



WINDBELIEVER

By

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WindLegends Saga

Glossary

Abbadon: Fortress of Prince Jaleel Jaborn; a dark and forbidding place.
Abdul Hussein: Owner of the Kilnt quarry in the Inner Kingdom
Ageless Ones: Depraved demons who control the wickedness of man
Amber-Lea MacFadden: Red-haired beauty who first catches Conar's then Brelan's eye; was lover to both.
Abyss: Hell
Asoteks: Fierce war-like tribe who lived on the land before it became Chrystallus.
Alel: Supreme god of the Seven Kingdoms
Alel's Force: Men and women who fought against the evil that sprang up after the Burning War. (see James Alel)
Alexi Romanovitch: Foreman of the stone quarry in the Outer Kingdom
Ali-Sajin Balizar, Prince: Emir of Rysalia
Anastasia Steffensberg: Tzarina of the Outer Kingdom
Andre Belvoir, Sir: Master-at-Arms of Norus Keep; sentinel for Queen Medea of Oceania.
Andre Talebov: Outer Kingdom Healer
Antoine du Mer, Duke: Father of Cul du Mer
Anton Steffensberg: Tzar of the Outer Kingdom
Andre Andreanova: Yuri's brother and a quarry worker in the Outer Kingdom
Angelique Saur: Mother of Brelan, one-time mistress of King Gerren McGregor
Anya Elizabeth Wynt: Daughter of King Shaz and Queen Medea of Oceania; sister of Princes Grice and Chand
Anya Katrine: Clipper ship captained by Serge Nicholayeviche Kutuzov of the Outer Kingdom.
Appolyon Kiel: Commandant of the Labyrinth Penal Colony on Tyber's Isle
Asher Stone: Rachel's and Sajin's brother.; Lives at Huhurn Oasis.
Azalon Ben-Hasheed: Asaraban merchant.
Balt: Town west of Boreas
Barracoon: Prison transport ship running to Guilder's Cay
Baybridge: An asylum for the criminally insane
Baybridge Harbor: Entrance to the capitol of Virago
Belial: Henchman of Jaleel Jaborn; Sentinel to Princess Sybelle
Belios A Tobin: Battle cry which means Prince of the Wind
Bennett Beriault: Another illegitimate son of King Gerren McGregor
Bent Armitage: Giant who was the Chief Executioner of Serenia
Black Ascendency, The: Raven of Immortality; merged with Conar in Chrystallus
Blasdin McGregor: Gerren's father; husband of Hestia
Boreas: Northern zone of Serenia
Boreas Keep: Fortress of the McGregor clan and capitol of Serenia
Boreal Queen: Cargo ship captained by Holm Van de Lar
Boreas Wind: A clipper ship
Boris Micalovek: One of the Outer Kingdom warriors
Borstal: Prison transport ship running to Guilder's Cay
Brelan Saur: Illegitimate son of King Gerren McGregor

Brell: Royal family of Chale

Brianna McGregor, Princess: daughter of Conar and Catherine

Briar's Hold Inn: Owned by Harry and Meggie Ruck; where Conar and Liza first consummated their love

Brotherhood of the Domination: An ultra-secretive society of sorcerers dedicated to ruling mankind through black magic

Brothers of the Wind: Priests who take care of the temples in the Seven Kingdoms

Burning War, The: Last war in which mankind was all but eradicated.

Capstan Mountains: Borders Kensett and Rysalia; highest peak is Mount Ireni

Carbondale Gate: Archway between Virago and Serenia

Catherine Steffenovitch: Daughter of Tzar Anton of Outer Kingdom; wife to Conar and mother of Brianna

Cayne Summerton: Healer at Boreas Keep

Celene McDonough: One of the women at Abbadon

Century: Where the Temple of the Winds is located.

Chale: Small Principality ruled by the Brell family; capitol at Meiraman; keep is called Briarcliff Keep

Chand Wynth, Prince: Youngest son of King Shaz of Oceania

Ching-Ching: Master of the martial arts in Chrystallus

Chaseton Montyne, Prince: Regent of Ionary

Chrystallus: Ruled by the Shimota family; keep is called Binh Tae Palace, capitol at Nyotoka

Ciona: Seaside town that is the home of Brellan Saur

Clere: The lawgiver God of the Seven Kingdoms

Comium: Hemlock

Conar Aleksandro McGregor: Prince Regent of Serenia; son of Gerren and Moira

Codian McGregor, Prince: Son of Glaen and Liza; known as Cody; had a twin brother who died at birth.

Colsaurus: A town in Serenia

Corinth: Town near the Temple of the Winds

Coron McGregor, Prince: Son of King Gerren and third in line to the McGregor throne

Courts of the Seven Kingdoms:

Chrysanthemum -- Chrystallus

Green Isles -- Chale

Hills -- Ionary

Sands -- Diabolusia

Sea -- Oceania

Storms -- Virago

Veldt -- Necroman

Wind -- Serenia

Creel Point: Dunes in Oceania

Cyle Alla Jemann, Princess: Galen McGregor's first wife who died from a fall from the balcony at Norus Keep

Colsaurus: Town near Norus Keep

Cul du Mer, Duke: Father of Roget and Teal; owner of Downsgate

Daniel: One of Conar's illegitimate sons

Daniel Pauley: Guard at the Labyrinth loyal to McGregor family

Daughters of the Multitude, The: Secret society of high born ladies dedicated to bringing harmony and peace back to the world
Deathwielder: Sword given to Conar when he was invested with his powers in Chrystallus
Demonicus: An arch-prelate of the Domination
Djebel ed Kjinn: Sybelle's keep near Helix
D'Lynn du Mer: Illegitimate daughter of Duke Antoine du Mer; grandmother of Gezelle
Diabolusia: Desert country; capitol at Deseo, near Heaj; keep is called Devil's Nest; ruled by the Sabina family
Dorrie Burkhart: Tavern maid at the Briar's Hold
Downsgate: Ancestral home of the du Mer family
Drew Llywelyn: Illegitimate son of King Gerren; monk in the WindKeeper Order in Diabolusia
Dulwitch: Capitol of Eurys Zone of Serenia
Duncan Connor: Another illegitimate son of King Gerren; Raja's sentinel
Dundenon: Military training town near Rommitrich Point
Dunswitch: A town near Norus Keep where Conar and his men were attacked and Rayle was killed
Dyllon McGregor: Son of King Gerren of Serenia and fourth in line to throne; married to Grace Brell, sister of Tyne
Dyriel McGregor Shimota: Sister of King Gerren and wife of Chrystallusian Emperor Tran.
Elite, The: Prince conar's personal guard
Emmie Lou Tucker: Nanny to Conar's children; wife of Ronnie
Epstein: Town where Ivor Keep is located
Eurys: Eastern Zone of Serenia; Capitol at Dulwitch is governed by Prince Coron McGregor
Fealst: Orphanage town in Oceania; capitol of Windswept Province
Galen Nicholai McGregor: Son of King Gerren and second in line to the Serenian throne; twin of Conar; regent at Norus
Galbrath Convent: Brutal nunnery run by the Brotherhood of the Domination
Gatherer, The: The Angel of Death
Gerren Yuri McGregor: King of Serenia and father of Conar; had numerous illegitimate offspring
Gezelle Castile: Servant girl at Norus taken in as Liza's personal maid; half-sister of Roger and Teal du Mer
Ghurn: Penal colony town to west of Serenia
Gilbert Tarnes: First mate of the Boreal Queen
Great Abbey of the Domination: Temple of the Brothers of the Domination; located near Corinthian Pass. This is where the most secretive ceremonies are performed.
Great Lady, The: Leader of the Daughters of the Multitude aka Lady of the Waters; she is the Windmaster's Mate and Keeper of the gate
Grice Wynth, Prince: son of King Shaz of Oceania
Grotto, the: Underground waterway where Prince Tristan was conceived, where Conar nearly died and Galen was murdered
Guil Ben-Shanar Gehdrin, Prince: Hasdu prince
Guilder's Cay: Penal colony at Ghurn Colony
Hern Abra, Sir: Master-at-Arms of Boreas Keep and sentinel to Queen Moira
Holm Van de Lar: Captain of the Boreal Queen; husband of Mary and father of Jenny
Hujurn Oasis: Where Balizar Arbra's camp was in Kensett

Habi Al-Kanoor: Slavekeeper
Haelstrom Point: Capitol of Virago
Haji El-Sabor: Stowaway eunuch
Harim Ahnaham: Assistant to Khan Subet and slave warden in Rysalia
Harry Ruck: Co-owner of the Briar's Hold along with wife, Meggie
Hasdu: Tribe of desert nomads
Healers: Physicians
Hebra St. Martyne: Chief Temple guard at Serenia and later Proconsul of Virago
Hesar: Royal family of Virago
Hestia McGregor: Gerren's mother; wife of Blasdin
Holy Dale: Ancestral home of the Sorn family; near Wixenstead Harbor and not far from the Carbondale Gate.
Hound and Stag Tavern: Where Conar and Liza met
Hull: Town south of Boreas
Illuvia: One of the god Alel's many wives; goddess of the seas (spelled Alluvia and Aluvia in some other countries)
Inner Kingdom: Country in the Ventura Province; Capitol is at Tasjorn and the royal family is Alla Lajeel.
Iomal: The city of Insults in the Southern Zone of Norus; once owned by Chale but now houses a contingent of the Southern Forces.
Ionary: Small principality ruled by the Montyne family; capitol at Derbenille and the keep there is called Ravenwood
Ipsmal: Town that is Zone capitol of Zephyrus ruled by Prince Dyllon
Ivor Keep: Estate owned by Legion A'Lex and given to him by his father, King Gerren; near Epstein in Boreas Zone; where Conar was conceived
Jabus Andoire: Cardinal of the Domination
Jabal: Inner Kingdom emirate just north of Rysalia. It has two princes, Raman and Nadar who were sent to the Labyrinth.
Jabol: One of the dual capitols of Kensett
Jabyl Jemann: Sheik of the Hasdu tribe; father of Princess Cyle
Jah-Ma-El: Illegitimate son of King Gerren; a priest in the Domination
Jaleel Jaborn: Hasdu Prince from Dahrenia who wished to marry Princess Cyle and took his revenge for her death out on Conar
James Alel: Commander of the North American Force fighting during the Burning War.
James Brigman: A Temple deacon
Janusk: Country in the Inner Kingdom
Jasmine Cay: Where Princess Nadia was born
Jasmine El-Gehdrin: Half-sister of Guil who is a dead ringer for Liza
Jemann Jaleem: Prince, son of Jabyl.
Jenny Van de Lar: Daughter of Holm
J'Nal: Viragonian greeting meaning 'peace'
Joannie MacCorkingdale: Daughter of Boreas' cook Sadie
Jobatik: First settler tribe of Chrystallusian lands
John Boggs: Stablemaster at Boreas
Jonas Crews: Illegitimate son of King Gerren
Jost: Town southwest of Breas Keep

Julian Faustine: Illegitimate son of King Gerren and twin of Morgan
Kaileel Tohre: Archbishop of the WindWarrior Society and Cardinal of Ordination for the Brotherhood of the Domination.
Kalli Jaborn, Prince: Jaleel's brother
Kanan: Cousin of Chaim and servant to Princess Sybelle.
Katrina Balizar, Princess: sister of Rysalia Emir, Ali-Sajin
Kegl: Island off the coast of Virago
Keil Jabyur: High Priest who trained Jah-Ma-El at the Great Abbey of the Domination
Kensett: Country that is the emirate of King Soabe Ben-Alkazar, father of Sajin and Sybelle; dual capitols at Kharis and Jabol in the Capstania Mountains
Khamsin: The name onar takes in the Inner Kingdom when he leads the Samiel (Wind Force) there.
Khan Subet: Slave trader
Kharis: One of the dual capitols of Kensett
Kharis El-Malich: Sabrina's sentinel
Kilnt: Quarry where Storm Jale was worker
Kirk Newkern: One of King Gerren's illegitimate sons and twin of Nathan.
Koussev: Mother language of the Outer Kingdom; high speech of the royalty.
Kym Taborn, Princess: Eldest daughter of Shalu
Lakeland: Town ten miles west of Century; where the Pigeon's Roost tavern is
Lake Myria: Crescent shaped lake north of Boreas Keep
Legion A'Lex: Eldest of King Gerren's sons and illegitimate. Commander of the Serenian Military and Vice Commander of the Serenian Forces.
Lucifus River: Border between Serenia and Diabolusia
Lydon Drake: Guard at the Labyrinth
Madalon: Great Circle of the Lost from whence came the sword called Deathwielder
Maelstrom: Mysterious bubbling waters that lead from one point in time to another
Mahmed Allajon: Slavetrader
Maiden's Briar: Blow fish poison
Marsh Eden: One of Conar's Elite and third in command behind Thom and Storm
Maxine Saur: Brelan's mother
Medea Wynth: Wife of Shag and Queen of Oceania; mother of Grice, Helen Louise, Francis Jean, Martha Ann, Chand and Laura-Alana; surrogate mother of Anya Elizabeth
Meggie Ruck: Co-owner of the Briar's Hold with husband Harry
Midworld: Where Inner and Outer Kingdoms are located
Miquel Espanoza: Diabolusian warrior who is an ally of Sybelle's.
Moiria Nadia Hesar McGregor: daughter of Syn-Jorn Hesar; wife of first Xander Hesar then Gerren McGregor; mother of Conar
Montyne: Royal family of Ionary
Morgan Faustine: Illegitimate son of King Gerren and twin of Julian
Myra Luz: Wife of Elite Morgan Luz; mother of Conar's son, Wyn
Nadia Steffensberg: Daughter of the Outer Kingdom Tzar; sister of Catherine
Nathan Newkern: Illegitimate son of King Gerren and twin of Kirk
Necroman: Jungle country whose capitol is at Jhakar; keep is called Lionheart and it is ruled by the Taborn family.
Nicholas Beriault: Illegitimate son of King Gerren; was raped by Kaileel Tohre

Nikabuto, Master: World's greatest Healer; lives in Chrystallus

North Boreal Sea: Northern waters above Serenia

Northwind: A clipper ship

Norus Keep: Regent home of Prince Galen and capitol of the Southern Zone; is one of the Pathways to the Maelstrom

Nyles Ben-Jani: Hasdu commander of archers sent to siege at Norus

Obelisk, The: The three-sided temple within the Shadowlands where the Daughters of the Multitude go to consult with the Great Lady and the Oracle.

Occultus Noire: High Priest of the Brotherhood of the Domination; was in line to be Arch-Prelate

Oceania: Island country ruled by the Wynth royal family; capitol at Seadrift.

Outer Kingdom: Land ruled by the Steffensberg royal family.

Palace of the Tzars: Steffensberg family home

Palace of the Winds: McGregor family home at Boreas Keep

Paegan Hesar: Youngest prince of Virago

Pearl Allegra: Champion wrestler living in Chrystallus

Peter Steffensberg: Son of Tzar Anton of Outer Kingdom

Rachel Stone: Sister of Asher; she is Liza's double; was mistress of Jaleel Jaborn; mother of Daniel with Conar;

Raine Chastayne: Bastard son of Raphaella and Conar

Raine Jael: A Hasdu from Ventura

Raja DeLyle: The woman who first seduced Conar; mother of his illegitimate son, Regan

Raphaella Chastayne: The Windweaver, Keeper of the Loom; sister of Shaz Wynth and mother of Liza and Raine. She is the guardian of World's End.

Raphian: The Supreme Evil Entity of the Domination; Bringer of Storms; Destroyer of Men's Souls

Rasheed Falker: Prince Guil's henchman

Ravenwind: Black flag ship of the Raven's Wind Force; was once the Vortex prison transport

Rayle Loure: Was captain of Cona's elite; twin of Thompson (Thom); killed by Hasdu near Dunswitch

Regan DeLyle: Illegitimate son of Conar and Raja

Rhinea: Town s, sw of Boreas Keep

Robbie MacCorkingdale: grandson of Boreas cook Sadie; priest of the Brotherhood of the Domination; Kaileel Tohre's right hand man.

Roget Du Mer: Son of Duke Cul and brother to Teal and Gezelle

Rommitrich Point: Old stone abbey near the city of Dunswitch in Eurus zone.

Ronnie Tucker: Keeper of the Kennels at Boreas; husband of Emmie Lou

Rupert Von Schlesendorg: Suitor for the hand of Catherine Steffernsberg

Rupine: A Hasdu Healer

Rylan Hesar: Crown prince of Virago; brother of Paegan

Rysalia (Middle Sector): Capitol of this country is at Dahrenia and is ruled by Shiek Jabyl Jemann; Abbadon fortress in near there.

Rysalia (Northern Sector): Nomad Emirate ruled by Jaleem family, capitol at Asaraba

Rysalia (Southern Sector): Capitol at Basaraba is ruled by Gehdrin family, Sheik Sadaam Gehdrin.

Sabrina, Lady: Owner of a breeding farm in the Inner Kingdom

Sadie MacCorkingdale: Cook at Boreas; mother of Joannie and grandmother of Robbie
Sajin Ben-Alkazar, Prince: Son of King Syam; brother of Sybelle, Jahi, Hashir, Mahmed, Nadir, Zadir, Kahlel, Balkar, Sagar, Nadar, Khan and Rasheed. He is known as The Hawk.
Samiel: Inner Kingdom Wind Force led by Khamsin (Conar McGregor)
Scrubroot: An astringent
Seachance: Oceanian clipper ship
Seachange: Conar's second black stallion
Seaflower: Wynth family summer retreat
Seayearner: Conar's black stallion
Sager El-Balidar: Arch-Prelate with Conar was a boy; grandfather of Guil Gehdrin
Sasheon Ben-Alkazar: Son of Sybelle and Conar
Se Huan: Young woman who cares for Conar in Chrystallus
Sentian Heil: Farmer turned Elite; sentinel to Liza
Serenian Star: Carries prisoners to Haelstrom Point
Serge Nicholayevich Kutuzov: Captain of the *Anya Katrina*
Seven Kingdoms, The:
 Chale
 Chrystallus
 Ionary
 Necroman
 Oceania
 Serenia
 Virago
Sentinels: Warriors trained by the Daughters of the Multitude as guardians and messengers for a Daughter
Serenia: Capitol at Boreas and home of the McGregor clan.
Shadowlands: The mystical land where the Obelisk of the Daughters of the Multitude can be found.
Shalu Taborn: King of Necroman and father of Kym
Shaz Wynth: King of Oceania; husband of Medea; father of Grice, Helen Louise, Anya Elizabeth, Francis Jean, Martha Ann, Chand, and Laura-Alana
Shanyon David Phelps: ex-Elite who killed a Boreas temple guard.
Shasamie: Nomad wench who was one of Sorn Jamar's prostitutes
Sirenes: The protector goddesses of the Multitude
Sorn Jamar: Nomad chemist who gets Conar addicted
South Boreal Sea: Southern waters below Serenia
Spittin' Cat Tavern: Worse tavern in Boreas
Storm Jale: Elite guard and second in command of Elite forces behind Thom
St. Steffensberg: Capitol of the Outer Kingdom
Suzerains: Hasdu kidnappers
Svetlana Steffensbert: Daughter of Tzar and sister of Catherine of Outer Kingdom
Sybelle Beth-Alkazar: Sister of Sajin; keep at Djebel ed Kjinn near Helix in Deimann province; is an Amazeen and will bear Conar a son she names Sasheon
Takahemmanon Khyrtuslish: One of the archers at the siege of Norus; called Taka by his friends; is a Hasdu guide
Tamara: Conar's Eldest illegitimate daughter

Tataina Steffensberg: Daughter of the Tzar and sister of Catherine

Teal du Mer: Half-brother of Roget and Gezelle; a gypsy

Temple of Chrystaus: Where Conar was given his powers during a ceremony in Chrystallus

Temple of the Winds: A university for the advanced training of WindWarriors, at Century near Corinth

Tenerse: A very powerful drug that is highly addictive. When mixed with various other liquids can achieve diverse results...

- (1. Milk: strong sexual arousal; aphrodisiac
- (2. Ale: severe, irrational anger
- (3. Water: potent sedative; hangover cure
- (4. Wine: stupor, hallucinations, ear ringing
- (5. Brandy: Uncontrollable anger
- (6. Taro root: severe heightening of pain
- (7. Vinegar: severe lessening of pain
- (8. Fruit juice: poison
- (9. Mead: madness, irrational behavior (depending on amount)
- (10. Distilled Water: what Reapers take to control Transitions

Tia: One of Conar's illegitimate daughters

Tjorn Faulker: Rasheed's father

Tolkan Coure: Arch-Prelate of the Brotherhood of the Domination

Traer Saur: Brelan's grandfather

Tran Shumota: Emperor of Chrystallus and husband of Dyreil McGregor

Treacle: A healing potion

Tristan McGregor: Son of Conar and Liza; adopted by Galen as his own

Tribunal: Governing body of the Seven Kingdoms

Tymothy Kullen: Guard at the Labyrinth; raped Holm Van de Lar's daughter, Jenny

Tyne Brell, Prince: Regent of Chale; excellent swordsman; sister Grace is married to Dyllon McGregor

Vanion: Liza's familiar

Vasdane: Male and female familiar of Conar's

Veldon: A quarry in the Outer Kingdom

Ventura: Homeland of Princess Cyle Jameem

Virago: Capitol at Haelstrom Point; governed by the Hesar Family; keep is called Tempest Keep

Vortex: Carries prisoners to Tyber's Isle

Windflower: Flagship of King GerrenMcGregor

Windkeeper: Liza's gray mare

Windswept: Ship Holm Van de Lar used to take the royal sons on when there were small

WindWarrior Society: A mystical sect of men dedicated to the preservation and protection of their individual homelands.

Wixenstead: The outlaw Syn-Jern Sorn's hideout

Wynland: Conar's eldest illegitimate son by a woman named Myra whom he later marries to one of his Elite, Morgan Luz

Chapter One

The sea rolled like the gentle slopes of his homeland's foothills. Its gray-green color was murky with the lowering sky that was bringing rain from the west. An occasional flash of lightning in the distance signaled a squall line off the coast of Serenia, moving inland at a slow and unhurried pace. The wind was freshening, the tang of salt and sea life bringing him fond memories of other sailing trips on the vast expanse of the South Boreal Sea. Crashing bravely through the whitecaps, her bow rising and falling with the sea passage, the Outer Kingdom ship sent salt spume spraying in its wake.

She was hugging the coastline as closely as the reefs and shoals would allow. At times the valiant ship was within shouting distance of the tall white cliffs that marked the passageway between Serenia and Oceania, and he would throw a hand up in greeting to the men who had stopped along the rugged cliff tops to admire the ship's passing. His lips would twitch with what passed as amusement for him when the men would point, recognizing him, stunned to see him on board that strange-looking ship.

Named the Anya Katrine, the Outer Kingdom clipper was something to behold skimming along the cresting waves. Her teakwood decks gleamed, her polished brass glowed. The figurehead at her bow was an intricately-carved mermaid, which had been freshly painted in tones of green and red and was dusted with gilt. Her running lights, lit because of the darkening of the sky and the probability of inclement weather, twinkled on the water and cast a myriad of reflections across the high sheen of the teak. Overhead her sheeting strained with the brisk sea breeze sliding the clipper over the sea with little effort. Her standard snapped sharply in the wind, the coat of arms of the royal family of the Outer Kingdom announcing both ownership and destination of the stately vessel.

Her sailors wore clean and pressed uniforms of sold white tunic and breeches. Her officers were dressed in sharply creased navy serge coat and trousers with an inch wide stripe of fancy gold braid running down the side seams and around the cuffs of their coats. The Captain wore his medals upon his broad chest, as did his First and Second Mates, and the cocked hat which covered their thick manes of curly brown hair, sported white ostrich plumes held in place by the insignia of the Royal Navy of the Outer Kingdom. All in all, the ship and her crew presented a very impressive picture as she made her way steadily south.

"Once we gain the Sinisters, we'll tack east," the Captain informed his passenger in perfect, precise Chalean. "Three days on that course will find us near the Isle of Winds." He grinned. "That's half-way home."

His passenger's brows shot upward. "I thought that sea lane was un-navigable."

The Captain smiled, showing perfectly straight and stark white teeth. He shook his head. "A myth our people started to keep away unwanted Outlanders and trespassers. I can assure you, there are no sea monsters lurking beyond the Sinisters, Your Grace."

Conar Aleksandro McGregor frowned. He could picture the fog-hidden stretch of water off the southernmost tip of Oceania. "From what I could tell when I was there, there are some pretty dangerous coral reefs out there." He turned his gaze to the sea. "Along with that hellish fog, how can you navigate?"

"I have sailed these waters many times, Prince Conar. There is no need to concern yourself."

There hadn't seemed to be any way he could explain to this tall, suntanned and elegant seaman that he was no longer a Prince, that his birthright had been denied him by his own father, his heritage discarded. From the moment he had set foot on the Anya Katrine, he had been

treated like the royalty he had once been. He had tried to correct the Captain, whose name he found out was Serge Nikolayevich Kutusov, but the man had politely ignored him.

"You were born royalty, Your Grace. Your mother and father were King and Queen. Consequently, royalty you still are in the eyes of my people."

Once more Conar had protested, telling the man how much he had always hated being called by his appropriate title even when he had deserved it and it was still his, but the man had smiled and shaken his head.

"To us, Your Grace, you are what you have always been. We would not dishonor you by calling you anything else but that which you are."

"Even if I don't like it?" Conar had inquired, one tawny brow lifted in challenge.

The Captain had grinned. "Even if you don't like it, Your Grace."

Now, leaning against the teak railing as the clipper sped ever faster toward the Sinisters, Conar looked out over the side of the ship and stared down into the rushing waters below.

For over an hour the ship had been doggedly pursued by a school of porpoises and he was watching them frolicking in the waves, arcing their silver-green bodies high. Now and again, their squeaky voices called out to him and he smiled.

"You like sea?"

Conar turned his head to look at Yuri. The Outer Kingdom warrior who had labeled himself Conar's personal bodyguard, was slightly less green around the gills than he had been the day before, but his face was still strained, his lips pursed against the tug of nausea. Obviously the man didn't like the sea as much as his four companions did for those men were forever climbing the rigging to relieve their boredom. For the most part, Yuri had kept to his cabin, a basin close at hand.

"But you don't, my friend," Conar answered. He reached out a hand to gently touch the warrior's cheek. "Why don't you stay below, Yuri. You don't need to keep me company. I'm use to keeping my own self occupied." He removed his hand.

The gentle, friendly touch had made Yuri's heart ache and he had to jerk his head away before this man saw just how much it had affected him. "I hate sea," he grumbled. "I, soldier." His frown deepened. "Not squid!"

A soft, sad chuckle escaped Conar's tightly pressed together lips and he turned his head away from Yuri's scowling profile. "I feel as though the sea has always been a part of me," he tried to explain. "And me, a part of it."

Yuri swallowed, trying to calm his seasickness. "There is old saying in my country, 'The man who love sea, is loved by sea, and she always protect him'. Sea love you."

There was a slight dimming in Conar's eyes, but he blinked, shoving it away. "I feel at peace out here."

"I feel" Yuri searched for the correct Serenian word. He swallowed hard with strained effort and then turned a sickly green color. "Sick!!" he gasped, slamming his hand over his mouth. He turned abruptly and ran away, his retching sounds concealed behind the constriction of his fingers.

"Stay in your cabin!" Conar yelled after him. "I'll send the healer!"

"Won't do good," one of Yuri's fellow warriors remarked from his place in the rigging.

Conar glanced up. "Why not, Petr?"

The man shrugged. "He no good at sea. Sea make him this way, every time. Potion no good for him. Make him sicker."

"Like Teal," Conar mumbled, nodding. What he wouldn't give for some of Liza's lavender

brew for Yuri, he thought. He knew that would have lessened the symptoms if not eradicated them.

“Your Grace?”

Gritting his teeth at the title, Conar turned, saw the Captain advancing on him with a cheerful smile. He tried to answer the greeting, but his jaw was still clenched.

Serge Nickolayevich Kutusov rolled easily with the pitch of the deck. His straight-backed, shoulders-squared walk was very imposing as he came to stand beside Conar. His smile was filled with adventure.

“It just came to me how you might pass this journey and not become bored,” he said, rubbing his hands together, his Chalean almost perfect. “How would you like to learn Koussev?”

Conar’s brows drew together. “Kou?”

“Koussev!” Serge exclaimed. “It is our mother language.” He waved his hand from side to side, fanning the air. “There are many dialects, but only one root. Koussev is the High Speech used by the royal house.” He puffed out his wide chest, straining the fabric of his uniform coat. “I, myself, speak twelve languages.” His face sagged just a bit. “As of yet, I have not mastered Serenian enough to feel competent to converse with you in your own tongue, but since you are fluent in Chalean, yourself, I can teach you enough of our mother tongue for you to be able to converse quiet properly with our Tzar and Tzarina.”

The idea intrigued Conar and he nodded. It was always best to be able to speak with a stranger in his own language rather than stumble through half-phrases and incorrect words that might prove embarrassing.

“If you’re willing to teach me, I’m willing to learn,” he answered. “I speak eight languages, myself.”

“Excellent!” Serge proclaimed. “Then you should have no problem assimilating Koussev. It is not a difficult language, at all.”

“When would you like to start?”

“Now?” Serge asked, eager to relieve his own boredom.

Conar swept his hand out. “Lead the way.”

Chapter Two

Passing the Sinisters in the daylight hours was one thing.

Passing the rock-strewn waters under the skipping ride of a pale crescent moon was another.

The fog was thicker than Conar had remembered from his year on the island where his daughter Nadia had been conceived and born. He had glanced at the black hump of the island as they sailed past, but he refused to name it or give it thought, for the painful jog of his memories had filled him with a despair so great he thought he would drown in it. Jasmine Cay had been the beginning of his worst nightmare.

"We call this place Cay Mist," Serge had told him. "What do your people call it?"

"I don't remember," Conar had mumbled. He kept his attention on the banks of phosphorescence as the milky vapor loomed at them from out of the dark. The memories hurt.

Serge had sensed the reticence in his passenger and had ended the conversation, moving slightly away from the man whose jaw was clenched and whose hands were tight on the railing as he refused to look toward the distant island.

There was stillness to the air, a preternatural quiet that set Conar's teeth on edge and made the hair along his neck and arms tingle. There was also a smell, one he could not quite identify, that wafted to him on the damp breeze that ruffled his thick mane of golden hair. When the clipper entered the first wisps of the ghostly fog, he tensed, his dark sapphire eyes narrowing with dread, his body going rigid as though it expected to be hit by some unseen hand coming at him from the depths of the vapor.

As the fog closed around the ship, sealing them inside its phantom arms, he found his heart thudding in his chest and sweat breaking out on his brow. There was a slight tremor in his fingers as he reached up to plow them through his damp, shoulder-length hair. The chill of the night and the mist of the salt water had turned the silken mane to a sticky mass. He grimaced, running his hands down his cold breeches leg to rid his fingers of the feel.

"This mess is as thick as pea soup," he commented.

"On the average, it will take us two hours to cut through the fog," Serge said quietly. "It's slow going, but these waters are treacherous at best."

Beneath the copper hull of the clipper, Conar could hear the faint scrape of something as the ship slipped through the night. He prayed with all his heart there were no reefs to gouge a hole in the hull for to be stranded in this murky, iridescent mist would have been a hell unto itself. His nerves were already tense enough as it was without thinking of the sea creatures, both real and imagined, which lurked beneath the smoky surface of the black waters. To have heard the shattering wrench of tearing wood and plating would have sent him into a screaming fit.

"There is nothing to worry about, Your Grace," Sergei said. "I have navigated these waters many, many times without mishap."

"It only takes one accident to sink a ship," Conar grumbled.

Without warning, something loomed at him from out of the fog and he gasped, pulling back from the railing as a black mass of shimmering rock passed close enough to the leeward rail for him to have reached out and touched it. He jerked, looking fearfully to Serge, and saw a fleeting smile of reassurance on the craggy, handsome features.

"Sometimes the passageway gets a bit cramped," Serge explained, "but we are in no danger of scraping those cliffs, Your Grace. Relax! Enjoy the quiet."

"Relax?" Conar groused under his breath. "How the hell can I relax when we're that close to the damned rocks?"

“Try,” Serge told him.

He clenched his fists, digging his nails into his palms and cautiously turned back to the rail. More jagged, deadly-looking rocks, cliffs as Serge had called them, jutted up from the water and glistened in the shimmer of ghostly fog. They looked as sinister as their name.

“Sweet, Merciful Alel,” Conar breathed. There was less than an inch at times between the rock and the side of the ship.

“Have no worry, Your Grace,” Serge said in a quiet, reassuring voice. “Our pilot is a skilled navigator. He has made journeys through tighter places than this.”

Conar thought, at best, that was a damned exaggeration and at worse, a boldfaced lie, but he didn’t say so. At that moment, he didn’t think he could have said much of anything intelligible.

For what seemed to him to be an eternity, the ship glided slowly and cautiously through the fog-shrouded waters. The stillness, not a sailor speaking, not even a single clank of metal or wood as the men moved about to do their assigned tasks. The ship creaked, of course, as all ships creak, and the water rushed gently and quietly beneath the keel, split apart in a quiet hiss as the bow slipped through it, but other than those natural nautical sounds, there was utter silence on board the Anya Katrine.

“Not much longer,” the captain said quietly, but even as quiet as it had been, Conar jumped, his body quivering as a tingle of surprise flowed down it. He didn’t look at Serge, his attention was glued to the lethal rocks slowly slipping past him, now further away, thank the gods, from the ship.

He began to relax.

And that had been a mistake.

From out of the fog came a sound that made the breath stop in Conar’s throat and his hair stand on end. It was a bellow of sorts--hissing in, rushing out, washing over him with a terror that set him to trembling violently.

He was a brave man, braver than most, but his nerves were already stretched thin and this shriek in the fog-laden waters, this unknown growl of whatever creature had issued it, brought Conar McGregor’s eyes wide in his pale face. He had to bite his lower lip to keep from crying out in alarm as the bellow came again--sharp hiss, rush of bellowing, prolonged and nerve-shattering echo.

And then came the deep clang of some unseen bell far off to the starboard--once, twice, three times. It stretched Conar’s bravery as fine as a gossamer thread. He could feel his knees clicking together through the fabric of his cords and when the bellow sounded again, closer still, he jerked his head toward Serge.

“What the hell is it?” he shouted, feeling himself ready to be pitched headlong into madness by the sound.

Serge’s face creased with surprise. “A fog horn, Your Grace.”

Even though he felt as though he were being chastised, the other sailors looking at him with both mild reproach and curiosity, he couldn’t stop the stutter of fear that made him ask just what the hell was a foghorn. If the sea creature wasn’t dangerous, he wanted to know.

“Will it attack the ship?”

Understanding lit Serge’s face and he looked about him, said something to his men in his native tongue. There were smiles, shakes of the head, and a few chuckles as the men realized Conar had no idea what it was he was hearing.

“I forget sometimes that you Outlanders are not as advanced as we are,” Serge said in a tone too close to condescension to be dismissed. “It is simply a warning device, Your Grace. A horn

which blows to warn us to be on the watch. The lighthouse at the Isle of Winds is close by. You should be able to see the light in just a moment or two.”

Feeling like a fool, and not liking the feeling one bit, Conar looked back into the darkness. He strained his vision to be able to pick out the lighthouse glow, but he could see nothing through the fog. There were lighthouses all along the Serenian coast. He was accustomed to seeing those tall, cylindrical towers jutting from craggy spars of land at the water’s edge, but the fog horn was an entirely different matter. Perhaps if he could see the thing, he wouldn’t be as concerned about it as he was. But when the hiss and bellow and echo of the thing called the fog horn came once more, it didn’t unnerve him quite as much as before. However, the deep clang of the distant bell made him grind his teeth.

“I don’t like that sound,” he mumbled to no one in particular.

“It won’t be long now before we are in Outer Kingdom waters, Your Grace,” Serge called. “You’ll be able to see the coastline of our homeland when the fog begins to lift.”

Conar nodded, still miffed. He scanned the fog, still couldn’t catch sight of the elusive fog light sweeping across the waters toward them. Somehow that made his anxiety even more pronounced.

“Our people are eagerly awaiting you, Your Grace,” Serge told him, trying to take his passenger’s mind from the clang of the bell off to their left. He came to stand beside Conar at the railing, leaning his arms on the polished teak. “You’ll be able to meet our people, see our beautiful lands. We have as much diversity in our geography as does Serenia. There are tall, snow-capped mountains, deserts, ocean-side villages, farm lands. The royal family will wish to show you the historical ruins of our country, have you sit with them at court.”

Conar moaned beneath his breath. Those were the last things he wanted to do. He moaned again, just contemplating what was being planned for him.

Serge didn’t hear. “The Tzarevitch, the royal Prince Mikel, will want you to accompany him to the musicales, the ballets. He loves to dance, does our Prince.”

Another moan was stifled. A sour bile rose up in the young Serenian’s throat.

“Of course, he will have to share your company with Tzarevitch Peter, the eldest son of our Tzar. His Highness will wish to take you to the museums in Musco.”

Conar bit his lip, striving not to show his disappointment.

“You will love our land, Your Grace,” Serge sighed. “Just as you will love the Tzarevna.”

Conar looked around. He had become accustomed to the Koussev language, even though he had learned only a smattering of the guttural dialect. He found he rather liked the harsh, slurred words that made up the High Speech of the Outer Kingdom, but it was proving to be more difficult than Serge had predicted.

“The Tzarevna?” he inquired.

Serge smiled. “Ah, yes. Our Tzarevna! She is the daughter of our Tzar. The lady we are taking you to wed.”

Chapter Three

“Turn the ship around!” Conar shouted, drawing the attention of every man on board the ship. His voice was a solid block of ice, his face livid with sudden fury.

“Did you hear me, Serge? Turn the damned ship around. Now!”

Serge looked at his passenger with a calm, innocent gaze. “Have I said something wrong?”

Conar’s eyes narrowed into thin, dangerous slits. He clenched his jaw and spat out his command in perfect Koussev. “Turn the damned ship ... around.”

“Stop teasing, Serge Nickolayevich,” Yuri snarled as he weaved his way toward the two men standing beside the rail. “He not used to such foolishness.”

Conar looked around at the Outer Kingdom warrior, almost smiled at the pea-green condition of the fellow’s complexion and the way he was pursing his thick lips to keep from vomiting, but the situation was too upsetting to be joking about it. He glared at the newcomer with a snarl on his handsome face.

“You’d better hope this son-of-a-bitch was joking!” Conar growled.

Yuri eyed Serge with a disdainful promise of future retaliation. “He was, Highness. Serge Nickolayevich think silliness entertaining.”

Serge’s face turned chalk-white. “Yes,” he muttered, then reached out to put a pleading hand on Conar’s forearm. “Yes! Indeed! I was teasing, Your Grace! Only teasing!” He swallowed and then a nervous, twitching smile pulled the Outer Kingdom sea captain’s lips into a sick facsimile of an ingratiating grin. “Just one of my silly little pranks.”

Conar looked from one man to another, searching faces that were nervous, just a little bit afraid, and that were carefully, too carefully, blank and accommodating.

“Let me put it in a way the two of you can understand. If it is your Tzar’s intention that I be forced to wed one of his old-maid daughters”

Yuri’s mouth opened wide, astonishment on his wide face. “Her Highness consider be loveliest woman this side of Uralap Mountains! She have many suitors for her hand, Highness!” He drew his shoulders back and for just an instant, all seasickness was wiped from his face as pride, and what could only have been deep love and admiration, filled his face. “Men fight duel of honor over privilege of sitting with her at supper.”

The nervous tick that was beginning to develop in Conar’s left cheek not only annoyed him, he hoped it gave ample warning to the two men watching him that he was on the verge of lashing out with the doubled fists pressed tightly against his thighs. His face had turned hard, unreadable, but his eyes were two gleaming embers from the deepest pit of hell.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass if she’s the most desirable woman in the universe!” he spat, each word falling into the silence like hot lava rock. “If your master thinks to put me in a position in which I”

Yuri held up his hand. “Highness, please! That not Tzar Thomas’ intent, at all! You go to our homeland as honored guest. We would not dare insult you by put stipulations on your visit. This cow ...,” he reached out and viciously shoved the Captain, “make stupid mistake. He apologize to you.”

“I don’t want a damned apology!” Conar hissed. He took a step closer to Yuri, staring up at the man with a fierce squint. “I’m not a stupid man, Yuri.”

“No! Of course not, Sire!” Yuri hastened to agree.

“Do you think I can’t read between the lines here?” He jerked his head toward Serge. “If that man was joking, he wasn’t aware that he was.”

Yuri sighed, a long, drawn-out blister of a sigh. "Yes, Highness. You right."

Conar's jaw hardened. "And that was your master's intent, to have me shackled to his daughter?"

Yuri flinched. He slowly shook his head side to side. "Not intent, Highness, but hope." His face turned soft. "It ALL our hope, Prince Conar, to see you and sweet Tzarevna united."

Serge eagerly nodded. "That's true, Your Grace! Yuri speaks to you truthfully! To unite the two households has been something our Tzar has long since wanted. It would be a great thing."

A militant, stubborn look set on Conar's face. "I won't do it!" he growled.

Yuri's broad shoulders slumped. "It your decision, Highness."

"Damned right, it is!" Conar spat at him. "I won't ever marry again!"

"We didn't mean right away!" Serge said and then yelped as Yuri very effectively kicked him in the shin. "Ow, Yuri! That hurt!"

"You haven't seen hurt until you've tried to make me do something I don't want to do!" Conar warned. His soul was blazing beneath the lowered gold of his thick brows.

Yuri shrugged. "It only suggestion, Highness. Nothing more." He looked down into the Prince's angry face. "Forgive. We mean no harm."

"Whether you meant it or not, it was done," Conar replied ungraciously. He turned his face away from the two men. "Leave me."

"Highness ...," Yuri began, but those hot eyes jerked back to him and impaled him with utter contempt.

"Don't make me give an order twice," Conar barked.

There was something very dangerous about the way those words were spoken. And something lethal in the set of Conar McGregor's face as he spoke them. Both men recognized it for what it was--the imperial command of a man not given to being denied. To ignore such an explicit warning would have been folly of the highest order.

"As you wish, Sire," Serge mumbled, bowing. He backed away, still bowing, then curtly turned on his heel and strode briskly away, his shoulders hunched down into his uniform coat.

Yuri stood where he was for a fraction of a second, longer than he knew he should have. He opened his mouth to say something more, but Conar's growl made him spin around and stumble his way back to the hatchway. He didn't even look around as he left. He was afraid of what he would see on the young man's face.

Turning back to the rail, gripping the wide teak with hands that itched to pummel someone, anyone, Conar stared out into the sea, scanning the wide waters from horizon to horizon. His fists pulsed with impotent fury, his face a livid shade of furious color, his blood rushing in his temples with enough force to blow the lid off a sealed jar.

"Just wait," he whispered to the rolling waves in a tone anyone who knew him would not have recognized. "You just wait, you tzar-of-a-bitch! I'll make you wish you'd never thought of me as a bedmate for your unmarriageable brat!"

In his anger, Conar had completely forgotten about his brooding. His self-pity had vanished. His melancholy, a part of him for so long now, had simply ceased to be. And his grief had been pushed aside for a more important emotion--revenge.

"Wait 'til you get to know the real Conar McGregor," he snarled, a grin of pure vengeance on his sulking lips. "Let's see how you'd like him for a son-in-law!"

Chapter Four

St. Steffensburg, the capitol of the Outer Kingdom, was a rather gloomy seaside town nestled along the outer rim of the crescent-shaped harbor of the Bulgas River, that muddy estuary which wandered haphazardly from the Northern Sea inland to Lake Marie Theresa. Tall spires, bulbous-shaped domes, forbidding gray stone blocks of buildings, squat and ugly, huddled so closely together, there was precious little room for an enterprising Outer Kingdom entrepreneur to build his own emporium. The cobblestone streets, although pristine clean and well-maintained, were narrow and dark, somehow forbidding, and as uneven and steeply graded as any wilderness mountain foothill. Obviously poorly engineered, the streets meandered hither and yon, sometimes without seeming purpose or destination, dead ended without warning, and were very tiresome on feet and hoof. There was nothing within the limits of the city that was pretty or worth standing long to look upon. The shops were functional, their plain and nondescript fronts showing only a sign of what the wares sold in that particular shop might be. The abodes, inns and the like, which were scattered at random along the main thoroughfare, if it could possibly be called that, were likewise as lackluster and unwelcome.

"Don't you have any other color paint but gray? It's depressing as hell," Conar grumbled as he twisted his head to look about him at the buildings they were passing. "My god but that's an ugly place!"

He had mastered the Koussev language, finally, and he had memorized all the words which conveyed insult in the High Speech.

Yuri, highly offended at his companion's waspish tone, spoke his words around a jaw that was rigid and beginning to ache.

"The buildings are made from stone which is taken from the quarry at Vealton. Our country experiences numerous earthquakes every year, Highness, and stone is far sturdier and safer than the wood of which many of Serenia's buildings are constructed," he explained in his native tongue. He glanced at his traveling companion and scowled, for Prince Conar's nose was definitely lifted in disdain at what he was seeing and Yuri's own rather broad proboscis was decidedly out of joint. "It would be rather stupid to paint stone, don't you think?" Yuri added with a hint of pique.

Conar shrugged. "Such ugliness needs something to make it easier on the eye."

A snarl lurked behind Yuri's tightly compressed lips, almost escaped, but the warrior swallowed it, and his growing aggravation with the man riding beside him, and turned a carefully blank face to Conar.

"We like it the way it is," Yuri ground out.

"You would," Conar snorted.

For over an hour the party of twelve men, Yuri and Conar at the head of the staggered column, clip-clopped through the winding streets of St. Steffensburg, and then took the wide, dusty road north which led to the Palace of the Tzars.

Not once in that entire hour did they pass a single citizen standing outside his or her shop. There were no curious bystanders, shoppers out and about, children playing along the way. Not even a stray dog or cat. The shops appeared closed and shuttered, the town itself bare of habitation.

"Where the hell is everybody?" Conar had inquired.

"At the Palace, no doubt," Yuri had answered. He had risked a sidelong glance at his companion. "Awaiting your arrival."

“Why?” Conar’s tone was clipped and suspicious.

It was not in the Outer Kingdom warrior’s nature to be haughty or rude. Despite his massive build and lowering brow, Yuri was a man of calm disposition, great intelligence, and who possessed a vast amount of compassion and patience. But over the past two weeks, he had lost a great deal of that patience, had forced that compassion into remission and had developed a bubbling temper that was about to boil over. His hands on the reins of his palfrey were beginning to cramp with the tight grip he was using to keep his fingers from Conar McGregor’s throat.

“Because,” came the reply, a reply much like one used when speaking to a slow-minded child, “they wish to honor you.”

“Why?” The suspicious question sounded deadly.

A twitch snagged the left side of Yuri’s cheek. “Because of who you are.”

“That being?”

Yuri’s head snapped to one side and his temper finally shot over the pot. “If you don’t know who you are, I sure as hell can’t help you!”

Conar’s left brow rose slowly, contemptuously, and his lips pursed. His wickedly dark eyes traveled slowly down Yuri and back again. “But you KNOW to whom you have just spoken?” The brow jerked and then lowered. “And in what tone you dared to use?”

“I’ve done it now,” Yuri’s inner voice hissed at him. He looked at Conar McGregor’s rigid features and saw retaliation. The Outer Kingdom warrior swallowed, his agile mind searching for something to say.

“Well?” The question was lethal in its pitch.

A deep breath, drawn in through distended nostrils, calmed Yuri to the point where he could slip a false smile of ingratiating meekness to his taut lips despite wanting to tear Conar McGregor’s head off. He lowered his voice, forced into it a mildness he certainly didn’t feel.

“My apologies, Highness,” he replied, putting more emphasis on the last word than he thought prudent or wise, but unable to keep himself from doing so. He cocked his head to one side in mock subservience. “I did, indeed, forget to whom I was speaking.”

Conar’s lip curled into a sneering grin. “Well, don’t forget again.”

Yuri had to bite his tongue to keep from shouting. If he had been just a tad calmer, a little less impatient, he would have seen the flash of hilarity in his companion’s eyes before the dark orbs shifted back to the roadway. And he would have heard the snicker of amusement that was hastily concealed behind a ragged cough.

The road began to narrow as it wound upward toward the Uralap Mountains. Ragged cliffs of dark rust shale jutted outward toward the roadway, closing in on the road. Sparse growth, mostly hardy evergreens and a stray seedling of some broadleaf tree, grew in the ridges of stone. The farther up the men road, the taller the cliffs became until nothing could be seen but dusty road and rugged umber cliff.

“The Palace of the Tzars sits in the Valley of the Saints,” Yuri remarked as he sensed his companion’s boredom. “It was built by our first Tzar, Alexandre.”

Despite his intention to be disagreeable, Conar was intrigued by the twisting, winding roadway upon which they trod. He glanced at Yuri. “It would be hard to get an invading army through this section of landscape. Is there an easier way to get to the Palace?”

Yuri shook his head. “The Palace of the Tzars is as difficult to assault as is your own keep, Highness. There is a wide fjord that circles the Palace and empties into a smaller tributary of the Saint Steffen River. There is only one way over to the Palace and that is by ferry. The walls are heavily defended and there are warriors garrisoned around the fjord to protect the access to the

water. I have been told there are land mines between the garrisons and the fjord itself, but I don't know that for a fact."

"Land?"

"Land mines," Yuri offered. "They are a type of bomb."

At his companion's confused expression, Yuri explained. "A type of explosive that will detonate if pressure is applied to it. You step on it, your horse steps on it, your carriage rolls over it and" He shrugged. "You explode."

"Impressive," Conar muttered to himself. He caught a glimpse of the pride on Yuri's face. "But any keep can be taken."

Yuri flinched, knew he was being baited and tried to ignore it. "Anything can be tried," he said softly.

Conar smiled to himself and looked up at the towering cliff wall beside him. Atop the highest crag a vulture sat watching them. He flapped his wings at their intrusion and then flew off, his scrawny neck arched before him as though it had been put on as an afterthought at his creation.

"Is everything in this country ugly?" Conar remarked.

"No more so than everything in your country!" Yuri snapped. He could have groaned at the look Conar sent his way, holding his breath for the reprimand he saw looming on that handsome face, but what came he could not have anticipated.

"I grow weary of your company," Conar said in a dry, bored voice.

Yuri's hand tightened on his reins. "I am sorry you will have to put up with it for awhile longer, Highness."

"Not if I don't wish to," Conar answered. "Go away."

"What?" Yuri turned his head, his brows drawing together with confusion. "I don't"

"Try this on for size," Conar thought to himself as he dug his heels into his mount's flanks and shot ahead of the fuming Outer Kingdom warrior.

"Highness!" Yuri called out. He looked behind him at one of his fellow warriors, saw the man hunch his shoulders in fatalistic acceptance, and then grimaced. "Damn it!" He tapped his own horse's sides and bolted forward behind the glistening palomino Conar McGregor rode with such reckless abandon.

Conar could hear the palfrey lumbering behind him and knew the glorious thoroughbred he was astride could easily outdistance the clumsier, heavier mount upon which Yuri rode with even more clumsy, awkward, and heavy seat.

Not that that was Conar's intent. After all, he had absolutely no idea where he was going, but aggravating the older man had become a game with him and retaliation was its name. He heard his name called out in disgust, smiled to himself and urged his steed on to a greater speed. There was a sharp turn in the road ahead and he thought to make it, halt his mount, and turn to face the charging palfrey. To be just sitting there, wrists calmly crossed over the pommel, waiting, would set Yuri's teeth sharper on edge.

Yuri yelled, but the golden horse and its golden-mane rider disappeared around the turn in the road in a blur of tawny light. "Son-of-a-bitch!" Yuri spat, digging his heels into the palfrey's side for more speed, something the wide-flanked animal neither appreciated nor was willing to provide.

Another sharp turn in the road, a switchback curve to the left, awaited Conar as he took the first turn and he pulled his reins to turn his mount's head. He was laughing, his face alive and happy for the first time in a long time as the palomino entered the second turn.

Then the smile was wiped from Conar's mouth.

The laughter stilled on his lips.

The happiness died on his face to be replaced by a stunned look of surprise.

Yuri galloped heavily into the first turn, heard a piercing shriek of an animal in distress, heard a shout of warning, a muffled scream, a loud crash, and drew in on his mount's reins, further annoying and upsetting the charging palfrey who reared up on its hind legs in protest of such rude behavior on the part of its rider.

Not expecting the horse to react in such a manner, and not all that expert at riding to begin with, Yuri's grip on his reins loosened, his backside began to slide off the mount's rump, and he hit the ground amidst a cloud of dust and stomping hooves. He would later thank his god that he had at that moment enough presence of mind to roll away from the kick the palfrey aimed at his head before the flashing hooves could connect with his noggin. He flipped over in the dust, came to land up hard against a jutting stone that gouged a small hole in his back, and yelped in surprise and pain.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" he bellowed, putting a hand to his injured back.

The palfrey, well rid of her rider and free to make her own statement, reared up once more, her hooves waving a fare-thee-well, and then came to ground with a thud that Yuri later swore shook the ground beneath his rump. With a nicker of disdain, the animal switched her tail, turned around and cantered back the way she had come, leaving Yuri cursing and spitting dust.

"Bitch!" he yelled after her. "Get back here!"

The palfrey nickered and continued on.

Wincing with pain, Yuri gingerly pushed himself from the ground, cursing Conar McGregor soundly as he did. He began to hobble his way to the second turning in the road, slapping at the dust on his pantaloons, his face set in a fierce scowl.

Boris Mavolachek, one of the Outer Kingdom warriors who had shadowed Conar McGregor for over five years, saw the palfrey trotting sedately toward him and the other men and reined in his mount. A look of worry, mixed with a look of coming trouble to be dealt with, flitted across his coarse features. He looked past the horse to the turn in the road and sighed.

"Get that mount, Alexi," he told one of the other men. He nudged his own horse forward, shaking his head, wishing he had become a farmer instead of a warrior. He could be plowing a field in the Uralap foothills right about now instead of cantering into the good Lord only knew what kind of trouble. If his sixth sense had taught him anything over the last thirty-nine years, it had taught him when trouble was just around the corner. That sixth sense was yelling to him at that moment and Alexi felt a shiver of dread go down his spine.

Yuri stopped, leaned against the stone wall beside him and winced with pain. He put his hand to his back, felt a sticky wetness on his fingers, and then held them up to see a smudge of blood on his fingertips. The rock had done more than gouge him. It had broken the skin. With a curse on his lips that would have turned the air blue had it not been filled with dust, Yuri pushed away from the wall and made his way around the second bend in the road.

He came to a stop, mouth open, eyes wide, a grunt of shock pushing out of his wide chest.

"Don't just stand there!" Conar yelled at him. "Do something!"

As Boris Malovachek walked his mount around the second turning in the roadway, he groaned. With a sigh of weariness, he swung his leg over his horse's head and slid deftly to the ground. He looked to where Yuri was standing, mouth agape, and knew the warrior couldn't have budged if someone had set a firecracker under his ass.

"One moment, Highness," Boris said. He tied his mount's reins to a scraggly pine sapling that had pushed its way through a crack in the cliff wall and then strode forward.

“Get this thing off me!” Conar yelled, but stopped when Boris walked past him to a hay wagon that was lying partially on its side, propped precariously up against the jagged cliff wall. “Hey!”

Boris flinched at the shout, but continued to make his way to the hay wagon’s driver who was half-lying, half-sitting in the wagon’s seat.

“Are you all right, Highness?” Boris asked, beginning to unhitch the traces which held an old nag to the hay wagon.

“Hell, no, I’m not all right!” Conar bellowed at him. “I’ve got a damned crate pinning me to the damned ground, as if you haven’t noticed!”

“I’d like to pin his damned ass to a damned barn wall,” came a muffled snort from the hay wagon’s buckboard.

“Don’t move, Highness,” Boris advised. “You could be hurt.”

“Could be?” Conar screeched at him. “I’ll be damned lucky if my damned legs aren’t broken!”

“He’ll be damned lucky if I don’t break his damned head!” the driver said loud enough for Conar to hear.

“Go to hell, you son-of-a-bitch!” Conar roared. “You and that piece of shit mule could have killed me!”

“I might yet!” was the just as furious reply. “And my horse isn’t a mule!”

“Why you lily-livered ...”

“Highness, please,” Boris said, wincing as he led the old nag away from the wagon. “There is no need ...”

“Is she hurt?” the driver cut him off, trying to look up from such an uncomfortable position to see the horse.

“I’ll check,” Boris answered as he ran his hand over the old nag’s legs and withers.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Conar yelled, staring open-mouthed at Boris’ actions. “I’m lying in the middle of the road with a wooden crate on me and you’re checking that goddamned nag first?”

“That goddamned nag is worth a hell of a sight more than you, you loudmouthed, uncivil bastard!” the driver shot back.

Yuri blinked, groaned. “Oh, Lord,” he breathed.

Struggling furiously to get out from under the heavy crate, Conar pushed and strained, but he couldn’t budge the weight. His face was red with fury, sweat running down the livid features to make runnels in the dust covering his complexion. His mount stood behind him, snorting softly, pawing the ground, rolling its expressive eyes at his predicament. Stretching out its long neck, the palomino butted Conar’s shoulder gently and nickered as though to urge him to get up.

“Go away!” he hissed, pushing the stallion’s golden face from his own as the horse nuzzled his neck. “Go!”

“The nag isn’t hurt, Highness,” Boris stated.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass if it is or not!” Conar hooted. “Get this damned crate off me!”

A heavy sigh of contempt could be heard from the seat of the hay wagon. “Who is that loudmouthed bastard, Boris?”

Boris risked a look at Yuri, found that warrior still standing in the road, face pale, lips pursed tightly together. He shrugged and turned his attention back to the driver.

“Prince Conar McGregor,” he answered.

“I should have known,” was the stiff reply. “Get me down from here, Boris.”

“Not before he gets me...”

“Go to hell!” was the driver’s immediate shout.

“Why you little ...”

“Be careful what you say, Highness,” Boris warned. He gripped the side of the hay wagon and began to pull.

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Conar yelled at him, watching as the big man got the wagon to rocking and then stepped quickly out of the wagon as the contraption began to tilt downward.

“Hang on, highness!” Boris yelled as the wagon started to right itself on the roadway.

The wagon crashed to the ground with a splintering sound. The driver flew sideways, jerked away from a tight hold on the buckboard’s high rim as the axle broke. Boris rushed forward, grabbing the driver before the momentum of the fall could carry them both to the ground, but he misgauged his footing and the two of them fell heavily to the hard-packed dirt. A loud whoosh of air was forced out of both their lungs as they landed.

“Serves you right!” Conar laughed, pointing at the sputtering, coughing pair. “I hope you choke on that damned dust, you peasant bastard!”

What came at him over the crate brought Conar’s laughter to an immediate halt. A flying fury of flashing white teeth, drawn back over snarling red lips--sharp, wickedly-pointed nails curved into talons of destruction, gleaming hazel eyes that glowed with absolute fury were like something out of a nightmare. Had those portends of lethality not been attached to a rather pretty, all too- feminine face, Conar would have sworn he was being attacked by a were-tigeress. As it was, the nails that gouged the undersides of his arms as he put them up to block his face, and the spitting fury that sent honey-flavored saliva into his astonished face, the soft body that barreled into his own, knocking him flat beneath its weight, left no doubt in his mind that this little harridan was intent on blinding him, maiming him, or both.

“Highness!” Boris shouted, hurrying forward. “You must not do this!”

“I’m not doing anything!” Conar yelled back as he twisted his face away from the fingers driving toward his cheeks. He managed to get a fairly good grip on the woman’s wrists, but she was strong, mindless rage giving her more strength than a woman should have had who was half-lying atop him, her feet and legs draped over the wooden crate, her upper torso wiggling against his chest.

“For the love of god, Yuri, help me!” Boris yelled as he grabbed the woman’s feet and tried to pull her back.

Yuri flinched, saw what was taking place and shook his head. “Oh, Lord.”

“Let me at him, Boris!” the woman screeched, kicking out at the hands which were trying to pull her backwards over the crate.

Conar stared into her eyes, eyes wild with her anger, and wondered if those gleaming, hell-bent orbs were really hazel or green. He couldn’t tell. All he knew was that her squirming on him, the tips of her heaving breasts burning live hot coals through his sweat-dampened shirt, had given him one hell of an erection beneath the covering of the wooden crate on his lower body. The knowledge did little to improve his own temperament.

“Get this bitch off me, Makalovek,” Conar hissed, avoiding the spittle she aimed at his face. He felt the moisture go down his neck. “You bitch!” he snarled. “I ought to turn your fat ass over my lap!”

“I’ll geld you if you dare to try!” she hissed back. “And serve your nuts to that ‘nag’ of mine!”

“Highness!” Boris pleaded, darting his gaze to Conar’s furious face.

“The gods help you when I get up, you cow!” Conar growled. “I’m going to beat your ass black and blue!” Her fingers were raking his hands, drawing blood, and he had every intention in the world of doing just as he had promised as soon as he could.

Boris looked up as another warrior joined him in helping to pin the woman’s legs. Between them, they managed to pull her back over the crate. They jerked, pulling her hands from Conar’s grip and winced as she drew back a fist and shot it straight to the point of the young Prince’s chin before she was dragged away. Luckily her blow was only a glancing one that made more sound than damage.

“You bitch!” Conar bellowed, trying to scramble toward her, but still confined under the weight of the crate, that with her squirming weight, was digging a furrow into his shins. He wasn’t surprised to find he’d lost his erection.

“You bastard!” she yelled back at him, trying to get to him again.

“Please!” Boris begged. He struggled to hold the spitting woman in his arms despite her attempt to stomp on his instep. “Highness! That’s enough!”

“Get this fucking crate off me!”

“Leave it on the bastard. Maybe it’ll crush him!”

Yuri sighed and stepped toward Conar. “Hold still, Highness. I’ll remove the crate.”

“Leave his ass under it!” the woman screeched. She bucked in Boris’ arms, bridged her neck backwards and clipped the unfortunate warrior on the point of his chin.

His hold loosened immediately and she darted around the warrior who had come to Boris’ aid and made a dive for Conar once more.

“That is enough!” Yuri shouted as he spun away from where he had been about to bend over Conar. He put out a hand to halt her. His big paw planted itself firmly in the center of her chest, large fingers splayed out between her heaving breasts, and he stepped in front of her. “Stop this now!” His face had taken on a stern, warning look. “Do you hear me?” His last words were evenly spaced, low, a thick brow arched in challenge.

The woman stopped, her gaze darting past Yuri to the man lying on the ground glaring up at her with enough hostility to start another holocaust. Her jaw clenched, her nostrils flared, her breathing went deep and long. She stared at her opponent for a fraction of a second longer then nodded crisply and turned away.

“Thank you,” Yuri breathed, lowering his hand. He watched as the woman walked a few steps away, turned to glare back at Conar as she leaned negligently on the buckboard of her wagon. “Stay there, now,” Yuri added for emphasis before turning his attention back to Conar once again.

Conar’s dark glower was fastened on the woman standing ten feet away from him. Most men would have recoiled from that vicious stare, but the woman looking back at him seemed amused by it. He growled as she tossed her head and sneered.

“Are you hurt, Your Grace?” Yuri asked, trying to draw Conar’s hot stare from the woman.

“No,” Conar hissed.

“Too bad,” she cooed. “He deserves to be for riding that stallion like a demon out of the pit.”

A tick began in Conar’s lean jaw. “You haven’t seen the demon in me yet, you fat cow.”

One delicate brown brow lifted in scorn. “Perhaps not, but I have seen the jackass in you, you pompous twit.”

Yuri groaned. He bent over and heaved the wooden crate from the man he had sworn to protect with his own life. Reaching out an angry hand to help Prince Conar to his feet, he clasped the young man’s sword hand in his own and levered up a very enraged Serenian monarch.

“Do all your peasants talk to their betters in such a manner, Andreanova?” Conar growled.

“Better?” came a shrill laugh. “He thinks to call himself MY better?” In a very unfeminine and unmannered gesture, she turned her head, bent sideways, and spat on the ground. Straightening up, she tilted her chin in the air and glared at him down her nose. “THAT for thinking yourself *my* better, you arrogant Serenian pig!”

His left leg aching horribly, his vision obscured by dancing red pinpoints of fury, Conar took a painful step forward, viciously knocking aside Yuri’s hastily flung out arm meant to restrain him.

“Just who the hell do you think you are, you Outer Kingdom cow?” he bellowed at her.

Before Yuri or Boris could open mouths to tell him, the woman drew herself up to her full five feet five inches of outraged womanhood and spat her answer at his feet.

“The Tzarevna, you son-of-a-worm’s belly! Crown Princess of St. Steffensburg! Second in line to the throne of the Outer Kingdom!” Her eyes sparkled with challenge. “And just who are *you*, Conar McGregor? Disinherited son of the Serenian Kingdom!”

Fury couldn’t quite describe how he felt at that moment, he later thought. Anger certainly wasn’t strong enough a word to adequately convey to an outsider what he was experiencing as he stood there glaring back at the little bitch.

Rage, well, that was close to the emotion, but still not as strong a description of his emotions as he would have liked.

Murder. That was closer still.

Total annihilation, only a hair’s breadth away from being adequate. But still, he didn’t think there had ever been a word invented in either of their languages that could have unerringly described how he felt.

Not that it mattered, he later realized. Standing between him and the target of his ire were five hulking warriors, hands on their weapons. Not that they would have harmed him, he rationalized, but they sure as hell would have kept him from attacking the bitch even though at that moment he had wanted to pulverize her to nothingness. Their worried eyes had flown between Conar and the Tzarevna, sweat had broken out on brows, under arms, in the palms of their sword hands. Aye, he knew, they would have put an immediate stop to any retaliatory action on his part, and hers, he came to understand.

“What? No ready insult to fling back at me?” she shot at him, baiting him. Lush coral lips parted in a sneer. “Or have you remembered what few manners your dame taught you when standing in the presence of *your* betters?”

Conar let his dark gaze go down her from the crown of short, lush curls on her head to the dusty brown boots on her feet. His lip curled in distaste and he jerked his head to Yuri.

“This is the old maid your Tzar wanted to foist off on me?” He snorted. “This is the bitch he wants me to marry?”

“What?” It was a low, menacing growl of both surprise and warning from the woman’s suddenly still face. She pushed away from the wagon, staring at him.

With a contemptuous lift of his golden left brow, Conar rewarded her with one of his most seductive, and deceptive smiles. There was actual frost in his voice as he spoke.

“Didn’t they tell you, highness?” He stressed the last word as though it were distasteful.

Her face narrowed and then moved turned to Yuri. “Tell me what, Yuri Andreanova?”

Yuri sent daggers of warning at Conar before letting his gaze mellow and merge with the Tzarevna’s. “Your father was going to tell you”

“Tell me what?” There was murderous rage now in the low voice.

“That he was giving you to me!” Conar chuckled. He ignored Yuri’s hiss of warning, Boris’ groan, and stepped toward her. “As my helpmate.” His voice went deep as he took another step. “My consort.” He reached her, stood glaring down into her upturned face. “My wife.” His lip lifted in an ugly sneer. “As if I’d have you!”

Her complexion turned a pale rose, her lips parted in disbelief, but when neither of the warriors standing behind Conar McGregor denied what the horrid man was saying, a livid blush of pure rage flooded her face and she drew back her right hand with every intention in the world of slamming the rigid, hateful smirk off his face. But as her hand came forward, with enough force to stagger the bastard whose fluidity of motion was so quick, and so exact, that he had her wrist in a powerful grip strong enough to make her knees bend in pain and shock before her palm could connect with his face. A slight groan, quickly stifled and immediately regretted, issued from her lips before she clamped down on her emotions and glared up into his face even as tears of pain welled in her eyes.

