

Aliette de Bodard

<http://www.alietteдебодард.com>

Through the Obsidian Gates

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I came into the palace of the lords One Death and Seven Death through the great gates of obsidian, on foot, armed with nothing but a desperate resolve. There, in the depths of the underworld, I asked for my husband's life.

The lords' thrones were huge, and made of human bones pieced together: skulls and finger-bones, ribs poking out at odd angles. Everything stank of death. I stood, unmoving, awaiting their response.

The lords' faces lay in shadow, and I could not see their expressions. "Few mortals dare ask for a dead man's life."

"It is allowed," I said.

They laughed without pity. "Yes, it is allowed. Tell us, Sahague. Will you play our game?"

"Which game?" I asked.

They laughed again. I clenched my fists, hoping my desperation would be enough to win over them.

They took me deep within their palace to an arena with cold obsidian walls. A vertical stone hoop had been affixed on the left-hand wall; it cast its shadow over the stark white sands.

"This is the game," they said. Their faces still lay in shadow; they had settled themselves on obsidian benches, ready to enjoy their fun. "Send the ball through the hoop, and we will give you what you came here for."

I nodded; I had no choice. I took my place on the sand.

"This is your ball," they said, and light coalesced in the center of the arena, until a ball of fire hovered before me. I tried to hold it in my hand, but it burnt me. I would have to strike it my hips or my knees, and hope it would not burn me through my tunic.

But I knew it would.

You cheat, I wanted to say, but it would bring me nothing.

I stood still as they summoned my opponents: beings of shadow, with human shape but no features.

At a signal from the lords, the ball stopped hovering in the air, and descended towards my opponents. One of them struck it.

I watched it trace a burning arc above me, watched it bounce off the polished walls. One of my opponents reached out with a raised knee, and the ball rose higher. I held my breath.

The ball rebounded on the edge of the hoop, and I heard the lords gasp. Did they even have lungs? Were they, like me, holding their breath, feeling the fire within their chest as they wondered where the ball would land? I had never seen their faces; all I knew was that they were much more powerful than I could ever dream to be. With the single-mindedness of the immortals, they wanted me to lose. And I, with the stubbornness of women, wanted my husband back. It was as simple as that.

I saw the ball come towards me; as if in a dream I threw my left hip forward, and upwards. I felt the shock of the ball, and it seared me to the bone. I saw it rise towards the hoop; and saw it pass clean through.

It was all that mattered. I watched the ball fall to the ground, consuming itself on the white sands. My left hip still smouldered, but I no longer felt pain. I breathed slowly, evenly.

I turned away from the shadows, and bowed before the lords.

"I claim my prize," I said.

They did not answer. They were watching me, and I could feel their contempt.

"I played for my husband to be brought back to life," I said.

"You did. And we gave our word that we would give him to you."

"Would you renege on that?" I asked, feeling, for the first time in my life that I was strong, that I could do anything, that no one could have told me what to do in that moment when I stood before them, drunk with my victory.

They shook their heads, in the shadows. "No," they said, and they were speaking as one. "Take him. But your joy will be short-lived."

Perhaps I should have listened.

#

I slung Achtli over my shoulder, and started the long journey back home. He weighed nothing in my hands. His breath, a mere whisper on my skin, was all that told me it was not his corpse I carried.

The obsidian gates of the lords' palace stood open for me, the great panels smooth, featureless and yet somehow radiating malice. Nothing alive was welcome in the underworld. I passed under them, over the many rivers barring the ghosts' way to the mortal world, until at last I reached the long flight of stairs leading back to the mortal world.

On my way down to the underworld the quetzal bird had shown me the way, flying ahead of me in the darkness, its green feathers shining with an inner light. But now the bird was dead; it had been consumed by the lords for having had the audacity to leave the world of the sun. I grieved for it, but I no longer needed a guide.

I climbed the stairs without stopping. Shadows hovered at the edge of my vision, but they did not taunt me with visions of the grave as they had done on my way down. I bypassed all of them, knowing they had no hold on me or on Achtli. I did not look back.

The light grew stronger, the air warmer. I saw the entrance to the world of the living ahead of me. At first the light was faint, and then it grew brighter and brighter until its radiance filled my sight. I did not even blink.

I passed through the threshold, and left the underworld behind me. The interminable climb had not left me weary; I felt strong, and knew I could do anything. I was going home.

