

Talkhun

By: Samad Behrangi

Talkhun wasn't like any of the Merchant's other daughters. Mah-Farang, Mah-Sultan, Mah-San, Mah-Begum, Mah-Moluk, and Mah-Rokh, the six other daughters of the Merchant, each had her own pretensions, her own demands. Sometimes, hearing their noise and play, all the neighbors' sons would come out into the streets. The sound of the lusty and joyful laughter of the Merchant's daughters was the talk of the town. Everyone spoke of how fashionable and full of appetites they were. Their luscious and plump bodies would make the neighborhood boys drool. Because of a string of lapis beads, they would giggle for a week, or they would drape themselves in the sun and stare at their jewelry. Sometimes, they would fall asleep right there next to the table at which they had just eaten. The Merchant had found each of the daughters a husband who could be good and lazy and become nice and fattened. The husbands lived with their wives and were loving life. They wouldn't work but two hours a day, and what work! They would check the Merchant's stores and manage things. Then they would come home and with their good-time girls would spend the rest of the day laughing and having fun.

Talkhun kept herself busy amidst all this, as if she didn't see anyone else. Or maybe she saw them and just ignored them. She wasn't plump, but had a sort of sweet beauty. She was the baby of the family. The Merchant couldn't find her a husband. She wouldn't wear all sorts of clothes. The skirt of her dress would wrinkle and she wouldn't pay any attention. Her sisters would look at her skirt's wrinkles and were in wonder over how she had the nerves to dress like that. Her father couldn't remember a time when she had asked him for anything, Whatever her father would buy, she accepted. Neither protests, nor thanks. As if she didn't consider anything important. She wouldn't go anywhere and she wouldn't talk to anyone. If they asked her a question, she would give short answers. She had harvests of black hair on her shoulders and back. When walking, she looked like lost fairies of myths. If they cursed her or complimented her, mocked her, or respected her, she was apathetic. As if she considered herself from another land altogether, or as if she was anticipating something bigger than all this.

Life went on as this until it was time for a great celebration. The girls began thinking days before the feast about what gift they were going to demand from their father. As if in this big wide world there wasn't anything more important to do. They had left everything else and focused all their attention on this one thing: what gift to ask for. But the festivities had no affect on Talkhun. For her, it was a day like any other. The same people, the same land, the same house of lazy girls and their lustful and idle husbands, the same sky and the same earth. Even the stormy wind of every afternoon that threw dirt in everyone's eyes hadn't quit his daily habit, and this, only Talkhun knew.

One day before the festivities, the Merchant gathered his daughters around him and said that he was going to go shopping in the city and each of the daughters should ask for whatever they wanted. First, the oldest girl, Mah-Farang began. Whenever she wanted something, she would sit on her father's knees, put her arms around his neck, kiss his cheeks, and then put her head on his shoulder, press her chest against him, and talk. This time, she did the same thing and said, "I want a bath, its water tub of gold, its walls and base of silver, and I want rosewater to come out of the taps. I want it to be ready by

this afternoon so my husband and I can bathe in it."

Mah-Sultan, the second daughter who used to press his father's hand on her chest and cry - for no good reason - said, "I want a pair of shoes and a dress. I want one of the shoes to be silver and one gold. I want one thread of the dress to be silver and one thread gold."

Mah-San, the third daughter, rubbed her face against her father's and said, "I want a black slave and a white slave, so that when I am getting ready for bed, the black slave takes my clothes off, and when I wake up, the white slave dresses me."

Mah-Begum, the fourth daughter, pouted her lips, kissed her father and said, "I want a necklace that is as white as cotton-candy at night and black as onyx during the day. I want it to light up to a farsang[2] too!"

Mah-Moluk, the fifth daughter, lifted her skirts and said, "I want a pair of carmelite stockings that come up to here and when I take them off, they fit into a thumbeline."

Mah-Rokh, the sixth daughter who always imitated the first daughter, did the same this time too and said, "I want something that when I go to the baths, she becomes my manservant, when I go to a wedding, she becomes my maidservant and when I don't need it, I can wear it like a ring."

