardens and well-dressed people of all sizes. Artavan realized that he was starving. His legs moved faster as the rich aroma of food assailed him. They soon saw a courtyard where people sat cross-legged on great white lengths of fine cloths. Each had several clay pots before them and plates made of dried leaves woven together with twigs. Boys strode up and down the rows announcing what foods they were serving, and ladling it out when interested people raised a hand or even a finger. Artavan needed no invitation, but quickly sat at the end of a row. Devdata and Drujo silently followed.

A little girl set plates and clay bowls before them. A boy ladled a huge mound of boiled barley on each plate. They began to eat like starved animals. A boy with thick chickpea gruel tried to ladle it over the barley, but managed to dump a quantity of the hot food on Devdata's hand as he

eagerly reached for it. The boy apologized profusely, but Devdata ignored him. Artavan only said, "Give us more."

Large flatbreads came next, and Artavan thought they were delicious. They ate yogurt with sliced cucumbers flavored with bits of fried chickpea batter, and large slabs of roasted lamb. Many people turned to stare at the way they ate, and some surrounded them to gawk. They kept handing them slabs of meat and flatbreads just so that they could watch. At last, they served rice pudding made of rich milk, boiled down until it was thick. Devdata devoured an entire pot of it, while several men cheered him on. One woman pressed her palm into his hard stomach, and she turned to tell the others that it was indeed, quite hard.

Suddenly the crowd parted and fell silent. Artavan looked up, and saw Mehr the Generous standing before them. He knew it had to be him, for none other had such a bearing. He was a Scythian, who had spent most of his youth as a mute mad-boy of the Paralatae tribe. These savages were known for their bloodthirsty natures and for their fine horses. Mehr had actually been a foundling prince, and you could see it by his fine features and curling golden hair. Artavan loved him on sight.

"Ho strangers! Welcome to my estate." Mehr

took a step with his hand outstretched. He stubbed a toe and stumbled, but his retainers set him right.

"We've come to see Tork!" Artavan could feel Devdata stiffen, and he wondered if he should have waited for him to speak first.

Mehr the Generous looked Artavan over. "You look like a Scythian man. What's your tribe? Are you a man-eater? Do you want to see my horses?" He blurted all this out before Artavan had a chance to think.

"I...I'm Tork's friend. We came to find him. He may be in great danger."

Mehr was already reaching for Artavan's sword. "Ah! What a weapon!" It didn't repel him. "We Paralatae would kill for such a thing! Can you demonstrate your prowess...uh...what's your name?"

"This is Prince Devdata of the Pahlavans. His is a kingdom so vast and filled with so many powerful armies that they appear like hoards of locusts." Artavan held a hand toward Devdata, whose eyebrow shot up. Artavan didn't even know why he always spoke up like a village idiot. "Prince Devdata is the most powerful warrior in the three worlds," he continued as if a demon had control of his tongue. "And this huge man is Drujo, the commander of the Pahlavan armies."

Mehr bent his head in greeting. "Welcome

Prince of the Pahlavans. Welcome, oh general."

"And I am Artavan. I'm a wild-man and I have no tribe." Artavan was oddly reluctant to claim that he too, was a Pahlavan. He didn't want to be a braggart, like Tork was.

"Welcome, wild-man Artavan," Mehr said with respect.

Just then Tork appeared. "Artavan! What are you..." He looked at Devdata and frowned, but then he seemed to veil his fury.

"Artavan! I was just about to come and seek you out. What a surprise. I trust you are all enjoying your meal."

Artavan saw that Tork's hands were bandaged. "What happened to your hands? Was the treasure too heavy?"

"Oh, it's nothing." Tork looked away, but a man stepped up smiling.

"Yes, you see, Tork battled a terrible dragon. He was injured in the fight. What a brave man!"

"Oh, is that so?" Devdata stared at Tork, who looked off.

Artavan saw that the bandages were slowly soaking through with a light brownish liquid.

"Well then. I have to go attend to my work. Enjoy yourselves." Tork nervously tried to shuffle away.

Devdata was eyeing him skeptically and finally said, "Tork, what's wrong with you?"

"Dear friend, there's nothing wrong, only that I am anxious to continue protecting the world, as I have protected you and Artavan from the dangers you've chosen to face." Tork looked worried.

