

The Black March

One

The little man pulled his robes about him furtively, adjusting the material of his turban so that it covered the lower half of his face. The dusty streets of the port city were crowded with people. Dark skinned, black eyed people who scurried from place to place, eager to be out of the harsh sun. Even in the shade it was hot here. There was no comfort. There was no winter.

Checking to see if any eyes followed his passage, the man slipped into the atrium of a thick sandstone dwelling. He rapped sharply at the door, twice. Almost immediately it was opened, and he found himself facing the intimidating stare of a black robed, black turbaned man. A host of similar men glowered at him from within, their dark faces, covered with thick beards, their eyes the only white within their countenance.

"Abu." From their midst a white robed man stepped forth. Portly, with gray streaking his dark beard. His face lined and almost brown, from many years in the harsh sun.

The little man, Abu, bowed respectfully, skirting past the door guard towards the white robed man. "Moulay Zainab, I have news." Abu said eagerly.

"What news?"

"The brother of the sea we hired to find the artifact has met with success. He will have it soon and be able to return. Within months- if that long - and it will be in your hands."

"Are you sure? If this is another false hope, my patience with you will be at its end."

"No. No. He sent word via a trusted comrade."

The Moulay's hard mouth turned up in a smile. His dark eyes glazed as he looked into his future. Abu knew not what he hoped to gain by this particular artifact he had spent mountains of gold and gems to find, but he supposed it would lead to power and wealth. If Abu could share in some part of it, he would be content.

"Soon, my faithful." The Moulay said, more to his men, than to Abu. "Soon and the way to the Black March will be opened again."

Abu didn't know why, but at the sound of that name, which he had never heard the Moulay utter before, he shuddered.

The wind off the ocean was starting to grow cold. Not frigidly cold as if it had swept down from the northern mountains where even summer was a chilly prospect, but more a subtle reminder that summer was long past and fall beginning to bleed in to the months of winter. It was never perilously cold on the coast below the northern divide. Even the winter was mild. Only freakish storms of unnatural natures might cast snow upon those bright, sandy shores.

Such a storm had hit, half a year past and though its ice had long melted, the wreckage of its passing was still a thing to be reckoned with. Kelededra had been hit moderately hard. It was the jewel of the coast, the sparkling center of wealth and luxury for folk from all across the lands. And even its red tile roofs and white marble villas had not been safe from the creeping ice. Buildings had toppled from the weight. People too stubborn to run had died, encased in ice. The lovely blue harbor had hosted floating ice and expensive yachts sunk to the bottom from their own frozen ballast. It was not a total loss. It had been a good distance from the center of the storm, on the out reaches of the devastation. But still it reeled. Its beautiful greenery destroyed, the lush forests outside its borders blackened by ice as badly as if fire had ravaged them.

Nature sprang back of course. The undergrowth eagerly thrived again to life. In months it was recognizable as a forest. The city almost livable again due to the industrious labors the wealthy hired to make it so.

The folk who drifted back to live in the tattered paradise were as wary of the wizard who had set up residence in the large villa at the far side of the cove as they were of more unpredicted turns of weather. None of the present residents recalled the day he had taken the city for his own. Plunder of war. He reminded them of his ownership with a decided lack of tact, sweeping down on Kelededra with a convoy of men at arms, servants and carts. He made a tremendous amount of fuss over the state of his villa. The skies darkened and stormed from the extent of his anger. He put his own followers as well as workers commissioned by other town patrons to work putting his estate in order. The town fathers were not at all happy with his disruptive and frightening presence, but his lady, who was not frightening or abusive charmed them into passive acceptance.

Most of the carts and servants and men at arms were here at the behest of the lady, who gathered friends and followers like a flower attracted bees. They followed her out of love. They followed her wizard out of a certain grudging respect and the desire to be on the winning side of whatever conflict he decided to engage in. He was after all, a most astoundingly powerful wizard.

It was a terribly good thing the servants - some eight of them - had decided to accompany the lady Yoko, from the chill northern city of Sta-Veron. The wizard, Schneider, sometimes called Dark Schneider, sometimes called Rushie or Darshe, sometimes called worse names uttered with the flavor of a curse, seriously thought he might not have been able to survive had he to eat Yoko's cooking. Yoko had a serious deficiency when it came to certain domestic things, cooking chief among them and Schneider had never bothered to cook a thing in his life. So her servants - which she named friends instead of underlings - were welcome. Them and the ten men at arms which the captain of the Sta-Veron guard had insisted go along to guard the carts of supplies Yoko had thought and wisely so, to take along had been put to good use fighting the ravages of the ice storm that had put the villa in such bad order.

Everyone in Kelededra called the storm a freak of nature or a curse from their elusive gods. Schneider knew better and narrowed his eyes occasionally, laying curses at the feet of those responsible. He had left a very nice villa and come back to one sagging and water logged. Yoko had seen it as a challenge. It gave her something to do, directing the restoration, sending out orders to towns further south up the coast for furnishings. She had discovered a great passion for decoration. She spent gold as if it were sand in the buying of domestic things.

She loved the ocean. She loved the white sand beaches. Her eyes when he'd first taken her down the path from the villa to the shore had grown huge and inspired from the rosy hues of sunset over the endless sea. It was worth it just to get that look out of her. Pleasing her had become addictive, something he needed to do to satisfy himself. An odd thing that, since he had never put anyone's pleasure above his own in the past. She made him do strange things and he found that it bothered him not. It didn't make him any more tolerant of the scurrying townsfolk, or the nobles and wealthy men who thought they were as good as he was. They weren't of course. His sense of self-worth had never been a thing to suffer a moment's doubt. He was the most powerful wizard in the world after all.

"I think you should go and make sure the rugs get here all right." Considering what he was, it was not a task he found suited to his status.

"But, Yoko -"

She was delicately picking through the bones of a poached fish. They sat out on the broad verandah overlooking the evening sea. Her long, reddish hair was caught up with a silk ribbon at her neck. Since she'd been recently replanting the flower beds around the villa she was dressed in boy's trousers and a dirty tunic. There was a smudge of black dirt by her nose. She looked charming. He never could look at her without wanting to tumble her. Even when she was screeching at him, or suggesting he perform menial tasks.

"They're very expensive rugs." She reminded him, pointing the prongs of her fork at him for emphasis. She had a thing for rugs, which he did not in the least share. He liked to walk on them, and had no hesitation to make love upon them, but what they looked like had never been a pressing concern.

"They're rugs." He sniffed. "They can get here on their own."

"The last shipment - which I remind you had all the fabrics I wanted to use for curtains and bed coverings, of which we only have the one set - was hijacked by pirates before it even got half way here. I really want those carpets. The merchant promised they were of the highest quality."

"But why do you want me to go? Send Kiro's men."

"They're retiling the roof. You certainly wouldn't stoop to doing that. *If* you even knew how. You do know how to keep pirates from stealing my rugs." Her voice turned a little sharp and she fixed him with a glare. He sat back sulkily, crossing his arms. He resented the claim that he couldn't fix a simple roof leak. Which, he had to admit, he most likely couldn't.

"It's only three day ride to Parthos. You were complaining of being bored anyway, remember?"

"I was not." He said automatically, then recalled that he had two days ago when he'd accompanied her into town to look for some drab household item. He'd tried to pick an argument with an overbearing noble, but the man was wise enough to keep far from confrontation. Schneider's reputation had spread the length and breadth of the town. Everyone deferred to him now. Yoko had bitched at him all the way back for being rude.

"Maybe you'll get lucky and pirates will try to hijack the shipment. Then you could get to destroy things. That always makes you happy. Its been months since the last batch of them tried to sack Kelededra."

Well, there was that prospect. He supposed there was some sort of informal system of communication among the buccaneers, because obviously the warning had been passed that Kelededra had a powerful protector. After two attacks earlier in the summer, not a single skull and cross bones had been seen cruising the waters around the city. Though they had been hitting up and down the rest of the coast. It was getting worse now, so the merchants said. With winter coming and the sea storms that accompanied it, whatever safe passages the pirates were using would be difficult to travel. They would go back to their elusive homeshore and wait out the winter storms, but in the meanwhile they seemed in a frenzy to reap all the rewards they could from the people of the coast before they were forced away.

"Well, maybe -" he said.

She smiled at him, looking like a dirty, beautiful urchin. There was an enticing smudge on the lobe of one delicate ear.

"You're filthy." He remarked, with a lazy grin. "How did I ever get saddled with a filthy girl?"

"Saddled?" she lifted both brows at him. "I'm sorry, but the more appropriate question is how did such a nice, honest girl like me get stuck with a blackguard like you. Besides, I was thinking about going down the shore and washing it off. You do want to come, don't you?"

The secluded shore below the villa was a favorite spot. The servants knew very well not to venture down when Schneider and Yoko were there. Schneider had made that abundantly and frighteningly clear the first time they'd been interrupted in an amorous position. It was a very private beach now.

Yoko shed her clothes and waded into the surf. It wasn't cold, even weeks into fall. He followed suit and helped her scrub off the dirt, then covered her in sand at the edge of the surf, the two of them rolling about like a pair of new lovers, even though they'd been sharing a bed for almost a year. They had to go back in to rinse off the sand.

She sat on her pile of clothes afterwards, wringing out her hair. His own dripped carelessly down his back, as long as hers, wet darkened silver against smooth bronze skin. He sat beside Yoko, sated for the moment and content to just feel the warmth of her shoulder against his. There had been a time when he'd shared this beach - this pretty villa and its spectacular view with another woman. He didn't know whether Yoko knew that this had been his and Arshes Nei's house, but he thought she suspected. She hadn't mentioned it. As long as it was past tense, Yoko would deal with it. She had made that abundantly clear. He had promised her he would not touch another woman. She had promised him that if he betrayed that confidence, he would loose her. He wasn't willing to risk that. He felt no need to with her in his arms. She was as hungry for his touch as he was for hers.

Well, almost. She was a woman after all. She could go a week, or a month or a year without it and not loose her mind. He doubted his own strength in that area if no other. Arshes had been the same way. Months, years sometimes used to separate them back when they were campaigning and he knew - absolutely knew - she hadn't slept with a single man until they

were reunited. Well, she had Gara now. He still wasn't entirely happy with the notion of the big ninja sharing her favors. He didn't think he'd be happy with the thought of anyone having Arshes' love other than himself. She was content at any rate, back in Sta-Veron. They had bandits to fight and the responsibility they both seemed to crave since the northern city had lost its lord to the charms of a traveling minstrel.

Irritating notion that. Kall-Su was completely lacking in wit, as far as Schneider was concerned. The girl was irksome and snide and in no wise on the level with the ice lord. Yoko said he was just being jealous, to which he had immediately and vehemently cried denials. She made no sense whatsoever. She would glare at him when she accused him of jealousy towards Arshes, which was justified, and smile when she claimed it of him over Kall, which was ridiculous.

"I wonder if winter has come early to Sta-Veron?" Yoko mused.

"Of course it has. It's a dreadful, cold place and we're well rid of it." It always snowed at least half a season early in the lands beyond the Northern Range.

"Oh, no it's not." Yoko poked him in the ribs with her sharp little elbow. "And I miss Keitlan and Setha and all the friends I made there. I miss Gara too, but I imagine he's happy as a clam with bandits to fight and - um - Arshes for company." Even Yoko knew not to bring that subject up too frequently.

He shrugged at the moment, too warm and content with her next to him to care. "I suppose."

"We can go back in the summer and visit, right. You promised."

"Did I?"

"Don't be an ass, Rushie. You know you did. Maybe Kall will have come back by then."

"Maybe." One might hope he'd healed enough to think he had justification to go back. Schneider knew very well Kall-Su wouldn't step foot back in Sta-Veron as long as he had no power to protect it. It was why he'd given it over to Gara and Arshes Nei. One hoped after all this time, the injuries induced by the damnable Prophet had begun to mend. One worried, even though to admit so was intolerable.

"Don't you like it here?"

"I like it here." She agreed.

Good. It was one of the few places he had left to him from the days of old. The rest were gone, destroyed by Anasla's final little spree of destruction, or taken over by the Alliance of Southern Kingdoms. He might take those few places back, if he wanted a fight. But Yoko would have fits. Better to let it rest for now. If boredom became too great of an encumbrance, he might rethink his options.

"The people here are a little stuffy." She admitted as an afterthought. He laughed outright.

"Let's put their heads on stakes."

She rolled her eyes at him, then reached around to pull his hair. It was fine and silvery white against her skin now that it was dry. He turned the motion into a kiss, pushing her down against the sand, pressing into the soft curves of her body. Her arms went around him, she rubbed her legs against his. It was pure bliss. Everything from the feel of her skin, to the taste of wine and spices on her tongue. Her inviting warmth was unbelievable - he never got tired of entering her, of possessing her, of giving to her of himself.

But of course it had to end. It always did, and the vast satisfaction he felt at the culmination of the act was always marred just a little by the disappointment that the sensations had drifted away.

It was getting dark now and the stars were beginning to shine in the night sky. The quarter moon was a distant arc over the ocean.

"You'll go tomorrow won't you? To get my rugs?"

Her hand was languidly stroking a now flaccid part of his anatomy. It perked with interest even after so recently being put to the test. She could be, he had decided some while back, as manipulative as he could, when she put her mind to it. It made for rather interesting times.

"I'll go." He sighed, allowing the manipulation.

The moon hung over the dark sea like the slitted pupil of a cat's eye. A thin string of clouds half obscured the lower edge. Tomorrow night it would be gone all together. The docks of Talmuth port were crowded with fishing skiffs and rafts. The smell of fish and crabs was overpowering. It reminded Kall-Su disturbingly of the fishing docks outside his childhood home. He hadn't liked the smell then either.

There was little choice in being in the little town. It was the next in line of a string of towns and villages along the coastal road that the minstrel's wondered to ply their trade. From what little coin they received in such poor little settlements, it hardly seemed worth their effort. But as the old master minstrel had preached, time after time, until one wanted to strangle him, it was not the gold that lured a bard to his trade. What lured Kall-Su, who certainly had better prospects, was one slim, dark haired harper girl, and the strange, but admittedly potent talent of the old man Selephio.

Without the old man - the cranky, irksome, rude old man - who had the voice of a mellow angle, Kall-Su might not be able to whisper a word and cause a breeze to wisp away the worst of the fishy smell coming in from the dock. He took great pleasure in doing it. Lily didn't notice, sitting next to him, her back to the table, watching the antics of a pair of drunken dancers in a space cleared of tables in the outside patio of a dockside tavern. Two of her minstrel cronies were playing a jaunty tune to which quite a few of the fisherfolk who lived in this town were kicking up their heels to.

Two months ago he hadn't been able to even summon a little elemental. Now he could hardly feel the edges of the scars. Oh, pouring out the power needed to control a big one made him a bit wary, but he thought with time it would be possible. The ice magic, the elemental magic came back the easiest. He had always had a rapport with the elements of cold. The other

magics, the ones that required different channels of power and different levels of skill were slower to heal. Healing was damned near impossible. He'd never been good at it anyway. He had a gash that was a little infected along the back of his hand even now that he'd gotten untangling Brawaith from a clump of nettles the horse had gotten himself caught in. Simple force spells, like levitation, implosion and explosion, anything that didn't rely on one of his elementals to carry out, were painful to work. He could feel the strain readily enough when he tested those waters.

And he tested them constantly. Enough to make himself sick sometimes, to make Lily frown at him in worry and the old man to just shake his head and remark caustically that if he pushed it too hard, any good his wishsing was doing, would be counteracted.

Sometimes Kall-Su just didn't care. He had gone too long without feeling powerful or in control of his own existence. He needed to feel the song of magic flowing throughout him as much as Lily or her harpers needed to hear the music of a lute's voice. He wanted to slip away, out from the town and flex his long dormant magical prowess now. He thought he could manage a greater summoning. He wanted to try and call *Ketheiro*, an ice elemental he held long association with. He'd been contemplating the attempt for the last two days, as he began to feel more and more sure of himself.

"Lily." He leaned forward and gently touched her shoulder. She turned her great dark eyes upon him, a questioning smile on her lips. "I think I'll ride out along the shore."

She frowned a little, knowing what he wanted solitude for. "Be careful." She said simply. She never harped. Though she worried, she trusted him without question. He loved her for it.

He let his hand trail down her arm to her hand, squeezed her fingers. He was by far too reserved to comfortably show more affection than that in such a public place. She was not so prim. She leaned forward and brushed his lips with hers, eyes sparkling.

"I'll wait up." She said and her look promised things that he still blushed about when openly discussed.

He weeded his way out of the press. His great bay warhorse, who had certainly seen more illustrious situations than this, waited patiently outside the tavern, hitched beside a swaybacked gelding and a long eared, evil tempered mule. Brawaith perked his ears and very eagerly broke into a canter as soon as they left the pitted streets of the portside town and set upon the trail that led along the bluff overlooking the ocean.

He rode a long ways, merely enjoying a brisk gallop with no ground bound harpers to slow him down. Miles and miles out from Talmuth, a distance safe enough so that if his play with magic went awry, no destruction would bleed over into the fishing town. He let Brawaith loose to graze, making sure there were no nettle patches near by for the foolish animal to wander into and sat on the sandy bluff, a great swatch of beach separating him from the noisy ocean.

He played at the small magics first, building concentration and renewing familiarity with the mental rituals that were necessary to control the larger ones. He had felt this last month or so, like a novice, just learning the byways and paths of wizardry. Gods, when he'd been twenty, some of these things had come easier.

Brawaith rustled in the marsh grass behind him, content and peaceful, only occasionally casting nervous glances at the magics his master conjured. The sky began to lighten perceptively, the moon fading with dawn, before he finally spoke the words of conjuring that would summon the ice elemental *Ketheiro*.

The air grew chill. Brawaith let out a little nicker of distaste and moved off a few paces, ears back and tail swishing. Something tested Kall's strength. There was the tautness of newly healed skin over a wound, but it was all in his head. All insubstantial and incorporeal. A swirl of sand and wind and something twice the height and width of a man hovered in the air before Kall. He remained sitting, hair whipping into his face, grains of blown sand getting into his eyes. A shield was an added strain, but he put one up anyway, not willing to be inconvenienced by this thing.

What do you want, little one? The voice sent cold lacing through his head. It was an ice elemental, after all. The elemental pivoted, taking in the place it had been called to. *I cannot make ice out of the brine of the ocean.*

"No." Kall-Su agreed. "It has been a long while since you bowed to our pact."

The face of the thing shifted, ice forming over ice, forming over ice. It pressed against the bonds of summoning magic that held it here. Kall felt the strain of it. They never went passively into submission, elementals. They tested the strength of their master's at every chance. Kall knew this one would. He welcomed it.

It rushed against him, and ice and snow formed in the wind. The marsh grass grew stiff with glittering ice crystals. Brawaith screamed his discontent and ran off a few lengths. Kall shut his eyes, summoning will and power and met the challenge. It was not a terribly huge one. He had not called forth one of the greater elementals. He was more than a little wary to do so, having had disastrous luck the last time, when he'd had more control of his powers than he did now. This was a moderate one at best. One that even if he lost control of, would not wreck havoc to more than its summoner. It could not overwhelm him. Its will, if not its innate raw power was not a match for his.

The wind subsided and the elemental hovered, complacent once more, before him. It held no hint of disgruntlement in its bearing. They never did. They accepted, and bowed down to a greater force. It was the way of nature. Kall sighed in satisfaction and waved a hand at it.

"I don't want anything. You can go."

No complaints for wasting its time. It merely faded away, the only sign of its passing a swirl of snow in its wake that was soon eaten up by the mild fall air.

He sat for a while longer, thinking about the next hurdle he might attempt. The rosy hue of dawn was dark to the south. The sky was almost red. It occurred to him after a moment, that dawn did not usually appear in that particular direction. The rosy hue that graced that horizon was accompanied by a thin cover of dark smoke. He rose, to get a better view, squinting against the distance. Talmuth lay in that direction.

A tingle of apprehension traveled up his spine. A premonition of ill omens. There was nothing between here and Talmuth to burn. Nothing but marsh grass and beach. But at such a distance,

for so much black smoke, if it were the fishing port, the whole of the town must have been up in flames. Two weeks ago, they had passed the charred remains of a tiny village, ransacked by pirates. Nothing but blackened corpses and shattered dreams had been left in the marauder's wake.

He whistled for Brawaith and grudgingly the stallion loped towards him, still wary of the scent of elemental presence. He swung up into the saddle and urged the horse into a gallop. Miles to travel and he was sorry he had let himself go so far out to practice his craft. It took by far longer to return than it had to leave. He kept hoping to pass a brush fire, but by the time he reached the bluffs overlooking Talmuth, that hope was dashed. He reined in Brawaith and looked down in dismay at a harbor full of burning ships, and a town smoldering with black curls of smoke and flames.

It appeared that Talmuth was the most recent victim of merciless pirate attack.

Two

Brawaith was not afraid of flames. He was bred for war and his ears pricked forward as Kall-Su reined him down into streets filled with smoke and blood and screams. A panicked ox stampeded past, an empty cart bouncing behind it. An old woman, clutching a crying child staggered out of the smoke. A man holding a profusely bleeding shoulder fell in the street behind her. Both their eyes were dazed.

Kall reined up next to the man, who was struggling to his feet and demanded. "What happened?"

He leaned down and grasped the man's good shoulder, pulling him up. "Marauders. They came out of the night. No warning."

He'd guessed as much. He had just needed to hear it confirmed. He headed towards the docks, and the place he had left Lily. It was not a large village. Perhaps a hundred folk had lived here. He passed the bodies of no few on the streets. Slaughtered men and animals. Houses put to the torch. The harbor was easy to find from the glow of burning boats. A man bodily carried a struggling child from the shattered door of a house. The screams of the child, calling desperately for its mother cut through the smoke and the crackle of flame. The swarthy skinned man held a knife dripping with blood in his free hand. No helpful neighbor saving an innocent, then. Kall hissed through his teeth, speaking the words of a blunt, simple ice spell.

The pirate's step faltered. His eyes widened a moment before they began to frost over, along with the skin of his face and the hair of his black beard. He toppled backwards, shattering and the child scrambled desperately free of the frigid remains. Kall didn't even slow Brawaith. The closer to the docks he got, the more dead. There was the occasional skirmish in the street. The occasional scream of a woman. A pair of men rutted like animals atop a shrieking young girl. They never noticed him coming.

He sliced the back of the one waiting his turn's head clean off, then when the other one looked up dumbly at the rider holding a blood smeared sword, sliced the man's throat. It was satisfying to give them their deaths at the edge of his sword. The girl feebly tried to pull her ripped clothing into place. There was little in the way of comprehension in her eyes.

"Don't sit there. Run." He snapped at her, fear beginning to eat at him. He could picture in his imagination Lily in the same position. He could picture worse things.

The row of taverns facing the piers were up in flames. He shouldered Brawaith past men that might have been fisherfolk, might have been pirates. He wasn't paying heed. He scrambled down from Brawaith at the place he thought they had been staying. The heat from the fire was intolerable. He held up a hand and thought to summon an ice elemental to quench it. A body on the street caught his attention. Blonde hair, rangy build. One of the minstrels. He ran over, flipped the body and recognized the harper Crayl under the blood leaking from a scalp wound. There was more blood on his tunic. Not dead though. The man moaned as he was moved and his eyelids fluttered.

Roughly, Kall shook at him, urging him back to awareness. When the bard's eyes opened weakly he demanded. "Where is she? Where's Lily?"

"I don't know. I -don't know. We were woken from sleep by the fire - everything was confused. When I came out onto the street - pandemonium. Someone stabbed me."

This last was said with an air of amazement. He laid Crayl back down, peering down the street for signs of other familiar forms

"I have to find her." He murmured, standing. Crayl made no reply, his eyes closed again. Down the dock he saw men forcing captives into a waiting longboat. There were other bound, huddled forms in the small craft. They were taking slaves, then. Through the smoke he could almost see the shape of a ship rocking in the choppy waters of the harbor, out beyond the burning fishing vessels.

He stalked through the smoke towards the dingy, eyes tearing from smoke, sword held loosely in one hand. A marauder saw him, cried out and rushed at him with curved sword held high. Kall spoke a brief incantation and something curled out of the thick haze bringing a chill with it that dampened even the heat from the flames surrounding them. An insubstantial cloud enveloped the pirate, pulling him into its pale core. The man had the chance to scream once before he was just gone. When the cloud moved on at Kall's bidding, there was a pile of brittle, frozen bones in its wake. He felt the strain of the spell though, but ignored it. He sent the ice fog towards the dingy, where the other waiting men looked up, attracted by the scream of their fellow and the movement of a lone swordsman towards them. There were whimpers and cries from the hostages at the bottom of the boat. Children and women mostly, but a few young men.

The ones that came at him died within the tendrils of his creation. The others made odd signs and uttered words in a language he did not know. They made to cast off, hoping to put water between him and them.

"No." He said simply. He sent his cloud of death to selectively envelope each of the pirates until there was nothing in the bobbing boat but the frightened forms of their captives. He peered down into it, looking for a familiar face.

"She's not there." A watery voice said from behind him. He whirled and faced the old man - the master harper Selephio who was mainly responsible for the mending of his magic. The old man wavered in his step, his hand clutching his narrow stomach, darkness welling out from

between his fingers. It trickled from the side of his mouth and down his chin. There was death in his eyes. But along with it, the stubborn pride that he had held in life.