The Merchant listened to his daughters and memorized their demands. But in vain, he waited for Talkhun, the seventh daughter to ask for anything. She was only watching. Or maybe she wasn't watching and it just looked that way. Finally, the Merchant couldn't hold back anymore and said, "Daughter, ask me for something I could buy for you." The girl turned her head. The Merchant said, "Ask me for anything!" Talkhun's eyes sparkled like never before, and said quickly, "Anything I want you will buy me?" The Merchant who couldn't imagine anything beyond his means, said confidently, "Whatever you want. Like your sisters." Talkhun waited until everyone was staring at her mouth. It was the first time that she was asking for anything. Then, whispering as if she was praying to fairy-tale fairies for someone's happiness and fortune, she said, "Heart and guts!" She said this quietly and softly, and like smoke at the end of a cigarette, she got up and left.

Her sisters and father were left there staring at her mouth as if they hadn't heard anything, as if she hadn't left yet. Finally, the Merchant saw that his daughter had left and hadn't said anything. None of them had heard her voice. Only Mah-Rokh, the sixth daughter who had been sitting to the right of Talkhun had heard that she had asked for heart and guts.

Heart and guts for what? Weren't there enough edibles in the Merchant's house that she was craving heart and guts? The Merchant ran after Talkhun. Her sisters began clowning around.

Mah-Farang, the big sister, barely kept from laughing and said, "Sister, isn't ridiculous that somebody doesn't ask for anything all her life, and when she does, she asks for heart and guts? That makes me

nauseous. Heart and guts, heart and guts.. really ridiculous.. ha ha ha..."

From her lips, flames of lust blazed.

Mah-Sultan, the second daughter opened her collar so that the breeze would catch her skin (the smell of human sweat blowing from between her breasts was breath-taking), and said, "Heart and guts... Mah-Rokh, dear, did you really hear her say that? It's so absurd, ha ha... God knows what she wants with heart and guts..."

Mah-San, the third sister, lay on her back, shook her head so that her hair tumbled on her face and said lustily, "Hey, sisters, what patience you have for this nonsense. I bet our poor husbands are bored to death all alone... Let's go and join them... come on, Let's join our husbands."

Mah-Begum, the fourth sister, seconded her by nodding. Mah-Moluk, the fifth sister and Mah-Rokh, the sixth one, did the same. They all got up to leave. They saw the Merchant in the doorway. He said, "She doesn't want anything else. I said, girl, whatever do you want a heart for? She only said, I want a heart. Then I said, fine, we reckon you can have a heart; what do you want guts for? It's all bloody. She whispered again, I just want it. What does I-just-want-it mean? Don't you think it's ridiculous to want tissue and blood?"

The sisters said in harmony, "Yes, father, it is ridiculous. It is completely absurd. Get her a husband."

The Merchant said, "She doesn't want a husband; says marriage is ridiculous; but male companionship is a joy."

The girls said mischievously, "Well, we'll call it male companionship. What difference does it make?" Then they all started laughing and pinching one another.

The Merchant said, "She says they are not true men, not even your husbands, not even me..." The girls said incredulously, "What? She says they are not men? We've seen with our own eyes..." Their father said, "She says that is an outer manifestation. It's not proof of manhood. I don't get it. Do you get it?"

The girls said, "It's absurd." Then Mah-San said, "Sisters, it's not nice to tire your pretty little heads with these sorts of things. Let's go to our husbands, then father can go to the market and buy our presents. Come on, sisters."

The Merchant ordered the bath for Mah-Farang, the dress and shoes for Mah-Sultan. He bought Mah-San two young and pretty slaves with just-budding bosoms, and for Mah-Begum, he found a necklace whiter than cotton-candy and blacker than onyx. For Mah-Moluk, he bought carmelite stockings that fit inside a thumbeline and for Mah-Rokh, bought an emerald that turned into a manservant when she went to the baths and into a maidservant when she went to weddings. Then she wanted to buy Talkhun,

the baby, her heart and guts. He thought to himself, "This won't take a minute." He had spent a lot of time for everything else: a whole hour.

First he went to a small market where he remembered they used to sell heart and guts, but he couldn't even find a single butcher-shop selling hearts and guts. They all now sold mirrors.

