

## A Diversity of Houses

by S.L. Viehl

"They will arrive today," Sorel Irea said as he watched his ClanSister unload the last bale from the conveyor. "We have never welcomed visitors from HouseClan Giran before."

"We have. You are too young to remember it." Natala Irea cut open the baling ties and divided the dried yiborra into three portions before distributing it among the last of the empty feeders. The smell of the feed grass added a touch of sweetness to the air. "It is a cause for much celebration. Our ClanFather must be pleased."

Her ClanBrother's young face lit up with happiness. "He is, I think. He never stops smiling."

Visitors meant the entire HouseClan would assemble and celebrate, to make a proper welcome and to present opportunities for strengthening ties between the Houses through commerce and trade agreements. Unlike the Irea, the Giran were known as a wealthy and powerful HouseClan, with vast land holdings, many ships and much influence with the Jorenian Ruling Council. The diversity of their Houses might even lead to some Choices being made.

Natala discarded the baling ties and wiped some sweat from her brow. "Why are you not up at the pavilion, helping with the preparations?"

"I was sent to fetch more milk from the dairy." Sorel hesitated before asking, "Will you not attend tonight?"

The calves shuffled over to the silver-white mounds of grass with more enthusiasm than they had last week; soon they could be released with the rest of the herd. She was pleased with them, though annoyed with Sorel. "You know the answer to that."

Her ClanBrother made a face and dug his boot toe in the dirt. "It does not have to be so."

She switched off the conveyor unit and went to the corner pen. Green-Eye, the name she had given to a sickly runt driven out of the herd by his sire, lay curled in one corner of the pen. Like all t'lerue, he was square-bodied and short-necked; his head shaped like a crude, five-pointed star. There was hardly any fat layer beneath his gray-green hide, however, and his joints protruded sharply. His eyes did not match in color, one brown, one green, and his sireline mark - three red ovals around and above his left green eye - made the oddity more pronounced. The contrast would likely fade as he matured.

*If he matured.* She had been hand-feeding him since she'd found the underdeveloped calf wedged under a water trough, but he had shown little interest in anything. Her ClanFather would order me to cull him soon.

*You cannot change the path, Natala,* Ylo Irea often said when she was young. Not so much to remind her of her duty than to reconcile her with the reason for it.

She took a bottle of newborn formula from the warming rack and went into the pen, and carefully lowered herself next to the listless calf. She had scrubbed and kept him clean so he did not stink of waste as he had when she'd found him. Still, if he did not get up and stand on his own soon, ground sores would start eating into his hide.

"Drink." When Green-Eye would not take the artificial nipple in his mouth, she pushed it in and began squeezing the sides of the bottle gently to encourage his suckling. "Stubborn little one."

Sorel leaned over the gate to watch. "You would know."

"I am not little." Indeed, she towered over Sorel, and stood several inches taller than the eldest of their ClanSiblings. After these many years in the yards, she was also much stronger. "Nor am I stubborn."

"What say you prove my claim wrong and attend the Welcoming tonight?" He tried to smile and make his gestures casual when she looked up at him. "It will be . . . enjoyable. We hardly ever have visitors and we want you there."

Natala never entered the pavilion unless summoned, and no summons would be sent this day. Her ClanBrother knew this.

"I have great affection for you, Sorel." And she did, for despite the gap between their ages, her youngest ClanBrother had always gifted her freely with the same. "That is why I ask you say no more, and leave me now."

"I could speak with our ClanMother." He gave her a hopeful glance. "You know how she favors me."

Natala squeezed the bottle too hard. Green-Eye gave a weak jerk before he regurgitated the excess formula all over her trousers. She used the hem of her tunic to clear his nostrils, and then cradled his head in her lap. "You must not do that."

His hope became a pout. "She can be made to see reason."

"While you cannot."

"It is not fair!"

"You think it fair to see me summoned before a visiting HouseClan? That your concept of justice will convince our ClanMother to present me to the Giran as potential kin?" She snorted. "I must speak with your tutors."

"You know what I say." He ducked his head. "There is nothing wrong with you."

"And yet you cannot look upon me when you say that." She stroked the calf's brow before she rose and left the pen. "Truly, Sorel, think you our visitors will afford me the same courtesy?"

"You do not know what will happen. You never come to see anyone." He caught her arm and tugged on it. "You are Irea."

"While you are no longer a child. Please stop behaving like one." She removed his grip. "Go now. I have work to do."

Natala kept working, changing the calves' soiled bedding for fresh until she heard Sorel pick up his milk cans and leave through the side entrance. Then she stopped and walked slowly back to her room. At the pavilion she had comfortable quarters with many amenities, like all the ClanDaughters of Ylo Irea were afforded. They had stood

empty since her tenth year, when it had been determined that no more could be done for her.

*There is nothing wrong with you.*

Sorel's words had wounded her, as such kindly-meant things did, and she went to the mirror panel she had placed on the wall beside her sleeping platform. She looked in the glass for a long time, until the sight of her own features calmed her.

*You cannot change the path.*

Natala had no intention of attending the Welcoming, where she would never be made welcome. Sorel did not understand, but she had made peace with her lot when she was even younger than him. She would stay here, in this small but quiet corner she had made for herself, where she could curl up and be left alone.

Never would she give her sire reason to drive her away.

#

"No one will welcome you unless you remove that scowl from your face," Qedalea Giran advised his ClanLeader.

Tavo Giran did not look up from the stock reports he was studying. "Somehow I doubt that."

"It would not divert your path to enjoy yourself for once," the young warrior said. "I should warn you that I

have been given strict orders to see you do more here than inspect and purchase stock animals."

"Then I would say your mission is doomed to failure, ClanCousin." He advanced to the next page of data.

"What is it you find so fascinating?" Qedalea leaned over to inspect Tavo's datapad display. "Irea sirelines, of course. Why did I not guess it?"

The edge of his stern mouth curled. "Perhaps because all you can think about is parading nubile young women in front of my nose."

"Never - I? Coerce our ClanLeader to Choose?" Qedalea thumped his chest with an indignant fist. "I am sworn to protect and serve, not to procure."

Tavo raised a dark brow. "What say you should I request such a selection of females?"

His young ClanCousin dropped his fist. "How many do you wish to see, and when, and where?"

"As I suspected." He nodded. "My ClanUncle has been busy."

"He has been driving me to madness." Qedalea sighed. "My days would be far more serene - and quieter - would you but Choose."

*So would mine.* Tavo glanced through the transport view panel and saw a glimmer of white in the distance to the north.

The Irea were one of the more remote HouseClans, with lands located in the farthest northern regions of Joren's smallest continent. Only three other HouseClans occupied the landmass, and they were all far to the south. In addition to this, few Irea traveled outside their territory as well, and thus the HouseClan had remained mostly cut off from the bulk of Jorenian society. Some claimed it was their location that kept them distant, but others thought the Irea a House of isolationists.

"They say there are no females in the twenty-eight territories that can compare to Irea women," Qedalea told him. "I have seen one myself among the Zamlon and their beauty was not exaggerated. She was stunning."

"I would advise you not judge the women of a House by one face." To the east, a dark blur moved slowly across a wide silvery pasture. It appeared to be too large to be anything but the Irea's main herd.

"They are said to be very clever as well," his ClanCousin added in a hopeful manner. "And fertile - an Irea woman would give you many young ones, and make you a fine family."