"Where?" Kall choked the word out, dreading the answer.

"They took her. Took some of the boys, too. Bards are prized catches for the slavers, you know."

"Gods." Kall whispered, feeling sick, glancing out into the smoke obscured harbor. "Is she on that ship?"

"More than one ship, boy. If you sink them - make certain you don't send our folk down with them - will you?" The old man's knees gave out and he sank to the slick planking of the wharf. "I think - you'll have to finish your healing on your own - the girl will help - when you find her. And don't forget the hall. Remember your promise." Then his eyes rolled back and he fell face forward onto the dock.

Kall stared at him a moment, then turned his attention towards the sea. Before he could even contemplate sinking a ship, he had to get to it. He hadn't attempted a Raven spell since he'd been crippled. It was elemental in nature, but not of the icy sort. He had everything to lose if he didn't try. He uttered the words, actually felt the power churning through the channels that directed magic, felt a little resistance, a little strain that started his head to aching. But the wind came and lifted him up. He was too intent on the ship, with its square black sails to relish the feeling. In the pale distance the shapes of two more ships, already a good ways out to sea could be seen.

If she were on one of them - gods he hated the ocean. Men lined the shoreward rail of the closer vessel, peering through the dawn light for sign of their longboats returning with plunder. There were captives on the deck, and goods looted from the town. Gazing at the water they hardly saw him descend from the air. He called the cold fog from the shore, and met with resistance. The primal intelligence that dwelled at its core did not want to cross the water. It abhorred the salt. He hissed in irritation. It had been useful and biddable on land and no strain at all. With each spell he used he felt the effort. There were limits to be conscious of now that he had not had before.

But he wasn't at them yet. There was enough condensation in the air to pull all the fuel he needed for ice based devastation. He whispered the words of a creation spell even as he sat down on the lower deck where the prisoners were. The moist air swirled, coalescing into something solid. An ice beast stood splay legged on the deck, wolf-like in shape, but shoulder high and deathly silent in its movements. The pirates hardly noticed Kall-Su when the beast lunged towards the closest one. Kall-Su paid the tearing and ripping of flesh, the screams of fury and pain no attention at all, stalking among the prisoners, looking for Lily. He cut the bonds of a woman who held her wrists out pleadingly and asked if there were more prisoners below decks. She shook her head negatively. There were perhaps ten folk here. He told her to free the others and take to the waters, for he had every intention of crippling this ship.

The ship began to list from the added weight of ice coating its surfaces. The main mast snapped from the weight of sails gone rigid and ponderous with ice. As he called the wind again to lift him into the air, he heard a foreign voice scream out.

"Devil! The Brother of the Sea will avenge us."

He glanced down and saw a desperate brigand shaking a fist in the air at him, then the man jumped overboard with the fleeing prisoners to escape the attack of the ice beast.

It was a fair distance to the other ships. Their dark sails were full of wind and the morning tide drew them out into the depths of the sea. Kall could feel the insulation of the ocean the further out he got. It was a buffer between him and the solid land where he felt most comfortable. Even supported by the winds he could sense the ponderous roll of waves. It misplaced his equilibrium.

He crafted a spell as he went, something similar to the one he'd used to damage the first ship. If they went down, he needed them to sink slow enough to find Lily. The magic swirled around him. The wind began to pick up. It buffeted him, vying against the winds of the raven spell that kept him airborne. It was not a wind of his making. The seas began to get choppy, the skies to blacken. Where dawn had loomed pale on the horizon, dark clouds now gathered out of nowhere. He could barely see the ships, the clouds were so heavy and the sea so suddenly gray. He dropped lower to better spy them out, feeling as he did the brush of a strange power against him. He hadn't expected that, and hastily erected barriers.

Between him and the closest ship, perhaps a thousand yards of turbulent sea remained. In the midst of that, a great dark wall rose up. A monsoon wave that blocked out ships and sky and ocean with its raging blackness. He cursed, barely having time to strengthen the shields around him before it crashed down over him like the fist of a giant. He plummeted, smashed into the ocean, driven down, down and down into murky gloom. The water enclosed him, seeming to press against his shield, trying to destroy it - to get to him safe within it.

He panicked, immersed in the water where the wind could not lift him up, bereft of the simple levitation spell he might have used to escape by the still healing channels in his head. He cried out the words to a powerful cleaving spell. The surge of raw power burned in his head, building and hurting like hell until he released it. A sudden, enormous onslaught of energy smashed through the waters surrounding him. The ocean split, water surging back as some great sword had slashed through it. It was still shallow enough at this point that silt from the bottom geysered up and littered the surface of the water. The ships in the distance rocked from the reverberations. In the brief seconds he was free of water he called the winds back and shot upwards, dizzy and disoriented from using more power than he reasonably should have.

The sea still raged against him. An ocean storm whipped wind and water in a maelstrom between him and the invisible ships. He thought another monsoon wave reared in the darkness before him. It crashed against him and this time he managed to make it break around him, but it weakened his shields. Water got past, and wind laced with hard pellets of hail. His storm against theirs, only theirs was fed by the sea, over which they all existed. The sea was a wild, furious force and it slapped at him, drawing him down. He thought if he went under again, he might not come back up. No choice but to flee back towards shore - be driven there by the monsoon. He would do her no good if he were dead.

The wagon had hit a rut and the axle cracked. The three wagoneers had offloaded all of Yoko's precious carpets and other various and unknown items she had ordered to fix it. It was past dawn and they had yet to mend the damned thing. Schneider sat on the grass under a stooped and twisted tree, picking at his immaculate nails with the tip of a dagger. The wagoneers kept casting wary glances his way. They were either scared of him or they resented him for not offering a hand. He could have cared less either way. He did not wish to be here anyway. And very much like mending roofs, his talents lay in areas other than wagon repair.

His horse grazed nearby, not having an opinion either way as long as fodder was provided. Schneider stretched out his legs, resenting three nights spent out in out of the comfort of his villa, which was just becoming comfortable again. Three nights not spent in Yoko's arms. And a fourth almost past. And not a pirate in sight. A waste of a trip. She owed him for this. He deserved coddling when he got back, he decided. A great deal of coddling. He smiled, contemplating the various ways she could make it up to him.

He was in them midst of entertaining himself by picturing a particular act she had balked at in the past performed out of gratitude for his sacrifice when something tickled the back of his mind. An awareness that most powerful magic users had to detect great arcane doings in process. There were spells of a rather large nature being utilized. And not too distant. Some were of a distinctly foreign flavor, intriguing but not half so interesting as the recognition of a more familiar signature in the other spell.

"What have we here?" he asked of the air, perking up, canting his head as he tried to better ascertain just how far and in what direction the castings originated.

South. Maybe a hundred - two hundred miles away. *I don't know what you're doing.* He thought, sliding the dagger back in its sheath. *But I'm glad you're able to do it.*

He stood up, dusted off his pants and sauntered over to the wagoneers. They looked up at him with ill concealed aversion. "Tell the lady, when you get to Kelededra, that something came up. Tell her I'll be back in short order. And if by some odd chance you happen to loose her carpets on the way, run long and far, because if I catch hell, I guarantee you will regret it for the rest of your short lives." He smiled at them. A brilliantly white, sharp toothed smile that befitted a predator more than a man. They blanched a little. Satisfied, he went for his horse forgetting their existence entirely. There were more interesting things to draw his attention. Like why Kall-Su was casting high energy spells and who he was casting them against.

It took him three days to track down the source of the magic he'd felt. He didn't have as good a sense for Kall-Su as he did for Arshes Nei. Kall was more guarded mentally, more wary of being hurt than Arshes for all her terrible childhood memories, ever had been. He was damned hard to pinpoint, once he wasn't casting. All he could do was home in on the original sense of where the magic had come from. If Kall-Su had moved on, Schneider had wasted a trip.

The air still smelled of smoke when he came upon the remains of the fishing town. Even before he topped the rise on the trail leading along the shore to it, he smelled the tell tail signs of a village sacked and burned. He knew the odor well, having caused a good bit of just such destruction himself in years past.

Perhaps a quarter of the village was intact. From the vantage of the ridge he could see what houses still had roofs and which had crumbled in upon themselves, blackened by flame. There were people in the streets, trying to make something of what was left to them of their home. They watched sullen eyed and suspicious at his passing, holding children close to their sides, clutching tools in their soot blackened hands. There were not a great deal of folk. He supposed there were fresh dug graves somewhere in the bluffs above the sea side town. He didn't have to ask what had happened. It was clear enough.

In the center of town there was a communal freshwater well. He stopped there, because it seemed a gathering place where tired townsfolk clustered to refresh themselves after the depressing task of cleaning up the mess left by pirates.

"Water for your horse?" An old woman gestured towards the well. "They didn't poison it. They do sometimes."

"How many died?" he asked. She wiped a wrinkled hand across her eyes, others around the well shifted in misery, making small mourning sounds.

"Thirty-nine. They took twenty-three of our own for slaves. A few outsiders."

"You were lucky, then." He remarked and they were. There were places that no single soul the marauders did not take as booty survived their attack.

"If you call it that." A man said bitterly. "Sorcerer drove them off before they could finish."

"Ah. Interesting. And where might this sorcerer be?"

The lot of them exchanged wary glances. "He's not much for small talk." The old woman warned. "Right touchy, in fact."

Schneider lifted a brow expectantly. "Where?"

"Either the harbor, or the shore. Not quite right in the head, if you ask me."

"Really? Why do you say that?"

"Took his woman, they did. He couldn't get her back cause of the storm and all. We caught some of the pirates after their fellows took off. Nobody who saw what he did to them afterwards will ever sleep well again, let me tell you."

They told him other things, which made him lift his brows in surprise, then frown in displeasure. When he'd heard enough, he spurred his horse towards the pier. It was a wreckage of half sunken vessels, a sea of blackened masts sticking up from the greenish water like cattails from a bog. One ship remained floating. Not a fishing vessel but a sleek sea going ship of unusual design. It had a long curving bow, and two masts instead of one. The taller of the two had been toppled and a replacement was being hauled into position. There was nothing else on the docks of interest, so he went southward towards the beach beyond the village.

Not far from the outskirts of town he saw a figure pacing at the edge of the surf. Two small boys sat half in a clump of marsh grass where the trail split away from the beach watching.

"What are you doing?" Schneider reined up beside the two young observers. The dirty faces looked up at him.

"Just watching him. To see if he does anythin' unnatural again. He's a witch, y'know?"

"Sorcerer." Schneider corrected them. "We get cranky when people call us witches."

Their eyes widened. He gave them a theatrical glower. "Stop being nosy, it can get you in trouble. Go on home." He waved a hand at them and they scampered back towards the town.

He slipped off of his horse, leaving the reins dangling so it could pull at the tough grasses and walked down the slope onto the sandy beach. His boots dug into the soft sand, hardly making any noise at all. Kall-Su wouldn't have noticed if they had, his gaze focused with maniacal intensity towards the vast watery horizon. Every time the surf washed up, it churned around his boots.

Schneider stood for a moment, a few yards behind him, observing. "What exactly are you looking for?" he inquired finally.

Kall-Su whirled, glaring. Then his eyes widened and he gaped in surprise. "What are you -?"

"Oh, just in the neighborhood. You got your magic back."

"I -" Large blue eyes blinked, still a little flabbergasted at Schneider's presence.

"You know -" Schneider stared down at Kall's soaked boots. "-You're standing in the water."

"DS -" he took a desperate step forward. "-They took her. I wasn't here and they attacked the village. By the time I got here it was all in flames and she was gone and there was somebody on the ships with some type of ocean based magic - I didn't know there was such a thing - I couldn't get past the storm. Not all my powers are working like they should yet - and the old man is dead - and he was fixing them -"

Schneider stepped forward and firmly grasped Kall-Su's shoulders, giving him just a little bit of a shake to stop the babbling. Kall did not usually babble. Kall was usually considerably more composed than he was at this moment. The pupils of his eyes were dilated to the point that the black was almost more predominant than the crystal blue.

"Get a grip, Kall."

"You don't understand. They took Lily. Slavers took Lily. I won't let her be made a slave again. I promised. *I promised!*" He twisted out of Schneider's hands.

"I recall hearing something like that. I stopped by the docks before coming out here. I heard a curious thing. I heard you're making them repair that pirate ship."

"I'm going after her." Kall said bluntly.

Schneider folded his hands behind him and kicked aimlessly at the sand. "Ah. I see. You sail now?"

"There are sailors here who lost family that are eager to chase them down."

"Well, that's well and good. How the hell do you track a ship in the ocean, you moron?"

Kall lifted his chin and glared. "There were survivors among the pirates. They volunteered the information. Eventually. I left a few alive that will help track them down. All the way to their home port, if need be."

"And where did they suggest such a place might be?"

Kall's eyes flickered away, slight uncertainty crossing them. "They called it the Blood Coast. West of here."

"How far west?"

"I don't know." Kall snapped. "I don't care."

"Do you recall the last time you got on a ship? How long was it before you were puking up your guts over the rail? You suck at sailing, Kall. Royally suck. Its not even your fault. Even I don't do well once you get too far out from land. Its a magic - deep water thing. They clash or something. If you'd stop and think for moment, you'd realize you'd probably get so sick that when your crew changes their minds about this stupid notion of chasing down pirates, they'll just toss you overboard and you won't be able to do a thing about it. Then I'll have to avenge you and its really boring killing a bunch of common sailors."

"Stop and think?" he hissed, eyes flashing dangerously. "Since when do know anything about stopping and thinking? Don't presume to tell me what I can and cannot do. I don't want or need your advice or your help, so go back to wherever you came from and leave me alone."

Schneider rolled his eyes at Kall-Su's uncharacteristic passion. "I don't see why you're getting all worked up about that little bit of fluff. She's not worth it."

Something cold and unforgiving slammed into him. He found himself sprawled in the sand, blinking stars out of his eyes. There was a little bit of blood trickling down his lip where he'd bitten his tongue at the impact.

"Go to hell." Kall's voice was as cold as his wintry north, then he stalked away.

Schneider fingered the blood on his mouth, looked at the crimson in amazement, then licked his finger clean and healed the wound. He ought to go and pay Kall back for that little surprise attack, but then, Kall was clearly not rational, and clearly intent on doing something foolish. Yoko, he thought, would be entirely proud of him for not flying off after Kall and force feeding reason into him. Instead he got up, dusted the sand off his trousers, and went to get his horse, for a more leisurely ride back to town.

The ship sitting at dock wasn't ready to go anywhere yet. He had more than enough time to pound sense into Kall's head. Whether Kall wanted to have it there or not.

Three

He couldn't concentrate. Staying still too long just led to panic, giving him the time to think about what was happening to Lily. Since he'd been forced back by the storm, Kall-Su had been frantic, latching onto the only course of action he could conceive - to pursue her kidnappers and get her back. The vision of the girl on the street, brutally raped - thoughtlessly raped - kept appearing over and over in his head. It had happened a thousand times probably under his command when his armies had rampaged over the south and he'd never once given such actions a second thought. To the victor the spoils, after all. Schneider had taught him that. Only it had never been anyone he'd loved. It had never been Lily.

Schneider's presence was still stunning. Astounding actually. And infuriating. That he had the gall to stride up out of the blue and to offer his sardonic opinions as if they were the wisdom of the gods. He always had thought he knew so much more than the rest of the world. He got rather offended if one ventured to disagree with that opinion. Lily had said he reminded her of the Prophet in that respect. Kall had disagreed, wanting no comparison of anything he loved ever made with that vile man.

At the moment, after what Schneider had said, he was having second thoughts. Schneider was overbearing and opinionated and Kall in no wise wished to be bullied into anything by he retreated back to the much abused port village. To the docks where the pirate ship he had crippled sat being men that did it were grim and hard faced, having lost as much or more than he had in this raid. Damned and determined to get back what was theirs. Coastal sailors. Fishermen mostly, but all of them born and bred by the sea and sensitive to her whims and her moods, which Kall was not. They had as much stake in this as he did, so he trusted them. The two surviving pirates had a stake also. To remain living. Out of the survivors these two spoke a spattering of his language. He had used the ones that didn't as examples. There wasn't enough left of them to bury so they had tossed the chunks of flesh and organs into the hungry sea. Nothing that he had not done before, but it had been a long while. Long enough to make him want to avoid the warehouse where the interrogations had taken place. Long enough to make him wish for Lily to never know of it.

They had told him what he needed to know, for the most part. the older one had lost an arm up to the elbow in the interrogation. The ice that had took it, had cauterized the wound to a certain degree and if the man had felt pain, which he must have, he refused to show it. They were strange men, who were clearly afraid, yet refused to cower. Who despised him and despised the folk they had ravaged. They called him *Kafir Djinn* and made signs against evil. He was used to the latter.

Since there was nothing else he felt comfortable doing, and it was place to escape Schneider if he followed him to the docks, he went to the ship. Went down to see his prisoners The slight rocking of the ship made him a little uneasy, but he pushed Schneider's words as far away as he could get them. Down into the place they kept their slaves, in the belly of their ship, they had been fastened with existing chains linked to manacles about their necks.

He stood a few feet away from them, offended by the smell down in the cramped cargo hold. The reek of the infected flesh was sickeningly sweet. There were no ports, no natural light that could reach here, so he made one of his own. Their dark eyes stared up at him balefully.

"We'll be four days behind them. Can we overtake them before they reach this Blood Coast?"

The younger man cast a nervous glance to his comrade. The older clutched the stump of his arm and spat at Kall's feet. He uttered what sounded like a curse in his language. "If the *Al Rab* is with us, who knows." The man said. "Perhaps the *Al Rab* will be with you - if he notices unbelievers - or perhaps he will be with the Brother of the Sea who you wish so badly to catch. I think when you do, *Kafir Djinn*, the fates will turn against you, for no one bests a Brother of Sea in the arms of the ocean."

"What is a Brother of the Sea?"

The old pirate laughed. "Ah. Like you, *Kafir Djinn*, but spawned from the mother sea. They are supreme among those who ride the waves. You will not take him or that which he holds. He will take you, if he so pleases."

"You think?" Kall said icily. "You won't live to see it." He promised. He spun on his heels, bothered by the man's fearlessness. The pirate's quiet laughter followed him out.

The air of the lower ship was stifling. He sought the deck with single minded determination. There was a great concentration of men on it, hauling on ropes to get the main mast back into place. He stood for a moment on the swaying deck, watching them position the towering thing, while others scurried out at its base, bolting it into place. Soon then, for the mast had been the main casualty from the ice he had called to form about the ship.

"When?" he asked of the old, gimp legged man who stood at the forecastle observing the progress of raising the mast. Arag was his name. They had argued among themselves who would command this foreign ship they had been gifted with. The old man was a fisher captain, who had in his youth sailed the coast and to the outer islands as a merchant. He was the only one out of the lot of them that had not looked reluctantly fearful when Kall had told them what he wanted them to do. He was the only one who had stepped forward and declared that no foreign pirate could outsail him. The others still had doubts, but with a combination of the promise of monetary reward and none too subtly veiled threats, their minds had been changed.

"Can't wait too long." Old Arag said, looking at the cloud littered sky. "It'll take the rest of the day to get the rigging up, but if we're lucky we might make the morning tide."

"Work through the night if you have to."

"Aye." The old man nodded. "They have a granddaughter of mine. I've no wish to let the bloody bastards sail clean away with her."

There was nothing else, really for him to do on the ship. The motion of the waves, even the mild ones of shore made his equilibrium questionable. He did not quite envy the grace these seasoned sailors exhibited, scurrying about the rigging, balancing precariously on the rail as they hauled canvas and rope and wood into place, but he found himself subtly impressed.

He stepped back onto the solidity of land. The row of buildings along the harbor side were blackened and burned. Few of them were fit for human occupancy. A warehouse the pirates had not the chance to loot before Kall had interrupted their plans. A tavern with a charred facade, but a relatively intact interior. He went to the tavern, stopped at the doorway at the discordant strum of a lute. For a moment, all he could think of was Lily and her delicate

fingers brushing the strings of her lute, her dark eyes thoughtful and inviting. The tavern they had been staying at had burnt to the ground and all their belongings with it. Her lute was likely ash now.

It was Crayl toying with this one. The harper looked up as Kall-Su entered, his one good arm testing the strings of a battered instrument, while he held it awkwardly with his other bandaged one. His eyes were tired and no little bit wary. They flickered to the bar, which was untended by its native barkeep, but behind which lounged Schneider, who had pilfered a dusty bottle of what might have been wine and was swirling the pale liquid around in a crude ceramic mug.

"What a pitiful selection of spirits." He observed, tasting the wine and making a face in disapproval. Kall stared, not certain whether he wished to stay or go, certainly not wishing further disagreement with Schneider. Schneider motioned him in with a rolling motion of one long fingered hand. Silently, he drifted towards the bar.

"You can hardly complain," Crayl said reasonably from the table where he had his boots propped up. "They've had everything of value taken from them. I suppose that includes any fine vintages they might have had."

"I can complain." Schneider contradicted him. "But, see how cheerfully I do it. I don't bite people's heads off." He gave Kall-Su an arch look. Kall looked away, thinking darkly that Schneider did worse than that when he was in a mood. Schneider conveniently forgot his own tantrums.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, because he couldn't remember if he'd asked before, and if he had, the answer eluded him.

Schneider walked around the bar, collected the bottle and the mug from the other side and went to sit down at one of the many empty tables about the room. About half of them were upright, the rest strewn and broken about the floor. There were bloodstains on the plank flooring. "I was getting something for Yoko. Your ice storm mucked up everything in my villa. I do expect restitution, by the way. I sensed your castings and thought I'd see what you were up to. I didn't realize it was complete foolishness. You hit me, you know?"

"It's not -" then he shut his mouth, because he didn't have the energy or the patience to argue the point. He hadn't slept since the night before Tolmuth had been raided. Schneider was not an obstacle one tackled tired and not thinking straight. "I'm sorry. I'm fine. Go back to Yoko, She'll worry."

Schneider arched a brow. "Don't tell me what to do."

Kall rested his forehead in his hand, beyond his endurance. "What do you want?"

No answer. Schneider sipped his wine. Crayl looked uncomfortable to be there.

"Damn you." He said softly. And Schneider did not even respond to that, playing enigmatic for once. So Kall fled his presence and went to the one soul in this wounded town who didn't remind him of Lily or choose to berate him. He went to find comfort in Brawaith's stolid presence and all it took for complete understanding was the offering of an apple.

"It's probably not my place to say," Crayl said carefully, and Schneider gave him a look that plainly asked why he was speaking if he felt that way. " - -but you could afford him a little sympathy. He's - distraught, over Lily's kidnapping."

"He should have taken better care for her." Schneider responded airily.

"It wasn't a matter of taking care. They came so fast. They took her and our friends and countless others. There was no warning. He wasn't here or he might have stopped it."

Why this mere harper chose to correct him, Schneider couldn't guess. He looked the man up and down crossly, dark brows drawn. "You and a dozen other towns up and down the coast. That's life. If you can't defend yourself, you get trampled by those that can."

The pale haired bard gave him an incredulous look. "You can't be serious? That sounds like something - like something out of the dark ages when all there was was war."

"I am out of the dark ages." Schneider gave him a humorless grin. "I used to live by those words. So did Kall-Su, for that matter. For a bard you don't seem to know your history. He knows about loss. He needs to get over it. He probably won't be able to find her anyway."

"You don't want him to go after her." Crayl stared at him, understanding dawning in his blue eyes. "Why ever not?"

Schneider leaned forward, eyes gleaming dangerously. "You have great faith in my patience, don't you, little harper? I'm not much for being questioned."

The bard sat back, his fingers clutching the neck of his lute, uncertainly clouding his eyes. "You must have a reason."

Out of sheer respect for the courage it took to press the query, Schneider answered. "Its pointless. You don't realize how big the ocean is. How much more of the world there is than the chunk of it we're living on. They're not from this continent, which means they could be anywhere. He is not up to this. The magic's back, but it's not all back."

"What would you do if it were your woman?"

"It wouldn't be." Schneider snapped, suddenly, coldly angry. The harper shrank back, lowering his lashes, sensing the change in the air. It irritated him that the man had the audacity to even ask. He drummed his fingers on the tabletop, wondering why he'd even bothered to come at all. Kall certainly had no gratitude. A waste of time. A monumental waste of time, when he could have been back in Yoko's arms by now.

Kall-Su must have dozed, in the quiet warmth of the stable, where the odor of horse and dung almost overpowered the bitter smell of ashes. He'd been dreaming about fighting with Schneider. Schneider berating him for something, sneering at him demeaningly as if he couldn't do anything right. It was a very old dream that he hadn't had for many years. Decades

even. He hadn't really fought with Schneider in a very long time. Well, not of his own free will, at any rate. One supposed the argument - Schneider's blasé attitude about Lily's capture - spurred the dream. One had to be careful of dreams. They could be one's downfall or salvation. He had gotten into the habit of scrutinizing the wisps of memory he had of them.

Brawaith cared not a whit about such things. He stuck his muzzle over the stall door and nudged his master, who sat slumped on a bench outside the stall. Kall obediently scratched under the large jaw. He'd made Crayl promise to take care for the stallion. He hoped the horse would cooperate with a minstrel who knew very little of horses in general or one or the other of the two would be sorry.

