

T'En Trilogy Book Two

Extract

Chapter One

Once the palace of a thousand chambers had overwhelmed Imoshen, now she strode its corridors the uncrowned empress. But her position was as precarious as the man she ruled alongside. General Tulkhan and his Ghebite army may be the overlords of a conquered people who remained loyal to the old empire but they were in the minority. Every day the palace servants deferred to Imoshen when in reality she was the General's captive. Every day the Ghebites flaunted their barbarian splendour carelessly insulting her people.

Imoshen smiled grimly. Though she had seen her island conquered and been forced to surrender her family's Stronghold to the Ghebites, General Tulkhan had claimed her for his own which put her in a position of great tactical strength. Much had been achieved in the twelve weeks since Harvest Feast. Only last night Tulkhan had signed the document recognising Church Law, returning to her all she had lost and more. For on their bonding day she would stand before her people as co-ruler of Fair Isle, the first pure T'En woman to take a bond-partner in six hundred years.

At the screech of metal on metal Imoshen froze, wary as a hunted woodland creature. She had become intimately acquainted with fear, and the knowledge that her life hung by a thread shadowed her every move. Heart hammering, she followed the razor-sharp sounds to a balcony where half a dozen servants were avidly watching a confrontation in the courtyard below. One glance told her the General and his men were at sword practice. Relief flooded her.

'Get back to work, the lot of you!' she hissed, dismayed to see the Ghebite fascination for violence infecting her servants. They made guilty apologies and hurried away.

In the confines of the courtyard the swords' song resonated harshly. As Imoshen watched unseen from the balcony's shadows, she could not but admire the Ghebite's skill, though she abhorred their love of violence.

Once past boyhood a Ghebite warrior practised with battle-ready weapons, scorning the use of blunt swords. They were feared for their ferocity, and Tulkhan was the very embodiment the Ghebite ideal. For at only nineteen he had assumed command of the country's army, leading it south, creeping inexorably across the mainland. In eleven years no kingdom been able to withstand the General's onslaught and it had appeared he would conquer the known world.

But instead of attacking the last of the southern kingdoms he had turned his eye on Fair Isle, making a surprise assault. Betrayed by her allies, unprepared for war on her own shores, Fair Isle had crumpled in the space of one spring-summer campaign.

The memory of those desperate times made Imoshen shudder and she returned her attention to the scene below. General Tulkhan was renowned for his tactical skill and physical bravery. Given that, why was he taking on three of his trusted swordsmen while his Elite Guard watched? What was he trying to prove?

Suddenly Imoshen understood -- once her position as co-ruler of Fair Isle became known, his men would believe she had emasculated him. They might even suspect he had been ensorcelled by her. Some of them still refused to meet her eyes, believing the rumours of treacherous T'En powers. No wonder Tulkhan wielded his sword with such intensity that his men could barely defend themselves.

Metal grated, setting Imoshen's teeth on edge. She gasped as one man gave a guttural cry, dropping to his knee. At the last moment Tulkhan turned his sword, striking with the flat of the blade. The Ghebite sprawled on the slippery stone.

No-one moved.

Imoshen took a step closer, drawn by the charged atmosphere. She could taste their intoxicating blood lust in the air.

The sound of the men's ragged breathing was magnified, trapped in the snow-bound inner courtyard. It was not unknown for Ghebites to take a fatal wound in practice. In the brilliant early morning light two remaining swordsmen faced Tulkhan over the body of their barely conscious comrade, steam rising from their skin.

General Tulkhan's naked back glistened with sweat as he stood poised to strike. He was magnificent and undeniably dangerous. Something tightened deep within Imoshen. With bitter sweet self-knowledge she recognised the sensation. She had known Tulkhan's body only twice but her need for him was so strong it made her vulnerable.

Moistening her dry mouth she watched mesmerised, as the confrontation unfolded. Swordsman Jacolm stood over his fallen sword-brother, bristling, ready to die for the man who was bound to him by the Ghebite warrior code. No wonder their army was invincible when its individuals shared such an unbreakable bond and welcomed death in battle. Fallen Ghebite soldiers were ensured a place riding at the side of their warrior god. Imoshen's lips curled with contempt.