Some mirrors showed one to be a thousand, small to be large, ugly to be beautiful, lies to be truth and bad to be good. And they were so popular. He said to himself, "Why didn't she want one of these?" If she had, he would have bought her one and taken it to her. Sad that she hadn't wanted one.

For two whole hours he wandered lost and bewildered through the market looking for heart and guts. Some were closed and had signs on the doors that said things like, What Business is it Of Yours? Get Lost! You Wish! Keep on Dreaming! Don't You Dare Such Cheek Ever Again! ...

The Merchant didn't understand. He asked somebody, "Why are they closed?" He heard the response, "What business is it of yours?" He asked another one, "When will these shops open up?" They said, "Keep on dreaming!" He asked a third one, "Why do these gentlemen give such rude answers? I haven't said anything!" In response, he got a juicy slap on the face and heard, "Don't you dare such cheek ever again!"

The Merchant realized that this just wasn't how he had imagined it to be. Meekly, he got going. He asked a colleague, "Brother, have you heard where I can find heart and guts in this city?"

His colleague looked at him as if he were a total idiot and said, "What strange things you are looking for!" And left the Merchant wild and confused right there. When passing a butcher-shop, the Merchant asked the butcher, "What do you do with the heart and guts?" And he heard, "What business is it of yours?" Afraid that he may get slapped again, he didn't pursue it anymore. If he did, would he get slapped again? What if after getting slapped, he kept pursuing it? What would they do to him? The Merchant was more cowardly and conservative to wonder about these questions.

He wandered around the whole city, but couldn't find anything. In the afternoon, tired and exhausted, he went to the coffee-house, ate a little bread and cheese, drank a couple of teas, and got going. He kept thinking about what to tell his daughters. His six other daughters were getting what they asked for, but their baby-sister couldn't, and that was bad. The Merchant just didn't get it. After so long, he began to think that Talkhun knew that heart and guts were not to be found in the city and he and his six daughters did not. One knew, seven didn't. How did she know? The Merchant didn't know. He was so tired that on the way back, sat at the foot of an orchard wall to rest a while. He had just sat down when he heard a voice from inside the orchard, "So everything has been arranged and there are no hearts left. None to buy and none to sell."

- "No, my daughter. It's not like that. If you look for it more diligently, you will find it."

As soon as the Merchant heard this, he got up and peered inside the orchard, but all he saw was a white rabbit breast-feeding her pups.

The Merchant thought he was losing his mind. Quickly, he started walking away, but when he got to the end of the street, his steps slowed down. He couldn't go home empty-handed. What would he tell his daughter? He had never felt so impotent. He sighed from the bottom of his heart as if to say if I had the power to find heart and guts, I would have no problems. Suddenly, something made of heat and smoke and fire appeared in front of him. He asked, "Who are you?" He heard, "I am the Sigh!"

The Merchant said, "The Sigh?"

The Sigh said, "Yes, What do you want?"

The Merchant said, "Heart and guts."

The Sigh said, "I have it, but I will give it to you on one condition."

The Merchant looked at the diminutive Sigh. He couldn't quite believe that such a creature would speak and be in possession of heart and guts. But finally, he said, "Anything you want!" The Sigh said, "Give me Talkhun!"

The Merchant said, "Right now?"

The Sigh said, "Not right now. I will come collect her whenever I want." The Merchant agreed, not thinking about the consequences of this agreement. He got the heart and guts and went home.

The girls were a little upset that their father was being so thoughtless and had kept them waiting. But as soon as they saw their gifts, they forgot everything except for playing with their gifts and with their husbands. They couldn't find Talkhun until dinnertime. One of the husbands had seen her at noon climbing a very tall elm tree in the middle of the house and was quite astonished that he couldn't do the same even though he was a man. Since then no one had seen her.