*To replace the one I lost.* Tavo needed air and space around him, and he needed it now. "Driver, stop." He tucked placed his datapad in his journey pack.

Qedalea followed his gaze. "Oh, no. You cannot go and chase through the grass after those creatures. It will be night soon."

"I want time to make a proper selection, they do not run away, and I am not afraid of the dark." Tavo often camped out overnight in the fields, and as it was summer in this region he would not require special gear. "I think I will sleep under the stars."

"ClanLeader, you cannot. We are expected *tonight*."

The men seated behind them - ten of Giran's highest-ranked warriors, who had accompanied their ClanLeader as escort for the long journey - made sounds of respectful agreement.

"Cattle are the reason I agreed to make this journey," Tavo said, and clapped the younger Giran on the shoulder. "I will view the herd now, while you and the others will go on ahead. Think of it as giving us both time to properly inspect likely candidates."

"I *am* assigned to you as bodyguard." Qedalea folded his arms. "I cannot do that unless I have your body present to *guard*."

"You hate cattle, and I am giving you an order. Tell the Irea that business delays me." When the transport came to a halt, he climbed out and hoisted his pack over his shoulder. "I will see you at the pavilion in the morning."

Tavo turned and walked toward the eastern pasture, hoping his ClanCousin and their escort would not follow. At last the transport continued toward the Irea pavilion, and some of the tension that had plagued him since leaving his own territory and crossing the sea began to ease. Likely Qedalea's efforts to secure a bondmate for Tavo would satisfy many among the Giran. Certainly they would Qedalea's ClanFather, who for weeks had been dropping adages about leadership like small stones on Tavo's skull.

*A ClanLeader must be an example to the House.*

Qedalea was right; he should Choose someone on this journey. The diversity of their Houses was promising; it was always considered good luck to Choose from a HouseClan located far from one's own. Being one of the few ClanLeaders on Joren who had not taken a bondmate had proved to be a continual annoyance for himself and something of an embarrassment to his kin. It would make everyone's life more pleasant.

Everyone's but his own.

Tavo knew he was long past the age of Choice, but he couldn't help resenting the constant pressure to take a bondmate. He felt he had enough to attend to, trying to manage the HouseClan's extensive holdings and govern his kin after the abrupt loss of his ClanParents, the former Giran ClanLeaders, and his older ClanBrother, Niro. He was literally learning to lead day by day.

It was Niro who had been groomed for this, not him. Tavo would have been content to serve his ClanBrother by managing the HouseClan stock - and would be doing so right now, had not a senseless transport collision wiped out his entire family.

Death was celebrated on Joren, but Tavo had been incapable of venerating the loss of the three people he had honored most. Especially Niro, who had been the best of ClanBrothers. For a time Tavo had even considered joining them in death, until his kin had stunned him by electing him as their new ClanLeader. From that moment on his life had become an endless procession of duty and formality, decisions and politics.

*Now they would have me add a bondmate and ClanChildren to my responsibilities when I can barely cope with what I have.*

Tavo noticed as he drew near that the t'lerue herd was much larger than he had originally estimated; even with darkness falling he could see well over ten thousand head. They appeared healthier and sturdier than any herd he had ever seen, justifying the admiration for the Irea sirelines which had been spreading for many years. It would seem this HouseClan's stock manager had a breeding program far superior to his own.

*Perhaps I should consult with him as to which of the ClanDaughters Irea to Choose, he thought as he came to the outer fringe of the herd. One of the larger males shuffled over to sniff at his tunic, and he stroked an admiring hand across the space between the placid creature's blunt, short horns. At least with that advice I could expect to sire healthy ClanChildren on her.*

Such heresy amused Tavo, but it would have scandalized his kin and insulted the Irea, who also had the reputation as one of the more proper and formal Houses of Joren. If he voiced those thoughts, they would create an instant rift between the Giran and the Irea, and such things had to be avoided.

Tavo could not do what he wanted, Choose when he wanted, or speak as he wanted. No ClanLeader could.

"Perhaps I may settle for purchasing you," he told the big male, who eyed him with placid curiosity. Tavo took out his datapad and made note of the sireline mark as well as the ID tattooed on the inside of the animal's right ear, "If not a ClanChild, then I can breed some stronger calves next season."

Although Joren had advanced to a highly developed, technological society, the t'lerue remained an important commodity. While Joreniens did not consume animal flesh, t'lerue milk was a staple part of their diet and contained vital nutrients which could not be synthesized. T'lerue manure was even more valuable, and considered to be the finest natural crop fertilizer within the quadrant. The animals served as a cultural foundation as well, for it was the t'lerue that had convinced the ancient Joreniens to abandon their nomadic ways and become tribal herders.

A plaintive sound of distress drew Tavo's attention away from the t'lerue, but the sun had set and darkness swallowed the source. As he moved around the herd toward it, he noticed some of the outside animals growing restless. Very little disturbed t'lerue, so he drew two blades from his belt and held them ready.

His eyes adjusted to the lack of light, and he saw the shapes of two yearlings on the ground, struggling as though

held by a great weight. Two cloaked figures stood over them, apparently readying to lift one.

"Hold!" he shouted.

One of the pair produced a pulse rifle and fired into the herd, sending a surge of frightened animals toward Tavo, who leapt on the back of a female to keep from getting trampled. After coiling one hand in animal's shaggy neck fringe for control, he used the other to throw a knife at the one who had fired. His blade sank into the arm of the intruder, who dropped the rifle.

The female bucked under him, frightened by the field rover which came to a screeching halt behind him.

*Ssssissss.*

Something invisible hit Tavo with such force that it drove him backward and over the animal's haunches to hit the ground. The herd was moving away from him so he didn't end up under her hooves, but as he landed the edge of one of his blades bit into his left side.

"Stop!" a woman shouted

Tavo swore as he rolled and pushed himself to his knees in time to see a tall female with unbound hair attack the two intruders. Air whistled as she wielded the herding staff in her hands like a sword, striking both with hard, rapid blows. The uninjured of the pair drew a pulse pistol

and fired at her. She used her staff to vault out of the way, but it gave the intruders an opportunity to skirt behind the now-receding herd and use it as a shield while they ran away. Before she could catch up to them, they climbed into a surface glider and took off, leaving her on the ground.

She watched their craft until it was out of range, and only then lowered the end of her staff to the ground.

"Houseless scum," he heard her say.

"Lady." He clamped a hand to the gash in his side and made his way toward her, but he was dizzy and his steps dragged. "Are you harmed?"

"No, but you are. Come." She put a strong arm around him and led him back to her field rover. "I regret that I did not arrive in time to provide proper aid."

"I make no complaint." He scanned the surrounding fields. "Have you no security grid?" Such a sensor web suspended above the field would have picked up the intruders' craft as soon as it landed.

"We hope to afford one next year," she said, reminding him of the disparity between their Houses. "For now I keep sensor pylons around the field perimeter, but they are widely spaced. They must have found a blank spot."

He grimaced. "I tripped them, then."

"I am happy you did." When he stumbled again, she tightened her arm around him. "To whom do I owe thanks for defending my stock, Warrior?"

Tavo began to answer her, and then hesitated. It was too dark for him to see much of her face, so he assumed the same was true for her. He had not put on his over tunic with all the ceremonial frittory befitting his status. For a time he could enjoy some anonymity.