“Don’t you ever try that again,” he whispered to her, his hateful face moving so close to her own she could smell the hint of cinnamon on his breath. “Do you hear me, Highness?” His question was punctuated with a tightening on her wrist she would have sworn could not have been possible.

“Yes,” she whispered, a single tear of agony falling treacherously down her left cheek.

“Good,” he said. He loosened his hold only enough so that the blood pounding in her fingers would lessen. “I believe we understand one another, now, don’t we?”

“Yes,” she answered, hating him with all her being as his lips lowered to within striking distance of her own.

“Just for the record, just so you’ll know, Highness,” he cooed to her, his gaze roaming over her face. His smile was slick, intimately evil. “I have no intention of allowing anyone to coerce me into marrying any female, be it you or one of your unsightly sisters. And even if I were so inclined to mate again, it would not be with someone I find ...,” he flicked a look over her that was filled with contempt, “unacceptable.” His smile grew nastier still. “Do I make myself clear to you, you fat cow?”

For a reason she could not understand, his words cut her deeply, and his brute strength overwhelmed her. To be seen in such a bad light, to be helpless against him, put another tear onto her cheek. Her entire body quivered with humiliation.

“Perfectly clear,” she told him in a voice she hardly recognized as her own.

“Good.” He spat the word at her like a deadly poison.

He released her wrist and stepped back, turning his back on her, dismissing her as he would a servant who had angered him, with no expectation there would be a reprisal. He walked calmly, strutted she would have said, to his mount and grasped the pommel and, disdaining the stirrup, swung himself expertly into the saddle and stared down at Yuri.

“I’m ready when you are, Andreanova.”

Yuri looked uneasily from his ward to his Tzarevna.

Never had he seen Marie Catherine Steffenovitch lower her eyes to any man--be it father or brother or Priest. Never had he seen her cry, not even when she had fallen from her horse and broken both an arm and leg. Not even when her favorite kitten had been crushed beneath the wheels of her mother’s coach. But as he stood there, uncertainly stamped on his blunt features, he watched silent tears falling down the ashen cheeks of his Tzarevna and was astonished. Slowly his gaze went to the man sitting astride the impatient palomino.

“Any time today will do, Andreanova,” Conar McGregor snapped. “I’ve nowhere special to

be.”

Boris caught Yuri’s attention and both men looked back at the woman standing docilely beside her wagon. Her head was bowed, her expression hidden beneath the fall of the short bangs covering her forehead. There was a slight slump to her shoulders as she twisted her hands together before her.

“Highness?” Yuri questioned.

“Go on to the palace, Yuri Andreanova,” she said in a low, toneless voice. “I will be along shortly.”

“Would you like one of the men to?”

“Leave her be,” Conar commanded. He kept his gaze on her, for he could sense what the others could not. “She can manage on her own.”

“But the wagon ...,” Yuri protested.

“Got to this point with her at the reins and can get to where it is going the same way. She doesn’t want, nor need your help, do you, Highness?” Conar called over to her.

She shook her head. “No, I do not. All of you, go,” she ordered. “Leave me.”

“But the wagon wheel is ...,” Yuri tried to protest.

“Mount up, Andreanova,” Conar ordered in a voice that brooked no argument. “The wheel will hold until she gets where she’s going. Someone there can fix it for her.”

Despite his better judgment, and the warning looks Boris sent his way, Yuri mounted his palfrey and kicked the animal over to where Prince Conar McGregor sat.

“This has been a bad start,” Yuri apologized. “Normally, Her Grace is”

“How far is it to the palace?” Conar cut him off.

Yuri sighed. He knew a dismissal when he was given one. “Half an hour’s ride,” he answered.

Conar glanced up at the sky. “Then we can make it before nightfall.” He kicked his mount in the flanks and moved forward, away from the wagon and the female who slowly lifted her head to stare after him as he rode away.

Marie Catherine Steffenovitch watched the tall man sitting astride the magnificent stallion until he was out of sight behind one of the sharp turnings in the roadway. For a long time she stood where she was, staring at the dust as it settled from the horse’s passing, and then she climbed onto the seat of the buckboard and sat down, surveying the damage done to the wagon. The wheel cantered inward, but it would, as he had predicted, hold until she could get the wagon home.

She sighed, glancing at the crate beside the roadway. She knew she’d have to send someone back for it, but it would be safe until she did. It bore the stamp of the royal house on its side and no one would dare pilfer what belonged to the Tzar’s household.

Slowly, she lifted her head and stared after the riders, the last of whom was just disappearing around the turn in the road.

“I hate you,” she said softly.

Chapter Five

He had to admit that the Palace of the Tzars was a sight better than the town of St. Steffensberg. Gleaming a soft, pale peach color in the fading day's light, the high walls, bulbous towers roofed in what could only have been pure gold, the elaborate crenellations and elegant stained glass windows along the upper stories, the Palace of the Tzars rivaled Boreas Keep in both splendor and bulk.

"The Palace was built just after the final battle between Alel's Force and the Domination troops here," Yuri explained as he saw Conar staring with awe at the beauty before him.

Conar glanced at his companion. "I didn't realize the perfidy of the Domination stretched this far east."

Yuri smiled. "It seeped into every culture, I was taught. We have had no trouble with that evil for hundreds of years, though. They have all but vanished from the Outer Kingdom."

A heavy frown crossed Conar's face. "But they were here, in your culture?"

A small shrug hitched up Yuri's right shoulder. "If they still are, they keep to themselves and cause us no trouble."

When they entered the gates of the palace, Conar whistled softly beneath his breath. Everywhere he looked in the courtyard there were people; people on the steps of the palace; people standing about the walls; people milling about under shade trees and canopies and peering out of doorways, leaning out of windows, perched on balcony rails. There was not an empty space anywhere that he could see that was not occupied by curious, staring people.

But they were perfectly silent.

"Why are they so quiet?" he asked Yuri, unnerved by the way the people were watching him and with their silence.

"Out of respect for you. They came to see you, but they know of your loss, Highness. They would not insult you by cheering unless they see it would not bother you."

Conar looked about him, tentatively smiling at a group of older men along the cobblestone pathway to the front steps of the palace.

"Dosfatoni," he said, politely greeting them in their own language.

"Dosfatoni," one of the men replied, smiling.

"Dosfatoni!" several women called out, drawing Conar's attention.

"It is a pleasure to be in your homeland," he told them.

Yuri looked back at Boris. The people were speaking among themselves, waving to the Serenian, speaking to him as he passed. A few put out their hands in a shy salute.

Conar's brow quirked. "They know the Raven's sign here?"

Boris chuckled. "We know everything that happens in the Outlands, Highness."

The Serenian turned to the men who had saluted him and returned their greeting, his right hand in a fist, thumb and little finger out and crooked inward.

"The Wind be at your back, Prince Conar!"

He turned in his saddle, searching for the person who had yelled out to him in his own native tongue, in the same soft drawl Conar, himself, spoke with. When he found a young man smiling broadly at him, jabbing a thumb at his chest in acknowledgment that it had been him who had spoken, Conar grinned.

"Where are you from, Serenian?"

"Danforth, Your Grace!" The young man stepped around several Outer Kingdom men. He gazed up at Conar. "I have not seen a fellow Serenian in eight years."

Bending down in the saddle, Conar extended his hand toward the young man who did not hesitate to grasp his Overlord's wrist in a warm welcome. "What's your name?"

"Jordan, Your Grace," the young man answered. "Jordan Knowles."

"What in Alel's name are you doing here?" Conar asked as he straightened on his horse's back.

A slight flush crept over the young man's cheeks. "I was pressed into the Domination's service as a seaman aboard one of their prison transports. I jumped overboard near Nylanton Point and was rescued by an Outer Kingdom barkentine. I've been here since before your brother, Lord Legion, took the throne."

"Lucky for you," Conar laughed.

"Aye," Jordan said, nodding, misunderstanding what his Overlord had meant. "Else I'd have been shark bait before I'd have let them Domination sailors pull me back on board."

"Tell Yuri where you live. I'd like to talk with you sometime. There's been a lot that has happened in our homeland since you've been away."

"I'd like that, Your Grace," Jordan answered, stepping back.

Looking about him, at the people who were smiling back at him, Conar lifted his hand. "I appreciate your welcome!"

Cheers rang out over the courtyard and applause punctuated the warm greeting, but almost as soon as the noise began, it stopped and people began to drift away.

"Was it something I said?" Conar laughed.

"You met with their approval and they will go home to discuss their impressions of you."

Conar nodded toward the Palace. "Do you think we could go on in, now? I'm starving."

A flicker of puzzlement slid over Yuri's face, but then he shrugged. Who knew the ways of royalty, he thought with a grimace? The man had just been given the warmest welcome ever to an Outlander and the man could only think of his stomach.

Throwing his leg over his mount's head, the Outer Kingdom warrior slid to the ground and tossed his reins to a waiting stable boy. "Her Highness will be in shortly, Sasha," Yuri told the tow-headed lad. He lowered his voice. "And not in a very good mood, either."

The boy glanced at the tall man standing beside Andreanova and nodded. "Another one?" he whispered.

Yuri sighed. "No, not this time." He reached out to tousle the lad's hair. "Take care, now."

Conar, who had been looking up at the looming stone walls before him, had not missed the undercurrent of conversation between the two. As Yuri extended a hand for Conar to lead the way up the sweeping thick stone steps to the Palace's entrance the Serenian prince turned cool blue eyes to his companion.

"Another what?"

Yuri flinched. "Pardon Your Grace?"

Conar's left brow crooked upward.

"Oh." The stain on Yuri's face deepened. "Her Highness has suitors who come nearly every day to ask for her hand, Your Grace," he explained. "Little Sasha thought you might be another such visitor."

Conar's brow lowered to meet its twin across the bridge of his nose. "If it's just the cow's hoof they want, the poor buggers might not be so bad off. But if it's the rest of her oversized carcass they're seeking, they have my pity and sympathy."

Yuri gasped. "Highness, please!"

Conar snorted, interrupting. "The only thing the bitch has going for her is her mouth. Maybe

some man could use that for his”

One moment Conar was standing at the base of the steps, his sardonic gaze raking Yuri’s shocked face, the next he was face down in the dirt, his forehead cracking hard against the bottom riser. “Oh, shit!” he heard Yuri moan just as the lights went out and he pitched into a bottomless well of silence.

* * * *

He woke to a splitting headache, the room throbbing along with the pulse in his temples, a blinding pain in his right cheek as he stared up at the underside of an elaborate damask canopy which stretched above the lush bed on which he lay. His fingers dug into the satin sheets stretched out beneath him as he gingerly eased his head to first the right then left to view his surroundings, but the bed was so high off the floor, the foot posts so thick and massive, all he could see was a broad expanse of gilt crown mold, a splash of gold and red damask wallpaper and huge double oaken doors. He tried to lift his head upward, but the strain caused him to gasp with pain and he snapped his eyes shut, groaning.

“You won’t die,” he heard a sneering female voice shout into the agony that was his awakening. “Unfortunately,” she added with a clipped explosion of contempt.

“Go away!” he whispered, knowing instantly who it was that was torturing him with her grating voice.

“If I could, I would, believe me, you sorry jackass,” she hissed back, “but Father insisted since I was the cause of you being here, I was to be the one to care for you.” What she thought of such a notion was evident in her bored and scathing tone.

“Bitch,” he breathed.

“Bastard,” she retorted.

He heard the creak of a chair and then her heavy footsteps moved toward the bed. He knew she was hovering above him, staring down at him.

“Go annoy someone else,” he sighed. He tried to shift on the bed and found himself gasping as pain flared in his rump.

“You look like shit,” she informed him and sneered down into his face when he managed to glare up at her. “Are all Serenian’s so ugly?”

If he could have he would have shouted at her, but such an action was sure to have caused him even more intense pain, so he settled for clutching the sheets in an even harder grip. “Are all Outer Kingdom cows so fat?” he shot back, almost smiling as the expression on her face slid from contempt-filled triumph at the annoyance she had caused him to one of hurt. He felt a thrill of victory go through him that he had managed to score a direct hit on her pride. The bitch didn’t like her weight being commented upon. A nasty smile twitched at his lips as he added, “Or are you the exception?”

Catherine blinked, understanding the gleam of revenge that had flitted through the man’s dark eyes. He had gone for blood, and upon finding it, he plunged the dagger deeper, aiming for a mortal wound. Her chin came up, her face shut down.

“It’s too bad you didn’t break your neck when you fell,” she said in a thick, seething voice. “I would have had the pleasure of attending your funereal. I have a black gown I have yet to wear.”

His eyes, despite the massive pain stabbing into them with every breath he took, slid over her from head to waist to back again, before finally settling into a squint.

“Do they make gowns that big or did they cut a tent down to fit you?” he asked in a pleasant, cooing tone.

She dug her nails into the palms of her hand and just stared at him, not wanting him to see

how much pain his callous words were causing her. She was very conscious of her weight, even though several of her suitors, mostly men from the northern climes of her land, insisted they much admired her excess of body fat.

"You are as uncouth as you are ugly," she replied. Her stare moved to the twin scars etched down his left cheek. "It must be difficult for a woman to let you touch her looking the way you do, but I suppose there are those women who will do anything for enough gold."

A shaft of hurt stabbed through Conar's heart at her words and his left hand lifted automatically to cover the ravages of his cheek. As her lips twitched at his motion, he knew she realized she'd managed to make a lethal jab at his pride. He jerked his hand down.

"Why don't you go pull the wings off some flies?" he snapped.

Her lips twitched again then slowly slid into a smirking smile. "Any such pastime would be preferable to conversing with you."

"Then, go do it!" he snarled.

Catherine cocked her head to one side. "You're very aware of your disfigurement, aren't you?"

"Get the fuck out of my room!" he shouted, his lids flickering with the agony such an action caused.

Her lips puckered into a pout. "My, my, my, my, my!," she purred. "You are such an uncouth lout."

"Get out!"

Turning on her heel, Catherine sashayed from the bed. Her laughter was like a goad that stoked the fire of Conar's fury and the raging repeat of his order caused her to fan the flames even higher as she stopped with her hand on the door's handle.

"I'd rather be overweight than have my face all gouged up. At least I can LOSE the weight!"

A roar of fury swept through Conar and the bellow that pushed out of his mouth nearly ruptured his vocal chords. As it was, the pain the shout caused pitched him back into the light-swallowing darkness.

* * * *

"Marie Catherine!" her mother, the Tzarina, sighed with displeasure. "Your conduct is not acceptable. Not acceptable, at all."

"Not acceptable," her father, the Tzar echoed. "At all."

"Whatever were you thinking to do such a thing?" her mother asked. There was a stern expression, admonishment on her pretty ivory face.

"Such a thing," her father said on a long, drawn out sigh, shaking his head as he did so.

"Prince Conar could have been seriously hurt," the Tzarina reminded her.

"Seriously hurt," the Tzar stressed.

"His head's so thick it took a chip out of the step when he fell," Catherine murmured. At her mother's stony silence, she dared to glance up. "Honestly!" she said. "It did!"

"It did," her father said, nodding.

A prim pursing of the Tzarina's lips was all the answer Catherine received for her comment.

Catherine let out a long, put upon breath. "Mother," she said in a rational, 'let's make sense of this' voice, "the man is obnoxious. He's uncouth, uncivilized and vulgar. I took exception to the things he was saying about me and I fear I let my temper get the best of me."

"By shoving the poor man down in the dirt," her mother snapped.

"In the dirt!" her father moaned, shaking his head.

The Tzarina turned to her husband, the love of her life, the bane of her existence, and her

companion of fifty-two years. "Thomas, *must* you repeat everything I say?"

The Tzar blushed. "No," he answered. He looked away from his wife's annoyed face. "I don't suppose so."

Laughter snagged at Catherine's lip, but her mother's grating tone wiped the humor from the young woman's face.

"We won't tell the poor man how you pushed him. We won't tell him how you kicked him in the"

"Ass, Dearling," her husband supplied. "She kicked him in the ass."

Charlotte Steffenovitch's eyes narrowed with warning at her husband's bland expression. "That will do, Thomas."

"Yes, Love," the Tzar mumbled. He glanced at his daughter and winked.

"This is not amusing!" the Tzarina declared, looking pointedly from father to daughter. "He could have been seriously hurt!"

"He got a conk on the noggin' and a raging headache, Lottie," her husband reminded her. "Nothing more. The physician says he's perfectly fine except for the headache."

"Which he deserved for insulting me," Catherine told her mother.

The Tzarina threw up her hands. "I give up!" she hissed. "The two of you seem to think this is a game!" She spun around and pointed a long, narrow finger at her husband. "This man is the heir to the kingdom of Serenia, Thomas! He is the most powerful man in seven kingdoms. Your people need him. His presence here is of vital importance to us. Will you have him insulted and abused by this slip of a girl?"

"Mother ...," Catherine began in an exasperated tone, but her mother turned on her in such a way the young woman took a step back.

"We need him, Marie Catherine!" her mother shouted, eyes flaring. "He is our future. Your future!"

"The hell he is!" Catherine hissed right back. "You will never force me into marrying that son-of-a"

"Who said anything about you marrying him?" her father demanded, coming out of his chair in a bound. "Who told you that?"

Catherine swung her own angry glare to her father. "He told me!" she snapped. "Just before he informed me he would rather marry a sludge pig than marry me!"

"He said that?" her mother gasped.

The young woman's lip thrust out in a pout. "Something to that effect."

"He knows?" her father groaned, sitting down again.

"Obviously he does," her mother sighed. A frown marred her loveliness. "Wasn't he supposed to know?"

The Tzar shook his head. "No." He glanced at his wife. "Not yet, anyway."

"It's true?" Catherine gasped.

"Now, Catherine ...," her father began only to have his daughter fix him with a livid stare.

"You were going to try to force me to marry this bastard? How could you?"

"Force is not the right word," her mother reasoned.

Catherine's head jerked toward her mother. "Then what would you call it, Mother?"

"It was to be only a suggestion, Marie Catherine," her father answered. "An alliance between the two kingdoms, the two houses."

A violent trembling took over Catherine's body as she walked to her father's chair and stared down at him. "Father," she said, her voice quivering, "I would rather die a fat old spinster than

be shackled to that vicious, pompous, ugly excuse for a man. If you try to pair me with him, I will ...," she looked about her, finally lifted her head and stared into her father's worried face. "I will slit my wrists!"

"Marie Catherine!" her mother gasped.

"You find him that repulsive?" her father asked.

"I find him beneath contempt," she informed her father. At his bleak silence, her mother's shocked stare, the young woman lifted her chin, straightened her shoulders. "May I go now?"

The Tzar nodded, unable to speak as his daughter curtsied and turned to walk away. He followed his daughter's straight back procession from the room.

"What now, Thomas?" his wife asked.

He shook his head. "We hope we can bring him to our way of thinking, then let nature take its course."

"And if nature balks at the union?"

The Tzar sighed heavily. "Don't even consider such a thing, Lottie."

Chapter Six

“I’ve questioned him, Your Grace, and I find he has had such headaches since childhood. Migraines, they are called,” the Physician informed his Tzarina. “I have given him some laudanum for the pain although he begged me not to. But I thought it best since this pain has lasted well over two days, now. He will sleep for a few hours, then hopefully the pain will have fled.”

A relieved sigh escaped Charlotte’s lovely mouth. “I was so afraid this had been caused by his fall.”

The Physician shook his head. “No, although hitting his head on the step didn’t help matters any. My guess is he would have acquired the headache in any case, Your Grace. Such maladies are usually brought on by stress and he does not appear to be in a settled state of mind at the present.”

“Stress?”

“He seems, well, agitated. Even with the extremity of his pain he seems to be fixating on some problem or another.” A slight smile touched the elderly white-haired gentleman’s lined face. “He asked if the Tzarevna was going to come back to see him.”

“Marie Catherine?” The lady’s brow lifted in surprise. “Does he want to see her?”

“He didn’t say as much, but I gather he wishes to for each time I enter his room, I find him looking up anxiously. When he sees it’s me, he appears to sigh with disappointment.”

The elegant old physician had no way of knowing Conar was sighing with relief. He had no desire to ever see the bloated cowarevna, as he had nicknamed her, again.

“Then I shall send her to sit with him and be there when he wakes,” Charlotte said, smiling. Maybe things would work out the way they wanted them to after all?

* * * *

Yuri Andreanova watched his wife hanging laundry on the line which ran from their cottage to a tall oak tree. He smiled lecherously as the pull of her arms dragged the bodice of her gown tightly over her straining bosom.

“Have you nothing better to do than ogle me, Yuri?” his wife, Raina, asked, casting him an amused look as she stooped down to lift another garment from her wicker basket.

“It’s been so long since I’ve had the chance to do so, love of my life, that I find I can not tear my eyes from you,” he answered honestly.

Raina smiled. “Did not last evening satisfy your lust, my husband?” She pinned a flannel gown to the line and then placed her hands at her hips and leaned back, stretching, aware of how the fabric covering her chest pulled even tauter across her breasts. Looking at Yuri, she saw how his face burning with desire.

Yuri pushed himself from the ground where he was sitting, his back against the aging oak, and dusted the seat of his breeches. With slow, purposeful steps, he walked to his wife and stared down into her smiling face.

God, he thought, a lump in his throat, how he loved this fragile-looking, petite woman. Her height was barely enough to reach him at mid-chest, her waist so small he could nearly span it with one hand, and this after three children, he thought with some measure of pride. Her pretty gray eyes were innocent, her coral mouth so tempting he had trouble keeping his eyes from straying to the luscious, moist flesh. Her silky black hair hung free to her small hips and her dusky complexion glowed with vitality and health.

“Do you know how much I have missed you, my lady?” he asked as he put out his hands to

draw her to him. "How often I dreamed of holding you in just this way?" He molded her to his huge frame and rested his chin on the top of her head. "I ache with want of you."

Beneath the coarse material of his uniform blouse, Raina could hear the slow, steady beat of her husband's heart, a heart so tender and gentle for a warrior of his size, she had feared for his safety every day he was away.

Her arms encircled his lean waist and she nuzzled her cheek against his chest. Tears of love and gratitude for his safe return filled her.

"The clothes can wait," she murmured and felt his heart thud with a leap of passion. She craned her head back and looked up into his smoldering eyes. "When do you have to be at the palace?"

He grinned. "After I make love to you."

* * * *

Conar looked up to see Yuri standing in the doorway. There was a smug, satisfied grin on the warrior's beefy face, and a cocky strut to his walk as he came to the bed.

"How are you, Your Grace?" Yuri asked.

A snort pushed its way from Conar's mouth. "Obviously not as well as you," he answered. "You look like a fox who's been set free in a hen house."

"Or a husband well sated from an afternoon of lusty tumbling about the sheets," came an amused voice from the direction of the bathing chamber.

Yuri glanced around, saw the Tzarevna Catherine, and his face lost its smile. His look went to Conar. He wondered at the bland expression on the Prince's face, wondered even more when the young man's words came out in a bored drawl.

"The cow was here when I woke up."

"At my mother's command," Catherine qualified. She flung the wet washcloth that she had been told to obtain at Yuri. "Here, *you* cater to his perverse whims from now on, Andreanova." Her glower raked Conar. "My duty is done with your arrival."

"And here I was just beginning to enjoy your subservience," Conar yawned.

"Bastard," she snarled.

"Bitch," he said in a pleasant voice.

Catherine glared at Yuri. "Did you have to bring him here?" she grumbled under her breath. "Couldn't you have left him at the Sinisters?"

"He didn't want to deny me the unique experience of seeing the bovine population in the Outer Kingdom," Conar said sweetly.

"Bastard!" she gasped.

"Bitch!" he breathed out in a sweet sigh.

Yuri looked to the ceiling, flinching as the door slammed shut behind his Tzarevna. When he looked down at the Serenian prince, he found Conar McGregor grinning maliciously.

"She doesn't like me very much, does she?" Conar chuckled.

"Like you?" Yuri snorted. "Your Grace, she can't stand the sight of you. I've never seen her take such a disliking to anyone as she has you."

"Wait 'til she really gets to know me," came the enigmatic reply.

Yuri's brow lowered. "What does that mean?"

"You love her, don't you?" Conar asked, changing the subject.

"The Tzarevna?" Yuri smiled. "Everyone loves her."

"Not everyone," Conar reminded him.

A blush stole over Yuri's broad face. "Can't you at least TRY to get along with her, Your

Grace? You've already made it clear you don't wish to marry her"

"I'd rather marry a hedgehog!" Conar snorted.

Yuri ignored the remark. "Trading insults is rather childish, don't you think?"

Conar's face narrowed. "Are you calling me 'childish', Andreanova?"

"If such behavior is not child-like, what would you call it?"

"Self-preservation," was the immediate reply.

A gleam entered Yuri's eye. "So the two of you try to outdo the other?"

Conar sniffed. "I give as good as I get."

Yuri nodded. "I know that, Your Grace." He shrugged. "I've seen you in action."

"But she hasn't." Conar folded his arms over his chest. "She's going to find herself outclassed."

It was on the tip of Yuri's tongue to tell the Prince it might well be the other way around, but he said nothing, instead nodding sagely at the young man's words. It might be best to let the two of them, Prince and Tzarevna, settle the differences between them in their own way and in their own time. The outcome would prove to be most interesting.

"So," Conar said, "what is on the agenda for today?"

Yuri looked down at the wet washcloth in his hand, seeming to see it for the first time. He looked back at Conar, lifting a brow in inquiry. When Conar shook his head, Yuri laid the wet cloth on the bedside table.

"If you are up to it, I will order a bath for you and have your clothes pressed and ready to wear when you are finished with your bathing. Then, if you like, I will escort you down to His Highness. If you are still feeling a bit under the weather"

"I feel fine," Conar answered, flinging the cover back. "Against my wishes and better judgment that Healer of yours gave me laudanum for the headache." He saw Yuri frown.

"Exactly," Conar remarked. "It wasn't enough to cause any harm, but I really didn't want it."

"I will speak to him if you'd like, Your Grace," Yuri promised.

Conar growled with just enough anger to get Yuri's immediate attention. "Don't call me that, Andreanova! I detest being called that! If you can't speak my name then get the hell out of my sight and send me someone who will!"

Yuri's face turned white. "I could never call you by your given name, Highness!"

"Then don't speak to me again and go find someone who can!" was the rigid reply.

"But I have been assigned as your personal bodyguard!" Yuri protested. "I know you well, Your"

"Don't say it!" Conar warned, pointing a finger. "I mean it!"

Yuri groaned. Why did royalty have to be so perverse? "It is an insult for me to call you anything but your title."

Conar glared at him. "I look upon it as an insult when you call me by that title, Andreanova!"

What was a man to do? Yuri moaned to himself. He knew better. Such familiarity would cause trouble for him with his own royalty, but if the Prince was going to be so stubborn about it....

"Conar." The word nearly choked Yuri, but he got it out.

"See?" Conar grinned, "that wasn't so bad, now, was it?"

"Conar." Repeating it wasn't quite as hard.

"Isn't that easier to say than all that Your crap?"

"Conar." It was a friendly name, Yuri thought.

"Don't wear it out, Andreanova," Conar mumbled.

Yuri nodded. He thought he could say it without flinching too badly. He looked at his companion and saw laughter.

“You enjoy putting people on edge, don’t you?” Yuri asked. “It truly gives you pleasure, doesn’t it?”

“Living on the edge is the only way I know how to live,” Conar answered.

Yuri smiled. “The only way you *want* to live, eh?”

“Same difference.”

Conar rummaged through the armoire where his clothing had been hung upon his arrival. He took out one shirt, frowned at it and dropped it to the floor.

The Outer Kingdom warrior shook his head. Not for the first time did he wish the Serenian Prince’s lady were still with him.

* * * *

Catherine moved away from the door where she had been shamelessly listening to the Serenian speaking to Yuri.

“You don’t like to be called by your royal title, eh?” she mumbled.

Such a thing was without class, of course, she thought with disdain. One born to royalty had certain obligations despite what one wanted. But then again, the Serenian was without class, himself. And he had been stripped of his title and positions, although Catherine had not been told why.

“You did something that annoyed your father, you bastard,” she said, nodding her head. “Something so bad he disinherited you before he died.”

Probably insulted someone, she thought as she walked away from the room which had been given to their Outlander guest, no doubt someone very high up in Serenian politics or even someone from one of the Outland kingdoms near Serenia.

“Someone with enough clout that you got your dirty little hand slapped by your King,” Catherine chortled as she headed down the stairs.

In her mind’s eye, she could see him before his father, trembling and pale, begging to be allowed to hold on to the title he so disliked. She could almost hear the wheedling in his voice as he pleaded.

“No,” she said as she stopped on her way down the marble steps. “You wouldn’t beg anyone for anything, would you, Conar McGregor?”

She stared off into the distance, seeing an angry, hurt young man fighting for his birthright, not begging for it to be reinstated. There would be blood and sweat flowing, not tears and perspiration caused from fear.

“What did you do, McGregor?” she asked as she took a few slow steps down the stairs. “What did you do to cause such a reaction from your father?”

Whatever it had been, she thought as she left the stairs and headed for the library where her brothers were waiting for her, it had been enough to sour the man on life and people in general.

“Who the hell cares?” she thought as she jerked open the library door.

Chapter Seven

“Supercilious son-of-a-bitch.”

“Waddling heifer.”

“Ignorant lout.”

“Addleheaded rhino butt.”

“Pompous reprobate.”

Tzar Thomas Steffensberg yawned. His wife glared. Their son, the Tzaravitch Peter, hid a grin behind his linen napkin.

“Sharp-tongued wildebeastess.”

“Arrogant know-nothing.”

Yuri looked from one of the two speakers to the other and sighed. How long were the Tzar and Tzarina going to allow this swapping of insults at their dining table to last?

“Knock-kneed sow.”

Marie Catherine frowned. She didn’t like the soft grin on the bastard’s face. He was saving his worst for last, she just knew it, and to forestall the inevitable reference to her weight, she aimed straight for his jugular. A sweet smile curved her full lips, and she purred her insult at him with a sultry, seductive breath of air.

“Scarfaced troll.”

The smile slid from Conar’s face slowly. The light of battle died. He swallowed, picked up his napkin, gently wiped his mouth, laid his napkin neatly beside his plate and then turned to his hostess.

“May I be excused, Highness?” he asked in a soft voice.

Tzarina Charlotte nodded, unable to speak. She barely heard his parting words as the young Prince turned away from her table and strode off, Yuri Andreanova following close on his heels. Her heart lurched with a great sadness for the man’s obvious embarrassment and she swung hostile, furious eyes at her daughter. Shocked by the pleased grin on Catherine’s face, her mother could only stare at the girl,

At last! Catherine thought with a smirk. She had managed to wipe the smug smile off the bastard’s taunting face. She lifted her chin and looked across the table to her brother. The smirk left her face.

“That was mean, Cat,” Peter told her. He threw his napkin to the table and pushed his chair back. “Mean and uncalled for.”

Catherine stared at her brother. “He was insulting me, Peter.” She looked at her younger brother. “Who started the insults, Mikel? Him or me?”

Her tawny-haired brother shrugged. “I wasn’t listening.” He glanced down the table to where his mother sat. “May I also be excused Mother?”

The Tzarina nodded at her youngest child. Folding her hands in her lap, she looked at her husband. “Thomas, you must speak to your daughter.”

His daughter, the Tzar thought with a pang of regret? Why was she always His daughter when she managed to alienate a possible suitor? Why wasn’t she ever Lottie’s daughter when the girl, without fail, insulted a highborn male guest there to look her over for marriageable material? He glanced at Catherine, took in the mulish look on the wayward chit’s face, glanced back at the set look on his wife’s and sighed mightily.

“Catherine,” he began only to have his daughter bound to her feet.

“He started it, Father.” Her face was livid with anger. “From the moment he sat down at this

table!”

“As I recall, Cat,” Peter reminded his sister, “all the man did was greet you.”

Catherine’s upper lip lifted in a vicious sneer. “And in that greeting did you not hear him insult me?”

“I believe his exact words were, ‘And how is my fat little dumpling tonight?’ ” Peter’s eyes glittered. His mouth twitched but he forced the humor down. “Prince Rupert of Churdan likened you to a ‘plump little partridge’ if memory serves, Cat, and you certainly didn’t answer the greeting of that gentleman by calling him a ‘despicable cur’.”

“Prince Rupert did not respond with calling me an ‘overstuffed loony bird’, either!” Catherine hissed. She turned to her father. “Don’t you understand? I detest being in the same room with that uneducated ass.”

“Marie Catherine!” Her mother had heard enough. “I would venture to say Prince Conar is far better educated, and certainly has possession of better manners, than you! Your last remark was, as Petya said, uncalled for. I shall expect you to apologize to the Prince before he retires for the evening.”

“I will not!” her daughter shrieked. “He started it.”

“And you kept it up all through supper,” her father reminded her. “New insults arrived with each new course.”

Her father rose, braced his hands on the table and leaned forward, piercing his daughter with a look that said he was tired of the whole situation. “As your mother has said, you will go to Prince Conar and apologize to him.” As Catherine’s mouth opened, he held up his hand. “This is not your father asking you, Marie Catherine. This is your Tzar commanding you.”

The young woman’s mouth snapped shut and she curtsied to her father, then her mother. “May I leave the table?”

“You may,” her mother agreed, “then you may proceed immediately to His Grace’s room and make your apology.” Her lids lowered. “You may be certain I shall ask him on the morrow if you did as you were told.”

“Yes, Mother,” Catherine said. She glared at her elder brother. She could find no support from that direction. Her back straight, her chin up, her hands balled into fists at her side, she marched regally from the table and was soon out of sight.

The Tzar turned his attention to his son. “Well, Peter. What do you think?”

“Yes,” his mother asked breathlessly. “What do you think of him?”

Peter leaned back in his chair and folded his arms over his thin chest. “I believe before God they are made for one another.”

Catherine stomped up the stairs, ignoring Yuri’s melancholy smile of encouragement as she neared Conar McGregor’s door. She nodded toward the door and grimaced at Yuri knocked lightly on the heavy oaken portal.

“Get lost, Andreanova!” came the gruff command from inside the room. “Go screw your wife and leave me the hell alone!”

Yuri’s face turned a deep crimson and he couldn’t look at his Tzarevna. He took a deep breath, bunched up his fist, and knocked again, louder and more rapidly.

“Damn it, Yuri!” Conar snarled as he yanked open the door. He stopped, seeing the fat bitch who had begun to make his life miserable, standing on the other side of the door. His eyes narrowed. “What the hell do *you* want?” he growled.

Her gaze slid over his naked chest, took in the hard muscles, the light furring between the manly breasts, the delineated ridges on his upper abdomen, the thick mat of golden hair above

the waistband of his breeches. Slowly she looked up into his face. Never had she seen eyes such a color of blue. They were the shade of sapphires, deep, deep blue, and mesmerizing. His face, despite the wicked scars on his left cheek was handsome, purely male, chin deeply cleft, high cheekbones, long, thick tawny lashed. Taller than her, she had to lift her head to take in the tasseled gold of his shoulder length hair. The deep tan which covered him only made the gold of his hair that much more striking. He was a prime specimen of a man at the height of his sexual attractiveness. Her close scrutiny came to an abrupt end when his sarcastic voice broke into her contemplation of his full lips.

“Like what you see?” he smirked.

Catherine blinked away her confusion. What the hell had just caused her heart to leap to her throat and her belly to lurch while she stared at those dusky lips? Surely the sight of this pompous fool half naked had not caused this heavy thudding of her heart! Or the glimmer of sweat she could now feel under her armpits.

“I hate to be the one to break this to you, baby, but you’re not as irresistible as I seem to be to you and I don’t care to stand here freezing my ass off while you ogle me. If you’ve got something to say, say it, and go!”

Yuri would later swear a demoness leapt into the Tzarevna’s body and took over when those cutting words finally penetrated. The shapely bosom heaved, the hazel eyes went dark as sin, the pretty little mouth hardened, the delicate bones in her right hand curled into a fist and her ivory-toned arm shot forward with enough power to knock the Prince flat on his ass on the floor.

“You son-of-a-bitch!” she screeched, making the five words sound as though they were one. Knocking Yuri’s restraining arm out of her way, she took a step into the Prince’s room, stared down at him as he lay bracing himself on one elbow while he rubbed his rapidly bruising jaw with his other hand, and delivered an unladylike kick to his shin.

“Ow!” the young man yelped, drawing his leg out of her way as she prepared to kick out at him again. And she would have had Yuri not grabbed her around her waist and swung her out of the room. “You bitch!”

“Bastard!” she shouted, squirming in Yuri’s arm as the warrior attempted to pull the Prince’s door shut behind them.

“Fat cow!” was the muffled explosion from the inside of the room as the door closed.

“Pig!”

Yuri manhandled the young woman down the hall, flinching as something hard hit the Prince’s door from inside. “Highness, please!” Yuri growled at her. “Stop this!”

She was trying to twist out of his grip and not succeeding. Andreanova was a very strong man. Her snarls and grunts did not impress him, nor did the vulgar words that were squeezed out of her when he increased his pressure on her waist to calm her down.

“You’re going to get into trouble with your parents if you don’t stop!” Yuri told her.

At the mention of her parents, Catherine stilled. A flame of shame crept up her neck and caused her to draw in a very concerned breath. She felt Yuri’s grip loosen and she found herself on the floor, his hand still at her waist in case she decided to bolt for the door again.

“Are you calm, now?”

She nodded.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She lowered her head, took a deep breath, let it out, and lifted her head to look up into Yuri’s worried face. “He makes me so angry,” she explained.

Yuri nodded. “I know. And you make him just as angry.”

"I can't tolerate the man, Yuri!" she swore, turning her face from him.

"Can't or won't?" Yuri asked quietly. He dared to put a thick finger under her quivering chin to lift and turn her face so he could look at her. "He's not like the others, Cat," he said, using the nickname he and her brother Peter had begun calling her when she was three. "This man is different."

"He's rude!" she spat.

"Yes, at times he can be," Yuri agreed.

"And he's arrogant!"

"That too."

"And spiteful!"

"Like you?" Yuri grinned.

Her lips formed a child-like pout. "Worse," she mumbled.

"Were you sent up here for a reason or did you come to continue the insults?" Yuri asked, moving his hand so his fingers lightly gripped her chin.

"Apology," she mumbled.

"Do you not think you had better do that then?"

She shrugged. "I suppose I shall have to."

"Do you want me to knock on the door for you?"

Her teeth nibbling on her lower lip betrayed her uncertainty and her need for this warrior's protective barrier between her and the boogey man behind the door.

"Please?"

Yuri chuckled. "Come along before he lets that foul temper of his stew overly long. The man can be irrational when he feels he's been annoyed."

"He's irrational to begin with," she muttered as Yuri lifted his hand to knock on the door.

Conar heard the knock, knew it was Yuri, no doubt coming to apologize for the bitch's actions. He ignored the first succession of raps, but the second set, more decisive and, to his way of thinking, demanding, made him snarl to keep from hurling something else at the damned door. Already a pretty vase lay shattered at the threshold. He stomped to the door, jerked it open and his face immediately flushed with rage when he saw the woman peeking from behind the bulk of Yuri's shoulder.

"Her Grace has something to tell you, Highness," Yuri began, cringing at the warning look the Prince darted his way. "Conar," he corrected.

Catherine glanced up at Yuri. So the man really didn't want to be called by his title. She risked a glance at the Prince's face and saw no resentment there at the breach of protocol. If anything, she thought with a mild grimace of confusion, she saw relief. She wasn't so sure she liked the familiarity that would cause a man like Yuri to break with traditional values.

"What's your problem, woman?" Conar growled.

Catherine turned her attention back to Conar, immediately on the defensive with his tone.

"Did I say I had a problem?" she snapped.

Conar snorted. "You didn't need to. If your upper lip gets any higher, you'll be able to pick your nose with it."

Yuri gasped, shocked at the ugly, childish taunt. He felt the woman behind stiffen him and grunted in dismay. Here we go again, he thought and prepared to reach for her should she decide to fly at the man.

"You are a vulgar man," Catherine told the Prince. "You go beyond the reaches of decency."

"Well, my life wasn't complete until I met you, either, baby!" Conar shot back.

“Any change would be an improvement, I’m sure!” she flung at him.

He knew an indefinable hunger to hurt her as she had hurt him. The need was a desperate, relentless ache that made his heart pound. He could barely tolerate the sharp-tongued bitch. Her snide remarks cut him to the quick for even after all these years, he was still ultra-sensitive about the ugly scars which ravaged his cheek. The pain in his soul those scars had caused him was healing, slowly, very slowly, but he doubted if he would ever feel whole again. No one dared to mention the scars to him for they knew how such a reminder pained him.

And he was confused by the bitch’s attitude toward him. No woman had ever really ignored him in his life. No woman had ever showered him with one insult after insult. And meant them.

He found he didn’t like it.

Not one bit.

And he intended to squash her once and for all. His male stubbornness and sense of masculine pride made it impossible for him to know when to leave well enough alone, and the little boy in him was egging him on to strike back.

He had never garnered the reputation as a forgiving soul. As a matter of record, he was considered to be an extremely vindictive enemy to make.

And this little fat cow was about to find out just how bad an enemy Conar McGregor could really be.

Catherine had been studying the different looks that were crossing the man’s face as he looked past Yuri to glare at her. First she saw a trace of surprise when he opened the door, then anger, then a boyish glee at beginning their confrontation again. Now she was seeing calculation on that striking face, retaliation, revenge. He was thinking of ways to get back at her and she was game. Never let it be said that Marie Catherine, the Cat to her friends, ever backed down from a fight--one-sided or not! She lifted her chin and smiled.

“Your turn,” she whispered.

“What do you want?” he asked, sensing now was not the time to hit back at her. Let her wait, give her time to lose her edge, not to be prepared for his out and out assault. Put a few days distance between them until he could zap her with something that would cripple her.

“At my mother’s insistence, I am here to apologize about my remark concerning your face. My parents, and brothers, do not wish you to be upset with them over this incident.” Her tone was regal, nothing in it hinting of true contrition.

“Oh, I’m well aware of where to lay the blame,” Conar retorted. “Your mouth is your worst enemy, baby.”

“I speak the truth as I see it,” she defended. “If you take exception to it, that’s too bad!”

“You open your mouth and shit comes out,” he shot back. “But I don’t suppose you can help being illiterate.”

“Just as you can not help it if you are deformed,” she said and could have groaned.

Yuri did.

She had not meant to say that. She was about to apologize for saying such a thing when she saw a rapid flow of emotions beginning to cross Conar McGregor’s face.

His look was confused, then hurt, then humiliated, then angry, closely followed by determination and finally swift retaliation.

“Who the hell do you think you are, anyway?” he stormed at her. He took a step forward only to have Yuri block his way.

Catherine, unaccustomed to being asked such a thing for everyone knew who SHE was, said the first thing that came to mind.

“I am the Tzarevna”

Conar guffawed. “What comes to mind when I say, I don’t give a shit? I am the king of Serenia!”

“You are not!” Catherine hissed. “You were disinherited.”

“It doesn’t matter!”

“Does, too!”

“Does not!”

“Does, too! I am a true Tzarevna. I could be Tzarina one day! As such, you would be subject to my command!”

Conar’s snort left no doubt what he thought of that.

“If you stay here,” she informed him, “you are honor bound to heed my orders, prince Conar.”

The dark sapphire eyes narrowed dangerously. “And am I suppose to jump when you tell me to?”

Catherine pushed Yuri aside and took a step toward her nemesis. “All you need to do is ask how high I want your big feet off the ground!”

Conar stepped forward until he was nose to nose with the bellowing wench. “And if I don’t?” he purred, true menace in his silky tone.

She actually came close enough so their bodies were touching. She stared at him, unafraid of the heat and the warning making his body rigid. In a voice as soft as the kiss of dew, she answered his taunt.

“If you don’t, I’ll have you hobbled where you can’t move at all!”

She wasn’t prepared for the hard hand that snaked out to cup the back of her neck and drag her face close enough to Conar McGregor’s that she could see his pores. There was absolute fury on his face and his nostrils were flaring with his anger.

“You are hurting me!” she ground out from between her clenched teeth. His hands on her neck were painful, but the touch she found something else again.

“I want it to hurt,” he shot back. He was staring down into eyes that weren’t hazel after all but a cross between green and yellow.

“No one has ever dared to touch me the way you dare to touch me,” she warned in a breathless voice.

Her hair was a silky touch of pale brown and silver moonlight, he thought as his hold on her neck loosened just enough to lessen the pain pinching her face. In a voice as sweet as molasses, and just as slow, he scanned her face and told her,

“I doubt if any man has ever wanted to touch you the way I want to.”

“Even if I do not wish to have you, of all men, to touch me so?” she answered, wishing with all her heart she hadn’t said that, for he instantly released his grip.

Conar looked at Yuri then returned his regard to her. Catherine was surprised to see real hurt and wounded pride in those stunning blue orbs. She’d really hurt him that time, insulted him beyond the game they had been playing with one another, humiliated him before another man. She could tell he was trying to hide his hurt quickly behind a hastily-erected facade of blandness in his expression. She watched as his gaze flickered away to settle once more on Yuri, and wondered why actually hurting him suddenly made her feel petty and small.

“Take your mistress to her quarters, Yuri,” Conar said in a quiet voice. “She has made her apology. I accept. Make sure her parents understand that.”

He gently pushed Catherine from his room and then firmly shut the door in her face.

Yuri let out a long breath. He'd seen pain in Conar McGregor's eyes many times. But he would never get use to it.

He looked down at Catherine and frowned.

"Did you have to do that?"

Slowly she looked up at the warrior. Yuri was stunned to see tears in those pretty orbs.

"What happened to him, Yuri?" she asked, her lower lip trembling.

"You insulted him beyond belief," Yuri responded.

Catherine angrily shook her head. "No! Not that." She swiped at a tear. "What happened to his face?"

Yuri frowned. "You must ask your father such questions, Highness."

"It wasn't an accident, was it?" she persisted. "Someone did that to him, didn't they?" She swallowed a lump in her throat. "On purpose?"

"I do not believe so, but you must ask your father." Yuri knew he was treading on dangerous ground here and his eyes became hooded. "I am not all that familiar with His Grace's personal history." That wasn't exactly true, but Yuri didn't think he had the right to tell the young woman of Conar McGregor's painful past.

Chapter Eight

My Sweet Meggie,

I hope this finds you and Harry well. By now I would imagine you are well ensconced at the keep. I still don't understand why you wanted to take on such a massive obligation at your 'advanced' age ha-ha but it is a relief for me to know the two of you are safe and well cared for by my family. Or what's left of it.

The Outer Kingdom is all right, I guess, but it ain't home. I miss Serenia's Alps and desert lands. I miss the sea and the forests. I miss seeing the farmers trudging into town with their produce on Farm Day. And, of course, I miss you most of all. I haven't found a lady to care for me the way you always have although I've found one who delights in annoying the hell out of me. The woman is beginning to piss me off, fat pig that she is.

The Tzar's family has treated me like one of their own since my arrival here a week ago. They are very informal here at the keep and I was really happy to find out that I could eat in the kitchen with the staff if I was so inclined. I was relieved to know they were not going to treat me with the 'respect' due my station in life. I'm just one of the gang, so to speak. I much prefer it that way than having to dress formally for dinner in my uniform (although I am glad you overruled me and insisted I bring it along). The damned thing certainly impressed the Tzarina, although that sow of a daughter of hers, Marie something-or-the-other, snickered at it. I do believe the woman is mentally incompetent.

I'm not really trying to make any close friends here yet. I don't feel up to the burden of that. The royal sons are nice enough guys, though, and I wouldn't mind doing a few things with them. The eldest, Peter, is as bookish as my brother, Coron. He is in charge of the keep's day to day management. The youngest, Mikel, seems to be a carbon copy of Dyllon, although I haven't seen that much of him. He's just beginning his military training with the warriors here as is his duty as the Tzar's son.

As for the women, the Tzarina, that's the equivalent of our Queen, seems to be a very nice lady. Her daughters, with the exception of that damned older one, are very polite and well-mannered. They remind me too much of how Liza's three younger sisters were for me to want to be around them much. It hurts too much still.

I don't want to be around that elder one, either, because the woman's a horrid bore.

My trip over was interesting and I can't wait to tell you about it. They have a thing called a fog horn, a sea creature whose roar is terribly frightening, but I wasn't affected by it. Its howl wasn't nearly as grating as the snipping voice of this elder daughter here. The woman's voice is enough to make a man deaf if he listens to it long enough, which I don't intend to do.

The countryside is similar to ours although their buildings are rather unimpressive and ugly nothing here to compare to the magnificence of Boreas Keep. It rains quite often here where I am, in country as they call it. The fog is atrocious, worse than ours.

I didn't tell you about my first meeting with the Tzar, did I? It was in his reading room where he goes every afternoon for tea. We sat before a cheery fire and chatted as though we were old friends. He gave me free reign of his palace and told me all I need do is ask and it will be given. (I almost asked for apple dumplings, but was afraid they wouldn't live up to yours).

At least they don't stand on ceremony here, as I've told you. I find that refreshing. It takes some of the worry out of me that I would have to endure court and all that while I'm here. At the Tzar's insistence, I can just be myself and relax, get all the bad memories out of my system. I have so little to do here I can walk about the gardens (they aren't nearly as pretty as ours) or just

sit quietly and think. I don't find such inactivity boring at all. Unfortunately, I've had to endure the unasked for company of that woman on occasion, but I am soon able to send her away with a few well chosen words.

That's my news for now. I'll write again next week. I'm having trouble finding a way to get my letters out so don't worry if you don't hear from me as often as I promised. The letters will get there to you. They just might take a few weeks to a month to do so.

Give my best to Harry, swat Dorrie on the rump for me, and remember I love you.

Your son,

Conar

P.S. I don't know when I'll be coming home, but you'll be the first to know.

P.P.S. I'd rather you not share my letters with anyone at the keep except Harry and ask him not to talk about them either.

* * * *

Four months to the day after Conar McGregor sent his letter by messenger to Boreas Keep, Meggie Ruck sat in her rocker beside the fire in her bedroom and nodded as she read the contents of the hastily-scrawled note. She turned her cocked brow to her husband and grinned.

"He's found him a woman, Harry."

Chapter Nine

Dear Legion,

By now you know where I am and I am sure you aren't pleased. I hope you understand I had an obligation to these people for all the loyalty the Outer Kingdom has shown me since the Labyrinth. When they invited me to their homeland to meet their monarchy, I jumped at the chance. I knew, if you had any idea where I intended to go, you would have had half the Serenian militia at my heels as bodyguards, and that I did not want nor need. It took four months to reach the coastal town of St. Steffensburg.

By the time you get this letter, I will have been gone three-quarters of a year and your temper should have cooled somewhat, I hope.

My trip here was uneventful, nothing to 'write home about', as they say. I was able to learn the Outer Kingdom language while on board ship. It is a rather complicated series of guttural tones, but the learning of it helped pass the time.

The people aren't all that different from us, but they do have some inventions that I hope to incorporate in our own culture when I return. One such ingenious device is a horn that blows whenever a ship nears one of the reefs. Its sound safely guides the ship past the danger at night and in the dense fogs for which this country seems to be well-known throughout the region. The device is called a fog horn and makes a loud, blaring noise you sure as hell can't miss. At first I was a bit startled by the sound of it, but I understood its purpose straight away. I plan on having several of these built along our coastlines where they can well save a ship from going down in adverse conditions.

How to explain this land to you so you can best appreciate it? I don't know where to begin. The Outer Kingdom is much larger than any of us expected. The land is unlike any other I have ever visited. Buildings here are massive, unique to this culture, awe-inspiring in their complexity.

The Place of the Tzars rivals Boreas in splendor although, naturally, I am partial to our own. I was open-mouthed with silence when I was conducted to the throne room here. This room is far bigger and much more stunning than the Palace of the Winds, but seems to have less warmth than our own. I felt small and insignificant in that vast cathedral of a room.

The people here are very formal. We are required to wear our dress uniforms at the evening meal. I am glad I remembered to bring mine along. The Tzar and his wife, the Tzarina, were very impressed with my medals, but not nearly as thunderstruck as was their eldest daughter, Marie Catherine. Don't be angry, but I do believe this woman would make you an excellent wife. The two of you have so much in common. She is a very lovely lady, with a soft, gentle voice, and shy manners. She'd be perfect for you.

The sons are very proper young men. One is a great scholar, I am told, and the other a mighty warrior with many years experience. They appear to have much to do about the place for I see them only at the meals. They have asked me if I would like to go hunting at some future time with them, but I don't really care for such outings, as you well know. And I haven't had all that much time to myself, either, since the Tzar has me sit in with him when he attends to his formal duties. It is such a bore, Legion, but out of politeness, I must not let on how I detest such proceedings. It is a great honor he has extended to me. How can I refuse him?

As boring as such court sittings are, I find a stimulating conversation with Marie Catherine can take my mind completely off the mundane. She is a very intelligent woman and is not afraid to voice her opinion.

My arrival at the Palace can only be described as mind-boggling. Hundreds of people were lined along the roadway to the Palace, cheering me, waving and smiling. Hundreds more were inside the baileys and were equally as welcoming. Would you believe I met a Serenian here? Truly! His name is Jordan Knowles and he had been pressed into the Domination as a sailor, but jumped ship and managed to be granted asylum by the Outer Kingdom. I promised him I would mention him to you so you could write a note to his sister in Dansforth to let her know he's still kicking.

Also, I was introduced to so many wealthy merchants, squires, and the like when I got here, I lost count. Once inside the Palace, it was a blur of royalty and well-to-do relations which greeted me.

My introduction to the Tzar was most enlightening. I was treated to all the pomp and circumstance to which my royalty entitles me. I was formally presented, crossed sabers and all, at court before a host of minor royalty and aristocrats. A more impressive ceremony I would be hard pressed to remember ever attending. The banquet that followed was beyond belief with foods from several different lands on the richly laden table. My dinner partner was, as she has been ever since, the shy and retiring Marie Catherine. Her presence beside me alleviated the tedium of a two hour meal. I find our talks so refreshing I have a hard time going to sleep at night.

I don't know how long I will stay here, although you will be the first to know when I decide to leave. I just might bring Marie Catherine back with me for you to meet.

I am told it takes as long to send mail as it took for us to reach this land so don't become alarmed when you don't hear from me at regular intervals. The letter, as they say, is in the mail, dear brother. I am kept busy and you know how I hate to write. Please don't let that stop you, and the rest of the family from writing me.

Give my regards to everyone and please see that Meg is well cared for in my absence.

Your loving brother,

Conar

P.S. Don't tell Meggie you've heard from me. She'll wonder why I haven't written and I don't want to hurt her feelings.

* * * *

In the cozy library of Boreas Keep, Legion A'Lex stood frowning down into the blazing fire. It had been over eight months since he had last seen his brother. Eight months and nine days, to be precise. The letter Conar wrote at the same time he had written Meggie's had somehow been mislaid for a week after it had arrived and had it not been for a maid's industrious cleaning, the letter might not have been found at all.

"He's found you a woman, eh?" Jamael laughed, reading his brother's letter for the second time. He glanced up at Legion's stony face. "Marie Catherine. I like that." He stretched his toes out to the fire and then held the letter out to his elder brother, Legion. "I like the sound of that-- Marie Catherine A'Lex. It's musical."

Legion's scowl deepened. "My wife, my ass! he snorted. "He mentioned that woman too many times for my liking." He looked down at Jamael. "You know Conar. He seems to be more taken with the bitch than he lets on."

"A romance in the making?" Roget du Mer asked. He saw Legion flinch. "It's been over a year since Liza's death, Legion. You need to get on with your life."

Legion swung his gaze to Roget. A snarl of fury pushed from Legion's clenched teeth. "If he thinks to bring that bitch here for me to marry, he'd best think again!"

"Maybe he isn't bringing her here for you," Gezelle said in a soft voice.

Legion glared at her. "And why else would he?"

"For himself?" she asked.

Legion threw his hand out in annoyance. "He isn't ready for such things yet."

"You might not be, but Conar isn't you," Roget reminded him.

Legion snatched the letter from Jamael and tapped the envelope on his nose. He swung around to Roget. "You say you think Meggie got a letter, too?"

Du Mer nodded. "I recognized Conar's writing on something she was reading last week, but when I asked her about it, she said it was an old letter." He shook his head. "Meggie isn't good at lying. I don't think there's a devious bone in the woman's body. She looked too guilty for what she said to have been the truth.

"I saw her reading a letter also," Gezelle said. "I got the impression she didn't want anyone to know what was in it."

"What puzzles me is why Conar didn't want you to mention his having written you, Legion," Cayn the Healer spoke up. "Obviously both letters were written at the same time and sent on the same day. If Meggie is hiding her letter from you, then obviously she was told to."

Legion's eyes gleamed. "I know my baby brother. And I've ready enough of his hen scratching to me over the years to know that this ...," he held the letter aloft, "took him a long time to compose. The lettering is near school-room perfect and it doesn't even begin to sound like him." He pitched the letter to the table beside Jamael's chair. "That is pompous bullshit he's written there."

"Meant to ally your fears for his safety," Cayn put in.

"And his real reason for leaving," Sentian Heil, the new Master-at-Arms of Boreas Keep remarked.

"Exactly," Legion growled.

Cayn pulled on the small goatee he had grown. "I would venture to say if you were to put that letter side by side with the one Meggie Ruck received, you might get a glimmer of the real truth of how the lad is doing."

"I'm thinking that, too," Legion nodded. He glanced at Sentian. "Go get her, Heil."

"One thing seems clear to me, though," Cayn said. The other's turned to the old man. He smiled. "The boy's met him a girl."

* * * *

"That thing called the fog horn must have scared the shit out of him," Roget laughed.

"I take it the buildings there are larger than ours but somewhat pedestrian in appearance," Cayn said. "This Palace of the Tzars must be very beautiful though."

"And he's loath to admit it outranks ours," Roget put in. "It must have been quite a shock to find a palace more elegant than that of the Winds."

"And he's bored out of his mind," Sentian chuckled. "Bored and trying to find something to do even if it's sitting at court with that Tzar fellow."

Gezelle looked up from her knitting. "But the people are being very good to him. If I read between the lines as well as the rest of you, I picture them catering to his every need and he finds that offensive."

"Always has," Cayn laughed.

"Not only offensive but aggravating if I know our Commander. I can just see his scowl if they're going around calling him "Your Grace" and the like!" Sentian shook his head. "He'd be fit to be tied."

"He was formally introduced to their society and was thoroughly embarrassed by all the folderol," Cayn giggled. "The boy never cared for 'pomp and circumstance' as he calls it. I can picture him sitting there squirming in his seat!"

"What of this business about the two sons?" Jamael asked. "It seems to me he thinks rather a lot of them for they remind him of Coron and Dyllon."

"He wants to get to know them better probably because he misses his little brothers so much," Roget added.

"And they're kept busy," Legion quipped. "They don't have time for him and he's a bit lonely."

"He's a lot lonely," Sentian corrected.

"Aye. The lad's homesick, all right," Cayn said. "That's obvious."

"I don't doubt the Tzar's asked him to sit in on the formal meetings and such," Legion agreed, "but I know Conar--the man abhors formality with a passion. He probably sat in on a few court proceedings for politeness sake like he mentioned, but by now, I would imagine he's begged off enough times that he isn't asked any more." A wicked grin twitched at Legion's lips. "Our friend wouldn't just squirm in his seat, Cayn, he'd fall asleep!"

Jamael tapped a long finger along his nose. "He left us because he just couldn't deal with Liza and Brelan's deaths. That much we suspected."

"And Amber-lea's," Roget interjected.

Jamael nodded. "All that on top of Sadie's treachery and Teal's disappearance. He must have felt overwhelmed by it all."

"And we were coddling him," Gezelle reminded the men.

"Coddling him more than he could tolerate," Roget agreed with his sister.

"So the Outer Kingdom people offered him a way to get away from all our mothering and he accepted," Gezelle commented.

"He knew I'd balk at him going to that place," Legion shook his head. "What did we know of it, anyway? It could have been a trap!"

"Those men thought the sun rose and set in our little brother, Legion," Jamael disagreed. "They'd have walked through fire to protect him."

"Like they stood under freezing water to do," Sentian said quietly.

"Conar must have seen a ray of light at the end of the tunnel when they offered to take him to their homeland. He would have seen it as a lifesaver," Cayn added.

"As I understand it," Roget injected, "he doesn't plan on writing very often, so he doesn't want us to worry when he doesn't."

"Although he wants to hear from us," Jamael told his brother.

"Because he's so lonely over there," Gezelle whispered.

"But if he's so damned bored and lonely, with obviously not that much to keep him occupied, why doesn't he come home?" Roget asked. "How does he plan on spending his time?"

Meggie snorted and drew every eye to her. "You people don't see it. None of ya, do ya?"

"See what?" Jamael asked the old woman.

"It's the girl, lad!" Meggie scolded him. "It's this girl he's met." She folded her arms over her ample bosom. "This Marie Catherine is giving our lad a run for his money, she is. He's attracted to her and she ain't having none of it. He's done finally went and found a woman he can't charm, a woman who don't want nothing to do with him, and he's done dug his heels in like most stubborn males'll do. She ignores him and he's made up his mind he's gonna go after her tooth and nail until she pays attention to him." She grinned. "He can't be bothered with

writing us 'cause he's gonna be needing all his time to court her."

"Court her?" the others gasped in unison.

"You can't be serious!" Legion sputtered, his face a dull red wash of color.

Meggie nodded curtly. "As serious as a heartache, lad." She squinted one fading eye almost closed. "Unless I miss my guess, that boy's decided he don't like being lonely and when he finally gets his little tail home, he's gonna be towing one "fat Outer Kingdom sow" right along behind it!"

Chapter Ten

Nine months, Conar thought as he stared up at the ceiling. He'd been in the Outer Kingdom for nine months. He took a long, deep breath and then let it out very slowly. He blinked, focused, and began to stare at the ceiling again and began once more.

There were nine copper panels above his head, raised panels with some sort of flower--he thought perhaps a lily--etched into the copper. Scrolls of some vine ran among the flowers, encircling it, imprisoning it. The edges of the panels were elaborately scalloped and shone from the candlelight beaming from the large, ornate gold chandelier in the center of the ceiling.

There were sixteen scallops on each side of each panel--five hundred and seventy-six scallops in all.

Each vine had twelve leaves--one hundred and eight leaves in all.

The chandelier had twelve arms with three candles per arm for a grand total of thirty-six fat white candles. There were eighteen links in the chain from which hung the chandelier.

"God!" he spat and pushed himself up from his chair. If he counted lilies and links and leaves one more time, he'd go stark, raving mad! Plowing his hand through his hair, he stomped to the cheval mirror beside the bathing room door and stared at his reflection. What he saw did not please him.

His hair had lightened somewhat over the past year. There were strands of gray reflecting in the light, but that was to be expected for he was, at least in his own mind, middle aged, now. There were a few more lines fanning out from the corners of his eyes and two deeper grooves ran parentheses down his cheeks beside his mouth, but that was normal for a man his age and who had suffered as he had. His cleft appeared deeper, his lips less full. His eyes were still that alien, unnatural blue, but they were devoid of light, blank and infinitely bored. They were the eyes of a man who would be thirty-seven in two months and who had seen more grief than he should have.

But it was not those features he saw in the mirror which concerned him, he thought with a grimace of distaste. It was the twin gouges of dark pink flesh which streaked down the left side of his face from the corner of his eye to his earlobe.

"Ugly son-of-a-bitch!" he hissed as his image and turned away.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he could hear an old conversation, taking place on a quiet hillside in the lush land of his Aunt's people--Chrystallus.

"And what of the scars on your face?" Occultus Noire had asked him.

"Leave them," he said. "I want a reminder of what was done to me."

Now, many years later, he wished with all his heart that the scars had been erased along with those Occultus had taken away. His brother Galen's initials had been carved into the back of his hand. Tolkan Coure's twin symbols of ownership had been burned into the soft skin of his thigh. The word 'traitor' had been tattooed into the flesh of his wrist. The marks left by Appolyon's riding crop were across the bridge of his nose; the Seals of the Domination in his palms; the brand of treason on his shoulder blade and the ring of burnt flesh around his left elbow where Kahlil Toire's 'marriage band' had become a part of his misery.

So many scars, he thought. So much pain. So much degradation. None of it deserved, but all of it meant to stay with him forever.

As would the scars on his face.

And back.

A wry burst of self-contempt exploded from Conar's clenched teeth as he wondered what Marie Catherine would say if she could see the mass of crisscrossed disfigurement on his back.

The ravages on that part of his anatomy made the scars on his cheek look like love taps. Many a grown man had turned away in horror at that sight.

“Why are you dwelling on this?” he asked himself aloud.

Flinging himself face down on the bed, he would have given a hundred gold pieces if Gezelle were there to rub his back. He’d give another hundred gold pieces if he had someone from home to talk to.

Idly, he thought of having someone find Jordan Knowles, but he knew his need drove deeper than wanting to hear the sweet drawl of his homeland or to have someone from home be there to reminisce with him. He longed to have someone who knew him well to talk to, to comfort him, to understand the way he felt.

Groaning in frustration and loneliness, he flipped over, put his hands behind his head and glared up at the canopy above him.

There were forty-five chevrons of color--red, green, gold, and royal blue in the canopy.

There were twenty-two tassels along each of the two sides of the canopy and sixteen along each end.

Each tassel was

“Stop it!” he shouted, tearing his attention away from the canopy. His gaze fell on the carved bed posts and he groaned as the number of turnings along the columns invaded his consciousness.

He bounded from the bed, stalked to the armoire, flung back the door and grabbed his brown leather jacket. Thrusting his arms into the garment, he jerked his door open and rushed from his room, ignoring the startled look of a lady’s maid who was brought up short by his hasty departure from his room.

“If I don’t get out of this keep, I’m going to explode!” he hissed at the poor woman.

“As you wish, Your Grace,” the lady hastened to say as she bobbed a quick curtsy to him.

“Don’t call me that, woman!” he shrieked at her as he began his reckless descent of the stairs.

“What does he wish me to call him?” the surprised woman murmured as she watched his headlong rush down the stairs. Rolling her eyes to the heavens, she re-adjusted the bundle of clothing in her arms and started down the hall once more. “Royalty,” she sighed.

There was no one in the central hall except servants, most rushing about as though their rumps were on fire. No one spoke to him although a few cast semi-friendly grins in his direction. One or two frowned at him as he got in their way, but didn’t speak to tell him he was being a blockade around whom they had to veer.

His annoyed tread carried him to the kitchens, which were deserted, to the library where the room was as quiet as a tomb, to the solarium where the Tzarina usually held her own brand of court at this time each day, but that room, as well, was vacant.

“Where the hell IS everybody?” he snarled, ducking his head into Peter Steffensburg’s office. The room was empty.

Walking to the vast quadruple doors which led out to the garden, he could find no one sitting in the lush wonderland of flowers and shrubs. That in itself was odd, he thought with a growing sense of concern. At least one of the royal daughters could usually be found there with a book to her pert nose. The elegant garden was silent and somewhat cold without human inhabitants.

“May I be of help, Your Grace?”

Conar turned and found a butler watching him politely although there appeared to be a faint tremor about the man’s lips and a worried look in his lazy gray eyes.

“Where is everybody?” Conar asked.

A startled look came over the man's pinched face and he blushed, a faint wash of dull red color. "Did no one inform you of what's happened, Highness?" The man brought his hands up to twist at his waist.

Grinding his teeth against the title, Conar shook his head. "No one's bothered to tell me squat!" he answered in Serenian and was surprised when the tall, skinny man bowed elegantly and asked his apology.

"I am sorry, Your Grace. We have been so preoccupied since the fire began and we"

"What fire?" Conar cut him off.

"In the forests just above the Palace, milord. The wind is coming down from the mountains and it is vital that the fire be brought under control before it reaches the village. Most of the huts there have thatched roofs and they are a tinderbox"

"Is there someone who can show me the way to get there?" Conar asked, shrugging quickly out of his jacket. He tossed the heavy leather covering to the butler.