When they all had sat down to dinner, Talkhun entered quietly and they only saw her sitting down. She didn't ask her father if he had found the heart and guts or not. As if she was certain that he hadn't found it. It was difficult to tell what her certainties and beliefs were. The Merchant gave her the heart and guts on a platter. Talkhun took the platter and left the room. A few minutes later, they heard the sound of the platter breaking and saw her coming back to the room. Her collar was open and between her breasts was a gaping wound. Talkhun, more sprightly than ever opened the window and stared into the street. The Merchant was telling all about his day in the city. When he got to the part about the mirror-sellers, he wished that one of the girls had asked for a mirror and sighed. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Talkhun jumped out the window. The Merchant ran to the windowsill frightened. Against expectations, he saw that his daughter was speaking to a tall and handsome man at the door. He got

himself to the door quickly. The sisters were peeking out of the window, bending over one another and laughing.

The young man said, "The Sigh has sent me to take Talkhun."

The Merchant had not mentioned this part of the story to Talkhun for two reasons; first he was worried that Talkhun may become upset, and secondly because even if he was to recount the story, Talkhun would not pay any attention. But it was as if Talkhun knew the story already and was not affected by it.

Her father said, "I can't do this. I can't give my daughter away."

The young man said calmly, "It is not in your hands anymore. This must be done." And reminded him of his promise and the Sigh's condition.

The Merchant softened a bit and looking for excuses said, "Don't you think it's absurd for a man to give away his daughter to someone he doesn't know and hasn't seen before?"

The young man said, "Knowing Talkhun is enough."

The Merchant looked at Talkhun and started; he had never seen her so joyous and lively. Talkhun nodded her head in assent. Finally, the Merchant was convinced. The young man got on his white horse and Talkhun climbed behind him and he commanded the horse to go. Talkhun held the young man by the waist and leaned her head on his back and clung to him closely. As if she were afraid they would steal him from her hands.

The horse sped up and galloped away.

For months and years, they passed oceans of water and fire; for months and years, they passed valleys full of blood-thirsty beasts; for months and years they perspired and climbed mountains of ice and blaze and descended into valleys of glaciers and fires. For months and years, they crossed dark woods from whose very corner one could hear cries of "I shall kill, I shall dismember"; for months and years, they were hungry and thirsty, for months and years, they faced every trap and every snare and managed to escape them. For months and years, seven-headed and thousand-footed dragons chased them and poured their foul and fiery breath upon them and finally the sparks from the hooves of the horse blinded them and they left them behind. Thousands of farsangs to the east, and thousands of farsangs to the west they went, they crossed a thousand and one wastelands from whose very air fire rained down, but all that didn't seem to Talkhun longer than a blink of an eye. When she opened her eyes, she saw herself in a verdant orchard in whose every direction fruit trees had queued up. From that moment forward, the orchard and the Young Man were hers. And now, one could say that Talkhun didn't just stare, but she laughed and she talked, she worked and she did things all other humans did. For months, they were happy and alive and lively.

One day, Talkhun and the Young Man were walking in the orchard hand-in-hand and one-at-heart. If a bird flew in the air, they would both see it at the same moment. They reached an apple tree. All the ripe apples had fallen below the tree. Talkhun bent down to pick one up. Even though the Young Man had also bent down, he suddenly said, "No, let's pick a fresh apple. I will climb the tree." He shed his shirt and gave it to Talkhun and climbed the tree to pick the freshest of apples on top. Talkhun was looking up from down below and was enjoying the look of his long limbs. He saw a small feather attached to his waist. When she reached to pick it, it all happened in a second. Who knows why this time, the Young Man didn't sense Talkhun's thoughts. Something such as this had never happened before. Talkhun held the tip of the feather and pulled, and at that very moment, the Young Man fell from the tree. Talkhun became confused, she had no idea what she had done and what she was to do. When she bent down over him, she saw that he was dead. She hit herself over the head with both hands. She tried to attach the feather to its original spot, but to no avail. Talkhun was engulfed by a profound sorrow. A deep sigh came from her within and suddenly the Sigh appeared in front of her.

The Sigh said, "I can do no more. I have to take you and sell you in the slave market. Perhaps then you can find a remedy."

And that is what he did.

The Key-Holder for a wealthy man, wearing all black, who saw Talkhun at the market and liked her, bought her for the price of a teardrop and a drop of heart's blood for the mother of the wealthy man. The mother of the wealthy man had for long looked for a lady's companion and among her own handmaiden had not found one she liked. The Key-Holder would go to the market everyday, but would not find any slaves, until he finally found Talkhun and thought that his Mistress would also like her. The Sigh kissed the girl's eyes and face and said that he hoped Talkhun would again conjure him. Talkhun only stared, as if she had returned to her old habits. The only difference was that her stare had a different quality, one that was difficult to describe.