#

Back in our house in Mayenque, I sat by Achtli's side, waiting for him to wake up, knowing I would have to tear his mind from the underworld. I knew that something would be wrong, for it had all been too easy. No mortal could defy the lords of the underworld and win.

But when Achtli's eyes opened they were free of the shadow of death.

"Sahague," he said, and I smiled. "Have I been sick?"

He remembered nothing. I said, slowly, as if speaking to a child, "You died of the summer fever."

I could still see death in his face, the smooth surface of bone underlying the taut skin. But he lived and breathed, and this was worth all I had gone through.

He raised a gaunt hand. "I don't remember. Is this the underworld?"

I shook my head. "I made a bargain with the gods." I saw him recoil, saw the fear in his eyes. "I played a game for your soul."

"You brought me back. I didn't think that was possible, Sahague. I didn't think anyone could--" He stared at me. His voice was quiet, but anguish filled his eyes. It would be a long time before the scars faded.

"Did they hurt you?" he asked.

I still bore the marks of the ball on my left hip, and my mind was filled with its radiance. I wanted to tell him how much I had grieved when he had died, but this was not the time.

"No, they did not hurt me. You should rest now," I said.

"Yes." His eyes had grown unfocused. "I should rest. Thank you, Sahague."

I watched him sleep, and wondered why it was that sleep should be so close to that other repose, as if there was but a thin boundary between life and death. I wondered whether, having crossed it not once but twice, he would know whether to remain on the right side of it.

#

I told the neighbours Achtli had fallen into a stupor and recovered, and whether they believed it or not mattered little to me. When Achtli was better, he put on his tunic and went to work in the fields. I sat outside the house, grinding corn kernels into

flour, or cleaning and sorting feathers to make into cloaks. Every night we delighted in each other's presence.

We did not speak much; Achtli was busy with his work. He wanted, endlessly, to know what I had seen there, what I had done, but I did not want to speak of it. He was not strong enough for those images of the underworld. Xibalba, my people call it. The Place of Fear. It is not for nothing.

Life was as it had always been, and during the day, I did not think of my time in the underworld.

But in my dreams I played, endlessly, with a ball of fire, and watched it grow until it engulfed me from head to toe. I woke up every night with a strong feeling of wrongness. It had been too easy. Why had the lords given in to me?

Too easy.

#

One morning Achtli did not get up. He moaned when I called his name, but did not answer.

I laid my hand on his forehead, found it beaded with sweat, and knew that the summer fever had struck him once more.

No. My heart beat faster. I would not lose him again. We barely had had time to enjoy each other.

I got up, put on my best tunic, and ran to the shrine.

There were temples to Huracan, the Sky God, in the centre of the city of Mayenque, pyramids of stone rising to the sky with their bloody altars, but they were for noblemen. The peasants had a smaller shrine in the outskirts, a mud hut with a statue of the god inside. It was there that I took my plea.

I had run through half the city to get there, but oddly enough I was not out of breath, and without pause I entered the darkness.

Many people had already come there. The summer fever always raged through the city when the heat became unbearable and the air from the marshes blew into the streets. Many fell sick, and few recovered.

There were orange garlands of marigolds laid before the altar, and the lifeless body of an emerald-green parrot. I laid down my own offering of ground corn, and sat cross-legged before the altar, collecting my thoughts for a prayer.

"Spare him. I gave so much to bring him back," I said, at last. But the words sounded false to me. The hut was unbearably small, and after a while I rose and went home.

Achtli's fever worsened. All the while I sat by his side, and fed him what herbs I could barter from the doctor. I prayed and prayed to whichever gods might be listening to spare him.

The last time, I had come down with the fever myself -- it was inevitable that I should catch it, being so close to one who had it. I had woken from a stupor to find Achtli's lifeless body by my side.

But I did not catch the fever this time. I nursed Achtli through the worst of it, and remained always by him. When it

passed, leaving him as weak as a newborn fawn, he looked at me, and said my name.

I wept. "You are safe," I said. "Everything is fine."

But I saw the gauntness of his face, and the bones of the hand he lifted to me, and I suddenly became aware that he was older than me, and that death had many ways of coming to mortals. I could not look at him anymore.

#

I thought it would pass. But as the days went by, still I saw the skull's face whenever I looked at Achtli, still I could guess at the ribcage below the chest whenever I touched him. He smelled, faintly, of the grave.

One morning, as I sat before the house weaving a basket out of cactus-fibers, I heard shouts of anger from the neighbours' courtyard.