"One of the stable boys, Your Grace, but"

"Is the Tzar and his sons up there?" Conar interrupted the man as his long legs began to carry him past the lanky butler and into the central hall.

"Yes, Highness. They went to supervise the efforts."

The butler shifted the weight of the unfamiliar garment to his left arm and followed quickly behind the young Serenian as that man made his way to the front door. "They would want you to remain here out of harm's way, though. You are a guest, milord. You will not be expected to help"

"What's the stableboy's name?" Conar snarled.

"Sasha's still here, I believe. All the rest have gone up to the fire. But, Highness"

It took him less than two minutes to find the boy named Sasha, less than that to have his palomino brought out of its stall. Ignoring the boy's offer to find a saddle for the mount, Conar led the golden horse from the stable and out into the bright glare of the midmorning sun.

"Can I go with you, Your Grace?" the lad asked, looking back at a little mare tied to a hitching rail.

"Only if you care to ride double with me," came the short reply.

Grasping a handful of the stallion's mane, Conar pulled himself atop the steed and then held his hand out for the boy to join him.

"Put your foot on mine and climb up, Sasha!" he commanded. "We don't have all day for you to decide how to mount this beast!"

A frightened look entered the young boy's eyes but he did as he was told, flinching as his weight pressed down on the Prince's instep as he swung himself up behind the man. He barely had time to put his arms around the blond-haired man's waist before the palomino was kicked into an all-out gallop away from the stables and through the bailey and out onto the public roadway.

He could smell the fire, now, Conar thought with a grimace of alarm. The air was thick with it and above the tall tree line beyond the Palace of the Tzars he could make out a thick black column of smoke. A dull red glow hovered near the base of those trees and he knew the fire was going to be a demon to stop.

"How far?" he yelled back, his words rushing past his passenger.

"Two, maybe three miles, Your Grace," the lad answered. His cheek was pressed tightly to the tall man's back and his lips were beginning to mumble the words of his nightly prayer.

"Hang on!" Conar yelled and kicked the horse up the roadway where he could see many

wagons had recently passed. How could he not have heard all the noise as people left the keep, he thought with a snarl?

"Because you were counting scallops," came a contemptuous whine at the back of his brain.

They passed several water carts, heavily-laden, the oxen moving slow and clumsily up the steadily upward-slating roadway. Men with pickaxes and hoes, boys with axes and shovels, trudged along in a steady stream. Most glanced up at the blond rider and his clinging companion and were startled to see the young Serenian visitor.

"Where's he going?" one man asked his son.

"Just what we need," the son snapped. "One more aristocrat to supervise!"

But when he finally found the gathering point where men were being put to work to head off the now blazing conflagration, Conar swung his rider down, slid from his mount and headed for a tall, husky man who was obviously in charge.

"Show me where to go!"

The husky man turned around, frowned, and pointed a blunt finger to a makeshift tent about twenty yards away.

"The Tzar has set up his post in there."

Conar jerked his head that way then flung the hair from his forehead. "Show me where to go to fight the fire, man. I don't sit on my ass when there's work to be done!"

A heavy black brow rose. "You know anything about real work, milord?"

Most men who knew Conar McGregor would have backed away from the deep growl of anger that came from the Serenian's throat, but the man taking his measure didn't know him, had never had the misfortune to run afoul of the infamous McGregor temper. But the narrowing of those sapphire eyes and the clench of that strong jaw should have warned the man that he had gravely insulted the man standing before him.

"You ask me that after we get this fire under control, you motherless prick, and I might even answer you then!" Conar snapped as he pushed a rigid finger into the man's chest. "Now tell me where to go to help!"

Dark brown eyes raked down the white silk shirt and spotless cords and then settled on the furious face glaring back at them. The man jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"They need help over there," he growled. "Get yourself an ax and"

"I know what to do," Conar hissed.

Alexi Romanovitch followed the Serenian's angry stride into the tree line and then shrugged. What was one less arrogant aristocrat should the men there at the worse part of the fire fail to finish the fire break and were trapped. None of the firefighters would risk their lives or limbs to pull a member of the royalty out of harm's way.

"He'll scorch them lily-white hands of his," one of the village men scoffed as he turned his head to spit out a thick stream of tobacco juice. "He'll be more in the way than a help, Alexi."

Once more the husky Outer Kingdom warrior shrugged. "I give him ten minutes before he's over there in the tent with the rest of them," Alexi prophesied.

Another stream of tobacco juice arched into the dirt. "And that's the God's truth!"

Marie Catherine Steffensburg looked up from her place at the edge of the crowd where she was expertly bandaging a village boy's arm and stared at Conar McGregor as he hurried past. She blinked in surprise.

"Isn't that the Prince from the Outland?" the lad she was bandaging asked her. The lad had been caught beneath a falling tree and his arm was badly scraped. Her mother was helping to care for the boy's father who had tried to rescue his son only to find his ankle caught in one of

the illegal animal traps that some foolish trapper had set. Two of her sisters were giving water to the firefighters while a third was helping cook to prepare a quick lunch for the men.

"Women's work," her father called it. "The village folk expect it."

Even if they hadn't, Catherine knew, she'd have been there to help. It was her nature her do so.

"Yes," she answered her patient. "His name is Prince Conar."

"Is he really going to help fight the fire?" the boy asked in wonder.

Catherine lifted one disdain shoulder. "Until he gets close enough to the flame to get his brow sweaty." She looked in the direction in which Conar McGregor had disappeared and frowned. "The man will only be in the way."

But after nearly an hour had passed, the Serenian had not returned. Men coming down for a few moments of respite from the heat, to gulp down food and drink, spoke of the fair-haired Outlander who was fighting the fire, and Catherine could not help but overhear as word passed from man to man around the command sight.

"You ought to see him, Alexi," one wizened villager chuckled. "That boy can wield a mean hoe, he can! I'd have sworn when he took up that thing he didn't know one end of it from the other, but he set in to digging right alongside us and he's still digging!"

Catherine saw Alexi Romanovitch frown. "I hope to God he don't chop off his own foot."

"If'n I didn't know no better," another firefighter said in a tired voice, "I'd say he's dug many a hole in his time." He glanced up at Alexi. "He don't waste no time in doing it, neither."

"He's a strong'un," still another man commented. "He helped Andrei lift that felled tree out of the way as though it were a piece of kindling." A wry grin touched the man's toothless mouth. "But he done went and ruined that silky shirt of his'n."

Alexi looked toward the stand of trees where word had reached him that despite the men and their efforts, the fire was rapidly spreading.

"We're going to have to move down the hill some." He found Catherine watching him and smiled. "You'd best tell His Highness, milady."

Catherine nodded and turned toward her father's tent. When she ducked inside, she sighed. Her father, the Tzar, was playing dominoes with one of his personal aides. When he looked up at her and frowned at her sweaty, dusty appearance, she forced a rigid smile to her lips.

"Where's Peter and Mikel, Father?" she asked, not seeing her brothers.

The Tzar shrugged. "They've gone to help evacuate the villagers." A pout formed on her father's face. "I refused to allow them to fight the fire, but they insisted on making themselves useful so I sent them on to supervise the evacuation."

It was something her father was good at doing--she thought with a grimace of disdain--supervising. He would have his sons follow in his footsteps, but neither of her brothers were so inclined. Both felt a keen need to actively help their people as well as lead them.

"Alexi says we are to move the command post, Father," Catherine announced. She almost screamed her disapproval when her father let out an annoyed sigh.

"I was winning, too," he said, looking up at her with a frown.

"You always do," Catherine snapped, looking at the man her father was playing. At least the bastard had the grace to blush at her reprimand. "Did you know Prince Conar is here?"

A startled look of fear crossed the Tzar's face. "Doing what?"

"Fighting the fire, I would imagine. He is up in the north fire line." She felt a twinge of revenge when her father's face paled.

"He can't be! I left instructions that no one was to let him know of this!"

Catherine shrugged. "Well, he found out somehow and is up there making a fool of himself."

"Or acquitting himself well," her father's domino partner said quietly.

"That is your opinion, Misha," Catherine snapped.

"Made from personal, first hand knowledge of the man, Your Grace," Misha answered her.

"Well, we can't have him doing it!" the Tzar protested. "If he's hurt he can't"

"I'll see to it, Highness," Misha said, casting a warning glance at his monarch.

"Yes, yes," the Tzar mumbled, avoiding his daughter's stare. "Please see that you do, Misha."

Catherine wondered at the hasty departure of her father's closest aide. She cast the Tzar one final look as he bid her send in men to help dismantle his tent.

"Perhaps you should go back to the Palace, Father," she advised.

Her father nodded absently, his mind elsewhere. "You do that, Catherine. I'll be all right here."

Letting out a long sigh, Catherine turned and ducked under the tent flap. She loved her father dearly, but the man was inclined toward an absent-mindedness that drove her to the brink of insanity. Plodding wearily to the camp cook fire, she sat down on a rock beside the hastily-erected work table and pilfered a sandwich of ham and lettuce.

"It's him!" her younger sister, Tatiana, sighed and Catherine glanced up to see an angry Conar McGregor stomping toward the water kegs. "Isn't he rugged-looking?"

"Dirty-looking," Catherine corrected as she watched Conar McGregor untie the bandana around his neck and wipe his grimy face. Scooping up a tin of water, he poured it over his uplifted face. She frowned as dirty lines appeared on his cheeks and down his neck. His shirt was a sodden, blackened rag over his wide shoulders and there were rips under the arms and along one shoulder seam.

"I think he's the handsomest man I've ever seen," Tatiana sighed again.

Catherine snorted, drawing Conar's attention. His dark gaze swept over her, obviously surprised to see her there. His grimace of dislike was so plain it made her hackles rise.

"Come to watch the fun, milady?" he called over to her as he began to tie his bandana across his face.

"Go to hell!" she answered sweetly, batting her lashes at him. She frowned as his dark eyes crinkled behind the obstruction of the make-shift mask.

"Been there!" he shot back, winking audaciously at her little sister before he turned to go back to his work.

She followed his progress until he was out of sight.

Obviously whatever he was doing with the firefighters he wasn't making too much of a nuisance out of himself else someone would have come to Alexi to complain.

"Isn't he the bravest man you've ever known, Cat?" Tatiana breathed.

"He's certainly the most arrogant," Catherine sneered.

Tatiana turned a curious look up to her sister. "Why do you dislike him so, Marie Catherine? I'd give anything to have him look at me the way he looks at you."

Catherine stared down at her sister. "And just *how* have you interpreted his looks at me, Tatiana?"

A sly, knowing grin stretched the young girl's mouth. "He looks at you like Mikel looks at unbaked cookie dough!" Tatiana answered. "As though he could gobble you up."

A snort of derision exploded from Catherine and she shook her head at her sister's romantic notion. "If he looks at me at all, Tatti, it's to smirk at me!"

“Move back!” a voice yelled from the northern edge of the camp. “Move back! The wind’s kicking up!”

Glancing up at the tall trees behind them, Catherine could see the tops swaying before she felt the hot blast of smoky wind searing down from the fire break.

“Get your things, Tatti,” the older girl ordered. “We’ve got to hurry.” She looked for her other sisters. “Svetlana! Nadia! Get in the buggy!”

The Tzar came out of his tent, looking slightly dazed and confused. He looked toward the higher elevation, saw the dense smoke and shrugged. Clutching his box of dominoes, he strode forward, smiling absently at his elder daughter as he walked toward the serviceable buggy which had brought him to the command site.

“Come along, Marie Catherine,” he commanded as he put his hand into his footman’s as the servant helped his Tzar into the buggy. “You mustn’t dawdle, child.”

Gritting her teeth, Catherine glanced once more toward the pathway leading up to the northern fire line. She drew her lower lip between her teeth and her forehead creased in worry.

“He’ll be all right.”

Catherine looked around, saw Misha standing behind her with an encouraging smile. “Who?” she stammered, although she knew she hadn’t fooled the man.

“If there is a man here capable of taking care of himself, and those around him, milady, that man is the true king of Serenia.” He held out his hand. “May I help you with that medical kit?”

“You have a lot of faith in him, Misha,” she commented. “Just how much do you know of Prince Conar?”

Misha smiled. “I had the opportunity to observe him for quite some time when my Tzar sent me to the Outland.”

Catherine’s brows drew together. “I never did know why Father sent you to that heathen place,” she said, referring to Serenia. “Since you seem to know so much about Prince Conar, I assume you were sent there to make his acquaintance.”

The twinkle in Misha’s expression flared and then disappeared. “In a matter of speaking, that was my mission.”

“Then perhaps you can answer a question I put to Yuri Andreanova concerning the Prince, one Yuri said he could not answer.”

A wary look entered Misha’s eyes. “And what question was that, Your Grace?”

“It concerns those horrible scars on his face,” Catherine stated. “I asked Yuri how Prince Conar came by them and he said to ask my father.”

Misha knew well enough that Yuri Andreanova knew all about the scars on Conar McGregor’s face and how he came to have them and who had dared put them there.. But if Yuri hadn’t answered the Tzarevna’s question, then Misha understood he better not, either.

“Your father knows more of the matter than anyone, Your Grace,” he answered, eyes hooded.

“In other words, both you and Yuri know but you’d prefer not to be the ones to tell me,” Catherine accurately surmised. When Misha would have protested, she held up her hand. “It isn’t important, Misha. I was simply curious, nothing more.”

Curious hell, Misha thought. The woman was itching to know. He saw no reason why she shouldn’t be told. As a matter of fact, he thought it would help matters along if she knew just what tragedies had befallen the monarch of Serenia, but obviously the Tzar had his reasons for keeping such knowledge from his daughter.

A whinny from beside her father’s buggy drew Catherine’s attention and she noticed for the

first time the palomino stallion nervously pawing at the ground, his eyes rolling as he drew the smell of smoke into his nostrils. She turned to Misha. "Can you ride that beast?"

Misha nodded. "I'll see to him."

She glanced once more toward the place where she reckoned Conar McGregor to be, drew in a long breath, and then allowed her father's footman to help her into the buggy with the rest of her family. She glanced around her.

"Where's Mother?"

The Tzar fanned a hand before his face to ward off the heavy stench of smoke. "In the village with your brothers. Some woman has decided to take this particular moment to give birth." He wrinkled his nose. "I say, the woman could have waited."

Catherine groaned at her father's idiotic statement and settled back against the buggy's seat. The leather felt warm and slick and she knew her gown would be dusted with ash and smoke. As the buggy lurched forward, she turned in her seat and looked back toward the fire. Already the breeze was fanning tendrils of her hair, whipping it into her face. With the wind picking up as it was, she knew the flames would be fanned, making the firefighters' job even more dangerous.

"Be careful," she whispered, not even sure to whom she sent the soft word of protection.

Chapter Eleven

“Get back! Get back! Andrei, get back!”

Conar spun around, his eyes watering from the heavy smoke. Vaguely he could see one of the men at the far end of the fire break frantically pointing toward a tall fir, its branches blazing, the stark column of its trunk slowly beginning to tilt downward. Beneath it, one of the firefighters, a man Conar had learned was Yuri Andreanova’s brother, Andrei, was in danger of being crushed beneath the weight of the falling tree.

“Shit!” the Serenian snarled as he threw down his shovel and raced forward. His legs pumped furiously as he dug his booted feet into the thick, fire-curved pine needles. He stumbled, almost went down, but managed to let his forward momentum push him toward the man who only at that moment realized he was in danger. From ten feet away, Conar could see the fear and stunned shock that had frozen Andrei Andreanova in his tracks.

Overhead, the air was split with a furious cracking noise and men were shouting, screaming their anxiety, their voices blending into one litany of warning. All around them the fire was roaring, hissing as it devoured the dry evergreens and lapped at the healthy green trunks that stood in its way of the vulnerable village less than a mile away.

“Ooof,” Andrei puffed as Conar’s hurling body knocked into his to send them both crashing to the ground beyond the flaming tree, out of its heavy descent. His face dug into the rugged forest floor, a stone painfully gouging into the tender flesh of his cheek as Conar’s heavy weight descended on him. Beneath them, the ground shook violently as the tree slammed to earth, sending up fiery sparks and leaping flames, igniting the area immediately around the tree and racing up the cotton pant leg of Andrei’s breeches. “God!” the man screeched as the flame licked at the hair on his leg.

Conar rolled off him, spun around on his knees and batted with his bare hands at the fire already charring the cotton. He managed to beat the flame out, then leapt to his feet and grabbed Andrei’s arm, dragging him away from the danger of being touched by the roaring tree once more.

“Here, prince Conar! Here!” someone yelled and hands locked onto Conar’s shoulders, tore Andrei’s arm out of his grip as other, more feverish hands dragged at Conar’s shirt, pulling him away from the advancing fire.

“I’m all right!” he yelled above the roar. “Get him out of here!”

The men moved in, helping the dazed Andreanova out of harm’s way. Conar glanced up at the fire leaping from branch to branch above him, back along the northern trail to the fiery wall of rushing flame and cursed. There was no way to get the fire under control before it reached the village. All they could do now was hurry to the village and save what little they could before the fire marched down to destroy everything in its path.

“We’d better get below!” he told the men. “We’ve done all we can here!”

There were nods of grim agreement and the men began to move toward the roadway where man-powered carts stood ready to roll. Tired, soot-blackened faces turned away from the enemy they had been fighting and tucked tail to run away, their foe hot on their heels. Not a man there did not feel the shame of losing or the injustice of a long day’s work for naught.

Conar, furious with the outcome, not one to give up easily, squinted in thought. He knew a way to demolish the enemy and he wondered that no one else had thought of it before now. He reached out a filthy hand to the man trudging alongside him and gasped, drawing his hand back with a yip of pain. He looked down at his palm and found his hand blistered, the flesh

bubbled up and raw around the edges.

“Didn’t even feel it when it happened, did you, son?” the old man Conar had reached out to asked in a loud voice.

“I feel it now,” Conar snarled.

“Did you want something or was you just trying to get a little sympathy from me?”

Conar’s gaze leapt to the old man’s face and he saw a toothless grin shining wetly at him from the man’s thin lips. He shook his head.

“Would you feel sorry for me if I moaned a little, Grandfather?”

“Nope,” came the chuckling reply.

“I didn’t think so,” Conar smiled. “Do you know if there are explosives at the Palace?”

“Might be at the quarry,” another man beside them answered. “They use it to break up the rocks.”

“The quarry,” Conar whispered, his dirty face lighting up. He took a few steps over to the man who had spoken. “Who would we see to get some of the explosives up here?”

The man shrugged his chin toward Alexi, who was about ten yards ahead of them.

“Romanovitch is the foreman there. Ask him.”

Conar nodded and loped quickly toward the tall, husky man who was walking with shoulders hunched forward in fatigue and head down.

“Romanovitch!”

Alexi turned and saw who was calling him. He plodded to a stop and waited. He stood where he was until the Serenian reached him, surprised when a strong, steady hand reached out to grip his shoulder. He didn’t miss the grimace of pain that crossed the young man’s face as his flesh touched Alexi’s coarse shirt. “Better get your hands looked at, milord,” he said wearily.

Conar tossed his head in negation. “Are there explosives at the quarry strong enough to put a good-sized dent in the earth?” he asked.

“Explosives?” Alexi questioned. “I don’t see”

Conar’s grip on the man’s shoulder increased although the pressure caused him to groan beneath his breath and clench his teeth tightly together. He spoke through the constriction of his teeth.

“If we set charges in the clearing just at the edge of the village, we might be able to blow the damned fire out. In Chrystallus they call it a backfire. The force of the explosion can extinguish the fire or at least contain what’s already there so it won’t cross the fire break. We might be able to make a fuel-free zone the fire can’t cross. If nothing else, the explosion will clear the vegetation.”

Alexi’s brows drew together. “Will it work?”

Conar shook his head. “I don’t know, but what other choice do we have? It’s at least worth a try!”

For just a fraction of a second Alexi’s eyes roamed over the smoke-dusted face of the man standing before him and then he turned, seeking out one of the men milling about around them.

“Petrov! Take three men with you and get your asses over to the quarry! Bring back two cart loads of explosives! And be careful about it!”

“If those villagers aren’t already evacuated from the village, we’ll be cutting it close,” Conar warned. “We have to get them to safety before we can dig a deep enough trench to lay the explosives.”

“I pray to God they are all gone,” Alexi answered.

“So do I, my friend,” Conar agreed. “So do I.” He tapped Alexi on the arm with the back of

his hand and started forward.

“Prince Conar?” Alexi called, wondering why the man frowned so fiercely at the call of his name when he had shown a moment’s camaraderie only a minute before.

“My name is Conar. Just Conar. I don’t like being called nothing BUT that!”

Alexi’s slow smile was infectious and he found the Serenian’s answering one, despite its own fatigue and worry, reassuring.

“If I was hiring for the quarry, Conar,” Alexi said, stressing this man’s name, “I wouldn’t hesitate hiring you.”

Conar laughed. “If I was looking for work, Alexi, I wouldn’t take a job in a quarry even if my life depended on it!”

Alexi threw back his head and laughed, his rich baritone bellow causing the other men to smile wearily. When he lowered his head, his face shone with admiration. “Too much like hard work, milord?” he asked in a teasing voice.

Conar nodded. “We aristocrats supervise. We don’t break our backs digging around in rock fields, my good fellow!”

“Well, excuse me!” Alexi chuckled. “I didn’t know we had an aristocrat walking alongside us.”

It was the highest compliment the man could have paid Conar and the Serenian recognized it for what it was--an extended hand of friendship.

“My dear man,” Conar scoffed in his most bored voice, “you not only have aristocracy walking alongside you, you have one tired son-of-bitch who desperately wishes he was sitting in a drawing room sipping cool wine with a hot woman on his lap!”

Alexi shook his head. “I don’t believe that. Unless I miss my guess about you, milord Conar, you are in your element here with us.”

A tired grin twitched at Conar’s lips. “It’s better than counting leaves.”

* * * *

The village was in chaos when the men arrived. Most of the forty some-odd inhabitants had already fled to the Palace, taking along what few belongings they could carry. Soldiers from both the militia and the palace guard were frantically loading what pieces of furniture and cookware they could haphazardly pile into the carts circled about the village common yard. Women rushed hither and yon, rounding up children, chickens, pigs, whatever else they could take with them. The sounds of voices shouting in various stages of dismay, alarm and frustration drowned out the creaking of wagon wheels as carts pulled away from the village.

Catherine stood off to one side, watching her older brother helping to stack an old woman’s brass bed frame into one of the carts. She smiled as the aged hag admonished Peter to “watch out for that bed, boy! I was born in that bed and so was my sixteen brats!”

The Tzarina was still inside one of the village huts, giving support and what little comfort she could to the woman who lay screaming in the last pangs of childbirth. The sound made Catherine blanch now and again and she turned away, searching for something to do. She was brought up short by the sight of Conar McGregor, nearly filthy beyond recognition, striding confidently into the village square. He was laughing with Alexi Romanovitch, the two seeming as though long-lost bosom buddies as they surveyed the turmoil around them. She felt the Serenian’s gaze pass over her, snap back to linger for a moment, but when she looked closely at his soot-smeared face, she found him staring intently at the hut where the screaming woman was piercing the air with her cries.

“I ain’t never seen a man who didn’t lose his color when a woman starts to moaning and

groaning on the birthing bed,” the old woman who had been nagging Peter said as she walked up to Catherine. “That one might be as handsome as a fine fellow can be, but he’s afeared of the sound of that baby coming!” She chuckled, gasped and coughed, her spasmodic cackles wet and explosive.

Catherine could not help but wonder at the odd look that had suddenly formed on Conar McGregor’s face. Even from where she stood watching him, she could see the effect the woman’s screaming was having on him. She could have sworn he was trembling, his eyes bleak and wounded as he stood there listening. She watched him wipe a shaking hand across his dirty face then reach up to tug at the smoke-darkened thickness of his golden hair. She watched him close his eyes and shudder as a particularly loud burst of agony ripped from the hut.

“It’s a’bothering him something fierce, ain’t it, lady?” the old woman said in a quiet voice. “That boy’s got experience of such, I’d say.”

Catherine looked down at her. “He’s never been married,” she answered, believing it, since that was what she had been told.

The old woman shook her head. “He don’t need to have been married, girl, to have got a woman’s belly fat with child.” She nudged her wrinkled chin toward Conar. “Look at him, dearie! Ain’t too many women I’d think that ever turned their backs on him unless it was for him to have at her that way!” Her leering giggle made Catherine blush to the roots of her hair. “If’n I had him in my bed, I’d give him a sore cock, I would!”

“Cat!”

Turning at the sound of her elder brother’s voice, Catherine walked gratefully away from the old woman’s merry chuckles at her discomfort and hurried to her brother.

“What can I do, Petya?” she asked.

“We’re going to have to move that woman in there,” he answered. “They’re going to try to blow out the fire with explosives and she sure as hell doesn’t need to be anywhere near that. Go in and tell Mother we’ve got to get her and the woman out of here.”

“Explosives?” Catherine echoed. “Whose bright idea was?” she stopped and looked toward Conar. She saw him pointing to the ground, watched Alexi nodding in agreement. Well, she thought with a grudging admission, it might work. “How will we transport her?” she asked.

“In one of the carts,” her brother answered gruffly.

Catherine turned to see Conar standing close enough to her for her to see the grim expression in his eyes. She watched him stride toward the hut, giving orders as he went.

“Pad one of those carts with all the blankets you can get hold of. Hitch up the most gentle and sure-footed mare you can find and put a jug or two of water in the cart.” He glanced down at Catherine. “You got laudanum in that bag of yours, girl?” At her nod, he nodded, as well. “Make sure you have it ready for her.”

“Rudolf!” the Tzaravitch Peter yelled to one of the palace guards. “Do what the Prince ordered! Get some blankets!”

Catherine stood there in the dust of the village common yard, smoke swirling in the air around her, the firestorm blazing away just up the hill and watched as Conar McGregor disappeared into the mean hovel where the woman’s trilling agony was humming in the air. When he walked out in a moment or two, the arching woman in his arms, the dark stain of the woman’s birth water flowing freely down his breeches, she couldn’t stop her mouth from sagging open as he gently laid the woman in the cart and then bent over to kiss her dirty forehead.

“It’s going to be a boy,” she heard Conar tell the moaning woman. “What are you going to

name him, sweeting?"

Despite her advanced agony and fear, the village woman forced a tremulous smile to her lips. "A boy?" At Conar's nod, the woman nodded as though in agreement.

"What be your name, Your Grace?" she asked in a gasping voice.

Catherine saw him smile. "Conar."

The woman nodded. "He'll be named so, Your Grace."

It might have been the smoke. It might have been sweat, it might even have been a piece of airborne ash drifting in the rushing wind, but Catherine didn't think so. The moisture that came into Conar McGregor's deep blue eyes could have been nothing else but tears.

"I'd like that, sweeting," he said in a soft, gentle voice. He stroked the woman's limp hair back from her forehead and smiled down gently into her flushed face. "I would really like that." Once more in bent forward and kissed the woman, playfully tweaked her nose, and winked.

From her place inside the cart, staring up at the Serenian's tired face, Charlotte Steffenovitch, the Tzarina of the Outer Kingdom, found her breath caught in her throat, her heart pounding as madly as though she were an untried, green girl. When those alien blue eyes lifted to her own, smiled sadly, and then moved on, the Tzarina thought she had never seen such an agonized hurt in a man's face before. There was such desperate longing and aching need written there that Charlotte trembled from the force of emotions which were crossing his saddened face.

"Are you all right, son?" she found herself asking.

Conar shrugged. "Nothing that a long bath and a good meal, finished off with a slow and leisurely re-count of the scallops, wouldn't cure."

Charlotte had no idea what he was talking about. Scallops? Had someone served him scallops? Did he not get enough? She shook her head, watching him walk away from the cart as the mare gently eased them forward. "I'll make sure he has scallops for supper this very eve!" she promised herself.

"I won't go without him!"

Heads turned toward the nearly-hysterical voice and narrowed with sympathy.

A little boy of about seven was tugging fiercely against his mother pull. His strident voice carried above the din of the evacuation as did his mother's pleas for reasonableness from her child.

"He'll be all right, Niki! He's an animal. He's use to fending for himself!"

"I won't go without him!" The boy strained, digging his little feet into the sand as he tried to pull free of his mother's grasp. "Maxi! Maxi, come back!"

Conar also heard the child and turned, frowning as he saw the mother jerking hard on the little boy's thin arm. A muscle ground in his jaw as the boy's mother bent down to smack the child soundly on his squirming rump.

"The explosives are here, Conar," Alexi said, momentarily taking Conar's attention from the mother and child.

"Are the trenches dug where I showed you?" Conar asked, his attention swinging back to the struggling family.

"Just as you wanted. Do we go ahead and place them?"

Conar nodded. Alexi shook his head in annoyance, seeing where his companion was looking. "The boy's dog ran into the forest. The noise must have frightened him. The boy doesn't want to leave without it."

There were tears coursing down the child's lean face, his eyes pleading as he found Conar's locked with his own. His trembling little mouth formed the word 'please' even as his mother

dragged him forcefully backward toward one of the carts.

"Please!" the little boy screamed. "I love him! He's my best friend!"

He was no older than this boy, he thought with a sharp prod of pain. Seven, eight, maybe. No older. He had been small like this one, thin, emaciated. He had begged, too. Begged a man who did not heed the cry. Who fed on the agony of a little boy, a man who turned a small boy's love into a misery that had lasted into adulthood.

"Don't let him die, sir!" the boy shrieked. "Please don't let my dog die!" His misery and grief bored into Conar with such force it made the older man flinch.

The puppy had been only a few weeks old, fat, wiggly, his little pink tongue lolling from the side of his moist mouth. He'd had spots on his belly, irregular patches of pale brown. Soft, shiny blond fur covered his pudgy little body and his long, floppy ears smelled of soap and powder.

"Save him, sir! He's just a little dog!" the boy cried in hitching sobs that lurched his body. "He ain't never hurt no one!"

The Bishop of Ordination for the Brotherhood of the Domination, Kahlil Toire, had brought the pup to him, laying it down on the altar. He'd looked down at a young Conar McGregor with vicious, malevolent eyes.

"Strangle it, Conar," he'd ordered in his ugly, hateful voice.

"Please!"

At first he'd refused, cringing away, trying to run. He'd begged, tearfully, promising to allow things, the memory of which still haunted him, if the puppy were only set free.

"Either you strangle it with your own hands or I shall put out its eyes then cut off its paws one by one before I slit its belly and pull out the innards!" the priest had promised the boy.

Conar shook himself, looking down at his hands where he could still feel the warm little body, trusting and loving, in his child's hands. He flinched as the memory of that pink little tongue had flicked over his arms, as the little tail had thumped joyfully on the altar slab. He could still hear the tiny whine of surprise as his fingers had closed around the silky neck and he had

Watching the play of emotions crossing the Serenian Prince's face, Alexi knew what was about to happen. Even as he reached forward to stop him, Conar McGregor had turned and was running for the woods behind the boy's hut.

"Conar, no! Don't! It's just an animal!" Alexi yelled, seeing the flames already beginning to show through the trees there. He would have stepped forward, to go after his new-found friend, but one of his men shouted there was a problem with the explosives. "Damn it!" he snarled, his devotion torn between the man and the bigger problem--the raging inferno.

Marie Catherine felt her heart lurch when Conar ran into the forest. She knew where he was going. The little boy's plaintive appeal had sprung the Serenian into action. "God, help him," she heard herself say.

The forest was black and thick with smoke. The heat was nearly unbearable. Flames crackled loudly around him as Conar bent forward, bracing his hands on tree trunks, his watering eyes on the ground, his acute hearing tuned for any sign of a whimpering animal. He searched the ground, pushing shrubs out of his way, his head swinging from side to side. If he had heard the name of the boy's mutt, it hadn't registered and he wished with all his heart that it had. He tried whistling, clicking his tongue, but his mouth was so dry, his spittle had evaporated, making it difficult to bring any sound out.

But he had to find the dog.

He had to.

The little boy's childhood depended on him doing so.

His own childhood screamed out for him to make restitution for an act he had been forced to do long, long ago, an act that had seen no pets in Boreas Keep when he had returned from the Monastery.

"I don't like dogs in the keep," he had told everyone and there had been no pets.

At least none until Liza had brought her menagerie into the keep at their wedding, most of them adoptees from Ron and Emmie Lou Tucker's kennels.

"Where are you, little one?" he called out.

Sidestepping a pile of leaves that were beginning to smolder from the heat, he peered into the gathering darkness of the trees. He was fast losing hope of finding the dog and hoped with all his heart the mutt hadn't already succumbed to the roaring conflagration that was rapidly advancing on him.

"Alel, please!" he whispered, his heart aching with remembered childhood pain. "Help me find it."

"Use your power."

He stopped, his heart slamming painfully into his chest, his mouth sagging open in stunned surprise.

Where the hell had the voice come from? He spun around, searching the trees, brows drawn together with both fear and confusion.

"Use your power," the voice spoke once more.

"Sweet Merciful Alel," Conar breathed. He looked upward, up past the arching branches high above his head, seeking the blue of the sky, finding only blowing ash and billowing smoke. He shook his head. "I don't have the power anymore!"

"Try," came the gentle rebuke.

Time was running out.

For him.

For the dog.

For a grown man trying to right a grievous wrong.

For a little boy whose best friend was lost to him.

"Conar, try!" The command was stern.

He didn't question the voice, but instead concentrated on hearing the low thrum of the little animal's life force.

Chapter Twelve

The wind was whipping down from the tall timberland to the north. The sky was darkening, day fading, but the harsh red-orange flames were lighting the way across the horizon, glowing, pulsing, as the straggling people from the village made their way down the roadway to the palace. Most kept looking behind them, watching the men poised to light the explosives as soon as the Outlander came out of the woods with young Niki Teranova's mongrel. That he would, none of them doubted. There had been a grim determination in the Outlander's face that all those who saw it understood.

"That boy's had him a might of pain in his lifetime," the old woman had commented as Peter Steffensburg lifted her into one of the last carts to leave. "Did you see his face, son?"

Peter had, and he didn't like what he'd seen. "Yes, Grandmother, I saw."

"He'll get your doggie, Niki!" the old woman had called to the crying boy. "He will."

"Don't tell him that," Catherine had admonished.

The old woman had turned a hazy, smug expression to the younger woman. "Have a little faith in your man, dearie," she'd snapped.

"He's not my man!" Catherine had snapped right back.

A bony, arthritic finger punched toward Catherine. "You tell him that, dearie! I seen the way he looked for you when he come in."

Catherine turned her head away. "He wasn't looking for me," she mumbled, ignoring her brother's lifted eyebrow.

Alexi chewed on his lower lip. He scanned the forest. One part of him wanted to run pell mell into the conflagration in search of the Serenian, while another part of him knew it would be useless. Even lethal. If the man wasn't already overcome with smoke, or lying in a ditch burning to death, Alexi would be if he went in search of him. Two men losing their lives over a worthless mutt was insane.

"What'll we do if he don't come back soon?" one of Alexi's men asked fearfully.

Alexi let out a long, shivering sigh. "Let's give him ten more minutes. We can't wait much longer than that or the fire will be on us."

Ten minutes didn't seem like a long time. But to the men who stood before the loosely covered explosives in the ditch that had been dug earlier, it seemed a lifetime. Nerves were fraying, catching on fire with the oncoming heat, searing the men's souls as they waited. Gazes flicked fearfully from the flames higher up the hillside to the darkening woods behind the little boy's hut.

"We can't wait no longer, Alexi."

Alexi Romanovitch nodded. His face pinched with misery. "Get ready to light the fuses." He looked around him. "You men go. Polin and I will take care of the charges."

"What about the Prince?" someone asked.

A dull ache started in the region of Alexi's heart. "He'll understand."

"But he'd be a might pissed if he got blown up, nevertheless, you son-of-a-bitch!"

Alexi spun around, grinning from ear to ear as he saw Conar stumbling toward them, a wiggling, slurping half-breed clutched tightly to his chest. The little dog's long neck was arched backward, affording his tongue a good lick at the dirty neck of the man carrying him.

"Will one of you take this mutt?" Conar grumbled, although his expression belied his ill humor as he scowled down at the whining dog. "He's licked the skin off me now." The little mutt yipped and slurped his pink tongue across Conar's chin. "You brat!" the Serenian chuckled.

Andrei rushed forward, taking the squirming little ball of fur from Conar's hands. He looked up quickly at the slight moan that issued from Conar's mouth. "Milord?" he questioned.

"Get him to his master, Andrei," Conar ordered. "We've got work to do here."

Alexi knew Conar's hands were paining him. The bleak look of misery in the man's dark face came from the blistered, running, raw flesh of the palms which were curled slightly at the Serenian's side.

"We'll get those hands looked at," Alexi promised.

"When we've done what we have to," Conar agreed.

"We've got a salve that will take away the pain," Alexi assured him.

"By Alel, I hope so," Conar murmured. His palms hurt so bad he was shivering despite the raging inferno behind him.

"Count on it!" the Outer Kingdom man swore.

Chapter Thirteen

Wind rushed toward the group on the road, shoving against them as gray ash swirled in dervishes around them. The sound of the explosion was louder than most would have dreamed possible, ear-splitting successions of booms that shook the ground and frightened the already terrified horses and mules. It took brute strength to keep the animals in control as the aftershock reached the straining beasts.

“Here they come!”

Peter Steffensberg glanced around and saw Alexi and the Serenian walking side by side, heads down, shoulders sagging and knew the men were bone-weary, hungry and more than a little held in awe by the villagers who had stopped to wait for the two men. He looked beyond the men and saw the fire, knew it had been stopped by the intrusion of the explosion in its path and smiled with relief. Bringing his hands up, he began to clap his thanks. Soon every hand available had joined the young Tzaravitch in his praise.

Alexi glanced up and grinned. His strong white teeth shone in the blackened halo of his face. He nudged his tired companion and chuckled. “We’re heroes, Outlander.”

Conar looked up, saw the crowd, scanning the gathering until he found the one face, the one pair of hands that were giving him their approval and he let out a weary sigh.

Marie Catherine stopped applauding when Conar McGregor’s gaze dropped away from her. She watched him stumble with fatigue, saw Alexi’s hand go out to steady him, noticed for the first time that his hands appeared to be injured. Burned, no doubt, she thought with annoyance. She was about to step forward, to gather her supplies to go to him, when she saw her mother rushing forward, her arms going up to embrace the startled man.

“Conar!” she heard her mother gushing. “You have saved the village, son! How can we ever thank you?”

A deep red blush swept furiously over Catherine’s face when those tired sapphire eyes seemed to automatically leap to hers at her mother’s inane question. That alien gaze held for a fraction of a second then lowered to the woman whose arms were around him. Catherine didn’t hear his reply, but she heard Alexi’s and her attention lowered to the quarry foreman who had dropped to one knee at her mother’s approach.

“He’s hurt, Highness,” she heard Alexi tell her mother.

“Hurt?” Charlotte Steffenovitch’s screech of dismay caused every voice to cease. “Where?”

“His hands,” Alexi informed her.

“Conar, let me see!”

The Serenian held his hands out, palms up.

Catherine let out a deep breath as she saw her mother examining the Serenian Prince’s hands, winced at the small cry of shock her mother uttered. One of her sisters rushed forward with salve and bandages and before Catherine could take another breath, Conar McGregor was sitting on the back of one of the carts having his hands tended to.

“Such a fuss over a minor thing like scorched palms,” she muttered.

When the small procession of stragglers finally reached the Palace of the Tzars, servants rushed out to help those who would be staying the night. Cots and pallets were hastily laid out in spaces available within the keep. An aromatic stew was already bubbling in a large cauldron in the inner bailey. Plank tables made from slabs of timber and sawhorses had been erected to feed the mass of people. Jugs of ale and cider sat off to one side along with a small table piled high with loaves of freshly-baked bread. Hampers of apples and pears flanked the steps leading up to

the guard house. Queuing up, the villagers began to pile tin plates full of the piping stew.

“Hungry, Cat?” Mikel asked his sister. He’d been busy all day supervising the procession of villagers into the keep.

“I’ve had some sandwiches,” she answered, arming the sweat from her brow. “I’ll get something later on.”

Mikel thrust his chin toward Conar McGregor who was climbing down from a cart which had just rolled into the inner bailey. “How’d he do?”

Catherine shrugged. “Well, enough, I suppose.”

“If there’s any truth to what I’ve heard from people all day, he’s something of a hero.” Mikel waved at the man he was discussing with his sister.

“He’s a man,” Catherine snapped and turned away from her brother’s look of surprise. “Nothing but a man!”

Conar waved back at the younger royal son, thought again how much the boy reminded him of his youngest brother, Dyllon, and wondered how the two of them would get along. He grunted. The two of them would get along just fine until they got their skinny little butts into mischief. Mikel Steffensberg had the same look in his hazel eyes that Dyllon had. It would be a toss up as to who would accept blame for their mischief making.

Wearily he walked away from the cart on which the Tzarina had insisted he ride, and went to a cool, quiet corner of the keep’s north wall and slid tiredly down it to sit on the slightly damp ground. He brought his legs up, laid his wrists on his knees, closed his eyes and hung his head.

He was tired, so tired he could barely stay awake. So tired he didn’t feel like climbing the steps up into the palace much less to try to make his way up the staircase to his bedroom. He’d love a bath, hot and relaxing, but he didn’t think he could stay awake long enough to take it. He was hungry, but his hands hurt him so badly he knew he couldn’t hold on to the fork or spoon.

He was thirsty, too, but just didn’t have the strength it took to get up from where he sat to trod over to the water barrel. And his head ached from the smoke inhalation, from hunger, from a day spent in anxious worry.

And he was so lonely he wanted to cry.

Oh, he thought with a tired sigh, they had been so good to him here. He was granted anything he could possibly want. He was treated with a deep respect that seemed to be growing every day. The men he worked with had treated him like one of their own. That alone, he knew, was as high a compliment as any they could give.

And yet he was withering inside from the loneliness he was feeling at that moment.

Although he was being fed well, better than he had ever been fed, his meals nutritious and so different from what he was use to that each feasting was an experience, he was slowly starving to death for what he ate could not feed the hunger growling within his soul. Neither could the fine wines and delicious spring-fed waters slake the terrible thirst that was slowly evaporating the juices of life that had sustained him. Nothing seemed to satisfy him. He was restless, discontent, bitterly lonely, and brooding on the past. He allowed himself to become morbid, melancholy, his attitude one of indifference. His rich baritone voice had become toneless, though softer, he thought. Too soft, he acknowledged, with little or no inflection and far less emotional energy than he knew himself to possess. He was becoming a wimp, he thought with a snort.

He knew he was slowly losing touch with reality here in this wonderland of gentle, caring people. Nothing had as yet been said about his past, although he knew the Tzar and his sons, perhaps some of the aides, knew of it. They treated him as though his long imprisonment in the Labyrinth, as well as the reason he had been there, had never occurred. To them, he was the King

of Serenia, by birth and by right, and they treated him as such--an honored guest. None of them, with the exception of that damned woman, he thought with a pang of annoyance, treated him like he was a human being.

He liked the people of the Palace well enough, but it was like it had been when he was growing up in the keep at Boreas. He'd hung around with the du Mer brothers, Teal and Roget, with the Loure brothers, Thom and Rayle, with a few other sons of members of the guard and staff simply because he hadn't liked being by himself after seven years of enforced solitude during his internment in the Monastery. He hadn't really enjoyed the company the men of the keep had provided him with, but he needed the companionship of other human beings.

There had always been, and he thought most likely always would be, a complex, never to be understood, emptiness yawning inside him that kept true friendships at bay. The closest he had ever come was with Sentian Heil. He suspected his childhood in Kahlil Toire's sinister clutches might well be at the root of his peculiar phobia against forming close personal attachments, but he truly didn't know for sure. Whatever had caused him to always stand outside the circle, looking in with hungry, longing eyes, would continue for as long as he drew breath. He only prayed the emptiness would be filled after that last breath was taken for he feared he would never find that bond between him and another human that he so longed to have. And that knowledge made his loneliness at the Palace of the Tzars that much more annihilating.

And yet he once had known brutal, unrelenting loneliness much worse than what he was feeling at that moment. That loneliness had claimed him, sucked the very life from his body, leaving him an empty shell of a man, numb, disassociated, barren of both energy and substance. Despair had driven him to his knees during that time. Depression had kept him there. He had dwelt on the fringes, beneath the ebb and flow of human existence, a being alienated from, and separate of, humanity. He had known a darkness so great during that time that it had blinded him to life. And yet he managed to rise above all that, to start his life over, to live again.

So why now, at this point in his life, could he not seem to take charge of his destiny once more? Why was he allowing other people to run his life for him? He plodded along from day to day, taking what was there, not striving to bend from the ordinary. He was bored and becoming boring. His time in the Outer Kingdom had tamed him, domesticated him to such a point he hardly recognized himself. He had become too civilized. If anything, time had begun to emasculate him.

Nor had time closed the gaping hole left in his soul with Elizabeth's death, nor had it stitched together the bleeding wound of his heart. It had merely prolonged the healing, made the infection of his pain open up fresh sores of loneliness and he knew there was no potion known to man that could cure him, no pharmacist could brew a salve to ease that suffering.

What shocked him, though, was the meanness he felt of late. He felt meaner than he ever had. He was far more argumentative with that little air-headed bitch of a Tzarevna than he could ever remember being with any woman, at any time. The woman annoyed the hell out of him, brought out a side to him he never knew existed. One moment he wanted to turn her over his lap and pommel her ass 'til it was black and blue. The next he wanted to toss her to the ground, throw her skirts up and

"Prince Conar?"

Vaguely he heard a noise interrupting his train of thought, but he pushed it aside, instead brooding on the fat cow's insistence at tormenting him. Didn't she KNOW what she was doing to him? Hell, yes, she knew, he thought with a vicious twist of his lips. She knew exactly what she was doing to him. She was driving him crazy and enjoying herself in the process!

“Excuse me.”

He heard that noise again and drove himself deeper into his thoughts to block it out. He had things to sort out, things to put in the proper perspective. He had to figure out why the little bitch got to him so easily. Always having prided himself in his ability to ignore a woman’s intrusion if he was of a mind to, he found he just simply could not ignore Marie Catherine no matter how hard he tried. Insistently, insidiously, infuriatingly she was slipping beneath the shell of his self-erected detachment and was slowly making a place for herself.

He did not want to accept the fact that the woman was having a profound effect on his natural urges, either. That was a control he always thought himself capable of maintaining. Now, he wasn’t so sure. Those urges had not been acted upon for a long, long time, and Catherine was probing at them like a tongue to a sore tooth. And it sure as hell got his attention.

He just damned sure wasn’t ready to admit to himself that Marie Catherine Steffenovitch was getting next to him!

“Prince Conar!”

He flinched, looking up quickly. As soon as he saw who was intruding, he frowned, his face becoming hostile and angry.

“What?” he snarled.

Catherine stared at the man. The incredible force of his personality, the awesome power of his presence, seemed to attack her on such a primal, almost sexual level, that it took her aback. Why had she never noticed how fierce his eyes could be?

“Do you want something or are you here just to aggravate me, woman? Haven’t I had enough trouble today without having you create more?” he snapped at her.

Her spine stiffened. She held up the bucket and dipper of water she was carrying. “I was sent over here to offer you something to drink.”

That wasn’t true. She’d taken it upon herself to do it, but she didn’t want him to know it.

His attention shifted down to the bucket, narrowed, and then slid back to hers. “What’d you do? Poison it first?”

“Yes, but at least you will die with your thirst slacked,” she shot back.

Conar snorted. He held out his hand for the dipper, keeping his teeth locked together to keep from crying out as the woman handed him the dipper and he took it in his injured right palm. He brought it up to his lips and drained it, feeling the cold, refreshing liquid slide down his throat. A small stream of water slipped down his chin, wetting his throat and he sighed as he handed the dipper back to her.

“You want more?” she asked in a voice that hoped he didn’t.

“Why not?” he grunted. “If you used the right kind of poison, I’m already a dead man.”

“A situation devoutly to be wished!” she hissed as she refilled the dipper and handed it to him once more.

He eyed her over the rim of the dipper as he drank. When he’d drained the dipper, he threw it past her as hard as his injured hand would allow. His lips twisted with anger.

“Why did you do that?” she snapped at him.

“You know, a man can take just so much shit being flung at him before he starts to fling it back!”

Catherine slowly turned her head, looked at the tin dipper lying in the dirt and then just as slowly returned her gaze to the Serenian. There was an infinitely bored expression on her prim mouth.

“You are the most detestable, despicable, ill-mannered, uncouth lout I have ever had the

displeasure of meeting. I was amazed at how easily you were able to fool our people into trusting you this afternoon. I don't know what you hoped to gain by doing so, but I am sure the real reason behind you pretending to be just 'one of the people' will be exposed before too long and they'll see you for what you are."

Conar snorted. "And just what am I, you stupid cow-faced bitch?"

"An opportunist who thinks to insinuate himself into the palace to gain my father's trust in the hope of obtaining a large settlement for not marrying one of his daughters!"

"You don't know anything about me," he snarled. "You don't know me!" He turned his face away from her. Her scathing tongue was shredding his pride again.

"I know enough to know I don't want to know any more about you. You aren't worth thinking about. Nor talking to! You were disinherited by your father because you couldn't be trusted to look after the kingdom that was your birthright!"

A look of stunned shock came over Conar's face as he jerked back around to face her. "Is that what you really think?" he asked in a subdued voice.

"It is what I know!" she hissed at him. "And I'll tell you something else I know. I would rather see my sisters dead and buried than have them turned over to the likes of you! You miserable, disfigured gnome!"

Her anger cut him, lashed across his heart like a rapier's blade. The suddenness of it, the precise viciousness left him stunned, shocked at how very cruel this woman could be. Involuntarily, he lowered his eyes from the grimace of contempt on her twisted face. He wondered, with growing hurt, what he had done to cause her to hate him so much. But then his pride reasserted itself and he lifted his head defiantly.

"Think what you will," he said with bitterness. "Your opinion of me means about as much as gnat shit!"

Catherine turned her face and spat on the ground. "You're worse than gnat shit!"

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you make me ill just looking at you!"

His anger turned to acute hurt. "What the hell have I ever done to you, woman?" he shouted.

Catherine smiled at him, a vicious, malicious smile. She lowered her voice to a soft coo.

"You were born, you son-of-a-bitch! Your mother must have gagged at the sight of you!"

"Do you," he asked in a quiet, soft voice, "really think I deserved that?"

"Yes, I do!" she spat, turning on her heel and marching away, her back stiff, shoulders back, head high.

From his place at one of the food tables, Yuri Andreanova let out a hiss of frustration. Didn't the two of them realize what was happening to them, he thought? There stomped the Tzarevna, her eyes glittering dangerously as she passed him. Over there sat the Prince, his face bleak with hurt. Couldn't they see what they were doing to one another? They could not resist what they were beginning to feel for one another no more than they could put an end to the persistent attraction that was drawing them together like iron shavings to a magnet.

"She's a challenge to you, Conar," Yuri said to himself. "She won't allow you to intimidate her as you have other women. She refuses to cower before your irrational temper tantrums nor bow her head to your insults. You've met your match in her, milord."

The warrior heard the door to the keep slam shut behind Catherine. "And you, Cat," he mumbled to himself, "you've met a man you can't beat into submission with that wicked tongue of yours. You've finally come up against a force more solid than your own, a man who won't be budged by that vile temperament of yours. He's going to wear you down just by the force of his

personality.”

Chapter Fourteen

Legion lowered the second letter from his brother and stared into the fire. Something was wrong. Vitrally wrong. This letter, even more formal than the first one, written on Conar's birthday, had arrived the day before--fourteen months since Conar's leaving. It gave no indication of how Conar was feeling, what he was doing. It reeked of carefully planned wording, well-thought out descriptions, detached observations. There was no personal messages, no mention of any kind of relationships. Boring stuff that was so unlike Conar McGregor's normally effusive style of writing that it was eerie.

"I'm worried," Shalu Taborn, the King of Necroman, their neighbor to the west said in his gruff bass voice. "I don't like the way he sounds."

Grice Wynth nodded. "Nor do I. You were right in calling us together, Legion."

The acting Regent of Serenia turned to look at his ex-brother-in-law, the Prince of Oceania. "I had hoped between us we could figure out how things stand."

"You don't suppose he's being held there against his will, do you?" Tyne Brell, the undersized Prince of Chale, a minor principality, asked.

"I don't think so," Legion answered, "but this is so unlike my brother, I can't help but wonder what's happening over there."

Prince Chase Montyne of Ionary stood up and walked to the sideboard, poured himself another snifter of brandy, and then turned around to survey the room. He looked about the fifteen other men gathered in that room and let out a tired breath.

"Who is this woman you told me about, Legion?" he asked.

"I don't think she has anything to do with this," Legion said.

"Her name is Marie Catherine Steffensberg," Jamael answered.

Chase looked at him. "But he doesn't mention her this time?"

Jamael shook his head.

"I don't think Conar's in any kind of trouble," Roget du Mer told them. "He sounds lonely, but he doesn't sound desperate or in trouble."

"Occultus might disagree with you," Rylan Hesar, the Prince of Virago commented. "Ching-Ching's presence here tells me the situation is more serious than you realize."

The tiny Chrystallusian warrior shrugged. "I was sent to observe, Rylan. The Master made no comment to me concerning the fledgling being in any kind of trouble. If anything, he thought perhaps Conar should be left alone and you men not interfere."

Legion turned an angry face to the wizened little man. "Left alone?" He waved the letter at Ching-Ching. "Did you listen to this letter I just read?"

Ching-Ching nodded. "Indeed I did, A'Lex. I am not deaf."

"And you don't think something's wrong?" Legion inquired with a sneer.

"I did not say that," Ching-Ching reminded him. "I believe Conar is homesick and doesn't wish his family to know so he covers up his truth feelings with inconsequential trivia meant to ally your fears about him. But I also believe he is not as yet ready to return to a family which tries to run his life for him." He turned his inscrutable gaze to Legion. "That is precisely what he tried to escape when he went to the Outer Kingdom."

"Do you have a brother, Ching-Ching?" Legion snapped.

"No," answered the man.

"Then you can't understand how it feels to see a member of your family so hurt and so devastated by tragedy that he tries to kill himself!" Legion hissed.

Ching-Ching waved a hand in dismissal. “He’s tried that three times now.” He held up his hand and ticked off the count on his slim fingers. “Once when he was a boy, once when he took an overdose of that nomad’s elixir and once that day on the battlements.” He lowered his hand. “It was not the Great God’s will that Conar McGregor die with those attempts. You must have faith in your god, A’Lex. And in your brother’s ability to know what’s best for him.”

“So, what you’re suggesting is that we just sit here twiddling our thumbs and wait!” Holm van de Lar, the Captain of the Serenian fleet scoffed.

“Precisely so,” Ching-Ching retorted.

Thom Loure, the Captain of the Serenian Guard, and Sentian Heil, the Master-at-Arms of Boreas Keep, exchanged a silent look with Storm Jale, the Chief Palace Guard. The three men did not speak, but instead, slipped quietly from the room.

Paegan Hesar, brother of Prince Rylan, and the Captain of the Boreas Queen, shook his head. “It’s going to be hard to do nothing when everything points to Conar needing us.”

“If he wants us in that heathen place,” Cayn snapped, “he’ll send for us, lad. Don’t go borrowing trouble where there may not be any.”

“Coron and Dyllon are on their way home,” Jamael remarked to no one in particular. “And they’re bringing Wyn with them. Can you tell me why, Ching-Ching, if Occultus thinks there’s no trouble brewing?”

Everyone turned to the monkey-man from Chystallusian. A thin shoulder lifted. “They have not been home in many years. They wanted to come for a visit.” He shifted his unfathomable gaze to Shalu. “And to let Serenia see Wynland’s new bride.”

Shalu frowned, his thick lips thrusting into a vicious pout. His black face turned darker still with ill-humor. “The gel could have waited until she reached home before marrying that little guttersnipe.” He wasn’t pleased with his eldest daughter, Kym, although her marriage to Conar McGregor’s oldest illegitimate son pleased him greatly.

“My brother is no guttersnipe!” Tristan McGregor, the only legitimate son of Conar growled from the doorway. As the men glanced around at him, the thirteen year old strode arrogantly into the room. His father’s other son, Regan, followed in his wake. “Wynland is as much a McGregor as is his father. And if he is coming home, that means he is as worried about Papa as Regan and I are!”

Chase Montyne flicked his regard over Regan and frowned. If that boy was worried about his father, he sure as hell didn’t show it. If Regan had ever shown any concern for his father, it was news to Chase.

“What are we going to do, Uncle Legion?” Tristan asked, planting his fists on his hips. “Papa may need our help to leave that ungodly place.”

Legion shook his head. Tristan was the spitting image of his father at that age, he thought with a wry smile. From the bright blond hair and pale blue eyes, to the cleft in his chin, to the height and breadth and width of the boy, he was Conar McGregor’s son. Even his temperament and restlessness were so like Conar’s it never failed to amuse his uncle.

“We’re going to wait awhile, Tris,” Legion answered. “I have a feeling someone will be on their way to the Outer Kingdom before the sun sets on this day.”

“Who?” Regan asked.

“Storm Jale, I would imagine,” Cayn answered. “In case the rest of you didn’t notice, our three stalwart warriors have vanished.”

“I noticed,” Legion snapped. “And Storm would be the logical choice between them.”

“If he can find his way on board a ship bound for the Sinisters he might be able to find an

Outer Kingdom ship,” Holm remarked. “It won’t be easy. Those bastards are very suspicious of those they call Outlanders.”

“And then what?” Regan probed.

“Then he’ll find out just what the problem is with our father!” Tristan promised. “And if he finds Papa is in trouble, the entire might of the Wind Force will come down on the Outer Kingdom like the vengeance of Alel!”

“Who’s going to lead that entire might, Tristan?” Tyne Brell chuckled.

“I will!” Tristan growled.

Chapter Fifteen

They were sitting in the Tzarina's solarium, the Tzar, his head back along his chair, lids closed, thumbs twiddling, the Tzaravitch Peter and his younger brother Mikel playing a game of chess and the three younger royal daughters, Tatiana, Nadia and Svetlana, had their heads together, giggling over the latest court gossip. The Tzarina, pacing from one plant to another, checked the leaves for insects.

"Checkmate," Peter said, grinning.

Mikel looked up at him and squinted.

"And then," Svetlana said, "her husband came around the corner and found her"

"In a wicked embrace with Count Boganskaya!" Nadia finished with a sigh of girlish drama.

"Girls," their mother warned and the three pulled away from one another and looked at their father.

"Lottie, have you ever noticed the smell in here?" the Tzar asked, opening his eyes. "It smells of" he wrinkled his nose. "Earth."

Charlotte sighed. "That's because there are plants in here, Thomas."

"Oh. Yes. Right," the Tzar mumbled. He glanced over at his wife. "Must we have them here, dear?"

His wife gritted her teeth. "It's a solarium, Thomas. Solariums have plants."

The Tzar frowned. "I don't see why." He wrinkled his nose again. "I don't care for the smell, Lottie."

"I'll move them to the library then," his wife snipped.

"Don't think so, dear," the Tzar answered in his absent-minded tone. "I'd hate the smell there, too."

"Then should I keep them where they are?" Charlotte asked in a sweet voice.

Her husband nodded. "Best place for them I think."

The two royal sons looked at one another and then away before either of them could laugh. Unfortunately, their sisters had no such compunction against laughter for their giggles brought an instant shushing from their mother.

"We are here for a reason!" the Tzarina snapped at her children. "We didn't assemble here to pass the time with inane conversation."

"Oh, yes," Peter said, nodding his head sagely. "We are here to discuss what should be done about the plants in the solarium."

"Don't be impertinent, Peter," his mother warned sternly. "We are here to discuss Catherine."

"Quite," his father put in. "The girl is getting close to being past her prime. We must get her and the Prince together soon."

"Whether they are of a mind or not," Peter commented.

"They want to be together," Tatiana added. "They just don't know how to go about doing so."

"They're too much alike," Nadia stated. "That's why they're having so many arguments."

"Arguments?" Svetlana groused. "They're more like battles."

"Battles of wills," Mikel chuckled. "And most of the time poor Conar comes out on the losing side."

Peter glared at his brother. "He's trying to be a gentleman about this and Cat won't allow it. Her barbed tongue is enough to make any man see red!"

“That’s true,” Mikel agreed. “But I have a feeling Conar’s had all he can take and intends to take no more.”

The Tzar lifted his head from the back of his chair and looked at his youngest son. “What makes you think so?”

Mikel shrugged. “Because I overheard him telling Yuri that if that ‘Outer Kingdom cow’ insulted him one more time, he was going to hop the next ship home.”

“Thomas!” the Tzarina gasped. “We can’t allow that!”

Her husband sat up in his chair and rubbed his chin vigorously, his forehead wrinkled with thought. “No. No, we can not.”

“I don’t see how you can prevent the man from going home, Father,” Peter stated. “He’s not a prisoner here.”

“Have any of you noticed how combative the Serenian is?” Mikel asked.

“I certainly wouldn’t attempt to detain him if he is of a mind to leave, Peter,” the Tzar insisted, “but I would do everything in my power to try to persuade him not to.”

“Conar seems to be of a nature to enjoy a good challenge,” Mikel looked around him and noticed no one was listening to him. He shrugged. No one ever paid attention to him when he spoke.

“What are we going to do to keep him here, Thomas?” The Tzarina sat down heavily in her chair. “The two of them are made for one another. We can’t let their vile tempers stand in the way of them being together.”

“Mother,” Peter sighed, fixing the Tzarina with an admonishing eye. “You can not play matchmaker to people who are not inclined to be matched.” He held up his hand as his mother’s mouth opened to protest. “I, too, agree they would make an ideal couple, but they must see that for themselves.”

“And just how do we make them see they are right for one another?” his mother snapped.

“It seems to be me Conar thrives on competition,” Mikel announced in a loud enough voice to gain his family’s attention.

“And just how would you know?” Peter snapped.

“I’ve been watching him.”

Peter’s left eyebrow elevated slightly. “Indeed.”

Mikel nodded. “On the training ground.”

The Tzar gasped. “Our training ground?”

“He was sparring with the militia,” Mikel informed his father.

“With our militia?” His father’s face blanched white as his thoughts of harm befalling Conar McGregor while training with the soldiers flitted through his mind.

“Unless we are training Inner Kingdom guerrillas on someone else’s training ground, then he’s training with our men here, Father,” Mikel said in a droll tone.

“Don’t be disrespectful to your father,” his mother cautioned, but she smiled at her youngest son.

“How does he do?” Peter asked, obvious curiosity on his face.

“Better than I would have imagined,” Mikel said begrudgingly. “When he first started working out with our men, he seemed not to be very well trained. I think perhaps the inactivity he has been forced to endure while here might well have weakened him, but as time advanced, he has shown a remarkable ability with the combative skills. Now that he has been allowed to work out with our men, he seems better satisfied.”

“And just who gave him permission to train with our men?” his father snarled.

Mikel's large hazel eyes widened in innocence. "He hasn't been denied access to any part of our keep, Father. No one said Prince Conar was to be kept bored and lethargic."

"Who gave him instructions on how to reach the training ground, Christophe Mikel?" The Tzar knew his son well enough to know the answer to that question even as he asked it. Nevertheless, he ground his teeth at the answer.

"I presume the man asked directions on how to get there, Father. I don't know whom he asked."

The Tzar growled at his son. "Who mentioned the training to him, Christophe Mikel?"

Mikel sighed. "One of the guards, I suppose."

"You're not going to get him to admit he had anything to do with it, Father," Peter laughed. He turned an admiring glance at his little brother. "So, the man likes competition, eh?"

"The tougher, the better," Mikel said.

"He thrives on challenge, you think?" Peter was grinning widely now.

Mikel, not realizing his earlier words had been heard by his brother, nodded. "Positively flourishes with it."

Peter looked up at the ceiling. "And it's your opinion that if he had someone with whom to compete for Cat's favors, he might see the error of his ways and decide to go after her?"

"When you're the only establishment in town, your customers begin to take you for granted," Svetlana observed. "They think you will always be there and there's no rush for them to purchase your wares."

"No variety, no interest," Nadia agreed.

"But there have been dozens of men through here, Peter, who have asked for Catherine's hand this past year!" the Tzarina reminded her son. "Prince Conar all but ignored every one of them."

Mikel snorted. "Not a single one of those silly twits were good enough to empty Conar's chamber pot. Why should he take note of them!"

"Mikel!" his mother gasped, squinting in warning to her younger son.

"What my silver-tongued sibling is trying to say in his usual 'delicate' fashion is that Conar saw nothing in those men to concern him with their attention to Catherine. He knew, just as Mikel and I did, that Cat would chew those men to shreds, spit them out and then go on her way the same as before," Peter remarked.

"Precisely," Mikel agreed.

"And just what is it the two of you are suggesting, then? Do you want to have a tourney for Catherine's hand? Have those men prove they are worthy of being her husband?" the Tzar scoffed. "In the hopes Prince Conar will be inclined to prove they aren't?"

Peter turned to Mikel and something silent passed between the two brothers. When identical, devilish smiles appeared on their faces, their mother's maternal warning system activated as it always did.

"What are you thinking, boys?" she asked worried.

Mikel, as usual, turned a carefully blank expression to his mother. Peter, on the other hand, smiled. His long lashes slipped down over the brightness of his eyes for just a second, long enough to clear the devilry from those hazel orbs, then he looked up at his mother's stern expression with a carefully blank one of his own.

"Don't give me those looks!" their mother warned. "What is it you are planning, Petya?"

"We think perhaps what has been lacking in your and Father's pursuit of Prince Conar's affections for our sister is a challenge."

"A manly challenge," Mikel amended.

"Exactly," Peter said as he gave his brother a quick look. "Cat isn't much of a challenge with her mouth, but if you put a man before Conar"

"A man with whom he can identify" Mikel interrupted.

"A man who is on an equal footing with him."

"Whose talents and intelligence rival his own...."

"Who will give him a reason to vie for Cat's hand."

"Who'll be striving to win the competition just as keenly as Conar will."

"Who will give our Serenian visitor a run for his money"

"Then," Mikel said with a wry glint, "you just might get Conar's attention."

"Or rather Cat will," the Tzarina said, smiling. She understood her sons better than she did her daughters and she nodded her approval. "It just might work."

The Tzar stood up, put his hands behind his back, lowered his head, and began to pace. No one said anything, waiting instead for his reaction, although they all looked at one another as the head of the household, and the regent of their kingdom, made his own decision about the boys' plan.

Thomas Steffensberg stared down at the fieldstone flooring at his feet, frowning at the pattern, counting cracks that should be mended, broken tiles which should be replaced. He nudged one with the toe of his house slipper, clucked his tongue with disapproval when the tile moved. He glanced back at his wife.

"Needs to be repaired, dear," he pronounced.

Charlotte clenched her jaw, nodded, but said nothing.

The Tzar resumed his pacing. He stopped to examine the ragged leaf of a philodendron, stroked the glossy surface, clasped his hands behind him once more and walked over to one of the many banks of windows facing out into the garden. He stood contemplating the sweep of windows, looking up, down, side to side. He looked over his shoulder.

"Panes need washing, Lottie."

The Tzarina let out a long, long sigh. She clenched her hands in her lap, buried them in the folds of her gown and forced a rigid, polite smile to her lips.

Peter shook his head.

Mikel pursed his lips to keep from laughing.

The girls stared with anticipation and slightly parted lips.

"Well, as I see it," the Tzar said in a soft, drawn out tone as everyone sat forward in their chairs, "the woodwork could use a new coat of paint, as well." He looked at Peter. "See to it, son."

"Yes, Father," the young man agreed, his face keen with disappointment.

"A few need caulking."