He brushed stray dust and straw from his clothes and headed outside where the sound of voices gradually grew louder. The light was still pale, the sun hardly risen past the horizon. The air was cool and damp so early in the morning. The coolness of autumn approaching was a relief, he was tired of summer.

A street over and the ocean was visible. People gathered on the docks. Maybe all the people left of this ravaged village, come to look at the sleek, foreign vessel that had carried marauders into their midst. It sat passively at dock now, its proud mainmast thrusting up into the gray sky, its canvas sails neatly rolled and secured. The old sailor had been true to his word, it seemed. He'd gotten the ship ready for the morning tide.

Folk saw him coming, shifted away cautiously to make a path for him, wary of his temper and of the things they had seen him do. But the eagerness on their faces warred with the trepidation. They dared not touch him, but anonymous voices wished for success. Save my wife, my sister, my son, my children. He didn't look at them, vaguely guilty that he could not find a great deal of concern over their casualties - that it was only his own that drove him.

Automatically he looked for Schneider, lurking at the edges, glowering in disapproval, but he wasn't to be found. It was a niggling concern, that absence, since Schneider was never one to abandon a cause so easily, but one effortlessly brushed aside as his attention was taken up with the ship and the old man limping down the gangway with a grim look of satisfaction on his lined face.

"We did it, milord."

"I see." Kall looked past him to the scant handful of sailors along the rail. It would be enough of a crew to manage this ship, Arag had promised. They wouldn't need to fight, after all, when they caught their quarry. They had a wizard for that.

"We're supplied as best as possible, what with the pirates own stores and what the folk here were able to scrape together to give us. If we're to make the tide this morning, we'd best be about it, though."

Kall took a breath, nodding his assent. Something coiled in his stomach that had nothing to do with anticipation to be about this pursuit or worry about Lily. It had solely to do with the fact that Schneider had been right about his wretched ability to adapt to the sea. It seemed unlikely that he had changed after - what, almost fifty years or more - of avoiding the ocean. He was probably about to put himself through as miserable as experience as any could easily think of and he could think of quite a few terrible things.

He had no wish to stay longer on the ship than was necessary, and little desire to stay on the docks among the milling crowd while the sailors finished whatever nautical preparations they had to make before Arag decided they were ready to sail. So he went in search of Crayl.

The harper wasn't far. He was sitting on a bench outside the surviving tavern, watching the activity around the ship. For once, he didn't have his lute with him. His arm was pressed to his side in a sling, and his face drawn and pained. Kall thought he ought to have asked Schneider to have done something for the man, since his own healing skills were at the moment unreachable.

"They're ready to go, almost." The harper observed.

Kall handed him a small bag of coin. The last he had, since the major portion of his funds had been filched at a fair some weeks past. "In case I'm gone longer than I anticipate. Make sure Brawaith has the proper care. If I am not back in a reasonable time, see that he gets back to Sta-Veron."

"I will. Bring them back, please. I know what she means to you, but the others - they're my closest friends in the world- I can't very well go around calling myself a troupe without them."

Kall nodded, uncomfortable. "Have you seen - him? Schneider?"

"Not since last night. He drank a great deal, surprising since he complained so bitterly about the quality of the brew. He called you a fair number of unflattering things - I won't repeat a one of them - then he left maybe two hours before sunrise. The two of you don't seem to get along very well. I seem to recall legends and tales that claimed differently."

Kall gave him a dark look, not particularly fond of the various legends, wivestales and ballads that had sprung up over the years about the deeds of Schneider and his Lord's of Havoc. Lily had mentioned something very similar to what Crayl said some time past. He couldn't remember exactly when.

"We get along fine." He said shortly. *When we're not at cross purposes.*

A boy ran up from the dock, bright eyed and out of breath. "Old Arag is callin' fer you, sir. He's wantin' ta cast off."

He looked back at the ship.

Up the narrow, swaying gangway, which a sailor pulled in behind him and aft to where the wheel was. The old man was shouting orders. Ropes were cast off from the pilings of the pier. Slowly, the ship drifted away from the constraints of dock and into the deep waters of the harbor. They passed a few masts and prows sticking up from the water, ships sunk by the pirates during the nighttime raid. The tide took them rapidly out to sea. The sails were unfurled and caught a fair breeze.

Kall gripped the rail behind him with white knuckled hands, trying vainly to reason with his equilibrium that it was just a matter of learning to shift with the constant, rhythmic sway of the deck. And that even if he never did get his sea legs, it ought not to effect the state of his stomach quite so thoroughly. He sat on a crate and wrapped his arm around the secondary

mast jutting up from beside it, pressed his cheek against the wood and told himself sternly that he'd endured worse things and that a half hour out to sea was too early to begin wishing he hadn't consumed food in the last week. With a strength of will, he forced the queasiness away.

When the land was a thin line behind them, Arag strolled up, graceful as you please on the swaying deck and stood with his hands in his pockets staring at the endless panorama of ocean before them.

"She sails smooth. Real smooth." He said approvingly. If we keep the wind at our backs, we'll make good time."

"We will." Kall promised him. He would make sure of that, if it killed him. He shut his eyes, not as impressed by the undulating field of grayish green waves as the captain.

"You look a little pale." The old man observed. "Sorta have a greenish cast. Not much for the sea, are you?"

Kall-Su did not see the point in answering. Just talking about it made his head swim a little. He thought about going below deck and lying down, but the thought of the stifling darkness was not encouraging.

Two hours out and the wind shifted, dying back a little. The sails lost some of their fullness. The captain looked to Kall expectantly. Kall sighed, summoning the stamina to call up a few minor northern elementals to breath life in the sails. The wind would be cold as hell, but it would be there. Then rather unexpectedly, without him doing a thing, the canvas snapped taught with a burst of gusty wind. The ship surged forward like a horse slapped on her rump. Kall-Su clutched at his support. The captain smiled, pleased, thinking no doubt that he had been responsible.

Kall stared up suspiciously at the invisible currents of air filling the sails. There were the hints of playful air sprites curling about the rigging. Not creatures answerable to him by any means. He looked towards where the shore had been. It was gone from view now. Miles and miles behind them. Something dark obscured his view, swooping down with a flutter of cloak and a faint turbulence of air. With a grace that would have made any hollow boned bird envious, Dark Schneider touched down on deck, impeccable in black and silver, looking disdainful and put upon. His blue eyes scanned the deck, his well shaped lips turned up in a sneer. He fixed his gaze on Kall-Su. Kall-Su stared at him wordlessly.

"You're seasick already, aren't you?" Schneider demanded, with a condescending lift of one dark brow.

"Why are you here?" Kall ignored the question and asked one of his own, very wary of Schneider's presence. "You said it was hopeless and a waste of time."

"Well, I see there's nothing wrong with your retention. It is hopeless and it is a waste of time, but at least now, when you're too sick to stand up, much less make a coherent decision, there will be somebody to tell this grimy little crew to turn around and take us back to port."

Kall didn't say anything. He *thought* all number of things. The ship lurched upon a particularly large swell. And though he could never prove afterwards that Schneider had

anything to do with it - and he had his suspicions - an aggressive wave of nausea rushed over him and it was all he could do to get to the rail to empty his guts into the sea. It was not an auspicious beginning.

There were worse things to come.

Four

They were clinging along the coast, following the ocean currents that swept southward along the straight sweep of the continent before swinging out to sea. The pirates they were after would likely stop and make a few more raids before the autumn storms drove them home. The sky threatened to spill its tantrums upon them, but Schneider kept it at bay, allowing nothing but the steady, strong winds that filled their sails.

Three days out and he was already tired of the ship. It might have been more interesting if they'd had pirates to fight, or sea monsters or Kall hadn't been so sea sick he didn't want to do anything but wallow in his own misery. Schneider felt a twinge of it. It got worse when they passed over deep water. When he could no longer feel the intrinsic pull of the solid earth beneath him he lost his equilibrium. Not so bad as Kall-Su - not yet at any rate - but it was there. The floundering weakness that made his stomach lurch and his head swim. Oh the power was there, the power of the storm and of the wind and all the things connected to them that were his forte', it was just a little harder to concentrate on calling them up when one's stomach threatened to toss up lunch. He didn't know what Kall had expected to be able to accomplish, indisposed as he was. But Kall hadn't been thinking straight in some while. Kall did not used to be so contrary.

Deep water and wizards didn't mix. That was the old adage. He hadn't believed it at one time, he still wasn't quite certain he trusted it entirely, but he did know that every wizard he knew had a certain intolerance for prolonged sea voyages. Unfortunately that included himself, even though his tolerance was relatively high. The last time he'd sailed it had taken over a week before he joined Kall-Su and Arshes Nei at the rail.

He was annoyed that they hadn't seen sight of their quarry yet. With his winds they should have been making exceptional time. The old captain didn't understand it either. Yoko was going to have fits. He'd had the sense to jot down a letter to her and send it along with his horse via one of the town's teenagers. A gold piece and promise of another when the letter reached its destination and his ire if it did not, had the lad eager to do his bidding. At least she wouldn't bitch at him for running off and not telling her. She couldn't complain about what he was doing, even if he did. It was exactly the sort of thing she would encourage enthusiastically. Gara would have too, having become wretchedly moral in his middle age. Arshes might have retained a bit of common sense, despite her poor taste in men, though he couldn't be entirely sure. Kall was just messed up from the whole Prophet business so one could expect no rationality from him. All in all the people Schneider most cherished would have frowned at him had he not decided to add his presence to this little pursuit. So really what was one to do?

A day later they were approached threateningly by two bulky, Alliance of Southern kingdom frigates who thought they were nothing so much as what they seemed in their captured pirate vessel. Schneider didn't sink the ships, though he was tempted when they were hailed and commanded to surrender or be boarded. He despised ultimatums. The old captain and his

crew full of clearly non- foreign sailors convinced the two frigates that they were friendly. Schneider leaned against the rail indolently while the shouted conversation took place. It seemed the frigates were in pursuit of a pirate vessel that had just plundered a coastal town. Hot in its wake in fact. Descriptions were passed. He supposed the old captain had some clearer sense of what the vessel's they were pursuing looked like than Kall did, for it was soon ascertained that the alliance's pirates and their pirates might very well be one and the same. The pirates it seemed were headed out to sea and the alliance frigates could only pursue them so far, before they had to turn back to patrol the coast.

Kall-Su staggered up on deck as the ships were drifting apart. He looked miserable and wan, pale hair in as much of a disarray as Schneider had ever seen. The circles under his eyes told that if he'd been sleeping he had not been getting much rest. The tense line of his lips made it clear that the nausea had not subsided. He misjudged the distance to the rail and stumbled against it. Schneider put out a hand reflexively to steady him

"What was that?"

"You're a little late getting here." Schneider said sweetly. "Trouble navigating the steps?"

"I hate you." Kall snapped, glaring blearily at the other ships in the distance. "Who were they?"

"You don't hate me. You love me. You're just agitated because I was so right and you were so wrong. They're some of Larz's toy soldiers. Sailor soldiers. Whatever. They're after your pirates too. We're heading out to sea to track them. They won't do it. Can't leave the coast or some such nonsense. Its not as if they're doing a decent job of protecting it or we wouldn't be out here in the first place. If you fall over the rail, I'm not fishing you out."

Kall-Su leaned over his elbows, head bent, hair falling over his eyes. "I don't understand -" he said hoarsely. "How I can still want to throw up if I haven't eaten anything in days."

"What? You haven't partaken in any of that poisoner they call a cook's fine cuisine? Why just today he concocted this shapeless slop that might have had beans and some sort of pre-chewed gristle which I shudder to guess where he found -"

Kall-Su gagged and fled from him. Schneider chuckled, but the amusement didn't last. Even with his air spirits filling the sails they didn't catch the pirates that day. The frigates dropped back and turned around early in the afternoon. The shelf of land that clung to the coast dropped off sharply the further out they got. Schneider felt it in a lurch of the gut when they began sailing over deep, fathomless water. His head began to swim a little at unexpected times, and he had to fight the steadily rising nausea. He began cursing by nightfall when they still hadn't seen the outline of a ship on the horizon. He went below decks, to escape the smell of the sailor's dinner. Kall-Su was curled in a fetal knot on the narrow bunk of his small cabin, sweat drenched and as good as unconscious, he was so debilitated by the sea sickness.

With no one to witness his weakness, Schneider allowed himself to slide down the wall and sit at the foot of the bunk. He rested his head on his forearms and stared bleakly at the rough planks of the floor. He gave himself another day before the sea began to have its way with him too. At that point he didn't care what Kall-Su wanted, this ship was turning about and heading home.

The ship tossed, rocked on a particularly large swell and Schneider's stomach did a echoing lurch. Bile trailed up his throat, leaving a nasty taste in its wake. He shut his eyes and tried to magic the nausea away. To a certain degree it worked. The worst of it subsided but the sickness lurked in the shadows, not even close to banished. It wasn't entirely physical he thought. It was something of the ocean - of the deep, true ocean that held a power of its own. Which did not blend at all well with sorcerous constitutions. The concept might have intrigued him some other time. Safe on solid land, say. At the moment it was an annoying hypothesis shoved to the back of his mind as soon as the ship lurched down another great swell and the nausea rushed back with a vengeance.

He couldn't stop it this time. He dared not even open his mouth to curse. He made it to the bucket that doubled as a chamber pot, and thanked all the gods it was empty, before spewing up his guts into it. Afterwards he cursed. Long and loudly and amazingly explicitly. Tears of rage glinted on his lashes.

Unacceptable. Completely and entirely unacceptable, that he be debased so. There was filth in his hair. He hissed and weakly summoned a spell to banish it. He shoved the bucket away and glared at Kall-Su. Kall had opened his eyes a slit, awakened by Schneider's blasphemies.

"This is your fucking fault." Schneider hissed. "Next time you want to go do something stupid, remind me to fucking *let* you."

"I'm sorry." Kall said miserably, barely a whisper. "Why'd you come in the first place?"

Schneider just glared at him, not in the mood to frame an answer.

"Its different now." Kall-Su observed. His voice held a little bit of a slur, as if he'd been drinking, which Schneider knew he hadn't. "The ocean. Its - stronger."

"We're well and truly away from coastal waters." Schneider said. "Deep water. There's some force to do with the sea that's clashing with our powers. Figures, I guess. You ever know a wizard who could control ocean elementals?"

"They're not controllable." Kall said softly. "Too powerful. Too wild."

"Territorial?" Schneider theorized, settling his back against the bunk so he could see Kall's pale face. Kall blinked at him, befuddled mind tossing that notion over.

"Territorial enough to want to repel any other type of power?" Kall had a head for this type of thing. The scholarly bisection of theories. He had a half hundred books on mythical ideology that he knew front to back, most of which bored Schneider to tears.

"You ever seen an ocean elemental?" Schneider hadn't and he'd been around far longer than Kall-Su.

"No. Maybe." Kall chewed the inside of his cheek, trying to pin down a thought. "Yes." He finally changed his mind. "The thing that slapped me down the night the pirate's attacked could have been one."

"Really? Tell me about it."

"It - it was more cohesive than ice, or air, or fire elementals. Not fickle. I think, if I were to describe the sense of it and I didn't have the chance to really study what was being thrown at me - I'd say it had the feel of a collective."

"It's all connected. The water." Schneider twined a piece of hair about his finger absently. "One big elemental force?"

Kall shuddered. "God, I hope not."

The younger wizard clamped his teeth shut, bracing a hand against the wall as the ship tilted precariously. It was becoming noticeably rougher. "Is there a storm coming?" Kall asked, because Schneider had a feel for such things. But his senses were not as sharp as usual, not with the queasiness and the ocean working against him.

"Maybe. Maybe."

Kall-Su groaned and threw an arm over his face. Schneider forced himself up. He staggered against the door frame as the ship rocked and had to lean against the wall of the narrow passage to work his way above deck. The sky was gray and spilling rain. It had been clear when he'd gone below decks. His elementally summoned winds were no longer the predominate source of power feeding the sails. He was drenched within moments. His knowledge of ocean sailing was limited, but the darkness sweeping up on them from the south seemed unsavory. He wondered if he ought to attempt and stave it off, and went aft to the wheel to ask if the old captain thought it necessary.

"Can you?" The old man asked both brows riding high on his wrinkled forehead.

Schneider wiped arm length tendrils of wet hair back from his face. "If I have to."

"These flash squall's can be the worst." Arag said. "Might not hurt, with this crew of fishermen to veer it away from us, if it's possible."

Schneider stared into the approaching storm bank. Flashes of lightening could be seen piercing the dark wall of cloud cover, the distant booming of thunder seemed to shake the ship. The ship dipped almost perpendicular as it went down the side of one great swell. There were a few cries of surprise as men lost footing and scrambled for purchase. Schneider just lifted off the deck and into the air. The wave was taller than the ship. It took him a few seconds to clear it as it rolled past. Just being off the rolling deck was a relief.

He headed into the storm bank, getting a feel for the natural powers that stirred within it. The ocean might be rising up to match it, but the storm itself was his element. It was still an odd mixture, wilder than land based storms. Less responsive to his control. To his surprise, he couldn't make it dwindle. It was a fight to convince it to turn away and it did it only grudgingly. The sea raged still beneath him, not so easily swayed. The waves still bashed the ship ruthlessly, as if in retaliation for the theft of the storm. The sea was not as fickle as the storm, it would take a while before the turbulence subsided.

He was tired when he sat down. The deck lurched out from beneath him when he'd been expecting its solidity. He stumbled, off balance. Something dark welled over the port rail, spewing cold wetness across the deck. The wave hit him broadside and the only thing that

kept him from going over the other side with it was the deck house, who's bulk he was slammed into with a force. He lost breath and equilibrium. He grasped at wood for a hand hold, blinded by water and hair. He felt of a sudden as if he were spiraling downwards, sucked into fathomless darkness by the sea. He couldn't concentrate to fashion a spell.

The ship rocked again and he clung to his safety. The turbulence decreased by measures. Someone put an hand under his arm, trying to haul him up. One of the plain faced fishermen, who was wet as he was, but enviously stable with the ship dancing under him.

"You should ride it out below decks, milord." The man suggested, as if he thought Schneider might prefer to be lashed by the waves out here. He shrugged of the helping hand, then regretted doing it when he discovered a sudden inability to walk properly. He used the deck house as crutch and made his way to the portal leading down. The passage was drenched with water. The ceiling was dripping with it. He found a shoebox cabin, with a bunk and collapsed onto it, wet clothing and all. He shut his eyes and the world swam. He barely leaned over the side of the bunk in time not to mess clothes and sheets with vomit. He was a little better afterwards, but not much. Maliciously, he thought, at least he wasn't as bad off as Kall, then wished a little extra misery on the younger wizard for getting him into this.

He shut his eyes and something happened. A timeless, meandering dizziness that might have cloaked sleep and might have only been the brief span between breaths. Shouts from the passage made him open them again.

"A ship. There's a ship on the horizon."

Schneider blinked haze out of his vision. He got up and felt an overwhelming nausea that made him double over half way between bunk and door. He cursed between dry heaves. He managed to get himself functional and out into the passage.

"Kall." He snapped, pausing by Kall-Su's door. "We've got your ship."

Kall blinked at him blearily and made an effort to sit up. Schneider didn't wait to see if he succeeded, rather doubting he had the capability to make the deck.

The sky was dark again, only this time it was from the onslaught of dusk rather than storm. He had slept then. The horizon glowed blood red. He shielded his eyes and looked in the direction old Arag indicated. He could just make out the dark silhouette of a ship, sails unfurled against the sunset. The sea was still choppy, but it was possible to keep his feet if he clung to the rail. No great waves washed over the sides, threatening to take men with them.

It seemed to take forever to close the distance, but eventually they did. The other ship, aware of the pursuit turned to face them. It was of the same design as the one they sailed, but it seemed to undulate through the waves like a serpent. It was eerie, how it steadily ate up the distance between them, yet its sails were not full of wind urging it in their direction. In fact the wind was against it. It should not have been making the headway it was.

"Its up to you." Old Arag said. "We've not the numbers to face them."

Schneider didn't answer. A humorless smile crossed his lips. *Ba Co Raven*. He whispered the words and lifted off the deck. It was odd, the sea seemed to pull at him. He fortified his

concentration and ignored it. He covered the span of ocean in a few heartbeats, leaving his ship behind. Sinking the pirate vessel would make this whole miserable experience worthless, so he had to work a little more delicately and merely disable it. Start with the main mast and a little fire on the deck.

He spoke the words to a Strike spell and a finger of lightning formed out of the air over his head and zig zagged down to hit at the base of the main mast. With a splintering crack the great spear of wood toppled, trailing sails and rigging as it went. The rigging was the only thing that saved it from crashing into the deck. It tangled in the lesser mast and lay there at an awkward, wounded angle. Men ran about the deck in a panic, small and inconsequential from his height. He spoke the words of a fire summoning. It was sluggish responding to his will. He frowned and redoubled his efforts. Reluctantly almost, flames sprang to life along the deck.

And were instantly smothered. He frowned at that, searching for the source and not able to find it. On the deck, men started yelling, pointing skyward. He was spotted then. He could have cared less. The attention of the pirates was not a thing that worried him. Their flimsy arrows he brushed aside like stray thoughts. He mouthed the words to a another strike spell and wood along the prow shattered.

There was a rushing sound, a sudden intake of air, the tingling sensation of power being put into play. He looked down in time to see a conical tendril of water snaking up from the sea towards him. He put up a shield - barely - but the thing still batted him aside a good twenty feet, then arched around like the waving tentacle of some deep sea monster and tried to chase him down. He hissed the words to an energy blast.

The sinuous body of the thing exploded, spraying water. A moment later and it had reformed. It took another high impact blast for him to realize it just wasn't going to work. The thing had the limitless resources of the ocean to draw upon. Whoever was directing it was on that ship. Get the water wizard and this fight would be over. He flew down close to the deck of the enemy ship, past startled pirate archers, looking for the unique power trail of a magic user at work.

And saw him on the raised deck at the aft of the ship. Just a glimpse of a thick, black bearded man, before he slammed an Exodus spell home. It hit with a blinding flash of light and a deafening boom. And then the sea rose up and took her revenge. It swept over the deck and snared him right out of the air. He went over the side and down into the depths, tangled in bands of current that were stronger than steel. He swallowed lungfuls of the stuff before he was able to erect a shield. But there was no air to trap within it. All he could do was try and force the water away - to keep it from crushing him. Even that was becoming difficult, totally immersed in the watery element, where no air or storm or fire could reach.

He couldn't get to the surface. He was drowning and he despised the feeling. A huge explosive spell and the water frothed around him, but he was deep enough so that all that happened was a bubbling expulsion of air and turbulence on the surface.

Try another route, then. Search for the elemental force that was carrying out the water wizard's spells. Overwhelm it if he could. He let himself sink into cold, blackness and searched out the nature of the thing.

And found enormous, ever changing - never changing rhythm. Enormous power. Solid and steadfast and relentless in its task and its loyalty. It was not a defeated, enslaved elemental. It chose service of its own will. It served something of its own.

It crushed what threatened it. He stopped fighting. Drifted aimlessly, teetering on the verge of blacking out. Something swam by him, huge and sinuous and patently invisible in the murk. He started, surprised out of lethargy. He was nudged. Teeth fastened to his leg and almost gently he was shaken. He put hands out and felt a leathery surface. Energy radiated through his fingers. He felt the flesh shatter under his hands. There was the warmth of blood in the water around him. For a moment he thought it belonged to the creature he had destroyed, then it occurred to him that more than likely such a creature would be cold blooded. He reached and felt at his leg. Numb, beyond feeling from the cold, but his fingers discovered ripped flesh and the sharp feel of broken bone.

Wonderful. Completely charming. His thoughts were beginning to splinter. He couldn't concentrate enough to perform a healing. Then something else, dark and massive drifted by him. This time it was no living thing. This time it was several tons of wood and canvas, sinking towards the undefined ocean floor. It shifted in its descent and the trailing mast slammed against Schneider's back. Then it was gone. Unfortunately it took the rest of his consciousness with it.

Five

The ship shuddered, as if she had received a death blow. Kall-Su hit the wall across from his cabin and pressed there, clutching at wood to keep from falling. Even if the ship had not been tossing wildly, his balance had fled along with stable vision, a calm stomach and his innate ability to fight off vertigo. His legs threatened to give out. He couldn't quite focus on the narrow hall way leading to the upper hatch. Water splashed down from the closed hatchway. He felt magic in the air. Ripping, angry magic both familiar and foreign.

Then suddenly it was gone. Just gone and the air was left static and wrathful in its wake. The ship still tossed. The seas still beat against her sides mercilessly. The foreign magic was still there, a faint undertone. But the familiar was gone. Panic wrestled its way past the sickness. He clawed for the stairs leading up to the hatch. Lost his footing once as the ship rocked and banged his shin painfully. Cursing under his breath he pushed the hatch up and was hit with a deluge of rain and wave spray.

There was darkness on deck. The sun was blotted out by the cover of a raging storm. The waves reared taller than the ship and she rode their swells only grudgingly. Water crashed down onto the deck and Kall clung to the deck hatch. Vaguely he saw the mute figure of a man swept overboard. The power of the ocean's wrath was smothering. He could feel it past the sea sickness, past the healing channels of his magic. She was angry and vengeful and wanted a sacrifice to soothe her irritation.