"One who does the same for the Giran, Lady." Fortunately the exchange of full names between members of different Houses was traditionally reserved until formal introductions could be conducted before kin.

"I wondered why you were out here. Only a stockman would forego the pleasures of Welcoming to inspect a herd." She helped him sit in the passenger's seat before she eased her arm away. "You are bleeding all over me, ClanSon Giran." She tossed her staff in the back of the rover. "I will take you to our healer."

"No." He could not arrive bloody and wounded before the Irea or his own men; their instinctive reactions might lead to open aggression or worse. Carefully he probed the wound. "I would not . . . shame my kin by appearing thus." It would be awkward but he might be able to suture it himself, or with her aid. "Have you a med kit?"



"Yes, I use it for the stock and my own injuries. But I am no healer of men."

Relief made him sit back. "I trust you to see to my wound, ClanDaughter Irea."

"It is your hide." She went around to the other side and started the engine.

As she drove back toward the low cluster of buildings set away from the pavilion, they discussed the incident and then herd. To keep his mind off his wound and his body from slipping into the darkness fringing his vision, Tavo asked her a number of questions about the Irea breeding program, to which she provided such detailed answers that it was clear that she was the stock manager. Unusual, to be sure - few women took interest in cattle breeding - but she seemed to have a natural affinity and affection for the work.

"You should invest in a security grid as soon as possible; your herd is too great a temptation to thieves," Tavo said. "Irea sirelines will soon outshine all others."

"I must tell the Lno buyer that the next time he signals me," she said, her voice rich with amusement. "He would have me believe my animals teetering on the brink of disease and death."

"Lno has told me the same, several times. He should alter his predictions occasionally." He noted the glint around her wrist. "You wear a wristcom - why?" The translation/location devices were virtually unnecessary unless one regularly dealt with offworlders.

"It is a convenience." Some of the friendliness left her voice. "Often I go out and spend many several days in our outlands, checking the fences. If I am ever injured, I can use it to signal for help."

He would have questioned why she did the work alone, but they had reached HouseClan Irea's stockyards. The compound was as impressive as the herd, expansive and well-maintained, with large barns for milking, breeding, isolation and culling. His companion parked the rover outside the smallest, which he assumed would be like his own for isolation of sick or orphaned animals.

No one came out to greet them, which also bothered him. They should have been surrounded by her kin. As she helped him out of the seat, his thoughts were replaced by more urgent ones.

"Are you strong enough to drag me inside?" Tavo asked as the ground tilted beneath his feet.

"I believe so."

"Your pardon, lady, for I think now you must." He sank down into darkness.

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Natala caught and supported the Giran's heavy, unconscious form until she could lay him gently on the ground, then she ran into the barn. He was too large and heavy for her to carry, and dragging him, while possible, would only aggravate his wound. The grav-lift she used to transport calves from the field was her only other option.

*No, you could signal a healer, a cold, inner voice that sounded remarkably like Hunetku's said as Natala rolled the unconscious male onto the lift's pallet. That would be the proper manner of dealing with a visitor.*

Yet all she wanted was a little more time with him, so that she could tend his wound and ask him more about the pair who had attacked him. Indeed, they had been so busy talking about the herd that she had practically forgotten about the intruders.

"Lights on," she said as she brought him inside, and the envirocontrol panel illuminated the dark interior of the barn.

This was the third time in a cycle her sensor pylons had been triggered, but the only time she had ever caught up with the intruders, thanks to the stockman. If the

Giran had seen and could describe their faces, she might be able to identify and track them.

*That is not the only reason.*

She brought him inside to her room and hoisted him up and over onto her sleeping platform before retrieving her med kit and a pair of shears. Rarely did she get this close to a man when he could not look at her, so it was a pleasant novelty. Particularly as he was not averting his eyes or chattering polite nonsense to cover his discomfort.

*Thank the Mother you are but a lowly cattle worker,* she thought. *Hunetku would never forgive me for treating some high-ranked dignitary like this.*

As Natala cut off his tunic, she admired the strong, tough lines of his upper torso. The Giran had a typical stockman's build, with heavily muscled arms and a deep, broad chest. His skin was a dark, even blue but marred by wide angular scars on both forearms. Marks left behind from young t'lerue hooves, she knew, because they were identical to her own.

"I shall have to show you my holding pen," she murmured. She had designed and built the holding area to immobilize new calves while tattooing them with stock numbers. "That should save some of your pretty hide in the future."

The wound was long but not dangerously deep, and she irrigated and disinfected it thoroughly before sealing it with the suture laser from her med kit. Their healer might have made a neater job of it, but this was a man accustomed to regular injuries and their resulting scars. It would have to do.

Natala studied his face as she washed the dark green blood from his skin and infused him with a mild analgesic she used occasionally for her own pains. He wore his thick black hair shorter than most men, in the style of a ClanLeader, but that was likely more for convenience. Working with the stock and equipment required her to bind up her hair or risk having it pulled out. Beneath his ear was his Giran ClanSymbol, which appeared as two small interlocking circles, unlike her Irea mark, which was shaped like a miniature jagged claw. He was not at all handsome, and many would say such an angular countenance made him appear remote, even intimidating. Yet it was not the strength of his features as much as the shadows beneath his eyes and a premature purple streak in his black hair made her heart constrict.

She dared to sift her fingertips through the purple strands that only came with age or great suffering. You

*are too young for this, ClanSon Giran. What have you endured, I wonder.*

Natala took her hand away and deactivated the interior lights. Since he occupied her only sleeping place, she sat on the floor beside the platform and rested her back and head against the wall. All of the excitement left her feeling drained, and she drifted into a light doze.

Sometime later his voice woke her. "Lady?" A large hand reached over the side.

She caught it with her own. "I am here, Warrior."

"Ah." He sounded drowsy as he laced his fingers through hers. "It seems I owe you a bed as well as my life."

She smiled. "If you have a spare security grid, I will take it in trade."

"I must remember to bring one with me upon my next visit." His voice grew serious. "I would ask your pardon. It was not my intention to place such a burden upon you."

"No pardon is required." She had to get up and turn on the light now, but she did not regret it. For a time he had spoken with her easily and freely, and she would have that happy memory to keep. "I will signal your kin at the pavilion."

"That can wait until morning," the Giran said when she stood and tried to release his hand. He tugged her toward him. "Come and sleep."

All Jorenian women were taught proper behavior - even Natala. She knew it was not seemly to lie with a man unless he was Chosen or a bondmate. Yet she was tired and uncomfortable from sitting on the cold dirt floor, and he sounded exhausted. Sure no harm would come of sleeping side by side.

"As you wish." Cautiously she stretched out beside him, uneasy and more than a little stiff. It was one thing to touch and smell and see an unconscious, wounded man, quite another to do the same when his eyes were open and mere inches from her face. She would have to rise before first light or-

"You are chilled." The Giran put an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

His limbs and torso pressed against her own, as well as the places where his bare skin touched hers, produced very strange sensations. He smelled of safira and his own body heat, an intoxicating combination.

*So this is why it is unseemly.* Natala let herself imagine for a moment sharing this closeness and contact with a man each day and night until life ended. It was

unbearably bitter, but she found herself relaxing against him. If she could never have this for her life, then she would have for these few hours.

"I can almost hear your thoughts, Lady," the Giran murmured.