He smelled foul, Artavan thought, and he noticed Devdata sniffing the air as well. He saw that Mehr was also looking at Tork as if waiting for him to say something else.

Tork sighed. "If you've come for treasure, I can give you some of it."

Artavan looked at Mehr imploringly. "Don't take any of those jewels. They're cursed! Tork is sick. I mean he's not in his right mind. He's in trouble."

Tork shook his head. "Mehr, sir. This is the slave I was telling you about. He's amusing, really. Full of wild tales."

"Shut up, idiot!" Devdata kept his distance, but he frowned at Tork.

"Oh, and this is the so-called prince who's after my treasure." Tork moved closer to Mehr, who stepped away. "I spared them, but these men want my treasure."

Mehr looked them over, but the crowd began to exclaim.

"How dare they?"

"Imagine the nerve? Mehr will kill them!"

"No, Tork can strike them dead with one blow, as he did the dragon!"

The crowd was exclaiming madly when suddenly it went silent and broke apart. A small, ancient woman hobbled out.

"It's the witch—the witch Kanka!"

"The witch who came to Mehr—to tell him of the future!"

The old woman looked up at Devdata, and reached for his face. He seemed to recognize her, and Artavan suddenly remembered. She was the witch they who'd given them Sarama. She pulled Devdata's shirt and he bent so that she could kiss him with her withered lips.

"You've done well. Together you've killed the dragon, but you were right to suspect that the trouble wouldn't end there. Yes, the dragon is dead, but the soul of the Sorcerer lives on. It lives to contaminate, and to eventually find a host—thanks to that man." The witch pointed at Tork. "Had he left the jewels, the Sorcerer would have been sealed in them forever, but now he is free."

Mehr looked shocked. "Old witch, did Tork lie? Did these warriors kill the dragon?"

"Yes, my dear. Heed what the young one said, and don't lay a hand on those cursed gems. Have them moved with an iron shovel, for iron has magical properties, and it won't be contaminated. Put them on a ship and sink it. Yes, it is too late for him." The witch again pointed a crooked finger at Tork.

"My jewels? My treasure? No! I won't let anyone, even Mehr, touch them!" Tork's face was red and contorted with rage.

"It's too late for you. Too late! Too late!" She sighed. "You are a greedy man and a liar as well. What will you do with your so-called treasure? Look at your rotting hands! Soon it will spread to your face, and nobody will be able to stand the sight and smell of you, for you are a leper now. Touching that cursed treasure has rendered you like the corpses you saw in the Bronze City. Artavan, you, dear boy, saw the vision and interpreted the riddle correctly, for he who touches the jewels of greed, reaps despair." The witch finished her speech and Tork's knees hit the ground.

Artavan could see the pus oozing from his hand, and when he looked up, red spots had already started to appear on his face. People screamed and backed away.

"He has it! The monstrous disease!"

"Leprosy! Ban him from the village!"

"Run, lest he touch you!"

The villagers cleared out, running away from the diseased man. They stood alone now. Only Mehr stayed.

Artavan felt sorry for Tork. "Please, old woman! Can you help him? He's stupid and greedy, but this fate is too horrible!"

The witch's eyes looked sad. "Who knows, but for now, I have a message for you warriors. You didn't follow my instructions completely, for you failed to rescue the cows." She pointed out at the fields.

Artavan saw it. Although they were green, an unseasonable yellowish tinge made them look like the fields of the fall. Even trees wore fading leaves.

"Yes. That drought is a result of the imprisonment of the sacred cows. Those red cows are the cows of dawn. If they aren't released, the entire world will become like that village." She paused and coughed deeply.

"Where are they? We didn't see any cows!" Devdata knit his brows and balled a fist.

Tork interrupted them with his weeping, but they ignored him.

"They were in the cave where you killed the dragon, naturally, my son. Now you have to go back and save them."

Drujo stomped his foot in an attempted to shut Tork up, but he wailed loudly. "I'll come and save the cows! Let me do this good deed, so that I may be cured."

"No, that is impossible. Had you not touched those cursed jewels, the cows would have called out for your help. The cursed cannot enter the transcendental realm. You can't even save yourself now!" The witch cackled madly.