Something dark rode the swells with their ship, side by side. Through the water and hair streaming into his eyes he made out the shape of another ship, her sails tightly furled, her rail almost touching the rail of their vessel. He ought to do something, with the pirate ship so close, but he was having a hard time thinking past the fevered pounding of the blood in his head.

A shape came at him out of the grayness. The old captain, limping and desperate, a boathook in one hand.

"You've got to do something -" the man cried in desperation and then gagged and staggered, plunging forward, the makeshift weapon falling from his hand. There was a man behind him, bearded and dark skinned, a dull curved sword in his hand. The blade was lifted. Kall struggled for concentration and cried out the first words that came to mind. The air, which was too moist by far, was easily to manipulate. A spear of ice erupted from the space between Kall-Su's hands and hurtled into the pirate's chest. The man toppled backwards.

Kall-Su staggered to his feet, staring wildly into the darkened sky.

"Schneider, where are you?" He cried into the storm. He made his way towards the prow, clutching at the rail. A great wave crashed over the prow, threatening to tear him from his feet. A man stood in its wake, holding onto nothing. He should have been washed away. Another wave washed over the plunging prow, and the water seemed to almost part to avoid him. Kall-Su stared, sensing not magic, but communion. Then something solid and hard slammed into him from behind and that combined with what the sea had done to his constitution sent him over the edge into oblivion.

There was a terrible pain in his chest and a bitter bile in the back of his throat. Schneider gasped and bolted upright, hacking up salt water and what seemed a good portion of his lungs. He doubled over, coughing, struggling for precious air. It took a moment to get it. And then he drew in great lungfuls of the stuff, momentarily aware of nothing but the fact that he was alive and not underwater.

He was in darkness. Pitch, sordid darkness that was laced with humidity and cold. He lifted his hands to his face and they jangled. Weight dragged at his wrists. There was a wall to his right and he leaned against it, trying to get his bearings, trying to gather his wits. It stank of wet straw and animal feces. The smell made his stomach turn. The bile in his throat grew hotter. No. He did not want to throw up.

His body paid him no heed. All the sea water he'd swallowed came up along with the acid contents of his stomach. It hurt more coming up than it had going down. He tried to crawl away from it when he'd done, but the chains on his wrists wouldn't let him go far and the weakness in his head and body was not ready to give up its claim and allow him to remedy the situation. His leg throbbed with pulsing pain. He felt around the edges of a wet, jagged wound. Felt a splinter of what might have been bone. He shuddered. He hated touching his own bone almost as much as he hated actually seeing it. He pulled his hands away, taking long breaths to quell another rebellion by his stomach. Just a minute to gather his strength. He rested against the grainy wall and silently cursed.

It was damned hard to think when he wanted to go and crawl under a rock somewhere, but he forced concentration and summoned a witchlight. It came merrily at his summons, and bobbed sickeningly in the air before his face. With a hiss he made it stay still. He was in a cramped, low ceilinged room. There were a handful of pigs settled down in the straw not five feet from him. Beyond that barrels and wooden cages full of various small domesticated

animals. He blinked at the accommodations, then looked down at the manacles on his wrists that were in turn attached to a chain running along the wall.

"They must be kidding." He muttered, then spoke a word of unlocking and the bracelets fell away. It took a bit more concentration to do a healing. He shut his eyes and thought about the wound and the shattered bone and torn flesh and what it ought to be like. Sluggishly flesh and blood knit. He rubbed his leg in irritation that it had taken so long for such a simple healing. He'd recovered from worse with no effort whatsoever.

He pushed himself to his feet and found he had to crouch. The ceiling was no more than five feet. He put a hand to the sore spot on the top of his skull received from that discovery. His hair was mildly damp. His clothes were still a little clammy from the ocean. He had not been here long then. He tried to recall being fished out of the sea and couldn't. He didn't think he'd done it on his own. His head hurt and not from the bump on the ceiling. He'd hit it when he was underwater -

- on the great sinking shape of a ship. His ship obviously since this one seemed to belong to an enemy that thought they could contain him with simple chains. *Goddamn it*. His heart slammed against his ribs in sudden panic. If Kall-Su had gone down on that ship - he didn't even take the time to contemplate the vengeance he would take.

The small door out of the hold slammed open, shattering, without him even touching it. His witchlight followed him along the narrow, low ceilinged hall. A sailor came out of a door further up the corridor, saw him and jabbered something unintelligible. The man made to grab for a weapon at his belt. Schneider lifted a hand and pure, contained energy formed.

"How slow do you want to die?"

His words might not have been understood, but the intent was more than clear. The dark eyes widened and the man scampered up the hall before him, screaming in his foreign tongue.

He must have been in a lower hold, for he climbed a ladder to a second level that might have been crews quarters. There were men in the hall with blades out, drawn by the cries of the first sailor. Belligerently, they blocked his path. They were as good a source for information as any, if any of them spoke his language.

"Where are the men from my ship? Do you understand? Anyone that doesn't can die right now." He grinned ferally and singled out a man with a wickedly curved sword closest to him. It took more effort than he generally had to exert for a simple spell. It felt as if the powers that be - namely the surrounding ocean - were pulling against him.

The pirate's skin began to smoke and blister. The man screamed, dropping his blade and shaking his blackening hands. The men around him shied away, making signs against evil. The unfortunate man was writhing on the floor, oozing blackened flesh and blood by the time Schneider voiced his question again.

"Did you take prisoners from the ship you sank? Or shall the lot of you meet his fate?"

"I don't think they will." The sailors muttered in relief among themselves and moved aside to make way for a weaponless man. Tall, thick bodied with muscle, with the aura of health and

vitality in the sparkle of his dark eyes and the whiteness of his grin. A trim beard covered his jaw and his hair was cut close to his head. There was nothing familiar about the man save the scent of power that radiated from him. This was the man who had directed the ocean's wrath during the battle. This was a man that in this particular place, in the midst of his element, was a power to be reckoned with.

"I did not expect to see you awake so soon." The dark eyes looked him up and down, ignoring the threatening glower in Schneider's stare. He spoke with a slight accent, but otherwise he was perfectly understandable. "You were rather thoroughly drowned."

"Where - the fuck are the people from my ship?" He ground the words out, gathering power as he did.

"What will you do? Blast this ship out from under us all? Will you kill yourself in a fit of rage? For that is what will happen, if you sink this vessel. The mother sea will not allow you to escape her again. She gave you back only grudgingly and only because I promised her many sacrifices to get you. She ate your ship and the men on board and she was sated."

Schneider's eyes grew wide. "You son of a -"

"Ah, but not the other *kafir djinn*." The man cut him off. "I would not throw to the ocean something so valuable as the two of you. There is a market for such things."

"Where the hell is he at?" Schneider stalked forward and men didn't know whether to move and let him past for stand their ground and protect their captain. The captain waved a hand and relieved them of the dilemma. They backed away, giving Schneider wide berth. He stood nose to nose with the other man. He was marginally taller, but not by much. The captain was grinning at him.

"*Jamad ja'da*." He said in his own language and the men murmured around him. "Well, then shall we prepare to meet the ocean, the lot of us? It would not be a bad fate for men such as us, who live our lives upon her surface. Is it one you wish to meet?"

"Push me much further and I may take the chance. Take me to my friend."

The swarthy captain shrugged, put a hand on Schneider's shoulder and moved him out of his path. "Follow me then." The captain said, ignoring the glare he got for daring to lay a hand on Dark Schneider. "My name, by the way, is Amir. This is my ship."

"I don't give a fuck who you are." Schneider snarled.

"You have a foul tongue, *Jamad ja'da*." Captain Amir chided, leading the way back down into the hold. They both had to duck to walk. They took a different route from the one Schneider had exited from and were plunged into darkness. Before Schneider could call up his witchlight, a bluish green glow popped into existence in the air before the captain. Almost the smell of sea salts and the faint sound of water came with it.

There were more pilfered goods, but no animals. No captured slaves either, just at the end of an empty line of chain, one still figure. Schneider hissed and stalked over, crouching beside him. He touched a thin line of crusted blood along Kall's temple, a slight swelling above his

ear. That was a wound Schneider could fix. The rest was the result of the cursed ocean and not correctable. No more than he could alter her effects on himself.

"Kall?" He called and forced the issue when Kall-Su didn't wake up with a twinge of magic. Kall's lids flickered. He looked up blearily, focused on Schneider briefly, then with a moan of purest wretchedness passed back out.

Schneider sat back, a flicker of worry crossing his face. Now that his initial panic over whether Kall was at the bottom of the ocean or not had passed, some bit of reason came back and with it, the realization of just how correct this captain Amir was in his assumptions. What did it matter if Schneider could blow this ship out of the water, if he found himself adrift without it as a result? Under the best of circumstances it was too far to fly back to shore, much less with the ocean against him and Kall-Su as good as useless. He glanced back up to Captain Amir gaugingly. The man didn't posture like a man trying to impress his power upon another, which worried Schneider. The quiet ones were often the most dangerous. The one's that didn't brag, that only subtly presented possibilities were the ones that usually held true power. He'd already tasted a bit of it himself. He could take this man closer to shore, maybe even here in the midst of his element, but at the moment, it would do him no good.

"What the hell do you want?" Schneider snapped, angry at his limited options.

Captain Amir lifted a dark brow. "It is you who were following me. What do *you* want?"

"Where are your slaves? You seem to be lacking."

"I gave them all to my associate, who is traveling to a port that deals in slaves. I'm going to another. You're the only two I have."

Schneider laughed outright. "You're dreaming."

"Not at all. As I said, there is a high demand for Djinn, foreign or not. I'll get more gold for one of you than my fellow captain will for all his hold full of slaves. Not to mention your uniqueness."

"What?"

"Jamad ja'da."

Schneider stared at him blankly.

"Hair of ice. I've never seen the like on a body that wasn't wrinkled and bent with age. Extraordinary."

Schneider lifted a brow sardonically. "Interesting. I'll keep it in mind. If you think you're going to make a profit off either of us, you're crazed."

Captain Amid shrugged, as if it were of no consequence. "We shall see."

Schneider sniffed and touched the manacles around Kall-Su's wrists. They fell off, clattering dully to the deck. He hauled Kall up and over a shoulder, which was a damn inconvenient way to walk under the low ceiling. Amir followed him.

"Where will you go?"

"Up."

"Into the air, or the sea?"

"Shut up."

Schneider didn't attempt to climb the ladder out of the hold, just levitated up. The crew made way for him, standing by and watching as he made his way to the deck, followed by their captain. He let Kall down on a pile of canvas, and turned in a wary circle to observe his world. They were in the midst of repairing the secondary mast he had destroyed. The men working paused in their labors to stare at him. He thought about ways he could force this crew into turning this ship about and taking them home. Kill the captain and the rest might be more malleable.

Amir moved up beside him at the rail.

"They'll die before they bow to an unbeliever, you know." The captain said, as if he'd read Schneider's thoughts. "They are not the soft, pale sailors of your land."

He didn't respond. He knew stubborn men that had broken under the type of pain he knew how to deliver.

"Kafir Djinn!!" A shrill voice screamed. Schneider and the captain turned. A battered, sailor holding the stump of one arm hovered over Kall-Su, a sword raised in his remaining hand. Schneider let out a hiss and an explosive burst of energy. It hit the pirate, and crashed him backwards into barrels of water. One burst from the impact and leaked the precious fresh fluid over the deck. He took a step forward to finish the job and Amir caught his arm, swinging him around roughly. He snarled, ready to cast a similar spell on the captain, but the man's eyes blazed and flashed a sudden, eerie seagreen. A sheer wall of water rose along the port side, rearing up taller than the main mast, pulsing and roaring in its sheer power. Threatening to smash down upon the deck, waiting for the command. Schneider stared up at it, ocean magic still managing to shock him.

"Do not." Amir said softly. "You will not threaten this ship or those upon it under my protection or the ocean will have you and that which you value."

"Then keep your men away from him."

"Ah, but he is not my man. He captained the ship which you made me sink. Perhaps it was your friend who took his arm? Vengeance is expected for such a thing, is it not? I would let him have it, save for the lost gold. A rawa golden djinn is as valuable as a silver one, no?"

The wave shuddered over them. He had to wonder if it would be selective in those it washed away. He rather thought it would. Slowly Schneider inclined his head. "All right. I won't sink

your ship or kill your crew. For the moment. Don't press me, though. And don't touch anything of mine." He jerked his chin back towards Kall-Su.

The captain lifted a dubious brow. "You are bold to present me with such ultimatums."

Schneider shrugged. "Give me a cabin. With a port. I despise not being able to see the sky."

Amir laughed outright, a deep brass sound that grated on Schneider's nerves. "So very bold. All right, you're worth enough to me to give you such a thing."

"Whatever."

Amir called to his mate to see that a adequate cabin was emptied. Some ship's mate would be sleeping with the common sailors for the rest of the journey. Schneider could have cared less. He walked over to Kall, who had rolled over to his side and was making little gagging sounds. He ignored him and stared down at the one armed sailor who was slowly regaining consciousness.

The man glared up at him balefully, then past him to Kall-Su. He spat out something in his foreign tongue. It sounded threatening and contemptuous.

"Go ahead and try something else." Schneider suggested softly. "And I promise you I'll make what he did to you seem like a blessing from your god."

"Jima al Ju'al." The man spat.

Captain Amir walked up beside Schneider and said something sharply. The one armed pirate scowled and limped away.

"What did he say?" Schneider asked.

"He told you to have sex with a dung beetle. One would hardly think it possible. I told him that the two of you were my captives and for him to harm you would be an affront against me."

"As if he could." Schneider sniffed. "And I'm not."

"Of course." Captain Amir agreed. "I will show you where you may sleep. Shall I have someone bring your friend."

"Don't touch." Schneider warned and went to get Kall-Su himself.

It was a very small cabin with a narrow bunk against the wall and a storage locker by the door. A bucket beside it and a hook on the wall over the bed that held a folded hammock. That was it. There was a small port over the bed. The only luxury. He dropped Kall carelessly onto the bunk and turned to fix the captain with his glare. "How long before we reach land?"

Amir grinned. "I'm sorry, but I cannot tell you that." And with that he shut the door and disappeared. Schneider stood fuming. There was a noise behind him. Kall-Su trying to push himself up. Very green about the face. Schneider pushed the bucket towards him with his

foot, though he doubted he had anything left to throw up. He tried anyway, then sat bent over his knees at the end of the bunk, shivering.

Schneider sniffed warily, the sound of gagging having made his own stomach ill at ease. "I wish you'd stop doing that." He complained. He plopped down at the other end of the bunk and pushed himself back into the corner, preparing to sulk. Kall turned his hanging head marginally to look at Schneider. Hair separated from dried salt water did a good job of hiding his face.

"If I could help it, I would." He managed to sound testy, even in his weakness. "What - happened?"

"You don't know?"

No answer, just a reproachful glare.

"We caught the pirates. They sank our ship. All your pitiful little fishercrew is at the bottom of the ocean. We're stuck with the pirates."

"Lily?" Kall managed to lift his head, some bit of hopefulness breaking past the misery in his eyes.

"No Lily. No captives at all. We got the wrong ship."

"Oh - god." Kall moaned, sagging back against the wall. He stared blindly past Schneider for a moment, even the green tinge fled from his skin. Then he leaned into his corner at the foot of the bed, arms around his legs, face hidden against knees.

"I wish I were dead, then I wouldn't have to worry about it." He murmured.

Schneider glared at him. "The seasickness is making you say that. And even though it is your fault and I *do* blame you - well, don't worry about it. We'll find your damned woman. I promise."

"I don't believe in miracles anymore. I know better."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say, considering you know me. God, you're so morose when you're like this."

"Like what?" Kall almost laughed, but it turned into a little groan. "So sick I want to die?"

"Yes. Like that."

"Why aren't you?"

"What? Sick or morose?"

Kall lifted his head to peer over his knees. He didn't need to answer. Schneider knew what he meant. And it was just a matter of time before the sea worked her way on him as well. He was

just better at fighting it off than Kall-Su was. But he felt it. And every league they sailed further into the sea put him more and more at the mercy of the men who rode her.

Six

There were good days and bad days, and recently the bad days had started to outnumber the good. This was a mediocre one. Schneider could walk around without losing his equilibrium entirely and he only occasionally had to stop and surrender to dry heaves. He hated the ocean. He would never ever sail her again, once this dreadful little fiasco was over and done with. He didn't even know if he wanted to keep the villa by the sea. He didn't want to hear, or see or smell the salt water again. He mooned over Yoko. He imagined the softness of her skin, the limpid gaze of her brown eyes after she was satiated from lovemaking, the sharp sting of her tongue when she wasn't pleased. He even missed that. He would very much like to have her yelling at him right now. Anything but the constant lapping of waves against the hull and the incoherent jabbering of the pirate crew, the majority of which did not speak a civilized tongue.

He went where he wished on the ship. The crew did not try to stop him, probably on orders from the captain, maybe out of a sense of self-preservation. Regardless, his way was unbarred where ever he chose to roam. It was not a tremendously large ship, built more for speed than cargo capacity. She had a large crew of fighting men to carry out her picaroonish activities. There was little free room to spare. But there was one cabin down the hall next to captain Amir's that no one stayed in. He noted it because the captain usually visited there once a day, taking brass key out of his shirt and speaking a word of unlocking to pass what was obviously a spelled as well as locked door. It spurred Schneider's interest. He had nothing else to do, save keep a totally unsociable and generally unconscious, Kall-Su company. Little mysteries perked his curiosity.

After strolling the deck one morning, and ignoring the solicitous nod the captain, who was at the wheel, delivered him, he made his way down to the lower deck. He bypassed his and Kall-Su's cabin and proceeded down to the spell locked door. He paused before it, looking up the passage for any sailor that might appear to catch him at something he was certain captain Amir would not approve of. Not that Schneider particularly cared what the captain thought or feared what might be done in retaliation, it was more a reflexive caution. He spoke a word of unlocking, and since he was not feeling *too* sick, the spell actually responded with alacrity the first time. The lock clicked and the warped plank door swung open.

The little cabin had no port. It was dusky and dark within the cramped confines. He summoned a witchlight and found himself amidst stacks of crates, chests with bold brass bands, rolled charts crammed in barrels and open boxes displaying various items of particular wealth. The captain's private store room for the fruits of his raids. There was gold, and jewelry, fine bolts of cloth, casks of perfume and what might have been rare spices. A pittance. Schneider had seen more offered at his feet in supplication in a day than what was gathered here in this dingy cabin. Privateering was not that profitable a profession he decided in disgust.

A small chest caught his eye. It was made of polished mahogany and banded with burnished brass. It sat in a place of distinction on the one small table in the cabin's far corner. Nothing else was clustered around it. Something about it drew his attention. He reached a hand for it and encountered the faint static of a warding spell. A very strong aversion spell. He curled his

fingers, frowning. This spell was of a personal nature. It was linked back to its caster, most likely the captain and if tampered with, it would sound alarms in the mind of the sorcerer responsible. He could break the ward easily, but he'd have Amir down here in a heartbeat.

Pride almost made him do it. Some bit of reason made him pull his hand back. He still cast the protected chest a thoughtful, curious stare before leaving the little treasure room, and resetting the spell lock behind him.

It would be quite a while before he thought about the chest again, but for the time being, he put it out of his mind as inconsequential. The sea grew rougher, he grew sicker and retreated to isolated misery

The days passed. Kall-Su got worse. He wouldn't eat or take water - he barely roused from troubled sleep and when he did, he was sick to the point of delirium. Amir offered relief or at least oblivion in the form of a small vial of unidentified liquid.

"It's a good recourse for those who do not react well with mother sea."

Schneider did not even ask what it was. He sniffed disdainfully at the vial, dismissing it with an airy wave of one hand. "You want to drug him"

"Better than what he endures now, is it not?"

"No. How much longer till we reach a port?"

Amir merely smiled mysteriously. Schneider ground his teeth in irritation. He was feeling distinctly green today. The wind was rocking the ship as much as the waves she rode upon. He had passed over breakfast and lunch and the thought of dinner was making the bile rise in the back of his throat.

"You might wish to use a little of this yourself, no?" Amir offered helpfully.

"I might not. How do you become a brother of the sea, anyway? Is it learned? Sacrifice? What?"

"Do you wish to become such?" Amir lifted both brows, amused. The dark captain was amused much to easily for Schneider's tastes. "You cannot, you know. A man is born with the sea in his blood. Perhaps one of my ancestors had congress with a spirit of the ocean. Who knows? But she has always spoken to me. Blessed me. She always watches over her own, you know?"

He didn't know any such thing. He thought once he got Amir on land they'd see how well *Mother Ocean* protected him.

Another week and they were hit by a fierce sea storm that even Amir's connection with the ocean could not sway. Schneider, under better conditions might have been able to send it elsewhere. He had retreated to the cabin as soon as the ship started rolling over angry waves, sick and dizzy. He almost wished the storm would sink the damned boat and get it over with. It would be almost worth it to have the sea claim the smug captain.

Kall-Su curled into a ball, moaning as if he were dying. Even Schneider's sense of pity was pricked and he slipped out of the hammock, which he had found he did not dislike, and onto the bunk, taking the younger wizard into his arms to share the misery. Kall sobbed into his shoulder, clutching weakly at the material of his tunic, mumbling incoherently.

Schneider shut his eyes, braced with his back against the wall, with Kall's warm weight on his chest, and drowsed. Lurid fever dreams plagued him. He dreamed of drowning, of struggling for air that was not there. Of Yoko calling for him from somewhere and him not being able to find her. The dreams turned darker and more poignant. Shadows descended over a landscape that was featureless and eternal. He felt himself dwarfed by them. He tried to force them back, but in the dream, he could not. They washed over him and took things that he loved and destroyed them. Then the world closed in and there was nothing but walls he could not breach. For some reason he thought he might be trapped there an eternity and he screamed -

- And jerked awake, wild eyed and gathering power to throw against something that was no longer there. Light came in from the porthole. The deck was not tilted precariously beneath him. His back was against the wall, one arm trapped under Kall-Su. He lay for a while, trying to remember the details of the dream. Dreams that potent always had meaning. But the recollection fled tauntingly.

He took a moment to gauge how he felt. A little fluttering in the pit of his stomach. A vague thickness in the head. Both would be multiplied once he got up. It was getting to the point where he didn't want to. It would almost be easier to hibernate until landfall. Just put himself into a numbing stasis and sleep away the storms and the sea sickness and the frustration. But that would put him and Kall at the mercy of the pirates and he wasn't so miserable yet to do that. He decided to just lay where he was for a while, sequestered with Kall's quiet warmth.

His lids fluttered shut and he drifted back into a dreamless doze. It was good to merely lie there and do and think nothing.

There was a sharp rap on the cabin door a split second before it opened. Captain Amir stuck his head in, a white grin splitting his dark face.

"Ah, you're alive after the storm. I'd feared the sea sickness had taken you once and for all."

Schneider's eyes snapped open. He cast the captain a dangerous lazy glare. "Get the fuck out."

"But I came to invite you to see a most wondrous thing."

"What thing?"

"You must come to see. A treasure I have found and just only discovered the magic of."

Schneider thought about the mysterious warded chest and his curiosity was pricked. He gently shifted a shoulder out from under a heavily sleeping Kall-Su and climbed over him to reach the floor. A touch of dizziness assaulted him when it was only his two feet supporting him and he took a moment to try and clear his head.

He shut the door to the cabin behind him and Amir proceeded him down the narrow passage to the captain's cabin at the end of aft of the ship. Inside was a relatively large sized room, as

rooms went on small ships. It was crowded with carved chests and wardrobes, silken and brocade pillows on a low, wide bunk. Ornate tables cluttered with all manner of junk. A railed dinning table with various charts spread out upon it and sitting on the bed what looked like a rusted out, dented portable radio player from the time before. Schneider stared at it for a moment in disinterest. The thing was too big to have fit in the spelled chest. Therefore it was not deserving of his interest.

"That's the treasure?" He jerked a chin at the battered radio.

"It is. I found it in the treasure house of a foreign lord. I only just discovered its secret."

"It makes noise." Schneider guessed wryly. "Probably static, obnoxious noise."

"It does." Amir said in surprise, both dark brows lifted. "I thought it some sort of cursed object, until this very morning, when I touched a certain spot and the most melodious song sounded forth."

He went over and pressed the play button and a tinny sounding female crooning began. One of the speakers was gone entirely, the working one was almost shot.

"I'm thrilled beyond words." Schneider said, letting his gaze wonder around the cabin. There was a round globe with various tubes protruding from it, brewing on the table by the bed. A sweet smoke drifted through the air.

"Ah," Amir saw his gaze and explained. "One of my pleasures. Have you ever experienced the euphoria of the white flower?"

"Another drug?"

"Not one to shutter the senses. But to expand."

"Whatever." he waved a disinterest hand. Amir chuckled at him. Schneider scowled, fingering a scuffed and much used hilt of a saber lying against a chair. Most of the things here had a well worn look about them.

"Pirating isn't a particularly profitable line of work I take it." He managed to get a lacing of contempt into his voice.

Amir plopped down on a pillow by his bunk, using the bed as a back rest. He picked up one of the tubes and sucked in a lungful of flavorful smoke. After holding it in and exhaling a broad, content smile spread over his face. "It is quite profitable, my friend. Perhaps you seek the trappings of luxury here? I need them not when the sea is all the comfort I shall ever require. All the lover. All the comrade."

Schneider snorted disbelievingly. "Then why do you do it?"