I did not move; none of the neighbours' affairs were my concern. But soon after that, Ixlac came to ask me if I had seen a dog pass by. The one they had been fattening for the birth of their child had run away.

I shook my head. "No," I said. "I have not seen it. I am sorry." She was heavily pregnant. Dogs were expensive; no doubt they could not gather enough wealth to barter for another in such a short time.

"I see," Ixlac said. "If you find it--"

I nodded, and lowered my eyes to my basket. I had work to do.

Much later, I brought my basket back into the house and laid it with the others I had made. I noticed an odd smell: a strong odour of rotten things, as if food had gone bad--but there was nothing in the room that should have smelled like that.

I searched the house, which did not take me long. A small, sad-faced animal cowered between two of the wicker chests, making whimpering noises. Ixlac's dog.

I extended my hands to it. "Come," I said. It did not move as I reached out and lifted it from the ground. Its flesh was plump, soft to the touch.

No, it wasn't.

As I took hold of it, the rotten smell rose to my nostrils, and I saw clearly the skull beneath the sad face, and my hands grasped only bone, as if the skin had melted away under my touch. I gagged. I wanted to throw the dog away; it smelled of death and of the grave.

I carried it out of the house and brought it to Ixlac. I quivered with repulsion all the while, aching to drop the thing to the ground.

Ixlac clapped her hands with delight, and thanked me profusely. I could have asked her whether the dog was sick, but, deep down, I knew what her answer would have been.

Back in the house, I stared at my hands, seeing every line on my callused skin, remembering the sickening touch of the dog's skin on mine.

Something was wrong indeed. But it was not with Achtli, not at all.

It was with me.

#

I walked through the streets of the city on the following morning, and I saw that every building would collapse, and that the temples would one day be abandoned when no one knew the secret names of the gods anymore. I saw that every person I met was a skeleton garbed in flesh, and that in the end only the bleached bones would remain. I knew that the corn growing in the fields would wither, and the water retreat into the ground, leaving only the desert, as it was before our ancestors had founded the city.

I ran. It did not matter where. I ran from the face of death, and everywhere I went it stared at me. Everything I saw reminded me of its presence. My feet carried me through the outskirts of the city, through the canals and the floating gardens, until I reached the plains and stood before a river. I was alone, with only the wind and the sound of the river in my ears.

And I was not tired. In fact, I thought, shivering, I had not been out of breath since the day I climbed the stairs back into the mortal world. I had never been sick, never weak. My face had remained smooth and untouched by time.

I stood for a while, staring at the expanse of water before me, aware that this, too, would one day vanish.

Something was wrong with me, and I had to know what. I had deceived myself for long enough.

I could only see one way to be sure: I had to summon another quetzal from the Heavens.

The quetzal that had guided me down into the underworld was no ordinary bird, but a spirit: the ghosts of the maidens sacrificed to the Sky-God dearly loved to take that shape. Only a spirit would have known where the entrance to the underworld was. Only a spirit would know what was wrong with me. I had once bound one to my will by ritual and the strength of my grief; now I would have to do it again.

I walked back to the city, my eyes averted from the presence of death. In our house I took my baskets, and everything of value we had left: the kitchen knives, my jewels, my comb, my makeup. In the marketplace I bartered those for five hummingbirds, and in the floating gardens I picked marigolds.

Then I went back outside the city. I found the ruins of the makeshift altar where I had summoned the quetzal bird, the spirit that had shown me the way to the underworld. I rebuilt the altar, and laid my obsidian knife on it to consecrate it to the Sky-God.

My hands did not shake as I slit the throats of the hummingbirds and said the prayers of summoning. They were things of this world, and death was their lot.

I arranged the bodies into a star-shape, and laid the marigolds around them as best as I could. Everything was soaked in blood. I spoke the final words:

"I have spilled the blood of your servants

I have plucked the flowers that are pleasing to you  
Come down from the Heavens and do my will."

Light coalesced around the corpses of the birds until everything shone with an otherworldly radiance. For the first time I saw no death before my eyes: this was a light destined to shine forever.

A quetzal appeared over the altar, even as the light shrank to encompass its body. The feathers on its breast were as red as if they had been dipped in blood, and the long feathers of its tail swished as it spoke.

"Sahague," it said.

I bowed, slightly, more out of respect than out of fear.

"Why have you summoned me?" the bird asked.

"I have need," I said.

The bird looked at me, its head cocked as if listening to some inner voice. "Yes," it said. "You do."

"Tell me what has changed," I said. "Please."

"You know what has changed," the bird said.