Suddenly Sarama appeared and flew at the witch. She began to lick the witch's wrinkled skin, and the old woman hugged her to her breast. "Welcome, Aralez Sarama!" The witch hunched over Sarama and kissed her over and over.

Artavan's breath caught as he saw the change. The woman began to plump up and grow taller before his eyes. Her withered face changed into the lovely visage of a young woman. Her perky breasts poked from the tattered gown she wore.

The beautiful, transformed witch waved a hand over herself and she stood like a goddess clad in splendor. She held a bow in one hand, and a golden quiver of arrows hung over her shoulder. Her golden hair moved softly with the sweet breeze she brought with her. Artavan had to shield his eyes, for she was as brilliant as a star.

The lovely witch laughed huskily as she watched their astonished faces. "I am Anahita, the one who makes pure the seed of men, and who purifies the waters. I am the keeper of the Cows of Dawn. Please return them to me."

She rose in the sky, with Sarama following her, until Artavan called out in distress.

"Sarama! Please don't go!"

The goddess embraced Sarama, who drifted down, while she shot into the sky like a star, and disappeared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Artavan hugged Sarama, but felt sorry for her. She belonged to the goddess, he was sure. One day she would return, for men weren't immortals. Now that thought made him turn to Tork.

Mehr spoke first. "I'm sorry Tork. You saw with your own eyes! The gods have spoken. You've wronged the gods. I took you in as a son, and even gave you my daughter in marriage. I believe now that you killed her, as many say you did. You've returned my favors with hate and ingratitude. Now leave this estate before the people return to beat you to death and throw your body in a ravine. Your life is finished." Mehr turned his back on Tork.

Artavan had seen that before. It meant that it was over for Tork. It didn't make him happy, although Tork deserved it. "Tork, maybe in our travels we'll find a cure for you. I'll try to find you then. Stay alive."

Tork sobbed spasmodically. "Please let me go

with you, as I allowed you to go with me when you were in distress. Please don't abandon me!"

"I won't, but you can't come with us. You heard the goddess. You're contaminated now, and you'll cause us to fail. Farewell." Artavan found himself weeping as they turned and left the village.

* * * *

"You're too soft, Artavan." Devdata didn't look disgusted. Even Drujo put a hand on Artavan's quaking shoulders.

Devdata turned him and looked at Artavan's eyes. "Well, I'm not like you, that's for sure. I think Tork deserved that richly. I like that about you, though. I like that you're soft. It's not a bad thing. Now, enough of this weeping. We return to the cave of the dragon. Now that we don't have Tork to worry about, let's make haste. We'll be there in no time if we fly." He sighed in exasperation. "But you better learn to fly on your own soon!"

"Master, I can haul him, if you want." Drujo went to grab Artavan.

"No." Devdata's eyes twinkled. "I can do it."

Artavan was thrilled when they took off like great Simurg birds. He imagined that they saw the world like that. Everything was tiny. He wondered if the gods looked down upon humans

and saw them like ants going about their work. He tried to forget about Tork, but in his heart, he promised to return his favor. He wouldn't let Tork die like that, even if he deserved it.

* * * *

They landed outside of the cave. It made Artavan shiver to remember the awful time they'd first entered it, but now he was a Pahlavan, and he steeled himself. Even then, he had to hug Sarama. The memory of her torn open still made him wince. They silently entered the cave, feeling their way through the darkness until they entered the room of the battle. The pile of jewels Tork had been unable to carry still shone so brightly that the room was bathed in color and light. Artavan gasped at their beauty.

The distant bellowing of the cows stirred them suddenly. The cows lowed in distress.

The men began to walk toward the back of the cave tentatively. Artavan held Sarama tight in his arms, fearing the worst. A reddish glow appeared as they neared the sound, and to their amazement, they saw a herd of ethereal cows, plump and red, milling about in an enormous field, which like them, seemed to be illusory.

"Come, Artavan," Devdata growled. "Tork has mentioned your skill in caring for cattle. Drujo,

you stay here."

"But...but the cows aren't real...I mean how can I...?"

"I'll come with you. These are the sacred cows the goddess spoke of. I've no knowledge of cows. You'll help me. Remember our promise to the goddess."