Amir grinned at him. "What would life be without adventure?"

It was not an answer that he could find immediate fault with. He might have given it himself on various occasions during his career. The static sound of the one radio speaker annoyed

him. He sat down on the edge of the bunk and took the thing in his lap. Amir almost opened his mouth to warn him to be careful with such a precious artifact. Schneider banged a fist on the faceplate of the working speaker and fiddled with the volume dial. Amir winced until something clicked and the static dissipated, revealing a much clearer, more appealing sound.

"Ah. You do have the touch." The captain sighed. "She sings like an angel?"

"Do you even know what she's saying?" the language was precarious at best, even for Schneider who'd been around long enough to have at least heard a fair sampling of dialects.

"It doesn't matter." Absently he handed the smoking tube to Schneider.

With a shrug, Schneider took it, and experimentally took a small drag. He'd tasted worse things. It sort of went straight to his head, bringing with it a certain calm. Almost it settled his stomach. He held the tube away from him and stared at it, impressed. "What is this, again?"

"Smoke of the white flower. Opium."

"Oh." He shrugged and took another hit.

"This ship is not all I have to show for my profession." Amir admitted, quite talkative in the arms of the opium. "I have a beautiful house on the shores of the Blood Sea. I have many beautiful slaves awaiting my pleasure should I return to land. And many beautiful things."

"I've got houses to spare." Schneider said, more than a little garrulous himself for much the same reasons. "And I don't need slaves. Women throw themselves at me."

Amir laughed. "I imagine they do, Jamad ja'da. You will fetch such a high price."

"In your dreams, sea rat."

Amir leaned forward conspiratorially, a lascivious look in his dark eyes. "So do have *jima* with the *ajmal djinn*?"

"What?" Schneider took another lazy drag off the tube. The stuff felt damned good. He felt remiss for never having discovered it before.

"Ah - how do you say it politely -? Do you have sex with the pretty golden *djinn*?"

Schneider sputtered and glared. "No, I do not. As if it's your business. God, when we get close to land I am sooo going to sink this ship."

"Hummm, pity." Amir took a drag. Whether it was a pity about sinking his ship or not having sex with Kall-Su he did not clarify.

"So what's in the warded chest?" Schneider asked, just to be nasty and to catch the captain off guard as the man had caught him.

Amir blinked at him, then his dark eyes narrowed warily. "How do you know of that, prying land snake?"

Schneider shrugged lazily and noncommittally.

"It is not for you to know." Amir snapped, suddenly out of good humor. "I would keelhaul a man of mine who ventured beyond the locked doors of my private storeroom."

"Oh, try it. Please." Schneider suggested.

Amir thought about it, then his face relaxed and he ventured one of his broad white grins. He reached out and patted Schneider's knee. "It is okay. I would look myself if I were in your position."

Schneider looked down at the hand lingering on his knee. With the captain's comment about Kall so fresh in his mind, such a gesture could only be taken in the most dissatisfactory light. "We could sink the ship right now?" he suggested civilly. "Or you could get your hand off me. Your choice. I'm game for either."

Amir tsked and moved his hand, settling with his back to Schneider once more. "You foreigners," he muttered. "So prudish. So boring."

Never having been called prudish or boring before, Schneider was not sure how to formulate a comeback. He settled for drawing in another lungful of opium smoke. One had to admit, with the white flower in one's system, it was much harder to take offense at otherwise mortal sleights.

Seven

Schneider hadn't even realized he'd passed out. It sort just of happened from one moment to the next, while he was sharing the fruits of the delightful *white flower* with captain Amir. The opium itself had not been the culprit. The opium he could deal with. It was the wine that got him, or more accurately what had been in the wine.

He came out of it slowly, aware of lying on an uncomfortable and uneven surface, of rocking a good deal more than he was used to even on ship board. And of the annoying, rapid patter of foreign speech floating above his head. The gibberish was interspersed with the distant, raucous cries of seagulls. Even half immersed in sleep, he was annoyed at the discomfort and the intrusive noise. He was vaguely aware of the dissipating lethargy of drugs in his blood. A fair amount of drugs, judging by the sluggishness of his mind. Probably enough to keep another man down for many more hours. Schneider had a particular resistance to the effects of narcotics.

He opened his eyes a little and found his head on the level of a good many feet and legs. The sides of a small boat rose up shallowly. A very small ship's dinghy filled with sailors that were not paying any attention to him, who should have been unconscious on the floor of the boat.

Land. They were rowing to land. Oh, what a very crafty captain Amir was, knowing that his advantage would soon be gone and working to take Schneider's away before he realized the shore was close by. One had to almost admire the man. Of course, his ship was still going to meet the bottom of the ocean.

With a quiet tendril of power, Schneider cleared away the last vestiges of the drug clouding his system. He contemplated blasting the bottom out of this little boat and sending it and its passengers into the next realm, then it occurred to him that Amir still might hold some advantage. If he had taken Kall-Su, who *was* quite susceptible to the effects of drugs, somewhere out of Schneider's reach, it would make all their lives more complicated. He really didn't feel like hunting him down in a foreign port.

But, for once on this miserable voyage, luck smiled on him. When he carefully shifted his head and looked down the bottom of the boat, he found both Kall and the mysteriously warded box that captain Amir was so protective of. How lovely. And at the far end of the boat, sitting at the prow, was Amir himself. The captain was staring fixedly forward at a shore that Schneider could not from his vantage see.

Time to remedy that. He drew in a breath and with it an influx of steady, undiluted power. How wonderful to have the earth close below him again. To not feel isolated by fathomless depths of water between him and solid ground. Even in this rocking dinghy he did not feel the unsteadiness he had the last time he'd been awake and aware. A cat like grin of satisfaction crossed his lips even as he spoke a word of power and sat up, gesturing with a languid finger at the prow of the boat. Amir barely had time to glance around in surprise before a bolt of pure energy took him full in the chest, arcing him up and twenty feet over the prow into the water. Sailors shrilled in shock, cringing away from him, lifting oars threateningly against him. He swung an arm around and the lot of them were swept like weightless mannequins from the boat. He leaned forward, hooking one arm around Kall-Su's waist and drawing him up, and grabbing the warded chest with the other. Then he was in the air and a spike of lightening based magic bolted down to scuttle the launch.

He started to summon another, figuring Amir's ship was close by, then stopped in mid-air, staring at the sea of masts bobbing in what appeared to be a major harbor. The water was startlingly blue, the shoreline colored in shades of beige and brown, interspersed with green here and there. A city sprawled along the curving shoreline. An odd, blocky city of sandstone and thatch. Small boats and rafts plied the waters between the larger ships, and brown, turbaned heads turned in shock at the explosion that had delivered the mortal wound to the ship's launch.

This was not a small harbor, or a familiar shoreline. Any one of these ships could have been the one he'd come in on. And though he was of a mood to wreck a little havoc, going about blasting ships out of the water might not be in his best interests if there were more *brother's of the sea* around, and or foreign wizards of indefinable power lurking in the depths of the strange city. With Kall-Su plainly of no help and himself uncertain of his situation, he decided to avoid the attention a tantrum would drawn.

With a curse, he gained a little height and headed towards the city. He felt the traces of Amir's ocean based magic gathering and figured the captain had survived the energy attack and was summoning a little retaliation of his own. Let him. The sea was beyond Schneider now and of no concern. He was over dry land and sprawling city. Block upon block of squat, flat-roofed dwellings separated by narrow, shaded streets and crawling with an abundance of people. None of them noticed him. None of the turbaned or cloaked heads looked up towards the blazing sun.

There was a point where the buildings began to look dilapidated and unused. Ancient almost, with the bare bones and jagged walls caused not only by time but by violence. A city of the old world perhaps, that had served as the roots of a new one.

He headed there, looking for seclusion. He found it in the second floor of a abandoned dwelling. The ceiling was half gone and one wall crumbling inwards. Stone littered the floor. There were not even the scrapes of furniture left. If the great destruction had not destroyed the trappings of domesticity, then human scavengers had. After Anasla, nothing had gone to waste. He dropped the chest absently on the stone floor, and laid Kall down with a little more care in a bare spot under a still intact section of roof. He did a quick assessment of the younger sorcerer's condition and figured it was half drugs and half the lingering traces of sea sickness that had him in its grip. He could come out of it on his own, given a little time. And Schneider was not ready to hear complaints about how miserably they'd lost track of the girl. Nor was he willing to argue about setting out to search frantically for her. At the moment he was a little more interested in discovering something of this strange land. One had to know the terrain to take full advantage of it. He was not quite certain how long they had been at sea. He'd not been at his best during a good part of the voyage, and who knew how long he'd been out after Amir had pulled his little trick. Many days, he thought from the emptiness of his stomach. With the sea cooperating eagerly with the dusky skinned captain, they probably had made extraordinary time. Time enough to sail out of the eastern seas and into more arid climates.

He took more thorough stock of himself, now that he had the leisure to do so. Found distaste in the clothing he'd been wearing for much too long and gathered the outrageously wasteful amount of power it took to cast a detailed *Sartor* spell. He felt much better in fine new clothing. Silk and light leather and silver tracing. It was too hot for anything bulky. Armor would have been dreadfully uncomfortable. He didn't need it for anything but show anyway.

He went downstairs the old fashioned way, testing the sturdiness of the stone steps. The wooden door to the second level was half off its hinges. He put a warding spell upon it and pulled it haphazardly shut behind him. Even the rats wouldn't pass his invisible barrier. Satisfied that Kall was safe from casual discovery, Schneider strolled down the pitted, unkempt street. It was several city blocks before he saw the first traces of habitation and then it was the drudges of humanity. The poor and maimed, the homeless and the criminal element. They lurked in the shadows of gutted buildings, staring out with hungry, desperate eyes at the oddity that walked through their midst. They made no move towards him, even to beg, even the most desperate of them sensing that a predator walked among them.

He heard the whispers behind his back though. Incomprehensible words. It grew more frustrating as he moved into the new city, where many many more people walked. Where conversations took place at quicksilver speed around him. Where merchants hawked their goods and shoppers haggled for the best deals. None of it made any sense. Everyone here was dark skinned, most of the men sported thick beards. The women - well, it was hard to tell what the women looked like. Most of them were veiled and heavily robed, only the obvious prostitutes went bare faced, and those were olive skinned and black eyed, with dark lustrous hair. People gestured at him, staring with frank curiosity. He stood out among them like a shining, pale beacon. He was used to attention, but he was not comfortable being stared at like a curiosity. Someone reached out and touched his hair and that was it. He whipped around with a hiss and the gangly youth who'd dared to lay a finger on him cringed back, jabbering something unintelligible.

"Back off." He snarled, even though the youth was already backpedaling. Schneider drew his brows and glowered at the street in general. "I dislike this place already." He announced to no one in particular. "Its hot and dusty and they hide their women."

"Not to hide them would be the height of bad taste." A heavily accented voice, but one that he could understand came from a vendor beside him. A short, grossly overweight little man sweated under a brightly patterned tent. A table of fine fabrics was displayed before him.

"You speak a decent language?"

"Ah, I speak a number of heathen tongues, my friend. I used to deal in slaves from other shores. More trouble than they were worth, I'm afraid."

Schneider leaned forward. "What city is this?"

"New Abadan." The merchant said. "The pearl of the gulf."

"Which Gulf?"

"Why the Persian, my friend."

Schneider drew in a frustrated breath. It was as bad as he'd expected. Worse. It was absolutely going to take forever to get home. Yoko was going to kill him.

"This is just charming. Absolutely wonderful. "

"Did you just arrive in port?" The merchant inquired.

"Yes!" Schneider hissed.

"Ah, everyone is coming in now, what with the storm season coming up. They'll be no ocean crossings till next year."

"No crossings? Predictable."

A pair of rotund, veiled women stopped a few feet away and openly stared, pointing and whispering none too quietly together. Schneider glared at them. He was going to start getting nasty in short order.

"Your hair." The merchant said helpfully. "They've never seen the like. We see fair haired foreigners occasionally, but not like you. It is -" The merchant struggled for words.

"*Jamad ja'da.*" Schneider grumbled sullenly, recalling what Amir had called him.

"Why yes." The fat merchant beamed at him. "Just that. Very apt, my friend. But perhaps if you wish to avoid so many staring eyes, you might purchase a turban and robes to cover it. I've many fine silks to protect one with such fair skin as you from the harsh sun. Cloth fit for a sultan."

* * * *

For the first time in eons, Kall-Su opened his eyes and didn't immediately feel the urge to purge the contents of his stomach. Not that he had anything on his stomach. He couldn't recall last eating and only vaguely held the recollection of Schneider forcing some sort of brothy tea on him days - weeks? - ago.

He lifted a hand and rubbed at accumulated grit in his eyes, then rolled his head to stare at the bright patch of daylight coming in through the half fallen wall of whatever place he was in. It was a very stable place. No rolling or rocking whatsoever, to which he was eternally grateful. There was nothing but rubble on the floor and a small wooden chest not far from him. The chest threw off an aura of distaste that made him want to kick it away. It took his befuddled mind a few moments to recognize the fact that it was warded. A few moments more to block out the revulsion and ignore the thing.

With a grunt, he pushed himself up, and sat with his back against the wall while his head stopped spinning. He felt a little fuzzy. Drunk almost. Drunk or drugged. He was familiar enough with the touch of drugs to guess the latter. This was not a magic blocking narcotic though, and although his healing abilities were not what they used to be, he still managed to sweep the traces of the stuff out of his system.

He felt better after that. Good enough to climb to his feet and move over to the shattered wall. He found himself on the brink of a sprawling city of sand colored buildings that seemed to spread forever before the glittering line of ocean could be seen. It was painfully bright, and abysmally hot. Hot and dry.

He stared at the vista spread before him and slowly blinked in confusion. He could not imagine why he had woken here. Where here was. Where Schneider was - or Lily - or home. He thought home was very far away. The feeling of being stranded out of his depths was strong enough to make his heart hammer in his chest. Or maybe that was the last of the sea sickness.

He put a hand to the jagged stone of the wall, a last little bit of dizziness making his head swim. The heat of the day made the air shimmer like a thing alive over the city. The heat was making him feel trapped and claustrophobic. He loosened his collar, ran fingers through lank, salt crusted hair and shuddered at the feel. He was filthy and he probably stank, though one could hardly tell if it were him or the ruins he found himself in. A simple cleansing spell would work wonders. He hadn't tried one since - he'd been crippled. He hadn't really needed to and there were so many other spells that he felt more inclined to spend his time and energy remastering. Surprisingly little resistance. He felt a dozen pounds lighter without the grime. His head felt clearer.

There was a door hanging half off its hinges. He put a hand towards it and jerked his fingers back suddenly as the thorns of a nasty little ward pricked him. He hissed through his teeth and shook his hand as little pin pricks of imagined discomfort raced through it. It was a strong ward, but not a difficult one. He was especially good at untangling wards and magic bindings and cryptic puzzles. He dissolved it in seconds, and pushed the door open. It lead down to narrow, half crumbling stone steps. Dusty and disused, and home to various crawling creatures. Kall wrinkled his nose in distaste, having an aversion to such disorder, and picked his way down the stairs. At the bottom was another door and another ward. If someone wanted to keep him in they would be sorely disappointed. If it were to keep others out - well,

what was the need anymore? He felt rather lightheaded with the sudden bout of health after so long without it.

He dissolved the ward, and pulled the door open, only to have it snatched out of his hand and himself facing a tall, turbaned, robed figure. Kall took a step back, giving himself enough room to cast a spell, gathering tendrils of power to himself even before he'd decided what spell to throw.

"Chill, Kall. It's me."

He stared, and Schneider brushed the patterned silk flaps protruding from his turban back from his face, a smug smile gracing his lips. The headpiece hid most of his mane of silvery hair, save for the few tendrils that escaped over his brow and along his cheek. He wore a very fine, embroidered tunic under the overrobes, and loose silken pants over soft boots. He looked like some exotic prince. "I look good, don't I?"

Kall continued to stare, flabbergasted. Finally he managed to gasp. "Where the hell are we?"

"New Abadan. Look, I brought you some native clothes."

"New what? What happened? How long have we been here. Do we know where the ship that took Lily is?"

"I knew you were going to be like this when you woke up." Schneider brushed past him, thrusting an armful of silk at him in the process. Kall took it without protest, staring at Schneider's back as he climbed up the stairs.

He had no choice but to follow him upstairs. Schneider went to the crumbled wall and looked out over the city.

"DS -" Kall hated the whine he heard in his tone, but he was beginning to feel rather desperate and Schneider was behaving in his usual, careless manner.

"Amir brought us to this port. He had some notion of selling us - can you believe he thought he was going to sell *me* as a slave? We've been here less than a day. I don't know how long we were at sea and I have no idea where your little bard is."

"This captain - this Amir - would he know?"

Schneider shrugged. "Maybe. Probably. If we meet again, I'll ask him before I kill him."

"We've got to find him and ask. I've got to find her."

"Listen Kall," Schneider turned to fix him with his narrow gaze. "She's either dead or alive. If she's dead, it's too late. If she's alive, the worst that could be done to her probably already has been. We're talking weeks here, maybe more. So getting hysterical about it now is a little pointless. It's not like she hasn't had to service strange men before. She was a slave aft -"

Schneider didn't get to finish the thought. Kall saw a vague wash of red across his vision and lunged forward, smashing his fist into Schneider's mouth. The silken robes fluttered to the

ground in the process, forgotten. Schneider stumbled back into the wall, and almost over the edge, holding up an arm to ward off a second blow. Stone and mortar crumbled.

"Shut up. Goddamned you, don't you dare say that about her."

Kall couldn't think. Fear for Lily, weeks of sickness and frustration, the feeling of helplessness made a muddle of his mind. Schneider's words, though possible true, pushed him over the edge. He couldn't even focus enough to use magic.

Schneider didn't use any in retaliation. Just blocked the second blow with his forearm and caught hold of Kall's sleeve to keep himself from falling backwards, then used his hold to jerk Kall off balance enough to ram a shoulder into his chest, then a fist into his stomach. Kall took him down with him when he staggered, but Schneider had the advantage of weight over him and a clear head and after a bit of wrestling about on the rubble strewn floor, he managed to get enough leverage to pin the younger sorcerer under him.

Kall got a slap across the cheek then, and another that made his head spin and made him taste blood.

"That's the second fucking time you've attacked me over this and I'm getting damned tired of it. Do it again and I stop being nice."

"Get off me." Kall struggled to buck Schneider off. Schneider pressed his weight down, grinding Kall's back into rubble, compacting the bones of his wrists with strength that might or might not have been magic born. Blood ran down Schneider's chin, forming a bright red droplet at the tip.

"Say you're sorry."

Kall turned his head away at that request. Schneider leaned down and hair and turban flaps brushed Kall's cheek.

"Say it, you little shit."

"Don't speak of her like that."

"Is anything I said an untruth? Is it?"

The drop of blood fell, hitting Kall's cheek. He shut his eyes to hide the welling wetness.

"You're such a bastard." He whispered. No one could hurt him as thoroughly as Schneider. No one could reduce him to feeling like a belligerent child.

"Yes, I am." Schneider agreed. "Answer the question."

"No. Nothing you said is untrue." Dully said. It seemed enough to satisfy Schneider's sense of justice or dominance or whatever emotions motivated him at times like this. He released Kall's wrists and sat back, staring down at him.

"We will find her. I didn't come all this way just to waste the trip. But freaking about it, isn't going to help. You know, you're usually the one with the clear head. You really need to get your wits together."

Kall shifted his head to stare up at Schneider, saying nothing. There was nothing he could think to say that would not come out sullen or combative. Schneider reached out a thumb and attempted to wipe the blood off Kall-Su's cheek. All he ended up doing was smearing it. He shook his head, flummoxed by a drop of blood, then swung his leg from over Kall and got up, wiping his hands on the folds of his overrobe.

"Just don't hit me anymore. I get crazy when people hit me." He muttered, striding to the crumbled wall then back again, almost nervously.

Kall sat up, wiping absently at the smeared blood, and more furtively at the wetness at the corners of his eyes. "What do we do now, then?" he asked softly. He didn't know this place. He didn't know how to begin to find Lily.

"I don't know. It doesn't help that I can understand a word these people say."

"Oh." Kall dragged a piece of the silk Schneider had given him over his knee, rubbing the softness between his fingers. "I was researching a language absorption spell a few years ago - I never had the chance to try it out."

Schneider turned to stare at him, one dark brow arched. "Language absorption?"

"I don't know how quick it is, but it supposed to allow foreign tongues to gradually seep into the caster's consciousness as they are overheard, until all the words and phrases are eventually understood."

"It sounds like something you'd find in one of your dusty books, But it might be useful. What's the spell?"

"Its been a while - let me think about it."

"Well, don't think too long. I don't want to hang around here forever."

Eight

Schneider glided through the market, a head taller than most of the other shoppers, the rich fabric of his native robes flowing about him as if he were surrounded by his own personal breeze. Which, considering it was Schneider, he might very well have been. Appearances were everything, after all. He was also infuriatingly unmindful that he'd ever said an inflammable thing in his life. Kall-Su simmered over it. And was practical enough not to let it show. Schneider tended to take offense at grudges held against him. He had very little concern for the state of other people's pride. Or feelings - which had always been a problem between them. Since he was one of the few people in the world that Kall did - deeply - want to have a good opinion of. When he didn't want to kill him. Or wipe the devil-may-care smirk from his face. Or slap him with the same casual nonchalance as Schneider had slapped him.

Schneider was not paying him a great deal of heed at the moment, other than to occasionally point things out, or to harass him about remembering the spell, which only made it harder for him to concentrate on recalling all the specifics. It had been a very long time, a decade or more at least since he'd been interested in it. And not any pressing interest at that. He *knew* all the languages spoken on the clump of land that formed his continent and hadn't the need to practice such a spell.

They worked their way through a crowded, dusty bazaar. The heat was oppressive and he wished he might discard the hooded cloak that hid his pale hair. So what if they noticed? He was not incapacitated on shipboard. He had enough of his powers back and enough bottled up frustration to welcome a little confrontation. But a few thoughtful moments later he realized it was that very frustration - over Lily, over this miserable situation - the damnable dry heat - that made him wish such a thing. And Schneider had been thoughtful enough to bring him the lightest of materials. Blue silks of varying shades that made up loose tunic and pants. Soft, cloth boots with leather soles and curling toes that he had stared at in confusion when he'd pulled them out of the pile of material. He hated the turban that Schneider seemed to revel in, it made him feel as if he were being suffocated, so he settled for wearing the hood of the cloak up. People still stared at him when they chanced to glance up into his face.

He disliked the crowds. The market was teeming with turbaned, robe swaddled bodies. They were worse than the markets at home. He'd hated the crowds there too. Until only recently, on his tours with Lily and her troupe, he had not had to endure them.

Schneider's words came back. Callous, cruel words they might have been, but so very likely true. It hurt, in a place at the core of his being, to think very hard on it. He couldn't stop the flashes of images that came to mind, so he forced his attention to the table after table of displayed wares. Swords and beads and fabulous materials. Jars full of unidentified, biological things, skulls made into candle holders, or bowls. Pottery and blown glass of all description, brass and metal work of incredible mastery.

"Where are we going?" he asked Schneider's back, because he was tired of the crowds and he had not been willing to talk to Schneider after leaving the abandoned section of the city. Schneider's indifference usually outlasted his grudges.

Schneider was staring at a dancing girl, who's face was bare for all the world to see. She gyrated in time with the cymbals on her delicate fingers. Her master sat on a rug not far from her, negotiating the price for her services, collecting the brass pittances interested bystanders tossed at her dainty feet.

"What are we doing, DS?" he snagged the edge of Schneider's robe, demanding attention. Schneider glanced around, one dark brow canted wryly.

"Talking to me again, are we?" he shifted the weight of the small chest he had collected from the room where Kall had awoken, under his arm. Kall gave him an imperious, icy stare.

"Is there a reason we're wondering aimlessly about the city market?"

"Can you come up with a better occupation?"

"We could be inquiring about where the ship that has Lily might have gone?"

"And how might we do that, not speaking the language? Have you recalled the spell, oh literate one?"

Schneider was being condescending. It dripped from his voice like newly spun silk. Kall glared harder, just a little guilty for thinking of everything *but* the spell while they had been touring the bazaar.

"I didn't think so." Schneider said when Kall didn't respond. He shifted the box to his other arm.

"What is that thing?" Kall hissed in exasperation. It exuded abhorrence.

"It was Amir's. He seemed to treasure it, so I relieved him of it. Its bound to be pissing him off royally."

"And of course, that's your first concern. Annoying this sea captain? How predictable."

Schneider swung around and smiled at him. "If you knew what he suggested about you, you'd wouldn't be so quick to abdicate forgiving behavior."

He moved on through the crowd, still eyeing the dancer. She held out her swaying arms invitingly.

"What did he suggest about me?" One had to ask, since it had been left tantalizingly unsaid.

"You don't want to know."

Of course he wanted to know. He wouldn't have asked if he didn't. He pressed his lips tight and held his silence.

"Hello. Hello there. I have been looking for you, most gracious one."

A pudgy, sweating little dark skinned man wove in and out of the pedestrians, waving his arms in their direction. Kall glanced at Schneider curiously. Schneider shrugged.

"Local peon." He explained and stared at the little merchant as the man puffed up before him.