*Mother, I hope not.* "The two who attacked my herd - did you see their faces, Warrior?" she asked.

His hand came up and shifted her so that his chest pillowed the left side of her head. "I regret I did not. You?"

She was distracted by the sound of his heart beating just under her cheek. "Ah, no. I only saw them from behind."

"The weapon they used to knock me from back of the t'lerue was unknown to me. They may be offworlders." His fingers brushed a tendril of hair back from her temple. "Even as talented as you are with a staff, you should not have pursued them alone."

"There was no one else to accompany me," she said. "All were attending the Welcoming."

"Why were you not?"

"I am not one for celebrations." That, at least, was true.



"Neither am I." He turned his head and pressed his mouth to a spot just above her right brow. "Sleep well, Lady."

Natala closed her eyes tightly. "And you, Warrior."

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Tavo had not slept so soundly since before the accident that had taken his blood-kin from him, and when he woke he did so with a smile and full memory of the past night's events. *Qedalea will never believe any of this, while I will never hear the end of it.*

Sunshine filled the humble little room, and he rolled on his side so that he could at last gaze upon the face of the Irea female who had saved his life.

In the space where a woman should have been lay only a folded tunic.

Tavo sat up, ignoring the flash of pain from his side, and looked around him. "ClanDaughter Irea?"

No one answered. He was alone.

As he rose he pulled on the tunic, which was old but clean and neatly mended. His footgear, he saw, she had placed at the base of the platform, along with his pack. He could still smell her on his skin - her scent was like new l'seevala blossoms - but there was no other sign that she had even been in the room.

*Why did she leave me?*

Tavo walked out into the barn, where several young calves eyed him as he passed their pens, and out into the stockyards, but saw no one. It was barely dawn. He turned until he saw the Irea pavilion, and headed in that direction.

*Had she recognized him? Had she gone to inform the other Giran of his presence?* He increased his pace and crossed the distance with long strides. *Was she angry with him?* He did not care for the fact that she had left him. She should have remained, she should have woken him. *There will be much to explain.*

Qedalea and some of the other Giran were walking out of the grand front entrance of the pavilion as Tavo approached, and they saluted him as usual.

"We were about to go in search of you," his ClanCousin informed him with a grin. "Did you enjoy your night under the stars?"

"In some ways." Tavo scanned the faces of his men, which were open and unconcerned. "Did no one bring word of me this morning?"

"No one yet knows you are here." Qedalea peered at him and lost his smile. "Something is wrong. You are favoring your left side."

Tavo informed them of what had happened, and the easy expressions instantly evaporated from every face. "We are visitors here; you are to say nothing of this to the Irea."

Qedalea already had his hand curled around his blade hilt. "No one attacks our kin and takes the coward's path," he said, his tone as lethal as the dark blue claws that had emerged from the tips of his fingers.

"We will track them later," he said. "I would pay my respects now and be properly introduced to the woman who saved my life."

Slowly his ClanCousin nodded. "As you say, ClanLeader." His gaze drifted down to Tavo's tunic and some of the killing rage left his face. "Perhaps a change of garments first?"

The men escorted him through the pavilion to their guest quarters, where Tavo took care to cleanse and prepare himself properly. As the men discussed how they would track the intruders, he inspected his garments and adjusted his best tunic. He knew himself to be too large and sharp-featured to be considered appealing to a young female, but he suspected his savior was somewhat more mature. Which made him wonder why she had not Chosen - surely a female with her strength, charm and talent would be pursued by every male within five HouseClan territories.

*What if she has Chosen?*

Tavo dismissed the alarming idea at once - no woman who had Chosen would have slept at his side as she had. Nor would any Chosen of hers allow her to occupy a room away from the pavilion. He had a suspicion that she spent much of her time in the stockyards, perhaps even slept there, which also disturbed him. It was not natural to dwell apart from kin.

He walked out to where his kin waited. "After introductions are made," he told Qedalea, "I will ask for the female so that she and I may discuss the Irea breeding program. Remember, you and the men are to say nothing about the attack. This is her business, and I will not intrude upon it without her permission."

By the time they emerged from the guest quarters, word had spread through the pavilion and the Irea had assembled in their central receiving room, which had been prepared in banquet style for a large communal meal. Qedalea and his men escorted Tavo to the head table, where a tall, stately couple stood waiting to receive him.

"ClanLeader Tavo Giran," the older man said as he made the formal gesture of greeting between Houses. "I welcome you to HouseClan Irea."

"ClanLeader Ylo Irea," Tavo said, returning the gesture and adding one of gratitude. "Your kindness is greatly appreciated. I regret the delay that prevented me from attending last night."

Tavo was introduced to Hunetku Irea, Ylo's bondmate, and to their four sons and two daughters. He was then presented to the HouseClan with the traditional ceremony before he and his men were invited to share morning bread at the ClanLeader's table.

By then Tavo felt impatient, but waited until all the customary remarks had been exchanged before venturing to ask for the female. "As I journeyed to your House, I could not help but notice your fine herd of t'lerue in the eastern pasture. I would not be the first to be envious of such fine animals, I imagine."

"We are quite proud of our stock," Ylo said as he broke the end of a golden, intricately braided loaf before passing it to his bondmate. "I understand that you wish to increase the diversity of your sirelines."

He nodded. "I would also like to improve our breeding program. Could your stock manager join us? I would appreciate a personal introduction."

The loaf fell from Hunetku's hand and clattered onto her plate, and everyone at the table gave Tavo horrified looks.

#

Natala drove the field rover as far as the border between the Irea and Zamlon territories, which were divided by a long stretch of inhibitor poles. The poles produced sensor-activated bioelectric fences, mainly to keep strays on Irea property as the Zamlon grazed their herds much farther to the south. She shut off the engine and sat staring at her hands, which were clenched so tightly on the steering controls that her knuckles bulged.

"It was an idyllic interlude, and now it is over," she told herself. "Over and done with. Forget him."

Natala took her staff and climbed out of the rover, to start walking the line of poles. At last count no animals were missing, but it was her duty to check the borders and maintain the costly equipment. Usually she did so in the field rover, but today she decided to inspect this portion on foot. She had to do something physical, to stop thinking about the Giran.

She had not slept, of course. His kiss to her brow had made that impossible; it had burned into her head like a brand applied for hours. *It must have amused the Mother*

*to have him touch his lips to that particular spot on my face.* Rising and leaving him just before dawn had been a cowardly thing, but after that kiss she could not allow the Giran to wake and look upon her in the light.

"He will never feel disgust or shame for his kindness to me," she muttered as she crouched to adjust a loosened sensor port at the base of one pole. "In time, he will forget me." Movement behind her rise and turn.

The cloaked figure standing a few feet away raised an odd block-shaped device.

*Ssssisss.*

Natala was thrown back into the space between the poles, which triggered the sensors to produce the energy fence. Pain crackled over her as she bounced off the fence and back toward the intruder. She had enough sense use the staff still in her hand to knock the device away before she hit the ground. As she heard their intruder scrambling for the weapon, she pressed a button she had never before used on her wristcom and then tucked her hand under her body to protect it.

*Ssssisss.*

#

"You do have a stock manager, do you not?" Tavo asked Ylo. His voice sounded overly loud, but that was due to

the utter silence that had fallen over the central receiving room.