Artavan felt foolish and cowardly for hesitating. He put Sarama into Drujo's arms and she began to lick his face enthusiastically. *It would be foolish to allow her to be in harm's way after all she had suffered before.* He began walking forward, holding his hands in front of him like a blind person, as he feared hitting the wall of the cave. He felt Devdata at his side.

In an instant, he found himself in a lush, tropical place. His hands dropped to his sides and he gasped at the sight. He'd never seen such plants and trees as what grew here. One tree seemed to have stout roots growing from the ground to the branches. In these branches, a number of huge bats were hanging upside down in repose, their large wings covering their chests and faces; as well as a multitude of birds that sang and cried out in complaint. In the bright sun they squinted and peered at odd yellow fruit, hanging in bunches from a tree that appeared not to have bark, but was smooth, with large, paddle-like leaves. Another tree was loaded with reddish

fruit. Artavan picked one up and it smelled sweet, but had a hard shell on the outside of it. Devdata took one in his hand and it cracked open loudly when he pressed it. The insides smelled sweet, but it was stringy and dry. Covering the edges of a river, there were plants that were lush, broad, and heart-shaped.

They saw no human habitation, but the earth under their feet seemed solid. The herd of cows appeared sleek and fat, and now they were quietly watching them. They had pendulous ears and humps, just like the bull that had attacked Artavan and Tork, but they were a soft fawn in color and appeared to be gentle. Artavan looked around for a stick to lead them with, but he could see none. Speaking softly to calm them, he began to move closer, with Devdata following.

Artavan was very experienced with cattle, so his fear dissipated as he approached them. They were well fed cattle with large udders, and sleek hides. Curious calves of various sizes peered out from around their mother's sides. Suddenly several of the cows were jostled and Artavan saw a familiar head poke out and look at them. He could never forget those gray eyes. Tossing his black head, the giant bull made his long ears flap and Artavan felt his knees weaken.

"Is that the ghost of the bull you killed?" Artavan barely whispered.

Devdata chuckled, but he grinned viciously. "Mmm...perhaps we'll have to eat him again."

"It's an illusion or maybe a vengeful ghost." Artavan felt rooted to the ground.

As if to prove him wrong, the bull snorted and lowed deeply. He walked out from among the cows and turned his side to them as he lowered his head and began to paw the ground. Artavan knew that posture as one of aggression. He was trying to look as big as possible, and he was doing an excellent job of it.

"I would kill it, but perhaps that would be the wrong thing to do. We promised to return the herd, and this bull, be he a ghost or not, seems to be part of it." Devdata shook a fist at the glowering bull.

"Well then we have to make it feel that we've backed down. We should get at least twenty paces away from him so that the bull won't feel threatened." Although Artavan thought that the bull had to weigh as much as three village bulls put together, he reasoned that it was still a bull, and he'd dealt with many a maddened bull in his years as a herder. Without turning their backs to him, they began to step backwards. Soon the bull looked up and seemed to become calmer. Artavan felt a tree touch his back and quickly shimmied up the tree and looked down. Devdata followed, seeming very interested in observing the ritual.

The cows suddenly began to low and mill about in agitation. The bull led them and they approached the tree, circling it. The tree was laden with red fruit that exuded a delicious fragrance, but although they smelled quite ripe, Artavan noticed that not one fruit lay on the ground. He grabbed hold of one of these fruit and threw it down at the cows, hoping to scatter them. Immediately the cows parted and a magnificent cow, bigger than the others, approached, followed by her twin heifers. She sniffed the fruit and her two calves began to suckle at her teats. They watched as she took up the fruit easily with her large tongue and closed her eyes in apparent pleasure as she chewed.

"How did you do that?" Devdata demanded to know, as the cow and her calves were becoming insubstantial until they disappeared.

"I'm not sure."

As soon as this happened, the other cows began to voice their agitation. Devdata picked another ripe fruit and tossed it down. This time another fine cow came and ate it, and then it too, disappeared. They began to throw fruit and watch as it was devoured, until all the cows and calves were gone. The only one who remained was the bull. He looked up at them and lowed. They threw more fruit at him, and he ate them, but remained as he was. Soon he lay down; falling to his knees

and then settling his great weight down to chew his cud.

