



# WINDRETRIEVER

By

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## PROLOGUE

As it was reported among the inhabitants and prisoners of Abbadon Fortress in the Dahrenia Province of Rysalia:

"The mighty oak had fallen and the branches of His tree had been sharply pruned by the number of six. But the oak was not dead, only diseased for awhile; His roots were still firmly embedded in the soil of the earth. Even as the dead branches were gathered, fresh green shoots began to spring forth from the bark of the oak and one of the acorns, which had fallen not far from the tree, began to take root on his own."

## Chapter One

He looked older than his forty years. The lines spreading out from his sapphire blue eyes were painful to look at for they appeared to be etched into his very soul. And those lines had been earned in an agony of spirit and of physical pain that would have broken a lesser man.

His pale gold hair had lost its sheen and his six foot frame had lost weight. When he spoke, which was rare in those first few hours after the Daughterhood of the Multitude had taken Abbadon Fortress, his voice was hoarse and so soft those around him had to strain to hear what he said. Those who loved him, who looked after him, were concerned for he neither wept nor swore nor screamed at the horrible injustice of his situation. His stoic acceptance was almost eerie in its calm. There were those who believed he had lost his power to reason properly. And there were those who watched him carefully, afraid his hand would stray to a hidden dagger or his feet to the tallest point from which he might jump.

And then there were others who guarded him.

Wherever he went inside the fortress, he was accompanied by fierce women warriors with armed crossbows at the ready. Outside the bathing chamber where he had been led immediately after his enemy's death, two women stood sentinel with pikes crossed against entry. Inside the chamber, two more women stood guard at the door while the Elders went about bathing the filth from his body.

Meghan Dunne, feeling every one of her eighty-seven years, poured cinnamon oil into the steaming water of the bathing pool, glancing now and again at the man who sat so still while his leg iron bands were being removed by a trembling smithy.

"Hurt him and you will pay for it with your life," she heard Meggie Ruck, her fellow Elder, warn the smithy in a voice filled with hatred as the first band was sawed in twain. Then Meggie's tone changed to one of gentle concern. "Are you all right, lad?"

Meghan put the stopper back in the flask of oil and turned to give her Overlord her full attention. She saw him nod silently, never raising his head to look at those gathered protectively around him. His dull blue gaze was locked on the floor at his dirty bare feet.

"Hurry up and get that damned iron off'n him, you bastard!" Meggie snarled, slamming the heel of her palm against the smithy's tense shoulder. She replaced her withered hands on the naked shoulders of her Overlord, soothing the slump of those wide shoulders and glared down at the smithy until the second band fell free and landed with a heavy thump on the floor. "Now get out of here before I turn you inside out!" the old woman threatened.

The two women at the door uncrossed their pikes and stepped aside for the frightened smithy to exit. Neither opened the oak portal for him, but both turned to watch him fumble with the door handle. A smirk of laughter came from the women as the smithy swung the door open to find two sharp, steady pikes aimed at his chest.

"Let him pass!" Meggie called out.

The outside sentinels lowered their pikes and stood aside for the smithy to run past. As soon as he was streaking down the hall, one of the women closed the door behind him and both resumed their silent vigil.

"You want me to help you get them breeches off, son?" Meggie asked, bending over her Overlord's shoulder.

"I can do it," came the barest whisper of sound.

Meghan watched him push himself up from the stool. He looked so tired, so infinitely weary, and, of course, she knew why. Just looking at him as he stood there, weaving slightly as he fumbled weakly to unbutton the studs on his breeches, was almost enough to break the old woman's heart. She knew he had been pushed well past the limits of bearable pain and into the savage and brutal realm of mind-altering agony. That he could function at all seemed almost too good to be true. The look of sorrow on his scarred face was almost more than she could bear, herself, and she wondered how he could handle it. Knowing the cause of it tore at her heart like a weretiger's claws.

"Here, baby," Meggie said softly. "Let me help you."

The old woman pushed his hands away, making quick work of undoing the studs. She was about to push them down over his lean hips when he staggered, grunting with surprise and weariness. Meggie made a grab for him, catching his left arm to keep him from tumbling backward. One of the women at the door threw down her pike and rushed forward to grab his other arm. Between them, they steadied him and kept a tight hold on his arms.

"You want me to finish undressing him, Mistress?" the woman asked.

Meggie shook her head. "No. He'll feel more comfortable with me doing it, won't you, lad?"

He nodded slowly, his glazed eyes staring somewhere off into space. His breathing was so slow, so audible, it seemed to be coming from the very core of him.

Meghan walked over and gently shooed the sentinel away, positioning herself so the two women at the door could not view his nakedness as Meggie stooped down to draw the breeches from him.

"Step out of the leg, baby," Meggie ordered. "Now the other one."

"Can you make it into the bathing pool by yourself, lad, or do you want me and Meg to help you?" Meghan questioned him.

"No, I can do it," he answered. He wavered for a brief moment, then turned and walked slowly to the steps of the bathing pool. Very carefully, he stepped down into the water and lowered himself with a sigh so heart-felt, it brought tears to the women's eyes.

"There's soap and a cloth just to your left, lad," Meggie told him. "Do you feel up to bathing yourself or do you want one of us to do it for you?"

He glanced up for the first time and there was a strange look on his face for just a second before he shook his head and reached for the soap. He lathered the cloth, seeming to take forever to do so, then lifted it to his chest.

Meggie turned away, as did Meghan, but one of the women at the door, her name was Miriam, kept her watchful gaze on her Overlord. Her forehead creased with worry as she watched his slow circular motion as he scrubbed half-heartedly at his chest. She bit her lip, aching to wade into the pool and take the cloth from him, to give him the bath he needed and deserved. She turned her pleading gaze to Meggie Ruck and found that woman looking steadily at her. Meggie's chin dipped in a silent acknowledgement of Miriam's request.

"Be gentle with him," Meghan warned as Miriam handed her pike to her fellow sentinel and loosened the ties of her robes.

He looked up, startled, as the water lapped around him. His blue gaze was puzzled as Miriam, clad only in her short gown, knelt before him in the water and gently took the cloth from his tired hand.

"What are you doing?" Miriam had to strain to hear him ask.

"She is going to bathe you, lad," Meggie told him and smiled as he turned his face up to her.

"Just you relax and let her do it."

Miriam felt his long, defeated sigh of surrender rather than heard it. She watched his eyelids close, saw his head go back along the rim of the pool, and then his eyebrows draw together as though he were in great pain.

"There are cuts on his arms, Mistress," Miriam said as she tenderly wiped the dirt from his flesh.

"Aye," Meggie conceded. "They'll be seen to when he's bathed." She frowned at the woman in the pool. "You just make sure you clean them cuts good. We don't want no infection to set in."

Miriam nodded, so very aware of the heat of her Overlord's body, the scent of the cinnamon oil wafting about her, the sound of his tired breathing, and the dark stain of ugly bruises beneath the grime on his flesh. Lovingly she wiped away the crusted blood, careful not to hurt him any more than she had to in order to do so. Now and again, she would hear him suck in his breath and know the tug of the cloth against his wounds had caused him pain.

Meggie grunted as she lowered herself behind him and reached out to stroke his forehead. She smiled down at him as he opened his eyes and looked up at her. "You look so tired, lad," she said, smoothing the damp hair from his forehead.

He turned his face so that his scarred left cheek was nestled in the old woman's wrinkled palm. "I'm all right, Meggie," he whispered.

"Are you really?" she inquired, caressing that ravaged flesh.

"Aye," he breathed and gasped as the cloth dragged too sharply over a nick high on his right thigh.

Miriam stilled, her hand on his leg, and looked up into the old woman's face. She saw no anger in that withered visage. "Does it look as though it needs stitching, girl?" Meggie asked her. Miriam looked down and saw tiny spirals of pink drifting up to the surface of the water. She nodded. "Yes, Mistress, it does."

"I've got the fixin's ready," Meghan said. "Soon's you got him bathed, we can see to them wounds of his."

Miriam drew in her breath as her hand moved for the last place on him that had not been cleaned. She was more than aware of the tremor in her hand as the cloth closed around his manhood and even more aware that his eyes had opened and that he was watching her. Her face flamed beneath that silent scrutiny and she dipped her head, making sure she did not turn her curious attention to the juncture of his powerful thighs.

"You finished, girl?" Meggie asked, sensing his discomfort at being touched by this strange woman and Miriam's flush of excitement at having done so.

"Yes, Mistress," Miriam answered, pushing herself up out of the water. The cotton of her short gown clung to her lush curves and she saw a flash of admiration flicker through his gaze before he lowered it once more to the surface of the water.

"I think the two of you can wait outside, don't you, Meg?" Meghan asked, watching the play of arousal staining Miriam's high cheeks.

"Aye, I'm thinking so. Just don't be going nowhere," Meggie ordered.

Miriam found her fellow sentinel looking at her with curiosity as the two of them left the bathing chamber. But despite the look Rebecca gave her, Miriam knew the woman would not question her.

"Do you need us to help you get up, son?" Meghan asked her Overlord.

He shook his head and, holding his breath against the pain of movement, levered himself

from the water and climbed the few steps up from the pool. He walked to the low bench Meggie pointed to and sat down, letting out a tired breath as he did.

"It might be best if you lie down, lad," Meggie said. "You got more'n a few spots that need tending and one or two that need stitching closed."

Without comment, he lay down on his side, then stretched out on his back on the bench, grimacing slightly, for the wooden seat was not comfortable.

"This won't take long," Meghan pronounced as she went about applying a mild astringent to the numerous cuts and scrapes on his body. One or two caused her a moment's anxiety as he moaned with the sensation, but she hurried on, wanting to put him through as little discomfort as possible.

"Meg?" he asked, reaching out for her hand.

"Aye, lad?" the old woman answered as she gripped his hand between both of hers.

"Can you give me something to help me sleep?"

His request surprised her and she looked down at him with concern. "Don't you think you're so tired you won't need nothing as soon as we leave you alone to rest, son?"

"Please?" he asked, searching her face.

Meggie removed one of her hands and touched his forehead. "If that's what you want. When we get you up to bed, I'll make up a little potion that'll bring you sweet dreams."

"You wanna stitch up this wound or do you want me to, Meg?" Meghan asked as she finished wiping the cut on his thigh.

"I'll be doing it," Meggie affirmed. "I don't doubt your ability, but I just don't like nobody laying hands to him but me."

Meghan understood. She handed the threaded needle to her Sister.

If the stitching caused him pain, he didn't show it. Not by a flicker of his eyelids or an intake of breath. He lay perfectly still as the old woman took four stitches in his thigh, three in his upper left arm, and four more in his right side. When she was finished, he let her pull a clean robe over his nakedness, place sandals on his feet, and help him to get up. He walked with the two women to the door and waited until they had made sure no threat waited outside for him.

Miriam and Rebecca went ahead of their Overlord and the four women who flanked him: the two elderly women at his side and the four other sentinels with their loaded crossbows in front and behind. When they reached the room Meghan had ordered for his use, they found four more armed women standing guard outside.

"His lady-wife demanded to be allowed inside his room, Mistress," one of the women told Meggie. "But we turned her away."

"Good," Meggie replied. "He don't need none of that now. Get him in the bed while I fix him up a little tenses and water to help him sleep."

They put him to bed, fussing and clucking over him as though he were a little boy. They tucked him in, pulled the covers over him and made sure he was comfortable before Meggie came back, huffing and puffing from her climb up the stairs, to administer the potion that would sedate him.

"Here you go, lad," Meggie said, helping him to sit up. She put the tumbler to his lips and smiled as he frowned at the smell. "I added a mite of bitter root as a treacle so's to help them wounds heal the better." She cupped the back of his head as he downed the somewhat pungent brew.

He lay back down, disliking the instant numbing in his mouth, but welcoming the signs that told him he would not be long bothered by the thoughts that were torturing him. He knew he

needed rest, undisturbed and unburdened by the memories that had been flooding his senses all week.

"You sleep good, now, baby," Meggie said, bending over with a grunt to put a light kiss on his forehead. She tugged the covers up to his shoulders and turned to go.

"Meggie?"

Meggie June Ruck turned back around and looked at her Overlord. "Aye, lad?"

"Life isn't fair, is it, Meggie?" he asked her, his voice already slurring.

Her heart ached for him. "Nay, lad. Sometimes it surely ain't." She waited, just in case he wasn't finished, but she heard his heavy breathing and knew he had fallen asleep. Very quietly, she pulled the door open and left the room.



## Chapter Two

"I don't know that much about him, really," Prince Kalli Jaborn admitted to the men around him. "My brother told me only his side of things and, with Jaleel, the truth was often twisted to be what he wanted it to be."

King Shalu Taborn of Necroman looked down into the amber of his brandy and swirled the liquid up the sides of the snifter. "You knew he had been in prison."

"The Labyrinth," Sentian Heil explained. "One of the worse penal colonies in the history of civilization."

"Most of us," Prince Paegan Hesar said, looking about the room, "were interned with him there." He pointed at the tall blond lounging on a low divan, then moved his gaze to some of the others gathered. "Montyne. Loure. Ching-Ching, too, but that was long before any of us got to the Labyrinth."

Kalli glanced about him. "I have heard the Labyrinth was a hell-hole."

"It was," Shalu snarled before draining his snifter of potent Viragonian brandy, thankful Serge Nickolayevich Kutuzov, the Captain of the Anna Katrine, had thought to bring a bottle with him when he and over two hundred Outer Kingdom warriors from four of Tzar Thomas' ships, had come storming into the fortress just after dawn that morning.

"How long were you there?" Kalli asked, knowing a little about imprisonment himself for until only a few hours before, he had spent over twenty years of his life shut up inside the walls of Abbadon Fortress.

"I was there about two years," Thom Loure answered. He stared down into his untouched snifter of brandy. "The others? About a year, as I remember."

"Conar was there for five," Prince Chase Montyne of Ionary said quietly. "None of us knew he was alive until we found him there."

"He had been sentenced to a flogging and exile," Wyn, the son of the man being discussed put in. "They beat him so badly, we thought he had died from it." The young man, soon to be twenty-eight years old in three weeks, looked up from cleaning his dagger. "The Tribunal told us he hadn't survived the beating and we believed them." His young eyes became haunted. "We didn't even question them."

"We weren't meant to," Holm van de Lar, the Captain of the Ravenwind grumbled. "Them bastards meant to make the boy suffer and he did."

"But he made them suffer when he got back home," Sentian Heil exclaimed. "He undid everything the Tribunal had done while he'd been in prison. He took back the land those sons-of-bitches stole and he stole the money from their coffers right out from under their noses."

"He destroyed the Tribunal," Thom Loure said, nodded. "And the Domination." He took a small sip of his drink and grimaced before setting it aside. "And nearly himself in the bargain."

"I heard he was married," Kalli commented. "That she died?"

"Elizabeth," Chase Montyne said softly. "She fell to her death."

"Along with Conar's brother, Brelan, who was trying to save her," the Tzarevna Catherine Steffonvitch McGregor injected.

"That is when we took him to the Outer Kingdom," Yuri Andreanova, the Shadow-warrior said. He looked at his Tzarevna. "And that is where he met our lady."

"And fell in love with her," Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar added, smiling at the lady in question.

"So much tragedy for so young a life," Kalli said. He shook his head. "I can see why my brother thought he could destroy McGregor's mind if he but heaped more personal pain on the man."

"It will take more than the deaths of a few of his closest friends to bring about the ruin of Conar McGregor!" Shalu hissed. "The man is stronger than that Hasdu demon realized."

"Yes, but Conar is wounded deeper this time than any of us may want to believe," Chase responded. "He may have avenged the deaths of our comrades, but he hasn't come to terms with those deaths, yet."

"Give him time," Balizar Arbra asked. "I've a notion when he's at himself, there's going to be hell to pay in Rysalia."

"I believe so, too," Asher Stone agreed. "He had started something before he was kidnapped that I believe he will want to see to a final end."

"You hope he will, anyway," Shalu snapped.

"We are fighting for the freedom of our homeland, Taborn," Asher argued. "He knows what that is like."

"Fighting for you almost got him killed," Thom Loure growled.

"We aim to see he goes home with us," Holm remarked, drawing agreeing nods from the men of the Wind Force and frowns of disapproval from the men of the Samiel.

"And should he want to remain here?" Rupine, the physician questioned.

"We won't let him!" Sentian snapped in answer.

"You could help us, you know," Asher protested. "You men came all this way to aid him and now you want to drag him back before he has finished with what he started."

"We want to keep his white ass out of trouble!" Shalu thundered. "Taking him back, *dragging* him back as you call it, to Serenia is the only way I know to keep him in one piece."

"Even if he doesn't want to go?" Rupine asked.

"It doesn't matter what he wants," Paegan Hesar, the sailor Prince of Virago grumbled. "He's going back whether he likes it or not! I won't lose any more of my kin in this heathen place!"

"Have any of you stopped to think of how he might feel about the lot of you so blithely making these decisions for him?" Catherine, Conar McGregor's second wife, asked quietly. As heads turned to her, she shrugged delicately. "If you know anything about the man at all, you know he will make his own plans and carry them out in his own way."

Ching-Ching, the Chrystallusian martial arts expert who had been silent up until then, spread his small hands. "The lady is right. It is Conar's decision to make and I believe we should let him make it."

"Let him make it?" Shalu bellowed. "That is the last thing we should do!"

"I agree," Sentian said, nodding. "We should just do like we've had to do before: put him on the ship and keep him there until we can set sail for home."

"What if he refuses to go, Senti?"

Every head in the room snapped around at the soft question and men leapt to their feet, staring at the man whose life they had been so neatly arranging.

Catherine's heart thudded painfully in her chest as she looked at her husband. The baby in her womb kicked in greeting and she put her hand down to smooth the shifting in her belly. She saw his gaze travel to her and then stop. She smiled, but there was no answering smile in the sad, tired face which looked back at her. He seemed to beg her pardon for that before moving his gaze about the room.

"When will you men ever learn?" he asked. His voice was weak, toneless, and as he came

further into the room, those gathered could see the effort it took for him just to lower himself into one of the gathering room's chairs.

"We want what's best for you, Papa," Wyn said, coming to hunker down by his father's chair. The young man put his hands on Conar's knees and looked closely at him. "Should you be up so soon?"

Looking from one face to the other, Catherine could see the fierce resemblance between the two men. If she had not known they were father and son, she would have sworn they were brothers. Their hair was the same ripe shade of golden wheat. They both had deep clefts in their slightly rounded chins. They were of the same height, physique and coloring, and both had striking blue eyes, the older man's a deep sapphire blue, the younger's, a pale azure. Only the looks in those eyes were vastly different. One set had seen little trouble and strife. The other had endured torments no less exacting than those the inhabitants of hell experience.

"I am fine, Wynland," Conar told his son. He looked around him at those gathered. "Tired, but otherwise all right."

"You can rest on the ship," Shalu said, his dark cinnamon gaze fusing with the Serenian Prince's. "We have decided to leave tomorrow."

Conar nodded. "As good a time as any for you to leave," he agreed.

"ALL of us to leave," Shalu corrected.

"I'm afraid not," Conar told him. "I'm not leaving until the last of the slave trade in Rysalia has been abolished."

Asher Stone and Balizar Arbura exchanged a look of relief, then both men smiled at the grimace of stubbornness which immediately formed on the Necroman's face.

"YOU are going back with US!" Shalu barked. "In chains, if need be, McGregor!"

Conar sighed and shook his head. "When do you intend to let me grow up, Taborn?"

"When you show some sense," the King of the dark continent stressed. "As yet, I have not seen such a phenomena where you are concerned."

"I'm not going to argue with you," Conar said.

"GOOD!" Shalu spat, nodding emphatically.

"But I'll not be on that ship when you sail, either," Conar warned.

"Then we won't sail until you are," Chase said quietly, gaining himself his boyhood friend's attention. "If you stay, Conar, the rest of us do, too."

Wyn had to move back as his father pushed himself out of his chair. He stood there, seeing the anger gathering on his parent's face, watching the spark of rebellion beginning to take hold, and he glanced over at Sentian, the one man he thought just might be able to reason with his father.

Sentian stood up, too, and walked to his Overlord. From years of close friendship and hardship with the man, he reached out to put a steady hand on Conar's shoulder.

"We didn't come ten thousand miles to be turned back, milord," Sentian told him. "We came to bring you home and barring that, to help you do whatever it was you were trying to do here BEFORE taking you back with us. Freedom fighting is something we all know quite a bit about. If you are going to stay here, then we'll stay here with ...."

"No you won't," came the reply. "Not this time. This time you men are going to do what I want you to."

Several voices interrupted with heated denials, but Balizar's shout, brought the argument to a sudden stop.

"Why don't you listen to what the man has to say for once?" Balizar shouted. "You profess to be his followers yet you would have HIM be yours!"

"Arbra's right," Asher injected. "Are you not, as are the men of the Samiel, sworn to do as he bids?"

"When it doesn't endanger his life!" Holm shot back.

"Or when we think ...," Thom began only to have his Overlord shout him down.

"You think?" Conar thundered. "You think? Since when have any of you men had an original thought not pumped into your head by Shalu Taborn?" He turned his angry glare to the Necroman. "Just because he is the oldest among you does not give him more wisdom than the next man!"

"More wisdom than you," Shalu muttered. He met the enraged stare of Conar McGregor with one of his own. "You've never known what was best for you, brat, and this nonsense about staying here proves it!"

"Let me make my own mistakes, will you?" Conar screamed at them. "I'm the one who will have to pay for them!"

The shout had been so loud, so virulent, all sound ceased in the room. Every eye was on the Serenian Prince. Every face in the room, save his own, showing the shock at the volume of his outburst. He had managed to gain their attention, and their worry, with that inhuman bellow of fury.

"How many more of you do you want me to have to be responsible for burying?" Conar asked, seeing several flinches and one or two scowls. "Isn't six enough?"

"Conar ...," Chase started to say in a reasonable voice, but he, too, was shouted down.

"WILL YOU LET ME TALK?"

Catherine watched her husband, seeing the man the world knew as The Darkwind staring down his men. The power of that stare, the unquestionable command in those strange eyes, was enough to quell even the most stubborn of these men. Faces lowered, even as fists clenched, but no one would dare to interrupt him again. The room grew as quiet as the tomb.

"You men have not been where I have been," he finally said in a voice, though not his normal slow Serenian drawl, that was one that demanded the full attention of everyone in the room. "You have not had to endure what I have endured. You have not lost anywhere near the loved ones I have."

Paegan lifted his head and looked at Conar. The young Viragonian Prince, feeling the loss of his brother, Rylan, keenly, was hurt further by what he thought a callous remark.

"You haven't, Paegan," Conar told him, intercepting the look. "And for the most part, none of you have had to deal with watching that loved one die right before your very eyes." He turned his gaze to Thom. "Not even you."

Catherine reached up to wipe away a tear that had crept unbidden down her cheek. She knew the men could hear the pain and desperation in her husband's voice the same as she could, but she could see no acknowledgement of that on their carefully blank faces. They were watching him as though he were a retarded child to be humored and their attitudes both bewildered and angered her. She found herself clutching her own fists in the confines of her skirt.

"Do any of you know how I felt to hold Hern Arbra in my arms, his blood dripping down my chest, and know I was the cause of him dying?" Conar asked.

"Hern interfered with a guard's duty," Thom protested. He cast a quick look to the dead man's twin brother, Balizar, and found that man glaring back at him.

"Because Hern wanted me to be able to rest," Conar reminded them. "If Hern hadn't wanted what was best for ME, he'd be alive today."

"You didn't cause his death," Sentian mumbled.

"Nadia?" Conar questioned. He looked at Kalli. "Did my daughter, Nadia, die because of some other man or was it because of me that Jaborn cut her throat? What of Rayle Loure? Who did he die trying to protect? And the six Elite hanged at Boreas?"

No one could answer that. Their very silence was assent enough.

"And Amber-lea?" Conar asked.

Chase's head came up. "She died in childbirth, Conar. The babe could just as well been Brelan's."

"But it wasn't, was it?" Conar asked. He held up his hand as others began to protest. "My father? My mother? Liza? Brelan? They all died because of me."

"Don't start this shit again," Shalu snapped. "You weren't to blame ...."

"Storm came over here looking for me. Now, he's dead." He looked at Paegan. "Rylan's dead because he came here trying to find me." He shifted his gaze to Chase. "So is Grice and so is Roget and so is Tyne."

Shalu knew what was coming and looked away from the keen probe that had settled on his face. "Don't say it," he commanded.

"Why not?" Conar asked. "Can't you admit that the only man you have ever called 'friend' is now lying in a wooden box ten thousand miles from his home because he had come to this godforsaken place to help his brother?"

"You want to accept the blame for their deaths?" Sentian shouted. "Fine! Accept it! No one seems able to keep you from doing so anyway!"

"I'm not blaming myself for what's happened, Senti," Conar told him. "I'm just admitting responsibility for it."

"Same difference," Holm mumbled.

"No it's not," Conar answered. "If I had put a blade to their throats," his voice broke, "as Jaborn did to Nadia's, then, aye, I would have been to blame because my actions took their lives. But that wasn't the way of it. But I am responsible for their dying and it is for that reason that I will not allow any more of you to die or be hurt because of me."

"We are grown men," Chase reminded him. "We are responsible for our own actions. We don't hold you accountable for what happens to us."

Conar stared at the man, wishing with all his heart and soul that someone understood. As Sentian and Thom spoke up, he lost all hope of having anyone do that.

"We made a vow," Sentian reminded him, "that we would protect you with our lives. To do anything less than that would be dishonorable."

"Aye!" Thom growled. "No one held a blade to our throats to make us take that vow, Conar. We did so because we love you. We followed you to hell and we will do so again if you but ask it of us!"

"I don't mind dying," Paegan put in, "as long as the cause is just and I know Rylan felt the same way. If he had to die, at least he died in the company of the one man he respected most in this life. And if I know my brother, he did not blame you and probably said as much if he had had the time to do so."

"Brell thought of you as the brother he always wished he'd had," Chase spoke up. "When I was getting ready to sail for Rysalia, he came to me and told me to make sure nothing happened to you. Tyne loved you, Conar."

"As for Jah-Ma-El," Shalu said in a husky voice, "that man loved you more than any man alive. He always told me he was living on borrowed time, anyway, since the day you kept him from hanging. Knowing Jamie, he died with only one regret: that his passing in such a manner

would hurt you, Conar."

"Don't any of you see what this is doing to him?" Sajin asked, standing up and glaring at the men. He pointed a finger at his friend. "Look at him! Look what you are doing to him!"

Catherine had been watching her husband closely as the men spoke. He was standing behind the chair in which he had been sitting and was gripping the back of it so hard the entire chair was quivering. His arms were rigid, his body taut. He was staring at the floor, pain and guilt blazing from his eyes and when the room grew still, he slowly looked up and the expression on his face was pitiful.

"You profess to love him," she heard Sajin haranguing the men. "Is this how you show him that love? By tormenting him? Can't you see what you are causing here?"

Sajin pushed past Shalu and walked to Conar's side. He faced the others. "He feels guilty enough as it is. Will you compound that guilt by remaining here against his wishes when he has expressly asked you to leave?"

"Our place is with him!" Sentian shouted.

"Your place is to do as your Overlord bids," Ching-Ching reminded them. "That was the vow you made at the time of the Convocation."

"Let's just say," Sajin hissed at them, "for argument's sake, that you force him to let you stay here to help in the fighting." He turned the heat of his glare on Chase. "Let's just say you get killed, Montyne." He switched his attention to Paegan. "Or you, Hesar? Who will bear the blame, then? YOU or him?"

"We would," Paegan snarled. "It is our decision to make, not his."

"No?" Sajin purred in a sneering tone. "Even when he has asked you to leave? Who do you think this man will blame?" He pointed at Shalu, then Sentian. "You? You?" He lowered his voice to a silky taunt. "Or will he blame himself for not being man enough to MAKE you do as he wanted?"

"The mark of a true military leader is to know when it is in the best interest of his men to run from a battle just as he knows when it is advantageous to engage in one," Catherine said quietly. The men glanced her way with looks of annoyance. "In my country, men who do not heed their commanding officers, are court-martialed." She looked at Yuri. "Then, they are hanged."

"I am sworn to protect your husband, Your Grace," Yuri defended. "To the death, am I so sworn."

"A position in which my husband does not want to place you, Andreanova," Catherine reminded the man. "Or any other of you gentlemen, either."

Conar looked at his wife. Her gaze met his and he saw her lips twitch in a plea for forgiveness for interrupting.

"Conar?" Ching-Ching asked, coming wearily to his feet. As Conar looked his way, the little Chrystallusian locked his eyes with the Serenian's. "What is it you want, milord?"

There was no hesitation. "I want you to go home."

"Without you," Chase stated in a hurt tone.

"Aye," Conar answered. "Without me."

"Are you making that an order, Your Grace?" Sentian growled, drawing his Overlord's attention to him.

"As surely as I am standing here, Heil," the Serenian Prince replied.

"Despite the fact that we do not wish to," Shalu snapped.

"He's your leader," Sajin reminded the men. "His word should be law."

Taborn spun around and fixed the Kensetti Prince with a murderous glare. "You stay out of

this, pog! This does not concern you!"

"Yes, it does," Sajin replied. "I am of the Samiel, one with The Khamsin, and from now on, the men of the Samiel are his to do with as he bids." He glanced around him at Asher Stone and Balizar Arbra and Azalon Ben-Hasheed and Kharis El-Malick, who had just entered the room, and Rupine, the physician, and the half-dozen more who made up the Cadre of the Samiel. "We would not dare question his authority as our leader."

"And neither should you," Balizar put in.

Conar's wife sat with her hands clenched tightly in her lap, sensing the real contest of wills lay between her husband and the big black man who was glowering back at him as though he could turn Conar over his knee and beat some sense into him. She watched the older man's brown eyes glaze with fury, then flare with resolve as Conar's squared his shoulders and let go of the chair on which he had had such a death grip. The two men faced each other as enemies, but Catherine knew that was far from the way things stood between these two strong, powerful warriors.

"This is what you want?" Catherine heard the Necroman ask.

"Aye," Conar assured him. "It is. It is time the mother bird let the baby bird go. He's already left the nest. Why not see if he can fly with the eagles again?"

"And if he falls?" Shalu snapped.

"There will be hands to pick him up," Sajin answered.

"And hearts to love him just as much as the hearts of the Wind Force do," Asher added.

"And swords to protect his back from the enemies he fears will harm you," Balizar said.

Chase left his place beside Wyn and walked to his old friend. He put his hands on Conar's shoulders and shook his gently. "This is wrong, my friend. To send us away is wrong."

Conar held his friend's gaze for a long moment before speaking. When he finally did, everyone in the room could feel the pain in his words.

"Do you love me, Montyne?" he asked.

Tears gathered in Chase's blue eyes. "You know I do."

"Then if you love me, let me go. Let me be what I have to be. Let me do what I have to do. Don't make me worry about you. I don't need that right now."

"I don't suppose it matters that we'll be worrying about you," Chase whispered. "That your safety is more important than our own."

Shalu spun around and shoved his way through the men gathered. Slamming the door behind him, his heavy footsteps echoed hollowly as he left the fortress. There was not a man there who did not know Taborn would not be returning.

"Go after him, Sentian," Conar ordered, tearing his gaze from Chase's. "You, too, Thom, Holm. I don't want him getting into trouble in Asaraba." He glanced at Kharis and the Venturian nodded before turning to go.

Sentian hesitated, wanting to deny the order, but Balizar put a beefy hand on the young man's shoulder and shook his head.

"Don't give him any more grief, Heil. That's the last thing the boy needs," Arbra challenged. "All this is hard enough on him."

Sentian risked a glance at his Overlord, found Conar looking back at him with every expectation of having his order carried out. Heil clenched his jaw and left, Thom and Holm at his heels, knowing it would do no good to try to reason with the Dark Overlord of the Wind.

"Are you going to order me and Chase around like that, too?" Paegan growled, wanting nothing more than to knock Conar down, chain him and drag him, kicking and screaming if need be, to the hold of the Anne Katrine.

"No," Chase answered for his friend. "He isn't." Before Conar could speak, the Ionarian drew him into his strong arms and held him. "He's going to hug us goodbye and then we're going to gather our belongings and head for the ship."

"I'm not so sure ...," Paegan started to say, but Chase had released Conar and was pulling the young Viragonian toward their friend.

"Say goodbye to him, Paegan," Chase ordered.

Conar brought the young man to him and gave him a tight embrace. "Look after my little brother Dyllon for me when you get home, eh, Paegan?" he asked.

Paegan nodded, overcome by the emotions that were boiling inside his gut. Dyllon McGregor, Conar's youngest brother, was Paegan's best friend. How was he going to explain to Dyllon why he hadn't been able to bring Conar home?

Wyn watched the two Princes leave the room, neither looking back at his father. He saw Ching-Ching bow respectfully to the true King of Serenia and then walk gracefully to the door where he turned and smiled warmly at Conar McGregor.

"Baby bird will be careful?" Ching-Ching asked in his sing-song Chrystallusian.

"He'll try," was Conar's answer.

"All I can ask of him," Ching-Ching replied before exiting the room.

Prince Kalli Jaborn rose from his seat and bid Catherine a good morning. "If you should need me, I will be outside." His young eyes crinkled with happiness. "Enjoying my freedom!"

The men of the Samiel also slipped quietly from the room, the warriors of the Outer Kingdom following, leaving Conar alone with his wife and his eldest son. The silence was loud in the room as the door closed behind the last man.

"Are you sending me away, also?" Catherine asked, fearing what Yuri had warned her about might well come to pass.

Conar shook his head. "No. If you would, I would like you to stay until I can take you back to St. Steffensburg, myself."

"You're going to the Outer Kingdom?" Wyn questioned.

Conar came from behind the chair and sat down again. He let out a long, weary exhalation of breath. "There are five coffins lying in the throne room, Wynland. As soon as Balizar's men bring Storm's body here, there will be six. I can not, nor will I, allow those men to be buried in Rysalian soil." He looked down at his hands. "Nor can Serge transport them back to Serenia." A look of pain crossed his face. "The journey takes too long and the bodies would not....."

"We would be honored to bury them in the Field of Honor outside St. Steffensburg, milord," Catherine interrupted, saving her husband from explaining to his son that the bodies of the men he loved would be long-since decayed and posing a health hazard before reaching Serenia.

"I would like that," he answered, glancing up at her. "It is a very beautiful place."

Catherine stood up, smiling shyly at Wyn. "If I do not see you again before you go, Lord Wynland, I bid you a safe and pleasant journey home."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Wyn replied, taking the hand she offered him and bringing it as gracefully and sensually to his lips as he father ever had. "And I pray for a safe delivery for you." He glanced down at her burgeoning belly. "And maybe a little sister?"

Catherine's face split into a wide smile. "We'll see," she said, standing on tiptoe to plant a kiss on his cheek. She turned and looked at her husband. "I will be in my room, milord, if you should need me."

Conar nodded, thanking her silently for the time she was willing to give him with his son. He watched her until the door closed behind her and then lowered his head, putting his hands up to



his temples.

"Papa?" Wyn asked, kneeling down before his father once more. "Will you please let me stay?"

His father looked up and it was obvious to the young man that another agonizing headache had come to claim his parent's attention.

"Wyn," Conar said with mild exasperation, "of them all, you would be the last I would allow to stay."

"But why, Papa?" Wyn whined. "I am your son. Of them all, I should be the very one to be at your side!"

"Of them all," Conar said, leaning forward so that he could put his hands on his son's neck, "you are the one I love the most. You are the one it would kill me to lose." He laid his forehead against Wyn's. "I may not have shown you how much I loved you when you were growing up, I might not have given you the time with me you wanted or needed or deserved, but Wyn ...," he drew his son's head down and put an emotional kiss on the young man's head, cradling that head against his chest. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, "you are my favorite son and I love you more than you will ever know."

"Then let me stay with you, Papa!" Wyn cried, pulling back and fusing his gaze with his father's. "Let me be at your side where I belong!"

"Your place is where I send you, Wyn, and I am sending you home."

The young man knew it would be fruitless to continue pleading with his father. Not only was there a warning of parental authority in his father's face, there was a hint of a royal order in the firmness of his parent's voice.

And a steadfast spark of denial in the too-bright sapphire eyes.

Wyn lowered his head. "Is there anything you want me to do when I get home, Father?"

"Father?" Conar questioned, not sure he liked that title. When Wyn shrugged, without looking up, he figured it was his son's way of letting him know he hadn't agreed with his decision but would abide by it anyway.

"Is there anything you want me to tell Uncle Legion?" Wyn stressed.

"Aye," Conar said, his voice turning just a bit cold. "You can tell him to mind his own damned business from now on and that if I see his ass over here, I'll sell it to a breeding farm!"

Wyn looked up, his face piqued with interest. "A breeding farm?" At his father's nod, Wyn smiled. "They really have such places?"

Conar's lips twitched although he did not smile. "Aye, they really have such places." He ruffled his son's hair. "Once you are on board ship, you might ask the Lady Sabrina all about it. She'll be going back to Ionary with Chase. And," Conar slid his hands to his son's shoulders, "You will see to Mistress Ruck for me. I've already told her she'll be going back with the men and she's not happy about it."

"But you're her Overlord, too," Wyn chuckled. "She has to do as you say, doesn't she, Papa?"

Conar didn't answer. "Make sure she stays in Serenia once she gets there, Wynland. That is the only thing I ask of you."

Wyn's face lost its smile. "I will miss you, Papa."

"I will miss you, too."

"And I love you, Papa!" The young man put his arms about his father and hugged him only briefly, then leapt up from the floor and was out of the room before Conar could answer.

Conar McGregor, the rightful King of Serenia, the Dark Overlord of the Wind, the man

freedom fighters on three continents called Commander, sat where his son had left him and stared across the still room, his hands loosely gripping the arms of his chair. He could not remember a time in present memory when he had felt so alone, so cast away from those he loved. He had sent his son and the men of the Wind Force back to his homeland. He had ordered Meggie Ruck back, as well, even though it had been a hard-won battle between Mistress and Consort. Now, he thought, as he sat there, his heart aching inside him, he had just one more person's safety to insure before he could begin his fight in Rysalia.

And that was the one person in all the world he wanted least to send away.

## Chapter Three

"Do you think he'll come to say goodbye?" Holm asked as he looked out over the yarboard rail of the Anna Katrine.

"Not a chance," Thom replied, squinting as he gazed up at the crow's nest where Wyn had climbed aloft to view Asaraba. "You know how he feels about goodbyes."

"Aye," Holm sighed. "That I do." He turned his back to the rail and leaned against it, folding his beefy arms over his wide chest. "I ain't so sure we're doing the right thing in leaving him here."

"It is what he wanted," Ching-Ching reminded the captain of the Ravenwind. "We must abide by his wishes."

"Even when you know he's making a mistake?" Paegan grumbled.

"Even then, young one," Ching-Ching answered.

Prince Lares Taborn, the youngest son of King Shalu knocked politely on his father's cabin door and waited patiently for the command to enter. When no such order came, he knocked again. "Papa? It's me, Lares."

"I've already tried talking to him," the Lady Sabrina told the young man. "Your father is most rude. He did not even show me the courtesy of answering."

Lares looked down at his boots. "Sometimes he can be a bit ...." He searched for the right word, could not seem to find one adequate to the situation and shrugged. "He's just angry."

"And hurt," Sabrina replied, putting a gentle hand on the young black man's back. "Maybe even a bit disappointed."

"He thinks of Lord Raven as one of his own," Lares mumbled. "Sometimes I think he loves him better than any of us."

Sabrina smiled. "I would not think so. Perhaps he just gives him more notice than he does the rest of you." She rubbed Lares' back. "Isn't it usually the child who gives the parent the most trouble who gets the most attention?"

Shalu's son thought about that for a moment and then grinned. "Aye," he agreed. "I see your point."

"Give your father time," Sabrina advised him. "He will adjust to the situation. It is never easy for a parent to admit his child has grown up under his very nose."

"HE AIN'T GROWN UP!" came the thundering boom from behind the cabin door.

Sabrina's smile widened and she shook her head. "Neither, it seems, has the father."

Captain Serge Nickolayevich Kutuzov glanced once more to the wharf. He strained to see the one face he hoped might be there. He had held back their sailing time by nearly forty minutes in the hopes the Serenian would appear. Now, he had to admit Prince Chase had been right: the man would not come.

"You might as well hoist anchor, Serge," Holm advised him. "If the lad was gonna show, he'd have done so by now."

Serge nodded and reluctantly gave the order to cast off. His blue eyes were disappointed for he had wanted to try one more time to talk Conar McGregor into letting him leave a large company of warriors behind.

"And I told you no," the Outlander had said in a stern voice. "Take them home with you, Serge. All of them."

Two other Outer Kingdom ships lay in the harbor, awaiting the sailing of the Anna Katrine before tacking north. Their captains were no less concerned than Serge was with leaving the Tzarevna and her husband behind.

"The Tzar will most displeased," Serge had informed the Serenian.

"Let him be," McGregor had answered. "Tell him I will protect his daughter. If he had worries about my ability to do that, he should never have desired the union between us."

"Will we be sailing up to St. Steffensburg?" Chase asked.

Serge glanced at Holm and then shook his head. "The Ravenwind is docked in Odess. We will drop you off there and then the rest of us will travel on to St. Steffensburg."

"Once they're assured we have hoisted anchor and are beyond the reef," Holm grumbled. "Once we're committed into the North Boreal sea lane, we can't turn around. I've no charts for that part of the ocean."

"A precaution, Captain," Serge told him. "His Grace asked that I make sure you did not attempt to ...."

"Foil his bloody plans!" Holm snapped.

Chase looked up as the shrouds filled and the winds grasped the Anna Katrine. He turned his attention back to the docks where a steady stream of humanity was hawking its wares and thieving and insulting one another. His gaze traveled over the shiny bulbous roofs of the Rysalian towers and slid past the warehouse where his life had changed so drastically.

"It is best to think of the future, not dwell on the past," Sabrina told him as she joined him at the rail.

"Aye," he answered. "I know." He drew her to his side and cradled her against him. "What will be, will be, eh?"

"Yes," she agreed. Resting her head on his shoulder, she looked out over the city where she had spent most of her life and was not unhappy to be leaving. She was with the man she loved, who loved her, and she was traveling to a new part of the world she had only glimpsed in Liza's letters.

"Do you see the man in black standing by the basket maker's stall?" Chase asked her quietly.

Sabrina narrowed her vision and finally saw the man he was referring to. "McGregor?" she asked.

"Aye."

"So he came to bid you farewell, after all," she said.

"When he knew we couldn't do a damned thing about it," Chase grumbled.

She looked up at her lover. "Will you wave to him or pretend you don't see him?"

"He knows I see him," Chase answered.

Looking back to the wharf, Sabrina watched the man in black turn his back on the ship and then disappear into the bustling crowd around him. No one seemed to notice his passing.

"May the Wind be favorable to you, Lord Khamsin," she heard Montyne whisper.

From the porthole of his cabin, Shalu followed the man in black until he could no longer see him among the crowd. The Necroman laid his head on the cool porthole glass and cried.

\* \* \* \*

Balizar handed the reins of the magnificent black stallion to his new owner. "I paid a goodly price for this beast, Khamsin," Arbra grouched. "He'd better be worth every goddamned Ryal!"

Conar ran his hand down the steed's front legs, lifted his hoof to inspect it, then patted the

horse's neck. He moved back to flanks, running his hand along the sleek ebony side, then patted the horse's rump.

"He'll fly, Arbra," Conar prophesied. "Like the wind."

"The thought of that bastard Belial selling Mistral makes me so damned mad I wish the Daughters had not lost him in the catacombs," Asher spat. "That beast was the finest piece of horse flesh I've ever encountered."

"This one will make you eat those words, Stone," Conar told him. "Mistral was fast, but this steed will be faster still." He grasped a handful of the stallion's mane and swung atop the broad back.

"What will you call him?" Azalon asked.

Conar bent over and patted the sleek neck. "I'll name him after what I plan," he answered. He straightened up. "His name is Revenge."

\* \* \* \*

Conar looked up from the papers spread across Jaleel Jaborn's desk. "Come," he ordered.

The door to the dead Prince's office opened and Rachel Stone, Asher's sister, peeked around the panel. "You wanted to see me, Khamsin?" she asked.

He laid the papers aside and sat back in his chair. "I wanted to see you two days ago," he said. He swept his hand to the empty chair in front of the desk.

Rachel closed the door and came into the room. She sat down, placed her trembling hands in her lap, and finally looked up at him. What she saw on his handsome face did nothing to alleviate the nervousness that had gripped since learning he wanted to speak with her.

"Why have you waited so long to come to me, Rachel?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Things have been hectic here. There were matters I needed to help with concerning the Daughters. Now, with the fortress secure and those of our enemies either imprisoned or executed, I have finally found time to seek you out."

"Liar," he said, reaching out to take up a letter opener.

Rachel's cheeks infused with color and her green eyes snapped with anger, but she held her tongue. She knew better than to argue with him.

"Do you want me to tell you why you haven't come before now?" he asked. He dug the tip of the letter opener into the blotter, turning the blade from side to side as he watched her.

She looked down. "There is no need." She jumped when he tossed the opener to the desk and leaned back in his chair. Glancing up, she found him staring steadily at her, his fingers pressed together and templed across his lips.

"Have you any idea how I felt when I thought Falkar had killed you, Rachel?" he questioned. He hadn't expected her to answer and when she did not, he let out a long breath. "I blamed myself."

She flinched. "I know."

His gaze narrowed. "Was it your intent that I keep on blaming myself?"

She looked up. "You saw me that night, Khamsin. In the crowd with the other women gathered in the catacombs. You looked right at me and I saw the relief on your face. You knew I was alive."

"Aye," he said. "I did and I was very thankful that you were. But when I asked Meghan the next morning to have you come to my room, you never showed up."

"Your lady-wife was ...."

"This doesn't concern her, Rachel," he interrupted. "This is between you and me."

Rachel didn't say anything. She had heard the annoyance in his voice and she had seen the

flash of irritation at her mention of his wife. When he pushed back his chair and stood up, she could feel the anger emanating from him.

"When I call you from now on, little girl, you had better not wait to answer that call. You want to be part of the Cadre of the Samiel, then you will obey me just as the others do. Is that understood?"

She nodded. "Yes, Khamsin."

"And that shit about loving me?" he questioned, gaining her immediate regard as she looked up. "I don't know why you told Jaborn that, why you even dared do something so reckless, but you had better *never* do it again. Do you hear me?"

"I thought ...," she started to say, but he was on her before she could finish.

"You *didn't* think!" he snarled, grabbing her by the arms and pulling her from her chair. He slammed her against him and held her there, glaring down into her stunned face. "If Jaborn hadn't needed you, admitting such a ridiculous piece of garbage like that could have truly gotten your throat cut! The women who have professed to have feelings for me have always been sorry they did for without fail they have suffered because of it!"

She stared up into his gleaming sapphire glower and felt her knees growing weak. If he but knew, she thought, how deep were her feelings for him, he would do to her what he intended to do to his wife, and that she could not allow.

"It won't happen again," she told him.

"It had better not!" he snarled, letting go of her. He stepped away from her, skirting the desk and slammed himself down into his chair. "That's all I wanted. You may go."

Rachel lifted her chin. "May I say something?" He flung out his hand in agreement. "I know what you plan in regard to your wife. I ...."

"Leave her out of this!" he commanded.

"All right," Rachel concurred. "I just want to know what will happen when you return from St. Steffensburg."

His brows drew together in irritation. "What are you talking about?"

"You are going to leave her there, am I right?"

He ground his teeth together. "What I do with Catherine is none of your concern."

"You will need a woman," she said. She watched his face turn hard and cold.

"Will I?" he sneered. "And are you volunteering for that dubious place of honor?"

"Yes," she surprised him by answering.

Conar sat forward, laid his arms on the desk and threaded his fingers together. He stared up at her as though he could not believe she had dared to admit such a thing to him.

"I am no whore, Khamsin," she told him, mistaking the look he was giving her with one of contempt. "But I can satisfy your needs and at the same time make sure no female spy infiltrates the Samiel through your bed."

For a long time he didn't speak. He just looked at her, seeing the way she held his silent gaze easily and without a flicker of self-consciousness. When at last he leaned back, his eyes locked with hers, all he did was nod his consent.

"Then it's settled?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, using the alien word that he knew would mean more to her than just the 'aye' of his agreement.

Rachel let out the breath she did not know she had been holding. "Will you tell her?"

"There's nothing to tell," he answered.

"It would make things more final when you left her if she knew there was someone else

waiting for your return," Rachel advised him.

Conar looked away from her. "That would hurt her."

"I am sure it would, Khamsin," Rachel said, "but if you mean to annul the marriage, what better grounds than adultery?"

He winced. His marriage to Elizabeth had been set aside for just such charges. It had hurt him then and it would hurt him now. Back then, he had been guilty. Now, he was not. He shook his head. "No such betrayal has been committed, Mam'selle," he answered. "I can not admit to a lie."

"It doesn't have to be a lie," she countered, meeting his unsure look with an encouraging one of her own. "It takes only a few moments to turn a would-be lie into the truth, Khamsin."

Conar knew Catherine would never forgive him if he betrayed her. She was not a woman to grant clemency for deceit and transgression. He knew little of her religion, but he did know adultery was considered a deadly sin, a more than adequate cause for the dissolution of a marriage. There would be no way her church would absolve him of such a sin and neither would Cat.

His gaze went to the door, held for a moment, and then returned to her. Slowly, his hands went to the laces of his shirt. "Lock the door, Mam'selle," he told her.

## Chapter Four

Sajin finished giving the orders to Asher's men and let out a deep, heart-felt sigh. Leaning back in his chair, he thrust his long legs out in front of him and closed his eyes. It had been a very long day and on the morrow, they would be sailing to St. Steffensburg.

"I hope tomorrow isn't anything like today's been, don't you?" the Kensetti asked the other man in the room. When there was no reply, he opened his eyes and looked across the room. His expression softened and he drew in his legs, eased himself from his chair, and walked over the chair in which Conar sat. He moved behind the chair and reached his powerful hands down to the sagging shoulders of the man sitting slumped in the overstuffed chair. He began to massage the tight muscles. "Is it bad?" he asked in a voice soft with concern.

Conar had been sitting with his fingertips rubbing small, tight circles on his pounding temples. His eyelids were closed and he was gritting his teeth to the blinding pain inside his head. Every muscle in his head, neck and shoulders was as tight as a drum head. "It feels as though something is trapped inside my skull and trying to get out," he answered his friend.

Sajin Ben-Alkazar was on personal terms with such debilitating headaches, himself, and he knew the pain could be so intense it often made the sufferer want to pound his head against a wall in order to let the demons inside out. He kneaded the muscles over Conar's collar bone, his thumbs working along the strong neck. "Do you want me to call Rupine?"

"No," came the immediate answer.

"Then why don't you go to bed, at least, Conar?" Sajin asked. "Maybe you can sleep it off." His hands threaded through McGregor's thick spun gold hair. He was alarmed at how tight his friend's scalp was. The pain had to be intense.

"I promised Catherine we would talk," Conar answered. "I can't keep putting that off, Sajin."

"Yes, you can," Sajin replied. "You don't need to try to deal with that when you're hurting like this. It can wait."

Despite the riveting pain in his right temple, Conar shook his head. "If I put it off, it's just going to be that much harder when we get to St. Steffensburg."

Sajin smoothed his friend's hair and came to stand in front of him. Hunkering down, he put his hands on the chair arms. "I could talk to her for you."

Conar opened one eye. "That would be the cowardly way out for me, wouldn't it?"

"Did it ever occur to you that all these headaches you've been having might be because you're feeling guilty over deciding to give Catherine up and don't really want to?"

"You know I don't want to," Conar argued, "but what choice do I have?" He felt the nausea coming again and swallowed tightly to keep it down. "Besides, to whose advantage is it that I give her up, nomad?"

"Even at the expense of your health, my friend?" Sajin reached up to draw one of Conar's hands down. "I may love her, McGregor, but I'd rather see you well than suffering like this."

"The headaches have nothing to do with Catherine," Conar told him. "I've had them since I was thirteen. You know that."

"Yes, but they've never been this bad, have they?"

"No." He gagged, making Sajin jump back. He was able to keep the bile down, but could taste the insipid fumes filling his nostrils.



"That's it," Sajin snarled. "You're going to bed!" He reached down to help Conar up.

With his head throbbing like someone was driving a sharp spike through his right temple, Conar allowed himself to be levered up from the chair. He swayed against Sajin for a moment as the pain lurched in his eye, spraying sparkling pinpoints of light along his vision. He could feel the secretion of sweat popping out along his upper lip and on his forehead. That wasn't a good sign and Sajin noticed it, as well.

"You're going to wind up having to be given something for the pain, Conar," he warned.

"God, no," Conar answered. "That's all I need."

Pushing the pain to the back of his conscious thought, Conar stumbled along with Sajin to the sleeping chamber, Jaleel Jaborn's own. He stood weaving at the door as the two women warriors lowered their pikes and one reached out to open the door for him.

"Would you send for Rupine, the physician?" Sajin asked the shortest of the two women. He gripped Conar's arm tightly as his friend sagged against the door frame.

"Immediately, Your Grace!" the women answered. Her sister sentinel leaned her pike against the wall and took Conar's other arm to help him into the chamber.

"I can walk by myself," the Serenian mumbled, but neither Sajin nor the woman paid any attention to him. He stumbled and began to pitch forward.

"Go pull his covers back," Sajin ordered the woman and took the full weight of his friend's suddenly limp body, bending down to put one arm under Conar's legs and the other under his back to lift him up. He carried Conar to the bed and then laid him down.

"I will get his boots and socks, Majesty," the woman said and went to the foot of the bed to carry out her task.

Conar put his hands up to dig the heels into his throbbing eyes, but Sajin pushed them away. "Let me get your shirt off," Sajin told him and began to unlace the ties.

"The doctor will be here shortly, Your Grace," the returning sentinel informed the Kensetti Prince.

"I don't need him," Conar muttered. He turned his face from the light that was streaming in through one of the small oval openings set in the wall.

"Yes, you do," Sajin answered and nodded at the woman who had just come in to help him lift Conar up so they could pull his shirt off. Between them, they managed to strip the sweaty clothing from him and unbutton the top two buttons of his breeches. Sajin glanced around at the woman who stood at the foot of the bed. "Can you find something to cover up those windows?"

"Of course, Your Grace," she answered and motioned the other woman to help her.

"Do you want the covers?" Sajin asked his friend.

"Stop fussing over me, nomad," was the growl.

There was a light tap at the door and Sajin turned to see Balizar standing there. "What is it?" he asked.

"I hate to bother you, Your Grace," Balizar admitted, "but the old one, Mistress Meghan? She wants to see you." He glanced at the Serenian. "Another one of them headaches?"

Sajin nodded. "Did she say what she wanted?"

Balizar shrugged. "Something about the two Princes she's got in the donjon. Gehdren and his cousin, I guess."

"Go," Conar told Sajin. "I'll be all right."

"Rupine should be here in a few minutes," Sajin said. "And don't give him any of your mouth, McGregor." He put his hand on the headboard and leaned over his friend. "Do you hear me?"

"Go away," came the mumbled reply as Conar turned his back to the man.

Sajin straightened and motioned the others from the room. As he, too, left, he quietly closed the door and ordered the two women not to admit anyone other than Rupine, himself, or the Serenian's lady.

Conar buried his face in the pillow, wanting to cry with the pain inside his head, wishing he could. His temples felt as though they would explode any moment and the nausea had returned full force. Drawing up his knees, he began to shiver, a sure sign the pain was going to get even worse. He heard the door open, but at the moment he did, bile leapt up his throat and he arched over the bed, knowing he was about to vomit. He gagged, making the agony inside his head worse, but nothing came out. Gripping the edge of the bed, he felt another wave of sickness coming and tasted the hot sting of bile in his mouth. Just as the bitter fluid filled his mouth, he felt the cold rim of a chamber pot against his chin and he spewed the hot liquid from him in a burst of force.

Whoever was holding the chamber pot for him was also holding his forehead as he retched. The coolness of the person's hand felt good against his fevered flesh and he was thankful for their assistance. He knew had it not been for that assistance, he would have soiled the floor by his bed for he was in too much agony to get up to get the chamber pot.

The noxious fluid poured from him in wave after wave. It got up his nose, made his eyes water with the pain the vomiting was eliciting in his temples, and made the shivering worse. His belly was cramping with the force of his retching and the pain in his right eye was an agony all its own. Looking down into the chamber pot, he could see it was almost filled with his vomit.

"I...can't..." he gasped, interrupted by another spurt of hot fluid. "Please...don't...let...me..."

"Don't worry about it, milord," he heard Catherine say. Her voice was soft and gentle as she strained to hold onto the weight of the chamber pot. "

"Catherine?" he questioned. His voice was hoarse, ragged, and plaintively embarrassed.

"I've got you, milord," she told him. "I've got you."

Footsteps hurried across the carpet and Catherine looked up to see Rupine. The physician took the chamber pot from her trembling hold. "Let me empty this," he said, hurrying away.

"NO!" Conar gasped. He leaned further out over the bed, trying to push Catherine away as another trickle of vomitus gushed from his lips. The vile fluid landed on the carpet, just missing Catherine's slipper.

She cradled his head as he retched again, gagging, but nothing came out. His dry heaves were even worse and she could feel his body quivering violently as he strained against her.

"Here," Rupine said, handing her a wet cloth.

Conar felt the chill of the cloth on his forehead and cheeks, then across his lips. He felt like a mewling infant, unable to look after himself. He was shivering and in so much pain he thought his head would burst.

"Help me get him back on the bed, Your Grace," he heard Rupine saying and felt gentle hands moving him back, pushing him down. "As much as he dislikes it, I have no choice but to give him a potion for this."

"No," he said weakly, but even as he denied the physician, he felt Catherine lifting his head and the rim of a cup against his mouth. "Catherine, no," he repeated.

"Drink, milord," she told him and the bitter lap of the laudanum touched his mouth. She would not let him argue with her and tipped the fluid into his mouth.

"Shit," he hissed, gagging as the godawful liquid slid down his throat, despising the taste of the laudanum and the fact that he hadn't been given a choice in whether to take it or not.

"You have to sleep," Rupine told him.

Almost instantly, the numbing began and the pain began to lessen in his right eye. Rupine made him drink some watered-down tenses, as well, for the nausea, and he felt even more like a helpless child. As the headache began to recede, he turned his face into the pillow and pulled the edges over his ears.

"He'll sleep for at least four hours," Rupine told Catherine. He pointed to the door. "May I speak with you a moment, Your Grace?"

Catherine nodded absently. She followed the physician out into the hall, barely noticing the women warriors who kept a silent vigil at her husband's door.

"I would like your permission to give him a preventative drug, Your Grace," Rupine began as he took Catherine's arm and walked her beyond the hearing of the two sentinels. "I know he would never consent to taking such a thing if he knew of it, but I believe it is important."

Catherine frowned. "He doesn't like to take any kind of medicine."

Rupine nodded. "I know that, Your Grace, but these headaches are so debilitating and, frankly, I am at a loss to explain their sudden occurrence in such a violent form."

"He's had them since childhood," she told the man.

"Yes, so I've been told." He glanced at the door, then lowered his voice. "Your Grace, I don't wish to alarm you, but I am worried about Khamsin."

Conar's wife's brows drew together. "You don't think these headaches are a sign of something more serious, do you?"

Rupine chewed on his lip for a moment, trying to decide if he should say what was on his mind. Seeing the concern in the Tzarevna's face, he thought it might be best if he did not mention his own worries.

"Please," Catherine begged him, "if there is something you think I should know, tell me."

"It's just that I..." Rupine sighed. "Well, I had a patient several years ago with symptoms such as the ones Khamsin is suffering. The only difference was that man developed the headaches when he was in his forties after never having experienced them before."

"What was the cause?" she asked, fearing the physician's answer.

"I can't say," Rupine answered. "I gave him a complete examination, as I have given Khamsin, but I could never determine why the pain started."

"What happened to him? This patient of yours?"

Rupine looked away. "After several weeks of such pain, an artery burst inside his brain." He looked back at her. "As best as I could determine, it was the pressure on the artery that caused it to collapse. The man died."

Catherine's face turned pale. "And you think that will happen to Conar?"

"I can't say for sure, Your Grace. Certainly these headaches are nothing like what he has come to expect. From what he told me, he only had three or four a year up until a few months ago and now they come nearly every month. He tells me the pain is getting worse and lasting longer, as well." He spread his hands. "I don't know what to think. That is why I would like your permission to try treating him with a drug I give my female patients who have such headaches during their monthlies."

"Is it addictive?" she asked.

"Not in the least," Rupine assured her, "but even knowing so, I doubt Khamsin would agree to take it."

Catherine slumped against the wall. "Then how will you administer it to him?"

"In his food. In what he drinks. Someone he trusts will have to be the one to give it to him so he will not suspect anything." Rupine put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I would never do

anything to harm him, Your Grace. If I did not feel this was necessary, I would not have mentioned it to you."

She nodded. "I believe you, Rupine," she answered. Looking up at him, she searched his face. "You swear this medicine will not enslave him to it?"

"I swear on my mother's grace it will not."

Catherine sighed heavily. "Then fetch it and I'll speak to Sajin. Between the two of us, we'll see that he takes it."

\* \* \* \*

Rupine knew the pain had to be excruciating. He watched the Outlander curl up into a defensive, fetal position on the bed, drawing in on himself as though the placement of his body would ease the extremeness of his pain. This episode, having lasted for two days, despite the laudanum and the prophylactic given to prevent the reoccurrence of the headache, showed no sign of lessening. The hurt, puzzled look on the strained face of Conar McGregor gave evidence that this was no ordinary migraine and that he knew it was not.

"Is the pain no better at all?" Rupine quietly inquired.

"No," came the ragged, panting reply. "It's worse."

"Khamsin," Rupine stated, coming to sit on the bed with his patient. "I must insist that you let me give you something to put you to sleep." As Conar began to voice his denial of the request, Rupine spoke louder, overriding the objection. "You can not take much more of this pain without going mad, milord. Two days of this agony is more than enough."

"You've no guarantee sleep will make it stop," Conar answered.

"No," Rupine admitted, "but at least you will have a surcease from the pain for a few hours. The laudanum has done little good and it has not made you drowsy enough to fall asleep. That in itself concerns me for I fear you've developed a tolerance to the drug."

Conar had no idea just how much about his past Rupine was privy to and he certainly had no intention of admitting to the man that there had been a time when he had been severely addicted to drugs that kept him in an almost constant stupor. Or that he had undergone a wicked, brutal withdrawal from those drugs that had nearly driven him insane. That he didn't want a repeat of that horrible time in his life was uppermost in his mind at all times and was the reason he did not want to be given anything that would take away his ability to function properly.

"Khamsin, please!" Rupine pleaded with him. "You have had no sleep in two days and you are as pale as a ghost. I really must insist you allow me to treat you as I see fit."

"Get the medicine and stop arguing with him," Sajin said from the door. "If we have to, we'll hold him down for you to administer it."

Conar raised his head and looked at Sajin. "Bastard," he mumbled before lowering his head gingerly to the pillow.

"Stubborn fool," Sajin shot back. He came to sit down in the place Rupine had vacated at his arrival. "Don't you know we are trying to help you, McGregor?"

Conar fused his gaze with Sajin's, asking something of the man he knew the nomad would understand. At Sajin's gentle smile and soft caress of his cheek, Conar relaxed. "You won't let him give me something to ...."

"No," Sajin said. "I will monitor very closely what he does, what he gives you, and how often he does. There is no need for you to endure this kind of pain when Rupine can help." He glanced back at Rupine as the physician informed him he was going after the sedative. "I'll stay with him until you get back."

When the door closed behind Rupine, Sajin reached out to cup Conar's chin. "Do you think

I'd allow them to addict you, again, my friend?"

"It was a nomad to whom I sold my soul in the first place," Conar grumbled.

"Not this time," Sajin assured him. He leaned over to re-wet a cloth lying on Conar's bedside table. Soaking it with cool water, he wrung it out, then wiped the sweat from Conar's face. "Is it still bad?"

"I don't know what's happening to me, Sajin," Conar told him. "It's never been like this before."

"I've had a few that were much worse than the others and lasted for several days at the time," Sajin replied.

"Truly?" Conar asked. At Sajin's nod, he put up a hand to rub at the pain in his temple. "Maybe I'm not dying, then."

Sajin chuckled. "You're too mean and arrogant to die, McGregor." He folded his arms across his chest and crossed his ankles. "Would you like some good news? The Daughters executed Gehdrin and his cousin this morning and I've sent word to his sister, Jasmine, to come get the bodies."

Conar looked up at him. "They didn't waste any time, did they?"

Sajin shook his head. "Gehdrin had a lot to account for, my friend. Not only what he helped do to you, but for atrocities he committed of which I wasn't aware."

"I've got to get rid of this headache," Conar mumbled. "My friends are lying in the catacombs, ready for burial and here I am lying here ...."

"My ship is at your disposal whenever you are ready to go, but until that headache is thoroughly gone, my friend, you aren't going anywhere," Sajin reminded him. "I'm going to keep your Serenian ass in bed."

Conar's head hurt too badly to argue. The way he felt at that moment, Ben-Alkazar could do whatever he liked with him. Thankfully, the nausea had lessened to a great degree with the tenses Rupine insisted he take every few hours, but the throbbing in his temples was becoming worse and worse.

"Would you get me some water?" Conar asked, wetting his dry lips.

"Sure." Sajin got up and went to a table across the room where a sweating jug of cool water sat. He was pouring a cup of the chilled brew when he heard Conar's loud gasp. The Kensetti turned, dropping the tumbler as he saw the horrible expression stamped on his friend's face.

A sharp agony had suddenly driven through Conar's skull and he clapped his hands to his temples, his eyes flaring wide with the pain of it. Blood abruptly flowed from his nose, splattering his naked chest, and his howl of agony brought the two sentinels hurrying into the room.

"Conar!" Sajin shouted, making a mad dash for the bed.

Balazar, having been outside the room speaking to the women warriors, rushed inside, his face white, and it was he who reached Conar first. It was Balazar whose arms encircled the groaning man and clutched him tightly to a thundering chest.

"Make it stop, Hern!" he heard Conar cry out. "Merciful god, please make it stop!"

Sajin stood wide-eyed as Conar's body jerked and his friend fell back on the bed, his hands digging into his scalp as though he could pull the pain from his skull. He knew Conar did not feel one of the women pulling his hands away from his hair.

"Your Grace, no!" the woman shouted, looking a bit green as she saw several strands of the thick blond hair clutched in her Overlord's hands.

And Sajin knew Conar didn't feel the sedative that was driven into his vein by a grunting, sweating Rupine.

Even as his body stilled and went limp in Balizar's arms, Sajin knew Conar was not even aware of the people around him.

"Milord?" the woman who still held onto Conar's hands asked, drawing Sajin's notice.

"Look." She pointed with her chin.

Sajin followed her gaze to the side of Conar's head and winced. "Rupine?" he questioned, reaching down to touch the faint trickle of blood dripping from Conar's right ear.

Rupine drew in a long breath. "I fear an artery has ruptured," he answered.

Sajin?" The groggy voice was thick, infinitely pleading.

"Yes, my friend?" Sajin replied. He knelt down beside Conar.

"Don't let them hurt me," came the slurred request.

Sajin glanced up at Rupine, then put his hand on Conar's head. "No, Conar. Never again." He stroked the fall of blond hair from his friend's forehead. "On my life, I promise you that."

Conar seemed to sigh and then his lids closed, shutting off the glazed look in his alien sapphire eyes.

## Chapter Five

Catherine paced the room, listening to the men of the Samiel discussing their ill leader. It had been three days since the blood had poured from her husband's nose and ear. During that time, Rupine had kept him heavily sedated, someone in his room at all times to watch him with orders to call the physician immediately should anything seem amiss.

"I haven't given him any of the sedative for eight hours, now. I am going to allow him to wake tonight," she heard Rupine telling the men. "I want to see if he is over the headache."

"And if he isn't?" Asher inquired.

Rupine scowled. "I'll keep him under until he is."

"What if he can not get rid of it?" Azalon questioned. "You can't keep him drugged the rest of his life."

"Rupine knows that," Balizar said quietly.

"I have been thinking," Catherine injected, gaining the men's attention. "If he still has the pain when he wakes, I would like to take him back to St. Steffensburg."

"He can't travel!" Rachel Stone spoke up. "The trip would be excruciating for him."

Catherine turned and fixed the only other woman in the room with a steely stare. "If he is asleep, Mam'selle," she said, deliberately using the title she had heard Conar call many an unmarried woman, "he will not even be aware of the trip." Her gaze narrowed. "Besides which, he is my husband and I will do what I think best for him."

Rachel's own eyes squinted dangerously. "Even if in moving him you might do more harm than good, Madame?"

Sajin looked from one woman to another and didn't like what he was seeing. They were glaring at one another, dislike showing on their pretty faces, but more importantly than that, there was suspicion in Catherine's face and smugness in Rachel's. He glanced at Asher, Rachel's brother, and found the man looking down at the floor.

"Why would you wish to take him to your homeland, Your Grace?" Rupine inquired, feeling the undercurrent of tension emanating from the two women as sharply as every other man in the room.

Catherine sat down on the settee. "There is a woman there," she answered. "A Daughter who I've been told is known for her healing abilities. If she can help Conar, even a little, I think the risk of moving him would be worth it."

"I don't," Rachel spat. She stood with her hands on her hips, and glared at Catherine. "There are Healer Women in Rysalia. Meghan can ...."

"It was Meghan," Catherine interrupted in a cold voice, "who suggested I take Conar to St. Steffensburg."

Rachel's chin came up. "Really?"

Sajin wondered at the nasty smile that suddenly stretched Rachel's full lips and when he looked to Catherine, he could tell Cat had interpreted that smile the way Rachel had intended for the Outer Kingdom woman to. "Then by all means," he heard Rachel coo, "take him. I am sure if Meghan advised you to go, it is the correct thing to do. She knows the sooner you get him there, the sooner his troubles will be over."

Catherine wanted to leap up off the settee and grab the Kensetti woman by the hair and snatch her bald headed.

The infuriating smirk on the woman's mouth was a warning which Catherine could ill-afford to overlook. Had there not been men in the room with them, watching them so closely neither could react in the way she wanted, Cat knew there would be blood and hair and spittle littered about the carpet.

"I think I'll go up to check on my patient," Rupine said, wanting to get away from the charged atmosphere that had developed in the room.

Sajin stood up, too, after risking a quick look of command at Balizar. "I'll go up with you, Rupine."

Balizar nodded. He understood that silent command to keep the women separated.

"Is something going on between Conar and Rachel?" Sajin asked as he and Rupine climbed the stairs to Conar's room.

"By the Prophetess," Rupine replied, "I hope not."

"She's been spending an inordinate amount of time in Conar's room," Sajin commented as he and the physician waited for the sentinels to move aside so they could enter Conar's room.

"Yes, but the man's been asleep the entire time."

Sajin motioned Rupine ahead of him. He lowered his voice. "Were they, ah, intimate before Jaborn abducted Conar?"

Rupine frowned. "How should I know, Your Grace? If they were, they were certainly most discreet about it."

Conar opened his eyes and smiled at the two men hovering over his bed. He was still groggy from whatever it was that Rupine had been giving him, but he fully recognized the friendly faces of the men. Running a hand over his stubbled chin, he let out a sigh.

"Feeling better?" Sajin asked.

"I think so," Conar answered. "I'll let you know when I can feel my hand moving on my face."

Rupine grinned. "A little numb, are we?" He reached down to smooth a lock of blond hair from his patient's brow. It was something nearly all who cared for the man seemed compelled to do.

"I don't seem to be able to feel my toes," Conar mused. His voice was only a little slurred, a little lazy, but his eyes were being obstinately hard to keep open. He forced them wide, then grunted. "I don't want any more of that shit, Rupine. I'm tired of sleeping."

"How is your headache?" Rupine asked.

Conar frowned. "It doesn't hurt as bad as before." He looked up into the physician face. "Not enough to need a painkiller."

Rupine nodded. "All right. Let's see if you can go the rest of the night without it, then." He glanced over at Celene Dunne, Meghan's granddaughter, who was sitting in a chair by the fireplace. "Will you be here the night?"

"Until four," Celene answered, "then Rachel takes over for me."

Sajin's immediate scowl at that information was not lost on the physician. Nor was the pleased expression on his patient's face. Rupine made a mental note to ask Meghan to assign another woman to watch the Outlander.

"Catherine has decided that we sail tomorrow morn," Sajin said, drawing Conar's look. "She means to take you to a woman healer in St. Steffensburg."

"I don't need that," Conar muttered. His face lost what little color it had and he looked down at the coverlet covering him. "I'm not sure I'm ready to go back there."

Rupine glanced at the Kensetti prince. "Your wife only wants what's best for you,



Khamsin," Rupine told him. "Perhaps you should listen to her."

Sajin knew it was not Catherine's desire to help Conar that concerned the Serenian, but the decision he had made to leave her behind in the Outer Kingdom when he returned to Rysalia. Conar had yet to tell Catherine he was going to have the marriage annulled and thinking of it, as he was no doubt doing at that moment, had brought fresh guilt to the Serenian's face.

"Catherine doesn't know everything," Conar said, looking up at Sajin. "Maybe if she did, she wouldn't be so anxious to leave Rysalia."

So, Sajin thought, that is what you've done. The questions he had concerning the girl Rachel had just been answered. He shook his head, watching Conar blush before looking away. Conar, oh Conar, Sajin mumbled to himself, you've done it now.

"She only wants you well, Khamsin," Rupine argued. "If this woman in the Outer Kingdom can help you, I am all for it."

"May I speak to Khamsin alone?" Sajin asked, looking around at Celene and including her in the request.

Rupine motioned for the girl, sensing there was something important to be discussed here that he should be no part of. He closed the door behind them as they left and engaged the women warriors in conversation so none of them could hear what was being said inside Khamsin's room.

"All right," Sajin snapped, drawing a chair up to Conar's bed and straddling it. "When did you sleep with Rachel?"

Conar's blush deepened. "What makes you think I did?"

"I know you," Sajin quipped. "And I know how your feeble mind works." He shook his head at Conar's heavy scowl. "You saw a way to have Cat want the marriage put aside and you acted on it." He snorted. "With Rachel's help."

"I don't know what you're upset about," Conar snapped. "You're in love with Catherine and you want her." He glared at his friend. "I'm giving her to you."

"How nice of you," Sajin sneered.

"What's your problem, nomad?" Conar growled. "You know damned well I don't dare keep her with me. With you, she'll be safe."

"If not happy," Sajin shot back. "It's you she wants."

"Well, she can't have me!" Conar snarled.

"But any other woman can for the asking, right?" Sajin grunted. He saw Conar's lids flicker and thought I threw him off with that one.

"When will we be sailing?" Conar asked, refusing to argue anymore with the nomad.

"Probably on the morning tide." Sajin stood up and swung the chair away from him. "And Rachel won't be sailing with us, I'll see to that."

Conar looked up. "I never meant for her to."

"That's good," Sajin told him, "because I damned well intend to see she stays here where she belongs."

Conar looked away from the irritation on the Kensetti's face. "I'm doing what I think best, Sajin."

"Pouring salt into Cat's wounds isn't doing what's best, McGregor. It's cruel and it's going to hurt her more," the nomad Prince answered.

The infuriating glare of sapphire anger shot toward Ben-Alkazar. "Then soothe her pain, Sajin," Conar snapped. "You can do that, can't you?"

"Yes," Sajin growled. "You can count on it!"

\* \* \* \*

At dawn the next morning, two men of the Samiel carried Conar on a litter to a covered dray that had been rigged especially for the trip to the harbor at Asaraba. Forty men rode guard behind the wagon with another twenty in front, all heavily armed. Catherine rode between Sajin and Yuri, casting puzzled frowns at the Shadow-warrior who had been silent and withdrawn for several days.

"Is something wrong, Yuri?" she had asked him again that morning, but the man had only shaken his head at her question. There was something worrying the man, but he refused to confide in her and there was nothing she could do until he did.

"Will we be taking the ship back to St. Steffensburg that we took before?" Catherine asked Sajin.

"No. My family has many ships, but this one belongs to me." He tightened his grip on his mount's reins for the animal was aching to run. "I won her in a game of kohn from a Venturian merchant."

"What is she called?" Azalon asked. He was riding off to one side of the others.

"The Temptress," Sajin laughed. "My sister named her."

"Where is Sybelle?" Catherine asked. "She left St. Steffensburg right after you, Sajin. When you came in search of Conar's friend, Storm."

Sajin's smile vanished. "I have no idea where she is, but I surely would like to. There are things I need to discuss with Sybelle." He thought of why he felt the need to find his sister and a heavy scowl replaced the smile of a moment before. "She has a lot of explaining to do."

Catherine sensed a quiet smoldering fury in her traveling companion at the mention of his sister and let the matter drop.

Inside the dray, Conar felt the headache returning and gritted his teeth to the jarring jolt of the wagon wheels in the ruts along the road. With every bump, the pain increased until he was once more sick to his stomach. Burying his face in the pillow, he was determined not to give in to the pain. He clutched the material to him and squeezed his eyes shut.

Rupine could look into the back of the dray from where he sat his steed. He had not missed the look of agony which had flashed across his patient's face and knew the man was hurting again. Outside of giving McGregor more of the drug, which he did not want to do and which the Outlander would no doubt refuse anyway, Rupine knew of nothing he could do to lessen the severity of the discomfort the man was experiencing. He only hoped the journey into Asaraba could be made as quickly and easily as possible.

Yuri glanced behind him at the dray as one of the nags pulling it snorted and flung its head, rattling the harness. He frowned and turned back around again. His thoughts had been on the man inside the dray and those thoughts had not been happy ones. He knew well what the Serenian prince intended to do once they reached Yuri's homeland and that knowledge ate at the Shadow-warrior's gut like a hungry rat. He had hoped Conar would relent once he had seen the Tzarevna, but the events that had taken place at Abbadon had served only to strengthen the Outlander's decision to put aside his wife, a woman Yuri knew loved Conar McGregor more than life itself. And a woman Yuri suspected McGregor loved just as much.

Balizar's gaze scanned the horizon for trouble. Not that any of them expected it, but it was better to be on your toes than on your knees in a slave camp. He stood up in his saddle and surveyed the land about them. There was no sign of a raiding party. He was sure most of the slave traders and owners were aware of what had happened at Abbadon and he was fairly sure there would be no reprisals, but he was taking no chances with Conar McGregor's life. Outriders had been posted along both sides of their route, about a mile out from the caravan, just in case. Scouts

constantly traveled the distance between both sets of riders, on the lookout for trouble. Arbra intended they make the trip into Asaraba without incident.

"Your sister wasn't happy to be left behind," one of the Shadow-warriors remarked to Asher.

Asher glanced at the man. He knew the man's name was Andrei something or other and that the husky warrior had been trying unsuccessfully to gain Rachel's notice. He shrugged. "She thinks she's as good as any man with that bow of hers."

"I've seen her shoot," Andrei said with admiration deep in his voice. "She is very good."

"But Khamsin ordered her to stay behind and she knew he meant it," Asher replied.

Andrei grinned. "I like a woman who doesn't take orders easily." At Asher Stone's lifted brow, the Outer Kingdom man winked. "It makes them more of a challenge."

Asher smiled despite himself. "Rachel's that," he agreed.

"She doesn't have a man, does she?" Andrei asked, unaccustomed worry clouding his wide face.

Asher flinched. "You'll have to ask her that yourself."

The Outer Kingdom warrior chuckled. "I intend to."

If you aren't ordered to stay in St. Steffensburg, Asher thought grimly. He looked over at the warrior once more and sighed. The man was handsome in a rough, rugged way, and would no doubt make Rachel a good husband. If his sister was so inclined. But he knew she wasn't. Marriage was something Rachel shunned like the plague, as she had most men who had courted her. And there had been more than a few who had. But Rachel had turned them all away, ignoring their lovesick looks and tempting smiles. She seemed not to notice the men. Not to want to be near any of them.

Until Conar McGregor had come along.

Asher knew his sister was in love with the Outlander although she had not admitted as much to him. He had seen the way her gaze had followed Khamsin wherever he went about their encampment before his abduction by Jaborn's men. And he had not overlooked all the time she had spent with the man since the fall of Abbadon. He suspected something other than friendship and respect had developed between Khamsin and Rachel, but he was loath to examine that connection too closely. After all, the man was married and his wife was only a few yards ahead of Asher.