The ClanLeader nodded slowly. "Our stock manager is . . . ." he groped for words.

"Not one for celebrations, I imagine." Tavo kept his expression and voice mild as he sipped from his server of jaspkerry. "Few cattle breeders are."

"Indeed." Ylo smiled his relief.

"Then perhaps you would permit me to visit your stockyards," he suggested, "so that I may speak to your manager in surroundings less formal."

"No!" Hunetku Irea gave her bondmate a hard look before adding, "Forgive me, ClanLeader Giran, but such matters are best delegated to those whose time is not as valuable as your own."

"I will have full details of our breeding program provided for your stock manager," Ylo added quickly.

Why were they so eager to keep him from meeting with the stock manager, when they had fallen over themselves to afford him every other possible courtesy?

"Before I was elected as ClanLeader Giran, I managed the HouseClan's stock." Tavo caught Qedalea's warning glance and realized his own tone had become quite chilled. He forced a smile. "Alas, as I have not yet selected or



trained a replacement manager, there is no one to whom I can delegate such tasks. I fear it must be me."

Before Ylo could respond, his ClanSon Sorel jumped from his seat and clapped a hand around his own forearm. "ClanFather - Natala signals. She is in danger."

The boy's ClanSiblings also looked anxiously at each other and Ylo.

Tavo spotted the flashing display on the wristcom the boy wore, and politely rose to his feet. "May the Giran be of service in this matter, ClanLeader Irea?"

Hunetku muttered something, and made a terse gesture at her son while Ylo said to Tavo, "Your offer is appreciated, ClanLeader, but my own men will—"

"ClanFather!" Sorel's young voice snapped, whip-sharp. He turned to Tavo. "Natala is my ClanSister as well as our stock manager," he said in a rush.

"Sorel!" Hunetku appeared ready to faint.

The boy ignored his ClanMother. "She would not signal unless her life was threatened. We must go to her now."

"I see." Fury welled inside Tavo as his claws emerged and he met Ylo's gaze. "Then it appears that her absence here was not, as you said, by choice."

The dull dark color of shame appeared in the older man's face. "Little in Natala's life is." He sounded old and tired.

His bondmate rose. "This is nonsense. Natala is in no danger. Sorel, turn off that device and sit down."

"Do you have a reading on her location?" Tavo asked the boy.

Hunetku's hands fluttered in near-incomprehensible gestures as she produced a strained laugh. "ClanLeader Giran, do not trouble yourself. We will send our own men to attend to this."

"She is near the border." Sorel came around the table to show Tavo the coordinates. His ClanBrothers were already heading for the doors. "We have surface craft, but not as fast as yours."

Tavo nodded. "We will take mine."

"Ylo!" Hunetku became shrill. "Do something!"

"ClanLeader, we appreciate your aid," the older man said, "but this matter is Irea business."

Tavo's vision dimmed for a moment.

"Unfortunately, it has become mine as well. Your ClanDaughter Natala saved my life last night." He shocked everyone by using his claws to pull open his tunic to reveal his wound. "I would return the favor."

Ylo's bondmate gaped at him. "You saw her? You saw and you said nothing?"

Tavo did not respond to her nonsense, but nodded to Qedalea, who like the Giran men stood ready. To Ylo he said, "We will bring back your ClanDaughter."

The ClanLeader nodded and sank back into his chair.

#

Natala had not expected to open her eyes again, but when she did she found herself in a peculiar position - upright, spread-eagled, and unable to move. A hum of energy pressed in around her, and she looked through the tangle of hair hanging over her face until she spotted a projection device on the ground in front of her. Four bright streams of energy had her pinned; apparently between two p'nepel trees, from the feel of the spiky bark biting into her wrists and ankles.

A pair of alien males stood a short distance away to her left, arguing with each other. They were of average size, vaguely humanoid but she did not recognize their species or language. Two Maneo t'lerue yearlings, a male and a female, lay to the right. Both had pressure darts in their haunches, and both were dead.

*Offworld thief breeders.* Her claws slowly emerged and buried themselves in the p'nepel bark. *They must have*

*attempted to tranquilize them for transport.* Anyone could access the planetary database and learn that most sedative compounds were fatal to t'lerue, yet this pair had not even bothered. Although the animals were not hers, the waste of life disgusted her.

That these two might have diverted the path of the Giran last night, however, enraged her.

One of the thieves noticed her watching them and strode over to her. He jerked her head up by her hair and peered in her face. "*Habartallanekkatan.*" He switched on a wristcom to translate his speech and pointed to the carcasses. "We gave them neuroparalyzer. Why did they die?"

"Because you are idiots." She strained and twisted against the energy bonds. "You cannot take t'lerue offplanet. They never survive the drugs or the transport."

He took out the square device that had knocked her unconscious. "That is a lie, invented to protect your livestock. Give me the truth."

She could not get at him like this. She needed to be free and on the ground. *Perhaps they are as ignorant of Jorenian women as they are of t'lerue.*

"Don't hurt me again." As she curled her claws into her palms to hide them, she produced what she hoped was a

convincingly fearful expression. "Release me and I will show you what you must do."

The alien glanced at his companion, and then bent down to switch off the device on the ground. Natala fell forward and landed on her hands and knees.

"Get up and—"

She sprang at him, slashing at his face and throat with her claws. They fell together, but she flipped him under her and straddled him. The pleasure of hearing him scream and feeling his flesh part under her hands made her want to linger and enjoy the work, but she had the other to disable first.

*Ssssissss.*

The blow was a glancing one, and still Natala was thrown off the thief and into one of the carcasses. She rolled over it and flattened herself behind the dead yearling just in time.

*Ssssissss.*

The heavy carcass lifted as it was propelled back, and landed on her left arm, snapping a bone in her forearm. As she struggled to work herself free of the dead weight, the second alien came to stand over her and leveled the device at her head.

Natala went still, and found the words she wanted to be her last. "Walk within beauty, ClanSon Giran."

"Who is Giran?" the alien demanded.

Someone loomed up behind him. "I am."

#

Tavo was the first to spot the two aliens and what they had done to Natala Irea. "There, to the west," he told Sorel. "Drop down and land behind that hill. We cannot take the chance of firing on them from the air."

He was the first out of the craft as well, and when Qedalea tried to move in front of him he jerked his ClanCousin back. His bodyguard started to protest until he saw Tavo's eyes and subsided.

They moved forward silently; Tavo flanked by Qedalea and Sorel and followed by his men and Sorel's ClanBrothers. As they approached, one of the aliens went to Natala, who hung unmoving between two trees. When the alien aimed the force-device at the helpless woman, Tavo raised his pulse rifle and targeted the back of the alien's head. He only lowered it when the alien released Natala from the projection field.

*Fool*, Tavo thought as he handed Qedalea his rifle. "Stay here." To Sorel he said, "They are mine."

The boy's eyes narrowed, and for a moment Tavo glimpsed the man he would be. "We have your back. Take them."

Tavo ran, but before he had crossed half the distance Natala had taken down one of the aliens. He changed direction and came up behind the other just as the alien had pinned Natala beside a dead yearling.

At such close range the force-device would blow her head apart. Tavo's mind cleared of everything except getting to the alien before he could divert Natala's path.

"Walk within beauty, ClanSon Giran," he heard her say.

Tavo slowed his pace and made his footsteps soundless as he came up behind the thief.