"No. I--I can find no respite. I see death everywhere."

"Not everywhere." And its eyes rested on me. I raised my hands, felt the smoothness of my cheeks. No matter what I did, I could not conjure the image of the skull with my own face.

I knew, then, why the ball had burnt that brightly in the underworld. I knew then that nothing could be created in that place without a sacrifice, and that something had fed the fire that had seared me. "They took something from me to make the ball," I said.

"Yes," the quetzal piped. "You played for love, and the lords of the underworld cannot allow love to triumph over death. Once a man has drawn his last breath he is theirs, and nothing should be allowed to change that."

"I need to go back," I said, for I could not go on. I had hoped I could stay away from the place of my nightmares, that nothing would keep Ahtli and me apart. I had hoped never to see the lords of the underworld again.

I asked the bird, "Will you guide me?"

It laughed. It was such a human sound that, startled, I dropped the obsidian knife to the ground. "Sahague," it said. "You no longer have need of one of us. You know the path. You made your own way back after the game."

"But I cannot descend the stairs," I said. "Only an immortal can--"

I stopped. No. They could not have done that.

The bird did not speak, but I thought I could see pity in its eyes.

"I cannot--"

"You can," the quetzal said, softly. "Death no longer holds you. It will be a hard descent, but not one beyond you."

I wept. The descent had been hard enough with the light of the first quetzal over my head. But the bird could not lie; it was not in its nature, and it was bound by ritual.

"Thank you," I managed. The quetzal's unreadable eyes were on me; it did not speak.

I spoke the words to release the bird, and watched as it faded away from the bloody altar, going back to the Heavens. Then I went home.

#

"Go back?" Achtli asked, when I told him. He was sitting near the hearth, eating a maize cake. "This is madness, Sahague."

I sat down next to him. "I have no choice."

"You went once. It was one voyage too many."

I reached towards him, stopped--knowing that once more I would feel only bone. "I did it for you."

"I know." Achtli sighed. He was not looking at me. "I owe you my life."

"You owe me nothing. It's what a wife should do for her husband."

Achtli put away his plate and looked straight at me. "No. You were the first to go down into the underworld for the sake of love."

"Hardly the first. And hardly the last."

"The first to come back, then," Achtli said.

"Perhaps. Does it matter?" I crossed my arms over my chest, daring him to contradict me.

"No," Achtli said. "That's not the point. You'll die if you enter that place, and I don't have your courage. I wouldn't come for you."

He had wounded me more than he knew with his honesty. I bit back tears. "You don't understand. They did something to me, and now everywhere I look I see death."

"We're mortals, Sahague. We're steeped in death."

"Yes. We are steeped in death.," I said, rubbing my hands against my cheeks. My skin was smooth and unmarked. "But we don't think about it every day. I have to go and get back what they took from me."

"You have no guide."

"What would you know of it? I found the way once, and I can find it again. But I can't go on like this."

He reached out towards me, but I managed to avoid him.

"Sahague..."

"Achtli, please."

His face was set. "I thought I'd be the one to change after you brought me back from death. Now I know you have changed."

"Yes," I said. "That's why I have to leave. To find a way back to when things were normal."

"They'll never be again. Innocence, once lost, cannot be called back."

I said nothing.

He rose and went to the threshold, staring at the stars. At length he turned back to me. He said, and I know it must have cost him, "I have no power over you. No longer."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

#

For all the bitter words between us, Achtli still came with me, quietly resigned to see this to its end. At dawn, we both stood before the door to the underworld. It was the mouth of a cave of shadows, and it whispered words of mourning into my ears. I did not know whether Achtli could hear them.

He said, with real fear in his voice. "Sahague, no."

"We had this talk already," I said. He had one hand on my shoulder; all I could feel were the bones of his fingers pressing into my skin. I turned to him, stared into his eyes. "Good-bye." And I stood on tiptoe, and gently kissed him. I felt only a corpse's withered skin on my lips.

He looked weary and infinitely older than he was. At length he sat on a rock near the entrance, and did not move.

"Achtli," I said. "Do not listen to the voices. Or they will lead you down the stairs, and then you will belong to them forever."

Achtli said nothing. As I entered the darkness all I could see was his face, and I wept, for all I could see were skeletal cheekbones and empty eye sockets that erased every trace of his beauty from my mind.

#

I made my way down the stairs with infinite care, seeking each step with my foot. Voices spoke to me of the grave, of sickness and of death. I was hardly aware of reaching the bottom of the stairs. As I passed each river, the voices grew stronger, drowning everything else in my mind.

