



WINDDECEIVER

BOOK EIGHT OF THE WINDLEGENDS SAGA

By

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ISBN 978-1-60394-057-6
New Concepts Publishing
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

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CHAPTER ONE

By the time the first rays of morning spread out of the desert, Guil, Jaleel, and Rasheed had lost all trace of their quarry. Unable to track him all that well during the dark hours, they could now no longer find even a hoof print to tell them which way he had gone.

"The wind's covered his tracks," Rasheed told the other men as he stood up from inspecting the sands. "We'll never find him."

"What do you suggest we do, Jaleel?" Guil asked, arming the sweat from his brow.

They had been searching uselessly for over an hour with nothing to show for it but thirst and sweat.

Jaleel Jaborn scowled at the sweeping vista of limitless sand before them. So close, he thought. So close he had been to his enemy, to having the man in his grasp, to making him pay for Cyle's death.

"We have just enough water to get back to the Nilus," Guil reminded his friend. "If we go after him, it will be suicide." He looked up at the blazing sun. "For myself, I have no desire to die for Conar McGregor." He lowered his gaze to Jaleel. "He's not worth it."

Jaborn seemed to pull himself away from whatever dark obsession controlled his mind. His shoulders sagged, then lifted, squared.

"Then let the desert have him," Jaleel spat. He kicked at his horse's flanks, driving the tired beast forward with a powerful lunge. "My desert will give him a more horrible death than the one I had planned for him anyway!"

Guil watched his friend gallop off, back in the direction of the river. But he knew they would not be returning there. McGregor was long gone. He looked out at the bleak hot landscape.

"He won't last long out there," Rasheed said. "He has no water."

Guil turned his horse's head. "Then I wish him a gruesome death!"

* * * *

The horse had stumbled, going down with a whinny of apology. It had shuddered once, trying to lift its head, trying to see its rider who had been thrown free, then had lain still, the great, valiant heart inside its body quiet.

Lying a few feet away, Conar McGregor was just as still as his mount. Only the slow rise and fall of his chest gave any indication that he was alive. Beneath his head, the desert sand was seeping up blood from the wound to his temple where a half-hidden rock had connected hard.

Overhead, a lone buzzard lazily circled, keeping a keen watch on the still forms far below. By the time it started its descent, was joined by others of its species, the noon sun was high overhead, the relentless rays beating down with mercilessness that turned the shifting sands hotter still.

The first buzzard landed on the horse's bloated side, pecked inquisitively at the shaft of wood buried in the sleek black coat. The quarrel did not move in the corpse and the taste had not proved enticing to the bird. It ducked its ugly black neck and drove its sharp beak into the horse's body.

Another bird hopped to the smaller form, partially covered by the blowing sands of the early morning, and pecked at the bare foot poking out. A groan and a flinch made the bird flap away, peering back at the human source of food with annoyance.

Conar groaned again, his lids fluttered, then opened slowly. He had trouble focusing for his vision was blurred, his head throbbing like the inside of a bass drum. He tried to lift his head and couldn't, nausea leaping immediately to his notice.

"Damn," he whispered, feeling something wet beneath his temple and cheek. He shifted in the sand, most of it falling away from his back and rump, and brought his right hand up slowly to poke at the pain in his head. He felt a stickiness on his fingertips and knew he must be bleeding.

Gently, with a great deal of grunting and groaning, he managed to push his upper body off the sand, shook his hair free of the cascading intrusion. He had to squeeze his eyes shut to still the godawful pounding behind his right eye that movement brought, but when he opened them again, his vision had cleared somewhat. He put his hand up to his temple and then looked at it. His fingertips were covered with blood.

"Shit," he breathed, pushing himself further up off the sand.

The first thing he noticed as he looked in front of him was the vast sweep of limitless sand. He frowned. Shifting his gaze to either side of him with a great deal of effort, he found the same infinite span of nothingness.

"Where the hell am I?" he asked, gathering enough strength to flip himself over to look behind him. What he saw made his face turned pale.

There was nothing there but boundless sand, wavering heat, the bloated, stinking corpse of a horse and five of the ugliest birds he's ever seen.

"Shit," he exhaled with amazement. He scanned the vista before him, unable to believe what he was seeing. "Where the hell is the water?" He looked all around him, confused even more. "Where the hell is the damned ship?"

Bits and pieces of what had happened to him over the last three days came back to him as he came unsteadily to his feet: being stabbed (he pulled up his shirt and felt the bandage to make sure the thing was real); being thrown overboard (he felt the back of his head and found the lump still there); being shackled hand and foot and sold; his escape; the blond warrior who had saved his life.

"Chase?" he whispered. His brows drew together in a deep scowl. "No, it couldn't have been."

A buzzard hopped toward him, its beady gaze intent.

He reached down and picked up the stone that had nearly caved in his head and threw it at the offending bird, setting the squawking, flapping thing into motion. His actions brought fresh nausea and pain, but at least the scavengers were keeping their distance, eying him as though he were the dessert after the main course.

"Sweet Alel," he said, looking around him.

He had no idea where he was; where he should go; how he was to survive out there in the sand.

"You did it once before when you escaped your captors. In the Labyrinth," that intruding, aggravating inner voice reminded him.

"Shut up," he snapped, hating that voice more than ever. Glancing up at the hot, brilliant sun directly overhead, he shook his head. "What now, asshole?" he asked himself.

The sweep of the sand seemed infinite to him. In all directions, unbroken by any kind of growth, the broad expanse of the dazzling landscape served only to overwhelm him. He stood there, his shoulders slumped, wondering which way he should go. There were no landmarks that indicated direction. No tracks around him.

"Wind," he thought, "the wind has obscured the hoof prints."

He turned to his left, to his right, looked behind him and sighed. There was only one thing to do.

He put one foot ahead of the other and stumbled away from the dead horse.

CHAPTER TWO

“Sajin?” Peter asked as he rapped once more on the Kensetti Prince’s door. “Are you in there?”

Sajin opened the door and the smile died on his lips. “What’s wrong?”

“There is someone I think you need to speak with,” the younger man answered. “Can you meet me in the stables in half an hour?”

Sajin nodded. “Have you heard something about Conar?”

Peter shook his head. “No, but this pertains to him. Thirty minutes?”

Sajin agreed and shut the door, hurrying to finish dressing. He wondered what was so important that the heir to the Outer Kingdom throne would come to his room so early.

Thirty minutes later Sajin entered the stable to find Peter, Mikel, Yuri and an Inner Kingdom man standing together outside one of the stalls.

“What’s happened?” he asked.

“Prince Sajin,” Peter said, introducing him to the unknown man, “this is Azalon. He is one of the traders we allow to cross into our country from the Inner Kingdom. He has something to say I think you might want to hear.”

Sajin inclined his head to the man who gave him the time-honored form of greeting and obeisance. “From where do you come, Azalon?”

“I am Rysalian, Highness,” Azalon answered. “From Asaraba.”

“Azalon arrived here the day you left for Kensett,” Mikel explained.

“I came to see if the Serenian Prince’s man had found him,” Azalon agreed.

Sajin’s forehead puckered. “Conar McGregor’s man?”

“I believe his name was Storm Jale, Highness,” Azalon answered. “The captain of the ship on which he arrived is a cousin of mine. He sent word the Serenian was looking for a guide to take him to the Outer Kingdom.” He smiled ruefully. “I went to the young man to offer my services and he accepted, providing he could not find an earlier expedition into St. Steffensburg.”

“Azalon told the man his would be the only caravan leaving Asaraba,” Peter said.

“He seemed very much in a hurry to reach here,” the Inner Kingdom trader put in. “I gave him the address of an inn at which to stay, it is owned by another cousin of mine.” A sharp, angry look came over the man’s dark face. “A mistake I shall not make again.”

“What do you mean?” Yuri asked, speaking for the first time.

Azalon looked embarrassed. “It seems I have reason to question my cousin’s honesty,” he answered. “When I went to the inn on the morning my caravan was to leave, my cousin tells me the Serenian has already departed for the Outer Kingdom.” His frown deepened. “I should have paid heed to the warning inside my brain at those words, but I was in a hurry to reach St. Steffensburg before the Khamsin set in.”

Sajin felt a prickle of unease beginning to form. “And when you got here, there was no trace of the Serenian.”

Azalon shook his head. “I asked around, expecting to perhaps see the man again and have a meal with him.” He looked into Sajin’s eyes. “The man is Kensetti, Highness, but he lives in Serenia, now.”

The prickle of unease turned to a stab of fear. “Do you think something happened to him in Asaraba?”

"He was probably sold to a slaver," Yuri ground out. He stared hard at Sajin. "I know Storm Jale, Your Grace. This is not a man given to wondering off. If he did not reach St. Steffensburg, something, or someone, prevented him from doing so. He is devoted to Conar McGregor."

"This cousin of yours," Sajin snapped, "where can he be found?"

"You are going to speak with him, Highness?" Azalon asked.

"Yes," came the snarled reply. "And more than that if his answers do not suit me!"

"I will go with you," Yuri pronounced. "There may be more to this than we expect."

With a start, Sajin turned to look at the man. "You don't think Conar could be alive, do you?"

"And in the hands of a slaver?" Mikel asked, shocked.

"Anything is possible where Conar McGregor is concerned," Yuri stated. "If someone did try to kill him, they would have had to use his own weapon to do so else the wound would not have been fatal."

"This man," Azalon put in, "the Serenian Prince? He is a magi?"

Yuri nodded. "One of the best."

Azalon shook his head. "But his magic would be useless in Rysalia."

"He wasn't IN Rysalia when he disappeared," Sajin growled. "He was at sea."

"And he who loves the sea, is loved by the sea'," Yuri quoted.

Sajin nodded. "How soon can we leave?" he asked Yuri

"I will escort you," Azalon declared. At the others' protests, he held up his hand. "I feel responsible."

An hour later, much to Sybelle's fury, Sajin Ben-Alkazar and Yuri Andreanova rode out of St. Steffensburg with Azalon.

* * * *

My god, he thought as he stumbled. It is hot. So hot. Hotter than anything he had ever experienced before. The very bowels of the Abyss could not be as hot as the shifting, sucking sands beneath his bare feet. He could no longer feel the pain of that heat on his soles. He had long since forced himself to ignore the agony of that. If he was to keep moving, plowing hopelessly through the unrelenting heat, he could not allow even the hint of pain to capture his attention.

The thirst was bad, he thought. It was draining him, burning his throat, making his head throb with need. There was no longer even any spittle in his dry mouth. He felt as though he were shriveling inside, drying up, and that soon he would implode for lack of moisture within him.

He stopped, drawing his arm over his sweating face, weaving weakly as he did. His flesh felt tight, drawn, and he knew his skin was burning beneath the steady onslaught of the sun's unrelenting rays. His tongue felt swollen, his lips were cracked, and his vision was beginning to play games with me. Dancing, shimmering pools of water would suddenly appear in front of him, but he knew they weren't really there.

It was difficult to breathe in this ungodly heat and just the act of drawing the overheated air into his lungs was an effort. He was breathing as slowly as his exertion would allow, but still there was not enough oxygen getting into his lungs.

He was beginning to feel lightheaded and his eyes were aching from the brightness glancing off the hot desert sands. If the glare did not soon blind him, it would be a miracle.

"Caw!"

He looked up, squinting against the harsh light and saw the buzzard circling again, trailing him as it had been for several hours.

"I ain't dead yet, you motherless bastard," he said, shuddering at the horrible death that creature promised. All it would take was for him to stumble, to fall, and not be able to get back up. The bird, and its mates, would descend on him and tear him apart while he still lived, unable to fight them off.

The thought chilled him and made it possible for him to move forward again, wading through the sand with waning strength and the great desire to lie down and give in to the death that surely awaited him here in this vast expanse of nothingness.

He did stumble now and again, going down and quickly pushing himself up again to move on. But the stumbles were coming closer together, the getting up time taking longer. Soon, he knew, he'd go down for the last time and he would meet his destiny alone in a place where no one would ever know. His bones would be picked clean and he would be just like so many other skeletons he had passed in this hell: nameless and forgotten.

"Caw! Caws!"

"Lie down, Conar, and let it be done," the hideous creature seemed to be telling him.

"Go away," he sighed, swinging his arm behind him in negation of the predator's demand.

He trekked on into the heartless heat for another hour before he stumbled for the last time, giving up, giving in. He heard the sickening pop as he went down, but he just didn't give a damn. He crashed to the white-hot sands, wincing as he did, feeling the heat of scorching his cheek, but unable to make himself get up. Unable to go on. Unable to take one more step.

He lay that way for a moment, his cheek against the sand, staring out over the desert, his exhausted breathing loud in the stillness, his lungs baking inside his chest as he drew in shallow bursts of suffocating heat.

"What's the use?" the buzzard called down to him. "I'll get you in the end."

He closed his eyes, thinking about the hopelessness of his situation, trying to decide if it were worth the effort to attempt getting up, made up his mind that it wasn't.

"Let it be over," he thought he heard the buzzard say. "Give yourself up to me. I have young to feed."

He flipped over to his back, gasping with the pain, and glanced up briefly at the sun that was starting its slow descent down through the blue, blue incandescent sky. The buzzard crossed his vision and re-crossed it: waiting, watching, eager.

"It won't be long now, you ugly bastard," he told it.

He turned his head and looked out over the sparkling sands. There was nothing for him to look at, to focus on. Not even a bone sticking up out of the sand. He thought if he had something to concentrate on, he might well be able to put himself into a trance that would deny the agony that he knew was coming for him.

Who would have guessed, he thought with some regret, that it would end like this?

"Caw!"

The creature circled, landed a few feet away from him. It stared curiously at him for a moment, then hopped closer.

"Are you ready, Conar?"

It will go for your eyes, first, Conar, he told himself, but the certainty of that didn't seem to matter. He watched it hop closer still, staring into its beady, deadly little eyes with impassive attention.

"Caw."

"Yeah, right," he whispered, closing his eyes, not wanting to watch the scavenger coming for him.

“Caw?”

He brought his hands up and covered his face, wanting to cry, wanting to sob out his hopelessness, but there was no moisture left in his body. Everything was gone. All gone. His body shook once, twice, and then his hands fell away to lay beside his head and he stared blindly up into the cooling sky, awaiting his fate.

“It won’t take long, Conar,” the bird assured him. “I’ll be as gentle as I can when I take your life.”

“Get it over with,” he sighed.

He would never know if it was the sound that caught his attention or the smell. Or both. Laughter drifted to him on a stagnant blast of heated air and then the pungent odor of camel flesh. He thought it was just another figment of his imagination.

“Caw!” the buzzard spat at him and jumped up on his left thigh, bringing a yelp of pain from his bleeding lips. It stared down at him as if daring him to fight back.

“What are you waiting for, an invitation to lunch?” he chuckled mirthlessly. “Well, then, have at it.”

The laughter came again, as did the sound of harnesses rattling. A woman’s voice called out, a man’s answered, and there was more laughter.

Conar turned his head slowly in the direction from which the sound had come, paying scant attention to the bird as it lowered its scrawny neck. It pecked at his shirt, hitting the sore spot below his navel where the dagger had entered. He yelped with the pain and drew his right leg up, causing the bird to flap away in irate flutters of his wide wing span.

That smell: camel flesh and camel dung wafted under his nose and he sniffed. Mirages were in the mind, he reasoned, but that scent was real. It poured over him, making his nostrils quiver, and somehow re-awakened in him a desire to live.

Just as he would never know what had brought him back from the deadly quagmire into which he had allowed himself to sink, he would not know from what inner reserve he drew the strength to turn over, lying there for what seemed like an eternity before gathering the strength to push himself up.

He found he could get no higher than his all fours, but that was enough. He began to crawl, dragging his left leg behind him, pulling himself forward on his elbows, his chest dragging against the hot sand as his right leg maneuvered him toward the sound of laughter and hope.

* * * *

All talk ceased as the child yelled out. Heads turned and looked in the direction the boy pointed. “What is it?” the adults asked while the children ran toward the apparition that had appeared out of nowhere.

Balizar, their leader, walked more sedately toward the group that had gathered. He gently, insistently pushed his way through them and then stood, just as they did, and stared down in wonder at the man lying in the sand.

“Where did he come from?” Asher Stone asked, looking up to Balizar for guidance.

“He is an Outlander,” one of the women said. “Look at his hair.”

“Is he dead?” someone else asked.

Balizar squatted down beside the unconscious man and put a hesitant hand on the sweaty column of the man’s throat. He shook his head. “He’s alive, but just barely.”

He glanced around him and found Asher’s concerned gaze. “Help me lift him.”

Rachel Stone was only a few feet away from the man on the ground and she saw his eyelids flutter open. “He’s awake, Asher,” she told her brother.

He felt hands on him, lifting him gently. He couldn't seem to control his body; his left leg felt crippled.

"Easy, son," he heard a familiar voice telling him. "I think your leg may be broken."

He grunted with pain as he was shifted. Every step they took with him was a jarring, white-hot agony through his hip and side and he moaned, sagging down between the two sets of hands holding him. His legs buckled under him and he felt the man on his left take his full weight against him.

"Let me have him, Asher," that familiar voice said and Conar felt himself being lifted into a pair of strong, secure arms.

"Take him to our tent," a woman called out.

He was so weak, so hungry, so thirsty, he was beginning to see things. He stared up at the man holding him, seeing what could not possibly be. He found a gentle blue gaze glancing down at him, saw a white grin form on the man's mouth.

"You're going to be all right, son," the familiar voice assured him. "I'm going to see personally to that."

That face, that dear face looking down at him, overrode the pain in his leg and the hunger and the thirst and the terrible weakness that strove to claim him. He stared up into that beloved face, trying hard to understand where? how? when?

"Am I dead?" he asked in a brittle, evaporated croak.

That familiar laugh: booming, dearly loved, highly entertained by the question, barked out of the man. "Nay, son," he answered, chuckling. "I may look like an angel to you, but I can assure you I am not!"

The sun skipped away and heavy canvas appeared above him. Coolness, shadowy coolness, blocked out the deadly rays.

He gasped, loosing consciousness for a moment as he was laid down on a soft, cool mattress that smelled strongly of lavender. He clenched his teeth to keep from crying out and found himself gawking at that wonderful face as it hovered over him.

"That leg's broken, son. It's going to have to be set."

He could do nothing more than stare as the man moved out of his line of vision and another face, dearly loved, wonderfully there, loomed over him with a gentle smile.

"I will give you something to make you sleep, milord," she said and put her cool hand behind his neck to lift his head. "Here. Drink this. All of it."

He let the potion ease down his throat, too amazed to do anything else. He swallowed, licking his dry lips, not even minding the awful taste the potion had brought to his mouth. Almost instantly, a numbing fog began to encase his overheated brain. She gently lowered his head and smiled down at him, reaching out to smooth away a sweat-soaked fall of hair falling over his forehead.

"The potion will help," she told him, her fingers moving from his forehead to his cheek to caress him.

He stared up at her through the wavering focus of his vision, her lovely face skidding away, coming back for just an instant, then lurching away again. He tried hard to keep that wonderful visage in check, but the numbness kept chasing it away again.

"Can you brace him, Balizar?" a man asked.

He tried to raise his head, wanted to see the man who had gone to the head of the bed and moved in behind him, sitting down on the mattress with great care and who lifted his sagging body

against a firm, hard-as-rock chest, but he was unable. He opened his mouth to speak, but his lips were so parched, his throat so dry, only a moan of helplessness came out.

"The boy's near dead," the man Conar reckoned to be a healer spoke as his hands moved knowingly over Conar's left leg.

"Damned pitiful sight he was lying out there," that familiar voice answered.

He couldn't help them, he thought. He felt cold and clammy, his body was beginning to tremble and he flinched as the woman bent over him and put a hand to his forehead. He stared up at her with pleading eyes. "Help me, lady," he heard himself beg.

"He's got a raging fever," she said.

"It's the heat," the man holding him informed her. "I've seen it before."

Aye, Conar thought. That you have.

"Keep a tight hold on him, Balizar," the healer said.

The bone shifted and he screamed, feeling the pain of it all the way to his toes. He passed out for a second, came around almost immediately, then passed out again, or so he thought, but he could hear them discussing him.

"He's burned nearly raw. Must have been out there a good long time."

"Long enough to set his foot on death's doorstep," the familiar bass voice spoke. He chuckled and Conar could feel the rumble in his chest. "But the boy's got spunk, don't he?"

"Spunk can get you killed in Rysalia," the woman said.

Conar's heart ceased to beat. Rysalia? Was that where he was? He had almost forgotten. Sweet Merciful Ale! He was among his worst enemies. The thought pushed him over the edge into unconsciousness once more.

* * * *

Balizar ate his food with little or no relish. There was something about their visitor, that young man lying inside Asher's tent, that worried him.

"Who do you think he is?" Asher asked.

"I have no idea."

"Did you see his back?"

Balizar nodded, chewing thoughtfully. "My guess is he's a runaway." He sopped up a puddle of gravy with his bread then plopped it in his mouth. "Whoever owned him did not treat him well."

"Maybe he did something to deserve the beating," Rupine, the physician interjected.

"No man deserves being beaten like that," Balizar snarled and tossed his tin plate down. "Animals don't even deserve to be beaten like that boy was."

"He said the strangest thing to me," Rachel said as she picked up Balizar's plate. She looked at their leader. "He asked where I had been."

"He seems to know you, too, Balizar," Asher remarked. "Did you see the way he kept staring at you?"

Balizar had. He scowled heavily. "I need to talk to him as soon as he wakes." He got up and dusted off his djebella. "Have someone come get me as soon as he does."

Asher helped his sister wash their plates, scrape the scraps into a pan. "Something is bothering him."

"The man in the tent is a countryman of Balizar's," Rachel reminded him. "Every time he sees an Outlander, he gets this way, Asher."

"This one is different, Rachel," her brother said. He looked toward their tent. "This one is trouble."

"I need to apply some more aloe cream to his burns," she remarked. "Will you help me?"

Asher nodded. "Does he seem familiar to you, Rachel?"

Rachel shrugged. "He looks like--"

"Asher?" Balizar called out from the flap of his own tent.

"Yes?"

"Ask him no questions until I have had a chance to speak with him." He ducked back inside his tent.

"Why would he ask that?" Asher inquired.

"He has his reasons," the physician answered. "I would do as he says if I were you, Asher Stone."

* * * *

His head hurt and he was feverish, but he didn't think the Labyrinthian fever had come calling again. He put his hand up and wiped at his face, found sweat and pain, burning pain at his fingertips.

"You've got a mighty sunburn, son."

He turned his head and found that beloved face looking down at him. He smiled, wincing as his bleeding lips cracked open.

"I had the most awful dream," he said. "I dreamt you had died."

Balizar stared at him for a good long while until he could see uncertain'ty forming on the young man's face.

"Who am I, son?" the man asked.

"Hern," Conar answered. "I might have been out in that heat a goodly time, but I do know who you are."

Balizar shook his head. "I am Balizar Arbra. Hern was my brother; he's dead."

Pain, terrible, blinding, crushing pain settled on his chest and he drew in a hitching breath. "Oh, god," he whispered, turning his head away. "I should have known it was too good to be true."

There had been such devastation on that reddened face, Balizar thought, there had to have been great affection between this boy and his brother.

"You knew Hern, did you?" he asked in a gentle voice.

Conar nodded, too grieved to do anything else.

"I had heard he died. Do you know how?"

He didn't want to look back around, to see that dearly loved face that was a carbon copy of Hern's, that had set him to thinking his dreams, no, his nightmares, had been just that.

"Son? Do you know how my brother met his end?"

And the voice! Exactly like Hern's: deep, just a touch of a lisp about it, an odd accent that Conar had never been able to identify. He didn't want to hear that voice that cut him so deeply. He wanted to put his hands over his ears and shut out the sound.

"Was he a friend of yours?"

A friend? Conar thought, tears welling. He had been like a father to me. I loved the man.

"I haven't seen Hern in forty years, but he was flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood. I still care deeply for him." Conar felt the man's strong hand on his arm. "Anything you can tell me of him, son, will be most welcome."

He gathered his courage and turned his head back around on the pillow. That face, that face he never thought to see again this side of paradise, was looking down at him with such gentleness, such encouragement, so like Hern's expression of love, he wanted to scream.

"He was dear to you, too, wasn't he, son?" Balizar asked quietly, seeing the naked pain in the young man's face.

Conar nodded. "I loved him."

Balizar heard and recognized the great sorrow in the quivering voice. "Can you tell me how he died?"

He searched that wonderful face, drawing in comfort from the wrinkles, wondering what young poggleheaded warrior had put them there. His lips trembled as he answered.

"He died in my arms."

Balizar sucked in a long breath. "In the Labyrinth? That is where I am told he died."

"One of the guards--" Conar squeezed his lids shut.

"Cut his throat," Balizar finished. "I heard that much. I just don't know why."

To protect me, Conar thought with heart-felt guilt, but how did he tell the man that without revealing his own identity. He didn't think he knew and when Balizar asked his name, he was sure of it.

"There was no identification on you," Balizar said, asking once more what his name was.

He said the first thing that came into his mind. "Khamsin." He thanked Sabrina, wherever she was, for putting that name on his lips.

"A good Kensetti name," Balizar pronounced and saw a flare of surprise enter the man's strange eyes. "Is that where you have been living since escaping that hellhole they called the Labyrinth?" He narrowed his gaze at the look of shock on the young man's face. "You are one with the Darkwind." He pointed to the tattoo on the back of Conar's sword hand. "I've seen that symbol a few times over the years. All the men of the Wind Force have it."

"Here?" Conar asked, surprised, alarmed that the man knew the symbol. "You've seen our men here?"

Balizar shook his head. "In other ports where I took runaways."

Conar's brows came together. "Runaways. You mean slaves?"

"We have an underground here in Rysalia. We get runaways to safety outside the Inner Kingdom. The Darkwind's men have aided us on more than one occasion."

"Balizar, let him rest," a woman said and Conar turned his head, stunned once more to find himself looking into another dearly longed-for face.

"This is Rachel," Balizar explained. "It is her brother's tent in which you lie." He held out his hand and the young woman took it. "She has been caring for you."

She smiled down at him. "You are feeling better?" He could not have explained the irrational fury that gripped him as he glared up into those emerald green eyes, inhaled the sweet fragrance of lavender, and found his gaze glued to the sleek, glossy black mane of hip length black hair that hung down the woman's slim back. As let down as he had been to find it was not Hern that was before him, he was that enraged that it was not Liza, his beloved wife, who hovered over him now, looking down at him with confusion as he tore his gaze from her.

"Get her out of here," he said, refusing to look up at the woman again.

Balizar's eyebrow shot upward. What kind of reaction was this? he thought. He glanced up at Rachel and saw the hurt on her face. "Will you wait outside, sweeting?" he asked and saw the man on the bed flinch as though hot embers had been applied to his chest.

Rachel looked at Balizar and then turned to leave. She had not been prepared for the hot look of hate that had shone her way when only the day before the stranger had looked at her with something akin to love. In his delirium as she and Asher had applied cooling balm to his sunburned flesh, he had held onto to her hand and kissed it, begging her not to leave him.

“Does Rachel remind you of someone, too?” Balizar asked. That could be the only explanation for the hurt that had now settled on their visitor’s face

“Keep her away from me,” Conar ground out.

“It is her tent in which--”

“Keep her the hell away from me, Balizar!” Conar yelled, drawing everyone’s attention in the camp and causing heads to turn toward Asher’s tent. “You owe me that much!”

“All right,” Balizar said in a reasonable voice. He searched the enraged eyes of the man on the bed. “If that is your wish.”

“It is!”

Later that evening, Balizar shrugged in answer to Asher’s query of concern. “I have no idea why he reacted as he did. It was almost as though he despised your sister.”

“Who is he, Balizar?” Rupine, the physician asked. “Did you find out?”

Balizar poked a stick into the campfire. “I have my suspicions, but I would rather not say until I am sure.”

“Is he a danger to us?” one of the other men asked.

“I think not,” Balizar answered. “He may even be the answer to all our prayers.”

Rachel sat quietly in the shadows and listened to the men talking. Now and then she turned to look at the tent where the man named Khamsin slept.

“Why do you hate me, Khamsin?” she asked, feeling the depth of that dislike to her very soul.

Her heart, so carefully kept to herself, had gone out to the one called Khamsin. His scarred cheek and ravaged back had touched her deeply in a place she had thought never to feel again. As he had gripped her hand, pressing his cracked lips to them, she had felt a longing that she had feared never to experience again. That he had obviously rejected her when coming to his full senses, made Rachel’s soul ache.

“Who hurt you so, milord?” she asked the darkened tent. “What woman caused you such terrible pain?”

* * * *

He could still smell the lavender and it made him sick. If he had been able, he would have gotten up and walked out of the tent where everything in it reminded him of the green-eyed vixen that had been placed on earth to torment him.

How could you, Alel? he seethed.

He turned over, burying his face in the coolness of his pillow. His fingers dug into the softness of the fabric and he growled, the muffled sound doing nothing to relieve his anger.

Punishment, he thought. It was another punishment from the gods. Just one more torment to drive him mad.

And you aren’t far from it, Conar, he heard that inner voice telling him.

He flung himself over and threw the pillow as hard as he could across the length of the tent.

“Damn you!” he spat, seeing her face before him. “Damn you to the Abyss!”

It was unreasonable. He knew that. His reaction to her was worse than churlish. It was uncivil. The woman couldn’t help looking like Liza. No more than he could help the resemblance between him and his sons, Wyn and Tris. It was a quirk of fate, a twist of nature, that had caused it, nothing more. And yet for some inexplicable reason, he viewed it as a personal affront. Another attempt to destroy him.

“I won’t let you do it,” he spoke, whether to his gods or to the woman he was thinking of, he wasn’t sure.

Either way, he meant to stay as far away from Rachel Stone as he could get!

CHAPTER THREE

“How long did you know Hern?” Balizar asked as he adjusted the pillows behind Conar’s back.

“All my life,” Conar answered and could have bitten his tongue.

“So you grew up in Boreas,” Balizar said, pretending he had not heard the slip.

“Aye,” was the stiff reply.

“Did you train at the keep with my brother?”

He saw no reason to try to lie if he could help it. Lies had never set well with him and he didn’t tell them very effectively on the few occasions he had attempted to do so, which had been rare, indeed.

“He was Master-of-Arms at Boreas Keep,” he answered. “Hern trained all the Elite.”

Balizar nodded. “And were you an Elite?”

He’d almost fallen into a trap he didn’t even realize had been set. “No.”

Balizar studied his face and knew that was the truth. He sat down on a small stool and propped his chin in his hand, a habit he had no idea hurt Conar for it was identical to one Hern had had whenever he felt the need to question his young protégé.

“I heard he was quite a lady’s man,” Balizar wagged his thick white brows. “A trait that runs in the family.”

Conar smiled, fondly remembering the many conquests of which Hern had bragged. “He had his share of company.”

“He never married, though,” Conar said.

“Neither have I,” Balizar announced. “Presumably the same trait runs through the family in that regard, as well.” He smiled. “Did he leave behind a niece or nephew for me, though?”

Conar shook his head. “Not that I know of, but he loved children. That much, I do know. If he’d given a woman a child, Hern would have told the world, had he known of it.”

“He loved the little Princes like they were his own,” Balizar remarked. “He often wrote to me of them when we were still in contact with one another.”

It was on the tip of Conar’s tongue to ask how Hern had felt about one young Prince in particular, but he didn’t think that was wise and the man sitting beside him would certainly wonder why he’d ask such a question.

“Did he ever get after you when you were little?” Balizar asked. At the strange look on his companion’s face, he shrugged. “If you were around him when you were a boy, I would imagine you’d have run afoul of him at some point.”

Did I ever? Conar thought with fondness, but he didn’t dare tell Balizar that.

“Come now,” Balizar pressed. “You have a look in your eye that says you did something that Hern wasn’t too pleased about.” He leaned forward. “Tell me!”

After a moment’s hesitation, he saw no reason not to. What he had remembered was certainly not incriminating.

“You gonna tell me or keep me guessing?”

Conar laughed. “It was when I was about four or five, I think. My mother was punishing me for something I’d done and wouldn’t allow me to go into town with her.” He ducked his head. “I badgered Hern, though, and he talked to her, told her he’d watch me if she’d let me go along.”

"Your mother was one of Hern's women, then?" Balizar asked, his gaze intent on the young man's face.

"No!" came the too-quick reply. He saw the look of interest on Balizar's face and shook his head. "My mother worked at the keep."

That wasn't exactly a lie, Conar realized. His mother DID work at the keep. She did sewing, gardening, some writing.

"All right. We've established they were no more than friends, then," Balizar said, but was damned sure it had been more than that. The young man's face said as much.

"My mother warned Hern that I wasn't to be given any special treatment when we went to town," Conar said, wanting to put the thought of Hern and his mother out of Balizar's mind, but he realized how that must have sounded and tried to cover it up. "You know: no treats or the like."

"No toys," Balizar laughed.

"Aye," was the relieved reply.

"But you meant to make sure that wasn't the case, eh?"

Conar grinned. "I waited until Mama was on the other side of the street, busy with a shopkeeper, and I ran to a candy seller's stall and started pleading with Hern to buy me some chocolates."

"You like chocolates, I take it?" At the young man's quick nod, Balizar smiled. "So did Hern, as I remember. Did he buy them for you?"

"Are you kidding? He told me to shut my trap or he'd put me to peeling spuds when he got my ass back to the keep." Conar chuckled, remembering the look Hern had given him and the intimidating words.

"Knock it off, Conar!" Hern had growled. "You know you ain't gettin' nothin'! Quit your pestering, boy!"

"But you got the chocolates anyway," Balizar predicted.

"The hell I did!" Conar answered. His face was glowing as he remembered. "The more I asked for the chocolates, the more Hern told me no. People started looking at us, even my mother, who was not happy, I can tell you."

"She bought you the chocolates to shut you up," Balizar chuckled.

"She pretended like she didn't know me."

Balizar could see the little boy, probably jumping up and down, making a nuisance of himself, thinking he'd get what he wanted if he kept it up long enough. "What happened?"

"Hern bent down and grabbed my arm, shook me until my teeth rattled. He told me if I didn't be quiet, he'd whip me." He chuckled. "I knew better than that. So I just got louder and louder, yelling that I had never had candy before and just wanted to try it."

"You didn't!" Balizar gasped. "Hern must have been mortified."

"Hern was livid!" Conar answered. "It was while I was crying that I had never had no candy that he bent over and gave me the hardest swat he could." That hit had been hard enough to shut him up and make him stare at the tall man with absolute terror even though the swat hadn't hurt.

"He really spanked you?" Balizar asked, picturing his brother doing just that.

"Aye, he did. Just two hits, but it was so unlike Hern, I didn't dare give him another reason to put his hand on my ass."

"Did your mother approve?"

"I heard her tell the shopkeeper some children needed to be reminded of their stations in life."

“And you behaved after that,” Balizar chuckled.

“You better believe I did,” Conar answered. “Hern took me back to the coach and plopped my scrawny little butt inside, letting me know by that fierce scowl of his that I had best behave. He stayed there with me, edgy as hell for having to do so, until Mama had finished her shopping then he drove us back to the keep. He didn’t have two words to say to me all the rest of the week, but then on that next Saturday, when Mama was going back into town, he came to ask if I wanted to tag along. IF I could behave.”

“Hern was nothing if not putty with those he loved,” Balizar commented. “Did he love you, son?”

Conar looked away. “I think he cared for me.”

“Did he care for your mother?”

There was only a slight flinch before the young man answered. “I believe so.”

“Hern was a good man,” Balizar sighed. He ached to put his arm around his companion.

Conar met his gaze. “He was a gallant fighter, a champion to those he found worthy.”

Arbra nodded. “I know he was devoted to his King.”

“Aye,” Conar said quietly. “They were the best of friends. So much alike it was uncanny at times. It must have been the royal blood running through Hern’s veins.”

Balizar looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“Once when he was one of the King’s Elite? Well, actually the king was still a prince back then, Hern saved young Gerren’s life by taking a quarrel meant for the Prince. Did you not know that?” Balizar said he had not. “Hern almost died. It was the young prince’s blood that saved him, transfused into his body from the prince’s.”

Balizar whistled. “The young Prince must have cared as deeply for Hern as Hern did for him.”

“He did,” Conar answered. “Gerren said the transfusion had made them bloodbrothers. Hern always joked about having my father’s blood--“

Balizar saw the young man’s face suddenly pale, his eyes go wide as he realized his mistake. He stared up at Balizar, the knowledge of his error stamped plainly on his fearful face.

There was a long moment of utter stillness in the tent as those alien sapphire orbs searched Balizar’s face for the depth of betrayal that might be lurking there.

“I did not hear you say that,” Balizar said, getting slowly to his feet. He let out a long breath. “I thought you well might be one of my nephews, Hern did have two sons.” Conar stared at him. “Aye,” Balizar assured him, nodding. “Reis and Calais, both as blond and fair-skinned as you.”

“How do you know that?” Conar questioned, stunned by the revelation, wondering why Hern had never mentioned he had sons.

“I don’t think the lady ever told him,” Balizar answered. “She left him before she started showing. She came here to me, had the boys one night, disappeared the next morning.” He looked away. “I haven’t seen them since nor heard anything of them.”

Conar’s brain was reeling with the information. It had overshadowed his stupid mistake in allowing Balizar to know who he really was.

“I would not have imagined in a million years you were one of the young Princes of my homeland,” Balizar said quietly.

Conar flinched.

“Your secret is safe with me, Highness,” Balizar declared. “On Hern’s grave I swear it is!”

“He is buried just outside Ciona,” Conar mumbled. “We brought him home from the Labyrinth to lay him to rest in Serenian soil.”

Balizar felt tears forming and he did not want to unman himself before the rightful heir to the Serenian throne. He ducked his head. “I’ll let you rest, Highness.” Before Conar could stop him, Hern’s brother hurried from the tent.

Conar sat perfectly still after the man had gone. He could hear him talking outside to someone, but he couldn’t hear the words. He didn’t think the man was betraying him, although he couldn’t be sure. Revealing what he had could very well have signed his death warrant or his future onto another auction block.

“Did you find out anything?” Asher asked, worried at the look on his leader’s face. When Balizar had come out of the tent, he was crying.

Balizar stared off into the distance. “More than I had any right to know.”

“Is he who you thought he was?” Rupine asked.

Balizar shook his head. “Not in a million years.” He swiped at a tear.

“Can he be trusted?” Asher asked.

Balizar slowly nodded. “Aye. He can.” He continued to stare across the miles of boundless sand. “More than any man alive.”

“Did he tell you his name?” Rupine asked.

“Khamsin,” Balizar told them without hesitation. “He is Khamsin.”

“That is his real name, then?” Asher demanded.

“Aye.”

And it was, Balizar thought. Khamsin. Conar. What difference did it make? The man inside the tent was the Prince of the Wind.

And he had been sent to help them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conar looked up as the woman entered the tent. He clenched his jaw, glaring at her bent head as she avoided his gaze and went to a trunk to take out clothing. She did not speak to him, had not since his outburst earlier that morning although she had seemed to find plenty of reason to come into the tent during the day. This last appearance was the final straw.

"Either have me put in another tent or get your damned things out of here, woman. I'm tired of having to look at you," he snapped, his eyes flaring as she turned to stare at him.

Rachel's face flamed and she hastily looked away, straightening up with her brother's djebella clutched tightly to her breast.

"I do not know what I have done to offend you, milord," she said in a soft voice, "but I offer you my most humble apology."

Conar squinted at her. "Your ass on the way out is the only apology I wish to see!"

She bowed her head. "I will not enter again without your permission."

"*That* will never happen!" he ground out.

Balizar ducked under the tent flap, frowning at the heavy atmosphere inside as he glanced at Rachel's embarrassed face and Conar's set one. "Is something amiss?" he asked.

"I want her out of here," Conar snapped.

Rachel met Balizar's look for only a moment before hurrying away.

"Was that necessary, Highness?" Balizar asked.

"Don't call me that," Conar grumbled.

A scarlet infusion sped over Balizar's face. "You're right, of course. I forgot." He came to stand by the bed. "How is your leg?"

"It hurts," came the grudging reply. He cocked his head to the stool beside the bed. "Sit. All the company I've had today is that woman and that is company I don't wish to have."

Balizar brought the stool over and sat down. "I have not told anyone who you are," he said, watching as relief settled over the young man's features. "I didn't think you'd want me to do so."

Conar looked hard at him. "There are those who would pay a great deal to know where I am."

"You are as safe here as you would be if you were at Boreas."

A snort of derision shot from Conar. "Boreas hasn't always been all that safe for me, Balizar."

"I suppose that is true," Balizar agreed. He shrugged. "But you will come to no harm here. That, I swear to you. I don't know how you wound up with us, but I believe you were sent," Balizar told him. "We can protect you, Lord Khamsin."

"And in return?" Conar asked. "What do you want from me?"

Surprise flitted across Balizar's face. "I don't understand."

Conar shrugged. "I'm in no condition to leave this place. With my leg broken, I am at your mercy. You could turn me over to my enemies at any time and I would not be able to stop you."

Balizar scowled. "That is not our intent. Why would we allow your enemies to take you when we believe you are the answer to our prayers?"

It was Conar's turn to be surprised. "How so?"

Balizar folded his arms over his chest. "We have enemies of our own, milord. Powerful enemies that hound us much as the Domination has hounded you all these years. If they were to

ever catch us, we wouldn't even be given the charade of a trial as you were. We'd be snuffed out in the twinkling of an eye."

A thick blond brow arched. "And what have you and your people done to warrant such annihilation?"

"What did you do to warrant having the flesh stripped from your back?" Balizar asked, wondering why he had not connected that ravaged sight to the exiled Prince of Serenia when he had first seen it.

Conar stared at him for a moment. "I fought my enemies."

"Precisely," Balizar agreed. "And that is what we've done." He sat forward, unfolding his arms and bracing them on his thighs. "For hundreds of years there have been those who have fought the evil here just as our countrymen, yours and mine, have fought the Domination. The Brotherhood's goal was to enslave all of mankind; the Rysalian's have settled for just enslaving those who can bring a tidy profit to their overstuffed purses."

"Slave trade is a lucrative enterprise," Conar commented. The memory of him being forced to stand, naked and defenseless, before a crowd of gaping buyers turned his stomach. "It's a way of life that should be abolished."

"I agree," Balizar said. "That is why I have spent most of my adult life in trying to help eradicate it."

"A most admirable mission, Balizar," Conar applauded him. "How did you come to be involved?"

"Hern and I were born in Jabol, Kensett," Balizar admitted. "Our parents were slaves in the household of one of the wealthiest sheiks in Jabol, so we were slaves, as well." His face turned stone-hard. "When Hern was twelve and I was seven, our mother was sold to a man who came to visit the sheik. He had seen her and thought her 'worthy' to grace his harem. Our father tried to keep them from taking her away. He died in the trying."

Sitting there propped against the tent pole behind him, Conar wondered just how much he really knew of those he had spent his life around. It had been a surprise to learn that both Marsh and Storm were from the Inner Kingdom. Now to learn that Hern had also originated in this arid desert country, filled him with complete surprise.

"He did not tell you," Balizar said, seeing the confusion on his companion's face.

"Nor did my father," Conar answered.

"Perhaps they saw no reason to tell you," Balizar commented. "Or maybe Hern never told his King where he had been born and bred."

"How did you get to Serenia?" Conar asked. "Surely they don't allow slaves here to buy themselves free like bondspeople."

"It was Hern who found the way for us to escape." He lowered his head and looked down at the floor. "He was in love with one of the young serving girls and they began to keep company right about the time our mother was sold. I have often thought Hern needed more comfort at that time than I did. The girl's brother had joined the underground and was helping others to escape to Creat, a seaport off the coast of Kensett. Hern contacted him and the three of us: me and Hern and Phoebe, the man's sister, were transported to Virago. From there, we fled into Serenia."

"Obviously you made your home there," Conar injected. "How did you wind up back here?"

Balizar sighed. "When I was nineteen, I met a Kensetti woman who had been brought to Serenia through the underground seaway. I fell in love with her, and, well, you know how it is when a man's in love: he'll do anything for his lady."

Conar smiled sadly. "Aye, that I do."

A dark cloud shifted over Balizar's face. "She still had kin over here: three brothers, a sister, several nieces and nephews. She worried about them constantly, fearful they would be sold to houses that would be less gentle with them than the ones in which they were enslaved. It nearly drove her to madness."

"I can understand that." Conar shifted in the bed, wincing at the pain in his leg. "Worrying about those you love can undermine your ability to survive."

"I hated to see her so beset with worry," Balizar said. "Hern and I talked it over and it was decided one of us would go back to Kensett and bring her family out."

"And you were the one who came back?" Conar asked.

"We drew straws and I lost, if you want to call it that." He sighed. "Hern wasn't happy about the situation; he wanted to come along with me, but one of us had to stay to protect Deanna."

"Was she the mother of his sons?"

Balizar glanced up, surprised at the young man's astute conclusion. He nodded. "Hern loved her as much as I did. They became lovers after I left." His face turned sad. "I think she always loved him more than me, anyway."

"So you are over here, looking for her family, and she comes back looking for you," Conar said. "Were you gone longer than she thought safe or did she come back to escape Hern?"

"Hern felt guilty over what they had done. He thought he had betrayed me, so he ran away, back to Virago, and joined the royal household there as a palace guardsman. He left our lady in the care of another, told her to wait for me.

"Deanna missed Kensett. It was in her blood. She told me when I saw her again that she would rather die a Kensetti slave than live free outside her birthplace."

"So she came back here to have her sons. She thought you would take care of her."

"Aye, but I had met another woman over here." He smiled. "Rachel's mother."

Conar stared at him. "Rachel is your daughter?"

"No, but she well might have been." He laughed softly. "It was not from lack of trying on my part that Rachel wasn't born from my seed." He shook his head. "No, she is Rupine's niece. Her father was Moshe Stone."

"And Deanna was hurt by your love for Rachel's mother and stayed only long enough to give birth before leaving," Conar concluded.

"That was the way of it," Balizar admitted. "I found out she went back to Jabol and the last I heard of her, she had sent the boys back to Serenia, fearful they would end up slaves if they should stay here. She even made them change their names so no one from here could find them."

"But she stayed," Conar stated.

"As far as I know."

"Have you tried to find her?"

"Many, many times, but it is as though the earth had opened and swallowed her." His gaze darkened. "For all I know, she may be long in her grave."

"So you decided to do everything you could to help others get out of slavery to atone for losing her."

Balizar looked at him. "You understand how it is. A man has to do what he can to make up for all the mistakes he's made in his lifetime."

"I know." Better than most, Conar thought.

"I am getting old, Lord Khamsin," Balizar admitted. "I have been at this for a good long while and my judgment is starting to slip. I am not as adept at leading my people as I use to be."

“And you think I can help?”

Balizar stood up and began to pace the tent. “Five days ago,” he explained, “twenty of our men were hanged at Abbadon.” He looked back at Conar. “You know the contraption they use at Boreas to hang men? That vile instrument of death they call The Garrote?”

How well I know it, Conar remembered. He had lost six good friends to that loathsome apparatus. “That was how they were executed?” he asked, shuddering, seeing men slowly choking to death as the platform slipped out from beneath their feet and the nooses constricted.

Balizar shook his head. “Just before they choked to death, the Prince had them taken down and disemboweled as a warning to the rest of us.”

A hard wave of nausea rose up in Conar’s throat. Kahlil Toire had threatened the same kind of agonizing end to Conar’s Elite that day in the Punishment yard. Had he not done as Toire had demanded, he would have witnessed his men meet the same gruesome fate as Balizar’s men had faced.

“A horrible way to have died,” Conar said quietly.

“The Rysalians do not take kindly to having their slaves liberated,” Balizar snarled. “Killing those men in such a fashion was meant to undermine our cause. Having so many of the resistance murdered like that at one time has taken the fight out of many of our people.”

“I can appreciate that,” Conar remarked. “The same thing happened in Serenia when many of the leaders of our rebellion were sent to the Labyrinth.”

“That is why I believe you were sent to us, Lord Khamsin,” Balizar said as he came back to the bed and sat down on the stool once more. He leaned forward, his face earnest.

“What can I do?” Conar asked.

“We have men, good men; men who are willing to die to rid this land of slavery. But they need a leader, a man strong enough to draw them together, to bond them into an elite fighting unit such as your Wind Force.” He searched Conar’s face. “A man who is capable of helping us destroy slave masters like the Jaborn family.”

The Serenian went deadly still. “Jaborn? As in Jaleel Jaborn?”

“You know of him?” Balizar asked. At Conar’s slow nod, Arbra continued. “It was by his orders our men were murdered at Abbadon. That is his own private fortress.”

For a long time, Conar didn’t answer. He sat there, seemingly studying Balizar. His face was carefully blank, his gaze unwavering, and when he finally did speak, his voice was hard and tight. “I owe you my life, Balizar, and--“

Balizar waved his hand in dismissal. “You owe me nothing, my Prince.”

“I feel I do and I always repay my debts.” He reached out to put his hand on Balizar’s shoulder. “Is it not written in your Book of the Prophetess that should you save a man’s life, his life belongs to you until he repays you by saving yours?”

A wry smile stretched Balizar’s mustached lip. “Aye, that is so.” He felt the strong sword hand of the Prince of the Wind tighten on his shoulder.

“Even if I did not owe you such a debt, I would gladly do everything I could to crush Jaleel Jaborn.”

“Then you will lead us?” There was hope in the oddly-lisping voice.

“Aye, my friend, I will lead you.”

* * * *

Rupine sat smoking his pipe, listening to Balizar and Asher as they spoke. He cast his dark gaze to his niece, Rachel, and observed that she was paying close attention to what the men were saying.

"He has agreed to lead us," Balizar informed the group of thirty-two men and nine women who were gathered at the camp fire.

"You trust him?" Asher asked.

"With my life," came the immediate reply.

"Is this Serenian from the Darkwind's force?" Rupine asked, withdrawing his pipe and tapping out the ashes in the sand before burying them with the heel of his hand.

"He is." Balizar saw no need to tell them the man in the tent *Was* the Darkwind.

"And you vouch for him?" Rupine pressed.

"I do."

"It will be another six weeks, maybe even longer, before he can be up and about well enough to lead a force of men, Balizar," Rupine reminded him. "What if someone comes looking for him before then?"

"We hide him," Rachel answered and drew everyone's attention. "His skin will darken after the sunburn goes away. He will blend in as one of our own."

"Not with those eyes of his," Rupine replied. "You may hide his face behind the cover of his headpiece, but you can not hide the color of his eyes."

"Blindfold him," Rachel suggested. She pointed to one of the other men. "Felder disguises himself as a blind beggar when he goes to Abbadon. Why not do the same with the Outlander?" Men nodded, murmuring their agreement.

"If you wrap him in a leper's rags, no one will come near enough to him to even wonder."

"Give him a tent to himself," Asher suggested. "Well away from the others. If Jaleel's men should come, I doubt they'll be overly interested in one of our outcasts."

"They are not smart enough to think him anything but that which he appears to be," Rachel put in.

"It might work," Rupine agreed.

"It's worth a try," Asher added.

Conar sat in his tent and listened to himself being discussed. The others had accepted him on the strength of Balizar's word and that meant the man was well respected and had his people's confidence. That was good, because there would be a need to have a buffer between him and the others when he began to teach them in the ways they would use to see an end to Jaleel Jaborn and others of his kind.

"It's not over between us," he could hear Jaborn snarling at him.

"You were right, Hasdu," Conar growled, "it isn't over between us." A vicious grin appeared on the Serenian's face. "It's just beginning!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Sajin slapped the man again, as hard as he could. He tore an already split lip, further still, and blood drooled out of the man's slack mouth.

"He'll kill you," Azalon warned his cousin. "I suggest you tell him what he wants to know."

"I don't know where they took him!" the innkeeper babbled. "They sold him. That's all I know!"

"To whom?" Sajin ground out, lashing out once more to connect a heavy hand with the bastard's thick face.

"I don't know!" the man blathered. He sagged against the Shadow-warriors who held him erect. A shriek of pain bubbled out of his torn mouth as the two Outer Kingdom brutes jerked him up.

"To whom?" the Kensetti bellowed at him.

"I don't know," the man whimpered, urine leaking down his legs beneath his caftan. "Ask Lord Khan."

Sajin glanced at Azalon.

"He's the wealthiest slave trader in Asaraba. If he sold the Serenian warrior, he'll have a record of it,"

Azalon told him.

A flick of the Kensetti Prince's hand caused the Outer Kingdom men to drop their burden to the floor in a heap.

"Where can we find this Khan?"

"He has a house not far from the auction arenas, but this time of day, he would be most likely inspecting his latest consignments." Azalon frowned. "There is a large warehouse where the slaves are kept before being sent to market."

Yuri snarled, the image of such a loathsome thing as slavery making him clench his big fists together. He stared hard at Sajin Ben-Alkazar. "This bastard had better not have put his hands on Conar McGregor like he did Storm Jale," he growled. "That much I know!"

Azalon's cousin looked up with dismay. "The other one?" he asked, fear making him shudder. He cringed away as Azalon quickly bent down and grabbed him by the front of his robe.

"What do you know of another one?" Azalon hissed.

"There was another. A blond," the man whimpered. "He was taken--" He got no further before the Kensetti Prince shoved Azalon aside and grabbed him up with a snarl of rage.

"Blond? There was a blond man here?" Sajin spat out. "A Serenian?"

Azalon was amused as his cousin vigorously shook his head in terror.

"Ionarian!" the man stuttered. "He was no Serenian!"

Yuri reached out to grasp a handful of the man's greasy black hair, grimacing at the feel of it in his beefy palm. He pulled hard, craning the man's head back as far as it would go.

"Leave off, Yuri," Sajin warned. "You'll break his neck."

The Shadow-warrior ignored the remark. "What was the man's name?" Yuri snapped, twisting the greasy hair. "What was the Ionarian's name?"

"It's there! In the register!" came the grunt of agony.

Yuri let go and stomped to the desk, jerked up the register and flipped back through several pages. He stopped at one page, stared down at the writing, then looked up at Sajin.

"Chase Montyne," he breathed.

"There was no man named that here," the innkeeper assured them.

"Yuri?" Sajin asked.

"There's a name here." He glanced back down again. "I can't make out what it says, but it's Montyne's writing. I've seen enough of it to recognize it. He sent many messages to Conar over the years and I intercepted most of them."

"This Montyne," Azalon remarked, "is he not royalty? I have heard that name before."

"He's the Prince of Ionary," Sajin answered. "I've heard tales of his expertise with a bow."

"But what's he doing here?" Azalon asked.

"My guess would be when Storm did not report back to Boreas, they sent another member of the Wind Force after Conar," Yuri said. "Montyne would have been my choice."

"And now He's missing," Sajin snarled. He looked at the cowering innkeeper. "Sold?"

Azalon's cousin nodded miserably.

Sajin swore. "Now we've two of Conar's friends to worry about."

* * * *

Harim nudged his master as the three men entered the warehouse. "Trouble," he whispered to Lord Khan.

Khan Subet turned, viewing the approaching men with only mild consternation for he recognized the caravan leader and knew who the tall man beside him was.

"Your Grace," Khan said, bringing his hand up in the time-honored greeting. "How may I be of service to you?"

"We are looking for a man," Sajin snapped, looking around him at the cages full of people. His disgust showed on his face.

"Two men," Azalon corrected.

Khan swept his arm about the warehouse. "Take your pick, Highness. The auction is not until the morning, but chose whichever one you would--"

"The men we seek have already been sold," Sajin growled. "A Serenian and an Ionarian."

As the word 'Ionarian' registered in Khan's mind, his face drained of its color. "Why--why would you seek these particular men?" he asked.

"I want to know who you sold them to," Sajin said, ignoring the question.

"Which Serenian do you seek?" Harim asked, seeing a way he might go beyond being a slave warden to being a dealer in flesh. He did not expect the vicious grip that leapt at him and shoved him helplessly against one of the holding cells.

"What do you mean by 'which' Serenian?" Yuri shouted into his face. "Was there two?"

Harim stared into the deadly eyes of the Shadow-warrior and knew he had met one man who would not be intimidated by his stare.

"We sold two last week," Harim admitted. "One to the quarry at Kilnt and the other to the Lady Sabrina."

Sajin's mouth dropped open. "The breeder?"

Khan, realizing the ploy his servant was utilizing, attempted to turn the tables on the man. "She paid the highest price for the Serenian that had ever been paid in Rysalia before now."

Swinging his eyes to the slave trader, Sajin felt a glimmer of hope enter his very soul.

"Why?"

“Because of who the man was!” Harim put in, once more gaining the upper hand and the attention of the others.

Yuri’s fists tightened in the man’s caftan. “*Who?*”

“He doesn’t know,” Khan injected. “He’s just--“

“Who?” Yuri bellowed.

“Conar McGregor!” Harim gasped, his windpipe severely constricted.

Khan swung his shocked stare to his slave warden. “We had Conar McGregor in our hands and you let Sabrina buy him?”

Sajin’s body went limp with relief. Conar WAS alive! He hadn’t dared to believe it was so although in his soul he had prayed that Conar had escaped the fate that everything on board ship suggested he had met. He barely heard the slave warden trying to explain his actions to his master. All he could do was stumble away, tearing his gaze from the hopeless face peering back at him from the cages.

“Where is he, now?” Yuri shouted. “Where is McGregor at this very moment?”

“I don’t--“ Harim shrieked with pain as a knee was viciously driven into his groin.

“Where?”

“The farm!” Khan yelled. “Sabrina took him to her breeding farm!”

Azalon’s head whipped around and he stared at the young Kensetti Prince who had suddenly erupted into hysterical laughter. “Your Grace?” he asked, his face mirroring his confusion and his shock. He took a few steps toward Ben-Alkazar.

“Oh, by the Prophetess, but this is rich!” Sajin chortled, waving the man away. He was wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “This is *rich!*”

Yuri frowned, looking away from the man whose privates he had crushed to stare at the nomad Prince. “I see nothing funny about Conar’s predicament,” he hissed. “To be sold into slavery. To be sold--“

“To a stud farm!” Sajin chuckled, bending over to slap his hands against his thighs. “A stud farm, Andreanova!” Fresh gales of laughter snorted from him and he staggered, throwing back his head.

The Shadow-warrior found nothing humorous about the situation. He viewed it, as he was sure Conar must, as a degrading, dehumanizing concept. Not just the slavery, but the very thought of being at the whim and mercy of a woman intent on breeding him--.

“Oh, my God,” Yuri breathed, finally understanding. He looked up slowly, catching Sajin’s eye, watching as the Kensetti dissolved into helpless mirth once more. The Outer Kingdom warrior’s lips twitched. “Oh, my God!”

Azalon, not smiling, not understanding the reason that both men were now doubled over with laughter, and, being a business man to the very core, turned his attention to Khan.

“Who bought the other one. The Ionarian?” he asked.

Khan had been grinning as he watched the Kensetti and Outer Kingdom man laughing. His grin rapidly dissolved. “The Lady Sabrina purchased him, as well.”

Azalon nodded and reached inside his caftan and took out a purse. He cast an annoyed look at his two companions who were still laughing uncontrollably, then counted out twenty gold Ryals. “This should cover what information we have earned here today.”

“The Ionarian was in bad shape when he left here,” Harim whispered, gagging over the pain between his legs.

“Shut up!” Khan yelled, taking a step toward his slave warden, but Azalon put himself in between them.