"Who is Giran?" the alien demanded.

"I am." As the thief whirled around, he knocked the force-device away with one hand, and buried six claws of the other in the alien's abdomen. Tradition held that an enemy be allowed to defend himself, but he was taking no chances. "I declare you my ClanKill."

Tavo had served Joren in more than one conflict. He had killed many enemies with blades and pulse fire during those service years, but he had never used his bare hands to rip open the body of another. ClanKill was reserved for those who threatened or harmed kin, and as he held down the

screaming male and did the work, he finally understood why. The deep, instinctive killing rage enveloped his reason, and if anyone had tried to stop him at that moment, he would have ripped them apart as well.

Only when Tavo was covered with the blood of both men did the rage fade. He went to where Natala lay, her arm pinned beneath the carcass. He went down on his knees and lifted the side of the heavy yearling, easing her arm out from under. She made no sound, but from the odd angle of her forearm he could see that it was broken.

"We meet again, ClanDaughter Irea," he said, gently cradling her arm against her breast.

"You do not fight fair, ClanSon Giran," she murmured. "I like that very much." When he tried to brush back the snarl of long black hair covering her face, she caught his wrist and turned her head away. "Do not look at me. Please."

Had they done something to her face? Tavo wanted to tear them to pieces all over again. "I have thought of little else since last night." He felt her cringe under his touch. "Lady?"

She drew in a deep breath, then swept her hair away and turned to face him.



Natala Irea had the same elegant bone structure and refined features he had seen among the other Irea women, as well as the elliptical, tilted white-within-white eyes. Her lips and brows were smooth and balanced, and her skin was the clear blue of the summer twilight. Clear and flawless blue, except for the large and livid purple oval that enveloped her left eye, and the two smaller matching circles above her left brow.

There was no mistaking the pattern - it was a t'lerue sireline mark.

Someone made a sound, and Tavo dragged his gaze up to see his men standing around them. All were staring at Natala's face. No one seemed to know what to say.

"Natala!" The boy flung himself down beside her. "Your arm - is it bad?"

"I do not think so, Sorel." She met Tavo's gaze. "I thank you for my life, Warrior."

"No thanks are required, Lady." Tavo lifted her into his arms and glanced at Qedalea. "Bring the bodies."

#

The Irea healer set Natala's broken arm and suggested she stay overnight in the HouseClan infirmary, but she refused. All she wanted was her quiet corner in the

isolation barn, where there were no strange eyes to stare at her, and no faces that would turn away from the sight.

Her ClanMother, however, stood waiting outside the infirmary.

"Natala." Hunetku's eyes took in the cast on her ClanDaughter's arm before moving up to her ruined face. "I was informed of your injury. You are well?"

"It was a clean break." She kept her voice and expression blank.

"That is fortunate." Her brows arched. "A pity that your actions resulted in this. Perhaps it will teach you to remember proper protocol in the future."

She stiffened. "Yes, I will endeavor to remember to behave with more decorum when we are next attacked by intruders."

"You have no regard for the disgrace you have brought down upon this House, do you?" Hunetku made a slashing gesture of contempt. "Return to the yards and stay there."

"At once, ClanMother." She turned, but saw a group of men entering the corridor and changed direction. She heard one of them calling her name but kept walking. Only when one of the Giran's kin caught up with her did she halt.

He was younger than the Giran and quite handsome, and smiled easily at her. "ClanDaughter Irea, I am Qedalea Giran. May I speak with you?"

"Your pardon, Warrior, but I am needed in the yards."

He frowned and stared at her arm. "Surely not."

"I am quite well." She hesitated. "I wish to thank you and your men for providing aid to our House. Please extend my gratitude to your kin." She made the formal accompanying gesture as best she could with one hand, and then walked away.

"Lady - wait," he called after her. "Our ClanLeader wishes to see you."

*Such a meeting would send Hunetku into hysterics.*

Natala was almost tempted, then she thought of the shame it would cause her ClanFather. *I cannot do that to him.* "I regret I am unable to attend him." She kept going, until a trio of Giran males blocked her path.

Qedalea came to her side. "I fear he was most insistent about it."

"Was he." She looked over his shoulder and saw her ClanMother a few yards away. Hunetka appeared prepared to explode. "ClanSon Giran," she said, keeping her voice low, "I am in your debt, but I have no desire to meet your ClanLeader. Such an introduction would only cause

discomfort and embarrassment for both Houses. Now, please tell your kin to get out of my way, or I will move them myself."

A different smile spread across the young warrior's face. "As you say, Lady." He nodded to the men, who stepped aside.

Natala went unhindered from the pavilion to the stock yards, but only when she was inside the isolation barn did she relax her guard. "Mother of all Houses, let that be the last of it."

She went to check on the calves, which were hungry but otherwise well. Only Green-Eye refused to rise or feed, and with a sigh she brought another bottle into the pen.

"I am not going to leave you alone, you know," she told him as he refused to take the formula. "You may as well resign yourself to life."

"My thoughts exactly," a deep voice said.

Natala's eyes flashed up to see the Giran stock manager standing just outside the pen. "What are you doing here?" she blurted, before she remembered her manners and averted her face. "Your pardon. I am very grateful for the aid which you provided today."

"It was little more than what you did for me last night." He opened the gate and came in to have a look at the calf. "Does he not thrive?"

Natala shook her head. "His dam did not survive his birth, and his sire drove him off before he could bond with another." *Why does he not go?* She dared a glance at him. "Have you had any such in your herd?"

"A few." He looked around. "Keep you any hides here?"

"There is a bundle in the storage bin there." Natala nodded toward the stack of t'lerue hides she salvaged from culled animals and sold to sheathmakers in the south.

The Giran retrieved one and brought it back to the pen. "Drape yourself with the hide and offer him the bottle again."

Natala did as he instructed. Green-Eye lifted his head and, after much snuffling, latched on to the bottle and began suckling.

She forgot herself and grinned openly at the Giran, who stood by the gate watching. "It worked - how?"

"The stubborn ones usually respond to the scent of the hide - wearing it, you smell like a t'lerue instead of a Jorenian."

Her smile faded. "A garment to match my face, then."

He didn't say anything for some time. Then, "How long have you had the mark?"

#

Tavo had not meant to ask her in such a blunt fashion, but she seemed to take no offense.

"Since the winter of my ninth year." She trailed her fingers back and forth along Green-Eye's silky hide. "Even as a child I spent most of my time in the yards. Nothing made me happier than to help with the stock, and our manager at the time indulged me. I think he believed in time I would lose interest and take up a more feminine pursuit, like weaving or garment-making."

He studied her. She wore simple, comfortable garb that suited her long-limbed, muscular body, but no adornments. Her hair she left loose, he suspected, so that she could better conceal the mark. "I cannot picture you at a loom."

"Neither could I, much to my ClanMother's despair." She stared past him, as if toward the pavilion that lay beyond. "It was a disagreement with her over my behavior that made me slip out very late one night. I could not sleep, and I was angry and distracted. I think that is why I did not sound an alarm when I saw the craft land near the herd. I rushed out into the field." She wiped a dribble

of formula from the side of Green-Eye's mouth. "There were eight of them, but I was not afraid. My sire was ClanLeader and I believed all I had to do was inform them of that and order them off our land."

*A child, alone with eight thieves.* Tavo muttered some vile. "Who were they?"

