

## CHAPTER VII

### THE FIRST ORDEAL

The shaman advanced to my side and asked me courteously how I fared.

I answered, "Better. Far better, oh, my host--but how are you named?"

"Simbri," he answered, "and, as I told you by the water, my title is Hereditary Guardian of the Gate. By profession I am the royal Physician in this land."

"Did you say physician or magician?" I asked carelessly, as though I had not caught the word. He gave me a curious look.

"I said physician, and it is well for you and your companion that I have some skill in my art. Otherwise I think, perhaps, you would not have been alive to-day, O my guest--but how are you named?"

"Holly," I said.

"O my guest, Holly."

"Had it not been for the foresight that brought you and the lady Khania to the edge of yonder darksome river, certainly we should not have been alive, venerable Simbri, a foresight that seems to me to savour

of magic in such a lonely place. That is why I thought you might have described yourself as a magician, though it is true that you may have been but fishing in those waters."

"Certainly I was fishing, stranger Holly--for men, and I caught two."

"Fishing by chance, host Simbri?"

"Nay, by design, guest Holly. My trade of physician includes the study of future events, for I am the chief of the Shamans or Seers of this land, and, having been warned of your coming quite recently, I awaited your arrival."

"Indeed, that is strange, most courteous also. So here physician and magician mean the same."

"You say it," he answered with a grave bow; "but tell me, if you will, how did you find your way to a land whither visitors do not wander?"

"Oh!" I answered, "perhaps we are but travellers, or perhaps we also have studied--medicine."

"I think that you must have studied it deeply, since otherwise you would not have lived to cross those mountains in search of--now, what did you seek? Your companion, I think, spoke of a queen--yonder, on the banks of the torrent."

"Did he? Did he, indeed? Well, that is strange since he seems to have found one, for surely that royal-looking lady, named Khania, who sprang into the stream and saved us, must be a queen."

"A queen she is, and a great one, for in our land Khania means queen, though how, friend Holly, a man who has lain senseless can have learned this, I do not know. Nor do I know how you come to speak our language."

"That is simple, for the tongue you talk is very ancient, and as it chances in my own country it has been my lot to study and to teach it. It is Greek, but although it is still spoken in the world, how it reached these mountains I cannot say."

"I will tell you," he answered. "Many generations ago a great conqueror born of the nation that spoke this tongue fought his way through the country to the south of us. He was driven back, but a general of his of another race advanced and crossed the mountains, and overcame the people of this land, bringing with him his master's language and his own worship. Here he established his dynasty, and here it remains, for being ringed in with deserts and with pathless mountain snows, we hold no converse with the outer world."

"Yes, I know something of that story; the conqueror was named Alexander, was he not?" I asked.

"He was so named, and the name of the general was Rassen, a native of a country called Egypt, or so our records tell us. His descendants hold the throne to this day, and the Khania is of his blood."

"Was the goddess whom he worshipped called Isis?"

"Nay," he answered, "she was called Hes."

"Which," I interrupted, "is but another title for Isis. Tell me, is her worship continued here? I ask because it is now dead in Egypt, which was its home."

"There is a temple on the Mountain yonder," he replied indifferently, "and in it are priests and priestesses who practise some ancient cult. But the real god of this people now, as long before the day of Rassen their conqueror, is the fire that dwells in this same Mountain, which from time to time breaks out and slays them."

"And does a goddess dwell in the fire?" I asked.

Again he searched my face with his cold eyes, then answered--"Stranger Holly, I know nothing of any goddess. That Mountain is sacred, and to seek to learn its secrets is to die. Why do you ask such questions?"

"Only because I am curious in the matter of old religions, and seeing the symbol of Life upon yonder peak, came hither to study yours, of

which indeed a tradition still remains among the learned."

"Then abandon that study, friend Holly, for the road to it runs through the paws of the death-hounds, and the spears of savages. Nor indeed is there anything to learn."

"And what, Physician, are the death-hounds?"

"Certain dogs to which, according to our ancient custom, all offenders against the law or the will of the Khan, are cast to be torn to pieces."

"The will of the Khan! Has this Khandia of yours a husband then?"

"Aye," he answered, "her cousin, who was the ruler of half the land. Now they and the land are one. But you have talked enough; I am here to say that your food is ready," and he turned to leave the room.

"One more question, friend Simbri. How came I to this chamber, and where is my companion?"