"What do you want?" Schneider asked flatly, just a little dangerously, his immediate forward path blocked.

"Oh, most glorious *jamad ja'da*, I have discovered information that will be of great interest to you."

"Have you really?"

One had to wonder how long one had been unconscious for Schneider to have already formed informational alliances.

"About the ships that sail from the east." The merchant clarified and Kall's interest was suddenly pricked.

"What ships?" He stepped up beside Schneider and the merchant eyed him warily.

"I have found a trader that knows all the likely port of calls for ships trafficking in foreign slaves. He will talk to you for a price."

"A price for you or for him?" Schneider inquired.

"Why for both of us of course. I left my booth for half a day to run your errand."

Schneider waved a hand airily, seemingly uninterested. "I suppose I could make the time."

Kall glared at him, the merchant shifted uneasily, put off balance by well orchestrated disinterest.

"Well don't just stand there, we haven't all day." Schneider snapped and the merchant winced, then beckoned them to follow as he dove back into the steadily moving crowd.

Schneider cast a smug look to Kall-Su. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"No heartfelt apology for doubting my concern for your interests?"

"No." Kall agreed, not in the frame of mind for capitulation. Schneider sniffed, put upon and unappreciated. Kall ground his teeth, not about to be sucked into the act. He was not ready to forgive for things said about Lily.

Through the market and into a less crowded street. Narrower, with low sandstone buildings crowding each side. The brine smell of the ocean was stronger here, away from the myriad perfumes of the market. But they were not heading towards the ocean. Instead the merchant led them back towards the uninhabited, ancient section of town.

There was a shifting of shadows and a group of turbaned, robed men with wickedly curved swords stepped out into the dusty street before them. Neither Schneider or Kall-Su bothered to look over their shoulders at the movement they heard from the rear. More robed ambushers no doubt.

"My. It appears you've been betrayed." Kall observed dryly. Schneider cast him a dark look at the tone. The little merchant hurried forward, past the line of sword bearing men, and only hesitated to call over his shoulder apologetically.

"If gold is offered on each side, the wise man turns neither down." Then he scampered down the street.

A broad shouldered man dressed differently from the others stepped forward. Kall held no memory of him, but Schneider's eyes narrowed and a hiss vented through his teeth.

"Sea rat." He said.

"Land snake." The seasnake responded with a tight smile. "Did you think to steal from me in my own land?"

"Steal? That's a matter of opinion, isn't it? You have to own something properly before its yours to be stolen, Amir."

"Everything you stole, I owned."

Schneider laughed, shaking his initial irritation. "And tell me what that might be."

"Why yourself, *jamad ja'da*, that pretty blonde thing beside you and most importantly the box you hold in your hands."

"Care to try and stake a claim? I dare you. I double dare you."

One had to take offense at being referred to as a *pretty blonde thing*, but indignity came second place to the budding realization that this was the captain who had taken them. That this man might know better than anyone else where Lily had been taken.

"If you insist." Captain Amir said stubbornly, obviously in no wise concerned for his own continued existence. Or obviously not realizing how badly the sea had ruptured their powers.

"Wait." An aged and authoritative voice echoed down the deserted street. The dark robed warriors shifted and moved aside to let a stately, white robed man through. Gray streaked beard. Immaculate turban and overrobes. Eyes as hard and as dark and as assuming of his own power as any lord or king back home.

"It is not captain Amir's chest to contend over. It is *mine*."

He said *mine* as if in the royal sense. Schneider lifted a brow at him. He had never, ever been impressed with blooded titles.

"And this means - what to me, exactly, old man?"

There was more shifting of the men around them. The swords itched to taste the blood of the irreverent man who spoke so rudely to their lord.

"It means you have stolen from me, foreigner. Not some nameless brother of the sea."

"And who are you?"

"The Moulay Zainab." Amir supplied when the old man lifted his chin proudly. "Very powerful. I would recommend against aggravating him - which I realize is a difficult thing for you, landsnake."

Schneider's smile broadened. He was being entertained by this. Kall was listening to it all with growing speculation.

"He stole it from you?" Schneider asked.

"He stole it *for* me. It is mine."

"Oh, god, now we're back to that whole stolen goods - ownership issue again." Schneider feigned a look of trepidation. He shifted the chest in his hands. "I don't know. I sorta like this box. Its foul reek grows on you."

"You haven't opened it?" the moulay seemed to hold his breath.

Schneider shrugged. "Who has the time?"

"If you want your box," Kall stepped past Schneider, tired of the word play. "You may have it. For a price."

"You wish."

"No price. It is mine already."

Two oppositions at once. Kall cast a warning glare at Schneider, urging silently for him to cooperate.

"It is not yours." He stated. "And you will die trying to take it. If your captain thinks otherwise, he apparently does not realize the sea surrounds us to protect him no longer."

The Moulay glanced sidelong at Amir, who shrugged and admitted. "Perhaps the *ajmal djinn* has a point."

"*Djinn*?" the old man's eyes lit up with interest. "*Kafir Djinn*, my lord. Foreign magics that have no place here."

The men behind the old man and the captain shifted a little uneasily at the few words they could understand. Superstitious men then.

"Perhaps we will talk, then. Of this price you want." Zainab said carefully.

Kall let go the breath he was holding and assumed his emotionless, ice lord face. He inclined his head shortly and heard a huff of distaste from Schneider.

"Talk all you want. I'm not going to bore myself with this drivel. I'll be over here. *With* my box." He sauntered over the shade of a doorless entry and sat down in the half darkness of the shadowed stairwell inside.

All the eyes watched him, then slowly drifted back to Kall-Su. "What I want is quite simple. I want the captives taken from the town where I was attacked. Your captain knows the one."

"I can give you the ship." Amir said. "But the slaves are long sold."

The ice face faltered. It felt for a moment as if the breath had been knocked out of him. It took him a precious few seconds to get his facade back into place. *No, no, no.*

"How long could it have been? You've only been in this port a day. No longer."

"This port is far beyond the one my comrades would have put into. The great slave city of Bahrein we passed many, many days ago. Those captives would have been sold and taken away by now."

"Taken where?"

"Why, where ever their new masters decreed, of course."

Almost, Kall struck out in anger. Power that he hadn't controlled in too long a time swirled in anger around him.

"Inquiries can be made." The moulay said. "If these slaves are so important, they can be found. But my property first."

"Its not your property. It's his." Kall-Su reminded them with a slight nod of his head towards the enclave where Schneider reclined. "Perhaps I might persuade him to relinquish it to you, if you were willing to give me guarantees -"

"Guarantees?" the Moulay Zainab laughed, revealing, stained, rotten teeth. A surprise considering the man's obvious self importance. "I own half the desert, *Kafir Djinn*. My word is as the word of Allah."

An old deity. From the old world and still it survived, even after Anasla. A persistence of beliefs that had not endured in Kall-Su's land. His people drifted from god to god, looking for salvation that very seldom came.

"I will take you to Bahrein and my sycophants will make inquiries. I will promise you the aide of my resources."

It was so damned little to go on. So damned uncertain to trust this man's word. But there was a certain honor to his face. Not honesty or generosity, but pride that would not allow him to blithely promise what he would not deliver. What else had they to go on, strangers in this very foreign land? If a bargain struck now got him closer to Lily, he would strike it. If the moulay reneged, then he would make him pay. No other options at the moment made themselves available.

"All right. Agreed." Now the difficult part. Making Schneider see past his own stubborn pride and give up what he considered a trophy of battle or wits or whatever over Captain Amir.

He walked over to the doorway. Schneider leaned against the stone steps, looking up at him.

"Please." Soft entreaty that the others could not hear.

"I don't like them."

"Nor I, particularly, but time is of the essence. If they can offer help - we cannot ignore it. You don't know this place. I certainly don't. What hope of finding her if we can not find aid from someone who does? *Please*, DS - help me with this."

Schneider's lip curled. He tossed the chest up at Kall. Kall caught it, surprised at the easy capitulation. He nodded once, heartfelt gratitude, and strode back to stand before Zainab and Amir. The moulay's eyes lit eagerly upon the chest. Amir watched him, dark eyes full of curious speculation.

"You are," the captain remarked. "Considerably more impressive when you're not senseless and trying to wrench up the last of your life on my decks."

Kall stared at him flatly, uncomfortable with the notion that he had been in this man's power for weeks and recalled nothing of it. He only had Schneider's words to go on. And Schneider's version of things were often colored to soothe his own ego.

Kall offered the chest into the Moulay's hands. The man flinched visibly, effected by the wards. His veined hands pulled back and he gave Amir an offended look. Amir shrugged and took it from Kall, speaking a few words to banish the wards. Zainab took the chest, trembling fingers fumbling with the catch and throwing the lid back.

He stared for a moment into its hidden depths, then his eyes lifted with rage and he cried.

"Thief! Its empty. We had a bargain."

Kall blinked, taking a step forward to look into the box even as Amir did. The men behind the Moulay lifted swords threateningly.

"The bargain was for the box." Schneider's lazy voice drifted up from behind. "Nobody said anything about what was in it."

He sauntered out from his shadows with a sibilant slither of silken robes and innate, dangerous grace. One could mistake him for nothing but a predator, regardless of dress.

"What was all the fuss about anyway?" he asked, razor sharp sweetness in his tone. From the folds of his overrobe, he withdrew a gilded, gem encrusted bottle. It was scuffed and the topaz glass between the gold gilding hazy with age. Most of the settings that had once held gems were empty sockets.

The Moulay's eyes went wide, then narrowed with simmering indignation. "Give it here! Take it from him!" he waved a hand and the men with swords advanced. Schneider laughed. The air was split with the reverberating sound of thunder. A bolt of energy hit the ground between him and the men approaching from behind. It drowned the air in pulsating, electricity, throwing mere mortals back, making clothing crackle with static. The warriors behind the Moulay hesitated. The Moulay did. Amir was mouthing the words to a spell. Kall saw his chances at alliance slipping away.

"Schneider. Damn you." He whirled, not having the slightest idea what he might do to prevent more violence. Certainly no action against Schneider.

"What is it? Some millennium old wine? Rare perfume?" Schneider's fingers went to the ornate glass stopper.

"No." The moulay cried. And the old man himself rushed past Kall, heedless of the danger he approached. Kall caught his shoulder, jerking him to a halt. But the damage was done. The bottle was unstopped and Schneider was bending his nose to take a whiff.

And rather suddenly got a faceful of noxious fumes. It smelled of an odd mixture of sulfur and jasmine. He gagged, jerking his head back, tossing the bottle from him like it had grown hot. It hit the dusty road and rocked back and forth, still spewing smoke. The lot of them, except for Schneider who was wiping involuntary tears from his eyes, stared at the thick mass of fog forming over the bottle. It took shape. Human shape. Arms, legs, head, all formed out of greenish white smoke. A voice drifted, as elusive as smoke, through the air.

Free. Free. I'm free.

"Yes." The Moulay breathed, trembling under Kall-Su's hand. "Allah be praised. Yes. Its mine. Mine."

The smoke solidified, took on substance and color and in its wake hovered an incredibly curvaceous, quite stunningly lovely, black haired female. Diaphanous skirts swirled around legs banded with gold bracelets. Gold coins and sparkling gems dangled from an immodest halter top. Rings with bells and charms jangled on her arms. Black eyes surveyed them all, and finally settled on Schneider, who was only just recovering from the face full of smoke that was her emergence. The uncertainty of her gaze melted away into an expression of pure adoration.

"Thank you Allah. Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you. This is the best gift I could ever have asked for."

At which point her feet hit the ground and she flung herself upon Schneider, wrapping her arms around his neck, which was a good deal higher than her own, and fastening her ruby red lips upon his. He staggered a little, caught off guard and quite thoroughly, one had to assume, surprised by the assault. Whether he broke the kiss, or she did was pure conjecture. But when they separated, she was beaming and he a little flabbergasted.

"Master," she purred. "Your wish is my command."

Nine

Schneider stared at the girl hanging in his arms in some bafflement. Not displeasure. Certainly not displeasure, for she was as pleasingly rounded and soft as any female creature he'd ever felt. And he had felt quite a few. They just didn't appear out of a stream of smoke from the interior of a bottle before they jumped into his arms. She was gazing up at him in absolute love/lust/adoration in those almost black eyes. Her breasts were pressed so closely against him he could feel the impression of her nipples. Not a bad thing at all - save for the niggling little voice in the back of his mind that shook an admonishing finger at him and reminded him of a honor vow he had made to Yoko. Can't be with another woman and still have her. It had gone something like that. Yoko was not in the least inclined towards sharing. Yoko had always tended towards the unreasonable in some things.

"Nooooo-" A impassioned voice cried, and the old man was shaking himself out of Kall-Su's grip and staggering towards Schneider and the girl out of the bottle. Girl out of a bottle.

Vague recollections of middle eastern myths came to mind. Genies and Djinn and that sort of thing. One hardly believed them. One knew the byways of magic and such things were not part of them. Unless the myths were totally misinformed and genies in bottles were in fact conquered elementals or demons and the bottles in question the magical prisons ancient sorcerers had used to contain them. That was interesting premise. The girl didn't look like an elemental or a demon. Well, perhaps a demoness of unusual charm. She had called him *master*. So she was a particularly keen one, if that were the case.

The old man went to grab the girl's shoulder. Wrapped his fingers around her smooth skin and she turned a dark eye upon him, then his hand melted right through her and slammed against Schneider's chest.

"Don't touch me, you repulsive old man." She hissed.

"Imprudent *Djinni*, you belong to me." The Moulay cried. But he jerked his hand back. The Djinni turned her back to Schneider, quite solid again and pressed her lovely backside up against him in a most inviting manner.

"No, you old goat, this one freed me from my prison. And even had he not, do you think I would willingly serve a dried up old prune like you? I am quite, quite pleased with my new master." One of her hands reached back and traveled down Schneider's flank. His mouth twitched in a smile. More at the old Moulay's outraged sputtering than her fondling.

Kall-Su approached them warily, eyeing the djinni with obvious distrust. The Moulay's men, the ones left standing, didn't quite know what to do.

"What is this - creature?" Kall hissed softly. Schneider could feel the faint tingle of magic as Kall-Su tried to discover the nature of her being. He hadn't thought to try an arcane examination himself, but first impression was that she was - different - than anything he had yet encountered.

"Creature?" the *djinni* demanded, turning her black eyes on Kall-Su. Kall ignored her, glaring over her head at Schneider.

"You always have to have the last word. Now look what you've done. They had agreed to help us."

"Why do we need their help? I've got a genie."

"Oh, darling, do with me as you will." She turned about in his arms, wriggling against him. One had to wrap an arm about her waist. One's hand just had to rest on the curve of her rear.

"You've also got a woman back home who will probably take offense at your new possession." Kall snapped testily. He hadn't been in a decent mood since he'd woken up.

"Ungrateful brat." Schneider hissed and disentangled himself from the djinni.

"Give her to the Moulay." Kall suggested. "We've no use for her."

"He's rather unimaginative, isn't he?" the djinni observed archly, crossing her arms sulkily across her ample bosom.

"He's a colossal boor." Schneider agreed.

"But," the djinni gave Kall a look she might reserve for picking produce at the market. "He's rather nice to look at, so I won't hold it against him. Yet."

Schneider shrugged.

"Besides, you opened the bottle, that's that. Can't be changed, can't just give me away. You're stuck with me."

"Not unless she goes back in the bottle and someone else frees her." Amir put in helpfully. He had a faint look of amusement on his bearded face. He wiped it off, when the Moulay turned to look back at him.

"And how do we make her do such a thing?"

"You don't." The djinni said. "Do you have any concept how long I've been trapped in there? Any earthly idea? You can't. The mortal mind can't imagine. All alone. Nobody to keep me company. No men. I have needs too, you know. Just because I'm a djinni doesn't mean I don't get lonely." She turned her bottomless eyes up to Schneider.

"Oh, master, the things I can do for you. I've been practicing - all by myself."

"Uuhhh -" He could not come up with anything more eloquent than that at the moment. One had to be thankful for loose robes.

"Amir, I hold you responsible for this. Do something, you miserable *brother of the sea*." The Moulay was in a fine temper. He was practically frothing at the mouth. Amir shifted a little uncertainly, suddenly at a disadvantage.

"My lord, I fear the *Kafir Djinn* may have had a point. Without the sea to provide me her energies - it might be unwise to challenge two land djinns and this infinitely charming creature out of the bottle."

"Oh, he's sweet." The djinni commented, smiling lewdly at Amir.

"And I'm bored with this. Get the bottle, Kall." Schneider ordered and with a whispered word, wrapped an arm around the djinni and took to the air. The Moulay started screaming foreign blasphemies. A handful of turbaned warriors rushed forward, wicked swords held high. Kall hissed a curse of his own, and erected a shield. The lot of them rebounded, sprawled stunned in the street. He snatched up the bottle and the stopper and called the air spirits to lift him up.

* * * * *

"So what's your name?" Schneider leaned across the plank table to reach for the clay picture of wine. They sat in the outside patio of a cantina on the other side of the city from where they had left the enraged Moulay. The djinni had scooted her chair up close to his and leaned one

scantily clad shoulder against him. A great many people gawked at her. She was no more indecently dressed than the dancer in the market, but she just filled the swishy outfit so much more - abundantly.

Kall-Su sat across the table, looking prudishly distasteful and not speaking at all, which meant he was so upset he couldn't trust himself with simple things like words. Schneider didn't pay him much heed. The girl more than demanded the lion's share of attention.

"Malice." She purred, rubbing her cheek against his arm.

"Malice?" He lifted a curious brow. "Not an indication of your nature, I hope?"

She shrugged, which did interesting things with her cleavage. "I didn't chose it. It was given me by my first master."

"And how long ago was that?"

She blinked at him, caught off guard by the question. Her eyes almost clouded with concentration. "The Hyksos - the Shepherd Kings - had come into the Nile Valleys bringing all their armies with them. My first lord was a Hyksos king. He was - harsh. Perhaps it was two - three thousand human years before the advent of the Jerusalem prophet."

"My god." Kall said softly, drawn out of his temper momentarily by the scope of time the djinni suggested.

It was beyond even Schneider's conception. "And how long have you been - in the bottle?"

"I think the romans were wrecking havoc in the desert when I last was free to walk the earth."

"And you were aware - cognizant of the passing of time?" Kall asked.

"Every moment." She said.

He leaned forward. "What are you?"

Malice shrugged. "What do you want me to be?"

"Can you help us find friends of ours?"

"Where are they?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be asking you?" Kall snapped. The djinni narrowed her eyes at him.

"What he's asking," Schneider put in, taking on the unfamiliar task of negotiator. "Is if you can find a woman of his that he's lost?"

"Not very responsible, is he? To have lost her in the first place."

A little sound of purest anger escaped Kall-Su. A sensitive man could feel the reflexive gathering of torrential energies in the air about them.

"If I knew this woman," Malice admitted. "I might be able to find her. If I knew the place she was at, I might be able to take you there."

"Bahrein." Kall said immediately.

She looked at him uncomprehendingly. "I've never heard of it."

Which was not surprising, considering how much the world had changed, politically and geographically since she had known it.

"How predictable." Kall said, very, very chill. "We were better off with Captain Amir and the Moulay."

"I rather like her better." Schneider said.

Malice beamed. Her hand slid up the inside of his thigh under the table.

"Really? I'm sure Yoko will be thrilled when you bring her home."

"You are getting on my nerves." Schneider growled. Bringing up Yoko served to douse the fire Malice had started kindling in his loins.

"Fuck you." Kall hissed, a totally uncharacteristic set of words to pass his lips. He pushed back from the table and stalked away. One hesitated to guess where he thought he might be going.

"Well," Malice purred, when Kall had melted into the anonymity of the passing crowd.

"That's an interesting suggestion. Shall I punish him for his impatience towards, you master?"

"Hummm. No, let him stew. He's had a bad month." He wondered if she could. He was curious what powers a several thousand year old djinni possessed, and whether they were equal to those of a high level sorcerer of this day. He wondered why the Moulay wanted her so bad, when he obviously had a wizard like Amir at his beck and call.

"So what exactly can you do, Malice?"

"Ooohh, many delightful things, I assure you."

"Magically." He clarified. He regretfully removed her hand from his lap and deposited it on the table. If she kept this up, his vow to Yoko would be at serious risk.

She pouted, but it only lasted for a moment. "I can shower you in riches. All the wealth a man could want."

"I can get that myself."

"All the luxuries in the world, the finest foods, silks - anything you desire."

"Again, I can get all that for myself. What can you do that I can't easily procure?"

This time a black brow arched at him a little petulently.

"What do you want?" she asked bluntly.

"Well, since you can't get Kall's little bard and you can't take us to Bahrein, then I guess the possibility of you getting me home is out. I can't think of anything else at the moment that I do want. So do you make the food out of thin air, or do you spirit it from somewhere else?"

"I don't know. I just think of it and it comes." She said a little testily. "No one has bothered to ask me specifics before. No one has been quite so hard to please."

"Well none of them have been me."

"So true." She swayed up against him again. "And you are so much better than all the others. So much handsomer. So much more powerful. I've never had a wizard for a master before."

Truth be known, he'd never had a genie at his beck and call, either. Since his conscience was still putting up a good struggle concerning the obvious uses he might put her to, he honestly didn't know what to do with her, other than keep her out of the hands of Amir and his offensive Moulay who seemed to desperately want her for some unspecified reason. He rather wished Kall had not stormed off in a bout of atypical tantrum, for it left him with no plan of action and nothing to do, save keep the djinni company. And that was taxing to say the least. She truly needed a good tumble to sate the excess sexual energy that had her hands constantly straying to sensitive and entirely too flammable parts of his anatomy.

The dusky waiter came up and babbled something foreign that probably concerned more wine or ordering food. The djinni looked at him expectantly, and he shrugged noncommittally.

"There are better places to feast." Malice assured him, casting the waiter a distasteful look. The man glared right back at her and the two of them exchanged a catty dialogue. Funny thing was, that Schneider could understand Malice's half.

"How come I can understand you and vice versa? And how come he could understand what you said, but not what I said?"

She shrugged, making various charms strung along her halter top jingle. "I don't know. I can talk to anyone."

Her singularly uninformed answers were getting on his nerves. He took a breath, concentrating on the feel of her words and discovered that he didn't so much *hear* them as sense what she was saying inside his head.

"Can you do that for me?" he asked. "Make me understand what everyone else is saying?"

She frowned, tapping her full lower lip. Finally she admitted. "I'm not very good with that sort of thing. Languages are boring."

"Ooookay." He managed not to growl.

"But he told me of a pleasure den down the street where it doesn't matter if you're understood and they have the best kabobs in the city. I haven't had a good kabob in forever. Can we go? Can we?"

* * * * *

Kall-Su managed with some effort, not to destroy the greasy, snake eyed merchant who he was certain had made overtures of a perverse nature towards him, as if he were some prostitute offering his wares. As if he were doing anything but searching in frustration for someone along the vast strip of slips and piers, that spoke a word of any language he understood. He found a few folk who spoke a spattering of his language, but it was impossible to get across to them his wants. A ship to Bahrein did not seem such a great request, but all he got back was nonsense about sea storms and any sensible captain staying in port for the rest of the season.

At which point he began furiously attempting to reconstruct the language absorption spell and found himself for the next several hours wondering aimlessly about the portside market in a mental haze. He thought he had it and stood staring blindly at a collection of elaborately colored carpets mouthing the words of the thing. The merchant kept staring at him as if he were possessed, finally babbling something sharply at him and waving his hand to shoo him away. The words didn't make sense yet, of course. It would take a few times hearing them for them to be absorbed. Or the incantation was incorrect in which case, he'd have to try again later if he felt no progress was made.

He drifted away, making a conscious effort to listen to the flow of conversation around him. Meaningless drivel.

Mostly. An oft repeated word here and there began to make sense to him. *Bargain. Sale. Deal. How much? Too expensive.* The common talk of any market. A warm sense of satisfaction washed away some of the frustration. Something had gone right. Even if it was the simple feat of learning a language.

"Bahrein?" he asked a likely looking merchant, hoping his simple grasp of the tongue would be enough to carry out a conversation. The merchant squinted at him, peering under the hood of his cloak, widening his eyes a little at the pale skin and locks of blonde hair that were hidden in the shadow of the hood.

He said something that Kall did not understand, then at Kall's look of confusion, the man said. "Caravan." And pointed in what might have been a southerly direction.

"Bahrein is in the south? There are caravan's that go there?"

The merchant nodded.

"Where?"

Eventually, through a gradually broadening vocabulary, managed to find his way to the south side of the new city. There was a market of tents set up there, and among them, a great number of horses and the oddest beasts of burden he had ever seen. Camels, he heard enough times for the word to stick in his mind with an image of the ungainly creature.

This market at the edge of town was a mass of confusion and activity. Not only were there merchants coming or preparing to go, but it also seemed that familial groups of desert dwellers camped here, with all their belongings, animals and relative while their representatives performed whatever business they had in the city. These folk rode small, bright eyed horses pell mell about the alleys between corals and tents, scattering people and domestic livestock both. The smell was atrocious. Beyond terrible. He almost turned around and fled. But it would hardly do to be chased away by an odor.

It was almost dusk. He'd lost track of how many hours he had wondered the city. He supposed Schneider had found no further trouble, else he would have felt the echoes of his particular magic being used. He supposed Schneider was quite pleased with the company he found himself in. He would just as well have stuffed her back into her bottle and given her to the Moulay. He did not trust bonded demons that he had not personally subjugated. One never knew what eccentricities they might display.