"I never saw their faces. They never spoke, and the fists they used on me were gloved. They laughed, though, when one of them produced the infuser and injected me with the chemical marker."

The compound used for the marking of t'lerue was a powerful one, which permanently altered the color of tissue on the cellular level. It was developed to do so to prevent anyone from altering or falsifying sireline marks. However, the alteration process took several hours to complete, during which time it could be neutralized. "Why were you not given the counteragent?"

She ducked her head. "They left me bound and gagged in the culling barn. Because stock had been stolen and no one realized I was gone, I was not missed at first. My kin found me late the following night, and by then the damage was irreversible."

At least her kin had not done this to her as some form of archaic punishment. He could not have left her here

when he returned to the Giran, had that been the case.

"Why did the raiders mark you thus?"

Natala's shoulders moved. "Perhaps they thought it amusing, or a way to show scorn for our House. They were never caught, so I have no answer." She held up the empty bottle and smiled at him. "Your ruse worked, Warrior."

Tavo knew in that moment that it made no difference how the Irea treated Natala. He could not leave her behind; he could never leave her again. In truth it was an odd moment to discover that she was his, and he was hers, but he accepted it without hesitation. That was the way of Choice.

He held out his hand to her and helped her to her feet. "You should not be working with a broken arm."

"I ran away from the pavilion again, I fear." At his inquiring glance she added, "I was told that your ClanLeader wished to see me. I thought it better to avoid the encounter and thus bring no more shame to my kin."

*Tell her who you are now, and declare yourself to her.* He followed her to the cleansing unit. "Your kin have no reason to feel ashamed of you."

"They are ashamed of me." She began to wash her hands. "They have always been thus."



She said it with such acquiescence that for a moment he could not speak. "Mother, why?"

"Is my face not reason enough?" She glanced at him, puzzled. "Irea women are renowned for their beauty. That is a matter of great pride to my kin."

Beauty? He could not think of a woman who could compare to her. "How could your kin not take pride in you? You were a child, defending the House."

"Now I am woman, marked like a herd animal." She dried her hands. "That is what people see, what shames my kin."

"My eyes must not function properly, then." He wanted to pull her into his arms, but settled for resting his hands on her shoulders. "What I see is that you are strong and clever and kind. And I see this" -he traced the oval surrounding her eye- "as a mark of your courage. It makes you beautiful in ways other women can never be."

Natala went still under his hands. "Do not say such things."

"Why should I not?" He moved closer. "They are true."

"It will be difficult enough to forget you now, Warrior." Pain laced every word she whispered. "Do not make it impossible for me."

"Lady, I fear I must." He bent his head, and touched his mouth to each mark. "I would be a constant presence in your thoughts." He cradled her face with his hands. "As you are in mine."

A man cleared his throat, and Tavo reluctantly released her and turned. His ClanCousin stood just behind them, and when Natala saw him her cheeks darkened.

Impatience made Tavo snap, "What is it?"

Qedalea's gaze shifted from Natala's face. "Forgive my intrusion, but you are needed at the pavilion . . . ClanCousin."

#

Tavo wanted to send his own men to bring Natala to the pavilion that night, but Qedalea persuaded him that diplomacy might work more to his advantage than brute force.

"You never think to exercise the power and privilege of rank, ClanCousin," the younger Giran reminded him. "Rules are made to be manipulated."

He dragged a hand through his hair. "I cannot remember them all."

"Which is why I have memorized them for you. Protocol requires that a visiting ClanLeader be introduced to his counterpart's blood-kin. All his blood-kin."

Tavo met his ClanCousin's gaze. "Natala has not been formally presented to me."

"Precisely." Qedalea straightened the line of his tunic. "I will go now and remind ClanLeader Irea of this oversight."

He made an impatient gesture. "He will only make another excuse to keep her away."

"Ah, but should he do so, I will remind him that you killed for her." The younger Giran grinned. "He cannot prevent her from acknowledging such an honor before her kin."

Despite his ClanCousin's machinations on his behalf, Tavo was uncomfortable with the entire matter. Natala still did not know he was the Giran ClanLeader; he had not found the opportunity to tell her earlier, in the barn. At the time reassuring her that she was beautiful in his eyes had been more important than driving her away with the truth of his rank.

*It still is,* he thought as he dressed for the presentation. Instead of resorting to his finest ceremonial garments, he selected a simple tunic and trousers, hoping that would make her feel more at ease. *She has suffered enough for ten lifetimes.*

Qedalea reported success as he and the Giran escorted Tavo to the elaborate feast the Irea had prepared to celebrate his ClanKill on their behalf. As was custom, the bodies of the two alien intruders were hung by their own intestines outside the pavilion, in ritual ClanSign to all of what could be expected by those who intended harm to the Irea. Tavo stepped outside to admire the presentation of the corpses, and found Sorel serving as the ceremonial guard.

"ClanLeader Giran," the boy said, giving him a respectful salute.

"ClanSon Irea." He eyed the swaying bodies, which had been displayed with great care and attention to detail. Most offworlders were said to find the ClanSign custom distasteful, but none had ever complained to a Jorenian about it. "Is this your work?"

"Mine and my ClanBrothers." Satisfaction gleamed in the boy's eyes.

Tavo smiled. "Well done, Warrior."

Sorel's jaw sagged for a moment - the honorific was reserved for adult men - and then he remembered his dignity and made a gesture of gratitude. "All Irea are grateful for your aid, ClanLeader Giran."

Tavo returned inside, and went with his men to the ceremonial banquet hall, where they were received with somewhat subdued pleasure. Hunetku was conspicuously absent, and it was left to Ylo to make the proper ceremonial remarks. As he spoke, the ClanLeader watched the open door at the back of the hall.

*She will attend*, Tavo told himself as he did the same. *She will attend or I will go and get her myself*. He relaxed when he saw a cloaked figure carrying a staff appear in the entrance.

"I have not had the opportunity to introduce you to the blood-kin for whom you provided aid," Ylo said, and raised his hand. "My ClanDaughter, come forth."

To her credit, Natala only hesitated a moment when she drew close enough to see Tavo's face. She continued forward and a few feet from the ClanLeader's table, moved her staff to a horizontal position and sank to her knees. "ClanLeader Giran," she said, "my life is yours."

"Rise, Natala Irea." He moved forward as she stood, until only a small space separated them. She would not lift her head or remove her cloak. "I would look upon the face of the ClanDaughter of this House," he said, very gently.

Natala pulled back the hood of her cloak and glared at him. Murmurs swept around the hall as most of the Irea stared then averted their eyes.

She was angry; her hand trembled so that she could not hold her staff motionless. "Are you satisfied now?"

"ClanLeader Irea," Tavo said, never looking away from Natala's face, "has your ClanDaughter Chosen?"

Behind him, the older man made a choking sound before he replied, "No. She has not."

"I am glad to know it," he said, ignoring the sounds of shock her kin made, "as I would make her my Choice."

"You cannot." The outrage faded from Natala's expression, replaced by a sadness that turned her skin chalky and made the purple marks stand out even more. "You *must* not."

"I honor you, Natala Irea." He lifted a hand to touch her face.

She turned and ran from the hall.

Tavo followed and caught up with her before she left the pavilion. "Natala!"

She whirled around, holding her staff like a weapon, her face wet with tears. "I have satisfied protocol. You will not look upon me or touch me again."