Then the grizzled veteran, Peirs, deliberately lowered his weapon. Turning his shoulder to Tulkhan he helped the injured man to his feet. Following his lead, Jacolm sheathed his weapon.

The General gave a disgusted shrug, though whether he was annoyed with them or himself, Imoshen could not tell. With a word he dismissed the others.

From her vantage point she saw the Elite Guard and Tulkhan's trusted commanders leave the courtyard. The General walked towards her. He scooped up a handful of the snow which had been swept into the deep drift, rubbing it vigorously over his face.

'General?' Imoshen's heart raced as she stepped into the patch of sunlight which illuminated the balcony rail. Startled, Tulkhan looked up, his expression guarded.

She recognised that battle stance. 'Only me.'

'Only?'

Imoshen smiled. She liked Tulkhan best when they were alone, when he did not have to play the public role of General Tulkhan, nor she the role of T'Imoshen, last princess of the T'En.

With a tug Imoshen pulled the brocade tabard over her head, casting it aside so that she stood dressed only in her loose-fitting trousers, thin undershirt and soft-soled boots. 'Teach me the use of the Ghebite sword.'

The General's eyes narrowed.

The women of Tulkhan's homeland never touched weapons. They hardly dared raise their eyes to a man, let alone a sword. Imoshen knew she was breaking Ghebite law, that was why she had waited until the others had left.

Before the Ghebites invaded last spring she had taken for granted the ways of Fair Isle. Now she understood that her island was a beacon of enlightenment in a sea of barbarism. Everything she believed in was under threat, but she was determined the Ghebites would not erode the position of women in Fair Isle. If this meant confronting Tulkhan and constantly forcing him to question his assumptions, then so be it. There was an ancient T'En saying which translated, 'Truth is a precious but often bitter seasoning'.

Imoshen swung her legs over the balustrade and dropped two body lengths into the heaped snow near Tulkhan. Aware of the General's keen dark eyes, she straightened, wiping crusted snow from her buttocks and thighs.

'What now, Imoshen?'

Holding Tulkhan's gaze, she tried to gauge his mood. For a Ghebite, the General was a reasonable man but he was proud too. 'I began instruction with the T'En sword the year before you attacked. But the Ghebite style is different and I may need to defend myself, so teach me.'

He prowled around her. 'How casually you insult my honour.'

'All I ask is to be able to defend myself.' She kept her tone reasonable. 'Where is the dishonour in that?'

'Truly, you do not see. In Gheeaba a man is expected to defend his wife. His honour rests on --'

A surprised laugh escaped Imoshen. She caught herself, aware of the slow burn of his anger. 'I mean no insult, General. But I fail to see how you could protect me unless I never left your side, and even then, wouldn't you rather have me at your back with a weapon in my hand, than clinging to you and encumbering your sword arm?'

Her question drew a reluctant grin and she smiled in return. She was not his wife yet and she never would be. Bond-partners of Fair Isle stood shoulder to shoulder.

Tulkhan lifted his hands. 'In Gheeaba my wife would be safe within the walls of my estate. You would be escorted to events of importance, protected by the Elite Guard of my house-line. You would never set foot outside alone, you --'

'How boring. How could anyone live like that?'

Tulkhan grimaced. 'You wilfully misunderstand me, Imoshen.'
'Yes.'

'You are a trial!' His hands flexed as if he would like to use them on her.

Imoshen's heart rate lifted another notch. 'All I ask is to learn to use the Ghebite sword.'

He glanced up at the balcony where she had been watching. 'So that is your excuse for spying?'

'Spying? If you call watching your men wield those ploughshares spying, then yes, I was spying.'

She saw a flash of amusement in his obsidian eyes. Sweat glistened on his coppery skin.

'For a woman to touch a man's weapon is death in Gheeaba, Imoshen.' She stiffened. 'This is not Gheeaba. And I will not be limited by your ... by Ghebite attitudes. Teach me.'

Tulkhan's eyes narrowed. 'Very well, I will enjoy teaching you your place.'