"Have you slept with him?" Asher had asked his sister. "Is that why you bait the Outer Kingdom woman the way you do?" He had gripped Rachel's arm. "Answer me! People are talking about you, Rachel!"

"Let them!" Rachel had snapped, yanking her arm away. "What I do is none of their business!"

Asher suspected the bond between his sister and the Outlander had become physical and he suspected it had been since their occupancy of Abbadon. He hoped to the Prophetess he was wrong, but he feared he was not. But one thing he was sure of: Conar McGregor was going to break Rachel's heart.

\* \* \* \*

Once aboard Sajin Ben-Alkazar's ship, Conar felt some better. The headache was still intense and he was covered with a sticky, prickling sweat. The nausea had receded somewhat but the stabbing in his right eye was even more pronounced. Light cascading in through the opened porthole made him turn his face into the pillow to blot it out.

"I'll find something to put up there to shut out the light, Khamsin," Azalon said as he and Balizar finished undressing their leader.

"Water?" Conar asked, feeling as though the inside of his mouth had been blotted with cotton.

"Here," Balizar answered. He put a hand behind Conar's head and lifted, putting the rim of a wooden goblet to the Serenian's lips.

He swallowed the cold water, relishing the feel of it flowing down his throat until he had drained the cup. Licking his lips as Balizar lowered his head to the pillow, he became aware of Catherine standing at the foot of his bunk.

"Lady?" he questioned, holding out his hand to her. "Will you stay with me?"

She smiled and walked to his side. She took his hand and sat down beside him. "For as long as you want me to, milord," she answered.

He drew her hand to his chest and cradled it there. Her touch seemed to push the pain back a little and he closed his eyes, nuzzling his cheek against the coolness of the pillowcase.

"If he needs it," Azalon said, "there's a chamber pot here, Your Grace. All you need do is call and one of us will come in to help."

"I can manage," Catherine replied.

"Would you like me to bring your lunch down when it's ready, milady?" Balizar asked.

"Both of them," Conar told him. "I want to try eating."

"Just bring him broth and bread," Catherine ordered.

"Catherine," Conar whined.

"Broth and bread," his wife stated more firmly.

Balizar smiled at her. "Lukewarm and soft?"

"Don't push it, Arbra!" Conar warned.

Catherine opened her hand on his chest and patted him. "Behave." She glanced up at Balizar and nodded. "Maybe a bit of watered wine if Rupine allows it?"

Balizar nodded and he and Azalon left, leaving the husband and wife alone in Ben-Alkazar's cabin. There was a bit of a breeze coming in through the obstruction of material over the leeward porthole and it smelled of salt spray. The air was not all that overheated inside the cabin, but the darkness caused by the assorted garments draped over the portholes seemed to make the room more confining.

"Will you lie with me?" Conar asked.

Catherine eased her hand from under his. "If you'd like." She pushed off her slippers and swung her legs onto the oversized bunk. Nestling down beside him, she felt safe and loved as his arms enfolded her. It had been a long, long time since she had been held by him.

"Am I squishing you?" he asked, nuzzling her hair.

"No," she answered as she settled against him. She felt his fingers rubbing protective little circles on her back. "Are you comfortable like this?"

"As long as I'm holding you," he replied.

Catherine inhaled the warm male scent of him, the faint tang of the cinnamon oil that seemed as much a part of him as the color of his strange eyes and the bright gold of his hair. She felt loved and safe in his arms and wanted to stay there forever.

"I've wanted you to hold me all week," she said, twining her finger in the patch of curls between his taut breasts. "I've needed to feel your arms around me."

Conar was looking out across the cabin, his head starting to cease its insane throbbing. Having her in his arms, cradled against him, was almost as good as one of Rupine's injections of painkiller. It soothed the ache in his body if not in his heart.

"Milord?" she asked, craning her head to look up at him.

He looked down. "Aye?"

Catherine hesitated as she watched his gaze soften. When he prompted her again, she nibbled at her lower lip. "Will you make love to me?" she finally asked.

The Serenian tensed, his arms going rigid around her. "What about the babe?" he questioned. "Surely you're too far along to ...."

Catherine shook her head. "Meghan says no and so does Rupine. If we're careful, no harm can come to the baby."

"I don't know," he said. "I'm not so sure it would be safe, Catherine."

She was watching his expression, seeing a look she could not interpret clouding his face. Her hand stilled on his chest, her fingers splaying out along his breastbone. "Don't you want to make love to me, milord?" she asked and her voice was childlike, almost plaintive as she gazed up at him with a hurt expression that said she feared his answer.

"Of course, I do," he was quick to answer. "It's just that I don't want to hurt you, Catherine."

"You won't," she said. She shifted against him, lifting herself up until she could take one of his hands in hers. She placed it gently on her breast. "I need you, Conar." She molded his fingers to her. "I need you so much."

Every instinct within him warned him not to give in to the pleading in his wife's voice. As much as he wanted her, needed her, too, he knew if he took her, it would make what he had to do harder. Not only on her, but on himself, as well. He shook his head, but she pressed his hand tightly to her chest and that part of him that had always leapt at the sight of her, stirred to remind him how great its need was.

"Catherine...", he tried to say but she strained upward and claimed his lips in a heady kiss that made his head reel and his body throb with passion. His mouth returned the favor, taking hers in a brutal press that brought a moan of arousal from both of them. He felt the kiss from the tips of his toes to the tip of his manhood and back again.

"Conar," she mumbled against his questing lips. "Please!"

He was lost with that simple request and he knew it. He had wanted to hold her for days now. Had wanted to lie with her one last time before he gave her into the keeping of another man. The thought of that happening, of him giving her up, had been hurting him for weeks and now that it was almost a reality, the pain was so intense it was hard for him to keep his emotions under tight control. He could no more have denied them the pleasure of their lovemaking than he could cease to breathe.

"Turn over," he said huskily against her mouth. "Turn over, Cat."

She looked at him with confusion, but his hand was already turning her so that she moved to her side, her back to him. "What are you...?" She felt him dragging her skirt up and looked back over her shoulder. "Conar?"

"Hush," he whispered against her ear as he bared her rump to his questing fingers. "I'm not going to hurt you."

She felt him fumbling with the buttons of his breeches, then drew in a startled breath as his hot flesh shifted along her backside. He scrunched down in the bunk until his hips were directly beneath her own.

"What are you doing?" she asked as she felt him positioning himself behind her.

"Catherine, hush," he ordered as he slid unerringly inside her vagina in a silky stab of erotic pleasure.

Catherine's eyes opened wide and she stopped breathing. What he was doing didn't hurt

and there was no pressure on her belly, which she realized he had intended not to let happen, but his thrusting was so intimate, so carnally possessive, she could not believe the sensations she was feeling.

"Draw your legs up," he told her as his left hand came around her to insinuate itself between her thighs. His fingers dipped beyond the tight brown curls at the juncture of her legs and his middle finger touched the very core of her sexual pleasure.

"Conar!" Catherine gasped as he began to rub the hard little nub that was sending exotic cravings throughout her being. Between his gentle thrusts and the movement of his hand on her clitoris, Catherine was panting with arousal.

"I've dreamed of being inside you," she heard him whisper against her ear. "Of making love to you." He pushed against her hard, his hips grinding against her backside. "I've wanted to..." his harsh panting was strained, almost savage, "bury myself so deep inside you, Catherine, that I could never break free."

She felt the unfamiliar little twist of pleasure that she had felt on those times he had made love to her before begin to build in her lower belly. There was that itch again, she thought, straining to wiggle against the power of his shaft, to impale herself as much as he would allow on that smooth sword.

"I love you," she said, putting her hands down to hold his as he manipulated her. "By all that is holy, I love you, Conar."

He could feel the need building in him and knew he had to be very careful of her. Every fiber of his being wanted to slam into her, to rip her wide open with his passion, to show her how much he loved her, but he knew he had to be very careful of her, of her condition, and he held back, sweat popping out on his straining face as he sought to bring her to climax before him. His right arm was under her, his hand clenched lightly around her right breast. His thumb moved over the erect nipple and he heard her groan with excitement.

"Feel me, Cat," he mumbled. "Feel me."

It started as a little spiral of feeling, swirling around between her legs. Then it spread upward, into her, rushing through her vagina and up into her very womb like the burst of a falling star. She arched her back against him, lifting her rump upward for his deeper penetration, groaning with regret when he would not go any deeper inside her.

"Conar!" she cried out, digging her nails into the back of his left hand.

He knew he could not hold out any longer. He was near to bursting. His hand tightened on her breast, his finger dipped into her oozing womanhood and he felt her first squeeze of climax so strongly it took his breath away. With each successive clenching of her inner muscles, he gloried in the sensation and unleashed the hold on his own self-fulfillment.

Catherine pressed herself down on him, embracing that twitching of shaft inside her as though she meant to hold him forever. His grunt of pleasure, the grunt followed by a deep bass growl far back in his throat as he spurted inside her, brought Catherine another twinge of climax, surprising both of them as Conar tensed, holding himself still inside her until her spasm had ceased.

"My God," Catherine breathed, unable to believe such a sensation could occur.

Conar lowered his head to her neck and kissed her, tasting her sweat, gently licking at it and planting tender nibbles along the column of her throat. He held her to him, not ever wanting to let her go.

"Catherine," he sighed. "My Catherine."

It was a goodbye, she thought, hearing that lost and helpless tone coming from the very depths of her husband's being. She felt the prickle of tears behind her eyes and as he spoke her

name once more, her entire body began to shake with sobs.

"Catherine?" he questioned, feeling her trembling against him. "Sweeting?" He pulled out of her and tried to turn her toward him, but her quakes began in earnest and he heard her first hitching explosion of crying. She buried her face in his pillow and would not let him turn her over.

If Conar had any doubts that Catherine knew what he planned to do, they were dispelled at that moment. Angrily he wondered who had dared tell her and thought fleetingly of Yuri. Her shudders wounded him and at that moment if he had had Yuri's throat in his hands, he'd have strangled the warrior.

"Catherine, don't," he pleaded with her. Her wracking sobs were growing louder and more forceful. "Please don't do this." He stroked her back, her head, begging her not to cry. "You'll make yourself sick, sweeting."

"I love you," she cried into the pillow. "I'll always love you, Conar."

He closed his eyes, hating himself at that moment. He had never wanted to hurt this woman. Not ever. By loving her, he had. He closed his arms around her and didn't know what to say.

"When.....when," she sobbed, "were....you...going...to...tell....me?"

His felt his heart breaking all over again. Idly he wondered how many times a human heart could shatter before it was impossible to put it back together again.

Catherine jerked out of his arms and spun over, facing him, staring at the pained expression on his face. "When, Conar?" she demanded. "Just before you sailed back to Rysalia?"

He looked at her tearful face, red and puffy from her crying, and all he saw was condemnation in her shining eyes. He saw the first faint glimmer of dislike hovering there. He lifted his hand to touch her cheek, but she batted it angrily away.

"Did you mean for this happen?" she hissed at him. "One more fuck for old times sake?"

He flinched at her vulgarity. "That wasn't what this was."

"No?" she shot back. "What was it, then?"

"You asked me to ...," he started to say, but her fury lashed out at him with enough force to stun him.

"And you always do what a woman wants of you, don't you, McGregor?" she yelled. "Far be it for you to deny so many so much!"

He reached for her, but she flung herself out of the bunk. He sat up. "Catherine, please. It wasn't like that."

"Did you love me even a little, Conar?" she asked, tears flowing down her flushed cheeks. She held up her hand and made the minuscule measure between thumb and index finger. "Even this much?"

"I love you with all my heart, Catherine!" he exploded. He came to his knees on the bunk. "With every breath I take I love you."

"Even when you were screwing Rachel Stone?" she shouted back at him. The moment she said it, the moment she saw the guilty look cross his face, she knew. She had only had suspicions before that moment, but with the lowering of his eyes, she knew. "You bastard," she spat at him. "It WAS her."

He looked up, stared at her, knowing then who the culprit had been who had told Catherine of his betrayal. He reached out a hand to his wife. "You have to understand. I..."

"You what?" Catherine whispered. "You had to have her? You needed her?" Her mouth twisted with scorn. "You were afraid to make love to me for fear of hurting your child?" Her voice lowered. "Tell me, Conar, is she better at it than me? Did she please you more?"

"No!" he snapped. "You've got it all wrong. She was just ...."

"Handy," Catherine spat at him. "Handy and available." She stooped down and picked up her slippers. "Well, she'll be at Abbadon when you get back." Her voice broke on a sob. "And I won't be there to interfere! You intend to see to that, don't you, Conar?"

"Catherine! Wait!" he yelled as she ran to the door.

"Go to hell, McGregor!" she flung back at him.

He watched her slam out of the cabin, yanking the door shut behind her so hard he feared she'd broken the hinges. He stared after her, feeling every ounce of the disgust for himself that she had felt. Slowly he lay back down, the headache returning, and covered his face with his hands.

"Catherine," he whispered through the barrier of his fingers.

He'd been right, he thought, in believing she would not tolerate his betrayal. In admitting his affair with Rachel, he had set into motion an avalanche of repercussions that would follow them both for the rest of their lives. Even if she could find it in her to forgive him for betraying her, lying to her, he knew she would never forget it. It would always be there between them like Tyne's sword had been, suspended on a fragile length of hemp, the rope waiting to unravel and the descending sword sever their love. There would never be any turning back. The avalanche was already in motion.

"I love you," he said, turning over on his side and drawing his knees up to his chest. "I swear to heaven I love you, Catherine."

Aye, McGregor, that inner voice mocked him. You might love her, but she'll never trust you again. You've effectively killed the love she had for you.

Conar wondered if that were true.

He also wondered if in trying to protect the woman he loved if he hadn't destroyed her in the process.



## Chapter Six

A steady cascade of rain hit the teakwood decks as the Tempest cut gracefully through the Straits of Mehmen. It had been thundering and lightning since Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar's flag ship cleared the coastline of Rysalia and ventured north toward Ventura. The swells were increasing and the sleek ship was being tossed from wave to trough and back again with growing regularity. The helmsman was fighting the wheel, his face glistening with salt spray, and most of the crew had gone below for their slickers. Captain Omar Rastupol, master of the vessel since the day she had been christened, was frowning mightily.

"Ramir! Habib!" the Captain shouted above the growing din. "Go aloft and secure that skysail before it's ripped to ribbons!"

Azalon, not overly fond of the sea, glanced up and shivered as the two sailors dug their bare feet into the ratlines and shimmied upward. The pitch of the ship made him groan with seasickness and he looked away, unable to follow the men's ascent skyward. A sudden surge of sea water shot over the yarboard rail and soaked Azalon's robe. He decided it was time he went below decks. Fighting his way down the hatchway, he shook his head at Balizar.

"Not fit for humans up there, Arbra," he warned. "It's getting rough."

Balizar clapped him on the back. "You worry too much, my friend."

The deck beneath them suddenly heeled larboard and both men had to reach out to grab hold of the steps to keep from falling.

"Seems I got something to worry about," Azalon snapped.

Balizar glanced up the hatchway. "I think I'll be staying down here with you," he quipped.

Yuri moaned as he swung in his bunk. His stomach was heaving with every roll and pitch of the ship. Already his complexion had turned a strange green hue. He clung to the ropes supporting his bunk and mumbled prayers to the Blessed Virgin that he wouldn't have long to suffer such hellish torments.

"I like to sail," Sajin remarked to Conar as he sat propped up alongside the Serenian in the wide bunk in Ben-Alkazar's cabin, "but bad weather makes me decidedly uneasy."

"I'm not all that fond of it, myself," Conar answered. He put his hand up to his temple and rubbed at the nagging pain that still persisted.

"Cat loves it," Sajin chuckled. He looked down at his friend who was lying stretched out on the bunk. "Actually reveling in it. Do you believe that?" The Kensetti shook his head. "She'd be topside if I'd let her."

Conar turned his head and glanced up at the nomad. "I hope you've got better sense," he grumbled.

Ben-Alkazar snorted his reply. He wagged his brows at Conar. "At least she does what I command, McGregor."

The Serenian looked away.

It had been two days since Conar and Catherine's argument and it would be another day before they reached Odess, the first Outer Kingdom port along the Baltus. Catherine had made it clear to Sajin that she wished to disembark at Odess and go on to St. Steffensburg by coach.

"No, Catherine," Sajin had informed her after consulting with her husband. "It wouldn't be safe."

"In my own country?" the Tzarevna had exploded. "I have nothing to fear from my own

people, Prince Sajin!"

"Conar thinks it would be ...," Sajin had started to say, but the woman's fury had flown at him like an irate bat.

"Do you think I care what that bastard thinks?" she'd shouted at him.

"Cat," Sajin had tried arguing, "be reasonable. The man worries about you. You are all he ...."

"He worries about me, all right," had come the low, deadly hiss. "So much so he couldn't wait to fling another woman to her back he was so damned worried!"

Sajin had reached out to take Catherine's arm, pretending he hadn't heard her breaking voice nor seen the tears that suddenly filled her big hazel eyes. "We will not be putting in at Odess, Cat," he told her. "You might as well not argue with me. I agree with Conar and it would not be safe for you. It doesn't matter if you like it or not. That's the way it's going to be."

"You don't make my decisions for me, Ben-Alkazar!" she'd screeched at him.

"When you're on my ship, I do, Madame!"

Sajin glanced down at his friend. "Is that headache back?" He didn't like the paleness of Conar's face nor the strained look about the man's mouth.

"It's never left," Conar mumbled.

A concerned frown drew Sajin's thick eyebrows together. "You haven't had any more nose bleeds, have you?"

"No," Conar replied. "But sometimes I think if I could, it would lessen the pressure." He rubbed his hands over his face.

Ben-Alkazar swung his head toward the light tapping at the cabin door. "You want company?" he asked his friend.

"Not really, but you'd better see who it is."

"Come!" Sajin called out and was pleasantly surprised to see Catherine framed in the doorway as the portal opened.

"May I speak with you a moment, Prince Sajin?" she asked.

Conar lifted his head and looked at his wife. She was studiously avoiding looking at him. Her gaze was directly on Sajin.

"Certainly," the nomad answered and swung his long legs to the floor. He didn't even glance back as he went to the door, following Catherine back out into the gangway. He shut the door behind him.

Lifting himself up on his elbows, Conar strained to hear the soft words outside his cabin, but with the occasional boom of thunder overhead, he couldn't make out anything that was being said. When the door opened and Sajin came back in, he frowned at the soft look on the Kensetti's face.

"What was that all about?" Conar questioned.

Sajin shrugged. "She was worried about you," he answered.

Conar's brows shot up. "Really?" he asked, unaware that his voice had filled with hope.

Ben-Alkazar had not missed that eager tone. "She was afraid the motion of the ship might have intensified the headache. She wanted to know if Rupine had been in to see you."

Conar sat up. "What did you tell her?"

"That you were doing well enough," Sajin replied. "She made me promised to send for the physician if you started getting worse." He sat down at the foot of the bunk and looked at his friend. "I asked if she wanted me to send for her if you did start to feel bad."

There was a heavy thud against Conar's ribcage. "And?"

An apologetic look came over Sajin's face. "She said she'd prefer I didn't unless you were dying."

Astonishment replaced the look of hope on the Serenian's face. "Dying?" Sajin drew his legs up on the bunk and crossed them under him. "That's what the lady said."

The astonishment drew down into a heavy scowl. "Wishful thinking on her part, no doubt," Conar grumbled.

"No doubt," Sajin agreed with a grin.

There was another rap at the door and Conar flung himself down in the bunk and flipped over, his back to the door. "If that's her again, tell her to stop bothering me!"

Sajin chuckled and bid the visitor enter. His grin faded abruptly when he found the captain of his ship standing in the doorway.

"My apologies, Your Grace," the Captain said, "but it looks as though we are in for a bad blow. I would like your permission to put in. Ghandar Cove isn't all that far from where we are."

Sajin nodded. "Whatever you think best, Abdul. I'll leave it up to you."

The Captain bowed respectfully. "Thank you, Your Grace." He glanced at the Serenian. "How is His Grace feeling?"

"He's alive," Conar growled. "Much to some people's dismay."

Sajin winked at his Captain. "And it's such a good mood!"

Abdul smiled. "I can see that, Your Grace." He bowed again and left.

"You aren't any worse, are you?" Sajin asked.

"No."

"You need anything?"

"No."

"You sure?"

Conar ground his teeth. "Aye, I'm sure!"

Sajin swung himself from the bunk and stood up. "Then I'll be going." He headed for the door.

Conar looked over his shoulder. "Going where?"

An amused look passed over Sajin's swarthy face. "Cat invited me to come sit with her awhile."

The Outlander's sapphire blue eyes narrowed. "And of course you accepted."

"Isn't that what you wanted?" Sajin asked. "Me and Cat together?" He almost laughed at the look of anger which flashed over his friend's face. "You did say you were giving her to me, didn't you?"

Jealousy tightened the Serenian's mouth before he turned his head away and laid back down. "You shouldn't keep the woman waiting, nomad," he ground out. He gripped his pillow beneath his cheek. "She doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"So I'm learning," Sajin quipped, seeing his friend stiffen on the bunk. He had to get out of the room quickly before he lost his composure and chuckled aloud. "I'll send someone in to check on you."

As soon as the door closed, Conar flipped over to his back and glared up at the planking above him. His eyes were filled with hurt, but his lips were pressed so tightly together there was a white line circling them. He reached up and behind him and grabbed the brass railing that ran the width of the bunk and tugged furiously at it.

"Damn you, Catherine!" he snarled from between his clenched teeth.

He could just imagine her entertaining the nomad in her cabin. Serving him tea. Smiling at him. Laughing at the things he said. Flirting with him.

"Shit!" Conar exploded, yanking hard on the rail.

Aye, he thought with growing fury. She'll be flirting with the bastard and he'll be flirting with her. She'll smile that cat-like smile at him and reach out to put her hand on his arm and....

"The gods damn it!!" Conar shouted. He snarled as he jerked on the brass rail with all his strength. His blood was pounding in his temples and the headache, only a minor nuisance a moment before, went full-blown and a tiny trickle of blood seeped from his left nostril.

How long will you wait, Catherine, he wondered? Six months? A year? How long does it take for an annulment to go through in the Outer Kingdom? What is the respectable passage of time before you can marry that mincing pog? Will you even wait that long before you allow him into your bed?

The thought of his wife lying in Sajin Ben-Alkazar's arms brought a forceful grunt of insane jealousy to the Serenian's throat and he tore his hands from the brass rail and sat bolt upright in the bed.

You've got no one to blame for this but yourself, he heard that wicked inner voice taunting him. You can't protect her against your enemies. You can't keep her out of harm's way. But the nomad can. He can do for Catherine what you can't. He'll be there for her when you won't be. He'll make her the kind of husband she deserves.

The pain in his right eye was becoming unbearable and he dug the heel of his hand against it, nearly whimpering with the agony that action brought. He started to get up, to go to Catherine's cabin, but suddenly the light dimmed around him, then blurred, then blinked off for a moment. A bolt of pain shot through his head and he pitched backwards on the bunk, digging his hands into his scalp. He squeezed his eyes shut, then forced them wide open. The light switched back on.

"What's happening to me?" he cried, pressing his temples tightly to contain the agony throbbing there.

Outside, the storm increased as the ship made for safe harbor at Ghandar Cove.

\* \* \* \*

Catherine flinched as thunder boomed overhead. She looked up sheepishly at Sajin. "I can handle the storm. It's the loud noise that unnerves me."

Sajin smiled. "I'm not all that thrilled with it, either."

"Is there a town at the cove?" she asked, wrapping her shawl more tightly around her to shut out the damp.

"A few native huts, nothing more," Sajin informed her. "Probably the only time they see strangers is during storms. This coastline is famous for horrendous squalls."

"I wish it were nice weather," she said wistfully. "I like to explore new places."

"I'll bring you back when we're...." Sajin stopped, his cheeks burning a fierce red. He looked away from the inquiring look on Catherine's face.

"When we're what, Sajin?" she asked politely.

"Ah," he stammered, searching for the right words. He looked up. "Back this way." His smile wavered, then settled in a look that was almost comical.

Catherine nodded. She toyed with the fringe on her shawl. "I don't know why it surprises me that he has already picked out his own replacement," she said.

Sajin's blush blanched away. "I beg your pardon?"

She looked up. "The man's arrogance apparently knows no bounds." As she spoke, she twirled one length of fringe around her index finger. "He likes you. He respects you. Naturally

you would be his first choice."

Suddenly the nomad's collar was too tight and he put up a finger to loosen it. "I'm not sure I understand your meaning."

Catherine's smile was slow and predatory. "Oh, I think you do, Sajin." She let out a long breath. "There's only one problem."

Sajin's brows came together. "What kind of problem?"

She shrugged. "Only a minor one, really." Looking up, forging her gaze with his, the nomad saw the hazel orbs harden and cool. "I have no intention of divorcing him or allowing him to divorce me."

Ben-Alkazar's world tilted on its axis. "Is that possible?"

"Quite possible," she agreed. She lifted her chin. "You do realize that what I am saying to you, here, in this cabin, is to go no further, do you not, Prince Sajin?"

The nomad frowned. "Catherine, Conar is my friend and I...."

"On your honor as royalty, milord," she stressed. Her gaze sharpened. "On your honor as a Knight."

Sajin groaned. "Catherine, don't make me...."

"On your honor!" she repeated.

"He has a right to know!" Sajin argued. "If you intend to keep him...."

"I do," Catherine answered. "I took my vows to him quite seriously, Sajin, even if he did not."

"This isn't right, Catherine," Sajin tried again. "For either of you. Even if your courts won't allow the annulment, Serenia's probably will. He's the law in his homeland, milady."

Catherine ignored his reasoning. "I want your promise, Sajin Ben-Alkazar, that you will not tell him what we discussed here this afternoon."

"I don't know that...." Sajin saw her face turn hostile. "Catherine, please don't...."

"I want your promise," she repeated.

He stared at her for a moment. "You're making a mistake, Catherine."

She shrugged. "It's my mistake to make and his to pay for," she replied. "If he can't protect one wife, he can't protect another, so what difference does it make if we are married or not?"

"He wants you happy!" Sajin protested.

Catherine's gaze softened, turned weary. "Without him, there will be no happiness." She put her hand on her protruding belly. "Our child may grow up never knowing her father, but she will at least grow up knowing her mother is legally married to the man who sired her."

Hurt flashed across Sajin's face before he lowered it. "I care for you, Catherine. I would make a good home for you and the babe."

She bit her lip. "I know you would, but I don't love you, Sajin." When he looked up at her, she smiled tenderly. "You are a good friend and I love you for that, but there will be only one man in this lifetime for me and that man is Conar McGregor."

"He's going to be furious when he finds out what you've got planned," Sajin warned.

"No more furious than I was when I found out what HE had planned," Catherine replied. She stared hard at him. "I want your word, Sajin."

He hesitated, weighing the lesser of the two evils. If he didn't tell Conar, the man would never forgive him. But he didn't really see anything Conar could do about it. Even should he have the courts in Serenia put aside the marriage, it wouldn't matter to Catherine or to the people of the Outer Kingdom. To them, Conar and Catherine would remain husband and wife.

If he did tell Conar, he thought with a grimace, that would only make matters worse. Conar

still couldn't do anything about Catherine's decision and quite likely such knowledge would only serve to heighten Conar's anger.

"Well?" Catherine demanded.

"I think you're wrong," Sajin replied.

"But?"

The nomad sighed heavily. "I won't tell him."

\* \* \* \*

As soon as the Tempest was anchored in Gandhar Cove, Rupine wove his way to Conar's cabin. After tapping lightly on the door, he went in and quietly called the Serenian's name. The young man was lying with his back to the door. When he received no answer, Rupine tiptoed out again, gently closing the door behind him.

"Is he sleeping?" Balizar asked. Rupine nodded. "That's good."

If either man had known Conar McGregor was lying unconscious, blood caked under his nostrils, they would not have gone so blithely on their way.

## Chapter Seven

He stared in the mirror and was alarmed at what he saw. The dark rust stain spread out from his left nostril and fanned along his scarred cheek made him grip the wash basin tightly. His eyes were sunken in his head and his complexion was far too sallow for his liking. His vision was somewhat blurred and the cabin seemed darker than it should be. Reaching up a trembling right hand, he plowed his fingers through his hair. He knew something was wrong, terribly wrong with him. When the knock came at his door, he swung his head toward it, grimacing as blinding pain slashed through his forehead and radiated down his neck.

"Who is it?" he managed to call out, wincing at the sound of his own voice.

"Me. Sajin. How come you got the door locked?"

"Just a minute," he answered. He lowered his head, whimpering with pain as the motion brought tears to his eyes. Scooping up the tepid water in the basin, he quickly began to wash away the crusted blood on his face.

"Conar?"

"Just a minute!" the Serenian snapped.

"Are you all right?" Sajin's voice was filled with concern.

"I'm pissing!" came the thunderous reply through the door. "Do you mind?"

Sajin sighed with relief. He leaned his forehead against the door. "I can wait."

"So nice of you!" was the snort.

He scrubbed at his face, then looked into the mirror to see if the tell-tale stain was gone. Satisfied that it was, he dumped the contents of the basin into the chamber pot and nudged the porcelain container into one dark corner of the cabin. Checking his appearance once more, he walked to the door, bumping into a chair he had not seen, and threw the bolt.

"Can't a man even piss in private on this damned ship?" he barked as he stumbled his way back to the bunk.

"Good morning to you, too," Sajin grinned. He shut the door. "How are you feeling?"

Conar had thrown himself down on the bunk, once more facing the cabin wall. "Stop hovering over me, nomad!" he grumbled. "I'm all right."

"And so personable, too," Sajin answered.

"Eat shit and die, Ben-Alkazar," Conar hissed.

"We'll be sailing in a few minutes," Sajin told him, chuckling at the irate tone. "Are you hungry? The rest of us have eaten already."

Conar's stomach revolted at the thought. "Maybe later."

An immediate look of worry passed over the Kensetti's face. "Is your head hurting again?"

"No," was the bitter reply, "but you're killing me with your incessant nosiness. Why don't you go bother Catherine?"

The Kensetti Prince stood there for a moment, then shrugged. "You want me to have Rupine look in on you?"

"No, I do not!" Conar snapped. "I'd like to go back to sleep, if you don't mind!"

Sajin knew a dismissal when he heard one. "I'll leave you to your moping, then," he retorted and went out again.

Conar clapped his hands over his ears when the thump of the anchor being hoisted rattled the timbers of the ship. The sound of the creaking chain was piercing to his sensitive hearing and it

made him jam his face down into the protection of the sweat-dampened pillow. He turned over and scrunched up on his knees, driving his upper body into the mattress. Rocking against the agony ripping through his head and neck, he whimpered into the rancid-smelling fabric.

\* \* \* \*

The harbor at Odessa was filled to overflowing with ships from many Inner Kingdom nations as well as merchant ships from most of the Outer Kingdom ports. When the Tempest docked, the crew tossed the mooring cables down to the dock workers for them to secure the ship. The gangplank came down with a soft thud and several Outer Kingdom officials scampered aboard.

"I hope you had an uneventful trip, Your Grace," one of the men, a tall, reed-thin gentleman with flaming red hair called out as he bowed eloquently to Sajin.

"As good as can be expected this time of year," Sajin remarked. He recognized the man as being the Harbor Master. "Did the Ravenwind get out before the bad weather hit?"

The Harbor Master, Nikita Chernov by name, bobbed his head. "They sailed two days ago, Your Grace."

"Hopefully with every man aboard," Balizar muttered to Azalon.

"We'll be in port until tomorrow night," Sajin told the man. He flicked his gaze over the silent man who had accompanied Chernov on board, but wasn't particularly curious to find out who the man was. "We encountered a rather vicious squall just below Gandhar Cove and have a few minor repairs to make before sailing on to St. Steffensburg."

"Take all the time you need, Your Grace," Chernov assured him. "Our ship chandlers are at your disposal should you need them." He craned his neck. "Is Her Grace with you?"

"The Tzarevna is with us," Sajin answered. "Is there a reason you asked?" He saw the two Outer Kingdom men exchange a look.

Chernov cleared his throat, then lowered his voice. "An old woman came to my office this morning and told us you would be docking today. To be honest with you, I didn't pay much attention to her. She's a bit ...." He circled his ear with his right index finger. "Well, added, I guess you'd say. I was going to send her on her way, but then she mentioned the Tzarevna would be on board."

"Did she want something?" Sajin asked.

"Who, Your Grace?" Chernov inquired.

The Kensetti ground his teeth. "The old woman?"

"Oh," Chernov laughed, blushing. "She wanted us to give Her Grace a message." He delved into his waistcoat pocket and produced a folded sheet of parchment. "At first I was just going to take the note and humor her, but she was so insistent ...." He shrugged, handing over the note to Sajin. "It might be important. I don't know."

"Sonya's a witch," the man with Chernov finally piped up. "You don't mess around with her."

Chernov groaned. "Felix, please!" The Harbor Master looked at Sajin with embarrassment. "There are those who believe in such foolishness, but I am certainly not one of them."

"You should be," the one called Felix grumbled.

Sajin's lips twitched. "I'll see Her Grace gets this." He tucked the note into the waistband of his trousers. "Is there anything else?"

"No, Your Grace," Chernov answered. He looked about at the hustle and bustle on board the Tempest. "If you need anything, please don't hesitate to send word."

"Thank you," Sajin replied. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, then?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" Chernov said. He bowed once more and then scooted Felix with him



from the ship.

Balizar, who had been listening to the exchange, hurried after the two men. "Hey, wait a minute!" he called out, drawing the men's attention. When he reached them, he asked if they knew of any passengers that might have stayed behind when the Serenian ship *The Ravenwind* hoisted anchor for that foreign shore.

Chernov shook his head. "One gentleman attempted to stay behind but his comrades would not permit it. As I recall, they literally dragged him back on board."

Balizar frowned. "What was his name, do you know?"

The Harbor Master thought a moment. "I don't believe I heard them speak his name, but if you know the men, you would certainly know if whom I speak." He grimaced slightly. "He was Necroman."

"Taborn," Balizar chuckled. "Shalu Taborn."

"He gave them a time of it," Felix told Arbra. "Bellowing at the top of his lungs the whole time they was manhandling him up the gangplank. Cursing them, too!"

"That's sound about right," Balizar answered. "But they did get his black ass on board?"

"Yes," Chernov agreed. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I know someone who will want to know," Balizar quipped. He touched his forefinger to his temple. "My thanks, gentlemen." He turned and loped back up the gangplank.

Catherine tensed as the light rap came at her door. She was almost of the mind not to answer it, but took in a deep breath and flung the door open. She was relieved to see Sajin standing in the passageway.

"It's just me," he laughed, seeing the relief spreading across her face. "The troll isn't awake, yet."

The Tzarevna's forehead crinkled. "He's still asleep?"

Sajin nodded. "Rupine said to let him sleep as long as he wanted. Maybe he can sleep that damned headache off." He held up one finger then dug into his waistband to produce the note Chernov had given him. "Some old lady sent this to you by the Harbor Master." He held out the folded parchment.

Catherine took the note and unfolded it. Squinting at the scrawl of writing slashed across the page, she read the note, then slowly lowered it to stare blindly at Sajin.

"Trouble?" he asked, wondering at the paleness of her face.

"It could be," she answered and turned her back. She walked to her bunk and sat down. After glancing once more at the note, she looked up at Sajin. "We have to leave the ship here, Sajin."

"Oh, no!" he began, not wishing to go over this with her again. He was about to remind her of their last discussion about disembarking at Odess, but she stopped him.

"The woman I wanted Conar to see in St. Steffensburg knew we were coming and she's come here to Odess to meet us," Catherine explained. "She's taken a keep just outside town and wants me to bring him there."

"How convenient," Sajin mumbled. He held out his hand. "Let me see the note, Cat."

Catherine's eyes flared angrily. "You don't believe me?"

Sajin didn't answer. His hand was still out.

"You can't read it," she protested. "It's written in the language of the Daughterhood."

"Even more convenient," he quipped, lowering his hand. Folding his arms over his chest, he stared at her. "I may have been born at night, Catherine, but it wasn't last night."

"Meaning what?" she shot back.

"Meaning I'm not falling for it. You're not leaving this ship to go wandering about in Odess. Those are Conar's orders and I will abide by them." He smiled. "Just as you will, milady."

"But she's here!" Catherine argued. "She came all the way here to meet the ship!"

"I don't care," Sajin replied. "You aren't going ashore, Catherine."

The Tzarevna stood up, her face a chiseled study in absolute fury. She crumpled the note in her fist then shook it at Sajin. "I will not be dictated to, nomad!"

Sajin cocked his head to one side. "You and the Outlander make some pair," he joked. "He doesn't like to be dictated to, either."

Catherine would have yelled at the Kensetti, but the door to her cabin opened and both turned to see Rupine standing in the doorway. His face was as white as snow.

"What is it?" Sajin hissed, walking to the man.

"I can't wake him, Your Grace!" Rupine replied. "I can't wake Khamsin!"

## Chapter Eight

Azalon glanced at the dark walls of the keep and felt uneasy. The entire structure had been painted jet black: the chains on the drawbridge, the saw-teeth of the portcullis, even the glass panes in the windows. Surrounding the keep was a forty foot wide moat filled with slithering, venomous reptiles and the ugliest crocodiles he'd ever seen. There was no vile smell emanating from the moat, but the thrashing and the snapping and spitting within those steep stone walls made Azalon gag.

"It wouldn't do to fall in that, would it?" Yuri remarked as he and Balizar crossed the drawbridge. Both men were staying as close to the center of the planking as possible, keeping their mounts in tight check.

"I wouldn't like to, no," Balizar replied, keeping an eye on the largest amphibian in the moat.

Sajin eyed the moat just as warily as he followed behind the men. He noticed that Catherine didn't seem to be worried about her progress across the drawbridge. Her eyes were on the cart where her husband lay. The strain of the last two hours was stamped clearly on her face.

Despite both Rupine's and Catherine's trying, neither had been able to wake Conar. There was a bright red splotch of blood on the pillow beneath his right ear when they had turned him to his back.

"I was afraid of this," Rupine had breathed. "He's hemorrhaged again."

"Conar!" Catherine had pleaded, gently shaking her husband. "Wake up!" When the Serenian did not move, she had turned her terrified eyes to Sajin.

Sajin had sent for the cart and within ten minutes, the small procession was on their way out of Odess and into the foothills of the Uralaps where the old woman had told Catherine the Woman Healer could be found. They had ridden for what seemed like hours before coming to the trail that led up to the keep. As soon as they were within hailing distance, the drawbridge had begun to lower.

"Not the most hospitable of places, is it?" Rupine asked Azalon. He looked nervously about him as they entered the outer bailey.

"Why the hell have they got it painted black?" Azalon asked, amazed at the solid ebon walls and blacked-out windows. Even inside the bailey, there were no shiny surfaces showing on wood or metal. Everything had been dulled with black paint.

"Creepy," Balizar remarked. "Damned creepy."

Sajin glanced up at the sheer walls, frowning at the color, himself. He felt distinctively uncomfortable, actually a bit worried, but one look at Catherine told him she had expected to find things no different. That was, he thought with a pang of regret, if she noticed anything save Conar McGregor's pale, pale face.

"Milady?" Yuri whispered as he reached out to touch Catherine's arm. He pointed at an old woman who was standing at the top of a long, winding staircase.

Catherine followed his direction and nodded. "Sonja," she answered and dismounted before any of the men could help her. She walked to the cart. "You men will have to make a litter and carry him upstairs."

Sajin glanced up the steep steps and frowned. "Way up there?" he asked.

Catherine ignored the question. She looked at Balizar. "Unless you think you can carry him

by yourself."

The warrior's left eyebrow crooked. "I can try, milady. He don't weigh all that much." He motioned to Yuri to get in the cart and hand Conar down to him.

Sajin would not have thought it possible for Arbra to carry Conar up the serpentine steps as easily as the older man did, but he wasn't surprised to find Balizar winded by the time they reached the top.

"Through here," the old woman indicated as she held open a door.

"Give him to me," Yuri demanded as he winced at Arbra's panting breath. "We don't want you down in the back, old man."

"Old man, my ass!" Balizar growled, but he gave his burden over to the other man.

Sajin took Catherine's arm as they followed the trio with Azalon and Rupine bringing up the rear.

The inside of the keep was so dark that not even the torches lining the walls could dispel much of the gloom. Walking down the long hallway was like threading one's way through an underground tunnel. Had not those making the trek known they were well above ground, the illusion would have been hard to expel.

"Who is this woman?" Sajin asked as he and Catherine made a sharp turn in the hallway and climbed a score of narrow steps.

"Sonja is her helper," Catherine answered. "I don't know the Daughter's name, but I am told she is a very powerful sorceress. I've heard tales of her at home, but I've never had reason to seek her out before now."

"In here," the old woman spoke, holding open an almost unseen door in the black expanse of the wall at the top of the stairs. "Lay him down and undress him."

"Down to his breechclout?" Yuri asked.

"Down to the flesh," the old woman answered.

Yuri shifted Conar's weight in his arms and then slowly lowered him to the examining table in the center of the dark room. The table felt ice-cold under his arms and he glanced around at the old woman. "Didn't you have a pad to put on here?"

"He feels nothing," she answered.

"Even so ...," Yuri began, but Catherine cut him off.

"She knows what it best, Andreanova. Don't question her." Catherine smiled at the old woman. "Is there anything I can do, Sonja?"

"She wants you to remain here," the old woman said, but her gaze went to the others. "The Shadow-warrior may stay until the Outlander is unclothed but then he, like the others, must leave. Rooms have been prepared for them and there is food when they are ready to eat."

"Now, wait a minute!" Sajin barked. "I'm not leaving her or Conar here alone."

"Sajin, please!" Catherine demanded, her nerves already frayed close to the snapping point. She put her hand on his shoulder and pushed him toward the door. "Go with Sonja. I am as safe inside this keep as I am in my own home."

Despite his arguing, Sajin was forced to leave. Having the door shut in his face did nothing to lighten his mood and he stalked back down the stairs with the others, fuming with every step. He glared at Yuri when the Outer Kingdom warrior finally joined them.

"What's going on up there?" the Kensetti snarled.

Yuri shrugged. "As soon as I finished undressing him the old woman made me leave. I heard her lock the door behind me."

The nomad Prince flung himself down in a chair. He eyed the table across the room with

disdain. "Does that woman really think we can eat at a time like this?"

Azalon glanced at the array of foods spread across the black planking and his mouth watered. He knew he couldn't be the first to try the wonderful smelling variety of food sitting there, but he hoped someone soon would put worry aside and grab something. He was famished.

Balizar sauntered over to the table and looked down. There was a whole ham, sitting in its juices. There were rolls and breads and sweetmeats. There was roast beef and fried chicken and broiled sea bass. He licked his lips, then resolutely made himself walk back to where Rupine was sitting on a low divan.

It was going to be a long wait, he feared, before any of them got to eat.

\* \* \* \*

Catherine bent over her husband and spoke softly to him, trying once more to wake him. Not even a flutter of lashes answered her gentle summons and she straightened up, looking down at his relaxed face. She put her hand on his arm and stroked the powerful biceps. Her fingers encircled that strength and stayed.

"He but sleeps, Catherine."

Catherine McGregor turned and found the most beautiful woman she had ever seen standing only a few feet away. Beside her was a young child, a boy of two or three. The boy bore a striking resemblance to the man lying so still on the table.

"His son," the woman said, coming forward. She held out her hand. "I am Raphaella."

Conar's wife took the proffered hand and was surprised to feel the icy coolness. There was no warmth in that polite grip nor in the smile that slipped into place on the woman's sensuous lips.

"I am Raine," the little boy said, holding up his own hand.

Catherine took the small hand in her own and felt the same coldness, the same lack of emotion in the touch. She could not wait to release that little hand. Every instinct screamed at her to wipe her palm down her skirt to rid herself of the unwanted touch, but she forced herself not to.

"Many find our touch repulsive," Raphaella laughed as she put her hand on Conar's scarred cheek. She looked up at Catherine. "Some do not."

"How do you know my husband?" Catherine asked, detesting the intimate way this woman was touching Conar.

Raphaella's smile widened. "He was my son-in-law," she answered. She arched one thick black brow at Catherine's gasp. "Aye. Liza was my daughter."

Catherine's gaze slid to the little boy who was looking at her with curiosity.

"Raine is my son," Raphaella told her. "Mine and Conar's." Her eyes went to the bulge of Catherine's belly. "His seed is most prolific, don't you agree?"

Despite the heavy blush that flamed her face, Catherine held the other woman's amused gaze. "You slept with your daughter's husband," she accused. "And the Daughters have not censored you?"

Raphaella flung out a negligent hand. "Oh, they did that long ago when I slept with my own brother!" she laughed. "Surely you have heard of World's End, girl. That is where they sent me."

"The Windweaver!" Catherine breathed in disbelief. She backed away from the woman. "The Keeper of the Loom."

Startling emerald green eyes flared wide. "You have heard of me."

Fear and absolute horror filled Catherine and she whipped her gaze about the room. Before she knew what she was doing, she had run to the door and pulled at the latch. Finding it locked, barred, she flung around and stared with mounting terror at the smiling woman standing beside

Conar's inert body.

"Don't worry, Marie Catherine," Raphaella laughed, the little boy joining with her. "You are not in my keep at World's End. When the time comes, you can leave here."

"And Conar?" Catherine spat. "Can HE leave?"

"If he is of a mind to," Raphaella answered. She stroked the bright gleam of his golden hair. "As I understand it he has unfinished business in Rysalia." She turned the force of her emerald gaze on Catherine. "And another woman to satisfy, as well."

A cold shaft of fury impaled Catherine's heart and she took a few steps forward, intent on wiping the smug smile from the other woman's lips, but the little boy blocked her path.

"You brought my sire here to be helped, did you not, Catherine?" the little boy asked, looking up at her with eyes centuries beyond his tender years. "You called my dam from her abode to help him, did you not?"

Catherine tore her gaze from that ancient stare and looked into Raphaella's face. "I called on the Healer's help, not the Weaver's!"

Condescension flitted over the lovely features of Raphaella Chastayne. "I AM the Healer, Marie Catherine."

"I don't believe you!" Catherine snapped. "I ...."

There was a low groan, a slight gurgle of sound from Conar and both women's attention was diverted from one another to him. Catherine rushed to the table and drew in her breath as she saw the awful agony stamped on her husband's face.

"Conar!" Catherine cried out, reaching down to grasp his arm.

"How long has this pain been with him?" Raphaella demanded. She ran her hands along the strong column of his neck.

"Too long," Catherine answered. She ached to snatch the woman's hands from Conar's flesh. She yelped as Raphaella lashed out and gripped her wrist in a clutch that made Catherine's bones grind together.

"How long?"

"The headaches have become steadily worse since he went to Rysalia," Catherine gasped, her knees growing weak with the agony in her hand. She tried to pry those relentless fingers from her wrist, but the grip tightened.

"How long has that been?" Raphaella hissed.

"Over seven months," Catherine told her, clutching her injured hand to her as the other woman let go.

"Too long," Raphaella mumbled. "Much too long."

"He's been bleeding ...."

Raphaella snarled, bending down to put her ear to Conar's chest. "From his nose?" she questioned. "His ears?"

"Yes," Catherine replied. She chewed on her lower lip. "Do you know what's wrong with him?"

"Can she help?" the little boy answered for his mother. "Isn't that what you mean?"

Catherine spared him a glance. She hated the child. His knowing little face, too similar to Conar's for her liking, and his steady gaze unnerved her. She somehow understood the boy was much more than a precocious offspring of an illicit union. The boy was a budding sorcerer with an intelligence and ability to match his father's, if not exceed it.

"Has he had problems with his vision?" Raphaella asked as she straightened up. "Blurriness? Dimness?"

Catherine shook her head. "I don't ...."

"Blackouts?" Raphaella demanded. "Periods of unconsciousness before now?"

The Tzarevna could only look at her. "I'm not sure."

"Any numbness of his face and legs? Stiffness in his neck?"

Catherine could only shake her head. "No one has mentioned it to me if he has."

"He would not have told them if he had," Raine reminded his mother.

"True," Raphaella agreed. She drew in a long breath, held it, then exhaled slowly before turning to face Catherine. "There has been bleeding inside his head."

The words were like a death bell tolling. Catherine's knees threatened to buckle beneath her. "B...bleeding?" she finally managed to ask.

For the first time, Raphaella's face softened. "He was beaten very badly once by a man named Tymothy Kullen. Such beatings may cause problems many, many years later, and if there have been subsequent blows to the head ...." She shrugged. "Our beloved Conar has not led a safe life," she finished.

Catherine sagged against the table. "Can you do something?" She reached across the table and clutched the other woman's arm. "Do you have the knowledge to help him?"

"My dam is most knowledgeable in such matters, but there is no guarantee he will survive," Raine said in a matter of fact tone.

Catherine's face turned pale. "But you will try?" she pleaded.

"Of course," Raphaella sneered. "I have no intention of letting Conar die if I can prevent it, girl!"

"Just as there is no guarantee what she does will save his life, there is likewise no guarantee he will come out of it intact, either," the little boy added.

"Will you shut him up?" Catherine yelled. She glared down at the child, hating him all the more as he gazed back at her with disdain and more than a little amount of amusement.

"Raine," Raphaella informed her, "is correct. There is no knowing the damage that has already occurred." She glanced down at her patient. "It is not the bleeding that concerns me." The sorceress' mouth twisted with hate. "What concerns me is the fact that he is unconscious. I have a suspicion that what ails him can not be cured."

"We fear he has developed a malady for which there is no known cure," Raine injected. "You are familiar with tenerse?" The little boy was studying Catherine.

"I have heard of it," Catherine acknowledged.

Raphaella laid her hand on Conar's naked shoulder. "Over the years, he has been given large amounts of the drug. It was used to control him in ways of which he was not even aware. I doubt the man responsible for handing it over to the bitch who gave it to Conar even knew what the drug might do to him."

"Or conceive my sire might be allergic to it," Raine injected.

Catherine looked down at the boy, her entire world shifting off kilter. "Rupine administered tenerse to Conar only a few days ago."

"If what Raine and I suspect is true, the malady which now threatens Conar's life was caused by his allergic reaction to the tenerse." She looked down at her son. "Go find the Kensetti healer, Raine."

The little boy glanced once at the still man on the table, then simply disappeared.

"His father means more to him than he is ready to admit," Raphaella said. "This is the first time Raine has seen Conar."

It was all too much for Catherine. She staggered away from the table and pressed against

the far wall, sliding down it to bury her face in her hands. She began to cry.

"That will do him no good," Raphaella said in a not ungentle voice. "Your prayers would be of more help, Marie Catherine."

"I don't want to lose him," Catherine sobbed.

Raphaella looked down into Conar's face. "You will not be the first to do so," she said softly. "Nor, I fear, will you be the last."

Looking up through the confinement of her fingers, Catherine watched the sorceress bend over her husband and place a tender kiss on his pallid brow. She wanted to scream at Raphaella, deny her the right to touch Conar, but knew she wouldn't.

"He loved Elizabeth beyond human expression," she heard the sorceress saying. "They were like two peas in a pod, destined to grow side by side, inseparable. I often warned her such love was destructive, but she wouldn't listen." She looked around at Catherine. "She gave her life for him."

"And you?" Catherine found herself asking.

Raphaella looked away. "He is the only man I have ever truly wanted and could never have."

"Yet you had a child by him," Catherine mumbled.

"I stole a child from him," the sorceress answered. "One he unwillingly seeded within me."

"You can't let him die, Raphaella," Catherine said, hugging her knees to her. "You can't."

"I won't," was the vehement answer, "if I can do anything to prevent it."

The door opened and Rupine was ushered into the room. He glanced at Catherine sitting on the floor and frowned. "Has something happened?"

"You have done trephining?" Raphaella asked, not bothering to introduce herself.

Rupine's attention leapt to the woman and held. He felt an immediate lurch of his manhood, a surge of intense lust that nearly staggered him. His face paled, then infused with color and his mouth twisted with passion.

"Oh, hell," Raphaella hissed and waved her hand, shooing away the reaction she caused in any male who looked at her. "I've no time for such things." She walked to the man, annoyed as a small residual amount of arousal still hung in his confused eyes. "Can you work a trephine?" she asked.

Rupine nodded, wondering why he felt so strangely in front of this woman, but no longer suffering from the exacting lust that had all but crushed him.

"We need to make a small opening near the base of his skull to lessen the pressure on his brain. Are you trained sufficiently to help me?"

Rupine nodded again, still too dazed to speak. He cast a quick glance at Catherine, then walked to a table he could have sworn had not been there when he entered the room. Absently, he began to scrub his hands in the disinfectant water in a deep basin.

"Do you stay or do you go?" Raphaella asked Catherine. "I warn you this could be most unpleasant."

Catherine pushed her back up the wall. She shook her head. "I am staying."

Admiration flitted reluctantly through Raphaella's green stare. "Suit yourself, but if you cause even a moment's trouble, I'll pin your ears to the wall behind you. Do you understand, Marie Catherine?"

"Yes." Catherine lifted her chin. "I understand perfectly."

"Then sit down and pray, girl," Raphaella warned. "Pray as you never have before because your lover's life depends on you."





## Chapter Nine

Hunger had finally won out over loyalty and the men of the Samiel had seated themselves along the banquet table and were just finishing their meal when the little boy appeared once more in the room. Hands stopped short of mouths and utensils slowly lowered.

"I seek the one called Sajin," Raine called out, his dark sapphire eyes shifting over those gathered. The alien gaze settled on the Kensetti and held. "You are he?"

Sajin nodded. He wiped his mouth on his napkin and, pushing his chair back, stood up. "How is he?"

"Still unconscious," Raine said in a dry voice. "My dam wishes to speak with you."

"The operation went all right, didn't it?" Balizar asked, also standing.

"He is still alive," the little boy answered. His fathomless gaze shifted to Yuri. "Your lady has asked that you take the first shift this evening. Is this agreeable to you?"

Yuri Andreanova threw down his fork. "It is." He came from around the table. "Is he still in that room at the top of the stairs?"

Raine shook his head. "My sire has been moved to a more comfortable room."

"Your sire?" Sajin questioned.

The little boy's full lips turned down in a slight scowl. "If you look closely at me, Prince Sajin, you will no doubt see the resemblance."

Azalon whistled softly. "Fancy that," he mumbled. "I wonder if Khamsin knows."

Raine ignored the Rysalian merchant. He swung his attention to Sajin. "Are you coming, nomad?"

The Kensetti Prince's brows shot up. "Like father, like son," he muttered as he fell into step behind the little boy.

Raine was quiet as he led the way up the stairs and down a long corridor which ran the length of the third floor. He tapped once at a closed door then entered, standing aside to allow Sajin to pass.

Sajin Ben-Alkazar was stunned by the luxuriousness of the room into which he'd been led. Fine silk tapestries woven with brightly-hued yarn shot through with golden thread hung from the black walls. A thick pile carpet of royal blue adorned the stone floor and the room blazed with dozens of glowing tapers in what appeared to be real gold sconces. The light cast back from the crystal globes over the candles arced flares of light along the richly polished oak furniture. Damask divans were ranged along one wall, an ornate writing desk along another. At the north end of the room, against a panel of tapestry that depicted woodland nymphs and satyrs engaged in sexual surrender, stood a magnificent brass bed with intricate swirls and finials along the headboard and footboard. On a table in the center of the room stood a canister of hand-blown glass with two tulip-shaped crystal goblets. The canister sparkled with a rich red glow that could only be the finest claret wine. Fruit and cheeses were piled atop a pewter platter and there was a loaf of freshly-baked bread that gave off its delicious aroma.

"My dam bids you make yourself comfortable. She will attend you as soon as she has assured herself my sire is resting comfortably." Raine made to leave but stopped, his young face filled with irritation as Sajin asked why he insisted on calling his parents by the biological appellation. "Because that is what they are," the child answered, closing the door behind him.

"Why not call them 'seed disperser' and 'incubator'?" Sajin grumbled, disliking the little boy

immensely.

He walked about the room, fingering the tapestries, running his hand over the high sheen on the elaborate desk. He pinched off a piece of bread, nodding at the flavor and had just popped a succulent grape in his mouth when the door opened and Raphaella Chastayne came into the room.

"Oh, my God," Sajin breathed, allowing his stunned gaze to slide slowly down the woman. He nearly choked on the grape as he swallowed, forgetting the fruit was in his mouth. He coughed, his face turning red.

"Here," Raphaella laughed as she came to him and offered him a goblet of the claret.

He hadn't even seen her pour it, he thought as he tipped the goblet and drained the claret before realizing that he had. His eyes watered at the wine's bite, but he managed to swallow the last gulp without coughing again.

"You should be more careful, nomad," Raphaella warned him. "That drink could have been poisoned."

Sajin stared at her. She bore a strong resemblance to Rachel Stone, but this woman was the most intoxicating female he could ever remember seeing. He wanted to fling himself on her and tear into her like a rutting beast. The bulge in his trousers seemed to have a life of its own and was demanding to be fed.

"I am Raphaella," she told him and took the empty goblet from his frozen fingers. Her arms curled around his neck. "And I am yours for the asking, milord."

Her touch elicited such a strong response in his anatomy, Sajin felt as though he would explode if he did not have this woman. He put trembling hands on her hips and drew her as close to him as space would allow.

"Are you hungry, nomad?" she asked in a throaty voice.

"Starving," he heard himself answer just as her body slid up his and molded to him.

"Shall I feed you, my lover?" she whispered, her lips against his.

Sajin felt her tongue slide over his lips and he was lost. His fingers dug into her buttocks and lifted her to him. Swinging around, he carried her to the bed and fell on her, his aching shaft straining to drive deep inside her willing body. As he freed himself and positioned her, he heard her laughter.

\* \* \* \*

Rupine dragged a tired hand over his face and let out a weary sigh. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he squeezed his lids shut and tried to relax. Yuri's incessant pacing was tiring him out even more and he wished he had the nerve to tell the Shadow-warrior to stop.

"How long is he going to sleep?" Yuri suddenly asked, making Rupine jump.

The physician looked up. "No one knows the answer to that, Andreanova. He could wake tonight. It could be five days from now."

Yuri scowled. "Five days?"

"Or five minutes," Rupine sighed.

The Outer Kingdom warrior continued his pacing.

Rupine heaved himself wearily from his chair and walked over to Conar McGregor's bed. He laid his index and middle fingers on the side of the Outlander's neck and felt for the strong pulse that seemed steadier than it had an hour before. Checking the bandage at the back of his patient's head, Rupine then lifted both of McGregor's eyelids and peered carefully at the pupils.

"What do you look for when you do that?" Yuri demanded, coming to look over Rupine's shoulder.

Rupine's mouth tightened, but he tried to make the Outer Kingdom man understand.

"If the pupils are fixed and dilated, then we have something to worry about. If they react to light, such as his did just then. his healing is progressing normally." Rupine saw the scrunch of confusion on the warrior's beefy face and explained what dilation meant.

"Ah," Yuri answered, not understanding at all, but it seemed the right thing to say. He resumed his heavy pacing.

Rupine adjusted the covers over Conar's bare chest and was about to turn away when he saw a hitch in that wide chest and stopped, turning back to watch the rise and fall. The rhythm had changed. There was no longer a slow, steady lifting of the chest, but a ragged, quicker lift.

"He's waking," Rupine said quietly. Even before he finished speaking, he felt the heavy hand of the warrior on his shoulder.

"Are you sure?" Yuri asked, looking closely at the Serenian's still face. He didn't see even a flicker of those long tawny lashes to indicate Conar was coming out of his coma.

"There," Rupine said, pointing to the twitch of the Outlander's fingers. "He's waking."

Andreanova held his breath, willing those remarkable sapphire eyes to open. He scanned the pale face of his Overlord, worry clouding his own blunt features, and reached down to take Conar's hand in his own.

Rupine smiled as the Serenian's lids fluttered open. Although the man's eyes were glazed, unfocused, the pupils had shifted suddenly into a fine dot from the glare of the lamp by his bedside.

"Milord?" Rupine asked in a soft voice. As Conar's gaze shifted toward him, Rupine reached down to stroke his forehead. "Do you hear me, Khamsin?"

He tried to speak, but couldn't. Only a groan came out. He couldn't quite see who was talking to him, the room seemed very dark, but he thought it sounded like Rupine. He tried to speak again.

"Can you squeeze my hand?" the man he thought was Rupine asked.

He felt a hand slide into his own and he weakly grasped the questing fingers.

"Good!" he heard. "Now, the other hand."

He gripped those fingers, as well.

"Excellent!" Hands moved down his legs. "Can you wiggle your toes?" He concentrated. "Most encouraging! Most encouraging!"

"Are you in pain, milord?" someone else asked.

Conar slowly turned his head toward the sound of the other man's voice. It sounded like Yuri's guttural vibrato.

"Wuh?"

Yuri looked at Rupine. "What did he say?"

Rupine leaned over the bed. "Try again, Khamsin." He put his ear close to Conar's mouth.

"Wuh....err?"

Rupine patted his patient's arm. "In a keep just north of Odess, Khamsin. You were brought here yesterday morning. It is now close to midnight."

"Cath....ren?" came the sigh of helplessness.

"Her Grace?" Rupine nearly shouted with relief when the Outlander nodded slowly. He squeezed Conar's arm. "She is sleeping. Do you want me to go get her."

"Nuh." The Serenian's lids fluttered closed. "Luh....sluhp."

"She should be told," Yuri said and saw the physician nod his agreement. The warrior left in search of his mistress.

"We are here with you, son," Rupine said, drawing a chair up to Conar's bed. "Not for one moment will you be left alone."

There was a faint grunt, then silence as the Outlander slipped once more into a deep, healing sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Catherine sat up in the bed, her heart thundering in her chest. She didn't know what had awakened her, but every instinct told her she needed to go to Conar's room. Swinging her legs from the bed, she reached for the bed robe Raphaella had lent her. As her fingers touched the silk, the low knock came once more at her door and she realized what must have wakened her from her slumber. With flying feet, she raced to the door and yanked it open.

"He came to," Yuri said without preamble. He wanted to erase the look of stark terror on his lady's face. "He said a few words then went back to sleep, but we thought you should know."

"Have you told her?" Catherine asked, tying the sash of her robe about her. She felt the baby inside her kick in protest and loosened the sash a bit.

"Do you want me to?" Yuri asked.

"There is no need," a small voice spoke from the darker shadows of the corridor.

Catherine looked past Yuri's shoulder to see Raine coming toward them. "You've told her?" she asked the child.

"She will have known the moment he woke," Raine answered. He stood gazing up at the woman. "Just as you did." He cocked his little head to one side. "My sire has great power over women, does he not?"

For a reason she couldn't explain, Catherine found the remark both unwholesome and insulting. She tore her gaze from the inquisitive sapphire stare and glanced up at Yuri. "Sajin should be alerted."

"He is with my dam," Raine announced as he continued on his way.

"At this time of night?" Catherine asked, then blushed to the roots of her hair as the knowing look from the little boy scalded her. She thought she saw him smile, but upon looking closer, found the full lips had not moved at all. She looked away, unable to meet that worldly stare.

"I don't care for that child," Yuri grumbled as he and Catherine started after the boy.

Raine could hear them speaking as easily as if they had been shouting. His powers were so great not even his own mother knew how strong they were. Nor how vast. His intelligence was far superior to either of his parent's and his intellect was still developing. His understanding of the complexities of male/female relationships would have astounded even the woman who had given birth to him.

Much to his chagrin, he had been stunned upon seeing his father for the first time. The man was now real to him whereas before he had been only tales told to him by his mother. Before that day, Raine could objectively view the man who had helped create him without letting any emotions cloud his judgment. Just as he had learned to do with the woman who had given him life. But now, after surreptitiously studying his sire, the man seemed to instill in Raine a feeling he at first could not identify. After a great deal of thought, however, he began to realize that feeling was pity. As unaccustomed as the child was to letting his emotions show, he was finding it difficult to maintain his normal air of objectivity where Conar McGregor was concerned. The complex and conflicting emotions that were tumbling around inside him were disturbing to his orderly and precise existence. He was also discovering that his ability to concentrate was suffering, for he was constantly thinking of the man who lay unconscious in the room above his own. This both annoyed and intrigued him. He had always prided himself on being able to detach himself from whatever he found uncomfortable, but with the arrival of his father, he could neither maintain that detachment nor summon it. To his amazed disbelief, he found himself worried about the man and actively

hoping he did not die.

"You do know," Raine said as he stopped and looked back at Catherine and Yuri, "that the babe within you will be a girl child, do you not?"

Catherine and Yuri exchanged a quick glance. "Yes," the Tzarevna answered. "I do know that."

Raine nodded. "I have four living brothers." He ticked them off on his fingers. "There is Wyn, Tristan, Regan, and Little Brelan." His strange blue glance lowered to Catherine's belly. "A sister will be a nice change." He looked back up and locked his gaze with hers. "I will protect *her* with my life."

"But not your brothers?" Yuri sneered.

Raine smiled. "There is no need. Each of them has our sire's powers within him." The smile faded. "Though only one knows how to use them to proper advantage."

Catherine stared at the child. "You feel love for this baby, Raine?"

The little boy frowned. "Love is a concept I do not believe I have had the misfortune of experiencing as yet." He shrugged. "It is loyalty to one of my own kind that makes me feel so about your child, milady." He turned his back and began walking again. "That and the fact that she will need my protection."

"What the hell does that mean?" Yuri growled.

"She knows," Raine answered and continued walking.

Yuri turned his angry face to Catherine, expecting to see her brow furrowed with concern, but he found her smiling. He demanded to know why.

"Because young Raine has seen the same future for my daughter that I have," Catherine replied. She risked a glance up at the warrior's set face. "If you think the mother has been difficult....wait until you meet her daughter!"

Raine held the door to his father's room open for the lady and her escort. He peeked around Rupine's broad back as the physician bent over the sleeping man on the bed. Assuring himself there was no need for his assistance, the child softly closed the door and went back to his own room.

"How is he?" Catherine asked as she came to the bed.

"He asked for you," Rupine told her. Conar's wife looked up, surprised. "But he didn't want us to disturb your rest." Rupine moved away so Catherine could sit down.

Catherine took the chair the physician had vacated and, without thinking, took her husband's limp hand in her own. Tenderly stroking the warm flesh, she ranged her attention over his still face, taking in every detail of his handsome profile as though committing it to memory.

"I wish to the Prophetess I'd known he was allergic to tenerse," Rupine sighed.

Yuri looked around at the man. "He is?"

Rupine spread his hands. "I don't guess he even knew it, but Raphaella tells me he has enough residual tenerse in his system to knock out a hundred men. His body can't assimilate the drug so the tenerse has continued to build up inside him. Now, all the doses he has been given have begun to play hell with his health."

"Sadie," Yuri hissed, wishing he could dig the old woman up and bury her alive. "She meant to do him harm and she did." He clenched his fists. "The bitch is probably rolling over in her grave, laughing."

"She was the mother of Joannie?" Catherine asked, remembering a conversation she'd had with Conar soon after he had asked her to marry him. He had wanted no secrets between them. Then.

"Yes," Yuri ground out. "And the grandmother of that bastard, Robert MacCorkingdale, who is the new Arch-Prelate of the Domination."

Rupine looked up from his contemplation of the rug. "I thought the Domination was finished."

"For all intents and purposes it is," Yuri answered, "but until every last one of them bastards is dead, there will always be a threat to Conar."

"Or so he believes," Catherine replied.

"I don't agree with what he wants to do," Yuri told her. "I think the two of you need to be together." As his mistress looked up at him, the Shadow-warrior blushed.

"I wish you'd tell him that!" Catherine lamented.

"At first I was angry," Yuri stated. "I didn't even want anything to do with him." His gaze mellowed as he looked over at his Overlord. "But I began to realize he thought he was doing what was best for you, Your Grace."

"At least the man is capable of thought," Catherine snapped. "Such as it is and for it's worth."

The door to Conar's room eased open and the three people turned in unison to see Sajin standing sheepishly on the threshold. He grinned self-consciously and then came in, closing the door behind him.

"Is he still out of it?" Sajin asked, avoiding the look Catherine aimed his way.

"He should be until morning," Rupine replied. "We made a small circular hole at the base of his skull to allow the built-up pressure to dissipate."

"Useless procedure," Sajin mocked. "Trephining was done away with years ago in the Inner Kingdom, Rupine. You know that."

"Yes," the physician answered, "but I was willing to try anything to help him."

"The man could have bled to death," Sajin argued. "Or you could have scrambled his brain." He leaned over the footboard of the bed and reached out to shake his friend's foot. "Although anything would be an improvement, eh, McGregor?"

"Raphaella is concerned there might well have been damage done already," Rupine said. "Stroke. Paralysis. The like."

Catherine looked up sharply. "She said no such thing to me!"

Rupine glanced at Sajin. "She didn't want to alarm you, milady."

"Well, we know there was no paralysis because he can move his hands and feet," Rupine was quick to point out. "A major stroke would have caused such things. Minor strokes might alter speech..."

"He wasn't talking all that plain when he came to," Yuri reminded the physician only to have Rupine shoot him a look of rage.

"His speech," Rupine stressed, narrowing his gaze at the Outer Kingdom warrior, "was slurred due to the sedative we gave him before operating."

No one noticed the dark blue eyes that were once again open and shifting from one speaker to another. Because they did not notice, no one saw the look of bewilderment on the pale face of Conar McGregor as he struggled to follow the conversation. They did not see him straining to see the people standing about him nor did they witness the effort it took for him to shift his unfocused gaze from one to another.

"He's going to be all right," Catherine said, finally looking away from Rupine to center her attention on her husband. She was stunned to see him watching her. "Conar?"

Sajin, who had been arguing with Rupine, looked around and smiled when he saw his

friend's eyes open. "Did you finally decide to join the living, Outlander?"

He could feel Catherine's hand on his, but her face was blurred. He thought it well might be because the room was so damned dark. He wondered why it was so damned dark, then thought it had probably been made so in deference to the headache that was still throbbing at his temples. He put his hand up to rub his forehead.

He could hear Sajin talking to him, recognizing that Inner Kingdom grating accent, although he couldn't seem to grasp what the man was saying. Some of the words made no sense to him. Not that he cared. A lot of what the nomad often said to him made no sense. But from the few snatches of conversation drifting around him as the others began to question him, too, Conar thought he might be in real trouble. He couldn't seem to understand any of it.

"Are you hungry?" Rupine inquired.

"Huh?" Conar shifted his head toward the speaker.

"Yes," Rupine answered, glancing up quickly at Catherine. "Hungry. Do you want some food?"

"Whuh?" He hadn't understood what Rupine said.

Sajin's brows drew together and he went around to the other side of the bed. Sitting down on the mattress, he reached out to turn Conar's face toward him. As the confused look met his worried one, Sajin's hand tightened on his friend's chin. "Who am I, Conar?" Sajin asked.

"Sajin, really!" Catherine snapped.

"Conar?" Sajin repeated, ignoring her. "Who am I?"

Rupine gripped the back of Catherine's chair as he waited for the answer. He could see the sudden tenseness in Yuri's body and knew both the Outer Kingdom warrior and the Kensetti Prince suspected something was very, very wrong with Conar McGregor.

Conar felt Catherine's hand gripping his and he swung his eyes toward her, tried hard to focus on her hazy face. "Cath.....ren?" he questioned.

"Conar!" Sajin said louder. "Tell me who I am!" He held his breath as that sapphire gaze moved back to him with bewilderment.

"Duhn...uhn...stan," came the piteous whimper. "Duhn...uhn...stan."

"Oh, my God," Yuri groaned. He found himself staring at his mistress, watching the realization setting in, seeing the horror forming on her stricken face. He skirted the bed and pushed Rupine aside, hunkered down beside her. He put his hand on her shoulder and flinched when she turned disbelieving eyes to him.

"I'll get Raphaella," Rupine said.

"Cath.....ren?"

Conar's wife tore her gaze from Yuri and dropped to the floor on her knees by her husband's bed. "Yes, my love. I'm here."

"Nuh...nuh..." There was frustration and anger building in the weak voice. "Nuhd...you." His voice broke on a hitching gasp, then he tried again, attempting to stress each word. "Nuhd...you, Cath...ren."

"I'm here," Catherine repeated, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I'm right here."

Raphaella nudged Sajin aside as she rushed into the room. She sat down on the bed, drawing Conar's unfocused gaze to her. She took his right hand in hers.

"Conar," she began, bringing his hand to her chest and nestling it there. "Susta hel exclu lostibe y oders du mus."

Only Catherine knew the woman was speaking to Conar in a language older than time. To the others, the phrases coming from the beautiful woman's mouth was just so much gibberish.



Catherine understood most of what Raphaella had said, but when she continued to speak, Conar's wife had to struggle with the translation. The words and phrases were more thought than actual speech and meant to be heard with the psychic senses rather than with the ear.

"I want you to listen to me," Raphaella repeated in the ancient language of the Wind Tribes, the root of the Daughterhood's own language.

"Ruh...ruh?"

"Aye," Raphaella agreed, cutting him off as she saw the disgust beginning to blaze across his face. "Pay attention, now. This is important."

"Ruh...phuh...luh," came the hiss.

"He knows her," Yuri whispered.

"You have suffered a stroke, Conar," the sorceress explained to him in the old language.

"Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

"Nuh...stuh...puhd," Conar ground out between his clenched teeth.

"A matter of opinion," Raphaella said under her breath in Serenian. To him, she continued in the ancient speech. "These people can't understand you any more than you can understand them." She glanced at Catherine and knew the woman was attempting to follow the conversation. "This inability to speak plainly should disappear by morning."

"Whuhf...duhn?" was the immediate snarl.

Catherine looked at Raphaella, awaiting her reply.

"If it doesn't, you'll work at trying to correct it," the sorceress said in a matter-of-fact tone that seemed heartless to Catherine.

"Whuhf...wuhn...cuh...rec?"

"You'll learn to live with it."

Sajin's eyes flared when he saw the fury flash across Conar's face. He had no idea what the woman had been saying, what she could have possibly said to Conar to cause the intense rage and hatred that suddenly came to life in that glazed stare. Even as the sorceress jumped back away from the bed, out of range of a suddenly irate and infuriated Serenian who made a desperate grab for her as she stumbled away from the bed, Sajin could do no more than gape as his friend lunged from the bed, jerking his left hand from Catherine's grasp, and dove for the woman who had angered him.

"Conar, no!" Catherine shouted, scrambling to her feet as Yuri nearly fell in his attempt to climb over the bed to stop the Serenian from attacking Raphaella.

"I didn't do this to you!" Catherine heard the sorceress shouting as she threw up her hands to protect herself. "You know I wouldn't, Conar!"

Rupine was knocked out of the way as Conar tried to get to the woman. The physician's arms cartwheeled as he crashed back against the armoire. His spine hit the edge of the armoire's door and he yelped, sliding down to his rump with a shocked look on his face, his legs splayed out in front of him..

"Stop him, Sajin!!" Raphaella shouted as Conar's hands closed around her wrists and jerked her hands down. He had her pinned to the wall, his hands at her throat, before she could call out for help again. Her strangled cries were awful to hear.

Sajin leapt forward, grabbing Conar's right arm as Yuri took his left. Between the two of them, they were able to break the Outlander's grip on Raphaella and drag him backwards, kicking and making unintelligible threats.

"Damn it, Conar, stop!" Sajin hissed at him as he and Yuri lifted the struggling man between them and slammed him back on the bed, pinning him there.

"Be careful of his head!" Rupine bellowed, coming to his feet. "There are stitches!"

Raphaella was bent over, gasping for breath, her hand on her injured neck. She could hear the jumbled half-phrases exploding from Conar's mouth and knew the man would have another seizure if not brought under control. Despite not being able to breathe properly and with her own vision blurred, she pushed away from the wall and stumbled toward the bed, coughing.

"Restrain him," Rupine was telling the two men. "For the love of the Prophetess, restrain him before he hurts himself!"

Catherine stared with open-mouth wonder at the enraged man Yuri and Sajin were trying to hold down. He was kicking out at them, twisting so violently beneath their clutches, the sheets had come almost all the way off the bed. She watched Sajin bending over him, anchoring Conar's right arm and leg to the bed with enough physical force to snap the bones in two. Yuri was doing the same while Rupine had gone to the head of the bed to anchor Conar's head to the pillow.

"Shut up," Sajin was ordering, ignoring the garbage spewing from his friend's mouth. "I don't know what you're saying but just shut the hell up!"

"He doesn't understand what's happening to him," Rupine said. "Khamsin, please! Lie still!"

Raphaella came to the bed and looked down at Conar. She bent over him and took his face in her hands. "Stop it before you do more harm to yourself, McGregor."

"Buh...chuh!" he spat. "Fuh...cuhn...buh..chuh!"

"I may be a fucking bitch," Raphaella answered, "but I did not do this to you. It was the tenerse. You were given too much."

Conar stopped struggling, but he was still panting and still glaring up at the woman with intense fury. "Ruh....puhn?" he questioned, his gaze trying to find the man above him.

"It was not Rupine's fault." Raphaella motioned Sajin to let go of his captive. When the man did, she sat down beside Conar. "All the tenerse you've been given over the years has been building up in your system, destroying your body's ability to absorb it, and it's caused the reaction that brought on the stroke."

"Stuh...ohk," Conar repeated, seeming to grasp his situation finally. He stared at her, although he couldn't actually make out her features.

"You have finally had an allergic reaction to the tenerse, Conar," Raphaella explained. "Toire didn't know you were allergic to it. None of us did. I doubt Kahlil would have given it to you in the first place if he had known."

Yuri moved aside as Catherine tugged on his arm, demanding he release his hold on her husband, too. Rupine lifted his hands from the Serenian's temples.

"How is your vision?" the sorceress asked, noticing the way Conar kept squinting at her.

"Bluh...duh."

"All right," Raphaella said, letting out a long sigh. "I was afraid it might be. I want you to relax. Give yourself time to heal. If your speech hasn't improved by morning, we'll start working on some exercises that will help. As for the blurred vision, that will correct itself."

"You...suhr?"

She smiled at him. "Yes, beloved, I am sure."

Catherine tensed at the endearment. She had been following most of the conversation and now knew Conar had been told all the pertinent information concerning his condition. He seemed to settle down and the anger was leaving his face.

"Cath...ren?"

Raphaella got up from the bed. "She's at your left side."

Conar turned his head and searched for her. As her hand caressed his cheek, he moved to her, turning so that his head lay cradled in her lap.

"Stuh...wuh...muh," he begged.

Catherine looked up at the other woman. "He wants you to stay with him," Raphaella told her. Catherine nodded.

Sajin caught Raphaella's arm, once more feeling the intense sexual thrill coursing through his veins when he did. He had to fight the urge to drag her against him and wondered why her touch had not seemed to phase Conar like it did him.

"Because he's immune to it at the moment," the woman answered, surprising the Kensetti. "If he were himself, he'd be slaving over me, too."

Catherine snorted, glancing up and away.

A dull red blush spread over the nomad's cheeks and he dropped his hand. He had to stammer his question to her for he was acutely aware of both Yuri and Rupine looking at him with commiseration. "Will he be all right?" Sajin asked.

"In time," Raphaella replied. "I would be greatly surprised if he is still having speech problems come morning." She looked behind Sajin to find her son staring at her from the door. "We will be up the rest of the night to insure that doesn't happen."

"He's not really seeing us all that clearly, is he?" Sajin wanted to know.

Raphaella shook her head and lowered her voice even though she knew Conar wouldn't understand what she said. "No and that concerns me. I was overjoyed to learn there was no paralysis and, as I said, I feel the speech problem can be corrected. But the sight....." She shivered. "I fear that is irreparable, but he doesn't need to know that for now."

Fear nudged Sajin's heart. "Could it get worse?"

"He could go blind," Raine said from the doorway. As his mother turned an irritated frown to him, the little boy shrugged. "Of course, we will do our best to see that doesn't happen, either."

Sajin frowned, as well. "I never believed in witches before now," he mumbled. He shook his head. "But now that I've seen you women in action, first at Abbadon and now here ...." His voice trailed off and he looked down at Raphaella. "My sister says ...."

"Sybelle," Raphaella said, making the word seem obscene. Her mouth twisted.

The nomad was surprised. "You know her?"

Raphaella flung her waist length black hair back over her shoulder. "I've heard of her."

"Is she ...? I mean, can she ...?" Sajin scrunched his shoulders. "You know."

"Your sibling is about as adept at her craft as a nomad bitch can be," Raine spoke for his mother. When Sajin turned a fierce glare on him at what he thought was an insult, the little boy smiled. "Bitch in the scientific usage only, Prince Sajin. I meant no disrespect to your sibling."