“Why?” the caravan leader asked, unaware that both Sajin and Yuri had sobered at Harim’s remark.

“He is just trying to cause me trouble,” Khan was quick to say. “Pay no heed to what he tells you.”

“What was wrong with the Ionarian?” Yuri asked, fully sobered, his hawk-like gaze intent on the slave warden’s face.

“Ask him!” Harim scoffed, still doubled over. “Ask him what he did to the man!”

Khan backed away, fearful of the look on the Shadow-warrior’s face. He held up his hands. “I did nothing to him!”

“The hell he didn’t,” Harim barked. “Ask him how much he got from his friends for the privilege of raping the Ionarian!”

Sajin stiffened. He swung his eyes from the slave warden’s angry face to Yuri’s shocked expression to Khan’s terrified countenance. “Is that true?” the Kensetti asked.

Khan backed further away, wanting to put as much distance as possible between him and the three men now looking at him as though he were of the lowest order of living things on earth.

“He was the first,” Harim recounted. “Then he let the others use the Ionarian until the man’s mind was gone.”

A violent shudder of loathing shot through Sajin and before he even knew what he’d done, the slave trader lay in a pool of his own blood, Sajin’s dagger quivering in his heart.

“Did you let them do that to my friend, too?” Sajin whispered, glaring at the dying man as though he would rip him apart with his bare hands. “Did you do that to Conar?”

“He would have had he known who the man was!” Harim told him. “Why do you think I didn’t tell him?”

Sajin swung his gaze to the slave warden. “Did any man touch Conar McGregor while he was here?”

Harim shook his head. “I protected him as best I could,” he lied. “It was a relief when the Lady Sabrina outbid Prince Guil. She--”

“Guil?” Sajin shouted. “Guil bid for Conar?”

Harim quickly nodded. “But the Lady bid more!”

Yuri swore. “That means Jaborn was behind everything that happened on that ship!”

Sajin growled, turning away. “That also means Jaborn knows where Conar is.” He reached out and grabbed Yuri’s arm. “We have to get to him, Andreanova! We have to get to my friend before it’s too late!”

* * * *

“There were eight of them, Your Grace,” Rasheed informed his master. “Prince Sajin, six of the Outer Kingdom warriors, and a Rysalian. They are riding to the Lady Sabrina’s farm.”

“So Sajin knows the Serenian escaped his end on the ship,” Guil commented. He shrugged, peeling another fig. “Little good it will do him. That bastard is buzzard bait by now.”

“I hope you’re right,” Jaleel remarked. He had an uneasy feeling that that wasn’t the case.

“No man could survive out there without water, Jaleel,” his friend assured him. “He’s long dead.”

Jaleel got up and stared out the window of his five story fortress. For the last week, he had felt strange vibrations coming to him from the desert; vibrations that boded him ill. But when he had remarked on it to the High Priest, the man had tried to allay his fears with a common explanation.

“It is the anger of the underground you feel, Your Highness. They are out there, lurking about, doing their dirty work.”

“They’ll learn nothing at Sabrina’s,” Guil told Jaleel. “What is there for her to tell them?”

“We should have killed them all that night,” Jaleel snarled. “Left no one alive in the encampment.” He turned his hot gaze to Guil. “Especially not that friend of McGregor’s.”

“The man’s harmless,” Guil answered. “You should have seen him when we were through with him that day.” He laughed. “He was mindless!”

Jaleel did not share his friend’s predilection for male sex partners. Guil’s tastes often left him feeling nothing but disgust for the man. That his boyhood friend often disguised himself as a slave buyer to haunt the auction houses in quest of fresh partners, both appalled and nauseated Jaleel.

“He didn’t seem mindless when he killed three of our men,” Jaleel reminded Guil. “He had enough presence of mind to take up a crossbow and do murder!”

Guil shrugged. “What does it matter, Jaleel?”

The Rysalian turned and pierced Guil with a hot stare. “What if a man like that should join the resistance? The Prophetess, alone, knows what harm he can do!”

“He was good with his weapon,” Rasheed mumbled, flinching as his master lashed out at him although the heavy fist did not connect.

“You want to go after him, then, Jaleel?” Guil asked. “Kill him?”

Jaleel thought about it for a moment. “It’s too late, now. The damage has been done,” he answered. “We can only hope McGregor is really dead and does not fall into the hands of the resistance.”

“What if he should?” Guil scoffed. “We will have crushed them by the end of the year.”

Jaleel looked at Rasheed. A quiet understanding passed between the two men. “Not with the Darkwind at their head,” Jaleel said softly.

CHAPTER SIX

"There is a quarry near Kilnt," Balizar told Conar, "where I am told there is a Serenian slave being kept."

Conar looked up from his meal. "How do you know?"

"We have spies throughout the country, Khamsin," Asher answered for the older man. "Any time an Outlander is sold into slavery, word will filter back to Balizar."

His leg had been bothering him all day, the falling rain outside not helping any. The wind of the Khamsin had ended its fifty day reign and now a light rain had come to plague the tent dwellers.

"Where is this place you're talking about?" Conar asked, lifting his splintered leg off the bed.

"About thirty miles from here, due south. Huge stones are being trundled over the desert to build a tomb for one of the Venturians. The stone is quarried at Kilnt."

Conar turned his eyes to Rupine. "How long before you can take this thing off my leg?"

Rupine shrugged. "Another three, maybe four days, I would think. IF you're getting along all right."

"I can hobble with the best of them," Conar quipped. He took the crutch Asher held for him. "But I can't ride with this damn oak tree lashed to me."

"You don't have to go," Balizar reminded him. "I think we're capable of stealing one weakened man from under the noses of a Hasdu watchdog."

"If the man is Serenian," Conar insisted, "I will be there to see him to freedom." He hobbled to the tent flap and ducked under.

"He's restless," Asher chuckled.

"He's as fidgety as an untried girl about to lose her cherry," Balizar joked. "And in a way of speaking, that's an apt description."

Conar made his way to the spot where he spent most of his late afternoons: a group of palm trees beside a glistening pool of spring-fed water. He wobbled gracelessly to the ground, his splintered leg thrust out before him, and propped his back against a good-size boulder. Laying his crutch beside him, he stared back at the encampment, watching children playing tag among the camels, women beating their clothes against the rocks at the far end of the meandering little spring, men tending to their weapons.

He sighed.

These were good people. He liked them. They had opened their hearts to him and had listened to him. There wasn't a one among them he didn't trust.

Except Rachel.

He frowned, thinking of the woman everyone was careful not to mention in his hearing. Who stayed just as carefully out of his way. Who invaded his every thought even when she was out on one of the raids with the men of the camp.

And that made him frown even more.

"You have women among the Wind Force," Balizar had protested when Conar had told him Rachel could not be allowed on one of the missions.

“Not in the Cadre!” Conar had shouted. “This is not women’s work! It’s dangerous even for a man!”

“Rachel is one of the best archers we have. She has no equal with a crossbow,” Asher had protested, not knowing why their new leader’s stare had hardened and become fixed and glaring.

“I don’t give a rat’s pecker if she can hit an ant’s ass at a hundred paces”

“She can,” Balizar had laughed.

“Not in my cadre, she won’t!” had come the irrational response.

But despite his shouting and cursing, Balizar had let the damned bitch go and, much to Conar’s chagrin, she had saved the lives of two men with her quick thinking and expertly placed quarrels.

“She’s good, Khamsin,” Balizar had assured him. “She knows what she’s doing.”

“Aye, and some fool will lose his life trying to protect her one of these days!” Conar had grumbled.

It hadn’t helped when the woman in question had come storming into his tent, berating him for trying to keep her from doing her job.

“I have been going out on missions with the men since I was sixteen!” she’d informed him. “I need no nanny to hold my hand!”

Her flashing eyes and angry face, even the way she had phrased her words, reminded him so vividly of Liza, it had cut him to the quick and he had lashed out at Rachel, wanting to hurt her as much as she was unknowingly hurting him.

“And what’ll happen if you get caught, bitch?” he had screamed at her. “Don’t expect one of the men to drop what he’s doing to come rescue you from some slaver’s cock?”

“I’ve endured it before!” she shouted back at him, shocking him to the core of his foundation. “I can do it again if need be!”

He’d watched her storm out of the tent, staring at the spot where she had stood, stunned by her words. When he’d asked Balizar about her cryptic remark, the older man had frowned.

“One of the few times Asher’s been caught was down near Abbadon. Rachel went with five of our men to rescue him. The others escaped; Rachel didn’t.”

“You left her there?” Conar has asked, shocked.

“No, but before Asher and Mahmed could get to her, she’d been brutalized. She doesn’t talk about it, but Asher thinks that is why she has no great desire to marry. She was sodomized. The experience was humiliating.”

How well he knew, Conar thought as he sat watching the camp. He had no way of gauging how a woman must feel when she’s been raped in that horrid way, but he knew well enough how he, himself, had felt. The experience had been humiliating and soul-shattering. It had left him with a certain legacy of fear that he knew would remain with him forever.

Rachel, he sighed, seeing her talking to Rupine. The very sight of her angered him, drove him near to madness. It had become more than her uncanny resemblance to Liza. The two women were of the same age, build, even carried themselves in a like manner. Rachel’s phrasing of a sentence was almost identical to the way Liza would have said it, in the same off-cantered way. Just hearing her speak in that same soft way made him want to strangle the woman. Her being there, reminding him so vividly of his lost love, was a torture he could barely endure.

“Why do you dislike her?” Asher had asked him many times. “What has she done to garner your dislike?”

How did you tell a man that you wanted to throw yourself on his sister and plunge into her until the need inside you was diminished? Sated? No, never sated. His need for Liza had never

been sated. It hadn't even lessened from one thrusting to another. His lust for her body was as strong at that moment as it had been the last time he had taken her.

No, you could not tell a man you hated his sister because you wanted to hump her. There were limits to what a brother could hear.

Look at her, that insane inner voice crooned to him. Look at her, Conar. Doesn't she walk like Liza? Doesn't she laugh like Liza? Doesn't she have that same tantalizing tilt of the head that Liza had?

"God," he groaned, tearing his gaze away from her.

He wanted her. He knew it. His entire being ached with wanting her.

"What kind of man are you?" he had asked himself only the morning before when he had followed her, his gaze hungry, across the camp.

He loved Catherine, his lovely Catherine, who, no doubt, thought him dead. He had married the woman; he remembered doing that on board the ship. And he had to get word to her that he was alive.

"That's not such a good idea," Balizar had warned him when he had mentioned it. "If word gets out, and you know it will, they'll come looking for you for sure!"

So he had not sent word to his beloved Catherine, the new love of his life, the woman who had made him come alive after two winters of bitter existence.

"Who are you trying to fool, Conar?" the voice sneered at him. "Look at Rachel. Tell yourself you don't want some of that!"

Oh, he did, he thought bitterly. More than he could dare admit even to that painful inner voice. He wanted her, wanted to bury himself to the hilt inside her warm, sweet moistness. But he knew it wouldn't be Rachel Stone he would be taking. It would be Liza. It wouldn't be Rachel's sweetness he enjoyed, but Liza's.

"I hate you," he whispered, watching as she turned to find him staring at her. For a long moment their gazes held and he clenched his jaw. "I hate you, Rachel."

Then she turned away, seemingly to dismiss him, and he found himself clutching handfuls of sand beneath his fists. He pounded the sand, despising himself for the thoughts that would not stay out of his mind.

"You're nothing but a rutting stag," Legion had once accused him. "Any woman, any cunt, will do when you get like that."

Legion had been right at the time. But that had been before Liza had tamed him. Before his sweet Liza had put her special brand on his heart.

"You betrayed her, too, Conar," the damned inner reminder spoke up. "With Gezelle."

"Leave me alone!" he ordered, flinging the sand away from him.

"You're just horny," came the taunt. "How long has it been, now, since you've lain with a woman? Two months? Three?"

The thought made him hard and he groaned, wishing he could be like normal men and control that eager libido that seemed to be a permanent part of him. Did every man go through this? he wondered. Did Legion?

He wondered what Legion was doing at that moment. If Legion was worried about him. He had managed to send out a message to his family, a coded message that informed them he was all right, but he had no way of knowing if the message had gotten through.

He heard Rachel laugh, as able to pick that laugh out of a crowd of other women's laughs as he had been able to pick out Liza's. The sound of it put his teeth on edge.

He was going to have to do something about Rachel Stone, he thought bitterly.

And soon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Legion A'Lex slowly lowered the page of hastily-scrawled gibberish and looked up at Roget with wonder.

"He's calling it The Samiel," Legion said in an exasperated croak.

"What the hell does that mean?" Roget asked, taking the note from Legion.

"It's a poisonous wind," Marsh Edan answered. "It's a Hasdu word."

Legion glanced at the ex-Master-of-Arms of Boreas Keep who had arrived with the message from Conar. Marsh had been not been seen at the keep since the day Conar left with the Outer Kingdom warriors. When he had shown up that morning, the rolled parchment note from Conar in his hand, no one had paid much attention to him, so relieved to have heard from their errant Overlord.

"Where have you been?" Legion asked.

Marsh shrugged. "I went home to Kensett for awhile. Conar was off gallivanting with those brutes from the Outer Kingdom and so I decided to visit my mother." He nodded toward the note. "You can imagine my surprise when a Hasdu walked up to me and handed me that note in Fealst. I was barely off the ship before the man grabbed at me to ask if I was traveling on to Boreas."

"How he'd know your destination?" Cayn inquired.

"He must have overheard me speaking with one of the ship's crew. I nearly fell off the dock when I unrolled that and found Conar's hen scratching staring up at me."

"So he's started another elite fighting force, eh?" Cayn chuckled. "The Samiel. I like the sound of that. He'll be poison for his enemies, that's for sure."

"I don't understand what the deuce he's doing!" Gezelle grumbled. "He's suppose to be in that other place courting that lady."

"If what I understand of this messy writing is correct," Roget said, "he's doing what comes naturally for Conar." He looked up, grinning. "Getting his ass in trouble."

"If he's mixed up with the underground seaway in the Inner Kingdom," Marsh warned them, "he's not only getting his ass into trouble. He's putting himself at risk." Edan frowned heavily. "He's got powerful enemies in Rysalia."

"But he's not in that place," Gezelle said, heaving a sigh of relief. When no one answered her, she looked around her. "Is he?"

"I'd wager my last copper that he's up to his ears in a whole heap of trouble in Rysalia," Marsh told her.

"What do we do?" Legion asked, searching Marsh's face for an answer, but it was du Mer who gave him one.

Roget sighed. "We go help him."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The sweep of the keeper's eyes flicked over Storm Jale with disdain.

"You will be taught what punishment is. You will learn what it means to defy your masters!"

The pain was horrible. It coursed through his body with such exaction, it left no part of him wanting for attention. Never could he have imagined agony so intense, so pervading, and he wished with all his being that he could die.

"When I am through with you," the keeper yelled, "I will feed your soul to the evil you dread most!"

They had isolated him from the rest of the slaves. From humankind. He had become little more than a beast, straining to pull a sled full of timbers three times his weight. The heart inside him was no longer beating to keep him alive. It beat to punish him, just as the whips lashing down on his defenseless body punished him.

"Let me die," he had begged, but the mirthless laughter had only tormented him more.

Pain. Such an easy word to say. Such a hard concept to endure.

"Let me die."

In his shivering late at night, when the rest of them were asleep, he had tried to make a covenant with the Wind that swept icily around him. He had begged of it to end his life, his misery, his dehumanized existence. But like his keepers, the Wind ignored him.

"Let me die."

The pain increased until he was howling mindlessly with it. Nothing he had ever experienced had prepared him for the excruciating agony ripping through his flesh.

"Conar!" he screamed, calling out the one name that had always seemed to sustain him when things grew bad.

"As your obedience grows, so shall your pain be lessened," the keeper had said, but Storm didn't think he would be able to stand much more.

Soon, he hoped, he begged, he prayed, his heart would give out.

The keeper stood back and enjoyed the spectacle. Already the Infidel had endured more than could have been dreamed he would. Smiling, the screaming music to his ears, the keeper looked on with excitement. His was a vile need, a dark, insatiable bloodlust, a hunger that was not easily satisfied. To corrupt, to pervert, to destroy, gave him immense pleasure, and to have an Infidel at his mercy, made the keeper ecstatic with pleasure.

"Let me die."

The voice was weak, almost a whisper and it pleased the keeper immensely to hear it waver with such hopelessness.

"Not yet," the keeper assured the object of his torture. "Not for a long, long time."

Storm's soul shattered inside him and he threw back his head, screaming for the one man in all the world who could release him from the horrible, horrible pain.

"Conar!"

* * * *

He came fully awake, his heart pounding, his body soaked with sweat. He was trembling, not understanding why, and he put up a shaky hand to plow it through his thick blond hair.

“Storm?” he heard himself asking. He looked about the tent, found no one with him, and wondered why he felt Storm Jale’s presence so clearly.

“Khamsin?” Asher asked, poking his head through the tent flap. “Did you call me?”

Conar stared at him, realizing the two names, Storm and Stone, sounded so much alike. He shook his head. “No, I was just dreaming. Sorry to have bothered you.”

“I wasn’t sleeping anyway,” Asher answered, coming into the tent. “I’ve always found it difficult to relax the evening before a raid.”

“Me, too,” came the heart-felt answer. “There was a time when I would have drank myself into a stupor or drugged myself to keep from thinking about it.”

“Why?” Asher asked, sensing the other man wanted to talk.

Conar shrugged, reaching over to light the lantern by his bed. Once the flame was steady, he replaced the chimney and leaned back against his pillows. “I think it was because I always feared I’d screw up and get myself or someone else killed in the bargain.”

“Yes,” Asher agreed. “I’ve felt that way since Rachel was--“ He looked away. “I’m glad you insisted she stay behind tomorrow when we go to Kilnt. I’ll feel better knowing she’s here. Safe.”

“She’s got no business going on any raid,” Conar scoffed. He drew his left leg up and massaged it, thankful it was no longer encased in splints.

“Rachel is good at what she does,” her brother defended her.

“So I’m told,” Conar drawled.

“Is she so much like your lady-wife?” Asher asked.

Conar flinched, looking up quickly to stare at the man. “What?”

“Balizar has letters from his brother, Hern. He went over them this evening, looking for a reason why you might dislike women.”

“Dislike wo ...” Conar snapped his mouth shut and looked to the heavens. “I don’t dislike women,” he growled. “I hope Hern’s letters settled that!”

“When he read about Hern meeting the young Princess Elizabeth in Oceania, he--“

“Wait a minute!” Conar interrupted. “Hern never went to Oceania.”

A confused pucker drew Asher’s brows together. “I beg to differ, but Balizar’s brother said he went there to see what all the commotion was about. Why you were refusing to meet your intended. That was the Princess, wasn’t it?”

“Aye,” Conar mumbled, a nagging little memory rearing up at the back of his mind. Didn’t Hern leave Boreas for a few weeks? Aye, he did!

“It seems the older Arbra met with the lady, spoke with her, and between the two of them decided when it would be best that you met her. He said you had thought her deformed in some way, so he described her for Balizar. From that description, he might as well have been painting a portrait of Rachel.”

Letters, Conar mused. First Liza’s letters to Sabrina; now Hern’s letters to Balizar. What he was finding out about the two people he had loved most in the world, who were both no longer in his world, was unbelievable. No wonder Hern had never tried to talk him out of his affair with Liza. The old warrior had known all along who the girl really was.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” Conar whispered. “He told her I’d be at the Hound and Stag that day.”

“I beg your pardon?” Asher asked only to have Conar wave away his question.

“I’d like to read those letters sometime,” the Serenian said.

“So they are very much alike, then? Rachel and your lady-wife?”

Conar nodded. “Too much alike, it seems.”

Asher looked at him a moment and then turned to go. "I think I understand why you don't wish to be around Rachel, now."

"Do you?"

Asher glanced back to find the Outlander staring at him. "Yes. You see your lady-wife in my sister's face and it hurts you."

Aye, Conar muttered to himself. It hurt like hell.

"Then you know why I don't want her in on the raids."

"Yes," Asher replied, "but there is something you are forgetting, Khamsin."

"What?"

Asher smiled. "Rachel is not your lady-wife. Rachel is Rachel."

* * * *

Dawn broke misting rain and whipping the wind about them as they mounted their horses. Already, in the space of several moments only, the men were damp and out of sorts. Their horses were restless, catching the excitement that drove the men recklessly into their saddles with eager thighs and tense hands.

"May the Prophetess ride with you," Rupine called out to them as Balizar took the lead, Conar directly behind him.

"May the Wind be at our backs," Balizar quipped, looking back to wink at Conar.

Conar grinned, feeling really alive for the first time in months. No, he corrected himself, years! He kicked his mount's flanks and galloped ahead of Balizar, turning his head to issue a challenge.

Rachel, her face obscured in the folds of her headpiece, shook her head. The man was reckless, arrogant, so cocksure of himself he was a danger to everyone on the raid. But he was good at what he did. She had already seen that as he had personally trained some of their men, shouting instructions as though he were bred to lead.

And he had been, she thought with a glimmer of excitement. Asher had whispered his secret to her, swearing her to secrecy, and she had been utterly shocked to learn the man's true identity.

"The Dark Overlord of the Wind!" Asher had breathed in awe. "Imagine it, Rachel! The Darkwind, himself, leading our little rag-tag group of warriors!"

Even in the backsands of their part of the world, they had heard of the mighty Darkwind. Many of them had met men from the Wind Force when they had transported escaped slaves to the Outland. Tales of the Darkwind's exploits were legendary. He was a hero to his people.

And soon would be with her own.

"Khamsin," she said aloud, her eyes on him. What an apt name for the man.

The man ahead of her moved out and Rachel nudged her mount forward, keeping her head down so no one would notice the last rider in line. So no one could make her turn back.

"That man is an idiot!" she had argued with her brother, but Asher had demanded she stay behind.

"We must do as he says. He'll be our salvation, Rachel," Asher believed. "I know he will." Rachel did, too.

If she could help keep him alive long enough!

CHAPTER NINE

Sitting in the midst of a lush growth of wavering grasses, The Farm, as most of Rysalia called it, looked somehow out of place. All around it were undulating sands, for as far as the eye could see; but right smack in the middle of all that inhospitable barrenness, was a sprawling structure, its many arms spread out like the spokes of a wheel. The pink-tinged stone rising up off the desert floor made the structure look as though it had sprang up out of the earth to roost among the lush green grass.

"It has a certain charm, don't you think?" Sajin asked as they rode toward the place.

Yuri chuckled. "I wonder what kind of mood he'll be in when he sees us."

Sajin had to bite his lip, something he'd done for three days now, to keep from laughing. Just contemplating Conar in such a place had kept his side aching from laughing for all that time.

"Not a happy camper, I wouldn't imagine," Yuri answered his own thought.

"If what you tell me of the man is true," Azalon quipped, "he well might be enjoying himself." He grinned. "I know I would."

"Not Conar," Sajin answered. "He will have brought the woman's wrath down on him by now." He glanced at Yuri. "How long do you reckon he's been here?"

"A month and a half. Possibly longer." Yuri couldn't stop himself from grinning. "Long enough to have fathered half a battalion of Wind Warriors."

"Don't!" Sajin snorted, his laughter starting all over again. His horse sidestepped, tossing its head at the man. It snickered to show its disdain.

Yuri started chuckling, too, his sputtering driving his own mount to dancing.

"I can not wait to meet this man," Azalon commented.

"How much do you think we'll have to pay to get him back?" Yuri asked.

"Not the two hundred thousand she paid for him!" Sajin drawled, then burst out laughing hard enough to bring tears to his eyes.

"What if she won't sell him?" Azalon asked in all seriousness.

Sajin looked at Yuri and the two men's guffaws were instant blasts of hilarity.

"She might not," Azalon told them, offended that they could find the situation so funny.

"Obviously she prizes his physical--" He stopped, shocked into silence by the loud hoots of humor coming from his companions.

Kharis stood just outside the main circle of protective wall which ringed the farm and watched the men approaching. He could hear their laughter, took in the slow canter of their horses and reckoned them slave buyers coming to inspect the Lady Sabrina's latest crop of offspring. He turned to speak to one of his underlings.

"Tell the lady we have visitors."

"Any reason to be concerned?" the man asked.

Kharis turned back, heard more raucous laughter and shook his head. "I think not, but I'll wait here and speak to them."

Ten minutes later, the trio came down off a high sand dune, and walked their thirsty mounts toward the opening where a tall man stood sentinel.

"Good thing we didn't bring the others with us," Sajin remarked. "They might have closed the gates."

"Let me do the talking," Azalon said. He glanced at Sajin. "They will no doubt know who you are, Your Grace. If they become suspicious, we might never find your friend."

"We'll find him," Yuri said. "Just listen for the loudest, meanest bellow you can hear!"

"Or the longest shout of ecstasy!" Sajin quipped, bringing fresh gales of laughter to Yuri.

Kharis smiled warmly at the laughing men as they came abreast of him. He bowed with respect, then straightened, momentarily taken off guard when he recognized Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar.

"My most humble greetings, Oh, Exalted One," Kharis called out. "You honor us with your presence at our lowly establishment."

Azalon walked his horse forward and smiled down with what he hoped resembled jaded acceptance of their due.

"His Grace has heard you have a fresh crop of young ones," Azalon said in a bored voice. "He wishes to choose a few for his household."

Kharis bowed. "Of course, Sire! You are most welcome. Please, dismount and I will have a servant take you where you may refresh yourselves. My mistress will want to escort you personally to the nursery."

Sajin hoped to the Prophetess his dislike of the man and his disgust of the situation did not show on his carefully arranged face. He inclined his head in acceptance of the man's offer. He swung his leg over his mount's head and slid to the ground.

"I would consider it a favor if I might be able to study your operation here," Sajin said, ignoring Azalon's heavy scowl and Yuri's averted face. "I am interested in the aspects of slave breeding."

Yuri nearly choked and had to cough to hide it. He didn't dare look up for fear his eyes would give him away.

"A case of gobbling up more than he could swallow," Sajin said in a bored voice. "The man is obnoxious, but a good servant."

Yuri choked again and had to turn completely around and stare back over the desert they had crossed to keep his composure. He listened to Azalon condemning him as well and finally found self-control enough to face the inquisitive slaver. He frowned heavily at the man, hoping to intimidate him.

He did.

"My mistress will provide you with whatever you want, Your Grace," Kharis assured the Kensetti Prince. "If you wish a woman to warm your beds--"

"I think not," Azalon announced. "We won't be here that long."

"Oh, I don't know," Sajin corrected. "I might decide to bide a few days here to--" he glanced at Yuri. "--observe what goes on."

Yuri choked again, coughing so hard his face turned purple with the effort.

None of them saw Chase Montyne watching them from one of the windows of the main building. He was leaning against the windowsill, his fingers threaded together, smiling.

"I can't be sure, but I think one of the visitors is a man I know," he told the woman at his side.

"Friend or foe?" Sabrina asked. Her eyesight was not all that good and she had to squint just to make out how many men were with Kharis at the gate.

"Yuri Andreanova is a man I would not call friend, but he is one of Conar's most trusted men. I have no idea who the other two are."

Sabrina's brows shot upward. "Do you think they are here to find the Serenian?"

Chase nodded. "Aye." He pushed away from the sill. "They're here looking for Coni."

"Stay here," she instructed him. "Let me see what they want."

Sajin looked around the luxurious furnishings of the parlor and was impressed. The carpet on the floor was worth a small fortune and the chandelier overhead had to have cost a sum to match.

"My own receiving room at Jabol is not as imposing as this," he said, fingering a richly woven tapestry. He looked around at his companions. "This is a woman of taste."

"And breeding," Yuri snickered.

Azalon looked to the heavens, annoyed with the two men. If he heard one more innuendo, he would murder them and be done with it. He was about to chastise them for their lack of decorum when their hostess entered.

"Lady Sabrina?" Azalon inquired, bowing graciously to her. "We are honored."

She moved into the room, her dark gaze shifting over Azalon, widening only a little as she took in Yuri's bulk, then settling with admiration on Sajin.

"Your Grace," she said in a throaty voice, dipping him a perfect curtsy. "It is my pleasure to welcome you to my home."

Sajin smiled. "And my pleasure to visit you," he answered her, going to her and taking her hand in his. He brought it to his lips. "It is always a pleasure to be in the company of so lovely a lady."

Her laugh was rich and teasing. "Your reputation proceeds you, Prince Sajin," she admonished. "Flattery will not lower my prices, but it well might get you other things you desire."

Ben-Alkazar clapped his free hand over his heart. "You wound me, Lady," he protested. "I speak the truth." He squeezed her hand. "You are lovely."

Sabrina shook her head. "I have been warned about you." She withdrew her hand and swept it toward the settee. "Please," she bid him take a seat, then sat down in a large wing back chair facing him.

Sajin glanced at Yuri and then seated himself. He smiled at her, not knowing how to begin. He was relieved when Azalon opened the conversation.

"We have come to inquire of your new little ones. His Grace wishes to find children suitable for playmates for his brother's youngest."

Sabrina turned her gaze to Sajin. "Really?" At his nod, she cocked a brow. "I have been told you do not approve of slavery, Your Grace."

Sajin tensed. "Normally I do not, but I am here for my brother, Jashir."

"I am amazed he would send you, Your Grace, for such an errand." She swung her attention to Azalon. "Your servant could have done this."

Azalon opened his mouth to speak, but Sajin interrupted.

"Jashir is not all that happy with me at the moment," Sajin explained with a sneer in his voice. "The man never grows tired of trying to match me with one of the sisters or nieces or cousins or--" He flung out his hand angrily. "--one of a dozen more relations of his wives." He sighed. "I have no desire to wed and I grow weary of his efforts."

"His Grace turned down a most worthy betrothal just recently and Prince Jashir was not pleased," Azalon improvised.

"Worthy my ass," Sajin mumbled. "The woman was a sow."

"But a rich sow, Your Grace," Yuri joined in, gaining frowns from both Sajin and Azalon. Yuri lifted his chin. "I thought she was pretty."

Sajin's eyes twinkled. "You would!"

Sabrina looked from the tall warrior to the handsome Kensetti and lowered her head, smiling. She knew play acting when she heard it. "So," she said, her voice tight to keep from laughing, "Prince Jashir sent you on an errand he knew you would find distasteful."

"Exactly!" Sajin quickly agreed.

The dark woman slowly lifted her gaze and looked at him. "I am told you wish to see how our farm works. May I ask why?"

"I--" Sajin looked to Azalon for help.

"Prurient curiosity that ill befits him," Azalon jeered. He grinned crookedly at the lady when she turned her fathomless scrutiny to him. "I have been with the Ben-Alkazar family for as long as I have drawn breath. If you know anything of His Grace's reputation, you know the burdens I have endured over the years." He turned a hard glare at Sajin. "The man is somewhat of a voyeur."

Yuri watched the Kensetti's mouth drop open and his face turn brick red.

"That is not true!" Sajin hissed.

"Then why do you wish to see how my farm operates?" Sabrina asked.

"I...i's because I--" Sajin's face turned redder still. He swallowed hard. "I just do!"

Azalon shook his head sadly. "See, my lady? He can not justify such a dark need, but who knows the ways of royalty?"

Sajin snapped his mouth shut with an audible click and squinted at Azalon, silently warning the man he'd gone too far.

"I see no reason why you can not watch one of the sessions," Sabrina told him. "I have several women in heat at the moment."

Yuri's face also turned a dull red at the matter-of-fact words. He looked away from the others and found great interest in the tapestry Sajin had stroked.

"That would be," Sajin grinned sickly, "nice."

She studied the men, watching the way they were nervously looking at one another. Waiting patiently for their next question, she folded her hands in her lap and smiled sweetly at them, wondering who would get up the nerve to speak.

"Lady Sabrina." It was the Rysalian. "We heard a most interesting thing in Asaraba recently."

Sabrina inclined her head politely. "One hears many things in Asaraba, sir."

Azalon nodded. "True, but this was most astounding." He looked at his companions, then turned back to her. "Is it true you paid the largest sum ever for a slave there?"

Ah, she thought, at last!

"I think you are referring to the Serenian I purchased."

Sajin clenched his hands together. "You have a Serenian? Here?"

Sabrina laughed. "I have many men here, Your Grace."

"I've never seen a Serenian," Yuri remarked, drawing the woman's notice. He withered beneath her calm stare.

"Yuri is from the Outer Kingdom," Sajin said, wishing the man would drop through the floor.

"Serenian's are no different from any other men," Sabrina informed them. "They have the same necessary equipment with which to perform." She tried to keep a straight face as the tall warrior and the Kensetti prince began to look ill at ease. "Would you like to see the Serenian?"

Sajin's brows shot up. "Could we?"

"In due course," she answered.

“Why not now?” Sajin inquired.

Azalon shot Sajin a nasty glance. “Your Grace, please! Let us get the matter of business out of the way before you indulge yourself in your sick pursuits.”

If he could have, Sajin would have leapt up to strangle the man. He hoped the look he gave the caravan leader was sufficient to make his feelings known.

“I also purchased an Ionarian,” Sabrina informed them, watching their expressions. She was not surprised to see keen interest flicker in the Outer Kingdom warrior’s face.

“I have heard they are a fierce race,” Azalon injected.

“They can be,” Sabrina agreed. “My Ionarian is most deadly with a bow.”

Sajin stared at her. “You’ve given the man a chance to show you his expertise with a bow?”

Sabrina nodded. “I treat my slaves quite well, Your Grace.” She schooled her face in a tight grimace. “Of course there are exceptions to that.”

Sajin glanced quickly at Yuri. “In what way, milady?”

The black woman let out an annoyed breath. “It is the Serenian,” she said in a flat voice. “He has given me trouble since the day we dragged him here.”

“Dragged?” Yuri bit out.

“I am sure the Lady Sabrina is speaking figuratively,” Azalon was quick to point out.

“On the contrary!” Sabrina disagreed. “If you have heard of the auction that day, you know he was shown totally naked before the buyers.”

“What?” Sajin whispered, not daring to look at the other men.

Sabrina nodded. “Oh, yes. He was manacled hand and foot, even yoked and gagged to control him.” She shrugged eloquently. “That should have warned me he would be a problem, but he was so--” She smiled. “Well, let’s just say he was well-endowed, though not circumcised.”

Sajin flinched.

Azalon groaned.

Yuri stared, his gaze hot as fiery embers.

“He was not pleased to have been purchased.”

“I would think not,” Sajin muttered.

“Especially when told where he would be going and what would be done to him.”

“Done to him?” Sajin croaked.

“We brought him kicking and screaming to one of the breeding huts.” Sabrina clucked her tongue. “He had to be restrained.”

“Restrained,” Sajin stated in a flat voice.

“Yes. Tied hand and foot. I grew tired of his vulgar cursing, so I keep him gagged.” She smiled dreamily. “Even when he is being mounted.”

“Mounted?” Yuri exploded, taking a step closer to the woman.

Sabrina turned her sweet look on the warrior. “Well, of course. Since he is bound in the breeding cot, he can not perform, sir. We let the women go in and--” She fluttered her eyes. “Shall we say ‘manipulate’ him?”

“Sajin!” Yuri thundered, tearing his gaze away from the woman to impale the Kensetti.

“Your servant is most disrespectful, Your Grace,” Sabrina admonished.

“And you are playing with fire, sweet one.”

Sajin turned and found a tall blond man standing in the doorway. Yuri’s head had snapped around at the sound of the man’s voice and Sajin watched as the Outer Kingdom warrior stalked to the newcomer and grabbed the front of his robe.

"Where is he, Montyne?" Yuri shouted, shaking his captive. "Where is Conar?"

"He isn't here," Chase said, disentangling his clothing from the man's hard grip.

"You let her sell him to someone else?" Yuri bellowed. His hands went back to Montyne's robe. "By all the gods in your world, you'd better not have!"

"Sabrina," Chase sighed, looking to her.

"If you will calm down, Yuri," Azalon tried to intervene, but the Shadow-warrior shook Chase violently.

Sajin stared with surprise as one moment the hulking warrior was shaking the blond man, the next he was half-way across the room, sliding down the wall, a look of stunned shock on his beefy face. The Kensetti looked back at the Ionarian with admiration.

"Conar teach you that?" Sajin asked.

"I taught Conar," Chase answered. He held out his hand. "Sajin Ben-Alkazar, I take it?"

Sajin gripped the man's wrist. "Chase Montyne?"

"You will have to forgive Sabrina," Chase said. "We had to know why you were looking for Conar."

"To get him back," Yuri grumbled, pushing himself off the floor. He glared at Montyne. "Don't you ever do that again."

"Don't you ever put your hands on me again," Chase warned.

Sabrina coughed delicately, gaining the men's attention. "I take it you have not come to purchase slaves." At Sajin's shrug, she grinned. "Or watch my slaves performing?"

"Enough, Sabrina," Chase chastened her. He motioned the men to sit down. "She gets bored and does this on occasion."

Sajin grinned. "I have to admit thinking of Conar being--" He chuckled. "--used in that fashion was a most amusing fantasy. But I'm glad to know he's all right."

Chase frowned. "I hope that's the case."

Sajin's smile vanished. "What do you mean? You DO know where he is, don't you?"

"Not at the moment," Sabrina answered. As the others turned to stare at her, she shook her head. "The last we heard he was with a group of resistance fighters somewhere near Hujurn Oasis."

"That was two months ago," Chase added. "He sent word to Sabrina that he was alive."

"Did something happen?" Sajin asked.

"We were on our way here when a group of mercenaries attacked the camp," Chase explained. "They were after Conar."

"Guil's men," Sajin spat.

"We believe so," Sabrina answered. "He bid against me for Conar."

"Did they take him?" Yuri snarled.

Chase looked over at the man. "You know better, Andreanova. I'd have given my life to keep him safe. You know that."

Sabrina turned her shocked face to her lover. They had not discussed Sirocco's relationship to the Serenian. She had thought them nothing more than friends, warriors in the same fighting force in Serenia. To hear the man she loved tell another man he would give his life to keep the Serenian safe, was something that disturbed her deeply.

"He escaped then?" Sajin inquired.

"Into the desert with no water and a horse with a quarrel in its ribs," Chase told him. "But if you know Conar at all, you know the gods are with that man every step he takes. He beat the desert."

"He is a survivor," Yuri agreed, pride in his thick voice.

"So now he is with the resistance," Sajin echoed. "Not exactly a safe place for him to be."

"Perhaps he'll find Jale," Yuri said.

Chase glanced at the man. "Jale is missing?" At Yuri's nod, Chase exhaled a hard, long breath. "I was afraid of that. Was he sold like me?"

"Not like you," Sabrina grinned.

Chase blushed and leveled his gaze with Yuri's. "Have you any idea where he is?"

"He was purchased for the quarry near Kilnt," Azalon told him. "We were going to go there after we left here."

"That's only four miles from here!" Chase exclaimed.

"And no place for an Outlander to be," Sabrina put in. "I have heard gruesome tales of how foreigners are treated there."

"As have I," Azalon admitted, "but I did not want to alarm His Grace and the warrior."

"This resistance group Conar is with," Sajin asked, "how do we find it?"

"You don't," Azalon warned him. "I am surprised your friend even admitted to being with them. It is very dangerous for all of them, especially so since he told you where they were camping."

"He didn't," Chase was quick to point out. "The man who brought the message to us thought it would be worth a few extra silver pieces to inform on the group."

"I hope you slit his conniving throat!" Yuri growled.

"Better than that," Sabrina laughed.

"If you'd like to speak with him," Chase chuckled, "you'll find him in hut number five."

Sajin turned admiring eyes to the black woman. "Your idea, lady?"

Sabrina sighed. "One does what one can for the cause, Your Grace."

Chase leaned forward in his chair. "I have convinced Sabrina to go home with me to Ionary just as soon as she can rid herself of her holdings here."

Yuri stiffened. "I would not think a man who spent three years of his life in a penal colony would condone slave selling, Montyne!"

Sajin's left brow shot up at the look the blond gave the Outer Kingdom warrior.

"There is no man in this room more strongly against slavery than am I, Andreanova. But where would you have these people go? How would they fend for themselves when they have led pampered lives since the day they were born? It takes time to find adequate homes for the children whose mothers do not want them. It takes money to give free lots to those who do not want to join other households." He stood up and stared down at the Shadow-warrior. "Did it ever occur to you that there are some slaves who do not want to be free?"

"I have already found a buyer for the brothel I own on the Nilus," Sabrina said quietly.

"Those who work there are free to go or sign contracts with the new owner."

"Don't judge me, Andreanova," Chase warned. "I am doing what I can to help these people."

"And what of Conar?" Yuri grumbled. "He is fighting to free those same people. Will you help him?"

"If he asks me!" Chase snarled. "I don't even think he knows I'm here!"

"He will!" Yuri shot back. "What then, Montyne? Will you join him or will you stay here with your woman?"

Sajin stood up, put himself between the two men. "If Conar needs us, we'll fight alongside him. So will Montyne."

Yuri glared at the Ionarian. He'd never liked the man; had never trusted him. But he was a friend to Conar. He backed down although it galled him to do so.

"Go with us," Sajin asked Chase. "Help us find this man Jale."

"Sirocco, no!" Sabrina cried, reaching out for her lover. "Do not!"

Chase patted her hand on his arm. "I have to, sweet one." He looked down into her tearful face. "Storm Jale is a friend of mine; we've been through a lot together. I came here to find him and now that we may know where he is, I wouldn't be much of a friend if I didn't go to his aid, now, would I?"

"But it is dangerous, Sirocco!" she cried, dragging on his arm. "You are an Outlander. With your fair hair and coloring, you will be--"

"My personal slave," Sajin interrupted her. He smiled at Montyne's fierce scowl. "So to speak."

"It might work," Azalon admitted. "His Grace can say we have come to the quarry to chose stone for his tomb."

Sajin winced. "I don't think so."

"What better reason?" Azalon inquired. "Everyone knows how eccentric the royalty is. What better excuse to go to a quarry and inspect the work than to pick out just the right slabs of stone for your final resting place?"

"It is bad luck to jest of such things," Yuri grouched.

"But a damned good ploy," Chase answered.

"All right," Sajin sighed. "What do you suggest we do once we find Jale?"

Sabrina listened as the men sat at the desk and planned their trip to Kilnt. Her expression was grave, her heart thudding in her chest. She watched her lover's excited face, saw the gleam of battle in his eyes and knew there would be no way she would prevent her precious warrior from leaving.

* * * *

Balizar held up his hand, halting the others. He stood up in his saddle and looked around him, reading the landscape as though perusing a map. There was a worried look on his lined face.

"What's wrong?" Conar asked as he reined in his mount beside Hern's brother.

The aging warrior shook his head. "Just a feeling," he answered. "Something in my gut is warning me to be very, very careful."

Conar crossed his wrists over the pommel. "A trap?"

"Doesn't feel like one," Balizar told him. "Just a feeling I can't shake."

"Maybe we should send a scout ahead," Asher said.

"That may be a good idea," Balizar agreed. He sat down in the saddle and pulled on the reins.

"You're going?" Asher asked.

"And who better, may I ask?" the older man sniffed.

"Be careful," Conar warned him. "If we were in Serenia, I could be of more help to you, but here, what powers I have left are useless."

"I hadn't thought of that," Balizar laughed. "Now, I am really worried!" He kicked his horse in the ribs and left the others on the flat stretch of barren sand.

"How far are we from the quarry?" Conar asked Asher.

"Three, maybe four miles." He pointed east. "The Lady Sabrina's breeding farm is just over two miles that way." Asher knew all about Conar's encounter with the procuress.

"Maybe I'll go visit her while I'm here," Conar laughed.

“And get a good look at that blond haired archer,” Rupine commented.

Conar nodded. “I could have sworn the man was a friend of mine, but I don’t think that’s likely.” He snorted. “If I know Montyne, he’s sitting on a cliff in Ionary sipping oozio.”

“That didn’t take long,” Asher said.

Conar looked around and saw Balizar riding back toward them. “Something’s wrong,” he said.

Balizar’s face was thunderous as he reined in with the others. “They ain’t at the quarry,” he spat. “They’re trekking to that great pile of stones that Hasdu son-of-a-bitch is building for his afterlife!”

“How many?” Asher asked.

“Three, maybe four hundred,” Balizar ground out.

“Hundred?” Conar gasped.

“And all in a little line spread out along a good long stretch, at that,” Balizar told him. “We ain’t never gonna find that Serenian in all that!”

Conar looked away from Balizar. All day, ever since he had awakened in the early morning hours, his heart pounding and his body covered with chilled sweat, he’d had the oddest feeling. The flesh on his back, long since devoid of feeling because of the massive amount of scar tissue, had been tingling as though a lash were being laid to it. His palms, where once twin brands had been scored into the flesh, were itching; and his left cheek with its parallel scars had been twitching ever since they had left camp.

“I can find him,” Conar announced, feeling the surety of it all the way to his soul.

“Ain’t no way, I tell you!” Balizar disagreed.

Conar nodded. “I can.”

“We can wait until the go back to the quarry,” Rupine suggested. “It will be safer and easier for us to find an Outlander there than on a trek to the Valley of the Dead.”

A dull pain jabbed into Conar’s gut and he leaned forward with it, drawing in his breath. His eyelids flickered.

“What is it, son?” Balizar asked, seeing a strange emotion crossing over McGregor’s face.

“If we don’t get him today,” Conar said, as sure of what he was saying as he had ever been of anything, “there won’t be any need to go after him again.” He turned his steady stare to Balizar. “They will have murdered him.”

Balizar didn’t need to ask the young man how he knew that. After all, this was the Prince of the Wind. He nodded. “What do you want to do?”

Conar looked back across the desert. “How many guards would you say they have?”

“Six, seven dozen,” Balizar informed him.

“On horseback or foot?”

“Some on horseback, but most on foot.”

“Weapons?”

“A few with crossbows.” Balizar shrugged. “Most with whips.”

Conar straightened in the saddle, once more feeling the vague, dull pain, but this time in his side. “How many crossbows?”

“Ten, maybe twelve.”

Asher Stone watched the Serenian carefully. There was a powerful expression on his scarred face, a deadly sheen that, when it turned to Balizar, boded ill for whoever had caused it.

“The man we’re going after will be apart from the others. They’ll have several guards around him whose only duty it is to torment him.” His mouth turned bitter. “Look for one out of all that throng who is being viciously beaten with every step he takes and you will find our man.”

“How do you know that?” Rupine asked.

“Don’t be asking him such a foolish question!” Balizar snapped. “The man knows what he’s about.”

Another dull pain flared in his stomach and Conar bent double with it, waving aside Balizar’s concern. He ground his teeth and forced himself erect, glaring off across the sand as though it were a mortal enemy.

“Let’s go,” he said, flicking his reins against his mount’s sides. “We don’t have all that much time.”

Rachel kicked her horse into motion, cantering him as closely behind Khamsin’s as she could get. Her eyes were on his back, her hand on the cross bow slung over her pommel.

* * * *

Storm fell, his bleeding face pushed into the hot sand by the keeper’s boot on his neck. He felt the heat, could not breathe, experienced the suffocating horror of the sand invading his mouth and nostrils. His lungs were burning beneath the torn and bloodied flesh of his chest. He barely grunted as someone grabbed his hair and pulled his head free of the sand.

“Infidel dog!” the shout came as a hard boot connected with his temple to flip him over.

Pain exploded inside his head and his vision dimmed. He rolled, his ravaged back tortured by the white-hot heat of the sand. Another boot drove into his side and he doubled over, drawing his legs up to protect his groin.

“Get up, dog!”

Hard hands, unrelenting hands fastened around his arms and jerked him up, held him. A vicious backhand blow caught him across his already-bleeding mouth and knocked still another tooth loose.

“When we arrive at the site, I will see to it you are staked again!”

Storm Jale, his dark eyes filled with utter submission, sagged between his captors, his head lolling, only partially aware of what was being done to him.

“Walk, dog!” the keeper bellowed.

They let go of him and he staggered, knowing if he went down again, he would never get up again this side of hell. He stumbled backward, caught himself from falling. It was an effort to drag one foot ahead of the other, but he managed to turn without crashing face down in the sand and walk unsteadily toward the cart he had been dragging before the keeper had singled him out for punishment.

“Is this how it was for you, Conar?” he asked as he placed himself between the traces of the cart and bent down to lift up the poles. “Did you yield to this surrender?”

“What are you saying?” the keeper yelled and the whip came down on his bare shoulders like a stinging hide of angry bees.

Storm leaned into the pull, feeling the weight of the cart dragging at his shoulders. He dug his feet into the sand and inched the cart of timbers forward. Blood dripped from his chin, ran down his chest through the thick matting of hair.

He stumbled, went down on one knee and the whip descended on him, cutting down his right arm from wrist to shoulder.

“Get up, dog!”

Storm turned his head and looked up at the man. With every ounce of strength he had left in his weakening body, he slowly smiled. He watched the incredulity flit across the man's dark ugly face; saw the moment the whip came up and lashed out; endured the agony of the steel-tipped barbs penetrating as the rawhide dragged over his exposed throat. Blood gushed out of his torn flesh and Storm, a smile still on his lips, crumbled to the ground in a heap.

CHAPTER TEN

Holm Van de Lar looked up into the sheeting and was satisfied with what he saw. The Ravenwind was running before the wind, her yards squared. She was making good time to Jasmine Cay and by his calculations, they should reach the Sinisters by mid-morning. He glanced down at his sea charts and nodded.

"I hope those charts are correct," Paegan Hesar commented to the captain.

"They are," Holm answered. "Let's just hope that Outer Kingdom ship is waiting for us when we reach Jasmine Cay."

"I'm not looking forward to going through the Sinisters," Paegan admitted. He looked off the starboard rail and could see the hump of land in the distance.

"Consider it a learning experience, little brother," Rylan Hesar said.

"I'm most anxious to view this thing called a fog horn," Jah-Ma-El announced. "I hope it doesn't frighten the men like it frightened Conar."

"He wasn't prepared for it," Roget reminded Conar's brother.

"And we won't be either," Sentian grumbled.

Legion had stayed behind, Tyne thought as he cleaned and polished his sword. As had Chand Wynth, who was seeing to the affairs in Oceania; Shalu, who was in bed with a bad case of the flu; and Marsh Edan. But all the rest of them were there, including young Wyn.

"I don't see why Coron and I can't go with you!" Dyllon, Conar's youngest brother had argued.

"You lost the draw," Wyn had answered. "Coron goes to Ionary to see to Chase's business and you, Uncle Dyllon, have to go to Chale."

"Chale!" Dyllon had spat as though it were a dirty word.

"Be careful, young McGregor," Tyne had warned him. "My people will set the leprechauns on you if you don't respect your obligation."

"It was rigged!" Coron had hissed. "The draw was rigged!"

Tyne knew it hadn't been; that it had been the gods' plan that the two young Princes remain behind. Marsh hadn't been happy with his lot, either. He had been the first to draw a short straw.

"But I know the country!" he had complained. "You need me with you!"

"I need you to help Tristan run Boreas while I traipse off to Virago!" Legion had fairly bellowed, another loser not happy with his plight.

"I want to go along!" Tristan had yelled at his uncle, but every man there had shouted him down.

"Conar would have our hides if we allowed any of you boys to go along!" Thom had reminded both Tristan and Regan, who had insisted he be allowed to go.

"You can do your father much good here," Ching-Ching finally impressed upon the boys. "His magic is useless in that heathen place, but yours can protect him for here."

"How?" Regan had shot back.

"Combine your powers, young birds," Ching-Ching had said. "Send your combined strength to him. He will take note of it, believe me."

"You don't know he's in trouble," Regan had answered.

Ching-Ching's wise monkey face screwed up in annoyance. "I know your father!"

"I'm thinking this ain't so bad," Meggie Ruck pronounced as she waddled across the deck toward Sentian. "A little bit like walking with your snoot full, but not so bad."

"He's going to blow his top when he sees you, Meg," Sentian warned her.

Meggie sniffed. "So let him. Won't be the first time my bonny boy showed his arse."

"Watch your mouth," several men cautioned her.

"Go to the devil with you!" Meggie smirked at them.

"The worse ship's cook I ever had," Holm lamented and he watched Meggie sit down on a coil of hemp. "Whoever told her hardtack and biscuits was what was served at sea?"

"Thom," Roget answered. "Hoping she wouldn't come along."

Holm stared across the deck at the tall, bald headed man. "Remind me to teach that bastard a thing or two when we get aboard that Outer Kingdom vessel."

Wyn peered down from the crow's nest. He loved sailing as much as his father did. He had scampered up to the lookout point before the Ravenwind had even cleared Boreas Harbor. It was him who saw the man standing on the cliff when the ship had started its tack south.

"Roget!"

Du Mer had looked up to see Wyn pointing at the cliffs they were passing. He narrowed his gaze, made his way to the taffrail and stood staring across the span of water.

"Is it him?" Sentian had asked.

"Aye, it is."

Holm was curious to know what the other men were looking at and walked to the rail. He looked out across the waves and a hard glimmer of anger shot through his pale eyes.

"Du Mer!" Holm shouted, making those on deck flinch with the fury and hurt in the man's booming voice. "Get your ass back to jenny!"

Roget saw his brother, Teal, thrust his hands into the pockets of his breeches, but he did not answer. He wondered if Teal knew where Conar was and that they were going to find him.

"He knows," Ching-Ching had told him. "He came to wish you well." The Chrystallusian had shaken his head. "A man's pride is a terrible burden at times."

"Conar doesn't blame him for what Sadie did," Roget had argued. "Teal should know that."

"No, but du Mer blames himself."

Teal had stood there for a moment longer, listening to Holm berating him, then had turned and disappeared.

"He's got a wife and babe and the man has forsaken them!" Holm had bit out, slamming his hand down on the railing.

"Give him time, Holm," Tyne had tried to soothe the man. "Let him come to grips with it."

"When we get Conar home," Sentian had vowed, "we'll go find du Mer and bring him home, too."

"Bring her around, Mr. Tarnes!" Holm shouted to his first mate.

Paegan scampered forward, giving orders to bring in the yards.

"Jasmine Cay," Sentian whispered, never thinking to see the island again.

"He loved this place," Thom said.

"Aye. Once," Sentian agreed. "But after what happened to Nadia--"

"Do you think Edan is the traitor?" Thom asked, surprising Sentian.

"Edan?" Sentian shook his head. "No. He loved Nadia as though she were his own daughter. Whoever took her from the keep is our traitor, Thom. It can't be Marsh."

"He left," Thom grumbled. "Right after Conar did."

“He told us why,” Roget said, joining them. “Do you have reason to think he was lying?”
Thom scrunched his rubbery face into a mask of worry. “Maybe.”
“What does that mean?” Roget asked.
But Thom would say no more. He kept his suspicions to himself.

* * * *

Captain Serge Nickolayevich Kutuzov grinned widely at the burly captain of the Ravenwind. He strode forward, his hand thrust out, his face beaming with pleasure.
“Van de Lar?” he barked in his thick accent. “It is pleasure to meet!”
Holm took the hand of the Outer Kingdom sea captain and cocked his head toward the sleek vessel lying at anchor in the cove. “She is a rare beauty! What do you call her?”
Serge lifted his chin. “She is Anya Katrine.”
“A lovely name for a lovely lady,” Holm assured him. “I can’t wait to get aboard.”
“We sail in three hours,” Serge told him and then looked about at the men who had disembarked the Ravenwind. “The Wind Force?”
“Most of them,” Holm agreed, then introduced the man to the others.
“Chalean!” Serge shrieked with joy and began to converse with Tyne in his native tongue.
“Boisterous fellow, ain’t he?” Thom asked Sentian.
“Conar spoke highly of him,” Roget said.
“Your ship handsome.”
Sentian turned around to see a man he knew could be nothing else but a Shadow-warrior. He smiled. “Conar named her.” He held out his hand, somewhat surprised when the man did not hesitate in taking it.
“I,” the man said, jabbing a thumb into his chest, “Alexi Romanovitch.”
“Sentian Heil, Thom Loure and Roget du Mer,” Sentian introduced themselves.
“You,” Alexi said, pointing at Thom, “he tells me of.”
Thom’s high forehead drew together. “Conar?”
Alexi nodded. “Fight fire together. Hear tale of how long.” He looked pointedly down at Thom’s crotch, then grinned and reached out to slap Thom’s shoulder. “Much good, eh?”
Sentian glanced up at Loure and saw the man blush. He laughed and found the Outer Kingdom man’s hand on his own shoulder.
“You, he say got *big* temper!” Alexi squeezed Sentian’s shoulder. “Say good friend.” He jabbed his thumb into his chest once more. “*My* friend, too!”
“I’d hate to know what he said of me,” Roget quipped.
Alexi shook his head. “Not gamble with you.”
Roget’s brows shot up. “No, that’s Teal you’re thinking about.”
“Not gamble with *you*!” Alexi repeated, walking off.
“Wait a minute!” Roget called out, following the man. “He was talking about my brother. Not me! Alexi!!”
Meggie stared at the tall, burly men walking around her on the deck of the Outer Kingdom ship and was amazed so many big men could gather in one place and not sink the ship. She smiled at them, was relieved to see them grin back, if only fleetingly.
“Brutes, they are, I bet,” she mumbled, shaking her head of fuzzy white hair.
“But polite brutes.”
Meggie glanced up, seeing only a dark outline above her for the speaker’s back was to the afternoon sun. She shielded her eyes with her hand and sniffed.

“Can’t see a bloody thing with you standing there. Sit yourself down here by me and let’s have a little talk.”

Wyn glanced across the deck and saw the woman sitting with Meggie. He elbowed Rylan. “Do you think that’s her?”

Rylan squinted through the murky haze drifting in from the Sinisters. “Probably.”

“Should we go speak to her?”

Rylan shook his head. “Not until Meggie’s finished with her.” He tried to see the woman’s face, but could see nothing more than a slim nose and a cap of dark curls.

“They called her Your Grace,” Paegan told them as he hurried up. “That’s Conar’s woman!”

“You sure?” Grice Wynth asked as he glanced behind him.

“Go ask her!” Wyn insisted.

“When Meg’s through,” Grice answered.

“What was her name, now?” Holm asked, standing with the others and staring across the deck.

“Her name is Marie Catherine Steffenovitch,” Ching-Ching informed the men in a haughty tone that said they shouldn’t be gossiping. “And yes, she is Conar’s lady.”

“What’s she doing here?” Sentian asked, craning his head to see the woman, too.

“Come to help get her man back,” an Outer Kingdom sailor chuckled and when the others turned to him, he grinned. “When message come he be found alive--“

“Alive?” the men of the Wind Force bellowed to a man.

Meggie turned her head and the sound and looked across the deck. “They be discussing you, gal.”

Catherine nodded. “I don’t doubt it.”

“I have just one question for you, sweeting,” Meggie said, gaining the young woman’s attention.

“Do I love him?” Catherine asked.

Meggie slowly bobbed her head up and down.

“Does the sun set in the west, Meggie-love?” she asked, surprising the old woman with the nickname Conar had given her long ago. “Does it rise in the east and dry the dew from the flowers?” She took the old woman’s hand in her own. “Does this woman love Conar McGregor?”

“That’s what I’m wanting to be knowing!” Meggie snorted.