"You were borne hither in your sleep, and see, the change has bettered you. Do you remember nothing?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," I answered earnestly. "But what of my friend?"

"He also is better. The Khania Atene nurses him."

"Atene?" I said. "That is an old Egyptian name. It means the Disk of the Sun, and a woman who bore it thousands of years ago was famous for her beauty."

"Well, and is not my niece Atene beautiful?"

"How can I tell, O uncle of the Khania," I answered wearily, "who have scarcely seen her?"

Then he departed, and presently his yellow-faced, silent servants brought me my food.

Later in the morning the door opened again, and through it, unattended, came the Khania Atene, who shut and bolted it behind her. This action did not reassure me, still, rising in my bed, I saluted her as best I could, although at heart I was afraid. She seemed to read my doubts for she said--"Lie down, and have no fear. At present you will come by no harm from me. Now, tell me what is the man called Leo to you? Your son? Nay, it cannot be, since--forgive me--light is not born of darkness."

"I have always thought that it was so born, Khania. Yet you are right; he is but my adopted son, and a man whom I love."

"Say, what seek you here?" she asked.

"We seek, Khania, whatsoever Fate shall bring us on yonder Mountain, that which is crowned with flame."

Her face paled at the words, but she answered in a steady voice--"Then there you will find nothing but doom, if indeed you do not find it before you reach its slopes, which are guarded by savage men. Yonder is the College of Hes, and to violate its Sanctuary is death to any man, death in the ever-burning fire."

"And who rules this college, Khania--a priestess?"

"Yes, a priestess, whose face I have never seen, for she is so old that she veils herself from curious eyes."

"Ah! she veils herself, does she?" I answered, as the blood went thrilling through my veins, I who remembered another who also was so old that she veiled herself from curious eyes. "Well, veiled or unveiled, we would visit her, trusting to find that we are welcome."

"That you shall not do," she said, "for it is unlawful, and I will not have your blood upon my hands."

"Which is the stronger," I asked of her, "you, Khania, or this priestess of the Mountain?"

"I am the stronger, Holly, for so you are named, are you not? Look you, at my need I can summon sixty thousand men in war, while she has naught but her priests and the fierce, untrained tribes."

"The sword is not the only power in the world," I answered. "Tell me, now, does this priestess ever visit the country of Kaloon?"

"Never, never, for by the ancient pact, made after the last great struggle long centuries ago between the College and the people of the Plain, it was decreed and sworn to that should she set her foot across the river, this means war to the end between us, and rule for the victor over both. Likewise, save when unguarded they bear their dead to burial, or for some such high purpose, no Khan or Khania of Kaloon ascends the Mountain."

"Which then is the true master--the Khan of Kaloon or the head of the College of Hes?" I asked again.

"In matters spiritual, the priestess of Hes, who is our Oracle and the voice of Heaven. In matters temporal, the Khan of Kaloon."

"The Khan. Ah! you are married, lady, are you not?"

"Aye," she answered, her face flushing. "And I will tell you what you soon must learn, if you have not learned it already, I am the wife of a madman, and he is--hateful to me."



"I have earned the last already, Khania."

She looked at me with her piercing eyes.

"What! Did my uncle, the Shaman, he who is called Guardian, tell you? Nay, you saw, as I knew you saw, and it would have been best to slay you for, oh! what must you think of me?"

I made no answer, for in truth I did not know what to think, also I feared lest further rash admissions should be followed by swift vengeance.

"You must believe," she went on, "that I, who have ever hated men, that I--I swear that it is true--whose lips are purer than those mountain snows, I, the Khania of Kaloon, whom they name Heart-of-Ice, am but a shameless thing." And, covering her face with her hand, she moaned in the bitterness of her distress.

"Nay," I said, "there may be reasons, explanations, if it pleases you to give them."

"Wanderer, there are such reasons; and since you know so much, you shall learn them also. Like that husband of mine, I have become mad. When first I saw the face of your companion, as I dragged him from the river, madness entered me, and I--I----"

"Loved him," I suggested. "Well, such things have happened before to people who were not mad."

"Oh!" she went on, "it was more than love; I was possessed, and that night I knew not what I did. A Power drove me on; a Destiny compelled me, and to the end I am his, and his alone. Yes, I am his, and I swear that he shall be mine;" and with this wild declaration dangerous enough under the conditions, she turned and fled the room.

She was gone, and after the struggle, for such it was, I sank back exhausted. How came it that this sudden passion had mastered her? Who and what was this Khania, I wondered again, and--this was more to the point, who and what would Leo believe her to be? If only I could be with him before he said words or did deeds impossible to recall.