"I can't believe you're Conar's son," Sajin snapped. "Your father has more personality in his little finger than you do in your whole body! And despite his arrogance, far more tact!"

"I'll learn," Raine answered, unperturbed by the man's accusations. "I have an excellent teacher in my sire, don't you agree?"

"Conar needs to sleep," Catherine told them, wanting them all to leave so she could be alone with her husband. She looked up at Rupine and the physician nodded his agreement. "All this talk is keeping him from doing so."

"You will be staying with him, then?" Raphaella asked her. The sorceress watched the Outer Kingdom woman's face harden.

"Good night, Mistress Chastayne," Catherine replied.

Raphaella's gaze narrowed. She stared at the younger woman for a moment more then took

Sajin's arm. "Come, my love. Perhaps we will get some sleep, as well."

Yuri glanced over at Rupine. Neither man thought Sajin would be sleeping at all. From the deep red flush that spread over the Kensetti's face, he didn't think so either.

Conar had been listening to the words being spoken, but he had not understood any of it. He hadn't recognized the little boy's voice, but instinct told him it was the son Raphaella had taken from him long ago. He had lifted his head to see the boy, but all he had been able to detect was the nimbus of gleaming blond hair and the thin little body. There had been no inflection in the boy's voice and Conar wondered if there was any emotion in him, either.

"Jubra est nilius, Conar?"

The Serenian turned his head in Catherine's lap and looked up at her. His brows drew together. She had asked him if he wanted anything in a language he didn't even know she knew.

"Wuh...tuh," he answered.

Catherine had to strain to reach the water pitcher. Her husband's arms were around her waist and he was holding her as though he never meant to let her go. She poured him a tumbler of cool water and helped him to drink.

"Foler chunst myrmos," Catherine said as she smoothed the hair back from his forehead. "Everything is going to be all right."

"I...nuh," he said.

"Susta chun uci." I am here.

"Luhf...you...Cath...ren."

Catherine bent down to kiss him. "Susta amat exclu, assi, Conar."

## Chapter Nine

Conar woke with a start. It was still dark out and he had trouble at first remembering where he was. Lifting his head and looking about the room, he crinkled his forehead with confusion, for he did not recognize the furnishings. A light sigh at his left side made him turn his head that way and he found his wife sleeping beside him, her hands tucked under her pillow as she lay on her side. He could barely see her through the darkness, but her scent was as familiar to him as Liza's had been.

Laying his head down, he continued to watch her. There was a faint smile on her face and he wondered what dreams she dreamt that made her pretty face so soft. He turned to his own side, the better to see her, and slowly scanned her relaxed features.

Marie Catherine Steffenovitch McGregor could not be called a classical beauty, he thought, but she was a lovely, lovely woman. Her face was oval with a slight point to her chin. The eyes behind the faint tint of purple at her lids were a shifting shade of hazel that sometimes turned pale green when she laughed and a darker verdant hue when she was angry. She wasn't tall, maybe five foot five, but she had long, tapered legs that made her seem taller. Cat, as her friends called her, was a bit overweight with a lush cleavage that made him want to bury his face in the crease between her breasts. Her nose was a bit too big for her face, but her lips were perfect, he thought as he stared at them: full and sensual, given to easy smiles. In all, to him, she was astonishingly beautiful.

"Has no one ever told you it is impolite to stare, milord?"

Conar jumped, his gaze going immediately from the suddenly smiling mouth of his wife to her teasing eyes. He felt the color creep into his face at being caught studying her.

"Conar," she laughed, reaching out to touch his cheek, "you look like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar!" His blush deepened and Catherine tweaked his nose. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," he mumbled. He eased over to his back.

Catherine held her breath. "No headache."

He thought about it for a moment. "No."

She didn't know if he remembered the events of the night before, but he was responding to her questions easily and his words were no longer thick and slurred. She raised up on her elbow and looked closely at him.

"Do you know where you are?" she asked.

Conar shrugged. "Some keep." He shifted his gaze about the room. "What time is it, anyway?"

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief. "I don't know." She flung her covers back and got out of bed. "With the windows painted black, I can't see outside to gauge the sun." She flung Raphaella's silk wrapper around her.

"Why the hell did the bitch paint the goddamned windows?" Conar snarled, looking over at his wife. "Is she afraid of people looking out or people looking in?"

There was not even a hint of difficulty with his speech and Catherine was greatly relieved. As a matter of fact, his testy mood was even normal for him. Conar had never been a morning person.

"And how the hell did I wind up in her goddamned keep, anyway?"

Catherine smiled. Not only testy, she thought, but displeased with where he was. That made his wife very happy. "She's a healer and ...."

"I *know* that, Catherine," Conar interrupted. "What I want to know is why you brought me to her of all people!" He flipped over to his side. "I hate the woman."

That statement pleased Catherine even more. "I think we all understood that when you tried to strangle her last eve," she giggled.

Conar looked over his shoulder at her. He might not have been able to see her face clearly in the gloom, but he had not mistaken her smug tone. "What'd I do?" he asked, not really caring.

"When she told you about the stroke ....," Catherine began, but he sat up so quickly in the bed, she stopped.

"Damn it!" he thundered. "Now, I remember!" His jaw clenched. "It was the tenerse!"

"Will you lower your voice?" she asked, coming back to the bed and sitting down. "The rest of the keep may not be up as yet."

"The shit could have killed me, Cat!" he protested. "I've had so damned much of it." The memory of his garbled speech and his inability to understand what was being said to him made his face turn pale. "That shit could have destroyed my mind!"

"But it didn't," Catherine said in a reasonable voice. "You don't seem to be suffering any lasting side effects from it."

He pondered that remark. No, he thought, he didn't. He hadn't been left paralyzed from the stroke and he could talk as plainly as before. There wasn't any difficulty in understanding what Catherine was saying to him. He put his hand up to his temple. The headache seemed to have left him and he was hungry, which was always a good sign after a migraine episode. The only problem he could see was his blurred vision, but the darkness of the room probably accounted for most of that.

"Well?" Catherine inquired, watching the play of emotions crossing his expressive face as he thought through the problem. "Are you content no grave damage has been done?"

"I suppose," he mumbled. He looked about the room. "I've gotta piss, Catherine." He turned his gaze to her. "Real bad."

His wife laughed and scooted off the bed. Stooping down, she fumbled under the bed for the chamber pot and dragged it out. She stood by the side of the bed as he crawled over and got up. Her smile slid away as she saw him waver for a moment. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"You'd better hold it for me," he answered, feeling a bit groggy. He put one hand on his wife's shoulder to steady himself and the other to his manhood.

"Don't you dare splatter me, McGregor," she warned. His hand was heavy on her shoulder and she wondered if he was aware that he was not just bracing himself against her but holding on as though he might fall.

The hollow ching of his urine flowing into the chamber pot seemed to amuse him although he didn't smile. Catherine thought back to the last week and a half and realized she hadn't seen him smile or heard him laugh since Abbadon fell to the Daughterhood. Nor had any of them seen him cry or appear to grieve in any way for the friends he had lost in that hellish place. It was almost as though he had put all his emotions on hold.

"I'm finished," he said, bringing Cat back from her reverie. He sat down on the edge of the bed and shivered, his nakedness finally penetrating the fog in his mind. He lay down and flung the covers over himself.

"Could you eat something?" Catherine asked, taking the chamber pot to the door. She sat it down on the floor.

"Aye," Conar answered. "A lot of something." He propped the pillows behind his back. "Feed me, wench."

Catherine grinned. "You're normal again." She started to leave, but he called her name and she turned, one thick dark brow lifted in query.

"Are you still mad at me?" he asked. He sounded much like a small boy whose mother had been displeased with him.

"I have every right to be, don't you think?" his wife countered.

"Aye," he mumbled, looking down at the coverlet. "You do."

Catherine paused with hand on the doorknob. "Is it still your intent to leave me in St. Steffensburg?"

He looked up at her, his face dark with guilt. "Catherine....," he began, but she put up her hand.

"Never mind," she told him. "You just answered my question."

Before he could respond to the chill in her tone, she had left him, closing the door firmly in a manner that said she would never discuss the matter with him again.

Conar squeezed his eyes shut and hung his head, cursing beneath his breath at the necessity to push the woman he loved away from him. He brought his hands up and drove the heels of his palms against his forehead as though he could press the pain of his decision away. His lips pulled back over his teeth and he spat out a vulgarity, the hiss of his anger sounding loud and unpleasant in the still room.

"Why?" he growled. "Why does it always have to be this way?"

There was a light bump against his door and his head came up, his gaze going to the portal. He squinted, trying to see through the dimness of the room. When the door opened, the blurred outline of a woman appeared on the threshold, but he knew it wasn't Catherine. There was a strong scent of lilacs that pulsed into the room.

"I brought your food," Raphaella told him.

He scowled, his mouth dragging down at the corners as the sorceress advanced to his bed. She held a tray in her hands which she placed over his lap.

"I knew you'd be hungry when you woke," she said, straightening up. She saw him rubbing his forehead. "Is your head hurting again?"

"No," he answered like petulant child. "I'm just dizzy."

Raphaella's face filled with concern. "How dizzy?"

He looked up at her from beneath his hand. "Dizzy enough," he spat.

The woman's mobile mouth tightened. "That's probably because you haven't eaten in two days."

He lowered his hand and looked down at the food on the tray. There was a thick ham steak, fried potato wedges, a heel of freshly-baked bread glistening with warm, creamy yellow butter, and a mound of baked apple slices. Steam wafted up from a mug of hot tea. He lifted his fork and knife and began to score the meat.

"Is the child I saw our son?" he asked as he speared a square of ham and forked it into his mouth.

"Raine," she answered as she sat down in the chair by his bed. "He will be three in the fall."

He looked up at her as he tore a piece from the bread. "Has it been that long?"

Raphaella nodded. "He will come to see you when he's ready." She clasped her hands in her lap. "Provided, of course, you wish to see him."

Conar paused with a wedge of potato at his lips. "Why wouldn't I?"

The sorceress shrugged. "One never knows with you, Conar." She met his hurt look. "You could feel the same way about Raine as you did Regan. Both were stolen from you and both are the sons of women you hate."

Conar crammed the potato wedge into his mouth and spoke around it. "I don't hate you, Raphaella. I just don't like you."

"Most men don't like their mothers-in-law," she replied.

"Most mother-in-laws don't seduce their son-in-laws, either," he shot back. He chewed on the potato, popped another inside his mouth. "Come to think of it, it wasn't seduction, it was out and out rape." He frowned. "Rape and thievery, Raphaella."

Her lips twitched. "If I didn't know you better, beloved, I would think you were bragging instead of complaining about what I did to you."

"Stop calling me that," he grumbled. He shoved a large forkful of apples slices into his mouth.

"I'm glad to see you're feeling better," she told him. "When you insult people, I know you're yourself again."

He didn't reply, but continued to fork food into his mouth, chomping on it with what did not appear to be relish. He slurped at his tea, making Raphaella wince, and she knew he was deliberately trying to antagonize her. Most likely in the hope she would leave. Something she did not intend to do.

"Despite myself," she told him as she settled back in the chair. "I find I rather like Catherine." She almost laughed at his immediate response to that statement.

"You leave her the hell alone, Raphaella!" he told her, jabbing his fork in her direction. "I mean it."

"Do you love her?" she asked, tilting her head to one side.

"That's none of your damned business," he growled, raking his knife through another section of steak.

"She certainly loves you," Raphaella commented. "If looks could kill, I'd be moldering in my grave by now." She smiled as he glanced up at her and scowled heavily. "She is jealous of our relationship, Conar."

"We have no relationship, Raphaella," he told her. He angrily shoveled the remainder of the apple slices into his mouth.

"I spoke with Sajin," she answered, making him stop chewing. She saw suspicion forming on his face. "Aye. I've had him and although he is no where near as good as you in bed, he does know how to pleasure a woman quite well."

Conar snorted, disgust making his exhalation of breath a wordless insult. He stabbed a potato wedge on the end of his fork and pointed it toward her. "Is there a man alive who you can't get to, Raphaella?"

"You," she said on a whimsical sigh. "I can use magic to bring you to my bed, but you are the only man who has ever successfully resisted me, beloved."

"Fancy that," he sneered. He drained his cup of tea.

"How is your vision this morning?" she asked, changing the subject.

Conar shrugged. "Still blurred."

"It may remain so," she said softly and saw him lift his head to look at her. She could see that thought had already occurred to him and was worrying him. "Your sight may not be as sharp as it was before. Eventually, I would think you'd need spectacles ...."

"No!" he bellowed, his vanity stung at the thought. "I will not!"



"As I was saying," she told him, "you might need spectacles when you need to read something." She watched his face relax. "Your father did, as I recall."

"Old men usually do," he grumbled.

Raphaella hid a smile behind her hand. "Aye. Old men."

He glanced up, looking to see if she was patronizing him, but the woman was only smiling blandly at him. He cursed and sopped up what was left of the ham juice with the remaining piece of bread.

"You want something else?" she asked, standing up to take the tray from his lap.

"My wife," he mumbled. He really wanted to get out of bed, but he didn't feel all that well. He was still dizzy and he had to pee again so badly his bladder was aching, but he didn't want Raphaella to help him with that problem.

"Sajin wants to come in to see you, but I'll tell Catherine you want to see her." Raphaella balanced the tray on a table by the door as she opened the portal. She glanced down at the chamber pot then craned her head around to look at him. "Do you have the need to relieve yourself?"

"Aye," he snapped. "But I don't need you to help me do it!" He thought she'd frown at him, but instead he saw her lovely face fill with worry.

"I'll let Sajin handle that," she said.

It wasn't five minutes before the nomad came striding cheerfully into his room, but he had been the longest five minutes of Conar's life. As soon as he realized his visitor was Ben-Alkazar, he demanded the door be closed and locked.

"Will you bring that damned pot over here?" Conar ordered. "I feel like I'm going to fucking explode."

Sajin grinned as he threw the dead bolt, then stooped down to pick up the pot. "Raphaella said you might be needing to piss."

Conar threw the covers back and swung his legs over the side of the bed. The moment he did, the room canted away from him and he had to reach out to grasp the edge of the mattress to keep from falling. "Shit!" he gasped, seeing brilliant flashes of light zapping across his dark vision.

"What's the matter?" Sajin questioned as he hurried to his friend. "Another headache coming?" He sat the chamber pot on the floor.

"I'm so damned woozy I can't see straight," Conar complained.

"Here," Sajin said, as he reached down to help Conar up. "Can you even see the pot, McGregor?"

Conar couldn't answer for his bladder was so full and so painful, he started to urinate before he knew if he would be hitting the pot or not. Luckily, he did. He threw back his head, wincing at the tug on the lower part of his skull where Raphaella and Rupine had worked to relieve the pressure inside his head, and he sighed as the urine flowed out of him.

"Another minute and you would have exploded," Sajin joked. He stood there supporting his friend's body, frowning at the slight pallor that still clung to the Outlander's face.

When he was finished, Conar stumbled as he tried to sit down and he had to be helped back in the bed. "God, I can't believe how dizzy I am," he complained.

"You've always been dizzy, McGregor," Sajin said dryly. "That's what attracted me to you in the first place."

"I mean it, Sajin," Conar said, trying to blink away the fuzzy image of his friend. "Something is wrong here."

Sajin carried the chamber pot to the door and set it down, opened the door and placed the thing out in the hallway for Sonja to empty. He shut the door then walked back to the bed. "What

do you think's wrong?" he asked as he straddled the chair by the bed and sat down.

"I don't know. I can't see all that well," Conar answered. "And I've never been as dizzy as this before." He put his hand up to his head and rubbed his right temple. "Never."

Sajin was not pleased to see the slight tremor in Conar's hand. Raphaella had asked him to look for just such a thing.

"Try not to arouse his suspicions, but see if you can find out if he has any weakness in his legs when he stands," she had also asked.

"When you stand up," Sajin said in a conversational tone, "do you feel like you're going to fall? Like your legs are going to give way beneath you?"

Conar looked over at him. "Why?"

Sajin shrugged away the rush of the question. "Well, if you're dizzy and your legs feel weak, then it's most likely hunger."

"I just ate," came the miffed reply.

"Yes," Sajin reasoned, "but the food hasn't had time to provide you with nourishment, yet, Conar." He crossed his arms over the chair back. "Are your legs weak?"

"Aye," Conar mumbled.

The Kensetti lowered his chin to his hands and studied his friend. "I'm thinking you're going to have to stay here awhile until you get back on your feet." When his friend started to protest, Sajin held up a hand. "Look, McGregor. If you can't even stand up without wobbling around like a goose with a broken neck, how the hell can you accomplish anything in Rysalia? How do you even think to lead a raid if you have to stop every ten minutes to take a leak?"

"I don't want to stay here!" Conar argued much as a child would.

"Tough titty," Sajin quipped. He pushed back in the chair. "I don't see you have any choice in the matter."

"I don't want to stay here," Conar repeated.

"I doubt Cat will let you be moved," Sajin warned him. "By the way, what the hell did you say to her this morning to make the woman cry?"

Conar's brows drew together with concern. "She was crying?"

"Like a Chalean bannie," Sajin replied. "She came running past me as though the hounds of hell were at her heels. When I asked her what was wrong, she told me to, and I quote: 'eat shit and die, nomad.'" Sajin sighed. "That's when I knew the woman had been in to see you."

The Serenian Prince leaned his head back on the headboard. "Will you go talk her, Sajin?"

"I can try," Sajin answered. He got up from the chair and swung it away. "But I don't think she's in any mood to listen right now."

"Just try," Conar asked.

The Kensetti nodded. "You want anything before I go?"

Conar looked up, his face stamped with apology. "A fresh chamber pot?"

"Again?" Sajin asked.

Later, on his search for Catherine, Sajin encountered Raphaella in the kitchen. The woman and her son had their heads over a bubbling beaker of orangish liquid and neither looked up as he spoke.

"Has he developed a problem with his bladder because of that tenerse?" Sajin inquired.

Raphaella added a small vial of clear liquid to the beaker and the contents inside the glass turned a deep, scarlet red. "The malady caused by his allergic reaction to the tenerse can cause urgent and frequent urination," she answered.

"We are working on a potion that will help," Raine answered. He handed his mother a

purple flask.

Sajin shuddered. He'd never get use to witches, he thought with a grimace. "Have either of you seen Cat?"

Raine glanced up. "She and the man called Yuri rode into town." His little mouth twisted with humor. "I believe the lady said something about visiting a church."

"A what?" Sajin asked.

"Synagogue," Raphaella clarified, using a word she knew the Kensetti would understand. She uncorked the purple flask and added a drop of thick yellow fluid to the potion.

"Did she say when she'd be back?"

Raphaella mumbled something to her son, then took up a towel to wipe her hands. "When her praying is done, I would think," she answered. She laid the towel on the table. "Will you walk with me outside to the garden, Sajin? There are herbs I need to harvest."

The nomad smiled. "It would be a pleasure, lady. These walls have a tendency to close in on you."

Raphaella took up a wicker basket. "Are you claustrophobic, too, milord?" She put a pair of scissors in the basket. "Conar is, you know." She nodded toward the kitchen door and waited for Sajin to open it for her. Bright, refreshing sunlight shafted into the dark room.

"He told me," Sajin answered as he shut the door behind them. "I don't like closed in places, but I'm not afraid of them."

"The two of you have so much in common," she said. "It would have been unfortunate had you never met." She looked up at him. "You have become very dear to him in a short length of time and given his tendency to keep to himself, that is a most remarkable accomplishment on your part. He has needed a friend such as you."

"I understand him," Sajin said, somewhat embarrassed by the compliment. "And I think he trusts me. At least I hope he does."

"Enough to give his woman into your keeping," Raphaella commented.

Sajin's brows shot up. "He told you?"

She shook her head. "No one had to tell me, nomad. I know Conar McGregor and how the silly man thinks." She stopped by a gray-green lacy shrub and cut several long stalks. "He thought to protect Liza in much the same way as he is trying to protect Catherine." She laid the stalks in her basket. "To his way of thinking he failed and that is why he is so determined not to do so this time."

"At the expense of his and her happiness," Sajin snorted.

"I don't believe my son-in-law always thinks before he acts," she replied. "But this time, he's had a long while to mull over what he's doing. He knows this will hurt him and Catherine, but stubborn man that he is, he's going to go through with it."

"There's a woman in Rysalia," Sajin admitted.

"Rachel Stone." The sorceress plucked several buds from a leafy green plant and added them to her basket. "Conar has slept with her."

He wasn't surprised she knew that. "If he's so afraid of something happening to Catherine, how can he think to take a mistress and risk something happening to her?"

"Because Rachel and Catherine are two entirely different women, Sajin." She lifted a delicate spray of yellow flowers to her nose. "He knows Rachel can take care of herself whereas he fears Catherine can not."

"By why take a mistress at all?" Sajin questioned. "There are always plenty of camp followers to ease his physical needs."

"Conar hasn't always been all that discriminating when it came to his bed partners, but age has tempered that recklessness. He knows there are diseases just waiting to happen. One woman is safer than a score of eager bedmates. Besides, your friend is not the kind of man to do without a steady woman. He likes the familiarity. I don't believe chastity has really ever crossed his mind except in passing. Even when he was married to my daughter, he had an affair with a woman there in the keep. He will need Rachel in his bed to calm him and keep him on an even keel, to smooth the edges of his temper. Sexual abstinence has often made him mean and he knows that."

"I see what you're saying," the nomad Prince agreed. "I wish it wasn't so, but I can understand why he feels he has to have a woman to replace Catherine."

"He'll regret it bitterly, my love," she said as she pinched off a dill leaf and inhaled its aroma.

Sajin looked sharply at her. "You think Rachel will betray him?"

"No," the sorceress answered. "As a matter of fact, she will serve him well." She looked up at him. "The woman adores him."

"Then why do you say he will regret taking her as his mistress?" Sajin asked, worry crinkling his brow.

"Because his guilt will get the better of him," Raphaella answered. "And because it will, he will find himself mired in misery without the rope necessary to drag himself out."

"Catherine," Sajin stated.

"Aye," Raphaella agreed. "Catherine."

## Chapter Eleven

The old priest patted Catherine's clenched hands as she cried against his stooped and bony shoulder. He mumbled soothing words to her in an attempt to hush her hopeless crying. His thin right arm was wrapped around her waist as he held her and her wracking sobs sounded as though her heart was breaking.

"There now, Your Grace," he whispered, leaning his head against hers. "You'll make yourself sick."

"I don't care," the woman cried.

"Well, I do," the priest assured her. He withdrew his left hand from hers and fished in his cassock for a handkerchief. Finding one and shaking it out, he extended it to her. "Here, now. Dry your eyes."

"How can he do this, Father Nicolai?" Catherine sobbed, taking the proffered cloth and dabbing at her red and swollen eyes. "How can he hurt me like this?"

The priest shook his head. "Men do incomprehensible things at times, Your Grace. I truly believe the devil has his hand in most of those stupidities."

"But I love him!" Catherine wailed, turning to look at the wrinkled face of the clergyman. "With all my heart. Can't he see that?"

"I am sure he does," Father Nicki, as his parishioners called him, answered. "And I am sure he loves you in return."

"Then why is he throwing me away?" she pleaded.

Father Nicki winced. "You make it sound as though he considers you a worn out boot, Your Grace."

"I might as well be!" Catherine whined. She buried her nose in the handkerchief and blew.

"Would you like me to speak with him?" the priest inquired. "Sometimes those who are not close to a marital problem can bring fresh insight to the situation."

"He won't listen," Catherine complained.

"Perhaps not, but with what you have told me about the terrible things which happened to him in Rysalia, he might need a man of God with whom to talk."

"He's not a Christian," she told the priest. "He is a pagan." She shrugged. "Or was. I think he's lost faith in his god."

"All the more reason I believe I should speak to him, Your Grace. If I can bring comfort to him even in the smallest of ways, he might find his way to the true God." Father Nicki smiled gently. "I can but try, milady. The rest of what happens is up to Him."

"It may be awhile before Raphaella allows him visitors from outside," she complained. She looked at the kindly man. "I'd rather bring him here, anyway. That keep is ...." She couldn't find the words to describe it.

"Of the netherworld," Father Nicki finished for her, perfectly capable of naming the keep for what it was. But he didn't seem too concerned with the matter.

"If I can get him to come here," Catherine said, drying her eyes, "what will you say to him?"

"What would you like me to say?" Father Nicki countered.

"Can you make him see that we belong together?" she asked. "We are married." She touched her swollen stomach. "I am carrying his child. We should be with one another."

"I agree," the priest said, nodding emphatically, "and I will certainly do all I can to convince him of that."

Catherine bit down on her lower lip. "What if he won't listen, Father?"

The old priest patted her hand. "We'll have to leave it up to a higher authority, then, won't we?"

\* \* \* \*

Sajin thrust his hands into the pockets of his trousers and climbed the little knoll on which Catherine was sitting. He smiled as she turned her head to look up at him.

"Oh, it's you," she grouched.

The smile slid off Sajin's mobile mouth. "I always feel so welcome whenever you greet me, Catherine," he said in a hurt tone.

Catherine sighed, closing her eyes in exasperation. "What do you want, Sajin?"

The nomad prodded a weed with the toe of his boot. "Are you feeling better?"

Conar's wife put her hand up to shield her eyes and stared at the Kensetti. "Did he send you out here?"

Sajin nodded, looking just like a little boy caught doing something he knew his mother wouldn't like. "He was worried about you."

Catherine snorted and resumed her watch of the meadow leading to a higher foothill. She felt, rather than saw, Sajin sit down beside her, but from the corner of her eye, she saw him reach out and pull a red weed from the grass and knew he had jammed it between his teeth.

"Wanna talk?" he asked.

She sighed again. "I don't understand you men, Ben-Alkazar," she admitted. "You are such strange creatures."

"We're strange?" Sajin gasped in a disbelieving tone. When she turned and gave him an irritated stare, the right side of his face jerked in apology. "Sorry."

Catherine looked away from him. "Sometimes I think it's the mother's fault," she commented. "Something we, as mothers, either fail to do or overdo." She turned her head and inspected him. "Maybe we pamper our little boys too much or maybe not enough. Maybe we deal too harshly with them or overlook what should be corrected immediately." She scowled. "Maybe we keep them at the breast too long."

"Or not long enough," Sajin chuckled. He wagged his eyebrows at her when she gave him one of her 'Cat' looks.

"You need us," she said, deciding to ignore his sexual innuendo. "But you don't want to admit you do." She uncrossed her legs and stuck them out in front of her, leaned back on her elbows. "Is that because of your fear of commitment, Sajin?"

The nomad shook his head. "It's mostly pride."

Catherine frowned. "Pride?"

Sajin took the stalk of red weed from between his teeth. "Men don't like to admit they need things, Cat. To admit you need something is to admit weakness. Men don't like to be made to feel weak so they compensate by trying to convince themselves they really don't need what they actually do."

"Like a wife," Catherine mumbled.

"Like a wife, a home, children. All things that some men see as weaknesses, chinks in their armor." Sajin laid down on the grass, crossing his arms beneath his head. "We tell ourselves we don't need any of that, but deep down we know better. Deep down inside us we recognize that need, but we try to tamp it down, hide it."

"Why?" she asked, genuinely perplexed. "It's the natural order of things to pair off and breed, to make a nest. All of nature does it. Are men so different?"

"Some men are," Sajin said. "Some men, like holy men for instance, seem to have found a way to deny that natural order, as you call it. Personally, I don't think that's good, but you have to admit it works for some of us."

Catherine thought of Father Nicolai Beshanko and nodded. "And men like my husband?"

Sajin shrugged. "Men like your husband are a breed unto themselves, Catherine." He turned over on his side and propped his head on his fist. "Men like Conar have been trained since childhood to carry the mantle of leadership on their shoulders. They feel responsible for everything that goes on about them. They aren't truly happy unless they have something to worry about."

"And those needs? Wife, home, child?" she asked.

The nomad shook his head. "He wants all that. He really does." He looked down at the grass. "And he had all that, Catherine, but he lost it once. I don't think he's ever really gotten over it."

"He could have it again," Catherine reminded him.

"Yes," Sajin agreed, then he looked up at her. "And he could lose it all again, as well. It's what frightens him, sweetness. Such a loss could finally tear him apart and he isn't about to let that happen."

"And that woman?" Catherine spat. "What about her, Ben-Alkazar? Do you have such a neat, tidy explanation for her?"

"She's a substitute for the woman Conar wants and is afraid to keep with him, Catherine," he answered. "You know that as well as I do."

"Hell!" Catherine sat up and glared across the distance. "If he really loved me, he'd find a way to keep me as goddamned safe as he seems to think I need to be!" She swung her furious gaze down to the nomad. "I don't buy your reasoning any more than I buy his!"

"Suit yourself," Sajin quipped, also sitting up. He tossed the stalk of red weed away. "But you aren't going to change his mind, Cat. When we leave for Rysalia, he's going to leave you here. Marriage or no marriage ...."

"You haven't told him I have no intention of divorcing him, have you?" she interrupted.

"I told you I wouldn't and I haven't," Sajin snapped.

"You'd better not, either," she snapped back at him.

"I won't!" Catherine watched her companion get to his feet and stand with his hands on hips, glaring down at her. "You're making this harder on him, you know that, don't you?" he asked.

"No harder than he's making it on me," Catherine replied.

"He's not well, Catherine," Sajin said and wished he hadn't. He hadn't intended to voice his worry about Conar.

"Well, maybe if he's not healthy enough to lead his little forays against Rysalia's slave trade, he'll come home to St. Steffensburg and let me care for him," Catherine answered, trying to hide her fear for her husband's wellbeing just as Sajin was trying to hide his.

"Maybe so," Sajin had to admit although he had his doubts. If any one was going to care for Conar, it would more than likely be Rachel.

"Either way," he heard Catherine grumble, "I'll be waiting."

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"How long?" Conar repeated, glaring up at Raphaella.

"A week, ten days. That depends on how well you do on the medications." She folded her arms over her ample chest. "Longer if you do not respond as Raine and I think you should."

The taste of her last 'medication' was still coating his tongue and he would have sworn before every Tribunal in the land that the junk was growing mold down his gullet. He swallowed, grimacing at the gritty residue the mess had left in the folds of his mouth. He shuddered.

"Once the dizziness passes, you can get up and walk about the room. Exercise will help strengthened your legs and put some color back into your cheeks." She watched him carefully as that piece of news registered.

"There's nothing wrong with my legs," he informed her.

"How is the blurriness?" she countered.

Conar looked away. "Not as pronounced, but still there."

"It may clear up altogether," she told him, but she didn't think it ever would. There was always going to be a slight fuzziness to his vision from then on. She turned to go. "By the way, Raine wishes to come see you. Shall I give him your permission?"

The Outlander looked up. "Sure."

"You don't mind?"

"No," Conar snapped. "Don't start with that crap about Raja again, woman."

"She's not dead, you know."

Absolute astonishment shot through Conar and he gaped at her, unable to say anything. He watched her shake her head.

"She did not die in the fall." Raphaella opened the door to leave. "Those who enter the Maelstrom don't die. They just go elsewhere in the cosmos. Another place; another time. But they do not die and never will."

"Kahlil?" he croaked, suddenly terrified of the woman's answer.

"He's where he can't cause mischief." She smiled gently at him. "Don't worry, beloved. Neither of them can ever do you harm again. I have made sure of that."

He sat, stunned, as the door closed. He stared at it for a long, long time, seeing faces he hoped he would never have to see again. But those faces reinforced the fears he already had for Cat's safety and his inability to protect her. If anything, those faces served to put more starch in the fabric of his plan to leave Cat behind when he left.



## Chapter Twelve

Yuri spoke quietly as he and Balizar followed Conar's slow progress around the inner bailey. Both men were sitting on the stairs, a checkerboard between them, but neither was paying attention to the game. They were there to make sure their Overlord did not pass out or trip and fall. He seemed strong enough, after all it had been almost two weeks since he had taken to his bed, but he was still pale and couldn't seem to go more than a few hours before having to relieve himself.

"That will improve," Rupine had assured them when Azalon had asked about the problem.

"By the Prophetess, I hope so!" Azalon muttered. He'd done more than his share of emptying the Outlander's chamber pot.

"He's getting restless," Balizar remarked as he crowned one of Yuri's men.

"I see that," Yuri answered. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his Overlord peeking through the slats of the portcullis. "It won't be long before he starts demanding to go beyond the keep." He jumped one of Balizar's men.

"And not long after that before he starts demanding to leave Odess," Balizar agreed.

"How far is it into town?" the object of their discussion suddenly called out to them.

The men looked up at one another. Yuri answered for the two of them. "A little over four miles. Why?"

"Is it good road?"

Balizar grunted. "Here it comes," he said beneath his breath.

"Fair," Yuri replied. "Why?"

"Just curious," Conar answered. He was standing at the portcullis, his hands wrapped over one of the lateral bars. He was gently pulling on the apparatus.

"Damned if he don't look just like my nephew, Rudi, when the brat wants to go out and play on a rainy day," Yuri chuckled. He jumped three of his opponent's men, winning the contest by clearing Balizar's checkers from the board.

"Well," Balizar griped, annoyed that he'd lost a game he considered himself an expert at winning, "his mama ain't gonna let him go out and play today."

"How long has Sajin and Cat been in town?" Conar asked them, turning to look around. "An hour?"

"More like three," Balizar answered and grunted as Yuri's boot drove into his shin. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"What do you think they're doing?" Conar asked, once more pulling on the portcullis' bars.

"He's seeing to his ship, Khamsin," Azalon spoke up from his place at the top of the stairs.

"How long does it take to see to a damned ship?" they heard their Overlord grumble.

"Maybe they stopped off for lunch," Yuri injected.

"Aye, maybe," Conar answered, but his voice lacked conviction. He pushed away from the portcullis and jammed his hands into his pockets. He strolled back toward them and all three men noticed the path he walked was neither straight nor his gait as sure as it had always been.

He hoped they didn't notice that he had to watch the ground where he walked in case he missed seeing some obstacle in his way. He'd lost count of the times he'd tripped over things in the last few days since Raphaella and Catherine had allowed him to be up and about, things he just hadn't seen. And he hoped the men of the Samiel didn't notice that he couldn't make himself walk in a straight line, either. His footsteps wandered off course no matter how hard he tried to keep to

an undeviating line. And he wanted to go into the stable for a moment so they wouldn't know that he had to piss so badly he could barely walk anyway.

"Maybe you should ride into town and see what's keeping them," he said as he stopped for a moment at the foot of the stairs. "I'll help you saddle your nag, Yuri." He walked on toward the stable.

The Shadow-warrior didn't dare glance at Balizar. He just got up and fell into step with the Serenian. "Can I get you anything while I'm in town?" Yuri asked, wanting to take Conar's mind from his obvious concern for the lady's welfare.

"I'd like you to send a message to Boreas if you can," Conar answered.

"I can probably arrange that. What do you want me to say?"

"Just write my brother a short note and tell him I'm doing all right." He stopped and looked up at Yuri, blinking to clear his fuzzy vision. "For your God's sake, don't tell the fool I've been ill. He'll have the entire Serenian Militia over here to drag me home."

"What excuse do you want me to give him for being the one who wrote the note?" Yuri asked as he reached up to drag his saddle from the low partition of one of the stalls.

Conar thought about it for a moment, wishing the man would hurry with the horse so he could pee. "Tell him I sprained my hand and can't write. He'll buy that."

"Anything else?" Yuri slung the saddle over his steed's back, hooked the stirrup over the saddle horn and reached under the horse's belly to buckle the cinch.

Conar took a bridle down from the wall. "Tell him we're going to bury our men here in Odess."

Yuri stopped and turned, looking at his Overlord. "Why here?"

Conar looped the bridle over the horse's head, gently settling the bit between its soft jaws. "I don't know how long it will be before we get to St. Steffensburg and they need burying, Yuri." He stroked the stallion's sleek nose. "The countryside is beautiful from what I can see of it and it's quiet here." He glanced up at Yuri. "Raine tells me there's a spot near here, a lush glade where I can lay them to rest."

Yuri knew the men who had died at Abbadon, as well as Storm Jale, had been embalmed by the women of the Daughterhood, but even the most elaborate precautions would not preserve the bodies for long. It was well past time the men were committed back to the earth from where they had come.

"Shall I have them brought out here, then?" Yuri asked as he finished cinching the saddle.

"Aye." Conar stepped away from the stallion, no longer able to hold his water. He walked behind the partition and fumbled with his clothing. "If there's a priest in town ...." He stopped as he began to urinate. "On second thought, ask Catherine to have her priest come up here for the burial."

Yuri's brows drew together. "Won't that offend your god, milord?"

Conar looked up at him. "I have no god, Andreanova, and the god that let my friends die the way they did doesn't deserve to be worshiped."

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"He said that?" Sajin asked after Yuri had finished telling him and Catherine about his conversation with Conar McGregor.

"Yes, and he meant every word of it," Yuri answered.

"It's just as well," Catherine said, looking toward the tall steeple at the edge of town.

Sajin also looked in that direction and puzzled at the cross atop the steeple. He had seen that symbol many times and had wanted to ask someone from the Outer Kingdom countries about

it, but never had the opportunity.

"What does that mean?" he asked Catherine. "That cross?"

"It signifies self-sacrifice," Catherine answered. She turned to Yuri. "I'll go speak with Father Nicolai, but I can't see him refusing to perform the rite of burial for the men."

"Is there anything special we need to do?" Sajin asked. He thought of his own religion's ceremonies for the dead.

"Not that I can think of," she replied, "but it would be nice if the men on board ship could be there. I am sure Father will send word around to his parishioners and many will attend to pay their respects."

"Perhaps we should put the word out that these men were of the Raven's force," Yuri said quietly. "The Darkwind is well-respected in all the port cities along the Baldus."

Catherine nodded her agreement. "That would be nice, Yuri."

"I'd better go look into getting a wagon to transport the caskets, then," Sajin told them. He looked around at Yuri. "Did he say when he wanted the ceremony held?"

"This evening," Yuri said. "At sunset."

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"I will use our ceremony, Your Grace," Father Nicki argued.

"I think that's what he intends you to do," Catherine told him.

"I find it strange that he would request this," the old priest said as he began gathering his things together. He put one arthritic hand on his senior altar boy's shoulder. "Petr, go tell Misha I want him to go to each of the other boys' homes and tell them we will be performing a funereal mass this evening." He shook his head at the boy's confused look. "I know it's odd, but something tells me it is very important." He turned then to his deacon. "You've sent word to the Altar Guild?"

"Every woman in town will be there, her husband in tow if he isn't out working, Father," the deacon replied.

"Good," Father Nicki said. He paused, studying the two seven-tiered candelabras flanking the altar. "Candles," he mumbled. "We need candles."

"I can see to that," the deacon told him. "Torches, too."

"Father," Catherine said, putting her hand on his arm.

"What of a choir?" She looked from the old priest to the deacon. "There should be a choir."

"Ivan," the old priest said to the deacon. "Gather together both choirs and have them meet us at that infernal keep."

"We aren't going inside that place, are we?" the deacon gasped.

"The funereal is in the glade beyond," Catherine assured the man. "There will be no need to enter the keep."

Looking relieved, the deacon hurried out to see to his assignments. His rapid footsteps echoed back off the stone floor of the nave.

"I want this to be a ceremony that will impress your husband, Your Grace," Father Nicki said. "One that will make him stop and think."

Catherine's brows drew together. "Think of what, Father?"

"His own immortal soul," the old priest replied. "In asking you to invite me to perform the ritual of burial, he is still seeking the guidance of a higher power whether he wants to admit belief in one or not."

"You think someone higher up is trying to nudge him in the right direction, don't you?"

Catherine smiled.

"Don't you?" Father Nicki grinned.

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Raphaella found him sitting alone in his room, his head down, his hands clasped between his knees. She went to him and laid her hand on his sagging shoulder.

"This does not have to be tonight, beloved," she said gently. "We can wait until morning."

Conar shook his head. "No. It must be tonight." Slowly he lifted his head and Raphaella saw the awful agony stamped on his face. "It has to be tonight."

"Why, sweeting?" she asked, kneeling down beside him. "You look so tired. You ...."

"Oceanian warriors are always buried at sunset," he said quietly. "So they can wake with the dawn to begin their new lives in paradise." He turned his head to look at her. "I don't think Tyne or Rylan or Jamie would mind, do you?" When she shook her head. "Or Storm or Roget?" He seemed to need her agreement.

"No, beloved." She rubbed his arm. "I think it would make them happy to honor Griceland in such a way."

Conar nodded. "I believe so, too." He looked down again. "Have they arrived yet?"

"The wagon is waiting outside the gates," Raphaella told him. "Your lady would not allow the bodies to be carried into the keep."

"I knew she wouldn't," he answered on a long sigh.

"Then are you ready?" Raphaella asked.

"Aye," he said.

She helped him up and stood holding his arm when he didn't move. He looked so lost, so terrible alone, and she ached for him. With all her being she wished he'd break down and cry, but he had not done so and wasn't likely to it seemed. Maybe, she thought, he would do so at the ceremony. For his well being, she hoped that would be the way of it.

Raphaella held his hand as they came down the serpentine stairway from the second floor. He seemed to need her strength, the touch of her hand to sustain him, and when they reached the bottom of the stairs, he still kept her hand in his.

"Do you wish me to walk with you to the ceremony, Father?" Raine asked from the doorway of the great parlor.

Not for the first time did Raphaella wonder what the two of them, father and son, had spoken of when Raine had gone to Conar's room. Before that time, Raine had never used the words mother and father, but now, he called the two of them by those names.

"I would like it well," Conar answered and held out his hand to his son.

Raine hesitated for only a moment, then joined his parents. He took the strong sword hand of Conar McGregor in his own and felt the power that coursed through this man's soul. It was the first time he had actually touched his father and the sensation startled him into speechlessness.

The evening air was damp, the smell of salt water hanging like mist as the trio crossed the drawbridge. It was just after seven of the clock and the sun was nearly past the horizon. The road leading to Odess was already an ebon ribbon stretching toward the coast. As they turned the western corner of the keep, Conar came to an abrupt stop, his hand jerking in Raphaella's.

Torches, planted in the ground, more torches than he could count, lined the pathway up to the glade on each side of the gravel walk. Sputtering in the slight breeze, the flames leapt and cast a soft glow on the ground. He had only caught a fleeting glimpse of the glade through a hole he had scraped in the paint on his bedroom window, but although he had not been able to see the verdant pasture clearly, he had been told it was beautiful. Now, the entire glade was ringed with more

torches, each held aloft by hundreds of hands. The light from those torches lit the faces of strangers.

"The men and women of Odess have come to pay their respects to the fallen warriors of the Wind Force," Raphaella told him. She felt his hand jerk again and covered it with her free hand.

"They wait for you, Father," Raine whispered.

Conar looked down at his son, then nodded. He seemed to stumble as he started forward, but walked with his head high, his shoulders squared. With Raphaella and Raine at his side, he did not wander from the pathway.

Father Nicki did not miss the hiss of outrage when the Tzarevna saw that her husband's hand was clasped in the hands of the woman walking beside him. The priest didn't care for the arrangement, either, but he seriously doubted the man coming toward him would have been able to make the short walk up from the keep had he not had help. There was a look on the young man's face that bespoke terrible, heart-wrenching pain and a grief driven so deep it would take a long time to heal.

"The man beside your lady is Father Nicolai Beshanko. He is the local priest," Raphaella explained as they walked. "The other man, the one standing beside Yuri, is Ivan something-or-another. He's a deacon in the church."

Conar had no idea what a deacon was, but he suspected the man was an assistant to the high priest standing next to Catherine. He glanced at a dozen young boys standing self-consciously behind the one called 'deacon. The boys were dressed in long white robes cinched with a dark belt. Their presence sent a chill down Conar's spine and he lowered his head to speak with Raphaella.

"What are those children doing here?" he demanded.

"They will be part of the ceremony as I understand it," Raine answered, thinking his mother would not know. "They are like acolytes, Father."

"Acolytes?" Conar repeated. A haunted look passed over his face. "I was an acolyte when I was ...." He shivered, unable to continue.

"They are called altar boys by your lady's church," Raphaella said, looking past him to impale her son with a look that said he didn't know everything about his mother. "Their purpose is to assist the priest during the ceremony. They have no such purpose as you had when you were a boy, beloved." She heard him sigh with relief.

Sajin saw Conar looking about him, nodding absently to the strange people he passed, who either doffed their caps to him or curtsied. He knew his friend was looking for the wagon upon which the bodies of his men had traveled to Raphaella's keep. Seeing Conar lower his head to the woman at his side once more, he would have laid good money down that Conar was asking where that wagon was. When he saw Raine point back toward the keep, Sajin smiled.

"I can go no further," Raphaella said as they came to the perimeter of the glade. "This is holy ground, blessed by the priest just before sunset and I can not trod upon it." She slipped her hand out of Conar's. "Neither can your son accompany you past this point, beloved." She held her hand out to Raine and was genuinely surprised when her son did not hesitate to take it. For just a moment, the boy held both his parents' hands and in that instant, Raphaella felt the immense power that was being transmitted between them. As soon as Raine let go of his father's hand, the feeling disappeared.

"Thank you, Raphaella," Conar said and was somewhat surprised he meant it. Apparently so was she for the woman did something he would have thought her incapable of doing: she blushed.

"We will be at the keep if you need us," Raine said, instinct telling him his mother was

beyond speech. He tugged at his mother's hand and they began to walk back through the corridor of torches.

"Go to him, Your Grace," Father Nicki said softly.

Catherine handed her missal to Yuri and stepped away from the place where a temporary altar had been erected in the middle of the glade. She hurried toward her husband, watching his expression of dismay at being left standing just inside the fiery ring of torches.

"Come, milord," she said to him as she reached his side. She took his hand in hers. "We are waiting for you."

He couldn't see the details of the faces around him, but he could see the smiles, the looks of respect that hovered behind those smiles. He didn't know if it was because of who he was, what he had been, or because he was the husband of the woman beside him. He had always known Marie Catherine was well-loved by her people and he suspected he had been accepted solely on the basis of his association, his attachment to her. Yet had he asked any of the two hundred and seventy-four people, the entire population of Odess, why they had come to pay homage to men they hadn't even known, each one of them would have said they had come to honor him as much as the men who were to be laid to rest.

"Prince Conar McGregor," Catherine said as they reached the altar, "may I present Father Nicolai Beshanko."

Father Nicki held his hand out. "It is an honor to meet you, Your Grace." He was greatly relieved when the man before him took his hand in a strong, unprejudiced grip. "Everyone calls me Father Nicki."

"I am grateful you are here, Father Nicki," Conar said. "Very grateful."

"I was honored to be asked," the priest assured him.

"If you will tell me what I need to do ...." Conar's voice trailed off. He looked at Catherine, seeking help.

"Let us handle it," Father Nicki told him. He looked past Conar's shoulder and lifted his hand. When the Serenian looked behind him to see what was happening, the old priest put a reassuring hand on his arm. "I have given the men at the keep the signal to carry the caskets up here."

Conar flinched. "Oh," was all he could say. He felt Catherine's arm around his waist and was thankful for her encouragement.

One of the town's people came forward at Father Nicki's signal and dipped his head in respect to Conar.

"This is Gilbert Nostroilavich, Your Grace," the priest introduced the man. "He and his wife, Illa, are often soloists in our choir. He teaches literature at the Academy of Arts in Musco and speaks fourteen languages."

Conar surprised himself and the others by extending his hand to the teacher. "Hello," he said.

Nostroilavich took the Outlander's hand and smiled. "A pleasure, Your Grace."

"Gilbert's here on summer vacation from the Academy," Father Nicki explained. He crooked his finger at a slim, attractive young woman. "Illa teaches dance at the Academy, as well."

Gilbert's wife bobbed a gracefully elegant curtsy to Conar and smiled shyly at him. "A pleasure, Your Grace," she whispered.

"They are ready, Father," Ivan said, gaining the priest's attention.

Father Nicki looked back up the path and saw the procession was in line. He nodded to Gilbert and the man and his wife took their places by some musicians Conar had not noticed until

that moment. His gaze swept over strange-looking drums and stringed instruments he did not recognize.

"Let us begin," Father Nicki said.

Conar was deafened by the silence that suddenly fell on the glade. He looked about him, seeing the smiles of a moment before replaced with solemn expressions of concentration.

"In the name of our Father and our Son and our Holy Spirit," he heard the old priest saying as the man made a strange configuration over his face, chest, and shoulders. As Catherine and Yuri made the same pattern over themselves, Conar remembered seeing such actions elsewhere, but he couldn't remember when.

Father Nicki left the altar and walked down to the edge of the glade where he stood waiting for the six caskets being carried up the lighted pathway. The young altar boys, six of whom carried folded white cloths in their hands, stood to either side of him and the man called Ivan, holding a silver pail and ladle, stood somewhat behind him. As the men carrying the bodies of Conar's friends neared the old priest, the Serenian saw the priest reach inside the bucket and take out the ladle. As each casket was carried into the circle, the priest flung water at it.

"He is reminding us of our baptisms as infants," Catherine said quietly.

Conar didn't understand what that meant, but he thought perhaps it had something to do with purification and nodded.

When all six caskets were within the perimeter of the circle, the altar boys stepped forward and unfolded the white cloths and placed a cloth on each of the caskets.

"The cloths symbolize our baptismal garments," Catherine explains. "When we are infants, we are brought to the church to be cleansed of our original sin. The white signifies purity."

One of the altar boys stepped forward with a large white candle and began to lead the procession toward the altar.

"Let us pray!"

Conar glanced at Gilbert as the man and his wife began to sing in unison, first alone, then accompanied by those gathered.

"As the first to be brought forth died, so shall we all leave this world. Just as our Lord rose from the dead, so shall we all come to life again."

Conar found he could not look at the caskets as they were brought before the altar and placed side by side. There were names carved into the wood, but he knew if he but saw one of those names, had he even been able to read it, he would have fallen prostrate on the ground and howled with grief.

"I'll explain to you as Father goes along what he's doing," Catherine whispered to him and he could only nod in understanding.

The ceremony was beautiful he thought as he listened to the words being read from a large book by the man called Ivan. When Ivan was finished, Gilbert and Illa led those gathered in a prayer song that made Conar's heart thud heavily in his chest.

"May we respond!" Gilbert and his wife sang.

"Our Lord is the Shepherd who leads his flocks through pastures green with new life. Here we may take our rest.

"Our Lord is the Captain who steers his crew over restful waters. Here our souls are refreshed.

"Our Lord is the Guide who leads his caravan down the paths of righteousness. Here we learn His ways.

"We might walk through dark valleys of fear, but evil will not touch us for He walks at our

side. His rod and staff beat down our enemies and gives us courage to travel on.

"Our Lord is the Master who sets a place at His table for His servants. Here in the presence of our persecutors we are raised up.

"Our Lord is the Savior who anoints the heads of His followers with sacred oils. Here we are restored to life.

"Our Lord is the Provider who gives His family the Living Water to drink. Here our cup overflows with His love.

"We will find only goodness and mercy when we follow Him each day of our lives. And when we pass from this world, we will live in His house forever."

When the singing stopped, Conar watched Father Nicki step forward, make another strange symbol on his head, mouth, and over his heart then begin to read from the large book, as well. He paid close attention to the reading the priest gave for it touched him deeply and seemed to reach out to his ears alone.

"Blessed are those who have little for they will have all in the kingdom of God," Father Nicki called out.

"Blessed are those who mourn for they will have their tears dried by God.

"Blessed are those who seek the righteous path for they will find their way to God.

"Blessed are those who have shown mercy for they will receive mercy in return from their God.

"Blessed are they who are pure in their hearts for only they will come to see God."

Conar found the old priest looking at him and as the man spoke, he felt a great lump form in his throat.

"Blessed," Father Nick said softly, "are those who are the peacemakers in their world for they are the true sons of God."

Conar's gaze fell to the caskets and stayed. Just barely, he could see the names written there and his heart filled with a quiet peace. As the priest finished speaking, Conar knew the words had been created with his friends in mind.

"And blessed are those who have been persecuted in the name of what is right for they have done the will of God. To these, the kingdom of heaven belongs."

Prince Rylan Hesar of Tempest Keep, Virago.

Duke Roget du Mer of Downsgate Keep, Serenia.

Prince Grice Wynth of Seadrift Keep, Oceania.

Lord Jamael McGregor of Boreas Keep, Serenia.

Captain Storm Jale of Boreas Keep, Serenia.

Prince Tyne Brell of Briarcliffe Keep, Chale.

Conar staggered beneath the reading of the names. He had known these men all his life, was kin to two of them by birth, a third by marriage. He had laughed with them, cried with them, eat, drank, and slept with them. He had fought beside them, fought for them, been tortured for them and saw them tortured for him. He had known their love, their respect, their admiration and their devotion. He had killed for them and had had them kill for him. He had been their pupil, their teacher and, most important of all, their friend. He was going to miss them more than he feared he could bear.

"Peace with those who have gone before us," Father Nicki said.

"May His Grace, Prince Rylan, be at peace with God," Ivan said.

"May he rest in God's hands," Catherine chanted with the crowd.

As each name was called out and the responses given, Conar felt the pain in his chest



lessening. They were such beautiful words, so soothing, so unlike those he had heard all his life. Spoken by a man with a soft voice and caring, loving eyes and repeated by people who had walked miles just to be there because they had wanted to be. Conar looked around him and understood there was no vengeful god hovering over these people, demanding worship. No frowning god waiting for them to make a mistake so He could pounce on them. No bartering god ready to strike a bargain for a man's immortal soul.

"May these warriors, laid to rest in hallowed ground, live in the eternal light of God and come to know His love," the old priest finished. He stepped away from the altar and reached out to take Conar's hand. "Would you like to say something, my son?"

Conar shook his head. He was as far beyond being able to speak as he was to take flight.

"Gilbert spent some time in Chale several years ago and he has asked if you would have any objections to him and Illa singing a Chalean death rite song as your friends are laid to rest." The old priest watched infinite sorrow well up in the darkest blue eyes he'd ever seen. "He spent all afternoon teaching the rhythm of it to the choirs."

"I...", Conar began and had to clear his throat. "I would ...." He couldn't finish.

"We would like that, Father," Catherine spoke for him.

Sajin stood beside Balizar, listening to the older man's quiet sobs and Azalon's incessant sniffing. He watched Catherine leading Conar around the altar and wondered what his friend's reaction would be to the grave that had been dug behind a low hedge of wildflowers. When he saw Conar stumble and look pointedly away, he started forward.

"He's gotta do this on his own," Balizar whispered in a choked voice. "Can't nobody do it for him, son."

The fourteen by seven foot wide hole, six feet deep, was the most horrendous sight Conar could ever remembering seeing. At first he was offended by the mass grave, but a calm acceptance came over him and he knew his friends would have wanted it this way. From somewhere through the mists of time, he heard Grice's voice speaking to him:

*"I can think of no better way to leave this life than with the ones I shared it with."*

Catherine looked up at her husband and felt his memory. It tugged at her heart strings and she pulled him closer to her, pleased when he circled her shoulder with his arm.

Sajin jumped as the drums started. He looked around Azalon and saw several men pounding on odd-looking kettles and wooden planks. An odd sound began to yowl above the steady, mesmerizing beat and many people looked on with wide eyes and open mouths as the shrill, bag-like thing was pumped by Gilbert's arm as he blew into a long reed. Eight young women beat sticks together and on the ground along with the cadence of the drums while several young boys hit iron triangles with small iron bars.

Gilbert nodded at his wife and, in a clear and delicate soprano, the lady began the Song of the Vanquished Warrior.

Although he had heard the song before, Conar could not remember ever hearing it sung with such feeling or performed so beautifully. He knew that wherever Tyne Brell was, the man was grinning from ear to ear.

"The gel is Chalean at heart, Conar! Can't you hear it in her voice?" Tyne would have asked as he wiped away a tear for which he would never have apologized.

As the song chant continued with its mystical beat and hypnotic rhythm, Conar could see flashes of the past moving across his mind's eye.

There was Jamie, arguing with Shalu about taking a bath. And Jamie taking care of him as he lay shivering with Labyrinthian Fever.

There was Roget, planning a raid with every confidence in the world that his scheme would work. And Roget winking at him when they had beat Teal at a game of cards.

There was Grice, struggling with a barbell it had taken two men to carry in and which he hefted alone with hardly any trouble at all. And Grice arguing with him over doing something the older man thought was reckless.

There was Storm, laughing and playing with Sentian and Thom and Marsh, beating the other men in a foot race. And there was Storm, at his side, sword in hand, protecting Conar's flank.

There was Rylan, limping across the compound, mumbling under his breath, ignoring his little brother's pleas. And Rylan throwing his hands in the air, giving in to what Paegan wanted.

There was Tyne again, his widowmaker flashing as he drove an enemy relentlessly back. And Tyne nearly beside himself with laughter when he had snagged his own breeches on the end of the Deathwielder.

"He has gone beyond our ken and has stepped into the light. He has gone to make his peace with the Wind."

Conar wondered how many there could understand the Chalean dialect, but he realized it didn't matter for the soft cadence of the words had brought tears to every eye there except his own. Even if those gathered did not understand, they were absorbing the meaning.

"He will tell them where he's been when he gets to paradise. He has gone to make his peace with the Wind."

Catherine leaned her head against her husband's shoulder and felt him bend down to kiss the top of her head. When she looked up at his face, she was concerned that she saw no moisture in his eyes, but the look he gave her as he lowered his gaze to hers, told her he was all right.

"He will be remembered by his friends who will now take up his fight. He has gone to make his peace with the Wind."

A faint glow caught Conar's attention and he looked out across the glade. He squinted, trying to make out what it was he was seeing. There was a pale blue tint of mist, growing steadily brighter at the top of the hill beyond and for just a moment he grew alarmed. Then he saw the striding figures coming over the hill and he recognized them as they stopped just beyond the circle of torchlight.

"Catherine?" he asked. "Do you see them?"

Cat looked up. "See who, darling?"

He knew she didn't. He didn't think anyone but he could. They were standing there, shoulder to shoulder, looking at him, smiling gently at him and he saw them lift their hands in greeting.

"He will be with us once again in the peace of afterlife. He has gone to make his peace with the Wind."

He heard the words drifting away on the sea mist and realized the song had ended, but his attention was focused on the bright blue swath of light at the top of the hill. He saw them turn to leave. He wanted to shout, to demand, to beg and plead if need be to keep them standing there, smiling at him, forgiving him, but as the soft sigh of sound reached him, he drew in his breath on a harsh gasp of pain.

"Prince of the Wind..." the night air whispered.

Catherine heard the words. Sajin did, too. Both looked to the place where Conar was staring, but saw nothing there. They looked at the Outlander and found him smiling for the first time since Abbadon.

"Conar?" Catherine questioned.

Her husband shook his head. They were looking back over their shoulders at him, laughing. Not with scorn or contempt or anger, but with the ease of long-standing friendships.

"May the Wind be at your back, Conar McGregor," he heard Tyne say. "And give that gel a kiss for me! She's Chalean at heart!"

"I'll see you again, cousin," Rylan called out. "Give Paegan my best."

"Look out for that bastard brother of mine, will ya, McGregor?" Roget laughed. "You know how he is."

"Remember to lift with you legs, Conar; not your back!" Grice warned him. "Don't let Chand grieve too long."

"Tell Marsh it's up to him and Thom to keep you out of trouble from now on, milord Conar," Storm joked.

And Jamie's shy voice drifted back to him. "I love you, little brother."

"We all love you," they said in unison and then they walked over the crest of the hill and vanished. Very slowly the bright blue mist faded until there was nothing left in the night sky but the twinkling stars.

Sajin eased past several of the altar boys and reached Conar's side, staring at the look on his friend's face. He turned, saw nothing at all Conar could be watching. He put a hand on the Serenian's shoulder. "Are you all right, Conar?"

Conar nodded. "I am now." He pulled Catherine to him, his eyes still on the hill. "I am now."

## Chapter Thirteen

Catherine's hand was warm and dry in his own as the two of them walked slowly back to the keep. Conar had stayed behind, long after the four men who had dug the grave of the Serenian's friends had filled it in again. He had been quiet, withdrawn, as the rich black soil was shoveled into the gaping maw of the grave, but there was no longer a haunted look in his dark gaze as the last spade full was spread over the mound and tamped down. No longer were his shoulders slumped, his back bowed beneath his grief or his face filled with deep, irrevocable sadness. As he walked, he kept his head down, but not out of the burden of what he had just been through, but rather from the unfamiliarity of the terrain upon which he traveled.

"Are there certain days when your church is open to visitors?" he asked, glancing at his wife.

Catherine shook her head. "Anyone may go there at any time, milord." Her fingers tightened in his. "Would you like me to take you there tomorrow?" At his silent nod, she smiled and returned her attention to the pathway before them.

"This religion of yours," he began, seeming to need clarification of what he had witnessed that eve, "Is the dogma difficult to understand?" When she seemed to puzzle over his question, he shrugged. "Are there mysteries that require years of study in order to participate in the ceremonies?"

The lines of misunderstanding smoothed out of Cat's brow. "No, not in the way you mean." She put her free hand on his arm and held it, bringing her closer to his warmth. "The precepts are simple, really. Our whole religion is based on love and forgiveness."

Conar stopped walking and turned to look down at her. Her answer seemed to surprise him. "Forgiveness for things you have done in your life?"

She nodded. "And forgiveness for things you may do in the future."

His brows drew together in a frown. "No matter how vile the transgression?"

"There is no sin that can not be forgiven, milord. If you truly are sorry for what you have done and ask for forgiveness, you will be granted absolution. Ours is a loving and caring God."

Conar continued walking, wondering at a deity that did not need pain and suffering to be appeased. Such a concept was alien to him, beyond imagining, but the hope it held for him was like a beacon lighting up the darkness of his night.

"I felt something tonight," he said, stopping at the gravel pathway leading to the stables. "Something I can't explain." He let go of her hand and leaned against the cold stone wall of the keep. "It was like a calming. A peacefulness I had no right to feel."

Her husband's voice was soft, full of confusion and the need to make sense of the emotions clouding his mind. She reached out to cup his cheek and smiled as he closed his eyes and leaned his face into the palm of her hand.

"You have just as much right to feel at peace with yourself as any of us, milord," she answered. "Maybe even more so considering the anguish you have suffered these last few years. Why do you feel you should not have it?"

Conar let out a long breath. "By all that is right, Catherine, I should be lying up there with my men." He turned his head toward the grave where so much of his life was buried. "I should have been the one to answer for Jaborn's vengefulness. Not my friends. It was me he hated. Me, he wished to hurt." He ran his hand through his hair. "I should have died in their place."

A pain of fear and hurt shot through Catherine's breast and she had the wild urge to berate him for such defeatist talk, but she knew his heart was filled with guilt at that moment. He was ashamed that he still lived while those he loved had died. He did not understand why he felt peace in the face of such terrible despair.

"Every man must find the way to his creator, milord," she told him. "For some, it is an easy path. For others, it requires sacrifice and suffering. And there are those, like you, who find it in the midst of death."

"That I have seems," he shrugged with annoyance, "selfish," he finished.

"Conar," Catherine assured him, "you are the most unselfish man I have ever known." At his look of exasperated disbelief, she took his arm once more and pulled him toward the keep's entrance. "It's late, milord. If you want to go into the village come morning, I think you should get to bed early."

He allowed her to lead him into the keep, even allowed her to walk with him to his room, but when she would have entered the chamber with him, he slowly shook his head and gently removed his arm from her light grip.

"I need some time to myself, Catherine," he explained, his expression pleading with her for understanding. Opening his room door, he paused, looking back at her, looking for hurt or embarrassment on her face and relieved to see she did, indeed, understand his need to be alone. "In the morning, then?" he asked, reaching out to gently touch her cheek.

"I'll be ready," she answered. Stepping back, she turned and hurried away, her flesh feeling the touch of his against it as she walked.

His room was as silent as the grave from which he had just come, Conar thought as he sat down on the bed. He let out a long, tired breath and lay back, drawing his legs up. He flung his right arm over his eyes and lay there listening to the stillness, hearing his own heartbeat in his ears. Before long, he was sound asleep.

Sajin glanced up as Catherine came down the stairs from the bedchambers. He laid aside the book he had been reading and stood up, motioning to Conar's wife to join him in front of the fireplace.

"How is he?" the Kensetti Prince asked.

Catherine took the chair to Sajin's left and brought her hands up to her face. She massaged the ache that had begun in her temples. "At peace with himself, I think," she replied.

"It's been hard on him," Sajin remarked. He sat forward, clasping his hands between his legs. "And on you, I would imagine."

A tiny shrug of irritation came from the Outer Kingdom woman. "I'll survive." She leaned back in the chair and rested her hands on the upholstered arms. Her gaze fused with Sajin Ben-Alkazar's polite, friendly watchfulness. "Do you know what I think, nomad?" she asked.

The left corner of Sajin's mouth twitched with humor. "No, milady." His smile was conspiratorial. "What is it you think?"

Catherine's own mouth tugged down at the corners. "That Conar McGregor has to be the most pigheaded, stubborn and arrogant man God ever put on the face of the earth."

Sajin laughed, sitting back to cross his ankle over his knee. "I would agree with that assessment of the man." He jogged his booted foot up and down. "Most folks who know him would, I'd wager."

"I'll let him go back to Rysalia," she said, squinting her eyes as she stared at the carpet. "I'll let him have that whoring slut for a companion." She looked up at Sajin and the expression on her lovely face was militant and speculative. "But when I think it's time, I'll go back to Rysalia,

myself, and draw that pigheaded, stubborn and arrogant bastard in on a line he won't be able to break!"

The nomad whistled softly at the lady's lethal grimace of promise for his friend. "When you think he's accomplished what it is he feels he needs to accomplish?" he asked.

Catherine nodded grimly. "And not a moment beyond that time, either." She plucked at a straggling thread on the upholstery fabric. "He can have a hundred nomad whores in his tent and I'll still drag his ass back to St. Steffensberg!"

Sajin's eyebrows shot up. "Whether he wants to go or not?"

The baby inside her belly leapt at the Kensetti's words and Catherine reached down to soothe the life growing within her. "He's my husband," she said in a soft voice. "I'll not give him up so easily or so lightly, Prince Sajin." She felt the babe kick in agreement.

Raphaella, listening from behind the study door, smiled. "You'd have liked this one, Liza," she said. The sorceress nodded emphatically. "The two of you are too much alike for Conar not to have fallen in love with Catherine McGregor."

"A mistake he will regret most fervently," Raine reminded his mother.

"True," Raphaella agreed, "but the time for that is a long way off." She wondered how much of the future her son could see with his novice's eyes.

"I'll not allow myself such foolishness," the boy quipped, turning to leave. "Love is for the weak."

## Chapter Fourteen

There was a faint scent of sandalwood clinging to the thick stone walls as Catherine and Conar ventured inside the tiny village church the next morning. The early Mass had just ended and the womenfolk of Odess were hurrying back to their homes and shops, the fields and streams where the week's wash awaited them. Their polite smiles and respectful nods to the Tzarevna and her escort were followed with giggles and backward glances of approval as the royal pair entered the tall wooden door.

"They like you," Catherine informed him as he held the portal open for her.

"They don't know me," he quipped in a low whisper as he ushered her inside the church, his hand at the small of her back.

Catherine reached around him and dipped her fingers into a small glass bowl, then made the curious sign that finally elicited a question from Conar.

"The sign of the cross," his wife answered. "I'll explain later."

He followed her into the cool sanctuary, looking about him at the rows of wooden benches which faced toward a high marble altar at the rear of the room. Except for a lone woman, her black widow's weeds blending in with the early morning shadows, they were alone. There was silence save for the click of the prayer beads in the widow's hands.

"Here," Catherine said, pointing to one of the benches. She motioned him to sit down, then knelt briefly alongside the bench before joining him. Before he ask her anything else, she put her finger to her lips, then slid gracefully to her knees on the stone floor.

Conar watched her, seeing her make the sign once more before she lowered her head, closed her eyes and began to pray. He studied her for a long moment as she talked to her god, his gaze playing over her moving lips, then turned to look about him.

There were stain glass windows flanking both sides of the church. On each panel were pictures of what he thought might be events in the life of Catherine's deity. He was surprised to see women pictured on the panels alongside the men. His gaze shifted to the walls between the panels and saw wooden plaques with still more depictions.

"You can go look at them," Catherine whispered to him, glancing over to see him squinting to make out the images on the plaques. So engrossed was he, she wasn't surprised when he merely nodded then got up to move to the side of the church.

Conar saw numbers on the plaques and realized they were in sequence along the wall. Walking to the front of the church, near where a statue of a lovely blond haired women stood sentinel, he gazed up at the first plaque with eyes narrowed in speculation. The images were frightening, somehow threatening to him, and he felt a chill as he followed the procession of plaques. Here was a man being flogged; being condemned before a tribunal of sorts; being forced to carry a heavy wooden beam upon his shoulders as men abused him with whip and pike. There, he had fallen and another had come to help him carry his burden. There, a woman wiped the blood and sweat from his tortured brow. As he made his way to the opposite side of the church, he was deeply disturbed to see that the man had fallen again and again; that he had been stripped of his clothing and then laid down upon the beam while his hands and feet were nailed to the wood. A shiver ran through Conar's body and he hurried past that image. The twelfth showed the man's death and Conar stared up at it, saddened by the violence of a religion Catherine had told him was based on a loving and caring God.

"He lives," someone said to him.

Conar turned to find the widow looking at him from her place on the floor. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his cords and walked back to where the middle-aged woman knelt. "He survived all that?" he asked.

The woman lifted an elegant slim hand and pointed to the last two plaques. "His friends took him down from the cross and then carried him to his tomb. Three days later, he rose from the dead."

Turning back to the remaining plaques, Conar gazed up at the dead man as he lay cradled in a woman's arms. The sight brought unbidden tears to his eyes. "Who is the woman?" he whispered. He was not prepared for the answer.

"His mother."

Fury crept over Conar and he looked back around, impaling the widow with a fierce expression. "A mother should not be forced to look upon her tortured son."

"The woman had been prepared for what her son was to endure for the sake of his followers," the widow answered him. With a sigh of fatigue, she pushed herself up from the floor, waving her hand as the young man made to come to her aid. She sat down heavily on the bench then patted the place beside her, never once expecting the Outlander to refuse her company.

Conar sat down beside the woman, wondering why he felt the need to speak to her. He turned so that he faced her. "Why was he flogged?"

"Because of who he was," she answered. Her soft brown eyes captured his. "I believe you can well understand that, can't you?"

The Serenian nodded, although he didn't quite take her meaning. "What did he do to make the Tribunal kill him?"

"He was the Messiah," the woman answered. "The Chosen." She searched his face. "And he was condemned because the people loved him and followed him. The Sanhedrin, the Tribunal as you call it, were jealous of him. They feared him and the power he could wield over the people. He taught love and forgiveness, not hatred and vengeance. And for that, his life was forfeit."

Conar looked back around at the final plaque. "But he didn't die." His gaze slid to the left and upward and he noticed for the first time the image of a man hanging from a cross above the high altar. "They just thought he had."

"There are those who say he was alive when he was laid in the tomb, but our bible teaches us he was dead, that his father raised him up to show us there will be eternal life after death."

"In paradise," Conar muttered. He was staring fixedly at the sorrowful figure hanging upon the cross.

"In heaven," the woman answered. "With our Lord and Father."

The image of the crucified man had burned its way into Conar's heart and soul and he did not feel the tears dripping silently down his cheeks. "I know what it's like," he said softly.

"He knows you do," she answered him. "He knows all there is to know about you, Conar McGregor."

The sign of the cross, as Catherine had called it, made sense to Conar then. His wife had touched her head, her heart, her left, then right, shoulder. The significance of that gesture was now all too clear. From the crown of wicked thorns on the man's sagging head, to the wounds in his feet and hands, the sign of the cross was a living reminder of the agony her god had suffered.

"He gladly gave his life so that we might live," the woman told him. "He knew from the first what he would be expected to endure and he embraced that future, if not gladly, at least willingly, for that was why he had been sent to us."



"He lived for his people," Conar said.

"And died for them," she answered. "I will explain why he did that."

Catherine sat staring at her husband, wondering why he was speaking to himself, wondering what he was saying. She watched him turn now and again and look beside him as though he were in deep conversation with a person sitting with him in the pew. Never once did he look toward her, but carried on with his mumblings, his deep, heavily-accented Serenian drawl soft and excited as he continued to talk to himself. She thought of going over to him, but something made her sit where she was, watching him, loath to interfere. For what seemed like an hour's time, she kept her vigil on the other side of the church from her husband. When at last he seemed to grow quiet, Catherine got up, then walked down the aisle to the pew where he sat. She eased herself down beside him and was alarmed to see the tears still coursing down his cheeks.

"What's wrong?" she asked, reaching for his hand. She was not surprised to feel the tremor in his hand as he gripped hers.

"I understand it, Catherine," he said, not looking at her but up at the cross. "I understand all of it."

Catherine caressed his taut arm. "What do you understand, milord?"

Conar slowly turned his head and looked at his wife. "Everything, Catherine."

Concern filled Conar's wife's face for the look she saw emblazoned on her husband's countenance was one of savage delight and unearthly zeal. She watched with growing fear as he swept his gaze back to the cross.

"I have to get on with it, Cat," he said, his hand tensing in hers. "I have to do what I was brought here to do and then get on with my life." He stood up, drawing her with him. "I have to finish it."

Catherine stumbled as he pulled her from the pew, giving her precious time to genuflect before he dragged her behind him from the church. Once outside in the bright morning sunlight, she blinked away the brightness invading her eyes, and pulled at the hand which held her captive.

"Until I've finished what I have to do," her husband was saying as his long stride propelled them toward their mounts, "my life is meaningless." He let go of her hand as they reached the horses, then gave her no time to protest before lifting her to her mare's back. He stood there, staring up at her, his hand on her leg, his face filled with resignation. "When I've done what I have to do, then I can come to Him and ask His forgiveness." He shook his head. "Until then, I'll just have to make do on my own."

Catherine watched with confusion as Conar vaulted onto his steed's broad back and jerked heavily on the reins. "Conar?" she questioned, turning her own mount as her husband kicked his horse into movement. "Wait! I don't understand any of this!"

"You don't have to!" he shouted back to her as he drummed his heels into the beast's flanks. He shot ahead of her, back toward Raphaella's keep.

Conar's wife kicked her mare into a fast gallop, wondering why she was suddenly terribly, terribly afraid.

## Chapter Fifteen

"He's what?" Catherine screeched at the top of her lungs. She shoved Sajin rudely aside and stomped to the stairs, gathering up her long skirts in a tight fist as she climbed the steps.

Sajin glanced around at Balizar and shrugged. "I'd like to be a fly on the wall when he lets her in his room."

Balizar Arbra shook his head. "Not me."

Azalon and Asher exchanged glances before hurrying out to the stables to do their overlord's bidding. Neither wanted to be in the keep when the hell that was brewing in Catherine McGregor's eyes broke free of its crucible.

"Conar!"

The door to his room burst open with a thud and Conar looked up from the valise he was packing. He had been expecting his wife and was not altogether surprised to see her hurrying into the room, her face a bold shade of seething red.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she shouted at him.

Raphaella, who had been sitting demurely on the settee in the Serenian's room, trying to talk sense into him, herself, calmly rose and headed for the open door. She cast a knowing look at the Outer Kingdom woman before quietly closing the door behind her.

"Answer me, McGregor!" Catherine demanded, grabbing her husband's arm and jerking him around so that he faced her.

"Lower your voice," Conar answered her. "The entire keep doesn't need to be privy to our business, Catherine."

"You're not going!" Catherine spat from between clenched teeth. "I won't allow it."

Conar gently pried her fingers from his forearm. "You know better than that, lady," he said without emotion. He reached for another shirt only to have Catherine push him away, grab the valise and fling it across the room where the contents spilled out upon the floor.

"No, Conar!" his wife snarled.

He drew in a long breath, mumbled something beneath his breath then calmly walked to the spot where his valise had landed. Bending over, he stuffed the clothing back into the tapestry bag, stood up, then went back to the bed to finish packing. "I'm not going to argue with you, Cat," he informed her as he crammed the last garment into the valise.

Catherine heard the resignation in his voice and knew further protests would fall on deaf ears and a mind already made up. She was breathing heavily, her breasts rising and falling with emotion as she stared at him. Her fingers itched to slap the bland look from his face and they twitched at her sides, finally burying themselves in the folds of her gown to keep from doing the man bodily harm.

"I am your wife," she said at last.

"I don't deny that, Catherine," he said.

"I won't give you a divorce, Conar."

He didn't look up as he buckled the clasp on the valise. "I doubt either your father or your church will give you much choice in the matter."

Catherine looked around for something to hit him with. Not seeing anything handy, she drove her nails into her thighs through the fabric of her gown.

"Our daughter needs a father."

"She has one."

"A father who will be there when she needs him," Catherine snapped.

"If she needs me, you can send her to me."

Catherine hissed, a feline warning that made him turn to look at her. He could see her fury mounting and knew her words would be cruel.

They were.

"The only place you'll see her is in St. Steffensberg, McGregor, and you will either come there or never see her at all!"

Conar hefted the valise and reached for the leather jacket draped over the headboard of his bed. "Ben-Alkazar will take you back to St. Steffensberg for me." He flung the jacket over his left shoulder. "And keep you there until the divorce is final."

"There is not going to *be* a divorce, McGregor!" Catherine yelled at him.

"According to Serenian law, we were never married, anyway," he said, not unkindly.

"According to Outer Kingdom law, we will be joined until one of us is dead!" she flung back at him.

"Don't make this harder than it needs to be, Catherine," he pleaded with her.

"I'll not make it easy for you to cast me aside, McGregor!" she shot back.

He looked at her, memorizing the lush beauty of her face, admiring the fire gleaming in the glare she sent his way, aching for the sweetness of her soft arms around him. His body betrayed him as his mind refused to do and he quickly moved around her, careful not to touch her as he made his way to the door for fear he would give up his resolve to put this woman aside, to keep her safe.

"You will let me know when our daughter is born?" he asked, fumbling with the door handle. When there was no answer, he glanced around, found his wife staring at him as though she could not believe he really meant to leave her. He waited for her answer and when it did not come, a sad, regretful smile tugged at his mobile mouth. "Goodbye, Cat," he said.

"Go to hell, Serenian," she answered.

For a long moment he stood there, looking at her, wishing with all his heart that things could be different. But the time had come for him to leave her, to finish what he had started, and to get his life in order. With a slight shrug, he opened the door.

"I've been there, lady," he replied, his face pinched with pain. "Many times."

"Why don't you stay there this time?" she snarled.

He had a feeling he was going to as he opened the door and crossed the threshold. The door closed behind him with a finality that pierced him through with utter agony. He stumbled against the weight of his decision, almost flinging the door open again and running to her, but he knew that would be folly of the highest kind, a mistake only a fool would dare make. Conar pushed away from the door and hurried toward the stairs.

"You're a bloody coward, Conar McGregor!"

His footsteps faltered at the curse which was flung at him from behind the closed door, but he didn't stop, didn't turn back even as he heard the door open. His pace quickened and he descended the stairs at a near run.

"How can you think to protect an entire people if you can't protect your own wife?"

Sajin Ben-Alkazar's gaze shifted from the mute, guilty face of the Serenian as that man practically leapt from the last three steps to the enraged face of the woman who was bending over the balcony, glaring down at her husband.

"Conar!"

He didn't look back as he flung the front portal open and strode from Raphaella Chastayne's infernal keep. His horse stood waiting, Balizar holding the steed's reins. Flinging the valise to Azalon, McGregor leapt into the saddle and jerked the reins from Balizar. "Let's go," he said through clenched teeth.

The Kensetti prince was framed in the doorway, his attention riveted on Conar. "Ride with the Wind, my friend," Sajin called out.

Conar's mount turned, prancing against the tight hold its owner had on him. The gray's tail swished against the hitching post as the steed backed up, making it necessary for its rider to turn in the saddle to look at the nomad.

"Keep her safe, Ben-Alkazar," Conar asked.

"With my life," the nomad pledged. He felt vicious hands on his back, shoving him, but refused to budge, to unblock the doorway as Catherine tried to move him aside.

The last sight Conar had of his wife's angry face was through the protective circle of Sajin's arms as he pushed her back into the keep and shut the door behind them.

The last sound he heard as he kicked his horse into motion was Catherine's desperate wail of heartbreaking sorrow.

"Conar!"

Raine turned away from the window, feeling somehow lost and abandoned as he had watched his father ride away from the keep. The little boy sat down on the floor in a wavering beam of sunlight and watched the dust motes flying in the light. "Be careful, Father," the child whispered.