“I came half-way around the world, against my parents’ wishes, my brothers’ angry denials, stowing away and living off a tin of warm water and two loaves of bread until I knew we were far enough out to sea that they couldn’t turn around and take me home. I shunned the hand of every eligible bachelor in my homeland, seven emirates and three kingdoms just to have Conar McGregor kiss me as only he can.” She lowered her eyes. “And I gave him what I had given no other man before him and thrilled in the giving.” She looked up. “How do you think I feel about him, Meggie?”

Meggie stared hard at her for a good long time then squeezed her hand. “Don’t go hurting him, lass,” she warned. “If’n you do, you’ll have a heap of trouble piled on your pretty little head the likes of which you ain’t never seen.”

Catherine smiled. “He’s been hurt enough in his lifetime. I’d die before I’d let anything hurt him, Meg.”

“That you might,” Meggie agreed. “That you might.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Chase couldn't believe what he was seeing as he and the three other men rode down off a high dune to view the staggered line of moving men and vehicles stretching along the desert.

"Sweet Alel," Chase gasped.

"Slavery," Yuri barked, his face stony. "Whips and shackles and torment. *That* is slavery!"

"How the hell are we going to find one man among all them?" Sajin asked, overwhelmed by the sight. Slavery had been a part of his life since he was old enough to understand what the word meant, but never had he seen such a sight as this. In Kensett, the slaves were not treated so.

"Well, we won't do it sitting here," Azalon remarked. He wiped the sweat from under his bearded chin. "Watch yourselves. There's other riders to the east of us."

Sajin looked to his left and saw twenty or so riders coming toward them. Something in his very soul told who was leading that group of men.

"Montyne!" When Chase looked his way, he pointed. "How much do you want to bet that's our friend?"

Chase twisted in his saddle and saw the other group of riders. "I'd say by the way they're bearing down, you may be right."

"They've spotted us," Yuri said, drawing his saber. He kept tight rein on his steed as several riders broke away from the main group and headed their way.

"He's going after that last column of men," Sajin said, watching a big black destrier racing ahead of the others.

Chase opened his mind, but nothing would come. Since coming to this godsforsaken land, he had not been able to use even a smidgen of his power.

"If that's Conar, he knows exactly where Jale is," Yuri said. He was watching the men hurrying toward him, preparing himself to fight if need be.

"Maybe not," Chase answered, still trying to probe the aura around him. All he got for his effort was a wavering shimmer of heat.

"Heads up!" Sajin shouted, kicking his horse toward the group that was heading straight for him.

Conar had seen the other riders on the dune, but he had no time to worry about them. He had heard Balizar issuing an order to some of their party to intercept the riders and that was all that mattered. His entire concentration was on trying to find his fellow countryman in the miserable throne of humanity on the roadway.

"Where are you, friend?" Conar thought, sending out his powers only to have them fall short, not connect. He tried again, caught just a faint shifting in the air around him and was stunned to know it hadn't come from the men on the roadway but from the riders up on the dune. He turned his head for just a second, saw his men engaging the other riders in hand to hand combat, and wondered what sorcerer had tried to call out to him.

"McGregor!" Sajin bellowed to the men who were lashing out at them with drawn sword. "Conar McGregor!"

The Kensetti had no way of knowing that name meant nothing to these men. If anything, it made them fight the harder.

"Tell them something, Sajin!" Yuri shouted, hacking at a nomad and trying not to hurt him just in case he was one of Conar's men.

"What do you suggest I say?" Sajin yelled back. He swatted one attacker on the side of the head with the flat of his sword and was relieved when the man fell off his horse and rolled to safety.

"Khamsin!" Chase called out, seeing two of the attacker's looking at one another. "Khamsin!" he said again and threw his sword away.

"Montyne, you idiot!" Yuri shrieked, kicking his horse between Chase and the seven men who had ridden down on them.

"Khamsin?" one of the attackers asked, pointing down to the big black stallion.

"Yes!" Sajin answered. "Khamsin!"

"The Darkwind!" Chase laughed.

The attackers reined in their mounts, lowered their swords and looked at the men.

"Darkwind?" the same man asked.

"Aye," Chase grinned, putting out his hand. "We are the Darkwind's men!"

The attacker reluctantly took Montyne's wrist in his hand. "Khamsin's man," he said firmly.

"Is that him on the black?" Sajin asked in the language of the Hasdu.

The man looked behind him. "Yes."

Yuri threw back his head and laughed. "Then what are we waiting for?" he yelled. He lowered his head and leaned low in the saddle, kicking his mount into action. "Let's go get him!"

Dozens of slaves were breaking free of the staggered column, running out into the desert, trying desperately to escape the guards. But a dozen men turned toward the intruders and drew swords from their scabbards, shouting out a war cry as they met the threat of the Samiel's raid head on.

Rachel was only two lengths behind Conar as he plunged his steed into the line of guards watching the last column of slaves. She saw him bend low in the saddle, take a backward swing with his sword to behead one guard and mortally wound another on the forward curve. He whipped his sword through the men as though they were sheaves of wheat inside of bone and blood and marrow. Few turned to fight him and those who did, died.

"Watch his back!" she heard Balizar shout and lifted her crossbow in time to bring down a guard intent on driving his spear into Conar's side.

Ahead of him was a lone man, on the ground, lying huddled between the traces of a pull cart. As he had raced his steed toward the roadway, he had seen the whip raised and lowered, counting six times the lash had descended before the guard became aware of the trouble bearing down on him. Every time that lash had connected with the still form on the ground, Conar's own back had tingled with an unpleasantness that was totally unlike anything he had ever felt before.

"Hang on, friend," he whispered, kicking away one of the guards who had lashed out at him with a dagger. His boot heel caught the man in the mouth and he saw the give as teeth caved in.

Storm opened his eyes and saw the big black horse racing toward him. "Seayearner," he sighed. He watched with detached calm the bloodbath going on around him. Several guards were down, some screaming from the bite of Conar's sword. Another fell from a quarrel in the back and Storm shifted his gaze to see Liza re-loading her bow.

"I'm dead," he said, keeping his steady gaze on the lovely woman who, without the least bit of compunction, reached down to a taut thigh and withdrew a wicked-looking dagger that sailed unerringly into the throat of a guard who had managed to drag Conar from his horse.

Conar pushed the guard away, not even realizing the man was dead, and plunged his sword into the corpse's belly. It wasn't until he was dragging the sword clear that he saw the dagger. He

glanced up, expecting to see Balizar and nearly screamed with frustration when he found Rachel bringing her bow up.

“You gods-be-damned stupid bitch!” he bellowed at her, wishing he hadn’t for the bow wavered for just a moment before the quarrel shot from the shaft and plunged into the heart of another guard.

“Let me do my job, Khamsin!” she yelled back at him.

Something hit him hard across his shoulders and he spun around, finding himself wrapped in the braided tail of a rawhide whip. His fury went beyond the rational to some farther reach of insanity and he grabbed the lash and jerked, pulling the guard off balance and impaling him with one fluid motion on the end of his blade.

“Don’t you ever hit me again!” Rachel heard him scream. She watched in fascination as he shrugged the rawhide from him and lunged forward to disembowel another whip wielder before the man could bring his arm forward.

“Conar,” Storm whispered. He tried to crawl toward the man he had desperately wanted to come for him, but he found he didn’t have the strength. He reached up, reaching out for Conar, but his friend was busy fighting two guards at once, and Storm dropped his hand to the ground again.

“You need help?” Rachel called out to Conar, looking around to make sure there were no other guards nearby to give him trouble.

“No! “

She shrugged and lowered her crossbow. She watched him, marveling that he had so much stamina, so much strength as he hacked at one man and drove the other back with feints and jabs that had the man’s shirt front bloody.

“You sure?”

Conar risked a look at her, enraged that the bitch could be taunting him at a time like this. He was so angry, he pivoted on his left and kicked one of his opponents in the face, breaking the man’s jaw.

“Bet that hurt,” Rachel breathed.

The remaining guard jumped back, away from the lunge that would have ripped his belly open. He flung down his own weapon and turned, running as fast as he could away from the deadly man he’d been fighting.

Conar’s hand went down to his thigh and he drew out his dagger, flipped it over so that the point was in his palm. He brought it back, then cursed, realizing the man was out of range of his blade.

“Let me,” Rachel sighed, pushing him aside and bringing up her crossbow. She leveled it and sighted.

“Shoot him!” Conar shouted at her.

“I will.”

He stared at her, wanting to slap her silly as she just stood there, letting the bastard get further out of range. Just as he was about to snatch the bow from her, she let the missile go and he turned his head to follow its arc: straight into the running man’s back.

“Sweet Alel!” Conar breathed, despite himself. He slowly turned his head to look at her.

“I always hit what I aim for, milord,” she told him, not realizing her words hurt him so badly he nearly cried.

“How come you always wind up with all the pretty girls, Conar?”

Conar spun around, his eyes flaring as he saw Sajin Ben-Alkazar sitting on a horse behind him. He shifted his gaze, found Chase Montyne staring back at him, then was stunned to see Yuri Andreanova grinning at him, as well.

"How?" Conar asked.

Chase shrugged. "Just looking out for your arse as usual, McGregor," he answered.

"That was you!" Conar gasped.

"Once more into the breach, eh, Darkwind?" Chase chuckled.

"This man is hurt bad, Khamsin," Rachel called out to him, breaking into his awareness. "He needs Rupine."

Chase looked around Conar and nearly fell from his horse as he caught sight of the woman who had spoken. Very slowly he dismounted his steed, staring at her all the while. "Blessed Mary!" he heard Yuri gasp.

Conar turned, more annoyed than ever with the woman, but he saw her sitting on the ground, holding a man's head in her lap, his face against her belly. There was blood on the front of her caftan and he hoped it was the man's, not hers.

"Were you hurt?" he asked, striding toward her.

"No," she snapped and smoothed the long hair out of the injured man's eyes.

Conar knelt down, put his hand on the wounded man's throat. He felt a weak pulse and relieved. "From all that blood on his throat, I was afraid they'd slit it," he told her.

"Lash mark," she answered.

"Unload that wagon," Balizar snapped to several of his men. "We'll transport him in it."

"Give him to me," Conar demanded and put his arm under the man's shoulder.

"Be careful with him," Rachel warned.

"Did I tell you how to shoot that bow, woman?"

"No."

"Then don't tell me how to pick this man up!"

"You aren't invincible, you arrogant bastard!" she shot back.

"Shut the hell up, woman!" Conar flung at her.

"Make me, you arrogant ass!"

Chase looked at Sajin when Conar lifted his head and glared at her. Sajin was frowning, darkly, and Yuri didn't seem happy, either.

"Is it Storm, Conar?" Chase asked, to break the angry stare between his friend and the woman who bore such a strong resemblance to Liza it was unnatural.

Conar flinched as though a lash had come down on him. He slowly turned his head and looked up at Chase with stunned confusion.

"We think it's Storm Jale," Yuri told him.

Rachel saw all the color drain from Conar's face as he looked back around, met her eyes briefly before lowering his gaze to the man. She saw his hand shake as he reached out to gently turn the injured man's face toward him. If she lived to be a hundred, she thought later that evening, she would never again see such unbridled misery on a man's face as she saw when Khamsin recognized the man she held.

"Oh, my god!" she heard him whisper, his voice breaking. His entire body shuddered. "Storm?"

Storm came to, hearing that familiar voice call his name. He looked up into eyes filled with tears, a face that was crumbling with pain.

"I knew you'd come," he managed to croak through his torn and bleeding lips. "I knew you would."

"Storm?"

"I'm sorry, Coni," Jale said.

Rachel relinquished the man in her arms to the gentle embrace that lifted him to Khamsin's chest, to the trembling arms that braced the man's thin and pitifully battered body, to the bloodied sword hand that cupped the greasy, dirt-encrusted head to Khamsin's shoulder.

"Forgive me--" Storm sighed, reaching up a shaking hand to touch his friend's face.

"For what?" Conar cried, his tears falling on the dirt-streaked face of one of his own Elite.

"He killed Nadia," Storm whispered. "He slashed her throat." His filthy hand caressed the scarred plane of Conar's cheek. "If I'd known--"

Chase turned away, his face going bleak and hopeless. They had found the traitor in their ranks at last.

"Don't talk," Conar told him, pressing his old friend's body close to his. "We're going to get you to a healer. He'll--"

"I betrayed you, Conar," Storm whispered, his vision beginning to lose focus. "It was me."

"It doesn't matter," Conar told him, rocking Storm's broken body against his own. "It doesn't matter."

"Forgive me."

"Aye, I do," Conar told him. "Be quiet now. Just be quiet and lie still."

Yuri stared down at the man in Conar's arms, wondering how Conar could possibly forgive Storm Jale. Forgive the man who had turned his infant daughter over to her murderer.

"When you didn't come, I thought you'd forsaken me," Storm said, trying to see Conar's face, but the darkness was closing in on him. "But you would never do that, would you, Conar?"

"Never!" came the immediate reply. "You know better."

Rachel sat back, staring at the ravaged face of Conar McGregor, seeing misery and agony filling the tearful gaze, watching guilt and loss already forming.

"You always forgive the things we do to you, don't you, my friend?" Storm's voice was so low no one heard it but the man to whom he was speaking. "No matter what we do."

"Shush, Storm," Conar pleaded with him. "You're going to be all right."

"No," was the weak sigh. "I'm paying for what I did to you."

"Don't say that!" Conar yelled at him. "You've done nothing to me!"

"I took Nadia to him. I let him kill your daughter."

Rachel winced, looking down at the man Khamsin held. She could see the light beginning to fade from his eyes, knew he was already heading for the light. Whether the warm white light of paradise or the glowing red of hell she didn't know; either way, she could already hear the death rattle in his voice.

"Find him, Conar," Storm told him. "Find Jaborn and kill him."

Sajin turned his head away and looked straight into the face of Asher Stone. A dark thundercloud of anger formed on the Kensetti's face and his hands balled into fists at his side. He could barely hear the dying man's words for hot blood was already beginning to pump through his temples as he stared at Asher.

"Jaleel Jaborn killed Nadia," Storm said on a long sigh. "Because she was your child and I did nothing to stop the bastard." His hand fell from Conar's cheek.

"I'll take care of it," Conar promised, his heart aching. "He'll die on his knees for hurting my daughter, Storm!"

"I know."

"Why?" Yuri heard himself asking, not even noticing the protective way Conar had quickly drawn Jale's body to him. "Why did you betray him? He was your friend!"

Storm used the very last ounce of his strength to look Conar in the eye. He tried to smile and couldn't. Tried to reach up once more to touch Conar's face and couldn't. His words were the last thing between him and death:

"It was my babe, not du Mer's. I loved Joanie, but she loved you. I hated you for that. I--"

Conar felt the life leave Storm's body and yet he continued to hold it, even when Balizar shouted at him that other guards were headed their way.

"They're going after the escapees," Rupine shouted.

"Aye, but they'll be coming after us, too!" Balizar yelled back.

"Yuri," Sajin ordered, "take the body away from--"

"I will not!" the Outer Kingdom warrior seethed. "I will not touch that traitor's body!" Conar looked up slowly, found Yuri's enraged stare and held it. "Never!" Yuri stressed.

Chase spun around and strode to where Conar knelt in the sand and forcibly took Storm's lifeless body out of his arms. He shifted the man's weight and glanced down at Rachel. "Help him up, lady," he ordered. He carried Jale to Sajin's horse, and assisted by the Kensetti, managed to place Storm face down over the mount.

Sajin, with one last glance at Asher Stone, mounted his horse and then kept it under tight control as the steed's sensitive nose caught scent of Jale's blood.

Conar's gaze shifted to Rachel as she reached out to put a hand on his arm.

"It is time to leave, Khamsin," she said.

He nodded, all the fight and anger gone out of him. He allowed her to help him up, did not comment as she slipped her arm around his waist and led him toward his prancing horse that Azalon was having difficulty controlling.

"Hurry!" Balizar yelled out all of them. He glanced behind them and saw guards running toward them with drawn swords.

Conar swung himself up into the saddle, felt her hand on his leg and looked down at her.

"Are you all right, milord?" she asked.

"Aye."

Chase pulled himself onto his mount, thinking there was no emotion in that flat answer, no depth. He turned his horse's head and walked him to Conar.

"You know where I can be found if you need me, Khamsin," Montyne said.

Conar nodded.

"If we don't ride, we're going to have to fight!" Balizar shouted.

Conar kicked his horse into motion, felt the sleek animal respond as it pushed its head forward and lengthened its stride. Vaguely he was aware that Montyne had taken a solitary path back the way he had come. Yuri, Sajin and the man he didn't know were close behind Asher and Balizar and he wondered where Rachel was.

"Here," she called out.

He turned his head and saw her matching him stride for stride. How well she sits her horse, he thought. Like beast and mistress were one entity.

Like Liza use to ride Windkeeper.

A sob tore out of his throat as he began to count all the people he had loved and lost over the years.

He swore Storm Jale would be the last.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The men of the Wind Force stepped off the ship in Asaraba and looked around them at the teeming life, the sharp gazes staring back at the them, the loud sounds of merchants hawking their wares and the running feet of juvenile thieves escaping retribution from their elders.

"If I didn't know any better," Thom remarked, "I'd swear we had docked in Tiji."

"Diabolusia is cleaner than this pig sty," Holm grumbled. His upper lip quirked at the condition of several of the Inner Kingdom dhows riding at anchor in the harbor. "I've seen better ships cracked up on barren reefs than what I see here."

"The Rysalian's are not people of the sea," Serge told him. "Their slave ships, however, are kept shipshape."

"Out of necessity," Holm sneered. "You keep your transports sea worthy in order to make a profit!"

Meggie stared at the women passing by her in their long black gowns, their faces almost obscured by heavy veils. Only their eyes, heavily-lined with kohl, and ancient beyond their years, could be seen peering back at her with mild curiosity.

"You are perhaps the first Outlanderess they have seen," Serge laughed. "They will be polite to you, Madame Ruck, but eventually one will come up to you and start to ask all manner of questions about your culture." He shook his head. "They will bombard you with their curiosity."

Meggie sniffed. "I don't have to tell them heathens nothing!" she answered, but her face had taken on the typical glow all female faces acquire when gossiping might prove stimulating.

"If you wish," Serge told her, "we can get you settled at the inn and then meet you after we've made some of our inquiries about Conar."

"I need a bath something fierce," the old woman admitted. "The inn sounds like the right place for me." She looked around and wondered where the Outer Kingdom woman had gotten herself off to.

"Her Grace is still on board," Serge informed her. "She is donning the native garb, the better to blend in." He frowned. "We dare not take chances with her. There are many Inner Kingdom sheiks who would dearly love to compromise her in order to win her hand."

The old woman hadn't thought of that. She, too, frowned. "If'n someone messes with my bonny boy's lady, he'll be doing more than compromising. He'll be signing his death warrant!"

Rasheed Falkar stood in the shadows of a rug stall and peered out at the group of people who had disembarked the Anya Katrine. He recognized the men of the Wind Force, even the old woman who had come along with them. A slow, vicious smile appeared on the man's thick lips and he backed away from the stall, blending in with the darker shadows of the marketplace.

"You are sure of this?" Prince Guil asked of him a short while later.

Rasheed nodded, grinning. "They have come to find their leader."

Prince Guil stood up from his dinner table and paced the room. "A message must be sent immediately to Prince Jaleel.

"I took the liberty of already doing so, Your Grace," Rasheed said with no little amount of humility.

Guil turned and glared at him. "To make up for letting McGregor get away from us."

Rasheed spread his hands. "How could I know? How could any of us know the man would survive the desert?"

“Not only survive the desert, fool!” Guil hissed at him, “but survive to organize a stronger resistance force than that simpleton Arbra could pull together! The infidel is wrecking havoc about the settlements, stealing slaves, snatching them up right before the noses of their masters!”

“I have a plan that might bring him to us, Your Grace,” Rasheed confided in a silky voice.

Guil glared at him. “And what may that be?”

Rasheed sidled closer to his master. “What would happen if we let it be known that the man they are calling the Khamsin had been captured and is being held prisoner at Prince Jaleel’s fortress at Abbadon?” His grin grew sly. “Do you think the men who have come to aid him would take the bait and ride to Abbadon?”

Prince Guil studied the face of his servant for a long moment and then smiled. “I believe they might.” He put his hands behind his back and grasped them as he slowly paced. “Of course should they do so, Jaleel would be forced to detain them in his donjon.” He stopped, turned his head and grinned nastily at Rasheed. “To insure their safety, naturally.”

“Naturally,” Rasheed agreed, cocking his head in admiration of his master’s insight.

The Rysalian Prince levered himself up on his toes and rocked up and down in contemplation. “I would think such news would reach the resistance in due course.”

“And would Conar McGregor go to Abbadon to rescue his old friends once he finds out they are being held captive there?”

“He is most loyal to those he calls his friends,” Guil acknowledged.

Rasheed folded his hands over his chest. “What is it you would have me do, Highness?”

A vicious smirk slowly formed on Guil’s oily face. “I would think letting McGregor’s allies know he is in danger would be helpful, don’t you think, Rasheed?”

Rasheed bowed his head.

* * * *

Rachel found him sitting by himself at an oasis close by though far enough from the camp he wouldn’t be bothered. He was staring out across the desert as the scarlet ball of the sun slipped slowly behind the horizon. She dismounted and tethered her horse by side his and then quietly went to sit beside him at the flickering fire. Drawing her shawl tightly around her, she kept the silence between them, understanding that if he wanted to talk, he would open the conversation between them.

Overhead, the bright star in the West was already beginning to glow. The purple velvet of the skies unrolled its fabric and covered the heavens. A slight halo of ripening light gave direction to the moon and the cool of the desert night descended gently by degrees.

“I never knew how peaceful the desert could be,” he said softly, breaking the silence.

“The desert is a paradox my people have tried to solve for thousands of years,” she answered. She pulled her shawl tighter. “At one moment it can be hostile and forbidding, as hot as the nether regions of the sun, a place where no man wants to be; the next it can be still and welcoming, as cold as a mountain stream, a haven to those who need the solitude.”

He poked at the fire, stirring the embers, craning his neck to watch the sparks floating upward into the now-dark sky. “I wondered who they would send to talk to me,” he said.

“They drew lots,” she confirmed, “and Asher won.”

He turned to look at her. “Yet you were the one to come.”

Rachel shrugged. “Sometimes it is best to have someone to speak to who is impartial.” She looked down at the fire. “There is not a man in the camp who has not lost a friend or who has not been betrayed in one way or another by those they trusted.”

Conar let out a tired sigh. “Of all the men I suspected, Storm was least among them.”

She smiled gently. "Is that not usually the case of those who break our confidences?" She glanced at his silent profile. "If we suspect them, we are on our guard to keep ourselves from being hurt."

He crossed his legs, drawing his ankles up close to the juncture of his thighs. "And have you been hurt like that, milady?"

She watched him staring intently into the fire. "I have never been betrayed, but I have been hurt, Khamsin. Few people have not."

Conar lifted his head and once more scrutinized the vast darkness of the desert. "Isn't it odd that I would have to come four thousand miles to find that one of the men I trusted most was the very one who had helped nearly destroy me?" He turned to look at her. "That a man I had considered to be a loyal friend had borne me ill will for over twenty years and I had no notion that he did?" He searched her face. "What does that say of me, milady? Of my judgment?"

She fused her gaze with his. "That you are perhaps too willing to see the good in those around you; so much so that you overlook their faults." She put her hand on his knee. "That is an honorable thing, milord Khamsin. There are far too many people in this world who are eager to find fault with everyone but themselves; you look for the good."

"It's a weakness," he growled, looking away from her.

"I disagree," she answered him. "It is most admirable."

"Aye," he said bitterly, throwing his head back to glare up at the stars twinkling overhead. "So admirable it cost my baby daughter her young life!"

Rachel withdrew her hand from his thigh. "The man who died today," she said, "begged for your forgiveness." She looked over at him. "You gave it to him, but did you truly mean it?"

He lowered his head although he did not look at her. "I never say what I do not mean, lady," he told her.

"So your friend died with his sins forgiven. You do not hold him responsible for your daughter's death."

Conar shook his head. "It was a case of an eye for an eye."

"How so?" she asked. She thought he was not going to answer, but at last he let out a long breath and began to speak.

"When I was a boy, there was a young girl named Joannie whose mother was the cook at our keep."

"The woman of whom your friend spoke," she stated.

He smiled sadly. "I had no sisters and I sort of adopted Joannie to fill that place." He glanced over at Rachel. "I use to tease her unmercifully because that is the way I thought brothers should behave toward their sisters."

Rachel smiled. "You weren't mistaken in your belief."

Conar shrugged. "I didn't understand it at the time, but Joannie took that teasing as something else." His face darkened in the glow of the camp fire. "She developed a crush on me."

"I would imagine that happened a lot," Rachel commented. When he looked at her with surprise, she lifted one shoulder. "You were the heir to the throne of Serenia. To the daughter of a servant, you would have been larger than life, the hero on a white charger come to rescue here from a life of drudgery and toil."

He snorted, looking away. "I was an arrogant little snot who took it as his due every time a girl lifted her skirts for him."

"That sounds like you," she challenged.

Conar ignored her quick retort. "I never laid a hand on Joannie." He shook his head. "Not in that way. But I knew Teal du Mer had."

Rachel's brows drew together. "Who was he?"

"A boy I grew up with." He cast a sidelong glance at Rachel then seemed to find something fascinating in the flames of the fire. "Teal had so many females chasing him he made me look like a monk."

"Were you jealous?" she asked.

"Hell, no!" he spat. "If they were chasing him, they weren't waylaying me." He turned an angry face to her. "By the time I was sixteen years old, I had five children I knew for a fact were mine. By the time I married Liza, there were over twelve."

Rachel stared at him. "Rather irresponsible, weren't you?" she asked.

He growled, turning away from her. "I didn't think so then, but now if I had it to do over, I'd have left every last one of their mothers alone!"

"We would all do things differently if we had the chance," she said, nodding.

"Aye," he ground out.

Shivering, she wrapped her arms around her and was somewhat surprised when he threw another stack of dried palm fronds on the fire.

"You knew the girl was seeing this du Mer?" she encouraged him.

"I knew they were doing more than playing hide 'n seek in the forest beyond the keep," he said bitterly. "I warned du Mer, but Teal isn't known for having the ability to listen to the voice of reason." He snorted again. "Or experience."

"You did not want him to have babes scattered about the keep like you did," she stated.

"No."

"Yet the girl became pregnant."

He nodded. "I was visiting my cousins in Virago when I learned one of the servants had committed suicide by jumping off the Bumsford Bridge." His gaze narrowed with pain. "I didn't know it was Joannie until I returned home."

"She could not live with having conceived by another man," Rachel said quietly and was startled when her companion pushed himself angrily to his feet and stood glaring out across the barren sands.

"I had this rule," he explained, seething self-condemnation in his voice, "that once one of my light-'o-loves got with child, I wouldn't go to her again. Joannie knew that!"

Rachel stared up at him with puzzlement. "I don't understand. If the child wasn't yours--"

"I told myself," he said, not hearing her interruption, "that it was because if that woman got pregnant by me a second time, there would be competition between the two offspring." He snarled, plowing his hands through the thick gold of his hair. "I told myself it would be better for the child if he didn't have to share my affection with another full-blooded sibling." He turned his head and glowered at Rachel. "But that wasn't the real reason. I just didn't want the damned responsibility of having a woman have that much power over me! You can fuck up once and get a woman with child, call it what it is: a good time, but if you keep going to her bed, knowing it might happen again, you give her a hold on you that will be hard as hell to break!"

"And you wanted no ties to bind you to them," she said gently.

"Hell, no, I didn't!" he spat. "It was bad enough when they'd come to me and tell me they were pregnant!" He paced in front of the fire. "I took care of them; I saw to the children. They never lacked for anything!"

"Then why did the girl kill herself?"

"She didn't!" he groaned. He came back and sat down beside Rachel, turning so he faced her. "She loved me, Rachel," he said with heart-felt guilt. "Or she thought she did. In her mind, she thought I'd take her as my mistress one day, that I'd marry her!"

"Surely she had to know that would never happen," Rachel gasped.

He shook his head angrily. "I think she really thought it would." Not even knowing he was doing so, he reached out and took Rachel's hands in his own. "Don't you see how it must have been? She was sleeping with Teal, probably pretending he was me, no doubt in her mind confusing him with me, and when she got pregnant, she realized he wouldn't come to her again." He lowered his head. "That I wouldn't come to her again."

"Poor girl," Rachel sighed.

"She didn't kill herself by jumping off the bridge that day," he whispered. "She went to one of the old crone's near Bumsford and got an abortion." He looked up. "The old woman must have butchered her, Rachel. Joannie had to have been bleeding badly, knowing nothing could be done to save her, and so she threw herself off the bridge to make it look like she'd fallen." His voice got lower. "But everyone assumed it was a suicide."

"Did her mother know she was with child?"

"Aye," he answered. "And she blamed me, thinking it was mine." He stared into the fire. "I didn't even know about the babe until three years ago. When Joannie's mother confronted me with it, I looked to Teal, thinking he would admit to being the father."

"Yet it wasn't your friend's child, but the child of the man who died this morning," Rachel said quietly.

His face crinkled with grief. "I didn't even know Storm was seeing her." The weight of it crushed down on him and his shoulders sagged beneath the onslaught. "He must have loved her, really loved her, to have waited all those years to get back at me for being the one who killed her."

"You didn't kill her!" Rachel admonished him, clutching his hands tightly.

"I might as well have," Conar answered. "Sadie thought I did; Storm thought I did. They both hated me for it." He pulled his hands away from her. "And they both got even in ways that hurt me so badly it's a wonder I'm still sane!"

"The man who died regretted what he had done," she reminded him. "He asked your forgiveness."

"And he received it!" Conar muttered, picking up a stick and jabbing it viciously into the fire. "To his way of thinking I had taken his child from him; he took mine." He threw the stick into the fire. "But I have to believe he didn't know what Jaborn would do to my daughter." He turned his moist eyes to her. "I have to believe he didn't have any notion the Hasdu bastard would kill my child. If I believed otherwise--" He left the hopeless words hanging on the still desert air as he returned his probing attention to the flames.

Rachel stood up and adjusted the warmth of her shawl around her. "I should be getting back to the camp before Prince Sajin and Asher go for each other's throats."

Conar looked up from his morbid contemplation. "Why would they?"

She twisted her head slightly to one side. "They are brothers; only a year apart in age. Did you not know that?" When he just looked at her, she nodded. "They have the same father, but it's been twenty years since they've seen one another."

"I don't remember Sajin telling me he had a brother and I know damned well he told me he had only one sister," Conar complained.

"Sybelle," Rachel said as though the name left a rotten taste in her mouth. "The witch."

He nodded slowly. "Why wouldn't he have told me about you?"

"We are no kin," she answered. "The only tie between us is Asher. Asher and I share a mother in common; our fathers were from different tribes."

"I take it, then, there's bad blood between the two of them," Conar commented.

"Because of me," she said in a low voice. At his puzzled look, she wrinkled her nose. "Prince Sajin made a bid for me. When I was twelve." She laughed at his look of shock. "As a concubine, not as a legal wife. My parent's thought Prince Sajin's quest for my hand was perfectly acceptable. I wouldn't have minded, either."

"Asher did though," Conar said, understanding.

"He thought it incestuous," she answered. "I don't know if it could be considered that or not. Prince Sajin certainly didn't think so."

"And so the two of them argued over it."

"Argued and fought a duel over it," Rachel agreed. "Prince Sajin was wounded and Asher fled, afraid King Syam, their father, would order him jailed for daring to lay hands on one of his heirs."

"He'd have his own son imprisoned?" Conar asked.

"Did your father not have you jailed?" she responded.

"Not exactly," he said, not wanting to go into that.

Rachel respected his reluctance to speak of his past. "At any rate, Prince Sajin ceased bidding for me and Asher and he became enemies."

"Now here they are together because of me," Conar mumbled.

"They've fought on the same side for years," she told him. "Both fighting to rid our land of slavery; each in his own way." She turned to walk to her horse. "Be careful out here alone, Khamsin."

He watched her mount her horse. She looked so much like Liza, sat her nag just as Liza use to, that it brought a lump of pain to his throat and he had to clear it before he could speak.

"Thank you, Rachel."

She wrinkled her nose, a habit which had not been one of Liza's. "Someone had to come out here. We all agreed you wouldn't take MY head off."

"I thought you said Asher won the draw?" he quipped.

"I lied," she grinned, turning her horse's head toward the camp. Clucking her tongue, she kicked the mare into a light canter.

Lying to protect his feelings, he thought with a wry grin, had been one of Liza's habits, too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Asher ignored Sajin as the Kensetti Prince sat with Balizar, discussing an upcoming raid on a slave caravan. He didn't trust Sajin; didn't like the man. He listened carefully to what was being said and now and again turned to glare at his brother, but did not join in to add his own thoughts to the scenario being planned.

Balizar looked up as Rachel walked her horse into camp. When she nodded pleasantly at him, he breathed a long sigh of relief. "He's all right."

Sajin's gaze followed Rachel to the tent she was sharing with another woman. "She is still unmarried."

"Don't even think about it, Ben-Alkazar!" Asher growled.

The Kensetti turned his head and just stared at his brother, not bothering to answer the warning. His silent gaze and blank look finally made Asher turn his head away.

"She is the only family Asher has left," Balizar said quietly.

"No, she isn't," Sajin snapped. He jerked his attention back to Balizar. "How many slaves have you been able to free since Conar joined you?"

"More than a hundred, so far," Balizar answered. "He has much experience with raids in Serenia and the other Outland kingdoms in re-taking hostages and victims meant for sacrifice. His methods are proving most useful to us here."

"He is a brilliant strategist," Yuri acknowledged. "He was trained by many who are experts in their fields."

Balizar smiled at the Outer Kingdom warrior. "You speak Serenian quite well."

Yuri puffed out his chest. "Conar taught me!"

"A man for all people," Sajin chuckled. "It is rare to find someone who can go anywhere in the world and gain for himself a loyal following."

"And vicious enemies," Azalon remarked. "Prince Jaleel Jaborn is not a man to be taken lightly, Your Grace." He sipped on a cup of strong Hasdu coffee. "McGregor can not lower his guard for a moment with such a man."

Sajin nodded. "I've told him as much."

"He'll eventually want to go after Jaborn," Yuri reminded the others.

"Not to Abbadon," Balizar said, a worried look on his wrinkled face. "That place is called the 'Depths of Hell' by the Kensettis."

Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar stood up. "My people have had reason to fear that place for over a thousand years."

"Longer," Asher grumbled. He raised his head and glared at Sajin. "It is written in the Book that Abbadon is the abode of the dead."

"Many have died behind those walls," Rupine, the physician said in a grieving tone. "My own father was murdered there."

"I've never been inside the gates," Sajin admitted, "but three of my brothers were invited when Jaleel reached his majority and all those of the desert tribe emirates went to sign peace treaties with the Jaborn family." A bitter light flooded Sajin's gaze. "That was before Jaborn started a holy war with nearly the entire populace of the Inner Kingdom."

"A war that still rages in parts of the Middle Eastern sector of our land," Rupine put in.

“Rysalia is a vast country,” Balizar remarked. “Why there must be so much friction between the different tribes in a mystery I still can not understand.” He shook his head. “There’s plenty of land for all of them.”

“The Kensetti are the rightful owners of all of Rysalia,” Rupine said in a bitter tone. “But through war and slavery and out and out murder, the land has been sectioned off, partitioned out in worthless treaties like the one with the Jaborn family, or taken as dowry right when a Kensetti woman marries outside her own tribe.”

“Which happens far too often,” Asher ground out.

“We have fought hard to retain what we have,” Sajin

told Balizar, “and we will fight to the death to see that no more Kensetti lands are taken.”

“The Hasdus are thieves,” Asher hissed.

Yuri’s forehead wrinkled with confusion. “Are you not all Hasdu?”

“By the Prophet’s beard, we are not!” Asher shouted, coming to his feet in a bound. “Most of you from the Outside group us all together, but Kensettis are Kensettis. We are the Chosen!”

“Those from the three sections of Rysalia: Asaraba to the North, Basaraba to the South, and Dahrenia in the Middle, are all Hasdu,” Sajin explained. “Technically, every person born in the Inner Kingdom are Hasdu, but--.”

“*I am Decus!*” Asher shouted his brother down.

“That is the name of your tribe, Asher,” Sajin sighed. He fused his placid gaze with Asher’s irate one. “It matters not if you do not claim to be Hasdu, I don’t either. I am Jabol.” He nodded toward Rupine. “This man is Ciam and I would imagine you have members of the Synsos tribe here, as well.”

“I am not Hasdu!” Asher spit.

“Some Rysalians argue that they are not Hasdu, either,” Rupine chuckled. “Those of the Northern sector call themselves Asars.” He tossed away the remains of the cold coffee in his tin cup. “As one of the Ancients once asked: ‘what is in a name?’”

“I am not Hasdu,” Asher mumbled.

“Are you Samiel, Asher?”

Asher looked up and found Conar McGregor, the man he called Khamsin, striding into the camp.

“Yes,” Asher said. “And as poisonous to the Hasdu as Maiden’s Briar!” He grinned. “Do you know of that brew, Khamsin?”

Conar nodded gravely. “Aye, unfortunately I do.”

“Are you all right?” Balizar asked.

Looking around him, Conar met each of the men’s eyes. “I am fine. Do not ask me again.”

“We have been sitting here discussing the raid you plan for later this week,” Sajin told his friend. “Mind if I come along?”

“He has nothing better to do with his time,” Yuri quipped, “except get into mischief with you.”

“We need every man we can get,” Conar answered. He smiled crookedly at Sajin. “Before you retire for the night, I want to talk with you, nomad.”

“See, now,” Sajin said, looking around him with a wide grin. “*That* is a name we can all agree upon.” He winked at Asher, whose lips twitched despite the fierce glower on the man’s dark face. “We are all nomad!”

“I wouldn’t brag about it if I were you,” Conar snorted.

Sajin walked to his friend and draped a heavy arm over his shoulder. "That's because you are Serenian, McGregor. Everyone here knows Serenians are the most arrogant people in all the world."

"We have to be," Conar answered in a bored tone. "WE are the true Chosen!"

Asher snickered, wondering how long Khamsin had been listening to their conversation before joining them. He found his brother looking at him. A tight feeling formed in his gut, then relaxed. Sajin was being on his best behavior and if he could, Asher thought he, himself, might be able to function normally with Ben-Alkazar around.

At any rate, he'd try for the Outlander's sake.

* * * *

"I'm here," Sajin sighed as he ducked into Conar's tent. He folded his arms across his chest, sighed again, braced his legs apart, and stared at his friend. "Go ahead and get it over with."

Conar cocked his head to one side. "Get what over with?"

"The scolding," Sajin answered in a resigned voice.

A thick blond brow lifted slowly. "And just what is it I'm suppose to scold you about, nomad?"

Sajin unfolded his arms and held up his left hand, lifting a finger as he counted the reasons.

"One: why didn't I know there was someone on my ship who meant you harm? Two: why didn't I keep that bastard from throwing you off the ship? Three: why didn't I come before you were subjected to that humiliating experience at Asaraba. Four: why did I let you wander around the desert, almost dead? Five: why the hell am I here in the first place because you are perfectly capable of taking care of yourself?"

"I'm glad you're here," Conar said, stretching out on his pallet.

"Humpf!" Sajin snorted, plopping down beside his friend.

"I am."

Sajin took an apricot from a bowl of fruit and bit down into the tangy flesh. He chewed for a moment, studying his friend, and then swallowed. "You are?"

"Aye."

Juice dripped down the side of Sajin's hand and he turned his palm over to lick at the stickiness. "Why?"

"Because I know who threw me overboard and I know who helped him do it," Conar told him.

Sajin was about to take another bite into the fruit. He stopped. "It was one of either Jaborn's or Ben-Shanar Gehdrin's men."

"The one who acted as second for Jaborn at the tourney."

"Rasheed Falkar," Sajin agreed, nodding. He took another bite of fruit. "I warned you about him."

"Your sister was a part of it, too," Conar said softly.

Sajin stared at him. "Sybelle?" At Conar's look, the Kensetti slowly lowered the apricot. "Are you sure?"

"She was there, watching the whole thing." Conar crossed his ankles. "She gave no alarm when the bastard stabbed me nor did she cry out when I was tossed over the rail." He held Sajin's stare. "She was part of it, Sajin."

His appetite gone, Sajin threw the unfinished apricot away. He let out a long breath. "I am sorry."

Conar shrugged. "We can not be held accountable for what our siblings do, my friend. My own brother, Galen, had much to account for when he met the Gatherer."

"She is in love with Jaborn," Sajin admitted. "I've known that for a long time. The man uses her like one of his legion of whores, but she doesn't care."

"It's her life," Conar reminded him.

"She will have left St. Steffensburg, by now," Sajin said, watching Conar's face. "I left her there with Catherine when Yuri, Azalon and I came here to look for Storm Jale." He shook his head ruefully. "We had no idea you were still alive, although Yuri suspected as much."

"It will take more than a Hasdu dagger in my belly to kill me," Conar ground out. He pushed himself up on the pallet. "And I intend to see a hundred Hasdu in their graves for all the pain they've given me and my people."

"You mean Jaborn," Sajin said.

"He'll be dealt with in time," Conar snapped, "but it is Storm's death that will be avenged first." He locked his eyes with Sajin's. "No one lays a hand to one of mine and not pay for it."

"You still consider the man a friend after what he did to you?" Sajin asked.

Conar looked away. "Jale felt he had reason for what he did against me; but he was loyal to the Wind Force, and thereby, loyal to me. I will honor him for that."

"You haven't asked about Cat," Sajin said softly, wanting to take the hurt out of his friend's face at the mention of Jale's death.

Conar flinched. "Now isn't the time to bring that up."

"When IS the time?" Sajin shot back.

"We'll discuss it when I'm ready," Conar growled.

Ben-Alkazar opened his mouth to say something else, then snapped it shut. He was beginning to recognize McGregor stubbornness when he saw it emblazoned on his friend's face and he knew arguing with the man when he was like this would be futile.

"I'll deal with Sybelle," he told Conar, instead.

"If you don't," came the answer, "I will."

A thrust of anger drove into Sajin's belly, but he knew his friend was right. Someone would have to see the Sybelle did not interfere again. If he, himself, couldn't do it, Conar had every right to since he was the one who had been hurt by Sybelle's part in the scheme.

* * * *

Roget unfolded the note and stared at it, unable to decipher what he considered to be nothing more than random scratches across the parchment.

"Let me see," Serge said, taking the note. He looked at du Mer. "It is written in Hasdu."

"What does it say?" Rylan inquired. He hobbled over to the men, his lame foot aching miserably.

"I don't read Hasdu, but I recognize the script," Serge answered. He looked about them. "Is there anyone here who can read it?"

Grice shook his head. "Not if our lives depended on it."

"Maybe we should have brought Marsh," Wyn remarked.

"Shit," Thom Loure spat. "He's our damned traitor and I know it!"

"You know no such thing," Tyne argued.

"Well, we've got to find someone to read the thing," Paegan injected.

"How about the innkeeper?" Grice suggested.

"Think you he can be trusted?" Alexi asked. He frowned. "He too damned accommodating for my liking."

"Alexi's right," Tyne acknowledged. "I didn't like the way he seemed to be studying us."

"We are Outlanders," Holm answered. "Everyone looks at us strangely."

"Perhaps we can find a constable," Wyn suggested. "Or one of their holy men. Surely such men would not lie to us."

"Hasdu constables are even more corrupt than the constables in my country!" Serge chuckled. "Maybe a holy man as the young one says will deal with us fairly."

"How do we find one?" Rylan asked.

"They pray five times a day to that building over there," Tyne answered, pointing through the window at the oddly-shaped tower. "Surely there's a holy man inside that tower."

"I'll find out," Roget told them. He glanced at Serge. "Did your mistress get settled in with Meggie?"

Serge nodded. "They are getting along quite well, aren't they? As far as the innkeeper knows, Meggie Ruck is the Lady Alina's chaperone."

"Alina?" Wyn asked.

"The name Her Grace chose," Serge explained. "We thought it best if no one even suspects her true identity."

"Good thinking," Roget agreed. He went to the door and was about to leave when Thom called out to him. He turned.

"Be careful, Roget," Thom warned. "This is not a good place."

Roget smiled. "Have you known me to be anything BUT careful, Loure?"

Ching-Ching sniffed, annoyed at the man's arrogance. "It only takes one slip, du Mer, to put your neck on the block!"

"Or your feet," Serge admonished him. "They sell many Outlanders from the arenas here."

"I'll be back," Roget predicted, closing the door on the anxious faces peering back at him.

Half an hour later, Roget returned, his face pale, his eyes haunted. The man had risen from where they sat or leaned or lay. Not a one among them did not know trouble had found them head on.

"What is it?" Jah-Ma-El had been the first to ask.

"It's Conar," Roget croaked, searching the faces of the others. "He's been captured!"

* * * *

Guil listened to Rasheed's report and smiled, leaning back in his chair. "Which Holy Man did you direct the Serenian to see?"

"His Holiness, the Ayato Mengi, Your Grace," Rasheed answered.

"Excellent," Guil applauded his servant. "And did the Ayato make any comment to the Outlander concerning the message in the note?"

"I doubt he understood the meaning, Highness," Rasheed informed Guil. "It would surprise me if he knew anything of the resistance forces. He did not recognize the name Khamsin."

"Let us hope he did not," Guil answered. "We need no interference from others."

"By this time, the Serenian will have returned to the others," Rasheed grinned. "I would imagine a caravan will be in progress within a few hours."

"If nothing else can be said for the Outlanders," Guil chuckled, "it can be said that they are consistent."

"Shall I have one of our men contact them?"

Guil shook his head. "let them find another to lead them to Abbadon. If they even suspect treachery, they may not fall into our trap. They are not stupid men, Rasheed."

“It is my understanding that the Outer Kingdom sailors will be staying with the ship here. Do you wish them taken into custody?”

“And have Tzar Thomas at my throat?” Guil gasped. “Most certainly not!”

“There are two women who also came with the men on board the Anya Katrina.” Rasheed frowned. “I highly suspect the younger of the two is the Tzarevitch Catherine; the older is more than likely a servant.”

Guil sat up straight in his chair. “You really think Catherine Steffenovitch is here in Asaraba?”

“I do, Your Grace.”

A frosty glint entered the Hasdu Prince’s eye. “This is news that will be most welcome by Jaleel,” he breathed. “My old friend was quite taken by the Outer Kingdom wench.”

“That she may be McGregor’s woman will not have escaped his notice, either,” Rasheed said slyly.

Guil turned and stared at his servant. “You are right!” he gasped. “If she is, she will be all the more valuable to Jaleel.”

“Shall I arrange for her to be taken?” Rasheed asked.

“By all means!” Guil said. “By all means!”

“What of the old woman? The one who traveled with the Tzarevitch?”

“Is she worth taking to sell?”

“Too old and, by the looks of her, too infirm,” Rasheed answered.

Guil waved a dismissive hand. “Then leave her be. If we can not make a profit from her, she’s useless to us.”

Rasheed bowed. “I will see to it, Highness.”

And still once more, a fork appeared on the Pathway.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Grice swung up into the saddle of his roan stallion and glanced around him as the others mounted their steeds. A Rysalian guide, handsomely paid and eager to make the trek to Abbadon, smiled at him and nodded.

"Obsequious little toad," Thom sneered, glaring at the Rysalian.

Sentian laughed. "Where'd you learn such a word, Loure?"

"Jah-Ma-El has always described Sern in that way," Roget commented. "Obsequious seems to be an adjective that fits most nomads."

"Treacherous is another," Jah-Ma-El quipped, walking his horse over to the men. "Watch yourselves, men. I have a bad feeling about this."

Sentian rolled his gaze heavenward. "You've *always* got a bad feeling about things, Jah-Ma-El." He looked pointedly at Jah-Ma-El. "Do you recall the day I took you back to Boreas from Norus? The day the keep fell to our men?"

Jah-Ma-El lowered his head. He was apt to never forget that day. "Aye," he mumbled, "what of it?"

"Do you recall telling me you had a bad feeling about Conar getting killed that day? Do you remember begging me to turn around and go back to make sure nothing happened to him?"

The thin man, second eldest brother of Conar McGregor, jerked his head up and he glared at Sentian Heil. "And do *you* recall that I was proven right in being worried about him?" He pointed a bony finger at his inquisitor. "Where did he go that day, Heil?" he snarled. "To what hell did my brother go from which you and Hern Arbura and Andre Belvoir had to rescue him?"

Sentian's face flushed. "I know well enough where he went, Jah-Ma-El."

"Then do not jeer at my feelings!" Jah-Ma-El bellowed, his reed-thin body quivering.

"Our powers, mine and Jamael's, are useless here," Ching-Ching remarked to no one in particular, "but that does not keep our instincts from warning us. I, too, feel strange quivers in the air that bode us ill." He looked about him, making sure each of the men were listening to him. "We must be on guard every moment."

"Abbadon is a very bad place," the Rysalian guide put in. "Some call it the Abyss."

Jah-Ma-El jumped, turning his head toward the Inner Kingdom man. "Don't say that!" he hissed.

The guide shrugged. "I am only telling you what people say of the fortress."

"We don't need to hear your rumors and superstitions," Roget told him. "We just need your help in finding the fortress." He narrowed his eyes at the man. "You *can* lead us there, can't you?"

"Anyone in Asaraba could lead you there, sir," the guide admitted. "But whether or not you reach there in safety would be another matter."

"How do we know *YOU* can be trusted?" Thom growled.

"You don't," the man answered, fusing his gaze with Thom's hot stare.

"We don't have much of a choice but to trust him," Tyne injected.

"I will get you there without a problem," the guide told them. "What happens once you are inside Abbadon's walls, I can not say. As for myself, I would not enter those steel gates if the lives of my entire family depended upon it." He put his foot into the stirrup. "And you shouldn't either."

"You ain't us!" Thom growled.

“Something for which I am eternally grateful,” the guide quipped.

Rylan watched the guide mount his nag. Roget had found the guide, a man the Holy One had recommended to him, but he, no more than Thom, trusted the sly-looking little weasel even though the man had tried his best to talk them out of going to Abbadon.

“If your friend is being held there,” the guide had said with an earnest look of regret, “his life is forfeit already. No one has ever escaped the fortress at Abbadon.”

“We’ll get him out!” Roget had sworn.

“I have heard some tales of this man they call Khamsin,” the guide, whose name was unpronounceable to Outlander tongues, admitted. “He has caused many traders to lose great revenues over the past few weeks. If he has been captured by Prince Jaleel Jaborn’s men, he may already have paid the price of such interference in Rysalian commerce.”

“Paid in what way?” Wyn had asked, fear in his pale eyes.

The guide had drawn a finger across his neck. At Wyn’s flinch of terror, the man had seemed to show remorse at his action. “But then again they may have only punished him as all thieves in Rysalia are punished.”

“How?” Jah-Ma-El had barked at the man.

“They may have cut off his hands.”

Tyne Brell had turned away with a sick look on his lean face. He had angrily shrugged off the comforting hand Roget had placed on his shoulders.

“If that has happened,” Tyne had ground out, “Conar would just as soon be dead!”

Rylan knew Tyne was thinking of the deadly swordsman in himself who could conceive of no more horrible a fate than having his hands severed from his body.

“Conar?” the guide had then gasped, stunned by the name. “Conar McGregor?”

It had been Thom who had rushed forward and grabbed the man, shoving him up against the wall of their room in the inn and bringing his large face close to the dark man’s.

“What’s it to you, you ugly Pog?” Thom had spat at the guide.

“I-I--” The man had looked around him, searching the faces. “I was at the siege of Norus Keep.”

Rylan had stepped forward. “Doing what?”

The guide had looked beseechingly at the Viragonian. “I was an archer sent there by our emirate to help get the Princess Anya Elizabeth back.”

Sentian had shoved Thom aside and grabbed the man’s robe, himself. “Who was your leader?” he shouted.

“Ben-Jani,” the man had gasped. “Hyles Ben-Jani! He is still the Commander of our Militia!”

“Who was second in command there?” Sentian bellowed, shaking the guide. “How many of our people died in the siege?”

Now, several hours later, Rylan watched as the guide mounted his nag. He still didn’t trust the man even though under close questioning he had sworn he had been among the twenty-four men who had come to Serenia to help their allies, the Oceanians, and had answered every one of their questions without dissemble.

“It had to have been common knowledge in Asaraba,” Roget had told the others. “Oceania has always been on friendly terms with this sector of Rysalia. If this man is a plant, he would have been schooled well with tidbits that would make us trust him.”

“I don’t trust him,” Thom had bitten out.

“Nor do I,” Roget had admitted.

"Then why let him lead us?" Wyn had demanded.

"If not him, then who?" Grice had inquired.

"Ask him why he's no longer an archer with their militia!" Jamael's grating voice had challenged.

"Look at his hands," Tyne had finally snapped. "If he does not have arthritis, I am a Diabolusian cockroach!"

"We just have to watch him," Paegan had reminded the others. "Our lives may depend on it."

Aye, Rylan thought as he watched the man riding out ahead of them. He'd watch the Hasdu. He let his hand fall to the dagger at his thigh. He caressed the hilt.

"Prove yourself, false, nomad," he whispered, "and it will be the last thing you ever prove!"

Takahemmanon Khyrtuslish kicked his horse into a fast trot, thinking of the way the Outlanders had looked at him. He had no illusions the men trusted him. To them, he was just another Hasdu, another pog. Despite his assurances, the answering of their questions, they still regarded him as the enemy, someone to be watched, and watched carefully.

"McGregor," he said the name softly to himself.

He remembered the twenty-two year old Serenian Prince who had led his men at Norus. A braver man, Taka, as his friends called him, had never known. Not even the gallant Nyles Ben-Jani, who was a national treasure, could hold a candle to the fierce warrior the Outlanders had called the

Prince of the Wind.

"See how he puts himself in the line of danger?" Nyles Ben-Jani had asked his men once when McGregor had rushed forward, oblivious to the arrows landing at his feet. "With no care for his own safety?" The wizened military man had nodded with obvious pride. "The man loves his lady well enough to die for her."

"It is a good thing his brother pulled him back," Taka remembered saying to his Commander, "else that quarrel would have pierced him through."

"He is to be much admired," Nyles Ben-Jani had told his men. "And protected with our last breaths, my friends."

"Why?" one of the young archers had demanded.

"Because he deserves it," Nyles Ben-Jani had stated.

Taka glanced behind him at the eleven men riding behind him were all seasoned warriors, except perhaps for the youngest who he had only met just before leaving. He had been stunned upon seeing the young man, a carbon copy of his father at the same age.

"You are McGregor's son," Taka had breathed, looking at the boy who had come into the room after all the others had questioned him.

"Aye," the boy had answered, glancing at the men frowning at him. "You know my father?"

Taka had smiled, thinking of the only time he had spoken to McGregor. "It was my honor to meet him once, yes."

"They are riding into danger," Taka thought, not remembering any of the men who had told them they had been at the siege of Norus: the ones called Tyne, Rylan, Paegan, Sentian, Thom, and Grice. He had not even remembered the warlock, the man called Jah-Ma-El, who it turned out was one of McGregor's half-brothers.

Taka squinted into the harsh weaving heat of the desert sun, wondering how he could aid these men, these allies of McGregor. He had tried to dissuade them from going to the place his people called the Abyss, but the men would not hear of it.

“Do you think we would leave him there?” the one called Roget had roared at him.

“What if he is already dead?” he had tried to reason with the man.

“I’d know if my brother was--“ The one named Jah-Ma-El had spat out a vulgar word. “I’d know!”

“He is our friend,” the small one, the one Taka now remembered was considered to be a great swordsman in his land, spoke up. “He is the oak--“

“We are the branches,” the one who seemed to be leading the group, Roget, finished.

Taka feared for the men. Once inside the massive steel gates of Abbadon, it would be close to impossible to keep them from harm’s way. People had been disappearing behind those thick walls for centuries, never to be heard from again. Many a prisoner there had died in torment, his body never recovered for it was rumored a pit inside the very bowels of the fortress led to the Abyss, itself.

“What shall I do, Rau?” he asked the deity that had governed him all his life. “How can I help these men? Even though they do not trust me, I would do what I can for McGregor’s friends.”

The crystal-clear image of Nyles Ben-Jani flitted across Taka’s eyes and then wafted away on an errant wave of hot air. And yet the bold black gaze of the warrior reminded behind to remind Taka of better times.

Taka drew in a long breath.

He had received his answer.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Why do you persist in thinking everyone but you deserves happiness?"

"I want what is best for Catherine," Conar protested, glaring back at Yuri with a steely glint that said the Outer Kingdom Shadow-warrior had gone too far.

"It is my belief you should let others decide what is best for them!" Yuri bellowed.

Conar threw up his hands. "Yet you're trying to tell me what's best for Conar McGregor!"

Yuri snorted. "That is a different matter altogether."

"How is it different?" the Serenian growled.

"Because you don't know what's best for Conar McGregor!"

The Outlander's face grew serious. "I know it's dangerous for me to be with Catherine."

Yuri's face flooded with rage. "Don't you dare to start with that insane pap about women who love you, you little shit!"

The men around the camp fire turned their heads toward the bellow of rage coming from Khamsin's tent. Rupine's hand stilled on the bread he was slicing. "Did he call Khamsin a little shit?"

"It's true!" Conar snapped back at the warrior. When Yuri shook his head violently in denial, Conar's voice rose even higher. "Aye, it is! *It is!* I have accepted it!"

"You are accepting a lie, then!" Yuri yelled at him. "I thought you had more intelligence! Conar--" He reached out to lay a reasonable hand on the younger man's shoulder, but Conar flinched away.

"Don't you dare to patronize me, Andreanova!" Conar fairly shrieked at him. His eyes flared.

"Fine!" the Outer Kingdom warrior roared. "Let others have the happiness you refuse to seek then! Give away all that would make your life content!"

"That would make my life unbearable to live!" Conar shot back at him. "Don't you know how hard this is for me? If I lose one more person I care for, you might as well lock me away for I will have lost every bit of my sanity, by then."

"You are stronger than that," Yuri argued, lowering his voice to a harsh sneer.

"Am I?" When Yuri just stared at him, Conar clenched his teeth. "I don't believe I am."

Yuri gathered a mouthful of saliva and spat on the floor at Conar's feet. "That is what I think of what You believe!"

"Get out of here before I have to hurt you, Andreanova," Conar bit out, glaring at the warrior.

"You and what army?" Yuri shot back.

"Get out!!!"

Sajin flinched, glancing up as Yuri came crashing out of Conar's tent. The Outer Kingdom man's face was set in hard lines of primal rage as he pushed roughly past one of the Kensettis and stomped off into the darkness beyond the camp.

"Who are they discussing?" Balizar asked.

"Catherine," Sajin said, sighing. "Conar's woman."

"I thought his wife's name was Liza," Rachel commented.

"Woman and wife are not synonymous, little sister," Asher corrected her.

Rachel blushed, looking away.

“Sajin!” came the fierce bellow from inside Conar’s tent.

Balizar grinned at the Kensetti. “Our master calls.”

Sajin got up wearily, not wanting to discuss what he suspected Conar had in mind. He stood there for a moment, head down, hands on his hips, eyes closed.

“Sajin!”

The Kensetti Prince looked up, glaring at the source of the shout. “By the Prophetess, but that man is loud!” Sajin grumbled.

“You’d better not keep him waiting,” Asher warned.

Sajin cast his glance to his brother. He was about to head for Conar’s tent when the sound of horses approaching made him stop.