Peter ground his teeth together. "I'll order it done tomorrow."

"Might as well have the glazer replace this pane here." He reached out to push against the glass. "It's loose."

"I'll be sure to tell Steis, Father."

"To whom would you send the invitations?"

Peter's brows shot upward into the dark gold of his hair and he slowly turned his head to first his mother, who was nodding, having understood her husband's bent of mind better than his children, and then to his brother, who was silently shaking his head at his father's obtuseness.

"Surely you had someone in mind, Thomas Peter?" the Tzar admonished. He turned around

and fixed his eldest son with a polite look. "Or have I underestimated the extent of yours and your brother's scheming?"

Peter cleared his throat and ran his finger along his collar which suddenly seemed too tight. Would he ever fully comprehend his father's way of going about things?

"Well, I thought perhaps since we have exhausted the aristocracy of the Outer Kingdoms and the Upper Basin, we could perhaps issue an invitation to"

"To the Inner Kingdom emirates," the Tzar finished for his son. His scowl was fierce. "You know how I feel about those tower-worshiping pogs, Thomas Peter."

"They don't worship towers, Father," Mikel said with a groan. "We've explained that to you. They face in the direction of"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes!" his father answered impatiently. "I know what you said, Christophe Mikel." He squinted at his son. "But that doesn't make it so."

"We pray before the Blessed Mother's statue, but we don't worship her," Mikel said defensively.

"Be careful," his mother crooned beneath her breath.

The Tzar strode to his eldest son and glared down at him. "You were thinking of sending out a proposal to that friend of yours. What's his name?"

Peter ground his teeth. "Sajin, Father. Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar."

"Yes," his father drawled the word out in one long hiss of disdain. "That one."

"I thought of Prince Jaleel of Dahrenia," Mikel added.

His father turned to give him a look of wonderment. "You are acquainted with those of the Rysalian tribes?"

Mikel shrugged. "Only by reputation and I have heard he is a grand warrior."

"A mincing pog," his father snapped. "He's pretty enough to be a girl. Cat needs a man not a sissy!"

"Then what of Prince Guil Ben-Shanar Gehdrin?" Peter asked. At his father's pointed look, Peter nodded. "He, too, is a Rysalian, but he is also one of the richest men in the Inner Kingdom Emirates. In Rysalia"

"Where he has a reputation for being the most foul of lechers," his mother injected and when everyone looked at her with surprise, she lifted one dainty shoulder. "I hear things, too."

In defense of a man he had met only once in passing but had taken an immediate liking to, Peter stood up and faced his father. "Give me one good reason why we should not invite Prince Sajin here to try for Cat's hand!" He looked his father in the eye. "I have never heard one bad thing said of Sajin. He has a flawless reputation among his people and he is, indeed, a warrior to be reckoned with as the Hasdus found out when they tried wreaking havoc on Alkazar lands."

The Tzar pursed his lips as he watched his eldest son's face for a moment. Finally, he sighed. "I have heard nothing against the man. It's just he's a pog." He looked imploringly to his wife. "I don't want a pog for a son-in-law."

"If Conar McGregor takes the bait, Father," Mikel explained reasonably, "you'll have a Serenian Windwarrior, instead."

"What if this Sajin whatever doesn't feel inclined to ask for Mary Catherine's hand?" The boys' father frowned. "How many wives does the man have already? Those pogs can have a score or more if they're so inclined!"

"None. He doesn't believe in the polygamous system of his ancestors. He wants only one when he marries." Peter took a deep breath and then exhaled it. "Let me send for him, Father. Once he meets Cat, he'll see the challenge there. If he can win her hand, wouldn't you agree he

deserved her?"

The Tzar frowned. "No man deserves Mary Catherine's wretched tongue." He looked at his wife, saw her nod her agreement and gave in ungraciously. "Then send for the pog, Thomas Peter, but ...," he pointed a finger at his son. "if this doesn't work to our advantage and I am forced to give my daughter's hand to a pog, I shall send you to the man's court as my representative!"

"It will work," Peter vowed, meaning to see that it did, although being Ambassador to the court of the Alkazars might not be all that bad.

The Tzar snorted and then waved his hand. "Well, send for him.

"I" Peter blushed. "I already have."

Before the Tzar could explode, his wife stood up and walked to him.

"Thomas. Be reasonable. You are training Peter to be Tzar after you. He is only exercising his natural leadership talents." She smoothed her husband's back. "This might well be what we have needed. After all, what harm can it do?"

What harm indeed?

Chapter Seventeen

Jasmine ran her hands through the black curls on her lover's head and sighed deeply. The man's hair felt like spun silk. Soft, luxuriously so, and so sensual that her fingers tingled at the touch. And his hair smelled of lime, pungent and clean. She looked down at his face.

By the Prophetess, the man was handsome! She caressed his features with her cinnamon-colored gaze and liked well what she saw.

Beneath the overly long, shaggy black curls was a high forehead with just a hint of worry lines spanning the width. Bushy black brows, long, thick black lashes fanned high cheekbones and a dusky olive complexion that, on a woman, would be called flawless. Behind those closed lids, she knew his dark brown eyes were shining, alive, full of both intelligence and laughter. The small, straight nose was bold and manly. The dusky rose of his full lips, the gentle curve of them, made Jasmine's heart flutter when they twitched. As they were doing now as he opened his eyes and looked up at her and she recognized the humor in his expression.

"If you're going to devour me, Jasmine," he drawled in his soft, husky voice, "at least make sure I'm awake to enjoy it." He reached up a strong sword hand to draw her head down to his.

When Sajin Ben-Alkazar's lips touched her own, Jasmine felt a flood of heat and moisture ooze into her womanhood. Something primitive, primal, stirred in her loins and she drew in her breath as his tongue struck like lightning between her parted lips. She groaned, a sigh of surrender, and darted her tongue against his. She faintly heard his low chuckle of amusement then felt his other hand molding itself around her right breast.

"Ah, Sajin!" she breathed against his mouth. "Do not torture me so!"

If he wanted her, she was his for the taking, as she always had been. But Sajin knew better. One taste of this sweet little virgin's tight tunnel of pleasure would see him shackled to her, hand and foot. He didn't think he'd like Guil Gehdrin as a brother-in-law. Slowly he pulled back from her and smiled.

"It is I who am being tortured, Jasmine." He reached for her hand and drew it down to the juncture of his thighs where the evidence of his statement boldly exhibited itself.

Jasmine felt the bulge of his straining manhood against her palm and quickly jerked her hand back, her face flooding with a heat of embarrassment.

"You are such a brute," she pouted, rubbing her hand down her silk-clad thigh.

"And you, my lovely little cousin, are a tease!" he grinned. He sat up, away from the sweetness and temptation of her delectable body and rested his back against the tent pole. He crossed his legs and looked across the way to the servant girl who was acting as chaperone for him and the lovely Jasmine Gehdrin. His warm, inviting smile made it clear where the servant would be spending her night.

"Are you really going to go to that horrid place, Sajin?" Jasmine asked, not missing the undercurrent of sexual tension between the man she worshiped, and meant one day to have, and the brazen serving slut who, even as Jasmine glared at her, cast demure eyes to the tent floor.

"I need a vacation," Sajin answered. "Besides, I look forward to seeing the Outer Kingdom. It is an honor to be invited there, sweeting."

"Oh, pooh!" Jasmine grumbled. "What honor is there in going to such a barbaric place?"

Sajin folded his arms over a chest so wide, so muscular, so heavily furred with crisp black curls beneath his robe, the servant girl itched with anticipation as she met his bold look. Her lips were touched with a secret smile.

"How long must you be gone, Sajin?" Jasmine demanded. She turned so that her body

blocked Sajin's view of the buxom tart across the way.

One corner of Sajin's expressive mouth lifted as he understood his guest's intent. "Long enough, Jasmine."

He cocked his head and observed his cousin with detached interest. The young woman was breathtakingly beautiful, so beautiful she made him giddy just looking at her, but despite her obvious charms, and the offer of her virginal flesh, he knew he'd never be the one to initiate Jasmine into the realm of sexual bliss.

Her long legs—she was a tall woman—were elegantly shaped, tapered and as smooth as polished ivory. Hanging freely about her waist was a thick mane of raven-black hair, shiny and soft, like silk to the touch. Almond-shaped eyes of the deepest emerald color he had ever seen brought a man's instant notice to the tilt of her nose, the slight cleft in her rounded chin, the sensual height of her cheekbones. Her voice was low, throaty, filled with an allure that brought a man's fleshy sword to immediate attention. Her lips were a deep coral, and he knew without ever having seen them, that the tips of her lush breasts would be the shade intriguing shade. Jasmine had everything a man could wish for in a mate, in a mistress, in a lover, or a wife, but along with her came that vile half-brother of hers and that was enough to cool even the horniest man's ardor.

"Are you listening to me, Sajin?" Jasmine hissed in an unladylike burst of breath.

"To every word, my little dove," he answered her. He took her hand and brought it to his lips, turned it over and planted a soft, lingering kiss on her wrist. He gazed up at her through the fringe of his lashes and he saw the hunger growing in her face. It was time he sent her on her way.

He let go of her hand.

"Your brother will be looking for you by now, mistress," the servant girl said in her soft, sultry voice.

"My brother can" Jasmine began in anger only to have Sajin shush her with his fingertips against the thrust of her pouting lips.

"Cause me trouble, Jasmine." He put on his sternest face and lowered his voice to the carefully developed tone that would give nothing away, not even his contempt for the girl's bastard kin. "I have no strong desire to duel with him over some imagined slight."

"I am a woman, Sajin," Jasmine protested.

"True. But an innocent woman who has no business being in this man's tent!"

Sajin glanced up at his sister, Sybelle, and grinned his thanks. He watched her pull Jasmine to her feet, swat the young woman on her backside, and send her, and the servant girl who would later help keep him warm during the cold of the desert night, out of his tent. He lay down on his side, propped his head with the palm of his hand and waited for Sybelle to come back. When she did, his grin deepened.

"You play with fire, little brother," Sybelle warned. "I have heard tales of Guil Gehdrin gelding men who looked askance at his sister."

Sajin shrugged. "That's because he wants her for himself."

Sybelle looked away. "I do not doubt that for a moment."

"Have you decided whether or not you are going to accompany me to the Outer Kingdom?" Sajin asked. Whenever the subject of Guil Gehdrin came up, his older sister was always acutely uncomfortable. He suspected she loved the reprobate but he hoped that wasn't the case.

Sybelle picked up a pomegranate and sliced it, began to pick out the bitter seeds and place them in her mouth.

"If you are seriously considering a marriage proposal for the Tzar's daughter, I suppose I

must go along to chaperone you.” She shuddered delicately as one particularly bitter seed burst on her taste buds. “I would not wish you to be detained in one of their gulags because you deflowered the little chit before the wedding night.”

Sajin threw back his head and laughed. Sybelle was the light of his life, the pleasure of his existence. His sister, having been married at the ripe old age of fourteen to a Kensetti sheik and widowed at seventeen, came and went as she pleased, was free to take lovers as she felt the need, and was in no hurry to re-align herself with masculine company. As long as she was discreet with her sexual appetites, not flaunting her liaisons, Sajin allowed her her entertainments. As her guardian, despite the fact that she was five years his senior, he rarely pulled the reins guiding her behavior any tighter than an occasional tug to keep the woman out of harm’s way and the eye of their local holy man.

“You might find one of their warriors to your liking,” Sajin teased her. “They tend to be hulking brutes with strong arms and weak minds.”

Sybelle smiled sweetly. “The perfect male.”

“Some would think so.” Sajin laughed. He reached out and gently touched her cheek. “Please go with me, Sybelle. I will surely get myself into mischief if you don’t.”

Her black eyes, far too old for her forty-seven years, regarded her beloved brother with amusement. “You want me to go along to keep the Tzar’s daughter in line, not you!”

“True,” he confessed, “but I would miss you.”

She leaned down toward him. “You knew all along I would go, you conniving little bastard.” She tweaked his nose. “How much leeway am I allowed there?”

A slight frown marred the handsomeness of Sajin Ben-Alkazar’s smooth face. “Don’t embarrass the family, that’s all I ask.”

“Don’t bring home an Outer Kingdom brat baking in my oven, is what you mean.”

“That, too,” Sajin agreed.

“Do you want my sisterly advice, Sajin?” she asked, all seriousness now that the rules had been laid down for their visit.

“Have I ever not listened to your advice, my sister?” He batted his long lashes at her.

Sybelle ignored his playfulness. “It would be better, little brother,” she warned him, “that no Kensett brats be left in ovens in the Outer Kingdom, either.”

Sajin gripped his sister’s hand. “I promise you I have no intention of leaving anything of mine behind when I leave the Palace of the Tzars, Sybelle.”

Unfortunately, that proved to be a promise the young Kensetti Prince would be forced to break.

As evening drew down and the sharp desert night brought with it a drop in the temperature, a silent, lithe figure slipped into Sajin Ben-Alkazar’s tent and folded itself beneath the welcoming covers held up for it.

“Good eve, my Prince,” a sultry whisper fanned over Sajin’s cheek.

“It will be.”

Chapter Eighteen

If no one understood you, Conar thought, no one could manipulate you.

If no one could manipulate you, no one could weaken you. Only weak men allowed themselves to be manipulated. Only weak men let others take control of their destinies. Weak men stood by passively and allowed those around them to plan their lives for them.

He was not a weak man, he reminded himself with a grimace. He had to make sure these people knew that.

Adversity and defeat had shown him a strength he never knew he had. That strength had brought along with it a determination to never, ever let anyone run his life for him ever again. He'd overcome obstacles most men who had faced them would have knuckled under to, but not him. He'd risen above those obstacles, had made them just one more reason to be in control of his own life.

He just damned sure wasn't use to have to ask anyone's permission to do anything, either, he told himself. Not even in the Labyrinth when his every waking moment had been planned for him.

Not even in the Wind Temple as a child had he ever needed to seek permission from another. He just did as he saw fit, suffered the consequences, and did as he wanted the next time, damn the punishment.

But when he asked the Tzar in a somewhat formal request to provide him with a ship with which to return home, he had been refused.

Refused, damn it! He'd been refused!

And he knew why!

The reason was at that moment making itself known.

As he stood, looking down from the battlements at the procession of horses, wagons, and strange, hump-backed animals so ugly he wondered from what nightmare they had been bred, he was in an absolute blind fury, mindless to the strange looks he was getting from the soldiers roaming the walls about him. His snarls of rage drew many an alarmed look from these men, but it was his alien eyes, hot with pure fury, that caused them to keep well out of his way.

"I will not be manipulated!" he told Yuri Andreanova who stood a few feet away. He swung that hot gaze to the Outer Kingdom warrior. "All my damned life I have been manipulated by people who didn't think I had sense enough to make my own decisions!" He jerked his head back to the procession winding its way to the palace gates. "I don't like it." He spun around and fixed a steely glare at Yuri. "I don't like it! Do you hear me, Andreanova?"

"Yes," Yuri said quietly. "Most of this province heard you."

A growl of spitting-mad bitterness erupted from Conar's clenched teeth and he tore his gaze away from the calm, placid face of a man who had come, if not to be a close friend, at least a boon companion, and glared down at the pair of high-stepping white horses which were almost now to the gate.

"I don't like my life fucked with!"

"So you've said," Yuri agreed. "We only want what will make you happy."

Conar gripped the battlement half-wall, threw back his head and snarled to the heavens above him.

"All my life I've been paying for the happiness people have wanted to give me!" he seethed. "You people want to force me into something I don't want!"

"No one is trying to force you into anything," Yuri reminded him. "His Highness just thought

you would like a little entertainment.

“Damn it!” His bellow of frustration echoed off the battlements, startled the men doing guard duty on the towers and brought in the instant reining of the two purebred Kensetti mounts below.

“What was that?” Sybelle gasped as she struggled to bring her horse under control.

Sajin Ben-Alkazar, struggling, as well, with his stallion as the beast side-stepped and nickered in protest, looked up at the battlements, twisting his head to do so as the horse continued to turn in circles, and saw a man glaring down at him from the wall. He stared back, his masculine instinct sensing trouble. Even from where he sat, he could see the irrational fury pressing the man’s face in a mask of deadly promise. A slow grin began to fashion itself on Sajin’s mobile mouth.

“I think that was a warning,” Sajin chuckled.

“A warning of what?” Sybelle needed to know. If her brother was in danger here, she would be aware of it and from whence it might come.

Sajin’s gaze had found the man’s on the battlement. Deep brown clashed with deep blue and a challenge passed between the two men, a challenge both recognized, and intended to act upon.

“A warning from the lion to the panther,” Sajin answered, “that the panther has strayed into the lion’s den.” He nodded his head at the man above him. “A warning this panther intends to ignore.”

Sybelle looked up at the tawny-haired warrior atop the battlements. She saw a glimpse of bright golden hair before the angry face, attached to it, jerked backward and away from sight. A nameless fear entered her chest and she reached out to put her hand on her brother’s arm.

“Be careful, Sajin,” she begged. “I sense true danger here.”

Sajin sighed. “Don’t start with that shit, Sybelle,” he warned. He looked at her. “I mean it.”

“Scoff at my gift if you will,” she answered him. “Just be careful of that man. He means you harm.”

Sajin drew on his mount’s reins and kicked his heels into the glossy white coat. “Keep your witch’s prophesies to yourself, Sybelle,” he ordered. “I don’t want to hear it!” The stallion leapt forward through the opened gates, taking its rider into the darkened archway above the wide portals.

“He’s trouble,” Sybelle said beneath her breath, glancing up once more to the battlements. “Very bad trouble.”

Stomping heavily down the stone steps to the guard rooms at the front of the palace, Conar was in such a rage, he did not see Catherine coming out of the duty officer’s quarters until he plowed into her. Reaching out with an instinctive grab to keep the woman from being bowled over, he pulled her up too quickly, too roughly, too hard into the solid wall of his chest. A small ‘oomph’ of air shot out of her surprised mouth before she brought her slippered foot down on his instep with all the force she could bring to bear.

“Unhand me, you brute!” she snarled.

“Goddamn it, you bitch!” Conar yelped, letting go of her and hopping away from her. He crashed into the damp stone wall behind him and cursed in such a vulgar, mean-spirited way, it made the woman before him take a step back.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going?” she snapped at him.

“Why don’t you stop following me around?” he shot back, rubbing his instep as he tried to maintain a dignified stance on one leg.

“Following you a” A furious burst of contempt spat from Catherine’s mouth. “Why, you grotesque, motherless”

“You’d better watch what you call me, woman,” he warned in a voice Catherine dared not heed. “I’m in no mood for you damned”

“If you don’t like my opinion of you ...,” she began, but found herself plastered tightly against the wall behind her, his hand at her throat, his body pressed so closely and intimately to her own that she could neither breathe nor move even if she had been so inclined.

“If I want you to have an opinion, woman, I’ll give you one!” he growled at her a second before his mouth swooped down over hers to cut off her response.

Catherine’s eyes opened wide, so wide it hurt. The man’s mouth was slanted across her own, his tongue thrust into the very core of her most lethal weapon, disarming her. His body, hot, sweaty, as hard as marble, was plastered against hers with enough force she could feel the imprint of his belt buckle into the flesh of her belly. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t move. Her belly was turning flips inside her. Her body had broken out in a sweat. The region between her legs seemed to be on fire, the inferno not helped by the insinuation of his thigh suddenly thrusting between her own. She had a fleeting thought of clamping her teeth down on that slick, moist tongue invading her mouth, but somehow she knew if she did, the man attacking her so expertly would do far more harm than a stolen, never asked for, kiss.

Even as the thought crossed her mind, his free hand came up and clasped her breast, and the heat from his palm through the thin fabric of her gingham gown made her whimper with both surprise and something she could not explain.

He flinched at the sound, his hand jerking away as though he had touched hot metal and when his mouth released hers and he moved away, his face as stunned as she knew her own to be for she could see her reflection in the gleaming sapphire pools of his eyes, she was left with the feeling that had his body pressed so close to her own not been there, her knees would have buckled.

Conar stared down at her, shock sending shivers of warning down his tall frame. What the hell had he done, he thought with a hard swallow which left his mouth dry? He was shivering from head to toe, burning up, his head throbbing along with the hard bulge between his legs. His heart was slamming in his chest, his palms sweating, his chest heaving.

“Are are you finished?” he heard her ask and he could only nod, unsure of what he had started.. “Would you please move?”

Why was her voice so soft, he wondered. So low? So calm? So polite? He took a step back, feeling himself peel off of her, their clothing actually sticking together. He took another step back, opened his mouth to apologize for what he never intended to do, when her hand lashed out and his cheek was on fire from the stinging slap she delivered to his left cheek. He literally staggered from the force of her blow.

“Don’t you ever put your hands on me again! Do you hear me, Conar McGregor?” she bellowed at him.

He put his hand up to his face, could feel the heat of her hit beneath his fingers. He stared at her, at the look on her face. Her entire body was shaking with rage as she glared at him. Her mouth was vicious-looking, lips pulled back over bared teeth, her expression filled with contempt.

He could stand it no longer.

“If you ever lay a hand to me again, I’ll make you regret it, woman,” he promised her.

Catherine’s fighting instinct leapt to the surface and she found her chest heaving, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps of outrage. Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Don’t threaten me, McGregor,” she warned him. “You don’t threaten me!”

He shook his head angrily, tossing his mane a golden hair. “Not a threat, a promise.” He pushed away from the wall where he had been leaning. “On my honor as the regent of Serenia, I swear to you you won’t like what I do to you if you so much as dare raise your hand to me ever again.”

“What would a man like you know about honor?” she sneered. “Men disinherited by their own fathers could have no honor, else they would not have been cast aside!”

She knew she’d pushed him too far that time for the look that came over his flushed face was so livid, so violent, she couldn’t help but scuttle out of his way.

“My God,” she thought, staring at the fury lashing his face, “the man is going to explode with rage!”

His eyes were merciless, fierce, boring into hers like twin coals from the fires of Hell. The rigidity of his body, literally quivering with his fury, caused Catherine to heartily wish she had never lifted a hand to strike him. Those powerful hands—had she once thought them soft and ineffectual?—were clenched into fists so tightly that the knuckles bled white. His lips were twisted into a grimace of such towering contempt, it was a wonder he could speak to her.

But speak he did and the words he said cut Catherine to the quick.

“I don’t think you understand me,” he ground out. “I wasn’t asking you not to touch me again, I was telling you you’d better not ever do so.” His hand snaked out and gently took hold of her neck, drawing her toward him. A slow, viciously cold grin settled on his lips as she stumbled toward him, her own body rigid with fear. He cocked his head to one side and looked at her for a long time, his strong fingers bracing her head so she could not move. His face was hard, frigid, infinitely deadly. His nostrils flared as though her smell nauseated him. When he spoke again, his voice was a mere whisper of sound fanning her ashen face.

“Give me a reason to hurt you, little bitch.” One tawny brow lifted. “Just one reason. And I will enjoy every minute I turn you inside out.”

His thumb rubbed a soft caress along her cheekbone as his fingers left her neck and slid forward until his fingers were curled under her chin. With a suddenness that brought a moan to her lips, he grasped her chin in a punishing grip.

“God, how I hate you!” he snarled into her face. His eyes shone with repressed fury. “I loath you, you fat cow!”

Catherine felt herself shoved away from him, backwards, coming up hard against the wall behind her. His handsome face was twisted into a snarl. He was staring at her with a hatred so violent and virulent, it sent shivers down her taut spine. His dark gaze was now blazing with uncontrollable anger, his body barely leashed as his fists opened and closed at his sides. She was afraid he would strike her, pommel her into submission, and she whimpered. She saw one golden brow slash into the fallen flax of his tumbled hair.

“What’s the matter, Catherine?” he cooed at her. His steel-edged voice was husky. A muscle bunched in his scarred cheek. “Have you found you’ve taken on the wrong man this time?”

“Please,” she begged, hating the sound of her voice, the need to say that word to this man, lowering her head to keep from seeing the gleam of revenge in his face. “Just leave me alone. I’m sorry”

“Not nearly as sorry as you’re going to be,” he promised.

Her head came up. If she lived to be a hundred, she knew she’d never see vengeance stamped so plainly on a man’s face as she did at that moment. Her heart lurched in her chest.

“You want a fight, bitch?” he asked her. “Then you’ve got one!”

Catherine watched him stalk away, his shoulders straight, his walk arrogant, coming close to

being a strut. Long after he was gone, out of sight, not ever out of mind, she could hear his voice, feel the press of his body against hers, smell the cinnamon scent of him all over her.

“It’s not what I want,” she heard herself whisper, a treacherous tear falling down her cheek.
“Not at all.”

Chapter Nineteen

Catherine took a deep breath and put a false smile on her face as she walked to where her father was sitting. Overhead fleecy white clouds were knitting together the unraveled skeins of a rainstorm's aftermath. A raven, its shiny black wings glistening in the peek-a-boo sun that finally decided to show itself, plied its ebon body through the sky with a raucous call to the Tzar who looked up at the scavenger and frowned.

"Go away!" Thomas Steffensberg called up to the crowing visitor. "You're a bad omen!"

"You don't believe in that silliness, do you, Father?" Catherine asked him as her father's attention turned down to her from his place atop the garden wall.

The Tzar shrugged. "I need no further bad signs to leap out at me, daughter."

She leaned against the fieldstone wall and put her hand on her sire's swinging leg. "What's wrong, Father?"

"What isn't?" came the brusque reply. He swung his thumb up and jabbed it over his shoulder. "Do you see him down there?"

Catherine turned around and peered over the waist-high wall. At first she didn't see anything, but then she caught movement and recognized Conar McGregor sitting on the gently sloping grass knoll about a hundred feet away. Her face hardened then she turned her back on the man.

"He shuns company, doesn't he?" she asked through clenched teeth.

"He is such a lonely man," her father sighed. "He doesn't make friends easily."

A snort of derision burst from Catherine's tight lips. "The man's an arrogant loner, Father. There's a difference. He doesn't like anyone's company but his own."

Her father turned his head and looked at her for a long moment before he spoke. "Catherine, you don't understand men."

"Men like him I don't wish to understand!" was the heated reply.

"And yet you would condemn him without even trying."

She turned an expression of surprise to her father. "Conar McGregor is no different from any other strutting peacock, fanning his feathers for attention. What is there to understand? The man is"

"If that is all you think you see in him, Mary Catherine, I fear you will remain unmarried." Her father slid down from the wall and started to walk away, but his daughter's shriek of outrage brought him up short.

"What does he have to do with my getting married?"

The Tzar thrust his hands into the pocket of his lightweight jacket and looked at his daughter. "Your mother has told you there is a Prince from one of the Inner Kingdom Emirates here to seek your hand?"

"A pog," Catherine pouted. "How could you, Father?"

"He is a friend of your brother's," Thomas said with a stern tone to his normally vacant voice. "You will not speak of Prince Sajin in such a way. It is an insult."

"What does Conar McGregor have to do with it?" she repeated, knowing full well her father's prejudices against the desert tribes.

"I have asked him to help your mother and I decide if Prince Sajin is husband material for you."

"You what?"

Conar heard the explosion of fury, recognized the voice that blared out to break the peace of the late afternoon, and turned to see who the bitch was tongue-lashing now. Seeing her father, he

shrugged. The man could handle her. He turned his back on the two.

“Lower your voice, Mary Catherine!” her father warned. “You are not a fishmonger’s daughter!”

“But you would have me a pog’s wife!” she spat back.

Conar turned back around at the vicious shout and stared at the father and daughter.

At her father’s lowered expression, Catherine dropped her voice to a low hiss of fury. “I will not allow you to put my future in the hands of that man!” she said, pointing toward where Conar sat.

“Now, what?” Conar thought, seeing the fat cow pointing at him. “Telling your father what I did to you, you frigid hippopotamus?” He scowled as she glared down at him across the distance. “Go ahead. Tell him!” he murmured to himself. “He won’t care!”

“Both your mother and I value Prince Conar’s opinion. He will sit in with us when we interview Prince Sajin. Conar is neutral and therefore he should be less inclined to pre-judge Prince Sajin.”

“What is it you and mother see in him? He has you catering to his every whim, seeing to his comfort as though he were the most important visitor to ever set foot on our shores!”

“He is,” her father answered.

“More so than Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar?”

“Without a doubt, Conar McGregor is the most powerful man in the Outlands. He is a warrior without equal,” the Tzar stated.

“In the Outlands, perhaps!” Catherine snarled. “But not here. Here he is just another”

“Look at him, Catherine,” her father interrupted. “Look at him!” He gripped his daughter’s arm and pulled her around, shoved her against the stone wall and made her face Conar. Absently he glanced down to see Conar looking up at them and he nodded in greeting, smiling a bit when Conar nodded back.

“What am I suppose to see?” Catherine ground out.

“That young man is one of a rare breed, Mary Catherine. He has been places, seen things, done things, experienced more of life than Sajin Ben-Alkazar ever dreamed of experiencing. He has lived, and suffered, more of life than any man I can name. He deserves nothing but respect and admiration!”

“What would a pampered libertine like him know of suffering? Did someone not bring him his supper on time? Did the laundress forget to starch his shirt?”

“Conar McGregor has been forced to endure hells you can not even conceive exist, Catherine!” her father snarled at her. “The suffering he has endured has not embittered him nor has it humbled him. A lesser man would have been driven to madness with the trials Conar has been forced to go through, and yet he rose above it all, such is the man he is!” Thomas let go of his daughter and pointed to the young man watching them so curiously. “Such is Conar McGregor!”

“Why the hell is he pointing at me, now?” Conar wondered.

“Is this so-called suffering you mention why he expects you to cater to his every whim?” Catherine shot back.

“He hasn’t asked for anything!”

“He didn’t have to!” Catherine hissed. “You haven’t given him a need to. You’ve given him everything you could think of to please him!”

“There is one thing I would gladly give him if he would but accept it,” Thomas growled.

“What’s stopping you?” his daughter spat at him.

He looked at her a long time. At the flush of heat on her cheeks, at the fire in her eyes, at the way her mouth twisted with anger. When he finally answered her, his face was bleak with disappointment.

"I fear he doesn't deserve such generosity." He shook his head as she asked for an explanation. "I want you"

He stopped, scowled. "No. I order you to go down and tell him your mother and I request the pleasure of his company in the throne room this evening after the meal."

"Why can't you send?"

"I am telling you to do it!" her father snapped.

Catherine snapped her mouth shut, knowing further argument would be futile with her father. She bobbed a curtsy to him and spun around to head for the break in the wall where a flagstone path led down to the spot where the odious Serenian was sitting.

Conar turned his back, knowing the bitch was on her way down to see him. He'd seen the anger on her father's face, knew she'd been ordered to do something that damned sure hadn't set well with her. A deep frown settled on his face as he wondered what maneuvers the royal busybody's were setting into motion now.

He'd heard all about the Inner Kingdom bastard's visit even before the man's caravan had been sighted. What he heard had not only added to the anger he was already feeling at being denied passage back to Serenia, it had brought a red-hot haze to his vision and he was still feeling the effects of the rage.

"Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar is coming here to ask for the Tzarevna's hand," Yuri explained. "There will be a tourney where all those who have proposed alliances to the Steffensberg family may come and challenge one another. There will be jousting, hand to hand combat, archery contests"

A snort of disdain twisted Conar's mouth. "There wasn't a one among those mincing fops I've seen since coming here who could sit a horse long enough to take up a lance, much less wield it!"

"It is merely a courtesy, Conar," Yuri answered. "Everyone knows Prince Sajin will win the tourney." He almost smiled at Conar's immediate scowl.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Prince Sajin is a great warrior. He has no equal in combat. He is much respected among the nomad tribes for his prowess. He will make our lady a grand husband."

"And she'll make him one of a dozen or so cunts to plunder!" Conar said vulgarly.

Yuri shook his head. "Prince Sajin is not in line to inherit the throne of Kensett. He has said many times he will take only one wife and she will be his love match."

Conar snorted. "Well, he'd better look elsewhere than Mary Catherine Steffensberg! That woman has no concept of the word!"

Yuri bent close to his companion, lowered his voice. "I have heard tales of Prince Sajin's sexual prowess. It is said he could charm the thorns from a rose."

"He'll get plenty of practice with Cat, then."

If the nickname for the Tzarevna Catherine on Conar's tongue surprised Yuri, the Shadow-warrior had covered it well. He looked down at his hands to keep the man beside him from seeing how pleased he was with the turn of the conversation. It wasn't what was being said so much as the *way* it was being said. Conar McGregor sounded peeved and more than a little unhappy with Prince Sajin's arrival.

"Prince Sajin will tame her, Conar. No one has any doubt of that. He will have her docile and

sweet, eating out of his hand in no time.”

“Docile and sweet, my fucking ass,” Conar snarled as Catherine came up behind him, clearing her throat to get his attention. “I know you’re there,” he told her in a gruff tone.

She wouldn’t look at him. Her attention was somewhere over his head, boring into the distance. “My father wishes you to attend the meeting he and my mother are to have with Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar this evening after the meal.”

Conar slowly turned his head to look up at her. “Why?”

“How should I know?” she lied, looking down at him finally.

Conar looked away from her, stood up with his face still turned from her and said, “I’d think you had a vested interest in the outcome of such a meeting. Why do they want me there?”

“It’s of little concern to me,” she shrugged. “And I don’t care *why* they want you there.”

“This man may become your future husband,” he said quietly. “Aren’t you concerned about him?”

“One man is the same as another to me,” she scoffed.

Conar turned to look at her. “You’ve got a lot to learn about men and what they can do, little girl,” he told her, his gaze raking down her.

Catherine, blushing to the roots of her hair, knowing he was reminding her of what had happened that morning near the guard’s quarters, spun on her heel and stalked away, calling over her shoulder as she went.

“Are you coming?”

“I wasn’t even breathing hard,” he mumbled.

Catherine stopped, turned, not understanding what he said but knowing somehow he had insulted her, flung him a look of disdain. “Are you *coming*?” she asked again.

“No, lady, I am not,” he said, barely able to control his mirth.

Catherine stared at him, vastly annoyed at his snicker. “You are a churlish, ill-mannered bore.”

Conar smiled sweetly. “And you are a class act bitch.”

“Go to hell!” she seethed.

“I’ll see you there!” he called after her as she all but ran up the knoll away from him.

Tzar Thomas smiled as he stood watching the two young people. “Go get her, son,” he whispered. “She’s yours for the asking!”

Chapter Twenty

Peter looked across the table at his brother. A faint smile was hovering over Mikel's tanned face. As he glanced up to see his brother watching him, Mikel lifted one thick dark gold brow. Peter lifted his own in answer. He pursed his lips and looked back down at his plate, afraid if he continued to look at Mikel, the two of them would burst out laughing.

Sybelle could not take her scrutiny from the tawny-haired man who sat across and down the table from her. His thick mane of golden hair was slightly ruffled, his uniform tunic, the pale gray wool rather in need of pressing, was unbuttoned. The white shirt beneath the tunic was unbuttoned half-way down the man's wide chest. His manners, or lack thereof, were no better than his dress, and she stared at his single-minded attention to the food on his plate. He neither conversed with the people sitting with him at the table, nor did he look up from his meal as he shoveled the food into his mouth. At least, now and again, he lifted his napkin to wipe his mouth, but he did not look at anyone there. Instead, he continued to ignore the conversation around him as well as those speaking.

Lifting her napkin to daintily wipe at her own lips, Sybelle saw him shake his head to the wine offered him by the steward. She had not seen him consume wine or spirits of any kind. Nor had he looked up as the beverage was offered.

"You have a problem with spirits, don't you?" she thought to herself as she watched him guzzle down a large glass of water, and she filed the knowledge away.

Conar McGregor had been introduced to her and Sajin as they made their way into the dining room. He smiled in a detached, I-don't-give-a-damn-who-you-are way at being presented to her, and positively glowered at Sajin, who seemed to have been expecting the man's boorish manners for neither he, nor McGregor, had offered to shake hands.

"I've heard of you," Sajin said, his stare locked with McGregor's.

"Well, I've never heard of you," was the waspish reply from the Serenian.

Sybelle's brows jerked upward in surprise when Sajin simply smiled. Her brother was not known for accepting insults easily. And there was an intended insult in the tone McGregor used.

"You will," Sajin answered in a quiet voice.

Conar McGregor's next words left no doubt in her mind as to the man's intention. "You've obviously mistaken me for someone who gives a shit who you are."

Sybelle stepped back, expecting Sajin to call the man out, but instead, he laughed softly and swung his arm around Peter Steffensberg's neck, speaking in a low voice to the Outer Kingdom royal son, leaving McGregor with egg on his face.

Every sound in the room stopped at that remark and breaths were held, but as Sajin began walking into the dining room with the young Outer Kingdom warrior, ignoring the insult, heads turned to McGregor, expecting trouble, but the man just stood there, scowling, his eyes on Catherine Steffensberg who was grinning sweetly at him.

Sajin glanced up from his steak to see his sister studying Conar McGregor. He chuckled softly to himself. Unless he missed his guess, Sybelle was planning one of her magic-sayings to try to turn the poor man into a frog. Anyone who dared to insult him usually wound up as fodder for Sybelle's ridiculous attempts at wrecking havoc with that person's life. He shook his head. Sybelle's belief in her magic was sacrosanct to her even if it never worked.

Or so Sajin believed.

And that was the way Sybelle wanted it.

Sybelle was studying Conar McGregor's face. It wasn't as handsome as Sajin's face for the

horrible scars which bisected his left cheek marred the manly beauty she knew had once been there. She had to know more about this man who, she sensed, was not as he appeared.

Squinting, she let her power flow freely, weaving its way to Conar McGregor. She watched as the pale blue tint settled over the man, willing it to enter him, to gather the information she wanted to know about this man.

Conar's head came up and he slowly turned to look at those gathered at the table. His eyes locked with Sybelle's and he saw the woman's face pale. A slow, malicious smile settled on his mouth as he stared at her.

"A sorcerer," Sybelle breathed, drawing little Nadia Steffenovitch's attention.

"And a very powerful one at that," came a bold whisper through the Kensett Princess' being. Sybelle shuddered. "No!" she whispered back.

"Did you say something Princess Sybelle?" Nadia was looking up at the beautiful, exotic woman who sat beside her.

Sybelle shivered again, feeling the force of those gleaming sapphire eyes scanning her. She swallowed, shaking her head in answer to Nadia's question. Jerking her gaze from McGregor's, she looked down at the table, her mind racing. She could feel his own probing, swirling around her, trying to gain entrance and then pulling back as swiftly as it had come. Daring to glance up at him, she found him once more intent on the meal in front of him.

"You've been warned," her inner voice whispered. "Don't try that with this man ever again."

Conar cut a chunk of steak, speared it with his fork, and popped it into his mouth. He ground the meat between his teeth, chewing thoughtfully, as the surprise of finding a sorceress here in the room with him settled in.

He had thought his powers were gone, yet twice now, in three months, he'd felt the resurgence of that power flowing through him. He wasn't sure he liked the fact that it was back. He swallowed the meat, scooped a spoonful of peas into his mouth and swallowed them without chewing. His anger deepened, congealed, and he viciously tore his bread in half and stuffed one piece in his mouth.

"Uncouth bumpkin," Catherine grumbled as she saw the Serenian stuffing his mouth full. She swung her attention to the elegant manners of the Inner Kingdom Sheik beside her and she smiled gently at him as his own smile touched her.

"A most enjoyable meal, milady," he said to her in his deep, seductive voice.

"I am glad you like it, Prince Sajin," she answered, feeling the heat of his smile on her face. She ducked her head to hide the furious blush which was creeping up her neck.

"Sajin," he whispered to her.

Catherine looked up at him and his look took her breath away. His coal-dark look was probing hers, caressing her face, his expressive mouth liking what his senses were taking in. Not once, she thought, not once, did his gaze wander below her neck to ogle her. Not once did his polite conversation wander from the appropriate. Not once did the man beside her make her feel like a piece of meat. He treated her with respect, with a gentleness she found intoxicating.

"Sajin," she echoed, her gaze warm on his handsome face. "Please call me Cat."

"Cat?" One thick brow elevated.

"My friends call me that." Her eyes lowered. "My brother says my eyes are like cat's eyes."

"They are the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen," Sajin swore.

"Shit."

Surprised glances moved quickly down the table to Conar. As the Serenian looked up, aware that his expression of disbelief had actually been heard, he glowered at first one diner then

another until heads lowered or the diners looked away.

All but Sajin Ben-Alkazar's. Those orbs, black as the pit of hell, were contemplating him with cool assessment. Was that a smile hovering on the bastard's lips? By Al-el, it had better not be! Conar thought.

"You like looking at me, Alkazar?" he asked, wincing at the stupidity and ridiculousness of his question. If he could have snatched the words back before they exploded from his mouth, he would have. Now, all he could do was watch the reaction they caused on the people at the table with him.

The Tzar and Tzarina were staring at one another in dismay. Peter and Mikel pursed their lips together tightly to keep from laughing. The three younger Steffensberg girls were staring at Prince Sajin. Catherine's mouth was prim with irritation.

Sajin took up his napkin from his lap, delicately wiped his lips and smiled genially at Conar. "If I was the kind of man who found other males interesting, I would venture to say I'd find you attractive, Prince Conar, but since my interests lie with the opposite sex, I can only apologize for my lack of manners."

Conar scowled at the man, a perverse demon inside him refusing to let it go. "I've heard tales that there are men in the nomad tribes who prefer young boys to women."

Thomas Steffensberg groaned. His wife shook her head with dismay. Peter and Mikel eyed one another with worry. The younger daughters switched their open-mouthed wonder to Conar. Catherine nearly choked on her wine, afraid of what the Kensetti Prince would answer.

Sajin only nodded gravely, his expression shuttered. "I have heard of such things myself." His eyes locked with Conar's. "But I would imagine there are men in your own country who are of such a bent. Perhaps you, yourself, have encountered them?"

The Princess Sybelle watched the color drain from the Serenian's face, his jaw clench and she lifted one delicate brow. Her brother had unknowingly struck a nerve, but instead of pressing his advantage as the silence spun out at the table, Sajin turned his attention from Conar McGregor and said something soft and gentle to the Tzarevna, but Sybelle did not notice the echoing look of pain on Sajin's face as he realized what his words had done to the young Serenian Prince.

"Don't give yourself away, Sajin," she begged, her thoughts almost immediately intercepted by the Serenian as he glanced at her. She saw raw shame in the man's keen blue gaze and had to look away, chastising herself for her wayward thoughts. A soft whisper, the seductive caress of her name being called, touched her mind as lightly as the downy softness of a fledgling bird's feathers, and she jerked, her notice going straight to Conar McGregor. He was looking at her with understanding. The whisper came again.

"I would never use such knowledge against any man," it sighed.

Irrational anger flitted through Sybelle's brain. Her face suffused with sheer fury for she realized not only had the Serenian intercepted, and correctly read, her own thoughts, he read Sajin's, as well, and, in doing so, had learned a secret her brother had killed to keep. Clenching her hands tightly in her lap, she willed her mind to shut down, her thoughts to cease.

Conar continued to watch the Kensetti Princess for sometime, probing her aura gently, but there was an iron will behind those lovely cinnamon eyes and the door to her subconscious was shut firmly against his intrusion. Conar knew he had made a powerful, deadly enemy in this woman, for having inadvertently discovered her brother's most intimate secret. Despite his reassurance that he would never use such knowledge against the man, he knew Sybelle Bath-Alkazar did not believe him. From that moment on, he knew he had to tread carefully around

Sajin's sister.

Chapter Twenty-One

Conar stared across the room at the man standing beside the Tzar. He swept his angry gaze over the man's thick, curly black hair, let his scrutiny linger on the finely-chiseled face with its dark eyes and thick lashes. He scanned the width of the man's shoulders, the leanness of his waist, the flatness of his belly, the long, tapering length of his legs, the strength of his hands. He grimaced at the rich, mellow bass of his voice, scowled at the way unselfconscious laughter lit up the dark handsome face. He snorted at the ease with which the man conversed with the Tzar and his sons, tore his gaze away from the eager look on the man's face whenever Catherine's name was mentioned.

"There have many suitors for my daughter's hands," he heard the Tzar explaining. "But Catherine has yet to meet the man she will accept."

Watching the younger of the two Steffensberg brothers pouring a liberal amount of brandy into a snifter, Conar's left brow crooked with surprise when the Kensetti Prince declined the offer of the snifter.

"It is prohibited by my religion," the man told Mikel.

Conar's brow lowered and joined the other one in a deep frown.

"No bad habits?" Peter chuckled. "You don't smoke. You don't drink. What vice *do* you have, Sajin?"

Sajin Ben-Alkazar threw back his head and laughed. "I gamble now and again, Peter, but not to excess. I lose too much at gambling to try it very often."

"If the rumors are true," the Tzar remarked, "you have more money than you know what to do with, anyway. You can afford to lose, probably won't even notice the money missing from the treasury."

Sajin shook his head. "I don't gamble with treasury money, Highness. I have my own money which is paid out to me from the Treasury. It's a stipend, nothing more, to each member of the royal family."

"I understand Kensett's primary income comes from slave trade."

The Tzar and his sons turned to look at Conar. All three men frowned. Such a remark was rude and socially not discussed. Embarrassed by both the cutting tone with which the Serenian had made the comment and the look of contempt on the young man's face, the Tzar sought to rectify the faux pas, but was stopped as the Kensetti Prince answered the charge.

"Yes, our income is largely from such enterprises. It has been a way of life for my people for thousands of years." His expression was neutral, but there was a spark of annoyance in his dark eyes.

"A hell of a way of life for those enslaved," Conar snapped. "Do you agree?"

Sajin's mouth tightened. "Yes, I imagine so."

"So why don't you change it?"

Peter Steffensberg groaned. He wished with all his heart his father had not wanted Conar to attend this meeting. The Serenian was baiting the Kensetti and, from the look on McGregor's face, enjoying the discomfort on Ben-Alkazar's.

"Prince Conar," Sajin said in a soft, steady voice. "I am the youngest of twelve sons. I have no chance of ever ascending the throne unless some major cataclysmic catastrophe should suddenly rear up to claim my brothers. But I assure you, if I were to ever be given the chance to sit on the throne of Kensett, as you are entitled to sit the throne of Serenia, I would work to alleviate the slave trade. I agree wholeheartedly that it is a terrible, dehumanizing way to live."

“Dehumanizing doesn’t even begin to describe it,” Conar ground out.

“I think perhaps you understand better than I what such a life is like,” Sajin answered.

Mikel watched a strange emotion cross the Serenian’s face and looked at his older brother. At Peter’s small shrug of confusion, the younger man glanced at his father and saw the Tzar scowling horribly. He wondered what knowledge the Kensetti had concerning Conar McGregor that his father also seemed to share.

Conar’s jaw clenched against the nomad’s dig, surprised the man knew so much about him and furious that he knew next to nothing about the Kensetti.

“Getting back to Catherine,” the Tzar began only to have Conar cut him off.

“Is it true the men of your country are allowed more than one wife?”

All three Steffensburgs looked at the nomad. Here was a question that needed answering for if the match between Conar McGregor and Catherine could not be made, the next best alliance would be with the house of Alkazar.

Sajin knew what the Serenian Prince was up to. His wide smile told the man he did. As their gazes locked, he could see McGregor wished he had not brought the subject up.

“My eldest brother, Haji, has nine wives, Prince Conar,” he laughed. “That may be why the man’s going bald!”

Recognizing the nomad’s strategy, Conar could not let the matter drop. “And just how many wives do YOU plan to have?”

The Kensetti looked away from the man baiting him and smiled at the Tzar. “I will have only one wife, Your Highness. I hold a commission in our army and it is a position I respect and enjoy. I could not do justice to either my profession or my wife if I had to worry, as Haji does, about which wife I would attend that eve, who’s child was due next or which two or three or four of my wives were feuding. Can you imagine being caught in the middle of such a situation?” He shook his head. “No, I don’t care to have women fighting over me. It will be one wife for me, and I will cherish that wife for the precious jewel she is.”

Conar rolled his eyes to the heavens.

“Catherine is use to having her way,” Mikel commented. “I fear she wouldn’t be a docile mate.”

The Serenian pounced on that.

“Isn’t it true that the women in your emirate must walk ten paces behind the man?” At Sajin’s nod, Conar’s gaze narrowed. “That, to me, seems degrading. In my country women are thought of as our equals. They walk beside us, not behind us.”

A thick black brow shot up. “Then how can you protect her should an enemy attack? If your lady is behind you, your body shields her from harm.”

All three Outer Kingdom men looked to Conar at see how he would counter the challenge.

Conar smiled nastily. “But if she’s behind you, an enemy can grab her and you’d be walking blithely on your way, oblivious to her peril.”

The Tzar and his sons shifted their attention to Sajin.

The Kensetti’s gaze turned cold. “Believe me when I tell you, Prince Conar, no man lays hands on what is mine without my consent. From the moment strange hands were put on my woman, I’d know it and those hands would not be long attached to the arms that tried such a thing.”

Before Conar could growl another comment, the nomad asked a question of his own.

“I understand the women of Serenia are thought of as chattel, that a man can do with her as he pleases, even put her in a nunnery if he so desires to rid himself of her.”

A quick flare of fury passed over the Serenian's face. "That was under Tribunal law. It is MY law that governs Serenia now. My wife was my equal and she always walked beside me."

"If you should, by some quirk of fate, win an Outer Kingdom woman's hand and heart while you are visiting here, Prince Conar, would you take her back with you to Serenia?" Sajin asked politely.

Three eager, curious glances leapt to the Serenian.

"Of course," came the sharp retort. "I would not leave a woman I cared for here. Would you?"

The glances shifted to Ben-Alkazar.

"No, but Kensett is not thousands of miles from here, either. It is a matter of two days journey by boat, six by horse."

Once more the eager scrutiny passed to Conar McGregor.

"Won't you be installing your lady in a seraglia?"

Tzar Thomas Steffensberg flinched as his attention, along with his sons, settled on Sajin Ben-Alkazar again.

Sajin frowned, seeing the other man's ploy, wishing for once that he wasn't the kind of man who never lied. He shifted his stance from once foot to another and answered with hesitation.

"Yes, but..."

An expectant hush stopped the breath of the three Outer Kingdom warriors as they quickly looked at the man who interrupted the Kensetti.

"And is it not true no other normal male may enter that velvet prison except you?"

Sajin ground his teeth together as he saw his host and the man's sons switch their notice to him. He felt like putting his fist through the Serenian's face, fully understanding what the bastard was implying.

"Well?" Conar scoffed. "Is that not true, Prince Sajin?"

"It isn't a prison," Sajin snapped, stalling for time, acutely aware that the inquisitive gazes of the three other men in the room had not left him.

"Can another male other than yourself visit her there whenever he chooses?" Conar pressed the dagger deeper into Ben-Alkazar's pride.

His answer was a snap of air and he hoped it didn't sound to other ears as defensive as it did to his own.

"The Tzar and Tzarina are welcome to come any time they like to Khamsin to see Catherine."

"Khamsin is the province where you live, isn't it, Sajin?" Peter asked, hoping to forestall any further animosity between the two foreign princes. "I mean, Kharis is the capitol of Kensett, right?"

Sajin nodded, not looking at the young man, but instead glaring at the Serenian, prepared for any further nasty remarks from the man.

"There are five provinces in Kensett," Conar answered. "Khamsin is the closest to Rysalia."

The nomad cocked his head to one side in acknowledgement of the Serenian's acquaintance with Inner Kingdom geography.

"I'm surprised you know anything of my country," Sajin quipped.

"I knew two Jabolian princes when I was in the Labyrinth," Conar told him.

"Raman and Nadar Jaleem," the Kensetti answered. "We heard they died in that foul place. Their brother mourns them still."

A faint twist of memory prodded at Conar, but skipped away before he could reach out and

grasp it.

“Well,” the Tzar said, getting up from his chair, wanting to stop any further questioning. “I think that’s enough for one night. Shall we join the ladies in the drawing room?”

“I would love to,” Sajin replied. He looked at Conar and smiled. “Will you be joining us, Prince McGregor?”

“Count on it!” Conar growled.

* * * *

“Well, what did you think of him?” Yuri asked Conar as the Shadow-warrior joined the Serenian.

“The bastard is as slippery as an eel and twice as sly.”

Yuri grinned. “And your judgment of him is?”

Conar glared at the nomad who was speaking to the Tzarina. “He’s arrogant. He’s cocksure of himself. He’s use to having things his way, getting what he wants, when he wants it, daring anyone to deny him. I’d say he’s ruthless when he has to be. He doesn’t take opposition well. Doesn’t bend, won’t break, and can’t be made to do anything he damned well doesn’t want to do.” He snorted at the rich male laughter that came from the Kensetti. “The bastard is sharp, I’ll give him that.”

“We are talking about the same man aren’t we?” Yuri inquired.

McGregor’s brows drew together as he turned to look at Yuri. “Prince Sajin?”

Yuri grinned. “Prince Conar?”

There was a moment of confusion, then a sheepish look settled on the Serenian’s face. He chuckled.

“Did sound a little like me, didn’t it?”

“If the boot fits,” Yuri replied.

Conar glanced over at the nomad and shrugged. “I suppose we do seem to be a lot alike on the surface.”

“Enough to either be the best of friends or the worst of enemies.”

“He’s the best of the lot, so far,” Conar grudgingly admitted.

Yuri sighed. “No, my friend. Not the best.” He stared hard at his companion. “But the man we prefer to ask for Catherine’s hand has not the courage to do so.”

“Courage has nothing to do with it. The woman doesn’t want”

“Cat doesn’t know what she wants,” Yuri interrupted. “She needs to be TOLD what she wants and what she needs.”

“She needs her ass whipped is what she needs,” Conar snorted.

“May I give you one word of caution, my friend?” Yuri inquired.

“Could I stop you?”

Yuri smiled. “You may not want to make Prince Sajin your friend, but I beg you not make an enemy of him. You were correct in your evaluation of him. He can be utterly ruthless when he goes after something he wants. Unlike you, he lets nothing stand in his way of getting it. Not a mighty Windwarrior or a recalcitrant female well past her time to be laid.”

Conar’s answer was angry, insulted. “I don’t want the bastard as a friend.”

Yuri watched his companion’s face very carefully. “Why? Because if the two of you were to become friends it would make it harder when he takes Cat away from you?”

The Serenian Prince flinched, but he didn’t answer. Instead, he moved away from the doorway into the drawing room where he and Yuri had been standing and walked purposefully over to place where Sajin Ben-Alkazar was heading--Catherine Steffenovitch’s side.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Conar sighed, turned over in the bed, sighed again, flipped angrily to his back and stared blindly up at the canopy above him. He sighed again, a heartfelt explosion of annoyance that made his lips purse tightly together in vexation.

“Kensetti gigolo,” he spat, his teeth clenched. He folded his arms over his naked chest and let out another long rush of breath.

He felt like getting up and finding the room, which the Steffenburg’s had allotted the nomad bastard, and beating his fist against it until the man opened it. What he wanted to do next made no sense to Conar at all, but the mere thought of it brought a slow, evil smile to his full lips.

“Put my fist right through your face, you cocky bastard,” he mumbled. His legs jerked beneath the silk covers and he was aware of a tightness in his gut that usually signaled an oncoming bout with typical McGregor male arrogance. He ignored it.

Lying there, his insides boiling with rage, he mentally chastised himself for having felt any kind of sympathy for the man from what he’d learned of the Kensetti’s childhood. So what if the bastard had been abused much as he, himself, had? Did it mean he had to like the man? Hell, no, it didn’t! Did it mean he had to forge a friendship with the bastard? When hell freezes over, he thought with a snort. Did it mean he even had to be nice to the puggy twerp? It certainly did not! If anything, the man’s behavior after the meal warranted a firm set down and a broken jaw!

“Will you walk with me in the gardens, milady Cat?” Conar mimicked, his voice sugary and sneering in imitation of the way he heard the bastard ask Catherine to accompany him outside.

A snort of disgust shot from Conar’s rigid lips and he flipped over in the bed to lie on his side, glaring into the darkness of the room.

“It would be my honor, my most gracious milord,” the chit simpered, her eyelids fluttering up at the black-haired demon who claimed her slim fingers and brought them to his lips in a suave move that caused Conar to utter a rather vulgar expletive he wished he hadn’t.

The Kensetti Prince turned to look at him.

“Do you have a problem with me escorting Catherine into the gardens, Prince Conar?” the surly bastard asked in a voice thick with feigned innocence.

“You can take her to hell with you for all I care!” Conar found himself answering.

Despite the fact that he could have bitten his tongue off for the rude, childish answer and ignoring the fact that his face was flaming with embarrassment, Conar stood his ground, staring belligerently at the other man, until Prince Sajin had smiled slowly with complete understanding.

“So you wouldn’t mind me taking her back with me to my homeland, then, would you?” He turned and looked down at Catherine with a slow, gently smile. “Mayhaps as my bride?”

Conar hadn’t missed the quickly in drawn breath that rushed into Catherine’s lungs or the flutter of her free hand at her breast. Nor had he missed the coy little smile she bestowed upon the man beside her.

“If the bitch wants you warming her bed,” Conar found himself saying, unable to stop the hate from showing on his face or the fire from snapping in his eyes, “you’ll have to ask her. It’s nothing to me!”

Peter Steffensberg groaned. His brother, Mikel, simply chuckled. Thankfully, no others from Catherine’s family were close enough to the two men to have heard Conar’s caustic reply. There had been no one else to see the glare of dislike and warning flash through Sajin Ben-Alkazar’s sin-dark eyes.

“I would be very careful how you malign the lady’s name, Prince Conar.”

"If you want to take exception to ...," Conar began, more than willing to douse the fire in those black orbs, but the Inner Kingdom bastard stepped away from Catherine and came nose to nose with him. The Kensetti Prince lowered his voice, so only the man to whom he spoke heard his next words.

"This is certainly no way to win her heart if that is your intent, McGregor." He put a strong, warning finger in the middle of Conar's chest. "I wanted it to be a fair fight between the two of us, but if you keep insisting on making a jackass of yourself, there won't be any kind of a contest, now, will there?"

Conar's eyes flared with indignation and he stared so hard at the man in front of him, the nomad should have dropped dead from sheer cutting rage.

"Why you"

"Careful, milord Conar," the man chuckled. "I wouldn't want to ruin the evening by having to whip your ass in front of Cat."

He'd gone for him, Conar remembered now with self-disgust. Gone after the man with a balled fist and a curse of such vicious volume, Peter and Mikel instantly reacted by flinging themselves on Conar with all the strength in their slim bodies.

Despite his struggling, the two Steffensberg princes proved stronger than they looked and twice as nasty.

"You stop it!" Peter snarled, twisting Conar's arm behind his back. "Father will have you expelled from the palace!"

"Let go of me!" He nearly wrenched his arm out of its socket as he'd strained to get to the Kensetti, who was regarding him with a slightly pitying look. "Let go!"

"Sometimes I don't think you're quite sane!" he heard Catherine hiss at him. "Your temper is outrageous and your manners are deplorable."

With all the unmitigated gall of a thieving gypsy, the nomad warrior extended his arm to Catherine and asked if she was ready for their stroll.

"I don't think you need to hear any more, Catherine," Sajin Ben-Alkazar said in a gentle voice. But Conar wasn't finished yet and as his loud, strident voice shook the chandelier overhead, the nomad glanced around with anger.

"That's right, Catherine!" Conar said, ignoring the look he was receiving from the woman's companion. "I'm an Outlander with boorish manners and a hot-as-hell temper. And I'm warning you that one of these days, little girl, you're going to feel the full extent of that temper, too!"

Conar could still hear himself shouting at the girl who looked back at him with astonishment as he struggled free of her brother's hold and took a step toward her.

"I'd be very careful if I were you," the nomad Prince himself warned, stepping between Conar and his objective.

"Well, you aren't me!" Conar yelled in the man's face.

"Thank God for that!" Catherine shouted. "The world isn't ready for any more men the likes of you!"

"What the hell do you know about men?" Conar cringed at her callous remark.

"She knows a fool when she sees one," the Kensetti quipped.

Sitting up in the bed, Conar flung the covers back and swung his feet over the side of the bed. He was aching inside to go to the man's room and start what was already being planned for the morning. Enduring the rest of the night's timeless anticipation of what was to come was going to be a different kind of hell.

"You want a piece of me, Ben-Alkazar?" Conar heard his own shout again.

“Any time,” the nomad agreed in a calm, rational voice. “Any place.” He dragged his gaze down Conar with contempt. “Any body part.”

The Serenian saw pure scarlet rage cloud his vision. His furious challenge was hot and loaded with deadly intent. “Tomorrow morning. You name the weapon!”

“Now, wait a minute ...,” Peter interrupted. His face was creased with worry. “There’s no need to”

“Let them settle it,” the younger Steffensberg brother said quietly. “They want to, let them.”

Peter turned, horrified, to his brother. “Father will have our hides if we let them kill one another, Mikelovitch!”

“They can settle it with their fists as well as with a lethal weapon of some kind,” Mikel commented. “Can’t you, Sajin?”

The Kensetti silently nodded, his gaze fused with the angry sapphire gleam which cut between him and the Serenian Prince. “Fists will do nicely,” he’d agreed in a soft voice.

A slow smile stretched Conar’s lips and he could still feel that feral grin as he glared back at the nomad. “No holds barred?” His question been asked with a thick tawny brow lifted in defiance.

“No holds barred,” Sajin Ben-Alkazar conceded.

“This is ridiculous.” Catherine’s voice was shaky, a touch on the concerned side. “They could hurt one another.”

“That’s the whole point, isn’t it, Conar?” Sajin asked. He hadn’t expected a reply from the Serenian and he didn’t receive one.

“I don’t want either of you hurt,” Catherine whispered, her hands twisting at her skirt.

The Kensetti had been watching his new enemy’s face very closely. “We’re not strangers to pain, are we, Conar?”

The answer was a burst of hate. “No.”

A thick black brow crooked toward Conar. “Sunrise? On the training field? Just the two of us?”

“Now, wait just a minute!” Peter tried to inject reason into the thing, but both men turned on him, their faces set and their mouths tight with irritation. It had been Conar who ended the conversation.

“This is between Ben-Alkazar and me. We’ll settle it between us without an audience.”

“Or anyone to stop the two of you from killing each other!” Catherine snapped. “Unless Peter and Mikel are there, I’ll see to it Father stops this whole thing from happening.”

“No, you won’t,” Sajin told her.

“And you won’t be there,” Conar put in.

“The devil I won’t!” Catherine pushed Sajin aside to come toe to toe with her Serenian nemesis. “My brother’s and I will be there to make sure the fight does not end up with one of you men being hanged for murder!”

He’d bent toward her, his nose almost against her own. He’d looked down into her pretty face, locking his gaze with hers.

“I would have thought seeing me hang would please you, Cat,” he growled at her, his voice thick and full of emotion. He’d been surprised when she’d violently shaken her head in denial.

“I don’t want to see either of you hurt or in the dock for this male stupidity.” She’d looked hard at him. “Despite what you think, Prince Conar, not every woman swoons at having men fight over her!”

Pushing himself up from the bed, Conar walked to the window and drew back the drape,

stared unblinkingly out into the moonlit night. In his mind, he could still see the look of hurt and then rage on Catherine's lovely face when he's spat back his answer at her.

"Who the hell said we were fighting over you? This is a man thing and it has nothing whatsoever to do with you!"

"Speak for yourself," came the Kensetti's quiet reply. "It has everything in the world to do with Cat where I'm concerned."

The truth is often a hard pill to swallow and there in the darkness, his hand clenched into a fist on the drapery, Conar admitted that Sajin's reason for fighting and his own were identical. It wasn't so much the animosity the two men might feel toward one another, and truth be told, Conar hadn't really felt any such emotion coming toward him from the nomad, it was the territorial rights which the two males would be fighting to gain.

The Kensetti made it as clear as he could that he had every intention of going after Catherine. The fight between them wouldn't change that and neither of them was about to back down from their positions. Whichever one of them won on the morrow would have a better chance at gaining the lady's hand, the loser either her sympathy or her disgust.

"What have you done, Conar?" he sighed as he let go of the drape and walked back to his bed to slump down on the mattress. He hung his head. "The woman doesn't even like you."

And maybe that was the trouble, he thought with self-pity. The more she professed to dislike him, the more he strove to prove to her that she didn't. The more insults she flung at him, the more he was determined to make her eat her words.

"But you've gone about gaining her in the wrong way!" he heard that stupid little inner voice chiding him.

His shoulders slumped. Yes, he thought grimly, he had gone about it in the wrong way. Unkind remarks and insults were poor substitutes for words of love.

Love?

His head snapped up. Where the hell did that notion come from? Lifting a trembling hand, he plowed his fingers through his already-tousled hair.

Was it really love, he wondered, staring out across the room. Or was it just his loneliness that called out to him to soothe it? Was it just having been separated from the greatest love mankind had ever known that had forced him into thinking he needed someone to love him again?

He shook his head, pulled tightly on the golden hair in his fist.

He'd had such a hard time allowing himself to love, he remembered. There had been so many women in his life before Liza had come wandering into it. He'd lain down with more women than he could even remember, now. But he hadn't loved any of them. Not even those who bore his children.

There had always been that nagging worry in the back of his mind, that whispering evil, that he would be hurt, rejected, betrayed by the woman. He hadn't wanted the pain of having loved unwisely to break his heart. It had taken all of Liza's unbelievable powers to break through the barrier he had erected around his heart. Without her unconditional love, he doubted if he would have ever known what it was to love so completely that he could lose himself in the loving.

He lay back on the bed, his legs crooked over the edge and put the heels of his hands over his eyes.

Was it the loneliness that was causing him to act like a teenage boy rutting after his first wench?

He didn't think so. In his youth he'd been a randy fellow, but he'd never chased a woman who appeared unwilling. There were too many more than willing to tumble with him in the

nearest hay mound.

He bent his knees and brought his legs up on the bed, putting his feet flat on the silken coverlet.

Was it because Catherine was giving him a run for his money that he was so intrigued with her? No woman had ever done that before, not even Liza. Oh, she'd run away from him now and again, but she always came back. She never treated him as Catherine did, as though he didn't exist.

Was that why he was so enamored of her?

"Not enamored, Conar," that wicked inner voice whispered to him. "You're in love with Catherine Steffenovitch."

He let his hands fall to either side of his head and stared up at the canopy.

Was he really? Did he truly love the woman?

How could he? It hadn't been that long ago that Liza was with him. It would be wrong to fall in love again so quickly. If ever.

"Liza's dead, Conar." The reminder was like a quarrel burying itself in his heart. "But you're alive."

"Am I?" he asked out loud, his voice unsure. "Am I really in love with you, Cat?"

The truth was not so easy for him to accept. He had loved Liza, still loved her, with such a mindless devotion, it was hard to imagine ever falling that hard for someone else ever again, that kind of love came along only once in a lifetime.

"Bury it, Conar," the voice advised him. "Bury that great love alongside Liza and get on with your life."

He didn't know if he could, didn't know if he wanted to.

He turned over to his side, his knees drawn up close to his chest and pulled one of the pillows to him. He clutched his arms around the softness of the pillow and laid his cheek against its silky coolness.

"Would Liza want you to grieve for her for the rest of your life?" he asked himself.

He pressed his face into the softness of the pillow. His voice was muffled.

"I love her," he said. "Alel, help me, but I love the fat cow."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar shook his head at the elder Steffensberg brother.

“The Raven, Peter? You brought me here to challenge the Raven?”

Peter glanced at his brother and then looked back at Sajin. There was a tight grimace of shame on the young man’s face.

“You’re the only one I knew who might be able to beat him in a fair fight.”

Sajin snorted. “No holds barred does not constitute ‘fair’, my friend.”

“Ah,” Mikel put in, drawing Sajin’s attention. “CAN you take him?”

Sajin shrugged. “I don’t know. That depends.”

Peter glanced at Mikel. “On what?”

“On just how bad he wants to win.”

