

FROM: **SHOREEN**, CHAPTER FOUR
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Alexander and his horse, Shona, stayed one more night in the grassy arroyo. The next day when Alexander looked over the hill, there was a lot more activity near the Round. There were many more machines moving around down there. A machine would stop and Smythes would get out of the machine carrying ropes and whips. They would walk around and search an arroyo or an area of rocks. They seemed to be looking for something or someone.

Alexander began to worry that they would come in his direction. As he watched, they slowly began to expand the area of their search. And suddenly, about a quarter of a mile away, Alexander saw something move. It seemed to rise up and race across the grass and then disappear from view.

He wondered if any of the Smythes saw it and he looked back at the Smythes.

Not that time, evidently. The Smythes continued to search near the Round in ever widening circles.

Alexander kept his eye on the spot where the moving thing had disappeared. An hour later, it rose up off of the ground and raced toward Alexander again.

It was a naked woman. Her breasts were swaying as she ran, pumping her arms. And then she dove into the ground again and disappeared from view.

Alexander's eyes had been so pulled to the woman that he forgot to keep an eye on the Smythes. He looked beyond the place where the woman disappeared and saw something: One of the Smythes was standing on his machine and pointing and shouting. He was pointing in the direction the woman ran and disappeared.

The closest Smythes were less than a mile away from the woman. All the Smythes nearby got back into their machines and began to move across the grasslands in

Alexander's direction.

The woman got up and began to run in a panic. Alexander could hear her breath panting. She was running and her breasts were swaying faster. She was pumping her arms harder than before. Her legs were moving as fast as she could run. And then she tripped and fell.

Alexander called Shona and mounted and raced the two hundred yards. He got down from the horse and went over to the woman and stood over her.

The woman screamed in fear and hatred. She came at Alexander with her fingernails and fists. Those were the only weapons she had. The rocks around her were too big to lift.

Alexander stepped under her arms and picked her up over his shoulder and carried her to the horse. When the woman felt the horse against her buttocks, she stopped fighting.

Alexander said, "Turn around and sit on the horse." Alexander lifted the woman up and she turned around and straddled the horse.

Alexander said, "Grab her mane and hold on." Then Alexander got up behind her.

Alexander looked back.

The Smythes were closer but still the closest machine was more than half a mile away. Alexander spoke to Shona. Shona got into her trot and then into her canter and finally into her gallop. And they raced across the grasslands toward the mountains.

The machines were not as fast as a horse. And the machines had to go around arroyos. They did not go up and down steep slopes very well.

After half an hour, Alexander pulled up and let Shona rest. He looked back at the Smythes. They were further behind, but still in pursuit.

Alexander got off of Shona. He said to the woman, "Hold on to Shona's mane. I am going to run now, so Shona

doesn't get so tired."

The woman nodded her head. She was still breathing deeply from fear or exhaustion or both. Alexander ran ahead of Shona. Shona followed at a canter.

Alexander ran until nightfall. By then they had reached some foothills. When Alexander looked back, the Smythes were miles behind. But they had turned on the lights of their machines and were continuing to follow Alexander at a slower pace.

Alexander got up on Shona behind the woman and told Shona to walk on as far as she could that day. Shona had better night vision than Alexander.

Shona asked for water.

Shona didn't speak. Alexander heard her in his mind. For some reason, the Tara and the horses understood one another's thoughts.

Alexander got off of Shona and took the water-skin off of his back and poured water into the palm of his hand. Shona drank thirstily. When Shona had enough, Alexander stoppered the skin, put it over his shoulder, and got up behind the woman again. Shona headed higher into the foothills.

Shona walked all night. The woman trembled every time Alexander touched her, so he rode with his hands touching Shona's back behind him. This way he did not touch the woman at all.

When dawn came, Shona stepped down into another arroyo and stopped. This had been one of their camps on the way down to look at the Round.

Alexander slid off of Shona and pulled the woman down with him. She was unconscious but her hands were gripping Shona's mane with all her might. She had been terrified of Alexander and of Shona, but more terrified to stay behind for the Smythes to find.