“Who?” Rupine asked, reaching for the sword that was not far from his hand.

“Strangers!” was the cry from the lookout. “Two!”

The men of the camp took up their weapons. Conar came out of his tent, his anger obvious as he flung a heated look toward Sajin. Rachel left the warmth of the camp fire for the crossbow in her tent.

“Identify yourselves!” came the lookout’s challenge.

“Taborn!” was the deep bass reply.

“Shit!” Conar cursed, drawing his follower’s attention. They turned to see him standing at the flap of his tent, his face even angrier than it had been. When he viciously flung the flap aside and stalked back into the tent, they looked at Balizar.

“I don’t know,” was Arbra’s answer.

Sajin’s eyes grew wide as the big man rode into the camp on his prancing beast which was nearly twice the size of most of their mounts. The creature’s sleek black coat was so shiny it glowed in the light cast from the flames and the dark cinnamon frown on the newcomer’s face was equal to the one that had adorned Khamsin’s.

“Necroman,” Balizar stated, his mouth open. “Hern wrote me about him.”

“Who is he?” Rupine asked, lowering his weapon. “Friend or foe?”

“Where is he?” the big man rumbled as he crashed down from his steed to land with a heavy thud of large feet on the packed sand. He ignored the hasty hand put out by the young man he was riding with and dropped his reins. “I am told he is here and I demand to see him!” He swung his gaze over those assembled, passed over Balizar, leapt back and latched on with a squinted appraisal. “*Who* are you?”

“Balizar,” was the answer as that man strode forward. “Hern’s brother.”

There was a nasty snort. “Well, I certainly didn’t think you were Hern!”

“He did,” Balizar chuckled.

“*He* would!” the big man sneered. His penetrating stare moved on, lingered only a moment on Sajin before shifting away. “I don’t see the little shit.”

“He must be looking for Khamsin,” Rupine whispered to Asher.

“I am looking for--” the big man began only to find himself staring at Yuri Andreanova as the Shadow-warrior came into view. “You could not keep his ass out of trouble?” he barked.

“I am overjoyed to see you again, too, Taborn!” Yuri spat.

“I have not come ten thousand miles,” Shalu explained, waving away his companion’s mumble of correction, “or however far I have had to come, to exchange pleasantries with the likes of you, Andreanova. Where is he?”

Yuri jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “In there if you have the balls to go in, Taborn.”

"This is my son, Lares," the Necromanian king snarled. "Would you question my bravery before him?"

"Papa," the young man groaned.

"Shut up," Shalu commanded. "Do not whine. It is unbecoming of a Necromanian Prince." He strode toward the indicated tent.

"You have been given a reprieve, Your Grace," Azalon chuckled.

Sajin sat back down and stared at the tent where the Necroman had entered without preamble. "I hope they are on friendly terms."

"My father is one of the Cadre of the Wind Force," Lares said with pride.

"How came you to be here, brat?" Yuri asked.

"The ship sailed without us," Lares explained. "Papa was laid up sick with a bad cold, but when he heard the others were leaving--"

"What others?" Yuri interrupted, a cold shaft of dread digging down his back.

"The men of the Wind Force," Lares answered. "They came to Rysalia to help the Darkwind." He frowned. "We missed them again at Asaraba."

Sajin looked at Balizar, then turned his full attention to the boy. "What do you mean you missed them?"

"They were there," Lares complained, "but they left again before we could join up with them. It took us ten days just to find a ship out of Ciona that would take us to the Sinisters." The young man grinned. "Boy, was that fun going through the fog!"

Yuri answered the Necromanian Prince's infectious grin. "You liked that did you?"

"I haven't had so much fun since I hid in a tree and knocked Dyllon McGregor off his horse when he came raiding once!" the young man chortled. "Knocked him out cold!"

"How many of Conar's men are here in Rysalia?" Sajin asked, worried.

"Eleven."

Yuri's smile slipped away. "You think something's happened to them?"

Sajin just looked at him.

* * * *

Conar's glower was steady as he surveyed the man standing in his tent. If he'd thought himself angry when he had been arguing with Yuri, he now knew that emotion did not compare with the all-pervading, towering rage he felt seeing Shalu.

"What are you doing here?" Shalu heard him growl.

"What are *you* doing here?" the Necroman returned.

"Merciful Alel!" Conar bellowed, flinging himself down on his pallet. "Why can't you people leave me alone?"

Shalu looked around him. "Where is the woman?"

"What woman?" Conar grumbled, throwing things out of his way.

"The one you have no doubt asked to marry you by now."

Conar's head jerked up and he stared at Shalu. The big man returned the stare with an arched brow. Moments passed and Conar finally lowered his gaze.

"It's complicated," he muttered.

"Everything is complicated with you, Conar," Shalu announced, sitting down, unbidden, on the pallet beside Conar.

"I fell in love with her," the Serenian admitted.

Shalu nodded. "Not unexpected considering the frame of mind you were in when you left."

"She is a special lady," was the soft reply.

“She would have to be to have gained your attention.”

Shalu folded his arms over his chest. “Have you sought her hand, yet?”

“I married her.”

Shalu didn’t think he had heard correctly for the words had been little more than a sigh.

“Repeat that.”

Conar looked up and fused his gaze with Shalu’s. “I married her, Shalu.”

If the big man was surprised, he didn’t let it show. “Where is she? I have come over twenty thousand miles to meet her.”

“She’s in the Outer Kingdom,” he answered, then shrugged. “At least I hope to Alel she is.”

“Why?”

“As far as she knows, I’m dead,” was the reply that did surprise Shalu.

“And you have not enlightened her, otherwise?” was the stunned inquiry.

“No.”

“Why not?” Shalu snarled at him.

“Because I am going to have the marriage annulled as soon as I get back to St. Steffensburg.” He looked away. “*If* I get back to St. Steffensburg.”

Shalu didn’t say anything to that. He merely continued to stare at his old friend, taking in the miserable look, the nervous tick that dragged at Conar’s scarred left cheek, the fidgeting hands, the jittery eyes that kept looking up at him, then shifting uneasily away. He knew this poggleheaded boy and there were all the signs of a patently stupid Conar plan being formed behind those alien sapphire orbs that Shalu knew would have to be either stymied or stopped altogether.

“Say something!” Conar finally snapped, the silence beginning to wear on his nerves.

“What do you wish for me to say?” Shalu inquired politely.

“You know damned well what I know you want to say!” Conar hissed. “Tell me I’m stupid.”

“You know that already,” Shalu contended.

Conar clenched his teeth. “Tell me I’m wrong in having the marriage annulled.”

“I can’t do that until I have had a chance to meet the lady in question,” Shalu said reasonably.

“Tell me how I’m giving up my own happiness so Catherine will be kept safe!”

Shalu shrugged. “Why? Is she in danger?”

“Aye, she’s in danger!” Conar shouted. “Every woman who has ever cared for me has died because of that love!”

“Oh, that,” Shalu sighed.

“Aye, that!” Conar screamed at him.

“Why do you have this need to be irrational, Conar?” Shalu asked in a calm voice. “Was it something Cayn did, or failed to do, when you were born? Did he hit your ass too hard, rattling your brain?”

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Conar snarled, turning away from the angelic look on the older man’s grinning face.

“Do you think this woman will agree to you so blithely unmarrying her, Conar?”

He thought about that for a moment and then looked up, feeling the guilt flooding through him at Shalu’s penetrating stare. “I have another man picked out for her,” he answered.

“How sweet,” Shalu said. “And who is this paragon who you think can take your place?”

“Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar,” Conar informed him. “You saw him outside.” He glanced up. “The tall man with curly black hair, worn short like I use to wear mine.”

“The handsome one with the very white teeth,” Shalu agreed and saw Conar wince.

“He will be better for her than I can be.” There was deep regret in the words.

Shalu’s upper lip lifted with indignation. “How can he be better for her than you?”

“He doesn’t have people wanting to cut off HIS head!”

Shalu let out a weary inhalation of breath. “You are over here less than three years and already people want to chop off your head. How DO you make friends so fast?”

“This isn’t a joking matter, Shalu,” Conar ground out. “They’ve already tried to kill me once. They will try again.”

“Who are ‘they’?” Shalu asked.

“Jaleel Jaborn, for starters,” Conar told him.

Shalu frowned. “I have heard that name before.”

“Aye, you have,” Conar agreed. “At Boreas. His was the name Liza’s would-be kidnaper gave as the man responsible for trying to have her taken.” He locked his eyes on Shalu’s face.

“He’s also the man responsible for Rayle Loure’s death, the attack on me at Shiku Pass, the wounding of Teal du Mer and--” His face turned hard and sad at the same time. “--and he was the man who slit Nadia’s throat.”

It took a moment for Shalu to place the female’s name but it finally came to him where he had heard it, he lowered his head. “Your daughter.”

“Aye,” Conar whispered. “My daughter.”

Shalu lifted his head. “Do you know where this bastard is?”

“Aye, but it will be awhile before I can get to him.” He reached out and put a hand on Shalu’s shoulder. “You are too young to remember a time when your own people bore the yoke of slavery around their necks, Shalu, but you have heard tales of it.”

Shalu nodded.

“These people still bear that yoke. I have an urgent need to help free them, Shalu. It eats at me day and night. It keeps me from sleeping. If there is anything I can do to help them, I must try. Do you understand that?”

“That is why the men came here,” Shalu answered. When Conar started to question that strange statement, he waved it aside. “Let’s get back to the woman. Have you told the man outside that he is to be the lucky recipient of her hand?”

Conar sighed. “Not yet. I was going to when you arrived.”

“And you think he will agree?” Shalu watched Conar’s face very carefully as the younger man answered.

“He loves her, Shalu. He’ll be good to her. She likes him. That liking can turn to love. He’ll raise my daughter to be--”

“Your what?”

The camp came to a standstill at the booming thunder of the newcomer’s voice. Up until then, only an occasional harsh word had filtered through the heavy canvas walls of the tent, but those two words: yelled at the very top volume of a loud voice, had startled the horses and awakened the camels.

“Will you let me explain?” Conar said, hushing the man. He lowered his voice, hoping there would be no more outbursts. “I only slept with her a few times, but I knew the last time I did that I had--”

“I do not believe this!!” Shalu bellowed.

“Will you hush?” Conar hissed at him, dragging on Shalu’s thick arm. “I don’t want the whole camp to hear!”

It took Shalu a full five minutes to get his temper under control enough to speak in a normal, conversational voice. When he did, his scathing tongue was like a fish monger’s blade gutting a fish.

“Conar,” he said in what for him was a reasonable facsimile of calm, “I am inclined to believe we should have you neutered to keep you from indiscriminately scattering seed everywhere you go!” He glowered at his friend. “Have you no thought, no conception whatsoever of self-control?”

“I didn’t mean to get her with child!” Conar defended on a hiss of outrage.

“Do you not see a pattern here, you imbecile?” Shalu bit out. “You screw; you impregnate!”

“Then I won’t screw again!” Conar spat back at him.

“From your mouth to Alel’s ears!” Shalu sneered.

Conar shrugged away the flip remark.

“Does this not sting your pride, man?” Shalu asked. “That your child will be raised by another?”

Conar clenched his hands into fists. “It savages the very heart inside me, Shalu, because I love this woman dearly.” When Shalu started to protest, he held up his hand. “But I have no choice. To keep her safe, I must give her up.”

“Say but the word and there will be a thousand times a thousand men standing in this desert, willing to take apart every stone in every keep in this barren wilderness to keep your woman safe!” Shalu promised.

“Did those men keep Liza safe?” Conar asked quietly.

“That was a different matter!” Shalu reminded him.

“An enemy I never suspected I had took her away from me, Shalu,” Conar answered. “An enemy took her life. I will not have the same thing happen to Catherine.”

“I have not come over thirty thousand miles to argue semantics with you, Conar,” Shalu informed him. “We can protect your lady and we can destroy your enemy. Do you doubt the power of the Wind Force?”

Conar held out his hand to his friend. “Take my hand in yours,” he ordered.

Shalu frowned. “Why?”

“Just do it.”

Shalu reached out and took the proffered hand. So?

Conar locked gazes with him. “What do you feel?”

“Your hand,” Shalu said dryly.

“What else?” Shalu started to take his hand back, but Conar’s grip tightened. “What do you feel?”

A faint tremor passed from Conar’s hand to Shalu’s and the big man frowned, looking down at their handclasp, his forehead puckering in concentration. He tightened his hold on Conar’s hand, his brows drawing together over the bridge of his nose. Shifting where he sat on the pallet, he put his entire concentration into the contact.

“You don’t feel anything, do you?” Conar asked quietly.

Shalu hissed, annoyed at the interruption, and tried concentrating harder. When he still felt nothing, he looked up slowly and met Conar’s understanding gaze.

“We have no power here, Shalu. We can feel a tiny flutter of vibration, but nothing more.”

Shalu clutched Conar's hand so hard the younger man's fingers began to throb with the pressure. Still, there was no leaping fire between the two magic-sayers. No colors to waft and outline their bodies. No sense of the other's thoughts.

Slowly, Conar withdrew his hand. "How can we fight what we can not find?" he asked.

The Necroman wiped his sweaty palm on the thigh of his breeches. "Is this normal?"

"I gather it is," Conar answered. "I have had no powers beyond a tremor of intuition since stepping foot on these shores."

Letting out a ragged breath, Shalu glanced up. "Do they have powers here that are useless in our lands?"

"I have no way of knowing. With the exception of Sajin's sister when we were in the Outer Kingdom together, I have had no dealings with any magi since I've been here."

"And her powers?" Shalu questioned.

"Didn't seem all that great," Conar answered. "She tried to probe me, but I blocked her easily enough."

Shalu frowned heavily. "I did not come over forty thousand miles not to be able to help you."

"You can help," Conar told him, smiling.

"How?" Shalu asked.

"By keeping Legion and the others from coming--" He stopped seeing the guilt already forming on Shalu's face. "Taborn?" he demanded on a long breath.

Shalu had the grace to glance away. "We were worried about you."

"Who are 'we'?" Conar growled.

"Brell. The older Wynth and du Mer. The Hesar brothers. Van de Lar. Loure. Your brother, Jah-Ma-El."

As the list grew longer, Shalu noticed an irate gleam in his young friend's eye. He stopped, swallowing.

"Who else?" came the sneer.

"Ching-Ching. Heil."

Conar stared at him, more furious than he had ever been in his entire life. "And?" he barked. When Shalu flinched and refused to meet his look, he reached out and shook the brawny warrior. "And?"

"Wyn." It was said so low, so softly, Shalu didn't think Conar had heard him. The young man's enraged reaction proved Shalu wrong.

"You have got to be shitting me!"

"He doesn't deal well with being thwarted, does he?" Rupine asked the others around the camp fire when the inhuman yowl of fury broke over the encampment.

"I don't know what your Papa told him," Balizar said to the young Necromanian Prince, "but whatever it was certainly wasn't the wisest thing to have said."

Lares shook his head. "Papa probably told him about the others." He glanced up. "Most likely about my brother-in-law having come with us."

"Oh, no," Yuri breathed, avoiding Sajin's quick look.

Sajin didn't like the way the Shadow-warrior's complexion had turned a pasty yellow. "Who is your brother-in-law," he asked Lares.

"Wynland," Lares smiled. "The Darkwind's oldest son."

"Oh, hell," Balizar groaned.

Sajin could well understand the shouting now that was coming from behind the canvas barrier. Conar's furious accusations, the Necroman's bellowing defense, were bringing others from their tents to stand and listen to the exchange.

"I ought to beat the hell out of you for allowing this, Taborn!"

"I didn't even know the brat had come with them until I got to Serenia and Kym met me! I wasn't all that pleased with it, either! And you'd best not even try picking a fight with me, you sniveling little shit!"

"Goddamn it, Shalu!"

"Goddamn it, right back! If you hadn't slunk off like a scalded dog, none of us would be here!"

"I didn't slink!"

"You practically slithered!"

"Are you calling me a coward?"

"If the breeches fit, wear them! But then you have had the hardest time of any man I know in keeping your gods-be-damned breeches on!"

Rachel's brows shot up.

"Don't start with me, Taborn!"

"Don't start with *me*! You don't see me knocking up every woman I lay with!"

Asher's brows drew together.

"Just shut the hell up!"

"If you can't take the criticism, don't start it! It wasn't me that got that outer kingdom woman with child!"

Yuri came to his feet.

Sajin sat down.

"I told you I didn't do it on purpose!"

"You never do, but it seems to get done, now, doesn't it? Did it ever occur to you to ask if a woman wants you seeding her belly with your get?"

"Catherine didn't seem to mind!"

Rachel giggled.

Asher growled.

Yuri gasped.

Sajin groaned.

"Are you two aware that everyone in the camp is privy to what you are discussing?" Balizar asked as he stuck his head in the tent.

Conar's face drained of all its coloring. "Yuri heard?"

"Aye, he heard," Balizar announced, withdrawing.

An overwhelming urge to puke made Conar sit back down on his pallet and bury his face in his hands. "Sweet Alel, the man is going to neuter me for you."

Shalu looked up as the tent flap was thrust angrily aside. He held up his hand. "They are married."

Yuri stumbled, taken completely off guard by the Necroman's words. "When?" he shifted his gaze to Conar's bent head. "When?"

"On board the ship," Shalu answered for his young friend. As Yuri's face began to crease into a smile, Shalu put an immediate stop to the elation. "He still means to give her to the man outside."

Yuri stared at Shalu. "To who?"

"The pog," Shalu answered, hearing Conar's slight groan of despair.

"Sajin?" Yuri ground out. "He is going to give her to Sajin?"

"He is laboring under the ridiculous assumption that if she stays with him, she will wind up as the other women in his life have wound up."

"I know that," Yuri grumbled, taking a step into the tent. "Is this true, Conar? Do you still want to throw her away?"

Conar looked up. "I am not 'throwing' her away, Andreanova. I am doing what is best for Catherine."

Yuri looked at him for a long moment without speaking and then nodded once, turning on his heel. He pushed aside the tent flap, stopped, and spoke over his shoulder.

"Prince Sajin will be a better husband for her. He would never think to let another man take what is his by right."

Shalu glanced down at Conar as Yuri left the tent, trying to gauge the depth of the direct hit that had struck Conar McGregor's heart. There was not even a flicker of pain on the still face; no hurt in the steady gaze. Even as the young man came to his feet, there was no groan of weariness or defeat or hopelessness.

"Where are they, do you know?" was all he asked. At Shalu's look of confusion, he clarified his question. "The others. Our men."

"The last I heard of them, they were in Asaraba. I spoke to a man there who says they left in search of you with a retired militiamen from the Rysalian army."

Conar pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "They could be anywhere, then."

"Chase Montyne and Storm Jale are here, too," Shalu admitted, thinking while Conar seemed calm enough, he'd better tell him the whole of it.

"Chase is about ten miles from here," Conar told him, going to a table to pour himself a glass of cool water. He took a long drink and then stood where he was, staring off into space. "Storm is dead."

Shalu drew in a harsh breath. "How?"

Conar took another drink, then held the glass against his cheek. His bleak eyes slid slowly to Shalu's stunned cinnamon stare. "He was beaten to death."

Fury leapt into the Necroman's face. "Who?"

"The man responsible is dead, but those who employed him own a quarry not far from here. We attack the quarry in two days." He rubbed the cool glass across his forehead where one of his violent headaches was beginning.

"There won't be a slave left in that quarry when I am through."

"I am sorry, my friend," Shalu said, meaning it. "Jale was a good man."

"He was our traitor," Conar informed the Necroman. At the gasp of disbelief, he nodded. "He told me so himself."

The older man slowly sank to the only stool in the tent. "I would not have thought it," he whispered, staring down at the floor. "Edan, yes, but Storm?" He looked up. "Never!"

"I have a feeling there is more to Edan that we know, too," Conar told him.

"Another traitor?" Shalu gasped.

Conar shook his head. "Not at all, but when you get a chance, look at Balizar's right arm. He has a birthmark that is identical to Marsh's."

"He is Edan's father?" Shalu was having a hard time comprehending these new revelations.

“Uncle.” Conar smiled. “Unless I totally miss my guess, Marsh is Hern’s son, and what is more, he knows it.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Necroman's dark face was split with a wicked grin as he plopped down beside Yuri Andreanova. He handed the Outer Kingdom warrior his skin of water, then fell back on the sand to stare up into the bright glare of the early afternoon sun.

"This country reminds me of the deserts in my own country." He sighed with pleasure. "Have you such places in your homeland, Andreanova?"

Yuri took a long drink of the tepid water, then wiped the sweat from his brow. "Yes, but I'll be damned if it is as hot in Afgun as it is in this miserable place." He turned his head and watched the long column of men making their way out of the quarry yards. "We did good today, eh, Taborn?"

Shalu smiled, actually smiled, then lifted his head to look at the liberated slaves. "Aye, my friend. We have done especially well this day." He laid his head back down in the sand. "Any time men can be freed of their chains is a good day, indeed."

Yuri took another drink of water, then handed the skin to Shalu. "My people were enslaved, too, many years before the Cataclysmic War. Not to slave owners, but to our own government."

Shalu closed his eyes. "Much as Conar's homeland was enslaved to theirs when he was away."

The Shadow-warrior turned to look down at the Necroman. "Do you really think he will give her to the pog?"

Shalu opened one eye and looked up at his companion. "What do you think, Andreanova? Given the pain our young friend has endured in his lifetime, do you think he is jesting when he says he can not abide another dying because of him?"

"No," Yuri answered, looking away. "I understand that. It's just that they are so suited to one another. So perfect a couple. They should be together."

"If it is the gods' will, they will be," Shalu sighed, sitting up. "I can not think They mean to keep Conar miserable all his life."

Yuri watched a wagon load of freed quarry slaves roll by. He lifted a hand in greeting to those who called out their gratitude. "Keep safe, my friends!" he yelled at them.

"How many slavers did we kill, I wonder?" Shalu asked, glancing about at the carnage sprawled on the hot desert sands.

"Enough to make the others think twice about jousting with the men of the Samiel," Balizar commented as he joined them. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "What do you know of the lad's headaches, Taborn?"

Shalu's cinnamon face crinkled with a frown. "Another one?"

"He's near to passing out with the pain of it and won't let Rupine give him anything. How do you deal with him when he goes stubborn on you like this?"

Yuri chuckled. "You don't, comrade." He got up and dusted the sand from his breeches. "You just pick his scrawny little ass up and put him to bed."

Shalu snorted. "If he'll let you." He, too, stood up. "It depends on how bad the pain gets before he'll admit he can't deal with it."

Balizar's jaw clenched. "His nose is bleeding."

Shalu exchanged a look with Yuri. "That's not a good sign," Yuri commented.

“Took eight men down before I even knew he was sick,” Balizar said with disgust. “Then another four before he went to his knees.” He shook his head. “The man growled at me when I went to his aid, then stumbled to his feet and lopped the head off a slaver who dared to try to run Asher through from behind. If Asher hadn’t caught him, the lad would have impaled himself on his own sword before he collapsed.”

“Too much pride,” Shalu scoffed. “That’s always been his problem.” He looked about him, sighing with disgust. “Where is he?”

“Interrogating some of the slave wardens. He’s trying to find out where to look for the owner of the quarry,” Balizar answered.

Shalu nodded. “And the brat will find him, I’ve no doubt.” He looped the strap of his water skin over his shoulder. “Let’s go get him.”

Rachel helped a wounded slave onto an oxen cart and then smiled at the helpless fellow. “Take care of that leg, Heltrane,” she told him.

“I will be back to join the Samiel, my lady,” the man swore. “As soon as my leg is mended.”

“We can use every man we can get,” Rupine, the physician, said. He winced at the meaty thud that came from the shack behind them then turned a baleful eye to Rachel. “He’s going to kill the bastard before we find out anything useful.”

“I’ll go in,” Rachel answered. “Maybe I can temper that anger of his.”

“Good luck,” Rupine said.

As she entered the work shack, Rachel was not surprised to see the man she knew as Khamsin bending over his prisoner, a powerful sword hand wrapped around the hapless man’s throat. She glanced at her brother, then at Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar, before shutting the door behind her.

“Where?” Conar shouted, digging his fingers in the sweaty column of the slave warden’s neck. “Before, Alel, I’ll strangle you if you don’t tell me!”

“I suggest you do or he will snap your neck in twain like a twig,” Asher warned. “I’ve seen him do it enough times to know he won’t hesitate.”

The slave warden’s face was already a deep scarlet and he was gasping mightily for breath that could not flow into his lungs for the constriction at his throat. Seeing his own eminent death in those alien sapphire orbs glaring down at him, he knew he’d held out for as long as he dared. The man whose strong hand was slowly crushing his windpipe would not be denied.

“He--is--visiting--the--Prince,” the warden choked out. “At--Abbadon.”

Conar’s grip tightened, his thumb digging cruelly into the soft hollow at the base of the man’s throat. “How many more slaves does he own?”

Rachel knew neither her brother nor Prince Sajin would dare interfere with Khamsin, but she could not allow him to murder the man. She walked to him and put a light, caressing hand on Conar’s arm. Conar’s head snapped around and his face turned bitter, but Rachel’s soft voice calmed the beast in him.

“You are strangling him, Khamsin.” Gently, she reached out to pry Conar’s rigid hand from the prisoner’s throat, then kept that hard hand in her own.

“Give him a chance to tell you what he knows.”

Gasping for breath, gagging with the effort, the warden managed to look up with hearty gratefulness. “Thank-- you-- my-- lady,” he croaked.

“I suggest you tell him what he wants to know,” Rachel replied. “He is not a patient man.”

A flash of annoyance shot across Conar's face, but he stepped back, glaring at Rachel's calm look. He opened his mouth to berate her for her interference, but she only smiled at him.

"You need not thank me, Khamsin," she told him.

"Thank you?" Conar hissed, his eyes flaring.

Rachel's smile widened. "You are welcome."

Sajin turned his head away to keep from letting the others see the laughter building. He bit his lip, striving hard not to allow the snort of humor to escape. He knew if he looked at Asher, who seemed to be having the same reaction to his sister's words as Conar was, he would laugh out loud.

Something moved through the glare Conar was directing at the young woman and then slipped away. His face relaxed and the smile he bestowed on her was one filled with the promise of retaliation. He turned away from her and focused his attention on the prisoner.

"Well?" Conar snarled.

The warden's shoulder slumped with defeat. He had to clear his throat several times before he could speak and even then, his voice was hoarse. Speaking seemed to pain him, but he did not let the bruises on his throat stop him from telling the man called Khamsin what he wished to know.

"Sheik Abdul has fifty house slaves and another twenty who tend his gardens in Cair," the warden explained. "I believe there are a dozen or more concubines he keeps and perhaps that many eunuchs who guard the women."

Rachel's smile turned hard. "How many children?"

The warden looked at her. "Ten. Maybe more."

Conar hissed and would have grabbed the man again had Rachel not stepped in his way. He would have shoved her aside had the woman not turned to stare at him, daring him to touch her. He balled his hands into fists, but did no more than glare down at her, his breath coming in deep, quivering intakes of outrage.

Rachel returned her attention to the warden. "We would like the names of those of your master's friends who own slaves and who mistreat them as he has done."

Gawking at the woman, the warden shook his head violently. "They would kill me!"

"I will kill you if you don't tell us!" Conar assured him.

Rachel knelt down in front of the bound man whose hands were tied securely to the rungs of the chair in which he sat. She put a gentle hand on the man's trembling thigh.

"Do as he says, friend, or you will never live to see the sunset this day." She glanced up at Conar, then fused her gaze with the prisoner's terrified stare. "If you learn nothing about this man, learn this: the Khamsin has known slavery and he abhors it. Those who truck in subjugating their fellow man will find his revenge exacting. He is not one to grant mercy when none was granted him."

The warden looked up into the rigid, deadly face of the man behind her and knew truer words had never been spoken. He wondered who had once dared to enslave this brutal man and if that fool still lived to draw breath. Somehow, he didn't think that was the case.

"Tell him," Rachel encouraged.

Sajin glanced up as the door to the shack opened once more and the Necroman and the Outer Kingdom warrior entered. Behind them, he could see Balizar. He swung his gaze to Conar as that man wiped angrily at the tiny trickle of blood oozing from his left nostril and knew Balizar had gone in search of help for McGregor. Pushing away from the wall against which he had been leaning, Sajin joined Yuri at the door. He glanced back at the prisoner who was rattling off names and numbers to save his life.

“May I suggest you wait until the warden has finished his recitation?” Sajin inquired. “He’ll be more manageable once he gets what he wants.”

Shalu’s gaze narrowed. “He’s practically weaving on his feet!” he griped. “He...” The Necroman hushed as Conar’s stony stare leapt his way and stayed. Shalu’s chin came up. “Fool!” he grumbled.

Conar’s stare remained for a fraction of a moment longer, then slowly returned to the woman on the floor who was writing down names. He stood where he was until the prisoner’s voice trailed off, then asked the warden if that was all he knew.

“Yes, my Lord Khamsin.” The warden’s eyes pleaded with Rachel.

Rachel stood up and handed the list of names to her brother. She turned to Conar. “May we let this man live, Khamsin?”

The dark sapphire orbs flashed and the hard mouth tightened, but the golden head dipped almost imperceptibly.

“Thank you, Khamsin,” Rachel acknowledged.

A muscle jumped in Conar’s jaw as she looked away from him. “When you are finished here, Mam’selle,” he ground out, drawing her attention once more, “I would like to speak with you.” His voice was cold.

Rachel nodded then turned back to the prisoner.

Conar spun around and nearly plowed into Shalu. He clenched his teeth together. “Get out of my way!” he spat, shoving the bigger man aside.

Taborn’s mouth dropped open and he stared after the furious whirlwind that yanked the door open and stomped outside. His jaw came together with an audible click as the door was slammed shut behind Conar with enough force to rattle the wall. “Why that shitty little--”

“Something tells me our gallant leader is not in the best of moods,” Balizar chuckled. He swept his glance over Rachel, then lifted a brow at Asher in challenge. “Did she pluck his tail feathers again, Asher?”

“I’ll roast his arrogant hide!” Shalu growled, making for the door.

“Leave him alone,” Rachel ordered and every man in the room turned to her with various degrees of surprise. She met their looks. “I’ll take care of him.”

Asher’s face turned pale. “I don’t think--”

“No,” Rachel declared, “you seldom do, Asher.” Her unfathomable gaze went to Sajin. “Let him do what he feels he has to do. When he is through, he’ll go back to the camp and I will deal with him there.”

“He said he wanted to speak to you when you’re finished here,” Asher protested.

Rachel turned a bland look to her brother. “He knows I understood his meaning, Asher. I will see him back at camp.”

“He’s in pain, little one,” Balizar told her. “Another headache like he had last month.”

There was a slight lifting of the young woman’s shoulders. “That explains his mood, but he will not appreciate being coddled, so leave him the hell alone.”

“She’s right,” Yuri concurred. “Best to leave him be.”

Shalu switched his malevolent glare from Yuri to the girl. He squinted. Aye, he thought, with regret, the woman looked too much like Elizabeth McGregor not to have captured Conar’s interest. He wondered if there was more to the relationship between them than he had suspected. He didn’t think so, but the look on Conar’s face had spoken volumes as he’d pushed past Shalu. If the interest hadn’t been keen before today, it was becoming so.

"The gods help us," the Necroman mumbled. "One woman here; one woman there." He threw up his hands. "No wonder the little bastard has a headache!"

* * * *

When he had assured himself that everything at the quarry was the way he would have it, Conar had mounted his stallion and galloped away, leaving the others to mop up the mess the Samiel had made of the slave barracks at the quarry that morning. He knew there would be no slaves left in the compound, no shacks left standing, not one piece of machinery left untouched. There would be nothing worth salvaging once his men were through.

The ride back to the oasis had been an excruciating jolt of thundering hooves and flying sand. With every bounce of the steed's flanks, Conar's pain had grown until, now, it was beyond anything he thought he could successfully cope with. As much as he hated the idea, he knew if he was to receive relief of even the barest minimum, he would have to take one of Rupine's proffered potions. Dismounting at his tent, he had thrown the reins to a young boy and had gone inside the relative coolness of the tent. Flinging himself down on his pallet, he threw an arm over his aching eyes and tried to fight the nausea building in his throat.

It was over three hours later when the first of the cadre began to drift into camp. Rupine was with the first wave of returnees and he went straight to Conar's tent, ducking under the flap with held breath.

"Khamsin? Are you awake?"

Conar moaned, turning his face away from the sliver of light that filtered through from outside. "Close the damned flap!" he whispered.

Rupine walked over to the pallet and knelt down. "Is the pain no better?"

"It's worse," came the bitter reply.

"Will you let me give you something for it?" Rupine asked.

"Aye," Conar muttered. "I have no other choice, now."

"I will be right back," Rupine told him and quickly left, going to his own tent to retrieve the laudanum.

Sajin noticed the physician as he came out of Conar's tent and he glanced at Shalu. "It must be bad enough by now that he's going to allow the surgeon to give him something." He threw his leg over his mount's head and slid to the ground. "Should we go see to him?"

"No," Balizar answered. "Let Rachel handle it as she has asked." He, too, dismounted and handed his horse's reins to one of the camp boys. He watched Rupine hurrying back to Conar's tent. "He had one or two of those headaches right after he first got here. This one has lasted him three days."

"Not unusual," Yuri commented. He handed his horse off to another boy. "There was one that lasted nearly a week."

"I have had such headaches, myself," Sajin said. "But none that lasted over a few hours." He frowned. "A day at the very most. Such pain has to be devastating."

"He's use to it," Shalu quipped, still miffed at Conar's rudeness to him earlier. When the others looked at him, he shrugged. "Pain is something to which our young friend has a very close relationship."

"She's here," Balizar mentioned, nodding toward the straggling group of riders headed their way. Rachel was the last among them, sitting slumped in her saddle as though she were very, very tired.

"Do you think she'll go in there straight away?" Yuri asked, worry on his face.

"Aye," Balizar answered. "He told her to and she will."

Shalu snorted. "If she does what he says, she'll be the first woman who has!"

* * * *

As Rachel entered Conar's tent, she realized he wasn't sleeping as Rupine had told her he was. Instead, he was staring at her, his pupils glazed and dilated, but as keenly aware of her as though he had not been dosed with a potent draft of laudanum. He watched her come to sit by him on the pallet, his gaze never leaving her face. She could hear his gentle breathing: even and steady, deep, and she knew he was making a supreme effort to stay awake long enough to take her to task for defying him.

"Yes," she said, opening the conversation, "you did tell me not to go with the men this morning. And yes, I am a pig-headed, stubborn woman. And yes, I could have been hurt. And I agree, I could have gotten some man killed trying to keep me out of harm's way. And no, I don't want you to chain me to a tent pole next time there's a raid. And, no, I won't --"

"Give me some water and shut the hell up, Rachel," he sighed, putting a hand to his forehead to rub at the pain there.

Rachel reached for the water jug. Pouring him a cool glass of spring water, she held it to his lips as he lifted his head. "Is the pain no better at all?"

"No," he muttered as he took a long drink. Slowly he lowered his head and closed his eyes. "It's so bad I can hardly think."

Moving to the head of the pallet, she eased his head onto her lap and began to massage the pounding at his temple. Beneath her fingertips, she could feel the heavy beat and knew the pain must be agonizing. "You aren't going to berate me?" she asked.

"Aye, but not now," he countered. Her hands were cool on his flesh and soothing. The faintest hint of lavender perfume clung to her clothing to remind him once more that this woman bore so strong a resemblance to Liza she could well be her twin.

"You would have killed that man had I not intervened, Khamsin," she said softly. "I could see it in your eyes."

"I know," he answered and turned his head so that his face was against her belly. "I should thank you but I won't."

Rachel smiled down at him. "I didn't think for one moment you would." She threaded her fingers through the lush flax of his hair and gently began to manipulate his tight scalp. "How long have you had these headaches, milord?"

Conar could finally feel the laudanum taking control of his mind and he was beginning to drift. Her voice seemed to be coming from far away, but her gentle touch was keeping him anchored to earth.

"Since I was a young boy," Conar answered. "Thirteen, fourteen. I don't remember." He could hear the slur in his own voice.

"I am sorry," she said in earnest.

"Me, too," he mumbled. He nuzzled his face against her and lifted one arm to drape over her thigh, holding her to him. "Good night, Liza-love," he whispered.

Her hand stilled in his hair. She felt him gather her closer still to him, heard his soft sigh of contentment. Then he was sound asleep in her lap.

Rachel held him for over an hour before Rupine came in to check on him and helped her to stand since her legs were asleep under his weight. They covered him and left him in the care of Yuri Andreanova who had unrolled his pallet beside Conar's own.

"Call me if when he awakes he still has that pain," Rupine had instructed before leaving with Rachel.

Yuri lay awake for a long time, watching his friend sleep. He wondered if Conar realized he was falling in love.

Again.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sajin Ben-Alkazar stared into the fire for a long time that night. He was remembering the conversation between him and Conar the day before when his friend had handed over the care of Catherine Steffenovitch to Sajin.

"Listen to me, nomad," Conar had insisted, waving away all concern Sajin had had about Catherine accepting him. "I love her too much to have her hurt because of me. People who get close to Conar McGregor usually pay dearly for it in one way or another. I would rather hand her over to you than any man I know. You will be good to her and I know you love her."

Sajin had snapped at that remark. "Yes, I love her, but she doesn't care a fig for me. It's you she wants, Conar. It's you the woman loves!"

"Will you have her die for that love, nomad?" Conar had argued. "Others have. Will you have her name added to that list?"

In the end, it had been no use to argue with the Outlander. Conar McGregor was more stubborn than any man Sajin could ever remember encountering before. And just as determined that things be the way he wanted them to be. Such an attitude was the ultimate in arrogance, but it wasn't self-serving. Sajin knew Conar's decision to hand Catherine over to him was causing the man great heartache. He also knew it was causing the man the physical pain he was enduring because of it.

"Every time he's ever had hard decisions to make, he's wound up with one of those damned headaches," Chase Montyne, who had ridden into camp an hour before, had told Sajin. "When things get too rough around the edges and he can't cope with them, he seems to come down with another headache."

"A safety valve," Rupine had nodded. "Better to have a little pain now than a breakdown later."

Chase had agreed. "Cayn once told me the headaches are caused by tension and anxiety. He says it is Conar's repressed anger that triggers these attacks. Whenever he's had a situation in which he's had to assume total responsibility for his actions, the headache isn't far behind."

"Did he have a very close attachment to his mother?" Rupine had asked.

Montyne had frowned, then nodded. "Aye, I suppose he did. Why?"

Rupine had lit his pipe. "My old instructor was of the opinion that those who suffer from recurring headaches of this sort tend to be overly attached to their mothers and resent it when the ties are broken." He drew on the pipe, puffing until it was going good. "There is great anger when the connection between them is broken."

"Conar's mother died when he was thirteen," Chase had informed the physician. "That is when his headaches started."

"The anger he experienced at her loss is still with him, then," Rupine suggested. "It manifests itself in the form of the headaches. When he comes to terms with the loss of her, the severing of those ties between them, the headaches will go away."

Hearing the soft whispers of Rachel and her brother in the tent across from him, Sajin lifted his head and stared at the silhouettes on the tent wall. He could not hear what Asher was saying to his sister, but he could see Rachel's bent head and thought she well might be crying.

"Do you love him, too, little one?" Sajin heard himself ask aloud. He looked around him, but no one was paying attention. He picked up a stick and poked at the fire.

Chase had also told him how much the girl Rachel looked like Elizabeth McGregor. It was that which bothered Sajin the most. He had seen the way the girl had looked at Conar today. He had seen the way Conar had looked at her, angry though he obviously was.

"There's nothing between them," Balizar had assured him, but Sajin thought differently.

If there wasn't something now, it was coming. But that didn't resolve his own dilemma concerning Catherine. He didn't think the woman would just blithely accept a substitution, even if he thought of himself as being Conar McGregor's equal. He had a feeling any woman who had ever loved the Outlander, would do so for as long as life flowed in her body.

"He's an easy man to love," Catherine had told him. "A difficult man to live with, I am sure, but an easy man to love."

Was there real danger for Catherine if she stayed with Conar or was it a figment of Conar's imagination? True, there had been women whose deaths could be explained in no other way than with their closeness to McGregor. Murders had been committed because of him. Fate had sealed the fortunes of several women who had loved, and who had been loved by, him. Would Catherine meet the same fate if she stayed his wife?

"Wife," Sajin groaned, closing his eyes. "How do you undo that, my friend?"

"Talking to yourself again, pog?" Shalu grumbled as he sat down heavily by the fire. "Our nights are not as cold as this." He shivered, drawing his cape around him. "The heat I can stand; the cold I can not."

"You get use to it," Sajin answered. He crossed his booted ankles. "Tell me something, Taborn."

"The earth is round," the Necroman quipped. He glanced at Ben-Alkazar's confused face. "You didn't know that?"

Sajin stared at him. "Of course I knew that!" he snapped. "What has that to do with anything?"

Shalu shrugged. "You asked me to tell you something and I did. What else would you like to know?"

The nomad's lips pursed into a tight line. "You're as confounding as Conar."

The Necroman drew himself up. "That is an insult of the highest order, pog!"

"Will he go through with putting Catherine aside?" Sajin demanded, in no mood for silliness.

"If he says he will, he will," Shalu stated. "The man doesn't lie and he doesn't say what he doesn't mean." He wiped his nose on the hem of his cape. "How do you feel about this?"

"I think he's making the biggest mistake of his life!" Sajin snapped.

"One of many," Shalu snorted. "The brat is a walking encyclopedia of bad choices." He chuckled, softly. "If he hadn't traipsed over here, he wouldn't be in the middle of another war."

"How difficult will it be for him to divorce Catherine?" Sajin wanted to know.

Shalu frowned. "I know practically nothing of Serenian law, but since he was not married by one of his own priests, I would imagine the ceremony would not stand according to Serenian religion. Since Conar is the government, such as it is at this moment, his word is law. If this is what he wants, his people will uphold him."

"I'm not so sure the Outer Kingdom government will!" Sajin growled. "If they don't know by now he married her on the ship, I don't see how she can hope to keep it a secret from her father once she starts showing."

"What do you think will be their reaction?" Shalu inquired.

“They brought him over there to marry her,” Sajin informed the Necroman. At Taborn’s raised brows, the nomad Prince nodded. “That was their intent from the beginning. They will no doubt be beside themselves at the wedding.”

“But?” Shalu asked, sensing something more.

Sajin’s face showed his uncertainty. “Once they learn he means to put her aside like a worn out boot, I’m afraid they will be insulted beyond measure. They might even declare war on Serenia.”

“Pooh,” Shalu snapped, waving his hand as though a vile stench had wafted over them. “Anyone stupid enough to invade Serenia will have the might of Six Kingdoms breathing down their necks.”

“Then there’s the problem of Jaleel Jaborn,” Sajin grouched.

Shalu looked up from the fire. “I’ve heard that name too much of late. Who is this ass?”

“The most powerful man in Rysalia,” Sajin answered. “And he hates Conar. I think he might well be the reason Conar has made the decision to divorce Cat.”

“To protect her,” Shalu grunted.

“Yes,” Sajin agreed. “Chase told me Jaleel might have been responsible for Conar’s daughter’s death.”

“Nadia?” Shalu gasped.

“The man who died? Jale? He told Conar he handed the child over to Jaborn and that Jaborn killed her himself.”

A shiver of apprehension ran through the Necroman. “If that is true, Conar will go after him.”

“I don’t doubt that at all,” Sajin answered.

“Well,” Shalu said, getting to his feet with a grown of aging muscles. “I think I should go back to Asaraba in the morning and look for the rest of our crew.” He glanced around him and found Yuri sitting off to himself. “If there’s to be more trouble, it would be best if Conar’s friends were with him.”

“To protect him,” Sajin mumbled.

“Aye,” Shalu sighed. “To protect him.”

* * * *

“You disobeyed him,” Asher accused, throwing aside his burnoose. “He expressly forbade you to come along with us this morning and you ignored him!”

“He isn’t my lord and master, Asher,” Rachel argued. “Nor my husband that he can order me about as he sees fit.”

“He is our leader!” Asher snapped. “We must do as he says. He knows what is best!”

“The rest of you can cower down and kiss his boots if you like, but I will not!” Rachel told him. “This is not his fight, Asher. These are not his people he is freeing from slavery. I have been at this longer than he has and I have more to lose than he does.” She pointed a finger toward the tent where the man of whom they were speaking was lying. “What do you think will happen to us once he loses interest in the game and decides to go home to his country? Or once he goes after Prince Jaleel? We will still be here to fight for our countryman long after he has gone!”

“Will you just try to do as he asks, Rachel?” Asher asked with exasperation. “He fears for your safety. You remind him of his lady-wife and he--”

“Enough!” she spat, glaring at her brother. “I am sick of being compared to his dead wife!”

Asher stared at her, taking in the heaving bosom, the flash of fire in her green eyes, the high color on her cheeks, the way she clenched her jaw. It was more than being compared to Khamsin's wife that irritated her. If he had not known better, he would have sworn Rachel was jealous.

"Stop looking at me like that!" Rachel snarled.

Shaking his head to the incomprehensible emotions of the female race, Asher sat down on his pallet and decided to let the matter drop. "Will you be going with us to the meal the Lady Sabrina has invited us to attend?"

"No," Rachel mumbled. "Montyne asked the men, not me." She pummeled her pillow then stretched out on her pallet, glaring up at the ceiling. "She has women to keep you men company there."

Asher turned his head and looked at her. WAS that jealousy he heard in his sister's sharp voice? Surely not. "I am sure she would not mind you coming with us."

"No," Rachel repeated. She flipped over onto her side, away from her brother's probing look.

"Suit yourself," Asher answered.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The next morning found Conar bleary-eyed and irritable. The headache was gone, but the lassitude he had learned to hate during the time he had been addicted to Sern's potions, was there to remind him that he had had to depend on another to rid him of the pain. When he ventured out of his tent, squinting against the harsh

late morning light, he appeared disoriented and tired.

"Chase Montyne came while you were asleep last night," Shalu told him, handing him a steaming cup of coffee. "He's inviting us to a feast his lady is preparing."

Conar grunted in answer and burnt his tongue as he took a quick sip of the aromatic brew.

"I think I'll pass on the feast and head back to Asaraba to meet up with the others," Shalu said.

"Tell them to get their asses back home," Conar grumbled. "I don't need them mucking up things over here."

The Necroman scraped at the day's worth of beard on his dark cheeks. He grimaced at the feel. "As if they give a rat's pecker what you want, Conar," he replied.

Conar stared at him over the rim of the tin cup. "Do each of you lay awake at night trying to find ways to make my life as complicated as possible?"

"There's no need to," Shalu said dryly. "You complicate your own life quite nicely without our help."

Lowering the cup, Conar glared at his old friend. "Tell them to go home, Shalu. I don't need them here."

"I'll tell them," Shalu said, "but I know what they'll say. They'll say you've gotten yourself into mischief again and they're here to bale you out."

"And get themselves killed in the bargain!" Conar snapped. "This isn't like home, Taborn. These people are demonic. You haven't seen the slave warehouses, the places where they sell human flesh! People like this are beyond the understanding of men like Brell and the Hesars."

"What are you afraid of?" Shalu asked, his brows drawn together. "You've been acting strange ever since I got here."

Conar looked away, unable to meet his friend's intense gaze. "I can't protect them here, Shalu," he finally answered.

The Necroman's forehead crinkled. "Protect them? In what way do you mean that? The men of the Wind Force are warriors all, McGregor. They have fought beside you before and you didn't worry about their safety. Why do you feel the need to do so, now?"

"I have no power here, Shalu," he admitted, looking back at Taborn. "None whatsoever. Anything could happen to them and I wouldn't know it." He tossed away the rest of his coffee. "They could be in harm's way at this very minute and I wouldn't even be aware of it." His face took on a look of intense pleading. "How can I keep them safe if I am not aware of their danger?"

Shalu understood. He had no powers in this strange land, either, but he hadn't let it bother him all that much. He'd had no powers in the Labyrinth, either. Neither had Conar, but they had not really been in any great danger in that hellhole. There had been no reason to need Conar's protection. If anything, it had been them: the men of the soon-to-be-formed Wind Force that had had to protect Conar McGregor. Afterwards, after the Binding Ceremony that had linked them for

all time, it had been Conar's powers that were to keep them all safe and out of harm's way. Without that power, Conar felt impotent to protect them.

"We can take care of ourselves," Shalu said in a soft voice. "We are grown men, my friend."

Conar stood up, shoved his hands into the pockets of his breeches, and stared out across the vastness of the desert. "Tell them to go home, Shalu." He looked back around. "MAKE them go home. If I have to worry about them, I'll go mad. Do you understand that?"

Shalu stood, as well, and put a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "You are the mighty oak, brat; we are the branches. Can the oak go where the branches do not follow?"

Conar stared into the Necroman's face for a long moment. "It can if those branches have been lopped off," he answered.

Taborn squeezed Conar's shoulder. "I'll tell them what you've said, but don't expect them to turn tail and run because you're afraid for them. If anything, they'll be insulted."

"I'd rather they be insulted than dead," Conar answered. "I've lost too many people I love to lose any more."

"Well," Shalu sighed, giving his friend's shoulder one more affectionate squeeze, "if I am to find them, I'd best get on with it. Balizar is going with me. It might be awhile before you hear from me again."

Conar reached up and laid his hand on Shalu's. "Be careful?" he asked, searching the dark face before him.

"Am I not always?" Shalu grunted.

Rachel stood in the doorway of her tent and watched Khamsin saying goodbye to his compatriot. She sensed his unease and when he turned to find her looking at him, she could see the tenseness in his eyes. At his silent signal, she started toward him, wondering if the browbeating she didn't get the evening before was to be given now.

"Your friend is going back to Asaraba?" she asked as she came into his tent.

"Aye." Conar motioned her to sit down.

Rachel seated herself on the low stool and waited until he was sitting cross legged on his pallet before inquiring after his headache.

"It's gone, but the hangover remains," he answered. "Sometimes I think that's even worse than the damned nuisance of the headache."

"His Grace told me how terrible the pain can be," Rachel remarked. At Conar's lifted brow, she told him she was speaking of Prince Sajin. "I have never had a headache," she told him. "I can not imagine how it feels."

"It feels like you've been kicked in the head by an irate camel," he quipped. "One intent on splitting your noggin'."

Rachel smiled. "I'm glad to know you're feeling better, milord."

"Well enough to turn you over my knee and make you heartily regret having gone against my direct orders yesterday, Mam'selle," he said in a sober voice.

"You won't," Rachel told him.

Conar sighed. "No, I won't, but I should."

She watched him for a long time and when he said no more, she put out her foot to nudge his. "Why did you call me in here, Khamsin?"

He looked down at her foot and swung his own against hers, tapping her boot with his. "You remind me so much of someone I knew a long time ago," he said at last. "She didn't let me get away with anything either." He looked up. "She was as apt to slap me as kiss me."

She knew to whom he was referring. For once, the notion that she bore so close a likeness to his dead wife did not drive her to anger.

"You have that effect on women," she retorted. "I've been inclined to hit you a few times, myself."

Conar smiled. "I'd just as soon you didn't, Mam'selle." He tapped her foot again. "If you hit like you shoot that bow of yours--"

"I do," she interrupted.

He snorted with humor. "I was afraid you did."

"I am a warrioress, milord," she said with all seriousness. "I know no other way to be."

Conar nodded. "I can understand that." His smile was gentle. "But it doesn't make me worry any the less for your safety."

"Don't," she said, reaching out to touch his hand, "confuse me with your wife, milord." She watched the instant pain form behind his thick golden lashes. "I am a firm believer in the Prophetess' words: what will be, will be. When my time comes, I will embrace death just as strongly as I have embraced life. If you must worry about me, worry that I meet my maker with as much courage as I can."

"I have no doubt that you will," he answered.

Rachel leaned toward him, fused her gaze with his. "Let me be what the Prophetess wants me to be, milord Khamsin. Don't try to make of me what you want." She put her hand on his cheek. "I can not be to you what you want me to be and do what must be done. Do you understand that?"

He reached up to cover her hand with his own. "What is it you think I want from you, Rachel? I am a married man." He searched her eyes.

Rachel slowly slid her hand from beneath his and placed it demurely in her lap. She sat back. "You want me to take your first wife's place and that I can not do." She lowered her gaze. "Not in this lifetime or in any other."

Conar was stunned that his thoughts could so easily be read by this woman, but not surprised since Liza had the same uncanny ability to read him as though he were an open book. The two women were far too much alike for him to be easy about the similarities.

"Who are you, Rachel?" he asked.

"Just a woman, milord," she answered and stood up, looking down at him with understanding. "You should not put aside your new wife, Khamsin, because you see in me your first. Your gods gave the Tzarevna to you, they put her in your life; can you not understand that is what they want for you?"

He lowered his head. "If she stays with me, she'll suffer, Mam'selle, as surely as the sun will rise tomorrow."

"We all suffer, Conar," Rachel said, using his name for the first time. "In our arrogance we think we can sway the will of the Higher Power, but that isn't true." As he lifted his head to look up at her, she smiled sadly. "We can only delay the inevitable."

He sat for a long while after she had gone and stared at the floor, gathering his thoughts and trying to make sense of the turmoil in his soul. He loved Catherine; that much he knew. And she loved him. He wanted to be with her, to watch her belly sprout with their child, to watch that child grow and take her place with her brothers at Boreas Keep. He wanted to grow old beside Catherine, to sit with her and laugh at the antics of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He wanted peace for once in his life.

Standing up, he felt every ache and pain in his forty year old body. He was tired and heart-sore and lonely. Raking his hands through his hair, he thought of what Rachel had said to him. He could not deny the attraction he felt for the woman, but he understood why: she reminded him vividly of Liza. And just as he knew the reason he felt drawn to Rachel, he knew he would never act upon that feeling. Neither of them really wanted that.

“Alel, help me,” he whispered, knowing what he truly wanted was Catherine at his side and dreading that for fear she would end up as the other women in his life had ended up: dead at the hands of an enemy.

“Not so of Amber-lea,” a tiny voice inside his head reminded him.

But he knew differently.

Amber-lea had died at the hands of his very worst enemy: himself.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Thom Loure was the first to go down amidst the heavy blows of the attackers. His last thought as unconsciousness sealed his fate was that this must have been how Rayle had felt. He stretched out his hand toward young Paegan as that man fell, then closed his eyes with a grunt of pain and fell headlong into the darkness.

"Take them alive!" Rylan heard as he struggled to reach Paegan's side. His brother was bleeding profusely from the wound in his head and Rylan was near to madness as Paegan lay still and pale.

"*Roget! Behind you!*" Tyne shouted, parrying the swords of the four attackers who were driving him back. He was bleeding from cuts to his arms and thighs made by the wicked, curved blades of his opponents. He had been fighting for over twenty minutes, trying to get to Wyn who was lying inert in the sand, his blood seeping from a gaping hole in his side.

Roget stumbled, felt a burning pain in his left side, and then pitched forward, landing hard with a groan. He tried to shrug off the hands which came down to clutch at him, but he was too weak, too tired, too numb to resist the hemp that was quickly bound around his wrists.

"That one! Get him before he can run!"

Jah-Ma-El looked behind him at the cry, but he renewed his efforts to reach the horses, to go for help. His feet dug deep caverns in the shifting sand as he tried to run. He almost reached the picket line where their horses had been tethered, but felt himself falling, something tight wrapped around his knees. He looked down as he crashed to the sand and saw the bola, screeched in ungodly frustration as hard hands plucked him up and began to tie him.

Grice and Sentian were fighting back to back, their blades scraping along the sharp edges of their attackers scimitars. Neither man thought he could win, but both wanted to exact as big a toll of their enemies as time, and the gods, would allow. Grice took a quick glance about them and hissed with rage.

Wyn, Paegan and Thom were lying lifeless in the sand. He didn't know if any of them were still alive.

Rylan, Roget, Tyne, and Jah-Ma-El were being dragged to their horses, all four men trussed so tightly the pain showed in their tired faces.

Ching-Ching was lying sprawled in the sand, his right arm crooked at an odd angle.

Holm was struggling mightily between three attackers, his hoarse bellows of fury making the heavens tremble. But even as Grice watched, he saw the brawny man go down beneath a torrent of vicious fists.

"Grice!" he heard Sentian yelp and cast his gaze back of him to see Sentian fall, a blade in his left shoulder.

Grice threw down his own weapon and raised his hands.

* * * *

Catherine's fingers arched into claws and she went after the man's face, only to have him step aside and let her fall to the floor. The wind rushed out of her body and her chin thumped painfully on the wood as she went down, stunned.

"Bruise her and His Grace will gut you, himself!" Rasheed snarled at his accomplice.

She felt herself being lifted, her arms dragged none-too gently behind her back and securely tied with one of her own silk scarves. Opening her mouth to scream, her kidnaper clamped a sweaty, garlic-smelling palm over her lips as his companion took up another scarf to silence her.

“You will not be hurt, Highness,” the taller of the two kidnapers told her. “His Grace only wishes the pleasure of your company.”

Kicking out with her foot, Catherine’s eyes blazed with satisfaction as the man howled with pain and hopped away, holding his right shin. She tried twisting away from the other man, but his hold on her upper arms as he slammed her back against his chest was powerful.

“I have no compunction against hurting you, woman,” she heard him hiss in her ear. “I am not afraid of Jaleel Jaborn!”

True terror went through Catherine’s very soul and she groaned, knowing why she was being taken and knowing, too, that because of it, Conar would be captured, as well. She renewed her efforts to get free, but the man behind her let go of her left arm just long enough to cuff her on the side of her head, making her see stars.

“Behave!” he snarled at her. His hold was painful as he jerked her around then thrust her into the other man’s arms. “Hold her while I tie her feet.”

She would have kicked out at this man too. Every instinct she possessed warned her to fight him, but he was too quick for her, and too furious. He lashed out with his right fist and tapped her hard on the point of her chin.

Stygian darkness sucked her down beneath its unwelcome waves.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Meggie Ruck argued with the merchant, thrusting her chin out belligerently as the man quibbled over the price of the fruit. She pointed angrily at another mound of oranges, liking the color and texture of their skins better than the ones the merchant was trying to foist off on her for the price she had paid.

“Don’t you be giving me no crap!” Meggie snapped at the little man. “I paid for them oranges and its them oranges I’ll be taking back to my mistress!”

Kharis El-Malick smiled at the old woman as she continued to barter with the merchant. He folded his arms over his chest and laughed, putting his money on the strange woman, liking her brashness and the thick, garbled explosion of her speech. He had come to the bizarre to purchase fresh vegetables for his mistress’ feast for the Outlander, McGregor, but had been waylaid when he’d heard the babble of argument between this woman and her nemesis. The bartering had been going on for over twenty minutes.

“I ain’t taking them damned oranges, you sorry bastard!” Meggie yelled, pushing the inferior basket of fruit toward the merchant. “Gimme what I paid for or know the reason why!”

Kharis’s lips twitched and he pushed away from the stall upon which he had been leaning and sauntered toward the outraged little woman. Glancing at the people gathered about who were also amused at the exchange, Kharis pushed his way through the crowd and walked up to the old woman. He smiled down at her when she lifted a quivering chin to glare at him.

“I think I might be of service to you, Madame,” he drawled, “if you would permit me.”