The Key-Holder took Talkhun through winding streets until they arrived at a large gate guarded by many doormen. Once they crossed the gate, they entered a garden. In the center of the garden, there was a magnificent palace that astounded all who saw it, and the entire garden was covered in fragrant flowers. Songbirds were flying in and out of trees in numerous clusters. The Key-Holder said, "Whatever you desire, from a fowl's milk to a man's life can be found in this garden, and all this prosperity and fortune belongs to my young master who disappeared a few months ago and no matter how hard we search for him, we can't find him. My mistress who is his mother has worn black since he lost her and you should do the same."

Talkhun looked around at every corner of the garden and said to herself, "To own such a beautiful garden, but suddenly to disappear and have no one know where you are... So here, also, Sigh!" But Sigh did not appear, because he could not do anything about the situation. He had said so himself.

They took Talkhun to the baths and washed her, perfumed her with rosewater, dressed her in black and took her to the mother of the Master of the house. She looked desperately sad. She listened to Talkhun's talk and found her a good companion. The other handmaidens were jealous that so soon after arriving, Talkhun had risen so quickly. But Talkhun only stared at them. She didn't care if she were the maid-companion of the Mistress or a lowly scullery maid.

One night, Talkhun was passing the handmaidens' rooms on her way to sleep at the foot of the Mistress's bed. She saw one of the maids who was the wife of the Head-Chef and the Mistress liked her and trusted her so much that had asked her son to provide her with a great dowry when she was married off to the Head-Chef. The Wife of the Head-Chef was holding a bowl of rice and a black whip and she entered the handmaidens' room, and as Talkhun peered through the window, she went to the bedside of every maid and whispered in their ear, "Awake or sleeping?" When no one had answered, the Wife of the Head-Chef came out and started heading towards the Mistress' room. Talkhun ran ahead of her, slept at the foot of the bed and pretended to be sleeping. The Wife of the Head-Chef entered the room and whispered in the Mistress' ear, "Awake or sleeping?" And when she heard no response, she reached under the Mistress' pillow for a set of keys and left the room. Talkhun wondered whether the maid was going to commit thievery. She followed her. The Wife of the Head-Chef opened a door with the keys, and there was a room and at the end of this room, there was another door and another room, and she went on like this through forty doors and forty rooms behind those doors. Finally, they arrived at a courtyard with a reflecting pool full of shimmering water. The Wife of the Head-Chef drained the pool and at the bottom of it there was a great trap-door. The Wife of the Head-Chef lifted the trapdoor and there were spiraling stairs descending deeply. She went down, and Talkhun followed her. They passed many damp cellars, until they arrived at a small area where a young man was chained from a ceiling. He looked miserable and unconscious. The Wife of the Head-Chef splashed some water on him and brought him around. She put the bowl of rice in a corner and held the whip in her right hand.

The Wife of the Head-Chef said to the man, "Boy, will you lie your head on my pillow?" The young man only said, "No!" The Wife of the Head-Chef repeated her question three times and then she lashed him so hard that he lost consciousness again. She brought him around again. After she had heard NO three times more, she again whipped him so hard that he lost consciousness again. The young man was whipped three times and passed out three times, but not even once did he agree to lie his head on her pillow. The third time that she was brought around, the maid held the bowl of rice in front of him. When he refused to eat, she force-fed him.

Talkhun watched all this from behind a column. Only once did she say to herself, "To own such a beautiful garden. But to suddenly disappear and for no one to know where you are. Then some maid has you chained inside the cellars of your own house and lashes you... Oh here also, Sigh!" But the Sigh did not appear, because there was nothing he could do. He had said so himself.

The Wife of the Head-Chef said, "Listen well! Tomorrow night I will come to you again. If you listen to me and learn, I will open your chains, I will lay you in my own embrace, I will caress you, give you anything you want. You can do whatever you want. Whatever. But if you are stubborn again, you will be

whipped and I will leave you hanging where you are."