Three days went by, during which time I saw no more of the Khania, who, or so I was informed by Simbri, the Shaman, had returned to her city to make ready for us, her guests. I begged him to allow me to rejoin Leo, but he answered politely, though with much firmness, that my foster-son did better without me. Now, I grew suspicious, fearing lest some harm had come to Leo, though how to discover the truth I knew not. In my anxiety I tried to convey a note to him, written upon a leaf of a water-gained pocket-book, but the yellow-faced servant refused to touch it, and Simbri said drily that he would have naught to do with writings which he could not read. At length, on the third night I made up my mind

that whatever the risk, with leave or without it, I would try to find him.

By this time I could walk well, and indeed was almost strong again. So about midnight, when the moon was up, for I had no other light, I crept from my bed, threw on my garments, and taking a knife, which was the only weapon I possessed, opened the door of my room and started.

Now, when I was carried from the rock-chamber where Leo and I had been together, I took note of the way. First, reckoning from my sleeping-place, there was a passage thirty paces long, for I had counted the footfalls of my bearers. Then came a turn to the left, and ten more paces of passage, and lastly near certain steps running to some place unknown, another sharp turn to the right which led to our old chamber.

Down the long passage I walked stealthily, and although it was pitch dark, found the turn to the left, and followed it till I came to the second sharp turn to the right, that of the gallery from which rose the stairs. I crept round it only to retreat hastily enough, as well I might, for at the door of Leo's room, which she was in the act of locking on the outside, as I could see by the light of the lamp that she held in her hand, stood the Khania herself.

My first thought was to fly back to my own chamber, but I abandoned it, feeling sure that I should be seen. Therefore I determined, if she discovered me, to face the matter out and say that I was trying to find

Leo, and to learn how he fared. So I crouched against the wall, and waited with a beating heart. I heard her sweep down the passage, and--yes--begin to mount the stair.

Now, what should I do? To try to reach Leo was useless, for she had locked the door with the key she held. Go back to bed? No, I would follow her, and if we met would make the same excuse. Thus I might get some tidings, or perhaps--a dagger thrust.

So round the corner and up the steps I went, noiselessly as a snake. They were many and winding, like those of a church tower, but at length I came to the head of them, where was a little landing, and opening from it a door. It was a very ancient door; the light streamed through cracks where its panels had rotted, and from the room beyond came the sound of voices, those of the Shaman Simbri and the Khania.

"Have you learned aught, my niece?" I heard him say, and also heard her answer---"A little. A very little."

Then in my thirst for knowledge I grew bold, and stealing to the door, looked through one of the cracks in its wood. Opposite to me, in the full flood of light thrown by a hanging lamp, her hand resting on a table at which Simbri was seated, stood the Khania. Truly she was a beautiful sight, for she wore robes of royal purple, and on her brow a little coronet of gold, beneath which her curling hair streamed down her shapely neck and bosom. Seeing her I guessed at once that she had

arrayed herself thus for some secret end, enhancing her loveliness by every art and grace that is known to woman. Simbri was looking at her earnestly, with fear and doubt written on even his cold, impassive features.

"What passed between you, then?" he asked, peering at her.

"I questioned him closely as to the reason of his coming to this land, and wrung from him the answer that it was to seek some beautiful woman--he would say no more. I asked him if she were more beautiful than I am, and he replied with courtesy--nothing else, I think--that it would be hard to say, but that she had been different. Then I said that though it behooved me not to speak of such a matter, there was no lady in Kaloon whom men held to be so fair as I; moreover, that I was its ruler, and that I and no other had saved him from the water. Aye, and I added that my heart told me I was the woman whom he sought."

"Have done, niece," said Simbri impatiently, "I would not hear of the arts you used--well enough, doubtless. What then?"

"Then he said that it might be so, since he thought that this woman was born again, and studied me a while, asking me if I had ever 'passed through fire.' To this I replied that the only fires I had passed were those of the spirit, and that I dwelt in them now. He said, 'Show me your hair,' and I placed a lock of it in his hand. Presently he let it fall, and from that satchel which he wears about his neck drew out

another tress of hair--oh! Simbri, my uncle, the loveliest hair that ever eyes beheld, for it was soft as silk, and reached from my coronet to the ground. Moreover, no raven's wing in the sunshine ever shone as did that fragrant tress.