Meggie squinted up at the darkly handsome face of the newcomer. “I don’t need nobody’s help in getting what’s due me!”

Kharis bowed his head. “I would imagine not in your country, sweet lady, but here in Rysalia, it helps if you speak the language.” A powerful hand shot out and grabbed the merchant around his neck. “Give her what she paid you for, infidel!” he barked, shaking the merchant.

Meggie’s mouth dropped open and she gaped at the stranger, seeing only mild irritation in his eyes, but knowing he would just as soon strangle the fruit dealer as not. When he released the hapless fellow, the merchant couldn’t hand Meggie the fruit she had wanted fast enough.

“Is that satisfactory, Madame?” Kharis asked, nodding toward the fruit Meggie held tightly to her abundant bosom.

“Aye,” she whispered, gazing at him with admiration. “I thank ye, sir.”

Kharis lowered his head in acknowledgement of her thanks, then held out his arm. “May I escort you back to your quarters, sweet lady?”

She took his arm, amazed that she would do so. Around her, people were stepping aside for this tall, elegant man and she wondered who he was and just how much authority he had in this place.

“I am called Kharis El-Malick,” he told her as though he had intercepted her thoughts. “And you are?”

“Meg,” she answered, then cleared her throat to try again. “Meggie June Ruck. From Serenia.”

Kharis stopped and turned to stare down at her. “Serenia?”

Caution leapt up in Meggie’s breast and she only nodded to his question. “Why do you ask?”

One thick black brow shot up. "Do you know His Grace, Prince Conar McGregor?"

Meggie's heart thumped in her chest. "Who don't know the rightful King of her homeland?" She narrowed her gaze. "Why do you want to know that?"

Kharis smiled warmly. "My mistress is giving a party in his honor this evening." His dark face crinkled with amusement. "You have heard of Prince Chase Montyne of Ionary."

"He gonna be there, too?" Meggie asked, her scrutiny sharpening on the tall man.

Kharis lowered his head and his voice. "He is my mistress' lover, dear lady. Do you think he would allow her alone with the legendary Dark Overlord of the Wind?"

Meggie giggled. "Don't know many men who would," she answered.

Kharis nodded wisely. "Precisely so, Madame." He continued on with Meggie hanging onto his arm. "I was sent to gather fresh vegetables and fruit for the meal. Have you the time to help me? I fear I am not nearly as adept at such things as the Lady Sabrina thinks me." Once more he lowered his head. "It is one of my most valuable ways of finding young ladies to court." He winked at her puzzled frown. "You dear ladies love to help a man who is out of his depth. What better way would I have to meet eligible ladies than to ask assistance in buying a commodity all women know more about than I, a mere man?"

Her face broke into a knowing grin. "You're the very devil with them, too, I'll warrant, eh, Kharis?"

He shrugged eloquently. "I try, sweet lady. I try."

* * * *

He held the door open for her, frowning immediately at the destruction scattered about the room. He shoved Meggie to one side and drew his blade, stepping over the threshold and sweeping his gaze about.

"What the hell happened in there?" Meggie gasped as she took in the mess.

"Stay back!" Kharis warned as he rushed to the adjoining sleeping chamber and pushed open the door. The room was not scattered as was the sitting room. He looked about him, then spun around and found Meggie standing in the doorway, her face pale and frightened.

"Your mistress was here when you left?" Kharis asked, sheathing his blade.

"Oh, sweet Merciful Alel!" Meggie stuttered. "She's been taken. I know it!"

Kharis squatted down and picked up a handful of beads that lay tumbled about the floor. Gripping them in his fist, he carried them to Meggie. "Was she wearing these?" he inquired.

Meggie looked down at the shiny gold beads. She nodded miserable. "Aye, lad. She was."

Hissing with anger, Kharis turned on his heel and headed for the door. "Lock this behind me, Meggie, and don't open it to anyone you don't know." He stopped, then spun around and pointed a finger at her. "On second thought: don't open it to anyone!"

She nodded, too numb to answer. Moving in a state of confusion to the door, she double-locked it behind his exit, then slowly sank to the floor in a heap of fear.

"Oh, lad," she said, covering her face with her hands. "How will I explain your lady's disappearance to you?"

* * * *

Prince Jaleel Jaborn read the missive then crushed it into a ball and threw it into the massive fireplace in his chambers. He smiled.

"They have captured the men of the Wind Force and are bringing them here."

Prince Guil looked up from paring an apple. "Alive?"

"All of them," Jaleel answered.

A knock at the Prince's door, stopped Guil from commenting. "Come!" Jaborn called out. A servant entered, bowing meekly to his master. "Well?" Jaleel asked.

"A messenger just rode in to say the woman has been taken, My Liege."

Guil chuckled softly and cut away a section of apple. "I would say your plan is falling nicely into place, dear friend." He put the wedge of fruit into his mouth and grinned. "You have the bait."

Jaleel motioned the servant away. Once the door had closed behind the man, the Prince went to the fireplace and stared down into the crackling flames.

"Yes," Jaborn acknowledged. "I have the bait and the game is under way."

* * * *

The pounding at her door made Meggie shriek with fear and go rigid, but the urgent voice calling her name managed to galvanize her into action and she rushed to the door to twist at the locks. She pulled the portal wide and found the man called Kharis standing there.

Kharis walked into the room and turned to face her, his eyes filled with murder. "I have learned your mistress was taken by Prince Jaleel Jaborn's men. They have taken her to his fortress at Abbadon."

Meggie's trembling hand went to her throat. "Who is this man?"

"The vilest of the vile," Kharis spat. "Someone must have seen your lady and reported her to him. Is she a beautiful woman?"

"I suppose so," Meggie answered. She didn't think the gal nearly as pretty as Elizabeth McGregor, but there was something about her that men would find irresistible. Her bonny lad certainly had.

Kharis' gaze narrowed. "What aren't you telling me, Meggie?" he asked.

She chewed on her lip for a moment, then made up her mind. "I think I can trust you, Kharis," she said, clutching her hands at her waist. "I ain't really her servant. I'm just kinda looking after her for my lad. You know?"

"No," he answered. "I don't know." He sat down on the edge of the settee. "You'd better tell me the whole of it."

"You asked if I knew the lad," Meggie answered.

"Prince Conar?" Kharis asked, frowning. "Yes. What of it?"

Meggie's face scrunched up with apology. "The lady is his wife. She came here to find him."

The dark face of Kharis El-Malick turned ashen and his eyes widened. He slowly stood up, his mouth opening in shock. "You can't be serious," he breathed.

She nodded. "As serious as I can be, son. But what's worse, the lady is the daughter of the Outer Kingdom Tzar. She's like a princess in her own right, I guess."

A groan of despair escaped Kharis' slack mouth. "By the Prophetess, this is not good." He searched the floor at his feet, his mind racing with thought, then he looked up at Meggie. "Prince Jaleel would have known this, then!

Just recently he went to St. Steffensberg to vie for the hand of this woman."

"Well," Meggie said, her lip thrust out, "he damned sure didn't get her! My bonny lad married that little girl on the ship here."

"Just before someone tried to kill him," Kharis mumbled.

Meggie's gaze turned suspicious. "How do you know that?"

Kharis waved a dismissing hand. "Because my mistress bought him at the slave block three months ago," he said, missing the shock which shot across the old woman's face.

"He's at in encampment not far from my mistress' farm." He clenched his fists. "I must get word to him that his lady is taken." He strode toward the door, making up his mind to find several cousins to go with him to Balizar Arbra's camp. They would need all the men they could get.

"Wait a minute!" Meggie called out, grabbing at his arm as he passed. "We've got men here. His men! Don't you think we ought to find them first?"

Kharis stared down at her. "What men are you speaking of?"

"The men of the Wind Force, lad!" Meggie informed him. "Eleven of 'em came here to find him. We heard he was leading this--this--" She couldn't think of the word.

"The Samiel," Kharis provided. "Just this dawn they raided a quarry and set the slaves free. It is the talk of Rysalia."

"That's my bonny boy," Meggie said, beaming with pride. "He don't hold with human misery."

"So his men came to aid him in what he has decided to do here?" Kharis said.

"They met up with some guides who were going to take him to where he was." Meggie frowned. "But unless I dreamed it, lad, that Abbadon place you named is where they were heading."

"The Prophetess be merciful!" Kharis gasped. "Who told them he was there?"

"Some holy man, I'm thinking," Meggie answered, fear beginning to show in her wrinkled face. She could see stark concern replacing the pallor on Kharis' dark face. "We got something to worry about, don't we, lad?"

Kharis slowly nodded. "Yes, Meggie. We do."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Chase dipped his head to Sabrina's lips and tasted the pomegranate juice along the dusky fullness. He licked at the corner of her wide mouth and chortled as she squirmed beneath him.

"You like that, lady?" he whispered against her mouth.

Sabrina's dark arms came up to entwined around his strong neck. She brought his mouth to hers and pressed their lips tightly together. Her tongue slid along the firmness of his lips and smiled at the shudder of pleasure which raced down his tall frame. Pulling her mouth from his, she stared into his blue eyes.

"Do you like THAT, milord?" she countered.

Montyne shrugged. "I suppose." He tried to roll away from her, but her arms grew rigid around him and he was not allowed to escape.

"I have been thinking, slave," Sabrina told him, scanning his face as she spoke. "I think I shall have my men come in and tie you spreadeagle to my bed."

One tawny brow lifted in amusement. "Is that so?"

"I shall have you stripped, of course."

"Of course," Chase agreed.

"Bound hand and foot."

"Is there any other way?" he retorted.

Sabrina's sultry smile was wicked. "And I shall have my way with you, slave."

Chase answered her smile with a retaliatory grin of his own. "And I shall fill you to overflowing," he responded.

Her arms unlocked from his neck and her hands moved down the silk of his shirt. "Shall I call them, now, slave?"

Chase flicked his tongue along her jaw. "Who, milady?"

Sabrina felt the shiver of excitement run down her spine and settle in her lower belly. "My men," she whispered.

"I'm the only man you need," he answered as he lowered his head to her breast. He nipped at her through the diaphanous satin of her gown, his warm mouth settling on one dark nipple.

She gave herself up to his love making, blocking out the uproar outside that told her Kharis had returned. She had given orders that she was not to be disturbed, even should the world be crashing down around them, and she knew her servants would obey her to the letter.

Chase stiffened at the crash which hit the door to their sleeping chamber. He pulled away from her questing mouth and craned his neck to look behind him. He barely had time to roll off her, to reach for his sword, before the portal was thrown back, hitting the wall with enough force to knock it half-way off its iron hinges. Crouched beside his lady's bed, sword in hand, he was furious to see Kharis standing there.

"What the hell is the meaning of this?" Montyne shouted, straightening even as his hand tightened on the grip of his blade.

"It's the Prince's woman!" Kharis yelled back, sweeping his gaze from the Ionarian to his mistress. "She's been kidnapped!"

"What woman?" Sabrina managed to ask, sitting up and covering herself.

"Prince Chase?" Montyne heard a woman calling to him.

An immediate frown crossed Chase's face and he skirted the bed, coming up short as a distressed Meggie Ruck hurried into the sleeping chamber behind Kharis.

"What the hell?" Chase managed to ask before Meggie threw herself into his arms.

"His wife's been stolen, Your Grace," Meggie sobbed. "The lad's wife's been stolen!"

Chase looked over Meggie's head to Sabrina's bodyguard, Kharis. His confused look would have been comical had it not been so intense.

"Prince Conar's wife," Kharis explained. "Jaborn has taken her."

"Liza?" Chase gasped. "Liza's alive?"

"No, lad!" Meggie growled, pushing out of his arms. "The Outer Kingdom woman he was courting! He went and married the girl and she's carrying his baby and--"

"BABY?" both Chase and Kharis shouted in union.

"You didn't tell me that, Meggie!" Kharis bellowed.

Meggie ignored his outburst. "You gotta get her back for him, son," Meggie said, looking up into Chase's blue startled gaze. "That son-of-a-bitch has got the others, too. If my bonny lad goes--"

"What others, Meg?" Chase interrupted, his whole world off kilter with this news.

"The Wind Force," Kharis told him. "It seems eleven of his men have been captured by Jaborn and taken to Abbadon."

"The Prophetess help them," Sabrina muttered, getting out of the bed.

Chase looked down at Meggie. "Who?"

"The Hesar boys," she answered. "Prince Grice and Prince Tyne." As she watched, Chase's face began to lose color. "That little monkey man--"

"Ching-Ching?" Chase whispered.

Meggie nodded. "The lad's brother, Jamie. That lumbering ox, Thom. The sea captain. The older du Mer and Senti." Tears began to form. "And the lad's eldest."

Chase crumpled to the bed. "Wyn?" When Meggie didn't answer, he reached out to grasp her hand. "Please, Alel, don't tell me they've got Wyn, too!"

"Who is this Wyn?" Sabrina asked, sensing this was the worst news of all. She watched the old woman slowly nod and felt the pain in her own heart that suddenly ricocheted through her lover's.

"Oh, sweet Merciful Alel," Chase sighed. "This will kill him."

"I gathered twenty of my cousins," Kharis said, "men I know I can trust. There are another forty or so here who can go with us to the camp."

"What are you suggesting?" Sabrina gasped. "You can't mean to attack Abbadon! The fortress is impregnable!"

"Any keep can be taken," Chase muttered, feeling Meggie's troubled gaze on his face. He reached out to caress her withered cheek. "Don't worry, Meg. We'll get them back."

"There is no way!" Sabrina told him. "Men have tried to storm that place and died in the attempt, Montyne! It can't be taken, I tell you!"

"And I tell you it can!" Chase repeated. He pushed himself from the bed and reached for his baldric.

"Chase, no!" Sabrina sobbed, hurrying around the bed to clutch him. "This is madness!"

"He has to be told!" Chase told her, looking down into her tearful face, seeing her fear.

"This is his decision to make, but I know my friend: he'll bring that fortress down around Jaborn's ears to get his men back, especially if his eldest boy is one of those held."

"And his lady," Meggie sobbed.

Chase ground his teeth. "And his lady!"

"There is an Outer Kingdom ship in the harbor at Asaraba. I sent men there to tell them of what had happened. I asked that those they could spare come here to the farm and the rest return to St. Steffensberg to gather extra forces," Kharis informed Chase. "I left my brother's boy, Haji, there to lead them here."

Montyne nodded. "Good idea. Once the Tzar finds out his daughter's being held captive, he'll send the entire might of the Outer Kingdom to help get her back."

"It won't do any good no matter if he sent a million men," Sabrina sobbed, holding out her hands to her lover. "You've never seen that place, Montyne! It can not be taken!" She turned to Meggie, fusing her terrified gaze with the older woman's. "It is a Gateway into the Abyss!"

At her words, Chase spun around and gawked at her. "What did you say?"

"Your power is no good here, Montyne," she sobbed, tears flowing freely down her cheeks. "You can not sense here what those of us who are bound to the Magi can."

Meggie wobbled on her feet. "You're a sorceress?"

Sabrina didn't look at the woman. Her gaze was riveted on Chase. "Norus Keep was one of the Gateways and it fell, Montyne. The monastery was another and it fell. But there are two more and they are the most aptly-defended of the entrances into the netherworld. Abbadon is by far the most protected by Raphian for it is His lair! There is no way to take it!"

Montyne shivered at her words, but his face did not lose its determination. He was stunned to learn that the woman he had been sleeping beside, making love to, falling in love with, was a magic-sayer, but somehow the news didn't concern him all that much.

"I have to go to Conar," he told her.

"Montyne!" Sabrina cried out, throwing herself at him, clinging to him. "I will not let you go!"

As surprised as she had been to learn this pretty black woman was a child of magic, Meggie shrugged away the knowledge and stepped forward to take her the Ionarian. She pulled on the woman's arms, telling her to let go, demanding she not interfere.

"He knows what he has to do," Meggie told her, struggling to keep the woman from escaping. "Let him be about it."

Sabrina turned on the old woman and was about to scream at her, to berate her for daring to intrude, but the look in the Serenian woman's face was one that stilled Sabrina in her tracks.

"This is men's work," Meggie said, locking her gaze with the black woman's. "We let them do what has to be done."

Somehow she found her tongue. "And if they fail?" Sabrina whispered.

Meggie drew her into her strong arms. "Then others will succeed where they fail," she answered, patting the worried woman on the back.

Kharis looked back as he was about to follow Montyne from the room and his gaze met the old woman's. There was an intent stare glaring back at him that made the hair stir on his arms. Meggie Ruck's face was hard, cold, and her eyes were steady as she looked at him.

"No one hurts my lad," he heard her mumble. "No one and them get away with it!"

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

King Shalu Taborn of Necroman exited the tavern and peered up at the lowering sun. He'd drank his fill of ale and was ready to go in search of the men. He hadn't seen the Outer Kingdom ship in the harbor when he entered Asaraba, idly wondering why, but thinking maybe they'd returned to St. Steffensberg once they had deposited the men of the Wind Force on Rysalian soil. Balizar had gone off to visit a lady of his acquaintance, promising to meet Shalu the next morning at the inn where Shalu would be staying.

"Nyja makes the best roast chicken in Rysalia," Balizar had said, winking. "I've not met many who could satisfy my appetites like she can!"

The Necroman sighed, thinking maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to get some grub in his own rumbling belly before he sat out to find Roget and the others. There wasn't to be another raid on any slave camps for several days and there was time to contact the others.

He looked about him, saw several places that looked interesting. He sniffed, then smiled. The heavenly aroma of veal was wafting toward him on an errant breeze. "Ah," Shalu grinned, rubbing his hands together. His purposeful stride took him toward the tavern from where the delightful smell was coming.

* * * *

Azalon laid down a card and grinned at Yuri. "Twenty golden Senis, my friend," he informed the Shadow-warrior.

Yuri snarled, throwing down his cards. "I don't understand this game!" he grumbled.

"Who does?" Azalon chuckled. Scooping up his winnings, he looked about him. "Who wishes to try his luck this evening?"

Rupine shook his head. "Not me. I know better than to play Fost with a Hasdu."

Sajin declined as well. "I'm not lucky at cards."

Azalon, who had not been able to go on the day's raid because of a sprained ankle, craned his neck back to look at Asher. "How about you?"

Asher smiled. "Thank you, but I don't gamble." He got up and stretched. "When are we to leave for the Lady Sabrina's?"

Sajin stood up also. "Seven, I think." He looked up at the dark heavens. "The meal is at nine."

"We'll have to spend the night there," Azalon protested in a bored voice. When the others looked at him, he grinned mischievously. "Which is a shame, don't you think, gentlemen?" At their snorts of humor, he turned an innocent look to Sajin. "Have you ever visited her establishment by the Nilus, Your Grace?"

Sajin blushed and looked away. "Once."

"A grand place," Azalon sighed. "A most worthy place."

"A whorehouse," Rupine said.

"But a grand whorehouse," Azalon corrected.

Rachel couldn't help but smile as she listened to the men outside her tent as they sat about, eagerly awaiting the time for them to leave for Sabrina's farm. She wondered if Khamsin was just as eager to go and thought perhaps he was, but not for the same reason as the other men. It would be his friend, the Ionarian, whose company he sought, not the velvet arms of a prostitute. He had asked her to join them, but she had declined, citing her reluctance to visit such a place.

"You will not be offended, Rachel," Khamsin had promised her. "I will see to that."

"Go and enjoy yourself, milord," she had laughed. "Your men deserve such entertainment. My presence will only hinder them from taking complete advantage of the feast."

He had understood her meaning well enough and had had the grace to look embarrassed. His high color had brought laughter to Rachel's eyes and a stern look from him.

"Be careful, woman," he'd warned her. "You want to be treated as one of the warriors and I will grant you that. Disrespect from you will be treated just as disrespect from one of the men." His sensuous lips had creased into a teasing smile. "I'll turn you over my lap just as readily as I will them."

Coming out of her tent, Rachel saw the man entering Khamsin's tent. She didn't recognize him, but that wasn't so unusual. Since the Outlander had joined their group of freedom fighters, many strangers had come into camp bearing messages for their leader. Most were informers who, having heard there was a man worthy of leading the rebellion against slavery in Rysalia, had come to seek his help in freeing members of their families. Khamsin, much to his credit, had never turned even one of these seekers down.

She glanced toward the campfire and saw that no one had noticed the man going into Khamsin's tent. That was strange, though, she thought. Normally, they were extra careful of the Outlander's safety, going so far as to post guards at his tent during the late evening and early morn just in case an enemy try to harm him. Since no one had paid attention to the man who had slipped quietly into Khamsin's quarters, he must already have passed inspection by the guards posted at the perimeter of the camp and be known to those gathered at the fire.

Going to the camp fire, she smiled at her brother, then sat down beside him. Her warm gaze fell on Sajin Ben-Alkazar and held. He was staring back at her with a gentle look on his fine features. Whenever the two of them chanced to meet, his look never failed to remind her that she was half in love with this tall Prince. The gaze was hot, steamy, and it was obvious he appreciated the way she looked for his bold stare would slowly travel the length of her before settling with unerring desire on her lips.

"It's time we saddled up," Rupine remarked, looking from the Prince to Rachel. He sensed the heady attraction between the two of them and wondered if the young Prince wouldn't be happier with one of his own than with the Outer Kingdom Tzarevna Khamsin wished him to have.

Sajin tore his eyes from Rachel with great reluctance. He had been studying her all week, finding everything in her he had often desired of a mistress, admitting to himself that he found her remarkably receptive to his lustful glances. He had yet to make a move, but the time was only moments away, he thought. If he was to ever taste the lushness of her sultry lips, it would have to be before Conar finally gave Catherine into his keeping.

"Riders," Asher said, coming to his feet.

The other men stood up, their hands going to their weapons. The sound of many hooves and harness was jingling through the night air.

"Get Conar," Sajin told Yuri and the Shadow-warrior hurried away.

"It's only Montyne," Rupine said with heartfelt relief as he recognized the man leading the riders. "Come to escort us, I suppose."

Rachel had headed for her tent, to get her bow, but at Rupine's words, she had stopped and turned to face the men entering the camp. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw two dark shapes melting into the darkness. Frowning, she walked around the tent.

"Where's Conar?" was the first thing Chase shouted as he slid from his mount's back.

"I've sent Yuri after him," Sajin answered. "What's happened?"

"I'll wait until Conar joins us to explain," Chase answered. He looked about them. "Where's Shalu?"

"Gone back to Asaraba," Sajin told him. When Montyne paled, he put out a hand to clasp the Ionarian's shoulder. "Something's happened, hasn't it?"

Yuri's bellow of anger shook the entire camp. "He's gone!"

"Who is?" Asher asked, knowing even before he asked.

"His sword is gone, too!" Yuri cursed, kicking at the sand. "As is his mount!"

Chase turned his eyes to Sajin. "Jaborn has his lady, Ben-Alkazar." The Ionarian swallowed. "And eleven of the Wind Force, including his son, Wyn."

Sajin's breath caught in a painful clutch in his chest. "How?" he asked.

"I don't know," Chase answered, "but we need to find Taborn. Alel, help us, if they've got him, too!"

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Conar risked a look at the man riding beside him. He had an uneasy feeling about the man who had come to tell him Sentian Heil wanted to meet secretly with him beyond the camp.

"He says to tell you there is treachery within your group, Your Grace," the man had said as he had handed Sentian's Wind Medal into Conar's keeping. "He bides you come for he has information he knows you will want."

The Serenian had looked down at the medal, recognizing it as one of twelve Occultus had had minted for the men of the Wind Force before they had left Chyrstallus many years before. The medal bore the Darkwind symbol on the front and the owner's initials on the back. He had traced the S.Y.N. with his thumb, then looked at the messenger.

"Did he say who he distrusted?"

The messenger had shaken his head. "He did not tell me, Your Grace. I think he feared I would be detained and forced to tell should he give me the traitor's name."

So soon after learning of Storm Jale's duplicity, Conar had accepted the man's tale at face value. "Where does he want to meet?" The medal had been slipped into the pocket of his breeches.

"At the Dhurn wadi, Your Grace. We must hurry before it is time for you to leave for the Lady Sabrina's."

Conar hadn't thought to question the man's knowledge of the feast being held in his honor. In his haste to reach Sentian, he had not been as overly cautious as he should have been and was at that moment regretting having come secretly out into the desert with a stranger. Not that the man had given him any reason not to trust him. On the contrary, he had appeared open and trustworthy, but there was still a niggling feeling creeping over Conar that he was going to regret his rash decision to venture out without telling anyone where he was going and why.

"Not much further!" the man yelled across to him as their mounts galloped at break-neck speed over the cool desert sands. There was a brief flash of white teeth as the man spoke and to Conar's overactive imagination, the grin had been predatory.

Looking about him, he saw nothing but the lumps of dunes off to his right. The deeper into the desert they rode, the stronger the feeling of unease and Conar was about to rein in his steed when the attack came.

"There! It is him!"

He yanked back so hard on his mount's reins, the horse reared up in high pitched protest, its front hooves digging into the air as it fought the tight bit in its sensitive mouth. As the horse's legs came down, the violent impact sent Conar hurtling over the steed's head. He hit the sand so hard his teeth clicked together and he tasted blood. The sword strapped to his back dug its point painfully into his left hip as he tumbled and gouged into his back as he came to a stop, staring with confused eyes at the twinkling stars overhead.

"Get him! Do not let the infidel dog escape us this time!"

The words seemed to penetrate his mind like red-hot shafts and he managed to shake away the confusion clouding his mind in order to twist over and scramble to his feet. Digging his boots into the sucking sand, he pushed himself up and started to run for his mount. The animal was rearing up, pawing at the air with its deadly hooves, whinnying loudly as a stranger tried to grab its reins. The man was shouting at the animal, frightening it even more, in his attempt to control it.

Off to his right, there were seven warriors bearing down on him, having caught sight of him as he came to his feet. To his left, five more were running as fast as they could toward him. He wondered where they had come from, how he could have missed knowing they were there, hiding behind the dunes, lying in wait.

“Because you have no power here, Conar,” that wicked inner voice reminded him.

He zigzagged away from a grasping hand and caused two of the attackers to run into one another. He heard the solid impact of their bodies and grinned malevolently as he managed to dodge a third attacker’s reaching hand. He knew if he could only make it to his horse and dispatch the bastard trying to grab Mistral’s reins, he might have a chance to outrun the men intent on capturing him.

Something hit him in the small of the back, making him yelp with pain, and he stumbled, going down to his all fours in an effort to keep from pitching face-first into the sand. He heaved himself forward, struggling crab-like to keep his forward momentum going. With concentrated effort, he was able to gain his feet once more and keep running, his backbone throbbing from the impact of whatever had hit him. He risked a look behind him and was stunned to see his attacker’s catching up to him. They were only ten or so feet away.

Putting his fingers up to his mouth, he whistled for his mount and he saw Mistral’s hooves crash downward, sending pale sand flying beneath its mighty forelegs as the horse lowered its head and plunged toward him. The animal was no more than forty feet away, coming at him fast.

“Catch him, You fools!”

Thirty feet and closing, Conar thought, pumping his legs faster in his attempt to get to Mistral.

“On your lives, do not let him escape this time!”

Twenty feet and he could hear the snorting breath of the steed.

“Get him!”

Only ten feet away and he could see the foam on his mount’s mouth. It had the bit between its teeth, but was slowing, digging its massive hind legs into the sand.

He reached up as the horse came to a shuddering stop beside him. Grabbing a handful of mane, he swung himself into the saddle and yanked hard on the reins, knowing Mistral wouldn’t fight him even though he had the bit in his teeth. The horse’s head arched to the right and the hooves dug into the sand.

“McGregor!”

He kicked his heels into Mistral’s sides and the steed sidestepped a few feet before turning. Escape was ahead of them in the open desert and he leaned over the horse’s neck, kicking it in the flanks to make it bolt.

Someone grabbed his leg and yanked. His head jerked around and he tried to kick out even as he felt himself falling.

“Alel, no!” he heard himself shout.

The horse slipped out from beneath him and he landed hard on his tail, an agonizing shaft of pain tearing up through his spine. Hands were all over him, grabbing at him, pulling, tearing at his clothing and he rolled away, trying to escape. Once more he was grabbed, held, and he bucked against the strong hold, landing a solid kick in some man’s stomach. The hold on his left side vanished and he managed to twist away from the hole on his right.

He came up off the sand like a madman, spitting and hissing, kicking and lashing out with expert blows that caught many of his attackers unaware. He broke one man’s nose with a spinning

back kick. Another fell as the base of Conar's palm drove under a thrusting chin to dislocate a jaw. Another kick felled a brawny attacker who was trying to toss a lasso over Conar's head.

"Watch him! Watch him!"

His sword came free of the scabbard and the Deathwielder lopped one head off, struck a hand from a reaching arm of another on the backswing. The deadly blade plunged into a soft belly and tore entrails, slid out to empty those entrails onto the sand. A lunge took the life of one attacker and caused another to back off in alarm.

"Come on," Conar whispered, his sword point quivering as he jabbed at another opponent.

The attackers, twenty or so that he could count at a glance, began to back off. They had encircled him, had completely hemmed him in. There were too many for him to take on at one time. His best ploy was to cause a break in the circle around him and try once more for the stallion that was standing beyond the circle, its wide sides heaving.

He turned around, looking for an opening, seeing none and realizing he was in deep, deep trouble here. If they took it in their minds to rush him, he didn't stand a chance. A few men would die before he went down, he thought, but not enough to count. They'd have him and there would be nothing he could do to stop them.

"But I'll cause as much damage as I can before I fall," he thought as he struck out at one of the men, annoyed when the circle moved further back, out of his reach. He was able to taunt them when the circle broke on his left and a man came striding into the enclosure of attackers.

Instantly alert, Conar swept a fleeting glance over the tall pike the man carried in his hands. He snarled as this new threat twirled the pike in his right hand, then lowered the point to the ground in a dismissive gesture meant to tell Conar he viewed no threat.

"Yield, now, McGregor," the man called out to him. "and you will not be hurt. Duel with me and you will be."

There were murmurs among the attackers, nods of agreement. The men put away their swords, clearly confident this warrior would subdue him. The insult could not have been clearer.

"I don't know who you are--" Conar began, but the bark of this new man cut him off.

"I am called Belial," the man answered, "and I am your defeat, McGregor." He brought the pike up, point toward Conar.

There was something truly evil about the warrior who advanced on him. If he hadn't known any better, he would have sworn the man was not human. He was big, bigger than Lydon Drake had been at the Labyrinth, and he was more powerfully built than that reprobate had been. His head sat atop a massive, bulging neck and his naked chest gleamed in the bright moon glow overhead. As he circled Conar, moving in closer with each circuit, his glaring eyes did not waver from Conar's. He advanced hunched over, his pike at the ready, a tight grin of challenge on his lips.

Few men, ordinary men Conar clarified in his mind, had ever caused him real fear. Tohre had, but there again, Kaileel Tohre had been no ordinary man; he was a demon in human form. Tolkan Coure had. Tymothy Kullen had. Kullen had nearly killed him; had caused him more physical pain than any man alive, Tohre included. Lydon Drake had to some degree, as had Appolyon Kiel, but the fear he had had of them had been during a time when he was not really at himself. All of those men were dead now and, with them, any fear he had of ordinary men.

Until now.

Belial jabbed out with his pike, catching Conar off guard, but the Serenian was able to jump back away from the vicious poke.

“Wool gather on your own time, McGregor,” the man crooned. “I am as unlike those puny shits as you were unlike your worthless twin.”

If Conar was surprised by the man’s knowing his innermost thoughts, he did not let it show. His grip tightened on his sword and he sidestepped, just as his opponent was doing, coming ever closer to the pike and the man who held it.

“Who sent you?” Conar asked, close enough now to stare into eyes that were completely devoid of mercy.

“Your master,” Belial replied.

Conar turned his head and spat in the sand. “I have no master!”

“You will soon learn that you do,” came the smooth answer and once more the pike was thrust out, its contact neatly blocked by Conar’s sword. Calm speculation entered the man’s beefy face and his grin widened. “You have quick reflexes, McGregor, but they will prove useless against brute strength.”

Conar had no doubts that the man was strong. His bulging arm muscles and the ridges on his upper abdomen gave evidence of that. The cords of this man’s thighs stood out so sharply against the turn of his hip and ankles, he might well have been able to strangle a man between his legs.

“Would you care to find out for yourself?” Belial quipped, easily catching the vague thought that had flown through Conar’s mind.

He struck out with his sword and the parry was neatly blocked with the pike. Conar was thrown back, pushed easily away as Belial flicked his wrists. There wasn’t even a nick in the thick pole the man held so negligently in his hands to indicate the Deathwielder had done any harm to the pike.

“Petrified wood,” Belial laughed. “Indestructible.” He swung the pike to the left and the wood connected hard with Conar’s right wrist, sending a numbing pain all the way up to the Serenian’s shoulder.

He was outclassed, he thought as he watched the man closing in on him. There was no way he was going to be able to win in this. Even should he lay down his sword and surrender, he thought this bastard might still beat him to the ground just for the pleasure of watching him bleed and hearing him beg quarter.

“You are right,” came the amused reply.

From somewhere in his soul, Conar dredged up all the hidden reserves of his courage and lashed out at the man, in an attempt to overpower him just long enough to break free.

He didn’t succeed.

The pike went low, in an arc that swept his legs out from under him and he fell, rolling away from the pike as it drove down into the sand only inches from his face. He heard the whoosh of the hit and felt sand spraying into his face, but he managed to come to his feet and turn, expecting the man to lunge at him with the pike. He wasn’t prepared for the wood to beat against his shins once more in an excruciating hit that toppled him once more to the ground. This time the blunt end of the pike jabbed viciously into his hip and caused his right leg to go instantly numb, the pain not even registering. He tried to scramble away, but the pike caught him his left thigh, causing instant agony before it tapped him hard on the right shoulder with enough force to make him drop his weapon.

The pike jabbed him in his upper back and he gasped for breath as the air was knocked from his lungs. Gaggling, trying to fend off the next hit that took him high on his left ribs, he doubled over in the sand, trying to cover his head to keep the heavy pole from caving in his skull.

"I'm not going to kill you, McGregor," he heard his attacker drawl. "I'm only going to punish you."

Once more the pike jammed into his hip, flipping him over to his back and he stared up into calm, deadly eyes that regard him down the length of the pike as the tip of the pole settled in the hollow of Conar's throat.

"Do you yield?" Belial inquired.

He tried to shake his head, to deny the defeat, but the pole pressed harder, cutting off his air.

"Do you yield?"

He was aware of the other men closing around, standing over him, staring down at him with laughing faces. He tried to curse them, but the pole's weight went deeper into his flesh.

"Do--you--yield--?" the man above him stressed.

There was no air left in his lungs and the pain of the pole's point being pressed into his flesh had already caused a slight trickle of blood to seep from the wound and run down the side of his neck.

The tip went further into his flesh.

"Do you yield?"

"Aye," he gagged, wincing with the pain the one word brought as it was forced from his lips.

The pressure lessened.

"Say it."

He looked up at the man's face through a red haze of pain and anger and humiliation. He wanted to deny the words, to throw them back in his tormentor's face, but the point once more pressed hard into his aching throat. He groaned with the pain.

"Say it, McGregor," his enemy demanded.

Conar knew he would be no good to anyone if he were dead. As much as it shamed him to say the words, he knew he had no other choice. He said what he had never, ever said to any other man.

"I yield," he croaked.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Jaleel Jaborn paced the confines of his throne room like a caged panther inspecting his lair. He had been waiting for well over two hours for the Warriors of the Abyss, his personal elite fighting force, to return with Conar McGregor. Just twenty minutes before, Rasheed and Tjorn had ridden through the steel gates of Abbadon Fortress with the Tzarevna Catherine Steffenovitch. The memory of it made Jaborn pause and smile.

She had been bound securely within the confines of a luxurious Bersian tapestry, her wrists and ankles tied with silk scarves so as not to damage the tender flesh. Rasheed and Tjorn had to hold her up to keep her from falling forward because of the restraints. She had been gagged with another silk scarf and the first thing she had done upon being relieved of the constriction around her mouth was to shout out her hatred of him.

"I mean you no ill, Your Grace," Jaleel had told her. "If my men have dared to harm you in any way"

Catherine had opened her mouth to scream her vindictiveness out at him, but she had sneezed, instead. Again and again, no doubt from the dust in the tapestry. She had no way of knowing our endearing those sneezes had been to Jaleel.

"Rasheed," Jaleel had laughed, eying his servant with high humor. "Take Her Grace to her quarters and see that she is made comfortable."

"I am not going anywhere until you tell me what i am doing here!" the Tzarevna had literally screeched.

"I thought that was quite obvious, Highness," Jaleel had answered.

"Not to me, you arrogant pog!"

Her pretty face had been a most unbecoming shade of red, but the fire flashing from her angry stare had intrigued Jaleel and he had stepped up to her, cupped her chin in a gentle grip and tugged playfully.

"You are here to become my bride, Catherine," he had informed her.

Stark disbelief had passed over her face, then building rage, until her words when she spoke were little more than raging bursts of contempt.

"That will be rather difficult for me to do, you sniveling pog, since I am already wed!"

Jaleel had shrugged indifferently. "Oh, you mean the ceremony on board Ben-Alkazar's ship?" He had waved the fact away, dismissing it as though it were a pesky gnat. "You are on Rysalian soil, my precious. We do not recognize Outlander marriages here." He had looked pointedly at her belly. "Even if you are carrying that bastard's whelp."

Thinking back on it as he resumed his pacing, Jaleel thought his future wife had handled the news quite well. She had spat at him, almost hitting him, but, other than her screams of outrage and her promises of retaliation by Outer Kingdom forces, she had calmed down quite nicely when told there was a life in the balance: Conar McGregor's.

"Either marry me or I will have him executed," Jaleel had threatened.

"He will kill you," she had hissed, but Jaborn had waved that warning away, as well.

"I have eleven of his men in my donjon. Do you think he will risk YOU and them to duel with me?"

The news of the Wind Force's imprisonment had stunned her, but she had recovered quickly enough. The more he was near her, the more he came to admire her tenacity and courage.

The woman was a veritable font of bravery for she had cursed him again, daring him to punish her for her outrageous flaunting of his authority.

“You will make a superb addition to my harem, Catherine,” he had laughed. “I have not had a woman so alive in many years!”

Her shout of fury at that remark could be heard still ringing in the throne room long after Rasheed and Tjorn had manhandled her to her chambers.

“A most challenging female, Jaleel,” Guil had chuckled. “One who, when broken to saddle, should prove highly entertaining.”

Jaleel had not told his friend that he was contemplating putting aside her other wives for this one woman or that he had already set into motion a plan to have his first wife murdered to make way for Catherine. Since Joanna was Guil’s cousin, such news might have proved awkward.

“Will they never get here!” Jaleel snarled, sweeping his arm over the chess board and scattering the men.

“Calm yourself, Jaleel,” Guil answered. “Everything in its own time.” He resumed reading his novel.

Flicking an annoyed look at his friend, Jaleel stalked to the window and glared out of the small oval opening. The throne room was on the third level of the fortress; the sleeping quarters were on the fourth, fifth, and sixth, with Jaleel’s own private chambers on the seventh. There were no windows on the first and second levels, each level twenty foot in height, and only four openings, too small for even a young child to crawl through, on the third level. None of the windows on the upper levels were any larger, but there were more of them. Actually, the windows were little more than oval arrow slits, slanted downward through the granite, and embedded around the circumference with steel barbs. The openings had been set into the twelve foot thick walls for ventilation and protection only. Looking out the openings was like looking through a narrow tunnel and it distorted the vision to a great degree.

“Do you see them?” Guil asked, glancing up.

“No,” came the bitter reply. “Not even a speck of dust is flying out there!”

Guil shrugged and turned the page of his novel. “They will return, Jaleel. Give them time.”

Jaleel snorted with disgust. He wanted nothing else out of life, had wanted nothing else out of life since Cyle’s death, than to exact a stunning, lasting revenge on Conar McGregor. He had long since found the way to do it, but the fates and the Prophetess had not cooperated and now, nearly twenty-two years after Cyle’s death, he was still waiting to take his revenge on the man he held responsible for the death of the only woman Jaleel had ever loved.

“I had his man killed,” Jaleel muttered to himself. “What was his name, Guil?”

Guil looked up. “Who?”

“The Elite Captain our men killed at Rommitrich Point!” Jaborn growled.

Guil’s brows drew together as he thought, then relaxed. “Loure, I believe. Rayle Loure.”

“Loure,” Jaleel said on a long sigh of agreement. He nodded. “I remember now.” He ran his index finger along the opening of the window. “And I killed his daughter with my own hands.”

A frown of pity crossed Guil’s face. “I told you that was a mistake when you did it, Jaleel. The child was innocent. You know how I hold with killing children.”

Jaleel turned and glared at his friend. “How innocent could she be having sprung from that infidel’s loins?”

The murder of Conar McGregor’s infant daughter had been a bone of contention between the two men for many years. Guil felt strongly about it and was not loath to say so.

“You could have brought the child back here. Given her to a childless couple to raise. He would still have suffered, Jaleel, for the child’s disappearance. Not knowing whether she lived or not would have been a terrible burden on him.”

Jaleel turned back to stare out the window opening. “Not nearly as terrible as holding his dead child in his hands and knowing he was the cause of it!”

Guil shook his head. “You hurt many people when you hurt that innocent child.” He closed his book, too distracted to read any more. “You nearly destroyed Elizabeth McGregor.”

“So?” Jaleel sneered. “Was not my Cyle destroyed?”

His face turned cold and as emotionless as stone. “Was I not nearly driven insane when Cyle was killed by McGregor’s kinsman?”

Prince Guil stood up and laid his book in his chair. “I can understand you hating McGregor. I have no love for the man, either. But to blame him for something his brother did seems unjust somehow, Jaleel. To my knowledge, Conar McGregor never met his sister-in-law. He wasn’t even in Serenia when Cyle died, was he?”

“Don’t start with me about this again, Guil!” Jaleel spat, turning to glare at his old friend. “Cyle’s death is McGregor’s fault. Not Duncan’s!”

“But Duncan poisoned her, Jaleel!” Guil protested. “You know that, now!”

“Aye,” Jaleel hissed. “Jale told me, but it just makes my case against McGregor that much stronger!”

“How?” Guil snapped.

“Duncan killed Cyle at Kaileel Tohre’s orders. McGregor was Tohre’s plaything. Tohre had my woman killed because he could not have Conar McGregor in the way he wanted him.”

Prince Guil stared with incomprehension at the reasoning. “Jaleel, I--”

“He had to settle for McGregor’s twin, Guil!” Jaborn shouted. “Galen McGregor looked enough like Conar to quell the lust in Tohre’s depraved soul, if he had one. A woman, MY woman, would only have gotten in the way of Tohre having Galen McGregor whenever he was of the mind to do so! If that bastard twin of his had only let Tohre have what he wanted, if Conar had only stayed with Tohre, Cyle would still be alive!”

The ridiculousness of his argument was lost on Jaleel. He saw what he wanted to see; he made of those tragic events of so long ago what he needed to make of them in order to justify the overpowering hatred he had for Conar McGregor. Like Galen, Jaleel was jealous of the Outlander Prince whose star had been set in the heavens brighter than all those that had gone before him. McGregor was the stuff of legends and his was a tragedy greater still. Guil knew all this, and suspected Jaleel did, too.

But it didn’t matter. Jaleel would have his revenge and it made no difference in his scheme of things how many suffered in the doing.

“I have thought long and hard about this, Guil,” Jaleel said as he squinted through the opening. There was a dust cloud on the horizon. “I shall not kill him.”

“May I ask why not?” Guil inquired.

“Killing would end his pain and I want him to suffer as I have suffered all these years,” Jaleel told him.

“You don’t think the man has known suffering, Jaleel?” was the astonished reply.

Jaborn laughed, but it was not a sound of humor but of insidious intent. “What is physical pain, Guil? Nothing but a moment’s intense agony, soon over, and, if not soon forgotten, at least dulled in the memory.” He nodded as the dust cloud neared the fortress and he could see horses galloping at top speed toward him. “Imprisonment? The sentence will one day end and the

humiliation and the debasement cease. Estrangement from your family? Fences are mended and everything is forgiven.” He could make out the rider in front of the others and he leaned his forehead against the coolness of the stone wall. “Setbacks? Problems? Obstacles? They can all be overcome. But there is one thing, one kind of suffering that is never dulled. It never ends. It never lets go of its hold on you. It never ceases to be there to remind you of its existence. It is a fence that can not be mended no matter the stone you heap upon it. It is the one suffering no man can overcome.”

“Death?” Guil asked.

Jaleel shook his head. “Guilt.”

Jaborn pushed away from the window and walked calmly to his throne. Sitting down, he clapped his hands and a servant appeared immediately, bowing. The man did not look up into the face of his master.

“As soon as the prisoner arrives, I want him brought to me.”

“Yes, Highness,” the servant answered. “Your will be done.”

“Go,” Jaleel ordered and the servant backed out of the throne room, his head lowered, eyes on the floor.

Guil waited until the door had closed before sitting down in the chair to Jaleel’s left, the chair reserved for his first wife.

“If you will not kill him,” Guil asked, “will you torture him?” He rather liked that idea.

“No.”

Guil frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“He has endured physical pain, Guil, and become stronger by it. Look at his face, if it does not sicken you as it does me: such a scar must have been excruciating when given, yet it did not break him. And what of his back? That must have been agonizing, yet he did not crumble because of it. He survived the torture chamber

of his Tribunal; was nearly beaten to death by one of his brother’s men; has been cut and stabbed and shot. Did any of those drive him over the edge of reasoning?”

“Not that one can tell,” Guil complained.

“Yet death, the death of those he has cared for, has brought him to his knees before it. Death,” Jaleel sighed with a dreamy look on his handsome face, “nearly drove him to madness when Elizabeth McGregor was taken from him. The death of his daughter, at my hands, nearly cost him his sanity, as well.” He turned his head and smiled at Guil. “He was on the very verge of killing himself because one old hag accused him of being the reason all the women in his life have died.”

Guil heard the massive steel door on the first level beginning to crank open. The shrill shriek of the chains which opened the doors and the heavy grind of the pulley taking in those chains made the very walls of Abbadon Fortress tremble. He wondered, as he had for most of his life, how much that ten foot thick steel door weighed.

“Do you not see where this is going, Guil?” Jaleel asked, drawing his friend’s interest.

“Have you not yet figured out how I mean to punish him?”

Guil spread his hands. “I fear not, good friend.”

Jaleel reached over and grasped Guil’s arm. “I intend to drive him mad with guilt, Gehdrin. I intend to see him a mindless cripple in payment for Cyle’s death.”

“How will you accomplish that?” Guil asked, not sure it was possible. McGregor was a strong man, a man whose life adversities had only served to strengthen him.

“You will see,” Jaleel said, smiling. “You will see.”

* * * *

Conar's first view of Abbadon sent a chill of foreboding down his spine. The vastness of the place was disquieting, but its position: sat high atop a steeply climbing plateau with a narrow switchback trail wide enough for only one horse at a time, was menacing sight that filled him with apprehension. This was a fortress that would rival the impregnability of Boreas Keep and maybe even surpass that bastion of defense. His heart sank as he gazed up at the windowless wall of sheer granite that rose for over one hundred feet straight up before there was even a break in the stone. Viewing those tiny oval openings, he knew beyond any shadow of a doubt, no human had ever laid successful siege to Abbadon Fortress.

Belial cast sidelong glances to his prisoner as they neared Abbadon in an attempt to gauge the man's reaction to the fortress. The signs he had been expecting to see were emblazoned on McGregor's pale face.

There was the nervousness in the way the man constantly licked his lips as he stared at the formidable bulk of the fortress. There was the pallor of his normally ruddy face as the realization began to set in that there would be no chance at all of escape once he was inside the vastness of Abbadon. There was the way he brought up his bound hands to wipe at the sweat that had begun to form on his brow as he understood his situation was desperate. And there was the bleak defeat in his alien blue eyes as the hopelessness of rescue finally entered his mind.

"The walls are twelve foot thick reinforced granite. The lower levels also have eight foot thick timbers lined side by side as double insulation from attack," Belial explained and was successful at keeping a straight face although he had the urge to laugh as that despairing gaze shifted to him.

"There are no battlements. None are needed. The roof is made of steel plates sandwiched between nine layers of four foot thick timber and braced with stone columns. There is only one entrance." He pointed to the wide steel door for which they were riding.

Conar's gaze moved slowly to the steel door studded with hundreds of long iron spikes jutting outward in sharp points.

"The doors are ten foot thick steel plate reinforced with horizontally-laid two foot thick timbers. It takes three dozen men fifteen full minutes to open the doors and

only one man a split second to close it. Beyond the doors is an ante-chamber shut off from the inner portion of the fortress by a triple-thick portcullis of forged iron. The bars of that portcullis are so close together, even an eel can not slither through it."

Belial looked down to see McGregor's hands trembling on the pommel of his mount. He smiled. Even the bravest of men soon lost their courage when faced with the overwhelming spectacle of Abbadon Fortress.

"Not since this stronghold was built has there been one prisoner to escape its walls, McGregor." Belial grinned as his prisoner looked at him. "And you will not be the first."

Conar jerked his eyes back to the fortress. The sinister steel doors were open only a foot or two, not even enough to allow a single horse through, but already he had counted over fifty men standing outside those clanking doors, weapons in hand, awaiting their arrival.

"There will be another ten inside the antechamber and fifty more inside the fortress. There is no margin for error when a prisoner is brought into Abbadon. The leg irons will be welded onto you before you even get down from your horse."

A long breath of dejection pushed from Conar's lips. If he had entertained any notion of being able to escape his captors, those hopes were dashed when he had set eyes on the place he would be kept. This was no Labyrinth, he thought bitterly, where he would be allowed outside in

the sunshine. This was no Tribunal cell from which he had dared to expect his friends and family to rescue him. This was a place of great evil, a place of hopelessness, where he feared he would spend the remainder of his days.

"They will come to attempt a rescue," Belial said. "Your friends." At the despondent look in the desperate face, Belial drove the shaft deeper. "And they will die in trying."

Once he entered those lethal-looking doors, Conar thought, there would be no more hope. He could no longer delude himself into hoping there would come a time when he could free himself and the men he now knew were also held captive in Abbadon Fortress. He could no longer entertain the thought that help would come.

"There is no way out of this place, McGregor," Belial assured him. "Once inside, you will remain inside." He laughed. "Even when you die."

The only chance he had was to try to escape before they took him inside that hellish citadel of utter defeat.

If he could but get his mount's reins out of Belial's hands, Mistral might be able to outrace the other horses. Surely by now Sajin and the others had realized he was missing and knew where he might be brought. Surely they were, even at that very moment, racing to his rescue.

"If you attempt to run, McGregor," Belial informed him, "I have been given permission to have you hamstrung."

Conar's head jerked toward his tormentor. He didn't doubt for a moment this brute would do just that and he would spend the rest of his life crippled, unable to walk, the tendons behind his knee having been sliced into by Belial's blade.

"I would catch you, McGregor. Make no mistake about that. Before you got fifty yards away, you'd be brought to ground by a quarrel in your steed's gut." Belial's gaze roamed over the stallion. "That would be a waste of fine horseflesh, but such is life, eh, McGregor?"

Ahead of them, only twenty or so feet away, the double steel doors with their glistening spikes were open just enough to allow one horse through at the time.

"They can open no further if you are wondering of it, McGregor," Belial said. "Supply wagons are off loaded outside the fortress and the goods taken in man by man."

The horrible clanking and grinding had stopped, but there was another sound being emitting from deep within Abbadon Fortress. It was the sound of wailing: loud and trilling, heartbroken howls of sorrow.

"You have arrived on execution day," Belial chuckled. "Those are the families of the dead bemoaning their fates. The widows and daughters of age will be given over to the Warriors for their amusement; the young boys will be turned over to the Master-at-Arms or slain if they are not worthy to be warriors."

"And the babies?" Conar made himself ask, the first time he had spoken since being made to yield to this savage man.

"Disposed of if no one wants them," was the matter-of-fact answer.

Great, wracking pain went through Conar. These people, these malevolent, despicable people had little care for life. No care for personal freedoms. For thousands of years the Hasdu had practiced ethnic cleansing, ridding themselves of age-old enemies and the weaker races. They had enslaved their own and made prisoners of those who dared to defy them. Perhaps more bloodthirsty and vile than the Brotherhood of the Domination, the Hasdu were a race of murderers and despoilers. A race of beasts that walked upright.

Belial stopped his horse before the doors and slid from his saddle to land with a heavy thud on the hard packed sands. He handed the reins of Conar's horse over to one of the guards.

“Watch him. He thinks he might want to escape,” Belial laughed. He looked up at his prisoner’s sweaty face and grinned. “I hope he does.”

The guard snorted and glanced down to make sure the prisoner’s bare ankles were still tied together under the belly of the stallion. He tugged on the hemp. Satisfied the rope was secure, he pulled on Mistral’s bridle and began to lead the horse through the three foot wide opening.

The moment Mistral was through the double doors, a piercing shriek rent the air, making Conar flinch and duck his head down into the protection of his shoulders to dull the sound. The steel portals slammed shut with a finality that made his heart thump madly in his breast.

“Dead man coming!” someone yelled from the antechamber as Mistral was stopped in the center the twenty foot square enclosure.

“Dead man coming!”

The cry was repeated among the guards in the interior of the fortress until the words were only soft echoes coming back to Conar to taunt him.

“Hold him,” he heard someone say and he twisted his head to the left. His eyes widened as he took in the small smithy set into a small alcove off the antechamber. There, in the semi-darkness was the bellows, the anvil, all the paraphernalia needed to apply manacles and leg irons to the prisoners brought into Abbadon Fortress. As Belial had said, there was no margin for error in this place.

The guard who had led him into the antechamber stepped back and took Conar’s right arm in a firm grip while another guard came forward to grab his left. He looked down at the men, saw hate in their dark eyes, and knew instinctively they were enjoying this. There was a promise of immediate retribution if he should dare to struggle and from the stares that were impaling him, he understood they would hurt him as much as they could before finally beating him into submission.

“Stand aside,” the smithy snarled as he hunkered down beside Conar’s left leg. Taking the hem of the Serenian’s breeches in his hard, calloused hands, the man ripped them up the leg and clamped a leg iron band around Conar’s ankle in one brisk, no-nonsense move. Hammering the pin in place, he stood up and went for the red-hot metal rod that would weld the pin to the band’s slot.

Even if he had had the strength and the hope to try to escape, there was nothing Conar could do once the leg iron was clamped into place around his left ankle. Two men held the other end of the chain, waiting until the rope was cut between his ankles and he was dragged from his horse, before handing that chain to the smithy.

“They are taking no chances with him, are they?” Conar heard a guard chuckle.

“We have been waiting a long time for this one,” the smithy snorted. “He even has a special cell prepared for him.”

That news did not set well on Conar’s mind as he was pulled from his horse and forced to lie on his belly in the loose gravel of the antechamber. A heavy foot was pressed painfully into his upper back while his thighs and arms were held down firmly by four of the guards. He wondered what Jaborn thought he could do with all these men about. Did the fool think he could run with nearly a hundred men watching his every move?

He winced as the right leg band was clicked into place around his ankle. He squirmed, grinding his hips into the gravel, for it had caused him pain.

“Too tight, McGregor?” the smithy asked.

“You know it is,” Conar said through clenched teeth. He was surprised when the smithy loosened the constriction of the band before driving the pin home. Craning his neck behind him, he found the smithy watching him. There was a faint smile on the man’s soot-grimed, sweaty face.

“His Grace was most adamant that we not hurt you unless you fought us, McGregor. If I caused you discomfort, I apologize.”

Guffaws of laughter came from the men standing over him and Conar jerked his head back down, seething with humiliation. He could not remember ever feeling so helpless in his life, so at the mercy of those around him, and when they dragged him to his feet, the heavy leg irons in place around his ankles, he was forced to kneel in the dirt while his manacles were applied, further adding to his feeling of desperation.

When they had chained him, six guards: two holding his arms, two in front, two behind, marched him under the portcullis and into the fortress lower level. Behind him, he heard the portcullis slam shut and the double steel doors begin to crank open.

“In case you’re wondering, McGregor,” one of the guards holding him quipped, “the antechamber can hold six horses at a time. The others will be brought in in that fashion until the whole war party is behind Abbadon’s walls.”

He wasn’t wondering and he damned sure didn’t care, Conar thought to himself as he shuffled along. The heavy iron was dragging in the dirt, hindering his steps, and already beginning to abrade the flesh around his ankles; the manacles were pulling at his shoulders and although he had known the torture of both before, it had been many years and he had forgotten how dehumanizing such appliances could be. He felt like a lamb being led to slaughter.

Looking about him at the eager faces watching him, he saw no women about the wide hall into which he was being led. Only men, warriors from the look of them, stared back at him with morbid curiosity. He heard his name whispered here and there and understood they knew who he was. He saw no pity on these rugged features; no mercy or clemency or compassion. There was no sympathy for his plight and no understanding of how untenable his position. There was only ruthless vindictiveness glaring back at him as he passed. Unrelenting, inflexible stares followed him through a low doorway and he could hear a louder buzzing from those pitiless warriors as the door was shut behind him.

Inside this even larger chamber into which he was taken, were more men scattered about who stopped what they were doing to watch him pass. Their eyes were hard, callous, and the gazes sadistic as Conar was jerked to a halt in their presence.

“McGregor?” one of the older men questioned.

“Yes.”

He felt naked standing before these men whose gazes were inspecting him, scrutinizing him as though he were a bug specimen in a jar. Some came closer, eying him with sneers of contempt while others leaned negligently against the wall and scoffed openly. He had the wild desire to shout at them, to lunge toward them and turn himself into the beast they no doubt thought him to be. But something warned him not to, that they were looking for any excuse to beat the shit out of him and if he but opened his mouth, he would give them the excuse they were looking for.

“Looks afraid to me,” someone joked.

“Maybe he knows what’s coming!” someone else chortled.

His guards yanked him forward, seeming to have given these men all the time they needed to look him over. He wondered if their stopping here in front of the particular men had been to humiliate him, to degrade him. If that had been the intent, it had worked. He had not felt so humbled in a long, long time. Not since he had been thrown naked into a chicken pen at the Labyrinth in full view of the men there.

They took him to a steep stairway and made him stand still at the base of the stairs until one of the guards could loop a length of hemp around his neck.

"Is that necessary?" he couldn't stop himself from saying.

There was no answer from his guards. The noose was dropped over his head and tightened. Not enough to cause him any concern, but tight enough to know that if he should try to twist himself sideways off the stairs, he'd strangle.

They led him up the stairs: one in front holding the noose, one behind with a hand gripping his belt. The other four stayed at the foot of the stairs, taking up positions with drawn weapons.

"What the hell are you people afraid of?" he asked, amazed they were taking such particular precautions with him. Where did they think he could run to inside this pile of rock?

The leg irons were torture as he lifted his feet to climb the stairs. By the time they reached the second level, he was panting with the effort and his head was throbbing, his face flushed. He could feel the rough surface of the steps on the soles of his bare feet and cursed beneath his breath. Belial had taken his boots and socks from him before they had put him on his horse to lead him here.

They let him rest before starting the climb to the third level. They probably wouldn't have except for the fact that the blood was already beginning to seep down his feet from the rub of the leg irons and he had stumbled twice on the steps close to the second level landing. Idly he wondered if he were to skid down the steps if the guard would let go of the rope around his neck. He didn't think so, but then again, he didn't think Jaborn wanted him dead, either.