The two Outer Kingdom brothers watched as the Kensetti Prince plopped down on his bed and hung his head. They looked uneasily at one another then back to Ben-Alkazar.

“How much do you two know about this man?” he asked them. When they young men didn’t answer, Sajin lifted his head and stared at them. “Not much, huh?”

Peter blushed. “Father has told us he was in prison for a crime he did not commit.”

“That he led a victorious rebellion in his homeland to rid his people of the Domination,” Mikel answered.

Sajin sighed. “What of his wife?”

Both young men winced, but it was Mikel’s whisper that told Sajin the two knew precious little about the man they were trying to wed their sister to.

“He’s married?”

Sajin shook his head. “No, not anymore. The lady’s dead.”

There was an audible sigh of relief from both Steffensberg males.

“But she was the love of his life,” Sajin explained. “It is said he nearly died to keep her safe from the Tribunal’s greedy hands. When he came back from the Labyrinth”

“That was the prison he was interned in?”

Sajin nodded. “When he came back, he found his wife married to another man. The Tribunal had annulled McGregor’s marriage to punish him.” The Kensetti Prince looked away from his companions. “I am told that nearly destroyed him, for the one she had been joined to was his own brother.”

Mikel whistled. “That must have put a chasm between the two men.”

“It did and it has only been recently that there has been a bridge built over that chasm.” He turned to look at the young men. “McGregor is not known for forgiving his enemies. He is a hard man to make do what you want if he isn’t of a mind to do it.”

“What you’re telling us is that Conar McGregor is a vindictive man,” Peter clarified.

“I think so,” Sajin answered. “He fights to the finish all he does.”

“He’s good on the tourney field,” Mikel told the Kensetti. “He boasts he can take on four men at a time and win.”

“He’s a legend in his own mind,” Sajin quipped. At the other men’s laughter he held up a hand. “Don’t get me wrong. The man is good. He’s sharp, I’ll give him that. I’ve heard true tales of his exploits that would curl your hair.”

“Knowing what you do of him, do you think he would make our sister a good husband?”

“He has a reputation for being violent,” Mikel said uneasily.

“Reputations are usually earned, my young friend,” Sajin acknowledged. “He’s a dangerous

man, or didn't you know that?"

"But would he be good to Catherine?" Peter pressed again.

Sajin let out a long breath. "Yes." He thought about it for a moment. "Yes, he'd do everything in his power to make her happy."

"How do you know that?" Mikel asked.

"You saw how he was tonight," Sajin answered. "Did he look like a man who was immune to her?"

Peter laughed. "He looked like a man consumed by jealousy to me."

Sajin looked hard at the young man. "And he's afraid."

Mikel stared at him. "Afraid? Afraid of what?"

"Afraid that I'll take your sister away from him."

"He doesn't have her, yet," Peter reminded his friend.

The Kensetti laughed. "You'd be hard pressed to convince HIM that he doesn't!"

"Will you do it, Sajin?" Peter asked. "Will you fight for her?"

"Answer me this, Peter. What if I court your sister and she decides she'd rather have me than him? What then?"

"Then I would be just as pleased to see you as the keeper of her heart as I would to see Conar have that privilege."

"Maybe even more," Mikel announced.

The Kensetti Prince turned his head and looked at the Outer Kingdom youth. "I've never liked arrogance. And I'm not all that terribly fond of men who think all they need do is reach out to get what they want, expecting it to be laid in their hands."

"Then you'll fight for our sister?" Peter asked.

"Yes, I believe I will."

"To put Conar in his place?" Mikel laughed.

Sajin laughed. "He's been put there many times, my young friend, but he doesn't remain for long." He shrugged. "If I am to win, I will have to defeat him at his own game and the physical side will not be the true contest between him and me."

"But can you take him?" Mikel asked again.

"Possibly, but it won't be easy and it won't be pretty."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mikel whistled even as his brother, Peter winced. Catherine stared with open mouth wonder and flinched as a meaty fist jabbed home and split the flesh over a taut cheekbone.

What the three Steffensberg siblings was seeing was something none of them thought could go on much longer, which had, in fact, gone on longer than any of them would have thought possible.

“Holy God!” Peter breathed as a spinning kick connected with an already-bloody jaw.

Mikel’s mouth dropped open. “How the hell can he keep standing after a hit like that?”

Catherine put her hand up to her mouth to keep the groan of dismay from erupting. She’d seen fights before, most between her two brothers, but never, never had she seen anything to equal the battle being waged between the two foreign Princes.

The fist came right at Conar’s nose, but he sidestepped, ducking away to come under Sajin’s reach to jab a hard right into the nomad’s midsection.

Sajin Ben-Alkazar felt as though he’d been kicked by a mule as the air rushed out of his bruised and battered lungs. He staggered under the mighty blow, but managed to grip his hands together and bring them down on the back of his opponent’s neck.

Conar’s teeth clicked together in his bloody mouth and he went to one knee on the training ground as the Kensetti warrior’s hands slammed into his neck. He lashed out, his fist driving into the other man’s groin. The grunt of surprise and pain brought a vengeful smile to the Serenian’s torn lips.

Sajin went down, arching over his battered manhood, gagging as the godawful pain in his nether regions reached up to spread through his gut.

“How can they stand this?” Catherine whispered. Her own face pale as she viewed the carnage.

Conar had one black eye. Sajin had two.

Conar’s cheekbone below his left eye was open and streaming blood. Sajin’s right brow was broken open and dripping blood.

Conar’s lips were torn and bleeding. Sajin’s were split and puffed up to twice their normal size.

Both men had deep purple bruises on their jaws and cuts all over their faces. Discolorations marked Sajin’s bare chest and belly. Conar’s shirt was torn at one shoulder and splattered with both his blood and the nomad’s. His and Sajin’s knuckles were scraped raw. Both of them were spitting blood, gagging on it, and there was dirt and grime and straw and only-God-knew-what-else plastered to their torsos and caked in their sweat-dampened hair.

“I think they’re done for,” Peter said.

Mikel shook his head. “I don’t know.” He would have bet money that last flying, spinning kick Sajin bestowed up side Conar’s head would have knocked the Outlander out cold, but all it seemed to do was make the man more intent on maiming the Kensetti warrior.

“Can’t you stop them, Peter?” Catherine asked, watching as the two weary men came weaving to their feet.

Peter stared as Conar balled his fist, drew it back and swung it blindly toward his enemy’s face. The roundhouse swing dropped the Serenian to the ground where he landed with a grunt of surprise.

Sajin stood there, weaving, his eyes clouded with the blood pouring down his forehead. He couldn’t see his opponent, but he knew the man was close by. He swung his head from side to

side looking for him, but he couldn't see him. Finally, his vision doubling on him, he looked down and saw the Serenian on the ground.

"Schtandup," he ordered. It came out in one word, slurred from between a throbbing jaw, aching teeth and swollen tongue.

"Go t'hell," came the equally garbled reply.

Sajin nodded, wishing he hadn't, and bent toward his enemy, intent on picking the man up and forcing him to go on with the fight. But when he leaned over, his eyes rolled up in his head and he sank forward with a thud to land nearly atop his opponent.

"Sonuffabish," Conar yelped, his severely bruised ribs crying in protest at the heavy weight which glanced off them before the Kensetti rolled over to his back in the dirt. "Geddup," he jabbed his hand toward the other man.

Sajin tried to swat the pestering hand away and groaned as his throbbing fingers encountered the back of Conar's hand. He jerked his own hand back with a curse of agony. "'Sbroken," he grumbled, cradling his injured fingers.

"Good."

Peter walked warily toward the two men, eying them as they lay in the dirt, their torn and bleeding faces, swollen eyes and multi-colored jaws evidence of the amount of damage that each had bestowed on the other. He winced at the massive destruction on their faces.

"Can you walk?" he asked as he leaned over them.

Conar opened his good eye and glared up at the young man. If there was something he didn't think he'd ever be able to do again, it was to walk.

Sajin could feel the grating whish in his chest that foretold at least one broken rib aching to be bandaged. He didn't think he could sit up, much less stand to walk.

Catherine came cautiously over to the two weary warriors and looked down at them with worry. "Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Shitno," came Conar's disgusted snort. "Luklikweare?"

Mikel grinned, amazed at the equality of the two abilities shown that morning. Fighting was his favorite pastime and men who could fight as well as these two, and *like* these two had fought, instilled in him a great respect and an awe that was breathtaking.

"Do you need stretchers?" he asked.

Sajin spat, his anger at the question giving him enough stamina to force himself over to his side so he could painfully push himself up to a semi-sitting position. He could feel, even if he couldn't see, his opponent doing the same thing. Once in an upright condition, he gingerly turned his head and looked unseeingly toward the Serenian.

"Notbad," he remarked.

"Yunether." Conar craned his head back and looked up at Peter then slowly lifted his hand. "Help."

With a great deal of respect in his face, Peter took the proffered hand and gently helped the Serenian to a wobbly stand as his brother helped the Kensetti to his feet.

"If they go back to the palace looking like this, Father will have a cow," Catherine prophesied.

"Haswun'nyou," the Serenian chuckled, then stopped, gagging at the pain the laughter caused him.

Peter looked at his brother. "The training huts?"

Mikel nodded. "Without a doubt." He carefully looped Sajin's arm over his wide shoulder and braced the man against him. "Ready?"

Conar nodded, wished with all his heart that he hadn't. He had a headache he knew the fight hadn't caused and moaned in regret. All he needed right then was one of his violent migraines to come calling.

Sajin leaned against Peter, feeling the boy's strong arm under his arm and pushing against a rib he had no doubt was cracked. He took a step forward and grunted with pain.

"Can you make it?" Peter asked anxiously.

"Shurhecan," Sajin snapped. His own grunts were in cadence with his opponent's.

Catherine stayed where she was as her brothers helped the two men off the field of honor. It was going to take more than a day or two before either of the foreign princes could be seen in the palace. She wondered how her brothers were going to explain to their father their whereabouts.

"Equally paired, wouldn't you say, Catherine?"

Catherine turned around with a gasp to see her father standing beneath a cottonwood tree. Her eyes went wide with fear.

The Tzar shook his head. "Did you and your brothers really think I wouldn't find out about this?" He eyed her with a cocked brow. "Nothing goes on here that I am not privy to, Catherine."

"They were just ... they were" She stammered to a stop as her father lifted an annoyed hand.

"I am perfectly aware of what they were doing, Catherine." He tilted his head to one side in question. "Were you?"

Catherine frowned with confusion.

The Tzar clucked his tongue. "Catherine. Catherine. Catherine," he admonished. "I grow more concerned with your naiveté with every passing day." He put out a finger to point at her. "Choose between them, Catherine, or I will choose for you."

"Them?" she gasped, looking back toward the training huts where the militia was housed during maneuvers.

"It's either them or the winner of the tourney," her father informed her. "Take your pick."

She watched as her father strolled back toward the palace, his merry whistling grating on her already-frayed nerves. She looked from his departing back to the huts, once more to his back, then once again to the huts.

Her mouth snapped shut with an angry click. No one, she thought with narrowed eyes and angry heart, was going to make her choose a man unless she wanted him.

The trouble was, she groaned to herself, the one she wanted really didn't want her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“God!” Conar groaned, turning his head to look at the man lying across the room from him. “Do I look as bad as you?”

Sajin squinted his one good eye. “You look pretty damned ugly to me.”

“You ought to see yourself.”

“I think you took care of me not being able to,” Sajin quipped. He tried to shift on the cot and moaned, his broken, bandaged ribs protesting his movement. “What the hell did you hit me with?”

Conar gingerly moved his jaw. “Same thing you slapped me in the face with.” He would have given odds that his jaw had been broken.

“You ever get beat up like this before?” Sajin inquired.

“Once.”

“This bad?”

“Worse.”

Sajin’s brows shot up. “Worse?”

Conar sighed. “Nearly died from it.”

“Tribunal?”

“Domination-hired thug.”

“Is the bastard still alive?”

The sapphire gaze was unwavering as it met the brown curiosity in Ben-Alkazar’s face. “What do you think?”

Ben-Alkazar felt his migraine returning. Putting up a hand to his brow, he rubbed at the sharp pain. “McGregor?” he asked.

“Aye.”

“You really want her all that bad?”

There was a long moment of silence before the Serenian answered. “Do you?”

The Kensetti warrior turned away. “It would seem so.”

“You don’t even know her,” Conar accused. “You only met the woman less than two days.”

“How long have you known her?” Sajin mumbled.

“A year. No, a bit longer.”

“Well, you’ve had a year, no, a bit longer, in which to have won her hand. That you either haven’t tried or didn’t want to or failed tells me she’s fair game.” Sajin twisted his head and stared across the room at his fellow patient. “Is that the way you see it?”

Conar looked away from the probing stare that was challenging him. “No,” he answered. “That’s not the way I see it.”

“You’re going to go after her, then?”

A tiny, flickering smile pulled at Conar’s torn lips. “It would seem so.”

* * * *

He hurt so badly he was having difficulty breathing. It wasn’t just his ribs that were causing him grief it was the blinding headache that felt like a giant fiend was inside his head hammering to get out. With his last bit of strength, he managed to pull himself over the edge of the bed to relieve the bubbling bile that galloped up his throat. The retching caused more agony in his temple and he gripped the side edge of the mattress with trembling fingers as his stomach heaved once more.

“Do you have migraines?”

Through the flooding taste of bitter saliva in his mouth, he told his fellow bedmate to shut the hell up.

“You know how I could tell? Your face is all screwed up and you look like you’re gonna puke.”

He wished the floor would open up and swallow the bastard across the room. The pain was increasing and he knew there was nothing that could be done about it. Nothing, that was, that he would allow.

“If you hadn’t been so damned good with your fists, I could go get someone to give you something for the pain.”

“No!”

“Suit yourself.”

He lay back on the cot and panted, trying desperately to ignore the blinding pain in his temple, the flood of bitter vetch in his throat, and the dancing lights in his vision.

“Why don’t you want something for the pain?”

“Why don’t you shut the fuck up?”

Conar grinned. “I’ve never known anyone who had those headache, but me.”

Sajin groaned. “If you have them, McGregor,” he snarled from between tightly clenched teeth, “then you know how much your blathering is hurting my head!”

Conar’s grin widened. “Goobledegookins.”

The Kensetti Prince opened his mouth to ask what the hell the idiot was talking about, but his mouth flooded with saliva and he barely had time to pull himself over the side of the bed before he gagged.

“Nothing left to puke, huh?”

“Go to the Pit, McGregor!”

“Didn’t you have buttered noodles with your meal last evening?” He waited until the nomad was once more flat on his back, groaning. “Didn’t they look like scrub worms to you lying in all that mucousy white gravy? The way you were sucking them in, I was afraid one might slither off your fork and crawl off the table.”

Sajin’s cheeks expanded, he gagged, and nearly fell out of the bed as he retched violently once more. The sounds he was making could have wakened the dead.

“Not feeling too good, huh?” Conar chuckled.

“Stop.”

“I, on the other hand, was going to try some of that jellied eel, but”

“Goddamn it, stop!” Sajin gasped, pushing himself up to glare at the Serenian.

“Goobledegookins,” Conar stated.

“If you don’t shut the hell up”

“You know those big fat green worms you find on tomato plants?”

“McGregor!”

“The ones with the little thorny-looking things on their backs?”

“I’m going to kill you.” He managed to swing his feet off the bed although his hands had a death grip on the edge of the cot.

“They’re goobledegookins.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Sajin roared.

“You don’t look so good, Ben-Alkazar. You sure you don’t want me to try and get you ...?”

“I hate you, McGregor,” Sajin muttered, coming unsteadily to his feet. “I loathe you.” He took a hesitant step, feeling the jar of it all the way to the top of his aching head. “I despise you.”

Feeling more nausea coming to call, he turned slowly around and sat back down on the bed. “I abhor you.” Very slowly, he lay back down on his side and drew his knees up.

“I’m sorry.”

“You can’t apologize for me hating you,” Sajin snarled.

“I didn’t mean that. I don’t give a rat’s pecker if you dislike me or not.”

“I detest you.”

“I had one of those infernal headaches when I first got here. I know how you feel. The Healer here gave me some laudanum even though”

“No drugs!” Sajin snapped, immediately sorry he did.

“That’s how I felt, too. I have a problem with drugs and alcohol.”

The Kensetti Prince lifted his head and looked over at the Serenian. “That’s a dangerous piece of information to give an enemy, McGregor.”

Conar shrugged. “You won’t use it against me anymore than I would use your childhood against you.”

If Sajin Ben-Alkazar was surprised the Serenian Prince knew about his abusive childhood, he didn’t let on. Instead, he closed his eyes and buried the side of his face deeper into the coolness of his pillow.

“Go to sleep, McGregor,” he begged.

“I won’t do it again.”

“What?” Sajin sighed in exasperation.

“Tease you when you’re in pain like this.”

“Good.”

“Unless I feel like it.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Something warm and wet and slick was teasing his face. It felt good. It felt sensuous and it felt stimulating. He smiled, easing himself into wakefulness only to find a fuzzy face peering down at him, tongue lolling, saliva dripping from its mouth. He stared at the apparition for a moment, trying to orientate himself to where he was and who this butt-ugly person was who

He blinked, clearing his vision and focused.

“Woof!”

Conar jerked up in the bed at the sound and banged his head against the head board.

“Thought it was a wench slobbering all over you, didn’t you?” came the amused chuckle from across the infirmary.

“He wanted to come see you, Prince Conar,” the little boy said. “He wanted to thank you for finding him.”

Conar glanced over at the nomad’s grinning face and then at the expectant look on the little boy’s face as he kept his puppy from jumping into the bed with Conar, although it was more than obvious from the mongrel’s leaping back feet that was his intent.

“His name is Maxi,” Sajin informed his fellow patient. “Relax, McGregor. He won’t bite. I’ve been playing with the mutt for over an hour while we waited for you to wake up.”

Conar narrowed his gaze at the man. “Did you sic him on me, Ben-Alkazar?”

Sajin grinned.

“Kiss my ass,” Conar spat.

“Did you have a puppy when you were little, Prince Conar?” the boy, Conar remembered his name was Niki, asked.

A shaft of pain went through the Serenian’s eyes and Sajin recognized it for what it was. He cleared his throat, drawing the man’s attention.

“It won’t hurt you to pet the little fellow, Conar. When Niki came into the room, your bed was the first one he went to. I think he likes you, although for the life of me I can’t imagine why.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Conar smiled warily at Niki and then patted the bed beside him. He laughed as the little mongrel whined and then jumped up on the covers, his bushy tail wagging like crazy. A long pink tongue thrust out of the puppy’s muzzle and caught the Serenian directly across his scarred cheek.

“No accounting for taste, I’ve always said,” Sajin remarked dryly.

When Catherine walked into the infirmary, she was surprised to see two grown men sitting in the middle of the floor, playing with a little puppy, tickling it and talking to it as though both of them were children.

“I see you’re both feeling better.”

As one, the two men jumped, their faces blushing furiously as they struggled to their feet, staring at Catherine like two boys caught doing something wrong.

“Niki brought the puppy in here,” Sajin defended.

“We’re watching it for him while he’s ...,” Conar began, but Catherine shook her head.

“Get back in bed. Both of you,” she ordered, her lips pursed to keep from laughing as the two of them scrambled onto their cots like schoolboys. She waited until they pulled the covers over them before reaching down to pick up Maxi as the pup stood on its hind legs for her attention.

“Did Doctor Talebov tell either of you that you could get out of bed?”

The two men looked at one another.

“He didn’t say we couldn’t,” Conar answered.

“But he didn’t say you could, either,” Catherine reminded him.

“We’re feeling better,” Sajin mumbled, looking for all the world like a pouting child.

“You don’t look any better,” Catherine admonished. She eyed the purple bruises and scabs.

“Neither of you are fit for the tourney this weekend.”

“This weekend?” both men gasped.

“Yes.” Catherine put the wiggling puppy down on the floor and turned to leave. “I’ll tell Doctor Talebov to look in on you.”

They watched her leave, the little puppy scampering behind her long skirts. Both were silent as the situation crystallized in each of their minds.

“I couldn’t hold a lance if it were tied onto my arm,” Sajin sighed.

Conar winced. “The thought of climbing on a horse right now makes me ache all over.”

The Kensetti nodded. “Me, too.”

McGregor turned his head and looked at his bedmate. “What are we going to do?”

“Get the hell up,” Sajin snapped. He threw back the covers and swung his legs to the floor, grunting as the ache in his ribs reminded him they were nowhere near healed.

“You fall off your horse and you’ll put one of those ribs through a lung,” Conar said, watching the nomad massaging the pain in his side.

“How’s your collarbone?” Sajin grumbled.

“About the same as your ribs.”

Prince Sajin Ben-Alkazar sighed and sat back down on the bed. He looked at Conar. “I don’t think either of us will be vying for Cat’s hand this weekend.”

A fatalistic shrug was the only answer Conar could give.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“I don’t know why Catherine told such a lie,” Peter said, shaking his head. “I haven’t even sent off the other invitations, yet.”

“We’ve made them out, but they haven’t been posted,” Mikel affirmed.

“Why, that little ...,” Sajin began.

“She needs her fat ass turned over someone’s knee and his”

“Hand applied vigorously,” Sajin concluded.

“Aye!” Conar punctuated.

Peter glanced at Mikel. “Who’s going to be the one to try something like that?” he asked.

Conar frowned. Sajin scowled.

“I didn’t think so,” Peter laughed.

“They can be up at the end of the week if they continue to improve,” the physician announced. “No tourneys until at least the middle of next month. Longer if His Grace’s ribs haven’t mended.” He snapped his bag shut and walked to the door, then stopped and looked around. “Do you feel hot, Your Grace?” he asked Conar.

Everyone looked at the Serenian.

“Why?” There was a strange look on McGregor’s bruised face.

Doctor Talebov shrugged. “You just seemed a little too warm to me.”

Sajin watched as the Serenian seemed to withdraw, his sapphire eyes darting away to hide the flare of knowledge the man obviously wanted kept hidden.

“I’m fine,” was the quick reply.

But Sajin Ben-Alkazar knew the man was lying and he would have bet his last Ryal of gold that lying didn’t set well with Conar McGregor.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Yuri walked with Doctor Talebov as the elderly physician headed back to the Palace. “He has a fever, doesn’t he?” Andreanova asked, his face set in heavy lines of worry.

“It would appear he does,” the physician answered. He glanced at Yuri. “Is there something I should know about him?”

The Outer Kingdom warrior looked back at the infirmary hut and nodded. “He has what the Serenian’s call Labyrinthian Fever. There is nothing he can be given that will help when he has an attack.”

The physician stopped walking. “Labyrinthian Fever?”

“Yes,” Yuri said. “He becomes very ill with it. It lasts several days. Sometimes over a week.”

Doctor Talebov’s forehead crinkled. “Tell me how it effects him.”

“He has the fever, of course. Very high. Sometimes he’s so hot you’d think just touching him would burn your flesh. And chills, very bad chills. He hallucinates and often goes into convulsions”

“Headache, profuse sweating, talking out of his head?” the physician asked.

“Yes!” Yuri agreed. “Have you treated it before?”

“Not here, I haven’t,” the physician replied. “But when I lived in the Northern climes, I saw such symptoms in malaria patients.”

“Malaria!” Yuri breathed, slapping his forehead. He looked furious with himself. “Why did I not think of the similarities before?”

“You say the Serenian’s had no treatment for the fever?”

Yuri shook his head. “No, but if I thought to connect Labyrinthian Fever with malaria” He shuddered. “When I think of all the needless suffering my stupidity has caused him”

“If it is, indeed, malaria he has contracted, then he will always have bouts with the disease. It is caused by parasites in his bloodstream and the parasites can not be destroyed for they breed inside him.”

“But there is a remedy to relieve his suffering?” Yuri asked.

“Quinine,” Doctor Talebov answered. “Go to my house and tell my wife I need the jar marked cinchona bark.”

“I have not heard of such a tree.”

The physician shook his head. “We do not have the cinchona shrub in the Outer Kingdom. I have it sent to me from an Inner Kingdom province.” He pushed out at Yuri’s shoulder. “Go, Andreanova. If the young Outlander is about to have another bout with this fever, I will need plenty of quinine on hand.”

* * * *

“Do you have a headache?” Sajin asked.

Conar looked over at the Kensetti. “Why?”

“Your face is all screwed up and you look like you’re gonna puke,” was the jovial reply in mimic of Conar’s words to the nomad earlier that week.

“Leave me alone, Ben-Alkazar.”

“Oh, ho! You can dish it out, but you can’t take it, can you?” Sajin chuckled.

“It’s not a migraine.”

Sajin noticed the Serenian’s complexion. “You’re face is flushed,” he said in a sober tone. “Are you ill?”

“Just get your clothes on and go!” came the demand. He glared at the man. “Can you do that

without annoying the hell out of someone?"

The nomad watched as McGregor's teeth clicked together. "Chills?"

"Go away, damn you!" Conar shouted at the man, pressing his lips together to stop his teeth from chattering. He pulled his covers up to his chin.

"You are ill," Sajin stated, walking over to Conar's cot. "You want me to go get the doctor."

"I want you to leave me alone!"

"Not a chance in hell," Ben-Alkazar's replied. He walked back to his bed and swiped up his shirt from the floor. He turned, pointed a rigid finger at Conar. "Keep your ass in that bed until I get back."

"Kiss my ass!" Conar snarled.

"Turn it up here and I'll take a bite out of it," Sajin responded.

"In your dreams," Conar replied nastily.

Sajin hurried from the hut, his face set in a heavy grimace of concern. He had been surreptitiously watching the Serenian Prince all morning. The man kept his coverlet tight around his neck, but his face was not only flushed but glistening with sweat.

"Fever," the nomad whispered and shivered.

He was all too familiar with the word.

* * * *

They carried him on a stretcher to his room where he could be constantly looked after by the servants. He was stripped, bathed, a fresh nightshirt pulled over his shivering, shuddering body. His febrile gaze had slid over those helping him, not recognizing them, not understanding what they were trying to do. Now and again he would call out a name no one understood, no one knew, and they would shush him, wipe his fevered brow with a cool, wet cloth.

"Meggie!" he called time and time again, but the servants only looked at one another with concern.

He was trying desperately to cling to consciousness, striving to swim up through the blackness surrounding him. He didn't know these people. He didn't know where he was. He was afraid. He was lost and he needed something to hold on to.

"Conar?"

He struggled to keep his eyelids open.

"You'll be all right, milord."

Someone took his hand in theirs. The flesh was soft and smooth and cool.

"Meggie?"

A gentle hand smoothed the damp hair back from his forehead. "No, milord. It's Catherine."

He peered up at her. "Liza?"

Catherine shook her head. The servants told her of the strange names he called during the night. The man had been delirious for most of the day and now his nightshirt had to be changed nearly every hour.

"It's Catherine, Conar." She squeezed his hand. "Catherine Steffenovitch."

She watched as a flash of agony, of regret, of terrible, terrible grief entered his face. His dark eyes glazed with unspeakable torment before the heavy sweep of his golden lashes covered them.

"Not my lady. Not her."

"Your Grace?"

Catherine turned to find Doctor Talebov behind her. In his hand he carried a tumbler. "The quinine?" she asked. At his nod, she asked if he needed her to help hold the Serenian's head up for him to drink.

"I would most assuredly appreciate it. The sooner I get this brew into his system, the faster the fever will leave him."

She stood up from the chair beside Conar's bed and bent over him, lifted his head, alarmed at how hot the flesh at the nape of his neck was.

"You must drink this, milord," the physician insisted as he brought the rim of the tumbler to the parched lips of the Serenian.

"I don't" he whispered, fearing these people were trying to poison him.

"It's for your own good, milord."

He tried to shake his head, found he couldn't. He had no strength to keep the tumbler from his mouth or the bitter vetch which entered it from seeping down his throat.

"God!" he gasped, gagging at the horrible taste. He coughed, feeling the bitter taste go up his nose. He gagged again, found the cool edge of a basin at his chin.

"Try not to vomit, Your Grace," he heard a man telling him. "We must get this medicine in you before you can get better."

"No cure," he tried to tell them. No cure for the Labyrinthian fever that had claimed him too many times to count.

"You will stay with him?"

Catherine nodded. "The servants are taking a rest. They have been with him all day."

Doctor Talebov hesitated. At his Tzarevna's curious look, he shrugged helplessly. "He will have to be bathed down in a little while, Highness. His nightshirt will need changing."

Catherine blushed.

Doctor Talebov smiled and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Andreanova will do it."

She shook her head. "He's been with Conar most of the day, as well. The man needs rest, too."

"I'll do it."

Catherine looked past the doctor and found Sybelle Bath-Alkazar standing in the doorway.

"I have bathed my brother many times when he has been ill," the Kensetti Princess explained. "I bathed my husband until the day he died."

The physician let out a relieved breath. "Good. Then, I will leave him in your capable hands."

"You need not stay," Sybelle told Catherine.

For a reason she did not understand, Catherine did not want to leave the Kensetti woman alone in the room with Conar. She shook her head.

"I will help you."

Sybelle shrugged. "As you wish." She moved to the bed and stood with her hands clasped until the doctor had left. Her gaze as she stared down at the ill man was hard to fathom.

"What can I do?" Catherine asked, drawing the woman's attention.

Sajin's sister flung out a hand. "Can you hold him while I pull the nightshirt from him?"

"I can try."

Catherine sat down on the bed and between the two of them, they lifted the semi-conscious man to a sitting position. Her nose wrinkling with distaste at the sour smell of Conar's sweat, Catherine let his head drop to her shoulder as Sybelle dragged on the soaking nightshirt and began to pull it up his chest.

"My brother is very taken by you," Sybelle admitted as she tugged hard to get the nightshirt from under Conar's rump. "He would make you a fine husband."

Catherine frowned. "I'm not ready for marriage."

There was a lilting peel of laughter from the Kensetti princess. "I know how you feel. I married young and have no desire to ever be at a man's whim again."

The nightshirt came up over Conar's hips and Sybelle reached down to take his limp left arm up to push through the sleeve.

"How long were you married?" Catherine asked, helping Sybelle to maneuver the shirt sleeve off.

"Too long, I would not do it again for any man." She bent over the bed and began to drag Conar's other hand back through the right sleeve. "I have yet to find one I consider worthy."

"Your brother seems to be a fine man," Catherine said, more in an attempt to take the fierce frown off the other woman's face than to make conversation.

"Sajin is"

Sybelle's dark eyes widened and her lovely mouth parted as she flung herself back, away from the man who was limply leaning against the Outer Kingdom woman's shoulder. One trembling hand came up to cover her mouth as a sickened groan escaped her trembling lips.

Catherine stared up at her, surprised to see the woman's dark gaze misting. "What is it?" she asked.

The Kensetti Princess stared down at the ravaged flesh of Conar McGregor's back and groaned again, knowing firsthand the agony that must have caused such horrible scarring. She slid down the wall behind her and buried her face in her hands.

"Sybelle?" Catherine questioned.

"Lay him down!" the other woman cried, not looking up. "For the love of the Prophetess, lay him down!"

It was difficult to return the sagging body of Conar McGregor to the bed and Catherine grunted with the effort. Her blouse was soaked with the man's sweat and he had drooled on her shoulder. She bent down to pick up his hand, which fell off the edge of the bed and returned it to the mattress beside him before she turned her attention to the woman kneeling on the floor.

"What's wrong?"

Sybelle shook her head. "He's a sorcerer," she mumbled. "He knows things he should not. I should feel no pity for him."

Catherine stared at the woman. What the hell was she talking about? Sorcerer? Who?

The Kensetti princess lowered her hands and stared up at the sweating profile of the Outlander. She seemed to shudder, to take hold of herself, and then she pushed her back up the wall and stepped away, her attention still on Conar.

"Sajin must be told," she whispered, dragging her gaze from the unconscious man to Catherine. "He needs to be told."

"Told what?" Catherine asked, thinking the woman's face far too pale and far too upset. She reached out to her to help.

"No," Sybelle barked, backing away. "Stay with him until I can find Sajin. He must not be left alone."

Stunned as the woman practically ran out of the room, Catherine could only wonder what had unsettled the Kensetti so badly.

"Meggie?"

Catherine looked down and found the hot stare of McGregor's eyes boring into her. "What, milord?" she asked.

If humoring him would help, she would. "I am here. What do you need?"

"Hold me, Meg," he begged, struggling to get up, although Catherine tried to keep him down.

“Meggie, please.”

Catherine sighed and helped him to sit, took him in her arms. “It’s all right, milord,” she said, running her hand down his bare back. “It will be all right. The quinine will help.”

“I hurt, Meg.” he mumbled, nuzzling his face into her shoulder.

“I know,” she answered, automatically, patting his back as she sought to soothe his grunts of pain.

Her palm moved over an odd puckering of skin, stilled as she wondered what injury he had sustained, then swept down to another raised section, and Catherine’s brows drew together. She poised, her fingers stroking a particularly deep ridge in the flesh, following it to another and still another bisecting gouge. Bringing her hand up, she felt the ragged creases along his spine, the indentation of a deep furrow. Smoothing her palm over as much of his back as she could reach as he lay sagging against her, his hands useless at his sides, she could feel a vast expanse of raised flesh over it all.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore, Meggie,” he told her.

Catherine asked, startled that he spoke. “What doesn’t, milord?”

“My back,” he said, his hot lips grazing her neck. “I can’t feel it anymore.”

She brought her hand up to his shoulder and pushed him a little ways away from her, noticing for the first time the thick band of striated flesh along his left collarbone. Bending away from him, she looked down at his side and saw the unmistakable stripe which curled thinly around to his belly.

“Bent did his job well,” he muttered. “No one can wield a cat-’o-nine like Bent.”

“Oh, Conar!” she whispered, tears forming as her arms tightened around him. “I didn’t know.”

“Do you love me, Meggie-girl?” she heard him ask.

Catherine Steffenovitch, Crown Princess of the Outer Kingdom, felt her heart shattering in her chest as she answered.

“With all my heart, milord.” She placed a gentle kiss on the side of his head. “With all my heart.”

* * * *

It was three days later before Catherine was allowed in to see him again.

For three days she had shouted at her father, berated her brothers, nagged at her mother, but no one would answer her questions about Conar McGregor.

“If he’s of a mind to tell you about the scarring on his back, he will,” her father had told her.

“But you knew!” Catherine had accused.

“There is much I know of him that he may not wish you to know,” the Tzar had answered. “Let him be the one to tell you.”

Sajin Ben-Alkazar had been no help, either. If he knew the cause of the deep scarring Catherine had carefully inspected when she finally laid Conar down to sleep, he would not admit it.

“Men have secrets women have no need to know,” the nomad had said quietly. “He should be the one to tell you if he feels the need to do so.”

Sybelle had shaken her head. “My brother has told me nothing.” She had not gone back to the Serenian’s room. “But I have heard tales of the man they call the Raven.”

“The Raven?” Catherine had questioned, but could get nothing more from the Kensetti princess.

Yuri had likewise been obtuse when she waylaid him outside the Outlander’s room.

“Do not ask me things I am honor-bound not to answer, milady,” he cautioned her. “His secrets are safe with this warrior.”

“What secrets?” she belabored the point. “You bring this man thousands of miles to wed me and yet you will tell me nothing about him?”

But Yuri had given her no explanations.

Misha would not even come when she had him paged.

Nor would Doctor Talebov allow her into the Serenian’s room.

“He is very ill, Highness,” the physician informed her. “The fever is worse and he has had to be restrained. He would not want you to see him so.”

“You tied him?” she gasped.

“For his own protection, yes.”

It was later on that morning that Catherine went to the chapel to pray and spent the better part of an hour before the Blessed Mother, seeking guidance.

On the third day after Catherine’s discovery, she went to Conar’s room and was finally allowed in to see him.

“Don’t stay long,” Doctor Talebov warned her. “He is still very weak.”

“Is the fever gone?”

“Yes, but he will need to remain in bed for several days yet. I have ordered beef broth with each of his meals. We need to build his blood up again.”

The physician patted her shoulder and left, his face bone-tired and his shoulders stooped beneath his weariness.

Catherine stood at the door, watching the Outlander sleep. When he turned to his side, mumbling, she called out softly to him. “Milord?”

Conar opened his eyes, wondering who they’d let in to see him. For what had seemed like an eternity he saw only two faces he recognized--the Healer’s and Yuri’s. When he saw it was Catherine who was standing at the closed door, he moaned.

“Have you come to finish me off, milady?” he asked in a tired, resigned voice.

Catherine stared at him, at the pallor of his face, the tired droop of his expressive mouth, the dark band of bruises around each of his wrists where they had tied him to his bed. She could see the effort it was taking him just to stay awake and her heart went out to him.

“What’s the matter, Cat,” he asked, sighing, “have you run out of insults?”

For the first time in her life, Catherine became aware of what every woman, sooner or later, comes to realize. There is scant difference, a fine line, between hate and love. Both emotions come from the soul and both emotions are governed not only by how a woman reacts to a man, but how that man, in turn, reacts to her. Her feelings toward the man staring back at her from the bed had changed. When, she didn’t know, but she suspected it had begun that very first day at the Palace when he had insulted her and enjoyed doing it. When she had insulted him back and had felt bad for doing so.

She gradually came to understand the sexual tension that stretched out between the two of them whenever they were close to one another. It was that electric lapping along her nerve endings that had brought him to her attention in the first place and refused to let her ignore him. She now understood the aching hunger, the ever-present and highly erotic need that began each time she saw him. It wasn’t anger or dislike, it was intense sexual excitement. The man set off warning signals in her gut every time he got within ten feet of her--warning signals she tried to ignore, but knew she’d better not. Not if she wished to hold on to her independence.

“What’s wrong with you?” he queried, frowning at the way she continued to just stand there

and stare at him, her face bleak and filled with something he had not seen before.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, taking a step toward him.

"I ain't dying," he snapped. He arched one brow. "Disappointed?"

She clenched her hands together in front of her and took another step. "Is there anything I can get you?"

A warning signal of his own went off in Conar's head and he looked at her askance.

"Somebody must have told you I was on my last leg or you wouldn't be standing there asking to do something for me. That ain't like you, Catherine."

She came closer to the bed. "A cool drink of watered wine, perhaps? Another pillow?" She stepped forward and bent over to adjust the pillow at his back, tucked his covers more securely around his waist and, without thinking, reached up to push back a stray lock of damp hair from his forehead.

He blinked. What the hell was happening here? The woman was looking at him as though she would throw herself into his arms and bawl her damned eyes out! He was further amazed when she pulled a chair up to sit in and reached for his left hand, holding it as though they were lovers.

"Cook is making apple dumplings for you," she told him, smiling with a jerky twist of her pretty lips. She massaged his hand. "How does that sound?"

"Apple dumplings?" he asked, totally bewildered by the woman. Why was she looking at him like that?

Catherine ducked her head. "When you were so ill, you kept calling me 'Meggie' and you pleaded with me to make you some of my apple dumplings." She glanced up. "I can't cook so I don't think you would have liked my effort at making dumplings, so I asked Natasha to make you the dish." She laughed uneasily. "Is Meggie the cook at Boreas Keep?"

The warning that had gone off in his head rang again and from some vast storehouse of knowledge inside his inner self, he understood what must have happened. He looked down at his naked chest, squinted and then returned his gaze to hers. He saw the answer in the quick way she avoided his look.

"You saw my back, didn't you?" he accused.

She bit her lip, flinching at the sharpness of his tone and released his hand. "No one will tell me what happened to you."

He shrugged. "I was whipped." It annoyed the hell out of him that they had allowed her any where near him to see the carnage of his flesh.

Her voice was a tiny whisper of sound. "By whom?"

"What difference does it make?" For some reason her question only served to make him ever more annoyed.

Catherine turned back to face him. "What did you do to deserve such a thing?"

He could see it was not everyday female curiosity that prompted her question. She asked because she truly wanted to know. He could also see his answer meant something to her.

"They called it sedition. They claimed I coerced some of my personal guard into trying to kill my father so I could ascend the throne."

She shook her head fiercely. "You would not do such a thing."

His gaze narrowed. "And just how would you know?"

She met his look squarely. "It is not in you to have someone else do your dirty work for you." She glanced away. "I learned that much the day you helped my people fight the fire. If you had wanted the throne, you'd have simply tried to take it."

“You wanted to know why my father disinherited me?” he asked, wanting to destroy the role of hero he saw forming in her eyes.

She looked up, expecting the truth from him, and getting it.

“I did something he thought evil. Something he could not forgive me for doing. That I had a very good reason for doing, but it didn’t matter to him. As far as he was concerned, I betrayed him and my people and he took away my birthright as punishment.”

“What you did,” she asked, “was it done because you thought it the right thing to do?”

He nodded. “At the time.”

“And would you do it again if need be?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Aye, I would.”

“Even knowing you would be hurt as you were?”

He sighed, closing his eyes to the sympathy in hers. “Even knowing my next four years would be spent in a hell I could not get out of.”

“Prison?” she whispered.

“Aye. Prison.”

She lowered her head. “It must have been a terrible time for you.”

“I endured it,” he snapped, not knowing why he felt the need to make her sorry she had brought up the subject.

Catherine heard the pique in his tone and stood up, her face full of shame. She put out her hand. “I am sorry, milord Conar,” she told him.

He looked down at her hand, then reached up to take it. “For what?”

“For having sorely misjudged you,” she said. Her knees threatened to buckle beneath her as his warm flesh covered her fingers.

“I don’t think you misjudged me, lady.” He shrugged. “I am what I appear to be.”

She shook her head. “No. You are far more complicated than that.”

For a reason he could not explain, before he even knew what he was doing, he brought her fingers to his lips and planted the softest of kisses on the back of her hand. Looking up into her face, he could see the kiss meant as much to her as it had to him.

He unwillingly released her hand and laid his own back on the bed covers. They stared at each other for a long moment and then Catherine turned to go, looking back over her shoulder at him for another lingering moment before she closed the door.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“You don’t play fair!” Sajin accused as he plopped down into the chair beside Conar’s bed.

“Good eve to you, too, nomad,” Conar snapped, but happy to see the Kensetti.

Sajin ignored the cold tone. “If I thought you’d win simply by getting yourself flogged, I’d have tried to think up something to tell her that had been equally agonizing to me.”

Conar’s lips twitched despite his concentrated effort to dislike the man. “Such as?”

The Kensetti threw out a negligent hand. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I could have told her someone branded me.”

“Aye, that hurts.”

The nomad looked up. “Yeah?”

The Serenian crossed his arms over his naked chest. “Yeah.”

Sajin stuck out his hand, palm up. “Crucifixion?”

Conar glanced down and shrugged. “Just a little less painful than branding.”

Sajin thought a moment and then he smiled. “Shot!”

“Crossbow quarrel in my hip. The tip’s still in the bone.”

The nomad’s face fell. “Stabbed?”

“Three times.” He grinned. “And cut twice by a nomad’s blade that nearly gelded me.”

Immediate interest lit the man’s dark face. “Hasdu?”

“Aye. How’d you know?”

“They don’t like you,” Sajin laughingly replied.

The humor left Conar’s face. “I know.”

The Kensetti exhaled. “Is there nothing that hasn’t befallen you? Something I can impress her with?”

Conar held up his hand and counted off his fingers. “I haven’t been drowned, unless you consider my brother Legion’s less-than-tender moments holding me under the water in the horse trough. I haven’t been suffocated, unless you count the three times I’ve been locked in tight places and couldn’t get out and nearly died from it. I haven’t been poisoned, unless you count the tenses I was given unknowingly over a period of years by an old woman who I didn’t even know hated my guts. I haven’t”

“Enough!” Sajin snapped. “By the Prophetess, McGregor, you’re a walking disaster waiting to happen!”

The first genuine laugh in over two years exploded from Conar McGregor’s lips and he looked at the nomad with a sincere smile.

“We’ll have to see what we can do to you that will attract Cat’s interest.”

Sajin chuckled. “I’m afraid her interest has already been caught and held, my friend.”

There was another genuine, unreserved smile. “You think so?”

The Kensetti snorted. “You know so, you despicable cur.” He shook a finger at Conar. “How can I compete with scars like you have for both our women to grieve over.”

Conar’s forehead crinkled. “Both?”

“Yes, as if you didn’t know you’d caused my sister a tear or two when she saw your back.”

“Sybelle?” the Serenian questioned.

“By the Prophetess, I hope I don’t have but one sister!”

“It bothered her?” Conar couldn’t imagine the woman being upset over something that caused him pain.

Sajin grimaced. “All my life, ever since I was old enough to know the meaning of the word,

Sybelle has sworn to me she was a witch.” He didn’t notice Conar’s raised eyebrow as he continued. “She swears she can do spells and such, but I’ve never seen anything she’s accomplished.”

“Is she of the Multitude?”

“The what?” Sajin asked, mistaking the glimmer he saw in the sapphire gaze with humor.

“The Multitude. It’s a sect of sorceresses who owe their allegiance to the Great Lady.”

Sajin shrugged away the question. “Sybelle says she owes her allegiance to a goddess named Sirene. She says the goddess appears in the form of a”

“Mermaid,” Conar finished for him. “A woman of the sea.” His voice was very quiet, very hushed.

“I think.” Sajin didn’t seem to care one way or the other and he hadn’t heard the strange quality of Conar’s voice. “Anyway, she came rushing to my room that night when she’d seen your back. You do know she and Cat were bathing you?” At Conar’s look of surprise, Sajin wagged his brows. “Only the Prophetess knows just how much of you they saw that night!”

“There isn’t much to see.”

“I wouldn’t think so, either,” Sajin chortled, glancing down at Conar’s lap.

“Bastard,” Conar said affectionately.

“As I was saying, Sybelle came running to me, crying that I shouldn’t fight you. Pleading with me to swear I wouldn’t try taking Cat away from you.”

Conar’s face showed his astonishment.

“Yes,” Sajin acknowledged. “Can you believe it? Then she broke down and cried, babbling something about how I should not make an enemy of you because you are a dangerous man.”

“I am a dangerous man.”

“And a conceited buffoon,” Sajin grumbled. “She said you were a sorcerer, do you believe that? And that I wouldn’t stand a chance if I went up against you.”

“She didn’t take into account the little altercation you and I had the other day?” Conar asked.

Sajin shook his head. “She told me that morning that she put some kind of spell on me and I wouldn’t be hurt all that bad.” He rubbed his ribs. “I don’t know what the lady calls ‘bad,’ but I thought you were going to kill me.”

Conar smiled. “Wouldn’t have happened.”

“So are you?”

“Am I what?”

“A sorcerer?”

The smile widened. “Of the First Order.”

Sajin rolled his eyes. “You’re as bad as her. She tells me she’s a ninth degree Adept, whatever that means.”

The smile left and Conar took a moment before he commented. “It means she’s good at her craft.”

“Yeah, right,” Sajin growled. “Anyway, I just came to tell you I’m wise to you. If you’re gonna be making the women sob over you, I’m just gonna have to come up with something to outdo you.”

Conar’s smile returned. “You do that, Ben-Alkazar. I look forward to whipping your nomad ass.”

Chapter Thirty

Major Storm Jale stepped from the Inner Kingdom jinriksha and frowned up at the minaret from which a very loud, very eerie-sounding voice was calling. With brows arched in wonder, he watched as the people around him headed for what the driver called a mosque and began to unroll little rolls to spread on the ground.

“It is their prayer time.”

Storm turned and looked at dark man who came up behind him. “I was born in Jabol, but this is not the religion I practice.”

“Once a child of the Prophetess, always a child of the Prophetess,” the man quoted. “You are the gentleman from Serenia?”

“How ...?”

“The good captain of the East Wind pointed you out to me. He said you needed a guide to take you to St. Steffensberg.” He held out his hand. “I am Azalon Ben-Hasheed. I have a caravan leaving for the Outer Kingdom at the end of the month.”

A heavy sigh escaped Jale’s lips. “Do you know of one leaving any sooner?”

Azalon shook his head. “There only a few of us merchants allowed across the border. Only one caravan a month may travel into the Tzar’s domain and this month it is my privilege to make that trip.”

Storm looked away, staring out across the sea of men who were bending and bowing toward the mosque. He had hoped to be in the Outer Kingdom before the end of the month, but if there was no other way, there was no other way. He looked back at the dark man.

“Where do you suggest I take lodgings until then?”

Azalon smiled, showing heavily-stained teeth where there were not gaping holes in his mouth. “There is a small inn owned by one of my relatives where you may acquire a clean bed and excellent meals. If you would allow me, I will escort you there.” He held up his hands. “The streets of Asaraba are twisting and there are no signs to point you in the right direction.”

Storm smiled. “Then I would greatly appreciate any assistance you can give.” He put out a hand to stop the man. “Would you be insulted if I try to find someone to take me across the border sooner?”

Azalon shrugged. “You may try, friend, but I doubt you will find anyone.”

* * * *

“There is a Serenian staying at the Moon and Scimitar Inn,” the spy informed his master. “He looks to be strong and healthy.”

“How old?”

“Thirty-five, thirty-six.” The spy glanced around him. “He has the look of our people, but does not answer the calls for prayer.”

“Is he alone?”

The spy nodded.

“Then, do what needs be done, Achmed.”

* * * *

Storm turned over in the bed, scowling at the scratchy feel of the rough muslin beneath his cheek. The room was like an inferno and the smells of garlic and curry was thick in the air. His stomach was on fire with indigestion from the spicy foods he had consumed and he had a slight headache. Jale knew sleep would be a long time in coming.

“The things I do for you, Conar,” he growled, lifting up to punch the pillow and regretting it

for the dust from the feathers rose up to make him sneeze.

He sneezed again. And again, exasperated by the allergy he'd had since childhood. It was as another sneeze exploded from him that he felt something heavy crash down on his skull and he ceased to sneeze.

Chapter Thirty-One

Conar and Sajin leaned over the battlements and stared unabashedly at the staggered group of riders entering the palace gates. Now and then Sajin would either sneer with disgust or laugh outright, pointing to men who would glance up at him from the roadway and then away.

“That fool there is Rupert Von Schlesendorf.” Sajin shook his head. “He doesn’t know one end of a lance from another but he’s a fair archer.”

“He’s already been here,” Conar exclaimed. “Why would he humiliate himself again by trying for Cat’s hand?”

“He needs the large dowry that comes with that pretty little hand,” Sajin mocked. “The man took the throne less than two years ago and has already drained his country’s treasury to copper coin. By allying himself with the Tzar, he can pull himself out of the muck of his finances.”

Conar pointed. “Who’s that?”

Sajin shook his head. “Alexi Barishnokov. He’s no threat.” He nodded politely at the man who waved cheerfully up to him. “He’s gay.”

A snort of humor escaped from Conar. “What does he want with Cat?”

“He probably wants to write sonnets and sing them to her.” Sajin clamped his companion’s shoulder with a friendly squeeze. “DON’T, I beg you, ask the man to sing, Conar. He sounds like a rusty barn door squealing.”

“I’ve had experience with that.” Conar chuckled. “You should hear my brother Legion!”

“Cat would go insane having to listen to Alexi. I think the man believes a wife would have to listen to him.”

“I take it he thinks he’s good?” Conar asked.

Sajin shrugged. “He’s godawful.” The Kensetti’s hand tightened on Conar’s shoulder. “Now, there is competition.”

Conar looked down at the man whose black stallion was prancing toward the gate house. By the set of his shoulders and the arrogance of his face, the Serenian prince understood the man thought himself someone of importance.

“That’s Prince Guil Ben-Shanar Gehdrin. He’s the crown prince of the Rysalian southern sector at Basaraba. That jackal riding beside him is his right-hand man, Rasheed Falkar.”

From the look on his new friend’s face, Conar could tell the Kensetti wasn’t pleased to see the Rysalian. “Is there bad blood between the two of you?”

Sajin pushed away from the wall and turned his back to the procession of men arriving for the tourney. He stared out across the battlements, his body rigid.

“Sajin?” Conar questioned.

“Do you know who Sager El-Balidar was?”

A cold shaft of intense foreboding scraped down Conar’s spine and he stared at the man beside him. The blast of a trumpet going off in his ear could not have made him move.

The Kensetti prince turned his head and looked at Conar. “Do you?”

Conar nodded slowly, searching the eyes of the man beside him.

Something dark moved across Sajin’s face and then he looked away again. “How well did you know the bastard?”

It took Conar a long time to answer. “Better than I wanted to.” He thought of the old man who had been the Domination’s Arch-Prelate during his internment at the Abbey as a boy and shivered. He let out a heavy breath. “Is he the one?”

Sajin’s steady gaze lifted to the heavens as a hawk circled lazily overhead. “It was before he

became Arch-Prelate and left the Inner Kingdom to take up his duties in Serenia.” He squinted as though in great pain. “My mother had taken me to Basaraba for the festival of the harvest. She was Rysalian, a distant cousin of the Gehdrin family, and they had invited her to attend a wedding of another cousin that was to take place that week.”

“How old were you?”

“I was nine.”

Bad memories of his own of the old man kept Conar from asking what he wanted of the Kensetti. If Sager had done to Ben-Alkazar what he had done to Conar, there was no need to ask.

“I never told my mother what happened at the court at Basaraba, but when I returned to Kensett, Sybelle somehow guessed what the old bastard did to me and it was soon after that that she began to talk of joining the witches in the hills.”

“To avenge you?”

Sajin smiled grimly. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Was Sager kin to this Guil?”

“Guil is Sager’s grandson.”

Conar turned back around and looked down at the meandering group of tourney participants. “But your dislike of him goes beyond his relationship to Sager El-Balidar.”

“Yes.”

“Does he know what his grandfather did to you when you were a child?”

Sajin shook his head. “I don’t believe he does.” He turned around and braced his hands on the half-wall. “If he did, he’d have brought it up to me before now.” A crooked, evil smile touched the Kensetti’s full lips. “He is in love with his half-sister, Jasmine, and Jasmine is in love with me.”

Conar looked at his companion and crooked a questioning brow. “His own sister?”

“Incest is best when kept in the family,” Sajin quipped. “Jasmine hates his guts.”

“Has he ...?”

Sajin snorted with contempt. “With Jasmine? She’d geld him and laugh the entire time! No, the girl is a virgin despite her attempts to alleviate that situation.”

“How old is she?” Conar asked.

“Sixteen.” He glanced at Conar. “She met a man from your Wind Force a few years ago and thought sure she’d get him to relieve her of her burden but her father put a stop to that.”

Conar’s face showed his surprise. “Who?”

“I forget his name but he is of royal lineage. He captains his own boat out of Virago.” Sajin looked around at the hearty laugh that came from his friend.

“Paegan Hesar.” Conar chuckled. “I remember now that he couldn’t stop talking about the Rysalian wench he had ...” He stopped, blushing.

Sajin’s face paled. “He didn’t!” A slow nod was the Kensetti’s answer. “Would he lie?” the nomad asked with a look of hope.

“Paegan, lie?” Conar shook his head. “No.”

The Kensetti groaned. “By the Prophetess, if that little conniving bitch had conceived, there would have been war between Rysalia and Virago!”

“He wants to marry her, if that’s any consolation,” Conar told him. “The Hesar’s are good men and Virago is a very rich Principality.” He frowned. “But they’re cousins of mine.”

Sajin shrugged. “That wouldn’t matter to Sadaam Gehdrin as long as the Prince gave Jasmine everything she wanted.” He shook his head. “But if Guil ever finds out his sister was compromised, there will be hell to pay.” He sighed. “The bastard wanted to be the first, and only

one, to take her.”

“Sorry about that,” Conar remarked. “Do they have the same father?”

“The same mother,” Sajin answered. “Guil is older than me by two years. He courted Sybelle until Jasmine was around ten and then he turned his lecherous attentions to her. She’s a beautiful woman.”

“So Paegan said.” He nudged Sajin with his foot. “Why haven’t you courted her if she’s so pretty.”

“She’s too young. I’m old enough to be her father.”

“So you think this Guil will give us some competition, huh?” Conar asked, wanting to take the heavy scowl from the Kensetti’s face.

“Yes, but we’ll have to watch that snake in the grass, Rasheed, while the other of us is jousting with the man.”

“You expect cheating from the man?”

“I both expect it and anticipate it,” Sajin snarled. “He’s a fair enough fighter, but when he feels he’s losing, he doesn’t let something like honor and chivalry stand in his way.”

“I take it you’ve fought him before,” Conar quipped.

“Yes, and it was only by the luck of the Prophetess that I didn’t have my head struck from my body.” He narrowed his eyes. “Hasdus are a vicious breed of desert rat.”

Conar nodded. “I know from experience that they are.” A memory stirred, surfaced, and he put a hand out to grip Sajin’s arm. “Do you know of a man named Jaleel Jaborn?”

Sajin turned, his face showing his curiosity. “Where have you heard of him?”

“Do you know of him?” Conar asked. He wasn’t at that moment prepared to explain how he knew of the man.

“He’s a Rysalian from the middle province of Dahrenia. Why?”

“Do you think he will come?” Conar’s eyes bored into the other man.

“No. He already has more wives than he knows what to do with.” Sajin grinned. “As a matter of fact, he stays gone from his fortress at Abbadon as much as his uncle, the Sheik Ali Jaborn, will allow. I am told he travels outside our own part of the world whenever the mood strikes him and has women from nearly every country in his harem.”

Conar scowled. “That’s a lot of women.”

Sajin laughed. “He thinks he can handle them.”

“What’s he like?”

“Jaleel? As close to a scorpion as any man can come. They say he murdered his own father and talked his mother’s sister into murdering her husband.”

“Using Maiden’s Briar,” Conar mumbled.

“You’ve heard the tale?” Sajin shivered. “A horrible way to die having a woman you trust slather poison on your cock, I’d think.”

“Do you know why he would have done that?”

Sajin glanced up as a hawk spiraled toward the flapping pennants of the Steffensberg family and then arched away, cawing out its greeting to him.

“It is rumored Jaleel was engaged to marry a Venturian Princess, his first cousin, actually, but before the contracts could be signed between them, her father contracted her to another, more powerful man. I understand her mother was furious and Jaleel was at his uncle’s feet begging Rysalia to declare war on Ventura.” Sajin shrugged. “Which the Sheik was more than willing to do. The two provinces have been at war ever since.”

Conar tightened his grip on Sajin’s arm. “Who was the woman he wanted to marry?”

Sajin shook his head. "I don't remember much of it, but I can find out." He looked closely at his companion. "Why is it so important to you?"

Conar let go of Sajin's arm. "Let's just say I have my reasons."

"I'll see what I can find out."

The Serenian prince stared blindly down at the dwindling parade of tourney warriors. He wished with his entire being Jaleel Jaborn was among them.

Chapter Thirty-Two

His tongue flicked lightly over her nipple and then spiraled around the dusky tip. He laughed deep in his throat when her hands tightened in his hair and pushed his questing lips closer to her breast. Drawing back his lips, he caught the erection of her nipple between his teeth and gently worked it, smiling to himself as she writhed beneath him, her back arching slightly from the mattress. Her fingers tugged at his hair, her nails grazing his scalp and his bite increased just enough to still her hands. He pulled his head up and looked at her.

“Don’t stop,” she gasped, dragging an excited breath into her heaving lungs. “Please, don’t stop!”

He shifted atop her, settling himself closer against the apex of her legs, his manhood stiff and probing at the core of her. Her groan brought another low chuckle and he swooped down to claim the pulsing flesh at the base of her neck with his mouth.

“Ah ...” he heard her groan as she ground herself against him. He could almost feel the moisture invading her vagina as he wriggled his hips against her.

Once more her hands threaded their strength through his lush mane and pulled.

“You were told not to do that,” he warned her as he sank his teeth none-too gently into the column of her throat.

“Don’t!” she hissed, feeling the pain. Withdrawing her hands from his scalp, she encircled his shoulders with her arms and pressed herself tighter to her lover. “Lick me,” she ordered.

He pushed himself away from her and stared down into her love-dampened face. One thick brow crooked and then he slid down her body until his face was at the triangular thatch of dark hair between her legs. Like a diving hawk, he pressed his mouth to her nether lips and swept his hot tongue over her pulsing flesh.

“Yes!” she moaned, bringing her hips up. She felt his hands slide beneath her buttocks to lift her higher and she drew in a quick breath, the tremors of passion settling like a heavy twist in her lower belly.

She tasted sweet to him and the musky, lusty scent of her filled his nostrils and he breathed deep, aroused by the smell. His tongue slid across her, into her, along the rough edges of her vaginal lips and then flicked with unerring aim at the very center of her passion.

“Oh!” she gasped as she began to lift her hips in a rhythmic upward lunge. His fingers dug into the tender flesh of her rump and she gloried in the slight pain the grip brought.

The bud of her sexual pleasure was a hard little nub of pulsing awareness to him. Even as he swathed her slit with his tongue, his teeth nibbled delicately on the stiff protrusion. He knew the feeling was driving her mad with desire for he could hear her panting, cast his eyes upward to see her gripping her pillow to either side of her head.

She groaned as he slipped one hand from beneath her and insinuated it between her thighs. Holding her breath, expecting his next move, she nearly swooned as he deftly parted her and drove his questing fingers deep inside, pushing them so painfully tight up inside her she flinched. When he began to move his fingers apart, twist them inside her, she brought the edges of the pillow over her head to shut out her cries of ecstasy. Between the press of his finger, the flick of his tongue and the bite of his teeth, she came in a bright burst of soul-shattering pleasure that brought her hips off the bed and her hot womanhood hard against his conquering mouth.

Deep inside her heat, he felt the contractions that signaled her release. He drove his fingers deeper, grinning as he heard her moan with the pain of it, and laughed as one final spasm ended and she dropped her hips back to the bed with a grunt of fatigue, all passion drained from her.

Without giving her time to think, to react, to deny him, he was up on his knees and flipped her over to her belly, dragging her hips up until she was poised on her knees on the bed. Even as she cried out in denial, he rammed his fully erect and pulsing sword into her from behind and rammed home with enough force to make her strike the top of her head on the hard surface of the head board. It took him five strokes, hard and unrelenting jabs into her soft body, until the seed shot from him in a thick, pulsing stream. With one final thrust, one last arching of his hips toward her, he pulled out, laughing at her gasp of both pain and disappointment, and rolled over to his back, panting.

“You bastard,” she said.

“After all these years you know how I like my women, Sybelle,” he answered in a bored voice.

“What you do hurts me,” she grumbled.

“It is meant to.”

Sybelle turned over and pushed herself up in the bed, leaned back against the head board and turned to look at him. His face was sweaty and the vein along the side of his neck was still throbbing heavily, but other than those two tell-tale signs, the man might have just been lying there in bed resting.

“Do you not receive pleasure from the act of love making, Jaleel?” she asked him, suspecting that he did not.

Prince Jaleel Jaborn blew out a long breath to let her know her question annoyed him. “Sex relieves tension, Sybelle. I do not engage in it for any other reason except to impregnate one or more of my wives.” He yawned.

“Besides, what are you complaining about? You derive pleasure from what I do to you. I don’t ever send you from my bed wanting, do I?”

“Would you care if I were satisfied or not?” she snapped.

“No.”

“It is the control, isn’t it?” she asked, watching his eyes close as he began to drift off. “You enjoy controlling people.”

“True,” he answered looking up at her, “but you enjoy me controlling you, don’t you?”

She jerked her gaze from his handsome face. This has been going on for far too long, she thought for not the first time. From somewhere she had to gather the strength to break off her affair with the Dahrenian prince. It was a destructive affair, one whose intimate bouts such as had just happened, more often left her disgusted with herself than satisfied. Idly, she wondered what was wrong with her, what part of her had mutated in childhood that would cause her to need the abuse Jaleel heaped upon her.

“They tell me the Serenian King is here,” Jaleel remarked, drawing her immediate attention.

“Conar McGregor,” she answered. “But I am told he has abolished the monarchy in his homeland.”

A snort of derision came from the man beside her. “You may discard the crown of King, but that does not make you any the less the one meant to wear it. McGregor knows that. He may have his people call him what they will, but he intends to sit the throne as monarch just the same.”

Sybelle shook her head. “He isn’t like what we have been told, Jaleel.”

He turned to stare at her. “How is he different?”

“He’s of the Power,” she whispered.

Jaleel’s lips twisted. “I know that.” He fanned a dismissive hand. “But that power was largely

channeled through his late wife and with her passing, he can do minimal damage.”

“I don’t know,” Sybelle answered. “He had no problem reading my thoughts.”

“Parlor tricks,” Jaleel scoffed. “I can read your thoughts, wench.”

“He’s dangerous, Jaleel,” she warned her lover of twenty-eight years. “I would not like to make an enemy of him.”

Jaleel Jaborn laughed. “I already have!”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Rupert Von Schlesendorf stared at the man who unseated him. He had expected as much, had known he would be no match for that man as soon as he had strutted out onto the tourney grounds, but what he had not expected was to be unseated at the very first pass.

"Are you hurt?"

Rupert shook his head and accepted the hand that was thrust toward him to help him to his feet. "My thanks, sir," the squat little man said.

"I hear you write sonnets."

Bright gray eyes turned even brighter in a pudgy little quiver of rosy-red cheeks and crooked white teeth.

"Indeed, I do!" Rupert answered, suspecting the man looking down at his five foot four inch frame wasn't going to be an enemy. "I don't suppose you partake of the art?"

"I helped write a limerick once, but that was the extent of my trying."

Von Schlesendorf's face lit up. "A dirty limerick, I hope!" he told the blond-haired warrior who was grinning down at him.

"My bride's parents took especial dislike to the ditty," Conar answered.

Rupert chuckled, setting his jowls to wobbling. "You will have to tell it to me sometime, Lord?"

"Conar. Conar McGregor."

The smile slid from the squat man's face and he swallowed hard before stammering out his question. "Ah, *the* Conar McGregor?"

"Just Conar McGregor, Rupert." Peter Steffensberg laughed as he joined the men. "Call him anything else and he's liable to bite your head off."

"And he could!" Von Schlesendorf agreed. He stuck out his hand. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Prince Conar."

"Just Conar," the Serenian echoed as he gripped the man's wrist.

"Oh, you will make Catherine a fine husband!" Rupert prophesied. "I had no idea the invitations had been so widely distributed beyond our own little corner of the world." He glanced around. "Are there more of you Outlanders lurking about?"

Conar chuckled. "There's another Serenian here, but I don't believe he'll be trying for Cat's hand."

"You've another opponent in fifteen minutes, Conar," Peter reminded him. "Perhaps you'd like to watch Sajin jousting with Alexi Barishnakov?"

"Boring," Rupert pronounced. "We know who'll win that." He lowered his voice. "What I want to see is the match between the famous Lord Hawk and Prince Guil of Rysalia."

"Lord Hawk?" Conar questioned.

"You have not heard of him?" Rupert gasped, looking at Peter with astonishment. "No one has told him of our infamous Lord Hawk?"

Peter blushed. "There hadn't been any occasion to bring it up and"

"My dear fellow!" Rupert exclaimed, dragging Conar's arm to him and holding on as he began to walk toward the lists where Sajin Ben-Alkazar and the Outer Kingdom Earl were about to duel. "Let me tell you about the man!"

From across the span of the field, Prince Guil and his boyhood friend, Jaleel Jaborn, watched the fat little Outer Kingdom troll walking with their enemy.

"You have taken a great chance in coming here, Jaleel," Guil complained, glancing up at his

friend whose face was shrouded behind the flap of his headpiece. Only the man's wicked black eyes and thick eyebrows could be seen.

"He'll not know I'm here until I am ready for him to know, Guil. He will not know what has happened until his blood is flowing from a saracen blade!"

"I've been asking around about him," Guil said, nodding as Rasheed Falkar passed by them. "He's bested five men this morning."

"He's bested five incompetent, bumbling fools!" Jaleel jeered. "None better than that fat slug speaking to him now. McGregor will not see any real competition until he duels with you."

Guil agreed. "All the same, I wish you would not come out in public like this. It was bad enough you going to that whore's room. What if that bastard brother of hers had caught you there?"