You dare to come here...

You are but a mortal...What makes you think you can defy the lords a second time?

What makes you so proud, Sahague? That you triumphed in a fool's game? Do you not understand that the lords made it so you would win?

What makes you so proud, Sahague? That you rescued your husband? But he will die again, no matter what you do, and you will be widowed a second time. Without recourse.

What makes you so proud, Sahague?

I had no answer. I traced my own path, teetering on the edge of madness with all the voices fighting in my head. I kept the image of my husband with his death's head, and though I faltered from time to time I did not stop.

At last I saw the palace, rising from the ground with its walls of obsidian. The skulls on the altars before the door watched me impassively. The gates themselves were closed. It had not been so when I had last come here; I was no longer welcome. I stood before the gates, ran my hand on the smooth obsidian surface, felt its coldness travel up my arm and seize my heart.

"I am Sahague, and I have returned," I said to the shadows around me. I laid my hand on the panels and pushed.

They ought not to have opened. The great gates of obsidian should have answered only to an immortal, but they swung under my touch, and that only confirmed what I already knew. I felt anger rise in me, wave after wave.

In the arena where I had played for Achtli's life, they were waiting for me. The light revealed their faces to me: not skulls, as I had thought they would be, but the expressionless faces of youths. Their eyes were as dark as night, and their skins smooth and unmarked, like obsidian.

I stood under the hoop. "You cheated me."

They smiled. "Did you think you could defeat us, Sahague?"

"No," I said. "I expected to die."

"No mortal may defeat the lords of the underworld," the leftmost one said, and smiled without tenderness.

"You burnt me."

"Yes," they said, as one. Their voices were the lament of the wind over ruins. "Do you know what we burnt, to make that ball?"

I nodded. "You took my humanity away from me."

"We burnt away the cross that made you mortal. You should be glad. Not for you the sickness, or the nights staring at the mirror, wondering where your youth has fled."

"I am not glad." I raised my eyes, looked at both of them.

"You left me no place in the world above."

"You are immortal," they said. "Mortality is the essence of the world above. It is normal that you should recognise that, and feel repulsed."

"I am mortal. My place was there, by my husband's side," I said, and almost wept.

"That is of little consequence. You belong here, Sahague. The one who defeated us shall dwell among us forever."

I looked at both of them, at the still faces without wrinkles, the impassive eyes, the polished surface of their skins with its unearthly sheen. "No," I said.

"You have no choice."

"There is always a choice," I said. "What was burnt will rise again. Life can be given again."

"Not in the underworld. There is no one to give you life, Sahague. No one to render you mortal again."

"In here as well, the gift of life can be given, and received. I ask for what you took."

"This is the world of the dead, Sahague. There is no mortal here from whom you might take life. And you have nothing to offer us."

"No," I said.

"Unless... We would gladly have your husband back."

"I gave enough to bring him back," I said, angry that they should try such sorry tricks.

They said nothing. I could feel their hatred. I had dared to defy them for the second time. "Very well," the one who had spoken first said. "If you are so stubborn...you will play another game. But should you lose you will be bound to us, and serve us forever."

It will be painful enough to remind you, day after day, that you should not have scorned us."

I didn't care. I had given so much to bring Achtli back. All we had wanted was to enjoy our time together. So little to ask. So much, in the eyes of immortals who knew not what love was. "If that is what it takes," I said, and saw them look at one another with undisguised joy.

"This game is not one you will win. We did not make it for that," they said.

#

The ball they gave me was cold to the touch, and, as the lights flared around the arena, I saw it for what it was: a skull, smooth and white. My skull, perhaps, for we were playing for my soul.

There was no gathering of shadow-beings, unlike the last time. I could hold the ball in my hand and not be burnt. But I knew winning this would be no easier than winning the previous game.

"Whom shall I fight?" I said, and heard them laugh.

Even before the darkness had taken on a human shape I knew whom I would meet.

His face was as pale as the waning moon, his eyes darker than obsidian. He moved in uncontrolled gestures, as if he no longer knew how his body worked.

Achtli.

I said, my heart in my throat, "This is unfair."

"Why? From the moment he set foot within our kingdom he was ours once again."

"You called him," I said.

They laughed. "No, Sahague. It was your voice he heard, coming from inside, your voice he followed. He thought you were in danger. He told himself he would go a little past the threshold, just look down the stairs to see whether he could help you. He was a fool."