"Yours is beautiful,' he said, 'but see, they are not the same.'

"Mayhap,' I answered, 'since no woman ever wore such locks.'

"You are right,' he replied, 'for she whom I seek was more than a woman.'

"And then--and then--though I tried him in many ways he would say no more, so, feeling hate against this Unknown rising in my heart, and fearing lest I should utter words that were best unsaid, I left him. Now I bid you, search the books which are open to your wisdom and tell me of this woman whom he seeks, who she is, and where she dwells. Oh! search them swiftly, that I may find her and--kill her if I can."

"Aye, if you can," answered the Shaman, "and if she lives to kill. But say, where shall we begin our quest? Now, this letter from the Mountain that the head-priest Oros sent to your court a while ago?"--and he selected a parchment from a pile which lay upon the table and looked at her.

"Read," she said, "I would hear it again."

So he read: "From the Hesea of the House of Fire, to Atene, Khania of Kaloon.

"My sister--Warning has reached me that two strangers of a western race journey to your land, seeking my Oracle, of which they would ask a question. On the first day of the next moon, I command that you and with you Simbri, your great-uncle, the wise Shaman, Guardian of the Gate, shall be watching the river in the gulf at the foot of the ancient road, for by that steep path the strangers travel. Aid them in all things and bring them safely to the Mountain, knowing that in this matter I shall hold him and you to account. Myself I will not meet them, since to do so would be to break the pact between our powers, which says that the Hesea of the Sanctuary visits not the territory of Kaloon, save in war. Also their coming is otherwise appointed."

"It would seem," said Simbri, laying down the parchment, "that these are no chance wanderers, since Hes awaits them."

"Aye, they are no chance wanderers, since my heart awaited one of them also. Yet the Hesea cannot be that woman, for reasons which are known to you."

"There are many women on the Mountain," suggested the Shaman in a dry voice, "if indeed any woman has to do with this matter."

"I at least have to do with it, and he shall not go to the Mountain."

"Hes is powerful, my niece, and beneath these smooth words of hers lies a dreadful threat. I say that she is mighty from of old and has servants in the earth and air who warned her of the coming of these men, and will warn her of what befalls them. I know it, who hate her, and to your royal house of Rassen it has been known for many a generation. Therefore thwart her not lest ill befall us all, for she is a spirit and terrible. She says that it is appointed that they shall go----"

"And I say it is appointed that he shall not go. Let the other go if he desires."

"Atene, be plain, what will you with the man called Leo--that he should become your lover?" asked the Shaman.

She stared him straight in the eyes, and answered boldly--"Nay, I will that he should become my husband."

"First he must will it too, who seems to have no mind that way. Also, how can a woman have two husbands?"

She laid her hand upon his shoulder and said--"I have no husband. You know it well, Simbri. I charge you by the close bond of blood between us, brew me another draught----"



"That we may be bound yet closer in a bond of murder! Nay, Atene, I will not; already your sin lies heavy on my head. You are very fair; take the man in your own net, if you may, or let him be, which is better far."

"I cannot let him be. Would that I were able. I must love him as I must hate the other whom he loves, yet some power hardens his heart against me. Oh! great Shaman, you that peep and mutter, you who can read the future and the past, tell me what you have learned from your stars and divinations."

"Already I have sought through many a secret, toilsome hour and learned this, Atene," he answered. "You are right, the fate of yonder man is intertwined with yours, but between you and him there rises a mighty wall that my vision cannot pierce nor my familiars climb. Yet I am taught that in death you and he--aye, and I also, shall be very near together."

"Then come death," she exclaimed with sullen pride, "for thence at least I'll pluck out my desire."

"Be not so sure," he answered, "for I think that the Power follows us even down this dark gulf of death. I think also that I feel the sleepless eyes of Hes watching our secret souls."

"Then blind them with the dust of illusions--as you can. To-morrow, also, saying nothing of their sex, send a messenger to the Mountain and

tell the Hesea that two old strangers have arrived--mark you, old--but that they are very sick, that their limbs were broken in the river, and that when they have healed again, I will send them to ask the question of her Oracle--that is, some three moons hence. Perchance she may believe you, and be content to wait; or if she does not, at least no more words. I must sleep or my brain will burst. Give me that medicine which brings dreamless rest, for never did I need it more, who also feel eyes upon me," and she glanced towards the door.

Then I left, and not too soon, for as I crept down the darksome passage, I heard it open behind me.