When Talkhun saw that she was ready to head back, she ran ahead of her to the foot of the Mistress' bed and pretended to be sleeping. The Wife of the Head-Chef came out of the cellars, closed the trapdoor, filled the pool, got the lily-pads floating again, passed forty rooms, locked forty doors, until she arrived at the head of the Mistress' bed. She left the keys under her pillows, changed back into her black clothes again and lay her head on her pillow and went to sleep.

The next morning, Talkhun sat talking to the Mistress and said to her, "Madam, if I find your lost beloved, what will you give me?" The Mistress said, "Whatever you want!" Talkhun said, "You have to wait until tonight." That night, Talkhun told the Mistress, "You have to cut your finger and put salt in the wound so that you won't fall asleep. Then you have to pretend that you are sleeping. Someone will come and ask you if you are awake or asleep. You will not answer and let her do whatever she wants. When I call you, you will get up and we will go together for me to show you your son."

They did as they had planned. The Mistress had specially put a lot of salt in her wound to make sure she didn't fall asleep. Like the night before, the Wife of the Head-Chef came with a bowl of rice and a whip and asked, "Awake or sleeping?" When she heard no sound, she picked up the keys from under the pillow and opened the same door. Talkhun called her Mistress and they followed the Wife of the Head-Chef. Forty doors were opened. Talkhun had brought a sugar-cube and some water along. When the Mistress saw her son in those conditions, she wanted to scream. Talkhun put the sugar-cube in her mouth and gave her some water and said, "Madam, don't you see where we are? If the witch sees us, we will suffer the same fate as your son. Let us wait till the morning and then we will come to his rescue with some help!" The Mistress assented and they left the cellars before the maid.

The next morning, the Mistress ordered for her servants to tie up the Wife of the Head-Chef and bring her over. They forced her to confess whatever she had done to her generous master. This, of course, was not so easy. They laid her on a bed and cut up small pieces from the tip of her toes and fed it to her, until she finally confessed. Then they dragged her down to the cellars. They released the young Master from his chains and took him to the baths and to the barber. Then they returned him home, looking all new and masterly, but a bit wilted. As for the Wife of the Head-Chef they tied her hair to the tail of a stubborn mule and released the mule out in the pasture so that every bit of her body became some carnivore's meal.

The Mistress ordered for everyone to shed their black clothes and rejoice. When the Young Master saw Talkhun and heard the tale of his own rescue, he fell in love with her and asked her to marry him. His mother was only too glad about his decision, and would say to herself, where else can I find a girl with such beauty and intelligence. But when they talked to Talkhun, she only stared and said no and asked the Mistress to take her to the slave market and sell her again. No matter how much the Mistress insisted, she resisted. She wouldn't even agree to stay on -not as a wife- but as a house-guest. She only said, "You have found the remedy to your ailment. I have to find mine."

This time, an old Miller bought Talkhun and took her to his mill. This man's mill was at the base of a mountain. A rich stream flowed from the top of mountain and powered his mill. He had a dragon that he had placed at the source of the water. Whenever he asked the dragon to move, it did just a bit, a little water would flow and the mill would start working. The Miller would tell the villagers that he had no control over the dragon and for the dragon to move, they had to give a young girl to the dragon everyday for his meal, so that the mill could work. Otherwise, the wheat could not be turned into flour and the villagers couldn't irrigate their fields either.

The villagers had no recourse but to obey the Miller, because they had no idea that the Miller had intentionally put the dragon in that spot so that he could water his own wheat on the side of the mountain. Talkhun's duty was feeding the dragon and returning back to the mill for work. The Miller had said to her, "If you lose a girl one of these days, I will feed you to the dragon." Talkhun had said to herself, "To have such a beautiful clear stream, and for a con-artist to come and dam it with his dragon, and look for sacrifices... So, here too, Sigh!" But the Sigh did not appear. He couldn't do anything about these matters. He had said so himself. Talkhun had noticed that whenever the dragon's meal was a little late, it would hop around and let more water pass through. One day as she was sitting and watching the mill, and the Miller was out irrigating his own wheat, the Village-Head's Son brought some wheat to the mill. When they had unloaded the wheat from the donkeys, Talkhun said to the Village-Head's Son, "Do you want me to rid you of the dragon?" Since the Miller had bought her, this had been the first time she had spoken. The villagers and the Miller thought she was a mute. Whatever she had wanted so far, she could convey with her eyes. The Village-Head's Son who was astonished, asked, "How can you do this?" Talkhun said, "There - and she pointed to a spot- dig a large hole there, and then let me know and I will take care of it." The young man left, knowing that the Miller could not know anything about this at all.