The climb to the third level was even more excruciating and his legs were burning, the soles of his feet raw, his ankles raw and bleeding freely. His wrists were chafing, his shoulders throbbing, and his headache had become a pounding agony in his right temple.

Stopping at a small wooden door, the guards pushed him up against the wall and began to strip the shirt from him, jerking him this way and that as they rent the material. Clamping his mouth shut, knowing they wanted him to vocally protest their treatment, he heard the bigger of the two grunt his disappointment as the last of his shirt came free of his body.

"You're not as stupid as you look, McGregor," the man complimented him in a gruff, 'I'm-sorry-you-aren't' voice.

Conar merely looked at him, his jaw clenched tightly together to keep in his mouth the spittle he was aching to heave into the man's beefy face.

Thwarted at not being able to goad his prisoner into rebellion, the bigger guard shoved Conar hard in the chest then turned to rap smartly on the wooden door. A command to enter was all the permission the brute needed to grab the prisoner's upper arm in a punishing, painful clutch and jerk him toward the door the second guard hastily pulled open.

"Get in there, you bastard!" the guard growled, pushing Conar through the door with enough force to stagger him and make him lose his balance. A hard hand in the middle of the Serenian's back sent Conar sprawling, his chin hitting hard on the stone floor.

His teeth clicked together and he tasted blood as his molars clamped down on the side of his tongue. He grunted with the sharp pain and lay there, too furious to do anything else.

"Did he give you any trouble?"

Conar recognized that voice. He had heard that voice at the tourney field at the Palace of the Tzars. He didn't need to look up to know it was Jaleel Jaborn who had spoken.

"He fought Belial," was the snort. "As you can see, Master, he lost." The guard struck out with his boot and clipped Conar's thigh, pleased when he heard the prisoner's quick intake of breath. "He gave me no problems, though."

"How could he?" someone else in the room asked. "He's trussed up like a lamb to slaughter!"

Slowly Conar pushed his chest up from the floor, lifting his head to stare at the dais where two men sat side by side. From talks with Sajin, he knew the one in the smaller chair had to be Guil Ben-Shanar Gehdrin. But it was into the bored, jaded gaze of Prince Jaleel Jaborn Conar's hatred took him and he let his own stare turn hot and as furiously snapping as the flames of hell.

Jaleel waved a hand and the two guards stepped forward, dragging Conar to his feet. Though he twisted in their grip, his sense of outrage and fury getting the better of him, he was no match for their brute strength and they easily subdued him, keeping him still as their master looked him over.

"You bastard!" Conar spat, pulling on the men keeping him from throwing himself on the man who had killed his daughter.

"I have been called that many times, McGregor," Jaleel conceded. "I would have thought you had thought up a much nastier name to call me."

"Motherfucker!" Conar spat.

"He is that," Guil giggled. "But he considers it a compliment."

Jaleel smiled at Conar. "The best woman I ever mounted."

His hatred nearly suffocating him, Conar's lips pulled back over his teeth. He twisted violently, but all his thrashing managed to do was put bruises and rub burns on his upper arms and shoulders. His manacles rattled like the chains of a haunting, swinging painfully against his upper thighs. Before this was over, he thought with a grimace of pure frustration, he would be black and blue all over.

"It won't do you any good to fight, McGregor," Jaleel announced as he crossed his legs and positioned himself more comfortably on the throne. "You are no match for my men or haven't you figured that out yet?"

"Go to hell!" Conar snarled at him.

"You do know I have your men, don't you?" Jaleel asked, bringing up his hand to inspect his fingernails.

"I know you're going to regret having taken them," Conar answered.

"Who's going to make him regret it, McGregor? You?" Guil laughed. "You can't even hold your own cock while you piss. How can you dare to threaten Jaborn?"

Conar's furious gaze leapt to the other man. "I've heard tales about Jaleel Jaborn's lickspittle. Guil, isn't it? Tell me, Gehdrin: just how much of him do you lick?" The Serenian's smile was nasty. "Do you lick his cock while you're licking his ass?"

Guil came to his feet, his face instantly red with rage. He took a step off the dais and would have lunged at the prisoner had Jaborn not put out a hand to stop him.

"He's baiting you, Guil," Jaleel chuckled. "I've heard he's quite good at insulting people."

"I will make him regret having insulted me!" Guil snarled. "No man calls me a lickspittle!"

"Would you rather I called you a cocksucker?" Conar asked in a pleasant voice.

"Jaleel!" Guil protested, looking to his friend. "I can not allow this!"

Jaleel laid his hands on the arms of his throne and gazed calmly at his friend. "What would you have me do, Guil? You are what he calls you."

"I will have you beat him," Guil fumed, "for his impertinence!"

"It's been done," Conar quipped.

"And he would no more feel it than you would, Guil," Jaleel said. "Would you, McGregor?"

Conar stared at him, refusing to answer. He glared at his captor, consigning the man to the very ooze beneath the Abyss.

“Then--then--“ Guil tried to think of something painful. “--*castrate* him!”

A nasty smile slipped into place on Conar’s face. “Like Jaborn’s gelded you?”

Guil shrieked in fury and ran down the rest of the four steps of the dais, flinging himself on Conar, beating him with doubled fists that did little more than further bruise the Serenian’s arms and shoulders, but managed to intensify the headache that was beginning to blind him.

“Enough, Guil!” Jaborn shouted. When his friend continued with his mindless hitting, screeching out his anger at the bound man, Jaborn stepped from the dais and pulled Guil away. “Enough, I said!” he shouted again, pushing his old friend away.

Conar lifted his head, his nose bleeding from a lucky hit, and smirked at the outraged man. “Run along and play with yourself, Gehdrin.” He swept his contemptuous glance down the man’s lanky frame, finally settling that ironic gaze on the front of Gehdrin’s loose-fitting robe. “If there’s anything there *to* play with.”

“Jaleel, really!” Guil protested, offended to the point of apoplexy. “You can not let him insult me like this!”

Jaborn switched his attention from his friend to the Serenian’s cold stare. “He’ll pay for it, Guil. Have no fear of that.”

“Fuck you,” Conar spat in reply and wasn’t prepared for the vicious backhand that split his lip and nearly deafened him as Jaborn’s fingers grazed his ear. His head jerked to the left and blood flew from his nose and mouth.

“Hit him, again, Jaleel!” Guil taunted. “Again!”

His head rocked back to the right as that heavy palm connected with his right cheek. The hit had been so hard, he had seen stars.

“Again! Harder!” Guil’s voice was shrill, his bloodlust a sentient life form in the room.

Once more Conar was slapped, so brutally he thought the hit had broken his nose. Blood sprayed over the stone floor and dribbled down his naked chest and his cheek felt as though the skin had split open.

“Again! Do it again! Punish him, Jaleel!”

But despite the insane commands to do so, Jaleel stepped back. He looked down with disgust at the sprinkle of bright crimson on his robe and growled. His lips pursed together in a tight line, he marched back to his throne and mounted the steps, flinging himself down with so much force, the throne rocked.

Conar slowly turned his head around and looked up at the man who had hit him. He didn’t bother to even glance at the man who still stood before him, fists clenching and unclenching at his sides, who had been responsible for the attack. The Serenian’s full hatred was aimed at Jaleel Jaborn.

“Come sit down, Guil,” Jaleel ordered.

Guil glared down at Conar, wanting to hit him. He had the presence of mind to back away from the man on the floor when that dark sapphire gaze lifted with contempt to scald him.

“Guil!” Jaleel warned.

“Your master calls, Gehdrin,” Conar sneered.

“*Guil!*” Jaborn shouted as his friend lifted his hand to hit the prisoner.

“Go away, you turd-faced troll,” Conar growled, looking up at Guil as though he were a piece of offal floating in a pool of urine.

“That is enough, McGregor!” Jaborn bellowed. “If you do not stop insulting him, I will let him do with you as he will!”

"I am not afraid of him!" Conar snarled. He swept his gaze to Jaborn. "And I am not afraid of you!"

"Not yet, but you will be," Jaleel answered. "Guil, come sit down."

Guil spun on his heel, his face flaming, and he took his seat beside Jaborn.

"You see what you make me do to you, McGregor?" Jaleel sighed. "I had no intention of physically hurting you."

"Yeah, right!" Conar scoffed.

"I did not." Jaleel crooked his head to one side. "I intend to let you hurt yourself."

Conar's lip quirked. "Really?" he drawled.

Jaleel leaned forward in his chair. "Oh, yes, because you are better at doing that than anyone else."

The Serenian's expression never changed, but Guil saw the rage crashing over him like the force of a tidal wave. His gaze was fixed on Jaborn. Both men were staring coldly at one another, each locked in a dark struggle to control the confrontation. How long they would have continued to glare at one another, Guil would never know for at that moment a knock sounded at the wooden door and Jaborn jumped.

"Come!" Jaleel bellowed, enraged at the smirk on his prisoner's mouth.

The door opened and Rasheed came into the room, dragging behind him a young woman Guil thought looked vaguely familiar. Behind him was Rasheed's brother, Tjorn.

"We caught her trying to sneak in with some of the burial crew," Rasheed sneered, shoving the woman to the floor at Jaleel's feet.

Conar glanced down and could have groaned. His heart sank as Rachel pushed herself up and looked behind her at him, her careful scrutiny going down his bruised body.

"Are you all right, milord?" she asked and would have gone to him had Rasheed not stopped her. She spat at the warrior, tried to scratch his face, but he blocked her hands and grabbed her around her arms, stilling her struggles.

"You know this man?" Jaleel asked, staring intently at the fear that had suddenly came to his enemy's face.

Rachel tore her gaze from Conar and looked up at Jaborn. Her chest was heaving with anger. "What are you going to do with him?" she countered.

Jaleel sat back. "You do know him, don't you, Rachel?"

Rachel's anger gave her the strength to stomp down hard on Rasheed's instep and the man let her go, yelping with pain and hopping on his uninjured foot as he gripped the one she had maimed.

"I don't know how you got him to come here--" Rachel began, but Jaborn cut her off.

"Oh, he didn't want to come, sweet one." Jaleel swung his heated gaze to Conar. "He was encouraged to do so."

"Forced to do so!" Rachel shouted. She cast a furious glance at the manacles and leg irons. "What are you going to do with him?" she demanded again.

Jaleel smiled. "Keep him, of course."

Rachel's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Conar listened to the exchange between the two and wondered how they could know each other so well. Well enough for Rachel to dispense of the man's title and him not care. There was something in the way Jaborn was looking at the girl that made Conar's skin crawl.

"Come here, Rachel," Jaborn demanded, drawing Conar's gaze to him.

"Not until you tell me--"

“Rasheed?” Jaleel interrupted. “Take your blade and give our Serenian friend two more scars on his right cheek to mirror the ones on his left.”

“No!” Rachel screamed, trying to get to Conar, but Rasheed grabbed her, thrusting her into Tjorn’s arms as that guard stepped forward to catch her.

Conar McGregor’s guards pushed him to the floor without a struggle. Guil wondered why the man was so calm, why he didn’t fight back. His manacled hands hung loosely in front of him, not going up to protect his face from the blade Rasheed had drawn and was even then bringing toward him.

“Jaleel, please!” Rachel screamed, twisting in Tjorn’s grip, trying to pull free. “Please don’t!”

The Serenian’s eyes were smoldering, but he didn’t move, made no attempt to stop what they were planning to do. Maybe, Guil thought, he knew it would be useless to struggle or maybe he thought Jaleel wasn’t serious. One look at Jaborn’s face assured Guil the man was deadly serious.

“Jaleel!” Rachel sobbed, tears running down her cheeks. “Don’t hurt him!”

Jaborn held up his hand as Rasheed grabbed a handful of McGregor’s hair and drew his head back, the sharp blade laid on the Outlander’s flesh. Getting up, the Hasdu Prince came down the dais steps and took Rachel out of Tjorn’s hold. Gripping the young woman’s upper arms, he shook her gently and forced her to look up at him.

“What are your feelings for this man, Rachel?” he asked.

“She has no feelings for me!” Conar hissed, his eyes watering from the vicious tugging on his scalp.

Jaleel didn’t look at the Serenian. His gaze was steady on Rachel’s tearful face. “I’ll ask you again, Rachel: what are your feelings for this man?”

Conar tried to jerk his head away but the grip on his hair only increased and he grunted with the sensation. He barely heard Rachel’s answer, but the words put instant terror in his heart.

“I love him,” Rachel whispered, lowering her eyes to the jaded look in Jaborn’s.

“She’s lying!” Conar shouted. “She doesn’t love me!”

Jaleel pulled Rachel to him, enfolding her in his arms. “I don’t like sharing my women with another man, Rachel. You know that.”

A horrible, stunning realization began to grow in Conar’s soul and he caught his breath on an agonizing hitch of air as Jaborn’s head lowered and he claimed Rachel’s mouth with his own.

“Oh, hell,” Conar muttered. He tried once more to free himself of Rasheed’s hold, but the warrior only laughed and tightened his hand in the thick golden mane.

Jaleel released Rachel’s lips and smiled at the fear in her face. “I’m not going to hurt him, Rachel,” he said, taking his right hand from her arms to stroke her cheek. “Nor will I allow anyone to hurt him, either.”

Rachel grabbed his hand and brought it to her lips. “Jaleel, please. Let him go. He--“

Jaborn shook his head. “I can’t do that, sweet one.”

She risked a glance at Conar’s bleak face, then turned her gaze to Jaleel. “Then, at least let his men go.” At Jaborn’s surprised look, she told him she had heard the guards talking about the Outlanders in the donjon. “Let them go, please. They have never done you harm.”

“I can’t do that, either, Rachel,” Jaleel answered, lifting her hands to his chest and holding them there. “They are the means to my end.”

“What end?” Conar snarled.

Jaborn ignored him. He looked around and motioned Rasheed to his side. The warrior let go of Conar's hair and came to his master. "Rasheed, take my lady into the receiving hall and see to her. I am not pleased she has granted her favors to another."

Conar tensed, the Hasdu's words sending a chill down his spine. He shifted his attention to Rachel and saw her face had drained of all color. "She hasn't done anything!" he shouted at Jaborn. "She was only trying to keep me from being hurt."

Jaleel turned and smiled at Conar. "Oh, I am sure there has been no illicit relations between the two of you, McGregor, but if Rachel tells you something, you can be assured it is the truth. When she says she loves you, she means just that."

"No!" Conar bellowed, shaking his head violently. "She doesn't! She was only trying to help me, Jaborn!" He twisted, trying to get to his feet, but his guards pressed heavy hands on his shoulders to prevent him from doing so.

Rasheed took Rachel's arm and began to pull her toward a wide copper door at the far end of the room. She was struggling with him, trying to break free, but the man's brother took her other arm and they dragged, her kicking and screaming toward the door.

"Rachel!" Conar yelled, struggling against his captors. "Tell them you were lying! Rachel!"

Guil was amused at the petrified look on the Serenian's face. What did he think Jaleel would do to the woman? He cast a quick look to his friend and saw something dark and unsettling in the way Jaleel was staring at the Serenian, something cold and entirely without sympathy. He looked back at the woman and found her bucking and twisting in the grips of Rasheed and his brother, then turned worried eyes to Jaborn.

"Jaleel?" he questioned, coming slowly to his feet.

Jaborn folded his arms over his chest and grinned malevolently at Conar. "Don't you think she looks enough like your precious Liza to be her twin, McGregor?"

Conar stilled, gazing up at the man's silky words, hearing a meaning he had been meant to hear. His heart thudded hard in his chest and he swallowed, terror leaping up to his throat to choke him.

"That was originally why I took her as my mistress, you know." Jaleel sighed. "I wanted to know what it was you felt when you lay with Liza."

The copper door at the end of the room was thrown open and the trio crossed the threshold with a scuffle. Rachel's scream of fear drove a shaft of agony straight through Conar's heart and he could barely breathe for the air was entering his lungs in ragged, rapid gasps.

"I cut your daughter's throat because she was a product of your seed. Did you know that, McGregor?"

"Don't," Conar whispered, his voice breaking.

"I hate to kill Rachel because she is--"

"Don't!" the Serenian begged. "She was lying to you, Jaborn. She doesn't love me. She was--"

An unearthly scream of pain rent the room and Guil flinched, bringing his hands up to cover his ears. His mouth dropped open and he stared at Jaleel's calm face. McGregor had collapsed on the floor, tears streaming down his cheeks. The Serenian was pounding the floor with his manacled fist, crying the woman's name over and over again. Jaborn turned his head and looked at Guil, smiling, and Guil knew there had been no murder, no harm done to the woman. He sighed with relief, lowering his hands to drag them down his face.

“Take him to his new home, gentlemen,” Jaleel ordered as he put out his boot to nudge Conar’s shoulder. “I think he wants to be alone for awhile.”

They dragged him up, supporting him, until he had gained his feet. They thought him grief-struck, unable to struggle, but the guards were not prepared for the violence with which this man reacted.

Guil cried out, jumping back as the Outlander lunged at Jaborn. There was an irrational frenzy of hatred; violent, psychopathic blind rage that drove him forward and onto Jaleel. McGregor’s hands closed around Jaborn’s throat and began to squeeze. The guards rushed forward, jerking on the Serenian’s arms, pummeling him, desperately trying to bring his grip on their master. Jaleel’s face was turning a dark blue color and his eyes were beginning to bulge out of their sockets. He was raking at the Outlander’s bare arms, striving to pry the powerful fingers from his throat.

“Do something!” Guil yelled, adding his hands to the guards to break the fierce clutch the Serenian had on Jaleel’s throat. “He’s killing him!”

Rasheed, having heard the commotion, rushed through the double doors and used every bit of his forward momentum, strength and savagery to jab a hard, brutal fist into the Serenian’s back, jamming it into his kidney. The blow broke McGregor’s hold and the Outlander went down on one knee, gasping with pain and bending forward over the agony. His body lurched sideways as Rasheed’s boot caught him in the belly and flipped him over.

“No!” Jaleel gasped, clawing at his bruised throat. “Don’t hurt him!” He was being supported by the guards as he struggled to draw air into his depleted lungs. “Rasheed, I said no!”

Lying on the floor, gagging with the brutality of the jab in his kidney, Conar was gasping for breath himself. He was holding his stomach, the kick having caused almost as much damage to his abdomen as the jab had to his kidney.

“Get him up,” Jaleel croaked, “and take him to his cell.” He bent over, retching, seeing a red haze before him. Vaguely he saw the Serenian being lifted, heard the man’s moan of pain as he was manhandled out of the throne room.

“Jaleel?” Guil whispered, putting a comforting hand on his friend’s back. “Shall I call the surgeon?”

Jaborn shook his head. He was crouched over, his hands on his knees as he drew great gulps of air into his body. “I’ll be all right,” he managed to say.

“When I thought you had had the woman killed--“ Guil said, shuddering.

“McGregor thought so,” Jaleel grated out, “and that is what matters.”

“But why? Surely there was nothing between them,” Guil protested.

Jaleel straightened up, let his head fall back as he closed his eyes to the pain in his larynx. He tried to swallow, grimaced, then lowered his head and looked at Guil, still panting for breath as he tried to speak.

“Guilt, my friend,” Jaborn ground out. “Guilt.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

"They've taken him to Abbadon," Asher told the others.

"And Rachel?" Rupine inquired, watching the grief flood Asher's worried face.

"She's there, as well," Asher acknowledged.

"He won't let her go this time," Rupine sighed.

Asher looked away. His sister's feelings for Prince Jaleel Jaborn were a mystery to him. He didn't think it was love she bore the bastard, but it was something closely akin to it. What made matters worse was that he feared Jaborn had feelings for Rachel, too.

"How do we get him back?" Yuri asked, looking about at the bleak faces of the men around the campfire.

"We may not," Sajin admitted and when the Outer Kingdom warrior turned a furious, outraged face to him, Sajin held up his hand. "Abbadon is a fortress the like of which you have never experienced, Yuri. In a thousand years it has not been taken and I fear it will never be."

"Getting in is nigh to impossible if they don't want you in there," Azalon remarked. "I've been permitted maybe twice in thirty years to enter those hellish gates and then it was never farther than the slave quarters on the ground level."

"Where would they be keeping him?" Chase asked.

"In the donjons," Kharis answered. "In one of the three sublevels below the ground."

"The fortress is built over solid rock," Asher informed the others. "The sublevels were blasted out with explosives and the structure itself was built atop. There are no windows big enough to get through, no access from the roof even if you could scale those slick walls and only the two double doors in front through which to gain entrance."

"How do the inhabitants come and go?" Yuri asked.

"They don't," Rupine answered.

"How the hell do they survive in there, then?" Chase demanded.

"Once a week, a caravan goes there to deliver goods. The doors can open only three feet or less. Guards inside wait in the antechamber then take the provisions in like a bucket brigade into the fortress while fifty or more stand outside the gates to watch the delivery men."

"The only people allowed to leave are the Prince and that jackal he calls his friend and the Warriors of the Abyss," Rupine added.

Chase turned to look at the physician. "The what?"

"The Warriors of the Abyss," Kharis echoed. "They are Jaborn's elite fighters. There are about thirty of them, all deadly men with no consciences and no remorse. They would as soon kill you as look at you."

"What about the water supply?" the Shadow-warrior wanted to know.

"There is an underground stream that feeds the fortress," Asher answered.

"Then, perhaps we can swim--" Yuri began only to find Asher shaking his head. "Why not?"

"No one knows where the source of the water comes from, Andreanova. Don't you think others have tried to find it in order to gain access to the fortress?" He shrugged. "There are those who believe the water is hell-sent."

"Don't start with that shit!" Rupine warned.

"It is one of the Gateways," Sabrina, who up until then had not spoken, reminded the men. "I know this. The one and only time I was allowed inside that evil place, I felt unclean just smelling the air."

"Would he know?" Chase asked her.

"Conar?" Sabrina inquired. "He might sense it, but it is unlikely he would realize what that feeling was."

"And even so," Yuri snarled, "not be able to do anything about it."

Chase stood up and stretched his back. He looked bleakly out across the camp sight. "We have to get him back."

"You sent word to Shalu and Balizar," Yuri reminded him. "Maybe they will be able to help." He glanced at his fellow countrymen who had come with Kharis' nephew. "Serge will return with help, as well."

"The entire might of the Outer Kingdom!" Alexi Romanovitch growled.

"Once Shalu gets here, we'll start planning. He's a good strategist," Chase told them. "The man's a veritable encyclopedia of warfare."

"You'd better start planning before then," Rupine warned. "Khamsin's life may depend on it!"

Meggie Ruck lifted her head and stared at the man. "They'd better not hurt my bonny boy!" she snarled. "We'll bring that goddamned fortress down around their ears if they do!"

Chase smiled, glanced at Sabrina who was once more watching Meggie with a strange expression on her face. He wondered what the women had discussed when they had gone off by themselves upon arriving at Conar's camp. They had been gone a good long time and when they had joined the men at the fire, there had been something evil in their gazes.

"Meggie thinks of him as a son," Chase had whispered to Sabrina and had found his mistress looking back at him with amusement.

"I think it goes a bit deeper than that, Montyne," she had answered.

"You think she's in love with him?" Chase had gasped, never even considering such a possibility before.

But Sabrina had not answered. She had turned to look across the leaping flames, her gaze meeting Meggie's, and both women had been silent, listening to the men speak.

"What do you suggest, Asher?" Rupine asked. "You've been inside that place a few times."

Chase's ear pricked up and he turned his immediate attention to Asher. "How long ago were you in there?"

Asher shrugged. "Two, maybe three years ago."

"He went there to get his sister," Rupine said quietly.

"Is there something we should know about that situation, Asher?" Yuri demanded.

The Kensetti got up and put another piece of wood on the fire. "Rachel and the Prince are friends. I don't think it goes beyond that."

"But you don't know for certain," Chase wanted qualified.

"No, but I do know if she can help Khamsin, she will," Asher told them.

Meggie's intent stare turned to Asher. "How so, lad?"

"Because she's in love with him, that's why," Rupine answered for Asher.

Sabrina met Meggie's look and nodded slowly. The older woman said no more.

"Do you think she'll have some influence on Jaborn?" Chase asked.

"Maybe," Asher answered. "Maybe not." He looked at Montyne. "It depends on why Jaborn wants Khamsin."

"Jaborn holds Conar responsible for his woman's death," Yuri spat. "As if Conar had anything to do with such a vile thing."

Asher's head came up. "The Princess Cyle? The one forced to marry Khamsin's brother?"

"Aye," Chase said. "I met the woman, though, and I'll tell you, now. She didn't seem all that upset about marrying Galen to me. As a matter of fact, she seemed rather happy."

"There was talk of that here," Sabrina joined in. "But I don't think Jaborn would have given much credence to the rumor." She wiggled her bare toes to the heat. "He didn't want to think anyone could hold her love but him."

A niggle of concern nudged Chase. "How would he react to finding out your sister loves Conar, Asher?"

Asher buried his head in his hands. "I don't know. He could ignore it or he could make Khamsin pay for having been the one to steal Rachel's affections. Who knows?"

"What worries me," Meggie said, fusing her gaze with Yuri's, "is that that Jaborn bastard took Conar's men for a reason."

"Sure," Yuri answered. "To get Conar in his hands!"

Meggie shook her head. "No, lad. There's more to it than that."

Chase, having known the old woman a long time, could tell something was bothering her. "What are you afraid of, Meg?" he asked.

"You were there that day at the battlements, weren't you, Chaseton?" she asked, searching his face. "The day that goddawful old witch accused him of being the cause her daughter died?"

Chase nodded. "I was there."

"Do you remember how the lad took that piece of foolishness?" she asked, her bottom lip quivering.

"Aye," Chase agreed. He remembered that day all too well. It was only a few days after Amber-lea had been buried and Conar, still grieving for Liza, had been at the lowest ebb of his life. Sadie MacCorkingdale's spite had driven him over the brink of sanity and nearly broken him on the rocks of the North Boreal Sea.

"What happened?" Sabrina asked.

Chase took her hand in his. "He tried to kill himself. If Meg hadn't been there, he would have for sure. We sure as hell couldn't control him that day."

"Conar blames himself every time someone he loves dies," Yuri injected.

"The lad takes responsibility for it," Meggie corrected. "There's a difference, Yuri." At the furious glare from the Outer Kingdom warrior, Meggie nodded. "He knows many of them have died because of him. His mama. His daughter. His other children."

"My brother," Balizar said as he quietly entered the camp. Everyone looked up at him with shock, never having heard his approach. He grinned with apology and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Shalu's with me."

"Amber-lea didn't die because of him!" Yuri snapped.

"She gave birth to his son and hemorrhaged to death, Andreanova," Shalu growled as he stomped into the circle of light, then sat down with a grunt. "He believes if he'd never laid hands to her, she'd still be alive."

"And then there's Liza," Chase said quietly. "She died because she was his woman."

"You can call it coincidence," Meggie remarked, "Most would. But the plain truth of the matter is there's been a lot of people murdered in Conar McGregor's name."

"So, what are you saying, old woman?" Yuri shouted, coming to his feet. "Are you blaming him like that vicious old witch at Boreas did?"

“No, lad,” Meggie answered. “I’m just trying to tell you why I think that Jaborn bastard took Conar’s men.”

Chase turned his head and stared at Shalu. The Necroman was staring moodily into the flames, his big black fists clenched on his rigid thigh. “Do you think they’ll harm the others, Shalu?” Chase asked, fearful of the dark man’s answer.

Shalu, who had been beside himself at learning Conar had been kidnapped, had ridden hard to get back to the encampment; but the closer he had come to the fiery glow on the horizon, the more he slowed his steed. He knew Conar would not be there, was, indeed, in the hands of a man who was conceivably a deadlier enemy than Kaileel Tohre had ever been, and he was truly afraid for the first time in his sixty-seven years. Not just for Conar, but for the others, as well. One in particular who had become the Necroman’s best friend.

“Shalu?” Chase pressed.

“We know now it was Jaborn’s men who attacked Conar and the others at Rommitrich Point,” Shalu pointed out. “That it was Jaborn who was not only responsible for Rayle Loure’s death but Nadia’s, as well.” He lifted his head and turned to lock his desperate gaze with Chase’s. “That it was Jaborn who was almost the death of Teal du Mer and who was--” He held his hand up and closed his thumb and index fingers almost together. “--this close to abducting Liza that time at Boreas.” He lowered his hand. “All that done to hurt Conar.” He searched Chase’s face. “Aye, my old friend. I think they’ll kill his men, one by one, and make him watch.”

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

They had dragged him down several flights of stairs, kicking and cursing, lashing out with all his futile strength, and had thrown him into a large cell barren of furnishings. His wrist chain had been looped to a thick pin in the wall above his head and his legs spread, the iron bands on his ankles slipped into hooks on the cold, damp floor. The wall behind him was frigid and wet and vile-smelling and reminded him vividly of the dungeon in Oceania where Liza's parents had had him incarcerated once.

"I want to see my men!" he had snarled from between clenched teeth, but his guards had only laughed at his request. They had slammed shut the cell door, leaving only a thin strip of light from the torches in the hallway outside to filter through the bars set high in the door. Their footsteps faded away and the far off sound of another door closing shut out all the sound around him save for the distant plink of water.

Tears welled in his stricken eyes. He hated being caged like this. It brought back too many memories of other times when he had been lashed down, unable to move, helpless and hopeless and miserable, at the mercy of others. Shaken, nearly out of his mind with grief and guilt, he thought of Rachel and he hung his head, his breath catching with sobs.

Rachel. Dear, sweet, brave Rachel. Her death added one more burden of guilt on his already burgeoning soul. He thought of her with an unbearable sense of loss. It was almost like losing Liza all over again and knowing he was the cause of still one more woman dying because she had cared for him.

"Alel, why?" he sobbed, unable to understand why his god was continuing to punish him.

He pulled savagely on the chains over his head and howled with his despair. He was beyond caring what they did to him. Rachel's death had opened up the still-oozing wound of his grief over losing Liza and all he could think of was that he would do whatever had to be done in order to survive so he could avenge her murder. He knew he would have to fight whatever force it was that controlled his destiny, a force he no longer understood.

The faces of his dead drifted slowly past his anguished eyes: his mother and father; his children; his mistresses; Hern, Storm, Rayle, Brelan. Even Galen's sad face skipped lightly across his vision then disappeared into the nether regions of his being where those he had loved were kept.

"You have to fight," he heard a voice saying. "You are a strong man, Conar McGregor. They will not break you unless you allow it."

He knew without a doubt that whatever was going to happen to him, whatever punishment Jaleel Jaborn had planned for him, was not going to be pleasant or easy. From some deep inner wisdom he understood that what would happen to him here in this hellish place would be the most difficult challenge of his life.

"Help me, Liza," he pleaded. "Help me survive this."

He laid his head back against the damp wall and stared up at the darkness beyond him. There was no light, no souging of wind, nothing to let him know his god had heard, and acknowledged, his cry for help. He strained to see into that vast darkness, to glimpse some ray of hope stepping down to him from the vault of heaven.

But there was nothing.

Idly he wondered if Alel held any sway at all here in this fiendish country. If his god existed among the brutes of Rysalia.

Just when he had learned to play the game, They had changed the rules on him.
Again.

He didn't know how to react to that. The gods had never been consistent with him except in their inconsistency.

He closed his eyes and sighed, wondering how his men, his son, was. He had been furious with Shalu when he had learned Wyn was one of the men who had come to Rysalia to find him.

"He's his father's son!" the Necroman had sniffed. "Who can control one such as that?"

Just knowing his son, his child, his firstborn, was within Jaborn's reach, put sheer terror in Conar's aching heart and brought a groan of desolate pain to his lips. Knowing Wyn was here, in this wretched donjon, maybe even chained as his father was, put a hatred so intense in Conar McGregor's soul, he opened his mouth and cursed the god who had allowed such a thing to come to pass.

"I hate you!" he yelled. "Do you hear me, Alel! I hate you!" He jerked against his restraints. "Never again will I trust you."

There was no bolt from the sky to strike him dead. There was no howl of wind, no chill, no rumble of thunder. There was only the steady far off drip of water and the occasional squeak of a rat.

With his mind churning with turmoil and chaos, he squeezed his lids so tightly shut he could see light squiggles. "I hate you," he whispered.

Only silence and darkness answered his curse.

* * * *

"Are you feeling better?" Guil asked, changing the cool rag on his friend's throat.

"Stop hovering over me, Gehdrin!" Jaleel snapped.

"He could have killed you," Guil pouted, moving to sit down in the chair beside Jaborn's bed. "You are a lucky man, my friend."

"Luck has nothing to do with it!" Jaleel growled, flinging the wet cloth from him. He sat up in the bed and glared at the far wall. "McGregor must be destroyed!" he hissed. "I will see that he is!"

"Death destroys quite nicely," Guil answered.

"Yes, but death is only a beginning, you know that, Guil!" Jaborn sneered. "Even if his afterlife is one of hell-fire and torment, he will continue. I want his mind destroyed! I want his very soul shattered! I want there to be nothing left of him when he reaches his final reward!"

"From the reaction I saw this morning," Guil replied, "I would venture to say you are on the right track with him."

Jaborn's face turned cold as stone. "By the time I am finished with him, Gehdrin, he won't even know what hit him."

"He's been imprisoned before," Guil reminded him. "He has tasted the sting of the lash. He will fight to keep himself from being destroyed."

"I told you it wasn't physical pain I intend to give him, Gehdrin!" Jaborn bellowed. "Do you not listen to anything I say?"

"He is an unyielding man, Jaleel. He will make you kill him before he will allow you to break him."

Jaborn turned his head and fixed his old friend with a steady look. "Once he has been isolated and we have him alone, completely alone, without benefit of friends and loved ones, without help of any kind, with nowhere to turn and no one to turn to, we will have him at the proper level of helplessness. It will be then that I will take from him everything he has ever

believed in and ever held dear. When all that has been accomplished, I will destroy his mind as he destroyed my precious Cyle!”

Guil shivered. Looking into Jaborn’s wild stare, that cold and inhuman stare that held not even a flicker of mercy, he almost found himself pitying McGregor. Jaborn’s brutal need, his dark, insatiable bloodlust to cripple the Serenian, to corrupt and pervert and crush the man, was something Guil had never been able to understand. Nor did he think he wanted to. Sometimes Jaleel frightened him with his talk of vengeance against the Outlander. Sometimes he wondered if his friend was not just a little bit mad, bordering on insanity in his preoccupation with punishing a man who had had nothing at all to do with Cyle’s death.

“I will destroy his mind,” he heard Jaleel whispering. “I will destroy his mind.”

“And your own as well,” Guil thought to himself.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

He was dreaming, he thought.

He had to be.

There were people all around him, looking at him, reaching out to touch him.

He struggled to wake up for he didn't like the feel of their hands on him, but his lids would not open. He tried to move away from the touches that pressed against his limbs, but he found he could not move. He wanted to speak, but could not seem to bring words from his throat.

Fear gripped him in a steel-like hand and squeezed. He was vulnerable to whoever, or whatever, was lurking about him and he was afraid they would crush him beneath the weight of their hold on him.

"McGregor," he heard a deep, soft voice call his name.

He tried once more to pry his eyelids open but they would not budge. He shrank away from the hands on his face, smelling the faint tang of lamp oil on the cool fingers which grazed his lids. The fingers lingered for a moment and then withdrew, allowing him the ability to open his eyes and look up into the faces surrounding him.

They were watching him struggle against the ropes which bound him hand and foot to a thick marble slab. He lifted his head and looked down the length of him, shocked to find himself naked and helpless before these people. He

Fought the restraints, hurting himself, until one of them put a calming hand on his bare chest.

"It will do you no good to struggle, my son," the man said. "Your time has come."

Somehow he knew they wanted his mind. They wanted his body. They wanted his very soul. He knew if he but looked away from them, they would snatch his breath away and drag him down into the Abyss to shut him away from the life forever.

"Do not be afraid, my son," the man told him. The calm voice was hypnotic, seductive, and it invaded his mind like wisps of incense. A gentle hand was placed on his forehead and he began to lose consciousness.

He fought against the restraints, felt the blood welling up on his ankles and wrists. He was weakening, losing touch with the there and then. A part of him realized it was useless to jerk against the thick hemp around his extremities, but he had to try. He could not let them have him.

"You have always belonged with us, McGregor," another of them said. "We have come to claim you."

Blood dripped down the backs of his hands, slick and sticky, and oozed into his palms. His thrashings only made the hemp gouge more deeply into the flesh of his wrists, but he would not give in to the pain. He would not stop trying to get away.

"He fears us," a sad voice said.

"There is nothing to fear, McGregor," another answered.

He was caught fast, his body lashed down, his soul caged.

He began to cry.

"Do not weep, my son. All will be as it should be."

They had stripped away his clothing, leaving him naked and defenseless before them. They had touched him, caressed him, stroked his shrinking flesh, lifted him and placed him on this altar.

Now their hands were on him again, holding him down, while above him the Chief Priest raised the dagger.

Conar stared up at the shiny point positioned above him. He recognized his own dagger, the one Belial had taken from him. "You are going to kill me?"

"You have left us no choice, McGregor," the Chief Priest told him. "We have done what we could to bring you into the Brotherhood." The old man shook his head sadly. "But you have blocked us at every turn. You can not be persuaded to take the necessary steps to become One with Us. You can not be corrupted. You can not be altered. You could not be neutralized. Nothing has worked with you, McGregor. Death is the only way We can destroy the powers you wield."

"It was not a solution we arrived at easily, McGregor," another of them said. "You were a Chosen and to destroy one of Our own is most unpleasant, but We will have to do so in order to survive."

"If We allowed you to carry on this ridiculous war with Us, you might one day find a way to annihilate the Brotherhood," the Chief Priest said.

"And that," said another, "We will never allow."

The blade's point caught a spark of light, arcing the beam across the ceiling, then the dagger began its descent toward his naked chest.

"Noooo!" Conar screamed, feeling the blade bite deep, slicing through flesh and grating off bone and cartilage as it struck his hammering heart and sank to the hilt into the muscle, splitting it.

"You are One with Us," the Chief Priest intoned. "You belong to Us."

Blood bubbled from his lips and dribbled down his chin. The pain in his chest was excruciating, an agony like nothing he had ever known. He could feel his soul being drawn up from his body, turning black and seared around the edges like a paper thrust into a blazing fire.

"You belong to Us," they all said in unison.

"I belong to You," he whispered, his voice slurred, his expression dazed as his life blood was pumped from his dying heart.

From somewhere far, far away from him, he heard other words: softer words, gentler words, words that were like a balm to him. He strove to hear those words, to make them out, to grasp their meaning for they were beautiful words and the voice which spoke them was the sweetest voice he had ever heard.

"Ignore Him!" the Chief Priest shouted, his grating voice shrill as he twisted the dagger in Conar's chest.

Pain engulfed him, horrible, wrenching pain, but the agony was slowly dissolving in his chest as the sweet words came closer, became more distinct.

"Ignore him!"

He could no longer feel the pain. There was nothing but a soft, warm lassitude flowing through him and he wondered if, at last, after all this time and all this pain, he had finally reached Death's threshold and could enter that region of eternal darkness to rest.

"McGregor! You are ours!"

The harsh voices were fading and that sweet, sweet melodic sound of beautiful, calming words were washing over him, cleansing him, repairing his soul, pumping his life blood back into his damaged heart and sealing up the tear in his chest.

He looked up into the most wonderful face he had ever seen. There was the kindest smile, the most understanding expression he could ever remember seeing. There was gentleness: infinite and unreserved, in the warm brown eyes of the man gazing down on him. And when that man

reached out to touch him, Conar thought he would explode with love. The touch was forgiving and understanding and healing all in one.

“When you are ready,” the man told him, “I will be waiting for you, Conar. Come to me and I will give you what you seek. I am always with you.”

He came awake with a start, pulling on the chains which held him, forgetting they were there. His heart was hammering in his chest, his breath coming in great gasps.

He could still see those soft brown eyes, melancholy at times, forgiving at others. The gentle face had been filled with love and compassion and mercy. There had been solace in the man’s look and the promise of hope.

He looked down at his chest, but in the darkness he could not see the wound he was sure was there.

“You saved me, didn’t you?” he said aloud, wondering who the man was.

A part of him was still filled with fear. That sixth sense that had not worked since he had come to Rysalia was tingling, trying to tell him something. He thought he understood that warning and began to realize that he was in a place even more hellish that he had originally thought. The thought crossed his mind that this could be one of the Gateways, but he dismissed it, thinking only his part of the world had been so cursed by the Domination.

Yet for all the unease in his body, he felt a kind of inner peace that he hoped would sustain him during what was to come.

And he knew he had that mysterious man with the sad brown eyes to thank.

* * * *

Catherine hurled the vase of flowers across the room and screamed her fury at the man who had dared to bring them. Had she not been tied by her ankle to the bed post, she would have gone for the bastard’s eyes.

“Get out of here!” she yelled, stretching out her hand to try and grab something else to throw at Jaleel’s messenger. As her hand closed around unlit oil lamp, she saw the poor fellow’s eyes go wide and watched him scuttle out of her aim, fumbling with the door as he tried to leave.

Conar’s wife slammed the lamp against the closing door, laughing triumphantly when the glass shattered and the oil ran down the heavy oak paneling. She was about to curse the hapless fellow who was on the other side of the door when she became aware of a presence in the room with her.

Spinning around, ready to do battle with whoever had dared to sneak up on her, she stared at the handsome young man sitting calmly on her settee.

“Hello, Catherine,” he said.

“Who are you?” she snarled, wishing she had something else to throw.

“Jaleel’s younger brother,” the man answered. “Kalli.”

“How did you get in here?” she demanded, seeing no way he could have save through the door she had attacked.

Kalli lifted one brow, but did not answer her. “Has my brother allowed you to see Conar McGregor?”

The high color left Catherine’s cheeks. “He’s here?”

“Have you not sensed him, yet?” Kalli countered.

Catherine’s face changed subtly, but her words were as cold as the snows of her Uralap Mountains. “And just how am I suppose to do that?” she bit out.

Jaleel’s brother smiled as though they shared a great secret. “I will be willing to wager Jaleel does not know you have magical powers, Catherine,” he said, claspings his hands and bracing

his neck as he leaned back on the settee. "I would imagine Sybelle has not had a chance to tell him you do."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Catherine spat.

"Oh, but you do," Kalli laughed. "In McGregor's homeland, as in your own, men and women both share such wondrous powers, but here in Rysalia, in the whole of the Inner Kingdom emirates actually, only the female of our race has such abilities."

"How nice for them," Catherine sneered.

"Yes, it is," Kalli agreed. "Especially when only such as they can enter the gates of Abbadon undetected."

"Or get out?" Catherine shot back.

"Well," Kalli said, shrugging, "getting out is a lot harder than getting in, I'm told. Jaleel has several sorceresses who reside here in the fortress. He employs their services on occasion." He cocked his head to one side. "You will be the first of his wives to have that power, though."

Catherine's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I am already wed, as you no doubt know, and even if I weren't, I'd rather die than be joined to that vile whoreson you call brother!"

"Strange that you should say that since Joanna, Jaleel's first wife?, is lying on her death bed even as we speak." Kalli's grin was merry. "I never liked the bitch so I'm not all that concerned that my brother is making way for you to be his primary spouse."

A shudder of fear ran down Catherine's spine. "Why are you telling me this?"

Kalli stood up and stretched. "To warn you, Catherine. For whatever his reasons, Jaleel has decided to court you. Most likely to annoy McGregor and hurt the poor man even more than is the plan."

"Hurt him?" Catherine whispered. She tried to go to Kalli, but the thin chain around her leg would not allow it. She cursed at the thing, then turned her gaze back to Kalli. "What are they doing to my husband?"

"Nothing yet," Kalli answered. "But come tomorrow morn, your lover's punishment will begin."

"Punishment for what?" Catherine shouted. "He's done nothing to you people! He's done nothing to Jaborn!"

"Unfortunately, Jaleel doesn't see it that way," Kalli answered. He looked down at the chain. "You can break that, you know." He turned a twinkling grin to her. "All you need do is try." Walking to the wall, reaching up to tug at the sconce there, he turned back and fixed Catherine with a look that was no longer filled with humor. "Don't let him know just how capable you are, Catherine. Jaleel is quite mad."

She watched a portion of the wall slide inward. Kalli bowed to her, then stepped through the opening and disappeared as the wall slide silently back into place.

"You don't like your brother much, do you, Kalli?" she mumbled. Her gaze lowered to the chain around her ankle. She stared at it for a moment and then the band simply parted and the chain fell away.

Catherine smiled.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Conar looked up as the door to his cell was unlocked and pushed open. He had been listening to the sounds echoing down the stone corridor and had known it was a woman's light footfalls. He was surprised to see no guard accompanying her.

"Aren't they afraid I'll attack you, Mam'selle?" he quipped, pulling on his manacles.

The woman smiled at him. "I think not, milord," she answered. She stooped down beside the heavy door and lifted a tray of food. Entering the cell, she came to him and knelt down, placing the tray beside him.

He glanced at the bowls on the tray and unconsciously licked his lips. His gaze lifted to her pretty face. "What? No fetid water and moldy bread?"

Her giggle was sweet. "If that is what you would prefer, I can--"

"That's quite all right," he interrupted, looking down at the soup, bread, and salad greens. "I'll force myself to eat this."

She shook her head at him. "You are wicked, milord."

Lifting the goblet on the tray, she held it to his lips. He was just as surprised to taste wine on his tongue as he had been that she had been allowed in here without chaperone. The wine was no ordinary vintage, either; it was of excellent stock.

"I don't suppose there's any chance that you can unchain me so I can feed myself, is there?" he asked.

The woman's left brow crooked in amusement. "Hardly, milord," she answered in a droll tone. She took up the bowl and spoon. "This is oxtail soup. Very nourishing."

And very good, he thought as she fed him. Alternating the soup with bites of the crisp salad and buttered bread, she didn't speak until he had finished the soup.

"If you have to relieve yourself, I can attend to that while I am here."

Conar stared at her. "You've got to be kidding!"

Her lips twitched. "I have a husband and two sons, milord. There have been occasions when they were ill that I tended to their needs."

He was thankful there was little light in the cell for he could feel his face burning. He mumbled something she asked him to repeat and then shook his head. "No thank you."

She shrugged. "No one will come back here until morning, milord, and it is only half-past seven. If you have to go, is it not best to go in the pot rather than in your breeches?"

Her blunt words shocked him and he stared at her, not knowing what to say. She stabbed the last of the greens on his fork and then put them in his mouth, making the decision for him. She told him she would help him with his bodily needs and that was all there was to it.

"Have my friends been fed?" he asked her as she took the tray out into the corridor.

"I would imagine so, milord, although they are seen to by the guards."

"Are you allowed where they are being kept?" he asked, hope in his eyes.

She turned at the door and looked back at him. "Is there a reason you ask?"

He nodded. "I haven't been allowed to see them and my eldest son is among them. I would like to send a message, to let them know I'm all right."

"They know you are being seen to, milord," she answered, setting the tray down and taking up the white chamber pot.

He flinched seeing that degrading appliance in her hand. Embarrassment flooded his face once more as she matter-of-factly knelt between his outstretched legs and bent forward to unbutton his breeches.

“What would you like me to tell them, milord?” she asked as her cool, soft hands closed around him.

As ashamed as he was to let this strange woman touch him, he knew he had no choice for his bladder had been throbbing with need for quite some time. But still he found it difficult to piss.

“Milord?” she prompted. She was not looking up at his face, realizing how uncomfortable he was. Nor was she looking at his manhood as she held it. Rather her attention was on the far wall.

“Are they all right or do you know?” he asked.

“They have been treated well, I believe.”

He felt his urine start and winced as the hollow sound of it streaming into the tin pot seemed to be loud enough to wake the dead. He sighed as his bladder began to empty.

“Will you tell them I am sorry?” he beseeched her.

She turned to look at him. “Sorry for what, milord?”

Conar’s face creased with guilt. “For being the cause of them being here.”

The woman nodded, then put the chamber pot aside. She readjusted his breeches and stood up, stooping to take away the chamber pot. “I will tell them, milord.”

He watched her as she walked to the door. He hated to have her leave for he had been alone in that dark world for hours. He hoped to forestall her for a few moments more.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Celene, milord,” she told him. She put the chamber pot outside the cell door, then reached for the heavy wrought iron ring to close it.

“Celene?” he asked. When she looked at him, he tried to smile. “Will you also tell them I ask them to forgive me for bringing them to this sorry pass?” When she agreed she would, he forced the smile to his lips. “Thank you, Celene.”

The woman nodded and pulled the door closed behind her, shutting him away once more with his loneliness and his fear.

* * * *

Rylan Hesar nudged Tyne Brell with his foot. “Company,” he whispered.

Brell lifted his head and looked through the bars of their cell to see a young woman standing there, watching them.

“I have a message to you,” she said quietly, “from your Overlord.”

Tyne looked at Rylan and then the two men stood up, going to the bars. “Conar?” Brell asked. “They really have him, too?”

Celene nodded. “He was brought in just after dawn this morning.”

“Is he all right?” Rylan asked. “Have they hurt him?”

“His Grace will not hurt Prince Conar,” Celene answered. “He wants your Overlord alive and well in order to exact his revenge.”

“Revenge for what?” Tyne exploded. “None of this makes any sense!”

The woman looked sorrowfully at them. “Prince Conar asked that I deliver his message to you. I need to find the others brought in with you, especially his son. I would answer your questions if I could, milord, but there is not time.”

“What did he send you to say?” Rylan inquired.

Celene exhaled a long, pitying breath. "That he is sorry and he asks your forgiveness for being the cause of your capture."

"Stupid fool," Tyne hissed, pushing way from the bars. He stomped back to his corner of the cell and slid down the wall where once more he buried his face in his arms.

"Can you get word back to him, Mam'selle?" Rylan asked.

"I will be feeding him tomorrow eve," she answered.

"Good," Rylan sighed. "Will you tell that poggleheaded idiot that we are grown men and quite capable of getting ourselves into trouble without his assistance?"

Celene put her hand over Rylan's on the bar. "The Wind be at your back, Your Grace," she answered him.

Tyne slowly lifted his head and stared at the woman. "Who are you, Mam'selle?" he asked.

"A friend, Your Grace," she answered. She caressed Rylan's hand then turned to go.

"Mam'selle!" Tyne called out. When she looked back at him, he flung out a weary hand. "Tell that numbskull that we love him, will you?"

Celene's eyes filled with tears. "I think he knows that already, Your Grace."

Rylan leaned his head against the bars of their cell door and stared moodily at the floor as the woman's footsteps dwindled away.

"I have a bad feeling about all this, Brell," he said. His foot, injured so long ago at the Labyrinth Penal Colony, was throbbing and he hobbled back to his place beside his old friend. "I don't think we're going to be seeing our homelands any time soon." He stared into the semi-darkness. "If ever again."

"Well," Tyne said, stretching out his short legs. "We've had a good run, though, haven't we, Hesar?" He turned his head and gazed at Rylan. "Everyone has to go sometime or another."

Rylan snorted. "I wanted it to be in Virago, in my own bed, with my lady at my side."

"Don't we all," Tyne replied.

"You know what worries me most, Brell?"

Tyne leaned his head back against the wall. "What?"

"What they are doing to him."

* * * *

Like Rylan and Tyne, Grice Wynth and Roget du Mer had been jailed together on the first sublevel of the donjon, but at opposite ends of the sprawling facility. Ching-Ching, Holm, and Thom were in another cell together while Paegan and Sentian shared still another; all on the second sublevel of the donjon and all separated from one another by hundreds of feet. Jah-Ma-El and his nephew, Wyn, had been placed on the third sublevel, where Conar was confined in a distant wing.

Celene had little difficulty in finding the other men and giving them the Serenian's message. Each time she relayed those heart-felt words, she was met with laughing contempt.

"Does the man really think we blame him for our folly?" the Oceanian Prince had quipped. "Tell the bastard I'll make him eat that damned apology when I see him!"

"Of all the asinine--" The young Viragonian Prince had been too angry to express his disgust.

"Tell him we needed the rest," the one called Sentian had finished for his cell mate. "Ask him if he's enjoying his."

"You tell that pompous little snot that we are quite comfortable and not to bother us with his whining," the Serenian Prince's half-brother had barked. "Tell him to mind his own damned business!"

“Forgive him?” the funny-looking little man with the monkey face had scoffed. “Well, of all the nerve!” He had looked back at his cell mates with disgust. “It seems our little bird has fallen out of the nest again and whacked that hard head of his!”

Celene had been amazed at the replies to her words. It seemed all the Serenian’s friends were use to teasing him and, even in this most dire of predicaments, still continued to do so. But each and every one of them had wanted the same message relayed to their Overlord. The Prince’s son had been the last to say it, but it had been on each of their lips: “Tell him we love him, will you?”

* * * *

Rachel jumped as the lock on to her room door clicked and the portal was slipped open quietly. She smiled with relief when she saw who had entered. “You have been to see him?” she asked, coming to her feet.

“Yes.”

“How is he?”

“As well as can be expected. He sent me to give a message to his men,” Celene explained.

“They are well?”

Celene nodded, then lowered her head. “For the time being.”

“Have you found out who is to be the first?”

Bleak misery entered Celene’s eyes. “Yes.” She brought her hands up and covered her face as silent sobs began to wrack her slim body. She leaned against Rachel as that woman took her in her arms.

“We can do nothing for them, Celene,” Rachel whispered around the constriction in her own throat. “I wish to the Prophetess we could.”

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

He came fitfully awake as his cell door was thrown open. His heart thudding in his chest, he looked up at the trio of hard-faced men who entered his cell. They came to him, two kneeling at his feet to hold his ankles firmly to the floor, while the third bent over with a strange-looking implement and slid the working end under one of the heavy links in the leg iron chain.

Conar flinched as the jaws of the cutter snipped through the link, but was relieved to feel the heavy chain fall away from his left ankle then his right. He didn't speak to the guards, knowing they wouldn't answer. The two kneeling down beside him were glaring back at him with sheer malice and he didn't think he wanted to give them any reason to lash out with those meaty fists that were restraining him.

The third man stood up and unhooked the length of manacle chain from the wall and Conar's numb arms plopped uselessly down into his lap. He could feel the blood tingling into his hands and had to grit his teeth with the pain. He couldn't have resisted the man unlocking his manacles even if he had tried for there was no way for him to lift his hands.

"Get him up!" the third man ordered and the two at Conar's feet lifted him none-too gently and held him erect. Without another word, the three marched him from the cell and down the opposite end of the long, narrow corridor through which he had been brought the day before.

Shuffling along in their taut clutches, Conar's legs were painning him, as well. The blood was rushing into his legs and feet and the pins-and-needles pricking was uncomfortable at best. He wondered where they were taking him, but didn't think they'd tell him should he ask. Besides, he thought with bitter rancor, it really didn't matter since he couldn't do anything about it, anyway.

The guards stopped in front of a low metal door, unlocked it and dragged him through, careless of whether or not he banged his head on the low overhang. Luckily he had time to stoop down before they forced him through the opening.

Once inside the room, Conar was thrown to the floor and the men retreated, locking the door behind their exit.

"Sons-of-bitches," he muttered as he pushed himself up off the floor. He looked around him, his forehead wrinkling with puzzlement. "Where the hell am I?" he asked, aloud.

The room was massive, the walls sheer rock that appeared seamless. The floor was equally slick and in the middle was a pool of water, maybe thirty feet in diameter, with a concrete slab sitting directly in the center of the blue water. Above the pool, hanging well out of reach, was a vast chandelier with tall tapers blazing to illuminate the chamber. Set high along the twenty foot high walls were torches to add additional light to the underground room.

Walking over to the pool, Conar looked down into the water and gauged its depth to be no more than five feet at the most. The bottom of the pool was a startling white, again seamless, and the water a clear, clear blue.

Looking closely at the concrete slab sitting about two feet up from the surface of the water, Conar's blood ran cold.

"Shit," he whispered, viewing the four iron rings which were stuck into the corners of the concrete, two at the top of the seven foot long rectangular slab and two at the bottom. He didn't like the looks of the thing and backed away, fearing it.

There was no other entrance or exit into or out of the room for he checked closely. There didn't appear to be any peepholes into the room, either. Searching about him, he found nothing he could use for a weapon, so he sat down along one wall and waited.

He didn't have long to wait.

The door opened and the two guards who had manhandled him to the room came through the door and stood to either side of the low passage. Two more followed, swords drawn. Close on their heels, two burly warriors, each at least seven feet tall, stooped through the door, Rylan Hesar in tow.

"Ry!" Conar called out, coming to his feet.

Rylan smiled crookedly at his friend. "Fancy meeting you here, McGregor."

He would have gone to Rylan, but the guards whose weapons were drawn stepped in front of him, blocking his way. He didn't fear dying for he didn't think these swords could kill him, but he really didn't know for sure. From the expressions on the guards' faces, he knew they hoped he at least try to get past them.

"Don't give 'em an excuse, Conar," Rylan warned as he was shoved toward the pool.

"What are you going to do to him?" Conar demanded.

"Good morning, McGregor."

Conar's head whipped around and he saw Jaleel Jaborn entering the chamber. Behind him was his lap dog, Guil. The two men were flanked by four guards whose loaded crossbows bore quarrels too similar to Conar's own to be anything else.

"Storm retrieved these for me a long time ago," Jaleel quipped as he reached out to lovingly stroke one of the black crystal shafts.

Grinding his teeth in anger, Conar asked again what Jaborn intended to do with his friend.

"If I remember correctly," Jaborn commented, "you were taught to swim by this man, weren't you, McGregor?"

Rylan turned his head and stared at the pool, not missing the iron rings set in the concrete. He looked at _

Conar. He could see worry clouding his friend's eyes just as he knew fear was clouding his own.

"Let him go, Jaborn," he heard Conar ask. "You have me; you don't need my friends."

Jaleel Jaborn grinned nastily. "Neither do you." He motioned to the men holding Rylan.

Conar's heart bumped frantically in his chest and he stepped forward, afraid for Hesar.

"What do you want me to do, Jaborn?" he asked. "Whatever it is, I'll do it if you'll let him go."

"Don't beg him, Conar!" Rylan spat as the two guards who had brought Conar to the chamber stepped up to take hold him while the two who had brought Rylan in jumped down into the pool. He tried to twist away from the ones holding him as they picked him up between them and swung him into the water.

Conar shouted with fury as Rylan sank beneath the pool's surface. His friend's wrists were heavily manacled, as his own had been, and the weight of the iron dragged him down toward the pool's bottom.

"Calm yourself, McGregor," Jaleel laughed. "They'll get him up."

Rylan was jerked up by the two guards in the water and brought to the surface, flinging wet hair out of his angry eyes. He cursed at the guards who levered him up out of the water and slammed him down on the slab. He struggled, but they soon had his wrists and ankles secured firmly to the four iron rings.

"This is a most ingenious device," Jaleel said, walking over to the pool and looking down at Hesar. "My great-great grandfather devised it, himself."

"Tell me what you want, Jaborn," Conar grated out. "Whatever it is--"

"Don't give the bastard the satisfaction, Conar!" Rylan shouted. "If I've got to die, I don't want it to be hearing you grovel before shit like him!"

"You're not going to die!" Conar shouted back. He lunged at the guards who held swords on him and tried to get to Jaborn, but fell as he was pushed from behind. He hit the floor hard, stunned, and felt himself being dragged to his feet.