Jaleel snorted with contempt. "Sajin Ben-Alkazar is of no more threat to me than that Outer Kingdom pig bending McGregor's ear!"

"You underestimate him, Jaleel," Guil warned his friend. "That is dangerous."

Jaborn turned a fierce scowl on the man sitting beside him. "I have made it my life's work to know everything there is to know about Conar McGregor." He glared at Guil. "I know his habits. I know his weaknesses, and I know what makes the man prowl the battlements at night, unable to sleep." He jerked his chin toward the man they were discussing. "I know his hopes and his dreams. I know his fears and his strengths. There isn't anything I don't know, and understand, about him!" He turned to stare at his enemy. "And when the time is right, when I have him where I want him, I will do what Kahlil Toire and that bungling group of profligates calling themselves the Domination could not do. I will destroy Conar McGregor!"

Chapter Thirty-Four

“Having fun?” Conar asked Sajin as that one bent over the horse trough and scooped up water to pour over his sweaty neck.

Through the cascade of water flowing down his neck and cheeks, Sajin chortled. “Did you see how far Barishnakov’s nag threw him?”

“The man broke his tail bone. I can tell you from personal experience that hurts like hell and it always will whenever he sits long at a time.”

Sajin shrugged. “Serves him right,” he groused. “The bastard actually nicked me on the fourth turn.” He glanced down at the rent in his chain mail and frowned. “I owed him.”

“Who are you dueling next?” Conar asked, handing Sajin a dry towel to blot his sweaty face.

“Some brute from the Northern Climes.” He squinted. “I think his name’s ‘Dumb Shit’ from the looks of him.”

“That one there?” Conar asked, pointing at a giant of a man with a thick chest, bushy head of coarse red hair and the features of a bull. At Sajin’s look and nod, the Serenian grinned. “This I gotta see!”

* * * *

Catherine smiled politely at the men gathering in the music room of the palace. It had been a long, tiring day for most of them and the morning would see a start to another long, tiring day of more jousting, fisticuffs, and archery. Turning her head to the musicians who would be playing that evening, she nodded at the flutist, her old teacher.

“We need an evening of gentle music to calm these savage beasts,” someone whispered in her ear and she looked up to see Prince Guil of Rysalia standing behind her. He bent down as she lifted her hand to him and graced her with a feather-soft kiss on her wrist.

“I was hoping you would bring your sister with you,” she told him as she withdrew her hand from his tight grip.

“Jasmine would have been bored to tears during these tourneys,” he pronounced, taking the seat beside her although she did not bid him do so. He smiled at her look of annoyance, not seeing it, and continued to tell her why his half-sister was not inclined to come to such events.

“She didn’t actually ASK that pompous ass to sit with her, did she?” Sybelle whispered to her brother as Sajin escorted her into the music room on his arm.

Sajin shook his head. “I don’t believe so.” He looked around, trying to find Conar and not doing so, let out a heavy sigh. “I was hoping McGregor would be here to help me wile away the excruciating squeal of this Outer Kingdom music.”

“Sajin, please!” his sister admonished him. “Their music is no worse than our own. If anything, it is more civilized.”

“Civilized?” Sajin grumbled. “What do you call all that jumping around and spinning in the air and squatting down and sticking out their legs and”

“I call it dancing and that’s not what they’ll be doing here tonight and you know it. Their musicians will be playing chamber music and”

“Chamber music?” Sajin groaned. “By the Prophetess, Sybelle, I may puke!”

Conar put his hand on his friend’s shoulders and shook him gently. “Buck up, nomad. We’re suppose to enjoy this.”

Sybelle saw the Serenian prince glance down at her and she felt an unease crawl over her backbone. She looked away, her smile slipping and with a near-groan of shock found herself looking into the hot eyes of Jaleel Jaborn, dressed in the loose garments of a servant, as he

passed by her with a tray of refreshments.

"Fruit juice, Your Grace?" he asked her, his eyes lowering.

Sajin, having never met the man who had been sleeping with his sister for nearly thirty years, reached out and took two glasses of orange juice from the tray and handed one to his sister, wondering at her pale face and quickly averted gaze.

"Are you all right?" he asked, looking down at her trembling hand as she accepted the glass.

"Yes," she whispered and had to say the one word again to be heard. "Yes. I am fine, Sajin."

"There's three seats here!" Rupert Von Schlesendorf called out, drawing their attention.

"Come! Sit with me, Conar!"

When she heard the man call out, Catherine looked away from Guil Ben-Shanar Gehdrin, not overly concerned that he was still speaking to her, and watched Conar, Sajin and Sybelle take their seats directly across the room from her. She smiled at Sybelle, nodded at Sajin and let her gaze linger a long moment on Conar although neither of them acknowledged the other with anything other than their eyes.

"I hear he is directly responsible for his late wife's death."

Catherine turned and stared at Guil. "I beg your pardon?"

Guil glanced across the room. "The Serenian," he said as though the word were a bad taste in his mouth. "It is because of him she died."

Here, she thought, with a heavy pounding of her heart, was a man who might answer the questions she had about Conar McGregor. She schooled her face into nothing more than polite inquiry and asked him to explain his rather cryptic remark.

"Well," he said, eager to gossip, "you know, of course, he was married before his Tribunal sent him to prison for sedition?" he asked. At her nod, not suspecting the woman had known no such thing, he commenced to tell her the particulars of the Serenian's confinement and what happened when he was released.

"I wonder that I have never heard of The Raven," she commented. "If I understand you correctly, he is a hero to his people."

Prince Guil sneered. "Peasants! Riffraff from the Outland! As a friend of mine just recently told me, it would not take much of a hero to instill blind allegiance in trash such as that!"

"And you say this woman was forced into marriage with his brother," she said, feeling the hurt Conar must have known at what could have only seemed like a betrayal of the highest order to a man like him.

"The woman was a whore," Guil stated. "She had children," he said that word as though it were a loathsome insect crawling on his tongue, "by three of his brothers, including the one who died with her when she fell from that ledge." He lowered his voice. "I'm told she was carrying McGregor's bastard offspring when she died."

Catherine moved slightly away from the man, sickened by his viewpoint of what must have been a great, overpowering love between Conar and the woman named Liza.

"He was devastated by her death!" Guil chuckled, seemingly pleased that such a thing had happened. "Took to his bed for weeks on end. Wouldn't eat, couldn't sleep. But then, of course, his mistress had her brat and that seemed to bring him out of his mourning. At least for awhile."

Catherine looked across the room, found Conar staring at her, a look on his face that said he was curious to know what the two of them were discussing. She tore her gaze away.

"He had a mistress?" she asked, wanting the matter clarified.

"Oh, the woman was his before he got back in his ex-wife's bed!" Guil told her.

"Nevertheless, he got her with child. They say she bled to death after the birth and he was once

more laid low by the event.” Guil’s tone of voice said no such thing would ever cause him trouble.

Catherine thought of the day of the fire when Conar had carried the peasant woman to the wagon and had so lovingly taken her trust. She could still see the hurt and fear on his face as he had listened to the poor woman’s screams.

“It bothers him, still,” she said, not realizing she spoke aloud, flinching as Guil jumped on her words.

“Well, I would say he deserves to suffer, don’t you? After all, the man is a walking baby factory, or so it would seem to me. He has to do little to get a wench with child!”

“I suppose that is why he came to visit here,” she mumbled.

“He came here to get away from his eldest brother before the man had him committed to an asylum for the mentally deranged,” Guil confided as though it were no secret.

She turned and stared at the man sitting beside her. “What are you saying?”

Guil threw his hand out. “He tried to kill himself. Climbed atop the barbican and was ready to jump to his death in the waves of the North Boreal Sea.” The man scowled. “Had it not been for the old woman”

“Meggie,” Catherine whispered, returning her gaze to Conar, who was still watching her.

“I don’t know. Maybe that was her name. She became the new cook at the keep.” Guil paused, trying to regain his line of thinking, frowning with annoyance when he could not grasp onto the dwindling yarn of his tale as it slid away from him.

“He’s led a tragic life, hasn’t he?” Catherine asked, her gaze intent on Conar.

Guil sighed. “I suppose you could say that, but the man has deserved everything that has happened to him.”

“They’re discussing you,” Sajin said as he leaned toward Conar.

“It would seem so.” Conar switched his attention from Catherine’s strange-looking face to the man babbling in her ear and wondered what the fool was telling her about him.

“I’m going to break his arm tomorrow.”

Conar turned to look at Sajin.

“I am,” the nomad warned him. “On the very first pass.”

Sybelle looked at him. “If you do, then there will be no one left for you to duel with but McGregor!”

Conar and the Kensetti looked at one another and grinned.

* * * *

It was all Catherine could do to keep from laughing. She brought her hand up and covered her trembling lips, already pursed together to keep any sound from escaping. Her eyes flared and she nearly choked as another spasm of laughter threatened to burst forth.

“It’s disgraceful!” the man at her side hissed. “Positively rude!”

Catherine had to look away before she ruined everything by erupting into loud chortles of positively uproarious laughter. She found her father frowning. Her mother’s face filled with exasperation and many a lord and lady darting surreptitious glances toward the Outlander.

“Oh, Conar!” she heard herself mutter, shaking her head at Guil when the man asked if she had spoken. She looked down at the floor, but found her gaze going unerringly to the man across the room from her.

Sajin noticed Catherine looking their way and dug his elbow into Conar’s side.

“Huh?” he heard the Serenian grunt.

“Wake up!” Sajin hissed.

Conar opened his eyes wide and tried to focus, tried to keep his drooping eyelids from closing. He sniffed, swallowed and tried to stay awake by shaking his head vigorously. Reaching up, he plowed his fingers through his hair and then cupped his neck to massage the aching muscle there. His eyes found Catherine's.

Her face was a funny shade of pink, he thought. The woman looked as though she were trying not to laugh.

By Alel, he thought with a pang of guilt, she was trying not to laugh at HIM!

He drew himself up in the seat and deliberately looked away from her and settled his annoyed regard on the five musicians playing the slowest, most uninspiring, hardest-on-the-ears music he had ever had the misfortune to have to listen to.

Catherine watched him cross his legs. Uncross his legs. Shift in his seat. Look around him. Up at the ceiling. Anywhere but at her.

"Be still!" Sajin snapped at him.

"All right!" he ground out and crossed his legs again. He folded his arms over his chest and glared at the musicians.

Keeping a watch on him, realizing he didn't know she was doing so, Catherine saw his eyelids begin to lower. She felt like chuckling aloud when she saw him snap his lids open and stare wide-eyed around him. Then the lids began to lower again. And his head began to sag toward his chest. And then his eyes closed. And his head fell down only to be brought up with a jerk when he became aware he was dozing off again.

"Positively rustic," Prince Guil proclaimed. "The man has no manners at all!"

Catherine saw the process of impending sleep beginning to claim the Serenian once more and she held her breath, waiting for his head to fall to his chest, but before it could, she saw Sajin jab the man painfully in the ribs.

"WHAT?" Conar shouted, coming fully awake.

It was the last straw and Catherine's laughter was a shriek of amusement, hastily cut off and blocked by her restraining hand as she saw her parent's squinting at her.

He glowered at her, at those who were staring at him, glaring until they turned away. He turned to give Sajin a fierce look and then returned his attention to Catherine who was daring to grin at him from behind the constriction of her hand.

She saw him arch one challenging brow and knew she'd pay dearly for laughing at him. She knew there would be another sparring match between the two of them over this.

She looked forward to it.

* * * *

"Well, you gave them something to talk about," Sajin grumbled as he and Conar climbed the stairs to their sleeping quarters. "I don't know if I should be seen with you again. People will think I'm as boorish as you."

"You are," Conar snarled at him.

Sajin shoved him playfully into the wall. "Yes, but I didn't fall asleep during the musicale."

"What do you think that bastard was telling Cat?" Conar asked as they reached Sajin's door.

"Who knows?" Sajin answered in a bored voice. "He was probably telling her all about your wayward life, McGregor." When he noticed his companion's concerned look, he regarded him with surprise. "She DOES know all about you, doesn't she?"

Conar winced. "Lord, I hope not."

Sajin whistled beneath his breath. "Now, I KNOW I ought not to be seen with you again." He leaned toward his new friend. "You're known by the company you keep, you know."

“Kiss my ass, nomad,” Conar growled.
“In your dreams, Outlander.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

The sun was bright the next morning, glaring down on the helms of the jousters and bouncing off with an unpleasant flare. The horses seemed restless and their riders bored for most already understood they would not be walking off the field of honor with Marie Catherine Steffenovitch's hand in marriage.

"One hundred golden Ryals on McGregor," Rupert offered Alexi Barishnakov.

"I don't know," the other man drawled. "It seems a sure bet to me."

"McGregor hasn't gone up against the Rysalian, yet," the Northern Climes Prince scoffed. "I would say they are an equal pairing."

"Not on your life, Nikita!" Rupert chided him. "Did you see the way the Serenian bested me?"

Nikita Dostayevni spat on the ground. "My ancient wet nurse could best you, Von Schlesendorf!" He grinned. "Two hundred against your hundred on the Rysalian against the Outlander."

Rupert smiled.

"Have you seen Cat this morning?" Sajin asked Conar.

Conar looked around. "She's not here." He adjusted his horse's bridle and then stooped down to tug at the cinch. "She knows she'd better stay out of my way today."

"Oh, I'm sure she's quaking in her slippers, old man," Sajin sneered.

Pulling on his saddle to make sure it was tight, Conar patted the sleek neck of the Palomino and then walked over to the young man who was acting as his squire and who was holding Conar's helm.

"Who are you jousting first today?" Sajin inquired.

"That man over there," Conar answered, pointing at the knight who was already helmed and waiting.

"Who is he?"

Conar shrugged. "He's fighting under a red banner is all I know of him."

Sajin turned his head and looked at the man whose face was covered by the protective visor of his helmet. "He doesn't wish to be identified but is from one of the Emirates, then." He snorted. "I suppose if you best him, no one knowing who he is will hurt his reputation this way."

"If I best him, nomad?" Conar quipped.

"When you best him," Sajin shot back, slapping his friend on his shoulder. "I'll see you after I break Ben-Shanar Gehdrin's arm." He started to walk off.

"Which one?" Conar called out.

Sajin stopped, thought a moment and then smiled. "He's right handed."

"Happy hunting," his friend told him.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Tzar Thomas was not happy with the pog, he told his wife. Not that it mattered that the man whose arm he broke was another pog like himself. Breaking arms just wasn't supposed to happen.

"When men duel, my love, men get hurt," Charlotte informed him.

"'T'wasn't necessary, Lottie," he grumbled. "The boy did it a'purpose."

Charlotte sighed. "I know, dear. There's bad blood between the two."

"'Twasn't necessary," Thomas reiterated.

"I know, dear."

"You know what this means, don't you, Lottie?" her husband mumbled.

"No, but I'm sure you'll tell me, Thomas."

"This means that pog and Conar are the last two who will be dueling if Conar wins against that no-name man out there."

The Tzarina fanned herself with the beautiful silk fan from Chrystallus that Conar had gifted her with when his mail had come in from Serenia earlier that week.

"Do you have any idea who the man is, dear?" she asked.

"Another pog," Thomas grouched. He looked about the field and bleachers. "I've got a damned invasion of them running about the place!" He glared as one Venturian warrior rode by, doffing his helm to the Tzar and Tzarina.

"They seem evenly matched, don't they?" Charlotte asked, a feeling of unease settling in her stomach as she looked from Conar to the jousting knight who sat his horse beneath the scarlet-red banner. She prayed the man with no name would not best the Serenian, and if he did, that the Kensetti prince could win in the duel between them.

"I don't know where the deuce the man came from!" Thomas growled. "It was to be that Kensetti with the Rysalian and then Conar to joust the winner. But this morning, there was this challenger, vouched for by that damned Rysalian pog as being of royal family and eligible to compete." He turned to glare at his wife. "I don't like it, Lottie," he told her. "Not one bit!"

"He'll win."

The Tzar twisted around in his seat to see his eldest daughter entering their tent. He snorted. "I am most displeased with you, Marie Catherine," he said with a pout. "Most displeased." He turned to his wife. "Tell her, Lottie, that I am most displeased with her."

Catherine's mother looked up at her daughter and smiled. "Your father is MOST displeased with you, Catherine."

"What did she do?" Svetlana asked.

"She laughed!" her father snarled.

Svetlana, who along with Nadia and Tatiana, had not been allowed to attend the musicale the evening before, was not privy to what had happened there. She looked at her big sister with confusion and saw Catherine grinning back. Whatever it was, Svetlana thought, it wasn't worth worrying about. She returned her attention to the field.

"Doesn't he look glorious in his armor?" Svetlana asked her sister.

Catherine had to agree Conar did look exceeding good in his leatherworks. The heavy breeches of thick leather and the stiff jerkin beneath the intricately-woven chain mail covering his chest, arms and hips, were of the creamiest tan and shone in the bright wash of the early morning sun like a beacon to draw the eyes.

"Are you going to give him your kerchief, Cat?" Nadia whispered.

“She will not!” their mother answered. “That goes to her champion at the last duel.”

“Who’ll you give it to, Catherine?” Tatiana asked. “Prince Conar or Prince Sajin?”

“She may have to give it to that fellow there,” Svetlana pointed out, motioning to the man in black leather who sat astride a prancing Palomino nearly as big as Conar’s mount.

Catherine shivered, looking at the man who had, until that moment, escaped her notice. He was not looking her way, instead staring intently at Conar, but there was something in his posture that told Catherine he was deadly serious in his pursuit of winning.

“It is time, Highness,” the Tzar’s Tourney Master informed him.

Tzar Thomas rose to open the day’s events and silence settled over the field. “You may begin!” he shouted.

Conar mounted his steed and drew on the reins, bringing the horse around. Kicking the Palomino gently in the ribs, he sent the destrier at a slow canter to the pavilion where the Tzar and his family were seated. He glanced at the unnamed man as that one joined him at the tent, dipping his own lance in acknowledgement of the Tzar’s position.

“May the Lord be with you both,” the Tzarina bestowed her blessing and was taken aback by the cold, impersonal and insulting tone of the man whose black horse strained at the bit.

“The Prophetess will be my Protectoress,” the man behind the slit helm informed the lady. He bowed at the Tzar and then drew sharply on his reins, ignoring Conar and the required greeting between the two men and the promise that the fight would be fair.

“How abysmally rude!” the Tzar huffed. “I ought to have that pog flogged!”

“You do not have to meet him,” Mikel told the Serenian as the Outlander’s surprised gaze followed the man.

Conar slowly shook his head. “I have a feeling this is between him and me.” He turned and found Catherine looking at him. “Milady,” he said, cocking his head her way.

“May the Wind be at your back, Prince Conar,” she answered his greeting, a teasing grin on her lips.

A slow, lazy smile touched his lips, then he turned his mount’s head and cantered toward the field where he would meet the unknown warrior.

Staring at his most hated of enemies down the length of the field, Prince Jaleel Jaborn was nearly blind with fury. Ben-Alkazar had purposefully unseated Guil at such an angle the man could not prevent his arm from catching in the stile between the lanes. The loud pop had stunned everyone as Guil’s right arm broke along the forearm. The man’s howl of agony had brought everyone to their feet in alarm.

Even knowing McGregor had nothing to do with Guil’s pain, Jaborn still intended to do as much damage to the man as was possible before he ran his lance through his chest.

“Careful, Master” he heard Rasheed telling him as he placed the lance in his hand.

“McGregor is an expert with lance and ax.”

“He’ll not live long enough to wield an ax against me, Falkar!” Jaleel growled. He settled the lance in the crook of his arm and waited the Tourney Master’s signal to begin his run against the man he had hated most of his adult life.

* * * *

Sybelle marveled at the viciousness with which Jaleel met McGregor’s first pass. Both men nearly fell from their mounts, wobbling in their saddles from the force of the impact. Neither had drawn blood, but there was a large rent in the shoulder of Jaleel’s jerkin and McGregor’s chain mail had been snagged by the tip of the opposing lance and some of the links had given way.

“Don’t do this, I beg you!” she had pleaded with Jaleel the night before. “He could kill you!”

Her Rysalian lover had shoved her away from him. "Have you no faith in my fighting ability, woman?" he had shouted at her.

"Shush!" she had warned, putting her fingers over his lips less someone hear and come to investigate. "Jaleel, please. This is folly."

"I want him maimed, Sybelle!" the man had spat at her. "Maimed and disfigured worse than he already is!"

She had never known what it was the Serenian was supposed to have done to warrant Jaleel's near-insane enmity. For over twenty years he had ground out his hatred of the man, wishing him ill, consigning him to the devil, and, Sybelle suspected, hired men to try to either kidnap or kill Conar McGregor. Jaleel's obsession with the man had begun not long after McGregor's twin, Galen, had married the woman promised to Jaleel--the Princess Cyle Alla-Jeman of Ventura.

"She's dead," Sybelle had told him, hoping against hope he would come to ask for her hand now that his first love was gone.

But that had not been the case. Jaleel still mourned the woman who had died at Norus Keep, plunging to her death over a low balcony.

"I know she's dead, bitch!" Jaleel had shouted at her, slapping her for the first, and only, time since their affair began. "I have Conar McGregor to thank for that!"

It was no use trying to explain to Jaleel that the Prince Regent had had nothing to do with his sister-in-law's death. Out of the country, staying with friends in Ionary, Conar McGregor had not even been at the wedding nor, to Sybelle's knowledge, and that knowledge was due to her brother's spies, had he ever met the young woman whose life had been so unthinkably snuffed out at Norus Keep, Galen McGregor's home.

Try as hard as she could, Sybelle had never been able to get Jaleel to tell her why he blamed Conar McGregor and why he wanted the man dead.

Watching the two warriors preparing for the second pass, Sybelle dug her fingernails into her palms and became rigid. As Jaleel dug his spurs into his mount's flanks, she held her breath, bracing herself for the impact that might take her lover's life.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“Well?” Legion A’Lex shouted at Roget du Mer.

“There was nothing from Storm in today’s mail pouch.” He let out a long breath. “I’m sorry.”

“He should have written to us by now,” Thom put in. “It’s been well over four months and not one word from him. He should have reached the Outer Kingdom two months ago.”

Legion looked down at the two letters that had arrived at the keep--one to him and one to Meggie. He picked his own up and slit it open, scanned its contents and then threw it down.

“From what that little turd writes, you’d think he was having the time of his life!”

Roget picked up the letter, knowing Legion wouldn’t care if he read it and frowned. “This isn’t like Conar at all.”

“I know!” Legion bellowed. He snatched the letter back and poked it at Cayn. “Meggie!”

“Ain’t no need to be shouting like a Chalean fishmonger!” Meggie snapped as she limped into the room. “I was on my way.”

“See if he’s still trying to feed you the same asinine pap as he always does,” Legion ordered, not seeing the look of annoyance Meggie shot his way.

She carefully open Conar’s letter, read it, then put in back in its envelope before slipping it in her pocket to be read and re-read throughout the day.

“Well?”

“Same thing he always writes.” Meggie shrugged. “Tells me how the lass is a’bothering him and how he’s a’putting some poggie in his place.”

“Things are heating up between him and the gel and he’s making friends with that young Inner Kingdom Prince,” Cayn translated.

Meggie glanced at the Healer. “Says he’s looking forward to some kind of games they’re going to be having and wishes he had some of my apple dumplings ‘cause they don’t know how to make ‘em over there.”

“There is to be a tourney in which, I would imagine, men will be vying for this gel’s hand,” Cayn told them. “And, if I know women, the gel had some dumplings made especially for him and he didn’t like them.”

Legion stared at the Healer. “How can you read all that from the garbage that little twit wrote Meg and me?”

Cayn grinned. “Because I know Conar McGregor.”

“That still doesn’t explain why we haven’t heard from Storm,” Sentian remarked. “Do you think we should send someone to see about him?”

“Storm can take care of himself,” Thom reminded Sentian. “He may not have found a reliable source of getting his letters to us.”

Sentian turned to the window and stared out at the place where the old whipping post had stood for so many years before being chopped down at Occultus Noire’s command.

“Well,” he said, squinting, “if we don’t hear from him in another few weeks, I’m going to go after the bastard, myself!”

* * * *

Storm Jale groaned and pushed himself wearily to his feet. The heat around him and the horrible stench of unwashed bodies made his hungry stomach lurch. He stared into the darkness, trying to find the one face that had befriended him the day before, but he could see nothing past the wavering press of the heat. He staggered for a moment, feeling the bite of the irons around his ankles, and cursed the very moment he had stepped onto Rysalian soil.

“One thousand Ryals!” the man had yelled as he had shoved Storm into the arms of the keeper. “Sold to Lord Hussein for one thousand Ryals!”

“You can’t do this!” Storm had yelled as he was taken away, his leg irons and the manacles around his wrists jangling.

“Fight Hussein, boy,” the keeper had told him, “and the man will cripple you.”

“I’m a free man!” Storm had protested as he was pushed along, stumbling beneath the thrust of the keeper’s calloused hands.

“You were a free man, Outlander,” the keeper had laughed. “Now, you are Lord Hussein’s slave!”

Four weeks, he thought, overwhelmed by the knowledge. For four weeks he had been held in this rat-infested shack with forty other men, barely room enough to stand among the emaciated and unwashed bodies. Four weeks of whippings and back-breaking work in the quarry. Four weeks of nights filled with a hopeless he hadn’t even experienced in the Labyrinth. There, he hadn’t been chained like an animal or whipped like a dog, but in this godawful place, he was treated worse than Conar had been under Lydon Drake’s less-than tender care.

At least in the Labyrinth, he had been allowed to roam free about the compound, to talk among the other prisoners. There he had had friends.

Here, in this place of horror, he had met only one man who would even speak to him.

“I am from Kensett,” the man had whispered as they toiled at the rock pile that morning. “I am told you are, too.”

“I was born there, but I am no Kensetti,” Storm had snarled, slamming his pick ax into the rock. “I am Serenian.”

“You are Rysalian, now, my friend, for it is a Rysalian who owns you.”

“NO man owns me!” Storm had snarled.

The man had spoken softly to him, encouragingly, until the overseer had separated them.

Now, trying to find that friendly face in the dark, needing the companionship of another human being, Storm knew how Conar McGregor must have felt when the Labyrinth had tried to take away his humanity.

“I need you, Conar,” Storm whispered into the dark, feeling the overwhelming burden of his situation to the very dregs of his being. He hung his head. “I need you, my friend.”

He tensed.

The keepers were coming to let them out to begin their day’s labor.

A single tear slid slowly down Storm’s cheek. “Please, Conar.” Another tear followed, leaving a wavering track against the filth of Storm’s flesh. “Please.”

* * * *

“And I tell you he found a man to take him into the Outer Kingdom.”

Azalón Ben-Hasheed looked at his cousin and scowled. “You saw him leave?”

The innkeeper glared at him. “Would I lie to you, Azalón?”

The caravan master snorted. “I know you had better not, Achmed.”

Achmed Ben-Robenth turned his back on his cousin and began to sort the mail that had come in to the inn’s guests, pushing the letters into the slots with such force, he crumpled several of them.

“I told you the Serenian left with a guide, Azalón. I will tell you nothing more.”

There was something in his cousin’s eyes that bothered Azalón, but he had no time to pursue the matter. He had come to the Moon and Scimitar to get the man he had promised to take to the Outer Kingdom. The caravan was ready and the others anxious to be about their trip.

“Are you still here, Azalon?” the innkeeper snapped as he turned back around and found the burly caravan master frowning at him.

“I am leaving, Achmed,” Azalon muttered, “but if that man is not in St. Steffensberg when I get there, I will be coming back here to question you about his whereabouts.”

“Me?” the innkeeper gasped, highly affronted.

“You!” Azalon snarled, then spun on his heel and left the inn.

Achmed watched his cousin through the opened door as the older man crossed the dusty street and motioned his servant to follow. The innkeeper bit his lip, his gaze shifting to the man sitting across the room.

“Don’t worry, Achmed,” the other man said. “There is no trace of the Serenian your cousin will be able to find.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

On the second pass, McGregor's lance broke in half as it struck the unknown warrior's leather breastplate just at the midpoint of the man's wide chest.

"He's down!" Sajin shouted, coming to his feet as his fellow Inner Kingdom noble suddenly tilted sideways, unable to maintain his balance after the hit. As the warrior hit the dirt, he rolled, cursing the fates that had knocked him from his mount.

Conar reined in his steed and turned the Palomino around. He saw his opponent down and slipped his leg over the horse's neck to slide easily to the ground. He barely glanced at his squire as the young man ran forward with Conar's morning star.

"He means business, Your Grace," the squire commented as Conar hefted the morning star.

The first hit had been stronger, more forceful than Conar had expected and he had known from that moment on the other man was out to draw blood or maim him. On the second pass, he began to realize the intent was far deadlier than that.

Catherine's hands were clenched in her lap. Her full attention was on Conar as he and the other man began to circle one another and test the other's mettle by swinging the morning star in a long circle above their heads, moving in closer to his opponent with each successive swing.

"I don't like this," the Tzar mumbled under his breath.

Jaleel Jaborn lashed out with his morning star and the weapon barely missed the Outlander's head. He snarled behind the constriction of the heavy metal helmet that protected his head.

"Who are you?" Conar asked as he took a swing at the man, not really intending to do the fellow any harm.

"Your death, McGregor!" his opponent snarled. He swung the morning star in a tight spiral and then struck out with it, slamming the spiked ball into Conar's unprotected side and putting several deep dents in the leather before the Serenian could jump back.

"No!" Catherine shouted, coming to her feet. She was not aware of Sajin's white face and Sybelle's victorious grin.

"Catherine! Sit down!" her mother snapped. She reached out to tug her daughter's hand, but Catherine stepped off the carpeted floor of the pavilion and joined her brothers near the wooden rail separating the onlookers from the field.

"Son of a bitch!" Conar gasped, putting a hand to his injured side. Although the spikes had not broken through the barrier of leather to meet vulnerable flesh, the swing had struck him such a blow he knew there would be a massive bruise along his ribs. Nothing was broken, but the hit was throbbing.

"Come meet your fate, McGregor," he heard the man sneer at him. "I will see your filthy Serenian blood flow before I am through with you!"

Conar's sapphire eyes narrowed as he circled the man before him. His right hand was gripping the handle of the morning star so tightly he wasn't even aware he held it.

"Then why don't you use a real weapon instead of these toys" he asked, "if you think you can best me in a fight, you motherless jackal?"

Jaleel Jaborn straightened from the crouch he was holding, anticipating McGregor's countermove. At the jeer, his lips pulled back over his teeth. His growl was like that of an enraged lion. He threw his morning star away, nearly hitting his own squire as the man jumped quickly out of the weapon's heavy path.

"I can best you with any weapon you choose, you infidel dog!"

Sajin's brows drew together. The man's shout, his accent seemed familiar. He glanced at

Sybelle and saw that his sister seemed to be enjoying the spectacle. A faint nagging worry began to open in the rich, fertile soil of Ben-Alkazar's mind and he slowly turned to look at the man whose taunts seemed to be taking a toll on McGregor.

"Knives?" Conar threw his own weapon away and reached up to snatch off his helmet. He shook his soaking wet hair from his forehead and blew a cooling breath over his upper face. "Can you best me with a blade, you scum-sucking pog?"

A livid red haze shot over Jaborn's vision and he yelled at his squire to bring him his dagger.

"Why don't you take off that helm so I can see what you look like?" Conar taunted the man as his squire ran forward and seemed to be arguing with his opponent. "Or are you too ashamed of that butt-ugly face of yours?"

Jaleel spun around, furious at the remark. He felt his squire's hand on his arm and tried to jerk away.

"Master, please!" the man hurried to say. "There is none better in all the world with a blade than Conar McGregor!"

"What's the matter, pog?" Conar called out. "Do you gotta get permission to come play with me?"

"Oh, for the love of the Saints!" the Tzarina groaned. "Why do men insist on insulting one another like that?"

"It makes the blood boil hotter, Mother," Mikel answered, grinning. "And I've heard there is none better at insult than our Serenian Windwarrior!"

"I can vouch for that," Catherine murmured.

"And no better master with a blade, either," his father put in. He got to his feet, not liking the turn of the events taking place on his field of honor. He cut his eyes to Misha. "Do we stop it?"

Misha shook his head. "Conar would be beyond controlling if you were to do such a thing. His honor is at stake here."

"His life is at stake!" Catherine growled as she turned to glare up at her father. "Stop this, Father. Now!"

The Tzar was undecided. On the one hand, he was regretting ever having listened to Peter and Mikel concerning this damned tourney in the first place. When would he ever learn not to listen to those two brats? Yet on the other hand, he was anxious to see the great Windwarrior he had heard so much about from Misha in action.

"Let's wait," he answered his daughter.

"For what?" Catherine shouted at him. "One of them to be taken off the field on a stretcher?"

"Have faith in your man's ability," Sybelle said in a calm voice. When Catherine glared at her, the Kensetti princess smiled. "If he's as good as he thinks he is, he'll win, now, won't he?"

"You gonna play or you gonna let your squire talk you outta it?" Conar taunted his opponent.

Jaborn shoved his squire away. There was a roar of rage pounding in his head and he rushed forward with the knife, taking a mighty swipe with the blade as he came within striking distance of his enemy.

Conar jumped back, drawing in his breath as the arc of the weapon struck for his midsection. He grinned at the man circling him, looking for an opening, paying special notice to the way the man held his weapon. He sidestepped another strike, then pivoted on his left leg and kicked out with a spinning jolt to connect his foot with his opponent's head.

Jaborn saw stars as the unexpected hit caught him alongside his right jaw and dropped him to the ground like a felled tree. He landed hard in the dirt, then pushed himself up on his knees, kneeling in the dust, shaking his head much as a wet terrier will do. Slowly he lifted his face to

stare at the Serenian who was looking down at him with a taunting smirk.

“What’s the matter, pog,” Conar quipped, “don’t you know how to fight like a real warrior?”

Sybelle had come to her feet when Jaleel went down. She was staring across the field with the first real nervousness she had felt since McGregor’s lance had broken. Her attention was glued to Jaleel just as Catherine’s was hard on McGregor.

“You wanna cry quarter?” Conar asked, grinning.

Jaborn’s lips drew back over his teeth and his bellow of rage was muffled but ferocious as he lunged from his crouched position and flew at the Serenian, their bodies coming together with a meaty thud as the leather armor clashed.

“I don’t know what Conar said,” Peter remarked quietly to his brother, “but I don’t think the pog liked it.”

“If I’ve come to know Conar at all,” Sajin whispered to Yuri, “he just cast aspersions on that man’s bravery.”

“That man,” Yuri scoffed, “is a fool to take on Conar McGregor.” He folded his arms. “And he will regret it.”

Catherine’s nerves were drawn so tight she thought she would snap in two. Her attention was leveled on the two men who were struggling to gain the upper hand in their battle with one another. She had ceased to breathe normally from the moment Conar had taunted the man into fighting with his dagger. Watching them as they clutched each other’s wrists while the flashing blades were pointed straight downward toward the heart of their enemy, Marie Catherine felt sick to her stomach and more than a little afraid.

Through the slits of the leather helm, Conar could see two infernally-lit black eyes glaring back at him. He could hear the man’s snorts of fury as he tried to drive his blade down. With a nonchalance he certainly didn’t feel at that moment, the Serenian stuck out his right leg and hooked his opponent’s calf, pulling his leg out from under him. Letting go of the man’s wrist at the same time, he twisted away from the curve of the Inner Kingdom warrior’s blade and stepped back to watch the man fall once more to the ground with a heavy thump.

“You aren’t showing me shit, pog,” Conar quipped, dancing away from the foot that lashed out at him to drag him down, as well. “You’re spending more time on your ass than on your feet. Cry quarter and I’ll let you walk off this field intact.”

With a roar of insane fury, Sybelle watched as her lover bounded to his feet and stabbed out blindly at his enemy. The Kensetti princess knew Jaleel’s vision had to be obstructed by the sweat dripping from his brow and the limitations of the helmet he dared not remove. Her knuckles were white on the railing she clutched, her face scrunched into a hard worried frown. She could hear her blood pounding in her temples and when Jaleel staggered from a shove McGregor gave him, she bit down so hard on her lip, she drew blood.

Catherine was not aware of her own hands clutching the rail before her. She did not hear her ragged breathing or feel the perspiration forming on her upper lip as she stood there in the gathering heat of the early morning. She could not look away from the combat, and she knew now without a doubt it was mortal combat taking place on her father’s field of honor. When Conar slipped on a patch of dew-drenched grass and nearly went down, she turned a pale, strained face to her father.

“Please stop this!” she cried, ignoring her mother’s instant shush and her brothers’ whispered commands to be still. “One of them is going to be seriously hurt, Father!” she told him.

“If we stop this now,” Misha reminded her, “he will not be happy with the one responsible.” He stared into her face as she looked at him with pleading. “He is a warrior, Your Grace, not a

little boy.”

“He can bleed just the same!” she yelled at him.

Misha nodded. “Aye, that he can, and has many times, milady. He’s no stranger to pain.”

Catherine turned away from the man, furious with him as well as her father. She caught Sybelle looking at her and glanced at the woman, seeing the strain of what was happening on the field on Sybelle’s lovely face.

“Can you do something?” Catherine asked.

Sybelle shook her head. “Not alone.” She lifted her chin. “Can you?”

The Tzarevna’s face crinkled with hopelessness. “I don’t think so.”

“Then we will have to wait, won’t we?” Sybelle asked, understanding for the first time that she had both an ally and a foe in the woman standing before her.

Conar was panting, his body drenched and suffocating in the confines of the leather armor. He was itching in a dozen places where sweat was running inside his cambric shirt and he was being gouged along his sides by the cut of the chain mail under the leather jerkin. But none of that discomfort mattered to him as he took a hardy swipe at the man in front of him and grinned as his blade snagged open a tear in his opponent’s left hand.

“You infidel bastard!” Jaleel swore, shaking his stinging hand, spraying blood as he sought to rid himself of the pain the cut had caused.

“Come on, pog,” Conar jeered, “let’s end this game. I’m growing tired of your insults.”

Jaleel jabbed at the Serenian, frustrated beyond endurance when the man stepped nimbly out of harm’s way, laughing as though the strike had been nothing more than an amusing gambit. He tried again and found himself on his knees in the dirt, his ears ringing from the vicious punch that had caught him on the point of his chin and clicked his teeth together.

“There you are on the ground again.” Conar laughed. “Can’t you keep your footing, you graceless pog?”

Prince Jaleel Jaborn of Dahrenia growled low in his throat and came slowly, menacingly to his feet. Blood was dripping down his chin, pooling in the cup of his helmet, and his eyes were stinging with sweat. He clutched his dagger with renewed strength and began to slowly circle to his opponent’s right.

“I’m going to gut you, McGregor,” he warned, his words coming from between tightly clenched teeth.

“You can try,” Conar taunted.

Catherine held her breath, sensing a change in the two men out on the field. She knew Sybelle had felt the same eerie premonition enveloping her, for she reached out to grasp Catherine’s hand as though the contact would stay the terrible outcome that had been promised with that change in the ether.

Peter and Mikel Steffensburg looked at one another, knowing something was about to happen, hoping it wouldn’t be deadly, for their father had glanced back at them with a warning that said should things alter drastically out on the field of honor, they would be held responsible.

Sajin stepped away from the railing separating the place of safety and walked a few feet out onto the field. From where he stood, he could see the look of determination on Conar McGregor’s sweaty and tired face and he could see the rigidity of the other man’s posture, the way he crouched as though his very life depended on him striking the first blow. For the first time, the Kensetti prince grew worried.

Rupert Von Schlesendorf stood beside Yuri Andreanova. He could feel the tension in the air and in the man standing beside him. When he risked a look away from the field of combat, he

could see a heavy scowl on the Shadow-warrior's face.

"They mean business," Rupert remarked, returning his attention to the field.

"One of them is going to die," Yuri acknowledged.

Sybelle's fingers crushed Catherine's but neither woman noticed. That each of them routed for a different male did not matter. They were aware of it, but it was of no consequence. They acknowledged the other's fears and prayed for the best.

Rasheed saw Prince Guil at the far end of the field, watching the contest with a worried frown. He had as much faith in Prince Jaleel as Rasheed, himself had. Both knew the man could not win against McGregor. Few men, if any, could. The outcome had been destined long before either man took to the field.

The blade flashed brilliant fire in the sunlight and drew blood. The cut was deep, not to the bone, but deep enough to put a long rent in the chain mail and turn the links into tiny pools of crimson.

"Father!" Catherine screamed, seeing blood dripping from Conar's left arm. She would have run out on the field to stop the fight if Sajin hadn't reached her first and grabbed her around the waist, swinging her back against him.

"Be still!" he ordered, tightening his grip. "You'll cause him to lose his concentration!"

"He's been wounded!" she cried, trembling from head to toe as she realized she could not escape the Kensetti's strong hold.

"Think you he doesn't know that?" Sajin sneered.

Conar's sapphire eyes hardened as he felt the pain in his forearm. He could see triumph behind the leather helm of his enemy and he shifted his weapon to his left hand, contempt lifting his lip as he snarled at the man before him.

Jaleel's eyes widened as he saw the fool shift his blade from his good hand to his injured. He had only a moment's thought of why the man, a seasoned fighter, would do something so foolish, but then his own ego leapt to the forefront and he struck out, thinking to end the fight, and McGregor's life, with one swing of his blade.

Catherine screamed, seeing Conar stumble as the man went after him. "Sajin!" she pleaded, struggling to get free. "Father! Do something before it's too late!"

The blade of Jaborn's dagger struck outward, jaggging upward to pierce his opponent's belly, to disembowel the man, but with the miscalculations the Hasdu had always experienced when dealing with this particular enemy, McGregor struck first, with an almost casual, contemptuous sweep of his own weapon, and the master stroke came with a quick flick of a tired, aching wrist.

At first he didn't feel anything. All he sensed was the wet flooding down his arm. He mentally shrugged it away, attempting to lift his arm to run his blade into the exposed, vulnerable expanse of heaving leather before him.

But his arm would not move.

Conar watched as confusion, then surprise, then slight worry entered the dark eyes behind the helm's slits. He stepped back, waiting for full realization to hit as the quick-flowing blood spread over the front of the man's leather jerkin.

Jaleel tried to raise his arm again and when he couldn't, he glanced down, knowing full well McGregor was not going to strike again, that his blade had done all the damage the Serenian had intended. He looked at the rapidly-spreading scarlet wetness staining his chain mail and his leather and tried once more to lift his arm. It barely moved.

"I'm no Healer," he heard McGregor say, "but it would be my guess I missed the place I was aiming for and hit an artery. That was not my intent."

A look of bewilderment flitted behind the leather slits as the dagger, stained with McGregor's blood, dropped suddenly to the ground. Jaborn stared down at it, wondering why the pain was just then beginning to register. He flexed the fingers of that hand slowly.

"You'd better have it seen to," McGregor told him. "If you stand there much longer, you'll bleed to death."

Jaborn looked up into the face of his hated enemy and finally began to understand what the man had said. He saw pity in the sweaty face staring back at him, saw compassion in the guilty look.

"It was not my intent to do real harm to you," he heard the Outlander repeating. "I meant only to disarm you."

Doctor Talebov hurried toward the men, glancing quickly at the Serenian before turning to the man who was bleeding so freely and who was standing so still in the harsh morning sunlight.

"I didn't mean to cut him so deeply," Conar said.

At first the words meant nothing to Jaborn. They were mere sounds. Even as the physician's gasp of sympathy finally registered, the Rysalian did not move. He turned his head within the confines of the helm and looked down at the deep, ugly gash knowing the scarring would be horrible, disfiguring beyond acceptance. He stared at it, feeling nothing but a spreading agony in his being that he was wounded in a way he could not overcome. Slowly, he looked toward McGregor.

"It isn't over," he said, watching the surprise flit across the scarred face of his enemy. "We will settle this one day. You'll pay for doing this, McGregor."

"I'll be waiting," the Serenian said quietly. He tossed the bloodied dagger into the dirt and turned his back on Jaborn.

"It isn't over, McGregor!" Jaborn bellowed at him. "It isn't over! Death would be too quick a punishment for you!"

Conar saw Catherine in Ben-Alkazar's arms and wondered why he didn't feel jealous. Maybe, he thought, as he neared them, it was because there was such concern on both their faces. Maybe, he sighed, it was because the moment Sajin let her go, Catherine ran to him and threw her arms around his neck, plastering her body so close to his it would leave the imprint of his chain mail on her arms.

"Are you all right?" Sajin asked him, seeing the blood dripping from his left arm.

"Aye." He brought up his arms to push Catherine away, wincing as he saw his own blood on her gown. "I am well, milady."

She searched his face, nearly groaning at the fatigue she saw glistening there. She clutched as his right arm. "You are hurt."

He shrugged, holding up his arm. "Nothing a little sewing won't remedy." She surprised him with her quick answer.

"I'll do it."

Conar shook his head. "Lady, no, I

"I will do it!" she snapped. She pulled on his arm, making him stumble against her. "Now!"

Sajin stood where he was, watching with bemusement as Catherine led a protesting Serenian Windwarrior to the medical tent and pushed him none-too gently inside.

"Prince Sajin."

Sajin turned and found Yuri pointing. He looked to where the Outer Kingdom man was indicating and saw Prince Guil walking with the physician and the unknown Inner Kingdom warrior, helping to support the wounded man from the field. He quickly glanced back at Conar.

“I would not speak with him if I were you, Your Grace,” Yuri warned. “I have a notion who that man is and if it is him, Conar will go after him the moment he knows for sure.”

The nagging feeling of knowing who the unknown warrior was finally settled in Sajin’s mind and he felt the blood drain from his face. “Jaleel Jaborn?” he asked.

Yuri nodded. “It is my belief that is who he is.”

Sajin looked from the Shadow-warrior’s face to the medical tent, then quickly looked back at the injured man being helped into the back of a wagon.

“Conar would try to kill him, Your Grace,” Yuri said.

“The Prophetess help us,” he mumbled and headed for the wagon.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Conar watched her threading the needle and couldn't help but think of another time, another woman, another wound, and a sad smile touched his lips. That woman hadn't been willing to suture close his knife cut. Catherine seemed almost eager to do so. His smile widened.

"I see nothing funny about this, Conar," she snapped, making a knot in the thread. She laid thread and needle into a bowl of antiseptic. "Don't you dare laugh."

The smile slipped away. "I am not laughing, Mam'selle," he answered. "Actually, it hurts like hell."

"Not surprising," she said.

She helped him take off his leather jerkin, eased him out of his chain mail, clucking her tongue at the dried blood clinging to the links.

"Some protection this was," she murmured.

Instead of trying to drag his cambric shirt up over his head, making it necessary for him to lift his injured arm, she picked up her knife and slit the shirt up the front, then began to tear it away from his chest. She glanced up at his snort of humor.

"What do you find funny now?" she grumbled.

"How long have you been wanting to do that, Cat?" he quipped. He saw her blush and his giggle was almost child-like.

She spun around, her blush deepening. She picked up the bowl of antiseptic and walked back to him. She held the needle and thread out to him. "Hold this."

His lips twitched as he took the bowl. "Yes, Ma'am." He knew she hadn't appreciated his acquiescence when her own lips turned down in a heavy purling.

"You'd better hope his blade was clean," she told him, uncorking a bottle of astringent and turning it up over a thick pad of cotton cloth.

"I did him far more damage than he's done me," he said softly, regretting having missed with his aim. Just as he had been marked for life by the whip in Kaileel Tohre's hands, he had marked the man he had fought with even more of a handicap.

"If this wound gets infected, you will have something to regret," she said, hearing the self-condemnation in his tone.

Conar gasped as she began to wipe away the seeping blood and cleanse the wound. He had to grit his teeth to keep from crying out for the astringent was stronger than he had expected. It brought tears to his eyes.

"Damn, woman," he ground out. "What's in that shit?"

"Here," she told him, ignoring his childish outburst. "Put your hand up here and pinch the wound closed."

He did what she asked.

"How good are you at suturing?" he asked, seeing another faint line where once long ago he had been sewn by trembling hands that had worked so carefully and slowly.

"I can do as well as whoever did this," Catherine said as she tapped gently with the needle's tip on the old wound. "What did you do, make someone else mad at you?"

"My lady-wife," he answered without thinking. At Catherine's arched brow, her look of surprise staring back at him, he squirmed in the chair. "It was an accident. She didn't mean to do it."

Catherine sighed. "If you annoyed Elizabeth McGregor like you annoy me, she meant to do it."

He flinched, surprised that she knew of Liza. When she glanced down at him, he could see condolence in her pretty face.

“Prince Guil told me of her.”

Conar scowled. “And what else did that mincing pog tell you?”

“I would venture to say there is little I don’t know about you now,” she answered.

Her first stitch was quick and so expertly done, he barely felt it. He marveled at how quickly she worked, her eyes intent on his wound, her lips slightly parted as she concentrated to make the stitches even and secure.

“How many men have you sewn up?” he asked, trying to break that heavy concentration.

She shrugged. “You’re the first, but it isn’t all that different from embroidery although the feel of the material is different.”

His brows shot up. “The material?”

Catherine smiled although she didn’t look at him. “Flesh is not as soft as cotton weave, milord Conar. There is a pull to it as the needle goes through.”

He grunted, thinking her perception of the situation somewhat unorthodox. Most women would find it unpleasant, even though necessary, to stitch up their menfolk’s wounds, but Catherine had found it ‘different’. When she had him hold the needle and thread, when she had finished, so she cut the thread, he whistled at her nonchalant attitude.

“You’d make a fine Healer, Cat,” he complimented her.

“If I stay around you much longer, I will probably get plenty of practice at being one, Conar,” she shot back.

She turned to put away the suturing material but found her hand in his light grip. She looked down at him. “Thank you,” he said, smiling at her in a way he never had before.

She squeezed his fingers then eased them from his grasp. “You are welcome, milord.”

“Cat?”

She arched an inquiring brow at him.

“Will you walk with me in the garden tonight?”

If she was surprised by his request, she didn’t show it. “Aye,” she said, liking the unfamiliar word on her tongue. “I suppose I will.”

Chapter Forty

The moon skipped high overhead, flitting through the trees, playing peek-a-boo among the branches. There was a stillness to the garden, not even a cricket chirping, that made the atmosphere seem surreal. A faint scent of roses drifted in the soft current and the reflecting pool's surface was as smooth as glass.

"What is the garden at Boreas like?" Catherine asked.

She was walking at his side, her hand tucked into the crease of his elbow. She felt his fingers tighten on that hand for he had been holding it to his arm since they had stepped from the stone patio.

"It's smaller than this," he answered. "Not so formal. We have no mazes or pools although there is a fountain. My mother wanted it small so she could tend it herself."

"Was there no garden before your father took the throne?"

"Aye, but it wasn't like it is now. Mama took such good care of it, adding a bush here, a shrub there. And Liza loved it just as much. She used to" he stopped.

Catherine could feel his pain. She eased her hand from him and sat down on a stone bench, looking up at him in the soft moonlight, seeing the loss easing over his face.

"You miss her very much, don't you?"

He seemed to mentally shake himself. "I don't want to talk about her, Catherine." He sat down beside her but might as well have been a thousand miles away for all the nearness she felt.

"I wasn't prying, Conar," she told him.

He nodded. "I know." He stretched out his long legs and stared out into the garden where a wall of dark greenery caught his attention. "Has anyone ever got lost in that maze of shrubbery?" he asked.

"I would imagine so," she said. "When I was little, I use to hide from my nanny in there."

He turned to look at her. "Did you never get lost?"

She shook her head. "Not me."

He smiled. "No, I would think not." He looked back at the shrubbery.

"Do you still want to leave us, Conar?"

Her question took him by surprise and he faced her, a puzzled look on his face. "What do you mean?"

"Mikel said you had asked for a ship to take you back to the Outland. He said you were anxious to go home."

He looked away. "Things change," he said.

There was a long moment of silence before Catherine commented on his enigmatic answer.

"Like between us?"

He didn't look at her as he spoke. "Have things changed between us, Cat?"

"You know they have." She watched him frown. "And you know the moment they did."

He let out a harsh breath through his nostrils and craned his head back to stare up through the trees overhead. He seemed to be searching the dark heavens for his words.

"Is it pity you feel for me, Cat?" he asked in a grating tone.

She was quick to counter. "Pity for what?"

He lowered his head and stared at her. "For what you saw. For what was done to me. Does it make me less dangerous in your eyes. Less capable?"

She fused her gaze with his. "I don't pity you, Conar. I am sorry you have been forced to endure such torment in your life, but you are not a man to inspire pity in any one. Compassion,

yes. Empathy, most assuredly. But pity? No. Pity has never been an emotion I have felt for you.”

“Just compassion and empathy,” he growled, turning away.

“And anger and rage and fury and exasperation and provocation and irritation and annoyance and resentment and impatience and”

She found herself in his arms, his mouth slanted tightly across her own to cut off the flow of words, his hands in her hair to hold her head still beneath the onslaught of his tongue that slipped so expertly, so unexpectedly between her lips, she felt as though she would faint.

Her body was sweetly pressed closely to his own. His nostrils filled with the tangy scent of lemon verbena that seemed to be a part of her flesh. Her short cap of dark curls was like silk beneath his calloused fingers and was as soft as a butterfly’s wings.

Catherine felt the heady play of his desire calling out to her and with all her heart she wanted to succumb to that sorcerer’s spell. Her entire being wanted to sink to the carpet of dewy grass at their feet, her body aching for his, her soul reaching out for the nameless need that was flooding her lower body with a heat and moisture that made her head spin.

“Cat,” he whispered against her lips, pulling his own rich fullness away, making her groan with the loss. “I don’t know what I’m doing when I’m around you,” he confessed, his lips plying kisses along her cheek and at her temple. “I am not me when I am with you.”

She had to say something or else she would explode with wanting him, but what came out of her sounded stupid, and she winced although the words seemed to incite him even more.

“Pray tell who are you, then, Conar?”

“A man lost, milady. Doomed.” He cupped her face in his hands and stared into her eyes. “A man who should not be in love with you, but who is.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Love?” she whispered, but she knew he hadn’t heard her. He laid his forehead against her own. “I have no right to love you, Catherine.”

She reached up to cover his fingers with her own. “Why not?”

“Liza is not”

Catherine heard the sorrow in his voice, could feel the sense of betrayal he was feeling. His guilt was there in the dampness surrounding his dark blue eyes and his voice was ragged and filled with hopelessness.

“Would she want you to spend the rest of your life alone, milord?” she asked him, her hands tightening on his as he shook his head in denial. “Then why do you think she would disapprove of what you are feeling?”

“I should not feel this way, Catherine. It isn’t right.”

“What isn’t right?” she echoed. “Your wanting a little happiness in your life? You needing someone to spend your life with? What isn’t right, Conar? Tell me. Tell me what you think is wrong with the way we feel about one another!”

He looked at her, taking in the militant gleam, the look of expectation, of hope on her face. Her heart was in her gaze and he knew at that moment she cared as much for him as he cared for her. And the knowledge cut through his own heart as the unknown man’s blade had cut through his flesh.

Before he could say something primarily male, and to her way of thinking stupid, Catherine shushed him with her fingertips.

“It has been two years since her death, hasn’t it?” When he didn’t answer, she asked him again. “Hasn’t it, Conar?”

He could barely breathe. “Aye. It has.”

“And how much longer do you wait? Another six months? Another year? Two? Three? How

many nights do you leave your bed and go up on the battlements of this keep or your own to walk until the morning light creeps over the horizon? How many laughs and tears and hopes and dreams will you keep to yourself? How many people will you keep at bay so they will not see the pain you try to hide so carefully?"

He lowered his head, stung by her words, knowing them for truth, but hurting from them nevertheless.

She heard him sniff and knew he was trying to keep the tears from coming. "Is it a weakness that makes you cry?" she asked and wasn't surprised when he looked up quickly, his face a study of confusion. "Is it helplessness? Is it a bid for sympathy?"

"No!" he grated.

"Is it loneliness?" When he would not answer, she pressed the point of her weapon to his jugular. "Is it guilt for having survived when Elizabeth died?"

"Don't," he answered. The moisture crept unbidden down his scarred cheek. "Don't."

She reached down and took his hands in hers, refused to let him pull away. "I am offering you something I have never offered another man in my lifetime. Will you reject it because you feel unworthy to accept it? Will you turn me away because you feel you will betray Elizabeth?"

He stared at her for a very long time. He wanted to take her in his arms again, to tell her he wanted her, that he needed her, that he wanted to take her home with him to Boreas, to spend the rest of his life with her.

"What's stopping you?" she asked, reading his thoughts as easily as she could feel his hands gripping her own.

"I'm afraid," he answered at last. His body was quivering with emotion.

"Of what, milord?" she asked.

His breath caught on a hitch. His mouth trembled. "Of losing you, too."

She reached out and gathered him to her, understanding at last his reluctance to claim her. How much this man has been hurt, she thought, thinking of all Prince Guil had unwittingly relayed to her of Conar McGregor's past. How much he had lost? How many loved ones had he forfeited over the years to the enemies who had tried to destroy him? Such pain would have broken a lesser man, she knew, but it had only strengthened this one.

"You can not live your life expecting to lose those you love," she told him as she felt his tears warm and wet on the bodice of her gown. "We are born to die, milord. None of us live forever."

"It hurts too much to lose someone you love, Catherine," he sobbed against her.

"Yes, I would imagine it does, sweetheart, but is it not better to love and lose than to have never loved at all?"

"I don't think I could survive another loss," he admitted.

"So you will deny yourself instead," she admonished. "That is not life, milord, that is existence."

"You don't understand, Catherine," he whispered. "You don't know what horrible things the people I love have suffered because of me." He pulled away from her and fused his gaze with her compassionate one. "I can not allow the same fate to touch you."

"So what do you do, then?" she asked, her voice filling with anger. "Do you walk away? Do you sail home to Boreas and take a mistress there? Someone safe and expendable?"

He was hurt deeply by her insinuation. "That's not fair."

"Life is not fair, Conar," she reminded him. "You above all others should know that."

"What do you want from me?" he shouted. He pushed away from her and got up, walked

away from her and the threat she presented.

"I want you," she told him as she joined him, not allowing him the self-indulgence of his moroseness. "Just as you want me."

He turned, his breath coming in wretched pants, for his nerves were rapidly fraying and his loneliness crushing him. "For the love of Alel, Catherine"

"No. For the love of Conar," she answered. When he didn't stop her, she slipped her arms around his waist and pressed against him, laying her head on his chest. She closed her eyes. "For his love I would do anything."

Reluctantly he closed his arms around her. "This is a mistake, Catherine," he told her. "We will both regret this."

She didn't look up at him. "Do you love me?" she asked.

His arms tightened. "Aye, Cat. I love you."

Catherine sighed. "Then show me."

For what seemed an eternity he stood still as stone, looking out over the silent garden, his vision sweeping across the plantings. He was searching desperately for an answer to the inner turmoil that made his heart thud so hard in his chest.

Help me, Liza, he pled inwardly, show me what to do.

Catherine felt a slight breeze touch her cheek almost as though she had been caressed and she lifted her head, smelling a faint aroma of lavender. She frowned for there was no lavender within miles of the palace grounds. Her mother was allergic to it. She looked up at the man who held her and saw him staring blindly across the garden.

"Conar?"

He was staring intently at a bush near the fieldstone walkway and she turned her head to get a better look at what he was seeing. "Do you have such roses in Serenia, milord?"

Conar flinched, tearing his gaze from the bush he didn't even realize he'd been looking at. "What?"

"The rose bush by the walk," Catherine prompted. "It is a hybrid species brought here from one of the Outlands. They say elsewhere it has no thorns, but here it does. Do you see the bramble near the garden gate?"

When he slowly turned to look at what she was pointing at, he viewed the twisted, forlorn bush with a tiny trickle of unease mixed with the faintest hint of hope.

"There's a story about the rose and the thorn and how they came to mate," he heard Catherine explaining. "It tells of a man who loved a woman so dearly he died when she could not be with him. After they buried him, she also died, mourning him. They buried her beside him and say on her grave grew a red, red rose and on his grew the briar. They twined and twined up the garden wall until they were joined forever in a true love knot, never to be separated in death as they had been in life. According to the legend, whoever picks the rose for his lover, and finds no thorns on the rose, will know the love of his lady for him will never die, that she will wait for him forever."

There was a garden behind the protected walls of Boreas Keep where once a young man, long, long ago had told a pretty young girl of another legend of roses and thorns.

He had not forgotten that day. Or the pretty young girl.

And she had not forgotten it, either.

"Conar?"

He looked down at Catherine's worried face. "Is something wrong?" she asked him for there was a look on his face that concerned her.

Let me go, Conar, came the gentle whisper on the breeze, *it is time to move on, milord.*

Catherine saw his shoulders sag, but then he seemed to come out of some dark thoughts. He looked down at her for a long moment.

“Do you smell that?” he asked in a soft voice.

“The lavender?” Catherine nodded. “I can’t imagine where it is coming from. There is none anywhere near the palace.”

For the first time that evening he smiled. The words he spoke were music to her ears.

“If you will have me, Cat,” he said in a husky voice, “I want to ask your father for the privilege of courting you.”

Chapter Forty-One

Sajin didn't want to take the smile from his new friend's face, but he thought the man had a right to know what he'd found out.

"Out with it, nomad," Conar demanded. "If you keep it in much longer, you'll burst."

The Kensetti prince frowned. "You're not going to like it."

Conar paused in lacing his shirt and looked at Sajin through the mirror. "Rupert and Cat eloped during the night and are going to name their first born after you." He wagged his brows and grinned.

A snort was the only comment Ben-Alkazar made to the asinine remark. He sat down on Conar's bed. "It's about that bastard you dueled with yesterday."

"Did you find out who he was?" Conar reached for his leather jacket, which was lying in a heap by the hearth and shrugged it on.

Bidding for time, not wanting to tell the Serenian what he'd learned, Sajin looked about the room. There were clothes all over the floor, on the drapery rods, on the backs of chairs and settee alike. A pair of socks were stuffed into the top of a porcelain vase, a shirt lay crumpled in one corner of the room. There was even a pair of breeches dangling from a portrait over the massive mahogany bed. He shook his head. "You're a pig, McGregor."

"So I've been told," the Outlander commented dryly. He put his booted foot on the coverlet beside Sajin's leg, leaned forward and crossed his arms over his knee. "All right. You've got my attention. Tell me."

Sajin let out a long breath. "The man you crippled yesterday was Jaleel Jaborn."

Conar stared at the Kensetti. He didn't say anything at all, did not even blink. His face, for all the expression it held, might well have been carved from stone. When he finally straightened up and placed his foot on the floor, his hands on his hips and continued to stare down at the nomad, his dark eyes began to fill with an unholy light of pure fury.

"Did you know this yestermorn when I was fighting the son-of-a-bitch?" Conar growled.

Sajin shook his head. "I thought his voice sounded familiar when he was shouting at you, but I didn't put it all together until after he was being helped from the field." He didn't want to tell Conar Yuri had suspected all along who the man was. If Yuri wanted him to know, Yuri could tell him. "If I'd told you then, you'd have gone after him and"

"Aye, I would have!" Conar bellowed. "Where is the motherfucker now?"

The Kensetti could answer with a great deal of relief. "Gone, both him and Guil. They left by ship as soon as the doctor was finished stitching Jaborn's shoulder."

A rumble of rage erupted from Conar's throat. "And I don't suppose you thought of having them stopped for me, did you?" His gaze narrowed. "Or were you giving your countrymen time to escape?"

Sajin's face turned hard. "You know better than that!" he snapped. "They are not Kensetti, Conar. They are Rysalian and I have about as much love for that hell-spawned country as you do for Diabolusia!"

"You knew I would have killed him if I'd had the chance, didn't you?" Conar shouted at him. When the nomad didn't answer, the question was bellowed again in a tone reserved for the acutely hard of hearing. "Didn't you?"

"Yes!" Sajin shouted back. "And seen you sent to one of this frozen country's gulags for your troubles!" He stood up, facing his friend with an equally angry look. "Tzar Thomas would have had no choice but to have had you arrested for killing the bastard. You'd already wounded

him. As far as Outer Kingdom law goes, that is the only thing they would have allowed. Believe me, if the Tzar had for one moment suspected the two of you were seriously intent on killing the other, he would have stopped the contest.”

“Did it never occur to that man that Jaborn was trying to kill me?” Conar spat.

“No one, not even Prince Guil, I suspect, thought Jaborn could do that. You did what everyone knew you would do--you wounded him seriously enough to stop the fight. He’ll bear that wound the rest of his life.”

“Aye, and let it fester along with his hatred for me! This won’t end between him and me until one of us is dead, Sajin!”

Ben-Alkazar reached out and gripped his friend’s shoulder. “I have no doubt of that. The die was cast between the two of you long ago, but if you’re going to go after him, Conar, go after him somewhere where you won’t be imprisoned for taking his life.”

“Like where?”

“Serenia.” Sajin nodded at Conar’s narrowed look. “Or Virago or Chale or Ionary or one of the other countries where you know you won’t be arrested for murder.” He stared hard at his friend. “Because we both know that is what it will be.”

“He tried to have my wife kidnapped, Sajin! Twice!” Conar reminded the man with a raging shout. “If what I suspect is true, he’s also directly responsible for the death of one of my Elite and damned near caused MY death in the bargain! Not once, but twice, in Serenia and in Chrystallus. Because of him a good friend was wounded and another lost his twin brother.” His face turned hard as stone. “I have a lot to make that bastard atone for!” He ground his teeth together and forced his words through the constriction of his jaws. “For all I know he might well have had something to do with my daughter’s death!”

Sajin’s heart missed a beat. “Your daughter?”

Conar turned away, the pain of Nadia’s death still an agonizing ache in his heart. “My little girl was taken from the keep.” He swallowed, the memory of that flooding his eyes with tears. “My brother, Brelan, found her in the loft of the stable where Liza and I met.” He flinched, seeing the pitiful burden Brelan had brought back to him from the Hound and Stag.

“How had she died?” Sajin asked quietly, already suspecting the answer and praying it would not come.

“Her” Conar shook his head to rid himself of the horrible memory of what he had seen that day outside the walls of Boreas Keep. “She’d been”

The Kensetti knew the man couldn’t say it, so he said it for him. “Her throat had been cut.” At Conar’s silent nod, Sajin squeezed his lids tightly shut. He hoped the Serenian wouldn’t ask him how he had thought of that particular atrocity and he didn’t.

“If I ever find the man responsible for Nadia’s death,” Conar said, “I’ll cut the flesh from his body, strip by bloody strip.”

Sajin opened his eyes and looked across the room at the man who was staring down into the courtyard. There was a vibration of primal emotion strumming through the room and Conar McGregor’s body was as rigid as steel as he stood there at the window. It was a long time before the Outlander spoke again.

“You did the right thing in not telling me who that bastard was, Sajin.”

Ben-Alkazar exhaled a long, worried sigh. There was no way he dared tell this man of the rumors about Prince Jaleel Jaborn that were common knowledge in the Inner Kingdom emirates. Of how the man, deep in his cups one night, had bragged of slitting the throat of an enemy’s child and watching that child bleed to death in his hands.

Of how Jaborn had bragged that he would one day have his enemy's wife and do to her what had once been done to the only woman Jaborn had ever loved.

"I'll make her suffer as my Cyle did," he had promised. "I will take his woman time and time again, making her scream with the taking, and then I will send her broken body home to him for him to bury what is left of it!"

"Did you hear me?"

Sajin jumped, focusing on the man across the room from him. He stared at Conar, wanting to protect this man from the knowledge he, himself, had of Jaleel Jaborn, for he knew, without any doubt at all, that Conar McGregor would move heaven and earth to find the man who had murdered his child.

"I heard you."

"Will you help me?" Conar wondered at the strange look on Ben-Alkazar's face, "to lure Jaborn to Serenia?"

The Kensetti knew he'd never tell Conar Jaborn had been to Serenia many times. "What of Catherine?" he asked, wanting to forestall any further discussion of the Rysalian.