Turning to watch her son, Raphaella could see the sadness on the boy's small face. Accustomed to his melancholy nature, she was not, however, use to seeing such blatant emotion flitting through his sapphire gaze. The sight unnerved her for she had never considered Raine capable of feeling anything other than calm detachment.

"What did you and your father talk about when you went to see him, Raine?" she asked, coming to squat down beside her son.

The child glanced up. "We spoke of many things."

"Such as?" his mother pressed.

Raine shrugged, a miniature replication of his father's annoyed reaction to questions he didn't care to answer. "I asked him about my brothers."

Partial guilt settled on the sorceress' shoulders. "Would you like to meet them one day?"

"Not especially," the boy answered. He looked back down at the sunlight pooling on the carpet. "But I am most anxious to meet Brianna."

A crease of confusion marred the perfection of Raphaella's forehead. "Who is Brianna?"

The little boy smiled, the first real smile of his young life, and he looked up at his mother with wonder on his small face. "The girl child who will be born this eve."

Coal black eyebrows shot up. "Catherine will have her babe this eve?" his mother asked in shock.

"Aye," Raine answered. He saw worry on his mother's face and frowned. "What concerns you, Mother?"

"It's too early," Raphaella answered, standing up. She stared down at the boy's calm face. "Will she survive?"

"Brianna will be one of the ...," Raine began but his mother interrupted him, demanding to know of Catherine's health. "Oh," he began, "she'll be well enough, but such will be the birth that there will be no more children for her."

Raphaella chewed on her lip. "Are you sure of this? I have had no glimpses of the birthing taking place this soon."

Raine shrugged again, this time with an expression on his young face that said his mother didn't know everything. He crossed his legs and hunched forward, his chin in his hand, dismissing his dam's worries.

"She'll blame Father for it, though," Raine remarked. "And she'll never forgive him for leaving her."

The boy's mother nodded in agreement for she had had at least that much insight into the way things would be from that day between her ex-son-in-law and his new wife.

"We must say a rune for the babe, Raine," Raphaella said. "And for her father's safe return."

Raine looked up. "Oh, he'll never come back to the Outer Kingdom, Mother. Not in this lifetime."

Raphaella gaped at him. "He won't come back for Catherine?" At the boy's shake of the head, she felt a shiver go down her spine. "Are you sure?"

"Aye, I'm sure," the boy said in a petulant voice. "Do you doubt it?"

"What have you seen?" she demanded, kneeling down beside her son, grabbing his arm and shaking him. "Have you seen harm befall him?"

Raine looked into his mother's eyes and nodded slowly.

"How?" Raphaella gasped. "Can it be prevented?"

"There is nothing neither you nor I can do for him," Raine replied. "He is in the hands of Alel, now."

Ice-cold fear ran through Raphaella's veins at those words. "But he has forsaken his god!" she cried.

"And has been forsaken by Him, as well," the child answered. "And for that, Father will have to atone."

Raphaella's face turned white and she let go of her son's arm and stood up, unaware that she was trembling from head to toe. "He won't die, will he?" she asked in a breathless gasp of primal terror.

Raine shook his head. "No, but he will wish he had."

## Chapter Sixteen

The raid had gone well and forty-three slaves were sitting under the canopy of a hastily-rigged tent, eating the first hot meal they had had in weeks. Dirty fingers scooped up food, shoveling it into equally dirty mouths, as grateful eyes followed the tall blond man dressed in the flowing black robes as he walked among the men who had rode at his side.

"They call him Khamsin," one of the slaves whispered to another. "He killed Prince Jaborn at Abbadon."

"Was a prisoner there, himself, I heard," another slave mumbled as he licked his fingers of the juices running down them. "Now, it's his headquarters."

Asher Stone handed a dipper of water to the Outlander and smiled. "That beard makes you look fierce, Khamsin," he chuckled.

"Makes him look dangerous as hell," Balizar agreed. He studied the thick gold growth covering the Serenian's face. "And more like a nomad than he'd care to admit, I would imagine."

Conar snorted as he let the cold well water flow down his throat, then over the road grime on his face. He handed the dipper back to Asher then hunkered down beside Azalon. He wiped his face with the sleeve of his robe.

"Did we lose any men?" he asked as he settled back against the wagon.

"Kamir got a cut on his arm," Rupine replied. "Other than that, we fared better than last time." The physician thought of the three men they had buried the week before.

"I don't want there to be any mistakes like Rhiad, men," Conar reminded them. "Mistakes like that can get all of us hanged."

"That particular mistake is rotting under Rysalian sand at this moment," Balizar grunted. "I don't think Mahmed's men will be so anxious to infiltrate the Samiel next time."

Conar's lips hardened at the mention of the man who had been chosen by the slave traders and Princes of the Hasdu who dealt in human flesh to root out the Samiel and execute its leaders.

"If what I heard from that slave warden this morning is true, Belial is Mahmed Allajon's right hand man," Azalon informed the others. He glanced at Conar. "He might know of a way to get into Abbadon undetected, Khamsin."

"There is no way to get into Abbadon undetected," Conar replied, shooting out his long legs. He crossed his ankles and brought the heel of his right hand up to rub at his eye. "We're safe there."

Rupine glanced at Balizar, then Asher. "Are your eyes bothering you, Khamsin?"

Conar shook his head although he continued to rub his eye. "I don't see as clearly as I once did," he answered, lowering hand. "But that was to be expected, wasn't it?" His lids closed tiredly.

"No more headaches?" Rupine pressed. At Conar's slow denial, the physician breathed a sigh of relief. He thought back to all the symptoms the sorceress at Odess had warned him to be on the lookout for and inquired after Conar's strength. "Has there been any more weakness in your legs? How about your bladder problem? Have you had to go more than ...?"

The strange alien eyes snapped open and impaled the physician with a warning. Though no words were spoken, none having been needed, the answer had to satisfy Rupine for the man knew the Outlander would not discuss his health. Rupine looked away from the fierce stare.

"Where are you going?" Balizar asked as their leader pushed himself from the ground with a grunt of pique.

"Where I won't be bothered!" Conar snapped. He strode angrily away, leaving his men to stare after him with concern.

"He's not doing as well as he would like us to believe," Azalon remarked. "Most of the time I don't think he can even read the messages coming in from Abbadon."

"He can't," Asher agreed. "I've been reading most of them to him."

"Stubborn man," Balizar commented. "I caught him squinting in the mirror yestermorn, trying to trim that bush he's got growing on his face. That's why he don't shave no more. He can't see to do it properly." The warrior clucked his tongue in annoyance. "Like we wouldn't do it for him if he but asked!"

"Rider coming in," Azalon told them.

Balizar sighed and stood up, dusting the sand from his robe. He lifted his hand to shield his gaze from the blazing noon day sun. "Looks like Rachel," he said. As the identity of the rider became clear to him, Balizar grinned. "It is."

Asher sighed. "He's not going to like her coming here." He got to his feet. "Why can't women ever listen when a man gives an order?"

Rachel Stone dismounted, throwing the reins of her bay gelding to one of the former slaves. She cast a quick look about her and was pleased to see so many had been rescued. There didn't appear to have been any more casualties among the men of the Samiel and that pleased her even more. Her sharp green gaze flitted about the encampment, searching for one face in particular.

"Why are you here?" her brother, Asher, asked as she joined the men at the wagon.

"Where is Khamsin?" she countered, ignoring Asher's scowl.

"He told you not to come, Rachel," Asher reminded her.

A faint smirk passed over Rachel's pretty face and she turned away, looking for Conar among those milling about. "I have a message for him that couldn't wait until he came back to Abbadon." She shook her head when Asher asked what was so important that it required her to risk their leader's ire. "Believe me when I tell you that you don't want to be the one to tell him this."

"Tell him what?" came a gruff growl from behind them.

Rachel turned and her pretty face became exotically lovely as she found Conar glaring her. "You are well, milord?" she asked, going to him. Her quiet voice shook with hesitation.

Conar put his hand behind her neck. "Walk with me, lady," he demanded, pulling her away from the others.

They made their way through the throng of sweaty, stinking bodies to the place where the horses were tethered. A small oasis of crystal clear water and drooping date palms stretched overhead.

"Did anyone get hurt this time?" Rachel asked to forestall the anger she saw building in his tanned face.

"Kamir," was the reply before Conar let go of her and pointed to a shady expanse of sand. "Sit."

Rachel did as she was told and waited until he was seated beside her before drawing in a long breath. Exhaling slowly, she turned to face him and found his inscrutable gaze fastened on her.

"Tell me," he said.

"A message came for you," Rachel answered. "From St. Steffensberg." She saw his face turn carefully blank.

"Oh?"

"I thought you would want to know right away."

He looked away from her. "Usually when it's a message you think I should know about right away, Rachel, I don't like what I hear."

"And you're especially not going to like this," she countered.

"They're all right, aren't they?" he asked, not looking at the woman beside him. "Catherine and the babe?"

"As far as I know."

His head came around. "What do you mean: 'as far as you know'?"

"When the message was sent to you over two weeks ago, the two of them were fine," she told him. She bit down lightly on her lower lip before giving him the news she knew would anger him. "Sajin has left the Outer Kingdom and should be here sometime this week."

Bright red blood infused Conar's face and he let out a vulgar curse that turned the air around them blue. "*What?*" he shouted. "*Why?*"

Rachel blanched at the absolute fury stamped on her lover's face. She didn't like being the one to tell him why the Kensetti was on his way to Rysalia; why there was no longer a need for him to stay in St. Steffensberg to protect Conar's precious wife and child. Her heart was already hammering in her chest and she could hear the quiver in her voice when she finally told him the bad news.

"Your wife took your daughter and set sail for Serenia the night of the Rhiad raid. Ben-Alkazar knew nothing of her plans until it was too late to do anything about it. The ship had already sailed."

Conar sat perfectly still, his mouth open, staring at Rachel. Nothing the woman could have said could have stunned him more than this bit of ill luck. Nothing, save Catherine or the babe being kidnapped by Mahmed's men, could have put more fear in his heart than the news that his wife and child were sailing west to his homeland.

"Khamsin?" Rachel questioned, growing concerned with the look of abject horror on the Serenian's face. She could see a vein throbbing dangerously in his left temple and his fists were clenched so tightly on his thighs his knuckles had bled white.

"How the hell ...?" he began before leaping to his feet. He looked about him, seeking something to smash or throw or kill with his bare hands, but only the strained and worried face of his mistress registered. Rachel would be the last object to feel the brunt of his fury. An explosion of sheer frustration shot from his clenched jaw and he spun around to slam his fist into one of the date palms. "SON-OF-A-BITCH!" he bellowed.

Rachel winced as her lover's knuckles cracked into the wood of the tree. She could not help but smile as he shook his fist as the pain finally caught up with him. Had it not been for the snarling, cursing invocations coming from him, she would have laughed.

"I can't believe she did that!" Conar thundered. He plowed his right hand viciously through his golden hair. "Or that that goddamned nomad ALLOWED her to do it!"

"Sajin knew nothing ...," Rachel started to remind him, but stopped as he spun around and fixed her with a glower that should have stopped her heart.

"He sure as hell doesn't know nothing!" was the shout.

"What's happened?" Balizar asked as he and Azalon came running. "Is there a problem?"

"Oh, noooooo!" their leader sneered. "No problem at all!" He kicked the sand much as a child being denied his heart's wish. "Everything is just *perfect*!"

Balizar turned his attention down to Rachel. "What did you tell him?"

The woman's face tinged pink. "His wife took their child and set sail for Serenia two weeks ago."



"Oh, hell!" Balizar muttered.

"I'll beat that bitch black and blue when I get back to Boreas!" Conar threatened, but the others knew he wouldn't.

"Can you handle this?" Azalon asked Rachel and at her silent nod, he jerked on Balizar's sleeve and the two made a hasty retreat, glancing back only once at the livid man who was pacing a gully in the sand.

"Do you believe this?" Conar snarled. "Of all the foolish things for that woman to do!"

Rachel circled her knees within the protection of her arms. "I'd have done the same thing."

Conar flung around and stared at her as though she, too, had lost what little sense he had credited her with.

"I would have," she repeated.

The sapphire eyes narrowed into pinpoints of anger. "Really?" he sneered at her.

"Any woman would have, milord."

It wasn't as though he didn't know why his wife had taken herself off to Serenia. He was all too aware of her ploy. She hadn't expected him to come back to the Outer Kingdom, but she had known damned well he would eventually go home to Boreas sooner or later. If she just happened to be there, firmly established as his wife and his Queen, having made herself an integral part of court life as well as being the perfect sister-in-law to Legion and surrogate mother to his sons, what recourse would he have for divorce before his own Tribunal? Their marriage could not be put aside for lack of consummation. Brianna's mere existence nullified that alternative. As for adultery? His extramarital trysts with Rachel were a possibility, but he'd wager good money that Catherine would find a way around that, as well.

"She believes she has you, milord," Rachel told him and wasn't surprised when he spat out a filthy epithet before flinging himself down beside her once more.

"I'll turn her ass over my knee and let her see just how much she has of me!" he grumbled.

"The woman is in love and has no intention of giving you the freedom she knows in your heart you don't want," his mistress said in a reasonable voice. At his look of annoyance, she smiled. "You know you love her, Khamsin."

"What the hell difference does that make?" Conar snarled. "I can't keep her safe, Rachel!"

"She's there. You're here. She's safe. You're free." Rachel watched the speculation forming in his dark gaze. "So, you stay here and she stays safe."

"I can't stay here forever," he pouted, digging the toe of his black boot into the sand. "By the time I go home, she'll be so firmly entrenched in my life there, I'll never be able to have the marriage put aside. If I had married her in Serenia, I could just have not seen her for six months and the marriage would have been invalidated according to Tribunal Law."

"She hates me," Rachel commented as though she hadn't been listening to him.

"Aye, she does," Conar agreed.

"Enough to risk a lengthy sea voyage to insure her place in your life even if I should accompany you back to Boreas when you go."

Conar flinched. "Do you think she thought of that?"

"Thought of it and decided to do something about it," Rachel answered.

"I can't have a mistress if I have a wife," Conar moaned. "That's Serenian law." He shook his head. "I don't fancy having any more flesh stripped off my back, thank you just the same."

"You can divorce her according to Rysalian law," Rachel suggested.

"What good would that do?" he grouched. "I married her according to Outer Kingdom law. I signed papers joining our two houses." He frowned. "Papers I shouldn't have signed, damn it!"

They make me a citizen of her homeland."

"But you are, for all intents and purposes, a citizen of Rysalia, now," Rachel reminded him. "You paid taxes on Abbadon, didn't you? To insure a place for the freed men and women to live until all slavery was abolished here? You own Abbadon, don't you?"

"Aye, but I don't see ...."

"As a citizen of Rysalia, you are entitled to all the privileges of Rysalian law. You can exercise any and all of those privileges and one of them is the ability to set aside a marriage you no longer wish to continue."

"She'd just ignore the decree," he told her.

"True, but if you were take a wife here ...."

"Hell, no!" Conar shouted, coming to his feet to glare down at Rachel. "I don't need another damned wife!"

"Even if it meant assuring yourself that Catherine would ask for an annulment of your marriage in Serenia?"

He stared at her. Rachel could see the gears turning in his head as he thought over the reasons why her scheme might not work.

"Think, milord," she pushed him. "We are agreed that she hates me. We are agreed that she knows I will probably accompany you home to Boreas when the time comes. We are also in agreement that unless she is given an iron clad excuse to terminate your marriage, she will hold you to it." Rachel stood up and put her hand on his arm. "If you let her know you have divorced her here, that you have every intention of staying here, that you have taken a new wife ...."

"You," he bit out.

"Yes," she answered. "I'll allow you to wed no other!"

Conar's lips twitched. "And just how would you prevent it, Mam'selle?"

"I'd geld you myself, milord," she warned him. "Have no doubt that I would not should you try to *ever* slip into another woman's bed!"

"I thank whatever god still looks after me that Cat didn't think of that where *you* were concerned," he mumbled.

"Taking me as your bride," Rachel said, caressing his arm, "will make Catherine think twice about you ever living with her as man and wife again. Her pride will not allow her to hold onto a man who belongs to another woman by law."

"According to Rysalian law, I can have as many wives as I want," he teased her. "I just might ...."

"Enjoy being a eunuch," Rachel finished for him.

Conar laughed, drawing her into his arms. He put his chin on her head and forced a long sigh from his chest. "I'll think on it," he told her.

"The merits of becoming a eunuch?" she retaliated.

"The merits of becoming a husband to a conniver like you," he answered.

"I am only trying to help," she pouted.

His smile widened. "I never doubted it for a minute."

He dipped his head and grazed her neck with his beard.

"Don't!" she protested, wiggling within his embrace. "That thing feels like a scouring pad!"

"Then shave it for me," he shot back.

Rachel pulled back and looked up into his face. "You trust me with a razor to your throat, Khamsin?" she taunted.

"At my throat, aye," he answered. "Elsewhere, I'd rather think not."

"Let your eyes or other parts wander, milord, and you'll find the blade where you'd least like it," she cautioned.

Conar reached down to swat her curving backside. "Go get what you need from Balizar. I'll meet you back at the wagon."

"Aren't you coming with me, now?" she asked, her brows drawing together over the perfection of her upturned nose.

"No," he answered, sitting down again. "Let me think on what you said, Rachel. It might well be the answer to the problem."

Rachel's heart soared in her breast. "It only takes saying the words 'I divorce you' three times before witnesses to make it so in Rysalia, milord," she said on a breathless rush. "And a wedding can take place at any time."

He looked up at her. "Like tonight?" he asked. He did not miss the instant look of hope in her pretty face.

"At any time you wish it," she answered. She held her breath.

Conar sighed. "Go get the shaving implements. I'll be along soon."

The breath left Rachel's chest in a rush of disappointment, but she knew when she had been dismissed. To push this man was to only make him dig his heels in deeper. She had to be content that he was, if not pleased with her suggestion, at least considering it. Even if he did not fall into the silken trap she had set up to make him hers, and hers alone, forever, he would act on the divorce. She had no doubt of that. To have him free of Catherine was vital.

"I'll be waiting," she told him before turning to go.

Conar watched her walk away, her luscious form causing an immediate reaction within him, one he wished wouldn't occur. Wife or not, Rachel was going to be at his side whether it suited him or not. She'd made that more than clear to him. That he was sexually attracted to her, and on occasion made use of her willing body, did not escape him. If he had to be tied down, Rachel was just as good a tether as any other. If he had to marry another woman in order to make Catherine see he would no longer come to her, then Rachel was better than most.

He only hoped he could live with whatever decision he finally settled on.

His heart, already scarred beyond repair, had no say in the matter.

## Chapter Seventeen

"I divorce you. I divorce you. I divorce you."

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Conar felt the chill of them to the marrow of his bones. A deep sense of guilt cropped up in his heart and sprouted the seed of regret. He turned his bleak gaze to Rachel and found her watching him.

"What now, milord?" she asked.

"Will you marry me?" he asked, already knowing her answer.

"With the greatest of pleasures," Rachel answered, tears forming in her green eyes.

Balizar ground his teeth together. He sent a look of frustrated anger to Azalon before spinning on his heels and stalking off, not pleased with what he had been forced to be a part of. It wasn't that he disliked Rachel. He didn't. If anything, he loved the girl as though she were his own daughter. And it wasn't that he found Conar to be the wrong man for her for, if truth were told, he'd have no other asking for Rachel's hand. What had upset the old warrior so intensely had been the certain knowledge that the only reason for this had been Conar's warped sense of duty where Catherine was concerned.

"Don't do this, lad," he'd warned Conar earlier that afternoon. "This ain't what you really want. You love that little Outer Kingdom girl. This will only cause you hurt."

Not that anything either he or Azalon had said had made any difference. The lad's mind had been made up before he'd asked the men to be witnesses to his insanity. And Asher had been no help at all for he had been more than pleased to hand his sister over into Conar's keeping.

"Welcome to our family, Khamsin," Asher had gushed with relish.

There were many in the camp who were beside themselves with happiness at the match and swore they'd seen it coming. Most were bewildered by the quick turn in events, but cheered the union, nevertheless.

Sajin Ben-Alkazar was going to be another matter, altogether, and Balizar kept hoping against hope that the Kensetti prince would show up to talk sense into Conar McGregor before it was too late.

"We need a Rabbi," Balizar heard Asher saying as the old warrior pushed his way past several meandering slaves.

"Any man of the cloth will do, Asher," Rachel protested. "If we were in Kenset, it would be different, but since we aren't, one of the local holy men will do."

"There's a holy man at Jabra," one of the archers spoke up. "I could ride there and be back in an hour."

"Go," Conar told him before he lost his nerve.

"Damn!" Balizar exploded. He knew a grave mistake when he heard one being planned.

"You're going to regret this mightily, lad!"

Within two hours time, Rachel Stone had become the Serenian's third wife.

It was a marriage plotted in the stars and conceived in the nether regions of the Abyss. And one that would never know the peace and happiness that either of McGregor's first marriages had known for despite Rachel's great love for him, and his gentle affection for her, Conar would never truly consider Rachel Stone his wife. Although she bore a striking resemblance to Elizabeth, Conar's first and deepest love, Rachel would never be able to make him see past the beauty of her face to the woman beneath, a woman vastly different from Elizabeth McGregor.

"We'll leave for Abbadon in the morning," Conar explained to his lady as they entered his tent after the ceremony. "I'll wait until Sajin gets here before we plan the next sortie."

"Then I hope he doesn't arrive too soon," Rachel whispered to him as she ran her hands over the taut muscles of his chest. "I would like some time alone with my husband before he goes out to risk his life again."

"The next time I go out, you'll be riding at my side," Conar promised her and laughed at the look of intense pleasure which crossed her face. "You like that idea, eh?"

Rachel threw her arms around his neck and pressed him to her, claiming his mouth with a hot, fevered kiss that turned her insides to molten lava.

"I like it *very* much, milord!" she swore.

That he showed no great concern for her welfare as he had for Catherine's did not register with the woman and when he eased away from her touch, she saw no deeper meaning in the action than that of a tired man. She allowed him to put distance between them as he began to remove his robe.

"Let me," she insisted, going to him and pushing his hands away. She helped him undress, then hurried to turn the covers back on his pallet and to turn down the lantern.

Conar blinked as the light became lower in the tent. He still had trouble adjusting to such changes and it bothered him more and more each day. His vision was worse than he let on and the headaches, back again with only minor levels of pain, brought with them even more blurring and darkening of his sight with each consecutive bout.

"Milord?"

He scrunched his eyes closed for a moment, then opened them wide to see his bride standing naked before him, the perfection of her limbs, the sleekness of her flesh glowing in the low lantern light. Her arms were out to him and with a sigh, he went to her, gathering her to him as he was expected to do.

"I love you, Conar," he heard her whisper to him as her lips trailed soft kisses on his naked throat.

"I know," he answered before scooping her into his arms and carrying her to the pallet he would now share with her as husband and wife.

If his legs felt a might too rubbery and his arms trembled more than they should, if his world tilted suddenly to the left, then righted itself with a lurch of pain behind his right eye, if his bladder felt full although he had relieved himself just before Rachel and he had entered the tent, and his mouth was so dry that he had difficulty returning the passionate kiss his lady bestowed on his unsmiling mouth, he did his best to ignore it. He had other things to worry about.

And if the name he called out in the throes of passion was not the name of the woman whose body he rode, he did his best to forget it. He had another woman's life to think about.

And if the woman in his bed cried bitter tears at the error and clung to him in pleading desperation to be recognized as his own, he would do his best to accommodate her.

He had, after all, made the worst mistake of his life.

\* \* \* \*

Meghan followed close behind her Overlord, trying to placate him, but the more she talked, the madder and louder he got until finally she shut her wrinkled mouth and glared at his retreating back. There was no talking to a man when he got his stubbornness caught in the crack of his arse, she thought!

"I won't have it, Meghan!" Conar shouted, glancing back at her only once as his long legs outdistanced her down the hallway.

"You still got enemies about, boy!" Meghan shot back. "We're only doing what Meggie would ...."

Conar spun around and pointed a furious finger at the old woman. "No, Meghan!"

"She would not ...."

"No!" was the bellow that fair shook the chandelier in the Great Hall of Abbadon Fortress.

"All right!" Meghan shouted back at him, her lower lip thrust out in a pout. "You want to take chances with your life, then so be it!"

He came back to her, towering over her short, squat frame. Glaring down into her militant face, he squinted a warning he hoped she'd heed.

"I can take care of myself, Mistress Dunne," he said in a too sweet, too gentle voice that didn't fool the old woman for one minute. The man was still furious with her, and all the womenfolk of the Fortress, and he was letting her know that he was. "I don't need your women following behind me and guarding me as though I were addled!"

"Well," Meghan sniffed, looking him in the eye, "you can't be *too* intelligent if you disdain them looking out for your precious hide!"

Conar ground his teeth together and forced a wicked, devastating smile to his lips. "Meghan," he said in a reasonable voice, "I am well. I am capable. I am able. I don't need bodyguards, male *or* female hovering about me in my own keep. Leave off or I swear I'll send every last one of your girls packing!"

The old woman threw her hands up in surrender. She snorted her contempt of his ability to look after himself and swung around on the heel of her rundown house slippers. Shoving past two of the women guards who had accompanied her, her amble rump waddling from side to side as she stomped back down the hallway, the slippers making little slapping sounds on the carpet.

"Well?" Conar growled at the women left behind. When they appeared to stand their ground, not sure if they should desert him, his gaze narrowed to a dangerous glower and the snarl which lifted his upper lip put both women into immediate flight. He watched them hurry back down the hall in Meghan's wake and the corners of his sensual mouth lifted in a well-satisfied grin before he turned and headed for his room.

"You're a bully. You know that, don't you?" Rachel asked him later that evening as she helped him prepare for his bath.

"I don't need those women lurking about in the shadows looking for imaginary enemies in this keep, Rachel," he explained. "Every time I turn around, there's one of them standing behind me." He looked up from pulling off his boot. "I can't even piss without having one of them listening to it being done."

"They mean well," she told him, but she was pleased that the only woman he needed at Abbadon was her. She took his boots and placed them beside the unlit fireplace.

"They can mean well with some other man," he grouched as he stepped into the hot tub of water. Easing himself down, he sighed with pleasure and reclined against the tall back. His lids closed and his head fell back against the high side.

"Did Azalon tell you he got word that Sajin's ship has docked in Basaraba?" Rachel asked as she knelt beside the tub and began to lather a soft, fleece cloth with cinnamon-scented soap she had had made just for him.

"He should be here by nightfall tomorrow I would think," Conar answered. The warmth of the water was intoxicating and he was tired from a day of fighting with Meghan and listening to the complaints of the men he had left behind that the womenfolk of Abbadon thought themselves in charge of the fortress.

"You aren't going to argue with him, are you?"

Conar lifted his head and looked at her. "Why would I?"

Rachel avoided his gaze. "About allowing Catherine to leave St. Steffensberg," she replied in a low voice.

A long sigh of understanding wafted from Conar. "No, I won't argue with him about it. Knowing Sajin, he did his job with remarkable aplomb until Cat outsmarted him. There's no sense rubbing salt into his wounds about it."

"I heard his sister was very angry that Catherine left. If what I suspect is true, Sybelle would have liked the two of them to wed. She dotes on her little brother."

Conar thought of the dark-haired woman he had met at the court of Catherine's father. The woman had made it clear to him that she thought him lower than a dung beetle and twice as useless. If the rumors were true, she had been one of Jaleel Jaborn's many mistresses and if that were the case, he figured she had even less regard for him now since he had been Jaborn's murderer.

"Well, I don't know a damned thing the bitch can do about it," he answered Rachel. "She can get mad in one hand and ...."

"Don't say it!" Rachel warned. Her husband's propensity for vulgarity shocked her at times and angered her at others. She had made it a habit since their marriage the week before, to forestall any Serenian sayings that she found offensive, which were most of them.

Conar chuckled. It amused him every time Rachel blushed at one of his coarser words and grew downright furious when he spouted sayings that were a bit off-color. As much as the woman enjoyed the carnal aspects of their life together, he couldn't understand why a little vulgarity displeased her so. It certainly didn't while they were making love to one another, which was most of the time when they were alone.

"At any rate, Sybelle should be overjoyed to learn I've divorced Cat," Conar said in a voice he didn't realize sounded defeated and terribly sad.

"She will be if she can persuade Sajin to go to Serenia to bring her back and take her to wife," Rachel answered.

Hurt drove straight into Conar's soul at his wife's words and he clamped his mouth shut to keep from blurting out that Sajin had no business going to Serenia and certainly no business with Catherine. As much as he had felt himself for the nomad's seduction of Catherine after he, Conar, had left her in Odess, he now realized that was the last thing he wanted. That Catherine was now free of him, something he had never really considered would ever happen, and free to take a new husband, ate at him like a hungry piranha.

"Let me get your back," Rachel ordered him. As he sat forward to allow her to bathe him, she averted her eyes from the horrible scars crisscrossing his broad back. The sight of the mutilation bothered her, as it did every woman who had ever seen it, and the pain he had been made to suffer made tears come unbidden every time.

"Sybelle should find her a husband," she said, dragging her mind from the image of her husband bound between two uprights, his flesh being seared with a cat-o'-nine. "It would make her a less severe woman, I would think."

"She didn't seem like the marrying kind," Conar quipped.

"Any woman is the marrying kind, milord, when the right man comes along," Rachel informed him. "Her first husband abused her, though, so I suppose she's not as anxious to take a new one to her breast."

Conar craned his head and looked around at her. "He beat her?"

"Many times," Rachel said, nodding. "Sajin would have called him out for it had the

bastard not died prematurely."

"On the end of some man's saber, I heard," Conar put in.

"Sajin knew nothing of what his sister was going through until her husband was in his grave. Even then, I think he would have dug the man up and stomped him to dust if he could have."

"I would have wanted to, too," Conar answered.

"She bears scars from his whippings, I hear," Rachel said, glancing down at the carnage on her husband's flesh. "He nearly killed her once."

"What of Jaborn?" he asked, knowing Rachel had slept with the man, herself.

Rachel's hand stilled on his shoulder. "What of him?"

"Did he beat her, too?" He fused his gaze with his wife's. "Did he beat you?"

Rachel shook her head. "He would not have dared lay a hand to me, Khamsin." She vigorously applied the rag to her husband's shoulder. "I would have killed him and he knew it."

"But he beat Sajin's sister," he said.

"It would not surprise me if he did. He was a very cruel man."

Conar nodded thoughtfully. "I know that well enough."

"There," Rachel said, coming to her feet. "All done." She lowered her eyes to the juncture of his legs. "Unless you feel too tired to finish the rest of you."

A slow, mischievous grin spread across the Serenian's face. "Well, now that you mention it ...."

When the maid came to clean the bathing chamber later that night, she wondered why there was so much water on the floor beside the tub.

\* \* \* \*

The three men crept silently down the hallway of the fourth story of Abbadon Fortress. The crystals in the pockets of their robes kept them safe from the prying eyes of the warriors and women scattered about. Every unlocked door was opened, every room searched, but the object of their search was not to be found in any of the rooms which ringed the fourth story. It was not until they came to the massive door at the end of the serpentine hallway on the upper story, that they found what they had been seeking.

Opening the door to the large chamber, one dark-shrouded figure moved soundlessly into the chamber and located their target. He stood for a long moment, looking down at the sleeper in the bed, then turned his attention around him, intent on surveying the chamber's furnishings. With one last probing scrutiny of his target, he backed slowly out of the room, closing the door with a soft click behind him. Pointing one dark, stubby finger toward the stairs, he led the other two men to the safety of the servant's quarters.

"It's him, all right," the man told the others in a near-whisper. "He's got a woman with him. We can't do it tonight."

"Can we afford to wait?" one of the others asked.

"We'll have to. Our orders are to take him when he's alone."

"But that could take days!" the third man protested.

"What difference does it make?" the first man sneered. "We've got a month before we have to have him in Rhiad."

Leaving without what they had come to Abbadon to retrieve, the men made their way from Abbadon Fortress, through iron-studded doors left carelessly unlocked, and to their mounts hidden half a mile from the desert keep. They had made camp three miles from the fortress and had resigned themselves to spending several days there. Every precaution had to be made in order to



do their work unobserved and correctly.

Had the men in charge of security at the Fortress known it was so easily accessed, they would not have slept so soundly that night.

And neither would the man whose kidnapping had been ordered by another bent on exacting revenge.

## Chapter Eighteen

Sajin shook his head at his friend and then took him in his arms, tightening his grip to the point of discomfort, chuckling at the grunt of pain that escaped his friend's throat.

"Couldn't seduce her, could you?" Conar asked, his golden brows elevated beneath the fall of one thick tawny lock.

"It wasn't me the lady wanted, you bastard," Sajin grumbled as he draped an arm over Conar's shoulder. "You knew that when you offered her to me."

"You couldn't persuade her with your inestimable charms, nomad?" the Serenian drawled.

The Kensetti snorted. "Not even by singing Hasdu love sonnets to her under her balcony."

Conar grinned. "Well no wonder she took flight, Ben-Alkazar. If you'd come warbling under my balcony, I'd have jumped ship, too."

"I'm sorry, Conar," Sajin said, sobering. He stopped and looked at his friend. "I let you down."

"She outfoxed you, nomad," Conar answered. "Me, too."

"But I made a promise to you. I ...."

Conar held up his hand. "Did she tell you she had no intention of divorcing me, Sajin?" When his friend didn't answer, Conar nodded. "And made you promise not to tell me she had. I understand how her mind works."

"From what I hear, you remedied that problem yourself." The Kensetti frowned. "I'm not at all sure you did a wise thing in marrying Rachel, Conar."

"Don't start," Conar warned. His expression was one that said he would not brook argument or discussion over what he'd done.

"I just hope you don't regret having acted so hastily, my friend," Sajin said, resigned to say no more about the situation unless Conar brought it up.

"Other than being out maneuvered by Cat, what have you been up to since I saw you last?" Conar asked. He knew the matter of Rachel was finished.

"I made a stop in Kenset, hoping to catch Sybelle there, but she's off on another of her endless forays to wherever the hell it is she goes where I can't find her." He frowned. "I worry about her, but little good it does me. She'll do what she wants and the hell with how I feel about it."

"Did you happen to see Ghedrin's sister while you were there?" Conar inquired. "Jasmine, is it?"

Sajin shook his head. "I heard she came here to claim his body, but since there was no love lost between them, I doubt she's upset with his execution." He continued walking with Conar.

"You aren't worried that she'll try to cause you trouble, are you? If you are, don't. Jasmine is happy to be rid of that vile lecher and, if I remember correctly, rather liked that Hesar lad from Virago."

"He wanted to stay and court her, but I wouldn't allow it," Conar admitted. "I told him maybe she could come visit him at Tempest Keep this summer." The Serenian's brows drew together. "Who is her guardian, now?"

"I suppose I am," Sajin sighed. "We're distant cousins and I don't think there are any closer than me who would dare take on the obligation of seeing to her."

"Will you send word to her that she would be welcome to visit Paegan? I can arrange passage for her, I think."

"I'm sure she'll jump at the chance," Sajin grinned.

"Then that's settled," Conar told the nomad. "I've had the cook prepare us a supper you won't soon forget and if you're a good little boy, I'll have something warm put in your bed this eve."

"Blond and blue-eyed?" Sajin asked, wagging his thick black brows.

"I'm taken," Conar answered, bumping his hip against his friend's.

"Oh, well," Sajin sighed hopelessly and both men broke into thunderous laughter.

After a repast that left them sated and pleasantly tired, Conar and the nomad sat in companionable silence in front of a blazing fire, warming their stocking feet. Conar sipped slowly on a snifter of fiery Viragonian brandy and Sajin puffed on a long pipe filled with strong Rysalian tobacco.

"I made a tour of the fortress yesterday," Conar said as he stared in to the flames.

Sajin, whose head had been lolling on the back of his chair, swung his attention to the man beside him. "That sounds ominous." His friend's tone had been filled with a strange quality that brought immediate concern to the Kensetti's mind.

Conar sat the brandy snifter down on the carpet. "I felt a need to re-visit the rooms where my friends died."

The nomad frowned through a cloud of thick blue smoke. "Was that wise, Conar?"

A long sigh came from Sajin's companion. "Maybe not, but I felt I had to do it." He laid his head back. "I was all right until I got to the room where Jaborn raped Cat."

Total shock spread over the nomad's face and he sat up straight in his chair, turning so that he was facing Conar. "You didn't tell me that had happened, Conar," he said.

"No one but you knows of it. She was unconscious and Jaborn is dead." He closed his eyes. "I don't think any of his men were aware of what the son-of-a-bitch was doing."

Sajin swallowed the nausea in his throat. "He told you what he'd done?" Intense fury welled up in the Kensetti Prince's gut and he could well imagine the hurt such news would have caused his friend.

Conar's head rolled toward Sajin. "I was made to watch him do it, Sajin."

The nomad's complexion bleached white as freshly fallen snow and his gaze became blurred with tears. "No," he whispered. His lips trembled for the guilt Conar must have endured. "I am sorry, Conar. I ...."

"Do you see now why I couldn't keep her with me, Sajin?" Guilt flooded the trembling voice. "I was bound so I could not go to her, could not stop that bastard from putting his filthy hands on her, but if it had not been for me, such a thing would never have happened to her in the first place." He looked away from the misery on Sajin's face for he knew the man was desperately in love with Catherine, himself. "Jaborn could just have easily slit her throat as molested her." His voice lowered to an agonized whisper. "I half-expected him to."

"And she doesn't know?" Sajin's whisper was just as pained as his friend's. Conar shook his head. "It's bad enough that you do," Sajin stated.

"Did you know my first wife was raped by my own brother?" At Sajin's slow nod, Conar sat forward in his chair and braced his elbows on his knees, his attention once more riveted on the leaping flames. "I couldn't protect her, either. Or Nadia. Jaborn killed my daughter."

Sajin didn't know what to say to his friend's confession of guilt. He felt as though Conar needed to talk, but when no further words came from the Serenian, the nomad allowed the silence to play out between them. Time, in itself, was a healer. Their friendship was the catalyst he hoped would start the healing process. He knew Conar understood that he was there for him.

"I have needed someone like you all my life, nomad," Conar finally said, feeling the comfort and support coming from Sajin. He turned to look at his friend. "I have a request to make of you and I hope you'll consider it."

"Ask," Sajin replied.

Conar returned his gaze to the fire. "If something should happen to me ...."

"Nothing is going to," Sajin stated.

"Something beyond our control, Sajin," Conar went on, ignoring the nomad's interruption. "Something irreversible. I would leave Abbadon on my own and not come back."

Sajin stood up, went to his friend and hunkered down beside him. "What are you talking about?" he asked in an annoyed voice.

Conar turned to face the nomad. "I'm not well, Sajin. I know it and Rupine knows it." Before his friend could deny that statement, Conar put a hand on the Kensetti's shoulder. "I don't believe I'm dying, but sometimes there are far worse things that can happen to a warrior than death. I won't spend my life as an invalid, a burden to my family and friends. I won't do that."

"You are not sick," Sajin snapped. "Maybe just a bit tired. Still getting over the problem with the tenerse, but you aren't going to become a cripple, Conar. You ...."

"There are several monasteries in the Inner Kingdom. I've visited one or two. There is one in particular where I could go. I've already talked to the Abbot. He has assured me that I could come to live there, that they would take care of me."

"I don't want to hear this!" Sajin shouted. He came to his feet in a rush of anger, pointing his finger at Conar. "There's nothing wrong with you. I don't want to hear about monasteries and abbots and ...."

"They won't let anyone see me, Sajin. They would deny I was even there. No force this side of heaven could enter those doors and I wouldn't want it any other way."

"You're talking about shutting yourself up in a prison!" Sajin yelled at him. "Cutting yourself off from everyone who loves you? That's selfish!"

"It's what I want, Sajin." Conar stared his friend down, fusing their gazes so that the nomad could not look away. "Leave me some dignity. Don't make me have to hear the pity or the grief in my loved one's voices when they look at me. I couldn't live with that."

"Conar ...," Sajin protested.

"Please?" was the heartfelt plea.

For what seemed like an eternity, the nomad glared down at the Outlander, then with a vicious snarl, he flung his hand out in surrender. "Under one condition," he snarled. "That you allow me to see you."

"No."

"Yes!"

"No." Final. No discussion. No retreat.

"Why not?" came the pitiful cry.

"Because if I am forced to leave, Sajin, it will be because I am no longer able to take care of myself and I won't have the ones I love having to do it for me."

Sajin stumbled away, his heart breaking. He had, at long last, found a man who could be his friend and he was losing him. Too soon.

"It may not be for a long time, Sajin," Conar told him, "or it may be tomorrow. Either way, I want your word that you won't come looking for me. That you'll allow me to just disappear." He stood up and walked to the nomad, put his hand on Sajin's trembling shoulder. "Will you do that for me, Sajin? Do you love me enough to do that?"

It took every last ounce of courage the Kensetti had to nod, to agree to something that was killing him inside. But when at last he lifted his head and looked at the Serenian, he gave his word that he would grant Conar's request.

## Chapter Nineteen

Lord Legion A'Lex sat down with a heavy thud, his mouth gaping open as the woman standing before him demanded once more to have her request carried out with alacrity. He swung his gaze to Lord Teal du Mer and found that man staring with shock at her, as well. Swinging his attention the other way, he looked into the amused face of Prince Chase Montyne.

"She has every right to ask it of you, Legion," Chase commented dryly.

Legion's shoulders drooped and he slumped in the chair, dropped his chin to his chest and let out a moan of despair. He shook his head, mumbling to himself that he couldn't believe any of this was happening.

"Such things are done here, aren't they?" he heard her ask him. "I was under the impression this was a civilized country."

Lifting his head slowly, Legion glared at her. "It is, Madame!"

"Then I see no reason why you can not accommodate me, Lord Legion." She turned her imperial stare to Montyne. "I don't believe I am being unreasonable, do you, Chase?"

Montyne shrugged. "No, I don't believe you are."

"But..." Legion began only to be cut off by the elderly man who had been listening with keen interest to the goings on in the library of Boreas Keep.

"Not that you've asked my opinion, Legion," the man injected, "but I am inclined to side with Her Grace. We all know Conar's propensity for foolishness. I do believe I dropped him on his head when I delivered him, but that is beside the point." Healer Cayn Summerton sniffed with disdain. "The lad comes unhinged easily and I believe Her Grace has found a way to screw him back into place." He chuckled at his remark. "So to speak, Your Grace." He winked at the lady.

"There is a law that provides for it, Legion," Prince Coron McGregor remarked. "Dyllon and I looked it up last eve. It's in the Eighth Tome on page ...."

"I don't give a rat's ass where the law is," Legion shouted. He plowed his thick fingers through the waves of his hair, the color of which his little half-brother, Conar, had turned from a luxurious dark brown to nearly-gray over the years. "I ain't saying we can't do it. I'm just saying I don't think we should do it until we hear from him!"

"And give the idiot time to circumvent the law by doing something patently stupid like marrying that Inner Kingdom slut?" Catherine shouted at her brother-in-law.

"Even if he did," Coron interrupted, "it wouldn't matter." As Conar's second wife turned on him, glowering hot fire at his young face, Coron held up his hand. "Peace, lady! What I'm telling you is even if big brother married half a dozen women, he'd *still* be legally bound to you according to royal law. He signed a contract between this household and yours in St. Steffensberg and although the marriage has not been blessed here, he is still your husband until Tribunal Law says he isn't."

"And if Legion will get off his high horse," Dyllon, the youngest brother of Conar McGregor, put in, "we can tie Conar to you with string that will never come unraveled no matter who he brings back to Serenia with him."

"Or how many," Coron added.

Catherine swung her attention back to Legion. "Well?" she demanded.

Legion threw up his hands. "You win, Madame!" he sighed. "I'll have the High Priest meet us at the Temple and we'll marry you and Conar by proxy under Tribunal Law."

Chase glanced at his own wife, Sabrina, and winked. "She's got him, now."

Sabrina smiled sweetly. "Well and truly," she answered.

Gezelle, a woman who had loved Conar McGregor for most of her life, looked up from the floor where she had been concentrating her attention. She studied the Outer Kingdom woman who had the day before come barging into Boreas Keep, unannounced. Having, as yet, to be introduced to the woman, Gezelle had had plenty of time to form an opinion of her by simply listening to what she said and watching her. What she saw, what she heard, and what she was able to ascertain about this strange woman, had made Gezelle keep silent, keeping her opinion to herself although no one had asked her yet what she was thinking. Not even her brother, Teal, who had finally come back to the fold upon learning of their older brother, Roget's, death in Rysalia.

"Penny for your thoughts," Sentian Heil asked her as he knelt down beside her chair. He turned his attention back to the woman across the room.

"She's loud," Gezelle commented.

"I believe the word is *intens*'," Sentian chuckled.

"She's arrogant."

"So much like our dear Overlord, wouldn't you say?"

"She's bound and determined to get her way, no matter the consequences or the trouble."

"Who does that sound like to you?"

"She seems to think Conar didn't really want to put her aside."

"I can tell you for a certainty that he loves her, 'Zelle," Sentian said. "I don't believe he would have ever married her if he didn't."

"Oh, I've no doubt of that, Senti," she answered him.

"But something's bothering you," the Sentinel pressed.

"It's not her," Gezelle told him. "I believe she loves him so intensely she'd move heaven and earth to keep him. She's proven that by coming here. For that reason alone, I'll support her."

"Then what has you frowning so?"

"I don't know," Gezelle replied. "I just have this feeling that the marriage should never have taken place. I can't explain it, but it's like there's a pall over it, you know?"

"Don't borrow trouble," Sentian warned her. He glanced around and saw the woman they had been discussing heading their way. He stood up quickly, smiling hesitantly, not sure she'd remember him. Gezelle stood, as well.

"Sentian, isn't it?" Catherine asked as she put out her hand to the warrior.

A delighted smile stretched Sentian's mobile mouth. "Aye, Your Grace. It is." He looked down at Gezelle. "And may I present...?"

"There is no need for introductions." Catherine removed her hand from Sentian's and moved to Gezelle, embracing the smaller woman with a tender circling of her arms. "This is Conar's 'Zelle."

Gezelle's brows rose as she looked at Sentian, but she returned the embrace, carefully arranging her surprised face as Catherine stepped back from the hug.

"He's told me so much about you," Catherine was saying. Her pretty hazel eyes lit up. "Things he'll probably deny if you were to call him on it."

A faint blush seeped into Gezelle's cheeks and she didn't know what to say to that. How much this woman knew of her relationship with Conar McGregor remained to be seen, but any doubt Gezelle had of just how personal was the knowledge was removed when the Outer Kingdom woman smiled saucily.

"The devil's own, he is," Catherine whispered. "On his wedding day, no less!"

The faint blush became an infused scarlet and Gezelle had to hide her shock behind a hastily-lifted hand. Her gaze leapt to Sentian and she found that stalwart warrior's face just as red.

"But," Catherine said, all humor now vanished from her pretty oval face, "if he so much as tickles you ever again, dearling, I'll tack his hide to the nearest tree!"

"I believe it!" Gezelle gasped, humor invading her own stunned face. "And well he'd deserve it, too!"

Catherine slipped an arm through Gezelle's. "Tell me," she said as she began walking, drawing Gezelle with her. "Do you know of a good nurse here in the keep that I can get to care for Brianna?"

Gezelle stopped, her eyes narrowing. "Why would you need one other than me?" she asked. "I have cared for every McGregor brat born to that man since ...."

A merry laugh sprang from Cat's twitching mouth and she shushed the woman. "I was hoping you'd volunteer, but I didn't want to ask. Now," she said, resuming their walk. "There's some things he didn't tell me. I understand there is a woman named Dorrie?"

\* \* \* \*

Teal du Mer was still not as comfortable at Boreas Keep as he had once been. His disappearance on the day Conar McGregor had tried to take a flying leap off the battlements had caused a rift between him and several of the keep's inhabitants, especially Marsh Edan, the Master-at-Arms and that man barely spoke to him anymore.

But Legion did not seem affected by Teal's leaving or Gezelle, Teal's half-sister or Sentian. Teal's father-in-law, Captain Holm van der Lar of the Ravenwind, Conar's flag ship, still grumbled about Teal's flight, but Jenny, Holm's only daughter and Teal's beloved wife, had understood and forgiven him. Still, there were those among the remaining members of the Wind Force who looked at the gypsy with suspicion and not a little resentment for having caused Conar the first moment's worry.

"Have you heard from Shalu?" Teal heard Chase asking Legion as the three men walked out beyond the training compound.

"Not a word," Legion answered. "Wyn says he's still pissed."

"Hurt is more like it," Chase replied. "We had some real trouble with him in Odess. Holm had to lock him in the cabin until we cleared land."

"Why is it Conar causes so damned much trouble for the people who love him?" Legion inquired of no one in particular. "Was the man *born* to give gray hair to those who love him?"

"Grice thought so," Chase said, chuckling. At the mention of the Oceanian prince, dead these many months, the atmosphere changed among the three men.

"How is Chand doing?" Teal asked, having heard that the youngest, and only remaining member of the Wynth family, had had a nervous breakdown upon hearing of his beloved brother's death in Rysalia.

"Coron told me he went to see him a week ago and that Chand wouldn't even acknowledge his presence in the room. As far as we know, Chand hasn't said a word since they took him to Baybridge."

Teal shuddered. "Godawful place, that is," he said. The place where those with mental problems were interred was not far from Downsgate, the du Mer family estate.

"Belvoir is there with him," Legion said. "His loyalty is with Liza's family. The last time I got a letter from him, he said Chand still blames Conar for everything."

"From Gezelle's abortion to Grice's death," Chase remarked. "A lot of blame for one man to take."



"He's vowed to kill Conar," Legion said quietly. "In his present frame of mind, I think he'd really try."

"It's hard to believe his love for Conar could have turned so sharply to such hate," Chase commented. "That boy practically worshiped the ground your brother walked on, Legion. He endured two beatings on Conar's behalf in the Labyrinth just to keep Conar from being hurt again."

"There's a fine line between love and hate," Teal said. "I know that well enough."

"Yet you don't blame Conar for Roget's death," Chase said. "Anymore than Paegan blames him for Rylan's."

Teal looked out across the compound where he had spent many torturous days as a lad under the not-so-gentle tutelage of Hern Arbra. "We each lost a brother in Rysalia, Conar included. But we lost something else, too."

"What was that?" Legion inquired.

"Our belief that we would live forever." Teal stopped, bent over and picked up a leaf from the spreading chestnut towering above them. He held the leaf up to the men. "Everything has its season like this leaf. When our time and our mission in life is over, we fall, just as this leaf has done." He looked up at the tree. "We tumble from the tree and fall to the earth where we wither and die and eventually go back to the soil from which we sprang." He let the leaf drift from his fingers to the ground. "Do you blame the tree for that or do you blame the gods?"

"Why blame anyone?" Chase asked.

"Because it is human nature to do so," Teal answered. "Better to put the blame on someone else than to believe the same thing will happen to us one day."

"But why blame Conar?" Legion demanded. "Doesn't Chand realize how much Grice's death affected that man?"

Teal shook his head. "It doesn't matter." He reached out and put the palm of his hand on the tree trunk. "Conar is our tree, Legion; we, the branches. It has always been that way." He patted the wood. "Chand blames the tree, not the gods, for Grice's death."

A shout from the training compound drew the men's attention and slow smiles broke out on each face.

"And that," Teal said, pointing to one of the men sparring on the field, "is our sapling. Growing up to be another powerful, sheltering tree."

Legion looked at Tristan, his nephew, Conar's oldest legitimate son, and nodded. "The next generation," he concurred.

"To carry on after this tree is felled," Teal said softly. He patted the tree once more then shoved away from it, turning his back on it. "Let's hope his branches will be as loyal as Conar's have been."

## Chapter Twenty

"That was abominably rude, milord," Rachel sniffed. She stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at Conar. "Can you not be polite at all?"

Conar snorted. "That was as polite as I can get, Mam'selle," he warned her. "If you want polite, go seek out Ben-Alkazar."

Rachel's lips pursed tightly together and she turned away, clenching her hands as she paced the chamber. "Those women mean you no harm," she finally reminded him. "They only mean to protect you."

"I won't let those women keep slinking along in my wake, Rachel," Conar shot back. "I'll not have Meghan walking all over me, either!" He drained his glass of milk then set the tumbler down too hard on the table. "I've told her and told her about those blasted women and their supposed 'body guarding' and I'll be damned if I'll allow it! Do you hear me?" His voice had risen to thunderous volume.

"I would imagine you could be heard in Diabolusia, McGregor," she said dryly.

"Good!" he snarled.

Shaking her head at his stubbornness, Rachel knew she would accomplish nothing with him now. The silly man had his dander up and when Conar McGregor got ornery, as he was at that very moment, you might as well be talking to the wall for all the cooperation you'd get. She decided to change tactics.

"What time tomorrow will we be leaving for Gilead?" she inquired as she went to turn the covers back on the bed they had been sharing for nearly three months.

Conar glanced over at her, squinting at her sudden switch in the conversation. His suspicious nature brought a mulish tightening to his mobile mouth. "Why?" he asked, his voice thick with caution.

His wife's brow quirked. "You haven't changed your mind about me coming along on the raid, have you?"

Her answer did nothing to mollify his suspicion of her motives. "We leave at dawn," he answered, studying her reaction.

Rachel stopped plumping his pillow and gazed off into space. "That means we should arrive in Gilead about nine. If everything goes as planned, we should be back here by sunset." She looked around at him. "Does that seem right to you?"

Conar nodded slowly, still wondering in what direction her seemingly innocuous questions was taking them. He had the feeling she was attempting to manipulate him and being handled in such a way by a woman, any woman, had always made him uneasy and angry.

"How does roast mutton sound for supper?" she asked as she went about unlacing the ribbons of her camisole.

Those dark sapphire eyes narrowed. "Did I miss something here, Mam'selle?" he asked in a silky tone.

Rachel wiggled her shoulders, allowing the lace-edged camisole to drift over her arms and settle at her waist. She saw his gaze go to her naked breasts and nearly smiled for that had been her intention. Her hands went to the rucked material and she began to push in down over the flare of her hips.

"Miss what, milord?" she asked. She saw him wet his lips with the tip of his tongue as the

camisole dropped to the floor to pool at her bare feet.

Conar's attention drifted slowly upward from the thick triangle of ebon curls between Rachel's long, tapered legs to settle on her expressionless face.

"What?" she asked innocently.

The right side of Conar's mouth slowly lifted in a sardonic grin that would have been lecherous if the man's gaze hadn't been so damned cool. When one tawny brow crooked up in challenge and his powerful hands went to the buckle of his belt, Rachel knew she had him.

"You don't play fair, Mam'selle," he said as he pulled the black leather belt from his waist.

"Me?" she asked, lifting her slim arms above her head in a long, languid stretch. "What have I done, milord?"

Heat blazed in the Serenian's face as the twin peaks of perfection before him tipped toward the ceiling, their dusky nipples an invitation he had no intention of declining. He walked to her and reached up to take her elevated wrists in his hands.

"You know damned well what you're doing, Rachel," he growled as his hands slid slowly down her raised arms. His palms slid under her arms, circled her back and continued down until they cupped her luscious rump. With a possessive grunt, he jerked her against the thick bulge in his breeches. "*That* is what you've done."

The hardness of him, the heat of him pressed intimately against her, made Rachel nearly groan with satisfaction. As it was, the sound she made was something like a purr as she lowered her hands to the thickness of his blond hair.

"Did I do that?" she asked, running her fingers through that tawny mane. She lowered her head and ran her tongue along the sensitive column of his neck.

His hands tightened on her naked rump and then he lifted her, drawing her long legs around his waist, shifting her slight weight about his hips. "You know you did, you conniving little bitch," he said in a throaty whisper.

Rachel's smile was saucy as she draped her arms around his neck and wiggled against him. "I could do more to you, you know," she reminded him.

Conar snorted. "I intend to see that you do," he answered as he turned and walked to the bed with her.

Over the last few months, Conar had used Rachel to diffuse the tension building in his overworked body. Sexual release had always been a means for him to cope with the complexities of his day to day life. As a young man, he had taken any female who'd shown even the slightest interest in him, using them and discarding them as he did his worn-out clothing. When he had met, then married, Liza, he had buried himself in the silken folds of her sweet flesh to blot out the tragedies that had plagued the two of them from the very day they had first encountered one another. With Gezelle and Amber-lea and the whores he had practically raped during his tenure as the Raven, sex had been a means of alleviating the guilt he felt, a balm for the loneliness that Liza's absence had created in his very soul. With Catherine, the act had been a blessing, a need that had been fostered by nearly two years of abstinence. With Rachel, sex had become a driving release of pent-up frustrations that seemed only to become more intense with each violent coupling.

"Do you intend to stand there staring at me all eve, milord?" Rachel asked as she stretched on the silken coverlet.

His fingers went to the buttons of his cords. "I like looking at you, Mam'selle," he replied.

Her attention went to the eager flesh that leapt from the breeches as he pushed them down over his hips. She smiled. "So does he," she said sweetly. Her smile turned lustful as he loomed over, his right knee dipping the side of the bed as he swung his other leg over her, straddling her

tempting body.

He was sheathed inside her even before his full weight settled on the bed. Her legs wrapped around his waist, drawing him to her, imprisoning him in a warm, moist cell that drew him further still into the dungeon of Rachel's desire.

"Take me hard, McGregor," he heard her mutter as her fingernails raked at his scarred back. "Thrust deep, my lover. Plunge into me."

He obliged her with a strength and power that left them both gasping as his manhood penetrated to the hilt within her willing flesh. He hurt her. He knew he did. But it was what both of them wanted. What both of them needed at that moment. He rode her as he would have a dockside doxy, slamming into her with thrusts that were meant to give pain, and pleasure, at the same time.

"Yes!" she screamed, her nails digging bloody furrows into the flesh of his back, but he felt no pain. She doubted he would ever feel sensation in the carnage of his ravaged back ever again.

"Is this what you sought, woman?" he panted against her neck. His shaft ripped into her, withdrew, then cut another path through the very core of her.

"I want you," Rachel said, clinging to him as though she never meant to let him leave her. "I want you, Conar." Tears slid down her cheeks from the happiness his lovemaking never failed to bring to her heart. "I want you."

"You have me," he hissed. He could feel the surge of his seed building, the explosion threatening to erupt at any moment. His hands dug into her buttocks, lifted her so that his penetration would be as deep as humanly possible for him to attain. "Have all of me!"

Rachel's legs clenched around him and she arched her hips up into the heat of his groin. The tiny itch that had started in the core of her was building, becoming a maddening agitation that made her grind against him, swiveling her hips as he plummeted into her as far as his rigid flesh would allow. She felt him tense, felt his arms go as unyielding as stone and she clung to him, calling out his name, burying her teeth in the throbbing column of his neck.

"Rachel!" he bellowed as his shaft leapt within her, emptying himself into her pulsing velvet sheath. He arched his head back, squeezing his vivid blue eyes closed, calling out her name once more as he shot life-giving streams of seed into the fertile soil of her womb.

Her climax came, wrapping around him, gripping him with tiny tugs of welcome and she felt him shudder against her, pleased that he had given her pleasure. As he collapsed, spent, against her, she enveloped his sweaty body against her and held him, cooing softly to him, smoothing the damp hair back from his forehead as his cheek lay against her shoulder.

"I love you," she whispered. Her arms tightened possessively around him. "Before all that is holy, I love you."

Conar opened his eyes and stared across the room they shared. Her admission did not surprise him. Some part of him had known all along that her affection for him had become something he wished with all his heart it had not become. He regretted it, felt guilty about it. He would just as soon leave their relationship strictly on a sexual basis, but even though it was that for him, it had gone far beyond that for Rachel. He hadn't wanted her to love him. Hadn't meant for it to happen. Just as he had not meant to do what he knew he had done tonight.

"Milord?" she questioned him, sensing the burden of his reaction to her words. "I expect nothing of you." She caressed his neck. "I swear it."

"I know," he sighed, gathering her to him. His sweaty body stuck to her as he shifted his weight from hers and turned to his side, drawing her with him and into the safety of his arms. Cradling her head against his damp shoulder, he stroked her silken back. "I know you don't,

Rachel."

## Chapter Twenty One

Sajin Ben-Alkazar's frown continued to deepen as he read, then re-read, the letter from his sister. When at last he was satisfied that he had not misread the missive, he crumpled the parchment page in his powerful fist and slammed his hand against his leg, his lips pursed tightly together. With a snarl, he sailed the offending letter across the room.

"Bad news I take it?" Azalon quipped as he turned to cast an amused glance at the ball of discarded parchment.

"Women!" was the grumbled reply.

Azalon nodded sagely. "The bane of many a man's existence," he agreed.

The nomad prince flung himself into a chair and slouched, his normally placid expression now filled with the light of mayhem. "I could beat the woman black and blue and it would do little good in achieving any semblance of cooperation from her."

"Aye," Balizar chuckled, "but it might well gain her attention, at least."

Sajin cast a jaundiced eye at the transplanted Serenian warrior. "You don't know my sister, Arbra. Such a solution would only make her the more stubborn, I fear."

"What's she done to cause you such anger, nomad?" Conar asked as he looked up from the map he had been drawing.

With a disdainful shrug of his wide shoulders, the Kensetti's answer came from between clenched teeth. "Oh, nothing of any real import," he snapped. "She's just decided to drive me to an early grave with her foolishness." He spat out a vulgar word, then sat up in the chair, leaned forward so that he could speak to his friend. "You never had a sister, did you, McGregor?"

Conar shook his head. "Not that I know of, at any rate." His blue gaze sparkled with mirth. "But, as you are fond of telling me, nomad, I don't know everything."

Sajin snorted. "Fine time to admit it," he grumbled. "Count your blessings that you have not been so encumbered." He swung his angry gaze to Asher. "*You* know what I'm talking about, don't you, Stone?"

Asher's left brow rose in question. "Not unless you decide to tell me, I don't."

The animosity between the two men, half-brothers, had not cooled to any discernible degree, but at least they no longer glowered at one another when they happened to be in the same room.

"Willfulness!" Sajin snapped. "Women are getting to be just too damned willful! You can't tell them what to do anymore without having them tell *you* they don't have to do it unless they want to!" The nomad pounded the chair arm with a bunched fist. "They do what they want, when they want and the hell with what their men folk say!"

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Conar remarked as he began to re-fold the map on which he'd been working. "I like having a woman as my equal rather than as my chattel, nomad." He laid the map aside. "It makes for more stimulating conversation and one hell of a sex life."

"Then you take Sybelle," Sajin snarled. "Maybe you can do with her more than I have been able to!"

Conar grinned. "Whatever she wrote in that letter must have put a burr under your tail."

"I ordered her to get her ass here to Abbadon and she tells me—no—she informs me that she is content in Helix and that is where she will be staying as long as I am playing warrior in the sandbox with the Infidel dog!"

One thick golden brow lifted. "Is that what she calls me?" Conar asked.

"Among other, less charitable things," Sajin snorted.

He looked over at his friend. "Don't ask me what other things for I really don't think you'd care to know how little my sister thinks of you, McGregor."

Conar laughed softly. "I don't imagine she's called me anything I haven't been called before." He got up, stretched, then shot an admiring glance at Azalon. "You did good today, Ben-Hasheed." A wide, teasing grin appeared on the mobile mouth of Conar McGregor. "For a Rysalian."

Azalon blushed to the roots of his coarse black hair. "One does what one can, milord Khamsin," he answered, pleased that his leader had singled him out. He looked about him, seeing approval on the faces of the other men in the room and drew his shoulders back, inordinately content with his new station in life as warrior instead of merchant.

"We'll hit the slave depot at Tarses this Friday morning. If you have any questions, you'd better ask now." Conar looked around the room but no one seemed to have any concerns about the upcoming raid in two days. "Any comments? All right, then. I'll see you gentlemen in the morning."

Sajin nodded absently as his friend left the room amidst mumbled 'good eves' from those gathered. His dark gaze followed the Serenian until Conar was out of sight.

"Sometimes," Balizar said as he got up from his chair and stretched his aging bones, the sound of those old bones popping making everyone except him wince, "I wish I'd known that boy when he was younger."

Asher turned his head to look at Arbra. "Why is that?"

Balizar let out a long sigh. "I came across some letters from my brother, Hern. I hadn't read some of those letters in thirty years, don't even know why I kept them." He snorted softly. "Just the old fool in me, I suppose."

"Maybe you just didn't want to let go of your brother," Rupine remarked. He drew on his pipe, withdrew the stem from his mouth and pointed at Balizar for emphasis. "Or maybe you thought it might be the only legacy you'd ever have from him."

Balizar nodded. "Aye. That's more the truth of it." He crammed his big hands into the pockets of his burnoose then leaned heavily against the wall. "I've been trying to decide if I should let him read 'em."

"Conar?" Asher asked. At Balizar's grunt of agreement, the younger man cocked his head to one side. "Is there something in them that might be of help to him?"

"Aye, I believe so," Balizar answered. "One or two of 'em might even be the answer to what he's seeking."

"That being what?" Sajin inquired, curiously.

"Like I said," Balizar continued as though the nomad prince had not wanted clarification of his last answer, "I wish I'd know the lad way back then." His face turned hard. "Before all his real troubles started." He took one meaty hand out of his pocket and wiped his sweaty face. "Before he had more pain that he could handle and while he was still innocent of most of life's treacheries."

"Then you'd had to have known him before he reached his sixth birthday," Sajin said quietly. As the others turned to look inquiringly at him, the Kensetti shook his head. "Conar hasn't been innocent since then."

"The Domination had control of him, didn't they?" Rupine asked.

"They had more than control of him," Sajin answered. "They had his very soul in their corrupt hands."

"It molded him," Balizar said. "Made him what he is today."

"No," Sajin disagreed, "I believe your brother had more to do with making Conar what he is than any other influence." When Balizar looked his way, Sajin smiled. "Conar once told me that had it not been for Hern Arbra, he would have probably given in to what the Domination had tried to make of him. But Arbra taught him what it was to be a man, a real man, and that was something Conar never forgot nor took lightly." He fused his gaze with Balizar's. "Let him read the letters."

"It might help him to see that he and that little lady need to be together," Balizar said. "That he's more'n capable of taking care of her."

"Well," Sajin said, coming to his feet, "if those letters can accomplish that, my friend, I'll take them to him, myself."

"Even though you love the woman, yourself?" Asher asked, drawing Sajin's attention.

"That doesn't matter!" Sajin shot back.

"Keep telling yourself that and one day you just might come to believe it," Asher retorted. He would like nothing better than to see Sajin Ben-Alkazar with Catherine McGregor. Should that happen, Khamsin might well take his wedding vows to Rachel seriously.

\* \* \* \*

Catherine smiled at Legion then patted the seat beside her. She had been sitting on the rim of the fountain in the palace garden at Boreas for over an hour, drinking in the lush beauty of the place, inhaling the intoxicating aroma of the wisteria, honeysuckle and roses.

"Did the boys wear you out this morning when you went riding with them?" Legion asked as he sat down.

"Where do they get such energy and recklessness?" Catherine laughed. "I can't remember my brothers ever being that rambunctious when they were that age."

Legion chuckled. "They are Conar's sons, milady," he answered. "Before you condemn them, consider that fact."

Looking over to where Tristan and Regan were sitting at a marble table, intent now on a game of chess that had been going on for nearly three hours, the Outer Kingdom woman sighed. "I don't want to be here when checkmate is called."

"A wise decision," Legion agreed. "Sometimes it leads to bloodied noses and at others, a begrudging murmur of congratulation. You never know which."

"Is Little Brelan going to be that intense?" she asked, turning to smile at Gezelle, who was re-lacing the boy's shirt for what had to be the tenth time in the last hour.

"Probably not," Legion told her. "He has his mother's meekness about him." He glanced around at Tris and Regan. "Something neither Liza nor Raja was known for having." Turning back to cast a fond smile on the little boy running toward him, Legion squatted down beside the fountain and held out his hands. "That's not to say he won't be all boy, though." He scooped up the child and held him on his hip, laughing as Little Brelan tugged playfully on his uncle's thick beard. "Isn't that right, Brelie?"

"Right," the little boy giggled, nodding emphatically before twisting forward and holding his hands out to Catherine, who took him with a whoop of laughter.

"He's Conar's son, all right," Legion grumbled. "The lad would rather be in a woman's arms than anywhere else."

"I'll take him in for his nap, now," Gezelle told them as she came up to take the boy from Cat. "If I don't, you won't be able to live with him."

"In that regard he's Conar's son, too," Legion snorted.

Catherine kissed both of the little boy's chubby red cheeks then allowed Gezelle to take him



from her. "Sweet dreams, Brelie," she told him.

Legion sat back down on the fountain and stretched out his long legs, folded his arms over his chest and regarded the woman beside him. When she turned, an arch of inquiry on one thick brown brow, he chuckled softly.

"You've won them over, lady," he said, admiration thick in his gentle voice. "The whole keep is feeding from your hand. From the lowest scullery maid to the fiercest Palace Guard."

"And that amuses you, Lord Legion?" she asked, tilting her head to one side to look at him.

"Aye, it does," he answered. "Liza did much the same thing, gently inching her way into the hearts of Conar's people before they were married. Even had he not loved her, it was already too late. The people of Boreas Keep did and they would have stood, tooth and nail, against my little brother had it come down to a choice between him and their lady."

Catherine's forehead crinkled with concern. "That was not my intention, Legion," she said, fearful that he thought her a conniving witch.

"He'll think it was," Legion said in answer to her worry. "Knowing my brother, he will think you came here, charmed his people into liking you, so that he could not so easily dismiss you should he decide to do so." He shrugged. "Don't let it be a problem for you, Catherine. If I for one moment believed that you were not what you appear to be, I'd have managed to undermine your purposes. Conar's people aren't as gullible as he seems to think they are. They see the good where it is." He nudged her thigh with his knee. "As do I."

A slow, infectious grin spread across Catherine's lips. "Do you, now?"

"If I hadn't approved of you, lady," Legion told her, "I'd not have sanctioned the marriage by proxy." He let his pale blue eyes roam over her pretty face. "You are what my poggleheaded brother needs and I aim to see he has you whether he's willing or not."

"A rather tall order," Catherine laughed. "My husband is a very stubborn man, as you well know."

"Stubborn men can be putty in the hands of the right woman," Legion reminded her.

"A lesson I intend to see that Brianna learns early in life," Catherine answered dryly.

"Then you aren't worried about him putting you aside?" Legion asked.

The fierce hazel glow shooting from Catherine McGregor's gaze was lethal in its intensity. "I don't care if he comes back with a harem full of women, I have no intention of letting him cast me aside, A'Lex!"

A look of horror passed over Legion's face. "You don't think he would dare do such a thing, do you?"

Catherine's upper lip quirked upward with disdain. "He'd damn well better not!"

## Chapter Twenty Two

"Are you all right?" Sajin asked.

Conar pushed away from the wall. "What I get for not having eaten any breakfast," he mumbled. Turning, he unbuttoned his breeches and began to urinate against the wall on which he'd been leaning heavily before the nomad's untimely arrival. "Just a bit lightheaded, that's all."

Sajin, having looked away to give his friend privacy, wasn't reassured by the weakness in Conar's voice. There was a strained quality that told him the Serenian was either lying or dissembling or both.

"Everything sewn up?" Conar asked as he re-buttoned his breeches.

"Sure," Sajin answered, looking back around. He didn't like the pallor on Conar's face, either. Nor the numerous times he'd been witness to the Serenian having to empty his bladder. He stared into those alien sapphire eyes, too blank, too carefully so to be believed, then looked away. "No loss of life this time."

"Good," came the immediate, relieved reply. Conar started to walk away, his intent to check in on the questioning of the slave merchants Azalon had taken upon himself to do.

"Is it getting worse, Conar?" Sajin asked quietly, not surprised when his friend turned, had to blink to focus on him.

"No," Conar answered, snorting in what sounded like amusement.

Sajin locked his gaze with Conar's. "Are you sure?"

A touch of irritation settled on the Serenian's tired face. "Just because I skip my morning meal and get a bit lightheaded doesn't mean the illness is flaring up again, Ben-Alkazar," he snapped.

"Rupine said you were staggering out there." He pointed to the slave depot's main yard. "You almost got yourself skewered or don't you know that?"

"I tripped!" Conar snarled at him. "Can't a man trip in the fucking sand without having you old women thinking the worst of him?" He threw out a negligent hand. "I saw the damn attacker, nomad. Don't you *ever* think I didn't!"

The Kensetti stared at him for a moment, then looked away. There was more fever in the high flush on the pallid face than there had been earlier that morning when he had gone to awaken McGregor, something that, until that morning, had never had to be done. Usually the man was up at the crack of dawn, rearing to go when there was a raid scheduled.

"You would tell me, wouldn't you?" Sajin asked, his gaze intent on the men scattered about the depot.

"Tell you what?" Conar grumbled in annoyance.

"If you were getting worse?" Sajin turned back to look at his friend. "I would want to know."

For a moment there was no answer, then it was the Serenian's turn to look away. "Why?"

The answer was without hesitation. "Because you are my best friend and I love you."

Conar flinched. He hated lying. He had always hated lying. And until recently, there had never really been a good enough reason to ever do so. But now, now that he felt so bad it was hard just to make himself get up in the morn, now that his right leg constantly felt like rubber and tortured him with an agonizing pins and needles tingle most of the time, now that his vision was so blurred he could not read the finer print on some of the maps nor make out who was speaking to

him from across a large room, now that his hands trembled and he felt the need to piss with even more frequency, now that he had to speak slowly at times for fear his garbled speech would alert his friends and fellow raiders that he was unwell, he knew lying was the only way he could keep the respect and trust of his men.

"If you love me," Conar finally said, "then have a little faith in me, all right?" He reached out to put a numb hand on Sajin's shoulder. "All right?"

Sajin reached across his chest to cover Conar's hand. "Don't shut me out, McGregor," he pleaded. "Please don't do that. I want to know if ...."

"You'll be the first to know if I start getting worse, nomad." Conar gently shrugged off Sajin's hand. "I swear you will."

It was an oath he had every intention of breaking just as he had every intention of continuing to lie to cover up the failings of his body.

\* \* \* \*

Rachel held his head as he vomited. He had been out of his head for over half the night, alternately throwing up, holding his temples where a horrible ache had settled to torment him.

"Let me call Rupine," she'd begged him, but he had not allowed it.

"Just hold me," he had pleaded, holding on to her with his waning strength. Another violent bout of nausea had claimed him and she had ceased trying to make him listen to reason.

She had simply held him until exhausted slumber claimed his weak body.

\* \* \* \*

Conar turned away from the bright light and scooted up in the bed. The sour taste of bile still filled his mouth and he felt as though his teeth had grown a coat of fur. As the light rap sounded at his door, it brought with it a sigh of resentment and annoyance, but he bid his visitor enter in a voice that was hoarse from a night of throwing up.

"You got a minute?" Balizar asked. He stood framed in the doorway, his hat in his hand, his face somewhat sheepish at having invaded his overlord's bedchamber.

"I'm being lazy this morning," Conar said, knowing Rachel would have given that explanation for his late rising for he had told her what to tell the others.

"I can come back," Balizar said, his face coloring. "Or it can wait until you're up and about."

"No," Conar said in a pleasant, drawn out denial. "We can talk now."

Balizar walked shyly to the bed and stood there, twisting his hat in his hand. "You look a mite peaked," he said, scanning the paleness of Conar's face.

"Rough night," Conar answered, wagging his brows, knowing the aging warrior would think the night passed had been spent in rapturous entertainment of the flesh. Sure enough, the man's ruddy face turned a deeply infused red.

"Well, then," Balizar said, then repeated. "Well, then." He looked as though he could drop through the floor and feel comfortable about doing it.

Conar was having some trouble seeing that morning. His vision seemed more blurred than normal, but, as yet, he hadn't had to get up to piss. For that, he was grateful. He settled back against the headboard and blinked, trying to clear the fog from his vision with little result.

"Spit it out, Arbra," he said in a soft voice. "What's bothering you?"

Balizar looked up. "Ain't nothing bothering me, milord," he was quick to say. "It's just that I ...." He tore his gaze away. "I just ...."

"Hern never had any problem telling me what was on his mind," Conar said, amused. "If anything, the man told me things I didn't want to hear." He cocked his head to one side. "Is that

what you've come to do?"

Balizar shook his head. "I hope not." Reaching around behind him, he pulled out a stack of letters bound with a rawhide thong. He looked down at them, then tapped them against his hat. "Now that you've brought my brother up in the conversation, I guess I can give you these." He held the stack of letters out to his overlord.

Conar saw a blur of movement coming toward him and, with careful action, lifted his hand to intercept the bundle. "What is this?" he asked, hoping they were letters for that was what they appeared to be once he got them close enough to see. He glanced in the direction of Balizar's face.

"Letters from Hern," Balizar explained. He shrugged. "Some go back as far as thirty years and more." He twisted the hat. "He mentions you in all of 'em."

Surprise, and not a little pleasure, flitted across Conar's heart. He held the precious letters in his left hand and then stroked them gently with his right. "Hern," he said quietly.

"Aye." Balizar moved a bit closer to the bed, encouraged by the soft, wistful way Conar had spoken his brother's name. "I thought you might like to read what he says about you."

Conar's head came up. "About me?" Puzzlement slid over his face. "What about me?"

Balizar extended his hand, pointing at the letters with his cap. "There's all kinds of things he wrote me about you, milord." He smiled with fond memory, then chuckled. "Many a thing he thought I'd like to know about the future King of Serenia in case I ever wanted to come back there."

The priceless bundle in his hands meant more to Conar than he could have expressed to another living being. He suspected Balizar knew how much Hern's letters meant for they no doubt had great value to Hern's brother, as well. But to Conar, they were a material source of a man he had loved like a father, even more than he had loved his natural father.

"I think he would have liked for you to read them," Balizar said.

Conar laid the bundle in his lap, knowing there was no way he could cipher the scribbling that had passed for writing with Hern. Not even had his vision not been doubling. The only one at Boreas who could accurately read Hern's writing had been Cayn.

Sensing that to be the case, Balizar looked down at the floor. "Would you like me to read you some of 'em, milord." He glanced up sheepishly. "Hern wasn't one of the best pensmen around, I'm thinking."

A slow sigh of relief escaped Conar. Here was a way for him to hear what Hern had had to say and not have to admit that he couldn't have read even his own reckless handwriting.

"I'd appreciate it," he said in a choked voice. He returned the letters to Balizar.

Pulling up a chair, Balizar sat beside the bed and slid the rawhide thong from the bundle. He opened one letter and then smiled coyly. "This one was written when you was about four," he said. Clearing his throat, he began to read.

"My brother:

I blistered his little arse, Bali. Embarrassing me and the Lady like he did. You ain't never seen no little rapsallion who can think up such mischief 'till you've seen this one. And with a perfectly angelic face, mind you. What did he do, now, you may ask? Well, Bali, I'll tell you!

"We was going to the country fair, the one over to Fehring? Gerren had asked me to take the Lady and the lad and, much as I had to do training them new recruits of his, I agreed although I knew damned well there'd be hell to pay if that wee brat got out of line again.

"Well, anyway. We get over to Fehring and she buys a bunch of silk and satin and the like and we get the lad some spun candy and such to keep him content. Now, that, brother of mine, was a mistake, for the lad got it all over her skirt with his pudgy little hands, wiping them on that pretty satin fabric like it was burlap! I yell at him, as she's always insisted I do to keep him in line, and he

runs away. Runs away, mind you! I chased that insufferable little booger all over that fairground until I caught him snitching apple dandies from a poor old woman's stall. Well, when I reach out to take hold of him, he starts to screaming that I'm trying to kidnap him! Have you ever heard the like of it? Me, trying to kidnap the Heir-Apparent he tells the whole bleeding world. And what happens to me? I get myself arrested by one of the sheriff's men and they cart me off like a common criminal before the Lady can gainsay 'em!

"When I got out of the jail, I turned his skinny little rump over my knee and beat the daylights out of him. Imagine it, Bali! Your brother in jail! The shame alone was enough to make my hand heavier and my hits harder than I had intended, but let me tell you this—the lad won't be doing that shit ever again! Nor sit down half as well as he did before he decided to play the imp with this Windwarrior!

"Now, you may be asking what the Lady was doing while I walloped her favorite son. Well, she was laughing, Bali! Laughing at all his caterwauling and playacting like I was killin' him. She knew I wasn't hurting our boy anymore than he deserved to be. Not that I didn't want to tan his terrible little hide 'til he couldn't sit down for a month of Sundays! She just knew it wasn't in me to ever hurt Conar."