"You cheated. He was not part of the bargain." I felt anger rise in me, stronger than my tears, stronger than my despair.

"There is no bargain," they said, laughing. "He is ours whether you win or lose. Now and forever, for we took the breath away from his lungs and sucked the life from his limbs. He is ours."

I forced back tears, focused only on the ball.

I threw it against the wall with all my strength, watched it fall. Achtli moved to strike it. His eyes held no expression.

"Husband," I called.

"I am no longer that." His voice was uninflected. "In death nothing holds."

"Our love held," I said, weeping. "I came for you, so that death would not part us."

"No. You came for yourself. You wanted your old life back. You never cared for me. When I came back from the dead did you show me love? You went back to your ways, sitting before the house, and never spoke to me. Is that love?"

I ran towards the ball, hoping to catch it before it struck the ground, but it seemed infinitely distant.

"I love you," I said. My breath burnt in my lungs. My heart beat like the drums of sacrifice within my ribs. I heard the lords laugh, and all of a sudden I knew what they had done: given me back my mortality, at the time when I least needed it. It is only fair, they said in my mind, that you should see what you are playing for.

"There is no love," Achtli said, raising a knee to strike the ball. It rose towards the hoop. I leapt, and caught it in the chest. Panting, I fell to the ground, curled around it as if around some treasure of inestimable worth.

"Only selfishness," Achtli said.

He stood over me, watching me rise, and his eyes were cold. But beneath that veneer I saw the trapped soul, saw the mind they had enslaved.

"Achtli. Listen to me. You don't belong to them."

"Throw the ball," he said, "or you are forfeit."

"You don't belong to them," I said. The bone-ball was smooth under my hands.

"I am dead already." He shook his head angrily, as if to clear his thoughts. "Throw the ball."

I remembered the voice of the lords. He is ours, now and forever, for we took the breath away from his lungs and sucked the life from his limbs.

I threw the ball. Achtli caught it before it reached the hoop. For a while we stared at each other, and I knew then that there would be no happiness for us. A man may not be claimed from death, not even by love.

No, I thought. This is not truth. This is their lie whispering in my mind.

Achtli tossed the ball again. I threw myself in its path and caught it with one hand.

I could win the game, perhaps. But even if I did, Achtli would still belong to them. That was not the solution.

I knew that there was only one way out of this. My selfishness, my refusal to accept that life had changed, was what had led him there. Now was the time for a true sacrifice.

"Achtli." I moved closer to him.

"Throw the ball," he said.

I shook my head. "I no longer play," I lied.

"Then you are forfeit."

I still held the ball. I remembered what the lords had told me: they had taken the breath of life away from him. The dead belonged to them. But even in the underworld, life can be given. They had agreed to that, laughing at me all the while. Life can be given.

By someone who still has life. By a mortal.

And the lords had taken my immortality away.

I bent forward and kissed Achtli. He tried to move away from me, but with my left hand I held him fast; I felt my own breath leave my lungs and fill his whole body.

Fool, the lords whispered in my mind.

I am giving half my life to him, I answered in the same way. Giving him what you stole from him. It is allowed. It is lawful.

When I pulled away from Achtli I was so weak I could barely stand. But his eyes were clear, and when he spoke his voice no longer held the echo of death.

"Sahague?"

I said his name, weakly. In that instant when he was distracted, with the last of my strength, I threw the ball.

There were no obstacles, and I had stood close to the wall. Although I was exhausted and merely raising my arm cost me dearly, there was never any real doubt of where the ball would go. I saw it pass through the hoop, and fall to the ground.

I felt no elation. I was shivering, and my whole body ached: from the place where the ball of fire had burnt me, to my right arm which had thrown the ball of bone.

"You have won," the lords said, and the force of their anger almost sent me to my knees.

"Yes," I said, knowing without raising my hands where the wrinkles and grey hairs would be. "He is no longer yours."

They laughed. "But we shall see you again, Sahague. Soon. Was it worth your years of youth?"

I turned away from them, and did not answer. "Come," I said, to Achtli.

We climbed the stairway clinging to each other. My breath rattled in my lungs, and Achtli looked even older than I.

"Was it worth it?" he asked, and his voice shook.

I said nothing. We had played with death, and won. A few years of life were but a small price to pay for the bitter joy of being mortal, for the bitter joy of love.

At the top of the stairs the last rays of the sun flooded the threshold. I held Achtli close to me, feeling his whole weight on my shoulder, and stepped out of darkness, into light.