"It looks like that's all that is going to happen." Devdata started to move down. "I believe the cows have returned to the goddess. Now let's deal with him."

They climbed down from the tree, but the bull ignored them.

"How do we return?" Artavan asked anxiously.

Devdata shrugged. "Perhaps the way we came, although I'm not sure how to do that. There is something I wish to do before returning."

Artavan noticed how still he'd become, and looked at him, the man he loved. The man he almost lost. Tears sprang from his eyes and he wiped them quickly. Devdata took him into his arms and stroked Artavan's hair gently.

"Artavan, I know how much you desired to be a warrior. You suffered much, but now you've attained something these puny humans can never achieve. You have something human about you too, and that's what attracts me. You're spirited and proud, yet kind."

Artavan wanted to stop crying and stand there looking noble. He was a Pahlavan, and he was with his lover. He was no longer a slave. The tears refused to stop.

"Artavan, do you remember what you said about allowing someone to love your body. You

said you wanted to love that person first. Do you love me yet?"

"I...yes, I love you, Prince. I love you very much. I wish to be with you forever!"

"Then come, we shall be as one in our love." Devdata took his hand and led him to a crystal stream. Each little rock shone in the clear water. Artavan removed his sword, hanging it on a branch. Devdata undressed himself, and when Artavan stood there shyly, he undressed him and they stepped into the water. Devdata washed Artavan's face with the cool water until his tears stopped. Artavan allowed himself to be bathed, and then they sat on a large stone on the bank as the warm breeze dried them. Artavan's hair cascaded over the rock and took up the sun's rays and shone like spun gold. Devdata took it up and put it to his nose repeatedly, as if he were intoxicated by its perfume.

He finally took Artavan by the hand and led him to a rich patch of grass.

"You tremble." Devdata put an arm around Artavan's shoulders and held him close before kissing him.

Artavan tensed all of his muscles. He remembered the beating he'd gotten from Tork after he had refused him, but Devdata smoothed away his hair and kissed him gently. He didn't take his lips off him as his hands roamed, gently

touching Artavan, massaging the tense muscles, and rubbing his forehead, which was sweating in his anxiety. His tongue roamed where Artavan had never felt before, and he groaned deeply as his pleasure increased. He cried out and pulled away as Devdata took his throbbing cock in his mouth.

"I'll be gentle. If you trust me, I'll make you happy."

Artavan allowed himself to be lowered again. He had to close his eyes, but that made the sensation all the more intense. Gently, and then insistently, he worked until Artavan could no longer take it. He cried out as he came, quickly using his hands to cover himself and what he'd done.

"Open your eyes, Artavan. Look at me. Was it good?"

Artavan continued to squeeze his eyes shut, but he nodded vigorously.

"Now it's my turn. Will you let me? Will you let me in?"

Eyes still closed, Artavan nodded again.

"Open your eyes," Devdata insisted.

Artavan slowly obeyed. Devdata stared into his eyes. "I want to see those eyes, so don't close them. They're very beautiful." He began to kiss him deeply, and pushed him to the soft grass. His heavy body settled over Artavan, and Devdata

could feel his now violent trembling. Artavan was embarrassed that he was unable to control the trembling in his thighs, even as Devdata tried to gently smooth his tension.

Devdata began to massage him. "Think about flying in the sky like a bird. As you are carried by the wind, you look down and everything that troubled you seems so small. You can float like that."

Artavan found he was relaxing. His tense muscles slackened and he felt warmth coursing through him. He moaned with pleasure as he felt those hands lovingly stroking him, but then it stopped.

"I must gather something. Please wait." Devdata slid off him.

Artavan was grieved suddenly. He wanted more than anything else, to feel Devdata inside of him. It was something he'd imagined so many times, but he was going to ruin everything with his timidity! He tried to stop the shaking in his limbs that began again, but was unable to make it go away.

When Devdata came back, he was holding an Aloe type plant he'd uprooted. He approached and tore off a large section. He squeezed it onto his hand and rubbed it on his cock until it was slick and shiny. This made Artavan laugh finally, until he squeezed more onto his hand.

"Lie down, Artavan."

He reclined, his knees shyly together and bent at the knees to conceal his embarrassing excitement. Devdata separated his knees by force and Artavan closed his eyes against what he guessed would happen next.