"Greetings, esteemed traveler" A carefully deferential voice said at his elbow. Kall paused in his observation of several of the camels being outfitted with tall, terribly uncomfortable looking saddles, to glance down. A small, turbaned man stood at his elbow. A dirty turban. Food stains on the lapels of his overrobe. His beard was splotchy in places, as if he could not grow the thick facial covering that most of the men in his land favored.

Kall-Su looked away more interested in the camels. One would have assumed the obvious snub would give the little man a hint of his disinclination to engage in conversation. The little man was apparently rather dense. He tugged lightly at Kall's cloak, venturing to ask.

"Are you the *Kafir* who is asking about a guide to Bahrein?"

"Am I the what?" He wanted to hear the word again, to discern its meaning. He'd been called it often enough to become curious.

"Unbeliever." The man said a little warily and this time it came through with translation intact. How charming. Religion here must be of paramount importance. He had an aversion to religious fanatics.

"How would you know of such a thing?" he asked.

"I have ears. Sensitive ears."

"And what should it matter to you?"

"Why I am a guide of paramount skill and integrity. They call me Abu the tracker. Or Abu the finder of trails covered in sand. No one knows the ways of the desert like I."

Kall cast the camel, which was giving its handler a difficult time, one last regretful look, then turned his attention to Abu the tracker.

"How many days is it to Bahrein?"

"Many days. The travel is slow and treacherous and this time of year the sand is thirsty to drink the blood of men. Most prefer to go by ship."

"So I've heard, but apparently storms keep the ships at dock this time of year as well."

"Yes. Yes. It is a dangerous season. But for the right amount of gold, a man might be willing to brave the elements and make such a journey."

Kall waved a hand dismissing the thought of gold entirely. He had not had a worry about money for longer than he could easily remember. Not that he had any of it upon his person at the moment, but that was hardly a concern. Schneider would have some. Or his annoying new possession could snap her fingers or do whatever djinn did to conjure things and make him a pile of it.

"It is imperative that I reach Bahrein as quickly as possible." He said.

The little man, Abu shrugged. "There is a caravan leaving tomorrow that will travel in that direction for part of the way. It is best to travel in numbers, so that the sand bandits think twice about raiding."

"Bandits make no difference to me. Speed does."

"Ah - but we have not even talked about the amount of gold."

"Nor shall we. Name a figure and if you take me to Bahrein, it shall be yours."

"Oh, my." Abu's dark eyes sparkled. "I like the way you do business, unbeliever."

"And don't call me that."

TEN

Schneider was exceedingly comfortable. Wonderfully, warmly comfortable. The cushions were soft and silken under his back, the mild scent of incense in the air delightfully stimulating. The wine of a very fine and very intoxicating caliber. The food exotically flavorful. And the women - well the women had quite turned his opinion of the why the females of this land went veiled, around. Of course, one had to assume that the ladies who filled this particular opulent house were of the professional persuasion. Even back home, where women were as brash - well at least some women - as men, they didn't dress like this. The lot of them were every bit as scantily clad as Malice and though some might not have been as amply endowed, they were all gorgeous, dark skinned, dark eyed beauties. And all of them were fascinated by him. All of them wanted to get their hands on him. In his hair, on his pale skin. It was a quite, quite agreeable situation.

Malice was jealous as a cat, which amused him greatly. Malice had already sent one of them, who had tried to shoulder the djinni aside in efforts to hand feed him a grape he had asked for - to some unspecified place. A very intriguing talent. He'd asked her where she'd sent the girl and the djinni had merely shrugged and waved an airy hand, replying - *'oh, somewhere else.'* Which meant, he had come to understand, that she didn't know.

She was not the sharpest blade in the rack, he had also concluded. Her power was quite obviously an inborn talent and not a learned property. He didn't think she had the capacity to

concentrate long enough to master a simple spell, much less the odd, intriguing talents she possessed.

She was very good at massage though. Better even than Yoko, though he'd never, ever say so in Yoko's hearing. The evening went by in a pleasant, wine softened blur, with himself as satiated as he might possibly be without actually engaging in sex. His self control was fraying though. He was seriously starting to wonder that if what Yoko didn't know wouldn't harm her? Or him.

It was well into night by the time Kall-Su tracked him down. Schneider was reclined upon a pile of brocaded pillows, a girl on one side ready to refill his wine goblet, another massaging his feet with a heady and aromatic oil, another two performing the stimulating and erotic dance he had seen in the market and Malice in the curve of one arm.

Kall-Su looked particularly displeased. Kall-Su looked a little harassed, as if he'd been building up frustration for some time now. He stalked in, through the swaying beads hanging from the ceiling, past various scattered pillows and languidly sprawled human forms to stand over Schneider. With his hands planted on his hips he stared down with distinct disapproval in his blue eyes. Lazily, Schneider returned the stare.

"Where have you been? Do you know how long I've been looking for you?" The questions snapped forth, cold as ice and just as condemning. As if Schneider answered to him. Or to anyone.

"You are starting to sound like a woman." Schneider replied easily, not particularly wishing to disrupt his present contentment to put Kall in his place.

"What are you doing? Is this some sort of game for you?"

"What does it look as if he's doing, oh disrespectful one?" Malice hissed, glaring up at Kall.

Kall ignored her, which made her dig her nails into Schneider's skin in irritation.

"You're the one who ran off in a tantrum." Schneider reminded him. "Don't get an attitude with me because of it."

Kall made an angry sound. He stabbed a finger at Schneider and hissed. "I should have expected to find you in a whore house. It's beyond me why I bothered to look anywhere else first."

"Yeeessss, rather stupid of you." This time Schneider's drawl held a good deal more malevolence. There were only so many insults he would allow himself to receive. Especially in front of witnesses.

"Oh, Master, do not take such insult from this *ju 'al jununi*." Malice rose to a crouch beside him, spouting a term which he did not understand, but which apparently Kall-Su did, for his face developed his offended ice lord expression and he hissed out a low, quick incantation.

Rather unexpectedly Malice went cold at his side. Very cold. In fact the air about her seemed to solidify and between one breath and the next the warm living djinni who had been molded to his side was suddenly a rather large chunk of ice.

"Goddamnit, Kall." Schneider snapped, jumping back from the uncomfortably cold block. Kall was glaring, not in the least repentant for the foul act of turning Schneider's djinni into an ice cube. He climbed to his feet, readying a spell to get rid of the ice, but found to his surprise that it wasn't needed. A fog began to emanate from the block, seeping outwards and coalescing in much the same fashion it had when she'd had come out of the bottle.

In short order a spitting mad djinni was back in solid form. She made a claws out lunge for Kall-Su. Schneider reached out one long arm and caught her about the waist, hauling back from that particular mistake.

"Malice. No." She let out a breath of pent up anger and turned, of a sudden pliable and eager in his arms. Her hands wrapped around his neck and she pressed her face into his shoulder.

"Oh, master, did you see what he did. He's a terrible, terrible creature."

Kall was staring at her, narrow eyed, just a bit wary that she'd evaded his spell so easily.

"If you wish to stay here with - that thing. Then do so. I believe I've ceased to care."

"Thing?" Malice cried out.

Kall whirled and with a flutter of cloak began to stalk away.

"I'm not finished with you. Get back here." Schneider hissed in exasperation.

Kall almost hesitated in his stride. Almost. He kept walking.

With a curse, Schneider flung Malice away and lunged after the younger wizard. Caught Kall's arm and jerked him about. A fist in his tunic and another twisted in the sun gold hair at his neck and Schneider glared down into eyes that mirrored his own flashflood of anger.

"Don't turn your back on me." He said softly. "You know better than to turn your back on me."

"Let go." Kall twisted to get out of the grip and Schneider tightened his fingers.

"Punish him, master." Malice slithered up, eyes glittering.

"Get out." Schneider hissed at her. Then yelled it, scattering the other denizens of this particular room. The women fled, feeling the prickling fingers of his power-fed agitation. Even Malice slunk away, casting dark looks over her shoulder.

"You are sorely trying my patience, Kall." He said, when they were gone. Kall blinked up at him, furious, wanting - oh one just knew - wanting to draw power and lash back at Schneider. But sane enough not to do it. He lifted a fine boned hand to Schneider's chest and tried to push away. Schneider was not sure he was ready to let him. He wasn't sure he had impressed upon

him how irritated he was. Damned if he hadn't been better company when he'd been passed out and sick on the boat. A Kall-Su who was distant and coldly disdainful of the world was one thing. Schneider was used to that. Kall had grown up with that detachment a integral part of him that very rarely shattered. A Kall-Su that flared into anger at the slightest infraction, who fairly emanated emotion - that was another thing all together. That took getting used to. Schneider wasn't certain he liked it. He rather thought it was the little bard's fault. He always had thought she was a disruptive creature.

"I don't think I like what your little wench has done to you." He voiced the thought and Kall's eyes narrowed.

"Done -? What business - ? You arrogant - get your hands off me."

Incoherent and babbling. Schneider smiled at him. "See? You prove my point. You're making a fool of yourself. You should apologize to my djinni. She at least has a notion of respect."

He released his hold and Kall-Su took an outraged step backwards.

"I'd rather die." He spat. "Gods, is this all you've been doing all day? Lying about in this - this house of carnality?"

Schneider shrugged. Kall always had been a prude. He imaged even the little bard couldn't change that.

"Was there something more constructive I could have been doing?"

"Yes." Exasperation there. And beneath it weariness that Kall was trying vainly to hide. If one looked closely, one could see the slight tremor in his hands. He clenched his fists to hide it, but Schneider caught it and narrowed his eyes. Perhaps not quite recovered weeks of extreme sickness. Perhaps not quite recovered from the more serious trauma almost a year past. An explanation perhaps for the mood swings.

"What, prey tell?" he asked, calmer now. Straightening the sash about his loose native trousers. He flicked a crumb off the bare skin of his chest. Kall stared at him, taking in his half dressed state, the wild tousled mess of his hair and he could see the notion as it occurred - explicitly occurred - of exactly what he had been doing all afternoon. A blush stained Kall's cheeks, he tightened his mouth and looked away.

"I found a guide to Barhien. There is a caravan leaving in the morning. It's almost morning now. I looked all night for you and couldn't - it's a large city."

A thought occurred to Schneider. "How did you manage to arrange a guide?"

A shrug. "I remembered the spell."

* * * * *

Kall-Su's so called guide was waiting at the edge of the city, in the midst of a tremendous amount of uproar as caravans arrived and prepared to depart from the coastal city. Schneider had the finest of new native robes thanks to Malice, who assured him that she

knew the desert fashion better than he and to leave the conjuring in her adept hands. He supposed she had to be good at something, and fashion and bodily pleasures seemed to be her strong suits. Kall had declined when Schneider had offered her services. The djinni had glared at Kall's back and muttered unpleasant things under her breath. Schneider was beginning to pick up the nuances of the language.

The little guide, Abu, looked at Schneider and the djinni somewhat warily when they strolled up behind Kall-Su. Malice turned her nose up at him, clearly unimpressed and proceeded to study her nails. Schneider stared warily at the camel at Abu's shoulder, distrusting the glob of drool that it worked with thick, hair covered lips.

"I'm not riding one of those." He announced, breaking into the conversation Kall and the little guide were having. The camel lifted its beady eyes and matched his gaze. It spat the gob of spittle into the sand at his boots. It obviously had no idea how close to annihilation it truly was.

"But -but my lord," Abu stuttered. "Camels are cheaper by far than horses and much more suited to desert travel."

Schneider turned a long, dangerous stare on the little man. Abu cringed a little and stepped behind Kall's shoulder. Kall gave Schneider a disgusted look, but knew better than to argue.

"Find him a horse." He said shortly.

"Oh, master, I can give you the finest horse to grace the desert." Malice perked up. Abu blinked at her. She had donned a loose silken robe, but it gaped open, revealing her harem girl outfit underneath. She shut her eyes, did a little humming chant and rather surprisingly a horse coalesced out of the shimmering, dry air.

It was indeed a very nice horse. Strong chested and delicate boned, all snowy white except for the mane and tail which were jet black. Its gear was studded with gold and precious gems and fluttering with tassels. It tossed its fine head and gave them all an imperious, challenging look. Kall, having a predilection towards things of equine nature, gaped at it. A grin split Schneider's face. Even *he* couldn't summon horses out of thin air. Maybe his djinni had concrete uses after all. He was starting to realize why the Moulay had wanted her so badly.

"How did -? How did you *do* that?" Kall couldn't stop looking at the horse. Malice smiled poisonously at him.

"Don't you know, wizard? Would you like one?"

She waved a hand and a second steed almost formed on top of him. He had to jump back to make room for the heavy body that settled into the hard packed sand. Not quite what the first one had been. In fact it looked rather mule-like and ungainly. It shifted its sway back and bared its teeth at all concerned.

Schneider laughed. Kall glared daggers and for a second Schneider thought he was going to have to intervene to keep spells from flying, but Kall got a grip on his irritation. He stalked over to Abu, grabbed the astounded guide's arm and ushered him away.

"You know, there are probably safer people to torment." Schneider leaned over Malice. She smiled seductively up at him.

"You wouldn't let him hurt me, would you master?"

"Hummm. He doesn't always ask before he destroys things, djinni."

"Ohhhh, how disobedient."

"Yes, rather. But what can you do?" he let out a long suffering sigh.

"I can think of a few things." Malice muttered, glaring past him to where Kall and Abu spoke. One got the idea that not all of those things would be particularly distasteful - well, at least not if they were done to Schneider.

"If I were you, he would be the last person I would start thinking about doing things to."

She arched a brow at him, red lips pursed. "Why? Is he yours?"

"No, he's not mine! God, what is it with you people?" He glared at her, letting out a hiss of breath.

"Well, he's pretty and you act like you own him." She pouted.

"I made him." He snarled at her and she flinched a little. "I saved him. I taught him. Yes, he's a creature of mine. No, I don't fuck him. And I wish to hell people would stop insinuating it."

"Of course master. I didn't mean to imply any impropriety. It is just not uncommon for -"

"Don't care. Don't want to hear it. I'm not sharing my horse. Make your own or ride a damn camel."

* * * * *

"I need gold." Kall-Su uttered the request, after leaving Abu and approaching Schneider and his annoying little djinni. Schneider glared at him accusingly. The djinni did. One could not begin to fathom either one of them. He held out his hand and waited. Abu wanted half the gold up front.

"Well, make him some gold, djinni." Schneider ordered. He sounded a little peevish, which was surprising considering what a fabulous horse he had been gifted with. Kall hated to admit it, since it had come from the djinni, but it was quite the most beautiful animal he had ever laid eyes on.

The djinni pressed her lips together - oh there was definitely something going on- and did her little singsong hum, and a pouch of gold appeared in his palm. Disconcerting to say the least, and he was used to ultra natural things.

He nodded curtly at her, closed his fist about the gold and delivered it into Abu's eager, brown little hands. He did not mind the notion of riding atop one of the very odd camels. The creatures were unusual enough to intrigue him. One learned from new experiences.

There was a group of some hundred of the beasts piled high with bundles of commodities on their way to some distant desert province. Abu had told him where, but he had forgotten the foreign name. Words he knew - that had a clear meaning in his own tongue lodged more firmly in his head. The spell did not work on words that existed only in another language. There were quite a few in this desert tongue that could not be absorbed. Half the speech of the camel drivers seemed that way. They whipped their charged into lumbering motion, jabbering among themselves and at the camels. A hundred camels, half that many men accompanying the caravan. Guards, merchants, drivers.

Abu urged them to join the departing line. The little man whacked at a camel's front legs with a wooden crop and the animal dropped down. It was a way to mount. Kall warily did so and held on as the animal lurched back to its feet. There were reins and one supposed a camel responded much like a horse.

Abu mounted his own beast and whipped it after the caravan. Kall's followed and he allowed himself for a moment to wallow in the experience of the odd, undulating gait. Schneider whipped past on his djinni summoned horse. The djinni cantered after on another showy white animal.

There was an odd thing about the desert. Close to the sea, it held some semblance of life to air. Some semblance of humidity. But it took no time at all, once the shores of the sea had been left, for the air to become unbearably arid. Kall-Su had never been in a desert before. Not a true one. He rather disliked the arid, desolate stretches that resembled a desert back home. This was - most definitely not the same. This night, he thought despairingly as the day wore into evening and the land grew more and more barren - be a most unpleasant journey.

Abu said that they had not even entered the real desert yet. It was not a comforting statement. The first night out it was cold. He didn't mind the cold. It was a relief. The djinni made a small tent for them. She wanted to create a large one, but it was decided, after much exasperating argument, that to do so would only frighten the superstitious natives. They stared warily enough at the small one that had cropped up at the edges of the larger caravan's camp.

There was a fire there and the sound of laughter and music. The natives celebrating their first night out. Malice was drawn to it, and soon after Schneider. Kall was not of a mood to engage in festivities. He preferred to sit alone within the tent, dwelling on the mistreatment of one he loved. His imagination was all too vivid.

Of course it was his fault. He hadn't been in a state of mind to dwell on it on the voyage here, and before that he had been too frantic in his efforts to pursue her captor's that he hadn't had the energy to spare. The last two days he had found the time. He had left her to fend for herself in that ravaged little fishing town. He had ridden off to indulge in his reawakening magic and left her undefined and because of it she was suffering now.

He curled his fists in the silk of a pillow and squeezed his eyes shut when the images wouldn't go away. He hated being helpless to save her. He hated the knowledge that it would be many days still before he could even begin to track her down. He hated the fact that Schneider

looked upon this as a whim of his. A thing that he had decided to humor him in - instead of throwing wholehearted support.

He heard Malice's laughter. A humorous retort of some sort from Schneider that signaled their return to her djinn summoned tent. They had repaired whatever bad spirits had effected them earlier in the day. The flirtations were almost painful, they were so lude. Schneider might as well sleep with her, for all the verbal sex they were having. He shut his eyes, feigning sleep, in no mood to deal with either of them.

The rustle of silk and cushions as they settled on the other side of the tent. The low murmur of Malice's voice as she whispered something in Schneider's ear, then giggled. Schneider's deeper chuckle of appreciation. More positioning of bodies - and then unexpectedly from Schneider.

"I said I couldn't." Annoyed. A huff from the djinni. Then - silence. And eventually he did fall asleep.

Eleven

It was hot at hell. Literally. Schneider had been in hell on occasion and it was definitely just as hot there as it was here, in the midst of this damned inconvenient, damned uninteresting desert. He hated it. It had been tolerable up to a day ago, when they'd left all semblance of anything remotely habitual. Even the shrub grass which had grown up in stubborn clumps in the hard as rock, dry earth had served to grace the land with a little spice of variety. Now there was nothing but sand and more sand and more sand. Never ending. Boring. Hot. Uncomfortable. Grits of sand under one's robes was damned annoying.

No matter how many times changed outfits, or had one's djinni do it for one - the sand still managed to work its way under. He didn't see how the damned desert dwellers lived with it. But no, they trudged along as if nothing were wrong. They steadily ate up the miles without so much as a complain or the constant motions of dislodging sand. So did Malice for that matter.

Schneider was starting to hate them all. The only person who was conceivably as miserable as he, was Kall-Su and Kall-Su was notoriously closed mouthed when it came to complaints. At least the ones regarding his own personal comfort. He had to wretched. He was an Ice Wizard after all. He was so totally out of his element. Yet he didn't say a thing. He didn't utter a word of complaint, which pissed Schneider off to no ends. He wanted company in his misery. He wanted to call down rain from the heavens, but he didn't think it was possible. There had to be weather patterns to draw from and they just weren't there.

"So can we make it rain in the desert?" He mused, riding along side Kall's evil eyed camel. He squinted up the considerable distance between them. Kall was bundled like a native. With the end of his turban wrapped about his face. He was silent for a while, then he shifted, looking down.

"It wouldn't be wise."

"Who said anything about wise. I'm hot."

"It would be a hot rain."

"Humm."

"I suppose with enough effort, you could pull a storm in from the coast. It would take a fair amount of power - even for you and you'd probably wreak havoc with every weather system for a thousand miles." Kall knew better than to argue against him. It only made him want to do a thing all the more.

"Why don't you have your djinni summon up a cold wind?"

"Why don't you? You're the one with all the ice elemental connections."

Behind the cloth, Kall might have frowned. He shrugged, a shimmering ripple of light silk.

"I don't think they would pay me much heed here. If they would come at my summons at all. I'm rather hesitant to try. The heat - the pure aridness of this desert might drive them away regardless of my hold over them - and once loosened they might stray."

"That's when you kill them." Schneider said, as if he hadn't impressed that upon Kall decades ago.

"I'd rather not have to. They're all useful. You didn't answer the question about your djinni."

Schneider sniffed, not particularly wishing to answer it. "She's not that type of djinni." He grumbled.

"What type is she? What other types are there?" Kall leaned over his saddle, suddenly interested.

"She doesn't do war things. Or acts of nature. She's a pleasure djinn."

"A pleasure djinn? You mean all she's capable of is satisfying needs of the flesh?"

"Something like that." He'd finally gotten that bit information out of Malice. She seemed to think her skills profoundly useful. He would have too, if he'd been in position to use them. And god, he was getting more and more tempted every day.

"Why ever would the Moulay go to so much trouble to get such a useless creature?" Kall seemed honestly stumped. Kall was just obtuse when it came to some things. If he'd slept with more than one woman in the last six or seven decades he might have had a bit more of a clue.

Schneider gave him a disgusted look. "Maybe he wanted the perfect lay."

Kall blinked at him, large, upturned blue eyes puzzled. "I didn't get that impression. He was desperate to have the bottle - I think he was as surprised as we were when *she* popped out."

"Well I don't personally give a damn. She's mine now and that's that."

"How will you explain her to Yoko?"

Schneider tossed his head in irritation. "I don't answer to Yoko. She most certainly does not dictate what I can and can not do. You obviously have a very short memory if you think I'd ever let a woman rule me."

Kall didn't say anything. Kall looked at him curiously, then turned his gaze back to the featureless desert. Schneider fumed. But one could not help worrying over the event when he presented his djinni- who was not in the least bit circumspect in her allure - to Yoko.

He was working a variety of scenarios over in his head when the call drifted back from ahead that an oasis had been reached. The first such stop where their canteens could be refilled and their mounts thoroughly watered on this too long, hot journey.

"Our path diverges from that of the caravan from here on out." Abu scurried up to announce, shifting uneasily from foot to foot, nervous of their presence. He would not quite look at Malice. Malice ignored the little man, wondering away and into the midst of the caravan, which was setting up camp. Schneider had the notion that in lieu of satisfying herself with him, she had made certain liaisons among the members of the caravan. He didn't particularly begrudge her - he hadn't banned her from such a thing - but it still rankled somewhat. He eyed her sashaying figure as it disappeared in amongst the camels and packs. Abu took their mounts, seeing to them himself. Malice had already created their tent.

He went to the spring with Kall-Su. It was a shallow impression in the hard earth. A few small shrubs and a bit of tough grass grew around it. There were rocks that shielded the area from the wind and blown sand. The beasts watered on one side and the men took their leisure on the other.

Kall-Su knelt at the edge, unwinding his turban, carefully laying the cloth behind him and away from the mud at the edge of the pool. He dipped his hands in the water and ran them through his hair. He'd let it grow out since he'd left Sta-Veron chasing after his little bard, traumatized over the mangling of his magic. Tousled and almost to his shoulders; such a loosening of personal standards was just - unnerving.

The desert men were staring at the golden thing among them, wide eyed and whispering among themselves. Schneider gave them something else to gawk at when he ripped his head gear off and leaned forward to immerse his whole head in the warm water. He reared back, shaking water from his hair, enjoying the simple feel of it running down his back and dripping under his robes.

"It's too damn warm." He complained then leered at Kall and commanded. "Chill it down."

Kall rolled his eyes.

"Go ahead, call a little elemental and see if it'll come and cool this spring."

"And distress these men more than they already are by our presence?"

"Who gives a fuck about them? We're talking my convenience here. Besides, we don't have to travel with them anymore after this anyway."

He leaned in, drawing an arm around Kall's shoulders, pulling him conspiratorially close. "Wouldn't a little ice cold water to chase away the heat be a wonderful thing? I'd do it - if I could."

Kall sighed, shrugging out from under Schneider's arm. "*Isuki*," He said softly. The smallest and most servile of his elemental servants. The first he'd ever mastered, Schneider had been there when he'd bent the thing to his will. Kall had been nineteen and full of the quiet determination that had never left him through out the decades.

Kall-Su's lashes fluttered in concentration. His brows, two shades darker than the pale gold of his hair drew down. A little swirl of dust kicked up. A few of the camels tossed their heads in alarm. Their human masters, deaf and dumb to the presence of something more than mundane went to calm them.

Schneider felt a cool draft of air. Saw the faint, shimmery movement of air that signified the passing of - something. Kall's eyes followed the flow, seeing things that Schneider had not the sensibility to discern. Ice magic was anathema to him, who commanded the elementals of fire. But he was not immune to its effects. He felt the cold air caress his skin. Saw the ripple as the water in the pool was altered. His hand, trailing in the water, was suddenly blessed with coldness. A caravan guard down the way from them yelped in surprise as the water he'd been filling his canteen with drastically changed temperature.