"That is unlikely." He couldn't understand why she was weeping. "Natala, you honor me as I honor you. I can feel it, here." He pressed his hand to his heart before he reached for her again.

"I feel nothing." She jabbed at him with her staff and backed out of reach. "Go back to the pavilion."

She was lying, but why? "Why do you deny me?"

Natala produced a short, bitter laugh. "You ask me that, *ClanLeader* Giran?"

"I should have told you that first night. I . . . I wanted you to feel at ease, to know me for myself instead of for the title given me." He made a gesture of regret. "What is done cannot be changed. Come back to the pavilion with me. If you wish time before we Choose, I will wait for you."

"Wait for me." Her gaze shifted like a trapped animal's, then she swung the staff and struck him across the face with a blow so hard it made him stagger backward.

He didn't understand why she had done it until his men swarmed around him with weapons drawn. "Hold."

"Are you blind?" she shouted at his men. "I harmed your *ClanLeader*!"

"I will survive." Tavo wiped the blood from his mouth. "I shield you, Natala Irea." When she swung at him

a second time, he caught the staff and wrestled it away from her. "Is this is your intention, then?" Furious now, he tossed the staff to Qedalea. "To goad my men to divert your path simply so that you may avoid our bond?"

"There will be no bond between us!"

"It already exists." He saw the truth of what he felt, reflected in her terrified eyes. It calmed him as nothing else could have. "You know we have but to Choose."

Natala looked at the impassive faces of the Giran man, then at Tavo. "You would disgrace your kin in this fashion?"

"You will be honored by HouseClan Giran as my Chosen."

"She will bring you nothing but ridicule and humiliation," Hunetku said from where she stood watching them from one of the upper balconies. When Tavo glanced up at her, she retreated into her apartment.

"There, you have it from the lips of my own ClanMother." Natala met Tavo's gaze. "I will not Choose you." She stalked away toward the yards.

Qedalea came to stand beside Tavo and watch her go. "She seems serious, ClanCousin."

"I will persuade her." Tavo rubbed his sore jaw. "If I can first keep her from diverting my path, or you from



diverting hers, and somewhere between silence that ClanMother of hers."

"Is gagging a ClanLeader's bondmate considered an insult to the House?" his ClanCousin asked. "If not I will be glad to do it."

"This is no time for humor." Tavo made a gesture of frustration and scanned the faces of his men. "What say you of ClanDaughter Irea? Do you find her an object of shame or pity?"

The men all gave rather forceful, negative replies. Qedalead added his own with, "I have great hopes that she will teach me how to fight with a staff like that."

Tavo felt a little better, knowing his kin shared his sentiments. "Now, how to convince her that we do not care what color her face is."

"You told me not to judge the women of a House by one face." His ClanCousin placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "It is a pity she judges her face by one House."

Tavo smiled slowly. "Qedalea, you are brilliant."

#

Natala spent a restless night pacing the length of the isolation barn. Toward dawn, she packed her meager belongings and prepared for a journey. To where, she knew not, but as long as it was far from Tavo Giran she would be

content. If she left at first light, she could avoid more unpleasant scenes. Perhaps the Zamlon or the Maneo would hire her to work their herd.

Her arm still throbbed as miserably as her head.

"Natala." Sorel came into the barn, and for a moment she considered concealing herself until he went away. But the temptation to bid her ClanBrother farewell was too overwhelming, and she slung her pack over her shoulder before stepping out to greet him.

"Sorel." She embraced him. "Your ClanSign was magnificent. It was an honor to see it."

"I am delighted that it pleased you." His eyes moved to her pack. "You are not going away from us."

"I must. The Giran - the ClanLeader Giran," she corrected herself, "is not thinking clearly. It must be the ClanKill that has unbalanced him. When I am gone he will come back to his senses."

"The man is not demented for wishing to Choose you," her ClanBrother informed her. "I rather think more of him for it."

She shook her head. "Then you are equally unbalanced, and will doubtless benefit from my absence as well."

"Oh, Natala, do not go like this." Fear colored his voice. "If you do I think I will never see you again."

"I must." She bent to touch her brow to his in a gesture of rare affection. "You will always be in my heart, Sorel. You are the finest of ClanBrothers, and the best of friends. Remember me."

They both looked up as Hunetku Irea stepped into the barn. Their ClanMother appeared both unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the surroundings, but she had never actually entered the yards before this day. "Natala, your ClanFather and I would speak to you."

They had all suffered enough pain and humiliation. It was within Natala's power to put an end to it, now. "I regret that I do not have time to attend you, Lady. I am taking a journey."

A familiar, imperious expression replaced Hunetku's uncertainty. "You will attend us, nevertheless." To Sorel she said, "Escort your ClanSister to the pavilion."

Natala could have walked off into the fields; neither Hunetku nor Sorel were strong enough to stop her. It was her ClanBrother's pleading eyes that convinced her to accompany him.

Hunetku led them not to Ylo's private chamber, but to the ceremonial hall. Though it was still not dawn, there her entire HouseClan stood assembled. There also stood her ClanFather and Tavo Giran, along with the Giran men.

Everyone was in full ceremonial robes. That was not what shook her so completely that she nearly collapsed. It was seeing the ClanLeader Giran and his men, and the three livid purple ovals that marred each Giran face.

Tavo and his men had injected themselves with sireline chemical marker.

"Come forth, ClanDaughter Irea."

Natala could not blink, much less walk, but Sorel took her hand and guided her to the front of the hall.

There Tavo stepped up to her, and Sorel joined her hand with the Giran's. "I would not give her back her staff right away," her ClanBrother murmured to Tavo before moving away.

"Are you displeased?" Tavo asked her.

"Displeased? Mother of all Houses . . . how could you?" She looked down the row of discolored faces. "How could you do such a thing to yourselves?"

"To honor the one who saved the life of our ClanLeader," Qedalea said, speaking for the men. With a mischievous grin, he touched his face and added, "I thought mine came out particularly well, don't you?"

Natala was speechless.

"I have signaled our HouseClan and told them of you," Tavo told her. "They thought it a marvelous notion and

have agreed to do the same." He smiled. "I only hope we have enough of the chemical on hand; we have many kin."

"This is madness." Natala turned to her ClanFather. "You must summon the healer. This can still be reversed."

"I offered, several times," Ylo told her, looking almost as dumbfounded as she felt. "They refuse."

She seized Tavo's arm. "You cannot disfigure an entire HouseClan on my behalf. Let the healer attend you. Signal your kin and tell them to stop." When he did not reply, she went down on her knees before him. "Tavo, do not do this, I *beg* you."

"It is done, my heart." Gently he raised her up. "For one alone, this may have seemed a disfigurement." He touched the oval that surrounded his eye, and then hers. "For my House, it now becomes a symbol of courage. For me, devotion. I honor you, Natala Irea. I will for all of my days. So shall my kin, whether you say the words you hold in your heart, or not."

Every pair of eyes in the hall was upon her; no one seemed to breathe.

"You do not fight fair, Warrior." She touched the new marks on his face. "Did I tell you that I like that about you?"

He inclined his head. "Might be there something more you wish to tell me?"

"As it happens, yes, there is." Natala pressed her cheek against his palm before she brought his hand down to rest over her heart. "Tavo Giran, I Choose you."