The Serenian prince was smiling when Balizar finished the letter. He looked up. "I remember that. Did he always think I was his son?"

Balizar blushed. "He really did, milord. Nothing could ever have convinced him otherwise."

"Yet he never considered Galen in such a way," Conar mused.

"Your twin wasn't the man you were, milord," Balizar answered. "Hern wanted only a son who he could be proud of. He loved you more than you will ever know."

Conar felt a pang of grief drive through him. "I loved him like a father," he said. He plucked at the cover over his legs. "He might as well have been one to me for all the love he gave me in return."

Somewhat embarrassed by that small confession, Balizar stuffed the first letter back into its envelope and pulled out another.

"Bali," it read.

"I did as you suggested and let him ride that big sorrel. He did well enough, but that beast threw him enough times that he finally got the hint that the steed wasn't ready to be ridden yet. But he won't give up. Not my Conar. We'll just keep that beast out in the corral until the lad's a mite older. He'll break that mean monster, yet. He'll either break that stallion or get his own neck broke in the process. I'll let you know how it comes out.

"Aye, he wasn't pleased with not being allowed to go with me and Gerren off to that skirmish over by the Necroman border. I swear that bastard Shalu, the new King there, has got to be the most ornery son-of-a-bitch this side of Diabolusia. He didn't want to listen to reason, but we finally convinced him. That little snob had no business going over there and insulting one of the Necroman's nieces, but then again, Galen McGregor has got to be as stupid as the day is long. You'd never catch my lad doing such a thing.

"I surely will miss him when he goes to that Temple, Bali. Me and the Lady are of a mind not to let him go, but Gerren is insisting on it. Mostly 'cause of that bastard, Tohre, the one who's in charge of novices. Tohre assured the Lady that he won't be there for more than two years, but there's something odd about the way that s.o.b. looks at my boy that makes the hair on my arms stand up like I was out in a summer lightning storm. He'll keep the boy longer if he can get away with it.

"Well, no use in belaboring how I feel about him going so far away from home. He won't be away all that long and maybe by the time he comes back, that stallion will have calmed down some."

Balizar folded the letter and slid it slowly into its envelope. He could tell that what he had just read had caused great pain for the man on the bed and he hadn't meant to do that, at all. He hadn't meant to read that letter, either.

"I'm sorry, milord. I ...."

Conar held up his hand. "It's all right. I knew he hadn't wanted me to go." He laid his head back on the tall head board and stared unseeingly at the ceiling. "Read another one."

Balizar chewed on his lip, trying to decide if he should, then opened another letter. He winced and made to re-fold the letter.

"Read it," Conar said, swinging his gaze to Balizar.

"I don't think ...." Balizar saw the command in that piercing gaze and sighed. He read with quiet desperation.

"B:

The gods help me, brother, but I've never in my life wanted to kill anyone as fiercely as I want to kill Kaileel Tohre! If I could get my hands on that scrawny neck of his, I'd rip out his throat and shove my arm down it to pull out that black heart of his. If she hadn't made me promise not to do it, I'd have gone after him the moment she and I laid eyes on our son.

"God, Bali! The boy was nothing but skin and bones! His little shoulders were so thin you could see every vein in his body under that pale skin. He looks like they ain't been feeding him at all.

"I can't talk now. I'll write more later. I've got to go see to him.

"I'm back, Bali, and as close to being driven out of my mind as a man can get. I don't know if I can stand it, nor if I even want to try. But I'd best explain to you why you won't be hearing from me for awhile.

"He tried to kill himself, Bali. My son tried to kill himself last night. He took a dagger—the gods help me but it was one of mine—and he sliced open both his little wrists. If I hadn't gone to check on him like I told you I would, he'd have bled to death. As it was, it took Cayn a good long while to stitch close them cuts. I've never been so afraid in my life as I was holding that child to me, cradling him against me as Cayn sewed up them terrible, terrible wounds. Why, Bali? Why would he do such a thing? Does he hate having come home to us that bad?

"I can't go on, Bali. I've got to get to the bottom of this. I've got to understand why my boy would want to kill himself.

"Pray for him, Bali. Pray for your nephew. We've got to help him."

Balizar glanced up and found his overlord sitting there, his striking eyes closed, his hands clutching fistfuls of the sheet.

"I can come back another time, milord. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

Conar shook his head although he didn't open his eyes. "Read."

"Milord ...."

"Please." There was pleading in the prince's voice.

The next letter had to have been written on the day Conar had gone to Hern to ask the older man to train him to become a warrior.

"Bali:

The lad showed up at the training field today asking me to teach him to be a man. Those were his words, Bali. "Teach me to be a man, Sir Hern," he asked. "I need to know I can be a

man." Can you fathom it, Bali? Conar? Of all the McGregor line asking such a thing?

"At first it took me back, but then I reckoned they'd tried to turn him into one of them mincing fops the priesthood has an overabundance of today. I figured he might be thinking that he was weak. That he might not be made of the strong stuff his King was wanting him to be. We've never talked about why he wanted to kill himself that time and I suppose that's the way it's going to be. Maybe him thinking he didn't have the warrior instinct no more drove him to it. When he's ready to tell me why he did it, he'll tell me. I won't push him for it.

"Can you tell I'm happy having him back with me, Bali? Well, I can tell you....come tomorrow morning when I start his training, there won't be a happier man on this earth than your brother. He'll need to be handled roughly at first I'm thinking. If I show him any leniency, he might think this old man has turned soft in his middle age. I can't let that happen, now, can I?

"I'll send you off a letter at the end of the week if the brat ain't done me in. Take care."

Balizar smiled as he replaced the letter. Glancing over at his overlord, he could see a gentle answering smile on that tired face. "Another one?" the old warrior asked.

Conar nodded. He had gone back to that sweltering day in August, the thirteenth summer of his life, when he had stood on the training field with Hern Arbra and made his request. He could still hear the men exercising, see Hern's stern face as he glowered down at him, warning him if he didn't do well the Master-at-Arms would have him peeling potatoes for supper.

Opening the next letter, Balizar's face paled. "I ought not to read this one, milord," he said and resolutely put the folded page away.

Conar opened his eyes and looked over at him. "Why not?" he asked.

Balizar couldn't meet his glance. "It was written the next day." He started to open another.

"Read it."

The older man shook his head. "I think not." He snapped another page open.

"I think you should," Conar said. When Arbra looked up at him, there was pain in the aging warrior's eyes.

"Milord," Balizar said. "I'd rather not."

Conar thought he knew what the letter might contain. After all, he'd lived through that long, agonizing night after moving a few of his meager belongings into the training hut with Hern. He remembered well that night.

"If I can stand to hear it, Bali," Conar said, using Hern's affectionate term for his brother, "then you can stand to read it."

The older man hesitated, not sure if the letter's contents should ever be read aloud for fear other ears, enemy ears might hear and realize what had happened to a young innocent boy so many, many years before.

"Please?" Conar asked, pain in his own direct gaze.

Balizar sniffed, angry at himself for ever having started this. Resolutely, he withdrew the damning letter and began to read. The page rattled in his big hand.

"There has never been a darker night than the one just passed, Balizar. Never has there been a more evil night for this man. Never have I felt more helpless or more enraged than at this moment. Can you not tell from the scribble of my handwriting that I am trying desperately to hold on to what sanity and temper I have left? Do you remember when Papa died? That's the only time I can ever remember crying before last eve, Bali. It ain't a manly thing to do and I always thought the men who did it were weak and soft. Well, no more. I ain't weak and I'm damned sure not soft, but I cried like a babe in arms last eve and unless I've totally lost all my wits, I'll dare say to you that I just might be crying again.

"I had the lad move into the training barracks last night as I might have told you. Well, he woke me and the others up screaming like a Chalean banshee during the night. Near scared my heart to a standstill, I can tell you. I go running in there and the lad is cowering over in the corner beside his cot, his pitiful little arms over his face like someone was beating him, trembling so hard I could hear his teeth clicking together. That boy's eyes were wild, Bali. As wild as a trapped animal and when I reached down to lift him up, he snarled at me, his teeth bared just as though he were one. It took me a full fifteen minutes to calm him down enough to where he knowed where he was. When he finally recognized me, he shot into my arms like the demons of hell were on his heels. I told you I thought him physically weak....well, them little arms of his was so tight around my neck he near strangled me and me a man full grown.

"Of course there was a whole passel of trainees standing about gawking so I shooed them away and took the lad into my room with me. I had a hell of a time prying them arms from around my neck, I can tell you, but I finally got him to lay down. I thought maybe washing his face would help, giving him something potent to drink to bring the flush back to his cheeks, but when he tried to drink my whiskey, he spilled it all down his nightshirt and I had to help him take the silly thing off.

"Bali, if I live to be an old, old man, something I'm reckoning I'll never do if this lad don't stop scaring me so, I won't ever forget the horror of what I saw on that child's back when I pulled his shirt off. They'd whipped him, Bali. Whipped that boy like he was a commoner. Like he was some kind of servant to be reprimanded with a strap. There was lines crossing his back, some of which I think may damn well be there the rest of his life. And there were some dark spots on his back and shoulders and, being a man accustomed to war and torture, I knew them to be burn marks.

"I'd often laughed at men who said they'd been so mad they'd seen red, but I'll tell you man to man, Bali, my sight went beyond red to blood-scarlet when I realized those bastards up to the Temple had deliberately hurt this child of mine! If I could have left him at that moment, though I dared not do so, I would have fled this keep and burned that evil place to the ground over their heads.

"And that ain't all they'd done to him, Bali, although I won't ever be telling you the whole of it. Just keep your council, man, and my lad's secret with you to your grave for I know you're perceptive enough to understand what must have happened in that vile place."

Conar looked over at Balizar as the older man stopped reading. There were tears in the pale blue eyes that refused to meet his own.

"You know what was done to me, don't you?" Conar asked quietly. At Balizar's miserable nod, the Serenian prince let out a long breath. "We never talked about it, Hern and me," he explained. "Not even years later when he and Belvoir and Sentian Heil came after me at the Monastery."

Balizar nodded again. "There's a letter that deals a bit with that, milord." He shuffled through the letters until he found the right one. Opening it, he smoothed out the sheet.

"He's home again, Bali," the letter read.

"He's brought his lady back to Boreas. But there's a look in his eye that worries me greatly and I fear once Gerren finds out what the lad has done, the fool will disinherit my boy."

Conar leaned his head back against the headboard. His father and king had done just that.

"But don't you be paying no attention to anything bad you hear about Conar McGregor, Balizar. None of it will be the truth. Well, not all of it, anyway. He only did what he had to do to protect his lady. He'd have given his life for her as I would have given mine for his mother."

A soft smile stretched Conar's full lips as he listened to the words of a dead man defending



him.

"He'll always be there to protect his lady, Bali. I have no fear of that, although I am thinking he will have to be doing it somewhere outside of Serenia. If that happens, I reckon I'll be resigning my commission with Gerren's Guard and be leaving with my boy."

Conar's head snapped up and he turned to look at Balizar. "He meant to go into exile with me," he said with a gasp of shock.

"To hell and beyond if he'd had to," Balizar agreed.

"He never told me that he had planned to leave with me," Conar said, tears filling his own eyes. "When we were in the Labyrinth together, he never told me that."

"I suppose he thought you knew he would," Balizar replied.

A single silver tear slid unheeded down the younger man's cheek and fell soundlessly to the coverlet.

Balizar looked away from the grief he saw building on his overlord's face. "There are only two more letters after this and they were written before you were arrested. I never got them until someone at Boreas Keep sent me his belongings after he ...." The aging warrior's lips trembled. "You know. After he was killed."

How well he remembered that day, Conar thought with heartbreaking guilt. He had been the cause of Hern's death in the sandy hell of the Labyrinth Penal Colony on Tyber's Isle.

"Here," Balizar said, wanting to wipe away the shame and hurt he was seeing. "Let me read you this one. It was written just before you met your lady, I think. I don't know why I never got it. Maybe he thought he'd sent it and hadn't."

"Balizar:

Conar, my bonny warrior-Prince, has more to him that Gerren realizes. The lad may be the very demon with the swaying skirts and the coy lasses who flock around him like flies to shit, but mind you, Bali, the Prince is more a warrior than his King ever was or ever will be. There is fire in Conar McGregor and it's burning a desire in his gut to crush them who've done ill to him and his. I can't tell you how proud of him I am—there ain't words in any language in the Seven Kingdoms and beyond that can express it to you. But this much I can say, and say with heartfelt conviction: My brave young Windwarrior will be a man to reckon with one day and the heavens help them what think to deny him what is rightfully his!

"He took on a Temple Guard the other day, a man twice his size and nearly as mean, and beat the man into senselessness. I don't know what the bastard had done, but the lad tried to get him hung for it. Well, that high and mighty Tribunal of ours would have none of it, but they did sentence the guard to life at the Labyrinth which somewhat mollified Conar, although he was hoping to see the bastard swing."

"He raped a little girl," Conar said, remembering Lydon Drake all too well. "Holm van der Lar's daughter."

Balizar looked up, wincing. "The sea captain?"

"Aye," Conar acknowledged.

A soft whistle came from the older man's lips. "No wonder he's so loyal to you, lad."

"Go on," Conar said, jutting his chin toward the letter in Balizar's hand. Lydon Drake was a memory he had tried hard to push as far down into his psyche as he could get it.

"I am thinking, brother," Hern had written, "that no man will ever be able to stand up to my lad when the brat has his dander up. He'll be one hell of a fine warrior one day and I mean to be there at his side to see it happen."

Balizar put that letter away and opened the last one in the stack. He glanced up and smiled,

then started to read.

"Well, Bali," Hern Arbra had opened his letter, "the lad is hitched! I wish you could have seen his face when he realized the 'Toad' as he's called her all these years is really the woman he's been in love with all this time! I didn't dare tell him I knew who she was all along. He'd have never forgiven me for that. But just to see his face the morning after the wedding, see the peace there, the happiness, the love glowing in his eyes, so like those of his dear mother, was worth every time I had to bite my tongue to keep from telling him who she was. I don't know who was happier about it: me or her mother! Of course, Conar was floating too high in the air to have noticed anybody but the lass.

"She'll make him a fine wife, Bali. God, but will she make him a fine lass! She'll curb that reckless streak in him and get him to settle down. I know one thing for sure, if he ever strays, she'll have him lashed to a post and do the whipping herself! Not that that's likely to happen for the lad worships her as much as I believe she does him.

"I told her Mama that she had nothing to worry about as far as my lad being able to keep her little girl safe. The boy would move heaven and earth to stay with Elizabeth Wynth McGregor and shift the moon in its orbit to keep her safe. He's a strong man, Bali. A good man. And we all know that evil don't stand a chance against a good man. He'll find the way to keep those slimy bastards of the Domination away from their doorstep. He'll let no man, nor woman either, keep him from the woman he loves. I have that much faith in him."

Conar wiped at his face, hearing the replica of Hern's voice reading Hern's words to him as though the dead man were speaking them himself.

"He might doubt himself at times, but he's smart enough and savy enough to know that as long as it is what he wants, nothing can stand in the way of his happiness. Not the Domination, not his king, not even himself. And Conar McGregor is his own worst enemy, you know. But I can help him overcome that. Me and his lady-love. We just have to teach him what the two of us already know: Nothing and no one can stand against him or take what is his unless he lets it happen. And we know he ain't going to do that!

"I wish you'd come to visit, Bali. I want you to meet him so badly. After all, he's your nephew, although only me and you and the Lady has ever known that. You'd love him as much as I do and that's for a certainty. He is what our Papa would have called a hero, Bali. His people love him and would do anything on earth for him.

"Well, I'd best be getting on with it. Belvoir and me got a bet going on when the first little Conar-heir will come popping out. I say right at nine months!"

"It took awhile longer," Conar said quietly. He thrust a trembling hand through his hair. "Two years later, actually." His bladder was hurting and his head throbbing unmercifully.

Sensing his overlord's discomfort, Balizar stood up, slipped the rawhide thong back over the bundle of letters then bent over to lay them in Conar's lap. At the look of surprise on the younger man's face, Balizar grinned.

"He would have wanted you to have 'em, milord."

Picking up the yellowed letters, Conar only nodded. He would treasure them as Balizar had. "Thank you, Bali," he said. Looking up, he smiled, although the emotion never reached his sad eyes. "Thank you very much."

"You may not want to be hearing this, milord," Balizar answered, "but I think you know it in your heart. Your lady needs you and she's made that plain enough to you by going to Serenia. She loves you so terrible much."

"It's dangerous for a woman to love me," Conar replied. "Dangerous and not all that smart."

"Maybe so, but unless I miss my guess, your lady would rather be in danger with you than unhappy without you." The warrior put a heavy hand on Conar's shoulder. "When you've done all you mean to do here, you go back to Boreas and take up where you left off with that lady, lad. She's your destiny."

How he hated that word, he thought as he forced a smile of understanding to his lips. Destiny, to him, meant pain and sorrow and grief and as much unhappiness as the old gods could heap upon him. Not once had his destiny ever brought to him the peace he had longed for all his life. But it had brought Liza. And it had brought Catherine.

Destiny had also taken both of them away.

"You can do whatever you set out to do, milord," Balizar reminded him. "Hern knew that. Hern had faith in you. In your ability to protect your own." He squeezed Conar's shoulder. "Will you be letting him down after he put so much store in you, lad?"

Staring up into a face that was identical to Hern's, listening to the voice that might well have been Hern's own, Conar could feel his mentor's spirit hovering in the room, goading him as Hern often did, chastising him as Hern always had, encouraging him as Hern would have had he been there.

"You're not a coward, milord," Balizar added. "You're not one to run away from your troubles. Why start now?"

Why, indeed? Conar thought after the old warrior had left him. As he stood there, relieving the horrible pain in his bladder, he could not help but remember something Hern had told him long, long ago.

*"Whoever told you life was fair, brat? Do you think life is going to let you win just because you're the so-called Heir-Apparent? Well, I'll disabuse you of that notion right here and now! Life don't give a flying shit who you are, boy, or what your station in this world is. You get knocked down just the same be you king or knave! You go after what you want because if you don't, someone else will come along and take it away from you and kick sand in your face in the bargain! You ain't no bleeding coward, Conar Alekandro! Get your ass up and do what you know is right! Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty or get your ass whipped. You might lose now and again, but I'll wager you'll win more often than not if you just put your mind to it. Don't you ever let me hear that you let someone take what was yours without you having put up one hell of a fight to keep it or I'll be the one to whip your ass!"*

He hadn't put up much of a fight to keep Catherine, he thought as he sat down heavily on the bed, his legs weak, his head spinning, the nausea having returned full force. He'd let life, and his enemies, take her away from him. He'd let that damnable destiny take her away from him as it had taken Liza away long ago.

"Fool," he called himself as he pushed up from the bed. He made it as far as the chair by the window before he collapsed, grabbing hold of the arm, nearly upending the heavy piece of furniture before he could sit down. The last thing he needed was Rachel to come strolling through the door, but he forced himself to smile at her. "I thought you rode into Dahrenia with Asher."

Rachel started to answer him but she had noticed the tremor in the hand holding desperately to the chair arm. She had noticed the pallor of his face and the sweat dotting his upper lip and running down his temples. She went to him and knelt by the chair.

"You're still sick," she accused, lifting her hand to feel his forehead. "You have a fever."

"Nothing new," he said, pulling his face away from her touch. He could not stop himself from shivering.

"I'm going to get Rupine," Rachel said. She started to get up but he put a hand out to cup

her neck.

"No," he told her, shaking his head although the motion made him sicker still.

"You were ill all night and you look terrible," she said. "And, by the Prophetess Mosen, Khamsin, you positively reek!"

"Such compliments will not turn my head, Mam'selle," he teased her. He shrugged. "My belly, maybe, but definitely not my head."

"This is no time to be funning with me, Conar!" she snapped.

He was in trouble with her, he knew, for the only time she ever called him by his given name, she was angry with something he'd done. He tried to soothe her, but she kept insisting on calling the physician to see to him.

"I told you no," he said with as much finality and conviction as he could muster despite the twist of his unruly tongue in his mouth. "I don't need him."

Rachel stared at him, itching to slap some sense into him and had he not appeared so sick, she well might have blistered his cheek. As it was, she reached to take his hand in hers, alarmed at the tremor and the white-hot dry heat of his flesh, and pressed his palm to her cheek.

"What can I do, Khamsin?" she asked, pleading in a voice that told him of her love for him.

He caressed her smooth cheek, delighting in the feel of her cool skin, wanting to ease her concern. "Just let me rest, all right? Just let me sit here and rest awhile. I'll be fine. If I get worse, I'll call you."

"But...", she started to protest, but he laid his hot fingers on her lips.

"And I'd rather sleep alone tonight, Rachel," he said.

"Why?" she gasped. "What have I done?"

He shook his head. "Nothing, sweeting, but I just think I'd rest better if I was by myself." He smiled. "Please? Just this once? I have a lot on my mind and a lot to think about."

Rachel watched him double over in the chair, twisting so that the hot bile which erupted from his lips spewed over the side of the chair and not into her lap. She scrambled up, holding his head as the vomit poured out of him, wondering how he could have so much in his belly when he'd eaten precious little that morning.

\* \* \* \*

"We know he's getting worse, Rachel," Rupine said. He looked at Sajin. "And we knew he would."

"Isn't there something you can do?" Rachel begged. "A potion? Anything?"

"Nothing that I know of." Rupine stood up wearily for he had spent most of the afternoon and into the early evening by Conar's bedside, trying to get the man's high fever down. "The malaria is treatable. The other?" He held up his hands. "I don't even know what it is to call this malady he has developed from the tenerse. How can I treat what I don't know?"

"What about Raphaella?" Sajin inquired.

"There again," Rupine answered. "She knows what has caused this illness, but she can only do so much herself. I shall write her, of course, or ...."

"Meghan will contact her," Rachel snapped. "There is no other way to reach the bitch."

Sajin smiled to himself. Conar's women all seemed to hate one another. "At least I think we've found out the real reason why he sent Catherine away," the nomad commented. "I called him on it when he was too weak to argue and got the truth of it at last."

"You should not have been baiting him with him ill!" Rachel castigated him. "The man is lying there ...."

"At my mercy," Sajin interrupted. "I know. You shouted that at me earlier, remember?"

Rachel's eyes narrowed into thin slits. "Don't do it again!"

Sajin shrugged. "Leave off, Rachel."

"It doesn't matter why he sent that bitch away," Rachel pouted. "She couldn't take as good care of him as I can, anyway."

You won't be allowed to care for him if he gets much worse, Sajin thought, although he didn't say it to the woman. Conar had already made plans to go to one of the Monasteries when his illness became unmanageable, but he doubted Rachel knew that.

"I'll look in on him again before I go to bed," Rupine told them. "It's just as well that you aren't in there to bother him, girl. He needs to rest quietly."

Rachel drew herself up and glared at the physician. "I wouldn't have bothered him, Uncle!"

"No, but he would have been obliged to talk to you or try to calm your fears and he doesn't need that right now." Rupine shook a finger at her. "Stay out of his room tonight Rachel. Do you hear?"

Sajin chuckled at the militant snort that exploded from the woman as she turned on her heel and stomped from the room.

"He has such a powerful affect on women, doesn't he?" Rupine said dryly.

If there was one thing Sajin understood well about his new friend, Conar McGregor, it was that women found Conar's defiance and the edge of danger about him intriguing. Such traits in a male were a devastating combination which gained a woman's immediate attention. But it was Conar's smoldering anger and at-odds melancholy that kept that attention. Not to mention his nonchalance and I-don't-give-a-damn-what-happens-to-me attitude that made women slather after him like bitch-dogs in heat. All that, combined with his devilish good looks, made for killer competition between him and other males. A competition Conar had rarely, if ever, lost. Someone less attuned to his own nature than Sajin might find a threat in that, but Sajin Ben-Alkazar found it funny.

"He doesn't always like the effect he has on them, either," Sajin laughed.

"Women like to coddle a man whether they know it or not. It's the mothering instinct," Rupine explained. "It's past time Rachel had a child to mother."

Asher looked up. "Do you know something we don't, Uncle Rupine?"

Rupine lifted one thin shoulder. "She's gaining weight. Have you noticed?"

Sajin sat up in his chair. "You think she's pregnant?" Conar wasn't going to be happy about that situation if she was.

"She has all the symptoms, but I could be wrong," Rupine admitted. "We'll just have to wait and see."

A long, heavy sigh pushed from Sajin's gut and his gaze went upward to the place where he knew his friend was sleeping. "Ah, Conar," he thought. "You aren't going to like this at all!"

## Chapter Twenty Three

Chaim Al-Shenkar slipped quietly down the corridor of the upper story. His bare feet made no noise on the stone floor as he crept quietly along. His hooded eyes moved constantly, searching, seeking, probing the darkened shadows of the corridor. His acute hearing strained to pick up the faintest footfall, the slightest movement. Satisfied there were no guards outside the chamber door toward which he was headed, a grim smile of purpose settled on the nomad's thin lips and he increased his pace. Almost without thought, he reached down to touch the dagger which he had stuck into the sash of his robe. Reassured that his protection was at his side, he stopped outside the unguarded door and slowly reached out to take the handle. Moving as silently as possible, he pulled down on the handle and eased the heavy wooden door open enough to be able to see through the crack.

The man Chaim sought was sleeping soundly, one arm flung out to the empty side of the wide bed, the other resting lightly across his belly. The faint sound of deep, regular breathing filled the room.

Glancing back down the corridor, Chaim motioned the men who had accompanied him to Abbadon Fortress to join him. He held his breath as the first of the two started down the long corridor. When he was certain the men were moving as cautiously and prudently as possible, their leader slipped unnoticed into the room of the man they had come to Abbadon to take.

Soundlessly, two dark figures joined Chaim in the room at the top of the fortress. No one spoke. They each knew what had to be done. Moving as one entity, they crept up to the bed as stealthily as they had been practicing for weeks and positioned themselves: one man on the left side of the bed, one at the foot, and one on the right. Three sets of eyes fastened on the sleeping man and held.

Chaim eased his right hand into the voluminous pocket of his burnoose and pulled out a small vial. From the man across the bed from him, he reached out to take a folded cloth. With precise care, Chaim uncorked the vial and turned the top of it over the cloth he held in his left hand. The liquid turned his fingers cold as it flowed onto the cotton material and saturated the cloth. When enough of the solution had covered the cloth, Chaim re-corked the vial and slid it back into his pocket. Glancing across to the man on the other side of the bed, Chaim nodded curtly. Then after turning his attention to the man at the foot, Chaim reached down so that his right hand could gently grasp the left wrist of the sleeper.

Very, very carefully, Chaim lifted that limp, relaxed wrist and brought it up to the pillow beside the sleeping man's head. There was no resistance, no sound, no movement at all from their target. Even when Chaim's right knee came up to dip the mattress, there was no reaction from the man on the bed. It wasn't until the cloth was jammed over his mouth and nose that the sleeper awoke with a grunt of surprise and instant action.

With a savage jerk, Conar reacted to the confinement that had awakened him. The hands which held both his arms and his ankles were strong, powerful, ungiving. The hand which covered the lower portion of his face had cut off his air and a portion of his brain screamed at him that whoever had come into his bedchamber were intent on smothering him. His head was pressed painfully into the pillow, his vision obscured from a fold of cloth clamped over his nose, but he fought the hard holds on him, trying to twist away from the vicious holds on his arms and legs. It wasn't until he heard the low, grating whisper that he realized that murder, at least not immediate

murder, was not what these men were about. Swiftly going from being afraid of dying from suffocation to being drugged from some unknown potion, Conar clamped his lips tightly closed and refused to draw air into his aching lungs.

"Breathe!" he heard the man who had straddled him demand. "Breathe!" The hand clamped down over his nose and mouth shifted a little. "Breathe it in, boy!"

Conar twisted to his right, felt a bony knee jamming into the soft part of his upper left arm as he was pinned to the bed. His vision watered from the pain of it and he sucked in a shallow breath, wishing he hadn't for immediately the cloying stench of whatever was on the rag burned his nostrils, penetrated swiftly and deeply into the back of his throat. He choked on the fumes, struggling to arch his body off the bed, to rid himself of the hand on his face and acutely aware of a smell that had managed to invade his very being with the swiftness of a loosened arrow.

"Breathe, damn it!" the man hovering over him hissed. "Breathe this shit in!"

His lips were stinging from the press of the liquid against his mouth. His world cantered off-kilter, righted, then slid violently away again as the light around him, what little light came in through the high, opened window slits, grew dim.

"Damn it, breathe, you little bastard!" he heard someone shouting at him. Then the sound faded, seemed to recede very slowly, drawn out into one long, creeping command. The fierce male voice that was ordering him to breathe in the suffocating fumes seemed to be coming from somewhere far, far away.

"Hit him!" another voice whispered loudly. "In the belly. He'll breathe!"

The hand covering his mouth let up on its pressure and the fumes burned his eyes so badly Conar squeezed them shut. He finally recognized the smell and as the knowledge registered, his struggles increased.

"Ether!" his befuddled and nearly-numb mind screamed at him. "That's ether on the rag! Don't breathe it. Don't dare breathe it!"

A hard fist drove into his gut with the power of a battering ram and Conar could not stop himself from doing it. It was a reflective action—gasping air when intense pain strikes and you are ill-prepared for it. The stifling stench, the brutal pressure clamped down on his face, the savage hands holding his flailing arms and bucking feet still, the demands to breathe, all combined to defeat him, to bring about his capitulation with a speed that left him cursing whatever god had abandoned him. He tried one last time to twist away, failed to gain his freedom, and then instinct, the old fear of suffocating, the claustrophobic terror of his childhood, the overwhelming need to live, to breathe, made him draw the ether deep into his lungs.

The light exploded in his head and he felt himself slipping irrevocably away from the tethers that had bound him to earth.

"That's it, boy," someone said. "Just breath it in. Nice and slow. Nice and deep."

The amused, and to Conar's slowly disintegrating mind, relieved, voice, was coming from the next galaxy, another universe, through the vast coldness of space to draw him upward.

"There you go," he heard as all the light in his own world began to ebb. "That's it. Just breathe."

He felt himself relaxing, felt the peace and contentment such drugs had once given him long ago, settling again on him to weigh him down, to press him into the cottony folds of pleasant intoxication. Although the rag was still pressed firmly to his face, he could see over the cloth and looked up dreamily into a face that did not seem unkind, into eyes that did not seem intent on murdering him.

"One more whiff," the man above him said in a pleasant voice. "One good, long whiff,

boy."

With supreme indifference, a total lack of concern for his own well being, Conar drew in a long, sustained, easy breath and the light snapped completely away from him.

"Sweet dreams, Your Grace," the man said, chuckling.

Conar felt the pressure on his face give way to cool, sweet night air. He was aware of his head falling to one side, of the restraints on his arms and ankles giving way to strong, powerful arms which lifted him effortlessly from the bed. He was shifted against a wide, hard-as-steel chest, his head hanging down over one massive arm, his legs dangling uselessly across another.

"Check the corridor, Kanan," the man holding him whispered.

"All clear."

Those were the last words Conar could remember hearing until he came partially awake in the back of a rocking wagon, his body dripping with sweat from the covers thrown carelessly over him.

"He's coming to," he heard a man say.

"Here," another man said. "Give him some of this. He'll go back to sleep."

He felt his head being lifted, smelled the sweet, intense aroma of cherries as something tepid and tart was poured down his lax throat. Instantly, his mind reacted to the smell and the taste and his drooping eyes flew open.

"No!" he whispered hoarsely, weakly. "Don't!"

The man above him either did not hear his protest or simply chose to ignore it. More of the sweet cherry liquid was poured into his mouth.

Conar gagged, trying to spit out the potion, but the man who was hunkered down beside him in the bed of the wagon, slapped a hand over Conar's mouth and held it there, pinching closed his nostrils so he had no choice but to swallow the liquid.

"It won't kill you," the man said in an exasperated voice. "It will only make you sleep."

"No," Conar protested, tears coming into his eyes. "No ten ...."

"Give him another slug of it," someone ordered in a grumpy voice.

"Please?" Conar begged, trying to move his limp head away from the hand which buried itself in his hair to anchor his head still. "You mustn't ... I'm ...."

The taste of cherries, a taste Conar would hate for the rest of his life, spread over his taste buds, invaded his mouth and slipped insidiously down his throat. He gagged, managing to twist his head away with a supreme effort.

"We aren't trying to kill you!" the man snapped at him.

Conar's last thought as the tenses, its wild cherry taste as evil as a viper's hit, claimed the Serenian's mind with its velvet-clad poison and spread rapidly through his system.

"Oh, god," Conar cried, tears falling hopelessly from his eyes. "Please god, no."

The bright sunlight streaming in through the back of the wagon, beneath the canopy of its cover, seemed to dim as though a dense cloud had passed over the sun. If it had not been for the intense, unyielding heat, Conar would have thought rain was headed their way.

"We aren't trying to kill you, I told you!"

No, Conar thought as he began to sink down beneath the waves of oblivion. It might not be his abductors intent to murder him, but they might as well do it anyway for the tenses, if such a large dose didn't kill him outright, would surely destroy what was left of his world.



## Chapter Twenty Four

He woke in a place he didn't know and knew he'd never been. Even the smells surrounding him were unknown. There was a faint tinge of muskiness about the place where he lay and he eased his head over so that his cheek rested against something cool and soft. A pillow, smelling slightly musty and old, caressed his face and he snuggled his spinning head into the quilted material. Dust tickled his nostrils and he reached up to rub his nose.

His hand trembled and felt weak. His legs felt heavy, numb, and he was afraid they would not sustain him when he tried to get up. Feeling along the silken bedding on which he was lying, he managed to grab a handful of the material so that he could turn over, dragging himself to his side with an effort that cost him a gasp of pain and a world suddenly tilted off its axis.

"Sweet Merciful ...," he began, but cut himself off. The pagan god of his youth had stopped listening to him for Conar has ceased to believe in the entity. Without a star by which to guide himself, he felt even more cut off from reality, without a Supreme Being to Whom to cast his appeals, he felt more alone than he had been in years.

He was having trouble collecting his thoughts anyway. He had no idea where he was, who had kidnapped him, why, for what purpose. The men who had taken him from Abbadon hadn't seemed as though they had wanted to hurt him. Rather they had taken great pains to let him know they meant him no harm.

"I know you don't like the taste of it, Your Grace," he remembered one of them saying, "but it's for your own good. You can't be seeing where it is we're taking you." A gentle hand had smoothed back Conar's damp hair.

The tenses, he thought with a sinking heart. They had poured spoonful after spoonful of tenses down his unwilling throat. How much of the stuff had they given him? He knew there had been several, more than he should have been given. But he didn't think they knew that. Somehow he knew that had they known how much of a danger the potion was to him, they would have blindfolded him instead.

Pulling himself half-erect, he fought the wild tumbling of the room, the jerky lights crinkling behind his closed lids. Nausea leapt up his throat to gag him and he coughed, but nothing came up. Not even the bitter bile, the taste of which he had become use to of late. Carefully, very carefully, he opened his eyes and was surprised that he could see reasonably well. At least his sight was no worse than it had been before his attackers had struck.

Somewhere in the depths of the place where he was being kept, he heard doors slamming, loud male voices shouting angrily. He could make out the unmistakable stamp of booted feet and his heart began to race.

"Get up," he told himself. "You've got to get up and get out of here."

With every ounce of his waning strength, he levered himself up off the pallet and sat, heaving, his breath coming in pants of pain as his head began to instantly throb with white-hot agony. The pain was almost too much to bear and yet somehow he forced himself up to a semi-erect position. He stood, wavering, his equilibrium suffering tremendously with the effort, his hands pressed tightly to his temples. It took a moment to simply put one foot ahead of the other and when he did, he found his right leg asleep, resistant to his brain's command to walk. He pounded the offending appendage with his fist, felt nothing as his hand struck his thigh and cursed softly. But he put the matter out of his mind and half-walked, half-dragged himself toward the only

door in the room.

Suddenly, the light in the room grew very dim, brightened, then grew dim again as though someone were turning down an oil lamp, but there was no one else in the room with him and there was no lamp, either. He stopped where he was, in the center of a large chamber bare of everything but the pallet on which he'd been lying. Confused, not yet concerned about the sudden shift in light intensity surrounding him, he turned his head to look around him. Blinking against the shadowy confines of the room, he took a hesitant step forward, dragging his right leg behind him, believing that at any moment, his balance would give way.

The light grew dimmer.

"Please, don't," he begged Whoever might take pity on him. "Don't take away the light."

The light grew dimmer still.

His heart began to race. His breathing became labored, sweat began to drip slowly down his face as fear set in. He could see well enough except for the mist swirling around the outer perimeters of his vision, but the room had become so dark, so filled with shadows and the walls seemed to be closing in on him. He felt a trill of terror forming along his nerve endings and he wasn't altogether sure a scream wasn't trying to make its way out of his mouth. The old memories, the exacting fear of closed-in places loomed out of the past to grip him.

"Please?" he whispered. "Don't do this to me."

The room's light began to fade even more until there was no light but that which was coming from the open doorway a few feet from where he stood.

He blinked, shook his head to clear it of the mist that was encroaching on him. But the mist remained and the room began to dim even more.

"No," he whispered, beginning to realize what was happening. Beginning to understand that his greatest fear was about to become a reality. "No." He put his hands out, striving to hold onto to what light remained.

The heavy sound of boot heels echoed to him from beyond the fading rectangle of light before him. He could hear a querulous voice snapping orders. They were coming for him and he had nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide. Could see no where to hide. Stumbling away from the door, he felt a vicious jolt of agony rip through his right hip and he doubled over against it, crying out like an injured animal as the pain became a spiral of radiating intensity.

"What is he doing up?" he heard a feminine voice asking before hands took hold of his arms and helped to support him. The grip wasn't rough, but it was firm.

Conar looked up, squinting against the fading light at the doorway. He could just make out the silhouette of a woman standing there, her arms akimbo, before the light went completely out of his world. It took him a moment to realize that he couldn't see. That the light that had been playing with him since he had awakened, since he had first become ill with the disease violating his central being, was gone forever. He stood there, feeling the men gently pulling him back toward the pallet and didn't resist them. He kept blinking against the absence of light, kept hoping a single spark would ignite to brighten his world again. But no such spark struck and the darkness became a shroud of cloying betrayal that settled heavily around him.

"Chaim," the woman snapped, "put him back down on the pallet. I don't have all day."

He turned his head toward the sound of her voice, coming out of the darkness at him. He shook his head, wanting to see her, instinctively realizing that it was this woman who had had him brought here. But he couldn't see her. He could see nothing. Nothing at all.

When that full realization hit him, he became a cornered animal, lashing out against his tormentor. "No!" he screamed, jerking against the strong arms which held him. "No!"

Chaim was stunned by the vehemence of the reaction as he and Kanan tried to put the Serenian back to bed. The bucking, twisting, cursing entity they held was almost more than the two of them could restrain.

"What's wrong with him?" Kanan asked, looking toward their mistress. He helped Chaim manhandle their ward down on the pallet and knelt there, keeping the man from struggling to his freedom.

"It's the tenerse," their mistress said. "He's probably having a reaction to it. Sometimes it causes hallucinations." She went to her knees on the floor beside the pallet, well away from the struggling man intent on getting up. "How much did you give him?"

"The vial was nearly full, milady," Chaim answered, looking up at her. "I gave him all of it." As the words left his mouth, Chaim was stunned by the ferocity with which his mistress lashed out at him, slapping him so hard across his rugged face that he lost his grip on the Outlander and tumbled back to land on his backside. He stared at her, putting up a hand to rub at his stinging cheek, oblivious to the trouble Kanan was having restraining the Serenian.

"Idiot!" she yelled. "Why did you give him the entire vial? You could have killed him!"

"You didn't say not to," Chaim defended himself, putting up a hasty hand to ward off another savage blow. "You said to keep him from escaping."

"I didn't tell you to kill the bastard, though, did I?" she screeched.

"I didn't know the potion was dangerous," Chaim tried to reason with her. "It took us three days to get him here. It's not as if I gave it to him all at once!"

Kanan grunted with pain as a heavy hand caught him in the shoulder, staggering him. "Chaim!" he exclaimed through clenched teeth. "Can you help me here?"

Conar could hear them talking, but his terror had escalated to such a point that he was convulsing with it. A cold, cold chill had pierced his very soul and he knew he might well be locked in this blackness forever.

"Help me," he begged, snatching his hand away to reach out to the woman who he sensed was angry at the men for having given him so much of the tenerse. "Please, help me." Someone caught his hand and he realized it was one of the men for the grip was powerful. "Please!"

"You'll get no help from me, McGregor!" she spat at him. "You're alive. Count your blessings!"

"I can't see," he whispered.

"It'll pass," she snarled at him.

"Please," he pleaded with her. "You don't understand. The tenerse ...."

"Shut up!" she ordered him.

Chaim flinched as his mistress threw a length of shackle at him. He caught it, wincing as the heavy ankle iron clipped his shin.

"Make sure he doesn't get up again, Chaim," she ordered. "I don't want him wandering around."

"My god," Conar moaned, feeling the iron against his ankle. "Don't chain me! I can't stand that!"

"You've stood it before, Infidel dog," she reminded it. "Jaleel made sure of that!"

Her voice, a voice he did not recognize, was bitter and hard, completely without pity, but he knew this woman just the same. "Sybelle?" he asked, holding his breath for her answer.

"I thought you would remember me eventually, McGregor," she spat at him. "For what little good it will do you. Sajin may have been taken in by you, but I can assure you I will not be."

"Why?" he asked, no longer struggling against the leg iron being snapped into place around

his flesh. "Why are you doing this? Sajin and I are friends. What have I done to you to deserve this?"

"You need to ask?" she hissed at him. "After killing my lover?"

He felt her coming toward him, but the cruel, brutal grip of her fingers as she grasped his chin and anchored his head so that she could snarl into his face, was a complete surprise.

"Consider yourself lucky that I do not have done to you what you did to Jaborn, you filthy bastard! It will be enough for you to know you will never leave this place again so long as you live!"

He stared sightlessly upward, wishing he could see the enraged face that belonged to the savage voice. Her fingers were hurting him, but he didn't answer her. Didn't try to pull away from her fierce grip. He let her hold his face and then he heard a faint snicker of contempt.

"You really can't see, can you, McGregor?" she asked, her cultured, sultry voice filled with amusement.

"No," he answered, feeling truly helpless for the first time since waking in this alien place.

She must have been staring at him, fanning her free hand before his eyes for he could feel the air moving across his face. She said nothing, just regarded him, then slowly released her hold on his chin.

"A most fitting punishment for a man blind to everything around him save his own lust, don't you agree, McGregor?" she taunted, laughter in her rich voice.

"He really can't see, milady?" Chaim asked. He looked down at the man he held and felt a great pity welling up inside him. Had he caused this? Surely not. The potion his mistress had given him to administer to this man would soon wear off and the Serenian prince's sight would return.

"No," Sybelle answered. "He can't see." She stood up, dusting off her smudged skirt for the floor of this room in her keep had not been cleaned in years. "I don't know how long his blindness will last, but ...."

"If it is revenge you wanted against me, Lady," Conar interrupted her, "you have it. There was nothing you could have done to me as bad as what you have inadvertently set in motion."

"Oh, be quiet, McGregor!" she ordered him. "The drug will wear off and you will be able to see again."

"No," he said softly. "Not ever again, I won't."

Sybelle's brows drew together, for the Serenian's words had a ring of quiet desperation about them. He was being too calm by far under the circumstances, too accepting now of his sightlessness whereas before, when he'd realized he could not see, he had lashed out with fierce denial. Worry began to nibble at her.

"You have had tenerse before?" she asked, squatting down beside him. She was not pleased when he laughed quietly, in such a way that told her he had found her question hopelessly silly.

"More times than I can count, milady," he told her. Then his voice became brittle, defeated. "Enough times for it to have already caused me damage."

"How so?" she asked, annoyed at his vague response.

"Ask your brother," he said and would answer no more of her questions though she threatened him.

Sybelle stood up, angry that she could not get him to say more. She turned to Chaim and demanded he saddle her horse and elect a traveling guard to escort her to Abbadon.

"On your life, Kanan," she told Chaim's friend, "he had better be here when I get back!"

"Where can I go?" Conar mocked her. He laughed and the sound was filled with self-

contempt. "How can I go, Lady?"

Sybelle cursed beneath her breath and stalked out of the room, her fists clenched at her side.

Chaim watched his mistress ride off into the desert less than half an hour later. The dust from the flying hooves of her mount flew back to sting his face. Shaking his head at Sybelle Bath-Alkazar's folly, he went back into the keep and closed the thick iron door. The sound of the heavy portal locking behind him, made the hairs stand up on Chaim's arms.

## Chapter Twenty Five

"Conar is no longer in charge here, Sybelle. I am," Sajin told his sister. "My Serenian friend will not be coming back."

"Where did he go?" Sybelle questioned her brother.

Sajin shook his head. "He told me not to come looking for him for no one would answer my questions. I did and he was right: none of the places where I stopped would admit to knowing anything of his whereabouts." He plowed a tired hand through his crop of thick black curls. "I should have known he'd do something like this when he became so ill."

"Ill?" Sybelle asked. Her lovely brows came together. "Ill from what?"

"A reaction from a drug."

"I remember the physician at St. Steffensburg giving him tenerse for his headaches." Sybelle took a sip of chilled coconut milk. "Did that cause his illness?"

"Apparently," Sajin began to explain, "he was given large doses of that potentially lethal drug for quite some time without ever knowing it. Starting back when he was in his early twenties. Rupine says his body can not absorb tenerse. It has stayed in his body, wrecking havoc with his nervous system all these years, causing problems even he wasn't aware of until his stroke."

"Stroke?" Sybelle gasped, coming to her feet, splashing her drink over her hand. "When was this?"

"A few months back. Before we went to the Outer Kingdom to take Catherine back. He was very ill and even then was having problems with his sight." He smiled grimly at her. "Why the concern for a man you don't even like, Sybelle?"

The nomad's sister scowled. "I may not care for the man, Sajin, but I don't wish him to be incapacitated."

"If what Conar believed would happen, has, he's lost his sight now and that is why he left Abbadon."

Sajin's sister slowly sat down, her mouth working but no sound coming out. She placed the nearly-empty chalice of chilled coconut milk on the table beside. "You mean his vision was fading?" she asked, fearful of her brother's answer.

Sajin nodded. "A little each day I think although the man wouldn't admit to it. He was terrified of losing his sight, but do you think he'd say so? Hell, no! He acted as though nothing was happening to him." The Kensetti cursed viciously. "How do you help a man like that, Sybelle?"

Horror had set in upon Sybelle. She sat there, staring fixedly at her brother who was unaware of her silence and her sudden pallor.

"That's why he sent Catherine away," she heard Sajin telling her. "It wasn't that he didn't think he could protect her. At least not when he was healthy. But he knew something was wrong with him. Probably had known it for a good long time although he had no idea what was causing his problems. He didn't want to burden her with having to take care of him, having to baby-sit a cripple. He knew eventually he might even become paralyzed, unable to walk. He didn't want to put that kind of grief on Catherine." He glanced at his sister. "As though any of that would have mattered to Cat."

"Paralyzed," Sybelle whispered, horrified at the notion. Her fingers clutched at the arms of her chair, her nails digging half-moon indentations in the fabric.

"Raphaella warned us that might well happen to him if he was ever given any more of that

brew." He didn't see his sister flinch nor did he hear her sharp intake of breath. "Even so much as a sip of it would cause blindness. More..." He sighed. "The Prophetess only knows what more of it could have done to him."

Sybelle stood up, looked around her. "I must be going now, Sajin."

Sajin stared at her. "But you just got here," he protested.

"I have business in Helix," she answered absently. "I must get back." She gathered up her reticule and shawl.

"When will you be back?" Sajin asked, standing up, as well.

"I don't know," she answered and was already heading for the door.

"Sybelle?" Sajin questioned, sensing her sudden worry. He went to her and took her arm. "Is there something I should know about?"

"No," she was too quick to say. "I have things I must do, Sajin." She reached out and cupped his cheek. "You will be careful now that you are leading this ragtag group of insurrectionists?"

Sajin frowned. "I don't like this, Sybelle. I want to know why you feel you must leave so suddenly."

"Be careful," she repeated, "and I'll come back as soon as I can." She stood on tiptoe and kissed him. "Lord Khamsin," she laughed, but the sound had not even a modicum of humor in it.

## PART TWO

## Chapter One

Sybelle threw up her hands and cursed, furious. Spinning around, she stood there, arms crossed over her heaving chest, her foot tapping out an angry rhythm on the stone floor.

"You can't do things for yourself anymore, McGregor," she hissed at him. "Can't you see that?"

"I can't see anything," came the soft reply.

"Will you stop it!" she yelled. "This isn't funny!"

There was a faint sigh. "Do you see me laughing, Lady?"

Chaim's lips twitched but he knew he'd damned well better not let his mistress see that he found the situation amusing. His cheek was still bruised from her last attack on him.

"What am I going to do with you, McGregor?" Sybelle sneered from between clenched jaws.

"Why don't you," Conar asked as Kanan and Chaim helped him to his feet, "try tying a bell around my neck so you can keep tabs on me?"

Kanan glanced at Chaim and smiled. At least their guest had not lost his sense of humor along with his sight.

"Get him back to his room!" Sybelle ordered the men, furious at the entire male gender. "And chain his ankle again until he learns not to go wandering off down stairwells!"

"That's not necessary," Conar told her with as much dignity as he could muster. "I don't think I'm going to try it again."

"Oh," Sybelle cooed at him, "I know you're not, McGregor! Even if I have to spread-eagle you to the pallet!"

"Naked, Sybelle?" Conar mocked her. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Chaim bent down so that his lips were at the Serenian's ear. "Behave, Your Grace. She's angry enough as it is. Unless you want her to order just such a punishment, she ...."

"Strip him, Chaim," Sybelle demanded, the light of battle glowing in her face. "I will want to see how much damage he did to himself when he fell."

"You want to see more than the damage, Sybelle," Conar shot back in an amused tone. "Why don't you admit you've been itching for a reason to have me bare-assed?"

Chaim groaned, casting an exasperated look at Kanan. Both knew their mistress would not let the challenge go unchecked.

Sybelle's face turned a mottled shade of red. Her dark eyes narrowed dangerously and she walked slowly to where the three men stood, the Serenian wobbling unsteadily between the Kensetti woman's servants.

"McGregor," she began as she reached them, "there's nothing you have that I haven't seen before, used, and..." Her fingers grazed his naked chest. "Discarded."

"I don't doubt that," Conar answered her. "Whores generally know more about a man's body than he knows himself." His head flew to one side as her hand connected hard with his cheek.

"Your Grace!" Chaim warned him. "You've been told not to do that. Don't insult Her Grace."

"Oh, let him insult me all he likes," Sybelle hissed. "He knows how he'll have to pay for it. Don't you, McGregor?"



Conar sighed heavily. Aye, that he did. He slowly turned his head toward her voice. "Why don't you just slit my throat and be done with it, woman?"

"Because I'm not through with you, you Infidel dog!" Sybelle told him. "You've yet to pay for your crimes against me."

They half-dragged him back up the stairs to his chamber for his right leg was all but useless now and his left knee had banged sharply against a riser as he had plummeted down the stairwell earlier. His elbows were scraped. There was a deep scratch on his right forearm and a cut right on the point of his chin.

"You're lucky you didn't break your fool neck," Kanan grumbled as he supported the Serenian's full weight while Chaim opened Conar's chamber door.

"Wish I had," came the mumble.

"No, you don't," Chaim chided their prisoner.

"Try living like this," Conar answered. "See how you like it." His unintended pun made him chuckle darkly as he was helped down to the pallet.

"Can you shuck them breeches?" Kanan asked. He was not as much in awe of the Serenian's station in life as Chaim was and tended not to address their prisoner with much respect.

"I'm blind, Kanan" Conar replied testily. "Not paralyzed."

"Many more trips down that staircase and you will be," Kanan chuckled.

"Why have you not undressed him?" Sybelle snapped at them as she came into the room.

"Your Grace," Chaim pleaded. "Is this really necessary? It will embarrass him and ...."

"Aye!" Sybelle agreed, using the Serenian word of agreement, intending it as an insult. She advanced to the pallet and stood staring down at Conar. "It will em-bare-ass him, won't it, McGregor?"

"Why don't you go pull some wings off flies, woman, and leave me alone?" Conar growled, but his hands had gone to the buttons of his breeches.

"You may leave, Chaim," Sybelle said as she watched Conar lay back on the pallet to slide the cords from his lean hips.

"But Your Grace!" Chaim pleaded. "You should not ...."

"You don't want to embarrass him anymore than he already is, now, do you, Chaim?" she responded sweetly.

"We haven't shackled him, yet," Kanan reminded her.

"I will do it when I am finished with him," Sybelle replied.

"When she's had her fill of me," Conar snorted.

"I loathe you, McGregor," she shot back.

"Get over it," he answered. He pushed his breeches down his taut thighs and kicked them away with his left leg, wishing he hadn't made such a stupid gesture because his left knee began to throb unmercifully.

Sybelle turned her head away from the blatant masculinity that had sprang into view with his undressing. She turned her attention to her two servants and then pointed silently to the door.

Chaim shrugged. Kanan grinned. The door closed soundlessly behind their exit.

There was complete stillness in the room for a long time. Sybelle had turned to look down at the naked man sitting on the pallet. Conar simply sat there, staring sightless ahead of him, waiting for whatever order his jailer gave him.

"Like what you see?" he finally asked, growing tired of the silence.

"I've seen better." Sybelle replied. "Lie down and let me see to that knee."

Conar lay back, putting his hands behind his head. He felt vulnerable, unprotected, and he

could feel her staring at him and knew it wasn't his knee that was holding her interest, yet he submitted to her petty torture for there was nothing he could do about it.

"You'll be sore come morning," she said, touching his knee. "A just payment for trying to escape."

"I wasn't trying to escape," he countered in a long admonishing drawl. "I was trying to get away from the sweltering heat up here."

Sybelle knew the chamber, facing the west, was hot this time of day and she had meant to leave orders to have him moved to the courtyard room. Most of the time, she was very conscious of his comfort although she still considered him her greatest enemy.

"Turn over," she said, dragging her eyes from the crisp V at the juncture of his thighs and the bold maleness at which she had been avidly staring.

"Don't you get tired of this, woman?" he asked with a heart-felt sigh. It was difficult for him to pull himself over.

"You're getting weaker, aren't you?" she inquired. Her gaze locked on the savage disfigurement of his broad back. The sight never failed to make her feel guilty.

"What do you care, Sybelle?" he asked. He flinched as her hand touched his shoulder then slid softly down to his waist.

"You'll need liniment on both these bruises," she told him. Her hand moved to his right thigh. "And here." Her touch lingered on his flesh.

"I knew you'd get around to putting your hands on me eventually," he said dryly and chuckled when she snatched her hand away. He turned back over, knowing her inspection was finished. He didn't move as he heard the sound of the chain rattling. "Is that really necessary? Why not just entomb me in your dungeon?"

"We'll see how comical you are after two days of solitude," she spat at him as she snapped the band of the leg iron in place around his ankle.

He'd been expecting that, for solitude was her answer, her punishment for anything he did that displeased her. In the two months since he had been brought to wherever it was she was holding him, he had come to accept her petty spitefulness that was meant to humble him. She had no way of knowing how terrible it was for him to go an entire day without hearing the sound of another human tongue or being near another person. He was already trapped inside his darkness. Being alone there was a torment he could barely endure. He heard her moving away from him and wanted to prolong the agony of being left alone.

"I don't guess you're going to let me put my breeches back on, huh?" he asked, tilting his face up toward where he thought she was.

"You were hot," she growled. "Maybe this will cool you." She threw a bucket of water over him and smiled with satisfaction as she heard him gasp and saw the instant fury flood his handsome face.

"You bitch," he snarled, wiping the water from his chin with the back of his hand. "One day someone is going to ...."

"Be very careful what you say to me, Infidel," she warned. "You can still experience pain."

Conar growled at her, humiliated that he could do nothing to prevent her from such cruelty.

"Once you're completely unable to move, McGregor," she taunted him, "and believe me that day isn't far off since you grow weaker by the hour, it won't matter if you have on breeches or not!" She knew that barb would hurt him and she saw that it had.

"Just leave me alone, Sybelle," he whispered, suddenly tired of the cruelty she practiced so unerringly on him every time they came into contact, which was, unfortunately, almost every single

day.

Sybelle met Chaim on the stairwell and instructed him to see to the Serenian's bruises. Continuing on her way, she did not see the disappointment and the unease in her servant's gaze.

Chaim winced as he came into Conar's chamber. The room was nearly airless and baking in the late afternoon heat. It was like walking into an oven and he felt the sweat gathering under his arms.

"You shouldn't have baited her, Your Grace," Chaim admonished Conar. "You know how she reacts to it."

"Is there water in here?" Conar asked. He didn't care to discuss Sybelle with Chaim. The servant was loyal to her and never failed to take the woman's side in every situation.

"Here," Chaim said, cupping the back of Conar's head and holding a chalice of tepid water to the prince's lips. His own hand was replaced by Conar's and he let the Serenian hold on to the chalice while he uncorked a bottle of liniment.

"Are you allowed to bring me a jug or two of water before I'm exiled back to hell again?" Conar asked. If he had to go without water, as he'd been forced to do once before, he would suffocate in this dry, blistering heat.

"I'll see to it." Chaim was still furious with Kanan's thoughtlessness the last time their prisoner was consigned to solitary confinement. The Serenian's lips had parched and he was severely dehydrated before Chaim had come up to bring him the next day's food.

The liniment was cool on his flesh. Although the spots where Chaim rubbed the strong liquid into his flesh were tender and getting more so, Conar appreciated the man's gentle touch.

"Have you traveled much of the world, Your Grace?" Chaim asked. He often questioned Conar when the two of them were alone. Not just because he was curious about the man, but also because he sensed the Serenian's need for companionship and was willing to provide it for him.

"Aye," Conar answered, needing the company and the conversation and willing to talk about the mating habits of horseflies if it would keep Chaim with him longer. "I've been to each of the nine inhabited continents, now. I've not been to either of the poles, but maybe one day I can ...." He stopped, knowing that day would never come.

Chaim wished he'd kept his question to himself. Once more, not meaning to, he had hurt this man whom Chaim found to be guilty of nothing more than having avenged both the deaths of his baby daughter and his friends at the hands of Prince Jaleel Jaborn. The Princess might hate the Serenian, might actively wish him harm, but Chaim did not. He wished he could help Conar McGregor, but he knew he would not even if given the opportunity. His alliance was to the Kensetti woman.

"What day is it?" Conar asked.

"Saturday, milord," Chaim answered.

"Saturday," the Serenian whispered. "The fourteenth of May?"

"Yes," Chaim agreed. "Is there a significance to this date?" He clucked his tongue over one bruise.

A gentle smile tugged at Conar's lips. "Today is my brother Coron's birthday. He'll be thirty-seven today."

Chaim smiled, also. "I have a brother that age." He worked the liniment into the bruise on the back of Conar's thigh. "Will there be a great celebration at your home, then, for him?"

Conar nodded, thinking of the party he knew Legion would have planned with Gezelle and Meggie's help. "Aye." He laughed softly. "And my brothers will get out what my grandfather called 'the Rod of Wisdom' and beat him with it. One hit for every year of his life plus one to 'grow

on'."

Chaim's hand stilled on Conar's flesh. "Beat him? Why?"

There was genuine humor in the Serenian's voice. "The famous rod is actually a pine board about six inches wide and an inch thick. It's really a paddle. Every McGregor male has been subjected to the not-so-tender ministrations of his brothers with that paddle for as far back as I can remember. It doesn't hurt all that much but it gets more painful with every hand that wields it."

Shaking his head at such a custom, Chaim resumed his attention to Conar's bruises. "I would think it degrading."

"It is. That's the point. But no one minds it, Chaim."

"You miss your home, don't you?" Chaim asked and could have bitten off his tongue.

"Aye," came the sad reply. "I miss it more and more every day."

Putting away the liniment, Chaim started to leave, but he looked back at the helpless man sitting chained to the pallet in the center of this scorching room. He found himself looking into Conar McGregor's face and felt his heart contracting with pity. Although those sightless sapphire eyes were devoid of light, there was within them an ember that hinted at unspeakable loneliness and such vulnerability it tore at Chaim's soul. Not since the first day, when the blindness had claimed him, had McGregor complained about what had happened to him. He seemed to have accepted it as something inevitable, irreversible, irrevocable, and had decided to make the best of it. Chaim, however, had not accepted it and still felt immense guilt because he believed himself responsible for the man's affliction.

"Don't forget the water, please?" Conar said, sensing Chaim had not left the room yet.

It took Chaim a moment before he could speak. "I will not, Your Grace." He saw Conar nod, then lay down on the pallet, drawing his knees up, turning his back to the door.

## Chapter Two

Another month passed and Conar had grown to tolerate, if not really accept, his silken imprisonment. He realized no one would be coming for him, no one would be looking for him. The promise he had made Sajin give, not to seek him out should he just simply disappear, had been his undoing. No doubt Sajin thought him safely ensconced in a peaceful monastery, having no idea he was the prisoner of the man's own sister.

Once more, he thought with bitter regret, his journey through life had taken him to a place he did not want to be. He felt lonely and isolated and without hope. He had plummeted into a dark, dank well of despair in which he was drowning. He had always been an assertive, aggressive male, letting nothing and on one stand in the way of what he wanted.

Until the Labyrinth.

Until now.

Now, he was at the mercy of a woman who hated him, who never failed to berate him for all manner of imagined sins of which she'd accused him. But he would never let her know just how much her cold, unfeeling taunts and accusations hurt him. His dependence on her both angered and shamed him, both emotions cutting down to the quick of his already-damaged soul.

And his loneliness was destroying what was left of that battered soul. It sapped his energy. Draining what strength he had left away. It was almost like being in the Labyrinth again except this time his jailer was not a sadistic slob intent on crushing his spirit. This time, his jailer was darkness intent on destroying his entire being.

Reaching up to adjust the silken scarf tied around his eyes, Conar heard again in his mind the argument he had had a few days earlier with Sybelle.

"You are helpless, McGregor. You have to depend on me for every drop of water, every crumb of bread you put in your belly. Because I follow the teachings of the Prophetess, I am obliged to care for your creature comforts, but I don't have to look at those sightless, milk-glazed eyes. They offend me! Looking at you makes me ill!"

It galled him that he had been reduced to tears by her acerbic insult. He had always been more vain than he should have been and for a woman to find him ugly, distasteful, hurt him deeply. And it humiliated him that she had laughed at his tears.

"I pity you, McGregor," she'd spat at him.

"I don't need your damned pity, woman," he had told her.

"You need it more than you need the revenge I had planned for you before the tenses punished you for me!" she'd responded.

Now, he wore the silken cloth to hide his eyes and it was easy for him to tell himself that the loss of his sight was caused by the scarf around his head, not the tenses that had invaded and crippled his body. He could explain away the sightlessness, but the weakness in his legs was not so easily explained.

She had moved him from the upper floor of his prison to a suite of rooms on the lower level where it seemed cooler and did not smell of mold and dust. Most of the furniture had been removed so he could get about unhindered by bumping into sharp edges and knocking over small fixtures. He had a bed, soft and comfortable; a settee and chair; a copper tub where she allowed him to bathe with either Chaim or Kanan in attendance. He had been provided a table with two chairs at which he sat to eat his meals. There was a small outside alcove, surrounded by a wall

higher than his stretching hands could reach to find the top, where he could sit in the late afternoon and listen to a fountain somewhere off to his right. With his sight gone, his hearing had become intensely acute. As had his senses of smell and touch.

Sybelle had insisted that he exercise, to try to strengthen his legs, so he walked about the three room suite, counting off his paces carefully, knowing now where every stick of furniture was. With his hands out, he probed his habitat and soon knew every nook and cranny in his prison.

"McGregor?"

Conar's head came up and he cocked it to one side. He could distinguish the patter of her bare feet as she advanced toward him. He had not heard her enter the chamber, but that was not unusual. She often sneaked up on him trying to catch him unaware.

"I have brought your meal," she said and he heard the clatter of a tray on the table by the outside door. He could smell roast chicken and his mouth watered.

Sybelle turned to look at him and found her heart racing again in her breast as it had for several weeks now each time she saw him with that silken scarf tied around his flaxen hair. The royal blue silk brought out the ripe wheat color and made her itch to tear it from him and run her fingers through that silky mane. Cursing beneath her breath at the folly of such thoughts, she pulled one of the chairs out from beneath the table and ordered him to come and sit.

Pushing himself wearily from the cushions spread out on the floor of the alcove, Conar made his way to the table, sat down and carefully reached for the food she had brought him.

"You look terrible," she told him.

Conar snorted around a mouthful of peas. "So you keep telling me."

"No," Sybelle snapped with annoyance, "You really don't look well." He didn't move as her hand touched his cheek. "You have a fever." She moved her hand above the edge of the scarf, pushing aside the mop of unruly waves that fell over his forehead. "McGregor, you are burning up!"

"Malaria," he mumbled as he shoveled creamed carrots into his mouth. "I've had it before. You know that." He reached for the tumbler of milk he knew would be there.

"Don't drink that!" she ordered, snatching his hands back. "It will curdle on your stomach." She took the milk away and went over to the door to call for Kanan, instructing him when he came to see what she wanted to fetch a pitcher of chilled water and a vial of quinine.

Conar ignored her as she came back to stand beside him. He continued to eat, wishing she'd go away and leave him alone. The fever had started earlier that morning, but the chills and delirium would take a while yet to start. His head was already beginning to ache and he wasn't up to having her torment him.

"Why didn't you call someone?" she grumbled.

He finished the last strip of roasted chicken and licked his fingers, knowing his lack of manners would infuriate her. He wiped his hands on his breeches.

"Ill-mannered boor," she hissed, gaining him the reaction he'd been seeking.

"Mean-spirited bitch," he answered as he pushed his chair back from the table and started to stand. He wasn't prepared for the dizziness that gripped him nor the giving way of his left leg as he stood.

Sybelle caught him as he stumbled, snaking her arm around his waist and keeping him erect as he made a grab for the edge of the table. His body, pressed against her own, was radiating heat and she knew he was going to be in for a day or two of debilitating illness.

"Let's get you to bed," she said with exasperation. Helping him walk was harder than she would have thought, for he seemed to be having trouble moving not only his right leg, but his left,

as well. When they reached the bed, she ordered him to remove his shirt.

His fingers felt numb, lifeless, but he managed to unlace his shirt. Standing there by the bed, wobbling, he dragged the shirt over his head and let it drop to the floor.

"You are not only ill-mannered," Sybelle said, letting go of him to snatch up the shirt, "you are slovenly, as well."

"At least I'm consistent," he mumbled.

"Lie down!" she snapped at him, annoyed with his flippant attitude.

Conar slumped down on the bed and had difficulty pulling his legs up. It angered him that she had to lift his legs for him and he could hear her cluck of annoyance as she did.

"How long have you been having trouble with your left leg, McGregor?" she snapped.

"I don't know," he answered, flinging a hand over his face. "Two, three days, I guess."

Sybelle's mouth tightened and she bent over him, reaching for the buttons of his cords, expecting him to stop her, but he just lay there, impassive, allowing her to undo his breeches. He arched his hips up at her command and let her slide the cords from him.

"You really enjoy stripping me, don't you, Sybie?" he chuckled although he was beginning to feel the onset of the chills that would render him nearly incapacitated.

"You've been told not to call me that, McGregor!" she hissed as she reached down to draw the coverlet over his nakedness.

"How do I compare to your other love slaves?" he teased her then chuckled again at her crude one word reply.

Kanan brought the water and quinine and poured out the dosage his mistress ordered. Helping the Serenian to sit up, he held the bitter brew to Conar's lips and grimaced at the look of distaste that passed over the sweaty face.

"Tastes pretty bad, huh?" the servant asked. He eased Conar's head back to the pillow.

"Worse than bad, my friend," Conar acknowledged, dragging his tongue over his lips and teeth to rid himself of the taste.

"Do you want me to stay with him, Your Grace?" Kanan asked his mistress, but was told she did not.

Sybelle tucked the covers around Conar's chest then sat down beside him on the bed. "How bad do you think this episode will be?" she asked, watching him tremble.

"You should be able to enjoy watching it, milady," he answered through clattering teeth. "Generally I get pretty damned sick."

Hours later, Sybelle thought his words an understatement as she stood beside the bed where Chaim and Kanan had had to restrain a thrashing, babbling patient locked in the desperate throes of delirium. She watched with worried eyes as his fever continued to climb and his uncontrollable shivering bordered on convulsion.

"Why don't you go rest, Your Grace?" Chaim asked her sometime toward midnight. "The worst of it seems to be over."

Sybelle shook her head. "I'll stay."

Just past dawn, the quinine finally began to work and the fever recede. The bone-jarring tremors that had racked Conar McGregor for most of the night tapered off to a shiver or two and then subsided. The incoherent mumblings died away to be replaced with an occasional moan of discomfort, a long sigh of weariness.

"McGregor?" she asked him after she had sent Chaim and Kanan to their well-deserved beds. "Can you hear me?"

He turned his head on the pillow. "Liza?" he asked, lifting a weak hand, reaching out

toward the sound of her voice.

Sybelle moved away from that questing hand and stood up from the bed, looking down at the glistening chest which rose and fell with slight agitation.

"Please hold me," he asked in a wavering voice.

She shook her head. "I'm not Elizabeth McGregor," she retorted.

Conar stretched out his hand, seeking, searching, pleading with her for a moment's affection, a single, reassuring touch of compassion. He was starving for that touch. Weakened as he was by the fever that had invaded his body, he desperately needed to know someone cared about what happened to him. He couldn't remember the last time someone had held him, shown him they understood his pain.

"Just let me put my arms around you," he begged. "Let me hold you, then."

It was an instinctual thing, this need to be held, to hold, to be reassured, to be protected. It was an animal need for self-preservation. A primal desire to survive.

Sybelle recognized that and she wished she could reach out to him, hold him as he wanted to be held, let him hold her, but she didn't even like the man. If anything she loathed him. His breathtaking good looks made her nauseous and his unfailing dark humor brought uncontrollable rage to her heart. She had no intention of comforting a man who had stolen, no, slain, the only man she had ever loved.

He reached out his hand as far as it would go, encountered only air, then let it drop to the bed with a resigned groan of defeat.

"Would it kill you to show me even a moment of friendliness, Sybelle?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"Go to hell," she snapped at him.

His lips twitched. "I've been there, Lady."

"No," she replied, coming closer to the bed. "You have not. You have been singed by the heat, I will grant you that, but you have never truly experienced the flame."

He turned his head away from her. "But you intend to correct that, don't you?"

"Shut up, McGregor," she warned him. She reached out and threw the covers from him, intent on shaming him, for he was naked beneath the heavy comforter. Her gaze went unerringly to that part of him she seemed to find so enthralling.

"Why don't you just whack that thing off for me?" he asked, his jaw clenched. "Since you can't seem to keep from wanting to gawk at it!"

"Don't tempt me," she mumbled. Her face flamed when the object of their conversation shifted against his thigh.

"Your Grace?" Chaim called from the door, embarrassed that his mistress was staring so boldly at the Serenian's genitals. "Prince Jashir's outriders have arrived. They came ahead to say he is on his way here for a visit."

Sybelle spat out a vulgarity. "I wish he'd give me more notice when he comes to call," she hissed. She spun away from the bed, passing Chaim without looking at the man. "See to McGregor." Over her shoulder, she ordered her servant to keep their prisoner quiet or else.

"Who is this Jashir?" Conar asked as Chaim pulled the covers over him once more.

"He is one of my lady's brothers," the man answered. He lives in Kerak province just north of here. He is second eldest son."

"Can he be trusted?" Conar asked, grateful for the sip of water Chaim placed at his lips.

"Why do you ask?" Chaim demanded. "I shall not tell him you are here, Your Grace."

"Did I ask you to?" came the somewhat hurt reply.



"Then why ask if the prince can be trusted?"

"I just wanted to know if he was anything like Sajin," the Serenian sighed. "Or is he as shitty as Sybelle?"

Chaim's chin rose. "My lady is not 'shitty' as you call it. She feels she has reason to keep you imprisoned here."

"The woman needs to be laid," Conar snorted. "That's her problem, Chaim."

Shock sped over Chaim's rugged face before he sat the tumbler of chilled water down on Conar's bedside table with a heavy thud.

"Do not speak so disrespectfully of my lady or else I shall have to gag you, Your Grace."

"So do it," came the reply. "I can't see. I can barely move. Why not make it complete by cutting out my tongue, puncturing my eardrums and stuffing my nose full of cotton! Then I wouldn't be able to hear or talk or even smell, you worthless son-of-a-bitch!"

Offended by the vicious words, Chaim bent over the bed and tried to shush his ward, but the Serenian let out a howl of fury only to have Chaim's hand slam down over his mouth.

"Stop that!" the servant warned him. "I *will* gag you, Your Grace!" He straddled Conar and slapped away the hands which tried to pry his own away. "And bind you to the bed if you do not behave!"

Conar sank his teeth into Chaim's palm and the servant yipped with surprised pain.

Prince Jashir Ben-Alkazar looked up from his glass of wine. "What was that?"

Sybelle shrugged. "Who knows, Jashir? One of the servants causing trouble. You know how they can be." She glanced nervously toward the doorway leading to the ground floor quarters.

"I am not pleased with you living so far from a settlement, Sybelle," Jashir said with a heavy scowl. "And neither is Haji. As the oldest, we feel you should move to the palace and allow us to find you a husband."

"One of whom you and Haji and the others approve, I suppose," she answered dryly.

"You need a husband," her brother reminded her. "A woman alone is fair game for any bounder who gets a sniff of her wealth and property." He looked around him. "You were left well off when your first husband died, but you must find another to replace him." He took a sip of his wine. "Or else dry up on the vine."

Sybelle's hands were clenched in the folds of her robe. The last thing she needed was one of her elder brothers coming to Helix to lecture her on what they thought were her womanly obligations. Sajin left her alone and she wished the other eleven would, as well.

"Have you heard from Sajin lately, Jashir?" she asked, trying to stir the man to a topic she knew would annoy him more than her situation did.

Jashir tilted the wine glass and drained. "Ever since he became involved with that Outlander, there has been no reasoning with him." He stood up and walked to the arched window where he stood glaring out at the lush garden. "My sources tell me he is even leading that seditious group!" Jashir looked around at his sister. "I tell you, Sybelle, I have no real love for slavery, either, but to lead these barbarians against his own people? It is folly!"

"Sajin only goes after Rysalian slavers, Jashir," she pointed out.

"For now!" her brother retorted. "How long will it be before he drags that rabble onto Kensetti lands? It's that infidel's fault, you know."

"McGregor?" she asked, amused by the rancor she was hearing in Jashir's tone.

"Who else?" Jashir turned from the window. "That man has been trouble since he stepped foot on Hasdu soil!"

Sybelle looked down at her hands. "I would imagine he will pay for ever having left

Serenia, Jashir."

"I should hope so," he agreed. "Well, let's not discuss the man any longer. I am tired and wish to have a long bath before the evening meal. Do you have the eastern wing ready for me?"

Sybelle's head snapped up. "The eastern wing?" That was where she had ensconced her prisoner. "No. I mean, it is being painted. Won't the suite beside my own do?"

Jashir frowned. "I suppose, but I would prefer my usual accommodations." He shrugged elaborately. "But beggars can't be choosers, eh?"

Ringling for Kanan to escort her brother upstairs, Sybelle waited until Jashir was gone before hurrying to the chamber where Conar McGregor was being kept. She was unprepared for the sight which greeted her as she slipped soundlessly into the suite and closed the door, bolting it behind her.

"It was the only way I could keep him quiet, milady," Chaim exclaimed as she joined him at the bed. "I believe he meant to cause enough noise to draw your brother in here."

The Kensetti princess nodded. "No doubt that was his intention." She stared down at the bound and gagged man lying so still on the bed. "You did well, Chaim."

Chaim bowed in relief. "What are your wishes, Your Grace?"

"Obviously we can't allow him to draw Jashir's notice. He will have to be kept thus until my brother leaves." As Conar began to thrash helplessly on the bed in denial of her orders, she laughed spitefully. "You brought it on yourself, McGregor. Perhaps you will learn something from this experience."

A low growl of pure rage pushed from the heavy cotton cloth pressed between Conar's teeth. He strained against the rags binding his wrists and ankles to the bed, restraint's that had not been removed since he had awakened from his latest bout with Labyrinthian fever.

"What about his supper?" Chaim asked.

"He'll get none," Sybelle replied, then turned and started for the door. "Come along, Chaim, and lock the door behind you."

Chaim took a last look at the enraged man struggling to free himself. Making sure that wasn't possible, he followed his mistress from the room, turning the key in the lock. "Give me the key," she ordered and he turned to her in surprise.

"But what if I should need to check on him during the night?" Chaim protested.

"I will see to him," Sybelle answered. She was already walking away.

"But, Your Grace!" Chaim whimpered, hurrying to catch up with her. "He must use the .... He has to ...." The servant turned a deep red. "I have to ...."

"Good eve, Chaim," his mistress interrupted.

Chaim came up short outside the library into which the princess had gone for she had shut the door in his face.

"Shit," the servant said, turning and stomping away. If she wanted to hold a chamber pot for the Serenian, let her!

\* \* \* \*

The keep was still, moonlight falling through the high-arched windows in gentle spills across the stone floor. There was a gentle breeze wafting about the long corridor as Sybelle made her way to the suite of rooms on the lower level. Slipping through the door, she made her way unerringly to the bed at the far end of the room.

"McGregor?" she whispered. "Are you awake?" There was a grunt from the man on the bed.

Unable to light a lamp in the room lest her brother, who was a light sleeper and prone to

midnight ramblings to aid his insomnia, see it and come to investigate, Sybelle sat down on the bed and leaned over her prisoner.

"Do you ...." She bit her lower lip, then lifted her chin with resignation. "Have you need of the pot?"

There was a snort of fury and a jerk on the ropes which bound his wrists which Sybelle ignored.

"Either nod yes or no or I will leave you like this 'till morning, McGregor," she warned him. "I will not untie you for you to do it yourself so unless you take me up on my offer, you can piss in the bed for all I care and lay in it all night!"

Furious mumblings came from behind the gag and she understood that he was cursing her and denying her the right to touch him.

"Suit yourself," she said, getting up, but just as she had known there would be, she heard him make a capitulating sound deep in his throat. She turned and bent over him, leaning on the headboard. "Do you wish to make use of the pot?"

Very slowly he nodded, his hands clenching and unclenching as though he wished he had her throat in his grip.

She pulled the covers back, exposing him to the desert's night air coming in through the window and she saw him shudder. Her lips twitched with amusement. The man was totally at her mercy, completely helpless, and unable to stop her from doing whatever she wished to him. Such power was heady and just a little bit intoxicating.

Conar felt the mattress dip as she knelt down to drag out the chamber pot from beneath the bed. He had never been so humiliated in his life as when the cold porcelain rim of the chamber pot was placed between his spread legs.

The chamber was dark. Apparently clouds were covering the moonlight that had been shining in the room. Sybelle had to slide her hand up his thigh to find his manhood and when she did, her fingers closing around the stiff erection of it, she gasped.

He couldn't help but laugh at her reaction. Did the bitch think he was aroused by her nearness? Set on fire by her fumbling touch? He wished he could spit away the gag so he could tell her it was his urgent need to relieve himself that had caused the rigidity of his staff.

Sybelle held the thick, pulsing shaft in her hand and marveled at the size of it. Never had she held a man's essence in her hand that so completely filled her grip. Moving her hand down the length of it, she was astonished to find that he had not been circumcised. Since members of her own tribe, and those men of other tribes with whom she had shared intimate moments, had all been circumcised since childhood, the fact that the Serenian hadn't, intrigued her.

"Why did they not cut away the foreskin?" she asked, marveling at the thin fold of flesh that covered the man's penis.

Conar snarled behind the gag. That she was touching him was bad enough, but that she was inspecting his anatomy turned him into a raging animal. He jerked against his bonds, infuriated more when she had the nerve to pull on that flesh that had so captured her notice. He screamed as hard as he could, finally gaining her attention. And it was just in time for out of pure spite, he released his urine.

Sybelle barely had time to push his shaft downward so that he did not spray her. If she had not heeded the warning his furious bellow had put forth, no doubt the man would actually have pissed on her.

"McGregor, you have no idea how close you came to being relieved of this thing you value so much!" she hissed at him.