"No! Open them!"

Artavan forced himself to open his eyes and Devdata began to softly rub his bottom with the slick plant juices.

"Is it alright...here?"

Artavan felt his face flush, but he nodded, still forcing his eyes to remain open. He wished it were dark so his embarrassment would not be so evident.

"You have to have full trust in me. I'm not like Tork. I think he hurt you. I'll never hurt you." Devdata soothed him as his fingers entered and massaged that spot Artavan never knew he had. It felt good—so good that it threatened to cause an explosion in his loins again.

"It will only be good if you trust me. We can trust each other and fight together against any enemy. Never will I doubt you." Devdata moved Artavan's legs over his shoulders. "Is this okay, or do you want to be on your knees?"

Artavan just nodded, unable to speak. He had been relaxing, but then he felt it. Just the tip pushed into him. Then a little more.

"Does it hurt still?" Devdata asked gently. "Don't hold your breath. If you calm down, it will be good. Should I stop?"

Artavan vigorously shook his head no. He wouldn't stop even if it did hurt and even if it did feel funny down there. He wanted Devdata to do it now! Devdata bent over him and kissed him slowly and deeply. Gently he turned Artavan, moving each leg ever so slowly, until he was facing away from him. It felt better now, Artavan thought as he settled onto his hands and knees. Devdata slipped in now all the way and Artavan gasped.

Ever so slowly, Devdata began to thrust as he held onto Artavan and worked his hand over his cock. He knew just where to rub that special spot, a place of pleasure inside of him that now lit up Artavan's body with passion. Artavan shook all over as the pleasure inundated him. Devdata didn't withdraw, but waited gently and then began to thrust shallowly, stimulating that place once again, and Artavan felt his erection perk up again and he moved his hips as the pleasure deepened. As their bodies joined in their rhythmic ecstasy, the rest of the world, their pasts, their futures, became merged in a lightening bolt of bliss. When it was over, they lay in each other's arms allowing the cool breezes to fan them to sleep.

* * * *

Artavan started awake as a warm stream of piss splashed his face. He sat up, only to find himself bumping into the underside of a large, hot animal. He kept the scream in his throat at bay, because he didn't want to swallow the hot piss. Although daylight shone, and he could see the giant bull looking down at him, he felt that he was in a dream. It seemed calm. Artavan sat up. He could see Devdata bathing in the stream. His body looked like that of a god, even with its terrible battle scars. His face reflected a happiness Artavan had never seen on it. The knit brows were relaxed and he wore the closest thing to a smile.

The bull prodded him gently with his great horns, and Artavan scratched him under the neck. As he started to walk toward Devdata, he felt the world go out from under him. Waves of dizziness caused him to fall to his knees. When he looked up finally, he was alone. In the distance, he saw a magnificent castle. The morning haze hung over the land, which was beautiful. Artavan tried to stand, but he realized that he couldn't feel his body. He was like a spirit. Panic seized him, but he rose into the air without willing it, and moved to a spot where a man lay under a tree. He wore the radiant crown and robes of a king, but his

hands and arms were rotting with the same disease that Tork had.

The king didn't move, but he sighed repeatedly. Out of the underbrush, Artavan saw a great bull emerge. It was the same bull who had just pissed on him. The king now stirred and as the bull licked his face, he opened his eyes.

The bull spoke. "Oh King Yima. How sad to see the first king of the humans in such a condition. How has this come to pass?"

The king didn't seem surprised at the talking bull. "Oh Bull of the Religion! My brother, the great Taxma Urupi, was such a brave warrior that he was able to subdue the Evil Spirit Ahriman. Every night, he would transform Ahriman into a horse and ride him until he was lathered and almost dead. However, the evil Ahriman noticed that when Taxma Urupi rode him to a certain bridge, he would forcibly turn Ahriman and change directions. The evil Ahriman wondered why this was so. He was looking for my brother's weakness. One day, Ahriman took the form of a mendicant and approached my brother's house when only his wife was home. He gave the poor woman jewels and honey, and then he asked her his question. She was very pleased with his gifts, and she told him. 'My husband avoids that place because it is cursed.'