Conar smiled, but it was not a smile that spoke of having his thoughts turned from the subject at hand.

"I've asked for permission to court her."

Sajin's left brow shot up. "Are you aware that I have, as well?"

There was a slow nod of acknowledgement. "Aye, but I don't think you stand a snowball's chance, my friend."

Ben-Alkazar shrugged. "I'm going to give it my best shot." He cocked his head to one side. "I bet you a gold Ryal against one of your copper Sentis that I'll win her in the end."

McGregor walked away from the window and came to the Kensetti, draped his arm around the other man's shoulder and squeezed Ben-Alkazar against him. The smile became real on Conar's handsome face as he leaned sideways and whispered in Sajin's ear. "I'll take that bet, nomad."

Sajin chuckled. "May the best man win," he admonished, jabbing a playful fist into Conar's side.

"He will," Conar shot back. He took his arm away and then looked Sajin in the eye. "Now, are you going to help me get that nomad jackal to Serenia or not?"

Chapter Forty-Two

Wyn walked between his brothers, not speaking, but listening to the eldest of the two telling him about what had been going on at Boreas Keep since he'd been gone. Now and again, he would look at the younger boy and listen as that one added a comment or two or his own. That the boy could not meet his eyes, told Wyn the child had not accepted him as yet, but that he wanted to be as much a part of Wyn's world as Tristan did.

"Do you think we should go after Papa?" Tristan asked his older brother.

Conar McGregor's oldest son shifted the child in his arms and bent his head to nuzzle the little boy's strawberry blond curls. "What do you think, Bre? Should we go after our missing sire?"

"He can't answer you," Regan grumbled. "He can't barely talk yet."

"Pa ... puh," the little boy chirped and grinned up at the tall blond man carrying him. "Pa puh."

"Aye, little one," Wyn laughed. "Papa." He stopped and put the child down, then sat down on the ground beside him. He looked up expectantly at his brothers and they joined him on the grass.

"Well?" Tristan pressed. He plucked a spiral of red weed and stuck it in his mouth to await Wyn's answer.

Wyn leaned back on his elbows and crossed his ankles. "I think if we went to the Outer Kingdom without Papa's express approval, he'd be very upset with us. The letters I've read don't say he's in need of rescuing, Tris."

"What of Storm?" Regan asked, missing that man despite the fact that he didn't want to.

"Well, now," Wyn said slowly, a frown marring his face. "Storm is a different matter."

"The last we heard of him was when he reached Rysalia, Wyn," Tristan reminded his brother. "He sent word he had gotten there all right and then" He shrugged. "There's been nothing from the man."

"That's not like Storm Jale," Regan put in. "He's a most dedicated soldier."

Tristan nodded in agreement. "Something's happened to him or else we'd have heard from him or at least read in one of Papa's letters that he was pissed because Jale was there."

Wyn smiled. "Watch your mouth, brat. You get into the habit of cussing and Meg will take a switch to your arse."

"I'm old enough to cuss!" Tristan grumbled with all the affront a fourteen year old male can muster.

"I'm twenty-four, brat, and I don't cuss," Wyn admonished his brother. "You know Papa wouldn't approve."

"Papa ain't here," Regan retorted. He leaned back on his elbows like his older brother and then crossed his ankles, too. "If he were, we wouldn't be having this discussion, now, would we?"

Wyn's lips twitched. "No, I suppose not."

"Do you like being married?" Tristan asked and blushed to the roots of his flaxen hair as his brother looked over at him with surprise.

"Where did that come from?" Wyn asked.

"Ah, he's been watching that girl, again," Regan said with a snort of disgust.

"What girl?"

"Leave off, Regan," Tristan warned, his blush going deeper still.

“Make me.”

“What girl?” Wyn asked.

Tristan’s lips pursed. “Well, if you must know,” he answered, glaring at Regan who had the audacity to smirk at him, “it’s Sention’s daughter, Lillie.”

“She’s eleven,” Regan said, rolling his gaze to the heavens.

“Almost twelve!” Tristan corrected.

“She’s the one that was born while Senti was in the Labyrinth,” Wyn said, “his youngest.”

“Talking about Papa not approving,” Regan snorted. “He sure as hell wouldn’t approve of Tris courting Heil’s daughter.”

Tristan glared across Wyn at Regan. “You don’t like Lillie because she’s Senti’s daughter!” He turned his furious stare to Wyn. “He doesn’t like Sention because Sention doesn’t like him for trying to kill Papa!”

Wyn sat up, a heavy scowl on his face. “We aren’t to mention that, Tristan,” he reminded his brother. “You know that.”

Regan sat up, too. “Oh, he never lets me forget it!” the seven year old snapped.

“Let’s drop it,” Wyn ordered with all the authority his being more than twice Tristan’s age brought along with it. “What’s passed stays in the past.”

Tristan tore his angry gaze from his brothers and stared out across the meadow. “You didn’t answer me, Wyn.”

“About married life?” Wyn smiled. “I’m enjoying it. Kym’s a wonderful woman.”

“She’s not as bad as I would have thought,” Regan commented in a grudging voice. “Her being that old bully’s daughter.”

The minute the words left Regan’s mouth he gasped, looking up at Wyn with fear of reprimand, but he found Wyn looking at him with twinkling eyes and lips pressed together.

“Little brother,” Wyn advised, putting a hand on Regan’s shoulder. “That old bully could teach you a thing or two if you’d but ask him, couldn’t you, Shalu?”

Regan’s face lost all its color as he followed his brother’s gaze and slowly turned his head to see the Necroman leaning negligently against a tree not ten feet from then.

King Shalu Taborn made a rude clucking sound with his upper lip and pushed away from the tree. “I came out here,” he said in his deep, booming voice, “to tell you men there is to be a meeting of the Wind Force to decide what must be done about your father.” He leveled his gaze with Regan’s. “You think me a bully, brat?”

Regan held the dark man’s stare. “You ain’t never been nothing but that to me,” he answered.

“You ain’t never given me reason to be no other way.”

“When’s the meeting?” Tristan asked, standing up and dusting the grass from his breeches.

“Half an hour. In the library.” Shalu hadn’t looked at the young heir to the throne of Serenia as he spoke. Instead, his fathomless gaze was still on Regan. “Come see me tomorrow. I’ll show you what the word bully really means, brat.”

Wyn watched his father-in-law lumbering away, his massive shoulders set in a tense shrug, his thick hands crammed into the pockets of his breeches. He, alone, of the three McGregor males knew how much that request, and it HAD been a request, not an order, had cost the older man. Shalu still held a great deal of anger toward Regan for what the young boy had tried to do years before.

“I wouldn’t be you for all the tea in Chrystallus,” Tristan whispered, also watching the Necromanian King.

“You want to be a warrior,” Wyn commented, “you train with the best.”

“Who says I want to be a warrior?” Regan asked in a small voice.

Wyn laughed and reached down to pick up Little Brelan who was crawling around on the grass, ignoring his elder brothers, and cramming things into his mouth with glee.

“I don’t see that you have much choice, brat,” Wyn chuckled.

* * * *

“From Conar’s letters,” Rylan Hesar remarked, “he’s doing well enough. If I understand anything from all this mumbo-jumbo he’s written calling himself ‘allaying’ our fears, he’s quite content over there, now.”

“And happy as a lark with that little Outer Kingdom pigeon,” Tyne quipped. He chuckled. “Wonder how he did at the tourney?”

Shalu growled at him. “He won, fool!”

“So, we’re all agreed Conar isn’t the problem here,” Grice commented. He looked at his brother and frowned. Chand hadn’t wanted to come. As a matter of fact, the young man had steadfastly refused to come to Boreas until Grice had literally threatened him.

“Conar can damned well take care of himself,” Chand snapped, feeling his brother’s gaze on him. “If you’ve just GOT to worry about someone, worry about Jale!”

“We are,” Roget answered quietly. He looked about him at those gathered, wishing not for the first time that Teal, his own brother, was there, but no one had heard from Teal du Mer in over two years, not even his own wife.

“Should we send someone to find Storm?” Thom asked. “If so, I’ll be willing to go.”

Legion shook his head. “You’re newly married, Thom. We need to send someone unencumbered by family.”

“Like who?” Holm van de Lar asked. “Who among us don’t have family here?”

“I don’t,” Chase Montyne answered.

“Do you really think it’s necessary for one of us to go?” Sentian asked. “We’ve got resources.” He looked at Roget. “You’ve got spies you can send.”

Roget nodded. “Aye, but each of us knows we won’t rest easy until one of us has seen for ourselves that Conar is all right and we find out what has happened to Storm. We can send all the spies at our disposal, but will it really make a difference?”

“No,” Shalu answered for them all. He stared at Heil. “Why don’t you want any of us going?”

Sentian glanced at Legion. “He’s going to be madder than hell when one of us shows up over there.” He sighed. “Did it ever occur to any of you that Storm reached him and Conar got so pissed about it he had the man jailed?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Chand grouched. “The man’s capable of doing it.”

“Without letting us KNOW he did it?” Paegan asked. “You all know Conar. If that had happened, he would have made damned sure we knew about it.”

“To warn us not to do it again,” Holm grinned.

“Something’s wrong over there,” Legion said, getting up from his chair to pace the room. “I don’t think Storm ever reached Conar.” He looked about at the faces staring back at him. “If he didn’t, where is he?”

“And what’s happened to him?” Thom asked.

Chase Montyne turned away from the mantle where he had been staring down into the flames. “I don’t see we have any choice but to go find out.” He swung his head around and looked at his fellow Wind Force members. “The logical choice to send is me.”

Jamael nodded. “He’s right. If there’s trouble, Chase can handle it.”

Shalu shifted his gaze to the three McGregor sons. "What do you men think?"

For the first time since coming into the library with the men of their father's army, Wyn, Tristan, and Regan became the focus of every man in the room. The younger boys looked to the older to answer.

Wyn cleared his throat. "I think we need to send someone and Chase seems the best choice."

"Then it's agreed that I go?" Chase asked, searching the faces of the others.

One by one, the men solemnly nodded their approval.

"It's settled, then," Chase said. "Holm? Can you get me there?"

Holm van de Lar glanced at Paegan Hesar. At Paegan's quick smile, the old sea captain mumbled his answer. "Aye, Chaseton, we'll find a way to get you to that heathen place."

Legion walked to the mantle and put his hand on Chase's shoulder. "You'll be careful?"

Chase grinned. "As careful as Conar always is."

Shalu groaned. "The gods help us!"

Chapter Forty-Three

He had once feared captivity. Now, he feared even more his release from the prison into which his own mind had locked him. Kahlil Toire had taken away from him the only thing in his life that had made that life worth living. And with the loss of his most precious of possessions, he had forced his emotions into a tiny, dark and lonely cell deep in the vault of his mind. The pain of his loss ate at his soul and hurt so intensely at times he often woke gasping for air, unable to get back to sleep, his nightmares paralyzing his lungs. That one dehumanizing act had taken away his will to live for awhile, had stripped him, leaving no heart inside him to feel. Once he had begged for the inability to feel, and he wished for again when he had lost Liza, but the gods had not been so kind.

They had never been kind to him, he thought as he walked the battlements of the Palace of the Tzars and stared out at the rolling tide of the Baldus Sea.

He had tried so hard to break Kahlil's hold over him. He had put a vast distance between them. But the chains had been too strong, forged with his own sweat and blood and tears. Those chains still bound him to Toire. The old fears and the old guilt ran too deep in his savaged soul to get over them so easily. Miles had not erased them, nor dulled the taste of Toire's poison in his soul.

The bastard was still out there, somewhere, biding his time, and Conar knew once he set foot on Serenian soil again, the call would come to him--Kahlil's revenge beyond the grave.

Leaning on the cold stone wall before him, the Serenian Windwarrior asked himself if he had the right to drag Catherine into this mess that he called his life. It was not only his fear for her safety, where what was left of the Domination was concerned, and Robert MacCorkingdale to be precise. It was also the strong suspicion that Jaleel Jaborn would come after her, as well. Such thoughts worried him and chased him from his sleeping.

The tide crashed against the shoreline and he inhaled the tang of salt spray. He still loved the sea, but now that love was tinged with unforgiving, with a large amount of resentment. It was waters such as these that had stolen his love, his precious love, his life, from him. The sight of the swirling, tumbling waves turned his heart to stone. Never again would he be able to look at a rolling wave and not feel what he was feeling at that moment. Never again would he view the sea as his friend. He wondered if the sea would take Catherine from him, as well.

"Stop it!" he ordered himself, looking away from the crashing waves. He turned his sight to the heavens and looked up at the twinkling stars. It was a safer sight to view than was the sea.

"Ah, Cat," he sighed, thinking of the day they had met. "What evil have I brought into your world, little one?"

In a way, it had hurt him terribly when he found himself desperately wanting Catherine to notice him. He'd done everything he could to draw her attention. When she ignored him, or seemed to, it only made him that much more intent on gaining her regard. In ways he knew had been thoughtless, rude and, aye, Liza, churlish. In the back of his mind, he viewed his trying to win Cat's admiration as a horrible betrayal of Liza. The thought had not set well with him, had pricked at his sense of honor and had brought him time and time again, in the middle of the night, to the very spot where he now stood.

When, he thought with brooding bitterness, had he allowed himself to fall so helplessly in love with the woman? How could he have been so indifferent, so blind, to the budding spark of hope that had brought his battered soul out of its numbing darkness into the bright glare of sunlight? How could he have allowed her to fall in love with him?

That she did, he did not doubt. Conar had had enough experience in his lifetime to know real love staring back at him. After all, he had known one of the greatest loves of all time.

And he thought, with worry and dread, the love between him and Cat was going to come awfully close to being what he had shared with Liza.

What if you lose her, too, Conar, his inner voice probed at his heart. How will you live with that?"

Icy winds skirled down from the Uralaps and wrote melodies of piercing notes through the gaps of the battlement walls. It broke Conar's concentration and made him turn up the collar of his jacket against the chill. A wry smile touched his lips when he thought of another time, long, long ago, when he had stood atop the battlements of Boreas Keep and watched a ship take away what he had thought was his last chance at happiness.

"Will you take Catherine, too?" he asked the silent heavens. "Will it ever be my destiny to have what I love taken away from me?"

Aye, he thought with sorrowful irony, he had had many such losses in his lifetime. He had experienced first hand that ultimate despair that drove many men to madness. His losses had plunged him down through the abyss of human misery and kept him there a long time. He had hit rock bottom depression once when, for one wild moment in time, he had known no reason to go on living. When he had seen no future for himself save years of crushing loneliness and mind-sickening pain. It had been at one of those low points in his life, when full realization that he had been the sole cause of many of his loved ones dying, that he had meant to end his own life on the craggy rocks of the North Boreal Sea. Had it not been for Meggie Ruck, the love she had for him, and his respect and love for her, he would have done just that, consequences be damned.

Now, as he leaned against the cold stone wall of Catherine's home, he wondered if he was doing the right thing by courting her.

The gods knew he loved her. They knew he wanted her and needed her. They knew he was lonely and aching inside and ready to let go of his past to embrace the future Catherine promised. But would They allow him the chance? If his past was any indication of his future, he might just as well step off the battlements and plunge to his death rather than have one more person he cared for suffer because of him.

"Don't you ever sleep?"

Startled by the intruding voice, Conar jumped. His heart leapt against his rib cage and he shook his head at the man walking toward him.

"If it was your hope to win her hand by giving me a heart attack, nomad, you almost got your wish." Conar took in a long, steadying breath. "Warn a fellow next time, will you?"

Sajin came to stand beside his friend. He leaned out over the half-wall and whistled. "A long way down, eh?" He looked sideways at Conar. "Thinking of jumping, were you?"

Conar found himself answering before he thought. "That did cross my mind." He blushed, not daring to look at his companion.

"Stupid way to die, my friend." Sajin pushed away from the wall and leaned his back against it, crossed his arms. "Cowardly, too."

"I wasn't going to do it," Conar snapped.

"If I thought you had been, I'd have had to do something about it."

"Like what?"

"Like telling Cat what you were up to."

Conar shivered. "A fate worse than jumping," he exclaimed. He turned to Sajin. "What are you doing up here anyway?"

“Looking for you.” Sajin smiled. “Sybelle wants to go home. She’s bored here.” He shrugged. “I guess I’ll have to take her.”

“When do you leave?” Conar missed the man and he hadn’t even gone.

“I’m going to leave the horses here and take her home by ship. I’ll come back and we can go on with our quest for Catherine’s hand.” His grin was infectious. “I trust you won’t undermine me while I’m gone?”

“Leave at your own peril, nomad,” Conar growled.

Sajin looked at him for a long moment. “Maybe you ought to sail down the coast with us? That way I can keep an eye on you.”

Conar laughed. “For what purpose? I had no real intention of flying over the wall, Ben-Alkazar.”

“No,” Sajin drawled, “but I wouldn’t put it past you to pull some dirty stunt to make Cat forget all about me while I’m gone.” He nodded. “But with you along, I won’t have that worry to nag at me.”

“Why not invite Catherine to join us?” Conar asked, eying his friend with humor. “That way neither of us would worry about her.”

The smile slipped from Sajin’s face. “Do you think someone might try to harm her while you’re gone?”

Conar shrugged. “I would hope not, but I know I wouldn’t feel easy if I left her behind.” He looked the nomad in the eye. “Would you?”

Sajin didn’t need to think about that. “No.”

“Then we ask her to go along?”

Ben-Alkazar could hear the boyish hope in his friend’s voice. “Do I have a choice?”

Conar grinned. “Nope.”

* * * *

“He’s going with us?” Sybelle accused as Sajin told her the next morning.

“Yes,” her brother replied. He folded one of his shirts and placed it carefully into his valise. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“I don’t like him.”

“You don’t know him,” Sajin reminded her.

Sybelle bit her tongue before answering. “I know all I wish to know about that demon’s spawn! He will be trouble for you, Sajin.”

“Don’t start with that again, Sybelle,” he warned her. They’d gone through this the night after Conar had wounded Jaleel Jaborn.

“Did you know that bastard was here?” he thundered at his sister. “Did he come to see you?”

It had taken Sybelle a long moment to answer and when she did, Sajin had not been pleased with her answer.

“We are lovers, Sajin. We have been for years.” She lowered her gaze, hoping to hide the lie of her next words from her brother, but Sajin had heard the falsehood in her words. “He did not know McGregor was here.”

“One of them is going to wind up dead, Sybelle,” Sajin had told her. “And I don’t believe it will be Conar.”

Sybelle had looked up, her face flushed with anger, her eyes flashing. “Jaleel is a great warrior!”

Sajin had heard all he had wanted to hear of the man. “We have been at war with the Rysalians of the Northern and Middle provinces for decades, Sybelle! How can you treat with an

enemy and call him 'lover'?"

"The same as you can treat with McGregor and call him your 'friend'! There are those of the emirates that would see the noose around that man's neck or have you forgotten that?"

There had been disgust on Sajin's handsome face when he had answered his sister. "The only bastards who want such a thing are Guil Ben-Shanar Gehdrin and Jaborn, and even then it is over something Conar had no part in!"

"So he tells you!" Sybelle had scoffed.

Sajin had reached out to grab his sister's arm in a punishing grip. "There was no more love between Conar McGregor and his twin than there was between me and Asher!"

Sybelle had drawn in her breath. It had been years since Sajin had mentioned their half-brother. To have him do so at that moment, was an indication of how angry the man was.

Sajin had let go of her arm, furious at himself that he had spoken the hated name. "You can believe whatever the hell Jaborn and that bastard Guil want you to believe, Sybelle, you will anyway. But I tell you Conar had nothing to do with Cyle Alla-Jemann's death. He never even met the girl."

Sybelle said nothing as Sajin finished packing. Her brother was still angry at her for admitting her love for Jaleel Jaborn, for helping to hide the man at the palace until the day of the tourney.

"If what you told me is true," she said, drawing a frown from Sajin, "McGregor thinks Jaleel means Catherine harm. Why take her with us, too, if that is the case? Do you not fear one of the men Guil left behind will report this and Jaleel will be waiting for us in Kensett?"

"He'd better not be," Sajin ground out, slamming the valise shut and buckling it. He looked up at his sister. "I won't stop Conar from killing him if they meet there."

Sybelle stared at him. "An infidel harming an Inner Kingdom prince on Kensetti soil is punishable by death. Have you forgotten that?"

Sajin smiled, but it was not a smile that held either warmth or amusement. "From the moment we step foot on that ship, Sybelle, I intend to make Conar my personal bodyguard. He need not know that since he certainly wouldn't find the title endearing, but it will protect him should anyone try to harm me or the lady I am escorting to our homeland for a visit."

The look on his sister's face told Sajin she understood well what he was attempting to do. "So if someone attacks him or he attacks someone else, you can say he was but defending your life."

Ben-Alkazar's smile widened. "Exactly."

A hard gleam of hatred flowed through Sybelle's lovely face and she turned away before her brother could see the look. Her gaze went to the intricately carved jade ring on her left hand, a ring that had been a gift from Jaleel for sending word to him that Conar McGregor was in St. Steffensburg. She twisted the ring around with her thumb and little finger, feeling the deep carving of the ribbed edges.

"The ship will leave at first light. What isn't packed properly, doesn't go with us."

"Yes," she answered, barely listening to him. She stiffened as his hands cupped her shoulders.

"Conar is a good man, Sybelle. If you would but let your heart open up to him, you would see that. He is not the ogre Jaborn makes him out to be."

Long after she went back to her room to do her own packing, Sybelle thought of what her brother had said. While it was true the two men got along better than most, there was still something between them that Sybelle wished had never been acknowledged--their mutual

respect for one another.

It was a bond that was going to be hard to break.

* * * *

The Ravenwind tacked southward off the coast of Oceania and headed for the foggy bank of mist off the leeward side of the sleek black ship.

"Jasmine Cay," Paegan remarked. "We'll meet up with the Outer Kingdom ship at the island."

Chase nodded, but didn't answer. Looking at the wide, thick bank of fog they called The Sinisters, he felt uneasy. There had always been something about the fog, he thought. When he was a little boy he had feared the shrouds of thick white mist rolling across his homeland's meadows.

"There be things in the fog, young Prince," he remembered his old nanny saying. "Best you stay clear of the fog, you do."

"It had to be fog," he thought with a sigh.

* * * *

His back was on fire, blood dripping down his sides and arms as he hung between the uprights. God, he thought with diminishing awareness of his surroundings, how did you stand it, Conar?

Another lash landed across his bare, bleeding shoulders and he cried out, gagging with the pain and the feel of his nails gouging ravines in the wooden post overhead. He clamped his lips shut, clenched his teeth to keep from crying out again. They liked to hear him cry.

Just as Lydon had liked to hear Conar cry.

"Where are you?" he asked as darkness swept up to claim him with its fiery brand of agony. "Why won't you come, Conar?"

Storm Jale slipped beyond the pain of his existence and fled to a sweeter, calmer place, a place where tall snow-capped mountains loomed on the horizon, where velvet glades of emerald grass waved in the cool breeze. Where friends gathered and laughed and played and loved and, occasionally, fought. Where life had been good and the world had been right side up.

"Conar"

* * * *

"Take this to His Majesty, now!" Rasheed Falkar told the spy. "Tell him I will find a way to get on board Prince Sajin's ship."

The spy nodded, then bowed low to the woman sitting in the shadows of Falkar's room. There was no need to see the Kensetti woman's face to know who she was.

Rasheed waited until the spy was gone before he turned to his visitor. "It was not safe for you to come here, Your Grace."

Sybelle stood and smoothed the wrinkles in her silken skirt. "I will find a way for you to board, Rasheed. All I ask is that you help me dispose of McGregor before we reach Kensett."

Falkar's face went deathly still. "But Your Grace, Prince Jaleel will"

"Not meet his fate at McGregor's hands!" Sybelle snarled.

She glared at the man cowering before her. "Would you have Prince Guil know you could have prevented his dear friend from being harmed and yet stood by and did nothing?"

Rasheed trembled, knowing well enough that if Prince Jaleel were denied killing McGregor himself, there would be one less Falkar in Rysalia.

"Do not think to cause me trouble, Rasheed," she warned him. "I do not take kindly to interference."

The Rysalian's eyes grew wide as the woman in front of him lifted her hand and fire flew from her fingertips to light the candles by his bed. He watched with horror as she conjured some black fiend from the leaping flame and sent it flying about his room, ducking as the beast flung itself at him with the shriek of a jinn. Dropping to his knees with a whimper of dread and true terror, he covered his face and promised to do whatever she asked.

Sybelle smiled. "I thought perhaps you might."

Chapter Forty-Four

Catherine hid her grin as he came toward her, but her nose quivered at the smell. She saw him smile, a little boy's silly smirk, and knew he wouldn't feel so well the next morning when it was time to set sail.

"You are walking none too steadily, milord Conar," she told him as he stopped before her and bowed, losing his balance, but recovering with exaggerated precision.

"That blasted younger brother of yours tried drinking me under the table," Conar mumbled, grinning at her.

"And where is Mikel now?"

Conar's grin grew wicked. "Under the table." He wobbled on his feet. "Shouldn't have tried that."

"And you shouldn't have been drinking," she admonished.

He knew, but for some reason he hadn't been able to explain to himself, he had accepted the glass of brandy from Mikel. And another from Peter. And another from Mikel. It was the fifth one that had set his ears to ringing and his mind to spinning and he realized what he had done.

"Have a problem with booze," he'd explained to the boys. He had seen the brothers looking at one another with guilt and he had tried to shake his head, had earnestly wished he hadn't.

"Don't worry 'bout it," he'd said.

"Are you going to ask Cat to marry you, Conar?" Peter had asked.

"You betcha!" He'd been a little surprised when Peter slowly slid to the floor in a smiling heap, but it didn't bother him overly much.

Not until Mikel had joined his brother.

"Uh, oh," he'd sighed, knowing his own capitulation to the brandy wasn't long in coming.

He'd wanted to get out into the cool air, to wash away the liquor fumes and try to evaporate the brandy from his system. He hadn't counted on Catherine being out there, too.

"Do you need help in getting to bed, milord?" she asked.

Conar drew himself up. "'Course not, woman! Who you think I am?"

"A drunken lord, Conar," she answered and took his arm in hers to help him back inside.

"Don't need no help," he grumbled, leaning heavily against her.

"I rather think you do."

"Gonna marry you, Cat," he told her, swinging his head around to look at her as they walked.

Catherine smiled. "Is that so?"

"Sure 'tis," he stated.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," she told him, supporting his weight until she could get the door into the drawing room open.

"Gonna take you back to Bo'rs with me."

"We'll see."

"Cat?" He stopped dead still inside the drawing room and tried to focus on her.

"Yes, milord Conar?" Her body jerked as he stopped, for her forward momentum had been carrying them both along.

He tried to smile and couldn't. Tried to walk and couldn't. Tried to talk and found himself gasping.

"Don't you dare!" she warned him, looking around quickly. She let go of him, not at all concerned when he crashed to the floor, and hastily grabbed up a spittoon. She barely had time to get it under his chin before he threw up.

“Don’t shake the bed, Toad!” she heard him mumble.

His words made no sense to her.

“What the hell did he drink?” Sajin asked as he came into the room and knelt down beside Catherine who was holding Conar’s head.

“Brandy, I think,” Catherine said, her nose crinkling. “An entire keg from the amount coming out of him.”

“You go on upstairs and turn back his bed. I’ll bring him up.” Sajin put his arm under Conar’s shoulders and hefted the drunken man to his feet.

“You’re killing me, Toad!”

“Who’s he talking to?” Sajin asked as he shifted Conar’s weight.

Catherine shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Between the two of them, they managed to get him in bed and partially undressed. As Sajin pulled the cover over his friend’s naked chest, he shook his head at Conar’s incoherent mumblings to the unknown ‘Toad’.

“I hope to the Prophetess we have a smooth sail tomorrow.”

Catherine laughed. “With any luck at all there will be a gale!”

Sajin winced. “Don’t even *think* that, lady!”

* * * *

She stood over his bed, staring down at his sleeping face and felt a great love well up inside her chest. She’d come in only to check on him, to make sure he was asleep and well, had not choked on his own vomit during the night. The sour smell still clung to the clothing Sajin had removed, but the Kensetti had been kind enough to bathe Conar and see that he had not gone to bed befouled.

“You really care for him, don’t you?” she’d asked the nomad.

“Look at him,” Sajin had countered. “Who couldn’t help but care for such an imbecile?”

Who, indeed, she thought as she reached down to tug the sheet up over his shoulder? She smoothed back an errant lock of golden hair and straightened up, smiling as she watched him sleeping.

He looks so gentle, she thought, so gentle and so vulnerable, like a little boy. There was just a hint of a smile on his full lips. She wondered what it was he dreamed as she watched his lids fluttering.

She leaned over and kissed his brow then turned to go.

“Don’t leave,” he mumbled and she looked back to find him watching her.

“You should be sleeping,” she said.

“Stay with me.”

She sighed as though much put out with him, although his request had made the pulse leap in her throat. “If I do, you won’t sleep.”

“I don’t need to.”

She came back to the bed and looked down at him. “How are you feeling?”

He frowned a little boy’s unconcern. “Like a hundred little men are playing bat-a-ball inside my head.”

“Serves you right,” she replied.

“I know.” He smiled crookedly at her. “I haven’t drunk like that in years.”

“And you shouldn’t have started tonight.” She studied his face. “Why did you?”

“I don’t know,” he answered and she could hear the real surprise in his voice. “I knew better, but I just couldn’t seem to stop from doing it.” He looked down at the covers. “Alcoholics are

like that, Cat.”

Her heart went out to him. To admit something so personal to her must have been hard. She sat down on the bed beside him.

“Will you promise me not to do that again?” she asked.

He glanced up at her, sensing something more in her voice. She was looking at him like Liza used to when he’d done something singularly stupid and wanted his oath that he would not do it again under penalty of her displeasure.

“I don’t intend to,” he answered, truthfully, “but I hadn’t ever intended to do it again, either.”

“Then,” she said, reaching out to caress his cheek, “I will just have to make sure you aren’t given the temptation then, won’t I?”

There was in her soft and soothing voice, a commitment he heard and understood. He lifted his hand and covered it where it pressed against his scarred cheek.

“What are you saying, Catherine?” he asked, holding his breath for her answer.

Her smile was like the softest of touches. “Sajin called you an imbecile, but I think perhaps you’re just a little slow.” Her fingers smoothed his flesh. “If you do not know what I am saying, milord Conar, perhaps I should go find Prince Sajin. He seems to be”

“The hell you will!” he ground out, reaching up for her, pulling her down to him in a fierce hug that took her breath away. “You are mine, lady!”

Never could Catherine have imagined the passion his words instilled in her, inflaming her senses like the wind can fan the flames of a roaring fire. She clung to him, her lips claimed by his, and felt herself turning, moving slowly and languidly to her back. She looked up into his face and saw the question in his dark eyes.

“Yes,” she answered, wanting him as much as he wanted her.

“Are you sure?” There was patience in his face, a firm reminder that he would wait if she was not ready.

“I have never been surer of anything in my life, Conar.”

Her arms closed around him and drew him down to her.

Chapter Forty-Five

“Sweet Merciful Alel!” Conar gasped as the bright morning light invaded his eyes with piercing shafts of steel. He groaned and looked down at the ground where he was walking, hoping he wouldn’t vomit before he could reach the safety of the ship.

“I don’t envy you the trip,” Yuri was telling him. “I know how you feel.”

“Aye, well you do,” the Serenian muttered. He flinched at a loud sound and heard Andreanova laughing.

“If I could get my hands on some of that lavender brew, I would,” Yuri chuckled, unknowingly voicing a sympathy Conar had made on their way over to the Outer Kingdom.

“If I could crawl into a hole, I would,” Conar returned.

“How’s he faring, Yuri?” Sajin called down from the ship.

“Tell him to go to hell,” Conar whispered, his skull caving in from the loud words.

“He’ll live,” Yuri answered.

“Don’t be so sure,” Conar mumbled.

Sybelle watched the man come on board the ship and wished she could use her magic to push him overboard. As he looked up, unerringly finding her and her wayward thought, she clamped down on her emotions and turned from the rail, disappearing from his sight. She didn’t think he had enough presence of mind to try probing her and was relieved when he did not.

“She’s not too happy with you,” Sajin told him when Conar was on board.

“I’m not too happy with myself,” Conar assured him. He glanced carefully around him, squinting with the effort. “Is Catherine on board?”

Sajin nodded. “She’s below.” He regarded his friend with an arched brow. “Are you responsible for the glow on her face this morning?” At Conar’s quick blush and hasty look away from the nomad, Sajin clucked his tongue. “Conar, how could you?”

He looked up, found humor in the nomad’s eyes. “You owe me a golden Ryal.”

Sajin scowled. “I owe you an ass whipping,” he answered. “Could you not have waited ‘til your wedding night?”

Conar grinned.

The nomad snorted. “I suppose not.”

“Welcome, Prince Conar.” A tall, thin man with a mustache as rail thin as he was came forward to greet the newcomer on board. “It is my pleasure to have you on board.”

Conar held out his hand, taking the smiling man aback for a moment before the Captain of The Golden Dawn took Conar’s strong wrist in his firm grasp. “You have a fine ship, Captain.”

Captain Abdul Hajib’s smile widened. “I think so.” He nodded toward Yuri who was still on the docks. “The Shadow-warrior tells me you like to sail.”

“I had a good teacher. Perhaps you have met him. Captain Holm van de Lar?”

The Captain shook his head. “Sadly, I have not, but I am acquainted with his ship, the Ravenwind. I have passed her a few times on the open sea.” He sighed wistfully. “A most beautiful lady, she is.”

Conar laughed. “And deadly. She bears six forty pounders.”

Impressed, the Captain assured Conar he had no intention of ever engaging the Ravenwind in battle. “We would trade with Serenia if the bans against doing so are ever lifted.”

“Perhaps Prince Conar and I can discuss that when we reach Kensett,” Sajin commented. “I think it would be a good idea, as well.”

Catherine smiled as she watched the men talking. Her gaze had gone immediately to her

lover when she came up from her stateroom. He did not see her and it was just as well for if he had looked at her face at that moment, he would have seen the memory of the night before passing across her blushing cheeks.

He had been a gentle, patient instructor, never hurrying, never doing anything that had made her tense or feel ashamed. He had loved her with great care, initiating her into womanhood with all the loving vigilance she could have dared ask for. His touch had been magic on her untried flesh. His mouth elicited moans that had, at first, shamed her, then thrilled her, as his lips moved over places on her body no other man had ever touched. He had been so tender with her, given to such courteous ministrations, that she was lost with the first brush of his thumb across that part of her lower body that had quivered with the touch. From that moment on, she could not have stopped him from claiming her even if she wanted to.

Which, she thought with a gentle smile, she most certainly had not.

He had covered her body like a silken coverlet, settling on her with a gentleness she would not have suspected of the man.

"I can wait," he had told her.

She shook her head. "I cannot."

He had tenderly nudged her legs apart and pressed his lower body against her own. The feel of him, the wonderful weight of him, upon her was like nothing she could ever have imagined. It turned her defenses to mush and her heart to a thudding drum inside her chest.

His hands went to her skirts, drawing them up slowly, with a sensual slide that nearly made her scream out with impatience. But the moment his calloused palm touched her bare thigh, she melted against him, squirming under him with a brazenness that brought a growl of contentment from him. The deep rumble coming from his throat sounded like that of a lion after its mate.

"Do you want me, Marie Catherine?" he had asked, the tip of his tongue flicking just under the point of her chin.

Catherine gasped, her hands clutching at his bare shoulders. "With all my being!" she swore.

His fingers slid higher up her leg until they found the obstruction of her petticoat which was wedged between her thighs. He tugged, unable to free the material.

"Tear it!" she demanded, needing the feel of his bare flesh against her. "Rip it!"

He laughed, tickled by her fervent commands. When he began to roll off her, she clutched at him, trying to keep him from leaving her.

"Relax," he had whispered, slanting his mouth across hers for a moment. "Let me do it the right way, Cat."

It had taken all her will power to let him get up. She watched impatiently while he unhooked the buttons of his cords. Her breath caught in her throat when he pushed them down over his lean hips and she caught sight for the first time the soft flesh that hung between his legs.

He looked down at himself and then up at her. "He will not stay so disinterested for long, milady," he warned her.

The sight of him naked--his wide chest furred lightly between the breastbones with golden hair, his slim waist with its rigid lines of muscles, the thick pelt of hair at the apex of his thighs, the strong legs--all combined to give her a heady sense of power that she could bring such a man to her bed.

"Actually I brought you to mine," he said. His grin said it all--you are mine and I will have you.

She held up her arms to him, wanting him, needing him, but he had shaken his head.

"Give me our hand."

Never once did it occur to her to refuse. She put out her hand and he helped her to sit. It took him only a moment to divest her of her own clothing and she was amazed that she felt no shame before this man as his gaze traveled slowly, carefully, over her.

"You are as beautiful as I have imagined you," he said.

"But too fat," she said, remembering all too well his baiting words of a few years earlier.

He had shrugged. "There's more of you to love."

She flung a pillow at him, laughing too loud and too freely before he had quieted her with his hand.

"Shush!" he whispered, his eyes glowing. "Do you want to bring your father and brothers in here to geld me?"

She reached for him, surprising the both of them, and took his flaccid flesh in her hand. As he promised, his shaft did not remain disinterested for long. Once she had him nestled in her palm, he stunned her with his immediate interest.

"Milord!" she whispered, feeling him leap in her hand.

"Let me show you," he said huskily and moved his hand down to hers to show her the rhythm. Whatever Catherine had been expecting, it had not been the surge of power that coalesced in her palm.

Conar had groaned at her gentle stroking and had pushed her hand away, warning her with a grunt that such careful scrutiny to that part of him might well be his undoing. He had lain still atop her, letting her enjoy the weight of him, the press of his flesh to hers.

"Give me a moment, Cat," he pleaded and she instinctively knew that if she moved or touched him or even spoke, he would not enjoy the moment as well as he might if she should heed his warning.

When at last she felt the stab of his manhood diminish against her thigh, he lifted his head and gave her breasts every ounce of his attention.

The feel of his tongue spiraling around her flesh, his teeth nipping at her nipples, set her body to shivering with desire, yet she kept her hands away from him, gripping the sheets instead of him with fingers aching to touch him. As he moved lower, his lips following in the wake of his body, she squeezed her eyes shut and gave herself up to the heat of him, the feel of him.

"Put your hands in my hair, Cat," he ordered as he settled between her spread thighs. His breath was soft against her lower belly.

"Why?" she asked, lifting her head to look down at him.

"Just do it."

Her fingers had tangled in the lush golden mane and he had dipped his head, his tongue flicking out to touch the very core of her.

"OH!" Her cry had been cut off as his tongue delved gently inside her. Her fingers had tightened on his hair and she heard a faint grunt of what might have been pain or could have been pleasure come from him. As his tongue moved again, she didn't care, couldn't have cared if her soul had depended on it.

What are you doing, she remembered thinking, feeling such a tangle of unsettling emotions roiling around inside her that it made her arch her hips from the bed, pressing herself tightly to his face. He worked his magic on her body and she worked her hips in an unconscious rhythm she had never heard before.

When her body began to tense, her hips to move faster, he had moved away from her, sliding up her in one lithe motion that made both of them stop breathing.

"NO!" she begged, squirming beneath him.

“I’m going to take you, now, Catherine,” he said huskily.

She brought her legs up, not even knowing that she did or understanding her action, and wrapped them around his hips.

“No,” he told her, making her put her legs down. “I will hurt you,” he warned her in a voice that said it was sorry, but could do nothing about it. “If we do it like that this time, it will cause you more pain.”

“I don’t care,” she answered as she tried to grip him to her once more, but he had been adamant.

“I do,” he told her sternly and shifted against her, threatening to roll off her if she did not lay still. “I will hurt you and I want the pain to be as little as possible.”

But he hadn’t hurt her at all. When, after a long time of touching her, kissing her, stroking her body, he put his hands under her rump and lifted her off the bed, had pressed the hard strength of him inside her, slowly, inch by inch, there had only been a moment’s tug of feeling, nothing more.

And that, she knew from hearing all the tales of all the women who had ever lain with a man, came from his expertise, his caring for her, his gentle nature, and his desire to give her as much pleasure as he could without the accompanying pain that might well make her find his lovemaking distasteful.

And the fact that his expert hands had made of her womanhood an overflowing vessel that fairly oozed around him when he had penetrated her maidenhead.

His fingers had dug lightly into her buttocks, molding her to him as he began to stroke her with the velvety length of his shaft. His own rhythm over took hers and she was soon moving in counter-time to his thrusts, her hips slamming against his with increasing speed. She was unaware that her nails were digging into the scarred flesh of his back. Neither noticed, for the desire was building to a crescendo that both of them were beginning to feel.

Her release had come with his and she clung to him, their joined bodies slick with combined sweat. He had not tried to stop her from wrapping her legs around him, in an attempt to pull his slowly shrinking flesh deeper inside her still. As his final shudder echoed through her, she gripped him so hard he stiffened with the pain of his ribs being so tightly compressed, but he did not tell her to let him go.

After it was over, when he lay pillowed on her breast, his left arm draped over her waist, she felt his tears against her.

“Why are you crying?” she asked, concerned that he had found her lacking. That he had not enjoyed the miracle she found so wonderful.

“Because I’m so damned happy,” he’d answered.

She held him, smiling in the darkness, wishing the morning would never come, that she could hold him like this forever.

He had fallen asleep that way, his body pressed so close to her own. He had barely even moved when she eased herself out from under him a few hours later and left him, asleep and smiling, in the bed where he had made her his woman.

* * * *

Conar looked away from the Captain’s smiling face and found Catherine watching him. Her look told him she was remembering their night together and he drew in a long, slow breath, exhaling just as slowly.

“Conar, get that look off your face before everyone here knows what you did last evening,” Sajin warned, eying the both of them with a stern expression. He flung his hand at Catherine who

was standing twenty feet away. “Go find Sybelle, Cat! You two can talk or something!”

Captain Hajib’s brows drew together. What had the Prince done? Whatever it was, it didn’t seem to concern the Tzarevna too much. The lady was smiling as though she

Hajib blushed. He looked at the Serenian’s grinning face, staring back with non-repentant glee at Prince Sajin, and knew. And it was something he didn’t care to know. He quickly bid the two Princes farewell and went about his business.

“Now, see what you’ve done!” Sajin growled. “You’ve offended Abdul.”

“Me?” Conar smirked. “If you’d kept your big mouth shut, the man might not have ever known.”

Sajin lowered his voice. “If this gets out, Conar, you’ll have to marry her before we even reach land! Do you want her reputation ruined?”

He hadn’t thought of that. His frown said as much. “Can your Captain perform a wedding ceremony?”

“Oh, be quiet, Conar!” Sajin snapped. “I’ll go talk to Abdul and make sure he doesn’t repeat any of this.”

Watching the Kensetti prince stalk off, himself offended by whatever had offended him, Conar thought of what well might have already happened with him loving Catherine too well.

“You’re a potent man, Conar McGregor,” Meggie had once told him when he’d come to tell her Amber-lea was with child. “Don’t you ever think, lad?”

Conar’s face drained of its normal coloring.

What if he had gotten Catherine pregnant?

Chapter Forty-Six

Captain Abdul Hajib didn't like the position in which he had been placed. He wasn't even sure if such a thing as he was doing was legal, but one did not deny the man known throughout the world as the Raven.

"This will have to be re-done once you reach Kensett." Abdul had scowled heavily. "If you can find one of Her Majesty's priests."

"Will you just marry us?" the Serenian grumbled. He was tightly clutching the Tzarevna's hand like a green boy afraid she would bolt and run. "And be quick about it!"

"Conar, shush!" Catherine said. "Do you want the entire ship to hear?"

No, he thought with acute anxiety, he did not. Especially not Sajin Ben-Alkazar. "Just get on with it!" he whispered to Abdul, none-too quietly.

Throughout the ceremony, the reading from the Prophetess' words, Abdul was sure he was doing the wrong thing. Marriages made in such haste, even those meant to undo a wrong committed by two over-eager lovers, never seemed to work out.

"Man and wife," he finally said, unhappy with the whole thing. He slammed the Book of the Prophetess shut with a snap. "May you be happy from this day forward."

"We will," Conar declared and swept his woman into his arms to seal their vows with a heady kiss that made the good Captain blush with shock.

"Go," he told the two young people. "Go before His Grace finds out what you've made me do and has me keelhauled!"

He had watched the lovers go, their eyes entirely on one another, and hoped no one saw them slip down below decks where he knew they'd be consummating a marriage he damned well should not have performed.

* * * *

Conar came up on deck just at the rising of the moon. No one had come looking for him and Cat and he probably had Sajin to thank for that.

Not that Ben-Alkazar approved of the situation. And not just because, as Conar was keenly aware, the man was a bit in love with Cat, himself. It was because he was giving Conar time alone with the lady.

"Familiarity breeds contempt," Sajin had laughed when Conar had told him he'd gotten Tzar Thomas' permission to court Catherine. "The more you're with her, the better I'll look!"

Conar suspected Sajin already knew he'd lost the wager between them.

His mind was on the lady who was sleeping in her own bed, wishing he dared go sleep with her. After all, she belonged to him now. They had been married on the open seas where neither of their country's law could touch them and where neither of their religions held rein. There would be hell to pay when they announced it, but there would be nothing either of their families could do since the marriage had been consummated before the vows were even spoken. And well-consummated afterwards.

He smiled, so content. So happy. His loneliness slowly vanishing like the silver wake behind the fast-moving ship. He glanced leeward and saw a low arch of darker color on the horizon and knew they were maybe three miles from land. Maybe a little more. He wondered what country it was and made a mental note to ask the Captain. He knew he wouldn't be sleeping much that night.

There was a steady southwesterly breeze pushing the ship along at a goodly speed. The sheets were filled and straining and overhead the stars skipped by at a dizzying pace.

He turned to go to below, to find Sajin and the game of chess the Kensetti had promised him earlier. He looked up, his brows drawing together at the dark shape that rose up to block his way.

“Infidel dog,” Conar heard a man snarl at him as a dagger was thrust into his stomach and the blade was twisted.

Sybelle watched Rasheed and another man lift the body over the high railing and faintly heard the splash as it hit the water far below the ship’s hull. She smiled as Rasheed looked quickly at her and then disappeared below deck once more.

PART TWO
Chapter Forty-Seven

Chase Montyne snarled at the men who stood laughing at him. He twisted in the grip of the two bastards who held him and cursed them, tried to use his power against them, but all he managed to do was put fresh bruises on his upper arms and wrists where hard hands kept a tight hold on him.

"Poor little Ionarian," the slave trader said, clucking his tongue. "If you have magic, it is useless in Rysalia. Has no one ever told you that, poor little Ionarian?"

Gathering a mouthful of spit, Chase sprayed the slave trader's vicious, sneering face, but the man only grinned and it was a grin that made the hair on the back of Montyne's neck stir.

"Our gelding knives are rather dull this time of year," the slave trader remarked. "So many slaves to sell and so little time to use the whet stone." He reached out and took Montyne's chin in a fierce grip. "It would be a shame to mutilate so handsome a man as you, but if you do not curb your anger, blondie, I will do so without a moment's hesitation."

"Go to hell!" Chase shouted, grunting when the slave trader's hold on his chin tightened to unbearable pressure.

"Speak only when you are spoken to, slave," the man snarled. His black eyes bored into Chase's pale blue fury. "Perhaps you need a lesson in who is the master and who is the slave."

A cold shiver of fear ran down Montyne's backbone as the slave trader nodded at the men holding him. He heard the one on his left chuckle and the sound abraded his bravery worse than the vicious smile on the slave trader's thick lips.

"Strip him."

Absolute fear shot through Chase Montyne's body and he threw back his head and howled. He bucked in the unrelenting hold of the two men, struggled against them, kicking out, striking out, but one particularly vicious hit along the side of his head stunned him and he went down, his ears ringing, spitting blood where he had bitten his tongue.

He felt their hands on him, tearing at his clothing, pulling it away from him, allowing the humid heat of the warehouse to wash over his nakedness in sticky waves. Despite all his efforts, the clothing came away as easily as if he had been a child and he was forced to cower on the cool stone floor, trying to hide himself from their mocking eyes and not succeeding.

The slave trader squatted down beside him and grabbed a handful of Montyne's thick blond hair. "How many women have you had, pretty boy?" the man asked in a low, sneering voice. His grip on Chase's hair tightened. "A hundred? More?" He put his face close to Montyne's. "And how many men have had you?"

He brought his hands up, his intention to wrap them around the slave trader's neck and squeeze until there was no life left in the nomad, but the other two men lunged at him, grabbing him, holding him, keeping him from killing the man who even at that moment was untying the belt of his caftan.

"I think you need to know what it feels like to be forced," the slave trader taunted.

"No." Chase heard his own voice, weak, trembling, as afraid as he could ever remember hearing it. His eyes had gone wide in his face. His complexion had drained of all coloring. When the slave trader spoke, something terrible broke loose inside Chase Montyne and the Ionarian prince knew his fate had been sealed.

"Take him down."

It had only been the slave trader at first. His ruthless thrusting had been bad enough, but

Chase had been able to endure it. After the man had gone, leaving him with only one guard to see that he did not escape, Chase had lain for over an hour on the floor before he could push himself up on trembling legs. His stomach had heaved and he had bent forward and thrown up.

Vomit had poured from him, gagging him, invading his nostrils where it clogged and burned and stung. The guard had snorted with contempt and stepped away from the sour smell that rose up in the hot warehouse.

He had hurt as he lay back down in a fetal position, curled in on himself, his arms wrapped around his knees. He was bleeding from his rectum, lying in the blood, and every movement brought fresh pain to his lacerated flesh.

And the pain brought back mind-shattering memories of his childhood in the Abbey high atop Mount Serenia.

A sound at the warehouse door made him look up and when he saw four men entering the warehouse with the slave trader, Chase Montyne had whimpered once and then gone as quiet as the tomb.

He had hissed at them, his teeth drawn back over his lips as he pressed himself tightly against the wall. But they had come after him. They had trapped him, the five of them, like a cornered animal and he had not been able to fight for long. They had overpowered him, dragging him down like a wounded stag, and he had gone under their pummeling fists with rapidly vanishing hope.

A part of him slipped quietly away then, leaving him to lie face down on the floor, his legs spread wide to accommodate the plunging evil that invaded him. There was no sound, no movement, not even the flicker of an eyelid to indicate he felt what was happening to him. He stared off into the far corner of the warehouse, his mind shut down, his unwavering gaze seeing something beyond the rafters and dark shadows.

And when they were finished with him, when the last caftan had been adjusted and he had been used so thoroughly he could not have moved if he had wanted to, they left him there on the floor, his hands tied behind his back, the loose end of the hemp crossing his left shoulder and wound once around his neck then looped back under his bound wrists to draw his arms up his back. Any movement of his body would have pulled taut the noose around his neck, cutting off the breath in his straining throat, strangling him, but Chase Montyne was incapable of movement. Or sound. Or thought.

"We're doing this for you own good, blondie," the slave trader had quipped. "Just so you won't hurt yourself until we can sell your sweet little ass."

"I might buy him, myself," one of his attackers had joked.

He had been weakened from the drug that had rendered him unconscious at the inn in Basaraba, weakened further by the lack of food and drink and the ungodly heat which had burned him red on his forced march through the shifting sands of the Rysalian desert. Being subjected to such brutal punishment and humiliating treatment as he had received that morning, served to push him down deep into the darkness of his own mind.

The shame of what they had done to him hurt him so badly he wished he could die. The savagery of the attack, the sheer brutality of it, wounded him deeper than anything Tolkan had done to him in the Abbey. It pushed him backwards in time, made him revert to the little burrowing, cowering animal Tolkan had tried to make him.

It wasn't until late that evening that someone came to release him from his bonds. The man had been kind, placing a cool cup of chilled water to his parched lips.

"Easy, son," the man had whispered. "Take only a sip or two."

His wrists had been chafed raw, his shoulders a source of immediate and paralyzing pain when his arms had been lowered. He had made the only sound since being brutalized and that sound had been a whimper of fear mixed with agony.

"He won't be touching you again, son," his benefactor had assured him. "You have been purchased by the Lady Sabrina."

Gentle hands had lifted Montyne to a sitting position and smoothed down his naked back.

"She's a good mistress, a fair mistress. You are a lucky man for having caught her eye when Khan brought you here this morning."

Chase had only partially heard the man's soft voice. He had been asked no questions, had not been expected to speak. He had remained mute while a fresh white caftan was pulled over his nakedness and he was helped to stand. His grunt of pain had brought immediate concern and a look of sympathy from his benefactor.

"I am to take you to a physician," the man had told him in an understanding voice. "Are you able to walk?"

Montyne had turned his head and stared at the man, the words meaning nothing to him.

"That's all right," the man had said. "I'll help you."

He had been walked from the warehouse, helped to a healer's home where he had been told to lie down on a narrow cot. It was at that moment, viewing that cot and the threat it construed to him, that Chase Montyne came alive. A bleak, heartbreaking wail of inhuman despair rose up to instantly paralyze the man who had been sent to help him and the physician whose face had blanched white when the wavering scream pierced the air and his patient lurched away from them to slam himself against the wall.

"My god," the physician whispered as the blond man slid down the wall and huddled against the floor, his face buried in his hands. "What did they do to him?"

Kharis El-Malik shook his head. "They raped him."

Montyne crouched there like a cornered animal, his panting breath coming in harsh drags through his fright-labored lungs. His blue stare was unsettling, wild, filled with unholy terror and he was trembling so violently, his teeth were clicking together hard enough for the two men to hear. His arms were wrapped tightly around his legs and he rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, little whimpering sounds of dread coming through his throat in cadence to his movement.

"It's going to be all right," Kharis promised, moving slowly toward the frightened man. "No one is going to hurt you, son." He held up his hands. "We will not allow it."

"I will see to him."

Kharis looked around and a slight frown marred his dark features. "He is not well, Sabrina."

The tall black woman came forward, her smooth face as gentle as a child's. There was compassion and concern in her big brown eyes and a slight hint of a smile on her full lips.

"He has gone to a better place in his mind, Kharis," she answered.

"He is not stable," the physician warned her. "He could be dangerous, Your Ladyship."

The black woman shook her head. "No. He is no danger to anyone but himself." Her eyes turned infinitely sorrowful. "Leave us, gentlemen," she said softly, although her tone left no room for argument.

The physician bowed respectfully and left the room with only a brief, backward glance at his patient to indicate his worry. Kharis stayed only a moment longer and then nodded, trusting his mistress' instincts.

The Lady Sabrina, her thick long black braids draping over her shoulders, walked to the

cowering man she had purchased for a goodly sum and swept back the bright, multi-colored skirt of her sari as she knelt down beside him.

"I am Sabrina," she said gently, reaching out to put a light hand on Montyne's arm. "And I will allow no one to harm you."

A part of him looked out from the wide stare and saw a kind face, a gentle face, a face his heart told him meant him no harm. The hand on his arm was reassuring, almost motherly, and the fingers holding his flesh were caressing.

"Will you let me care for you?"

That part of him that was still functioning, that had not closed down, made him nod at her quiet request.

She put her arm around him. "Let me help you to stand."

He came unsteadily to his feet, detached, unhindered by thought. He allowed her to seat him on the cot, to help him lie down. He closed his eyes when she smoothed his hair back from his forehead and eased her cool fingers down his flushed cheek. He shivered, some inner workings of his mind still trying to put up a fight at her touch.

"You have nothing to fear, sweet one," she told him. "I will see to it."

With her there beside him, he had not protested the brief examination that had turned into an easing of his physical pain. With her hand holding his, he had not minded the salve or the painful stitching that had brought tears and small moans which she shushed with her murmurs of reassurance.

Outside, a warm, sultry southeasterly wind pushed against the windows and a light rain began to fall.

Lady Sabrina smiled as she watched the fall of the water against the panes. She turned her warm gaze back to him, finding him staring up at her like a trusting child waiting for an adult to give him a hint of what he should do.

"Sleep, Sirocco," she whispered to him, her hands gentle on his brow. She bent forward and placed her full lips against his. "My sweet wind."

With her arms around him, he had finally slept, the strong drug they had given him melting his world and mellowing the awful memories of that morning.

* * * *

"Run from me again and I will cripple you!" the keeper shouted at Storm Jale.

Storm went down under the heavy lash, his naked back stinging as the whip struck him again. He rolled in the sand, flinging his arms up to protect his face as the rawhide lash came down once more with enough force to break open the flesh of his right forearm. He screamed with the pain of it and rolled again, burying his face in the hot desert sand.

"Get him up!"

He felt hands on him, dragging him up, dragging him to the uprights where he knew they would hang him still again. His wrists had not healed from the week before and as the hemp closed around his flesh, he howled in pain.

"You will be broken, Serenian!" the keeper told him. "I will personally see to it!"

Storm clenched his jaw, refusing to allow the groan of agony to erupt from him as his weight settled helplessly on his bound wrists.

"Conar endured it time and again," he heard a voice inside his head whispering. "You can, too, Jale."

But Storm wasn't so sure anymore. His existence had become one long nightmare of agony which, compared to his internment in the Labyrinth, made the Domination's hellhole seem like

paradise.

It was not only the back-breaking work that went on from sun up to sun down. Nor was it the lack of decent food and fresh water. He had endured those things in the Labyrinth. It wasn't just the homesickness or the loneliness that was wearing him down. He had known that in the airless heat of those bluffs, as well.

What ate at Storm Jale the most, what bothered him and what he could not overcome, was the physical punishment that had become almost a daily occurrence for him.

"How did you stand it, Conar?" he wondered. "How did you manage to stay sane?"

Somewhere in the back of his mind he still called out to his hero, but he had long since given up any hope of Conar coming to his rescue. That was a dream, a wish, that he now knew would never come true. He was going to die in this godforsaken place, yoked to one of the massive stone blocks that were being piled atop one another as a tomb to one of the keeper's masters.

And if he did not die soon, Storm realized, there would be nothing left of his mind to know when he did.

Chapter Forty-Eight

The pain in his belly had been bad, but the hit had not been mortal. Had it been with one of his own weapons, he might well have died before he slammed into the water. As it was, he had fallen, striking his head against the hull of the ship as he tumbled and had plunged, unconscious, beneath the bubbling wake of the ship and drifted down, taking in water through his open mouth.

He had sank slowly, his arms flung out, fingers crooked. How far down he went, how much water he swallowed and breathed in, no one would ever know, but it was deep enough and large enough that it should have killed him.

Blood oozed out of his stomach wound, spreading like black satin through the murky water, sending out a scent that attracted the more ferocious denizens of the deep and set off a warning signal that brought another form of marine life to his rescue.

The hammerhead moved in with blinding speed, its dorsal fin twitching in expectation of tasting the strange life form sinking through its habitat. Glistening, sharp teeth were poised, ready to snatch at the alien thing before them. The oddly-shaped snout was pulled back, the massive jaw extending in preparation for the bite. There was only a matter of ten feet separating prey from predator when the hammerhead was struck broadside by the pointed nose of the dolphin, the sleek gray belly of the shark opening up as it caved in beneath the fierce hit.

Eyes watched the spectacle unfolding as the shark flipped over and over in the water, its entrails spilling out, the mushrooming flow of its blood emitting the same scent of enticement that Conar McGregor's blood had sent out to gain the hammerhead's attention.

Blue and green and brown and gray and black and lilac and every shade in between viewed the onrushing sharks which beat down on the mortally wounded hammerhead as the means to an end. The feeding frenzy was sickening as the hammerhead was torn to pieces even as it was twitching about the water in its death throes, but it had served its purpose. It removed the immediate danger from the man who would have been killed had those daggers of ivory torn him asunder.

"Lift him," a sweet voice instructed the dolphin that had come to McGregor's rescue.

An inquisitive wail of acknowledgment beeped through the water and the dolphin moved into position, stopping with its own body the downward descent of the unconscious man. Using its nose, the mammal eased its burden upward, slowly and with great care, ignoring the blood lust going on below its sleek body as the other sharks tore the hammerhead into pieces only big enough to feed the smaller fish. Another beep of inquiry echoed through the water and the dolphin was joined by a fellow swimmer. Between the two of them, they made sure the unconscious man reached the surface without being attacked by the savage fishes that jerked and twitched and prowled far below.

"Conar."

He came awake, coughing, sinking beneath the water, struggling to tread water, reaching out, catching hold of something that at first alarmed him, then surprised him as a gentle nose bumped against his face.

"Hold on to the dolphin."

Not even aware that he did so, his arms closed around the smooth body of the female dolphin and she bore him toward the shore, five hundred yards away. It wasn't until they had reached the shallows that she shook herself away from him and arched in the water, bidding him a piercing farewell as she struck out with her mate for the deeper recesses of the sea.

He swam to shore, stumbling through the breakwater, crashing to his knees. He bent forward

on all fours, coughing, gagging, finally vomiting salt water from his stomach and lungs. He collapsed there at the tide line, the waves breaking gently around him, pushing his body forward with every advancing wave. His cheek was pressed into the wet sand, the spume pooling around his body. His fingers clutched at the sand, desperately clawing, trying for a hold on the earth to keep him from being dragged back into the water.

“Help,” he whispered, his voice hoarse from his gagging and the pungent burn of the salt water in his throat.

His belly was burning with agony and each time a wave broke over him, shifting him in the loose sand, he moaned, feeling the pain flood through him all the way to his feet.

“Somebody, please help me.”

He thought he saw horses along the dunes above him. Thought he heard a shout. He wasn't sure and as the shadow of unconsciousness once more loomed over him, he didn't really care.

Chapter Forty-Nine

There were cages lining the room. Cages not all that much bigger than the one that had been the home of a Serenian prince in the Labyrinth many years before. The floors and sides of the cages were made of wire mesh and the metal cubicles were stacked one atop another, three cubicles high, twenty-one cages per wall, eighty-four cages in all.

Every cage, except one, was filled with pitiful human cargo awaiting transport to one of the four major slave trading arenas in Basaraba. Cages along the north wall contained children, none younger than five, none older than fourteen. The cages along the western wall contained women and young girls thirteen and over--those along the eastern wall, men and boys who were destined for the mines and quarries, the fields and farms.

The men in the cages stacked across the southern wall were either old or frail or ill. Their fate, depending on the verdict of the physician who examined them, would be decided prior to their sale. Many would have their throats cut, their bodies dumped into the sea, if they did not meet the slave traders' standards.

"That one," the trader gestured. "What of him?"

The physician turned and looked at the ill man inside the cage. He shrugged. "A patrol found him on the beach, nearly drowned. Apparently, he had been stabbed and dropped off one of the ships heading south. He has lost a lot of blood and may not survive." He pulled at his thin goatee. "My advice would be to put him out of his misery."

Gazing up at the cage where the blond haired man slept fitfully, the trader scowled. "He looks familiar."

"He looks like the one you sold to that bitch Sabrina," the trader's assistant reminded the man. "I would say this one is an Ionarian, as well."

Khan Subet cocked his head to one side as he viewed the face of the slave pressed tightly against the mesh of the cage. "He looks more Serenian," he remarked.

"What is your desire, Lord Khan?" the physician asked, bored and more than ready to go home to his new wife and the delicious meal he knew awaited him.

Khan studied the man for a long moment. He moved around to the side of the cage and peered up at the heavily-scarred back that was hunched in the confines of the cage.

"He has known the lash many times," Khan's assistant said. "It would be my guess that he has not been an obedient servant."

The trader agreed. "He looks strong enough, though." He sighed as he turned to the physician. "When he comes to, turn him over to Harim for evaluation. I will trust Harim's judgment." He stepped away from the cages where the smell was starting to bother him. Urine was pooled in opaque lakes under the bottom cubicles and human excrement had sifted down through the cages to mound and form islands in the piss. "Clean up this place," Harim ordered, his nostrils quivering.

The man in the upper left cage opened his dark sapphire eyes and watched the trader and his assistant leave. He wondered idly who Harim was and what evaluation he would have to offer.

Not that it mattered.

"What is your name?" he had been asked when those who had found him at the seashore had turned him over to stare down at him.

It was a minor disharmony that bothered him. It nibbled at his consciousness, methodically chewing at his peace of mind.

"Who are you?" they had shouted at him.

He thought perhaps it was important that he answer them for they had seemed hard men, men without compassion and pity for his pain and his suffering. He wondered if he told them what they wanted to know they'd take away the pain eating at his gut.

"Where did you come from?"

"How did you get here?"

"Who tried to kill you?"

"What had you done?"

"Who are you?"

"Who are you?"

"Who are you?"

Questions, he thought. So many questions. Too many questions to try to answer.

So he had decided not to try.

They had lifted him, ignoring his gasps of pain, and flung him face down over the back of a nag with a gait from hell. Her bouncing flanks had brought groans to his lips until he had passed out once more, the wound in his belly opening and closing with every step the horse took.

When he had come to, he had been on a small narrow cot, the man above him frowning heavily as he worked to stitch closed the tear in his belly.

"By the Prophetess, this man should be dead," he heard the man comment.

Whether it was the loss of blood, the duration of the pain, or just the dazed confusion surrounding him, he hadn't felt the needle piercing his flesh or the tugging of the thread as it closed his wound. Nor had he reacted all that much to the strong astringent of scrub-root poured over the sutures when the man was through with him.

"He's known pain and taken it well," someone said.

"He'll know more before this wound heals," the man Conar had begun to realize was a healer answered.

"Put him in one of the upper cages. If he dies, it won't matter."

He had slipped over the edge of what he was able to endure when they moved him from the cot to the cage. Hung over some brawny bastard's shoulder as that tormentor had climbed a shaky wooden ladder, it was a blessing as he was flung into the cage, naked as the day he had been born, that he passed out. The shadows had lengthened in the warehouse when he awoke and he figured it was probably close to feeding time for he could smell some noxious beefy smell that invaded his stomach with a rumble.

But they hadn't fed him when they tended to the others in the warehouse.

"There is no need to feed a slave who may die before the night is through."

He had shrugged, not caring one way or another if they fed him. He'd been without food many times. And water. And clothing. What was one more time, eh, Commandant?

The next morning, the trader showed up at his cage, staring up at him, asking questions of the physician. Not wanting them to know he was conscious, he had opened his eyes only a slit, just enough to view the man the physician spoke to with such reverence. He listened to them discussing him, wondering why he didn't seem to care that they spoke of him as though he were a piece of meat in a display case.

"If he survives, I might be able to get a few hundred Ryals for him. No one will want to buy a slave who has been whipped so thoroughly. They will think he will be recalcitrant."

Recalcitrant? Conar thought. Aye, there have been those who said I was. Pondering the word, he thought it might well be an apt description of him.

Churlish, too, he would imagine.

“It will be months before he will be able to do any physical labor, Lord Khan. The stomach wound was deep.”

“Stomach wound?” another man had asked and Conar had shifted his attention to the speaker, thinking the man looked like an ass-kisser to him.

“A patrol found him along the beach”

Conar stopped listening. Instead, he concentrated on the man staring up at him, the man the other two gave deference. He watched the man’s hawk-like, professional gaze evaluating him and mentally shrugged. What did it matter? He had been evaluated many times before.

“Harim,” he heard the physician muttering and it brought his attention from watching the slave trader and his toady exiting the warehouse to the healer. “I hate dealing with that one.”

“Lord Khan won’t even get one hundred Ryals for this blond weakling,” someone said. “I wouldn’t even give a copper Senti for him.”

A faint smile twitched at Conar’s lips. Hadn’t someone bought him for a copper Senti once? No, he remembered, he had bet someone a copper Senti, but he couldn’t think why or for what.

The physician glanced up and found the dark sapphire gaze watching him. There was something in that look, in the way those alien orbs looked at him, that made the medical man take a step back from the row of cages. It was almost as though there was a light on behind that unfathomable stare, but no one in the cottage to answer the door should you go calling.