Alexander pried her hands loose from Shona's mane

and carried her to a sheltered area near grass and water. He sat down with the woman on his lap. He pulled the water skin off of his back and gave the woman some water with his fingertips.

Soon she opened her eyes, grabbed the water skin, and drank deeply. Alexander let her get two swallows, and then Alexander took the water skin away from her.

Alexander whispered, "You can have more, later. Let those two swallows settle in your stomach first."

The woman closed her eyes and slept, leaning her head against his shoulder.

Shona went to the spring and drank thirstily. Then Shona rolled in the dust, shook herself, and settled down to cropping grass and snoozing.

Alexander felt the woman move in his arms. He opened his eyes. She was staring at him. She had hazel eyes and chestnut hair. She whispered, "May I have more water please?"

Alexander pulled the water skin off of his back again and she took it. He said, "Four swallows, this time. This water is safe to drink. I am not sure about the water in the spring over there."

She obediently took only four big swallows and let go of the skin. He stoppered it again and pushed it back over his shoulder.

She said, "You are Tara, aren't you?"

He answered, "Yes."

She asked, "Are you going to eat me?"

Alexander answered, "No."

She looked at him. "Are you going to rape me?"

Alexander said, "No, but I will take you over the mountains with me to the Valley of the Tara, if you want to go. Do you want to leave the Valley of the Round and get away from the Smythes?"

She nodded her head and kept looking at him. She wiggled a little in his lap, wanting to get up. He continued to hold onto her, gently.

She said, "I need to ..." And she wiggled her bottom.

Alexander got the idea. He got up while holding her in his arms and he let her put her feet on the ground. He gestured to the right with his head and said, "Do it downstream so your waste doesn't foul the water."

She walked downstream. Her feet hurt her so she was limping a little.

There was no cover downstream. Finally she squatted down in full view of him. She urinated and then defecated. She used some grass and leaves nearby to wipe herself.

She came back toward him looking at her hand. There was some stool on her fingers.

Alexander went downstream to meet her. He knelt down below the spring and dug out a hole in the gravel.

He said, "Come here."

She was trembling again with her fear.

He pointed to the hole that he had dug. It was already filling with water. He said, "Wash your hands here. Down stream is better than upstream for something like that."

She knelt beside him and put her hands into the water-filled hole and washed them.

He asked, "Are you hungry?"

She nodded her head.

He handed her some jerky and said, "Take small bites and chew it for a long time before swallowing."

She took it and nodded her head.

He left her and went downstream. He took the time to cover her excrement with soil and rocks.

When he came back, she asked, "Why did you do that?"

He said, "Horse manure is fine to leave out in the open. There are still a lot of free-range horses down here, but the

Smythes, who are looking for you, would notice your excrement.” Then he said, “Wait here.”

He went up the side of the arroyo and looked back the way they came. He climbed up a little higher until he could see further. There was no one in the distance.

He listened. The machines of the Smythes made a distinctive chugging sound. He didn't hear any.

He came back down into the arroyo and stood over her. He reached down and offered her a hand. She took his hand and he helped her to stand.

He walked back to the sheltered area where they sat before. She followed him. When he sat down, she came over and sat down in his lap and pulled his arms around her. It was the exact same position they were in when she indicated that she needed to pee.

She asked, “What is your name?”

He answered, “Alexander Singkara. What is yours?”

She said, “They call me Bita. None of the women have last names. Only the men have last names, like Emory Smith or Ramon Chavez or John Larchfield. Those are the names of some of the My Lords of Smythedom. There are one hundred and fourteen houses of Smythedom: one house for every male survivor of the crash of our starship. Every house has its own Keep. The Round is the Keep of the Nugents. It was founded by the survivors of the massacre of the Smythes by the Tara. I am a virgin from the house of Nugent. My bleeding came last week. I was to be placed on the bridal altar and raped by My Lord last night and then serve him as his chambermaid until I am pregnant. Then I would be left alone until my child is weaned. After that I would be passed on to the next Man of the House until he gets me pregnant. But I had a dream. I dreamed that I should run away into the mountains and I would be free.”