From that day forward, Talkhun made sure that she brought the dragon's meal right on time, so that he wouldn't move a lot and a lot of water gathered behind it. She even fed the dragon with the villagers' wheat. The dragon had gotten nice and fat and had completely obstructed the flow of the stream. She had also asked the villagers to bring less wheat to be floured, and they had accepted. One day the Miller noticed that if any more water was to accumulate behind the dragon, all his wheat would be flooded. In a panic, she came to the mill and told Talkhun to go and move the dragon a little bit however she could so that the water level would go down a bit. Talkhun had heard that the great big hole was dug and ready. That day she said to the girl that was supposed to be the dragon's meal, "Don't worry. Today I won't feed you to the dragon. I will feed the dragon to you." The dragon was sleeping. When it was time for its meal, it woke to see that there was nothing there. It took a little nap and when it woke up again, noticed that there still wasn't any food. It roared madly and went to sleep again. When it woke a third time, and noticed that there was no food, it got furious. The Miller was working in the mill and had no idea what was going on. Talkhun brought the sacrificial girl out from behind a tree and let the dragon have a peek at her. The dragon, whose appetite had been stimulated madly at the sight of the girl and was angry with Talkhun, leapt to devour both the girl and the Talkhun in one bite. Talkhun and the girl began running and the dragon fell into the hole and roared. The Miller heard the roar and was about to

run out, but did not have a chance, as a great flood of water overtook the mill and drowned both the mill and the Miller.

The villagers dismembered the carcass of the dragon and threw it in the mountains to be eaten by wild wolves. Then they took Talkhun to the Village-Head's house with great respect. The Village-Head's son who had fallen in love with Talkhun wanted to marry her. The Village-Head and his wife couldn't be happier with his choice. They said to themselves where else could they find a girl with such beauty and intelligence? But when they talked to Talkhun about it, she only looked and said No.; As if she had become a mute again. No matter how much the villagers insisted, she resisted. She only asked them to take her to the slave market and sell her. Her last words were, "Friends, you found the remedy to your ailments. I have an ailment and I have to go find its remedy."

The third time, a Merchant bought Talkhun. This Merchant had a wife who had no children. The Merchant saw Talkhun and liked her and bought her for the price of a tear-drop and a drop of heart's blood so that he could make her his daughter. And that is what he did. The Merchant was a rich man, but he had no children. He loved his wife very much and had provided for her ever comfort. The Merchant said to his wife, "I have bought you this slave so that she can take the place of the daughter we don't have and at night, when I arrive late, she can keep you company and help you with your housework."

That night, they all sat around with one another, had dinner and went to bed. The Merchant and his wife were at one end of the room and Talkhun was at the other end of the room. Around midnight, Talkhun heard a voice and opened her eyes. She saw that the Merchant's Wife got up, brought a sword out from a wardrobe and decapitated her husband from ear to ear and put the head on a shelf. Then from one of her cases, she brought her best clothes, made herself up to the nines, and looked like a pretty bride. Then she left the house, and Talkhun followed her until they got to a cemetery. Seven graves forward, seven graves to the right and seven graves to the left. The Merchant's wife knocked on the eighth grave with a rock. The gravestone opened as if a door, and the woman entered and Talkhun behind her. They went down some stairs. They reached a grand salon where all around forty bandits with great big mustaches were sitting and smoking opium. The chief of the bandits said sharply, "Why are you late?" The woman said, "As if I could get up and come here before that hyena fell asleep." Then the bandits began playing music and she began dancing and laughing.