"As I was saying before being so rudely interrupted," Jaborn continued, "this form of execution was devised to test a man's bravery, his strength, and his determination."

Conar bucked against the men holding him, but he was no match for their brute strength. They easily subdued him, leaving him snarling with frustration and fury.

"You see," Jaleel explained, "the platform in the center of the pool is attached to a counter balance weight. The weight is controlled by a lever in the room beyond." He indicated the wall to his right. "Once the lever is unhooked from its latch, the platform begins to descend through the water. The time it takes for the platform to reach the bottom of the pool varies with the weight of the man strapped down to it. It can take anywhere from five minutes to an hour."

Conar understood what the bastard was going to do and he screamed in outrage. "You can't do this!"

"Oh, but I can, McGregor," Jaleel said reasonably. "As your friend is lowered into the water, you have, oh, I'd say fifteen to twenty minutes from the looks of him, to figure out how to unlock those bands around his wrists."

"They can be unlocked," Guil giggled. "I've seen it done only once, but it can be done."

"If you don't succeed," Jaleel warned him, "the platform will go all the way to the bottom with your friend in tow."

Rylan slowly closed his eyes and began to mutter the Prayer of Forgiveness.

Conar was panting for breath, his fear making the pulse in his neck throb so hard it was visible to the men holding him. He bucked, letting his full weight slump in their grasp, but they lifted him up, keeping tight control on his arms.

"Now, McGregor," Jaleel told him, "if you can unlock his manacles before he drowns, I swear to you I will set him free. He'll be taken outside these walls and allowed to go on his way. If you don't--" He spread his hands. "Like I said, you don't need friends when you have me!"

"You son-of-a-bitch!" Conar yelled at him. He struggled with his captors, seething with rage as Jaleel and Guil headed for the door. "Your fight is with me; not him. You want to kill someone, kill me!"

"I can't do that, McGregor," Jaleel assured him. "I want you to live, especially so if you aren't able to unlock Hesar's manacles. I want you to live knowing you couldn't save your friend's life and was the cause of him dying in the first place!"

"Shut up!" Rylan screamed. "Shut the fuck up, you sniveling pog! He's not to blame for anything!"

"If he doesn't save you, Hesar," Jaleel reasoned, "he will have been the cause of your death. Why do you think I brought you and the other's here?"

Rylan cursed him, laying all the revenge of hundreds of years of Viragonian warriors at Jaborn's doorstep. The Hasdu laughter only added more fuel to his rage and he leveled one more epithet at Jaleel Jaborn.

"He'll avenge me, nomad! Conar will avenge me!"

Jaleel chortled with hilarity as he ushered Guil ahead of him from the room. He ignored Conar's own shouts of anger and called all but the two guards holding his enemy from the room.

Rylan spat at the two men who climbed up out of the pool and left him chained to the slab. "May your cocks fall off you sons-of-whoring bitches!"

"They have no tongues or cocks," one of the men holding Conar laughed. "They are eunuchs!"

"Larn! Fedor! Come!" someone outside the chamber called and the two men shoved Conar away from them and laughed as he crashed heavily to the stone floor.

As the door slammed shut and the lock was thrown into place, Rylan lifted his head and watched Conar sit up.

"A fine mess I've got me into, huh, McGregor?" he quipped.

"Shut up, Hesar," Conar grouched as he crawled over to the pool and dropped down into the water. He sucked in his breath with the coldness.

"It'll damned sure draw your balls up in your ass, won't it?" Rylan joked.

"How are the others?" Conar asked as he waded over to Rylan and looked down at the band holding his left wrist.

"I don't know about the others, but Brell was complaining to the heavens when I was so rudely awakened this morning."

Conar pulled on the band.

"How's it look?" Rylan asked, craning his head up to have a look for himself at the bands.

"I don't--" Conar started to say when the platform shifted, jerking an inch downward.

Rylan lowered his head and stared up at the chandelier. "Can you do it?" he asked in a quiet voice.

Conar felt like crying. He would try, he knew he would try; he knew he had to, but he also knew it would be nigh impossible to find a way to unlock the bands holding his friend to the concrete slab. He waded around to the other side.

The platform shifted downward again, lowering six inches in one plunge.

"If it's all the same to you, McGregor," Rylan told him in a breathless quiver, "I'd like to get up now."

"Hush, Rylan," Conar asked him. He fumbled with the lock and felt something give.

The platform dropped another six inches.

"That's a pretty lady you have," Rylan said and could hear the fear in his own voice. "Sweet-tempered, too."

Conar glanced at his friend's sweating face. "Cat? Sweet-tempered?" He looked back down at the lock and twisted it. Something moved and the pin holding the manacle in place slid out half an inch. "Are you sure we're talking about the same woman, Hesar?"

The platform shifted another six inches into the water.

"Pretty little thing," Rylan answered, his breath coming in quick little pants of fear. "Big hazel eyes and light brown hair?"

The manacle lock's pin slid another half inch out of the lock. Conar felt the band give way and nearly whooped with relief as Rylan pulled his hand free.

The platform slipped another six inches and water began to flood over the slab, wetting Rylan's backside.

"Ah, McGregor," he said, nervously. "I'd take it as a personal favor if you'd hurry!" He twisted until he was half out of the water, bracing himself with his right hand.

Conar waded back around to his left side and took hold of the lock. He pinched the pin between his thumb and index finger and began to jiggle it as he had found he had to do to get the thing loose.

The platform seemed to drop out from under Rylan Hesar and the water lapped up his legs and waist to pool at his chest. He turned frightened eyes to Conar who had stilled, his own sapphire eyes wide with sudden alarm as he looked up at Rylan.

"Hurry," Rylan whispered. "Conar, hurry."

The Outlander could hear the trembling plea in his friend's voice. Fear was already turning his normally ruddy face pale. Rylan's pants were becoming painful to hear and there was a shudder in his chest every time he drew in a breath. Conar bent over the edge of the slab and plucked at the pin. He lost his tenuous grip on the pin and as he did, the platform lowered again.

"Conar!" Rylan gasped, the water up to his neck. He strained to push himself up as far as the restraint on his left wrist would allow.

"Be still, Rylan," Conar begged. He almost had the pin out of the lock. He dug his fingernails into the metal and jerked. The band slipped open.

Rylan yanked his hand free, whimpering with relief. He pushed himself up, sitting and scrambling for the band which held his right leg to the slab, but unable to reach it. He watched Conar take in a deep breath and lower himself in the water.

The platform shifted.

"Conar!" Rylan screamed for with the platform's descent, the water was just under his chin. It lapped at his lips and he spat, bringing his hands up to wipe at his face.

He could see the pin. It was wedged deeper in the ankle band than either of the two pins in the wrist bands. He plucked at it with his nails and kept losing it. His air was running out, his lungs aching, but he tried twice more before shooting to the surface and gasping a mouthful of air.

Rylan had seen the look of desperation on Conar's face when he had popped up out of the water. For just an instant, their gazes had met before Conar dropped back into the water. There had been no hope in that wild look. No hope at all.

The platform jerked, bringing the water up over Rylan's lips. He moaned with fear, striving to stretch his neck in order to rid himself of the water. He sucked in deep drafts of air through his nostrils, wondering with each intake if it would be his last.

The pin wiggled and Conar strained harder to pull it partially out of the lock before he had to go up for more air. His lungs were hurting, his head throbbing for lack of oxygen, but still he stayed beneath the water, trying to make the pin slide out.

The platform lowered another fraction of an inch and the water lapped up Rylan's nostrils.

"Oh, god!" Rylan cried out. "Please!"

Hesar knew he was going to die. He could feel it. Even as Conar lunged to the surface and gulped in enough air to sustain him for a few minutes, Rylan Hesar knew it was futile. He knew it because Conar had deliberately not looked at him. He knew it because with every breath he took now, a fine mist of water entered his nose. He knew it because this was to be part of a horrible punishment meant to destroy Conar McGregor.

"I'm sorry, Conar," Rylan sobbed, tears dripping down his cheeks to ease into the water.

The pin came half-way out of the lock and Conar clenched his jaw, willing himself to stay beneath the water. He felt the platform shift and looked up quickly, still seeing only Rylan's chin beneath the surface. He lowered his head, plucking at the pin feverishly.

The platform lowered two feet all at once and Rylan Hesar was submerged beneath the lapping waves.

“No!” Conar thought he heard. He let go of the pin and pushed away from the bottom, shooting around Rylan’s back. He got beneath his friend and levered him, pushing him upward and shot up beside his head, relief washing over him as he saw Rylan gasping for air.

“It’s--no--good--” Rylan told him.

“Breathe!” Conar told him. “Just breathe.”

“Conar--” Rylan cried.

“Just breathe, Rylan!” Conar screamed. He sucked in a great breath and let go of Hesar, kicked out, and dove down to his friend’s left leg where he picked at the pin, wiggling it.

Rylan fell back into the water, holding the deep breath he had taken. He could feel Conar yanking at his left leg and wondered why the man just didn’t give up. There was no way to free him and it was only a matter of moment’s before he drowned. Conar with him if his friend didn’t soon stop.

“The sea can take his life,” Rylan heard Occultus saying to the men of the Wind Force long ago. “Water can claim him. He must be taught to swim better than any man alive to stay alive should the water try to take him.”

Hesar could see Conar’s straining face as he tried to dislocate the pin; but he knew even if McGregor was able to do so, there was still one more pin holding him to the slab.

“Give up, Conar,” he thought, loosing the last of the air in his lungs. “Give up, my dear, dear friend before you die, too.”

He shot up to the surface, gasped for air and then dove, scrambling for Rylan’s back. He braced Hesar’s body with his own and levered up, pushing with all his strength so Rylan could take in air.

The platform moved, sinking all the way to the bottom of the pool.

Instant despair took hold of Conar McGregor. He knew at that moment, as he had known all along but refused to accept, that Rylan Hesar was going to die. He could feel the man twitching as he held him and felt hands clawing at his own, trying to push him away. He tightened his hold, clutching Rylan to him, refusing to let go. Nails gouged into his hands, hurting him, raking across his knuckles, but still he held on.

Rylan no longer had feeling in his body. He was losing consciousness, the blackness already speckled his peripheral vision. He was losing strength, as well, as he tried to unhook Conar’s hands from around his middle. He slapped at those strong, powerful hands, then grasped his friend’s right wrist and yanked, hoping Conar would understand.

Something tore loose inside Conar and he released his hold on Rylan. His air was almost gone and he knew his battle to keep Rylan Hesar alive was almost over. He felt Rylan pulling on his arm and he kicked out, moving through the water until he was in front of his old friend.

Rylan used the last of his waning life to reach out to Conar. He laid his hand on Conar’s scarred cheek, smiled, then shook his head, his gaze pleading with Conar to understand.

“It’s not your fault, my friend,” he thought, then he opened his mouth to let the water in.

Conar’s eyes went huge in his pallid face and he violently shook his head, denying what Rylan was trying to do. Even though he knew it was over, that there was nothing he could do, he shot to the surface, drew in breath and would have plunged back down into the water had not someone grabbed a handful of his hair and stopped him. Other hands went under his shoulders and began levering him up.

“Let go of me! Let go!”

Yelping with fury and pain, he fought the hands that pulled him out of the water, kicking and screaming and lashing out as though the hounds of hell were attacking him. He gouged and hit and twisted viciously, cursing the hands that held him back.

“Rylan!” he screamed, struggling to break free and help his friend.

Belial drew back his fist and brought Conar McGregor’s screaming to an end.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The early afternoon sun bore down hot on the encampment of the Samiel. Beyond, in the shimmering sands of the desert, spirals of heat danced about the dunes and tiny whirlwinds skipped about playing tag. Occasionally, the palm fronds over the tents would clack against one another and an errant breeze would tiptoe through; but for the most part, the heat ruled the encampment, making tempers short and bodies sweat.

"We have been at this all night, nomad!" Shalu protested, tipping his water skin over his glistening face to cool himself. "We are no closer to finding a way inside that bastard's lair than we were at midnight!"

"Even if we were to get inside those damned walls," Rupine cautioned, "what are the odds of us finding Khamsin and getting him out?"

"Little to none," Asher grumbled.

"You men are pathetic!" Sajin shouted at them, directly his heated glare at Shalu. "Did you give up so easily when the Domination had control of Serenia?"

"We had Conar to leave us, then!" Shalu shot back. "And all his powers in the bargain!" He slammed his water skin down beside him. "We, Montyne and myself, had powers in Serenia. Here, we have nothing!"

Sabrina swung her head and looked at Chase. Her lover's face was bleak, his heart showing in the pale blue of his eyes. She knew he was worried that his friends were being mistreated and that he could do nothing to help them sitting here with the men of the Samiel. Also, she knew he was trying to put himself in Conar McGregor's place, trying to feel what that warrior was feeling and beginning to understand just how hopeless the situation was for him and the men sitting here arguing. She turned her gaze to Meggie Ruck and was found the old woman watching her.

Meggie cocked her head toward one of the tents and Sabrina nodded. She glanced around, caught Kharis' eye and looked toward the same tent. At Kharis' almost imperceptible lowering of his head, she got up and followed Meggie.

"Chaseton?" Meggie called out as she held open the tent flap. When Chase glanced up at her, she smiled. "Could I speak with you a moment, lad?"

He wanted to stay with the others, try to figure out a way they could get into the fortress. He shook his head, but Sabrina called him, as well, and he sighed with impatience. Getting to his feet, he looked an apology at Sajin.

Meggie's face was stern when he entered the tent for she had seen that look. Nothing angered her more than a man thinking he was being put upon by a woman. As he entered the tent, somewhat surprised to see Sabrina and Kharis there, as well, she tore into him as though he were a feast goose set before a starving peasant.

"Let me tell you something, Chase Montyne!" Meggie snarled, pointing a finger at him. "I've never thought you to be one of them mindless men who thinks a woman's place is at the stove and on her back, but watching you just then giving Ben-Alkazar that condescending look as if to say you're patronizing me, I ain't so sure no more!"

Chase stared at her, his jaw dropping open. He swung his attention to Sabrina and found her glaring back at him like he had just committed the most vile of social blunders.

"And one more thing," Meggie snapped. "When you're called, boy, you'd best come right then from now on. Do you take my meaning, Montyne?"

He snapped his mouth shut with an audible click and his pale blue eyes narrowed into thin slits of pique. He looked at Sabrina, seeing her regarding him with a steady warning, then jerked his gaze to Kharis. He saw the man shrug.

"You'd better listen to her, Your Grace," Kharis told him.

"Sit yourself down," Meggie commanded, annoyed with him. "It fair puts a crick in my neck to be staring up at you."

Chase's mouth tightened for just a second, then he opened it to bellow at the old woman, but Sabrina's cool voice cut across his hot temper like a smithy's hammer.

"Do as she says, Montyne," Sabrina ordered.

"Now, just one damned minute!" Chase yelled.

"Now, boy!" Meggie shouted back and glanced at Kharis just long enough for that man to walk to Chase and push him forcefully down onto a stool.

"Goddamn it!" Chase hissed, more furious than ever. He craned his neck to glare at Kharis and would have berated the man for daring to lay hands on him had Meggie not stepped forward and grasped his chin, pulling his head around and not giving him a chance to do so.

"You knew Hern Arbra," Meggie said, staring down into his face. "And Brelan Saur."

"Of course--" Chase tried to say but the old woman's grip, more powerful than he would have imagined, pinned his mouth shut.

"And you know Sentian Heil and Andre Belvoir," Meggie interrupted.

"Aye!" Chase managed to growl through his clenched jaw.

"And would you be knowing what all them men had in common?" the old woman queried.

"They are in the Wind Force," he bit out, snatching his head from her control. "What of it?"

"That ain't all they had in common, Montyne," Meggie said. She narrowed her gaze. "You think about it a minute and then I think you'll remember what it was that forged a common link between all them men!" She folded her arms over her ample bosom.

"They were Conar's men," Chase snapped. "They all loved him."

"And?" Meggie prompted.

"And what?" Chase exploded. "I don't know what the hell it is you want me to say!"

"Think, Montyne," Sabrina encouraged him. "Think of the women those men were close to. Each of them was. Each of them had a special lady to whom he owed his allegiance."

Chase flicked his annoyed stare from Meggie to Sabrina. "I don't know what you're--" He stopped, his face suddenly registering confusion, then brightening as he realized what it was they wanted him to remember. "They were all Sentinels," he whispered.

"Aye, lad," Meggie sighed. Sometimes, she thought, trying to get a man to use his brain was like pulling eye teeth.

He looked over at Kharis. "You?" he questioned. At Kharis' nod, he turned his gaze to Sabrina. "Why didn't you tell me?"

His lady fanned her hand. "You had no need to know at the time, Montyne."

"The only Sentinel in that Abbadon place is Sentian Heil, but even if the abilities granted to him by Elizabeth McGregor were still available to him, he couldn't use them there," Meggie reminded him. "No more so than my bonny lad can use his in this heathen land."

"Once inside the walls of the fortress," Sabrina said, "one of the Daughters who resides there can link with this Heil and, through her, he can be granted a limited amount of power in order to help us."

“Us?” Chase questioned, beginning to feel a cold finger of warning scraping down his spine.

“Meggie and I,” Sabrina answered. “We can get past the guards easily enough--“

“Wait a minute!” Chase thundered, coming to his feet. “Wait just a damned minute! Who the hell said you women could go to Abbadon?”

Meggie cast an irritated look at Sabrina, then unfolded her arms and pointed a wrinkled finger at Chase.

The Prince of Ionary sailed backwards through the air, flying over the stool on which he had been sitting, and crashed down on the sleeping pallet at the rear of the tent. He opened his mouth to speak, but found his arms and legs flung wide, lashed down to the pallet by unseen hands and held there. His eyes went wide as saucers as Sabrina and Meggie walked over to him and stared down at him with the same kind of look his mother had bestowed upon him as a child when he’d disappointed her.

Meggie leaned over him. “Any questions, lad?”

Chase’s face was bright red with surprise. “You, Meg? You’re a Daughter of the Multitude?”

The old woman’s slow, victorious grin was not that of a old woman. It was the teasing moue of a young girl.

“Fooled you all, didn’t I, lad?”

Montyne just stared at her for a long time, trying to grasp the implications of Meggie Ruck being a sorceress. When he finally found his tongue, he asked in a little boy’s contrite voice if he could get up now.

Meggie waved her hand over him and the invisible restraints were removed. “Now,” she said as he sat up, “this is what we’re gonna do, lad.”

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

When Conar came to, his head was hanging on his chest and he was sitting in a wooden, straight-back chair which was bolted to the floor. He swung his head, trying to shake away the grogginess of the blow that had damned near broken his jaw. Flexing that jaw, he grimaced, feeling the bruise that pulled at his chin. Slowly, cautiously, he lifted his head and tried to focus. His vision was blurred and the horrible aching in his temple signaled another one of his headaches that seemed to be coming too frequently and too violently of late. He tried to put a hand up to his face and found he could not.

He was tied to the chair, his arms behind him.

"Damn," he breathed, pulling against his bonds.

For the longest time, he could not remember anything but the wicked hit that had put out his lights. Nothing before that flashed across his memory as he tried to wiggle his wrists free of the hemp which bound him. Finally, sighing with defeat, he let his head slump to his chest once more and stared down into his lap, trying to make the headache go away.

"Is it bad?"

Conar raised his head and tried once more to focus. The strange aura that always proceeded the worst of his headaches was making it supremely difficult to focus. Little squiggles of light were zapping from the corner of his vision, making his nausea worse and causing the blinding pain in his right temple to pound more furiously.

He squinted one eye and turned his head, searching for the source of the voice that had spoken. Finally, he caught just a bulk off to his right and swung his head gingerly that way until his tunnel vision could zero in the speaker.

"How's it going, brat?" Tyne Brell asked him.

Conar blinked, squeezing his lids together for a moment until he could finally focus. He shook his head, gagging at the intense sickness that movement brought, and the agony, but his vision cleared somewhat and he could finally make out Brell lying on the floor about thirty feet away, watching him.

"You don't look none the worse for wear, Conar," Tyne said conversationally.

He strained against the ropes binding him.

"I don't think you're going to have any more luck than I did at getting free, old friend," Tyne chuckled. "These bastards tie a mean knot, they do."

Conar let out a weary breath and squinting at Brell, seeing the ropes anchoring his friend to the floor. Tyne's wrists and ankles were spread so far apart, the man had to be in excruciating pain.

"That's gotta hurt," Conar mumbled.

"I ain't enjoying the position I find myself in," Tyne acknowledged. He turned his head from Conar and looked up at the ceiling. "Not at all."

Conar craned his head back, following Tyne's look and drew in a quick, shocked gasp. Above Brell's helpless body, Tyne's own sword dangled by a thin rope tied around the hilt. The sharp, lethal point was aimed directly at Brell's heart.

"May I direct your attention to your immediate left along the ceiling, old friend," Tyne suggested. He swung his head toward Conar. "You'll see why I'm not all that overjoyed to find myself lying here."

Slowly, Conar turned his head to find the end of the rope which held Tyne's sword suspended above him running atop one of the flaming torches set at the top of the walls. The fire was only a few inches below the hemp and already the rope was smoldering, tiny wisps of white vapor wafting up among the crossbeams which supported the floor above.

"I've been lying here," Tyne said in a dry voice, "trying to remember the calculations Hern taught me. By my reckoning, I've got about ten more minutes before I'm ventilated." He snorted. "Maybe even less time than that."

It all came crashing back to him with the realization that Tyne was in deep trouble. The memory of Rylan's death, of how his friend had died, shook Conar to the very core of his being and he threw back his head and howled with rage.

Tyne flinched, the sound of Conar's war cry making his heart leap in his chest. "For Alel's sake, McGregor! Don't do that!"

"Alel's sake!" Conar spat, lowering his head and glowering at Tyne. "Don't speak to me of that bastard, Brell!" He twisted violently in the chair, straining against the restraints.

Brell's black eyes widened with shock. "Don't be talking of Him like that, Conar! We're in enough trouble as it is!"

"And He won't be freeing us of it, either!" came the bitter reply.

Tyne wondered briefly what they'd done to Conar to make the man lose his faith in his god. There was a look on McGregor's face that said he no longer put any trust in the Higher Powers that governed them all. There was also something terrible in that stony stare that said Conar was on the verge of having a breakdown.

"Don't struggle like that, Conar," Tyne said in a calm voice. "It's not helping me."

"If I don't get lose, Brell," Conar shouted at him, "that Widowmaker of yours is going to pierce you. Is that what you want?"

Tyne tried to put as much rationality in his voice as possible. "Conar," he said, "every time you pull against those ropes, my friend, it pulls the rope holding my sword higher toward the flame."

Conar stilled, jerking his gaze up toward the ceiling. How, he wondered, with a sinking heart, had he not seen the direction that rope took after it passed atop the flames. Traveling down the length of the hemp, he could only twist his head back just so far, but it was enough for him to realize that the end of the rope that held Tyne's sword was tied to his own wrists.

"If it's all the same to you," Tyne quipped, "I'd rather you didn't drag on that rope no more."

Those sapphire blue eyes slowly closed, squeezing tight. A heavy exhalation of breath: defeated and terribly, terribly desperate, pushed from Conar McGregor's nostrils.

"I think," Tyne said, "they mean for you to get free in time to stop the sword from falling as the flames bite through it, but in order to do so, you've got to move your wrists to untie them. Of course, every time you do, it tightens the tension on the rope and pulls it closer to the flame."

The Serenian warrior opened his eyes to see Brell grinning at him.

"Either way," Tyne chuckled, "I lose."

"Don't joke about it, Tyne!" Conar pleaded, understanding the cruelty of the game Jaborn had devised.

"Would you rather I laid here and bemoaned my fate, old friend?" Tyne asked. "I'm afraid that's not in my nature."

Conar cast his gaze up to the rope and tried to twist the bonds which held his wrists crossed behind him. He saw the rope overhead bob upward and stopped, drawing in his breath as one strand of the hemp snapped.

"I've been meaning to tell you," Tyne said, drawing Conar's attention to him. "That little lady you sent to give us your apology?"

He jerked his gaze from Tyne back up to the rope and held his breath, trying to ease his right wrist out from under the constriction of the hemp.

"Conar!" Tyne demanded, bringing McGregor's eyes back to him. When Brell saw he had his friend's regard, he grinned. "She's a fair one, ain't she?"

"Aye," Conar said, once more looking up to the rope. He rocked his right wrist back and forth over the hemp, gritting his teeth to the pain that motion caused, but relieved to know the movement didn't increase the tension.

"Celene was her name if I'm remembering it rightly," Tyne remarked. "That's a good Chalean name."

Conar glanced over at his friend, then returned his full attention to the ceiling. He could feel the blood he had drawn from his wrists while rubbing them against the hemp making the rope slick.

"Did she tell you what I told her?"

Conar's breath was coming in quick, fearful snatches and he shook his head slightly, giving Brell his answer and causing the horrible pain in his right temple to flare.

"I told her to tell you we were grown men quite capable of getting our own asses into mischief." Tyne clucked his tongue. "Looks like we did a bang up job of it, huh?"

"You're here because of me," Conar ground out, striving to ease his blood-slick hand out from under one loop of the rope binding it. Overhead, the rope bobbed upward and another strand snapped. He stopped instantly.

"You know, Conar," Tyne said with a droll sigh, "despite what you think, the world don't revolve around you, son."

"You wouldn't be where you are if it hadn't been for me," Conar spat.

Tyne clenched his jaws together as he heard the pop of another hemp strand overhead. He glanced up and saw the rope entirely too close to the flame for his liking.

"Rylan's gone, ain't he?" Tyne asked, his gaze steady on the smoke rising up from the hemp.

Conar didn't answer. He didn't want Tyne to know. Unless he could get his wrist free, Tyne would be finding that out for himself soon enough. He pulled gently against the restraint and felt his right wrist slide out further from beneath the rope. The movement did not seem to have caused any reaction in the tension.

"He loved you, Conar," Tyne said, understanding his friend's silence to be an acknowledgment of Hesar's death. Somehow he knew Conar had tried to save Rylan, as he was trying to save him, and that effort, like this one, had been futile. He turned his gaze to Conar's intent face as the Serenian stared unblinkingly up at the ceiling. "We all love you, my friend."

"I know," Conar bit out, the truth of that statement cutting through him like a hot knife.

Another strand popped and the sword dangling above Tyne dropped down an inch.

"And we don't blame you," Tyne was quick to say, alternately his gaze from Conar's profusely sweating face to the gently spinning sword hovering above him. "We've never blamed you for anything and we never will."

"Hush, Tyne," Conar ordered. He could feel his wrist coming free.

"You take too damned much responsibility for things out of your control, Conar," Tyne charged. He went perfectly still as the sword dropped another inch or two.

"I'm almost free, Brell," Conar told him as he carefully slipped his right wrist from under the rope. Flexing his hand, sticky with his own blood, he gently slipped his right index finger under the rope binding his left wrist and lifted it.

The rope overhead went no closer to the flame.

"The thing is, Conar," Tyne said, "caa-caa happens."

Conar slowly turned his head and looked at Brell. "Caa-caa?"

"Shit," Tyne clarified. "Shit happens." He tore his gaze from the sword, locking it on Conar's face. "Ain't no one to blame for it when it does. In Chale, we call it Murph's Law: whatever can go wrong, will."

Conar looked back up at the ceiling. Very gently, he began to wriggle his left wrist out from beneath the hemp.

"Still," Tyne went on, "it ain't nobody's fault when it does."

"I've been meaning to tell you," Conar said, feeling his left wrist coming free, "you talk too much, Brell."

"The curse of all Chaleans," Tyne sighed. Another strand popped, drawing Tyne's immediate notice, and he groaned with alarm as the sword began to slowly twirl above him. He caught in his breath and it was at that moment he noticed something that had, until then, entirely escaped his attention. Allowing his gaze to move along the rope, he nearly cursed out loud as he realized the rope which was attached to the sword was running through a small hole in the stone wall while another rope, lying parallel to it, and almost unseen in the shadows at the ceiling, ran down to the floor and to Conar's chair. Beginning to realize it wasn't Conar's bonds that were controlling the tension on the rope, but unseen hands that were tugging it upward, Tyne knew a fury unlike anything he had ever known. He glanced at Conar, wondering if he knew that, but he could see his friend very slowly, very carefully getting up out of the chair in which he'd been tied.

"Conar--" Tyne began.

"Hush, Tyne!" Conar ordered, coming to his feet slowly. He took one step forward.

The rope tied to Tyne's sword made a hissing sound and both men jerked their heads up, staring in horror as the last of the strands popped and let go.

"No!" Conar shouted. He made a lunge for Tyne, intent on throwing himself over his friend's body, hoping the sword point would go no further than his own thundering heart.

Brell's eyes went wide as he stared up at the sword beginning to fall toward him. He snapped his lids shut, unwilling to see the blade plummet into his chest. He heard Conar's yelp of pain, then felt a pain of his own, so intense and so overwhelming, he knew he would not survive it. Opening his eyes, he looked up into the stricken stare of Conar McGregor.

"Tyne," he heard Conar whisper on a catch of breath.

Tyne forced his gaze from Conar and could see the hilt of his sword. Craning his head up, he saw the blood first, Conar's blood, dripping down the blade and onto his chest. Lifting his head up further, he could see the blade centered squarely in his own chest. Beneath him, he could feel the pooling of his blood seeping under his cotton shirt. Slowly lowering his head, he tore his gaze from the hands which were wrapped around the blade of his sword, just under the blade guard.

"Now, that has to hurt," Tyne whispered as he laid his head down on the floor.

Conar didn't feel the deep cuts in his palms. He had tried to protect Tyne's body with his own but he hadn't been quick enough. All he'd had time to do was try to catch the sword as it fell. The blade had sliced through his flesh and driven its deadly point deep in Tyne's chest.

"I'm sorry," Conar sobbed, gripping the sword so tightly his blood flowed freely onto Tyne, mixing with his friend's. "I'm so sorry, Tyne."

Tyne turned his head and his gentle black eyes found the tearful sapphire orbs that were nearly closed with guilt.

"Don't grieve for me, Conar," Tyne whispered. He smiled, wishing he could embrace this most trusted and loved of friends. "Please don't grieve for me."

Conar McGregor was trembling so violently he did not realize his shudders of agony were causing great pain to the man on the floor. The sword, buried deep in Tyne Brell, was quivering with every sob that tore through Conar, but Tyne would not tell him.

"You aren't to blame, Conar," Tyne said, death beginning to glaze his beautiful eyes.

"I'm sorry," Conar repeated, his face screwed up into a mask of heart-wrenching despair. He lowered his head, sobbing wracking his body.

"Don't cry for me, Conar," Tyne asked him. "Look at me."

Conar shook his head, feeling his guilt riding him like a vicious trainer.

"I don't have all that much time to argue with you, brat," Tyne said, his voice quivering with the depth of his emotion.

Slowly, Conar lifted his head.

"Tell the others," Tyne said, his voice fading to a breath of sound. "Tell them I have gone--to make peace with--the Wind."

Tyne Brell, the Prince of Chale, was the second to die.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

They dragged him back to his cell and left him, his hands bleeding, his heart broken. He curled up in a tight ball in one corner of the cell, hid his face in his arms and cried. He didn't move as Celene came in with his food later that afternoon. He lay staring at the door, having taken himself to a place no one else could go.

"Milord," Celene called to him, aware of the guards who stood just inside the cell with her.

He did not want to be taken from that place where his mind had hidden him. His dry eyes were blank, seeing something beyond where his body lay in its fetal position on the cold stone floor. He had traveled on beyond tears; had journey past his mind-numbing grief. The inevitable had come to pass and he had accepted life's latest cruel blow as his due.

"Milord, I have your supper," Celene said. When he did not answer her, she laid the tray down beside him and put a gentle hand on his tense shoulder. "Milord?"

"Go away," he heard himself answer and wondered why his voice sounded so normal when the rest of him was anything but.

"Milord, you must eat," Celene said.

"No, I don't."

"Let him starve," one of the guards grated. "Come, woman."

Celene caressed his shoulder, was not surprised when he jerked away from her touch.

"They won't let me leave the food here, milord," she told him.

"Fine," he answered.

"Just take up the bastard's tray and come along, Celene!" the guard who had spoken before demanded. "He'll wish he'd eaten it when he don't get nothing 'til tomorrow night."

"Milord, please," Celene pleaded. She would have begged again had not a sudden bright light been thrust into the cell and she put her hand to shield her eyes to the glare.

"I've come to stitch his wounds," she heard the Prince's surgeon grumbled. For the first time, thanks to the light flooding the cell, she saw the small pool of blood which had coagulated under the Outlander's hands.

Conar was vaguely aware of one of the guards pulling Celene to her feet and thrusting her away. His lids flickered as the food tray was kicked roughly away, the metal bottom making a scratching sound as it skidded across the floor. He barely flinched as brutal hands yanked him upright and closed around his wrists, holding his hands out to the Healer.

"These are deeper than I thought," the surgeon clucked. "It will be several days before he will be able to use them." He rummaged in his bag and pulled out a bottle of astringent. "Hold him securely."

Celene could detect no movement at all as the fiery brew was poured into the gaping cuts in the Serenian's hands. Not even a flutter of his eyelids indicated he felt the pain of the astringent. Nor did he move a muscle as the suturing was done, the needle plied by the surgeon moving roughly through his flesh to bind close the cuts. His gaze was somewhere beyond the place in which he was trapped and the steady stare, unwavering and cold, was fixed.

The surgeon glanced up only once as he wrapped medicated linen around the Outlander's hands. He had been curious to see for himself the man an entire Emirate had gone to war over. Disappointed that the Serenian was not the ogre he had expected, but rather a very handsome

young man with twin scars that seemed to make his face all the more intriguing, the surgeon's hand became gentler as he wound the bandages into place.

"I am to give you something for the pain," the surgeon said and stilled as the young man's unblinking stare shifted to him.

"No."

"But--"

That alien gaze shifted away again and the cold face hardened even more.

"He has had a problem in the past with drug addiction," one of the guards holding Conar's arms remarked. "His Grace said he would refuse the narcotic."

The man's grip tightened. "Give it to him anyway."

Conar turned his head and looked at the man, then looked away again. His gaze met Celene's and he found comfort in the way she was watching him. His face softened just a little and he lowered his head. "Celene," the surgeon called. "I will need your help."

The woman came forward, kneeling down beside the surgeon. "Yes, milord?"

"Take off your sash and tie it securely just above his elbow."

"Why?" she asked.

"Do as you are told, woman!" the guard on Conar's left snarled.

Celene fumbled with the sash of her robe, drew it from her waist, and gently wrapped it around Conar's upper arm.

"Tie it tightly," the surgeon commanded.

Looping the two ends of her sash together, Celene tied the Serenian's arm. She winced at the puckered skin under the sash and looked down with alarm at the veins in the man's arm which had begun to stand up.

The surgeon once more rummaged in his bag and brought out a thin, hollow reed with a sharp point. Uncorking a bottle of milky liquid, he stuck the reed into the bottle, lowered his head to sip some of the potion up into the reed, putting his thumb over the blunt end to keep the medicine in.

"What are you going to do?" Celene asked.

Not bothering to answer, the surgeon took hold of Conar's arm and expertly drove the hollow tube into a distended vein.

Celene saw the Outlander jump, heard his intake of breath. She watched as he slowly lifted his head and his defeated gaze settled bleakly on her face. She wanted to cry for the look he gave her was pitiful.

"Untie the sash," the surgeon ordered and as Celene did so, he removed his thumb from the end of the tube and the liquid flowed freely into Conar's arm. "He'll sleep for a good six to eight hours," the surgeon said.

"May I stay with him?" she asked.

"Someone should," the surgeon answered, forestalling the guard's denial. "In case he should begin choking or the like."

Glaring at Celene's calm face, the guard on Conar's left snorted, letting the woman know he didn't think she should be allowed to stay.

The guards took the tray of spilled food with them as they left. They also locked Celene in with their prisoner after kicking a chamber pot in to her. "You want water left?" one asked.

"Please," she answered and was surprised when they left her with a full water skin.

Conar sat propped against the wall, his head drooping, his body already beginning to feel the weight of the drug dragging it down into slumber. He was barely aware of the woman moving to his side and pulling him down so that his head rested in her lap.

“Sleep, milord Conar,” she said, smoothing the hair back from his forehead.

He turned so that he was on his side and wrapped his right hand around her left thigh, holding her to him. His tongue was thick in his mouth, his mouth horribly dry, and he could not ask for the water he desperately wanted to ease away the thirst.

“They’ll not bother you for a few days,” she told him. Her hands were cool on his flesh. “Maybe by then help will have come.”

As the darkness closed around him, Conar knew there would be no help for him.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Jaleel Jaborn tapped lightly on Catherine's door, frowning when there was no answer from within. He tapped louder, then tried the handle. The door was bolted from the inside.

"Catherine?" he called through the panel. "It is me. Jaleel. Open the door."

From his room across the hall, Kalli Jaborn watched his older brother trying to gain entrance to the Tzarevna's room. His grin was wicked and his lips twitching with contempt.

"Perhaps you should have taken the lock from the inside of her door, Jaleel," Kalli suggested, "instead of just putting one on the outside to keep her in."

Jaborn swung his furious gaze to his brother. "Perhaps you should mind your business, whelp!"

Kalli shrugged. "I was only trying to be helpful, Jaleel."

Annoyed at his brother and furious with Catherine, Jaleel slammed his fist against the woman's door and yelled at her to open it. "I will have it broken down if you do not, Catherine!"

"Then do it!" was the angry shout from within.

Seething, Jaborn slapped at the door once more then turned on his heel and stomped away, leaving his young brother chuckling behind him.

"I don't think she likes you, Jaleel!" Kalli called after him.

Catherine, who had moved close to the door, heard the vile curse which reined down upon Kalli's head and wondered how long it would take the young man to wind his way through the hidden tunnels to her room.

She didn't have long to wait.

"You've put a burr under his tail, Cat," Kalli grinned as he came through the hidden panel. He plopped down on her bed and wagged his brows. "Couldn't find the way to get out of here, could you?"

Catherine snorted. She'd tried several times to pull on the sconce that Kalli had used to leave the room on his last visit, but had been unable to make the panel move.

"Why are you bothering me, child?" she asked.

Kalli shrugged. "Did I mention to you when I was here last that I've never been outside the walls of Abbadon?"

Seating herself wearily on the settee, Catherine just looked at him.

"I haven't," Kalli answered. "Not once in all my twenty-two years."

"How sad for you," Catherine quipped.

"Isn't it, though?" Kalli sighed. He turned over and lay on his belly, his knees crooked, ankles crossed, chin propped in his smooth hands. "That's one of the reasons I despise Jaleel as much as I do." He grinned. "Almost as much as I think *you* do."

"Is that why you are calling yourself helping me?" Catherine countered.

The smile slid slowly from Kalli's young face. "Jaleel has many enemies in this place, Cat. There are many who would like to see another hand rule Abbadon."

Catherine's eyebrow lifted. "A hand like yours, maybe?"

Kalli looked at her, his humor gone, replaced with sincerity. "I would make a good ruler for our people, Catherine. I am not the bastard Jaleel is."

"Few men are," Catherine quipped.

Swinging his legs to the floor, Kalli sat on the edge of her bed and looked at her. "Two of McGregor's men have been killed."

Pain washed over Catherine's face and she drew in a slow breath. "How?"

"One drowned and one was stabbed." He bent forward and clutched his hands between his spread knees. "McGregor was there each time they were murdered. He saw it happen."

Catherine hung her head. "Do you know how he is?"

"Sleeping at the moment," Kalli answered. "They drugged him."

She looked up sharply. "Why?"

Kalli shook his head. "Not important. What is it that Jaleel intends to wait two days before killing another of McGregor's friends?"

She stood up, began to pace to the room. "Is there nothing that can be done?" She stopped, stared at him. "Let me out of here, Kalli. Show me--" At his slow shake of the head, she nearly screamed at him. "Why not?"

"I will tell you this much," Kalli answered. "There is another woman here in the keep. A friend of my brother's, or so he thinks. She was planted here long ago by the same women to whom you owe your allegiance."

Hope flared in Catherine's heart. "There are other Daughters here?"

Kalli nodded. "Several. Maybe as many as two dozen. Most are foreign slaves who could have escaped long ago except for some reason they didn't." He snorted. "I don't think it was because they liked Abbadon all that much."

"Then why?" she asked, not understanding why any Daughter would deliberately stay in this vile place.

"Maybe they knew company was coming," Kalli said cryptically.

Catherine resumed her pacing. "This woman you speak of, is she powerful?"

"How should I know?" Kalli answered.

"Can you get word to her for me?"

Kalli shrugged. "I suppose."

Catherine went to him and knelt down before him. "Listen to me, Kalli." She put her hands on his arms and gripped him. "If you help us free Conar, I promise you I will see to it that the entire weight of his homeland and mine, and the combined might of many other countries, will put you on the throne of Rysalia!" She stared into his young face. "That is what you want, isn't it?"

He nodded slowly.

"Then it will be done if you can find a way for us to free my husband, to get him out of this fortress."

"Is that all?" Kalli quipped.

"Can you do it?" she asked, fusing her intense gaze with his smiling one.

"Yes, sweet one," he answered. "I can."

* * * *

"She won't open the damned door!" Jaleel snarled as he glared back at Guil.

"When she gets hungry," Guil laughed, "she'll open it."

Jaleel threw himself into his chair. "It's not good for the babe."

Guil's left brow crooked up. "The babe?"

Dropping his head to the back of his chair, Jaleel glowered at the ceiling, making a mental note to tell the plasterers a new coat of paint was needed on the elaborately scroll work along the borders.

"If I kill the brat or let it die, Catherine will never forgive me." Jaleel tapped his foot on the floor. "Despite the fact it's McGregor's spurting, what choice do I have but to make sure nothing happens to it?"

"You're really serious about making her your wife," Guil said, amazement making his voice sound higher than was normal.

"Yes, I am," Jaleel spat. He rocked his head toward Guil. "I was taken by her the first moment I laid eyes on her at the Palace of the Tzars."

"You became obsessed with her the moment you knew she'd let Conar McGregor between her milky-white thighs," Guil scoffed. "You want what is his."

Jaleel opened his mouth to deny that, but realized it was true. He squinted at his friend, then returned his gaze to the ceiling. "Do you think he loves her?"

Guil crossed his ankles. "I think perhaps he does. My thought is he would never have married the chit otherwise, knowing him as we do."

"As much as he loved Elizabeth McGregor?"

"I would imagine not. That was the kind of love few men ever experience." Guil looked at him. "Why?"

"But would you say he loves Catherine so blindly, so deeply, that anything that would cause her pain would hurt him, as well?"

Guil frowned, not liking the way the conversation had turned. "You'd best not do anything to that woman, Jaborn. Her father--"

"I intend to make her my wife," Jaleel interrupted. "I would do no more than what any husband would do."

The worry intensified on Guil's face. "Such as what?"

"Since he woke this morning, he has not said a word," Jaleel commented, ignoring the question. "He just sits there staring off into space."

Guil sniffed. "Maybe his mind's gone."

"No," Jaleel drawled out. "He's gathering his resources if I understand him as I think I do."

"Well," Guil replied, settling more comfortably in his chair, "you can't play any more games with him until his hands heal anyway."

Jaleel tapped his lower lip with the nail of his thumb. "That's not entirely true."

Instant interest perked up Guil's ears. "What are you planning, now, Jaborn?"

"You'll see," Jaleel smiled. His eyes were evil.

* * * *

He didn't protest when they came for him. He didn't struggle with them and he didn't help them, either. He allowed them to drag him along the corridor and shove him into still another underground room, this one small and also containing a chair bolted to the floor. He grunted as they shoved him into the chair and yanked his arms behind him to tie them to the slats along the back; but he didn't make a sound as his ankles were lashed to the chair legs.

After the guards left, he sat there, looking about him, wondering which of his friends they would bring before him here. He hoped with all his heart it wouldn't be Wyn.

"Not yet," he begged. "Please not him. Not yet."

Somewhere deep in Conar McGregor's soul, he knew he would be a raving lunatic long before they brought Wyn to his death. That he couldn't help his son, or any of his other friends, he had already accepted. When the door opened, he was only mildly curious to know which of his friends' deaths he would be responsible for this time.

Jaleel Jaborn and Guil Ben-Shanar Gehdrin entered together, each looking at him as though he were the best of entertainments. He turned his head away from their intent stares.

"How are your hands, McGregor?" Gehdrin asked him, chuckling.

He would not answer them. He kept his eyes averted.

"Have you realized that with every pull of those pins on Hesar's irons you lowered the platform into the water?" Jaleel asked him. "Or that with every tug on the ropes which held you yesterday you brought the rope closer to the flame?"

A thrust of pain drove deep in Conar's battered heart, but he would not give them the satisfaction of seeing just how much those words hurt him. He clenched his jaw, refusing to let fly the vindictive curses that longed to break free.

"You caused their deaths instead of helping them, McGregor," Jaleel was saying. "You have their souls on your conscience."

He knew that was true. Hearing Jaborn voice the words was like pouring salt on an open wound.

"But you had to try, didn't you, McGregor?" Guil sneered. "The warrior in you would allow for nothing less."

"It did him no good," Jaleel laughed. "He only caused his friends more pain than if he had not tried at all."

Conar closed his eyes, trying to shut out the man's cruel words.

"I've brought someone to see you," Jaleel said in a pleasant voice. "Someone I know you'll want to see."

He would not look around as the door opened again. He heard shuffling footsteps, but refused to look to see which man would die this time.

"I had to have her door battered in in order to get her out of her room," he heard Jaborn chortle.

Against his will, wishing he had the courage not to turn and look, Conar swung his head slowly around. The color drained from his face.

"I didn't want her awake for what is going to happen," Jaleel remarked as he began to untie the sash at his waist. "After all, we are to be married and such a thing as this could cause problems for us later on."

She was being held in Belial's thick arms, her head and feet dangling over the massive biceps. She was unconscious, that much Conar knew, and he thanked whatever deity looked after Catherine McGregor that she was.

Jaleel shrugged out of his robe, letting the heavy white folds pool at his bare feet. He stood there, his thickly-muscled body bare to Conar's sight.

"Lay her down, Belial."

"Don't," Conar pleaded, his voice hoarse. "Jaborn, I beg you."

"Beg all you want," Jaleel told him. "Although it will do no good, I will still relish hearing you plead with me."

"Don't shame her like this!" Conar begged.

"Oh," Jaleel assured him, "they aren't going to stay to watch this." He motioned the others out of the room.

"She'll never forgive you," Conar promised.

"She won't even know it's happened," Jaleel told him. "When she wakes, she will wake in her own bed."

“Jaborn,” Conar tried again, knowing it was useless, knowing the bastard was going to ravage Catherine right there on the floor in front of him. “I am begging you not to do this.” His voice was beginning to quiver with pain.

Jaborn went to her and knelt down between her legs, pushing them gently apart.

“Oh, my god, please don’t do this!” Conar pleaded with him.

“Not your god, but your master, McGregor,” Jaleel laughed. He leaned over Catherine and gently touched her face. “Don’t you think she is lovely, McGregor?” He looked back over his shoulder at Conar. “Not as lovely as Liza, but then I never got a chance to have her, did I?”

“Jaborn, please!”

“Watch, McGregor,” Jaleel said, his mouth twisted in a vicious taunt. “Watch while I mate with your woman.”

He twisted against the bonds but the ropes were tight, so tight he could not work his wrists at all. He jerked against the bonds around his ankles, but they too held secure.

“Jaborn, don’t!”

Jaleel put his hand on Catherine’s still breast and squeezed gently. “So lovely. So soft,” he whispered.

“Jaborn!”

The Hasdu slid his hand down to the hem of Catherine’s gown and slowly began to pull it up. “Her skin is like silk,” Jaleel remarked as he smoothed his palm over the crisp curls which nestled at the juncture of Catherine’s spread thighs.

“No!” Conar screamed, bucking violently. His blood was pounding in his temple and he thought he would pass out with the fear and horror filling his mind.

“Watch, McGregor,” Jaleel said and he took his manhood in his hands and lowered his body over Catherine’s.

Nothing yet had hurt him as much as watching his enemy take his woman. With every thrust of Jaborn’s shaft into Catherine’s defenseless body, a part of Conar’s mind disintegrated. A part of his soul was destroyed beyond repair. He looked away, unable to see the woman he loved shamed in such a manner. Tears rolled down his flushed cheeks and he hung his head as the sounds of Jaborn’s lust filled the small room. He whimpered, understanding this, too, was as much his fault as the deaths of Rylan Hesar and Tyne Brell.

As the last stroke of Jaleel’s revenge was thrust into Catherine’s unconscious body and the last grunt of pleasure escaped the man’s excited throat, the Serenian was brought that much closer to the brink of madness.

* * * *

Celene walked down the corridor to the Outlander’s cell with four guards escorting her. Strict orders had been given that she was not to be allowed to stay with him after he had been fed. Once more chained hand and foot to the floor and walls of his cell, the Serenian posed no threat to her, but it was feared he would try to gain sympathy from her and His grace did not want that to happen.

“Feed him and then leave.” His Grace had been very explicit in his instructions. “I do not want you talking to him, Celene. Do you understand that?”

The only way she would be allowed to see him, to make sure he was all right, Rachel had warned her, was to adhere to the Prince’s instructions. Hating the man even more than she already did, Celene had bowed meekly to his demands, vowing she would not engage the Outlander in conversation.

“He is not to be given any comfort,” Jaleel warned her. “None at all!”

As the door to his cell was thrown open, Celene saw the Serenian's head come up, saw the terror in his glazed eyes, could almost hear the pounding of his heart, and she knew he had thought they had come for him to take him to one of the gaming chambers. When he saw it was only her, his rigid body seemed to relax, his clenched fist release, his shoulders sag with relief.

She walked into the cell, all four guards behind her, and knelt beside him, placing the tray on the floor. Glancing up at his face, she saw his dirty cheeks were streaked and knew such stains had been caused by tears. She ached to wash his face, to comb his matted hair, but it would not have been permitted even had she the means to do it. Instead, she took up the chalice of tepid water and brought it to his lips. She winced as his eyes leapt to hers as he realized there would be no more wine, no cool water to slack his thirst. She tried to convey with her expression that she was sorry and she thought he understood for his gaze slid away.

Lowering the chalice, she tore off a piece of the moldy bread and put it to his mouth. She felt like crying when he obediently opened his lips and took in the bread, chewing it as though it were freshly-baked and warm with butter from the oven instead of hard and dry and tasting of mold.

It didn't take her long to feed him. There was only the few ounces of water and the heel of two-day old bread. When that was gone, there was no reason for her to stay. She took up the tray and turned to go. She knew he would understand that there would be no chamber pot allowed him this night. If he had to relieve himself, it would be where he sat.

As the door closed and the light was shut out, Conar leaned his head back against the wall, the musky taste of the moldy bread clinging to his teeth. It had been well over a week since he'd bathed or brushed his hair or his teeth. He felt grungy, alive with vermin, and itched in a dozen places where fleas had nibbled at his flesh. He hated the feeling. The rasp of his beard was bad enough, but the smell of his own body, and his breath, was enough to make his vision waver.

A week, he thought. He had been there at least a week by his reckoning. Two days ago--

His mind shied away from that thought. He refused to think of what had happened two days ago. There was nothing he could do about it anyway. Tomorrow, he thought, they will come for me again.

Tomorrow, he knew, someone else would die.

* * * *

Meggie walked to the big studded doors and peered upward, impressed despite herself by the massiveness of Abbadon Fortress. There was a smell there, she thought. A smell of evil. It quivered the hairs in her nostrils and brought nausea to her gut. Laying her hands on one of the sharp spikes, she could feel the malevolence in this place. It throbbed against her palm and filled her mouth with the tang of metal.

"This Gateway is steeped in the mire of the Abyss," she mumbled to Sabrina. "Can you sense the corruption here?"

"I have been inside these gates only once," Sabrina answered, "and I had nightmares for years afterwards."

Meggie nodded. "Aye, I can believe it." She withdrew her hand. "When is the caravan due?"

"Tomorrow afternoon," Sabrina told her.

Meggie stepped back and craned her neck to look up at the small oval openings which started on the third floor. "Where is his throne room?"

"There," Sabrina pointed. "Just to the left of those first four windows."

The old woman squinted then turned away. "I can not feel my bonny lad's presence in this pile of rocks."

"The walls are layered with steel and iron plate," Sabrina said. "The openings are lined with iron spikes. That's why."

"Maybe so," Meggie agreed. Iron was a great hindrance to conjuring.

"Come tomorrow," Sabrina reminded her, "we'll find him, Mistress. Do you doubt that?"

"No," Meggie answered. "It's the condition we find him in that concerns me, girl."

It concerned Sabrina, as well.

* * * *

Chase squatted in the sand with Kharis and made sure the crystals the women had given him were still in the pouch that had fallen out of Chase's robes.

"To lose these," Kharis snapped, "could cost you your life, Your Grace."

A faint blush of guilt seeped over Chase's face. "I understand that, Kharis."

Kharis finished counting the crystals then slipped them into the hide bag and pulled the drawstring closed. He double-tied the knot. "Then take better care of them," he growled. He handed them back to their owner.

Chase slipped the bag into his pocket, nestling them deep down and patted them. "I swear I will."

"You're lucky you felt them drop out," Kharis grouched. "Else once we got to the caravan, the bastards would have seen you."

Not accustomed to be berating by anyone, and accepting it, other than by Conar McGregor, Chase frowned at the man. "Don't treat me like a child, El-Malick," Chase sneered.

Kharis snorted, nervous as he was and fearful for the Ionarian's life lest he let the man be hurt and have the Lady Sabrina carve the hide from his body piece by bloody piece. Sometimes being a Daughter's Sentinel was not easy work.

"Do you think the others have missed us by now?" Chase asked, glancing at the heavy scowl on the Hasdu's face.

"It matters not a whit if they have," Kharis growled.

"They'll know where we've gone," Chase said.

"They won't know in which direction and they won't know about the caravan, either."

"What if they try to go to the fortress?"

Kharis sighed heavily, rolling his gaze to the blue heavens. "You'd better hope they don't, Your Grace. It's secrecy we're counting on to get us into the fortress. All we need is a group of would-be rescuers calling attention to the caravan. In the process, some sorceress not aligned with us could see me and you and the ladies and then all hell will break lose!"

* * * *

In one of the lower chamber rooms of the second sublevel, Celene and a group of women, far more than Kalli would have imagined, were gathered around in a circle. Hands clasped together, the women were chanting softly. The rune was ancient, as ancient as time, and the words were so old few of the women even understood their meaning. It was the impact of the words, not the words themselves, that mattered.

As the chanting stopped, the women let go of the hands they had held. They waited for the oldest in the group, a woman named Meghan, to speak. They looked to her wizened face and held their questions out of deep reverence for Meghan's advanced age and wisdom.

"There was a time," Meghan said, her voice cracking and brittle, "when I could go to the Shadowlands and ask what had to be asked."

Around the circle, several women nodded in agreement, expressions of fond memory on their lined faces.

"But that time is long gone," Meghan sighed and the sound was like rustling parchment in her wheezing throat. "You younger Daughters have never been allowed outside these walls to make the trek to our Oracle and until the evil in this place is laid to rest, you will not."

"Tell us of it, Grandmother," one of the teenage girls, bolder and braver than the rest, pleaded.

"Aye, Grandmother," another added her plea. "Tell us of it."

"Ah," Meghan said, smiling a toothless pleasure. "The Shadowlands was where any Daughter could go to make entreaty to the Great Lady, although only a very few were allowed deep within the Obelisk to ask Her blessing."

"Were you ever allowed inside the Obelisk, Grandmother?" Celene asked.

The old woman nodded. "Just once, but it was something I never forgot. It is an experience no Daughter who has undergone it will ever forget."

"I have felt things of late, Grandmother," one of the kitchen girls said. "Things I can not explain."

"So have I," another spoke up. "A strange feeling like the one I had when I saved Miriam from the scorpion that day."

"Sometimes I wake in the middle of the night," Celene said, "and my heart is hammering in my chest so rapidly I think it will explode."

"What you are feeling," the old woman answered, "is fear, Celene." She looked around her, her rheumy gaze lighting briefly on each of the women. "Have you all felt this strange emotion?"

Several nodded; most mumbled in agreement.

"I have told you of the Great Lady and Her Consort," Meghan reminded them. "I have told you how one day He would come here to break down the walls of iron that keep us imprisoned inside this wicked place."

"The Dark Overlord," one of the teenage girls breathed. "He, to whom we owe our allegiance."

"Aye," Meghan chuckled. "That is the one."

A middle-aged woman named Miriam looked up from her concentration. She turned her gaze to the old woman. "He's here, isn't He?" she asked. As Meghan looked over at her, the breath caught in Miriam's throat. "He is, isn't He, Grandmother? The Dark Overlord is here!"

"He has been for six days," Meghan told them all.

"The Outlander," Celene added.

"You knew?" Miriam, Celene's mother, gasped. Celene nodded. "Then why didn't you say something?"

"I ordered her not to," Meghan answered for the young woman. "The time was not right for the Daughters to know He was here."

"But Jaborn has been killing His friends!" Miriam protested. "Why have we not been called together to do something for Him?"

Meghan slowly shook her head. "It was not in His destiny that we interfere, Miriam. This tragedy that is enveloping Conar McGregor was preordained even before He ever drew breath."

"Conar," one of the teenage girls sighed, trying the sweetness of the name out on her tongue, rolling it around as though it were a piece of candy.

"Your Overlord, girl!" her mother corrected.

“So, now that He has been made to suffer,” Miriam argued, “we will be allowed to help Him before any more of His friends are slain.”

Sadly, Meghan shook her head. “No, the time has not yet come to interfere.”

“Then, when?” Miriam demanded. “Do we wait until His heart has been broken, His mind destroyed, before we step in?”

“I dreamed last night,” Meghan said, ignoring the rude snort Miriam made, “that we were to wait another day.”

“Aye, and in another day, Jaborn may well have killed one or two more of His friends!” Miriam barked.

“That can not be helped,” Meghan answered.

Miriam clamped her mouth shut, knowing it was useless to argue with Meghan. She glared at her daughter, making sure Celene knew she wasn’t happy.

“Soon,” Meghan promised them “Soon, we will be led to freedom. Have patience, Daughters. Nothing worth keeping has ever been easy to gain.”

“Nothing worth having has ever been easy to lose,” Celene added to the ancient proverb.

“And nothing,” the Daughters chanted, “worth accomplishing has ever been easy to do.”

* * *

Grice Wynth, the Prince of Oceania, was the third to die. His death was as unavoidable as Rylan’s or Tyne’s and just as sorrowful. As he lay in the place where his life had been taken, Conar sat beside him, cradling Grice’s head in his lap, smoothing back the thick black hair that fell in waves from Wynth’s high forehead.

“Are you with her, Griceland?” Conar asked, smiling down at his friend’s still face. “Do you see her?”

He lowered his fingers to the trickle of blood seeping from the corner of Grice’s mouth and wiped it away, blotted it on his filthy breeches. He hummed, a song from long, long ago, memory making his face soften.

“The Prince’s Lost Lady,” he told Grice. “Remember?” He lifted his head and stared across the chamber. “She loved that song so much.” A small laugh pushed out of his mouth. “Do you remember me having them play it at our Joining?” He frowned. “You weren’t there, were you?” He stroked Grice’s cool cheek. “I bet you heard about the limerick, though.”