“Tell me your name!” The slave hadn’t answered when the patrol’s captain had brought him to the warehouse, despite the heavy hand that had connected with the injured man’s jaw. “I will know your name, slave!”

Looking up into those vacant sapphire eyes, the physician suspected the slave no longer knew his name. There had been a bad cut on the back of the man’s head, a lump that said he had been struck. Probably, the physician had remembered thinking at the time, when he fell overboard.

“Do you know who you are?” he had asked the slave when he had finished sewing up his wound.

His answer had been a vague twitch of the man’s full lips and nothing more.

“Son-of-a-bitch is awake.”

The dark blue attentiveness flickered then hardened.

“Who are you?” the physician asked the man staring at him. For a reason he could not have explained, the answer seemed vitally important.

“Harim will get it out of him,” that other speaker snapped. “Or gut him in the bargain.”

Conar moved his head just enough to try to see the man who had flung out such a pronouncement, but he couldn’t see beyond the corner of the cage where a metal bar supported the mesh and blocked his vision. It took too much effort to try to lift his head and he was so weak he doubted if he could.

“If you live through the night, I’ll feed you in the morning,” the physician said, shuddering at the faintest grunt of unconcern that came from the man in the upper cage.

Long after the warehouse was quiet for the night, with only an occasional sob or moan to punctuate the stillness, Conar lay awake and thought.

He knew he was being held somewhere where he could not escape even had he the strength to try. There was a heavy padlock on the door of the cage and the mesh was heavy, reinforced steel. Had he a sharp weapon, he seriously doubted that he could cut his way through the links of mesh. The door to the warehouse had been locked from the outside, the bar sliding into place with a finality that had sent one man into a screaming fit. Since there were no windows in the

airless, unbearably hot building, and the floor was of some kind of unseamed stone, there was no escaping that way. Looking up at the rafters high overhead, he saw that there didn't appear to be any way to reach them and, even if he could have, no way to exit the building through that avenue.

Wherever he was, it was a maximum security internment that left no doubt that escape was impossible.

It wasn't the Labyrinth, he was sure of that, although for the life of him he couldn't exactly remember where the Labyrinth had been. He knew he had been imprisoned there, and for a good long while, even though he couldn't seem to remember for what crime or for how long. So far, he hadn't been whipped, but he expected it at any time. Not that it mattered, he thought with a mental shrug. He wouldn't feel it. He couldn't feel anything anymore since he'd been lashed so expertly, so many times before. By whom, though, also seemed to have skipped just beyond his ability to reach out and grasp it.

Selective memory, he snorted, wasn't all that bad. It took away what might have caused him real concern. What he did know, though, brought a worried scowl to his sweating face.

He was to be sold, that much he knew, and he wondered idly if the new master would be better than the old. The Commandant had been cruel, but had allowed him some freedom when he, himself, had been good.

"What's your name, friend?"

Conar looked to his left and saw the eager, lonely face of the old man in the cage beside his own. Death hovered on that weak, frail countenance like a buzzard sitting atop a fence post, watching for road kill. The parchment-like skin of the elderly man was stretched thin across his prominent cheekbones. His fading eyes were sunken deep in their sockets and the cap of white fuzz about his lean face seemed to glow in the faint light from the candles about the room.

"How do you feel, Grandfather?" Conar asked and watched as the old man's shrunken lips pulled back to reveal a toothless mouth with bleeding gums.

"I am not long for this burden, son," the old man whispered. "My time on this plane of torment is nearly run out."

"It is a better place to which you go," Conar said and wondered how he knew that.

"You are Serenian," the old man said, painfully moving his body so his bent and crippled fingers could poke through the mesh of his cage and touch Conar's hand.

"How do you know?" He didn't even know his own nationality, so how could this man tell?

"By your accent, son," the old man informed him. "I have heard that slow drawl many times over the years."

Conar moved his hand until his fingers closed around the old man's arthritic claws, their hands clenched through the mesh. "I don't know who I am, Grandfather," he said. "And I don't think it matters, now, do you?"

The old man shuddered and the light began to fade from his eyes. "It matters, son," he said on a long sigh. "Never let anyone tell you no different."

He held the old man's hand until the fingers grew stiff and cold and the vacant stare that looked back at him through the links of the cage filmed over and seemed to sink back into the old man's shrunken face.

"The Wind be at your back, Grandfather," he whispered, wondering just what the hell that meant.

* * * *

The physician was surprised that the blond man was still alive the next morning when he

came in to check on the slaves. That probing sapphire stare was even keener than it had been the evening before, more alert, more demanding, and when it had moved over the physician, the medical man had felt stripped by, evaluated more intimately than he had ever felt scrutinized before.

“This one is dead.”

Conar finally got a good look at the healer’s helper and didn’t like what he saw. The man looked mean, rabid dog mean, and the glance he shot at Conar said he would just as soon slit his throat as look at him. He’d seen that look on another man’s face, somewhere. The Labyrinth? It must have been.

“Then dispose of him, Habi,” the healer answered and Conar knew the deadly bastard’s name.

He had managed to push himself up in the cage until he was in a semi-seated position. With bland curiosity, he watched the healer’s helper unlock the cage next to his own and drag the old man outside it, letting the fragile body crash to the floor in a shameless exhibition of unconcern for the sanctity of death.

What did it matter, he asked himself? The old man was dead, gone on to a higher reward than this earthly plane where life held no measure beyond the amount of money spent to buy a warm body and strong back. The shell that had housed the old man’s gentle nature was nothing more than a casing. What had counted had been inside and now that precious commodity had flown.

“What are you looking at?” the helper snarled at Conar. A slow, slow smile from the blond slave became the answer to his question. “Bastard! I asked what you were looking at?”

Watching that sinister grin spread like molasses on a cold, cold day, the physician instinctively knew the man behind that slow smile was as deadly as they came. Even the dark sapphire stare seemed to take on a hardness that spoke volumes. The man was classically handsome, despite the wicked twin scars on his lean left cheek, but the look that had come over his face was lethal.

“Lower your eyes to me, scum!” Habi shouted, fairly quivering as the cold, cold look continued to attach itself to him.

That deadly expression changed, turned pit viper steady and the soft voice that spoke was just as intense.

“Fuck you.”

Admiration lit the physician’s eyes. No slave had ever dared to speak so to a keeper, especially not to one such as Habi Al-Kanoor.

Scarlet red infused the keeper’s face and he growled, grabbing an iron bar to poke it through the mesh in the cage.

“Don’t even think of it, Al-Kanoor,” someone warned from further back in the warehouse and the keeper spun around.

“He’s asking for it, Harim!” Habi complained. He turned to the physician. “Isn’t he?”

“He has spunk, eh, Kahlil?” the newcomer drawled.

The physician watched as the blond slave’s head whipped around, his deadly stare searching for the owner of the new voice that had intruded. There was a look now on the slave’s face that was hard to describe. For just a moment, there had been shocked surprise, then intense fear, then immediate fury. As those dark orbs had settled on Harim, the man’s full lips had drawn back in a snarl and a low, menacing growl had hummed through the silence. His fingers jabbed through the mesh, gripping the steel links.

“The bastard’s no better than an animal,” Habi spat, wanting to reach out and rattle the

slave's cage, but not daring to. The look on that furious face was enough to make him back down the ladder in an urgent desire to put distance between him and the blond man.

"He doesn't look all that dangerous to me," Harim quipped, staring up at the slave.

"Try me."

Harim's left eyebrow shot upward into the curls of his thick black hair. He smiled. The slave's fingers were threaded through the mesh, clutching it with a mindless fury that had turned the knuckles white. Weak though the man might be, there was still a tenseness, a willingness to vault like a bloodthirsty lion from that cage should the door just happen to spring open.

"Has he been fed?" Harim asked, looking away from that deadly stare to the physician.

"Not yet."

"Then feed him," Harim ordered. "He'll bring a fair price." He turned to go.

"I'm not hungry, you motherless prick!"

Harim looked back and found that hot glare impaling him. Well versed in the ways of the human race, there was no doubt in the slave warden's mind that the man glowering at him would gladly crush his windpipe if given the chance. Harim had no intention of giving him that chance.

"You can be force fed," Harim suggested. "Is that what you want?"

"I want you to shove it up your ass, you goddamned pog."

Harim shrugged. "I'm afraid that isn't one of your options, my friend."

"If he won't eat, what do you want me to do with him, Harim?" the physician asked.

"How about letting him go?" the blond slave spat.

An amused grin pulled at Harim's lips. "You may not be worth much, slave, but you are worth something." He chuckled. "Whatever we get for you will go toward paying the physician for your medical care."

"You'd better make it a fucking fortune you get for me, pog, because I swear I'll come back here and find you bastards." He pulled furiously on the mesh. "And I'll wipe that condescending smirk off your ugly face!"

"He's trouble, Harim. There's no one who will give you a brass Kopi for this one."

Harim sighed. "You may be right, Habi. Since he is intent on giving us trouble, sedate him. When he is unconscious, place him in one of the holding cells. I want him manacled hand and foot, yoked so that he can not move. Gag him if you need to, it won't matter." A vicious grin stretched Harim's lips. "As a matter of fact, I think it would be best if you did."

Conar's gut was cramping with fury, with his urgent need to kill the man looking up at him with such jeering contempt. Even though he tried to keep himself from doing it, hating himself for his lack of self-restraint, he jerked at the mesh of his cage, rattling it like a beast, growling like one, and was infuriated even further by the laugh that came from the object of his rage.

"You'll not last long here, Blue Eyes," Harim chuckled. "Some master will lop that pretty head from that sexy body of yours."

Immediate shock stilled Conar's hands on the mesh and he felt a quiver of true terror run through him. The man's chilling words as he made to leave cut deep and left him with an intense urge to vomit.

"And don't bother clothing him." Harim grinned. "If he wants to act like an animal, we'll treat him like one. Besides, there may be a bidder in the audience who wants a bed partner he can beat into submission!"

"You motherfucker!" Conar yelled, rattling his cage mindlessly, impervious to the hurried movements of the physician below him. "Let me out of here and I'll show you what kind of animal I can be!!!"

So enraged was he, he barely felt the dart that was blown through the hollow reed into his naked thigh. He plucked the offending missile out and flung it away, wrapping his fingers through the mesh once more to pull at the cage. His fury was no less diminished when the second dart hit him and he slapped at it, breaking the needle off in his arm. As the drug coursed through his system, a system already pumping adrenalin, his eyes glazed, his lids began to droop, but he continued to jerk on the mesh of the cage until he shuddered and his head dropped to the cage door. He tried to shake off the drug, but it began to shut down his mind.

"Shoot him again!" Habi barked, not wanting to climb the ladder to get the blond man until he was sure the bastard was out cold.

Once more the physician blew a dart into the slave, hitting him in the belly, just above the wound that had nearly cost the man his life.

"They'll never be able to even get a bid for him like this," Habi grumbled, dragging the ladder over to the upper cage. "They'll have to keep the bastard in restraints even on the auction block."

"That's their concern, not ours," the physician answered.

"I say they'd be better off slitting his throat," Habi complained. He stuck the key to the padlock in and twisted, warily eying the unconscious man as if anticipating him leaping up and attacking.

"Just get him down, Habi," the physician ordered.

It took longer that Habi would have liked to get the slave into one of the holding cells, but once he did, it didn't take long to manacle him and stretch his well-muscled arms into the restriction of the yoke, an apparatus that had been designed to teach troublemakers a hard and uncomfortable lesson.

Constructed of a thick piece of sturdy oak, the yoke's six foot span was heavy and cumbersome. Somewhat resembling the contrivance used to harness oxen, this particular symbol of subjection served a two-fold purpose--it kept a prisoner from being able to use his arms and when drawn up with the pulley inside the holding cell to the cross beam overhead, it became a formidable form of excruciating punishment resembling crucifixion.

"You aren't going to give anyone any trouble, now, are you, pretty boy?" Habi sneered. He clamped the wrist restraints as tight as he could get them.

"Leave him alone," the physician growled.

"Let me have him for just ten minutes," Habi growled as he securely tied a thick gag over the slave's mouth. He reached down to press his fingers against the bandage covering the man's stomach wound. He laughed when there was a faint groan.

"Get out of there, I told you!" the physician yelled. "They may not get much for him, but Lord Khan won't like it if he's been damaged!"

Habi snorted his displeasure and then reached for the rope that would hoist the prisoner up from the floor. When the slave was dangling helplessly from the overhead beam, his feet off the floor, the physician's assistant slipped ankle irons around his feet and secured them to hooks cemented to the floor.

"It'll be a miracle if hanging like that doesn't pull his stitches lose and he bleeds to death," the physician grumbled.

"Harim won't care and I doubt Lord Khan will," Habi sneered.

"Just go find out when they intend on selling him," the medical man ordered. "I want him here no longer than is absolutely necessary." He stared at the man in the cage and shuddered. "If he survives this, he can survive anything and I don't want to be anywhere near him if he should

ever get free!”

* * * *

“There is another blond haired man in the warehouse,” Kharis told his mistress.

“Ionarian?” Sabrina asked as she spoon-fed the man she had named Sirocco. She picked up her napkin and wiped his mouth.

“Serenian, I believe.” Kharis felt sorry for the handsome young man Sabrina was caring so diligently for. As yet, he had not spoken to them, to tell them anything of his past or what he had thought his future would hold.

His vacant stare was pitiful and he flinched whenever loud sounds occurred. Docile, and totally vulnerable, he followed Sabrina with his thankful gaze wherever she happened to go.

And he slept in the black woman’s bed, curled against her like a child would its mother.

“Has he touched you, Sabrina?” Kharis had asked only once, but his mistress had shaken her head sadly.

“It will take time, Kharis,” she said. “He is like a music box that has been dropped and broken. The music is still there, trapped inside, but the mechanism which runs the music box is damaged.”

“Shall I bid for this other one?” Kharis asked.

Sabrina lifted a cup of wine to her bedmate’s lips. “Do you think he is worth buying?”

Kharis shrugged eloquently. “I am told he is handsome. Blond, blue eyes the color of dark sapphires, well-built. Who knows?” He frowned. “His face has been scarred on one side and he has been beaten rather badly. His back is covered in” He stopped, seeing Sabrina staring at him with her mouth open. “Is something wrong?”

“His back is scarred?” she asked, putting down the glass, unmindful that the lips of the young man beside her were dripping with red wine.

“Yes,” Kharis answered. He was puzzled at the strange look on his mistress’ face.

Sabrina stood up and stared at her servant. “And which cheek is it that is scarred? His right?”

Kharis shook his head. “I am told his left.”

“Twin scars, from the inside of his left eye to his ear?”

A dark scowl crossed Kharis’ face. “I have no way of knowing.”

“Go look!” Sabrina ordered. When her servant nodded and made to leave, she stopped him. “And check the back of his sword hand, the right hand. Tell me what you find there.” If he had been puzzled before, Kharis was even more mystified by her next request. “If you find a tattoo on his hand, let no one purchase him before I have seen him, Kharis. Under penalty of punishment, do not!”

Kharis nodded again and left for the warehouse where new slaves were kept, his thoughts a jumble of surprise.

Sabrina stared at the door out of which her servant had exited for a long moment. Her heart was racing inside her chest and she could hear the blood pounding behind her temples.

“It can’t be,” she said in a whisper. “It isn’t possible.”

Chase Montyne watched the black woman, wishing she would come back and touch him, put her gentle hands on him and smooth away the fear her excited words had caused him. He grunted, striving to gain her attention, and was immediately relieved when she turned back around and looked at him with the tenderness with which she had been soothing him all week. His expression turned from anxious to content when she came back to sit down beside him.

“If it is him, Sirocco, I dare not let him see you.”

A shaft of fear drove through Chase Montyne’s heart and he reached out for her, clasping her

waist as he laid his head in her lap. He grunted his agreement, not understanding of whom she was speaking, but fearing him, nevertheless, connecting him with the man who had brutalized him.

“Do not worry, my sweet wind. I will keep you safe,” she whispered to him, bending down to put a light kiss on his cheek.

He reached up for a thick braid of her coarse black hair and brought it to his mouth, kissing it as though it were a precious religious icon.

“If it is him, I will keep him safe, too.”

* * * *

Kharis stared through the mesh of the cage at the slave. He had to crane his neck to see the right hand that was held in the clamp of the yoke, annoyed that the back of that hand was pressed tightly to the wooden bar.

“May I see his right hand?” Kharis asked.

“His hand?” Lord Khan inquired. “Why?”

“I am to look at his hand,” Kharis said. He need not give the slave trader an explanation. The Lady Sabrina paid good money for her slaves.

Lord Khan stared at Khan for a moment and then shrugged. “Open the door, Harim.”

Harim unlocked the cage door, lowered the slave, and then allowed Kharis to enter. He paid close attention to the Lady Sabrina’s servant as the man unlocked the slave’s wrist and turned his hand over to see the back of it. He saw a strange expression of concern flit across Kharis’ face before the man re-clamped the limp wrist to the yoke. He waited until Kharis had left the holding cell before he hoisted the slave up again.

“I have been instructed to ask that you not to sell this particular slave until Her Ladyship can view him.” Kharis reached into his caftan and drew out a holding fee. “Will one hundred gold Ryals be enough to secure him?”

Harim folded his arms over his chest, half-listening to his master bargaining with Lady Sabrina’s man. His gaze was intent on the slave. He wasn’t even aware of Kharis leaving until Lord Khan spoke to him.

“Why would she want this one?” Khan asked. He viewed the man in the holding cell as little more than a nuisance. He had not thought to get even a hundred for him and wasn’t sure Sabrina would buy him although it meant she would lose her security deposit.

“Who knows what her criteria is?” Harim asked.

“Well, at any rate, I want him sold to the highest bidder tomorrow at noon.” Khan turned to go. “Are you coming?”

Harim shook his head. “No.” He had seen the strange tattoo that Kharis had seen, but unlike Kharis, he knew what the strange bisecting lines meant. “There is something I need to attend to.”

Khan shrugged. “As you wish.”

Harim’s inner voice was telling him this man in the cage might well be worth more than what Sabrina would pay for him for her farm. He glanced at Habi. “Did I not hear that Prince Guil Ben-Shanar Gehdrin is here?”

Habi nodded. “His ship docked two weeks ago and he has yet to leave. His man will be at the auction today. They will be buying slaves for their quarry.”

Harim looked back at the blond slave. “Where is His Grace staying?”

“With his cousin, Prince Hedron.” Habi thought the look on the slave warden’s face seemed entirely too smug. “Why?”

Harim smiled. “No particular reason.” He glanced around at the eastern wall where hopeless

faces peered back at him. "I am sure we will rid ourselves of quite a few slaves this day." He looked back at the blond man who was just beginning to stir inside the holding cell. He grinned. "Quite a few." Harim chuckled.

Chapter Fifty

Sabrina outdistanced Kharis as she hurried toward the slave auctioning arena where her servant had told her the blond slave would be sold. Her legs pumped furiously beneath the multi-colored cotton caftan and she had a set and determined look on her broad black face that made others step out of her way with arched brows.

"In a hurry, Lady Sabrina?" someone called out to her as she passed. "A goodly assortment in today?"

There was raucous laughter and elbows jabbed into sides as she hurried on her way, but the lady ignored them, her purpose clear, her heart skipping beats as she plowed through the gathering crowd of buyers.

"There is a tattoo on his hand as you suspected," Kharis had told her. "Two lines which look like"

"A bird in flight," she answered, her eyes intent on her servant's face.

Kharis sighed. "Yes." He had studied her, watching the expression that had alarmed him further. "What does it mean, Sabrina? Who is this man?"

But Sabrina refused to answer.

"What will you sell that Ionarian for, Lady Sabrina?" a woman yelled out to her as Sabrina neared the auction block. "I will pay twenty Luens for the pleasure of his company!"

"Bitch," Sabrina hissed as she elbowed her way to the front of the crowd. Relieved that the auction had not begun, she reached out to clutch Kharis' arm in a death grip as he reached her side. "You did pay Khan a holding fee, did you not?"

Kharis sighed. "Yes. I told you I did."

It was not easy standing there with Sabrina, he thought as each new slave was brought up on the block. Each time a new man was thrust up there, she would dig her nails into his arm until it was obvious it was not the man she had come to buy.

"Where is he?" she asked a thousand times.

"Since you plan on buying him," Kharis had explained in his most pleasant voice, "what difference does it make?"

And when the blond slave had been brought out, struggling like a wild animal as he was thrust naked onto the block, Kharis had felt Sabrina's wicked nails gouging into his arm like dagger points.

"Look!" she gasped, her face filling with absolute fury. "Look what they would dare do to him!"

There were those in the crowd that day that were shocked and dismayed that a slave had been brought before the crowd in such a condition. That he was naked was of little consequence since most were divested of their clothing before the buyers, anyway. But this one was shackled, manacled hand and foot, his arms stretched into the confinement of a wooden yoke used only for the most dangerous of slaves and never used for the slaves sold from this arena. Two burly guards lifted him and hooked the restraining yoke between two uprights, then knelt to shackle his feet to the wooden platform.

"Why is he gagged, Hiram?" a man called out from the crowd.

"He can't control his tongue!" Hiram answered, laughing. "So, I controlled it for him!"

Laughter broke out and many pointed at the slave who was thrashing furiously, doing his best to get free.

“It’s a good thing you hobbled him, Hiram!” someone else shouted.

“If Sabrina’s here to buy him, he’ll get used to it soon enough!”

The crowd erupted into vengeful laughter that made Sabrina swing her head about, her eyes flashing fire at those gathered. She had never been so angry in her life and it showed on her dark face.

“You buying him for yourself, Sabrina?” a woman taunted.

Kharis was watching the blond slave, seeing humiliation and fury alternately taking control of his face. The dark sapphire glare was awesome to behold. It fairly sparked with lethal intent at those who were ogling him. The crowd’s laughter and taunting, the fingers pointing at his more than adequate anatomy had brought a furious red glow to the man’s face and he was sucking in his breath so harshly through the restriction of the gag, the fabric moved in and out with each breath.

“I’d like to get MY hands on him!” one of the women in the crowd yelled out. “I’d stake him down and make him beg for mercy!”

Sabrina was quivering, her insides like jelly. She turned away from the jeering of the crowd and looked up into the humiliated and enraged face of the man on the auction block. He was not looking at her, but she knew the gleam in those dark eyes boded ill for anyone who dared buy him.

“Are you sure you want him, Sabrina?” Kharis asked, bending down so she could hear him above the ribald remarks and coarse innuendoes. He was deeply concerned by the look on his mistress’ face.

“I have to,” Sabrina breathed. “I have no choice.”

“Get on with the auction!” a bold voice shouted above the den and heads turned to see a member of the royalty striding forward, pushing people out of his way.

Harim smiled. “Good morning, Prince Guil. Will you be bidding on this slave?”

Conar swung his head toward the man who had pushed his way to the edge of the auction block. He did not know the man, but there was something in the way the man stared at him that put his hackles up.

“Five hundred Ryals,” Guil said, staring into Conar McGregor’s eyes with revenge. He massaged his broken arm, adjusting the splint. “He’s not worth it, but that is my bid.”

Sabrina frowned, sensing something that was beyond her understanding here. She looked from the eager, knowing face of the Rysalian prince to the auctioneer. “Six hundred,” she bid.

Conar flicked his furious glance over the woman who had dared bid for him. He grunted with contempt beneath the gag and was not surprised when the man bid again.

“Seven hundred.”

“Eight.”

Prince Guil turned to glare at the black woman. “Nine.”

Sabrina’s chin went up. “One thousand.”

There were surprised looks in the crowd. Was the man on the block really worth that much to Sabrina? Women turned to stare at the blond slave, assessing him as they had not before. Men shook their heads, wondering what Sabrina saw.

Guil’s lips rose in disgust before he turned back to the auctioneer. “Fifteen hundred.”

A rumble went through those gathered.

Conar’s eyes narrowed. The man was willing to pay a lot to have him and that didn’t bode well. There was cruelty in the man’s gaze and a hardness to his mouth that suggested he was anxious to make this purchase and be done with it.

“Two thousand.”

As the crowd rumbled again, louder now, Conar turned his attention back to the black woman and his stare lowered. To his way of thinking, she was staring back at him, her dark gaze gleaming with lust. Boldly, her scrutiny was sliding over him, stopping now and then at his shoulders, his chest, lingering insultingly too long at the juncture of his thighs.

“Twenty-five,” Prince Guil shouted.

Heads turned from Prince Guil’s bored expression to the man who had stopped struggling on the auction block and was staring down at the Rysalian prince with hatred.

“Three thousand.”

Heads swung to the Lady Sabrina.

Conar watched the woman wet her lips as her eyes crawled slowly up him again to fasten on his face. He felt unclean, degraded, unmanned as she fused her haughty stare with his furious one.

“Thirty-five,” the man shouted, annoyance beginning to sound in his harsh voice.

Those gathered looked back to the Lady Sabrina and were not surprised to see a smug smile on her thick lips.

“Four thousand,” Sabrina bid.

His blood ran cold as that slow, nasty smile pulled at the woman’s purple-tinged lips. Why did she want him so badly? The man, he could see. There was something in the man’s dark gaze that said he would enjoy breaking him. But the woman?

“Five!” Guil bellowed.

“Six,” Sabrina countered.

Conar had no idea what slaves were worth, but obviously that was a lot for a gasp had gone through the crowd and all speech had stopped. People were no longer looking at him, but shifting their attention between the two bidders who were glaring at one another.

“Any other bids?” Harim called out, stepping in front of the auctioneer.

“Seven,” the man in the black burnoose snarled. He flicked his angry gaze to Conar. “Seven thousand Ryals!”

Conar flinched as the woman’s smile grew nastier. “Eight thousand.”

Eyes leapt back to the man.

“Prince Guil?” the auctioneer questioned.

Guil tore his gaze from Conar to the black woman. “Ten thousand Ryals!” he shouted.

You want me very badly, don’t you? Conar thought, wondering what tortures this man would inflict on him. He almost wished the woman would win in the bidding war although he thought there well might be only one part of his anatomy she’d torture.

Sabrina barely glanced at Kharis as he cautioned her to be reasonable. It had gone beyond her desire to compete with the Rysalian Prince. It had now gone beyond her innate sense of competitiveness. There was something in Guil’s face that said he would maim, even kill, the man on the auction block if given the chance.

She could not allow that.

“Fifty thousand gold Ryals!” she called and laughed when the crowd’s gasp was immediate.

Guil stared at her. No slave had ever brought more than twenty, not even a slave taken from a foreign household. He doubted the black bitch knew who it was she bid for, and he didn’t care, but fifty thousand gold pieces was a lot to bid for any man, Conar McGregor or not.

“Your Grace?” Hiram asked, his face glowing with greed.

Guil swallowed, saw the smirk in McGregor’s strange eyes and yelled, “Sixty!”

Conar stared at the man, sensing that such an amount was not only ludicrous, but unheard of. People were staring at him again with what could only be considered pity, instinctively realizing the man meant him nothing but agony. Without knowing he was doing so, he swung his gaze to the woman. Had he known there was pleading in his eyes, he would have been mortally ashamed.

Kharis tensed, barely able to breathe. He knew she was going to bid again, saw her smiling that cat-like smile that said she was about to get what she wanted. He was just not prepared for his mistress' all out assault.

"Two hundred thousand golden ryals!" Sabrina bid.

"Oh, my god!" Conar heard the auctioneer gasp.

Guil was stunned. She has to know, he thought wildly, seeing the challenge in her dark gaze. He glared at her, wishing her dead, consigning her to the pit, for he knew he dared not bid so recklessly. His father would take away his allowance if he did such a ridiculous thing.

"Prince Guil?" Harim could barely ask. He was already counting his share of the slave's price.

With a growl of frustration and growing fury, the Rysalian prince cut his hand through the air.

"If she wants his cock that badly, let her have him!"

Kharis stumbled as the Prince shoved past him, plowing his way through the silent crowd with murder written on his handsome face. He looked down at his mistress and saw her staring intently at the blond slave.

Conar had kept his gaze on the woman, unable to look away once she made her last bid. It did not take him long to realize that he was hers, that she had paid a high price, indeed, to own him. He stared at her, hot fury and promise of revenge glowing in the sapphire orbs and when she laughed at him, actually giggled at his humiliation, he had the intense urge to beat her broad face in with his fists until there was nothing left but pulpy ooze. Being manacled and yoked the way he was did not offer the chance, he realized, but she could not keep him like this forever. He lifted his chin, his head held proudly, and glared back at her laughing face.

"Oh, you are magnificent," he heard her purr up at him, her face crinkled with delight, and the crowd went wild with thunderous applause.

"She'll make you a fine mistress, Serenian!" a man called out. "His grace might have worn you down, but the lady will wear you out!"

Harim jerked his head at the two men beside Conar, indicating they were to take him off the block. He chuckled at the way the slave still fought his fate, even as he was dragged away, his chains clanking.

Sabrina made to leave, but stopped as the slave warden came to the edge of the block and squatted down. She looked up at him.

"Do you really think he's worth two hundred thousand gold pieces, milady?" Harim asked.

She smiled at him. "Do you know who he is?"

Harim nodded. "So does Prince Guil."

Sabrina reached up to touch his cheek. "Then you know he's worth every coin."

"He doesn't know who he is," Harim informed her. "The physician says he's lost his memory."

Sabrina smiled. "It is just as well he doesn't remember, don't you agree, Harim? If you thought he fought hard just now, can you imagine how he would have reacted if he was himself?"

“Be careful, Sabrina,” Harim warned. “His Grace wants the man badly enough to kill for him.”

A hard gleam entered Sabrina’s dark gaze. “So do I, my old friend.” Her smile turned lethal. “So do I.”

* * * *

Prince Jaleel Jaborn glared at his old friend. “Here? In Asaraba?”

“I bid on the bastard, Jaleel!” Guil bellowed. “I looked into his infidel face. There are no two men with a face like that!”

Jaleel clenched his hands. “Then your man lied about having killed McGregor.”

“He shall pay for his incompetence,” Guil promised.

Jaborn looked up. “Who bought him?”

A look of disgust passed over Guil’s face. “The woman they call Lady Sabrina.”

“The procuress?” Jaleel asked, surprised.

“That is one of the bitch’s professions,” Guil snarled. “But it is for her farm that she purchased him, I am sure.”

For a long moment, Jaborn didn’t speak, then his face brightened and he began to laugh. He laughed so hard tears formed and ran down his cheeks and he had to sit down to keep from collapsing.

“I see nothing funny about this, Jaleel,” Guil grumbled, staring at his friend as though he thought the man had lost his mind.

Jaleel swiped at his eyes. “Do you not?” he gasped. “By the Prophetess, Guil! Do you not see the irony in this?”

Guil’s narrowed gaze was hateful. “All I see is the black bitch beating me out of purchasing that son-of-a-whore!” He held up his hand and clutched his fist. “I had him right here, Jaleel. Right here!”

There was a negligent wave of Jaborn’s own hand. “We’ll get him, Guil.” He chuckled again, then shook his head. “If not before their caravan leaves Asaraba, then on the trek to Phaedra.”

“She won’t sell him,” Guil told him. “Two hundred thousands Ryals, indeed! Even if she is aware of who he is, he isn’t worth that kind of money.”

Jaleel instantly sobered. “You think she knows who it is she’s bought?”

Guil nodded. “I am almost sure of it.”

The Lady Sabrina having such knowledge changed things. If she knew, others might, also. Jaleel’s forehead crinkled with concern.

“Have one of your men find out when she plans on leaving for her farm. I want to know the minute that caravan leaves Asaraba!”

Chapter Fifty-One

Conar grunted beneath the tight constriction of the gag, tossing his wet hair back from his forehead. The inside of the warehouse was like the inside of a roaring inferno and sweat was dripping down his face and sides. It was hard to breathe with the gag drawn securely over his mouth and the heat and the smell inside the warehouse was clogging his nostrils, making it even more difficult to draw breath.

His shoulders ached, pulled as his body weight sagged from the yoke. His lungs, constricted with the pull, were being pressed close by his diaphragm. If they left him like this much longer, he thought, he'd suffocate.

The warehouse padlock clicked and he swung his head up to see who was coming. All the other cages were empty, the slaves either sold or disposed of in ways only their gods and their murderers would know.

He had been expecting the black woman to come for him all morning long. The healer had already told him the woman had paid for him and the man seemed to have been highly amused that he had brought such a high price.

"I see nothing about you that would warrant such an outrageous amount," the man had laughed, sweeping his curious gaze down Conar's naked body, "but then again, I am not in the profession to which the lady belongs."

Conar hadn't understood the remark. When he was being dragged back to the warehouse, he had heard vulgar comments that made no sense to him at the time and the man's sly innuendoes only added fuel to his puzzlement.

"How long do you think it will take Lady Sabrina to recoup what she paid for him? Three years? Five?" one of his guards had asked the other.

"He'll die before he works that debt off!" a man had guffawed as they passed.

"I doubt he has that much in him!"

"Oh, I don't know," a brazen woman had remarked, stopping his guards and reaching out to put her hand on his manhood, shocking him to the very core of his being as her fingers had closed around him. "I'd pay a goodly price to have this service me!"

He snarled at the bitch, his eyes flashing, and she had squeezed him, winking at him as though she had every right in the world to touch him as she was doing.

"Wait your turn, Janna," one of his guards had chuckled, pushing the woman away from him. "Once she sets a price for him, you can barter over him then."

It hadn't been until the healer had told him just how the black woman made the money that had bought him did Conar began to see how dehumanizing his position was going to be.

That the woman had purchased him for her bedmate had been bad enough, but if what the healer said was true, it would not be only her he'd be servicing.

"She has a keep just on the other side of the Nilus. I've been there a few times. She has women and girls in one side of the keep, men and boys on the other." The healer had laughed. "A little something for everyone." When he had seen the horrified expression on his patient's face, he had shaken his head. "Oh, I am sure she did not pay that kind of price for you to become one of her prostitutes. She bought you for her farm."

Conar had shivered at the cruel laugh that had made the man's face turn ruddy. His fear must have shown for the healer had put what he probably thought was a comforting hand on his patient's shoulder.

"It's a breeding farm, my friend." He had not seen the absolute horror behind the shocked

sapphire stare. “Only the richest women will be able to afford your services. You’ll be treated well.” He had smiled. “I almost envy you.”

Disgust made Conar roar behind the gag. His thrashing only served to chafe his wrists more and brought a look of concern from the healer.

“Would you not rather live a life of luxury and enjoyment in golden shackles than toil your life away in Prince Guil’s quarry with manacles and leg irons attached to your flesh?”

The thought of being at the mercy of the black woman, his body used to breed children for wealthy women, his seed going to the highest bidder each night, infuriated him to the point of mindlessness. He had struggled so violently against his bonds, the healer had sedated him.

When he came to, he found himself alone in the sweltering heat of the warehouse, dread his only companion.

Hanging there, waiting to see who was coming out of the shadows toward him, Conar knew a helpless fury that turned in his gut. As he caught sight of her tall, chunky frame bearing down on him, he threw back his head and roared with rage.

“He doesn’t seem particularly happy to see you, Sabrina,” Harim, the man Conar had come to realize was the slave warden, teased her. “I think he’s found out what you intend to do to him.”

Sabrina frowned at Hiram. “Who would have told him?”

Harim shrugged. “The physician, most likely.”

Conar lowered his head and if looks could have killed, would have reduced the woman looking back at him to cinders. He pulled on his restraints, his legs irons rattling, and growled deep in his throat.

“Lower him, Harim,” Sabrina told the slave warden. “Such a position has to be uncomfortable.”

Uncomfortable? Conar sneered to himself. Agonizing was more like it, bitch! He wondered what kind of restraints she would be forced to use on him to get him ready for her clients. That she would have to immobilize him, chain him spread-eagled to the bed, had probably not occurred to her yet.

Harim stared into the hot gaze which raked over him as he entered the holding cell. Not for the first time was he glad a slave could be confined in such a manner. This one, he had no doubt at all, would have gone for his jugular. He carefully lowered the yoke until the blond man was seated on the floor.

“Better she bought you than Prince Guil,” Harim quipped. “If you think you had known the lash before, you would think again.”

“Prince Guil will never lay hands on him,” Sabrina snapped. “No one touches what is mine.”

The slave’s menacing snarl behind the gag made Harim chuckle. “I don’t believe he cares to hear himself defined as yours, Sabrina.”

The Lady Sabrina shot the slave warden another cautionary look then turned her full attention on Conar.

“Will you behave if I have Harim remove your gag?” Sabrina asked as she also came into the cell. Her expression did not change as the man glaring back at her narrowed his eyes to thin slits of fury, nor did she jump as he tried to kick out at her with his chained foot.

Harim squatted down and drew up the link of chain that hung between the two leg irons, effectively bringing the slaves legs together and hobbling him. The action brought another roar of hatred from behind the gag.

Sabrina sighed. “All this could be avoided if you would just be good.” Her comment was

rewarded with a low, menacing growl of promise.

"He doesn't know the meaning of the word," Harim quipped.

"You're going to have more trouble with him that you bargained for, Sabrina," Kharis told his mistress from outside the holding cell. He was watching the slave's hatred growing as that sapphire stare bored into his mistress.

The black woman shook her head. "No, I'm not." Her lips twitched when the gagged man vigorously nodded his head as though to prove her wrong. She swept her skirts aside and knelt in front of him. "No, I am not and do you want to know why I am not?"

Because you're going to lash me? Conar snarled at her. Well, go ahead and do it! I've been turned inside out by the best, bitch. Or you can let these two beat me senseless and it won't make any difference at all. I'll just spit in your ugly face. Give it your best shot then I'll give you mine!

"They tell me you don't know who you are. Is that true?" she asked him, cocking her head to one side when his brows drew together in confusion.

He stared at her, her question taking him off guard.

"They say you've lost all memory of who you are."

He wondered at the game she was playing with him. Did she really know who he was? Could she help him piece together the jumble of incoherent pictures which flooded his mind? Could she help him make sense of the faces and sights he saw when he closed his eyes?

"If you will promise me you will behave, I will have Harim remove the gag and we will talk." She smiled warmly at him. "Will you do that?"

He thought about it for a moment and then almost imperceptibly nodded his head, wary of her motives and disliking the look on her dark face.

"Good," she said and looked up at the slave warden. "Hiram?"

Harim could not help but admire the color of the man's hair as he untied the gag. Even with the sweat and grime which turned it lanky, the flaxen thickness would bring a high price at the breeding farm. Combined with the color of the man's strange eyes, there would not be a slave owner within a thousand miles who would not want to have this man's offspring in his household. And if that owner should find out who the man really was

The gag came off and the words came tumbling out before he knew he was even going to speak.

"I don't like being owned by a goddamned woman!"

Sabrina's face showed her surprise, then her amusement. "From what I know of you, I would imagine not."

He clenched his jaw, hissing his warning at her through his teeth. "And I will not be a goddamned st ..."

His lips pulled back. "A goddamned st" His breathing was shallow and forced. "A st"

"A stud," Harim finished for him and was rewarded with the blond man swinging his furious face up at him. He grinned. "A stud."

"Harim," Sabrina warned, looking at him with disapproval. She then found herself the object of that outraged glower.

"I won't do it!" Conar fairly screeched at her. "I'm no seed boar, woman!"

"I have not said you would be," Sabrina reminded him in a calm voice.

"And I'm damned sure not going to be your plaything, either!" He bellowed at her. "Or any other woman's!"

"Have I told you that was what I wanted of you?" she asked.

He snorted. "I know what you are."

“Be careful,” Harim advised him, unperturbed at the vicious look the slave aimed his way.

“Are you not curious to know who you are?” Sabrina asked, wanting to get the man’s mind off what he had been contemplating.

“Aye, I’m curious!” he ground out. “If I’ve got family, they’ll pay you for my return.”

“Really?” Kharis asked, highly amused. “Have you any concept of how much the lady paid for you?”

“They’d pay it,” Sabrina commented. “And more to get him back.”

Kharis stared at her. “You are joking!”

“She’s serious,” Harim answered him. He studied Sabrina. “But unless I miss my guess, she has no intention of letting them know where he is.”

Conar swung his angry gaze from the slave warden to the woman. “Why not?”

“Because I owe a debt and I intend to see it paid,” she answered, enigmatically.

“To who?”

Sabrina stood up and adjusted the folds of her skirt. “You don’t need to know that right now.” She ignored his furious snarl and looked up at Harim. “As much as I hate to request it, Harim, I think perhaps you should sedate him again. He”

“No!” Conar bellowed at her. “Damn it, no! I won’t be drugged again, you filthy bitch. I will not”

Harim lashed out and clamped his hand over Conar’s mouth, shutting off the enraged shout. “You have no say in the matter, slave.” Despite the wild movement of the man’s head, Harim kept his grip, turning his attention up to Kharis. “On the table, there by the window. There is a bottle of purple fluid. Bring it here, please.”

Conar knew an insane moment of primal fear that he could not explain at the mention of ‘purple fluid’. Something dark shuddered inside him, warning him, but he was helpless to fight back as the woman’s helper came into the holding cell and poured the amount ordered by the slave warden.

“You’ll have to help me with him, Kharis.”

Despite his struggles, his head was pulled back, his chin cupped, and the helper pried his jaw open with a hard, unrelenting hand whose thumb had hooked down over his back teeth to keep his jaws open as the slave warden poured the foul tasting potion into his mouth.

Kharis grinned as he clamped the slave’s mouth shut, bracing his chin as he watched the look of distaste flow over the angry countenance.

“Swallow it,” Harim demanded. He knew the man was holding the potion in his mouth. He pinched the slave’s nostrils shut. “Swallow it or suffocate. It’s your choice, my friend.”

Sabrina watched as the blond man’s face began to turn red with his effort to keep from digesting the potion. But finally his throat constricted and his eyes snapped shut in defeat as the tenebre shot down his throat.

“It is for your own good,” she told him gently. “I can not afford to have you try to escape before I get you back to the farm.”

Chapter Fifty-Two

They had turned the ship around as soon as it became known Conar McGregor was not on board. A thorough search had been made of the vessel, from stern to bow, deck to hold, but there was no trace at all of the Serenian. What they had found, though, had been a small puddle of dried blood on the aft deck, a smear of it on the larboard topgallant rail and in the fore-hatch, evidence of a stowaway.

"Where is he?" Catherine had cried on Sajin's shoulder.

The Kensetti prince had not been able to answer. His arms had tightened around the sobbing woman, holding her to him, relishing, despite the reason he did so, the feel of her against him.

"We'll find him, Cat," he had promised.

But that had been two days before and there was no trace of Conar McGregor between the point where the ship had come around and the harbor at Bolgaston from where they had disembarked the Outer Kingdom.

"What are we going to do?" the ship's captain asked Sajin as they prepared to leave the ship. He glanced at the silent, grieving woman being supported by the Kensetti princess.

"What can we do?" Sajin asked. His eyes were haunted. "There is no doubt he was thrown overboard. If he was dead when they" The nomad flinched. It had taken him a lifetime to find a friend like Conar McGregor and only a day to lose him.

"Your Grace?" the ship's first mate called out. Sajin glanced around. He saw the man pointing to a carriage pulling up on the dock. "It bears the royal coat of arms, Highness."

How was he going to tell Tzar Thomas? What possible explanation could he give for Conar's disappearance? He turned to look at Catherine, flinched again as he saw her tearful face and trembling lips.

"I have something I need to tell you, Highness," the captain started to say but Sajin cut him off.

"It can wait." He squared his shoulders and turned his attention to the men getting out of the royal coach. Even from that distance he recognized the Tzar and his eldest son.

"Something's wrong, Father," Peter said, shading his eyes as he watched Prince Sajin helping Cat into the longboat. "I don't see Conar."

The Tzar felt a cold finger of premonition scrape down his spine. When the ship had been spotted, a runner had come to the palace at break-neck speed. There was no adequate explanation why the Kensetti ship should have come back so soon.

"Thomas?" Charlotte had asked, fear already forming on her lovely face.

"I'll go see," her husband had said, patting her hand. "Maybe Conar developed the fever again."

"There would have been no reason to bring him back here, Father," Mikel said. "They could treat him just as well in Kensett."

Standing there, watching the longboat being rowed to shore, focusing on the worried look on Sajin's face, the blank look on the man's sister's face and the bowed head of his own daughter, the Tzar knew something terrible had happened. It did not take Sajin coming up to them on the dock and actually saying the words.

"How?" the Tzar asked, reaching out to grip the Kensetti's shoulder.

"We don't know for sure," Sajin answered, "but we believed he was murdered and thrown overboard."

Peter gasped. "Murdered? By whom?"

Sajin shook his head. "We think there was a stowaway on board. There's evidence of it, but whoever it was, he's not on board now."

"How could this have happened?" the Tzar asked, disbelief crossing his face. "And how could his assassin have left the ship without you knowing it?"

"We think there must have been two of them. One probably held him while the other" He tore his gaze from the Tzar's. "There could have been a boat waiting for them. They could have slipped overboard and swam to it without us noticing."

"Far fetched," the Tzar mumbled. He narrowed his gaze. "Have you questioned your own men, Ben-Alkazar?"

Sajin stiffened. "You know that I have."

"Not one of Sajin's men would have had anything to do with McGregor's disappearance," Sybelle said as she joined the men. Her arm was tight around Catherine's stooped shoulder. "I suggest you let all this talk go for now and get Catherine to a physician. She has not spoken a word since early yesterday morning."

Peter reached out for his sister, took her unprotestingly into his arms. He looked over her head at his father.

"Go on," the Tzar said. "I'll ride back with Ben-Alkazar."

Gently helping his silent sister to the coach, Peter supported her sagging body, speaking to her in a soft, gentle voice meant to ease her pain.

"There is no hope he is still alive?" the Tzar asked, searching Sajin's face for an answer he hoped to find.

Sajin shook his head. "I don't believe so."

Sybelle took her brother's arm. "His destiny was sealed before you ever met him, Sajin. Be happy that you knew him if for only a short while."

All the way back to the Outer Kingdom palace, Sajin stared out the coach window, his expression one of intense grief. He did not feel his sister's gentle touch as she patted his thigh or hear the low conversation between her and the Tzar. He felt numb, drained. In the back of his mind, he told himself there should have been something he could have done. That somehow he was responsible for what had happened to his friend.

If you hadn't taken him with you, an inner voice chastised him, Conar would still be alive.

The Kensetti closed his eyes and leaned his head against the window's framework.

"I'm sorry, Conar," he whispered, wanting to cry and knowing he could not. "I let you down, my friend."

* * * *

Storm Jale bent over and threw up, not surprised to see stringy strands of blood in the vomitus. They'd given him a beating the day before that had made him piss bloody urine. His kidneys were on fire and his belly so sore he could barely stand erect.

"Get your lazy ass back to work!" one of the keepers shouted at him.

Straightening up, Storm stared hopelessly across the wavering sands of the desert. There was nothing for miles around them except the pyramid being erected behind him. He let out a tired, despondent sigh.

"You let me down, Conar," he whispered. "I thought you would come, but you haven't."

"You, there!" came the furious shout. "Get back to work!"

Storm's shoulders sagged. "Alel, help me," he prayed.

He barely felt the sting of the lash as it wrapped itself around his bare chest.

* * * *

He came to inside the confining heat of a moving wagon. His wrists were manacled to the wood above and behind his head and his ankles to the floorboard of the wagon. His head was hurting and he had the godawful taste of the tenerse still in his mouth.

Tenerse? he thought idly. How come I know what it was they gave me?

Because you've had it before, fool, he heard himself answer.

He was hungry. Starving, actually. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten, but he knew it hadn't been in the last two days. His stomach was rumbling and his head throbbing from lack of nourishment and he wondered if they intended to starve him.

With a jerk, the wagon stopped and he heard voices outside the canvas side to his right, then the back of the wagon dipped and the woman climbed on.

"You're awake," she said, smiling.

He glared at her, hating her with every ounce of awareness in his body.

"Are you thirsty?" she asked, holding up a gourd. "It's fresh spring water."

"Combined with what?" he sneered.

She smiled. "Poison, but it's chilled." She arched a thin black brow. "Interested?"

His lips pulled back over his clenched teeth. "Why the hell not?"

She slipped her hand behind his neck and lifted his head, brought the thick rim of the gourd to his lips and allowed him to drink.

The water was cool, tasteless, odorless. He hoped with every fiber of his being it wasn't laced with something that would put him back into the mindless slumber into which he'd fallen earlier that day.

Sabrina gently lowered his head and set the gourd aside. "Are you ready to listen to me?"

"Do I have a choice?" he snapped.

"Your name is Conar McGregor," she told him. "Conar Aleksandro McGregor." She watched for any reaction the name might have on him, but there was only a brief smirk from his expressive mouth.

"Stupid name," he pronounced. He didn't know if what she said was true, but he didn't like the name, anyway and he told her so.

"It means 'black-winged scavenger' in Oceanian," she informed him, again searching his face for a response.

"Idiotic name. I don't care for it." He sniffed disdainfully.

Sabrina shrugged. "Then let's call you something else," she answered.

His gaze narrowed with suspicion. "Like what?"

She thought a moment then her face lit. "How about Khamsin?"

That didn't sound so bad. "What does it mean?"

She could see interest in his eyes for the first time. "In the language of the Inner Kingdom it is a hot southerly wind." She laughed. "Your temper is as hot as they come, my friend. I think the name suits you."

He shrugged. "Call me whatever you want." He fused his gaze with hers. "I don't have to answer if I don't want to."

"No, you do not," she agreed. She leaned back against the wagon's side rail. "Shall I tell you about yourself, Khamsin?"

He was dying to know what she could tell him, but somehow didn't think letting her know he was all that eager was such a good idea. It was hard to feign indifference, but he gave it a try.

"Do whatever you want."

Sabrina studied him for a moment, seeing through the guise of his unconcern. The man was exactly as he'd been described to her--arrogant and insolent and supremely churlish, but there was a vulnerability there that touched her deeply. He had no notion of who he was and that knowledge was a thorn in his side.

"Are you going to just sit there and stare at me?" he sneered. "Or are you going to tell me who the hell I am?"

Arrogant? Sabrina thought. The man was more than arrogant. He was downright surly. Then again, she'd heard him described that way on more than one occasion.

"Let me show you something," she said, reaching into the pocket of her skirt. She withdrew a packet of what appeared to be letters wrapped with a blue ribbon. She held them up. "This is how I know you."

Conar looked at the small packet of parchment and then looked back at her. "Letters?"

She nodded and laid the packet in her lap to untie the thin blue ribbon. "Letters from someone very close to you."

"Who?" he growled.

She picked up the first letter and unfolded it. "I will read it to you."

Sabrina took a deep breath and then began to read to him the contents of the letter.

* * * *

"My dearest friend,

I finally took your advice and journeyed to Serenia. It is as I have always heard it described, beautiful and wild. The people there are friendly, although somewhat suspicious of strangers, but once they get to know you, they accept you with open arms.

I know you are anxious to know if I have met him. Aye, I have, and in a way that I am sure you would not approve of."

Sabrina glanced up to see that sapphire gaze staring at her with boredom. "This letter is written about you."

His thick brows drew together.

"I had been told by one of his men that he would be at a certain tavern on a given day and it was there to which I traveled, hiding myself in the loft of the stable where his horse was boarded."

Conar looked up from the letter to the woman.

"The tavern was called the Hound and Stag," Sabrina told him. "Does that mean anything to you?"

He shook his head irritably.

"It was not long before he came out to the stables and I could tell from the look on his face, a face even more handsome than I had imagined it"

The black woman glanced up to see a smug look on her companion's face. She snorted gently and continued to read.

"... there was to be trouble."

* * * *

"Who's writing this letter?" he asked.

Sabrina shushed him.

“Three men entered the stable not long after him and I began to realize they were there to rob him. A mistake on their parts since Conar had no intention of letting them take anything that is his.”

“Damned right,” he muttered.

“You can not imagine how brave he is, Sabrina. He took them all on, single-handed.”

Sabrina lowered the letter and arched a brow at him. “Not a particularly intelligent thing to do on your part, do you think?”

Conar shrugged. “Obviously I won.”

She answered his shrug. “With help.” She seemed to scan the letter until she found the part she wanted. “Here. This I like.”

“He didn’t see the pitchfork coming at him. If I had not been there, he would have died. As it was, my dagger barely made it into the bastard’s throat before he could ventilate Conar’s back.”

Sabrina looked up and saw her companion’s scowl. “Four against one are rather mighty odds, don’t you agree?” At his nod, she continued.

“I killed two men for him that day, Sabrina, and wounded another. One escaped and I pray for his sake he never shows his face around me again for I will be inclined to make him pay for trying to hurt my beloved.”

“Beloved?” Conar repeated.

Sabrina put the letter down. “Yes. This was written by your intended, Liza.” She smiled as confusion spread over his face. “It goes on to tell how you and she travel to a keep owned by your brother and then on to another tavern where you” She lowered her eyes. “Made her your woman.”

Conar stared at her, watching her re-fold the letter and lay it down beside her. As she unfolded another parchment, one much smaller than the first, his mind was working furiously.

“Liza?” he asked, the name meant nothing to him.

Sabrina nodded and held up the smaller parchment, putting it close to his face so he could read it. “This is your wedding invitation.”

He jerked his head away. He glared at her around the obstruction of the parchment she held. “My what?”

“Read it,” Sabrina sighed. When he refused to look at the parchment held in front of him, she rattled it. “Go on, Khamsin. Read it.”

Cautiously he tore his gaze from her and let it settle on the parchment, drawing his head back some to focus on the elaborately scrolled letters. She pulled the parchment back, adjusting the distance for him and he was able to read it.

“The King and Queen of Oceania request the pleasure of your company at the nuptials of their firstborn daughter, the Princess Anya Elizabeth, to the firstborn son of His Majesty, King Gerren McGregor of Serenia, Prince”

He slowly lifted his eyes from the page and stared at Sabrina with his mouth open.

The black woman nodded, lowering the page. “You are Prince Conar Aleksandro McGregor.”

He snapped his mouth shut, his furious stare boring into her. “Who the hell do you think you are, woman? I don’t know what your game is, but”

“Elizabeth was a very good friend of mine,” she interrupted him. “We took our initiation into the Daughterhood on the same day. She meant more to me than any woman I had ever met and her letters to me were like warm rays of sunshine.”

"I am not royalty," he shouted at her. "Look at my back and tell me different!"

Sabrina jerked up another letter and quickly unfolded it, ignoring his outburst.

"Sabrina,

They have found him guilty and have sentenced him to a public lashing and then exile. I can only pray they will allow me to accompany him. If they do not, I will find a way to join him even if it means moving heaven and earth to do so."

Looking deeply in his eyes, Sabrina hoped her explanation would jiggle his memory. "They whipped you that day in the Tribunal Square. Whipped you so badly even your own physician thought you had died. Liza was inconsolable, taking to her bed for days on end because she could not cope with your loss. There was no way any of your family could know that the Domination had only made it appear that you had succumbed to the beating. They used magic to make everyone believe you were dead and they transported you to the Labyrinth Penal Colony where you spent five years of your life hidden away."

Something leaped in his memory and then fled before he could catch it. He remembered fragments of his imprisonment--the hot, arid sand, the back-breaking labor, the punishments on the uprights, so what she was telling him made sense to him.

"What had I done?" he asked.

"They say you hired men to kill your father so you could gain the throne."

"I'll see you in your grave before I allow you to take away my birthright!"

Conar shivered, that memory jumping up to haunt him.

"You did not," Sabrina told him, reading his thoughts. "You loved your father. Liza told me you threatened him, but you would not have carried out the threat."

He shook his head, wanting to remember, needing to, but nothing seemed to be there. He looked up at her.

"Does she know I'm alive?"

Sabrina smiled sadly at him. "You came back from the Labyrinth a different man, Khamsin. You were angry, distrustful and you brought back with you a hatred for Liza that nearly destroyed the both of you."

His face showed his confusion. "Why?"

"Because, thinking you dead, she fell in love with your brother, Legion."

"Legion." The name on his tongue seemed to mean something, but he could not hold on to it. He let it slip away. "Surely I didn't blame her for wanting to be happy if she thought me dead."

Sabrina nodded. "Oh, but you did. It was not until much later that you forgave her."

He looked away from her, not liking the portrait of him she was painting. "Where is she now?" he asked. When the woman didn't answer, he turned back to her and found her eyes glistening. "What?" he asked, afraid to know.

Sabrina unfolded the last letter in her lap. It took her a moment, a moment in which the man across from her stared at her with a look that told her he really didn't want to hear what was in the letter, before she could speak.

"My most cherished friend,

We leave for the Abbey at first light. Although this confrontation between my beloved Conar and Tohre has been a long time in coming, and unavoidable, it is with a heavy heart that I accompany him.

I shall not return from the Abbey, Sabrina."

His heart thudded in his chest. He shook his head. "I don't want to hear anymore."

Sabrina re-folded the letter. "She drowned in the Maelstrom."

There was a bleak look of hopelessness on his face. "Did I not try to save her, Sabrina?" he asked, using her name for the first time.

She nodded. "It took four men to drag you away from the ledge, Khamsin. Four men to keep you from plunging to your own death alongside Liza and your brother, Brelan."

He closed his eyes and lowered his head. "I don't remember any of it."

"You will," she said gently, reaching out to touch his shoulder.

He lifted his head. "How did I get here? What happened to me?"

Her fingers caressed his shoulder. "At the end of her last letter to me, Liza asked a promise of me. The woman was good at her craft, Khamsin, an adept of the highest order. She could look into the divining pool and see into the future. She knew our paths, mine and yours, would cross one day, and she bid me protect you as she would have." She moved her hand to his scarred cheek. "And I shall with the last breath in my body, sweet wind."

"Sabrina, I ..."

She shushed him with her fingertips. "I am going to unchain you and I want you to rest. Are you hungry?"

Despite the turmoil boiling inside his head, he nodded. "I'm famished."

"Then I'll have Kharis bring you something to eat."

She took a key from her pocket and slipped it into the wrist lock at his right hand, then unlocked his left.

Conar chaffed his wrists and looked at her with puzzlement. "Aren't you afraid I'll try to escape?"

"Where will you go, Khamsin?" she inquired. "We are miles from Asaraba and miles still from my keep beyond the Nilus. I have told you I mean you no harm. The only way I could protect you, that I could return you unharmed to Serenia and your people, was to buy you."

"I will pay you back," he vowed.

"I know," she answered. "But until I can arrange safe passage for you, well cleared of any problem with Prince Guil ..."

"The man who bid against you?" At her nod, he frowned. "He hates me, doesn't he?"

Sabrina sighed. "Yes, and I don't understand why, but it doesn't matter. I will not allow him to harm you, Khamsin." Her eyes hardened. "I made a vow to Elizabeth McGregor!"

Chapter Fifty-Three

Rasheed Falkar's back was crisscrossed with stinging, burning lash marks and just sitting in the saddle was an agony he would have foregone the pleasure of having had it not been for the knife his master had placed at his throat.

"We will have to go after that infidel dog, Falkar!" the Prince had yelled at him. "And when we do, I will give you one more chance to redeem yourself."

"McGregor is not to die," Prince Jaleel interrupted. "I want him alive."

Rasheed had agreed, thanking the Prophetess once more for saving his miserable life. He would do everything he could to make sure McGregor did not escape retribution again.

"How much further to the oasis?" Jaleel called out, gaining Rasheed's attention.

"Three miles, Your Grace," the servant answered. "They would have stopped there earlier this afternoon. We should catch up to them by midnight."

Jaleel nodded.

By midnight, McGregor would be in his hands.

"What will you do to him, Jaleel?" Guil asked.

Jaleel Jaborn smiled. "Take him back to Abbadon."

Guil whistled. "Why do I get the notion you don't intend to kill him right away, old friend?"

The smile on Jaborn's face grew vicious. "There are worse fates than death, Guil." His hands tightened on the reins. "And McGregor will have intimate knowledge of each and every one before I slit his worthless throat!"

* * * *

Sabrina stroked the pale blond hair and smiled, crooning softly to the man whose head lay in her lap. She smoothed the flaxen mane from his high forehead and caressed his lean cheek.

"Did you miss me, Sirocco?" she asked.

Chase Montyne nodded and nuzzled his cheek against her cool palm.

"It was him," she said, looking up from the handsome face of the Ionarian. "I knew it would be."

Her words meant nothing to him, but he grunted in question and saw her look back down at him.

"He doesn't know you're here." She watched as instant fear shot through the pale eyes of her bedmate. "No," she told him, soothing him. "He is a friend, Sirocco. An old friend of yours."

He grunted again, questioning.

"In the morning," she said. "I'll bring him in. Now that I know he means you no harm, I will let him see you. Perhaps your face will bring back his memory." She bent down to kiss his forehead. "And seeing him will bring back your voice, sweet wind."

Chase studied her face, thinking it the most beautiful he had ever seen. He reached up and cupped the back of her neck and drew her head down until their lips touched. Sweetly, gently, he caressed the dusky fullness.

Sabrina had known many men in her lifetime--had lain with more than she could count and be truthful with the sum. But never had she felt the depth of emotion the tender kiss this man gave her caused. She pulled her head back, looking down at him with wonder.

"Was that gratitude, Sirocco?" she asked.

Chase shook his head and drew her down to his lips again. His kiss deepened a fraction of a second before his tongue came out to probe inquiringly at her lips.

Sabrina opened her mouth to him.
As she opened her heart.

* * * *

Conar climbed out of the wagon, not really surprised to find no guards standing there to keep him from doing so. For a reason he could not fully explain to himself, he trusted the black woman even though she had opened a can of worms in his mind that were wiggling so furiously he could not sleep.

He walked around the wagon, out of sight of the campfire where the caravan drivers sat, and relieved himself. The night was chill, as desert nights always are, and he shivered as he stood there. Looking about it, all he could see was miles of dark sand stretching as far as he could see to his left and right. Glancing behind him, he saw the same. Beyond the top of the wagon, he could see palm trees.

“Did you get enough to eat, Khamsin?”

Conar jumped, not having heard the man called Kharis approaching. He quickly adjusted himself and turned to face the man.

“I can make do until morning,” he answered.

Kharis leaned against the back of the wagon. “Do not try to run away, Khamsin.” He flung out his hands. “There is nothing between you and safety for twenty miles. This is the last oasis before we reach the Nilus and there are asps and scorpions and jackals every foot of the way.”

“I have no intention of trying to escape,” Conar said, although the thought had briefly crossed his mind.

Kharis nodded. “That is good because”

Both men turned, hearing the loud, shrill war cry, both automatically crouching, reaching for weapons that neither carried.

“Quick!” Kharis shouted, reaching out to grab Conar’s arm. “Get back inside!” He pulled Conar around to the back of the wagon and tried to shove him inside.

“I need a blade, man!” Conar yelled at him.

“Kharis!”

Kharis swung his head around, seeing the dark shapes running through the encampment, hearing Sabrina’s frightened voice. He didn’t have time to stand here and argue with the Outlander. He had to get to his mistress.

Conar stumbled as the man pushed away from him. He stood there for only a moment before dashing after the man as he ran headlong toward the largest tent in the encampment.

“There!” he heard someone shout. “There he is! Get him!”

He spun around, seeing men running toward him, instinctively realizing they meant to apprehend him. He had no weapon on him to defend himself and realized his best chance was to make it to one of the horses tethered at the picket line. Digging his strong legs into the sand, he bolted for the animals.

“Catch him! Don’t let him escape!”

Sabrina stood in the doorway of her tent, the man she called Sirocco cowering in the far corner behind her. She watched Conar McGregor running for the horses, saw him fumbling with the reins of one sleek black mount, held her breath as he gathered a handful of the steed’s thick mane and swung himself up on the horse’s back.

“Go, Conar!” she yelled out to him, seeing him glance around at her for only a second before lashing out with his bare foot to kick an intruder in the feet. “Go!”

Chase heard the name and something stirred in his sleeping mind. He came slowly to his feet,

shaking his head, hearing Sabrina shout the name again.

“He’s getting away!” someone yelled from right outside the tent. “Get him! Get McGregor!”

Conar McGregor, Chase thought. Conar is out there and they are trying to hurt him. I have to help him. He looked about him, puzzled that his weapon was not nearby, vaguely confused for a moment at the strange-looking fabrics and furnishings of the tent. He heard a woman urging Conar to get away and, seeing her framed in the doorway of the tent, started toward her.

Sabrina’s eyes went wide in her face when her bedmate pushed past her, rushing out into the darkness. She saw him staring at Conar as that man struggled to get his horse away from the three men blocking him.

“Somebody give me a crossbow,” she heard her lover shout. “Damn it, hurry! Conar’s in trouble!”

Conar managed to get his mount turned, kicking out at two more men before there was a clear spot for him to head for. He dug his bare heels into the horse’s flanks and the animal shot forward, its powerful hooves digging into the sand.

“Milord?” a Hasdu guard yelled at Chase and held a crossbow out to him. “Do you know how to use it?”

Chase jerked the weapon out of the man’s hand and jammed a quarrel into the crosspiece, locked the bowstring and brought the weapon up, sighting it directly in the center of the back of the man who was at that moment bringing his own bow up to deliver an arrow into the horse beneath Conar McGregor.

“You can’t hit him from this distance,” Kharis shouted, seeing where the blond man was aiming.

“If I can’t, no one can,” Chase snarled.

Sabrina watched the archer go down, her lover’s quarrel buried deeply in his flesh. She saw Conar jerk on his mount’s reins, saw him racing the horse toward them, beating the reins against the horse’s front legs. She stared in open-mouthed wonder as the steed leapt high into the air, sailing over a low wagon, before crashing down only ten feet from her, its flashing hooves scattering the men who had overrun the camp.

“Go, Coni! Go!” she heard her lover shout.

“Get him! Shoot him if you have to!”

Conar looked back, saw a spear aimed at him, caught sight of a blond haired warrior leveling his bow at the spear carrier. The warrior looked familiar in the shifting glow of the campfire, but he didn’t have time to think long on it. He drummed his feet into his steed’s sides and the animal shot forward.

Chase brought down the spear carrier, but had no time to bring his weapon to bear on the archer whose quarrel arced through the air to strike Conar’s mount in the ribs.

“Damn it!” Chase bellowed, training his quarrel on the bastard who had shot Conar’s horse. The deadly missile zinged from the crossbow and buried itself in the man’s throat.

The steed stumbled, but regained its footing, its sides heaving as it dug craters in the loose desert sand. Conar knew it had been hit, could see the deadly tip of the missile wobbling as it stuck there in the horse’s side.

“Go, boy,” he begged the horse, leaning low over his steed’s neck. “Give it all you’ve got.”

Chase lowered his crossbow, panting deeply as he watched the horse and rider disappear into the night. All around him, the caravan men were battling the intruders, and winning, but three other horses had managed to gallop off in the same direction Conar had.

“Alel, protect him,” Chase muttered. He looked down as a gentle hand settled on his

shoulder. He shook his head. "I did all I could, lady," he told her.

"You gave him time," Sabrina answered. "No one else could have, Sirocco."

He took her in his arms and held her, his chin on the top of her head. "Pray Alel that it was enough time."

Sabrina held him to her, feeling his strong steady heartbeat, reveling in the comforting arms which held her. "Sirocco?" she questioned, drawing back her head to look up at him. He was still staring toward the place where Conar had disappeared.

"I'm all right, lady," he answered, not looking down at her. "I'm all right."

Epilogue

Once more into the Void, Conar thought as he raced his horse across the burning sands. Once more evil was close upon his heels but he was putting distance between them. He glanced back—determined to outdistance his pursuers. There was nothing ahead of him but blistering sand and nothing behind him except men determined to bring him down. It was but a matter of time before the brave animal beneath him gave out, for blood was pouring from the wound in the beast's side.

He could hear the laughter of Raphian—that pitiless Destroyer of Men's Souls—reverberating through his ears. Looking up to the heavens, he could not see that hideous monster but he could feel His wrath bearing down upon him and he knew escape wouldn't be so easy this time.