Alexander said, “I came of age three months ago. I was going to leave home right away. But in a dream a

woman dressed like an angel told me to wait for a sign before seeking a wife. A few days ago I dreamed that I should come and see the Round and I would find what I was looking for. Maybe I was supposed to find you.”

They looked at each other.

Alexander asked, “May I touch you?”

She said, “Aren’t you touching me already?”

He answered, “No. You are sitting on me. It isn’t exactly what I meant.”

She said, “Go ahead, and touch me.”

She was leaning against his left shoulder. Alexander ran his right hand through her hair from her forehead to her left ear. It was more than a touch. It was a caress.

He commented, “Your hair is the same color as my horse, Shona. Your whole body is the same color as your hair. Have you ever worn clothes?”

“No.” she answered.

“Why?” he asked.

She told him, “I’m a girl. A girl of the Smythes does not wear clothes unless she is transferred to another Keep where branches and brush might mar her skin on the journey. She would lose value if cuts and scratches marred her skin. But a girl isn’t transferred unless she was born in that Keep. If she was born in that Keep she is always traded to another Keep. Girls who weren’t born in that Keep are kept as virgins for the use of that Keep. And virgins are never transferred or traded until after they have given birth to a child by every Man of the House in that Keep. Since women usually die in childbirth before that ever happens, most Smythe women never wear clothes.”

She continued, “As a child, I came to the Round from the Keep of Emory the Great. Security Guards took twenty of us naked and we had to walk all the way. I was traded for a crone who lived long enough to be over childbearing years and was now useful as a teacher. Crones that old are very

rare, unless they were women who could never have children. Most women die in childbirth. Not often from their first child, but by their tenth or before their twentieth child, they die.”

Alexander pulled his hand away from her hair. He said, “I would give you my shirt to wear, but I would be seen for miles if I took it off.” He pulled the shirt away from his neck. “See!” he said.

And Bitia looked down his shirt. Alexander was as white as a fluffy cloud in daylight under the shirt.

Alexander added, “We are safer from the Smythes if I keep my shirt on while we ride into the mountains.”

“May I have another drink of water?” Bitia asked.

Alexander pulled the water skin over his shoulder again.

“How many swallows?” she asked.

He whispered, “Two swallows.”

She drank. He took the water skin and drank two swallows, stoppered it, and put it over his shoulder again.

She leaned her head against his chest and fell asleep. Alexander slept as well.

At nightfall, Shona nudged Alexander. Alexander patted her muzzle. He stood up, lifting Bitia in his arms.

Bitia stirred. She whispered into his ear, “I was having such a nice dream.”

Alexander whispered, “We must travel now. In the dark, they may be able to hear us, but they will not be able to see us as well.”

He lifted her up. Bitia swung astride Shona and grabbed Shona’s mane and held tight.

Alexander swung up behind her and Shona climbed out of the arroyo and headed across the hills toward the mountains.

As they rode, Bitia realized that she could hardly feel

Alexander behind her. She could hear him breathe, but she couldn't really tell he was there, because he wasn't touching her.

It dawned on her. She leaned back against Alexander. He leaned back away from her. She reached behind with her right hand and grabbed his shirt and pulled him against her back. She whispered, "Alexander, you can touch me."

And at that moment, Alexander put his arms around her and put his hands into the mane of his horse. His arms touched her breasts.

And for the first time in her life, Bitá liked the feel of a man holding her. All the other times in the past, they held her down to be sure that she was still a virgin. And, lately, they held her down to check to see if she had her first bleeding. Most of the time they held her down so she could take a penis into her mouth to service a man who came to get his need met.

Bitá began to cry, silent tears. The kind of tears all women of the Smythes learned to cry. If they cried aloud, the crone would say what are you crying about? And if the crying persisted, the crone would say, I'll give you something to cry about. And the crying girl would be beaten with a whip that left no marks, until she stopped crying. That ended the crying aloud forever.

Bitá cried until she fell asleep. And the strong arms of the young man who held her never let her go.