Chase’s limerick had nearly caused him a beating, he remembered. That dirty limerick that Liza had been so embarrassed by and the King and Queen of Oceania had been shocked to hear.

“Not as shocked as my own sire was, though,” Conar admitted, threading his fingers through the thick black mane. “I thought Papa was going to flay me for sure!”

Another trickle of blood appeared at Grice’s mouth and Conar tenderly wiped it away. He drew in a long, weary breath and hugged his friend’s head closer to his chest.

Idly, he wondered why no one had come to take him away.

“Grice?” he suddenly asked, his face filling with concern. “Is there much pain where you are?”

He didn’t think there should be. Not where Griceland had gone. Not to the realm of the Wind where he knew his friend was making peace.

“There has to be a place,” he said softly, rocking Grice against him. “A place where I won’t have any pain, either.”

“It’s time to go, McGregor,” someone said.

Conar looked up. He smiled at the guard. “Already?”

“You have someone else to meet,” the man said coldly.

“Who?” the Serenian asked.

“Just get up.” The guard motioned for two others to take hold of him. They dragged him out from beneath his dead friend.

“You’ll see to him?” Conar inquired.

“Yeah,” the guard laughed. “We’ll see to him!”

They marched him to the door and grunted with anger when Conar looked back. Cruelly, they didn’t try to keep him from seeing the huge boulder being removed from Grice Wynth’s crushed chest as the overhead pulley cranked into motion. Nor did they turn him away from the view of the broken body that was heft between the two eunuchs and carried away.

“He taught me how to lift weights,” Conar said, calmly watching the guards snap down the chain from the fulcrum he had not been strong enough to hold in place long enough for Grice to scramble out of the way. “Did you know that?”

“Let’s go, McGregor,” one of the guards mumbled, unnerved by the calm acceptance on their prisoner’s face.

“I’m sorry, Grice,” Conar said. He cocked his head to one side. “I really am sorry.”

* * * *

Roget du Mer jumped as the door to this strange chamber was opened. He backed up, away from the two burly guards who came through the door, not expecting to see Conar behind them as two more guards shoved his friend into the room. He took one look at Conar’s face and knew. “Grice?” he managed to ask, tears filling his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Roget,” Conar said, sinking to his knees on the floor. “I am so very sorry.”

* * * *

At just past two o’clock on the afternoon of May 14th, in the year known as the Year of the Dying, Jah-Ma-El McGregor struggled to get away from his captors; but from days of precious little food and nights of restless sleep and fear, the warlock could do no more than run a few feet before being brought down.

“You’ll pay for that!” Belial warned him.

Somehow he had known. When they had taken him from his cell, Jah-Ma-El had bidden Sentian goodbye.

“You’ll be back!” he could still hear Sentian calling out as they had marched him away. “Do you hear me, Jamie? You will be back!”

But Jah-Ma-El knew he wouldn’t. He expected to see Conar being brought into this chamber any moment now. The stage was set; the props all in place. He had his lines down and he knew Conar would have his. The other actors were scattered about the room, waiting, and the air was filled with expectation. It was almost a letdown when the door through which he had been brought finally opened and his precious brother was drawn into the chamber.

He looks so tired, Jah-Ma-El thought as he gazed into that beloved face. He’s lost weight and he looks so hurt. Jah-Ma-El forced a smile to his trembling mouth for the benefit of the man whose own expression was so filled with sorrow.

“How are you, little brother?” Jah-Ma-El asked.

Conar looked up toward the ceiling, then down to Jah-Ma-El’s face. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“No need to be,” Jah-Ma-El said in a soft, agreeable voice. “None of this is your fault.”

“He knows better!” Belial snorted. “Every one of you has been his fault.”

Jah-Ma-El winced, wondering how many were dead. He kept the smile on his face, trying with every last ounce of his quivering courage to send comfort to Conar.

“Will you let me speak to him before you do this?” Jah-Ma-El asked. He held his breath, waiting for the answer.

“Get him up there,” Belial snarled, coming forward to grab Conar’s arms and pin them behind him in a savage grip that brought agony to the man’s dirty face, but put no light in his glazed blue eyes.

They forced Jah-Ma-El up on the chair and looped the noose around his thin neck. He grunted as the knot was tightened next to his cheek.

“Don’t think about it, Conar,” he asked. “Just let it happen.”

Conar shook his head. “I’m sorry, Jamie. I am so sorry.” He was beginning to shiver.

The door opened once more and Jaborn and his lackey, Gehdrin strolled into the chamber. Jaborn glanced up at the rope dangling from the ceiling and then smirked.

“You saved him from hanging once before, didn’t you, McGregor?” he asked, drawing Jah-Ma-El’s immediate shout.

“Don’t do that to him, you son-of-a-bitch! This isn’t his fault!”

“Let’s see if you can save him this time,” Jaborn laughed.

Conar slowly turned his head and looked at Jaleel Jaborn. The memory of only an hour before when he had run blindly through an elaborate maze, trying to save Roget du Mer’s life, to keep that dear friend from falling to his death, was still fresh and raw in Conar’s mind.

“My version of the Labyrinth, McGregor,” Jaborn had told him. “If you can solve the maze before he loses his grip on the rock ledge, I’ll let him go free.”

There had been no way to solve the maze for every time he had come to an opening leading to the place where Roget dangled helplessly, a solid block wall of stone had fallen from the ceiling, cutting him off. His hands were still bleeding from the futile times he had slapped at the walls in frustration and despair.

And Roget had plummeted to his death just as Conar had finally been able to reach out for him, their fingers sliding away from one another as Roget’s death scream echoed off the stone walls of the cavern into which he fell.

“What’s the matter, McGregor?” Jaleel asked him, sensing the pain his enemy had just gone through. “Are you wondering how many more you’ll kill today before I allow you to rest?”

“*Stop it!*” Jah-Ma-El screamed at the top of his lungs. “Conar, listen to me. This is not your fault, little brother. Don’t listen to that bastard!”

He looked away from Jaborn and gazed up into Jah-Ma-El’s angry face. “I’m sorry, Jamie. I really am sorry.”

Jah-Ma-El would have told him again that none of it was not his doing, but the chair on which he was standing was kicked away and his words were cut off in a gurgle of anguish.

Belial let go of the straining man he was holding and watched with amusement as McGregor rushed to his brother, grabbing the swinging man’s legs and holding him aloft. He could see the strain on McGregor’s face and glanced at his master. “A hundred sentis says he will last no more than twenty minutes,” he quipped.

Jaborn stared at his enemy, listening to the apologies tumbling from the man’s lips as he strove to keep his brother from strangling. “No,” he answered. “He’ll last longer than that.”

For over an hour, Conar held Jah-Ma-El up, ignoring his brother’s pleas to let go, to stop trying to save him. He was concentrating, his face red with his effort, sweat pouring down his cheeks. His arms were trembling, giving out, still he struggled to keep Jah-Ma-El aloft, to keep him from being hanged.

Guil could not help but admire Conar McGregor's tenacity. Despite all odds, knowing he would not be able to save the lives of his friends, the man had, nevertheless, tried. He was, even at that very moment, perfectly aware how this scene would end, but was refusing to give in. To give up. To admit his defeat. His jaw was clenched, his lips tightly pressed together. To him, there was no one else in the room save him and his brother.

"Look at him," Guil whispered. "Do you believe this?"

Jaleel shook his head, angered by the whole thing. He turned and looked at Belial. "End this," he ordered.

Belial nodded and reached out for a lever on the wall beside him.

One moment he was holding Jah-Ma-El, keeping his brother from dying, the next he was falling through the floor, instinctively grabbing hold of Jah-Ma-El's legs. He heard the loud snap, felt the death twitch that told him in his effort to save himself from crashing to the level beyond, he had inadvertently broken his brother's neck.

He let go of Jah-Ma-El and fell, his scream of denial loud and grief-stricken. Slamming onto his back in a damp expanse of loose sand, he felt the breath knocked from his body and he gasped, tasting blood where he had bitten his tongue in the fall.

Guil joined Jaleel at the opening, studiously avoiding looking at the swaying man dangling between them, and looked down into the hole. A shaft of light from the upper chamber spilled into the cavern below, lighting a five foot circle around the place where Conar McGregor was lying dazed. He saw the confusion on McGregor's face, then the realization of what had happened, then stark, unrelenting horror, passing across the man's dirty features.

"The mighty oak has fallen, McGregor," Jaleel Jaborn laughed. "And the branches are being pruned one by one by one."

Conar rolled over onto his stomach, still trying to breathe normally. Pushing up on his hands and knees, he hung his head, drawing in steady drafts of air.

"And do you know what I am going to do when the branches have all been severed, McGregor?" Jaborn taunted him. There was a wicked, vicious laugh. "Then, I'm going after the acorns."

The Serenian lifted his head and looked up, craning his neck around so he could see the man speaking to him. His face was pinched with wretchedness, his eyes full of pain.

"The acorns, McGregor," Jaleel shouted down to him. "All four of them: Wynland and Tristan and Regan and Little Brelan! All the insipid fruits of your loins, McGregor."

Conar stared at the man above him, understanding settling in as Jaborn squatted over the opening through which he had fallen.

"And do you know what I do to acorns, McGregor?" Jaleel Jaborn smiled. His gaze fused with Conar's. "I crush them beneath my heel, Infidel! I destroy them as I have destroyed the tree!"

Guil Ben-Shanar Gehdrin watched the suffering slip slowly from McGregor's face. He saw the anguish disappear, the torment fade. He, alone, saw the resignation begin to form; recognized the inherent evil residing in Conar McGregor coming to the forefront and backed away from the opening.

"Jaleel," Guil breathed, "the man is--"

But he never got any further for McGregor pushed himself up off the sand and bolted, disappearing beyond the light.

"There is only one way out of the catacombs," Jaleel commented as he got to his feet. "And that way is locked from this side."

“Aren’t you going to go after him?” Guil asked, suddenly afraid and not really understanding why.

Jaborn shrugged. “Eventually. I’ll give him a few days without food or water, in the dark of the caverns, then I’ll send Belial after him.”

“He is afraid of such places,” Belial chuckled. “By the time I retrieve him, he should be quite harmless, Your Grace.” He had sensed Prince Guil’s unease.

“Should be,” Guil murmured as he followed Jaborn out of the chamber. He looked behind him at the dead body of McGregor’s brother and shivered.

Conar stood in the shadows, just beyond the spill of light from the opening above him. He heard the crank start and knew they were closing the hatchway through which he had plunged. Waiting until there was no light, no sound, and no hint of a threat, he pushed away from the wall where he had been plastered.

Down here, he thought, his mind churning with sensations, it was utterly dark and cold. The walls seemed to be closing in on him as his eyes attempted to adjust to the darkness. There was no sound, no sense of direction. He somehow knew he was totally alone in the ebon space of what Jaborn had called the catacombs.

This living hell to which he had been condemned might once have driven him mad with the urge to break free. There had been a time when such a place would have crushed the air from his lungs and set him to howling with terror of the unknown. Closed in places had been a special horror for him since he was a small boy; the dark had always been his greatest fear.

But he was free from the past he knew could no longer hurt him. He had conquered his old enemy and had derived strength from it. He was thankful Jaborn didn’t know that about him.

Sitting down in the sand, his back against a jagged rock, he lowered his head. He forced himself not to think about Jah-Ma-El and Grice and Roget. Nor of Tyne or Rylan. He refused to worry about the others who were still in Jaborn’s clutches or of Catherine and whether or not she was aware of the perfidy done to her by Jaleel Jaborn. He pushed all thought of his comrades out of his mind and concentrated, trying to send one vitally important message beyond the cell in which he sat to someone who might hear.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

It had been the easiest thing Chase Montyne had done in a long time. He and Kharis had simply strolled up to the staggered column of the supply caravan and joined the sweating men leading their camel's and pack horses to Abbadon.

And no one had even noticed them.

Smiling at Kharis, Chase shook his head. He started to say something, but El-Malick put a warning finger to his lips and cautioned him to silence. Chase nodded. The men in the caravan might not hear them, but the animals would. Despite the protection of the crystals in their pouches, the animals had noticed their arrival. Montyne figured the animal world was immune to Multitude magic.

His first sight of Abbadon was much the same as Conar's had been. Chase stared with open-mouth awe at the massive structure rising out of the desert sands like a lion ready to pounce. Sweeping his gaze over those bleak, featureless walls, he could well understand why the fortress was feared so much. The sight of it was enough to put alarm in the stoutest heart.

Meggie pointed her finger and saw that Sabrina had found their Sentinel's in the midst of the advancing line of men. She looked behind her as the heavy iron-spiked door trembled in its casing and the pulleys beyond the thick walls squealed and clanked to life.

"They will only open the doors just wide enough to allow for the supplies to be passed through from the caravanners to the inside guards," Sabrina explained. "We have to be quick in slipping through."

Despite her bulk, Meggie Ruck knew she'd have no difficulty squeezing through the opening. As soon as one basket of goods was handed off to the inside guard and that man had turned to hand the basket to the man behind him, she would slip through and around the men, moving with the quiet grace she knew herself capable of exhibiting whenever the need had arisen. But she didn't want to go inside the fortress until the two Sentinels and Sabrina were already in.

"As soon as the door opens, go on through, Sabrina," she ordered. "I'll see to our men."

Sabrina cast the older woman a worried look, but knew better than to argue with Mistress Ruck.

Kharis plucked at Chase's sleeve and nodded toward the double doors. When Montyne squinted, focusing through the wavering heat coming up off the hot sands, he was finally able to make out the two women waiting for them.

The wide iron doors of Abbadon Fortress began to crank open. The groan of the pulley system shook the very ground beneath Sabrina and Meggie's feet and caused them to crunch up their faces with the ear-splitting shriek of the chains and flywheels grinding as they turned.

"No one could open those damned doors quietly, could they?" Meggie grumbled.

Kharis and Chase walked away from the caravan and came up to the doors just as the wooden panels begrudgingly slipped apart. A splinter of light shone in the minute crack between the two portals.

"I want you to go in right after Sabrina, Montyne," Meggie ordered, jerking her thumb toward the doors. "Kharis, you go next. I'll take up the rear."

"Any particular reason?" Chase asked, letting his head fall back as he gaped at the thirty foot tall door panels.

“Just do as she says,” Kharis told him. “I’ve learned never to question a Daughter.” He cast an apologetic look to Meggie. “Especially the older ones.”

“Smart thinking,” Meggie concurred.

Sabrina peeked through the crack between the doors which by then was no more than half an inch. Her forehead creased as her nostrils took in the vile smell coming from inside the fortress.

“That’s death you’re smelling, girl,” Meggie told her, sniffing the scent, herself. “Death and sin.”

The caravan leader halted his men about ten yards away and walked up to the doors. He neither saw the four people standing there already nor did he sense their presence. They heard him mumbling to himself, cursing Jaleel Jaborn’s elaborate security measures, consigning the Hasdu Prince to the Pit and beyond for making them wait out here in the sun before opening the doors. They watched as he stood there, arms akimbo, and tapped an angry sandal on the hard-packed dirt.

“You’d best have cool water for us to drink, Jaborn,” the man grumbled. “And my gold ready to hand out!”

“What will you if he doesn’t, you braying Jackass?” Kharis laughed.

Chase laughed, too, amused by the little man’s diatribe against the mighty Jaleel Jaborn. He noticed Meggie wasn’t smiling and nudged Kharis. As Kharis’ gaze slipped to the old woman, he glimpsed his own lady’s face and frowned.

“Do you feel that?” Meggie asked, turning so that she could look through the slit in the door that was now four inches wide.

“I feel something,” Sabrina acknowledged.

Meggie slipped her hand through the opening, well away from the iron spikes which jutted out from the heavy wood. She barely noticed that she was dangling her hand nearly right in the face of one of the inside guards. She flexed her fingers, seemed to be grasping for something floating on the stagnant air coming from inside the fortress.

“It’s faint,” Sabrina said. “Very faint.”

“Aye,” the old woman agreed. Whatever was tickling her senses, she could not quite latch on to it. “Once I’m inside, I’ll be able to get a bead on whatever that is.”

Chase could see the guards beyond the door waiting for the portals to move far enough apart to accommodate handling the supplies being off loaded from the pack animals. He looked back at the caravan and saw several slaves already lined up with boxes and small crates, baskets and rolls of material. The caravan master was barking out orders in an annoyed tone, taking his displeasure out on his crew since he could not, dared not, take it out on those inside the fortress.

“Another inch and I think I can squeeze through,” Sabrina remarked as she positioned herself at the opening.

“Once you get inside, girl,” Meggie ordered, “wait over there by that staircase. The boys will join you.”

“The boys?” Chase quipped, not having thought of himself in that term for many years. He grinned at Meggie’s pretend frown then reached out to tweak her beaked nose.

“Knock it off, Montyne,” Meggie snapped, batting his hand away, but her eyes were twinkling.

“I’m going through,” Sabrina said and sucked in her breath, holding the skirts of her gown tightly to her so the material would not catch on one of the thick spikes.

They watched her slid sideways between the parallel panels and move quickly past two of the guards who had each taken it in their minds to step back at the same moment. Both looked around, seemingly watching Sabrina, puzzled looks on their faces for they had felt the small breeze

fanned by her passing. They turned back and looked at one another, shrugging, then faced the opening doors.

"She's good," Meggie cackled. "Damned good."

"I'm up," Chase grinned. He waited until the doors had shuddered to a stop, then rushed through, knocking into one of the guards as he passed.

"You son-of-a-jackal!" the guard thundered at one of the other men, thinking it had been him who had shoved him.

"Me?" the man being berated shouted. "What did I do?"

"Kharis!" Meggie hissed. "Go while they're arguing!"

Kharis nodded and slipped easily between the panels. He thought of reaching out and showing the man who was being chastised for something he neither did nor understood, but he thought better of that idea as Meggie came through the opening and shoved him forward, her hand in the center of his broad back.

"Oh, no, you don't," she warned him. "We've got better things to do!"

Sabrina crooked an admonishing brow at her lover as he sauntered up to her, a cocky grin on his face. "Did you enjoy starting that little tiff?" she asked.

"It got us through, didn't it?" Chase queried.

"Son-of-an-infidel whore!"

"Eater of animal offal!"

"Abuser of sheep!"

The guards were shoving one another, their loud shouts drawing attention from their commanders as those men hurried forward to put an end to the commotion.

"See what you did?" Meggie asked in an exasperated voice that belied the twitching of her lips.

"My humblest apology, dear lady," Chase swore.

Meggie sniffed at his apology. Looking about her, she spied several women off to one side. They were intently watching the havoc taking place at the doors. "Not a Daughter among them," she sighed.

"But there are many here," Sabrina assured her. "Rachel is here."

"And his lady," Meggie agreed, thinking of Catherine McGregor.

"I don't feel that sensation now that we are inside, do you, Mistress Ruck?" Sabrina asked.

Meggie lifted her head and seemed to sniff the air. She shook her head. "No. Whatever it was, it's stopped."

"Well, we aren't going to find Conar just standing here," Chase said. He glanced around. "Where do we start, Meg?"

"Are your crystals safe?" Meggie asked. At the men's nod, she pursed her lips. "Check and be sure, will ya?"

Chase rummaged in his robe and pulled out the rawhide purse which held the cluster of crystals she'd given him. He hefted it in his hand. "Shall I tie the string of it to my manhood, Meg, just to be on the safe side?"

"I'll shove that pouch up your tight little ass if you don't stop mouthing off to me, Montyne!" Meggie snapped. "So there won't be need for me to be worrying that you've lost it and some fool has captured your reckless self!"

Montyne blinked. Not only at her crudeness but at the vehemence with which she had spat it at him. He staggered as the old woman jabbed him in the chest with a sharp finger. He grunted with the pain of it.

“Put that pouch back in your robes and secure it, boy! That’s your passport to freedom and don’t you be forgetting it!”

“As well as Conar’s,” Sabrina said quietly.

Stuffing the little pouch back inside the lining of his robe, Chase stood there, chastened and contrite. He didn’t dare look at Kharis for fear Meg would think he was being condescending again.

“Now, listen up, the two of you,” Meggie growled. “This is what I want you to do while Sabrina and I go looking for the other women--“

* * * *

Meghan’s hands stilled on the needlework she was doing and lifted her head slowly. Her fading eyes narrowed and her aged ears cocked sharply. She listened for a moment, the needle half-way through the fabric on which she’d been working. Absently, she pushed the needle on through, unaware that her hands were finishing what her mind was not cognizant of doing. She pulled the thread up and her hand stilled once more. Yes, she thought, laying her sewing in her well-padded lap and listening more closely to the winds blowing about Abbadon Fortress, there had been a definite shift in the Veil.

“Grandmother?” one of the young sewing girls inquired, seeing the elderly lady just staring off into space. “Is something wrong?”

Meghan turned her head toward the girl. “No, Deanna,” she said and smiled, her toothless grin relieved. “Something is right for a change.”

Miriam and Celene, who were working at the loom, paused and looked at the old woman. Both women had been feeling odd all morning and now that it was middle ways the afternoon, neither of them had been able to concentrate on even the simplest of tasks for with every passing minute, they had felt that strange nudging that had been occupying their thoughts all day.

Meghan’s wrinkled face puckered as she sought to gather in more of the sensation that had touched her. She had already acknowledged the presence of two new Daughters into the fortress, as well as their Sentinels, but there was something else, something, or someone, calling out in a voice begging for help.

“What is it, Mother?” Miriam asked the old woman.

Meghan held up her hand, demanding silence. Once, about half an hour before, she thought she had sensed a calling, but when she’d listened hard to hear it, it had suddenly faded and she had felt a great sadness loom out of the Veil. The sadness had come to her and she had known whose thoughts were stumbling blindly about the cosmos and she had sighed with regret. Now, it was not just his sadness she was feeling.

Meghan laid her sewing on the table beside her. “He’s in the catacombs and he’s lost.”

“In the catacombs?” Miriam asked. “Why would he be there?” She reached out and took her daughter’s arm. “I thought you told me he was not scheduled to be taken from his cell today.”

Celene stared at her mother. “They said there would be no games until his hands were healed.”

Miriam’s mouth tightened. “They lied.” She put aside the wool in her hand and stood up. “Can you fathom why he is in the catacombs, Mother?”

Meghan turned her head slightly to one side and probed the Wind. “He is trying to keep thoughts of death away from him.” She squinted. “He wants to summon one of us to him and knows if he thinks of the deaths this morning--“ The old woman’s eyes filled with tears and she looked up. “Three more of his men were killed today.”

“One of us should go to him,” Celene said, getting up from the loom. “He knows me. I believe he trusts me.”

Meghan nodded emphatically. “Go,” she ordered in a rush of worried breath. “See to him, but watch yourself, Daughter.”

Miriam glanced about at the curious eyes of the other women. She sensed their excitement and willingness and she went to her mother and knelt down. Taking Meghan’s hands in hers, she looked up into the fading eyes. “We are not alone, are we, Mother?” she asked.

Meghan shook her head. “No. Others have come to help us.” She looked away from her daughter’s eager face. “It has begun.”

* * * *

Celene held the torch high as she stepped carefully down the narrow stones cut into the cavern wall. Ahead of her, there was pitch blackness, cold and pervading darkness that leapt back begrudgingly as the light from her flare advanced. Her silk slippers were damp from the moisture on the rough stone and her teeth were chattering more fiercely together with each step down into the vastness of the catacombs she took. Cursing her lack of thought at not bringing along a cape, or at the very least a shawl, she stepped down from the last stone riser and looked about her.

The walls of the cavern were slick-looking, moisture dripping visibly down the rockface in some places and showing incandescent trails where it had once fell in others. There was a noxious odor coming from the stone and, upon close examination, Celene found a strange growth of dusky mold lined along cracks and crevices in the stone. The smell tickled the hairs in her nose and made her sneeze, the sound echoing out from her like ripples in a pond.

Conar’s head snapped up as the faint sound came to him. He was far away from the source of that vague noise and although he didn’t understand why, it didn’t alarm him. Coming slowly to his feet, he searched the darkness, squinting to see, but no light reached him. He moved along the wall, feeling his way, easing his feet forward, not knowing what might lie before him and remembering all too well his experiences in the cavern beneath the Monastery of the Wind. He didn’t want a repeat of those painful events.

Celene studied the sand at her feet and could see no fresh-looking footprints that would suggest the Outlander had been this way. The indentions in the sand looked ancient and she wondered when the last time was that a human had passed this way. Squiggles and curving lines told her there were underground creatures lurking about, but she had never been one to worry about such things and she didn’t want to start doing so then. Thrusting the squirming, slithering, crawling concerns from her mind, she took the closest pathway among the catacombs, trying not to look at the stacked skeletons that had been shoved against one another inside small niches in the wall.

He stumbled against something that gave way beneath his hand as he reached out to break his fall. His arm went into some declivity in the rockface and he felt sticks of some sort: smooth and thin. They rattled as he drew his arm back. Something dropped down on the back of his hand and scuttled over his knuckles, scampered between his third and fourth fingers. He yanked his hand back with a cut-off yelp of disgust, shaking it to rid himself of the feeling of those tiny legs on his flesh.

Celene stopped. She turned and listened. There had been a small cry, a sound that had reached her ears. Lifting the torch, she quickly looked away from the pile of bones that had tumbled down from their resting place and were lumped together at the base of one wall. She hurried on, toward the sound of that cry.

Conar wrinkled his nose, bothered by the faint stench of something odorous wafting in the still air. He stretched his hand along the wall, stopped when his fingertips dipped into a jagged

hole in the wall. Feeling along it, he frowned in the darkness as he tried to think what these irregular openings could be. He was afraid to put his hand inside one for fear something else would light on him. Instead, he traced the circumference of the hole with his hand and was even more puzzled by its size. Moving on, he encountered more openings in the wall and grew more and more concerned.

The smell here was worse for there were fresh bodies jammed into one section of the rockface. Celene knew these were the men executed the day the Outlander had been brought into Abbadon. She lifted a section of her robe and held it to her nose to blot out the putrid stench of decay, gagging as she happened to glimpse bloated faces and staring, sightless eyes among one group of corpses.

She realized she was getting close to the end of the newest part of the catacombs and would soon be in the vast cavern beyond. Such knowledge pleased her immensely for she was acutely uncomfortable among the dead of Abbadon Fortress.

He stopped, narrowing his gaze as a flare of light off to his left caught his attention. He stepped back, pressing himself against the wall, shifting over when he felt another of the openings behind his back. The light played just a few feet away, dripping among the craggy rocks and he was able to discern some of the terrain around him. As the light grew in intensity as it came toward him, Conar McGregor's vision sharpened, focused, and he found himself staring across at a wall dotted with three foot wide holes dug into the stone.

"Catacombs," he whispered, pushing away from the wall against which he had been leaning. His eyes flared and he fell back, screaming, jamming his hands out in front of him to keep away the horrors that were only inches from his bare chest. He slammed into the far wall and slid down it, gaping at what he had found.

Celene shrieked with terror as that piercing scream rent the air. She nearly dropped her torch at the sound for it had come from just ahead of her. Trembling, more afraid for the Outlander than for herself, realizing it had been his ungodly scream she had heard, she moved forward, the torch nearly touching the low stone ceiling.

She found him kneeling on the floor, his arms wrapped around his shivering body. He was mumbling, his lips moving but no intelligible sound coming out. He was staring at the far wall, his attention riveted there, and he was not even aware that he was no longer alone. Even as she went to him, reaching out to touch him, he did not shrink away from her nor did he acknowledge her presence in any way. His entire focus was on the wall before him and when she turned to see what it was he was looking at, Celene heard him whispering.

"Look what they've done," he said. His voice was brittle, ragged. He rocked back on his heels and lifted one trembling hand. "Look."

She didn't want to look.

And she didn't want him to, either.

"Milord," she said in a soft, calm voice. "You must come with me." She put her arm around his waist.

"Why?" he asked, cocking his head to one side and Celene knew he was not asking the reason she wanted him to accompany her.

"Men do evil things sometimes, milord," she answered him, feeling him quivering beneath her touch. She drew him toward her, not surprised when he leaned against her.

"Did I do this?" he asked, his voice small like a child's and just as bewildered.

"No, milord Conar. You did not." She jabbed the end of her torch down into the sand and put her arms around him. "You surely did not."

Conar McGregor seemed to collapse in her arms and he bent forward, laying his head in her lap, his face buried in his hands. She smoothed his hair, listening for the sobs she thought he would make, but all she heard was his labored breathing as though he were striving hard to keep his composure.

He slid his fingers from his eyes and stared once more at the atrocity stacked against the wall. Common sense told him the bodies would not be shoved into the niches ranged about the cavern until they were stiff and easy to handle, easy to manipulate into the gaping holes of the catacombs. He shuddered violently.

"We must go, milord," Celene said, listening to distant sounds that warned her someone was coming. "You can't stay here."

He stared at faces, bloated and rigid in death, that he had known all his life. Faces he had loved. Faces that had smiled and laughed and looked back at him when admonishment when he had done something supremely arrogant and stupid. Faces that had been as dear to him as the air he breathed. Faces that, even in death, were as beloved as they ever were.

"They did not blame me," he said, lowering his hands as his gaze took him to Tyne Brell's dull eyes. "They never did. No matter what I'd done, they never blamed me."

Celene took her arms from around him and picked up her torch. "Milord, someone is coming. We must go."

"How am I going to explain this to Teal?" he asked as he looked at Roget.

"Milord!" she hissed, finally breaking through to him. He sat up, hearing those distant sounds now. His face hardened and he reached out to grip her hand. "Celene, go," he ordered. "Go and bring me back a sword."

"A sword?" she gasped. "Milord, no! You must come with me. Once they take you back into custody, the games will begin again!"

Conar turned his head to one side. "The games?"

The young woman looked away. "That is what they call what they have been doing to you."

For a brief moment he stared at her, then nodded slowly. "The games," he repeated. Sighing heavily, he pushed up and got to his feet, put his hand down to help her. Still clutching her cool fingers in his, he asked her once more to fetch him a sword.

"Milord, please!" she tried reasoning with him. "There is help that has come. We are no longer alone. By now, Grandmother will have--"

"Who am I, Celene?" he asked, cutting her off.

She glanced behind her, hearing the voices and thump of footsteps coming closer. She flinched as he took her upper arm in a fierce grip.

"Who am I, Celene?" he asked again, shaking her firmly with each word.

She knew what he meant. "The Dark Overlord, Your Grace."

"That's right," he said. "And are you not as beholding to me as you are to my Lady?"

The voices were much closer, too close. "I am, milord," she answered.

"Then go and do what I tell you, Celene," he said, wondering why he knew as surely as he was standing there that this girl was of the Multitude.

She searched his face for only a moment, then turned, slipping back around a section of wall. When she glanced around, hoping to see him hiding in one of the niches, he was gone.

"What are you doing down here, woman?" Belial roared as he rushed to her and grabbed her arm in a punishing grip.

"I--I am trying to find--him, sir," she panted, wincing at the pain the big man was causing her.

“Get your ass back where you belong, bitch!” Belial roared at her, shaking her brutally. “Before I turn you over to my men for their amusement.” He spun her around and shoved her, sending her stumbling away. “And don’t come down here again!” he yelled after her.

Conar stayed where he was, well out of sight of the men searching for him, knowing they’d never look for him among the dead. Wedged behind the bodies of his friends, protecting him in death as they had often protected him in life, he was safe from Jaleel Jaborn.

* * * *

Meghan Dunne slipped quietly up to the woman and touched her on the shoulder, nearly scaring the poor thing out of her wits. The gaping grin Meghan gave her was enough to calm the woman, but not enough to stop the barrage of scolding.

“You near took twenty years off my life, woman!” Sabrina gasped, but she knew she’d found another of her kind among the women hovering about the kitchens.

“Looking for something, are you, girl?” Meghan asked, searching the pretty black face before her.

“Something lost awhile back,” Sabrina replied. “Something dear, worth keeping.”

“A hard thing to lose, eh, girl?” Meghan inquired.

“And hard to get back, I’m afraid,” Sabrina told her.

Meghan put a finger along her nose. “Well, as to that, I’m thinking ‘twill be easier to do than you’d think.”

Sabrina looked around at the women who, up until the old one had accosted her, had been ignoring her as though they had not seen her. Now, they were keenly interested in her and what she was saying.

“How many, Grandmother, do you have to help?” Sabrina asked.

The old woman grinned. “There are close to two hundred warriors in this fortress, milady. Every one of them has a woman.”

“And there are well over three hundred slave women scattered about the fortress,” Miriam added as she joined them. “Maybe half that many men slaves who’d just as soon see Jaborn and his men slaughtered as look at them.”

“There’s the Prince’s concubines and his wives,” Meghan said, pretending to count.

“That’s about forty in all, I’m reckoning.” She nodded. “I’d say there is somewhere between five hundred and forty to five hundred and fifty women hereabouts.”

“How many are Daughters?” Sabrina demanded.

Meghan looked at Miriam and shrugged before turning back to Sabrina. “All it really takes is three powerful women to rid this fortress of the evil in here. Up until now, there’s only been me although the rest of them are well enough at what they can do.”

“But those imprisoned here who have been to the Shadowlands were never allowed inside,” Miriam said. “No one but Mother Meghan.”

“How many Daughters in all, though?” Sabrina asked again. “We have to know. I don’t know if I’m powerful enough to help you do what must be done.” She shook her head. “I was never allowed inside the Obelisk, either.”

Meghan’s face clouded for a moment. She could have sworn she had sensed great power invading the fortress. “In all,” she answered, disappointed, “enough to bring this rubble down.”

“But how many?” Sabrina demanded.

“Four hundred,” Miriam answered for Meghan. “All true to the Daughterhood and sworn to the Great Lady and Her consort.”

Sabrina’s mouth dropped open. “Four hundred?”

“Most born here,” Meghan explained, “and few over the age of twenty-five. But even our little ones can wield magic if there are three adepts running the show.”

Sabrina was staggered by the numbers of her own kind amid the women of Abbadon. She sank down into a kitchen chair. “I had no idea,” she muttered.

“Another came with you,” Meghan asked. “Where is she?”

Sabrina looked up at her. “She’s gone after his lady.”

“Catherine,” Miriam put in. “Jaborn handpicked the women allowed to care for her. None are Daughters. As far as he knows there is only a handful of us here, but he dared take no chance with the Dark Overlord’s wife.”

“For fear we’d try to help her escape,” Meghan added.

“We’ll do more than help her escape,” Sabrina growled, getting up. “Where do you meet?” she asked.

“In a room in the second sublevel,” Miriam answered.

“Can you gather together the Elders without causing too much attention?”

Meghan nodded. “There are only nine of us.”

“Mistress Ruck will find his lady, but we’ll need someone to show them the way to the meeting place,” Sabrina stated. “This woman Rachel. Where is she?”

“I am surprised you know of her,” Miriam answered. “We can arrange for her to be let out of her room.”

“Then find someone to lead Mistress Ruck and the lady to the meeting place, but take me there now. We brought our Sentinels and they are trying to locate the Outlanders who are being held prisoner here. They will need our help in freeing those men.”

“Five of them are dead,” Meghan said and put a comforting hand on Sabrina’s shoulder as the black woman groaned. “Gone to make Peace with the Wind, they have.”

Sabrina’s face turned cold. “We’ll send their murderers to a place where peace can never be made!”

* * * *

At the light scratching at her door, Catherine rushed to the panel. “Who’s there?”

“Meg, milady. Open up.”

Catherine stared at the panel, unable to believe what she had just heard. She put her ear to the wood. “Meg, who?” she called out.

“Who do you think?” came the heated reply. “Open the door, girl!”

Conar’s wife twisted the lock and nearly smothered the old woman she pulled quickly into the room. She wrapped her arms tightly around Meggie Ruck and rained kisses down on the wrinkled face.

“I never thought to see you again, Meggie!” she cried, squeezing the old woman so tightly Meggie’s face began to turn red.

“You might not see much of me, neither, if you don’t let me breathe, child!” Meggie gasped.

Catherine let her go and re-locked the door before drawing the old lady to the bed. “How did you find me? Have the others gotten free? Have you seen Conar? Is he all right? Have they hurt him? Have--“

“Hush, child,” Meggie chided her. “I just got here.”

A pained look shot through Cat’s eyes. “You weren’t captured like me, were you, Meg? Please tell me you weren’t captured!”

“Me and another Daughter brought our Sentinels through them doors downstairs just like them doors weren’t even there!” Meggie boasted. “You don’t need to worry about that.”

“She’d better be worried about McGregor, though.”

Meggie jumped, nearly screeching as the smooth young voice broke into their conversation. She stared across the room at the young man lounging next to a gaping hole in the wall.

“Who are you?” the old woman demanded.

“He’s a friend,” Catherine said, getting up and going to Kalli. “What’s happened? Is Conar in trouble?”

Kalli looked past her at the old woman. “They’re down in the catacombs trying to find him. I saw one of you women sneaking down there with a sword and if I’ve learned anything over the years from Jaleel and Guil about Conar McGregor, he’s going to use that sword to dispatch a few of my brother’s top warriors.”

“How many men?” Meg asked, going over to the young man.

“Ten or so,” Kalli answered. “The odds are not in his favor.”

“They will be!” Meggie snapped. She took the young man by the arm and pulled him toward the opening in the wall. “Can we get down there from here?”

Kalli’s eyes lit up. “Are you thinking to go down there on your own to help McGregor?” He winced as her nails dug into his arm at the unintended insult. “I meant no offense, Grandmother, but you aren’t what I would consider of an age to be of much help to him.”

Meggie put her face in his. “Which wine makes you drunker, lad: freshly bottled or aged?”

Kalli grinned. “Aged.”

“Then don’t be giving me none of your smart lip!” Meggie growled. “Just lead me to my bonny lad.” She pulled the young man toward the opening.

Kalli dug his heels in, refusing to move until he could look the old woman in the face. “How do you know I won’t lead you into a trap?”

Meggie smiled. “You want to live, don’t you?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The sword Celene brought him had been Tyne Brell's. The irony of that was not lost on Conar as he hefted the Widowmaker blade and flexed it. He lowered the point and lunged, sliding forward with the ease of an expert swordsman. Straightening, he turned to look at Celene.

"You'd better go now, Mam'selle. There will be blood shed here and I would prefer none of it be yours."

"Jaborn has all your weapons, those he took from you and those he had stolen from your cache in Serenia, locked up. He keeps the key to the armament room with him at all times, but today he can not seem to find it." Celene reached into the pocket of her gown and handed the key to him. "Rachel's present to you."

He looked up from the brass key in his hand. "She is all right? He hasn't hurt her?"

"He would not dare," Celene laughed. "He knows she is a Daughter."

Conar sighed. "I'm beginning to think every woman I meet is."

Celene smiled at him. "You should be thankful," she answered.

"Aye," he mumbled. "I should." He pocketed the key in his breeches' pocket. "Now, go, before those bastards come back this way and find you with me."

"I can't believe you want to take them all on, milord," she told him. "If you will but wait awhile longer--"

Conar glanced at the men he had loved. "My waiting is over, Mam'selle. I won't let Jaborn slaughter another of my friends." His jaw clenched. "Or my son."

"My mother gave them their meals this evening. They were all as well can be expected then. I would not think any of them have been harmed since your disappearance."

"They'd better not have been," Conar snarled. He lifted his chin. There were voices coming back toward them. He turned Celene around and patted her smartly on the rump. "Go. Now!"

She would have done as he said had there not been men blocking her path. Her eyes opened wide and she cried out, spinning around to run back to him, seeing that, at her cry, he had turned and found her escape cut off.

"You must tell me the secret of your success with women, McGregor," Jaleel Jaborn drawled as he strolled toward them. He was flanked by the two eunuchs and Rasheed and his faithful lap dog, Guil Ben-Shanar Gehdrin. "How do you inspire such blind devotion in them?"

Celene backed up, pressing herself to the wall. She looked at the Outlander's calm face then beyond him to the men coming up behind him. She could see the triumph on Belial's cruel face.

"I don't manhandle them, Jaborn," Conar answered, aware of the warriors advancing behind him and cutting off his retreat. He lifted Tyne's sword. "And I don't have to rape them."

Jaleel chuckled. "Well, if memory serves me correctly, you raped Elizabeth McGregor on at least two occasions, now, didn't you?"

Celene was looking at the Outlander as Jaborn spoke and she watched his face turn carefully blank. But that blank look had not come quickly enough to hide the pain Jaborn's words had caused him. She had seen intense sorrow well up in his sapphire eyes.

"At least I was married to the woman I loved," Conar answered. "You never got that chance, did you, Jaborn? Another man broke your mare to saddle."

Rasheed drew in a harsh breath, shocked by the Serenian's insult. No one dared mention the Princes Cyle to His Grace and to remind Prince Jaleel that he had not been the one to take Cyle's maidenhead, was folly of the worst kind.

Jaleel's mouth went white around the lips and he stepped forward, his anger lashing out at McGregor with enough force to have been a physical blow.

"And whose fault was it that I did not get to initiate my woman, McGregor?" the Hasdu bellowed. "Had it not been for you--"

"You're a fool, do you know that, Jaborn?" Conar asked in a calm voice. He cast a quick look behind him at the men standing in his way. "You can't even fight your own battles, can you?"

"Be careful, Your Grace," Belial warned his master. "He thinks to taunt you into dueling with him."

"I could win against him!" Jaborn screamed, his eyes flaring wide with hate.

Conar snorted with contempt.

Jaborn's male ego would not let him back down although he knew well enough he was no match for the Serenian. Few men, if any, were. Even after a week of little food and forced captivity, McGregor looked more than capable of taking on four men and running them through.

"Let me fight for you, Master," Belial asked. "He fears me."

Conar looked behind him and laughed. "I don't fear you, you cocksucker. If you want a part of me first, come and try to get it."

Belial began to draw out his sword.

"On second thought," Conar quipped, "I really don't have the time to fool with you."

Before any of them knew what he was about, McGregor lashed out with his sword and the tip slashed across Belial's face from ear lobe to ear lobe, just under the man's nose, neatly bisecting his face with a deep enough cut to cause extreme pain and plenty of blood. Belial dropped to the floor of the cavern, his hands up to his face to hold the gaping parts together. Through his reddening fingers, those gathered could see the roots of his front teeth.

Rasheed stared as two of Belial's Warriors of the Abyss helped their commander to his feet. They stumbled away with him, his bulk making them grunt as they supported him. Jaleel's servant looked slowly at his master.

Jaborn's own stare was filled with shock at the ease with which McGregor had done his destruction. Some of the Warriors milling behind the Serenian were muttering among themselves for none of them had seen the attack coming until Belial's face had been split apart.

"We are twenty to his one," Jaborn called out. "Rush him. He can not wound us all!"

Conar backed up until he was within equal distance from the five men on his left and the fifteen on his right. His sword sliced through the air, singing a deadly tune, then tensed as its master looked from one group of men to the other.

"Who wants to try?" Conar asked. "Who wants to see how many men I can take down with me before I fall?"

The men's murmurs grew louder and a few backed off, putting a safe distance between them and the man whose ice-cold eyes were staring through them.

"Cowards!" Jaborn shouted. "He is but one man! He can not win against you all!"

"I might not, but they'll know I was here," Conar laughed. He moved again and the loose pantaloons of one of the eunuchs dropped away from his hips to pool at his big feet.

The eunuch slowly lowered his gaze, took in the rent in the silk pantaloons then even more slowly lifted his eyes to the Outlander. He found that alien stare riveted on his privates and quickly covered himself.

"If some man had done that to me," Conar told him, drawing the eunuchs gaze, "I'd have done my damndest to slice his cock in twain and make him eat it."

Without knowing he'd done so, the eunuch shifted his attention to Jaborn, then returned it to Conar. He saw pity in the Outlander's gaze and lifted his head.

"Did he do that to you?" Conar asked.

Jaborn could feel the hatred rolling toward him as the man beside him dipped his head in answer. He turned his gaze back to McGregor and found him sneering.

"Did he cut out your tongue, as well?" Conar asked.

When the eunuch once more nodded, the Serenian Prince let out a long breath. "And you still give your allegiance to a man like that? What does that say of you? What kind of men does that make the two of you?"

The hand of his fellow servant fell on Haji El-Sabor's shoulder and the eunuch turned to look into the other man's face. An understanding, silent as it had been for a long, long time, passed between the two men and they turned, pushing past Rasheed.

"Come back here!" Jaborn screamed, drawing out his dagger. "Do you hear me?" When the men continued on, he drew back his hand to throw the knife into Haji's back, but found the back of his hand sliced open by the tip of McGregor's sword. Jaborn yelped and dropped his dagger in the sand, turning to face his enemy with a snarl of fury.

"Only cowards aim for a man's back, Jaborn. I guess that tells me what kind of man you are," Conar sneered.

Celene saw the women coming down the stairs beyond them. She frowned for a moment, not recognizing two of them, but seeing Rachel with them, she knew the newcomers to be allies. She saw Prince Guil glance behind him, then whisper something to Rasheed.

"I'd leave them alone if I were you, you son-of-a-bitch," Conar said, seeing where Rasheed's attention had gone. He couldn't make out who the women were from where he stood, but he knew he wasn't going to let them be hurt.

Rasheed looked from the Serenian to the women, then his face went pale for there were even more of them coming down the stairs, their faces set and cold, crossbows and daggers in their slender hands. He looked once more at the Serenian, then shoved Jaborn aside and ran.

"Rasheed!" Jaborn shouted, trying to reach out to grab the man and keep him there, but the servant was too quick for him and was soon sprinting toward the newer parts of the catacombs.

The fleeing servant did not see the group of six women who broke away from the stairs and began to follow him, but the fifteen men to McGregor's left did. Looking nervously at one another, then turning their fearful attention to the women advancing on them, they, too, turned tail and ran.

Celene saw the fear beginning to form on Jaborn's face. It was already there on Prince Guil's, but not in the same way it was leaching across Jaleel Jaborn's. As soon as Jaborn noticed the women coming toward them, he bent down and snatched up his dagger. Swinging it in a low arc, he started toward the Outlander.

From where she was, Catherine watched the deadly smile creeping across her husband's face. As much as she wanted to run to him, or to at least call herself to his attention, she knew she dared not, for there was bloodlust in Conar's dirty face and it was a craving she knew would be satisfied with nothing less than Jaborn's total destruction.

"Milord!" Rachel shouted, though, drawing that frigid stare to her.

Conar caught the dagger thrown to him. It felt familiar and he spared a glance at the black crystal blade every Daughter was given on her Initiation Day. He smiled. Shielding the dagger at his side, he stepped away from the wall.

“You want me, Jaborn?” he cooed. “Then go for it.”

Jaborn’s irrational hatred of the man before him turned into a red haze of madness. He lunged at McGregor, intended to skewer the man.

“Jaleel!” Guil screeched. “Be careful!”

Sabrina pushed past Rachel and stood watching the fight between the two men. She folded her arms and admired the fluid ease with which the Outlander put a nick here and a cut there and a deeper cut elsewhere. Her mind was on the tale Liza had written to her of this man’s fight with three would-be robbers at a tavern on a lonesome road in Serenia. Liza had not exaggerated his prowess with his steel.

Catherine was unaware that she was gripping Meggie’s arm in a punishing clutch that would leave horrible bruises on the old woman’s flesh. Nor was she aware that she was trembling or that the babe inside her womb was leaping.

But Meggie was. She felt the babe move against her and she looked down to the swelling mound of Catherine’s belly. Maybe, she thought, her face softening, maybe this once I’ll get to see one of his bairns birthed.

Celene took her mother’s hand as Miriam shoved Guil aside and went to stand beside her daughter. Both women kept their gazes on their Champion, silently applauding his ability.

Jaborn knew he was outmatched. He knew there was no way he could hope to win fairly against this man. He kept glancing back to Guil, hoping his old friend would come to his aid, but every time he caught Guil’s gaping stare, a little more color had drained from Gehdrin’s face and, every time he looked at Guil, McGregor put another slash on his skin.

Conar was peripherally aware of the women gathered in the wide chamber. One quick sweep of his eyes, not close enough to distinguish faces, told him there must be at least fifty to seventy women watching him. He heard some male voices and thought he recognized one in particular, but he knew he had to keep his mind on what he was doing. One slip would be all it took for Jaborn to plunge that dagger into his belly.

Chase Montyne eased past several of the women and reached Sabrina’s side. He took her hand and felt her squeeze his fingers with what he knew had to be immense relief that he was all right. She leaned against him and he put his arm around her, drawing her to him.

“That is his own blade,” he heard Rachel say. “The one Jaborn is using. He has worn it since the day it was stolen for just such a time as this.”

“What does that mean?” Celene asked her mother.

“It means,” Meggie answered for them all, “that only a weapon of his own, one forged especially for his hand, can kill Conar McGregor.”

A tremor of fear raced through Celene’s body and she clutched at her mother’s hand.

“Don’t worry, girl,” Meghan Dunne called out. “Our Dark Overlord will win. Have no fear of that.”

Guil swung his head toward the old woman. He found several women looking at him, watching him, and he dared make no move that would cause these bitches to fall on him as he knew they had fallen on Rasheed and maybe every man in the keep.

“I warned you, Jaborn,” Guil whispered beneath his breath. “I warned you not to trust these women.”

From the back of the crowd of women, several older women pushed their way through and came to Meggie and Meghan. They whispered something and both of the old women smiled knowingly and nodded. Guil watched the two old hags exchange a look, then turn their attention on him. He backed away from those looks and plastered himself against the wall.

Kharis glanced behind him and saw other women coming down the stairs, accompanied by men he was not all that surprised to see. He nudged Chase with his elbow then cocked his head back toward the stairs.

Chase craned his neck to look in the direction Kharis was indicating. When he saw Shalu Taborn bulldozing his way through women not inclined to give ground to the Necromanian whirlwind, he chuckled, then returned his full attention to the one-sided fight.

Jaborn was winded. He was bleeding freely in more places that he could count, but he felt each and every one of them. He had managed to get close to McGregor only twice and both times had resulted in deep cuts on the Serenian's arms, but the man had not even batted an eyelash at the pain. He had simply struck out what that hell-blade Rachel had tossed him and put another mind-shattering cut on Jaleel's chest.

Shalu hissed into the face of a young woman who hissed right back at him and was shocked to the very core of his foundation when the diminutive woman shoved him hard enough to actually make him stumble.

"Be careful, Necroman," she warned him. "Friend or no friend of our Overlord, I don't let no man push me around!"

Balizar's eyebrows shot up as he saw the black man step aside for the woman. If there was anything he didn't think Taborn was capable of doing was feeling contrition. He had been wrong. If it were possible for Necroman's to blush, he thought Shalu well might be doing it at that moment.

"How many of our men were hurt?" Chase asked Sajin as the Kensetti Prince finally made his way to the front of the rapidly-enlarging group of onlookers.

"None," Sajin answered, his attention on Conar to make sure the man was unharmed. "When we got here, the doors had been thrown open and there were about a hundred women out there waving us in."

"Just doing their jobs," Meghan sniffed. "I'd have been disappointed if'n they hadn't done it to the best of themselves."

Sajin crooked a brow at Chase, but the Ionarian only shrugged. He had no idea who the woman was.

Shalu cursed as he was bumped from behind and rolled his eyes to the heavens. Woman or no woman, lady or not, he was not about to be mauled by these bloodthirsty little pieces of fluff. He spun around, meaning to take whoever had plowed into him to task. His scowl was met by the tired, sad face of Sentian Heil.

"We heard he was down here," Sentian said softly. His haunted expression was painful to look upon.

Shalu nodded. He put a beefy hand on Heil's shoulder. "How are you, son?" he asked.

Sentian shook his head. "I don't know, King Shalu." Tears began to fall down his cheeks. "I really don't know."

Ching-Ching was pushed forward respectfully by some of the women and he came up short as he saw the burly Necroman taking Heil into his arms and comforting him. The little monkey man cleared his throat and ducked his head, overcome by emotion, himself.

Thom Loure helped Paegan through the gathering and looked back as Holm gripped his shoulder. Thom smiled wearily. "He was told his brother is dead."

Paegan shuddered, overcome with grief and felt Holm take him into his arms. He flung his arms around the sea captain's neck and began to sob.

"Where is my papa?"

Conar heard his son's voice and knew Wyn was all right. The young man's words were greeted by such a roar of feminine shushing, the very walls trembled with it. But it put a smile on the Serenian Prince's lips and more strength into his weary body.

Guil saw the moment Jaborn realized he was going to die. The fierce light of battle died in the man's eyes and his face became slack. His shoulders, despite the crouch in which he still fought on, seemed to sagged beneath the weight of his knowledge and it was at that moment that McGregor moved in for the final hit.

Catherine held her breath, seeing her husband lunge toward the blade in his opponent's hand. Conar's belly was only an inch from that lethal black crystal dagger as he thrust forward with his own.

Jaborn felt the blade enter his body, sliding in without the barest hint of obstruction. The pain wasn't as bad as he had always thought it had to be, but it was bad enough to make him moan. He stared into McGregor's face, wishing he had enough strength left to plunge his own blade into his enemy, but even as the thought crossed his mind, he felt his dagger drop from his hand.

Guil had a clear view of Conar McGregor's face as he pushed the blade further inside Jaborn. The dagger went in to the hilt and the blow lifted Jaleel slightly off the floor.

Conar pushed against the dagger again, feeling the warm, sticky blood gushing over his fist. He held the blade there, staring into Jaborn's suddenly pallid face.

Jaleel Jaborn thought fleetingly of McGregor's baby daughter; of how the child's blood had flowed crimson on the red clay; of how her strangled cry had been cut short by the slicing of his blade across her tiny throat. A hiss of sound pushed through the chamber as the Daughters intercepted that random thought and Jaborn somehow knew when McGregor was through with him, these women would tear him to pieces. He looked into McGregor's eyes and knew that man knew it, as well. The alien stare that glared back at him bore an intensity so malignant it was palpable, beyond human comprehension.

"Die, you motherfucker," Conar snarled. He twisted the blade in his enemy's gut then jerked up on it, slicing through muscle and organ. He jerked again until the blade was lodged in Jaborn's chest bone and could go no higher.

Guil collapsed to the floor and buried his face in his hands. The Serenian had shown no mercy to Jaleel; he could expect none from him, either.

Everything wavered around Jaleel Jaborn and sounds seemed to be coming from far, far away. He thought he heard applause as McGregor's blade was yanked out of him with a gush of intestine. He slowly sank to his knees, coming down with a soft thump that spilled more of him onto the cavern's floor. Curiously, he looked down at the red mass puddled in front of him, then slowly looked up into his killer's face.

"I just want you to know," he heard Conar McGregor telling him, "You did not destroy me, Jaborn. You did not take away my mind." There was absolute quiet in the chamber as the Outlander stepped behind Jaborn and grabbed a handful of his hair. "Nor did you succeed in making me believe I was the one responsible for my friends' deaths."

Sajin Ben-Alkazar watched his friend pull Jaborn's head back and place the blade of his dagger against the man's exposed throat. Conar's words chilled him to the marrow of his bones and he felt Sabrina jerk against him in shock.

"What you did," Conar said as he began his cut across Jaborn's throat, "was piss me off!"

Shalu flinched as what was left of Jaborn's blood geyser out of the gaping wound in his throat. He stared with shock as Conar brought his knee up and slammed it into the side of Jaborn's head before letting the man drop to the cavern floor.

Conar stood there, blood covering his hands and dripping down his thighs, and stared at the body of Jaleel Jaborn. When he turned around and the crowd saw his face, there was a gasp, then the women among them began to drop to the ground.

Sajin stared at his friend, unable to accept what he was seeing. Even as the women continued to kneel before Conar McGregor, he had trouble understanding what was going on. If he had not seen the horrible red slit eyes and the fierce green glow from those strange, strange eyes, he would not have believed it possible. "The Black Ascendency," he heard someone whisper and he shivered.

Tyne Brell's sword slipped from Conar's hand and a woman reached out to take it, bringing the blood-slick steel to her bosom as though the weapon were a holy relic. She kissed the hilt tenderly, closing her eyes as she began to mumble a rune of thanksgiving for what the blade had brought about.

Catherine would have gone to her husband as he stood beside Jaborn's still body, but Meggie put out her hand to stop her.

"Not now, girl," Meggie whispered.

The Serenia looked about him, seemingly in shock, but when his gaze settled on Shalu, he lifted his red-smeared hand and pointed at the Necroman. His voice was infinitely tired and drained of inflection.

"There are five of our men in the chamber beyond. I want them taken from this place, Shalu."

Shalu nodded. "I will see to it."

McGregor swung his attention about the group, assuring himself the men who had been imprisoned there were alive and reasonably well. Then he found Sajin Ben-Alkazar's face among them and his face softened to a small degree before tightening again as he found Guil looking at him warily.

"That man was as much a part of what was done here as was Jaborn," he said, pointing at the Hasdu. "I leave it up to the Daughters what they want done with him."

"Kill him!" the women shouted as they came to their feet in a rush of thundering sound. "Kill him!"

Guil dropped to his knees, his hands up in pleading to the Outlander. "McGregor, please! I beg you! They will listen to you. I--"

Conar shook his head. "It is not up to me to decide your fate, Ben-Gehdrin and even if it were, I would not interfere with these women." His gaze went to Meggie Ruck and held. "Their Mistress is the one to whom you should make your entreaty, not me."

Wyn pushed through the crowd and went to his father. His expression was filled with immediate concern as he saw Conar waver. "Papa?" he asked, putting out a hand.

"Conar?" Chase asked, stepping away from Sabrina at the same moment. "Are you all right?"

Catherine rushed forward, ignoring Meggie's advice, but her husband put his hand up before she could touch him. "No, Catherine," he said, shaking his head. "I am not fit to have you lay hands on me."

"Do you think I care?" his lady asked, her eyes blazing with insult.

"Give me time," he answered, his own eyes pleading with her to understand. "I feel dirty, Catherine. Unclean. And I will not touch you until I--" He staggered again and felt Montyne and Wyn's hands closing on his arms to keep him from falling.

"Milord, please!" Catherine begged him. "Your wounds need tending to and--"

“He needs a bath and clean clothes more than anythin’ else, girl,” Meghan advised, easing Catherine aside as she and Meggie stepped forward. The two old women took their Overlord from Chase and Wyn’s hold, staring the men down as they made to protest. “We know what he needs, lad,” Meghan told Chase. “And we will see to him.”

He let the women lead him away, aware of the eyes that followed them to the steep stairs. Only once did he stop, looking back over his shoulder, his gaze unfailingly going to his lady.

“Give me time, Catherine,” he asked. “All I ask is that you give me time.”

Shalu followed the trio’s progress up the stairs, his attention glued to Conar’s bent head and tired footsteps. There was much he would never understand about the Serenian and from the looks of those who knew him well, their feelings were much the same. The black man turned to look at Montyne.

Chase shrugged. “They meant to break him, but what they did was bring the Demon back.”

“The Demon?” Balizar asked, not sure what the Ionarian meant.

“He’s like a rattlesnake, you know?” Thom Loure asked quietly. “Those beasties just coil up and lay there, minding their own business until someone comes tramping along, disturbing ‘em. Then those creatures start to shake their tails to warn the fool not to mess with ‘em, to leave ‘em the hell alone. You don’t head that warning, you’re gonna be bit.” He shifted his attention to the dead man on the floor. “Like that one got bit.” Thom nodded his bald pate sagely. “I’m standing here thinking our rattlesnake ain’t finished striking, yet.”

THE END