Conar breathed a sigh of relief as his bladder emptied. He had been in acute pain since early evening. Although he had been expecting her to come, he had not expected her to be the one to be helping him do what she was helping him do. The embarrassment wasn't as acute as he would have thought it should be. Her touch was almost clinical after her 'examination' of him.

"By the Prophetess, McGregor," she exclaimed as he continued to urinate, "you were nigh to bursting." Guilt made her even more aware of his discomfort and she looked up at his face, almost obscured by the blindfold and the gag. Guilt gave way to shame and as he finished relieving himself, she asked if he would behave himself if she removed the gag. "Else I'll leave it in place 'till morning."

There was an immediate grunt of acceptance to her condition.

Conar worked his aching jaw as the gag came off. He had no intention of doing anything to make the woman, or her damned servant, silence him again.

"Did you have any food this past eve?" she asked as she carefully took the almost-full chamber pot to the door and sat it outside the chamber in the hall.

"No," he whispered, his throat so dry he could barely answer. He licked his chapped lips. "No food."

Sybelle frowned. "Are you hungry?"

"Thirsty," he answered.

She went back to the bed and poured him a cup of water, held his head up so he could drink. Her gaze scanned his sweaty face, lingering on the fullness of his lips as he lapped the water from them when he'd had his fill. It was not in her nature to be gentle. She was not a gentle woman. But his helplessness had cracked the hard shell she'd built around her heart. It was more than pity she felt for him and the unintentional pain she had allowed Chaim to inflict upon him had started the crack widening.

"More?" he asked, tilting his head up in pleading.

She cupped the back of his head, touched by the dampness of his thick hair at the nape of his neck. Such a strong neck, she thought. So powerful, so completely masculine. There was strength in that thick column of muscle and sinew.

"Thank you, Sybelle," he whispered when he'd had his fill.

She eased his head back onto the pillow. His meekness was more than she had bargained for. His surrender to her authority more that she had been prepared to accept, and his capitulation more than she was capable of handling.

"My brother will leave early tomorrow," she informed him. "If you do no bring attention to yourself until he does, as long as you do as you are told, McGregor, I will keep Chaim off you. Otherwise, I make no guarantees."

"I understand," he said. He turned his head into the pillow. "I won't give you any more trouble."

"I will leave the covers off you unless you think you will need them," she said, her gaze going back to the thickness between his legs of its own accord.

"I would appreciate it," he said quietly, thankful she was not going to tuck those heavy covers around him again.

"I will see you in the morning," she said in acknowledgement of his gratitude. Sybelle had almost reached the door when he called out to her, in a voice not meant to arouse anyone's interest save her own.

"Sleep well, Lady," he told her.

When she had closed the door to her own chambers and sank down upon her cold and

lonely bed, Sybelle Bath-Alkazar experienced an emotion so strong, so powerful, so demanding, she shivered from it.

"I want him," she said in a voice filled with surprise. "I want him."

It stunned her to realize that she wanted him so badly her hands were shaking. Angered her that she had no control over her rebellious body and roaming eyes. The sight of his bold maleness, the strength and power and sheer male beauty of his sinewy body, made her weak with a pulsing need she had never known existed. It drove her to licentious thoughts as she sat there, shocked at the things she was feeling for a man she professed to hate. Such thoughts interfered with her plans to avenge Jaleel Jaborn's death. Such thoughts, combined with the moist dreams which woke her with panting gasps and sweaty sheets and moans of frustration, should have shamed her. But instead, they thrilled her.

"You are no better than all the other women he has seduced," she accused herself. "No better than that whore Rachel."

Yes, but you want him just as all the others have, she told herself. You want him and can not deny it. There can be no mistaking the emotions that flood your being when you are in close contact with him. It was lust. Pure and simple lust. Catherine had once told her the Serenian's 'body was a gift from his pagan gods, meant to pleasure a woman and make her feel more a woman than she ever had before she had known his touch'.

And Sybelle wanted that touch upon her own body. She wanted those strong thighs clamped alongside her own. She wanted to feel those powerful hands caressing her, lifting her to accommodate the thrust of his manhood.

She shivered, wrapping her arms around her. When had her hatred for him turned to want? When had her vengeance become need? Whenever it had happened didn't seem to matter, she answered those telling questions. What mattered was that she wanted him.

And she meant to have him, his body hard and willing, submitting to hers.

The problem now was how she was going to accomplish that with a man whose physical strength was deteriorating more with every passing day and whose mental and emotional needs were becoming almost childlike in their helplessness.

## Chapter Three

Nicholas Beriault shaded his face from the hot Inner Kingdom glare glancing off the crow's nest and cursed. He was a week overdue in Asaraba and in a foul enough temper to have already sent two of his men to the brig and another to the ship's doctor with a broken nose.

"Get that damned cargo loaded, Nathan! We don't have all the bloody day to waste here, man!" Nick yelled at the top of his lungs.

Nathan Newkern rolled his eyes at the First Mate and ordered the man to hurry his shipmates up. "He's on the rag," Nate commented wryly, glancing up to the quarterdeck where his half-brother was strutting back and forth, glaring at whoever ventured past him.

The Lady Monique, Nick and Nate's barkentine, was riding low in the water, her cargo holds filled with coffee beans, sugar cane, and spices from Diabolusia. Her four masts soared higher than the Inner Kingdom dhows with their lanteen sails, dwarfing the smaller boats. Whenever the Lady Monique, named after Nick's mother, sailed into one of the Inner Kingdom harbors, she drew notice and many an envious eye among the other sea captains who had docked there.

"How long will you be in Basaraba, Lord Nathan?" the Dockmaster asked as he scribbled something down in the book he carried.

"Just long enough to drop off this cargo. We're on our way north to Asaraba." Nate warned one of his men not to bother Lord Nick, then turned back to the Dockmaster. "Why are you frowning so, Jaffir?"

"There are troubles up there, Lord Nathan," Jaffir answered. "Have you not heard of the Samiel? The insurrectionists who are attempting to free Rysalia's slaves?"

Nate nodded politely, not interested in such matters since he and Nick did not transport slaves. "Word spreads from port to port. We heard something of it in Odess."

"I hear your old friend, Azalon Ben-Hasheed has involved himself with those ruffians," Jaffir commented. "The man will get himself beheaded just as easily as will the one calling himself Lord Khamsin."

"Azalon?" Nate asked, his thick reddish-blond brows leaping up into the curls of his darker red hair. "Why would a reasonable man like Ben-Hasheed get himself mixed up in such matters?"

"What matters?" Nick growled as he strode heavily down the gangplank. He scowled at Nathan, then turned a heavier grimace to the Dockmaster. "Can't your men off load this shit any faster?"

"He's doing the best he can, Nicholas," Nathan sighed. Between them, Nate was the more easy-going of the two, the less intense, and the one least likely to wind up in a confrontation.

"What's this about Azalon?" Nick asked, ignoring the soft reprimand from his half-brother.

"Remember hearing about the Samiel?" Nate inquired. "Azalon has joined them."

Nick nodded. "A man of conscience is our Ben-Hasheed. I can see him doing such a thing."

"It will get him the death penalty if he is caught, Lord Nicholas," Jaffir quipped. "The Serenian, too."

Nick's frown deepened. "What Serenian?"

"The one who leads them, Lord Nicholas," Jaffir answered. "The one who also led the Wind Force in the Outland."

Nate's gaze shifted to Nick and he found his brother staring at him. There was suspicion forming in Nick Beriault's deep green eyes and a mulish set to his mouth that Nate knew all too well.

"What's a Serenian doing in Rysalia?" Nate asked to forestall the fury he saw building on Nick's rapidly-darkening face.

Jaffir shrugged. "He was sold to a slaver and ...."

"Conar McGregor?" Nick interrupted. "That is who you are talking about, isn't it? The rightful king of Serenia?"

"Yes, Lord Nicholas," Jaffir answered, somewhat taken aback by the vehemence of the man's question and the immediate snort of contempt that came from him when his inquiry was answered. "Do you know of him?"

Nate stepped in front of Nick and faced Jaffir. "You say he was sold to a slaver? Here, in Basaraba?"

Jaffir nodded. "Yes. To Lord Khan Subet. But Lord Khan sold him to the Lady Sabrina for the highest amount ever paid for a slave."

"No doubt the woman thought him worth it," Nick growled. "Most do."

Nate was quick to ask the Dockmaster what had happened to the Serenian after being sold to the woman.

"He escaped," Jaffir said with a chuckle. "No doubt highly displeased and ashamed of what she intended to have done to him."

Nick pushed his half-brother aside. "Meaning what?" he snarled.

Jaffir took a step back from that steady Diabolusian glare. He had a healthy fear of Lord Nicholas Beriault and suspected most men did who had dealings with the tall, golden-haired sea captain.

"The Lady Sabrina owned several brothels in Rysalia," Jaffir replied, watching Beriault's green gaze sharpened. "Plus the breeding farm where she took the Serenian."

"Breeding farm?" Nate choked, his own green eyes widening. "You don't mean ...."

"The bitch took Conar to put him out to stud," Nick answered, his lips twitching. "By the gods, but that's rich, Newkern." His normal grimace turned soft with humor. "That is rich!" He elbowed his brother and started to chuckle deep down in his wide, barrel-like chest.

"But where is he now?" Nate questioned, not finding any humor in Conar McGregor's predicament.

"Who knows?" Jaffir replied, lifting one shoulder with typical Inner Kingdom acceptance of fate. "Leading his men somewhere near Dahrenia. That is where they say his stronghold is. At the ancient fortress of Abbadon."

Nate whistled. "He took the fortress?"

Jaffir nodded with respect. "The man is good, Lord Nate. They say he is invincible."

"Maybe not invincible but damned close to it," Nick chuckled. He reached out to slap a meaty hand on his brother's shoulder. "What say you we take a trip to Abbadon, Nathan?"

"They will not let you in, Lord Nicholas," Jaffir was quick to point out. "Only men of the Samiel are allowed within those walls."

"Oh, they'll let us in," Nick grunted. "I've no doubt of that."

\* \* \* \*

"I know these men, Prince Sajin," Azalon told the new leader of the Samiel. "I will vouch for them."

"Diabolusians?" Balizar snorted, then spat on the ground. "I'd as soon trust one of them

heathens as trust a cobra. I say we send them on their way."

"Did they say what they wanted?" Sajin asked Asher, who was in charge of the security at the fortress.

"Only that they wished to see Azalon." Asher shook his head. "If I didn't know any better, I'd swear the bigger of the two was kin to Khamsin. They have the same look about them."

Balizar pushed away from the stable wall. "Conar ain't got no relatives from Diabolusia," he pointed out. "His daddy didn't go looking in that hell-hole for women."

"Nick was born in Serenia," Azalon said, looking from Balizar to Sajin. "Could it be he's one of Khamsin's bastard brothers?"

"Half-brother, you slimy Hasdu turd," came an explosive snort.

Sajin's hand went automatically to the dagger at his waist, but one look at the man striding confidently toward him, another man close on his heels, stilled his fingers on the hilt.

"How did you get in here?" Asher gasped, looking behind the two strangers. There were guards in attendance but there had been no cry of alarm.

"We're McGregor warriors," Nick snapped. "We go where we want to go." Sensing the man was in charge, his attention went straight to Sajin. "Who are you?"

Taking his hand from his weapon, Sajin fused his gaze with the big blond man's. "I am Khamsin," he said.

"Shit no, you're not," Nick spat. He switched his gaze to Balizar, looked past him, then that fierce green scrutiny slid back to Arbra with a snap where it settled with disbelief. Astonishment crashed down on Beriault's rugged face.

"If he ain't Hern's twin, I ain't Kirk's," Nate said dryly.

"You knew my brother?" Balizar asked, trying to see the resemblance to Conar Asher said was in the face of the bigger of the two men. He couldn't see it, but he suspected the others did.

"We trained under that vicious old tyrant," Nick growled, daring Balizar to take offense at his words.

"And have the scars to prove it," Nate put in quickly to forestall any trouble his brother might be causing.

"Who are you?" Balizar asked, deciding to ignore the challenge that had been issued.

"Nathan Newkern," Nate answered, striding forward to put out a hand to Balizar. "One of the legion." He gripped the older man's wrist. "Nick and I are two of the many sets of twins our father foisted off on the world. I have a brother, Kirk, and Nick has ...."

"Had," the bigger man snarled.

"Aye," Nate corrected, "Had a twin named Bennett."

"I don't remember no Newkerns as being part of the royal family," Balizar said suspiciously although he had taken a liking to this red-haired man with the friendly green look.

Nate nodded. "It was Suddith, but we changed it so we wouldn't be identified with the King."

Balizar's lips begin to move into a knowing grin. "The gypsy lads, eh?" His grip tightened on the younger man's wrist. "I remember now."

Nick made no offer to introduce himself. He stood there, his dark face heavy with a fierce scowl and directed his questions to Sajin. "Where is my brother?"

Sajin didn't like this man. There was something about him that set the Kensetti prince's teeth on edge. Azalon said he could be trusted, but Sajin wasn't so sure.

"Why do you want to see him?" Sajin asked. "He sent the others back to Serenia. If he didn't want them around him, he doesn't want you."



Nick's chin rose threateningly into the air. His gaze narrowed dangerously and his powerful hands balled into tight fists. "Listen, you pog," he spat, ignoring Nate's gasp, "I'm going to give you exactly one minute to tell me where Conar is. If you don't ...."

"If I don't what?" Sajin returned the challenge.

What passed for a smile crossed Nick's craggy face. "If you don't, you'll regret it to your dying day."

The gauntlet had been thrown and every man in the stable yard held his breath as the Kensetti prince and the Diabolusian seaman stood in the broiling heat, squared off against one another, hate flickering in their steady glares.

"This isn't necessary," Azalon told them. "Nick, your brother isn't here. He's ...."

"He's not going to find out where Conar is," Sajin cut the former merchant off. His hand moved back to his waist and to the grip of his blade.

Nick's stare slid insultingly from the nomad's face to the weapon then lifted with disdain to settle with an unblinking glower directed at Sajin's steady gaze.

"You've a death wish, eh, pog?" Nick asked in a deceptively pleasant voice. "I can accommodate that." He reached for his own dagger, strapped to his meaty thigh.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Nate hissed. He rushed forward, putting himself between the two men. "If this nomad is a friend of our brother's, he's not likely to tell us where he is, Nicholas, until we've proven to him we're no threat to Conar." He glanced at Sajin's set face. "Isn't that right?"

Sajin didn't bother to respond either with words or movement. He stood glaring back at the blond man who had at least fifty pounds and three or four inches of height on Sajin. He wasn't going to back down from this man, so if it was a fight the bastard wanted, Sajin was more than willing to give him one.

"He's not here," Azalon put in, hoping to forestall the duel he saw coming. "By the Prophetess, Nick, your brother isn't here."

"Where is he?" Nate asked, keeping between Nick and the nomad.

"We don't know," Asher responded to the question. "He left and wouldn't tell us where he was going. He's living at one of the monasteries. That much we ...."

Nick snarled, jerking his head toward Asher. "I know better than that! Conar would never go to a monastery of his own volition for *no* reason."

"It's not the same kind of monastery where I suspect you spent time," Sajin told the big man and was pleased to see that direct green gaze flicker with uncertainty.

Nate groaned. No one dared bring that particular subject up to Nick. Especially a man Nick was intent on disliking and more likely than not wanted to maim.

"What the hell is that suppose to mean?" Nick grated.

"Conar is my friend," Sajin answered. "He and I have a few things in common." The Kensetti's own gaze wavered. "Some things I suspect you and I have in common, as well."

Nate turned his attention slowly to the nomad. There was pain in that handsome dark face. He wondered if Nick saw it and recognized it for what it was. He should, Nate thought, it was in his own face and had been since his childhood. It was a look that never seemed to go away no matter how old, or how wise, Nicholas Beriault became.

Nick's hand came reluctantly away from his weapon although his glower did not move away from the nomad's carefully blank face. He studied the man a moment, scanning his face, probing the truth of his words, then nodded. "Which monastery?" was his only concession to giving up his desire to fight.

Sajin exhaled a quick breath. "We don't know. He wouldn't tell us."

"Why not?" came the gruff question.

"He wasn't well," Azalon answered for his leader. "We suspect he was even more ill than he had let on to us."

Nate and Nick exchanged a quick look, then Nick made his demand, "Tell us about it."

## Chapter Four

Rain splattered against the stone walls of Sybelle's home and set her teeth on edge. She had been in her suite of rooms most of the day, keeping away from the Outlander, trying to decide what she should do. Her desire for him had grown steadily over the last five months since she had had him brought to her keep, Djebel ed Kjinn, near Helix in the province of Deimwan. Unfortunately, he had shown no inclination to respond to her blatant sexual overtures although she knew the man was more than aware of them.

"Damn you, McGregor," she seethed as she threw a pomegranate against the wall of her bedchamber. The pithy fruit exploded and ran down the wall, its seeds plinking to the floor in patters almost as annoying as the raindrops.

He had free roam of the keep, now, she thought with mounting frustration. She allowed him to wander outside with one or two protectors in attendance to keep him safe from wandering off or being attacked by viper or beast. She had provided as much comfort for him in his suite of rooms as his infirmity would allow and had even taken to sending Kanan into Helix for food supplies with which her chef could tempt the Serenian to eat. She had all but given the man a horse and guide to stir him back to Abbadon, a few hours ride from the mountainous regions of Deimwan. What more could he want?

Perhaps, she mused as she flung herself down on a group of multi-colored silk cushions, the man wanted what she, as yet, could not give him: power over her, herself. They still sniped at one another, swapping insults that had by now become so routine they meant nothing. She had stopped trying to intimidate him, but she would not relinquish the upper hand by allowing him to have even a modicum of independence without her granting it to him. He was still subject to her moods and humor and often as not rebelled against her power over his life. He loudly voiced his objection to being subjugated, constrained to do as she bid him, but he no longer tried to physically challenge her power over him. He had learned that lesson well enough when she'd been forced to have Chaim lock him in the well house until he agreed to her demands.

"Your Grace?" Chaim inquired as he scratched at her door.

Sybelle pounded the pillows with her fists, then got up to unlock the door. "What?"

"He wishes to see you," the servant told her.

Her eyes narrowed. "And what does he want now?"

"He would not tell me," Chaim answered.

She was of half a mind not to go, but, despite her best intentions, she ached to be in the same room with the man. Just to see him, hear his soft, gentle Serenian drawl, so seductive in its volume and sweet tone, that she found herself actively looking forward to their next battle of wills.

"Tell him I'll be there in a moment," she responded, her heart already racing. It was rare for him to call her to him.

Chaim bowed politely and withdrew. He had not missed the look of excitement on his mistress's face. No one in the keep had not seen it of late and yet none would dare comment on it. He knew the servants had wagers on when their lady would finally give in to the sexual needs the Serenian had aroused. There was not a servant in the keep who did not wish it to be soon for the lady's temper had gone from bad to worse in the last few weeks.

"Why doesn't she just have you strip him then impale herself on him?" he had heard one of the cleaning women ask Kanan. "He can not deny her if he is bound to his bed."

"I would hold him down myself if I could get a ride from him, as well!" another of the women had sighed.

"She'll not have any other way than with him willing," an old servant woman had giggled. "Too much pride in our lady to take a man who doesn't want her."

Chaim wasn't so sure the Serenian didn't want their lady. He'd wager a few coppers that the man was becoming almost as tense with a need of his own as the Princess was. Despite his growing weakness, Conar McGregor was still a vital man with a vital man's needs. It would be an act of mercy for both mistress and prisoner if the two of them could get on with what a man and woman naturally did to one another in such a situation.

Sybelle dabbed a potent perfume made of crushed mimosa flowers behind her ears and at the base of her throat. A generous splash was applied to the tender crook behind her knees and at her temples, as well. She checked her appearance in the mirror although she knew he could not see the pains she had taken to perfect her hair and makeup. His sense of smell was so acute now, that she would have to depend on that alone to arouse the passions in him that she wished to have him respond to her own growing desire to have him in her bed.

"Please, Mosen," she begged her Prophetess. "Make him want me as I want him."

She was almost at his door when she heard a thunderous crash from inside his chamber. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest and she rushed in, coming up short when she saw him on the floor, kneeling on all fours, his head hanging down. She stood transfixed as he tried to push himself up, wobbling back and forth on his knees, but making no headway. Sybelle was about to go to him when he lifted his head and seemed to be looking at her through the constriction of his blindfold.

"Are you enjoying this, milady?" he asked in a bitter voice.

Sybelle's wayward tongue claimed her judgment and she rattled off an answer before she could stop it. "A woman always enjoys having a man prostrated at her feet, McGregor." She dug her nails into her hands, wishing she could snatch the flippant words back for she saw his head lower as though in defeat.

"Aye," he said on a long breath. "And you have me where you want me, don't you, Your Grace?"

Conar tried to push himself up, but his legs would not obey him. His arms were losing their strength and he was trembling. He collapsed on the floor with an oomph of helplessness.

"What's the matter with you, McGregor?" she asked. She was aware of a niggling fear growing in her gut. A part of her wanted to go to him, to help him up, but another part warned her not to show such compassion. That compassion was the last thing he either wanted or needed at that moment. "Get up."

Conar ground his teeth together and pushed himself up from the floor so that his chest was not touching the thick pile of the carpet. He tried scooting forward, hoping to rock back to his knees and eventually push himself all the way up, but there was no reaction from his legs. They felt dead. Numb. Totally without movement.

"What happened, anyway?" Sybelle asked, seeing the table where he usually took his meal lying on its side, the remains of his morning meal scattered about the floor. "Have you no concern for my china? Have you any conception of how much that dinnerware cost me?"

Her acerbic tongue was like a prod to his manhood and he growled a vulgar reply before trying once more to push himself up. He might as well have saved his strength for he could not do so and he was growing steadily weaker as he tried.

"For the love of Mosen, McGregor!" Sybelle taunted him. "Get up!"

Conar tried dragging himself along the floor, but with his legs not working and the strength in his arms fading, he couldn't. Twice he tried and twice he was defeated. He slapped at the floor with the palm of his right hand and then tried again. He collapsed to his face.

"Do as you are told, McGregor. Get up!"

Real fear had managed to grip Sybelle. She knew he was not playacting. The lower portion of his body was motionless against the floor, his legs splayed out as though he were a rag doll having been tossed from a child's window to the ground. His arms trembled violently as he tried to drag himself and he was sweating profusely with the effort. She jumped as he slammed his fist down on the floor. Then slammed it down again and again, his furious bellow loud enough to wake the dead.

"I can't!" he yelled, repeatedly striking the floor. "Damn it! I can't. I can't!"

With her heart beating so loudly in her chest she could hear each thud, Sybelle went to him, kneeling down beside him. She half-lifted him up so that he was once more on his knees. Her arms went around his back, clutching his side as she held him to her.

"Chaim!" she yelled. She knew she would never be able to lift him to his bed or even support his weight should she by some random chance get him to his feet. "Chaim!"

"Oh, god," she heard him whimper. His entire body was shuddering with what she instinctively knew was fear.

"It will be all right," she soothed him. Her arms tightened around him. "It will be all right."

His head hung down between his quivering arms and he shook it violently. "No. No, it won't. Not ever again."

Sybelle listened to the grief building in his voice, heard the tears coming. She pulled him to her so that his head rested in her lap. "I will make it all right for you," she swore to him. "That I promise you!"

Conar didn't hear her. In his mind, he was as good as dead. Not only could he not see, he could not feel anything from his waist down and even his arms were becoming numb. His life, as he had known it, was ending.

"You may eventually become paralyzed, Conar," Raphaella had warned him. "Be prepared for it."

He knew that time had come and he was not prepared.

Sybelle flinched as a roaring gasp of hopelessness, helplessness, and defeat exploded from the man she held. His face was buried in her lap and she could feel his hot tears through the folds of the blindfold as they spread over the silk of her gown. He was shuddering uncontrollably and his hands were plucking at the carpet as though he were trying to gather together the remnants of his shattered life.

"Shush," she told him, crooning softly to him, unmindful of the men who came rushing into the room. "I will take care of you. I swear by all I hold precious, I will."

Chaim came up short as he entered the chamber and found his lady on her knees beside the Serenian. A great lurch of pity welled up in the man's heart and he fell to his knees beside them, reaching out to grasp McGregor's limp body.

"Be careful with him, Chaim," Sybelle warned. "On your life, be careful with him."

Effortlessly lifting his burden from the floor, Chaim swept his arms under Conar's legs and hefted him, carried him to his bed as easily as if the Outlander had been a child. "What happened?" the nomad warrior asked.

"I don't know." Sybelle sat down on the bed beside Conar as soon as her servant had settled him on the mattress. "I came in to find him on the floor." She looked up at Chaim. "I don't think

he can walk."

The nomad had been expecting such news for several days. Their prisoner had become weaker and weaker, dropping things he tried to hold, stumbling when he walked, having more and more difficulty dragging his right leg as he tried to do so.

"Your Grace?" the servant asked, reaching out to lay a comforting hand on Conar's knee. "What can I do for you?"

There was no answer from the man on the bed. Only a hitching sob that came from trembling lips. Conar McGregor lay there, his face turned away from them, his hands clutching the sheets beneath him. He twisted the covers in his hands, dragging at them as though that were the only way he could vent his anger and disappointment.

Sybelle motioned Chaim to leave. Bending over, she swept a fallen lock of flaxen hair from the Serenian's brow. "Can you move your legs at all?" she asked.

Conar shook his head, unable to answer her. He had no feeling whatsoever in his legs.

"This wasn't totally unexpected, McGregor," she said softly. Her hand moved down the wet plane of his scarred left cheek. "You know that."

How bitter were her words, he thought as he lay there, unbearable sorrow welling up in his chest. He felt fresh tears stinging his eyes and was determined not to give in to them. He wished she'd go away and leave him alone.

Sybelle eased her hand from him, understanding he did not want to be touched at that moment. She put her hands in her lap and threaded the fingers together.

"What was it you wanted?" she asked, hoping to make her voice as calm and unconcerned as she wished she felt.

When he didn't answer, she prodded him gently. "When you sent for me. What did you need?"

A resentful hiss of sullenness issued from him. "Can you believe it, Sybelle?" he snarled. "I wanted to ask you if Chaim could take me riding again." He laughed, a bitter explosion of contempt. "I don't guess that's a viable option for me now, is it?"

The Kensetti woman lowered her head. "Maybe not."

There was another rasp of self-disgust. "Aye. Maybe not."

Sybelle closed her eyes for a moment and then drew in a long, painful breath. As she exhaled, she turned to look at him. He lay there so rigid, so angry, so furious at his body's having failed him.

"There is a way I can help," she told him.

"Oh, aye," he said from between clenched teeth. "Kill me and be done with it."

"You know better than that," she answered in a stern voice.

"What good am I, Sybelle?" he shouted at her. "What good am I to anyone?" He turned his head toward her, wishing with all his being that he could see her face, could look into her eyes and find some hope of release. He could not read anything in her voice.

"There is a way to turn back the clock, McGregor," she said. "A way to undo what has happened to you."

His guffaw of laughter was malevolent as he turned his head away again. "Sure there is."

Sybelle wanted to touch him, to put her hand on his chest. Her palms itched to caress his flesh, to sooth him. But she knew his anger would not allow even the most platonic of touches at that moment and so she had to satisfy herself with caressing him with her gaze.

"I am of the Amazeen," she told him. "A sect similar to that of which your wife belongs." She watched his mouth twist with irritation. "The Sisters of Amazeen are even more powerful than

those of the Multitude. We accomplish what they only dream can be done."

Conar sighed. Was the world full of magic-sayers intent on tormenting him to his dying day? Did they all think themselves more powerful than their kinsmen in other orders?

"Chaff in the wind," he muttered.

"You belittle what you as yet have experienced," she reminded him. "The Multitude could not keep this from happening to you. Perhaps the Daughters even wished it upon you."

His head swung over on the pillow. "Why would they?" he growled.

"To punish you?" she asked.

"For what?" he asked in exasperation.

"For putting aside a Daughter to take another?" she hinted. "I am told no woman of the Multitude will tolerate the man she has claimed sleeping with another."

Conar's lips twitched with ironic humor. "Chaim caused this, Lady. No one but him."

"And I can undo it," she said.

"How?" His curt tone left no doubt that he believed such a thing was impossible.

"By going to the Wealdzone," she replied. "To make an entreaty for your protection." She ignored his snort of contempt. "It is our equivalent of the Multitude's Shadowlands."

"And your Great Lady will grant me back my good health if you go," he sneered.

"She is not called that, but yes, She will grant such a petition if She feels you are worthy of a Sister's devotion."

Conar wished he could hit the woman sitting beside him. He wished he could tear her limb from limb. She was taunting him with her make-believe magic and his pain was growing harder to bear by the minute.

"You don't believe me," she said.

"No," he shot back. "If I could have been helped, Raphaella would have done so."

"That bitch was excommunicated from her own Order," Sybelle snickered. "She wields no powers save those of the Darkworld to which she now belongs. Her puny powers might have prolonged the inevitable, McGregor, but they could not stop or reverse it." She stood up. "I can, but if you do not wish to allow me to do so, then so be it. Remain as you are for the rest of your life." She turned to go. "Which, as you know, will be a long, long life, Infidel."

He heard her shut the door behind her with more force than was necessary and knew she was furious with him. That he had not fallen into her silk-lined trap, fallen for her lies, had no doubt enraged her. She could not fool him into pleading with her to do her magic to save him. He was beyond help and he knew it.

Lying there, in his world of darkness and inescapable loneliness, he tried to find a way that he might end his own life, but could think of none. He could not twist from the bed for the paralyses had spread up to his chest and it was all he could do just to move his hands. Slitting his throat or wrists, plunging a dagger into his heart was out of the question. And besides which, where could he lay hands on a weapon of his own that would accomplish such a feat? His dagger and sword were no doubt still at Abbadon and no other blades could sever his life from this world. For a fleeting moment, he thought of trying to swallow his tongue, but he doubted that would work. Occultus Noire had no doubt foreseen such a calamity long ago, because of his bouts of Labyrinthian Fever, or malaria as the Outer Kingdom physician had named it, and taken precautions of just that occurring to cause his untimely demise.

He saw no way to end his life and the torment into which he had been plunged. That realization hurt him even more than the helplessness which had claimed him.

"Let her help you," his inner voice whispered to him with treasonous baiting. "Perhaps she

can."

"No!" he spat, plucking weakly at the covers he had at one time been able to crush in his fist. The weakness was spreading.

"What have you to lose, McGregor?" that insidious traitor cooed to him.

"She is playing with me!" he said allowed. "Taunting me to hurt me more!"

"But what if she isn't?" came the sigh.

Conar felt the tears beginning again.

What if she wasn't?



## Chapter Five

Nicholas grabbed a handful of the monk's robe in his fists and lifted the smaller man up so they were eye to eye. "I won't ask you again, you weasely little runt!" Nick bellowed into the man's serene face. "Either tell me if my kinsman is here or I swear by the Virgin, I'll rip you apart!"

The monk smiled sadly. "I can not tell you what you wish to know."

"You're not getting anywhere with him, Nicky," Nate sighed. "Just put him down."

With a snarl of irritation, Nick let go of the monk and then shoved the hapless man away from him. "I will find my brother. Do you hear me you pogy cleric?"

"They heard you all the way to Basaraba," Sajin quipped. He stepped around Nate and laid a gentle hand on the monk's thin shoulder. "We just want to know if the Prince is here. Can you not ease his brothers' minds? They have traveled a long way to see him and I know he'd want to be told they are here."

"Our Abbot was most explicit in his instructions, Your Grace," the monk said. "Even if the Outlander is within our walls, we could not tell you."

Nicholas roared and shoved past the monk, tossing aside the two wide-eyed novices who tried to bar his entrance into the monastery as though they weighed no more than mere babes in arms.

"Here we go again," Nate groaned. This was the third of five holy places his bull of a brother had invaded in the last week. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a sack of gold coins. "Here, Brother Achmed. Let me pay for the damage he's going to do."

The monk shook his head. "He will not do damage to a house of the Prophetess." He closed his hand around Nate's. "Keep your money, Sir."

After an hour's search brought nothing with it but more fury, Nick pushed his way from the monastery and stomped heavily to his mount. "He ain't there," was all he said as he grabbed a handful of his steed's mane and pulled himself into the saddle.

"Are you sure?" Sajin asked, eying the monk who was gazing back at them with a peacefulness that was almost unnerving.

"There ain't a nook or cranny in the place I didn't search, nomad. If Conar was there, he'd have heard me calling for him and come out."

Asher exchanged a quick look with Azalon. Both men doubted that assumption, but if it made Nicholas happy, they'd agree to it.

"The Peace of Our Lady ride with you," the monk called out as the riders turned their horses from the monastery gate. He shook his head sadly and went back into the walled world of his life. The man they sought must be someone important, indeed, to cause such a fuss.

"Now where?"

"There's a monastery in the mountains near Helix," Sajin answered Nick's furious inquiry. "Not far from my sister's keep. But there's one between here and there at Thesaur. I suppose that should be our next stop."

Nick snorted and spurred his mount, leaning over the saddle as the beast broke into a run. He slapped the ends of his reins against the stallion's rump and rider and mount moved far out ahead of the others.

"What will he do if he can't find Conar?" Sajin asked Nate.

Nate shrugged. "Take the bloody country apart with his bare hands." He chuckled. "That's the McGregor way, isn't it?"

\* \* \* \*

Toward morning of the next day, Chaim gently scratched at his lady's door and slipped into her chamber as she bid him a breathless entry. He bowed to her respectfully. "I am sorry for the intrusion, Your Grace," he apologized.

"Has something happened?" she asked, sitting up and reaching for the robe across the foot of her bed. "Is he worse?"

"He asked me to have you come to him, Your Grace," Chaim said. "He has not slept any at all this night and I fear he can no longer move even his fingers."

Fear shot through Sybelle but she hid it well. If she could have gone to the Wealdzone soon after his paralysis began, she could have been assured of a speedy recovery. Now, it might take days to accomplish what could have been done in a few hours time. Flinging the robe over her shoulders, she thrust her arms into the sleeves and hurried from the room. Her bare feet slapped urgently against the cold stone floor as she outdistanced Chaim.

Conar heard her come into the chamber and tensed. He had been preparing himself all night for this and still was not sure he was doing the right thing. If she had only been taunting him with her ability to help, if such a thing was part and parcel of her artillery to torment him, he wasn't so sure he could withstand the assault. His ego had suffered greatly and now his manhood was also at stake. He hated to ask a woman for help of any kind. It was not a manly thing to do.

"I am here, McGregor," she told him, drawing up a chair to sit beside his bed. She studied his face in the soft glow of the candlelight. The edges of the scarf covering his eyes were wet with the perspiration that dotted his lean face.

Conar exhaled a long, weary breath. "I can't move at all, now," he said. "Does that please you, Sybelle?"

"I am not surprised," she said, ignoring his bitter question. Reaching out, she laid her palm on his ravaged cheek. "Can you feel this?"

There was no sensation at all, but he could smell the faint odor of soap and lemon. "No."

Sybelle withdrew her hand. "What do you wish me to do?" She held her breath for his reply.

She had him, he thought. Caught in her web, wrapped up as tightly as a feast goose. What choice did he have but to go along with her? Even if she were toying with him, what other alternative was open to him save asking for her help? He was helpless and might as well admit to it.

"You put no price on it, Lady," he said softly. His chin quivered. "There is always a price."

Her hands clenched. "Total submission," she said. "You must swear total submission to me."

He had thought as much. Her price was one many a magic-sayer had put on their services. But the answer hurt him just the same.

"And what does that submission entail, Sybelle?" he asked. He thought he knew, but he would hear her say it.

"You must pledge never to leave this place. You must swear to stay for as long as I desire you do so. Even if that is to my dying day, McGregor."

Conar sighed. "What else?" He'd expected no less.

"You must submit to all my desires," she told him. "In whatever fashion I deem fit."

She would have his body, as well as his soul, he thought grimly, but that had not been

unexpected, either. Her touch had told him she wanted him. He was use to that. What did it matter? One more woman's hands on his body should not concern him, now. Not now that he could no longer feel any woman's hands on him.

"Is there more?" he asked.

"You must sign a writ of divorce from both Catherine and that whore at Abbadon. I will not have you bound to any woman, but me." She leaned close to him. "Since you will never set eyes on either of them again, that should be of little import to you."

His heart began to ache with the bitter knowledge that he would never again see his homeland nor his children. Never hold the girl child that was the product of his and Catherine's love. He had resigned himself to losing Catherine, but his children were a different matter.

"I can cure you," she taunted him. "Remember that." She leaned closer so that her lips were at his ear. Her voice was a seductive caress. "I can make you see again, McGregor. Walk again. Feel again. I can take away all pain and all affliction."

She was tempting him with the things he desperately wanted. She was offering him life again. A way out of the horrible darkness into which he had been pitched. A surcease of the agony he had been suffering for years.

"Will you tell me no and live the rest of your life as you are, McGregor?" she whispered in his ear.

How could she think he wanted to live his life wrapped in this cocoon of emptiness, he thought? How could she believe he wanted to spend the remainder of his life encased in cement? A loathsome object of pity that could not feel life as it slipped by him? He could not and knew it. He had once been a vital man. To be left otherwise would be worse than hell on earth for him.

"And if I agree to your conditions," he said quietly, "what then?"

"I am Kensetti royalty, McGregor," she said, intently watching his reaction. "In order for you to live here with me as I desire you to do, we must be man and wife."

That did surprise him. He was silent, contemplating why she would want to tie herself to him in such a way. Her next words explained it to him.

"My brothers might one day find you here with me. Should I conceive by you, which is likely considering how potent your seed is, McGregor, even Sajin would call for your head on a pike if we are not legally bound to one another. You are royalty. I am not lowering myself to take you as my husband. My brothers will not welcome the union, but they will not gainsay it, either, if Sajin approves."

Conar swallowed. "But you have no intention of telling Sajin where I am, do you?"

"He would want you to go back with him and I will not allow that," she said simply. "You will remain here with me. You will not dishonor your oath to me. I know you, McGregor."

She had it all figured out. Down to the smallest detail. She would bind him to her with cords of tempered steel from which he could not break free. His words was his bond. Whatever he swore to her, he would do.

"Well?" she asked, clutching the side of the bed. "What is it to be?"

He was silent a moment and then he sighed, a heartfelt surrender that brought tears to his eyes. "What choices have you given me, Sybelle?"

"None," she said in a matter of fact tone that was cold and brutal to even her own ears. She sat rigidly, awaiting his answer. "Either stay as you are or give yourself to me."

How he hated the sound of that. The woman hated him. She had made that clear. What terrible things would he have to do in order to repay her tainted generosity?

"Time is running out, McGregor," she reminded him. "I must have your answer now."

"Aye," he answered so softly she barely heard him. "I agree to your demands."

Sybelle drew in a slow breath. "You must say it. I will hear you swear to me your submission, McGregor."

He bit his lip until a tiny bead of blood appeared on the full lower surface. It was all he could do to keep his voice from breaking as he answered.

"I will not leave you, Sybelle." His words became almost inaudible. "I will do whatever you wish of me."

She could hear the blatant sadness in his tone and it probed at her conscience. But she wanted this man and there was no other way to have him totally in her control than this.

"No matter what I wish to do to you or have you do to me?" she prodded him, wanting to make sure there was no misunderstanding between them. It would be his full cooperation or none at all.

Conar heard Kaileel Tohre's words from long ago. The evil sorcerer had made him take a similar vow. He doubted if the humiliation Sybelle planned for him could be any worse than that which Kaileel had shone him.

"Like unto like," the Serenian answered. "I will not say no to you."

"No matter what I ask of you? No matter what I demand?"

His answer was a mere whisper of breath. "Aye."

And with Sybelle Bath-Alkazar's long exhalation of held breath, Conar's fate was sealed.

## Chapter Six

In the whispering green forests beyond the Capstanian Mountain range of Kensett, lay a magic land which pulsed in the shifting mists like the beating of a gentle heart. The air was redolent with the scent of pine and clover and there was about the place a peacefulness, an abundance of calm that soothed the spirit and awakened the soul to the beauty surrounding it. The land abounded with a plethora of living creatures: shy fawns peeking out from behind the thick trunks of live oaks; flitting birds skipping among the moss-draped branches; scampering squirrels and waddling raccoons; sly foxes lurking among the tall ferns. Life was rich and turgid in the land of the Wealdzone. Rain fell softly at times, more lustfully at others. Where the precious water fell, new life sprang up and flourished, spreading out on the floor of the greensward to carpet the fertile soil and bring from it all manner of living things. There was sound in the Wealdzone, as well: the chirping of myriad varieties of bird life; the click of insects; the snuffling of wolves and forest beasts; the gentle sougling of the wind across the primeval sky.

And in the midst of so much life, so much beauty, stood a keep of such loveliness, of such architectural splendor, it fair shone in the sunlight which draped about it. The walls were made of a soft white stone and there were no doors to bar entrance, no window shutters to keep out the abundance of wildlife skittering about, no portcullis to lower, no drawbridge to raise, no guards to bar entry. The forest floor with its carpet of lush green growth, flowed right up to the keep's main entrance like a welcoming mat for the weary visitor to Wealdzone. There was about the keep an air of serenity that could be found nowhere else in the universe.

Flowing beside the keep was a river of crystal waters, gently lapping at the mossy banks and filled with all manner of water fowl who skimmed along with grace and beauty, calling now and again to one another, delighting in the protection the keep afforded them. In the midst of the water was a small island and perched on the island was a delicate gazebo, its lacy sides of white latticework glowing in the sunset sky, for it was always sunset in the green forests of the Wealdzone.

"Welcome, Sister," a maiden called out as Sybelle entered the keep. "You are expected."

The interior of the keep was lushly furnished with period pieces from every era of time, some as old as the ancients, some as new as the year before. Each piece lovingly cared for by careful hands. Paintings of the Masters and modern artists adorned the walls alongside tapestries of ages past. Soft light gleamed from crystal chandeliers and glowed gently from highly-polished sconces. There was no darkness within the keep. There was no barren starkness. No foggy mists obscured the walls. No shadows lurked in hidden corners.

"Our Lady awaits you in the solar," the maiden informed Sybelle.

"Thank you." Sybelle smiled at her Sister and headed toward the massive glass-enclosed room where every variety of indoor plant grew in splendid abundance.

"Ah, Sybelle," the Lady laughed as she gracefully stood up from her chaise. "It is always such a pleasure to have you visit. Here, sit beside me. May I offer you tea?"

"I would enjoy that, Madame," Sybelle answered. She seated herself on an overstuffed settee and kicked off her shoes, drew her legs up on the cushions. She settled back with a sigh of pleasure.

"Your trip was peaceful?" the Lady inquired as one of her Handmaidens began to pour the rich cinnamon tea into delicate china cups.

"Peaceful and too short," Sybelle replied. "Sometimes I wish the journey to the keep would take a bit longer so I might enjoy the scenery."

"Then by all means take your time in going back. There is no hurry," the Lady chided her. "You know you will have what you have come for without asking."

Sybelle sighed, relieved. "I had hoped so." She accepted the fragile bone china cup and took a sip. Her eyes glowed with appreciation of the brew. "Excellent," she told the Handmaiden.

"He is what you have been seeking for so long?" the Lady asked as she sipped from her own cup.

"I believe so," Sybelle acknowledged, "although I would not have said so a month or two ago." She licked her upper lip. "The power I wield over him intrigues me."

The Lady nodded with understanding. "I would advise you to be careful how you exercise such authority over a man such as this one. Many have tried to tame him and few have succeeded. Those who have did not entirely gain his submission. Not even Elizabeth Wynt." "

Sybelle inclined her head in acceptance of the warning. "He will hold to his vow to me, Madame. He is a man of his word. Honor is not just a word with him."

"True," the Lady agreed, "but one can push a man such as he only so far without paying dearly for the privilege." She placed her half-empty cup on a low marble stand beside her chaise. "You have yet to test him, I take it?"

A soft blush spread over Sybelle's high cheekbones. "I shall this evening. As soon as he regains his strength."

The Lady shook her head. "A word of warning, child: Give him a few days. Allow him to re-acustom himself with the workings of his body. He has gone long without knowing adequate strength." She smiled archly. "One would not like to see you pounce upon him in the, shall we say, 'heat' of the moment. That might prove unwise in the handling of this particular man. Go slowly with him and you might gain that which you seek." She cocked her head to one side. "It is his love you want, is it not?"

Sybelle's heart thudded against her ribcage. "Yes."

"You may gain it if you handle him in just the right way," the Lady cautioned her. "But alienate him and you will find your work cut out for you. A man thinks with his privates, child. Never allow him to think you control that part of him."

The faint blush deepened. "I will adhere to your advice, Madame."

"Good," the Lady agreed. Her pale blue eyes sparkled with an inner light and she reached up to drape the long braid of her golden hair over her smooth ivory shoulder. "I sense you wish other considerations where this man is concerned?"

Looking at the lovely woman reclining on the chaise, Sybelle could not help but wish she was as beautiful and sensuous as the Lady. With the flawless perfection of her delicate skin, her lustrous blue gaze, her slim form and lushly-curved legs, no man could withstand her attention. Not even the Serenian. Even the Lady's smoky voice was not without sexual enticement.

"You are beautiful in your own right, Sybelle," the Lady laughed and smiled tenderly at the lowering of her visitor's head. "He will be enchanted with you if you but play him as you should. Sexual delights have always held a strong attraction for Conar McGregor. When he finally understands that you might well be the last female with whom he will ever be allowed to copulate, I believe you will have gained your purpose. He will not resist you after that."

"But will he love me?" Sybelle could not help but ask.

"What is love?" the Lady inquired with a delicate arch of her tawny brow. "Great affection is love. Caring for the comfort of another is a form of that emotion. Dependence is also love to

some degree." Her lovely lips pursed. "Knowing he has you to thank for restoring him to good health will be a mighty goad into altering his feelings toward you. It might not become love as foolish dreamers conceive it, Sybelle, but gratitude carries weight with this man. He will keep to his bargain and make you as happy as he can."

Sybelle frowned. "But will he be happy?"

"No," the Lady replied. "But it is not his happiness you seek, now, is it?" She took up her cup of tea. "You can not have it both ways, child. If you wish the man, you accept the limitations which come with him."

The Kensetti princess put aside her tea cup and swung her legs from the settee. Sitting forward, she reached out to lay a pleading hand on her mistress' arm. "Can I alter certain things about him while I am here?"

The Lady lifted her tea cup to her lips and looked over the rim at her guest. "Such as?" she asked before finishing the cooling brew.

Sybelle bit her lower lip for a moment and then rushed on with her request. "I want to change his appearance somewhat."

There was a long, satisfied sigh from the Lady. "You wish to do away with those wicked scars," she stated.

"Yes," Sybelle agreed. "On his cheek and back." Her hand tightened on the Lady's arm. "And there are other war marks that I wish to erase."

"I will make it so," the Lady assured her. "I have never liked the disfigurement of his body. I have always thought it marred an otherwise perfect male specimen."

Sybelle felt a wave of jealousy shudder through her being at the Lady's words and she hoped she had hid her feelings beneath the down sweep of her lids. "Thank you, Madame."

"Is there anything else?" the Lady inquired, "besides his good health and the restoration of his flesh?"

Glancing up, Sybelle shook her head. "I do not think so unless you have stipulations of your own." She held her breath awaiting the reply.

The Lady smiled. "There is one other thing."

Sybelle tensed. "Madame?" she asked, suddenly fearful of the answer.

The beautiful blond woman swung her long, tanned legs to the floor and stood up, her luscious body framed seductively against the light from the sun. She put her hands on her curving hips and stared down at her visitor.

"If I were you, Sybelle," she said in a husky voice, "I would not wipe all thoughts of his former loves from his mind as you intend to do."

A soft gasp came from Sybelle. She had thought to hide that particular bit of business from the Lady. She should have known better.

"But why not? Would it not make it easier for him to love me?" she asked, bewildered by the sudden wicked gleam in her mistress' eye.

"Perhaps," the Lady answered, "but you will be denying yourself the greatest source of control over Conar McGregor that you will ever have. Erase Elizabeth Wynth or Catherine Steffenovitch from his mind and you will have lost the perfect means of reminding him who controls him. By letting him know you are keeping him from that Outer Kingdom sow, keeping him from his homeland and those brats he holds so dear, keeping him from his kinsmen, you are constantly reminding him that it is you who wields the power, not him."

Sybelle's perfectly-arched eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown. "But will he not think of them? Constantly compare me to them?" She bit her lip. "Will that not defeat my

purpose?"

The Lady laughed softly. "Let him think of them, child. He is a man who likes to brood and I believe he is not happy unless he is doing so. Show him unfailing kindness, support him, but be firm with him. Make it clear to him that *you* will be the only woman in his life from now on. It is your will that will be done, not his. When he finally accepts that, you will have gained a strong hold on his soul if not his heart." She stood up, signifying the meeting was over.

Sybelle eased herself up, as well. "Thank you, Madame," she said, taking the Lady's hand and bringing it to her lips. "For your advice and help."

"One final word of warning, Sybelle," the Lady said as she walked with the Kensetti princess to the door of the solar. "Do not let him try to manipulate you. He will attempt to do so for that is his nature. He is accustomed to having women fall all over themselves in an effort to gain his notice. As I have said: be firm and do not let him sway you. That is the only way to control Conar McGregor."



## Chapter Seven

He awoke with a start. The smell of jasmine was heavy in the air and he knew he was not alone. He cleared his throat, trying to rid himself of the dryness in his mouth before he spoke. "Sybelle?" he croaked, his voice cracking.

"Yes."

Conar had no idea how long she had been there. Time no longer had meaning for him in his constant world of night. He dreaded asking her if she had gone to her world of magik and spells for fear she would tell him she had changed her mind, that she had decided she would not help him after all.

"We must talk, McGregor," she told him.

Here it comes, he thought with a sinking heart. She was going to tell him it had all been a monstrous joke. A taunt to hurt him more. She would tell him she had not the power to do away with his troubles or, if she did, that she would not uphold the bargain they had made between them.

"Water," he said, wanting to delay the inevitable hurt that he was sure was about to pierce his already broken heart.

Sybelle reached for the tumbler on the bedside table. She put her hand behind his head and brought the cool water to his parched lips. As he drank, she ran her gaze over his face and felt a stirring of intense desire shoot through her.

"You were thirsty," she said as she tipped the tumbler as he drained it. When the water was gone, she eased his head back to the pillow and smoothed away the fallen tawny locks which draped over his brow. Her palm rested on his flesh. "You have another fever, McGregor."

"Same one," he mumbled. The malaria was coming back and his head was aching.

"It doesn't matter." Sybelle put aside the empty tumbler. "Come morning, you will never be bothered with that illness again."

Conar drew in his breath. What kind of game was she playing with him, now? He wished he could see her, look into her eyes. If he could, he would be able to tell her intent. He could gather nothing from her soft, unemotional voice.

Sybelle let her scrutiny wander down his rigid body and understanding lit her delicate face. She smiled. "Did you think I would not keep to our agreement, McGregor?" she asked.

He could feel her gaze on him and it made him acutely uncomfortable. But if she held to the bargain, he would suffer more than her gaze on him, he thought with hopeless irony.

"The thought had crossed my mind," he answered her. "What better way to torment me, Sybelle?"

Her laugh was girlish. "The torments I have in store for you, my warrior, are of the flesh. Not of the mind."

He did not doubt that. He could almost feel her nails raking down his back and he wondered if her power was not as she had hinted to him that it was.

"Come morning," Sybelle said, sensing his confusion, "you will be as you were before you ever set foot off Serenian soil to come to the Midworld continent." Her hand caressed his bare chest. "Strong and healthy and as vibrantly alive as you have ever been." Her palm trailed down his side and smoothed over the thick pelt of hair haloing his deeply-inset navel. "A sensual being to delight any woman's fancy." Her fingers slid beneath the sheet and wrapped themselves around the flaccid flesh that lay against Conar's thigh. She knew he could not feel her touch and the

thought both saddened and thrilled her.

"Why wait until morning?" he asked. "If you are going to make good on your purpose, why not do so now?"

Reluctantly she let go of his manhood and withdrew her hand from beneath the sheet. "You must be unconscious for the ritual to be performed, McGregor," she told him, tugging the sheet up over his bare chest and tucking it under his arms. "Otherwise, the transition would be too painful for you to bear."

Conar smiled grimly. "I would think you would enjoy watching me writhe in pain, Sybelle," he replied.

"With sexual pain, perhaps," she said bluntly, grinning as his smile slipped, then disappeared. She almost laughed aloud as she watched his jaw clench and realized he was grinding his teeth together in impotent rage and embarrassment at her words. She patted his shoulder then stood up. "Don't worry, McGregor," she assured him. "You will enjoy the pain I inflict on you."

"I sincerely doubt it," he growled from between his teeth.

Sybelle put her fingers on his mouth and pried his lips apart. His inability to turn away from her touch was an asset to what she had to do. "Open you mouth," she ordered him, but wasn't surprised when his lips grew taut.

He was about to answer her, to tell her to go to hell, but he choked on the words as something bitter was spread over his lips and trickled into his mouth. The taste was awful, the worst thing he had ever had invade his taste buds. He tried to spit it out but found himself unable to do so for she had clamped her hand over his mouth.

"It's to make you sleep deeply, McGregor," she told him. "Don't fight it. When you wake, you will be whole again."

If he woke, he thought with panic as the acrid taste slid down his throat, burning as it sped down his gullet and spread into his stomach. He had never felt anything so insidious attacking his system before. He felt as though he were drowning on whatever she had forced into his mouth. He gasped, striving to draw breath into his burning lungs.

"It is not a pleasant taste ...," she began but his coughing, choking words cut her off.

"I can't breathe!" His chest was on fire. His belly was sizzling. The pain was so intense he could feel himself being cooked alive.

"You aren't dying," Sybelle said in a dry voice. "Although I am told the brew does cause intense discomfort, it is not lethal. If you will not fight it, it will lull you ...."

"Sybelle!" he shouted. His world was dropping away from beneath him.

"Don't fight the potion, McGregor," she warned him. "Let it claim you."

And it did. With a vengeance that leapt out of the darkness and grabbed him with implacable claws that tore him from this world and dragged him into another from which he never expected to return.

\* \* \* \*

Sybelle squinted against the light which was pouring in through the arched window to her right. She sighed and turned away from the intrusion, snuggling against the warm body which lay beside her own. Her cheek rested against the firm flesh of a powerful shoulder and she slid her arm over a hard chest. Beneath her arm, she could feel the steady beat of Conar McGregor's heart and she opened her eyes to look up at him. He was still under, his steady breathing a sure sign that he had as yet to awaken from the brew that had kept him unconscious all night. Sighing with pleasure, she closed her eyes and fell once more into a light doze, awaking only when she became aware of the timbre of his breathing. He was coming out of it and she pushed herself up on her elbow so that

she could look down into his still face as he came fully awake.

It was the light that registered first. Bright, insistent light that made his head ache with the intensity. Even before he tried to open his eyes beneath the covering of the silken scarf, he was aware of that light. It was invading the world of darkness in which he had spent so much time, trying to push back the demons that had held him captive in that lightless world for so long. He wasn't even aware that his hand had lifted, that his intent had been to drag the cloth from his face so that he could see that light before his arm was gripped lightly in a restraining hold.

"Not yet," he heard Sybelle warn him.

His second impression was that he could feel her hand on his arm, not that he had lifted that arm without problem or without weakness or trembling. He almost sighed aloud with pleasure that he could feel her touch. As the realization set in that he had been able to move, he sucked in his breath and held it, suddenly afraid that, although he could move his right arm, and his left as he discovered when he lifted that arm so that he could cover her hand with his own, he could not move his legs.

"Try," he heard her whisper to him.

He concentrated on wiggling his toes and was nearly leveled by emotion as he did so with no effort at all. He flexed his foot, still holding his breath, then slowly drew his knee up.

"Everything works, McGregor," Sybelle giggled as she squeezed his arm. "I told you it would and it does."

He could feel the smoothness of the sheet beneath the sole of his foot, his rump, his back. He drew his other leg up and exhaled slowly, understanding that when he tried, he would be able to walk, as well. He reached for the blindfold again.

"No," Sybelle said firmly. "Not yet."

He knew he could see. His eyes were open and he had an impression of light and shadow beneath the silk scarf. He wanted nothing more than to yank the blindfold from him so that he could view the world around him once more.

Sybelle flung the covers back from him and smiled at his gasp of shock. The cool morning air drifting down from the mountains to the north of the keep was wafting in through the opened window and flitting across his nakedness.

Conar was about to ask her to let him cover himself when he felt the mattress dip and then grunted as she straddled him, settling her slight weight on his hips.

"I want to feel you, McGregor," she told him in a husky voice. "I want to ride you as you have ridden many a woman in your lifetime."

Sex was not something he cared to indulge in at the moment, but he knew he was not going to be allowed to protest. Her hands were all over his chest, caressing him, her fingernails dragging softly down his flesh.

"Sybelle...", he started to protest, but she bent forward and covered his mouth with hers, her tongue darting between his parted lips. Her breasts flattened against his chest and he realized she was as naked as he.

"I will have you, McGregor," she mumbled against his lips.

The last thing he wanted was to have her rubbing her firm rump against his manhood. The crispness of her nether curls pricked at his thigh as she slid down him and he ground his teeth against the immediate awakening of that part of him she sought. His hand went to the scarf once more.

"No!" she said, an edge of anger in her tone. "I will have you the way I want you, McGregor, or have you forgotten our bargain?"

He let his hand drop back to the bed. "I haven't forgotten, Sybelle," he said. "And I doubt if you'd let me, anyway." His tone was that of a hurt little boy.

His words made her angry, as did the warning from the Lady which flitted across her mind like a stern reminder that this man had to be handled very carefully in order to bring him to heel. With a flounce of annoyance, Sybelle swung her body from his and she got off the bed in a frustrated bound.

"Cover yourself, you Infidel dog!" she flung at him as she stomped to the chair where she had placed her gown.

Conar reveled in the ability to sit up, to reach down for the sheet. He should have felt weak, he thought, after so many weeks of inactivity. Of days without being able to move. But he didn't. He felt refreshed, almost invigorated, as though he had not gone months without strenuous exercise to keep his muscles taut and firm. It was almost as though he had just been asleep for all that time and was now awake, ready to get on with his life.

"Don't gloat," Sybelle hissed at him. "You may be in full possession of your health and physical prowess, McGregor, but you are still accountable to me for what you have and what you are."

He turned his head toward her and could just make out her outline through the folds of the silken scarf. "I know that, Sybelle," he answered. "I will not go back on my word."

"I know you won't, either!" she spat. "Else I'll return you to that world of darkness you found so terrible!"

He didn't doubt for a moment that she would. If she could take him from it, she could send him back. And he knew the return trip would be worse than the first. He also knew he had to be careful with this woman. The wrong word, the wrong action, could be his undoing. He hung his head.

"Tell me what you want me to do, milady," he said softly.

Seeing that bright blond head bent beneath the weight of his sentence brought a lurch to Sybelle's heart. She ached to run her hands through that lush softness, to thread that silken mass through her fingers, to feel the weight of it in her hands. She took a step toward the bed, her body throbbing with need, but once more the Lady's warning touched lightly on her mind.

"Lie down, McGregor!" she snapped. Seeing him sitting there, so vibrantly alive, his wide chest rising and falling with every anticipatory breath as he awaited her command, brought a keen awareness of her darkest needs. When he obeyed her immediately, she nearly groaned with frustration. She had to turn away from the sight of him lying there, his hands beside his head, that silken scarf hiding the unmistakable allure of his glorious eyes.

Conar could sense her impatience and wondered what she was thinking. Had they been in Serenia, his own powers could have told him, but here, in the Inner Kingdom, he had no powers. Not even the uncanny insight that had always been with him.

"Don't think of leaving this room, McGregor," she warned him. "If you do, I will have Chaim chain you to that bed."

"I won't," he answered.

She stood at the door, watching him for a moment, before hurrying from the room, her heart pounding with desire and her body wet with the need to know the powerful thrust of his sensuous body.

Conar sat up as her footsteps faded down the corridor from his chamber. His hand, now trembling, went to the scarf and slowly he pulled it from his face. The light was very intense and he squeezed his lids shut to block out the pain, but slowly, carefully, he eased them open until he

was able to see his surroundings with such clarity, such sharpness, that he marveled at the ability. He swung his gaze about the sparsely furnished room and wasn't surprised to see that the room was decorated with very expensive-looking furniture.

With more calm than he felt, he eased himself up, holding his breath as his feet touched the floor, then he levered himself from the bed. His breath came out in a slow, relieved gush as he realized he could stand without falling. His first step was sure and unassisted by the foot post of the bed although his hand hovered close to the cannonball upright. His second step was surer than the first and he moved away from the bed, exhilarated by the fact that he didn't feel weak. A wide smile of relief spread over his face and then he flung his head back and hooted with delight.

Sybelle heard the sound as she hastily stripped her gown from her and plunged her heated body into the pool. She knew he was testing his newfound strengths and abilities and wished she could be there to see it, but something, no doubt at the Lady's command, had warned her that he needed time to adjust. Slumping down in the too-cool water, she let the harshness of her watery environment wash away the need that was running rampant in her body. There would be time to do with him as she wished.

Conar walked to the garden doorway and stood there, drawing in the early morning coolness and smells wafting down from the mountains. Although he had as yet to see the Capstans, he knew they were there for Chaim had once taken him riding up the twisting trail to a hidden pool where the two men had bathed beneath a waterfall. Chaim had described a beauty which Conar knew must rival that of his native Serenian Alps.

Padding over to an armoire in the corner of the room, he opened the doors to find several robes hanging there. Frowning, he pushed the heavy material aside and searched for some of his own things. At last, folded neatly at the bottom of the armoire, he found his cords and a cambric shirt. He put them on and felt better than he had in months. After tying his shirt, he raked his hands through his hair, grimacing at the tangles. His gaze searched the room, looking for a mirror, and when he found one, he went to it and stood there, smoothing down the wild tumble of his blond hair. Shrugging at his inability to tame the mess without benefit of a brush or comb, he was about to turn away when he met his gaze in the mirror and stopped, going as still as a statue. He stood there, unable to believe what he was seeing, then walked closer to the glass, reaching up to touch his reflection. As he realized that what he was seeing was real, he shivered, unable to believe what she had done to him as he slept.

Gone were the livid twin scars which had bisected his left cheek from the corner of that eye to his earlobe. The bright scarlet slashes had vanished and only smooth, tanned flesh remained. His hand left the mirror to touch his restored cheek and as his fingertips moved over undamaged flesh, he closed his lids, his lips trembling. When he opened eyes, his gaze shifted to those orbs that had, the last time he had looked into them, been a dark, sinister blue. Now, they were as bright and pale as they had been when he was a child, as innocent-looking as they had been before he had been given into Kaileel Tohre's keeping.

"Oh, my god," he whispered, staring at his reflection.

How long had it been since he had looked as he did at that moment? Ten? Fifteen? Twenty years? It was as though the hands of time had been turned back for all the lines, the stamps of pain and grief and hurt had been wiped from the face which looked back at him. The man staring at him from the mirror looked no older than twenty, if even that, and surely no worse for the wear Conar had known for most of his adult life.

It didn't take him long to wonder if the flesh of his back was as smooth as the flesh of his cheek and he tugged up his shirt, turning so that he could see his back in the mirror. The scars that

had ravaged his back were no longer there.

Slowly he let his shirt fall. He tore his gaze from the mirror and walked back to his bed, sat down with a grunt of disbelief and stared into his hands, hands that bore no scars, no brands. Sybelle had erased every imperfection that had marred him.

"Why?" he asked, looking up. He was at a loss to understand her motive. What did his appearance matter to her?

It wasn't until night began to fall that he understood. Or thought he did. When she appeared at his door, clad in the silkiest of gowns, her lush body outlined beneath the pale azure material which did nothing to hide her from his view, he thought he knew.

"I can not wait any longer," she told him on a breathless sigh as her gaze raked over him.

He could see the lust on her face, shining on her wet lips, pulsing in the vein at the hollow of her throat. She was devouring him with that heated stare, stripping him where he stood, and he knew at that moment why she had altered his appearance to her taste. His shoulders slumped and he reached for his shirt, drawing it from him.

Sybelle was unaware of the panting little breaths that were lifting her ripe breasts beneath the gauzy material of her nightgown. She barely heard her plea to him, unaware that to his ears it sounded unsure and filled with the fear of rejection.

"McGregor?" she whispered, searching his face for any sign of rebellion.

Conar sighed deeply, his heart breaking within his chest, then he held out his arms to her.

## Chapter Eight

He stood quietly beside Sybelle, his head slightly bent as the Holy Man chanted words he could not understand. Now and again, he would glance at Chaim and wonder at the look of delight on the servant's face, then look away again, unable to bear that joyous look when his own soul was being destroyed by the ceremony binding him to Sybelle Bath-Alkazar.

"McGregor," Sybelle hissed at him, nudging him with her elbow. When his gaze met hers, she held out her hand. "The ring?"

He nodded and fished in the pocket of his robe to take out the simple thin gold band she had told him he would be required to place upon the third finger of her left hand. As the Holy Man looked on with a beatific smile of consent, Conar slid the shiny gold ring onto Sybelle's finger. Glancing up into her face, he saw the glowing light of possession looking back at him and he had to look away.

"Do you have a ring for your husband, Your Majesty?" the Holy Man asked.

Conar flinched. He had been adamantly against this part of the ceremony and had made his objections known, but Sybelle had insisted. As she put out her hand to take his, he almost refused her.

"McGregor!" she mumbled.

One look at her face, tight with warning, and he extended his hand to her.

The ring felt cold as it slid over his flesh. As cold as the iron shackles which had once bound his wrists and ankles. It seemed to glow with an evil cast and he could see his dejected visage in the wide finish. Although he knew it was his imagination, the ring seemed to weigh his hand down, to cut into his flesh as though bonding itself to him. With a heavy heart, he wondered if he would ever be able to remove that tell-tale symbol of Sybelle's ownership.

"Husband and wife."

Those were the last words he heard before he was given a glass of wine to sip. Before he and his new bride stamped their booted heels on the fragile crystal wineglasses. Before the servants gathered around the white canopy under which he and Sybelle stood and shouted their wishes of good luck to him in the Kensetti language. From that moment on, the music and singing, the chatter of people in the main garden as they laughed and wished him well, was only a steady hum. He saw mouths opening and closing, nodded politely at smiles and pats on his back, but heard nothing beyond those three caustic words that burned into his brain like acid. Sybelle's hands, wrapped tightly around his left bicep, kept him at her side else he would have ran, ran and hidden where he could blot out those horrible words that were echoing through him. Ran and hidden from the woman who kept him prisoner in her heated grip.

The night wore on his nerves. He danced with her, supped with her, lifted his wineglass in toast after toast to her as each servant felt compelled to impart a word of congratulations to their mistress and her mate. When at last the Holy Man nudged him and nodded toward a freshly-filled wineglass, Conar stood up, his legs shaking, and lifted his glass in salute to his new bride.

"Milady," he said in a voice so soft and so lacking in inflection it did not miss his own notice, "may you know the happiness you seek."

If it was not quite what those gathered had expected to hear, or what Sybelle had wanted him to say, it was the best he could do. The wine as it touched his lips after the toast was bitter as bile and filled him with such a sense of hypocrisy, he nearly choked on it. When he sat down, he

did not miss the frown of annoyance on Sybelle's lovely face.

*Better than a dirty limerick*, he thought with a stab of intense grief.

Sybelle leaned toward him and whispered. "It is time to go, McGregor."

Conar winced, nodding his agreement. He got up from his chair, held out his hand to her and helped her rise. Tucking her arm into the crook of his elbow, he escorted her from the garden amidst a thunderous clatter of hands applauding them.

"May your troubles be little ones!" the Holy Man called out to them.

The Serenian stopped dead still in his tracks and looked down at the woman beside him. She was gazing up at him with a slight smile, her lips twitching.

"The thought had not crossed your mind, McGregor?" she asked him.

It had not, he thought with a wild burst of panic. He knew this woman was older than himself, older than Sajin, who was forty-three now, by five years. Could a woman nearing fifty still be fertile? Still be able to conceive?

As though she had read his mind, he saw her nod.

"Quite capable and more than likely to, McGregor," she said, pulling on his arm to lead him away. "Does that please you?"

No, he thought bitterly. It did not. The last thing he wanted was a child to spring forth from this unholy union.

Sybelle knew what was on his mind. It hurt her, but it did not stop her from praying each night that she would quicken with her lover's seed. She had long since wanted a child and who better than this magnificent warrior to give her one? He had proved that his progeny was of sturdy stock. How could he not give her a perfect child?

"It would be dangerous for you, Sybelle," he said through clenched teeth and he meant it.

"What do you care?" she found herself snapping back at him.

He answered her from his heart. "Because Liza lost a child of mine and nearly died because of it. Another woman I cared for bled to death after giving birth to one of my sons." His hand tightened on hers. "I would have no more women die because of me."

Sybelle tilted her head so that she could see his face. There was misery in the strong planes of that handsome face. Misery and truth and she was touched.

"Don't worry, McGregor," she told him. "The Sisters will protect me."

"As the Multitude protected Liza?" he shot back, looking down at her with bitterness. His thick tawny lashes fanned the heat of his gaze. "Are you more loved by the Amazeen than my lady was by the Daughters of the Multitude, Sybelle?"

To hear him call the dead woman his lady enraged Sybelle, but she knew for as long as Conar McGregor lived, there would never be another woman he would ever truly love as he had the Oceanian princess.

"Do not let it concern you, McGregor," she muttered. "If I die, you will be free of me."

"But not of the guilt," he stated.

They were at her door. He had as yet to enter the sumptuous quarters of his new bride. Beyond the opened door, he could see a luxurious display of opulence. He wondered if he should carry her over the threshold as he had carried Catherine the evening they were married on board Sajin's ship.

"I absolve you of any guilt," Sybelle snapped as she let go of his arm and entered her chambers.

He followed her slowly, amazed at the luxury which adorned this silk-clad suite of rooms. Everywhere he looked, there was gilt and crystal, gold and silver and brass. Fine carpets spread out



on the stone floor and magnificent tapestries hung from thick brass poles along the walls. A fountain bubbled in one corner of the room. Sweeping plants hung from the ceiling, cascaded down the walls, trailed from stone planters, or else sprang up from huge terra cotta pots which sat in groups of three about the huge living quarters. Through one sweeping arch, he could see her bathing chamber and was awed by the pool with its blue reflective waters that were as smooth as glass.

"You may make use of it if you desire," she told him as she began to untie the sash of her robe. "I am going to."

Conar walked to the bathing chamber and stood beneath the arch, gazing at the massive size of the place and the verdant splendor before him. He could not help but compare it to the bathing chamber in the Wind Temple at Serenia. He would have been hard pressed to say which one was the lovelier of the two.

"Help me, McGregor," Sybelle demanded, walking to him.

He turned. She was holding out her arm to him and he realized she had been having trouble removing one of the many gold bracelets which adorned her slender arm.

"The clasp is stuck," she told him.

His fingers were cool on her flesh, Sybelle thought, as she stared at his bent head. She reached up to touch the gleam of his golden hair. He looked up, catching her gaze, then returned his concentration to the clasp. He seemed very aware of her touch as she smoothed his hair back from his forehead, but made no comment nor moved away from the caress.

"I have never seen a man with the color of hair you have," she commented, thrilling to the feel of the coarse silk through her fingers. "I would imagine many a woman has envied you such a shade."

He shrugged. "I wouldn't know." The clasp came free and he extended the bracelet to her in the palm of his hand.

Sybelle slid her hand into his, covering his palm with her own then wrapped her fingers around his thumb, smiling as his hand flexed instinctively to grip hers.

"Come bathe with me," she said in a husky voice, not making it a demand, but an invitation.

Conar drew in a deep breath, exhaled, then answered her. "If you would like."

"I would," she whispered.

He had always been an astute man. Nothing much had ever missed his notice. And when he had made a bargain, no matter how detestable he found it or how much it went against his grain to keep to it, he had always tried to make the most of it. He had always tried to see the good in every situation, even when there was none. Sybelle was his wife, for better or worse, and he would treat her as she deserved to be treated if for no other reason than that she was Sajin's sister.

The Kensetti princess' brows drew together in puzzlement as she looked up at him. There was something passing over his face that she was hesitant to name. Could it be resignation she saw settling in those wondrous blue eyes? Could that be submission that was turning his lips soft and pliable? Was he relinquishing his stubborn heart to her? Was that what his hand sliding up her arm was trying to convey?

Conar's fingers cupped her chin and pulled her face to his. His lips were gentle as he brushed them against her own. When he drew back, his gaze was steady as his hands went to the clasp at her shoulder and he unbuckled the jewel ornament to let her robe fall in a soft pool at her feet. He smiled at her sharp intake of breath.

"Undress me," he told her and let his hands fall to his sides.

A part of her wanted to rip the clothes from him. To drag him down to the floor and ravish

him. Never had she felt such wantonness as was invading her body at that moment. Never had she felt the wild instincts of the Amazeen warrioresses that flowed through her veins to capture and subjugate the male. To bend that captive to her will and thoroughly enslave him. Her hands trembled with the need to overpower him and imprison him within the silken folds of her body.

"Slowly, Sybelle," he warned her, gauging the depth of her passion as he looked into her face. "Remove them slowly."

With fingers shaking so badly she could barely untie the sash of his robe, slide the linen from him, Sybelle undressed her husband with all the care she would have given a newborn. Despite the lust which bid her take him, urgently and passionately, she kept a tight rein on her desire, and finally managed to have him naked before her hungry gaze.

"Now," she heard him say as he reached for her, drawing her nude body to his. As their bodies touched, Sybelle groaned, reaching up to clutch his shoulders in a fierce grip.

"Take me, McGregor," she ordered him. Her mouth latched onto the thick column of his neck and she slid her heated body along his.

"You can wait," he said, dragging her arms from him with no little difficulty. He stepped back, putting her away from him. "We have all night."

She wanted to jerk her wrists from his grip as he stood there holding her hands together in front of him. Even as he slowly lifted her hands and placed a soft kiss on each of the knuckles of her thumbs, she wanted to shove him down and straddle him, impale herself on his rigid flesh.

"I can't wait," she panted, thrusting her hips toward him. She pulled against his hold.

"Yes, you can," he answered her and his use of the foreign affirmative, a word not his own, made the statement that much more seductive.

Conar could see the effort it was taking for her to allow him this brief moment of authority. He was all too aware of who was the master, who the slave, in their relationship, and he instinctively knew that the only control he would ever have over this female would be in the bedchamber. He had every intention of maintaining that slim control.

"Touch me," Sybelle pleaded with him, unable to be so close to him and not feel his powerful body on hers.

"No," Conar answered, shaking his head. "You touch me." He let go of her hands.

Lust flared in Sybelle's dark eyes and her fingers curled into claws. She reached for him, her intent to throw herself on him, but the look on his face warned her he would not allow it. He was standing there, his gaze fused with hers, his body relaxed, yet he was in command of the situation and she knew he understood that. Slowly her fingers straightened and she took a hesitant step forward, reaching to lay her hand on the hard muscles of his chest. She smoothed her hand over the sparse pelt of fur between his breastbones, then shuddered as one stiff pap passed beneath her palm.

"Kiss me," he ordered her, still standing as impassively as he had been, his hands lax at his sides.

Her palms slid up his chest, onto his shoulders, and she drew him to her, standing on tiptoe so that she could mold her mouth to his, but he drew back, unwilling to let her kiss him as she had meant to.

"Gently, Sybelle," he told her. "Like a butterfly's wings passing over a flower."

It took every ounce of her control to place her lips so tenderly against his own hard planes. She tasted the wine from their meal on his mouth. As she plied her lips along his, she became aware of the heat of his body touching hers, of the stirring of his manhood between them. She drew back and looked at him. There was a glow in his pale blue orbs that had not been there the

moment before. Perhaps the way to his heart was through this innocent seduction rather than through wild and unbridled passion. No doubt he had taken Elizabeth and Catherine with such gentleness. She smiled at him.

"You like it this way, McGregor?"

Conar nodded, but he didn't answer. He was too busy trying to tame the urgent need in his loins to take her and be done with it. To get it over with. To get away from her.

Sybelle's smile widened. So this was the way to hold him, she thought. He had not enjoyed their violent copulations when she had taken him before. He had made that obvious to her. Perhaps this was a man who did not need the allure of rape in order to take pleasure in a woman's body?

Well, she mused as she trailed tiny kisses down his throat and chest, she would play this game with him when it suited her. There would be times when she knew she would still want to have him in her with uncontrollable thrusting. There would be times when having him bound to her bed, helpless and at her mercy, would be a need she could not put aside. And there would be times when she would make him kneel before her, begging for the release she would finally give him, pleading with her for the use of her body. But for now, this tenderness would suffice.

With a sly smile, she dropped to her knees before him and did what she had long since wanted to do.

Conar stared straight ahead of him, going back in time to the Briar's Hold Tavern. To Dorrie. To the impersonal pleasure the tavern maid had given him that long ago day. Sybelle's mouth had no more appeal to him now than Dorrie's had then and his reaction, as release claimed his body, was the same. His lashes flickered for just an instant before the hardness and the jaded glow settled once more in his azure orbs.

## Chapter Nine

Sajin couldn't help but laugh at Nicholas. The man was like an enraged bull let loose in a china shop. Everywhere he turned, destruction followed. Conar's half-brother had managed, single-handed, to have them banned permanently from every monastery in Rysalia and two in Kensett. Even if their souls had depended on it, Sajin seriously doubted the holy men would allow them inside the grounds of the monasteries ever again.

"So where is he?" Nick was bellowing as he stalked around their campsite. "If he ain't in the monasteries, then where is he?"

"Did it ever occur to you, Nicky," Nate asked in a dry voice, "that he was and just didn't want to be found?"

"NO!" Nicholas Beriault shouted, startling the horses and making them whinny.

"Or that something else could have happened to him?" Asher asked quietly.

Every man sitting around the campfire looked at Asher.

"Such as?" Rupine questioned his nephew.

Asher poked at the fire with stick. "I can't help but wonder if there is more to his disappearance than we've been taking into consideration." He threw the stick into the fire, clutched his hands together and looked up, scanning the faces circled around him. "Have any of you thought about Mahmed Allajon?"

Sajin frowned. "What of him?"

"We heard rumors that Belial was working for him. You know there is no love lost between Khamsin and Belial. If there is a secret way into Abbadon, I'd lay odds that brute knows of it." Asker bit his lip. "If there is, could he not have sneaked into the fortress and perhaps abducted Khamsin?"

"For what purpose?" Nick asked, not knowing of the circumstances behind the dislike between his brother and the man called Belial.

"Other than to kill him, you mean?" Azalon scoffed.

"Stow that kind of talk, mister!" Balizar snapped. He glanced at Nick and saw the fury building. "Before you get on that famous McGregor high horse, Beriault," the old warrior snapped, "let me tell you that Conar didn't believe there was a secret way into the keep and ...."

"Crystals," Nate said softly. He had been sitting there, probing the aura surrounding the others, listening with his gypsy sixth sense to what was not being said, and the image of crystals: pink that would allow a body and mind to relax; orange to promote success; purple to produce uninterrupted sleep; red and white for protection; black to make the one carrying it invisible to others.

"Did you say something, Nathan?" Rupine asked, studying the odd look on the younger man's face.

Nate looked up, blushing, and he shook his head. "Just thinking aloud, I'm afraid." He turned his head away so the others could not see the furious concentration that was going on within him.

"I don't think Conar was in any danger at Abbadon," Sajin remarked. "Those women of Meghan Dunne's would have made damned sure of that. They'd have known if someone was after kidnapping him."

Not if it was one of their own who had been sent after him, Nate thought. Someone who

knew enough to provide the protection against detection. He got up and moved away from the fire, out of the light which was illuminating the faces of the other men. He didn't notice Rupine watching him as he paced beyond the glow of the firelight.

"Conar had every intention of leaving," Sajin went on to say. "If he'd gotten worse ...."

"And we knew he was getting worse with every passing day," Azalon put in.

"Then he did what he told me he was going to." Sajin tossed away the remainder of the strong black Hasdu coffee in his cup. "And there isn't a one of the monks in the whole of Rysalia, in the entire Midworld, who will betray him." He shrugged regretfully. "We might as well go back to Abbadon and do what he wanted us to."

"Not me!" Nick snapped. He glared at the Kensetti. "I am going to find my brother with or without your help, Ben-Alkazar!"