Talkhun who was watching from behind a column said to herself, "To have a beautiful wife, provide her with every comfort, then she cuts your head and becomes a bunch of bandits' good-time girl... oh here also, Sigh!" But the Sigh did not appear, as there was nothing he could do. He had said so himself. Talkhun thought again, "I should let the man know so that one day someone will let me know." By now, it was near the morning and the Merchant's Wife was about to leave. Talkhun came ahead of her and climbed in bed and pretended to be sleeping. When the Merchant's Wife came back, she first changed out of her party clothes and cleaned her makeup and then from the wardrobe she brought out a cup with a feather and some liquid. She dipped the feather in the liquid and drew it to her husband's neck

and stuck his head back in its place. Then she put the cup back in the wardrobe and climbed in bed with her husband. The merchant sneezed and woke up. He said to his wife, "Woman, your body is cold. Where have you been?" The woman said, "I was in the outhouse. Your head had fallen from your pillow. Does your neck hurt?" The Merchant said "No", and all three went to sleep.

That day, Talkhun went to tell the Merchant. She said, "If I show you your wife's lovers, what will you give me?" At first, the Merchant became angry about how she could make such accusations. How could a maid libel her mistress so? Then he promised that if Talkhun couldn't prove her word, he would cut her head off. Talkhun asked for a reprieve until midnight. At midnight, the Merchant's wife did as she had the night before and when she left, Talkhun brought the cup out from the wardrobe and dipped the feather in the liquid and rubbed it against the Merchant's neck and stuck his head back on. A little while later, the Merchant sneezed and awoke and said, "Woman, is that you?" Talkhun said, "No, it's me. Your wife has gone to her lovers. Does your neck hurt?" The Merchant said "No" and then the two of them went to the same grave in the cemetery. When they entered, they stood watch in a corner. When the Merchant saw his wife dressed to the nines and dancing for forty mustachioed bandits, he became so furious he wanted to jump amidst them and start a fight. Talkhun prevented him and said it's best if they let the woman's people know about this so that they could witness this with their own eyes and then altogether they could kill the woman and the bandits. And that is what they did.

Then the Merchant wanted to take Talkhun for a wife. But Talkhun only looked and said "No. It's best if you just give me this cup and feather." The Merchant gave the cup and feather to Talkhun. Then Talkhun asked him to take her and sell her at the slave market for the price of a teardrop and a drop of heart's blood. No matter how much the Merchant insisted on keeping her, she refused. Finally, he took her hand and took her to the slave market.

Talkhun stood on a high pedestal. All buyers would pass her and lose themselves staring at her. But she would not pay any attention to any of them, as if she did not see them or if she saw them she did not care. She was thinking to herself of all those who had found remedies to their ailments and hoping that she could go to the source of her own sorrow and see him under the apple tree. How she wished she could do that. If she only could find him again. She thought, "I wish I could see him, but I can't. Sigh!" And this time the sigh had arisen from her deepest place. Suddenly she saw the Sigh who was approaching them. She told the Merchant, "Sell me to the Sigh!" The Sigh came forward and the deal was done. The Merchant sold Talkhun to the Sigh for the price he had bought her, a teardrop and a drop of heart's blood.

Talkhun said, "Sigh, is it really you?" The Sigh said, "Yes, it is me!" Talkhun said, "Is he still lying down in the garden?" The Sigh said "Yes." Talkhun said, "Take me to him!" The Sigh took her to the orchard. The Orchard was as before. Everything had frozen in that moment. Even the leaves of trees had not moved. The birds had frozen midair, the butterflies upon flowers, and the Young Man was lying under the apple tree.

The Sigh said, "For ten years, nothing has moved. For ten years, no bird has sung. For ten years, no

butterfly has flown. For ten years, no tree has blossomed. For ten years, all joy and freshness has gone. For ten years, this man has lain here, blood frozen in his veins, his heart silent."

Talkhun said bitterly, "Sigh, how terrible!"

Then she dipped the feather in the liquid and rubbed the feather against the man's waist. He sneezed and awoke. "Talkhun, why did you not wake me up? I feel like I have slept for so long."

Talkhun said, "You weren't sleeping. You were dead. Do you hear? You were dead. For ten years, I have carried your sorrow..."