"Ahriman left in happiness. That very night,

when my brother rode him to that place, Ahriman, in his horse form, bucked and reared until my brother was thrown. Now that he had fallen in that cursed spot, Ahriman swallowed him whole. When I learned of this, I tricked the evil Ahriman, promising him evil pleasures. When I had him in my grasp, I shoved my hand into him, and retrieved my brother, but he was dead. I buried him as befitting royalty, but soon this disease began to eat my hands." The king wept now.

The bull stepped over the king and began to pass urine on him, soaking his body. Artavan watched in awe as the disease began to disappear before his eyes.

"My urine is the cure for this disease. Now you can return to your throne. The disease is one created by the devil Ahriman in the beginning of time, but for every disease he created to assail humans, the god Ahura Mazda created a cure." The bull looked over to the spot where Artavan watched and suddenly Artavan felt himself tumbling away. He landed in the same place where he'd been kneeling before his vision. The great bull lowed softly.

Artavan rushed to the stream and Devdata was waiting. "You've had another vision, haven't you?"

"How did you know?"

"I was watching. I saw you droop and faint

after the bull pissed on you. Now that you're a warrior, I knew that you weren't fainting like a maiden horrified over a little piss!" Devdata laughed, and it was a sound Artavan had never heard before coming from him. "So what did you see?"

Artavan related to him the vision, and Devdata smiled slightly. "You really did care about what happened to Tork. Well, we had better use a coconut shell and collect some of that piss, eh? What if the bull disappears?"

They watched and waited until the bull relieved itself again. Artavan got himself soaked with piss as he collected it, but he had what he wanted. He hoped that he wouldn't spill it as they flew back to find Tork. Artavan was happier that he'd ever been.

He looked around as if saying farewell to the place. Artavan was unwilling to break the spell. He was afraid it might disappear like an illusion and that he would end up in Nogard's house as a slave again. He didn't want Devdata to leave him after he'd drunk the passion he never thought he'd experience, but it was no illusion. His lover was by his side, and he was no longer a slave.

Devdata smiled as if he could read Artavan's mind. "I have an idea of how to get back. We'll follow the bull. I believe that he'll lead us." He approached Artavan and took his head in his

hands. They kissed.

Devdata held him firmly. "I was happy to have the time to be alone with you. I thought I'd go crazy with desire walking for so many days, watching you and knowing that it was on your mind too."

"You...you can read my mind!" Artavan choked. "I thought so."

"You amused me also with your fantasizing about how Tork would meet his demise. You truly think like a Pahlavan warrior." He hugged Artavan close and they kissed again. Artavan didn't hold back as he had before.

The bull began to walk away and Artavan scrambled to retrieve their clothing, the piss, and his sword. They followed the bull until they came to a copse of trees. The bull lumbered through, and they followed, but when they entered, they found themselves in the cave again, before the bewildered Drujo.

"What? What...where did you go? How did you come out of nowhere like this?"

Sarama flew into Artavan's arms and began to welcome him with her licks of ecstasy. He hugged her to his chest. Drujo had a leering grin on his face.

"Artavan, my friend, are you feeling well?" Drujo began to snicker.

"Um..." Artavan licked his kiss-swollen lips.

Artavan blinked a few times and looked around. The scene with the cows was gone. They were looking at a blank wall and there were no more sounds coming from the cave aside from the dripping of water somewhere.

Devdata allowed Sarama to attack him with her licking tongue. "The cows were stolen by the sorcery of Angraminyu, and they were returned by magic. We gave them magical fruit, and they were freed from the spell that held them. I'm sure they are safe with the Goddess now, and the spell is broken."

Drujo was more interested with Artavan. "So, did you two finally..."

Artavan stood tall and forced the embarrassment down. "Yes indeed! We fought with many demons and defeated..."

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KB Forrest received a Ph.D. in the subject of the Ancient Near East from Harvard University. This work required the knowledge of many dead languages, and the study of countless esoteric tomes, which supplied KB with an endless source of myths, legends, magical spells, curses, and exorcisms. This knowledge proves to be very useful in writing fiction, but it tends to attract ghosts and other spirits, as well as legendary creatures of all sorts, who demand that their stories be put into writing. KB is diligently working to assure that this happens soon, so that they will stop their incessant howling and nagging.