"Not if he don't want to be found, you won't," Balizar quipped.

Nick swung his head toward the old man. "A hundred Ryals says I will!"

Balizar grinned. "Two hundred says you won't!"

Nate continued to pace near the picket line where their horses were tethered. His hands were thrust deeply into the pockets of his breeches and his shoulders were hunched, a sure sign to anyone who knew him that the man was totally lost to his surroundings and was deep in thought.

"Is he always so bullheaded?"

Nate looked up, startled that he was not alone. He smiled. "Always has been and always will be," he told Sajin.

"A McGregor trait, I've discovered," the nomad prince chuckled.

"Aye." Nate leaned against a tree. "Are we still going to stop at your sister's tomorrow?"

Sajin nodded. "We'll need to gather some fresh supplies before going on to Abbadon." He looked up at the heavy blanket of stars overhead. "By the Prophetess but it's cold tonight." He shivered, then huddled down into the warmth of his heavy cape. "Don't you feel the cold, man?"

Nate shook his head. "My blood's too hot," he laughed. "What's she like?"

"Who?"

"Your sister," Nate answered.

Sajin's mouth tightened. "More trouble than she's worth most of the time." He pulled the wool of his cape tighter around him. "The last time I spoke with her, we really didn't get our business settled." He thought back to that day. "Odd."

Nate tuned in to the bewilderment in his companion's tone. "What was?"

Sajin looked over at him. "We were discussing Conar and when I told her about the illness, it was almost as though the news floored her. You know?"

"No," Nate said, "I don't. What do you mean?"

The Kensetti felt as though he could tell this man anything and felt as though he should. He relaxed. "She's always disliked Conar. Ever since the first time she met him in St. Steffensburg." He chuckled ruefully. "I'm afraid my sister fancies herself a witch and she warned me Conar wasn't to be trusted."

Nate pushed away from the tree. "Is that so?"

Sajin nodded. "I've been told Sybelle is truly empowered with magical abilities, but I still find it hard to believe. And even if she is, she was certainly wrong about Conar. I've never met a man more trustworthy than he."

"And you won't," Nate replied offhandedly. "He's a powerful sorcerer in his own right. Did you know that?"

"I've heard as much although I've never seen evidence of it," the Kensetti answered.

"You wouldn't be here where Windwarrior magic is useless to males of that caste," Nate told him. A vague smile slashed across the gypsy's mouth. "Thankfully other magi have not that problem in the Midworld."

"Whatever," Sajin said with disinterest. His teeth clicked together and reminded him he was getting colder by the minute. "You coming back to the fire?"

"In a minute," Nate answered. There were things he needed to think about.

Rupine had not been consciously listening to the conversation between the two men, but he became aware of a niggling sensation playing along his nerve endings that made him very aware of Nathan Newkern. He understood the gist of the conversation the two men had had and couldn't help but wonder why Nate had been so interested in the Kensetti prince's sister.

\* \* \* \*

"How many?" Sybelle asked as she paced the room.

"Seven, including the Prince."

Sybelle swore. "Go get him."

Chaim bowed respectfully. He had brought her news he knew she would not want to hear, but had to be delivered nevertheless. That she would be furious had been a foregone conclusion and Chaim had not been disappointed with her reaction to his words. His mistress was hard on fragile vases. The evidence of that was lying scattered about the main corridor where she had thrown a lovely Chrystallusian urn. He skirted the destruction and headed for the Serenian's quarters.

Conar turned his head to see who had come into his chambers. The door, left open as it always was now, afforded him no privacy from whomever wished to enter. Sybelle had issued orders that the portal was to never be closed. Not that it mattered, he thought wryly as he watched Chaim coming toward him. He was always watched lest he renege on his word and try to escape the tender prison she had built for him.

"The Princess would like to see you, Your Grace," Chaim said.

It would do him no good to tell the servant he had no desire to see the Princess, Conar knew. Her command was law within the keep and he suspected for miles around the place, as well. Wearily, he got to his feet.

"Has she decided to allow me to go riding again?" he asked, hoping the answer would be what he wanted to hear.

Chaim shook his head sternly. "You know better, Your Grace."

Conar's anger, pushed down over the last four days of inactivity, leapt up and spilled over on the hapless servant. "Damn it, man! I wasn't trying to run away!"

"So you've said repeatedly, Your Grace," Chaim answered tonelessly, "but the Princess does not believe you."

"Shit!" Conar exploded. He shoved past the man and stalked from the room, his face set and hard. His heart hating Sybelle Bath-Alkazar more than it ever had.

He hadn't tried to run, he reminded himself. The damned horse had simply gotten the bit in his teeth and had taken off like a bat out of the Abyss! It had been all he could do to finally bring the beast to a halt, Chaim and a dozen other men close on his heels, at the wadis just north of Mount Ireni. When he had, Chaim had lunged across his own steed, knocking Conar to the ground in the process, and the Serenian had found himself bound and gagged, trussed up as tightly as any feast goose, and slung across the damned beast's broad white back with no recourse but to bounce along behind Chaim's mount. And that indignity had only been the beginning. Once they had made their way back to the keep, he had been manhandled to a damp, dank dungeon cell and locked

in. He had spent the night in the same bondage as he had endured during the excruciating ride. His ribs were bruised beyond belief and he got thirstier and thirstier as the long night passed. No amount of screaming through the gag had brought anyone to his aid.

Morning, however, had brought an infuriated Sybelle to stand over him, hands on hips, eyes glaring at him with murderous intent. She had brutally kicked him in his battered ribs and he had nearly passed out with the pain of it.

"Infidel dog!" she had screeched at him, kicking him once more, following him as he tried to roll away and planting the toe of her riding boot in the small of his back as he lay helpless on the floor. "If you ever make me have to send my men after you again, I'll sure as hell make you wish you hadn't, McGregor!" She kicked him again, this time landing a vicious blow to his right shoulder blade.

Hot bile had bubbled up in his throat from the pain. Swallowing around the constriction of the gag jammed between his teeth was difficult and he was afraid he would choke on the vomitous should she kick him again. But that had not been her intent.

"Get him up!"

They had dragged him, two men he didn't know, from the floor. He tried to jerk away from them, but they were too strong and he was too weak from a day spent without water and food. He fought them as best he could as they pulled him from the cell, yet even as they bent him over a table and he realized what she was going to do to him, he could not break free of the men holding him. His shouts of denial from behind the gag were useless.

"This is going to hurt you, McGregor," he heard her say behind him as her nails raked down his back, ripping his shirt and exposing his back. "I can promise you it will!"

The first hit of the riding quirt had brought back the memory of the Tribunal Square and the intense pain he had endured there. He had not thought he would ever relive that agony for his back had been so savaged during that day of pain and humiliation, and through all the years he had spent in the Labyrinth, that there was no feeling left, all the nerve endings having been severed. But as Sybelle's wicked quirt trailed hot leather kisses down his spine, he realized that with her healing of his back, she had made it possible once more for him to feel the brutal caress of the whip. The pain was acute and brought with it the same sense of hopelessness he had felt that day when Bent Armitage had flogged him. His bound hands clenched, his teeth ground over the constriction of the gag, and he squeezed his eyes shut to keep from making even one single hiss of sound.

"I will have you obey me, McGregor!" Sybelle had shouted at him as the lash came down for the tenth time. "Do you understand that?"

He had waited for the next blow, and when it did not come, he became aware of her issuing orders to have his bonds cut, the gag removed. When his hands were free and he had worked his tight jaw back into place, he staggered against the table, turning so that he could face her. Bracing his bruised and battered and then-bloody body against the table's edge, he had lifted his gaze to hers. What he had seen on her face made his blood run cold.

It was well within her rights to punish him, Sybelle had told him. After all, he belonged to her, now. "If you ever run again ...."

"I wasn't running," he said from between clenched teeth. He could feel the blood trickling down his back and flexed his shoulders, wishing he hadn't for the pain was so intense he nearly groaned aloud with it.

"Pay heed to me, McGregor," Sybelle had warned him. "I will not be so tender with my punishment the next time should you ever try to leave me again."

He had almost laughed at her description of the beating. If she thought she had been 'tender'

with him, what would her 'brutal' be like? He knew he didn't want to find out.

"I wasn't trying to escape, Sybelle," he said. "The horse got away from me."

Her snort had been furious and unladylike. "There isn't a horse in the entire world you can't control, McGregor! Do you think me so besotted with you that I would believe you lost command of that beast?"

Conar knew it would be of no use to argue with her. She wanted to think him capable of going back on his word and no amount of denying that would do any good. He understood her and kept his mouth shut although every inch of his masculinity screamed at him not to give in to her.

"From now on, there will be guards posted outside your door, beyond the garden walls, and at every entrance to this keep." She had thrown the quirt to one of the servants. "Cross me again and I'll flay you alive. Do you understand me?"

His pride stung him and he wanted to shout his denial in her face, but common sense told him he'd be better off to accept what she said and be more careful in the future. He doubted if he would ever be given the chance to venture past the walls of his prison again so the point was moot.

"Do you?" she had fairly bellowed at him.

"Aye, Milady," he'd answered. "I understand you."

Rapping loudly at her door, he wondered why she'd sent for him. It had been over a week since she had whipped him. They had not seen nor spoken to one another during that time. At least, he thought with a grimace of satisfaction, he had had a respite from her incessant lust. He doubted he could have borne it with any grace at all with his back having been laid open by her viciousness.

"You wanted me?" he asked.

Sybelle could not believe a man's look could be so brutal as what she was seeing as she gazed into Conar McGregor's face. His gleaming eyes bore an intensity of hate so malignant it was palpable, beyond human comprehension. Her beating him had done more damage than she had intended. Not only to his flesh, but to the fragile ember of trust she had so carefully nurtured over the last few weeks. He was standing there, his face impassive, emotionless, but there was murderous rage shooting back at her. Blue steel impaled her with a savagery that she found terrifying.

"My brother is on his way here," she said, annoyed that her voice was not as to the point and sharp as she had intended that it be.

"So?" he snapped. Over the last few months several of her brothers had come calling. He'd just stayed out of their way, at her command, for her family had yet to learn of her marriage to him.

"My brother Sajin," she qualified, searching his face very carefully for any sign of mutiny. She watched as his rapier-quick intellect assimilated her words. She was not fooled by his careless shrug of indifference.

"Am I suppose to beg you to let me see him?" Conar scoffed.

"It wouldn't do you any good," she responded. She narrowed her gaze as she informed him that he had kinsmen who were accompanying Sajin.

Unease shot through Conar's gut. "Who?"

Sybelle lifted her chin. "Two of your brothers, I am told."

He took a step toward her, his hands clenching into fists. "Who?" he nearly shouted at her.

She thought of refusing to tell him, but could see he'd be difficult if she didn't. "One called Nicholas, the other named Nathan."

Nothing she could have said could have stunned him more. He literally staggered beneath the weight of her words and bumped into the door behind him. He stared at her, unable to believe



he had heard her right. Nick? Nate? Here in the Inner Kingdom? How could that be?

"You will, of course, not be speaking to them," she told him.

His gaze searched the floor in front of him, giving his mind time to accept what she had said. "You must have heard wrong," he said although he hadn't really been speaking to her.

"Chaim is not mistaken. His information is accurate, McGregor." She arched a thin brow as he looked up at her. "You did not know they were here?"

He shook his head. "I haven't seen them in ...." He squeezed his lids shut, then opened them, unaware that he was looking at her with pleading. "Sybelle, please."

"No," she said holding up a hand. "Do not even ask it."

"But I haven't seen my brothers in over twenty-five years!" he protested, walking toward her, his hand out.

"And you will not see them now!" she stated firmly.

"Sybelle, please!" he begged her.

"No!" She crossed her arms over her ample breasts. "I told you no, McGregor, and no is exactly what I meant."

She watched the anger building in his body. "As a matter of fact, I think it would be best if you were sent back to the dunjon until they leave." Her smile was nasty. "That way you won't be tempted to create a problem, now, will you?"

"I hate you, Sybelle," he whispered.

"Get over it," she told him.

"Not in this lifetime," he spat and turned on his heel, wanting to put as much distance between them as he could. He knew it wouldn't be long before she sent men to drag him back to the dunjon.

"Bitch!" he fumed as he flung himself down in the chair by the garden door. "Fucking spiteful bitch!"

He could not remember hating even Raja De Lyle as much as he hated Sybelle. The woman meant to sever the ties that held him to his world, to the life he had once known. To cut him off from every source of peace and pleasure he had ever experienced. Until his attempted 'escape', he thought with bitter helplessness, things had not been so bad between them. He had managed to endure her nightly couplings with detached calm, but now he doubted if he would ever be able to have her touch him again without wanting to strangle her.

## Chapter Ten

The meal was excellent, the conversation entertaining, the company congenial. The wine was like nectar flowing over the tongue and the pungent Janusk tobacco the princess provided for his pipe was most enjoyable. Nick sat back in his chair, contemplating the glowing bowl of his long pipe as he puffed. Hazy white smoke drifted about his head and the aroma of vanilla bean wafted through the air.

"A beautiful place you have here, Majesty," Azalon remarked as he accepted a tumbler of fruit juice from a serving girl. He smiled his thanks to the pretty, almond-eyed girl.

"I am at peace here," Sybelle acknowledged. She turned her attention once more to the massive shoulders of Nicholas Beriault and wondered, not for the first time that night, what his weight upon her body would feel like.

"Such luxury is wasted out here in the middle of nowhere," Sajin grumbled. "You don't entertain enough to make the price you paid for this keep worth having it, Sybelle."

Sybelle turned away from her regard of Nick's thick hands to look at her brother. "I enjoy my solitude and my comfort, Sajin. I would not care for one without the other." Her gaze went back to Nick. "What do you think of my home, Captain Beriault?"

"When you get use to a hard bunk on a bobbing ship," Nick remarked with a chuckle, "anything is a luxury." He let his sensuous gaze slide down the Kensetti woman. "Don't you get lonely way out here, Your Grace?"

"Sometimes," she answered, letting her attention wander down to the juncture of his thighs.

Nick's mouth lifted up at one corner as he looked at her. The woman was his for the taking if he wanted her. She had been boldly stripping him with her stare since she'd laid eyes on him earlier that day. She'd even made it possible for him to sit beside her at supper, her knee accidentally touching his now and again as they ate. Each time their glances met, she'd look at his lips, or his crotch he thought with humor, then wet her full, sensuous lips in invitation. If the group decided to take her up on the offer of spending the night, he had no doubt where he'd be passing his time.

Sajin had not missed the glances between Conar's brother and his sister. He didn't like it, but Sybelle was a grown woman. And a smart one. A dalliance with Beriault would be just that and nothing more for Sajin had made damned sure before supper that he had informed Sybelle of Nick's bastardy.

"It doesn't matter on which side of the blanket a man was born, Sajin," Sybelle had said with a wicked gleam. "What matters is how well he performs under that blanket!"

Sajin had no illusions about his sister's morals. After all, she'd been Jaleel Jaborn's mistress, something Sajin still had trouble accepting. That she turned her charms on any man she found appealing never failed to both annoy and shame Sajin, but there was little, if anything, he could do about her numerous affairs. Like the rest of his brothers, he turned a blind eye to her goings on in the hope that she would one day find a suitable man to take her in hand. Unfortunately, Sajin doubted any man could control his temperamental sister for long.

"How are things with the Samiel?" Sybelle asked her brother, sensing his disapproval and hoping to stir the conversation along lines that would take his mind from the dark thoughts that had turned her brother's face stony.

"We have managed to crush most of Mahmed Allajon's resistance although there are still a

few pockets of slavery left." Sajin, looking down into the wine, twirled the wineglass between his thumb and index finger. "I miss Conar more every time we free a group of slaves."

"You still don't know where he is?" Sybelle questioned. Her attention wandered to the man sitting across from Asher Stone and she found Nick's brother staring at her. She felt acutely uncomfortable and looked away.

"We've searched every monastery within three hundred miles!" Nick answered for Sajin. "It's like that little bastard just vanished into thin air."

"Asher believes our brother might have been kidnapped," Nate said softly, his gaze never leaving the beautiful woman's face. He threaded his fingers together and rested his chin on the tips. "What do you think, milady?"

Sybelle felt a chill go down her spine. She was unaware of the heat which had crept to her cheeks. Her laugh was forced although she doubted anyone noticed.

"I'm sure I wouldn't know, Sir. I am not that well acquainted with the prince, nor with his enemies."

"You knew one of his enemies quite well, didn't you, Your Grace?" Nate pressed, ignoring the warning look Nick shot at him.

Sybelle's blush deepened and she looked at her brother, but Sajin was regarding her with a glance that said "I told you so" and she tore her gaze from him.

"If you mean Jaleel ...," she started to say, but Nate cut her off.

"He murdered my brother's daughter." Nate's voice was hard. "I doubt a man could have a more fierce enemy than that, can you, Your Grace?"

Sajin's brows shot up. Was the man baiting Sybelle? If so, he supposed he should intervene although he had as much enmity toward the dead Hasdu prince as Newkern seemed to. "What is your point, Nathan?" he asked.

Nate turned his glance to Sajin. "Perhaps your sister might shed some light on where we might look for Conar."

"I have told you I don't know the man well enough to be privy to his affairs, Captain Newkern," Sybelle replied.

"Aye, but if you knew one of Conar's enemies, you might know another." Nate smiled. "Isn't that so?"

"Leave off, Nathan," Nick ordered, annoyed at his younger brother's probing. "She says she don't know anything about the brat."

"The brat?" Sybelle questioned, swinging her attention back to the burly seaman.

"Conar," Nick grinned. "We all call him that."

Sybelle smiled. "How endearing. Were you very close as children?"

Sajin sensed an undercurrent flowing not only between his sister and Nick Beriault, but a stronger, more potent one between her and Nate. But that current definitely wasn't of a sexual nature, he thought. Whatever leapt between Nate and Sybelle, it was certainly not friendly.

Rupine had much the same feeling as he watched Nathan Newkern watching the Kensetti princess. There was a look on the young man's face that spoke of intense mistrust and infinite dislike. Such a look baffled the old physician. Her Grace had done nothing to cause such immediate antipathy on Nate's part. The woman had been nothing but graciousness, itself. Her manner had been both forthright and cordial, and frankly, Rupine was at a loss to understand the grimace of distaste on Nate's face. How could a woman so lovely, so pleasing of form, have caused such ill regard in a man who had just met her?

"But why can't you spend the night, Sajin?" Rupine heard the princess whine. He shook

himself away from his thoughts and turned his attention to Sajin.

"We've a long way to travel and if we get a head start this evening, we won't bake quite so horribly as we did today, Sybelle."

"Surely you know travel in the desert at night is dangerous, Sajin," Sybelle reminded him.

"There's a full moon out," Sajin sighed, knowing why his sister wanted them to spend the night. "We can get another fifteen miles at least before it sets."

Nick chuckled to himself. It wasn't that he wasn't willing to try the woman's charms. He was. He and Legion A'Lex had that little peccadillo in common. But he liked the thrill of the chase and the woman sitting across the room from him had posed no challenge at all. Let her stew in her own passionate juices, he thought as he took a sip of his brandy. The next time I see her, she'll be all the more anxious to have me take her.

Sybelle's pout as she walked them to the door was not a pretense. She was greatly disappointed that she would not be able to compare Nick's lovemaking to his brother's. Her eyes lingered on that part of him she wanted to test and then slowly crept up to meet his. She grinned at his long, hopeless sigh of disappointment.

"Another time, milady?" he whispered to her as he lifted her hand to his lips in farewell. His tongue darted very lightly over her wrist before he released his grip on her hand.

Sybelle's womb clenched inside her and she felt her womanly juices seeping from her. "Aye," she answered in a husky affirmation of his intent.

Nick tossed his thick golden braid over his shoulder and strutted away, swinging up on his mount as though the beast were little more than a drawing room chair upon which he came to rest. He winked at the luscious woman gazing back at him from the doorway, then tugged on the stallion's reins, kicking the hapless steed in the ribs to make it prance.

"Fool!" Nate hissed at him, annoyed that his brother was trying to show off for Ben-Alkazar's whore of a sister. He kicked his own mount and headed for the open expanse of desert beyond the keep. He was barely aware of Rupine's cantering beast coming up alongside his own as they ventured out past the glow of the keep's lights.

"He was there, wasn't he?" Rupine asked, drawing a startled glance from Nate.

"Who?" Newkern asked although he knew damned well who the physician was speaking about.

"Khamsin," Rupine replied. "Your brother Conar. He was back there at her keep."

Nate frowned. "I believe so."

Rupine nodded, glancing back as the others galloped after them. "Is he in danger?"

"I sensed no real danger. Only the threat of violence." Nate wanted time alone to think about what he'd felt back at the keep.

"What better place for him to hide than right under Sajin's nose," Rupine stated. "That is the last place we would have thought to seek him out."

"True," Nate had to agree, "but if he is there, it's not because he wants to be."

"Are you going to mention this to the others?" Rupine inquired.

"Not yet," Nate answered. "Not until I know more about this woman, Sybelle, and what she could want with my brother!"

\* \* \* \*

Conar did not look up from the book he was reading as Sybelle unlocked the door to his dunjon cell and bid him come out. He didn't answer her, either, but instead, kept reading, his gaze riveted to the book in his hands.

"Don't pout, McGregor," she said on a sarcastic sigh. "Such childishness does not become

you."

His mouth tightened, but that was the only sign that he had heard her. He calmly licked his finger and turned the page. If anyone had asked, he couldn't have enlightened them as to what it was that held his attention so raptly for, in truth, he could not remember a single word he had read. As furious as he was, as hurt, it was all he could do to keep his hands on the book and not wrap them around Sybelle's slender throat.

"I liked your brother, Nicholas," she said, coming into the cell, unaware of the murderous glint that had begun to form in his pale eyes. She sat down on the foot of the cot and looked at him. "But I found Newkern to be intolerable."

Conar snorted, but didn't look over at her. "That's not surprising," he informed her.

Sybelle's left brow crooked. "Why not?"

He lowered the book just a tad then looked up from it, his gaze steady on the far wall. "Nate is a very astute man. He probably saw right through you." With his attention still on the wall, he shrugged. "He knows a whore when he sees one."

The Kensetti woman's back stiffened and before she knew what she was about, she shot out a hand and knocked the book from him, came to her feet in a lethal bound and stood glaring down at him with rage.

"Be very careful what you say to me, McGregor," she warned him. Her gaze narrowed dangerously. "Unless you want more flesh stripped from your back!"

Very slowly he turned his head and looked up at her, his expression blank, his mouth cocked in a taunting half-grin, but he didn't answer her threat.

Sybelle had expected there to be defiance and it was there in the unpleasant smile on his full lips. It was a mean smile that left no doubt in her mind how he felt about her. But there was also great hurt and longing and she knew that if she played her cards right, she could turn that hurt and longing to her advantage.

"Let's don't fight," she said, her voice becoming softer. "There is no need." She resumed her seat beside him and reached out to lay a soft hand on his hard thigh. "You know why I couldn't let you see your kinsmen." She smiled sweetly at him. Encouragingly. "At least not right now. Perhaps later."

He understood her ploy, recognized it for it was, and the knowledge made him hate her all the more. She had no intention of allowing him to speak with his brothers. There would be no opportunity to plot with them for his escape. Sybelle would see to that. Until she tired of him, he was virtually her prisoner despite the fact that his wrists and ankles and neck were free. His soul was not.

"If I behave," he murmured.

"I didn't deny you seeing them to punish you, McGregor," she said and was astonished that the words were true. She had only wanted to keep him out of his kinsmen's sight lest they try to take him away from her.

He shook his head ruefully. "What does it matter? They are gone." He got up from the cot and walked to the bars of the cell, thrust his hands through the slats and gripped them. "As you once told me, I have nothing more than what you allow me." He looked back at her. "But that shit can be a two-way street, Sybelle."

The Kensetti princess frowned. "What does that mean?"

Conar looked way from her. There was a tight little smile on his mobile mouth. "I've learned a lot of things over the years, Sybelle. From a lot of women." He leaned back, pulling on the bars. "How to arouse a woman so thoroughly she will forget she has a husband and five brats

waiting back home for her." He withdrew his hands, turned and leaned his back against the bars, folded his arms over his chest. "I've learned how to prolong a woman's pleasure so that she can derive even more intense sensations from our lovemaking than she has from any other man she's ever slept with." His eyes glowed. "I can bring her to the point of climax, time and time and time again, leaving her hovering there until I am ready to grant her release." The right side of his mouth lifted sardonically. "Or just leave her there, wet and panting and begging, then walk away, never looking back."

Slowly she stood up, her glare frosty. "You wouldn't dare."

The Serenian's thick golden brow arched. "Wouldn't I?"

She took a step toward him. "And risk being flayed alive for the insult? I think not!"

He unfolded his hands and took a step forward, nearly laughing aloud as she quickly moved back, putting the cot between them. He cocked his head to one side.

"What's the matter, Sybelle?" he taunted her. "You aren't afraid of me, are you?"

Her snort was vulgar. "Don't jest with me, McGregor," she said, stepping around the cot, keeping out of the range of his long arms. "You would not like to experience my anger."

Conar advanced on her, his lean hips thrust out suggestively, his lips twitching with merriment. "You want me, don't you, Sybelle?" he asked hoarsely as he took another step toward her.

"Stay back, McGregor!" she snapped, edging toward the cell opening. "I'm warning you."

He stopped, looking at her with the same powerful stare that Elizabeth Wynth had once jokingly called his 'predatory leer'.

"Conar is irresistible around anything female when he looks like that," Liza had said. "You just can't resist him."

And Sybelle was no more immune to that intoxicating stare than had been any other woman Conar had turned it on. It was, as another woman had once described it, like the way a snake mesmerizes its prey with an unblinking, unwavering look. She stood there, watching him stalk her, unable to move, unable to look away from that riveting stare, and became aware of the low keen of anticipation that came from deep within her being.

He heard that soft, unbidden, submissive sound and knew he had her. Even as he closed the distance between them and reached out to snag her arm, to jerk her toward him, he knew she had no thought of denying him.

"You want me, bitch?" he asked, his hard hands yanking her so close to him the pressure of their bodies in contact would leave the imprint of his belt buckle on her tender belly.

"Yes," she whispered, frightened of him, but wanting him so urgently she could feel the blood pooling in the nether regions of her body.

Conar nodded, scanning her face, glancing down at her heaving bosom. "All right."

He let go of her left arm and moved his hand to her rump, drawing her against the steel-like bulge forming between his legs. He lifted her, rubbed himself against her, then slid his left thigh between her legs.

Sybelle gasped as he lifted her free of the floor, bracing his booted foot between the cell bars, positioning her so that she was sitting almost on his knee. Her thigh muscles clenched around his and the heated core of her pulsed wetly as he slid her down his leg until her pelvis rested against his.

"You want me to fuck you, Sybelle?" he asked, tensing his thigh beneath the juncture of hers.

Her eyes glazed with lust. "Yes," she answered, breathlessly. "Yes!"

His hand moved from her rump to her breast and squeezed, viciously, painfully, and he grinned at her harsh gasp of agony. Yet he wasn't surprised when she leaned into him, putting more pressure on her captured breast as she did so, seemingly unmindful of the cruel twist that brought tears to her eyes.

"He beat you, didn't he?" Conar asked, his palm pressing so hard against her breast he could feel her heart pounding. "Jaborn beat you, didn't he?"

She nodded, her hands moving down his powerful arms, up over his wide shoulders until she had circled his neck. Her head dipped to the soft flesh at the intersection of his throat and shoulder and she licked him.

"Did you like it?" he asked.

She nodded again, trailing fevered kisses down his sweaty neck. She arched against him, grinding her hips against his.

Conar was disgusted by her actions, but understood her. He'd once known a woman, Wyn's mother to be exact, who enjoyed rough sex. It was the only way Myra could gain pleasure. In the mood he was in, he doubted he could have become erect any other way, either, and the thought brought a passing sense of shame to his heart before he resolutely shoved it aside and let his foot fall from the bars.

Sybelle moaned as she slid down his leg and he spun around with her, shoving her roughly to the cot. Her back hit the hard metal mattress guard and she crumpled to the floor, flinching as he rushed to her, reaching down to jerk her up before flinging her to her back on the cot. She barely had time to cry out before his powerful grip gathered up the bodice of her gown and ripped it from her, the sound of the material being rent down the middle almost sexual as the cold dunjon air flushed over her naked breasts.

"I'm going to hurt you," he said, his hands going to the buckle of his breeches. "I swear before all that's holy, I am going to make you wish you'd never laid eyes on me, bitch!"

He fell on her, like a rutting beast, his flesh so rigid, so hard, it tore into her as though it were a dagger aimed at her vitals. His thrusts were painful, so painful she cried out with the agony of it, but there was pleasure there, as well, a pleasure that thrilled her despite its brutality and savagery. Her flesh bruised beneath his cruel touch and her womanhood would be lacerated before he was through with his attack, but she reveled in the violence of it, the possessiveness of it. Her arms gripped his shoulders, her legs wrapped high around his body as he drove mindlessly into her. She could feel the itch beginning at the very center of her and arched up to him, wanting him to drive harder into her defenseless body to ....

Conar laughed, withdrawing from her in one quick, angry jerk of his lean hips, throwing off her arms.

"No!" she shouted even as the back of his hand lashed out and connected with the fragile beauty of her face. The slap was loud in the still room and echoed down the dank corridor.

"Shut up!" he seethed, his open palm rocking her head back the other way. He saw a fleck of blood well at her lips and the sight pleased him more than he would have thought possible.

Sybelle's cheeks were stinging. She knew he hadn't hit her hard enough to do damage. Only hard enough to cause pain and to exact the revenge he thought he deserved. She surprised him by flinging her hands to either side of her and thrusting her face up as though asking for more of the same.

"Sick slut," he whispered. His slap was harder than the first one and executed with more self-disgust than revenge.

"Take me," she crooned to him, her eyes wide, her lip bloody. She stared up at him,

wanting him more than she ever had before. "Take me. Hurt me. Beat me!"

Conar's fist doubled and for once brief moment in time he wanted to smash it into her face, to obliterate the taunting, sexual look leering back at him. His entire being throbbed with the need to punish his jailer. To wreck her beautiful face and kill any part of her that still remained that would entice other men to their doom.

"You're not worth it," he said, seeing a hanging rope dangling before his heated vision. If he killed her, he'd pay with his own life for it.

She nearly moaned as he levered himself from the bed, moving as far away from her as the small cell would allow. She pushed herself up on her elbows, unaware of the gaping ruin of her gown. She looked at him as he stood there, wedged between the cell bars and the wall, glaring back at her with so much hatred, so much loathing, it was palpable.

"I'll have them tie *you*!" she warned him, swinging her legs over the bed. She walked to him, pushing a furious, unsatisfied finger into his chest. "I'll ride *you*, McGregor, if you don't finish it!"

The part of him that had wanted to rape her, to ravage her as though she were a bitch in heat, had cooled. He was ashamed of his reaction, sickened by the unknown need that had reared up to goad him on. He couldn't do to her what he really wanted to do and still hold onto what humanity he still thought himself to possess. He shook his head.

"It doesn't matter. I won't do what you wanted me to."

That he had realized her intent annoyed and angered her, but Sybelle didn't care at that moment. She was aching with desire, her body primed for fulfillment and all she thought of was the cessation of the torment inside her overly-excited body.

"Chaim!" she screamed, smiling hatefully when she heard the running footsteps tearing toward them from beyond the dunjon cells.

Conar barely glanced at the burly servants as they ran into the cell, asking what was amiss.

"Take him!" Sybelle ordered, pointing her finger at him. "Chain him to that bed." Her chin lifted with spite. "Then strip him!"

He didn't resist. What good would it have done? There were four to his one and a powerful sorceress whose idea of pleasure was pain.

Not only her own, but his, as well.



## Chapter Eleven

He had to get away.

Before she killed him. Or he killed her.

He could not go on, night after night, being mauled. Having his body abused, his soul plundered. Sybelle Bath-Alkazar was dangerous. The things she did were dangerous. To him. To her. If he didn't get away, he was going to wind up swinging from a noose or having his head lopped from his body. Either way, his neck was in danger of paying the price for the woman's insatiable hunger.

"I am not crazy!" she had yelled at him the night before and Conar could not stop himself from saying to her what he had once said to someone else about himself:

"Well, if you're not, you and I both know you're damn close to it!"

Their words had escalated to an all-out, no holds barred shouting match that ended up becoming a shoving match, as well. When she had finally slapped him to keep his quiet, to still his insults, he had hit her back, hard enough to split her lip, again, and knock her to the floor.

"See what you made me do?" he had yelled at her, backing away from the livid handprint he had put on her face. "Hell, woman! I don't even know who I am anymore!"

"You are who you are, McGregor," she'd hissed at him as she got up. "Who you've always been but were too much of a coward to admit being!"

"No!" He had taken a step toward her, to shut her up, to wipe the sneer from her twisted, bloody lips, but had stopped. His words had been controlled, but he was shivering from the urgent desire to pummel her into oblivion. "I don't want to be that man." He had looked at her with loathing. "I won't be that man!"

"Do you think you can destroy him, McGregor?" she had mocked, wiping her torn lip with the back of her hand. "You can't, you know. And denying he exists won't make life any easier for you."

"Leave me alone!" he'd bellowed at her, running from the room as though the hounds of the Abyss were close on his heels.

"You enjoy it, McGregor!" she yelled after him. "You enjoy what we do. Admit it!"

"Your Grace?"

Conar sat still as stone, staring at the blazing fire in the grate. His forehead was puckered with worry, his hands balled tight into fists in his lap. He had not heard Chaim come in with his supper tray.

"Your Grace?" Chaim's face crinkled with concern. Although there was certainly no love lost between the Serenian and his mistress, the two men had not let that situation cause them problems. Despite the times Chaim was forced to restrain the Serenian prince, there was never any remonstrations from the man, nor hard feelings. He cleared his throat and tried to gain the prince's attention once more. "Your Grace?"

It finally penetrated Conar's brain that someone was speaking to him and he shook himself, glancing around to see who had come into his chambers. When he saw Chaim standing there, he nodded, seeing the tray of food, and returned his attention to the leaping fire.

"Her Grace would like to know if you would care to go riding tomorrow," Chaim said in passing as he placed the tray of food on the table by the garden door. He thought the news would please their guest, as Chaim now thought of him, but the snort of contempt told him otherwise.

"You can tell Her Grace to get someone else to go riding with her," Conar growled.

Chaim sighed. Why couldn't the two of them behave as normal married people did? The household was never calm. There was never any peace. Day to day, their shouts shook the timbers and their slaps punctuated the fighting like snaps of lightning during a storm. Sooner or later, one of them was going to be seriously hurt during one of their bouts.

"She is trying to make amends, milord," Chaim said. "Can you not meet her half way?"

Conar looked around at the servant. It was hard for Chaim who had a gentle soul by nature. The Serenian suspected the man was in love with his mistress and would gladly lay down his life for her. Whenever he had to come to Conar with the small 'requests' Sybelle made, it always embarrassed Chaim for he knew the request would more than likely be turned down and there would be a physical end to the situation.

"Did you see her face?" Conar asked, locking his gaze with Chaim's as the servant looked over at him. "I did that, Chaim."

"You would brag of it?" Chaim asked, astonished and not a little irritated.

"No," Conar sighed, standing up. "I merely mention it because that's what happens when the two of us are alone together. Meeting half way usually means her hand to my cheek or mine to hers."

Chaim winced. Unfortunately what the prince said was all too true. If he could keep the man and woman apart, he would, but he suspected the hatred his mistress had once professed toward the Serenian had turned to a gentler emotion, if not out and out love, then so close to that feeling it would be hard to describe it any other way.

Conar could see the difficulty Chaim was having with the situation and decided to change the subject.

"Has she heard any more from Sajin?" he asked, pulling out his chair and sitting down to his supper.

The servant shook his head. "Not this week, but I heard there was a raid on a slave ship just north of Asaraba on Tuesday." He smiled. "The Khamsin is doing a good job, wouldn't you say?"

Conar scored the meat on his plate, speared a chunk and popped the delicious beef into his mouth. "Aye," he said, chewing thoughtfully. "I think Sajin has found his niche in life."

"She worries about him," Chaim told him. He leaned against the wall and looked out into the still garden. "He is her favorite."

Conar nodded as he reached out to take a sip of his wine. "Understandable. Sajin is a likable man." He washed down the beef, savoring the pungent taste of the rich red wine.

"Do you miss the excitement of it, Your Grace?" Chaim asked, watching his companion's face.

There was a brief lifting of one shoulder. "What good would it do me to miss it?" He glanced at Chaim over a forkful of creamed potatoes. "I'm as much a prisoner here as the slaves Sajin is out to rescue."

Chaim frowned. That wasn't exactly true. The man was married to his mistress, but Conar McGregor did not have the run of the keep, not since his attempted escape. There might have been no shackles applied to his limbs to hold him, yet there was precious little freedom allowed.

"Don't worry about it, Chaim," Conar chuckled, sensing the man's embarrassment. "I made my bed and I'll have to lie in, now, won't I?" He stabbed a cherry tomato and crammed it between his teeth, chomping down on the fruit with fervor.

"Go riding with her, Your Grace," Chaim pleaded. "Please? There will be several of us along as ...."

"Guards," Conar snapped as he wiped his lips on the linen napkin.

"As protection," Chaim retorted. "There are suzerains in the mountains who would love to catch one of the Alkazar family out riding alone." His lips twisted with disgust. "Ransom is a good way to buy seed for your crops."

Conar sopped up the creamy sauce from the potatoes with a chunk of crusty bread and then popped it in his mouth. He chewed it as he stared at Chaim, seeing the pleading in the man's warm eyes. "I'll regret it, Chaim," he said after he swallowed. "I always do."

Chaim's face brightened. "Perhaps it will be a good day."

"Yeah, right," Conar mumbled as he washed down the bread. "And maybe the earth will open up and swallow me. I've a feeling that's the only way I'll ever be free of your mistress!"

Maybe not even then, Chaim couldn't help thinking. He had a feeling that the lady would follow this man through the depths of hell to keep him at her side.

\* \* \* \*

"He will go?" Sybelle asked as she noticed the smile on her servant's face.

"He says he will," Chaim replied. He could see the happiness such news brought to his mistress and was happy to have been able to give it to her.

Sybelle clapped her hands together. "Good!" She walked past him and headed for the kitchen, giving instructions to the cook to prepare a feast for the next day's excursion. "Everything you know he likes!" she ordered.

Chaim smiled as he listened to the princess make arrangements for the two hour ride up into the Capstan foothills. Fine linen. The best silver and chinaware. Only the best vintage wines and aged cheeses. The baker up long before dawn so the bread would be hot and as soft as a fleecy cloud for the noon meal.

"Things must change," Sybelle told him as they walked back to her chambers. "I must make them change, Chaim."

"I sincerely hope you succeed, Your Grace," Chaim agreed.

\* \* \* \*

Nate shrugged away Nick's questions as the two half-brothers sat in the tent Sajin had obtained for their use. Newkern had been having odd sensations most of the day and had become morose, almost sullen, in the last hour or two.

"What *is* your problem, Nathan?" Nick asked as he kicked at his brother's boot.

"Leave off," Nate spat at him.

Nick was closer to Nate than any man alive, even closer than Nate's twin, Kirk. He was as finely attuned to Nate's moods as he was his own and could always tell when something monumental was worrying the man. All week, ever since they had come back to Abbadon, Nate had been acting strange, secretive, and hadn't shared his thoughts with his brother.

"Tell me!" Nick finally snarled, hunkering down before Nate and refusing to allow the man to get up and out of his way.

"Can't you just let me think in peace, Beriault?" Nate snapped.

Nick's blue eyes narrowed. "It's about Conar, ain't it?" Nick asked.

Nate snorted, refusing to take the bait.

"It is, ain't it?" Nick repeated. He reached out to jab a hard finger into Nate's thigh. "You know where he is, don't you?" When his brother only glared back at him, Nick grinned. "You do! You know where the brat is!"

"Did anyone ever tell you that you're a pain in the ass, Beriault?" Nate replied.

"Where?" Nick asked, his mood altering to one of jocular. If Nate knew where their

brother was and hadn't said, Conar couldn't be in all that much trouble.

Nathan clenched his jaw and stubbornly refused to answer. He hadn't sorted it all out yet and the spies he had hired to snoop around the Kensetti woman's keep had yet to return with the information he had sent them to get.

"The hell with you, then," Nick grouched, plopping down to sit cross legged beside Nate. "He can't be in any danger if you won't discuss it with me."

Exasperated by Nick's incessant prodding, Nate squinted at him. "I don't tell you everything, Beriault, any more than you tell *me* everything. Some things are best left unsaid until you are sure of them."

"Just tell me he ain't in no trouble," Nick shot back. "If you tell me not to worry about him, I won't."

Nate's guffaw of disbelief was instantaneous. He looked away from the intensity of Nick's probing stare.

"He with that loose-skirt?" Nick asked, wagging his brows. "The Kensetti siren?"

Nate threw up his hands. "If you knew that why have you bothered me these past two weeks, Beriault, trying to get me to tell you what was wrong?" He knew his brother as well as his brother knew him.

Nick grinned. "Because I like to annoy you, Nate. That's why I was put on this earth, you understand. To annoy you."

"I believe it," Nate grumbled. He should have known Nick would have picked up on the undercurrents crossing between him, Nate, and the Kensetti bitch.

Nick sobered, his face relaxing from it's happy grin to a visage of concern. "He *is* all right, ain't he?"

Nate shrugged. "I think so, but I got the impression he isn't happy."

"When has that brat ever been happy?" Nick inquired.

"When he was with the Oceanian princess," Nate said quietly. "Since then?" He spread his hands. "Who knows?"

Nick leaned back on his elbows and regarded his brother with a serious expression. "Should we go see?"

"See what?" Nate asked although he knew what was on Nick's mind.

"If he didn't want Sajin to know he was there, I can understand that. Maybe he ain't been on top of the weather of late and needs to rest. Maybe he's content to let the Kensetti woman take care of him while her brother leads the Samiel." Nick's face hardened. "Then again, maybe he has gotten sicker and don't want none of his friends to see him." He shook his head. "We're family, though. He shouldn't begrudge us wanting to be there for him, should he?" At Nate's ironic look, Nick grunted. "Well, even if he does, it don't matter none."

"I've sent spies to have a look around," Nate admitted. "If things aren't what they should be with Conar, then we'll take a ride back up there."

"And if it looks like he needs rescuing?" Nick prompted.

Nate sighed heavily. "I suppose we'll just have to take matters into our own hands."

## Chapter Twelve

The three women paused to allow the children to catch up with them. Above them, the sky was a bright, piercing blue with a few wisps of white vapor stitching amidst the azure material of the heavens. There was a soft breeze soughing among the oak branches and the smell of clover was heavy in the air. Here and there, a white puff of fluff bounded away from the footpath as a rabbit caught a whiff of the women and children approaching.

"This is my favorite time of year," Gezelle said as she looked out over the babbling stream that was silver-shot with sunlight. She bounced Brianna on her hip and cooed at the girl-child who had taken her first step on the day before and who was trying to bend over Gezelle's arm to get down, eager to try her new skill on the lush green carpet of grass.

"I prefer fall," Catherine remarked as she shifted the picnic basket from her left hand to her right. "I love the smell of burning leaves and the crispness of the air."

"Being in the fall of my life," Meggie grunted, "you can give me the springtime!"

Cody McGregor, Galen's only son, nudged his half-sister, Jillian, Brelan Saur's daughter, and nodded toward the silent doe who was standing at the edge of the forest watching them. Jillian smiled and reached out to tug at Adair Patrick's arm. Adair was Gezelle's youngest child.

All in all, there were fifteen children with the women: Five of Gezelle's; six of Elizabeth McGregor's; three sons of Conar McGregor and Conar's only daughter, Brianna. They ranged in age from sixteen years to thirteen months, from Tristan McGregor, Conar's heir, to the babe who had sprang from Conar and Catherine's union.

"I like winter," twelve year old Regan DeLyle put in self-consciously. He was always surprised when no one challenged his statements. Sometimes that part of him that was of Raja's inheritance, reared its ugly head to goad him, but those times were becoming few and far between. Regan had switched the affection he had developed for Elizabeth to Catherine and was genuinely happy with the way the woman seemed to treat him no differently than she did her husband's other offspring. If anything, she seemed to go out of her way to make him a part of the group he had for so long shunned and been kept separate from.

"Winter's nice," Catherine agreed. "Especially the snow." She looked back at Regan. "In my homeland, we go sledding quite often. I always beat my brothers."

"That's because you weigh less than them," Cody said in his scholarly fashion. "Gravity naturally would ...."

"Leave off, Codian," Tristan, the elder and the one they all looked to for the appropriate way to behave, warned him. "No one needs a lesson in physics."

Cody sniffed, arching one thick golden brow at his sister, Jillian, in annoyance. He loved Tris, but sometimes the man acted as though he knew all there was to know when he damned well didn't!

"I wish Conar could be here," Catherine commented as she paused to look out over the footbridge that spanned the sparkling stream. She looked at her daughter as Gezelle stood the baby down on the even ground. "He's missing so much of Brianna's growing up." She set the picnic basket down. "He should be here."

Meggie pursed her lips. "Ought not to have left that dimwit little sot over there in the first place," she snapped. "Only mischief will come of it, I'm telling you now."

Catherine squinted into the bright light that bounced off the water. "I'll tell you something

else," she said, her mouth tight. "If he's come to care for that simpering little nomad twit, I will make him regret it!" She clutched her fists in the folds of her skirt. "I'll take her away from him just as his first wife was taken from him." She glared at the water. "I'll drown the bitch!"

Meggie and Gezelle exchanged a quick look, both having heard the sentiments before, but never with quite the same amount of venom with which it was spoken at that moment.

"You don't think he's fallen in love with that woman, do you?" Meggie couldn't help but ask.

"He'd better not have," was all Catherine dared allow herself to answer.

"Something's been eating at you all week, girl," Meggie said. "And it ain't just learning that the girl over there is expecting his bairn. You had to have known that would happen sooner or later."

"With Conar," Gezelle said dryly, "conceiving seems to be a given for any woman who sleeps with him more than once."

"Once can do it," Regan quipped. At the look of warning from the old woman, Meggie, he lifted his chin. "'Twas all it took to conceive me, Mistress Ruck."

"We don't need to be discussing such things around the children," Meggie intervened.

"It's not as though we don't know what Uncle Conar's doing," Kells A'Lex, one of Legion's sons put in.

"Well," Meggie snapped, "you don't need to be discussing it!"

Catherine walked to the footbridge and stood there, looking down into the water. "I had a dream about him last night."

Gezelle eased her hand out of Brianna's and grinned as the fat little girl wobbled unsteadily on her feet then promptly flopped down on her well-cushioned rear. "Oh, stop it!" Gezelle laughed as the baby started to cry. "You're no more hurt than I am."

Brianna looked up at her, her big gray eyes wide in her pudgy face, then she smiled, chuckled, and reached for a sprig of clover to stuff in her wet little mouth.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Gezelle admonished her and squatted down beside the child to make her spit out the clover.

"He was riding this huge white horse," Catherine said. Her voice was soft, hollow, as she spoke. "I've never seen such a huge horse before."

"Can't see the lad riding no white horse," Meggie said. "He's partial to black ones."

Catherine shook her head. "No, it was white. As white as snow." She put her hands on the guard rail of the footbridge, squatted down, sat, and dangled her legs over the planking, still holding onto the guard rail which was over her head. She peered intently into the water. "And he wasn't alone."

Gezelle glanced over at her. "Who was with him?"

Catherine shook her head again. "I couldn't tell who she was although I knew I was acquainted with her."

"How'd you know that?" Lenore, another of Gezelle's daughters, and a young woman who fancied herself in love with the man being discussed, asked.

"I really don't know, but I did."

"It was probably Papa's paramour," Tristan stated.

"No," Catherine disagreed. "It wasn't Rachel Asher."

"What was the dream about?" Cody asked. One of his favorite subjects was dream interpretation and he had spent many a pleasurable hour with Cayn, the Healer, learning about such things.

Catherine laid her head against her left forearm. "He was riding along this mountain trail and there was a waterfall cascading in the background. There was a heavy scowl on his face, like he was very, very angry, and he was clutching the reins so tight, his knuckles were white."

"Maybe the trail was steep," Kells injected. "He could have been afraid of the incline."

"Papa isn't afraid of heights!" three year old Little Brellan exploded. "Papa isn't afraid of nothin'!"

"He's afraid of closed-in places," Tristan retorted. "Just like me."

"And with good reason," Cody added.

"The same reason," Tristan acknowledged, glancing at Cody, the second oldest child there.

"The ground was sloped steeply, but I had no sense of any great height," Catherine said.

"There was fear coming from your father, but it had nothing to do with where he was."

"Fear of what?" ten year old Lenore asked. She didn't really believe Conar McGregor could be afraid of anything. Even closed-in places like his son, Tristan, who she planned on marrying since she was more than aware that she couldn't have the father.

"Fear of himself," Catherine whispered, but only Meggie, who was standing the closest to her, heard her.

"Why do you say that, lass?" Meggie inquired, sitting down on the footbridge beside her.

Catherine shook herself. "It was just an impression I got."

"What happened in the dream, Aunt Cat?" Jarad, another of Legion's sons, asked.

For a moment Catherine didn't answer, then she hung her head, closed her eyes and told them what had brought her gasping from her slumber.

"I saw this black cloud coming at him. The wind started howling, keening, then it turned bitterly cold. Ice pellets fell from the sky and pierced the ground, shattered the rocks and froze the vegetation. Red flashes of light shot through the blackness and there was a horrible, horrible stench. A smell of ...."

"Sulfur," Regan finished for her, glancing quickly at Tristan, then at Little Brellan who was nodding sagely.

"Yes," Catherine acknowledged, "sulfur." She shivered. "I saw him look up at the sky and smile."

"Smile?" Tristan queried, his brow furrowed. "You saw Papa smile at the black cloud?"

Catherine nodded. "I think he was happy to see it although in the short time I was with him, I never thought him to be excited by violent storms."

"Especially not that one," Regan mumbled.

"What happened then," Tristan asked. He was looking at Regan and their expression's were identical.

"He let go of the reins and held his arms out to the cloud," Catherine told them.

"He wouldn't have," Little Brellan cried out.

"But he did," Catherine said, unaware of the three little boys staring at her with horror and not seeing the intent way her own daughter was staring at her, her little fist jammed into her mouth. "And although the woman with him tried to stop it from happening, Conar was drawn up into the cloud and disappeared."

Tristan winced, Regan groaned, Little Brellan shook his head angrily and stamped his foot in irritation. "Papa wouldn't have gone willingly with that bastard!" he shouted.

"Brellan!" Gezelle gasped. "You know better than to use such language!"

"Tell her, Tris!" Little Brellan yelled. "Tell her Papa wouldn't have gone with Raphian!"

"Hush!" Regan warned, glancing over at Meggie. The old woman was sitting there on the

planks, her mouth a hard, surprised 'O'. He found her turning to look at him and knew she realized that the Outer Kingdom woman's dream was more prophesy than anything else.

"You're of the Craft," Tristan said, drawing the three women's attention to him. "Don't you understand what it is you dreamed, Lady?"

Catherine stared at him for a moment. So much like his father, she thought. Too much like his father. She buried her face in her hands and began to weep.

"He's in danger," she sobbed. "Mortal danger!"

Tristan caught Regan's attention and cocked his head away from the group. Shoving his hands into his pockets, he walked a little ways back up the path and stood there, his back to the group at the footbridge and waited for Regan and Little Brelan to join him.

"What do we do?" Regan asked.

"Go see Wyn," Tristan answered. "Someone will have to go after Papa."

"He won't like it," Little Brelan reminded them.

"She dreamed of the Domination," Regan snapped. "They are after him again. What choice do we have?"

"Who could the woman with him be?" Tristan thought out loud. He looked down at Regan. "Raja?"

Regan shook his head. "She's not on this plane of existence or I would have sensed her before now."

"Even way over there?" Little Brelan scoffed.

"Aye," Regan growled. "To the ends of the earth, fledgling!"

"What about Raphaella?" Little Brelan asked. "Aunt Cat met her in Odess."

"I don't think so," Tristan disagreed. "I don't know who she is, but obviously she tried to protect Papa in the dream."

"There is precious little protection from Raphian," Regan snarled. "You know that well enough, Tristan."

Tristan flinched. "Aye," he said quietly. "That I do, little brother."

"So what do we do?" Little Brelan asked. His small face was screwed up much as his father's would have been when in deep thought that boded ill for whomever he was thinking of.

"Let's go find Wyn and tell him what we suspect. He can get the men of the Wind Force together and they can go back over there." Tristan turned and looked at the footbridge where the women and the rest of his siblings and the children he had grown up alongside were standing. "He won't let us go with them, but I think Meggie just might decide to take a vacation as she did last time."

As though she had felt the touch of his thoughts, Meggie Ruck turned and looked at Tristan. Her smile was evil and her quick, almost imperceptible nod, told Conar's sons she had no intention of being left behind when the men of the Wind Force went after their father.



## Chapter Thirteen

"Stop brooding," Nate warned Nick.

"I ain't broodin'!" Nick snarled.

"He's not in any trouble," Nate reminded his brother.

Nick's vulgar snort left no doubt as to his interpretation of their brother's peril. "Being married to that whorish bitch ain't trouble enough for him, Newkern?" he exploded.

Nate sighed. They'd been through this at least a dozen times since Nate's spies had come back to camp to tell them the bad news.

"He married her over two months ago, Cap'n," the man had reported. "Legal-like. With a holy man. The prince took the vows without protest, they say."

"You're sure?" Nate had pressed. "Of his own accord?"

The spy had nodded quickly. "That's what I'm told. He's wearin' a weddin' ring and all." The man pulled his right eye with a grimy index finger. "Looks to me like if'n he weren't happy 'bout the arrangements, he wouldn't be wearin' the ring. Don't it to you, Cap'n?"

"I suppose," Nate had conceded, wondering how on earth he was going to explain this to Nick. When he had, the explosion had been as bad as he had feared it would be.

"He couldn't have, damn it!" Nick had ranted. "The bitch had to have been holding a dagger to his throat!"

"Apparently not," Nate had said wryly. "If everything our men gathered is true, he's quite content where he is."

After a long moment of reflection, Nick had sworn hatefully then spat out his view on the matter. "Well that explains why he didn't want the nomad to know he was there, then, don't it?"

Nate had not understood the point. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it, Newkern!" Nick had hissed. "The brat up and marries Ben-Alkazar's sister without telling the man. He's got her preggies! Don't you *see* that?"

The thought had not crossed Nate's mind and when it did he turned a suffused dark red. "Oh, shit!" he mumbled.

"Oh, shit is right!" Nick had thundered. "The slut's knocked up and I'll wager it might not even be Conar's!"

He had kicked sand onto his pallet. "It could be any swinging cock's within a thousand mile radius!"

"Not the best of situations, I agree," Nate had admitted, "but one that explains why Conar's staying hidden from Sajin."

"Aye," Nick snorted. "That is does!"

Now, after the two men had had time to think about it, that explanation didn't seem all that plausible. The woman hadn't looked pregnant to them a month before when they had been at her keep. But after a quick calculation, putting her at no less than three months, they thought it could be possible that she was, indeed, carrying a kinsperson of theirs.

Which had brought on Nick's intense brooding.

"I could throttle him," Nick grumbled.

"The question is," Nate asked, "do we tell her brother what we suspect or not?"

Nick looked over at him with a brow cocked in speculation. "And have the bastard go after the brat with one of them scimitar things?" He snorted. "I think not."

"I don't think Sajin would do that." Nate leaned back on his cot. "Conar is his only friend, Nicky. If anything, I think the man would be happy about obtaining a niece or nephew of our brother's."

"Or two of each or one each of the other," Nick mumbled. After all, twins ran in their family.

"Let's just wait a while and see what happens," Nate advised. "If she is carrying Conar's child, we'll know soon enough I'm thinking."

"I want to go see him," Nick snapped, pounding his boot heel into the loose sand scattered about the floor of the tent.

"I don't think that's such a good idea," Nate warned. "By now, she's told him we were there." He looked a little hurt. "If he'd wanted to see us, he'd have sent word somehow."

"If he could," Nick reminded him.

Nate thought about it. "Aye," he said, worry creeping into his voice. "If he could."

\* \* \* \*

Wyn listened very carefully to what his young brothers had to say. There was a tight frown on his face when they had finished, but a steady gleam in his pale blue eyes. He glanced at the other men who had been permitted to listen in on the meeting and saw that they, too, were scowling heavily.

"What do you think?" Wyn asked one of the men.

Sentian Heil unclenched his jaw, cast a quick look at Andre Belvoir, then spoke with a voice that was thick with anger.

"I believe he's gotten himself in trouble again," Sentian agreed. "And I think the Domination's behind it somehow."

"I've been feeling edgy for awhile now," Belvoir, the ex-Master-at-Arms, told them. "Sentinel-edgy. Like just before I'd get a call from my Lady to go on an errand for her."

"As have I," Sentian admitted. "I thought it was just this thing with Chand, but now I can see that it isn't."

"It still could be," Tristan warned him. "He's been missing for nearly a month and for nearly a month now, Regan and Bre and I have been having these dreams of the sea." He looked to his brothers, who nodded gravely back at him. "We thought it meant Holm was coming to visit, but now, we're not so sure."

"You mean you think Chand could have somehow gotten on a ship bound for the Inner Kingdom?" Wyn shook his head. "Not possible, little brother."

"I don't see how he could have gotten out of Baybridge," Belvoir said to no one in particular. "They kept him locked in his room most of the time." His face betrayed his care for the last of the Wynth line. "And he use to just sit there, staring into space, unmindful of them what came to see him." He shook his head. "I just don't see how he escaped the sanitarium."

"Either he wasn't as immune to his surroundings as the Healers thought or he played a damned good game with them," Sentian commented. "Knowing him as I do, I'd say he waited until they weren't watching him as close as they had been and then made his getaway."

"As enraged as he was with Papa," Tristan said, thinking about the terrible things his uncle had said about his father, "he certainly doesn't mean the man any good. If he could have found a way to contact the Domination, to gain their assistance, he would have ...." He couldn't say it, but Regan, never one to let emotions cloud his thinking, finished for him.

"Betrayed Papa to them." He looked at Wyn. "He's as liable to hand Papa over to that bunch on a silver platter as not if he can get revenge for Grice's death."

"And I think that may be what's happening," Tristan breathed. "If so, we need to strike back before anything happens to our father."

Wyn chewed on his lip. Their father had expressly forbidden him to stay in the Inner Kingdom out of fear for his, Wyn's, safety. He'd made Wyn promise him not to disobey, but this was a different matter altogether.

"All right," the oldest of Conar McGregor's sons said at last. "Let's just suppose we call the Force together." Wyn swung his glance from brothers to Sentinels. "And we take the Ravenwind back over to the Inner Kingdom." He pointed at Sentian and Belvoir. "You men have no powers over there."

"Neither does Papa," Little Brelan reminded him.

"True," Wyn answered. "But Meggie does." He looked about him. "You know she'll go."

"We were counting on it," Regan snapped.

"All right," Wyn said again, thinking about the logistics of it. "Nothing's happening in the kingdoms right now ...."

"Except for looking for Chand," Belvoir put in.

"True," Wyn agreed, "but anyone can do that. We send word to the Force, explain things, get only those of the fighting units together." He shook his head. "That means Coron and Dyllon stay here as well as Legion and Teal."

"You're going to have problems there," Sentian piped up. "Legion is going to want to come along this time."

"So will du Mer," Regan said. He clucked his tongue. "And that bastard Edan. He'll insist on going."

"He should," Wyn declared. "He knows the place and he's been there many times. We'll need him."

"How many of the original unit should we take?" Belvoir asked. He held up his hand. "Shalu, of course."

"Of course!" the others said in unison.

"Chase and Paegan," Belvoir counted. "Thom, me, and Senti." He nodded at Wyn. "You." His brow crinkled. "Who else?"

"Misha," Tristan responded. "You couldn't keep him here if you tried."

"Aye, Misha," Belvoir grinned. He looked around. "That's only ten of us. We'll need at least twelve."

"There's Holm," Sentian answered. "Don't forget him."

"And the deadliest one of them all," Regan snorted.

The others looked at him, then in one voice added the last name:

"Ching-Ching!"

\* \* \* \*

High overhead, the moon sailed through a turbulent sky. Dark gray clouds, hanging low from the heavens, flitting across the skyrail of the brigantine. An occasional flare of lightning lit up the starboard horizon and the brisk stormy wind whipped the sheeting, snapping it, making it sound like firecrackers during the new year's celebrations. The brigantine listed sharply for a moment as the great ship tacked westward and the passenger at the rail wondered if the hull would grind against the jutting rocks which thrust up to either side of the speeding vessel. The craggy walls of stone were close, too close for comfort, and the heavy clang of the ship's bell as it tolled eight of the clock set the passenger's nerves on end, for it was almost like that of the death knell.

"We're making good time," the captain informed him as the man joined his passenger at the

rail. "We should reach Serenia by dawn tomorrow."

His passenger nodded. "Sooner, I hope."

The captain hunched down into his great cape and leaned against the rail. "You never did say why we're in such a hurry."

The tall, thin passenger looked out over the moon-clad waves and tried to see past their churning depths. For once in his life, he could not hear the siren call of the depths that had alternately taunted, then calmed him, over the years. That, in itself, was not a good sign.

"They'll be leaving for the Midworld at the end of the week," the passenger finally answered. "I must have Ching-Ching there to go with them."

Holm van der Lar, the captain of the brigantine *The Ravenwind*, the flag ship of the Wind Force's mighty navy, winced. "Why are we going back?"

Occultus Noire smiled to himself. "Why else, Captain?"

Holm let out a long sigh. "The lad."

"Yes," Occultus agreed, looking around. "The lad."

"What's he doing now?" Holm asked with exasperation.

The smile slipped from the aging sorcerer's thin mouth and unease filled his dark gaze. "It's not what he's done, my friend, but what will be done to him if we do not stop it."

The captain felt a chill finger of fear scrape down his spine. "By who?"

"The Domination," Occultus whispered, hating the sound of that damnable word on his lips. He had thought his fight with that evil sect over with when Conar and his Wind Force had destroyed the Monastery, but now, once more like the many-headed dog of legend, another head had sprang up to cause more trouble.

"You reckon Conar's aware of the danger he's in?" Holm asked.

Occultus shook his head. "He won't be able to sense it, Holm." And that thought terrified the sorcerer. "It will be on him before he can do anything to stop it."

"Bad?" Holm asked, suddenly very worried about the young man he thought of like a son.

Occultus nodded silently, his eyes bleak with a fear that had come to him on a still, chill night, and had stayed to turn his blood to ice. There had been little sleep since that dream had invaded his bed and roused him, gasping and sweating, from his deep slumber.

"Very bad, old friend. The worst thing that could ever happen to him."

"Death?" Holm whispered, praying that wasn't the case.

Occultus gripped the railing. "Sometimes there are fates worst than death, Holm." He felt a tear careening down his cheek. "And that is what the Domination has planned for our young warrior."

\* \* \* \*

Robert MacCorkingdale regarded his guest with ill-disguised contempt, but listened to his wild tale, his rambling lunacy with a polite expression on his handsome face. Now and again he would nod courteously, mumble a word or two of condolence, and shake his head at the sad tale his guest was telling. All the while, he contemplated how best to kill this stranger to their midst, this enemy who had somehow stumbled his way into the secret place where MacCorkingdale and his followers had been forced to hide for three years. Pain, horrible exacting pain, was uppermost in MacCorkingdale's mind when one rambling comment caught, then held, his attention. He leaned forward, his gaze sharply fused on the man before him.

"Repeat that," MacCorkingdale ordered.

There was a slight pause, then a knowing smile. "He trusts me," the man said.

MacCorkingdale stared at his visitor for a long time, then leaned back in his chair, regarded

the man with an arched brow. "And do you know where he is?"

"Aye," came the immediate reply. "And how to get to him."

Robert MacCorkingdale, Arch-prelate of the almost defunct Brotherhood of the Domination, grandson of Sadie MacCorkingdale, the deceased cook of Boreas Keep, Serenia, slowly smiled. "Do you really?" he asked.

"Close enough to stick a dagger between his lying, cowardly ribs!" the man hissed. He fished in his tattered coat and withdrew a black obsidian blade, snagging the razor-sharp blade on the material and renting it further, before fumbling it from its hiding place. He held the dagger up. "I can slit his gullet with this and leave him lying in his own blood on the floor." He turned the blade so that the light from the oil light flashed along its lethal surface. "He won't survive a cut from this!"

A rare chuckle came from MacCorkingdale's mouth. There had been little to laugh about since the Monastery had been burned to the ground. "No, I would venture to say he wouldn't."

The man replaced the dagger in his coat and squinted at MacCorkingdale. "Do we have a deal, then?"

Looking into those insane eyes made MacCorkingdale uneasy, but he knew hatred when he saw it—fierce, unadulterated hatred that could kill. And would kill, given the right encouragement.

"How do you propose to find your way to him?" MacCorkingdale asked and was amused to see the first hint of uncertainty, insecurity flash through the man's wild stare.

"I thought you could take care of that," the man answered. "That's why I came here, Robbie."

MacCorkingdale's chin lifted. He hated to be called by that childish, insulting nickname. Especially by a man his own age who looked twice as old in the throes of insanity. It showed little respect for his authority and importance. He would have said as much but he doubted if the neurotic, psychotic fool standing in front of him would understand the reprimand.

"For the sake of argument," MacCorkingdale said instead, "let's say I provide passage for you to this place you mentioned." He tapped his finger against his bottom lip. "And let's say you find your way to him, get even so far as being alone with him so you can carry out your revenge." He pointed his finger at his visitor. "How will you escape once the deed has been accomplished?"

Chandler Grice, the last surviving member of the Wynth family, the heir to the throne of Oceania, the ex-brother-in-law of the man he wished to kill, shrugged indifferently.

"Once McGregor is dead, I don't care what happens to me." His eyes glowed feverishly. "I will have avenged my sister's and brother's death and that is all that matters."

"Even knowing they will probably turn you inside out, Wynth?" MacCorkingdale chuckled. "McGregor's allies will make you pay for killing him."

"It doesn't matter," Chand said stubbornly. "All I want is to see him dead!"

"As do I," MacCorkingdale assured him. "He has much to atone for in my family, as well."

Chand could have told the Arch-prelate that it had been Storm Gale, not Conar McGregor, who had been responsible for the death of MacCorkingdale's mother. He could also have told him what a drunken Sern Jern had once confessed on a long, winter night that it had been Meggie Ruck who had poisoned Sadie MacCorkingdale for the old woman's part in nearly killing Conar McGregor. But he didn't say any of that. It didn't matter. If Conar wasn't guilty of the crimes MacCorkingdale laid at his doorstep, he was still guilty of being the cause of Liza's and Grice's deaths. And Conar McGregor had to die to atone for that sin.

MacCorkingdale thought over the man's proposition very carefully, weighed the chances of failure, the possible repercussions that might be created because of it, then decided there were none

for the Brotherhood. He and his followers had everything to gain and nothing to lose if McGregor should die at the hands of a man who had once been his friend.

"All right, Wynth," MacCorkingdale finally answered. "I will get you to the Inner Kingdom."

\* \* \* \*

They gathered in the summoning chamber, their voices lifted in incantation. The sacrifice lay gasping out his last breath, blood flowing copiously from the grievous wound which had disemboweled him, the blood of the black goat hanging overhead mixing with the human blood to form a noxious smell that was like perfume to the men assembled in the black room with its scarlet-red pentagram.

"Come, Master," Robert MacCorkingdale crooned to the massing presence looming over Its followers. "Come and grant us Your help to finally destroy our enemy, Conar McGregor!"

Raphian, the Bringer of Storms, the Destroyer of Souls, cackled and hissed as It took shape at the south end of the summoning chamber. Its odorous smell was overpowering and more vile than anything between heaven and the Abyss, and Its forked tongue dripped specks of acid on the stone floor. Blood-red eyes glowed in the semi-darkness of the chamber and in those eyes was the rekindled light of battle.

"Where is he?" the entity spat, Its huge triangular head bobbing over the respectfully assembled sorcerers.

"In the Midworld, Oh, Noxious One," MacCorkingdale complimented the demon. "Where he is powerless against you."

A hiss, what those gathered took for pleasure, slithered from the maw of the entity, but in actuality it was a hiss of great annoyance for Raphian had no powers in the land of the Prophetess. But It did not tell Its followers so.

"You have a warrior to champion me?" He asked.

"We do," MacCorkingdale confirmed. "One of McGregor's friends. He will do the deed."

The demon licked Its thick, obscene lips. If the young bratling from Oceania could accomplish what Tohre and MacCorkingdale had not been able to do, to rid the Black Way of Conar McGregor once and for all, it would be worth anything to the Nightwinds.

"What do you need of me?"

"Your help in transporting Wynth to the Midworld, Oh Detestable of Detestables!" MacCorkingdale answered.

Raphian hissed. Such would not be easy, but it could be done. It waved Its long neck about the room, Its scarlet eyes impaling those gathered, then grinned. The grin was the most awful thing any of the men had ever seen.

"I will make it so!"

\* \* \* \*

Chand Wynth had to cover his mouth with his hand as he listened to the men talking so they would not hear his giggle. No one knew he was on the ship, hiding where no one would ever think to look for him. What a coup, he thought as the voices faded away. To be on the very ship that was carrying the men of the Wind Force to Conar McGregor!

## Chapter Fourteen

The nightmare had started long, long ago.  
In a hard wooden bunk, aboard the Boreas Queen.  
It had nearly destroyed him once.  
Now, it was back.  
Or at least a crazed version of it was back.

He lay in her bed, sweat pouring from his pores like water. His lips moved in silent plea. His eyes moved rapidly beneath blue-tinted lids. His hands clutched the headboard rails and pulled at them as though his wrists were tied and he were striving to get free. He lay rigidly on the damp sheets, his legs thrown out wide, but now and then he would writhe as though some monstrous evil was being done to him. An occasional moan left his trembling mouth and sounded so pitiful, so immensely hopeless, it was all the woman who lay beside him could do not to cry.

"McGregor," she whispered, trying to waken him gently, to bring him from the nightmare that hurt him so. "McGregor, wake up. You are dreaming."

The snakes were back, wrapped around his wrists and ankles, biting into his flesh, sinking their fangs so deep he could hear the bone grating. The gargoyle loomed over his head, peering down at him, laughing at him, taunting him, hissing its evil in his ear. It was dark, darker than any moonless night, darker than any nether region of the Abyss. And it was cold. So cold he shivered, his teeth clicking together against the chill and the fear that was roiling inside him and building with every fevered breath he took.

"McGregor," he heard the gargoyle hiss at him and he cringed against that hated voice, that loathsome touch that reached out with wickedly-sharp talons to rake his bare chest and draw blood.

He didn't want to see them—these fiends intent on driving him over the edge and into the waiting arms of insanity. He didn't care to look upon the faces of his enemies and see the gloating glee in their savage eyes. It was bad enough that their hands were on his flesh, pinching, scratching, gouging. Caressing.

"McGregor!"

He could feel them shaking him, pummeling him, drawing their evil hands over his flesh, lingering on him, touching him. Soiling him. He felt dirty. Unclean. Beyond redemption and their oily voices and slimy hands were contaminating him to the point of destruction.

He didn't want to see them. He didn't want to open his eyes and look into the eyes of the demons who had vowed to destroy him. Whose lusts had been slackened on his body with hands and fists and other touches even more vile and vulgar. No, he didn't want to see them.

"McGregor! Damn it! Wake up!"

His face stung with the hit and he whimpered, wishing they'd leave him alone. Let him sink into a hole somewhere and hide from their rapt attention. Slink away from their hands and mouths and organs. He tried to draw his limbs toward him, to protect himself from their vicious attention, but he couldn't move. The snakes were holding him still, keeping him from escaping.

He didn't want to see them, but his eyes seemed to open of their own accord and he stared in abject horror at the fiends who held him captive.

Raja was holding his left hand, grinning down at him as she wet her slick red lips.

Raphaella was at his left ankle, pressing her weight against his leg.

Sadie held his right ankle and was digging her old woman's nails into his flesh, puncturing

it and laughing at the pain in his eyes.

Rachel sat beside him, her strong hands wrapped around his right arm, pinning it easily to the bed.

"You have an uncommon knack for getting yourself into trouble, milord."

He craned his head back, expecting to see Tolkan Coure sitting there, holding him, but it was not Tolkan's pretty green eyes that looked down at him with such mockery. It was Liza. His beautiful, lost Liza who smiled sweetly at him and clucked her tongue.

"When will you learn, milord?"

He wanted to speak to her, to tell her how much he had missed her, but his words were drowned out by the laughter around him as every woman he had ever lain down with rushed toward the bed, their eager faces devouring him, pressing forward to better see.

"McGregor!" they screamed at him—Gezelle, Amber-lea, Myra, the mothers of all his children, the women he had taken without care to their feelings. The women he had scornfully dismissed when their usefulness was done.

"When we're through with you, McGregor," he heard Raja whisper to him above the din of womanly laughter, "no woman will ever want you again. You won't even be a man when we're through with you."

Hands clutched at him, picked him up, held his manhood loosely, and he lifted his head, staring down at the woman kneeling on the bed between his spread thighs:

Sybelle.

And in her hands was a carving blade.

"McGregor!"

He woke with a choking gasp, panting for breath, his eyes wild, his body covered with sweat. He was trembling so violently his teeth were clattering and he felt the warm trickle of urine pooling beneath his rump.

"It was a dream!" Sybelle told him, reaching out to lay a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"Don't touch me!" he screamed, jerking away from her. He plastered himself against the headboard, staring at her as though she were a vision dredged up from the deepest pit. His knees came up and he clutched them, drawing in on himself in a protective reaction that was childlike and pitiable. His stare was crazed and the smell of intense fear drifted from him in waves.

"It was just a dream," she repeated.

"No," he whispered. The dream had been as real as the ones he had had nightly in Chrystallus. And just as terrifying. It had emasculated him then and, at that moment, he had been emasculated again as surely as though she had plied the blade across his flesh.

Sybelle turned away from him and lit the lamp. When she looked back, he was watching her like a hawk, his body tense and untouchable. There was sweat all over his face and chest, running down his cheeks and throat. He was breathing heavily as though he had run a great distance to escape the demon of his nightmare. She could see the vein throbbing in the side of his neck and the sight aroused her.

"Would you like to talk about it?" she asked, wetting her lips.

"No!" he spat, scrambling off the bed to get away from those slick, wet lips. He jerked on his breeches, snatched his shirt from the footboard and yanked it on, tearing it at the shoulder as he thrust his arms into the sleeves.

"You don't have to leave," Sybelle said quietly. She threw the covers back to get out of the bed.

"Stay away from me!" he ordered her. He hurried to the door, threw it open with a bang



and left the room. She could hear him crashing down the hall like a wild boar. She heard his door slam shut and knew he had locked it against her wishes. She should have had the lock removed.

"What did you dream, McGregor?" she asked aloud, wondering at the fear she had seen blazing back at her from those pale blue orbs. There had been true horror stamped on his handsome face, twisting it into a mask of hopelessness. Whatever it had been, it had driven him away.

The ride, she thought as she lay back down and tucked the covers around her waist, had gone well that morning. He had enjoyed it for they hadn't fought. He had bathed beneath the waterfall and laughed when she had pushed him under the thundering cascade. He had tugged on her leg, sweeping it out from beneath her, and she had fallen beside him, sputtering with mock rage when she popped back to the surface. He had even smiled at her, then. The first time in days that she had seen that glorious smile. They had spent a day of truce, laughing and speaking of nothing more controversial than the merits of red wine versus white. And the ride back had been just as enjoyable. When she had asked, not demanded he join her in bed that night, he had not refused. Nor had he seemed thrilled by the prospect. But that he hadn't protested, his mouth turning mulish as it usually did, had encouraged her and she had been as gentle, and allowed him to be as gentle with her, as she knew how to be. The evening had been pleasant and she had rejoiced in the thrill of his magnificent body, now toned and as powerful as it had ever been. He had held his tongue, and temper, and he had pleased her as she had hoped he might.

Then the nightmare had come to claim him and he had fled from her.

"What did you dream?" she whispered.

She intended to find out.

\* \* \* \*

Conar dropped to the stone floor in the garden and brought his hands up to cover his face. He was still gasping for breath, still so terrified he thought his heart would burst out of his chest. He could hear it pumping wildly against his ribcage. The shudders which had wracked his body had been reduced to an occasional hitching jerk, but he couldn't keep his knees pressed tightly together as he knelt there on the cold floor.

"Oh, god, why?" he sobbed, re-living the nightmare that had been brought up out of the very essence of him.

Once, there had been Tolkan and Appolyon and Timothy Kullen and Lydon Drake and Galen with Kaileel Tohre wielding the blade. They had reduced him to a quivering mass. A shameless husk of a man. No more able to perform like a man than any other eunuch in the courts of the Inner Kingdom. They had lopped that part of him away that had been the root of his manhood and had planted in him the fear. Fear of worthlessness. Fear of being unable to control his own life and destiny. Fear of being left forever at their mercy, unable to defend himself. No longer a man, but an empty vessel, drained of its worth and essence.

"Shit!" he spat, pounding his fist against his knee.

He couldn't take these nightmares again. It didn't matter that the cast of characters had changed. The intent was the same. The meaning was the same. The nightmare, that of being emasculated, made unworthy, hung over him like a noose.

Then suddenly his fury, leaping up to push back the nightmare, erupted with such violence, such overwhelming power, that he had managed to reduce his bedchamber to rubble before he became aware that he was smashing glass, ripping material, splintering furniture and slashing and reducing the priceless paintings and tapestries to nothing more than torn fragments. When he came to himself, when he realized what he had done, he stood amid the carnage and stared, bewildered,

numb, panting from having wreaked such devastating havoc. He looked around him and began to cry.

Conar was beyond anger. Beyond pain. Beyond rational thought. He had plunged himself into a realm of total insanity. Even the pounding at the door, the anxious shouts, the thud of an ax against the heavy, locked portal barely registered in his mind. He could only turn and stare at the source of the noise, neither understanding it, nor realizing he was standing at the center of the vortex. And when the blade of the ax broke through the wood, when the door was flung back fiercely against the bedchamber wall and six men rushed inside to confront the battle they thought was being waged inside his room, he could only gaze back at them with dazed indifference.

"Are you all right?" Sybelle asked, coming to him, not quite daring to touch him as he stood staring back at her, his eyes blank.

"Aye," he answered and turned his back on her. He walked to the garden and sank down on the floor once more. Drawing his legs up, he encircled them with his arms and laid his head on his knees.

Sybelle surveyed the destruction of his room and felt a tight band of fear squeeze her heart. What could have made him do this, she wondered? Her gaze went back to him and she shuddered for he was lost to the bewildered questions and looks around him.

"McGregor?" she questioned. "Why did you do this?"

"I don't know," he said helplessly. His voice was like that of a small child.

The Kensetti woman looked at Chaim. "What could have caused this?" she asked.

Chaim shook his head. "Anger, Your Grace. Irrational anger." He looked at the destroyed room and shook his head. "A great deal of irrational anger."

Or spite, Sybelle asked herself? She could not put such behavior past the Serenian. He was not in control of his life and the only authority he had was over the furnishings in his chambers.

Here, she thought, was a man who had always been emotionally tough, physically strong, mentally alert and spiritually intact, reduced to submitting to a mere woman's whims and desires. He could not lash out at her as he had the room, so instead, he had demolished what he could get his hands on. In protest, she wondered? As a substitute for her?

"I'm sorry," he muttered, his head still down. "I'll clean it up."

"No," Sybelle said quietly. "The servants will see to it."

"The fight's been knocked out of him," Chaim said softly. "I doubt he'll give you any more trouble, milady."

Sybelle blanched. That was not what she wanted. She didn't want him meek and humbled. Obedient, yes, but not spirit-broken. Submissive? Yes, that, too, but not crushed as he was at that moment.

Had she done this to him, she asked herself? Yes, she supposed she had. The answer was there to see in his bowed shoulders and hanging head. What she had done to him was unpardonable and it tore at a heart already beginning to regret her part in helping to destroy what he had once been.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked, aching to take him in her arms and hold him.

"No, thank you," he said politely.

"Your Grace?" Chaim asked quietly, taking her arm. He motioned toward the door and reluctantly she followed him, clutching the servant's hand with her own.

"Should we leave him like that?" she asked, looking back over her shoulder.

