

ICE SONG

26--The Masked Ball

...**She would stand atop** the long banquet table with skirts lifted and her white net stockings and garters exposed, allowing the fingers of the curious to creep where they would and loosen the ribbons of her heeled shoes, taking her painted toes in mouth or hand. They would feed her cakes, fruits and caviar from their fingers and barter favors among themselves for the chance to sign her love card, the list of partners that she would choose from among them for the coming fête...

...**Whether or not she succeeded**, this fête would be the death of her in one way or another. If she completed the transformation and coaxed Sidra's name from Chen's lips before he ravished the last remaining vestiges of her moral chastity (for sweet Elu was but a lure, forced upon her then taken freely—he had since scrubbed away the stains of any wrong-doing), she would rise from the bartering bed marked with the sins of her sale.

If she failed to summon the change at Chen's command, he would sweep from the room and vanish, leaving her to fend for herself and devise some ill-gotten ship to master the breakers and carry her back to the Erun shore. She foresaw herself trudging overland into the dark forest once again, fighting her way through the dense, primeval trees to reach the manor. Success meant following her predestined course armed with a fatal secret glowing warm in her heart, or carrying failure's coldness within like a burned out lamp, lightless and leaden...

...**Chen licked her everywhere** and the mint oil on his tongue set her skin to singing. He kissed her and she felt again that he was an enormous python, smothering her in a full embrace, his sibilant whispering words rushing in tides through her ears, inside her nose and throat, inside her very brain to combat the image of sweet Sidra that waited there, urging "*Make him say my name*"...

...**The chubby cook** (whose name, Sorykah realized with searing shame, she had yet to learn) dusted the crumbs from his ample girth as he clambered up to greet her, his apple-round cheeks red with eagerness and embarrassment. He stood beside her as Chen ground himself into her back and thighs, his heated skin scorching on contact, his sweat searing Sorykah's body like drops of liquid flame. Chen groaned against her neck and Sorykah stared helplessly at the interloper, who was already unbuttoning his trousers with a sheepish yet unapologetic expression.

Horns surged, stringed instruments whined and drums thrummed while the lecherous "Folksong of Maiden Taking" was sung by a passel of slurry drunks. Chen wrestled Sorykah's arms back and bared her naked chest to the blond man, his own feverish breath steaming against her ear, hot saliva running uncontrolled over her shoulder and dripping down her breasts.

“Don’t be shy, man!” Chen egged on the cook, who fumbled with his fly. He had to lift up his gut to loosen the belt and Sorykah made a strange face, which caused Chen to laugh even more vilely. “Our cook is a man of appetites, my dear. I’m not sure such a skinny scrap of meat will satisfy him.” Chen inserted his knee between Sorykah’s and pushed her legs apart. “Come to the table then, good man, and eat your fill!”

Grinning and red-faced, the cook pushed himself on Sorykah, giving her a cursory, exploratory feel before inserting himself between her legs. Chen held her pinned and would not relinquish her, so she could hung awkwardly as the cook thrust away, his complexion soon turning the color of boiled lobster.

It was quickly over. The cook pulled out and tucked himself back into his trousers even as Chen attempted to goad him into a repeat performance. Shaking his head, the cook bowed to both the disappointed Chen and the relieved Sorykah before making his way down the flimsy iron stairs to a dessert table laden with creams and pastries that he had been eyeing for some hours. It was evident that the man hungered for comestibles that he could actually swallow, not a woman’s taunting flesh...