"Yes," Chaim answered firmly. His eyes met one of the guard's and a silent order was passed, acknowledged with a curt nod, and would be acted upon.

Conar spent the rest of the night huddled on the floor, staring blindly into the dark.

## Chapter Sixteen

Legion jumped as the fog horn bellowed once more and the thought of Conar's first encounter with the warning sound flitted through his mind. Somehow he thought his little brother would have been just as disconcerted as he was, if not more so.

Teal, still in his bunk and sick as a dog ever since they had set sail four weeks earlier, had sent word that he wanted to see Legion, but A'Lex was in no hurry to go below. The smell of du Mer's puke was still hovering about the cabin despite the cabin boy's best efforts to remove it. Legion would rather stay on deck, marveling at how close they had come to the jagged rocks when the Ravenwind had ran the gauntlet between them earlier that morning.

"Once we leave the Sinisters," Holm had explained to Legion, "there won't be nothing but fog and crags."

"Crags?" Legion had questioned.

"Rocks," Paegan laughed. "Rocks like you've never seen before, my friend."

And Legion hadn't. Despite his fear that the sleek black ship would hit one of those deadly-looking monoliths, he had not been able to tear himself away from watching the ship's progress through them. He had been fascinated, wondering who had dared navigate these waters the first time through to plot a sea lane through such dangerous formations.

"They called themselves the Viks," Misha explained in answer to Legion's question. "Ancient relatives of the Chales." He'd smiled. "Fierce seamen, they were, and plunderers without equal. Many an Outer Kingdom lady lost her virtue to them red-haired warriors!"

Legion glanced up to the wheel and saw Holm staring out through the line of crags. The man was an able captain and it was to his honor that the Tzar had had handed over to him the navigational charts which would bring the Ravenwind through the crags. Months earlier, when the crew of the ex-prison ship had sailed along behind an Outer Kingdom barkentine to find Conar, Holm had had to rely on the First Mate of the Anna Katrine to navigate the Ravenwind through the gauntlet. Now, Holm and his crew could come and go at will. Thanks to the faith and respect and honor given to the men of the Wind Force by the Steffensburg family.

"Land ho!"

Legion craned his neck to look up at the crow's nest and saw the lookout pointing off the starboard beam. Carefully skirting a coil of hemp, A'Lex made his way to the other rail and joined Marsh Edan. Marsh sighed with relief and Legion slapped him on the back.

"I'm not a damned sailor," Marsh complained.

"You've made this trip before," Legion reminded him. "Doesn't it get any better for you?" Marsh looked green around the gills.

"I'm not as bad off as du Mer," the Boreas Master-at-Arms growled, "but I'm not at ease until my feet are on solid ground." He spat over the rail. "Dry ground!"

Legion laughed and drew in a long breath of the salt air. "I swear I can smell that land," he said as he exhaled. "Smells like cinnamon."

"Humpf," Marsh grunted. It smelled like dead fish to him.

"We're going to run on in to Odess, Legion," Holm called out to him. "Probably spend the night and take on a few supplies before going on to Basaraba."

"How far is that?" Legion asked.

"Half a day's sail," Mr. Tarnes, the Ravenwind's First Mate answered as he took the wheel

from the captain. "Up at first light, in the pog harbor by early afternoon or better." He hawked a gob of spittle over the side. "If'n the wind be with us, I reckon."

"It will be," Meggie told him. She squinted up at the brilliant blue sky with its fleecy patches of clouds. "The rain will hold off 'till we get to that godforsaken place."

"Monsoons will be setting in soon," Misha prophesied. "It's best we get to the Inner Kingdom before they do."

Legion turned from the rail and decided he had put off seeing du Mer as long as he dared. He nodded at Thom and Belvoir, who were playing a game of chess on a makeshift table on the aft deck, and went below, smiled at Sentian as they passed in the companionway.

"Ching-Ching is with him," Sentian called over his shoulder. "Be prepared, A'Lex!"

Legion didn't bother knocking on the cabin door but went on in. He saw the little Chrystallusian man glance at him, angrily Legion thought, then turn back to the helpless ball of humanity lying in Holm's bunk.

"You are not dying, du Mer," Ching-Ching snapped as he poured a spoonful of dark amber liquid into a spoon. "Sit up and take this or I might decide to kill you and be done with it."

"Have pity," Teal gasped. The smell of the potion had reached his nostrils and he was becoming ill again. "I can't ...."

"Yes, you can!" Ching-Ching shot back in an authoritative voice that sounded as though it were losing all patience. "And you *will*!"

Legion walked to the bunk and reached down to help du Mer to a sitting position. "Up we go," he said merrily.

"A'Lex! Have pity!" Teal gagged. The ship was spinning around him and his belly felt as though it would come up through his mouth.

"I've always pitied you, Teal," Legion answered. "Now, take the medicine like a good little boy."

Ching-Ching bent over and forced the spoon of bitter liquid between Teal's gaping lips. A tiny smile tugged at the man's monkey face as Teal's wrinkled up with immediate disgust.

Teal gagged again, slapped a hand over his mouth and fell back to the mattress, his lids squeezed tightly shut.

"Such a baby," Legion chuckled.

"Worse than the little bird at taking medicine," Ching-Ching grumbled. He laid the spoon aside and folded his arms over his thin chest. "We should have left him in Boreas."

"No," Teal said weakly. It had been over two and a half years since he had seen Conar and there were things the two of them needed to talk about. Joannie MacCorkingdale was at the top of the list. "I'll be all right."

"We have repeatedly told you so, gypsy," Ching-Ching scoffed. He looked over at Legion, then scrunched his bony shoulders up toward his over-sized ears. "Now, he listens when we are only minutes from land."

"How did you ...?" Legion stopped. This man had powers similar to Conar's and Meggie's and Occultus'. Even Chase had abilities that both puzzled and worried Legion. Why should he question how the Chrystallusian knew they were nearing land?

Ching-Ching grinned, showing twin rows of sharp little teeth. "I heard the lookout, A'Lex," he chuckled. "I'm not deaf!"

\* \* \* \*

Chand Wynth peeked out from behind the barrels where he had been hiding for most of the journey. His food supply, and that small portion of edible stuffs that he had been able to pilfer

from the ship's galley, had all but run out. He, too, had heard the man in the crow's nest alert the ship to landfall, and was relieved to know he wouldn't have to sneak out of hiding again to look for something to eat. Seeing Chase Montyne and Shalu Taborn walking along the deck together, Chand moved back among the lashed-down barrels and wedged himself, invisibly he hoped, behind a large crate. He could hear the men talking, though, and paid close attention to what was being said.

"He's going to be pissed," Chase remarked as he sat down on one of the barrels.

"Let him be," Shalu barked. "I did not want to leave his skinny white ass here in the first place!" The Necroman sat down beside Montyne with a grunt of anger. "He does not have authority over me!"

Chase laughed. "What are we going to say to him if Catherine's dream turns out to be nothing more than a case of something she ate?"

The black warrior screwed up his face and snarled. "I, too, had dreams of a black cloud hanging over him, Ionarian! As did Occultus. We were separated by thousands of miles. Does that sound like indigestion to you?"

Montyne's smile slipped away. "I had the same dream." As Shalu turned his head to look at him, he nodded. "Six nights in a row before I decided to come to Boreas." He tapped his heel on the planking. "Sabrina had been feeling uneasy, too."

Shalu snorted. "The woman is pregnant, Montyne! She is allowed to feel uneasy." He let his gaze wander down the blond, blue-eyed, handsome white man and snorted again. "Only the gods know what such a union between the two of you will produce." He turned his head away. "Speckled children are most unnerving to look upon."

"Remind me of that when Kymmie and Wyn give you your first grandchild, Taborn," Chase answered dryly.

Shalu grunted.

Some small part of him rejoiced that Chase had found real happiness with the Lady Sabrina, Chand realized as he sat listening to his old friends. He had not known that the woman Montyne had wed upon his return to Ionary from the Inner Kingdom was of the same race as Shalu. Not that it mattered to Chand. He had been pleased with Wyn and Kym's wedding, the two were so obviously in love. If Chase was just as much in love, it didn't matter if the woman was a Diabolusian rat-trapper. He wished he could congratulate Chase, but no one must know he was on board the ship. Not if he was to do what he had come to this heathen land to do.

"We shall make damned sure we take him back with us this time," Shalu said in answer to a question Chase had put to him.

"Even if he doesn't want to go?" Chase quipped.

"It will not matter!" Shalu brayed. "We will manhandle him if necessary. Hog-tie him if he gives us any trouble."

"Too bad Bent isn't here," Chase said. "I remember a time when Conar was visiting me when Bent showed up and dragged him out to the ship, stark naked."

"Bent will be missed," Shalu said quietly, emotion crossing his dark face.

Chand's brows drew together. What had happened to Bent, he wondered? Had the giant man died? Been killed alongside Grice and Roget and the others?

He shook his head. No. Someone would have told him if Bent had been killed at Abbadon. He couldn't even remember if the ex-executioner had been with the others at that vile place. He squeezed his eyes shut. There was so much he couldn't remember. So much that seemed to be lost to him forever.

"Well, any way," Shalu was saying, his voice returning to its normal gruff, deep bass volume, "we will bring Conar back one way or another!"

Aye, Chand Wynth thought as he ground his teeth together. Sealed in a coffin if I have my way!

\* \* \* \*

Meggie June Ruck had been feeling strange since she had set foot on the Ravenwind. Her sixth sense had been speaking to her, warning her, but she couldn't quite figure out what it was that was niggling at the edges of her consciousness. The closer they came to land, the more electric became the feeling that had kept her nervous and expectant all during the trip.

"It's this land," Occultus had said to her when Meggie mentioned the feeling. "It does strange things to a person." He was looking out at the stretch of dark along the horizon. "My powers will be useless once I set foot on that venomous shore."

"Mine won't," Meggie sniffed. If anything, her powers seemed to be magnified when she was in the Inner Kingdom.

"I, also, feel the warning, Mistress Ruck," Occultus acknowledged.

Meggie looked around at the men gathered at the rail. She'd known most of them for nearly twenty years—the length of time she had known Conar McGregor. She knew their weaknesses, their strengths, their likes and dislikes, their habits. She could have recounted their family histories and present circumstances had anyone asked. They were like sons to her. Sons of the Wind. But one of them, she thought as she looked over those gathered, was a threat to her bonny lad and she meant to find out which one it was.

"Yes," Occultus said as he intercepted her thoughts. "There is one among them who wishes him ill."

"Wishes him more than ill," Meggie said. Her gaze drifted from man to man, but she couldn't lay her doubts at any of their feet. They all seemed so sincere in their affection for Conar.

Occultus, too, was looking at the men. He had not been able to pinpoint the traitor, either, but he knew there was one on board for he could feel the hatred, the violence, the death threat.

"We shall ferret him out, Mistress Ruck," Occultus assured her. "We will let nothing happen to our champion."

"Damned right we won't!" Meggie spat. Her scrutiny fell on Marsh Edan, held, then slipped away.

She'd never really liked that man, she thought.

## Chapter Sixteen

He was still sitting in the garden the next morning when Sybelle came to his chambers. She could tell he was asleep for he was gently snoring, his lips slightly parted. His face was turned to the side on his raised knee and his right hand had dropped to the floor beside him, the strong fingers curled slightly. A heavy lock of bright gold hair covered his eyes and a wisp or two fluttered with every breath he took.

She thought he looked so young as he sat there. So innocent and so sweet. Her heart swelled with emotion as she watched him, then she realized that emotion was love.

When had she come to love him, she pondered? When had the hatred she had borne him turned to this new, alien feeling that had her beaming like a school girl whenever she thought of him?

Conar drew in a long breath and his lids fluttered open. He found himself looking into Sybelle's smiling face. His breath held, then slowly left him. He could see the destruction of his chambers behind her and felt ashamed.

"Have you been sitting there all night?" she asked, knowing that he had.

He didn't answer, but lifted his head, groaning a little as the crick in his neck reminded him that he had been sleeping in an awkward position. He lifted his hand and rubbed at the tightness along the muscles. Arching his head back, he tried to work out the knot.

"Here," she said, coming to squat down beside him, "let me."

He really didn't want her to touch him, but let her, figuring it was easier to allow her her momentary benefaction than to try arguing with her.

"You're so tight," she said as she worked at his neck. He was sweaty, his skin oily, but she didn't mind. Her fingers worked their way up into the thick gold of his hair.

"I've got a headache," he said in passing. When her hands automatically stilled, her fingers tensing on his scalp, he shook his head. "Not a migraine. Just a damned nuisance headache."

Sybelle breathed a sigh of relief. "I can remedy that easily enough with some powders."

"It'll pass," he said, not wanting any of her powders. He eased away from her and got to his feet, wincing at the tightness of his leg muscles. Little electric shocks ran into his toes and he regretted having fallen asleep on the floor.

"Why don't you go to my room and lie down awhile?" she suggested. "You'll feel better."

He was tempted to tell her no, but he wasn't really feeling all that well and if he could stretch out, bury his face in a cool pillow, he knew the headache would go away a lot easier. Sighing, he nodded his agreement and walked past her, deliberately looking away from the havoc he'd created in his room the night before.

Two hours later, he woke in her bed to find her lying beside him, her head propped on one fist. She was staring intently at his face.

"You don't like being kept, do you?" she asked.

Conar's brows came together. "I'm not an animal *to* be kept."

The Kensetti princess smiled at him. "No, you are not." She fingered the ribbons which held the bodice of her gown together. "What was it they called Elizabeth Wynth?"

His frown deepened. "What?"

"The Multitude gave her a name, her sorceress name. When one of her kind was initiated into their sect she was given a nom de magie. What was it they called Elizabeth Wynth?"



Conar tore his gaze from her. "I don't remember."

"Yes, you do," she said with just a touch of reprimand in her tone. "You remember everything there is to remember about her." Her voice lowered. "What did they call Elizabeth Wynth?"

He ground his teeth. "What difference does it make?"

"What...did...they...call...her... McGregor?" she stressed.

"The Keeper of the Wind!" he snarled, turning his fierce glower back to her.

"Ah, yes," Sybelle agreed. "The Keeper of the Wind." She twirled the ribbon around her finger. "The Windkeeper." She looked at him from beneath the canopy of her long dark lashes. "And you are the Wind, are you not, McGregor? Isn't that what they call you?"

"So?" he growled. He knew where this was heading and hated her for it.

"Well, if Elizabeth Wynth was ...."

"Elizabeth McGregor!" he snarled at her.

Sybelle's smile slipped only a little. "All right. Elizabeth McGregor," she stressed. "If she was the Windkeeper, that meant she kept you, doesn't it?"

He hadn't been wrong about where this was going. "That was different," he ground out. "We were married."

"So are we," she replied sweetly.

"In name only," he took pleasure in reminding her.

"That's not entirely true, McGregor," she replied. "The marriage has been consummated many times and it was blessed by a Holy Man."

"One of your Holy Men," he shot back. "Not one of mine! My people would no more recognize this marriage than they would the one I have with Rachel."

Sybelle was hurt and wanted to pay him back in kind. "Or your marriage to Catherine?"

Conar turned away from her, flipping to his side so that his back was to her. "I won't discuss Catherine with you."

"Shall we discuss the child?" she asked, reaching out to put her hand on his back, angry when he tensed beneath her touch and tried to pull away.

"I won't discuss my daughter with you, either," he said bitterly.

"Son," she corrected.

Conar looked back over his shoulder. "Daughter! Her name is ...."

"Our child, McGregor," she interrupted him. "Mine and yours."

He stared at her. "What are you talking about?" he whispered.

Sybelle's hand slid from his rigid shoulder to her slightly-mounded belly. "I am carrying your seed, McGregor." Her lips twitched at his stunned look. "Does that please you, my gentle lord?"

His whole world was crashing down around his ears and all he could think of was that Taborn had been right. Someone should have neutered him long ago. Maybe that's what his dream had meant—that terrible, irrevocable trouble was on the way.

"Well, say something, McGregor," she laughed. "Don't just lie there staring at me."

"You've got to be kidding," was all he could say and he didn't recognize his own voice. It sounded bleak and wretched to him.

"I assure you I am not. I found out for sure this morning when I missed my third monthly time." She rubbed her belly. "In six months, you will be the father of another robust, healthy son." She fused her eyes with his. "I will name him Thesjin, after you and my brother."

"No," he said, whipping his head from side to side. "Absolutely not!"

She misunderstood him. "All right. Then I will call him Sasheon."

"No!" He bounded from the bed and stood there glaring down at her. "You won't name it anything, woman, because you're going to get rid of it!"

"You know better than that," she said quietly. She watched him pacing her room, plowing his fingers through his already-rumpled hair. Now and then he would glance over at her, his face filled with the unholy light of pure rage.

"How did you let this happen?" he asked her, stopping to glower at her.

"I wanted it to happen," she answered. "I have always wanted a child."

Conar winced. And who better to give her one that the world's most potent breeder? Apparently all he had to do was look at a woman and he got her pregnant. Taborn had been right. Whack it off and the temptation would be gone as would the end-result of thoughtless rutting!

"Don't carry on so, McGregor," she laughed, enjoying the hapless expression on his face. "Did you think we could mate indefinitely and not have me conceive?"

"I really didn't think ...." He slammed his fist against the tall footboard of her bed. "I thought you would ...."

He was furious with himself, enraged at her, and thoroughly at a loss to know what to do to extricate himself from this latest foul-up in his life. He honestly had not believed she would let this happen despite her threats to do so.

"Of course my being with child will prevent us from loving one another until after he is born," she said, looking down at the coverlet.

Conar stopped pacing and stared at her. "What did you say?" He didn't think he'd heard her correctly.

A dull blush spread over her cheeks. "Chaim explained to me that we could not be intimate now that I am sure I am carrying your babe lest I miscarry it."

He stood there, knowing she believed what Chaim had said, and wishing he could hoot his joy at the situation. He would have six months in which to thank Chaim for this little piece of deception.

"As much as it will sadden me not to be able to have you touch me," he heard her saying, "I would do nothing to dislodge this child, McGregor." She patted her belly. "I have waited so long to conceive." There was a touch of embarrassment on her face. "I am getting to the age when a woman can not have a child, you know."

"It's dangerous for a woman as old as you to be having her first child," he said before he thought and could have bitten off his tongue for the insult, but she surprised him again.

"I know, but I am willing to take the chance." She looked at him so tenderly, so helplessly. "It may be the last chance I have and I will be honored to have a son by you, Conar."

It was the first time she had called him by his given name and her doing so at that moment put more meaning to her statement.

He stood there, not sure what he should do. Hating the situation. Disliking, if no longer actually hating, her. Feeling sorry for himself. For the child she carried within her. For the whole sorry mess.

"Are you really that upset by this?" she asked, her voice quivering. When he didn't immediately answer her, a single tear rolled down her cheek.

"Don't cry," he said, fearing she was going to do just that. He went to the bed and sat down. "It's all right, I guess."

She reached for his hand and took it, brought it to her cheek and leaned her face against it. "There is something else I have to tell you," she said, watching his face carefully.

He was afraid to ask. "What?"

She turned her head and placed her lips against the palm of his hand, then nestled it on her neck where a strong, steady pulse raced through her veins.

"I love you, McGregor," she said and he could have groaned aloud. As it was, he hung his head in defeat, sighing heavily. He squeezed his eyes shut, pursed his lips and shook his head in disbelief.

"I do," she told him.

"Sybelle," he warned her.

"I'm not asking for your love in return," she was quick to tell him. When he opened his eyes and looked up at her, she cocked her head to one side like a small child. She looked at him so pitifully. "At least not right away."

He stared at her for a long time, seeing the hope in her face, hearing the tiny little hitches of her breath as she fought back tears, and knew she had him. Gently he pulled her toward him, rested her head on his chest, and stroked her back.

"We'll work it out," he said.

"I do love you," she repeated, clinging to him. "Before all that is holy, I do, McGregor."

Conar stared out across the room and wondered which was worse—Sybelle's hate or her love.

## Chapter Seventeen

Conar stared into the mirror and winced at what he saw. He looked tired, exhausted, really. There were dark smudges beneath his eyes, underlining the bleak look lurking there, twin grooves, like parenthetical marks to either side of his mouth, qualifying the tight lips, and his stare was blood-shot, punctuating the weariness. The sleeplessness was beginning to take its toll. His depression had become a sentient being tormenting him. It lived with him, slept with him, toyed with him. And it was looking out at him from the mirror, leering like a jackal.

He turned away, sighing heavily. His world had split into two unequal parts—his time before Sybelle Bath-Alkazar and the bitter time since. Neither of his worlds were habitable, he thought with irony. Sybelle wouldn't let him live in one and he couldn't let himself live in the other. He was simply existing in this one, barely alive, making the motions of living while hating his life and dreading the sunrise of each new day.

"Haven't you slept at all?" Chaim asked as he brought in the Serenian's breakfast.

"No." There was no use trying to hide it from the servant.

"The dream still?" Chaim set the tray down and turned to look at the prince. The man looked terrible. It bothered Chaim.

"Aye, the dream," Conar sighed. He ran his hand over his face, then went to the table and sat down. He looked at the food, but had no appetite despite the delicious smells wafting up to him from the tray. He pushed it away, put his elbows on the table, threaded his fingers together, then dropped his head to his clenched hands. "The eighth night in a row that I've had it."

Chaim chewed on his lip, not wishing to disturb the prince, but realizing the man was near the edge of endurance. "Your Grace?" he asked, coming closer, "what can I do?"

Conar shook his head. "There is nothing anyone can do for me, Chaim." He lifted his head and stared into the distance. "Not anymore."

"What bothers you so?" Chaim asked. He seated himself across the table and reached out to put a comforting hand on Conar's wrist. "Perhaps I can help."

"I wish you could," Conar whispered. He bowed his head again, speaking as though to the table. "I feel trapped, Chaim. Cornered. I'm like an animal run to ground. There's nowhere for me to turn."

"You should not feel that way, Your Grace," Chaim told him. "My lady loves you."

Conar looked up, straight at Chaim, ignoring the last thing the man had said. "I can't help feeling like this because it's happened so many times in my life. Other people have put me in this same position that Sybelle has, and I can't deal with it any better now that I did then." His face turned bleak. "I'm a prisoner here, Chaim, and the chains are getting heavier and heavier."

Chaim's hand tightened on Conar's wrist. "But don't you see the difference?" He swept his free hand around the re-decorated room. "This is no prison, Your Grace. This is luxury. It is ...."

"A silk-clad prison with satin sheets instead of burlap throws, and vine-covered walls instead of bars." He let their gazes lock. "But a prison, nevertheless."

"You can't let yourself think that way," Chaim admonished, withdrawing his hand. "It will only make things more difficult for you to accept. You know it. I know it. So why do it?"

Conar smiled, but the smile was hard and brittle, cold as the snow-capped mountains of his homeland. "I can't stop doing it, Chaim," he whispered. "It's in my nature to brood and brooding is what I do best."

"Develop a new talent, then," Chaim muttered. "One that does not require making your friends feel guilty." He got up from the table.

The Serenian looked up. "Why should you feel guilty, Chaim?" he asked. "You've gone out of your way to make me comfortable here."

"Yes," Chaim growled, "but nothing I have done has taken the sadness from you, has it, Your Grace?"

Conar glanced down at the golden band that circled his finger. The slender manacle was a forceful reminder of freedom lost. He stared down at it, lifting his hand to get a better view. He turned it with the thumb and little finger of his left hand, worked it around his flesh.

"I don't think it's possible for me to exist without sadness, my friend," Conar said quietly. "The gods decreed that punishment for me a long, long time ago."

Chaim flinched at the hopeless tone in the younger man's voice and had to turn away before the Serenian caught sight of the tears beginning to well in the servant's dark eyes.

"Eat your food before it gets cold," Chaim ordered as he hurried from the room. There seemed to be nothing he could do to help.

Conar stared down at the ring, hating it, hating what it had made of him, what it had done to him, what it would continue to do to him. He had once tried to remove it, but the band was smaller than his knuckle and would not come off. Conar had likened it to a shackle, Sybelle's shackle on his unwilling flesh, and had grown to detest the shiny gold ornament. The feel of it on his finger was almost evil and it, like the chains of his silken prison, was getting heavier and heavier with each passing day.

"Stop it, McGregor!" he snarled, pushing back from the table and getting up. "Feeling sorry for yourself ain't gonna help!"

He paced the room, his restlessness growing with every step, his depression sinking in with vicious claws that were rendering his identity to shreds.

He was furious with himself, now. Ever since Sybelle had told him of the child, his child, which she was carrying, he had been going out of his way to be nice to the woman. To care for her. To smile at her. To speak gently to her and laugh with her and cater to her smallest whim. Since she no longer required the use of his body, he could breathe a small sigh of relief, but what was to happen after the child came, he wondered bitterly? What then, McGregor? Could he pretend to be the loving husband and doting father to a woman and child he despised?

"The child is not at fault here," he had reminded himself, but even saying it aloud did not make it so in his mind. The child was just another stone laid on his living grave and a mill stone around his neck, dragging him beneath the waters of oblivion. He didn't hate the babe, but he didn't love it, either. Could not force himself to think of it with anything other than despair.

Sometimes, when he wakened in the cold hours of the desert night, shivering and sweating, his forehead beaded with moisture, the nightmare lingering just at the periphery of his consciousness, he wished he could clasp his fingers around Sybelle's neck and squeeze until there was no life left in her deceitful body. He knew he wouldn't, but he knew he could if he let himself.

She had trapped him. There was no mistaking that. And for that, he loathed her. The child was a trap. He understood women well enough to know that. How many had come to him over the years with their bellies burgeoning with life? Telling him that the child was his? Expecting him to do the right thing by them? And hadn't he? Hadn't that been part and parcel of what Conar McGregor was? Randy stud and generous impregnator?

Aye, he thought with seething hate. He could kill her, his honor be damned. His promise not to leave her would end with her death. None of her servants would dare try to keep him there

once she was gone. He might even be able to outrun her brothers, get back to Serenia somehow, before the noose was drawn tight around his neck. Even if he paid for her death with his own life, his neck separated from his body by a headsman's ax, it would be worth it to be free again. To be his own man, again.

Aye, he could kill her. He daydreamed of doing it.

Sometimes he even planned how he could do it. He was capable of killing without remorse. He didn't think her death would bother him all that much. Once, he had beaten a man to death with his bare hands and had enjoyed doing it. If the motivation was there, as it had been back then at the Cave of the Winds when he had ended Tymothy Kullen's worthless life, he could do it again without compunction.

But each time the thought settled in his mind like a spitting viper, the innocent face of the unborn child looked back at him with sorrow and he knew he would never be able to kill Sybelle for in doing so, he would destroy the child. His child. His wayward seed that had taken root in fertile ground that he had never intentionally sown.

He'd made one woman abort a child of his. Never again. The pain was bad, the guilt was agony, the shame of ordering it something he would never be able to atone for.

And then there had been the unborn child that had died with Elizabeth.

Conar's eyes welled with inexpressible agony. "Oh, Liza," he whispered. He had been the cause of that child dying as surely as though he had pushed her mother and Brelan over the edge into the Abyss. As he had been the cause of Nadia's death.

No. He would never have another child's death on his conscience.

Sinking to the floor, his back to the wall, he drew his legs up, resting his wrists on his knees. He stared out across the plush accommodations of his suite and knew a helplessness, a hopelessness, that had often plagued him. It was the inability to control his own life, his own destiny, and it was a torment that burrowed under his skin and slithered its way to his heart, deadening that organ as it had once been numbed to the horrors of the Labyrinth.

"What are you doing?" Sybelle asked him as she entered the room. She was looking down at him with ill-disguised irritation.

He glanced up at her and shrugged. "Nothing."

Sybelle frowned. McGregor never answered her questions. "Chaim tells me you didn't sleep again last eve." Her lips puckered. "I think I should give you something to make you rest tonight."

It was on his tongue to tell her no. He had a fear of drugs, a consequence of a time that had nearly destroyed him. He had once sold his soul to the sweet oblivion such potions could give him. The price had been exacting and the cure had almost killed him. He had not forgotten his time in hell.

"I will not be gainsaid, McGregor," she warned him, seeing the tell-tale signs of denial flitting through his expression. "Tonight you will sleep."

He lifted one shoulder, giving in. What difference did it make? She'd have her way, regardless. "Whatever you think best, Sybelle."

She looked at him, studying his face, trying to decide if he was going to cause trouble. He'd been so good of late, so docile, she was beginning to be concerned. Were the nightmares so horrible that they had tamed him for her?

"I wish you'd tell me what it is you dream," she said. She put her hand on the wall above his head. "Perhaps I can help you understand them."

"It doesn't matter," he sighed, heaving himself to his feet. He stood there, hands on his hips

and cocked his head to one side. "Can we go riding in the mountains tomorrow?"

Sybelle's eyes narrowed, suspicious of this abrupt change in the course of the conversation. "Why?"

His smile was sardonic. "Because if I stay one more day in this pile of stones, I'll go stark, raving mad, Sybelle." He arched one thick brow. "You don't want a raving lunatic for a father to your child, do you?"

The Kensetti woman's face turned hard. "If you think to try to run away ...."

He had her pinned to the wall, her eyes wide with sudden fright as he loomed over her, before she could cry out.

"Listen, bitch!" he snarled from between teeth clenched and jaw tight. "I didn't run the last time you took the hide off my back!" His hands were painful on her soft shoulders and his grip would leave bruises. "I gave you my word I wouldn't do it and I haven't tried, but if you don't stop accusing me, I'll damned sure give you reason to next time!"

Sybelle tried to lift her chin, but his hand was too quick, grabbing her jaw so quickly, she hadn't even seen him move. He clamped her lips together.

"The only thing I want to hear out of you is, 'Yes, McGregor. We'll go riding tomorrow if you like.' Otherwise, don't bother to say anything!"

"Let....go...of...me!" she hissed at him as his grip loosened.

"With pleasure," he snapped, then moved quickly away from her. He had shoved her against a wall once before and it had been a move he had bitterly regretted for she had planted her knee in his groin with enough power to drop him to his knees, retching at the pain.

Her eyes flared as she stood there, trembling, glaring back at him as he stood a good ten feet away from her, watching her, waiting, anticipating the attack that might come. The flying body hurled at him, the gouging nails, the kicks and scratches and biting and spitting in his face that had often marked their fights before she became pregnant with his child. She took a step forward, saw him tense, his body going rigid, his hands curling, coming up, and she threw back her head and laughed.

"You're afraid of me, McGregor!" she chortled, putting her hand to her belly for the laughter hurt it was so forceful. "You're afraid of a woman!"

"A she-cat," he grumbled, never taking his eyes off her, for he'd learned that even when the woman was amused, she was dangerous and just as liable to jump him as not.

"All right, McGregor," she said, reaching to wipe the tears of laughter from her cheek with the heel of her hand. "We'll go riding." She turned away, meaning to leave, then looked back over her shoulder. "Laudanum?"

He frowned. "What of it?"

"You have no allergies to that, do you?" Her laughter was gone and she was back to being his keeper.

"No," he snapped.

"Good. I'll send Chaim with it after we sup." She grinned and flung her long hair behind her as she moved from the chamber. "Dress for the occasion, McGregor."

"Shit," he snarled as he spun around. Her idea of dressing meant cocooning himself in the robes of her people and he found them unbearably hot and burdensome, heavy and scratchy. The last thing he wanted to do was 'dress' for his supper.

"The black robe, McGregor!" he heard her call back to him from further down the hall.

"Bitch!" he hissed. That particular robe was worse than the others.

\* \* \* \*

Sybelle had also dressed for their evening meal. Her diaphanous gown of ice-blue silk and antique ivory lace was an Ionarian creation she had ordered through a modiste in Asaraba. It was cinched with a braided cord of silver satin interspersed with copper thread and the gown hugged her lush figure like a second skin. She wore nothing under it and the only other adornment on her person was the wide golden marriage band marking her as Conar McGregor's legal wife.

"I am sorry to bother you, milady," Chaim apologized as he bowed at her. "But I have learned something you should know."

His mistress glowered at him. "Can it not wait?"

Chaim shook his head. "I think not, Your Grace. The messenger rode hard to get here from Basaraba and nearly killed his mount in the process."

She didn't like the sound of this. "Tell me."

\* \* \* \*

Conar looked in the mirror and hated what he saw. His dark complexion was made darker still by the color of the black robe. If his blond hair was hidden beneath a headpiece, he'd bare a very strong resemblance to Jaleel Jaborn. His mouth turned hard. Why had he never seen the likeness before? Had Sybelle? He thought perhaps she had and the notion infuriated him. His hands ripped at the robe, yanking it from him and he threw it in the corner of his room and stood glaring at it as though it would come to life to attack him.

"You bitch," he muttered, wishing he could break his sworn vow to her and leave.

He turned, stared at the walled garden for a long time. His honor had always meant something to him. He'd tried never to go back on his word, especially not if that word had been given honorably.

"But was it extracted from you with honor?" that inner voice that had plagued him all his life asked. "Did she not trick you, McGregor? Did she not dangle before you your very existence in order to keep you at her side?"

Aye, he thought with bitterness. She had swapped his handicaps for health. She had swapped his freedom for this damnable incarceration in her lush prison. She had swapped his very manhood for total, blind obedience. Had that been honorable?

"No," he whispered. It had not. It had been blackmail, pure and simple. And did he owe her honor for that?

Conar found himself at the base of the tall sandstone wall, looking up, staring at the clear midnight blue sky above the top. He put his hand on the stone. It was cold, cold like his life had become.

"There will come a time, little bird," he could hear Ching-Ching reminding him through the winds of time, "when there will be no mountain you can not climb. No wall you can not scale. No height you can not conquer."

He lifted his foot and dug the toe of his boot into a mortared joint. His fingers found a purchase point above his head and he hefted himself up.

\* \* \* \*

Sybelle was worried as she paced her living quarters. The news Chaim had brought her was totally unexpected. Not even in her worst nightmares had she dared to think his men would come after him.

"They say nothing can stand between the men of the Wind Force and their Overlord, Your Grace," Chaim had whispered, fear showing in his dark face. "They will take Rysalia apart stone by stone until they find him."

"We must hide him," Sybelle said as she stopped before the cheval mirror and stared



gloomily at her body. A body that, even then, was thickening with the Serenian's child. "I will not let them take him from me."

Word that McGregor's own brother, Lord Legion A'Lex, King of Serenia in McGregor's absence, had come, himself, to find the missing man, had brought intense fear to Sybelle's heart. That an entire kingdom should want for adequate leadership while its two strongest leaders were absent, told her that what Chaim had said was true, nothing would stand in the way of his men retrieving Conar McGregor.

"Where?" she asked her reflection as she tried to think of a place to which she could take the father of her child. "Where so they can not find him?"

The answer came to her on the softest of whispers, the coolest of night breezes, and she lifted her head to look out the window of her chamber. Her lips parted in a secret smile.

"Yes," she sighed. There could be no other place but there. "I shall take him to the Wealdzone."

Turning hurriedly away from the window, she yanked open her door, passing a servant as she started down the long hallway.

"Have someone saddle two horses," she told the servant.

"Yes, Your Grace," the servant gasped, having been frightened by the rush of her mistress.

Sybelle flung the door to his chambers wide. "McGregor!" she called out, not seeing him in the outer room where he spent most of his time. She walked to his dressing area. "McGregor?"

The room was empty, the black robe she had demanded he wear lying crumpled in the corner by the copper bathing tub.

"McGregor?" Her voice was husky, anxious. She entered his bedchamber and her heart began to thud heavily in her chest. He never left his chamber without permission. "McGregor!"

Chaim stood uncertainly in the doorway. He had heard his lady calling. As she came out of the Serenian's sleeping area, he could see the fear on her pale face.

"Where is he, Chaim?" she demanded, striding toward the servant. "Is he in the dining alcove?"

Chaim shook his head. "No, Your Grace. I thought he was in here."

Sybelle felt the first fledgling flicker of true alarm fluttering through her chest. She reached out to grab hold of McGregor's desk. "Then where is he?" she asked, her voice thick.

"I don't know," Chaim told her, "but we will find him!"

Spinning on his heel, not waiting to be dismissed, the servant stamped down the hallway, calling for other servants. Sybelle could hear him questioning them, his own voice now raised in pique.

She sat down at the desk, looking about her with stunned eyes. He's gone, she thought. He's found a way to freedom and he has gone. She knew it as surely as she knew the sun would rise on the morrow with bright hot rays.

"You broke your word," she said. Her fists clenched in her lap. "You have disregarded your honor, McGregor, and broken your promise to me."

There would be a reckoning, she thought, her dark eyes glowing with anger and hurt and revenge.

"I will make you regret ever having betrayed me, you infidel dog!"

## Chapter Eighteen

Nicholas couldn't believe what he was seeing as the troop of men wound their way toward the camp where he and Nate were staying. He made sure his vision wasn't playing tricks on him, then scooted down the slippery dune and vaulted onto his mount. He beat his reins against the unfortunate animal's taut flanks and galloped back to the encampment. When he reined in and threw one long leg over the steed's head, his feet had barely hit the ground before Asher Stone was hurrying to intercept him.

"Who?" Asher asked. "Enemies?"

Nick shook his head violently, then reached out to grab Asher's arm, propelling him toward Sajin's tent as they walked. "Far from it!"

Sajin flinched with surprise as the flap of his tent was thrown open and Nick came striding in. The man's wide shoulders nearly filled the opening and Asher came hustling into the tent as though the hounds of hell were close on his heels.

"My blasted brother and what's left of the Wind Force are bearing down on us, nomad," Nick snapped. "What the hell are we going to tell them?"

Nate, who had been playing a friendly game of chess with the Kensetti prince, stared hard at Nick. "Which brother?"

"Legion," Nick grumbled. "The eldest bastard!"

"A'Lex?" Nate asked, one thick brow crooked in stunned surprise. "He's here?"

"What did I just say, Nathan?" Nick growled. "Did I say the man's here?"

"Hell," Nate mumbled. He leaned back on Sajin's pallet. "That puts the proverbial fly in the ointment, doesn't it?"

"Aye, it does!" Nick agreed. He became aware that he was still clutching Asher's arm and let go, flicking a mute apology at the man as Asher put up his free hand to rub at the bruise that was going to be on his forearm come morning.

"Well," Sajin said, standing up. "I suppose we go out to meet him."

"And?" Nick challenged.

Sajin shrugged. "We tell him we don't know where Conar is."

"Have you any idea what A'Lex will do when he hears that wondrous piece of news?" Nick thundered. "He'll be down on me and Nate like a boot on a June bug!"

"Then I suppose," Nate said as he came to his feet, "we tell him where our little brother is and let Legion take it from there."

The Kensetti prince turned to his chess partner. "You *know* where he is?"

"Aye," Nate sighed. "We do."

"He's with your sister!" Nick bellowed. He glanced at Nate, then away.

Sajin blinked. "Are you sure?"

"We're sure," Nate answered. He put a hand on Sajin's shoulder. "And we just found out for sure yesterday that she's pregnant."

Nothing could have stunned Sajin more than that simple statement. He staggered beneath it. His face lost all its normal ruddy coloring and he sat down heavily. "Is it Conar's?" he asked in a pained voice.

"Aye," Nick told him, "but before you go get your knickers in a bunch, the two of them are married."

"Married?" Asher gasped. "But he's already ....." He stopped because Sajin had leapt to his feet.

"Married!" the Kensetti fairly screeched. "Conar and Sybelle?"

"Aye," Nick said, backing away from the anger that was suddenly blazing on Ben-Alkazar's now-green face.

"But how?" Asher whispered. "He's already married to my sister."

"And to Catherine!" Sajin hissed. He skirted the chess table and reached out to grab Nick's shirt in a vicious tug. "When did this happen?"

"Several months ago as best we can tell," Nate answered for his brother. For the first time in his life, Nicholas was incapable of speech. It wasn't something Nate enjoyed seeing although before that moment he would have sworn he'd have given anything to see Nicky at a loss for words.

"I don't believe this," Asher mumbled, shaking his head. "What do I tell Rachel?"

"Rachel?" Sajin spat. "What do I tell Catherine?"

"Three women," Asher stated in a flat tone. "The man's married to three women and I can't even find one!"

"Why didn't he let us know he was at Sybelle's?" Sajin questioned, shaking Nick. "Why didn't she tell me he was there when we visited her?"

"I suppose neither one of them wanted you to know," Nate replied. "For reasons of their own, I would imagine."

Sajin spun around, dragging Nick with him. "I'm her brother!" he bellowed, flinging Nick aside as he took a step toward Nate. "Why wouldn't she tell me?"

"You'll have to ask her," Nate replied calmly.

"I will!" Sajin snarled. He pivoted on his heel and thrust angrily through the tent flap, kicking sand behind him as he stomped to the picket line.

"Do we go with him?" Nick finally managed to ask. He wouldn't have thought himself afraid of any man on earth, but for some reason he had been terrified of the Kensetti and his reaction to the news of his sister's marriage to their brother.

"No," Nate said on a long breath. "We'd better wait for Legion."

Nick groaned. "Oh, hell," he said. He'd nearly forgotten about A'Lex.

\* \* \* \*

Sajin, Azalon riding hell bent for leather behind him but not knowing why, passed the troop of men heading for his camp and didn't even look their way. He heard the challenge yelled out to him, but he kept on, ignoring it.

"He was in one mighty big hurry," Marsh said.

"That was Ben-Alkazar," Chase told the others. He turned in his saddle, looking after the thundering horses. "I don't even think the man saw us."

"He saw us," Shalu said. He scowled. "I wonder where the nomad was going in such a hurry?"

"Company," Paegan quipped, calling the others' attention to the riders heading their way out of the lowering sun.

"That's Hern's brother," Chase Montyne reminded them.

"Merciful Al-el," Legion breathed as the three riders reined in before them. He stared at Balizar, unable to believe he wasn't looking at the old Master-at-Arms of Boreas.

"Well, now," Balizar said, his eyes twinkling. "You must be the first of the litter." He looked Legion up and down. "I remember you only as a lad of three or so who use to love taffy apples." His grin twitched. "Do you still like taffy apples, Lord Legion?"

Legion blushed. "When I can get them." He dismounted, as did Balizar, Asher, and Rupine. Striding forward, he put out his hand to Arbra. "If I were to meet you on a dark night, I'd think I was being visited by Hern's ghost." He clasped the old warrior's wrist. "I wish I could say I remember you, but I'm afraid I don't."

"Doesn't matter," Balizar laughed. "I'm thinking we'll get to know one another well enough before it's all through." He glanced around at the men who had come to Rysalia with A'Lex, nodding at those he knew and giving those he didn't a questioning look.

"Lord Occultus," Legion said, looking behind him and bidding the sorcerer to step forward with an outstretched hand.

"Occultus," Rupine whispered and found the man whose name he spoke looking at him curiously. Rupine ducked his head and put up a finger to his temple in salute. "I've heard much of you, milord."

Occultus smiled. "All bad, I suppose?"

Rupine smiled back. "It depends on who was doing the telling."

"He's not with you, I take it," Occultus remarked.

Balizar shuffled from one foot to the other. "If you mean the brat, he's living not far from here as we understand it."

Legion caught the unease in the warrior's tone. "What's he done, now?" he asked.

Asher found Chase staring at him. He nodded politely, then looked away. There was no doubt in his mind that Chase, and probably the others as well, knew that Lord Khamsin had married Rachel, Asher's sister. It was going to be embarrassing to explain that the Serenian had also married another woman.

"You saw Sajin riding like a blue streak from camp?" Balizar asked, glancing at Shalu who was staring back at him with a dark scowl.

"Going after the brat unless I miss my guess," Meggie Ruck snorted as she moved back into the shadow cast by Shalu's bulk. She peered around the Necroman. "When did all this business happen?"

Occultus turned an inquisitive eye to the old woman. He, like any male seer from beyond the Inner Kingdoms, could not feel the sensitive vibrations nor use his enormous powers in this land. He quirked a brow at his fellow Mage. "There is trouble, Mistress?"

Meggie turned her head and spat on the ground. "Wherever that boy goes, there's trouble." She stepped from behind Shalu. "I take it the nomad just found out about all this awhile ago."

"Just this morning," Rupine answered. He smiled endearingly at the old lady.

"Found out what?" Legion asked, looking from Meggie to Balizar who was avoiding his look.

"It's not the trouble we've been seeing," Meggie told Occultus as she stepped up beside him, "but it's trouble enough."

"What?" Legion repeated.

Occultus was annoyed that he could not read the woman's mind any more than he could fathom the mysteries of this ancient land. He was useless to the group except as an advisor. The entirety of any magical solution would have to come from Meggie. It galled him that he had to ask what Conar had gotten himself into this time.

"Has he created a further problem, Mistress Ruck?" he asked.

Meggie's face had a sour expression and her lips were tight with anger. Up until she had come within spitting distance of Sajin Ben-Alkazar, she had been as oblivious to what had happened as those magi with her. But from the moment she had heard the fury rattling around

inside the Kensetti Prince's mind, she knew there was going to be more trouble from Conar than just the dark cloud of Raphian hanging over his golden head.

"He's gone and allied himself with another female," Meggie spat as though the words were bitter in her mouth. "A Sister of that rogue sect, the Amazeen."

"Conar," Occultus swore with exasperation. "You young fool." He looked to the heavens, then glanced at Ching-Ching who was staring back at him with a pursed mouth.

"What the hell is the Amazeen?" Legion asked, but no one answered him.

"Unless I dreamed it, wasn't that the group that Raja was initiated into when she was traveling here, trying to get away from the anger of the Multitude?" Chase asked.

"Witches," Meggie growled. "They're just witches!"

"Witches?" Legion groaned. What had his little brother done, now?

"You remember correctly," Ching-Ching told Chase. "It is rumored that is where she hid while she carried Conar's child in her womb." He cocked his head at Occultus. "The Wealdzone, is it not?"

"Yes," Occultus replied. He was beginning to feel a darker cloud rushing toward the young McGregor than any of them had suspected. "I have heard the Amazeen have no love for those connected with the Multitude."

"And with good reason!" Meggie snarled. "We have been, and always will be, the bitterest of enemies."

"And how does that effect Conar?" Teal asked. He knew so little about the netherworld of magic and though his gypsy blood often allowed him to see things and hear things and perceive things normal people couldn't, he didn't understand how he did it and really didn't care to know.

"It means his ass is in serious trouble if he's mixed up with such women," Shalu snapped.

"They'll not harm him," Meggie stated with confidence. "Not now." She fused her gaze with Occultus. "Not when he's gone and done it again to one of theirs."

What color there was in Occultus' face faded and twin spots of crimson infused his high cheekbones. His lips came together so tightly there was no discernible line there beneath his hawk-like nose. He swung frigid dark eyes to Ching-Ching.

"Done what?" Legion asked in a hopeless voice, thinking he probably shouldn't ask and didn't want to know.

"Sajin was furious," Balizar explained as he saw Meggie looking his way. "Not that he's of a mind to do anything about it, you understand. He's just mad 'cause neither the brat nor the Princess told him about the marriage."

"Marriage?" Shalu gasped. "What marriage?"

Chase sighed heavily. Sabrina had warned him that she had sensed Conar doing something he was going to bitterly regret.

"To your sister, right?" Paegan asked, pointing at Asher.

Asher shook his head. "That was months and months ago. Before Khamsin disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Legion echoed.

"He'd been getting worse," Rupine mentioned, not sure how much these people knew of the situation. At the puzzled looks, he shrugged, looking to Balizar for help.

"It's a long story. We'll explain back at the camp," Balizar told them.

"He's married Sajin's sister?" Chase wanted clarified. He saw Legion swing his head toward him, heard Shalu's grunt of disbelief.

"Aye," Balizar admitted. "When, we don't know. But the woman is pregnant with his child."

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Shalu exploded, swinging around to roar his disapproval to the heavens.

"It will be," Meggie muttered. The thought of an Amazeen bearing a child of her bonny boy's put a wicked and fierce hatred deep in Meggie's heart.

"Let's go on to the camp and we'll ...," Rupine began, but Legion cut him off.

"Why was the Kensetti in such a hurry to get to my brother?" A'Lex demanded.

"If you're thinking he means to do the brat harm, don't." Balizar lifted his hands to his shoulders. "The two of them are too much alike and Sajin has never cared for the things his sister does. If she got herself pregnant, she meant to do it and the brat probably had little to say about it."

"As if he ever does!" Shalu snorted. He scowled at Meggie's look of reprimand.

"Besides," Asher commented, "your other brothers are waiting back at camp for you."

Legion's brows came together. "What brothers?"

"Nicholas and Nathan," Meggie answered, ignoring the surprised looks of the men. She turned and headed for her horse, flinging an impatient hand for Teal to help her mount. "I'm thinking there's more to this than just my bonny boy marrying that tart." She grunted as she struggled to get on her horse. Once in the saddle, she glared down at the men who were still standing about. "Well? What are you waiting for? I've not met Nicky and Nate and I'm of a mind to do so before I'm too old to see them!" She dragged on her reins and turned the steed in the direction from which the others had come, kicking the bay in the ribs lightly with her heel.

"We should have castrated the little bugger," Shalu said as he put a heavy foot to his stirrup. "That is what we should have done in Chrystallus!"

"I am inclined to agree," Ching-Ching mumbled as he swung lithely into the saddle.

"Sooner or later," Paegan quipped, "someone just might!" He laughed at Teal's shocked expression.

Occultus shook his head as he mounted his horse with decorum and grace. "What could he have been thinking of to ally himself with a witch?" He wished his powers were of use to him here in this arid land, but the only glimmer of the preternatural he felt was the danger to Conar.

## Chapter Nineteen

Sybelle dug her heels into her mare's flanks and easily outdistanced Chaim and Kanan. Her long black hair flew behind her, whipping in the dry wind of her passing, the lush locks tangling wildly. She scanned the deepening night around them for sunset was only ten minutes away and the air was growing cooler. Before long, it would be too dark to see the hoof prints of the Serenian's horse.

"How could you have let him steal one of the stallions?" she had thundered at the stable keeper before lashing out at the unfortunate man with her quirt. She had caught him across the bridge of his nose, drawing blood and an agonized yelp of pain. "Why didn't you stop him?"

Fedura, the stable keeper, cowered before his mistress, crossing his arms over his face as she lifted the quirt again. He moaned as the rawhide lash stung a line of pain across his forearms.

"I did not see him, Highness!" the poor man cried. "Before the Prophetess, I did not!"

"Nor will you ever see anything again!" she shrieked at him as she swung onto her mount. "I will see to that when I return, you worthless dog!" She jerked viciously on the reins and pulled her screeching mare's head around. Drumming her feet against the horse's ribs, she shot out of the corral and was a good five lengths ahead of her two guards before the men could take chase.

It had been over two hours now since the Serenian had been found missing. Two hours since Sybelle had worked herself into such a frenzy that her jaw ached from grinding her teeth. She had dug her nails into her palms so relentlessly that there was an oily, sticky residue of her own blood on the reins she gripped so fiercely in her hands.

"She's going to either kill us or the horses at this pace!" Kanan yelled across to Chaim as they prodded their mounts up a high sand dune.

"Mosen help him," Chaim muttered. His mistress would do more than apply a few well-aimed lashes to the Serenian's back for this. She was likely to kill him for deserting her.

The sun was almost kissing the dark lips of the mountains beyond them. It hovered above the peaks in a burst of fading radiance and already the sky around it was a deep, majestic purple color signaling the end of day. For one brief, dazzling moment, it flared and then dropped quickly behind the mountain range. With it went the warmth.

"We can't see anything now!" Kanan complained as he raced beside Chaim. "Our horses could step into a hole and ...."

Chaim held up his hand. Their lady had stopped at the top of the high dune and was standing in her stirrups, scanning the vista before her. He saw her glance back at them, point off to the left, then kick her horse in that direction.

"She's heading for the caves," Chaim said. If the Serenian was hiding, it would be there.

Sybelle had no patience to wait for her servants. She kicked her horse viciously and bent over the mare's neck. It mattered little that she could barely see where she was going or that her hair was whipping painfully against her face. All she cared about was finding McGregor and making him sorry he had ever decided to defy her.

\* \* \* \*

"Now, you know the whole of it," Balizar finished explaining to the men of the Wind Force. He looked at Meggie. "From Hern's letters, I suppose the lad's always been a bit headstrong."

"Headstrong!" Shalu guffawed. "Retarded is more the word!"

"I can understand him not wanting to be a burden on you," Legion remarked. "If his

eyesight was failing him and he had reached the point where he couldn't care for himself, he'd have gone to a monastery rather than put himself off on those he loves."

"Retarded," Shalu repeated.

"You insult the mentally challenged, Taborn, by comparing Conar to them." Ching-Ching commented wryly.

Shalu nodded, somewhat chastened at the reprimand. "Aye, I suppose you're right."

"We were planning on going back to our main camp in the morning," Balizar said, "but now I think we should stay until we know what occurred between Sajin and the lad."

Asher groaned. "I'm in no great hurry to tell Rachel about any of this." He winced. "She's going to be furious."

"And with good reason," Rupine said dryly. He knew his niece as well as her brother did. "I would imagine she'll be heading this way to challenge Her Grace."

"Oh, that's all we need!" Shalu thundered. "Two women fighting over his ass!"

Meggie threw him an annoyed look. "Watch your mouth," she warned him. She looked at Asher. "I will handle your sister. She is one with the Multitude."

Legion's brows shot up. "She is? This other woman Conar married?"

Meggie nodded. "Aye." She squinted at him. "Didn't Catherine tell you that?"

A'Lex shook his head. "No, she did not." He wondered why.

"It's late," Rupine reminded them all. He got up from the campfire and dusted off his robe. "We can do nothing until morning anyway." He bid them a good eve and left.

"You really don't think there's been trouble between Conar and the Kensetti?" Legion wanted clarified from Balizar.

"No," the warrior answered, emphatically shaking his head. "Sajin's been worried about the lad and now that he knows for sure where he is, he couldn't wait to see him." He grinned as he poked a stick at the fire before him. "Oh, there may be words, but that'll be all there is to it."

"I agree," Asher said. He handed a chunk of apple to Paegan. "I would imagine he feels as I do about having Khamsin for a brother-in-law."

From the deep shadows behind the wide tents, two gleaming brown eyes shot sparks of fierce fire at Asher's words. The face in which those angry orbs was set grew bitter and cold and rigid with hatred. A low, soft growl of rage came from deep within the watcher's throat and the knuckles of the hands which gripped the striped tent canvas were bleached of their normal dark color.

It had taken Chand Wynth most of the evening to find the encampment to which Legion and the others had gone. He had hidden himself well, slinking from shadow to shadow to keep his presence from being suspected. He had seen Meggie Ruck looking around her several times during the course of their evening meal and knew the old woman was feeling vibrations in the air that boded ill for Conar McGregor, but she had yet to discover Chand's whereabouts. He knew she was only aware of a threat, but knew not from which man there that threat was coming.

"The keep is at Djebel ed Kjinn," he heard the man who bore such an uncanny resemblance to Hern say. "Near Helix. It's about a two hour ride from here."

"We'll set out at first light." Asher leaned back on his blanket. "The road north is easy to travel, well marked, and we will make good time."

"North," Chand mumbled to himself. He glanced behind him. His mount was hobbled beyond a high rolling dune where it could not alert the other horses. He took one last look at those gathered around the fire and then melted into the shadows, his passing creating only a mild niggling unease in Meggie Ruck's neck.



\* \* \* \*

Sajin didn't know what to do.

He had arrived at his sister's keep only to find her and Conar, gone. The servants had been little help except to tell him that their mistress had been livid with rage and had set out after her husband with malicious curses reining down on the man's unsuspecting head.

"Husband," Sajin muttered to himself as he turned over in his bed and plumped the pillow. "Sybelle's husband."

The thought didn't bring the joy that it should have to him. Under other circumstances, he would have been overjoyed to have Conar as a brother-in-law but given what he had learned from one of the servant girls who usually warmed his bed when he was visiting Sybelle, Conar had been virtually a prisoner at the keep.

"When he couldn't see," Rajheen had told him, "Her Grace kept him blindfolded so she did not have to look at his sightless eyes. She insulted by doing that. Once his sight was restored, she still would not allow him outside the keep without escort for she feared he would run away again."

"Again?" Sajin had questioned her and the girl had nodded.

"He did once, but Chaim and Kanan caught him. When they brought him back, he was lashed."

The thought of Conar being beaten sent a chill through Sajin at the same time it sent blazing anger at his sister's viciousness. She'd seen Conar's back. She knew what agony the man had suffered long ago. But when Rajheen told him her mistress had taken away the scars on Conar's back and face, Sajin was stunned with the news. He'd had no idea just how powerful a sorceress his sister was. It hadn't been that long ago that he had accepted the fact that she was a sorceress.

"You do know your sister is carrying his child?" the servant girl asked him.

"Yes," Sajin answered. Even the confirmation of that news did not bring comfort to him. If anything, it alarmed him more.

"He was not pleased, either," Rajheen told him.

"I would think not," Sajin sighed.

"They will find him," Rajheen said confidently. "They know the terrain and he does not."

Sajin had strolled to the window and stood staring up at the dark expanse of the mountains to the north. "Do you suppose he went up to the caves?"

"Possibly," Rajheen answered. "Where else is there for him to go but desert?" She had come to place a gentle hand on his broad back. "I think he will hide until morning and then try to make it back to your camp."

Sajin nodded. "Yes. I suppose so." He turned, gathering her in his arms. He needed the mindlessness of sex to take his worries from Conar McGregor and Rajheen was good at taking his mind off other things.

## Chapter Twenty

Conar heard the horses coming up the mountain pathway and knew it was Sybelle. He had hidden his own mount deep inside one of the nine caves dotting the larger of the mountains in the range and had covered the entrance to that cave with brush and loose rocks. Unless someone accidentally stumbled into the blockade, he doubted they would find the entrance and his horse. As for himself, he had climbed as high up the rock face as he dared in the darkness and now clung precariously to a rocky overhang in order to have a good vantage point from which to see the pathway. He had known she'd come after him. He just hoped he could hide out until she went elsewhere to search.

He was cold. And thirsty. And hungry. And, because he was hungry, somewhat lightheaded. His stomach was growling in protest and his mouth was as dry as the rocks around him. He huddled on the ledge, his arms wrapped around him to hold in what warmth he had. Clenching his teeth together to keep them from chattering, he was giving himself a wicked headache. Where he perched was cramped and his legs were throbbing, his feet going to sleep, but he dared not move any further up the mountain.

The horses stopped on the pathway and, through the faint skipping of the moon overhead through dark gray clouds that hinted at rain, he could see the pale oval of Sybelle's face. He could not hear what was being said, but from the rigidity of her body and the way she flung out her hands as she spoke, he knew she was furious. He didn't need to hear to know she was not speaking of him in glowing terms of endearment.

Looking away from her as she and the others—Chaim and Kanan?—continued on up the serpentine pathway, he caught a glimpse of jagged lightning in the distance and almost groaned. If he was still up on this mountain when the rains came, he was going to be soaked and miserable as well as hungry. He figured the rain would cure his thirst, but he knew it wouldn't fill his rumbling belly. And to be wet *and* cold on this little piece of unprotected ledge, would be hellish, indeed.

"Spread out and search the caves!" he heard Sybelle order.

His forehead crinkled with concern. Did they know these caves well, he wondered? If so, they'd find his horse and know he wasn't all that far away. If they found his horse, they'd continue their search until they found him. He doubted they could see him in the dark, but come morning, they would have no trouble seeing him sitting up on the side of the mountain. It would only be a matter of when he'd come down and how.

"I want him found, Chaim!" Sybelle's angry shout reverberated through the mountains.

Aye, Conar thought with regret. That she did. He had been a fool to think he could get away from her so easily. He had, of course, every intention of trying, though. If he failed, he failed, but if he succeeded, he would somehow find his way back to Balizar and force that man to help him get to Serenia somehow. He had had all of the Inner Kingdom he wished to ever see!

They searched for him for well over two hours. He could see them moving about the cave entrances, trying to find some evidence of his passing. By his reckoning, it was after midnight. He had left the keep just before sunset and the sun had set around seven that evening. It had taken him a few hours to get to the mountains and he'd been waiting at least another two hours before he'd heard their horses. Sunrise would come around five or a little later. If he could only hold out. If they would only give up and go away ....

"He's here," Sybelle yelled. "I can feel him."

Conar flinched. He had not thought of that! With her witch's sight, she would find him before too long. The injustice of it shattered what self-assurance he had that he could get away.

"Up there!"

She could see him! He gasped. She was looking right at him! What a fool he'd been. What a stupid, blind fool!

"Come down, McGregor!" she demanded. "Now!"

"No," he whispered. Lightning flared overhead, illuminating her upturned face as she stood staring up at him. A hundred feet or more separated them, but he could easily see her enraged expression as the light radiated above them once more.

"Did you think you could escape me, McGregor?" she yelled up to him.

The first soft patter of rain fell on his shoulders and he grimaced. The rocks would become slick with the moisture and the descent would be treacherous at best. Like the wet chimney stones at Ivor had been after the tornado, he thought with irony.

"Will you stay up there and be toasted, McGregor?" she asked him as a heavy clap of thunder shook the ledge on which he sat.

"Go away!" he yelled down at her. "I stay where I am!"

"We have all night!" she answered him. "You can not leave that perch without me seeing you!" She crossed her arms and glared up at him. "I can wait!"

For over an hour, she said no more to him, just stood there, staring up at him, getting wet herself as the rain came down in a soft, cooling sheet of moisture. When at last she did call out to him, it was to warn him that the longer he took in coming down, the more severe would be his punishment.

"I'd be a fool to come down, Sybelle!" he told her.

"You are a fool any way you look at it, McGregor!" she shot back. "I'll get you down from there if I have to wait until you are crow bait!"

Another hour passed and Conar wished he had a way of telling what time it was. It was close to two, maybe even later, and Sybelle looked as though she had no intention of getting into one of the caves to avoid the onslaught of the rain the increased thunder warned was coming. If she would, he might be able to sneak past them, crab-walking his way along the rock face during the heavy rainfall. He could escape given time, but he didn't know how much time he had before the light of the new day rose to spotlight him on the mountain.

Sybelle asked Chaim how long he thought it would be before dawn. Her servant shrugged.

"Three hours. Maybe less."

"Here, Your Grace," Kanan said as he flung an oilcloth cover around her shoulders. "You are soaked through."

Conar wished he had the protection of the oilcloth as he saw Sybelle adjusting it around her. The rain was increasing along with the frequency of the lightning spears jutting through the night sky. The air was turning frigid and a chill wind had whipped out of the north to plaster his rapidly-wet clothing to his shivering body. His hair was already limp and straggling in his eyes and droplets of water were cascading down his face. He ran an absent hand under his chin to wipe away the moisture.

"You'll catch your death of cold up there, milord!" Chaim called up to him. "It's not wise to be out in the open like this during a storm. Come down."

"Get your lady back to her keep, Chaim!" Conar yelled although he knew such a demand was worthless and he was wasting his breath. He shivered, his lips trembling, and he put his hands up, cupping his mouth, to blow on his chilled fingers.

A howling began along the mountain ridges, swooping over those standing on the gravel pathway looking up at the man sitting hunched on the rock ledge a hundred feet up the mountain's face. The cold wind buffeted Sybelle and fanned her growing anger, bringing tears of frustration and fury to her.

"Come down here, now!" she shrieked, her words almost drowned out by the skirl of the northern wind.

"No!" he yelled back.

A loud crack of lightning rent the air and a straggling tree sitting forlornly in the crevice of the smaller of the mountains split down the middle and fell toward the pathway with a shower of loose rocks and flying wind.

"Do you want to die up there, McGregor?" she hollered.

"Better here than at the end of your whip, Sybelle!" he replied.

Sybelle shrugged off Chaim's hand as he begged her to take shelter out of the increasing fury of the storm bearing down on them. The lightning was nearly constant, the flashes blinding them, and the thunder was shaking the ground beneath their feet as more and more rocks came tumbling down the mountain.

"I am warning you, McGregor! Come down here this minute!"

"I told you no, Sybelle!"

A furious hiss of breath erupted from Sybelle's chattering lips and she looked about her as though she could find something to throw up at him. As she did, an idea flashed through her mind just as a bolt of lightning stitched through the dark sky.

"Get me your crossbow," she snarled at Kanan.

"Milady?" Kanan questioned, looking from her to the sopping wet man hunkered on the rock ledge above them. "What are you about?"

"You heard me!" Sybelle shouted to Kanan, reaching out to shove that man into action.

Chaim gave only a cursory glance to Kanan as that man hurried to do his mistress' bidding. "You don't mean to try to hit him from here, do you?" He didn't think she could anyway, but he knew the action would only make the Serenian more stubborn and less likely to see reason.

"I don't intend to try, Chaim," she hissed at him, flinging her long wet hair behind her. "I intend to send a quarrel through his lying black heart!"

Not for one moment did Chaim believe she would actually try to do her husband harm, but he feared in her petulance and rage, she'd loose a quarrel that the wind would snatch out of the air and send to harm Conar McGregor.

"Milady, think!" he begged her. "He can't climb the rock face behind him. The stone is too wet. He can't descend, either, for the same reason. Let us take shelter until the storm passes. Kanan and I will keep watch. He can not escape our notice. We can ...."

"Give me the bow!" she growled as she shoved Chaim aside and yanked the crossbow from Kanan's grip. "Quarrel," she demanded.

"Milady, please!" Chaim pleaded. "Do not do this!"

Kanan's hand trembled as he handed his lady one of the deadly missiles. He looked with apology to Chaim but he wasn't sure that man had even noticed for his cousin's eyes were glued to the woman who at that moment was fitting the quarrel into the crossbow.

"You can't hit me from there, Sybelle!" came the taunt from the rock ledge. "Go ahead and try, but you can't do it!"

Lightning forked in several directions and a mighty crack of sound cleaved the night sky as the jagged bolt struck the mountain and a large boulder broke loose, careening wildly past Conar as

it rumbled down.

Conar gaped at the boulder as it tumbled. He saw Kanan and Chaim dragging Sybelle out of its path and leaned forward over the ledge in an attempt to make sure none of them were hurt. As much as he hated Sybelle, he didn't want to see her killed.

Sybelle shook off the hands which held her as the boulder crashed past them and rolled away into the brush. She snatched her long skirt aside and stood, feet apart, crossbow aimed, and let the quarrel fly.

He saw it coming, knew she was wide of her mark and laughed. His trained eye told him the trajectory was off even as the quarrel shot toward him. But at the last moment, an errant gust of wind, just as Chaim had feared, swept under the quarrel and lifted it, correcting the trajectory and the deadly shaft changed course.

"Shit!" Conar had time to say before he scrambled out of the way. The quarrel hit the rock where his chest had been only seconds before, split in two and fell to the ledge at his feet. But the momentum that had taken him out of harm's way, brought his arms cartwheeling and his booted foot slipped on the wet rock and skidded off.

"Conar!" Sybelle screamed, seeing him tumbling backwards off the ledge. "No!"

Chaim's breath caught in his throat. Kanan's mouth dropped open and he reached out to grab his cousin's robe. Both men were unaware that they groaned. Neither heard their lady's wild shriek of denial as the Serenian dropped over the ledge.

He would never know how he did. There would never be a day in his life that he cared to remember that night on the ledge. His heart had lurched to his throat as he began to fall and he had caught just a glimpse of the jagged death looming up at him from the rocks below as he fell away from the ledge and began to plummet to the craggy floor. A brief flash of the treacherous rocks at Boreas Keep flitted through his mind and he bellowed in fear and anger that it was to end like this. Perhaps it was that anger or just the monumental terror that struck out at him as the lightning jagged past him to strike off the mountain. Or it might just have been another stray, helpful wind reaching out to change the course of its master's life. Whatever had caused it, brought his fingertips in contact with the rocky lip of the ledge, his wedding band catching on a sliver of rock to steady him, and he clung to the ledge, his legs swinging under the base as though he were a child at play on a tree limb.

"Blessed Mosen, please!" Sybelle whispered, seeing her husband dangling beneath the ledge, swaying back and forth beneath the thrust of the rocky promontory.

Conar dug his fingers into a fissure in the rock, feeling his nails breaking, vaguely feeling the pain, registering it, disregarding it, for he had more important things on his mind at that moment. As the wind lashed at him, swinging him, he could feel his heart thudding so hard in his chest he thought it would burst.

"Help him!" Sybelle ordered her men, but she knew there was nothing either of them could do to aid her husband. She looked on in horror as he tried to bring his right leg up to gain purchase on the rock beside him. His foot skidded down the slippery rock and he lost the grip of one hand as he dangled.

"By the Prophetess," Kanan whispered. He could not imagine that the man hanging above them had the strength to pull himself back up on the ledge.

Sybelle sank to the wet ground, her hands over her mouth, tears creeping down her cheeks to mix with the rain already there. She dared not breathe as she watched Conar straining to re-attach his grasping hand with the ledge's lip. As he did, she stifled a whimper of fear for as soon as he had a good enough grip, he swung himself closer to the mountain's face, edging his hands over,

inch by inch, until he could put his foot in a crevice.

"Are you up there?" Conar grunted to the god who'd somehow always managed to get him out of scrapes like the one he found himself in at that moment. "Do you still care anything about me?" He was losing his grip, could feel his fingers slipping out of the crack. "If you do, then how about just letting me get back up on that damned ledge?"

A keening sound blared through the mountains and the lightning seemed to come as one solid sheet of blinding light as it zipped down from the firmament. Loud, deafening crackles of sound shook the mountains and the air smelled heavily of ozone as the thunder rolled. To the East, the sky was lightening, a faint green glow hovering just at the horizon. No one had time to see it or make note of it for three sets of eyes were glued on Conar McGregor and Conar was too busy trying to keep from falling to his death.

"How about it?" Conar asked his unseen protector. "Just a little nudge. What do you say?" He could feel the wedding band cutting into the flesh of his finger and blood was oozing down his palm.

Sybelle caught a shriek of terror from exploding from her as Conar once more lost the grip of one hand on the rock and swung sideways, slamming back against the rock face. She heard Chaim begin to pray, Kanan to join in, as the Serenian managed to dig his wildly flailing right hand into the rock behind him.

He was hanging there: one hand on the ledge, his hand caught by the wedding band, one hand gripping the rock to his right, his feet dangling uselessly. He tried to jam his boot heels into any crack he could find in the mountain's side, but there was none there.

Sybelle heard the sound coming at them only a fraction of a second before she got a whiff of the horrid odor accompanying it. She turned, her expression only faintly concerned and the blast of the putrid smell blew over her, watering her eyes, making her squint as her hair blew straight out behind her from the force of the wind. She staggered, gagging at the stench that washed over her.

"What is it?" she heard Kanan gasping as he, too, staggered back from the brunt of the wind's gale-like force.

Conar felt his strength waning. There was no way he could hold on like this indefinitely. His arms were stretched to their limits, his hands were beginning to cramp from their desperate grip, and he was having trouble catching his breath as he dangled there, his lungs constricting from the pressure. The rain was lashing at him, driving unmercifully into his unprotected face and he had squeezed his eyelids shut to keep out the stinging intrusion.

He did not see the fierce green glow which had crept up out of the storm and was spreading toward the mountain.

He did not see the spiraling red shapes darting among the sickening hue of the glow.

Sybelle Bath-Alkazar was flung back against the mountain, plastered there by the force of the wind. She put up a arm to protect her face from the flying debris being hurled at her and gagged again at the intensity of the horrible odor permeating the air. Her arms were alive with goosebumps, the hair moving as though it were a life form all its own. She tasted the metallic wash of iron in her mouth and knew instantly that whatever was heading their way was more evil than anything she had ever known before.

Chaim stumbled forward, trying to reach his mistress as the eerie green glow bore down on them. He could see writhing images in the billowing haze and his fear had risen to unstoppable proportions.

"We must get inside the cave!" he yelled at his lady, reaching out to her as he fought the wind to reach her side.

"Conar!" Sybelle screamed, somehow understanding that the force gathering above them, hurrying their way, was after him.

He drew in a breath, preparing to let go of the rock on his right and attempt to swing toward the ledge again. As soon as he did, he gagged, his mouth flooding with the taste of the stench saturating the air. His eyes flew open and grew wide, bulging from their sockets as he saw the hellish essence spreading toward him.

"No," he breathed, seeing the darker blob forming in the midst of the haze. He could just make out the long, eel-like neck, the gaping maw beginning to form at its end. "Oh, god, no!"

The smell was the worst thing Chaim had ever come into contact with in his entire life and he was near to the point of throwing up when he reached his mistress. He gathered her to him, dragging her toward the cave's entrance beside them, ignoring her hands as she tried to free herself from his grasp.

"No!" she shrieked. "I have to help him. I have to help Conar! That is a demon! I must help my husband!"

The wind was so loud it blotted out everything but the terrified thump of his heart in his chest as Conar hung helplessly on the mountain, unable to protect himself from the demon slithering his way. He drew in deep lung-fulls of tainted, sickening air, tasting the vile odor in his mouth, becoming sick with it. There was nothing he could do. Nowhere to turn. No one to help him as the creature bore down on him, Its evil mouth stretched wide in a grin of anticipation.

*"At last, McGregor! At last!"* the demon sneered.

Sybelle broke free of Chaim's hold and rushed back onto the path, fighting the wind every step of the way. She threw up her hands, invoking the pantheon of her sect, calling names she had almost forgotten in an effort to stop the horrendous evil that was advancing on her husband.

"Mosen, please! Sirene! Jhaman! Bath-Kree! Help him! Help my beloved!"

The creature's fiery red gaze swept over her as It loomed overhead. Sizzling drool dripped down around her, striking her gown, singeing it, falling on her boots to sear the leather. It's long, scaly neck waved about in the hurricane wind whipping around her, then It's triangular head suddenly dipped until it was directly over the place where she stood.

"*I am raphian!*" It howled at her and she had to put her hands over her ears to keep from being deafened.

"Get away from him, Sybelle!" Conar yelled. "Run!!!"

Sybelle swung her head toward him, pleading, staring at him with abject horror. "Hurry, milord!" she begged him. "You must come down! Now!"

Conar no longer had the will to try to get back on the ledge. What good would it do him? Sybelle could not fight the Domination's Prime Evil, its Destroyer of Souls, Bringer of Storms. There was no way he could without his powers. He was as helpless as he dangled there as he had been the first time, at Norus Keep, when he had encountered this monstrosity from the depths of the Abyss.

"Conar, Come down!" Sybelle pleaded with him.

"It's too late," he whispered.

Seeing that her husband could not move, or would not, the Kensetti princess turned her fury on the raging demon. "What do you want?" Sybelle yelled at the immense being hovering above her.

Raphian's great maw opened to reveal row upon row of lethal, razor-sharp teeth. Its long split tongue shot out and a loud, piercing slurping sound shook the mountains.

*"What is rightfully mine!"* the demon laughed and It threw back Its head, arching the long,

scaly neck. The smell of Its loathsome body grew in volume until Chaim and Kanan were bending over, retching. It spat a mawfull of venom at Sybelle, chortling wickedly as she stumbled back away from the sizzling spit.

"*Get away from It, Sybelle!*" Conar yelled at her, not sure if she could hear him above the roar of the wind.

Sybelle had heard and she tore her horrified stare from Raphian to Conar. "What does it want?"

Conar cringed as the demon swung Its leering gaze to him. He could see the infinite savagery burning in the viper-slit eyes of the creature. He understood the promise in that vile stare. It unnerved him and made his groin tighten painfully.

"*Tell her what I want, McGregor!*" Raphian crooned to him. "*What I will, at long last, obtain.*"

A shiver of pure dread shot through Conar's soul. He glanced down at Sybelle, saw her horrified face, felt her fear, knew her helplessness, recognized finally the great love she bore him as she held up beseeching hands to the monster intent on finally destroying him. He shook his head.

"He wants me," he told her.

"No!" Sybelle screamed. "Fight him, Conar! Don't let him near you!"

"It's no use," he said, although no one but the demon heard him. "It's no use."

"*You are mine, McGregor,*" Raphian chuckled. "*As you always have been mine!*"

He made a decision as the beast laughed at him. Never again could he be at the mercy of this fiend. Never again would he allow himself to know the depravity of which the Domination was a part. Someone, some traitor, had brought this evil to him. Had helped Raphian to find him. Had been used by the Brotherhood to help finally destroy him. He could not fight so many unseen enemies and hope to win. No, he thought bitterly. Never, never again.

He took one last at Sybelle, smiled, and then turned to Raphian. "I'll see *You* in hell, Raphian!" he bellowed.

One moment Sybelle was staring up at the man she loved and the next he was gone. She screamed as she saw him falling, plunging downward, his body beginning to turn sideways as he plummeted.

Kanan's ear drums burst as the demon began to howl with fury. The sound made the ground tremble, open up into a long, plunging fissure. Rocks crashed down from the mountain and dropped into the gaping hole. In his pain, he was barely aware of Chaim rushing forward, sweeping their lady out of the way of a heavy rock as it fell, pulling her back from the widening cavity which was sucking everything it could into its maw. He, himself, scrambled back, away from the place where only moments before he had been standing, staring at the massive gap which rock had once paved.

"Conar!" Sybelle shrieked, clawing at Chaim's restraining arm, striving to get to the place she had seen his body fall. But the rocks were still dropping, mounding at the base of the mountain, layering themselves one upon the other as though a giant hand were building a monument to the fallen warrior.

"Milady, no!" Chaim shouted at her, dragging her back from the mound.

Raphian shrieked with insane frustration then vanished, taking the loathsome stench and the violent wind with Him almost as fast as the blink of an eye. The demon was sucked back up into the billowing green glow with its squiggles of red lightning jagging through it and the air returned immediately to a cool, dry desert climate.

The silence was eerie after the loud roar of the wind. Nothing moved on the mountain path.



Nothing stirred. Sybelle and her servants might well have been in the farthest reaches of the universe as where they were.

Kanan felt blood dripping down his neck and strained to hear. There was a slight roaring in his ears and a dull ache that told him his hearing had been impaired by the creature's shrill laughter. He stumbled to his feet and made his way to the high mound of stones which had sealed the gaping hole that had moments before been formed by the demon's angry roar, staring down at the avalanche with a sinking feeling in the pit of his gut. How could anyone survive beneath the onslaught of that weight? Live after falling into that bottomless pit? Looking about him, seeing nothing but fallen rocks, there was no doubt in his mind that the Serenian was dead, crushed beneath the towering mound of stone.

Sybelle hung limply in Chaim's arms, her face streaming with tears as she stared with disbelief at the huge mound.

"Conar?" she asked pitifully.

Chaim held her to him. "He's gone, milady."

Sybelle looked up at him much as a child would and he shook his head sorrowfully.

She threw back her head and screamed.

## Chapter Twenty One

The last stone was thrown away from the hole in the earth which had been caused by the fallen rocks. What lay at the bottom of the indentation made every man there turn away in stunned grief.

Legion slumped to the ground, staring mindlessly at the place where his brother had fallen. He did not feel Teal's hand on his shoulder or hear Shalu's quiet, angry weeping, nor feel the misery spreading among those gathered.

"Sweet Merciful, Alel," Paegan muttered as he, too, sank to the ground, burying his face in his hands as tears began to spill.

Sajin, awakened early by the arrival of the men of the Wind Force, then thrust into immediate action as Kanan came pounding on the door to tell them of what had happened on the mountain, sat with his head on his chest, his own tears dripping to the ground before him.

The others—Occultus, Ching-Ching, Marsh, Sentian, all the others, stood silently, disbelief and utter hopelessness stamped on their stunned features.

"Get the girl back to her keep," Meggie ordered, taking charge of those around her. "Give her something to make her sleep."

Sybelle lifted her head, feeling the old woman's hate. She flinched as Meggie's eyes met hers, but she held that vicious stare. "I loved him," she defended. "You can believe that or not, Mistress Ruck."

Meggie snorted, turning away from the Kensetti woman's tearful face. She looked at Chase. "I will need you, Montyne," she said. She turned to Sentian. "And you and Belvoir." Her gaze swept to Occultus and his servant. "And the two of you. There's a reckoning to be had."

"What good will it do?" Nick asked as he stared into the hole. "What good at all?"

Nate stood up slowly, wiping the sweat from his dirty face. "We can only try," he said, gaining Meggie's attention and letting her see that he had some little power of his own.

Meggie nodded. She cast one last look at the hole, listened intently to the crashing sound from far below them, felt the emptiness of it to the depth of her soul, and looked away again.

Balizar walked to the hole and stared down into it, puzzling at the lapping, angry waves churning far below. "What is this thing?" he asked in wonder.

"The Maelstrom," Meggie said, gazing out across the desert. "Conar fell into the Maelstrom."

The End