"Oh, lovely." Schneider purred, dipping both hands into the water and bringing them to his lips. "You are so convenient to have around at times, Kall."

Kall-Su frowned at him. "It didn't want to come. Only the presence of the water convinced it. I think once out into the desert they won't appear."

"Hummm. There's no ice in the desert, huh?" Schneider mumbled, water dribbling down his chin. Kall blinked at him.

"What did you say?"

"What? No ice in the desert?" He pulled off his boots and stuck his feet into the cold water. "Why?"

Kall opened his mouth. Shut it and shook his head. "Just something - something I thought I'd heard before. It doesn't matter."

The caravan left early the next morning. Abu and Kall-Su watched them go. Schneider and Malice were still abed within the tent.

"Which way do we travel?" Kall asked the little man, though why he bothered was a mystery since all directions looked dismally similar. Sand and sand colored rocks, all of it shimmering with heat even so early in the morning. Abu pointed a way, and Kall absently nodded.

He shut his eyes, trying to chase away the headache that had been plaguing him for two days now. The heat was traumatic and overwhelming. He had never imagined it could be so unbearably hot and life still thrive. But these, small, dark desert men obviously did thrive here. Life adapted. Magic was not so easily convinced. It was unsettling to feel the reluctance

of his, before this, loyal elementals, when he called. They wanted to do his bidding, they wanted to respond - but the heat and the dryness repelled them. An ice elemental could not survive with no moisture to feed it.

There is no ice in the desert. That phrase rang in his memory. What had been the rest of it? The prophesy from the gypsy fortune teller Lilly had stopped at the fair. He could not recall. He had paid it dubious heed at the time. Odd that he should be in a situation that struck so close to its truth. Odd that Schneider should utter the same words.

"Should I ready the animals, oh great lord?" Abu always bowed and scraped. Kall wasn't quite certain he trusted the little man because of it. Anyone that tried that hard was generally after something - or was trying to save face.

He nodded. "I'll get them up."

Malice had gravitated into Schneider's arms while they slept. It might have been an unconscious thing, but Kall-Su rather doubted it. Neither of them, it seemed, liked to sleep alone.

By the time he'd gotten them up and willing to prepare for another day's travel, Abu had the camels loaded and the horses saddled. Malice had whipped up breakfast. Fruits and honeyed wine and bread so fresh it smelled as if it had just come from the oven. Cheese just as fresh lay atop it in slabs. He could not say he quite trusted her food, drawn out of thin air as it was, but it was by far more appetizing than the dried fare that Abu had packed. There was only so far he was willing to inconvenience himself out of pure dislike of the djinni.

He missed the small spot of comfort that had been the oasis as soon as it was out of sight. While they rode, immersed in endless, featureless landscape, he worked at countless mental chores to keep his mind from straying to dark musings about what was happening to Lily. Anything from reciting little used spells and histories, to inciting debates with Schneider. The latter was generally a losing proposition. Schneider was *never* wrong. Schneider refused to loose arguments. But it passed time. Until the Djinni would come up, tired of not being the center of someone's attention and insert her moronic views into a perfectly intelligent conversation. He marveled that anything with as much creative power as she had could be so *stupid*.

Schneider didn't seem to mind. Well, not much. He occasionally caught a look of exasperation.

The second night away from the company of the caravan and all they had seen all day were rolling dunes. Not even rocky outcroppings marred the horizon. It felt as if they were delving into the heart of the desert, not towards a distant coast. But he could not trust his senses on such things. The desert was not his element and his desire to hasten to his destination made him impatient.

After dinner, with the night sky a sprawling vista of stars overhead he sat on the slope of a dune over their camp, distancing himself from Schneider and Malice's overt flirtations. She even played the tease with him now, bereft of other victims to ply her charms. His disregard irritated her greatly. Which pleased him.

Something along the unchanging, rolling line of dune on the far side of the camp shifted. He blinked into the darkness, not certain if his vision were betraying him. But yes, something undulated on the ridge of the dune. Something that grew in length, covering several hundred yards. Quietly, he sent out magical senses and felt - horse minds. The quiet, focused goal of human presence intent on a single purpose.

He took a breath, and rose slowly and smoothly, wiping sand casually from his robes as he walked back towards the small camp. Schneider and Malice were inside, of Abu there was no sign, but the guide never slept in the tent with them. Always outside with the animals. Schneider was drinking wine and playing some board game with Malice. She was attempting to explain the rules to him and he was intent on making his own.

"It appears that we have callers." He said softly.

Schneider looked up, his hand poised over a marble game piece. "Really? Where?"

Kall-Su gestured through the back of the tent. "Along the ridge. A good many of them, in fact."

"Another caravan?" Malice suggested excitedly, missing the company of so many men willing to sample her charms.

"I don't believe so. They've a more - foreboding sense about them."

Schneider tossed the game piece down and rose gracefully to his feet. "It seems there are more interesting games afoot." He grinned, quite content with the notion of conflict.

The two of them went outside, stood beyond the flap of the tent as if they were merely taking in the night breeze.

"Company on both sides." Schneider said. Kall glanced to the left, atop the dune he had been sitting on minutes before. There too a gathering of men and horses appeared, shielded by the night, muffled by the sand.

"Charming." He murmured.

"Yes. Where's your little ass kissing guide?"

"Good question." A little taste of despair crept up on him, as the thought that they had been led astray by Abu occurred. That the man had duped him and led them far off their track for his own purposes. He would kill the little miscreant if that were the case. Painfully.

"Well, shall we welcome them?" Schneider gestured to the right, where the greater numbers of shadowy forms resided. "I'll take those." And he left the ground with a whispery surge of power.

They must have seen him coming. For a cry rose from a hundred or more throats as if from one, and the shadows which had been still suddenly surged to life, pouring down the dune from both sides. And not totally mundane either. There was the sense of magic about them.

They had magic users. He felt the shields protecting the force that slid with a cascading wall of sand towards him. Not particularly powerful shields.

First impulse was to summon an elemental. It was his specialty. He had to fight it back, unwilling to cast a spell that he was not certain would work. It limited his repertoire considerably, since he was still not up to commanding his total aggregation of magics. He felt before he heard a billowing flare of explosion from behind. The very air shook with one of Schneider's energy blasts. He cries of men and horses became shrill with pain and surprise.

He had no time to lend attention to what Schneider was doing. The mass of dark riders was almost upon him. He called up a force spell, sent it rippling outwards, pushing sand and air before it with a rushing, booming vibration. It encountered the shield, trembled against it a moment, then overcame it and bowled horses and men over, toppling the lot of them, sending them cascading down the dune along with the sand his spell had shoved up before it. Not as patently destructive as Schneider's work, but then Kall-Su held a curiosity about the men that would attack them in such mass in the dead of night. There was no such thing as a random attack out in the middle of nowhere. It had to be purposeful.

Another deafening crack of explosion. The night sky flared with the wrath of a fire elemental. The flames blazed, cast everything into harsh orange relief, then died out, having nothing concrete to consume. Like ice, there was little to feed them in the wasteland. Sand didn't burn. Flesh did. Men ran screaming, living flags of flame.

Men righted themselves from the tangle of human limbs and equine and came at Kall-Su. He sent them sprawling with a swipe of his arm. Did not take the lot of them out with a concussive blast of his own when he could have. The horses were too exceptional. Like the creatures Malice had made, they were fine boned and beautiful and not to be destroyed out of hand, despite their rider's intent towards him. He rather wished he wasn't smelling burning horseflesh along with the acrid odor of human on the wind. Schneider had never been so selective in his destruction's.

He looked beyond the confusion he had made of his attackers, to the top of the dune where a group of riders still were, observing the tumult below.

The root of the evil. He rose into the darkness, regardless of the men below overrunning the camp. There was only Malice there and he feared little for her. She had proved unusually difficult to kill.

Four large, black robed guards, wicked curved swords naked upon their thighs. The white bearded, weather beaten face of an old man he knew at their fore. So the Moulay had followed them. Perhaps even paid his erstwhile guide to led them into this trap. Quite, quite determined to have Schneider's little djinni.

"Little honor in attacking under the cover of night." He said it softly, hovering over their heads. The lot of them started, swords came up. The old man gasped, loosing composure momentarily, then quickly regaining it. They found him, where he was not expected, in the darkness over their heads.

"What know you of honor, foreign thief."

"Very little, according to some. But it appears to me, you are the one acting the part of thief in the night. What is so important about her that you would throw away so many lives? Surely you realized we were not so easily taken from our first encounter."

"It is not a thing you need to know. You need only to hand her over."

"She's not mine." Kall said. "And I'm tiring of this conversation. I've business of my own to attend."

"You'll not find her."

He narrowed his eyes, a surge of anger rising. "What do you mean?"

His feet touched ground. He stalked up to the Moulay's horse, catching its reins. The black robed guards made to force him away and with a snarl he sent them tumbling backwards, blasted off their mounts with concentrated ripples of force energy.

"What do you mean by that?" he repeated.

The hard as diamond old eyes gazed down upon him. There was passion there. The fervor for something unspecified. And a hint of victory. This was a man who believed in something very strongly it was only a matter of discovering what.

"I've sent the captain, Amir to track down his comrades who took her. He will succeed where you would fail."

"And what will he do with her once he has found her, old man?"

"Why nothing, if you give me what I wish."

"You seek to threaten me? I could kill you here."

"And your woman would disappear into the desert and you would never find her. All I ask is a small thing. You can keep the djinni if she means so much. I only need her to perform a task that only she can, and I've not further use for the creature."

There were fading explosions from the neighboring dune. Schneider was running out of enemies. The Moulay followed his stare.

"Tell him to stop and let us parlay. Perhaps there are things to be discovered that will be of interest to two men of magic in what I seek as well."

Twelve

The only reason Schneider agreed to step down and he did that grudgingly, impassioned by the fervor of battle that he hadn't engaged in, in far too long, was because there was no one left opposing him. The ones that were alive were cowering or attempting to flee and even though picking them off would have been amusing, Kall-Su's insistent harassment and subsequent sulking after the fact would not have been worth it.

Thus a ragged, much abused group of desert raiders gathered to face a pair of hardly winded wizards for what purpose Schneider could not guess. He hardly wanted to waste his time on it. He had already made his decision on the matter of the djinni clear. He hated to repeat himself. But Kall had said something about them finding his bard and the Moulay having a proposition. As if the man could offer anything Schneider might conceivably want.

So he hovered in the air above the Moulay, not wanting to stand and have the mounted man looking down upon him.

"What do you have to say that I might possibly want to hear?"

The old man was proud. Stupidly so. He lifted his turbaned head and glared up at Schneider.

"You are a thief. And I usually would not stoop to bargain with such."

He had to laugh. The old man was bold, he had to give him that. "Are you trying to get yourself sent head first into the arms of whatever god you worship? If so, you are going about it the right way."

The desert raiders shifted uneasily at his casual mention of their deity. Hands clenched at sword hilts. The Moulay held up a hand, mouth tight with irritation. "Hold." He said sharply to his men, then to Schneider. "Are you so great a lord that you hold no respect for the god?"

Schneider shrugged. "Most of them are overrated."

"Then perhaps you would be interested in the discovery of a power that even the gods of old held in awe. A magic so great and so old that it was legend even when the pyramid's were built."

"Oh and what magic might that be?" There was a light in the old man's eyes that bordered on fanatics. Not quite greed. More like worship. It was that reverent look, the slight tremble in the veined hands when the Moulay spoke of this ancient power, that pricked Schneider's interest. A dispassionate explanation he would have taken for nothing more than a ruse to get his cooperation.

"What makes you think I care?"

"You are djinn are you not. A sorcerer. Do not sorcerer's thirst after knowledge. After the cumulating of mystical prowess?"

Schneider smiled at him. A taught, dangerous little smile at the man's presumption. He glanced over his shoulder at Kall-Su. Unreadable expression for anyone who didn't know him. Curiosity burned within his pale eyes, though.

"You attack me in the depths of night and then expect my help?"

"I need the help of the djinni."

"Then you want my help. She's my property. You've got my interest - tell me more and you might keep it."

"For generations my family have been the keepers of certain legends. Twenty years past my esteemed father found an inscription on the wall of a bordello built around the ruins of an ancient burial shrine. It told of the location of a temple and a tomb and vault all in one that held within it the greatest magic the old world had ever known. Kings and pharaoh's worshipped at this temple, asking for guidance and luck from the powers held within. Magic trapped within for five thousand years. No one had ever been able to release it, for whoever had sealed it within, had used powerful magics. Fifteen years past we found the site. And for all these long years we have been excavating, digging up a city long buried by the sands. Finally we have uncovered the seal itself and only the unique powers of the djinni you now possess may pass it."

"What is this power? Is it an artifact? An entity? A demon?"

"After five thousand years would it even still be potent?" Kall mused softly from behind. He had a point. Even strong magics lost their gusto after long periods of time. Five millennia was a damn long time. Even for a three hundred plus year old, immortal wizard. But, even if it was a defunct artifact of power, the Moulay was correct in his assumption that wizards had an obsession for things of that nature. Schneider was no different. He had gone to great lengths in the past to unearth talisman's of power.

"All I ask, is that you let the djinni unlock the seal and then I have no further use for her. And for the service I will gladly spend my resources to finding that which you seek."

Ah, back to the bribe/threat. Kall-Su's bard.

"All right." The man could promise all he wanted. He could make agreements all day with Kall-Su for all Schneider cared. It didn't mean that if this magic he spoke of pricked Schneider's interest he wouldn't take it for his own.

"How far is it?"

The old man's face creased into what might have been a smile of satisfaction. It was hard to tell with all the weathered wrinkles.

"To the north. Many days ride to the north and into the endless desert."

"Fine. We can start in the morning. Don't bother me again until then."

Which did not sit well with the desert raiders, but they had little choice but to mutter and complain among themselves or risk the rest of them meeting the fate of the ones who's charred corpses scattered the dune on the other side of the camp.

Schneider went back to the tent. A frowning Kall-Su followed.

"What? I thought this was what you wanted." Schneider stared pointedly at him as he flounced down upon the cushions. The djinni was conspicuously absent. The bottle lay among the cushions. Schneider picked it up and rattled it absently, wondering if she were physically in the bottle as a tiny little woman, or if it were merely the portal into a slice of another dimension. He put his eye to the mouth, but there was nothing but indiscernible darkness within.

"You're going to double cross him." Kall stated flatly.

"That would infer that I had agreed to anything other than going to this place and lending him my djinni's services, now wouldn't it. I thought you had a better head for these political type things."

"Oh for -" Kall glared, aborted it and took a breath instead. "Wait until he's found Lily for me first, at least."

"I may not be able to. You know how touchy these things can be. Unearthed powers and all."

"Damn it, DS, she's more important."

"To you."

"To me! If you ruin this -"

"You'll do what?"

He dangled the bottle from his fingers, curious to hear what threat Kall might make.

Kall-Su's expression went neutral. All regal and cold - his Ice Lord persona. The one he showed enemies and rivals. "Then I will not forgive you it and you and I shall be at odds. I would prefer not to be."

"Hummm." Schneider kept his face careless, kept the slight smile on his lips, but a vague sense of unease troubled him. It was not an idle vow. Being at odds in no way bothered him. He had been at odds with Kall-Su before. It was the first part that bothered him. And the fact that it did, annoyed him. He drew his brows and shook the bottle.

"Come out, djinni. The fighting's over."

After a moment she did, in an outpouring of colored smoke.

"Oh, master." She cried, all large eyed and grateful. "I am so happy it is you who won."

Kall-Su made a disgusted noise and skulked over to the other side of the tent as Malice went about showing Schneider just how happy she was.

She stopped when he told her the change in plans to take place in the morning. She sat back on her heels then, wary and uncertain, twisting long locks of black hair about her finger. "If someone went to the trouble to lock such a thing away, perhaps it is better to leave it where it is. Some things are better left alone."

"Nothing is better left alone." He repeated it to himself and thought it made a good motto.

* * * * *

Many days to the north. Kall-Su was torn between believing the Moulay's claims and wanting to reach the port where Lily had been taken himself. Not that he could reasonably find that

port with his guide a spy for the Moulay. The little man had crept back to camp that morning, cowered behind the Moulay's horse, blathering his desperate apologies for the deception. He was only a lowly desert guide, he claimed, only doing what his employer - the Moulay- made him do. A babbling, treacherous idiot, who Kall-Su might have destroyed out of hand a few years past. Whom he might have now, if he hadn't been so distracted with worries over this change of plan. He ignored the guide. He ignored the djinni who clung annoyingly close to Schneider, who he might have conferred with if not for her presence. He listened to the Moulay talk about the excavation and the ancient city where this mysterious power rested and concentrated on enduring the overwhelming dry heat of the desert.

Five days into the desert, and they came upon the signs of habitation. A village dug into the hard packed earth under the sands. A village of low sandstone buildings, packed close together in the lee of a rocky bluff that afforded it some protection from the harsh winds out of the desert. Women and children ran out to meet the riders, crying out to the desert raiders, bowing their heads in respect to the Moulay. The Moulay's people. The Moulay's settlement that his father had built to house the workers he brought to excavate a city hidden under the sands. They rode past it and up a trail to the bluff behind it. And beyond that, spread out like a maze of crumbling walls and streets were the bones of an ancient metropolis.

It spread for acres and acres. The unearthed remnants of what once must have been a wondrous city. Monuments stood here and there, unfazed by the passage of time. Obelisks with intricate carvings, human headed animals perched on great pedestals looking down upon the tiny scurrying figures of men. Some of the buildings still had walls, some even roofs, but most were only foundations with the occasional column or support jutting up.

Ancient. Kall-Su found himself gaping in awe, found his heart beating hard in a sudden flood of excitement. He had never in his life beheld something so old. So imminently immortal as the bones of this place. The skeletons of the cities that had been destroyed when Anasla destroyed the old world were the oldest things he had ever passed through. The age of this in comparison was staggering. The scholar in him was quite thoroughly enraptured by the notion of exploring the secrets of this place.

"What was its name?" he asked as they rode down the trail towards it.

The Moulay did not answer, distracted by the sight of his achievement. The little guide, Abu, did.

"It was called Askenaten. City of the March."

Kall glanced at him, curiosity overcoming distaste. "City of the March? What does that mean?"

Abu shrugged. "It was the only reference to Askenaten on the wall of legend."

"You saw this inscription? You read it?"

The little man's head came up proudly. "I have many talents. I read the languages of the ancients. Here, let me show you." Abu searched within his voluminous robes and produced a folded sheet of parchment. A rubbing filled with indiscernible hieroglyphics.

"See?" the little man ran his finger down a line and mouthed the words that went along with the picture script.

"The resting place of the gods lies within the precepts of the city of the March. No force or power of violence can break the seal that grants them eternal sleep. No magic born of man may disturb the rest of the shadows." He went on, obviously entranced by the legend.

"Read it again." Kall-Su directed, studding the symbols carefully. The same spell that let him absorb spoken languages worked as well on written ones. It just took initial understanding of the symbols for them to start making sense. He took the parchment out of Abu's hand and reread it himself, asking the little man for clarification when a symbol refused to make sense.

"Its not city of the March. Look, there's a partial symbol between city and march."

Abu squinted at it, then at him, a dubious look in his dark eyes. "I don't think so - I have been studying this for years."

"Then you've been sloppy. Do you have more symbols I could see?"

With a sniff, Abu waved towards the city of Askenaten. "There are abundant wall carvings there. Though how you expect to read them after seeing only this little scrap of parchment is beyond me."

Kall did not see any reason to enlighten the man. But he did have an interest in this ancient culture. It would have been nice to have the time to study it at leisure. It would have been nice if Lily were safe by his side. The Moulay would see that she was or he would not live to appreciate this discovery of his.

They entered the boundaries of the city. Workings hauling rock and sand in wheelbarrows and sacks moved aside for the mounted men. Schneider reined his horse next to Kall-Su, his eyes bright above the swath of material he had tucked into his turban.

"This might be interesting after all." He surmised, looking up at a towering statue of a stone queen, her arms crossed over her chest, her gaze looking out over the desert. The sand that had hidden her all these years had also protected her features.

"Its name is Askenaten." Kall informed him. "Its rather amazing."

"Rather." Schneider shrugged, trying for nonchalance, but Kall saw past it to the excitement underneath. "I saw the pyramids before Anasla destroyed them - they were like this. Exuding age."

"The pyramids?"

"Before your time. Before everybody's time. Too bad about them."

Through carefully laid out streets they worked their way to the center of the city, where the lower level of a large, flat building remained. They dismounted and men ran to bring torches as the Moulay gestured Kall-Su and Schneider and a reluctant Malice to follow him and his honor guard into a narrow, low ceilinged passage. The darkness soon swallowed every bit of

daylight. Only the flickering flare of the flame illuminated the way. The path veered downward steeply. Kall had to stoop a little, and Schneider had to walk considerably bent over. They came to a great chamber that smelled of age and dust and stale air. The torch light hardly reached the ceiling. Columns lined the sandstone walls.

"You wanted to see more hieroglyphics." Abu whispered reverently behind Kall-Su's shoulder. "Look at the walls."

He thrust a torch close to one wall and column upon column of picture language was revealed.

Kall took a breath, staring up into the shadows. He called a witchlight to better see and the blue glow of the hovering sphere cast the wall into better relief. Abu muttered a protection against evil at the appearance of the light.

"Read this section for me." Kall directed. The little man ran his finger down a line and translated. Kall mouthed the words with him. Schneider got bored and wondered on, not having the interests in language that Kall-Su did. Malice clutched the edge of his cloak, casting wary glances into the shadows. The Moulay waited impatiently at another narrow doorway. This one appeared to have been a hidden entrance, for the slab of stone that sat beside it, was covered in the same flowing picture script that graced the walls around it.

Kall moved on slowly, picking out the meanings of script here and there along the walls. A history mostly, he thought. Of the builders of this temple. Of the aristocracy that had commissioned it. Through the hidden passage was a hall so narrow they had to walk single file. Schneider cursed softly over the low ceiling, after hitting his head on a low jutting stone. He summoned a witch light of his own then, casting the whole of the passage into stark relief. Rough stone walls and floor. Not a passage meant for show, but for mere practicality. Perhaps its builders had never meant for feet beyond theirs to travel it. At the end was a set of steep stone stairs. The air was unpleasant, thick and old and viperous. The occasional sneeze escaped as they stirred dust in the wake of their passage.

Another bending passage at the bottom, and then a crawlspace perhaps three feet high. Past that - past that was a chamber most interesting. Tall slanted walls, covered with script. A vast sunken floor, at the bottom of which might once have been a pool fed by a spring. Perhaps once the whole thing had been filled with water, but time had dried up the spring and now only a small fetid puddle of dark water lay at the bottom. Three walls slanted inward to form an apex at the roof of the chamber, the forth slanted outwards and this one was masked in a massive plaque of what might have been gold. There were wall scones about the chamber and the Moulay's men went around lighting them.

Kall-Su ran his fingertips along the wall, across carved picture script so dust encrusted that it was almost indecipherable from the flat surface of the stone. Schneider was more interested in the dully gleaming panel at the end of the chamber. The Moulay stood before it, speaking of the day they'd found this hidden chamber. Of all the things they had tried to break the rune seal. Kall felt Schneider test it. Felt the outflowing of familiar power that felt along the old, old edges of the seal. It did not respond like any magic he knew. It was not innate, it was merely - placid. It did not so much repel Schneider's mystical inquiry as absorb it. It took the magic in and it was no more. It made Kall-Su uneasy. He stood with his hand on the wall, staring at the golden facade - the gateway that held something at rest beyond it. It occurred to him that the djinni was probably right. Such a thing had been imprisoned for a reason.

Ansasla had been imprisoned for a reason and it was the greed and the gullibility of men that released it a second time.

"Neither man nor demon can release the seal." The Moulay quoted, then gestured at Malice. "She is neither. Neither force nor violence can break the rune. This rare creature - this being created for pleasure and for pleasure only, utilized neither force nor violence."

"Master, don't make me do this thing. It is wrong." She clung to Schneider's sleeve. His eyes were glued to the rune plaque. If he even heard her plea, Kall-Su would have been surprised.

"Do it." Schneider said absently and unhooked her fingers, giving her a shove towards the plaque.

She turned large eyes back to him. Frightened eyes. "But - I don't know how."

"You do, lying creature." The Moulay hissed. "It is a rune seal. Break it."

She pouted, shivering, then hesitantly turned to face the golden wall. Her body dissolved into smoke and slowly the colored gas seeped into the etched lines of the rune seal.

Nothing happened. Minutes passed and the stillness of the tomb became overwhelming. Kall-Su glanced back to the wall his fingers still touched. He absently brushed the dust from the carvings. Words came to him sporadically. He waved Abu over and the little man reluctantly turned his attention from the goings on at the rune seal to approach.

"What does this say?"

Abu's eyes scanned the writing. His lips moved silently, then he said. "It tells of the disciples of the gods banding together to create a - a conjuration of - tranquillity? Peace? It is hard to tell. And into this conjuration they lured the minions of the darkness."

"The minions of darkness? What's behind the seal. The spell. The disciples of the gods? Or these minions of darkness? What are we releasing, little traitor?"

Abu shrugged nervously. Kall looked up the wall and found a familiar line of hieroglyphics. The naming of the city. Only this one had the half obscured symbol inscribed clearly.

"What is the word for that symbol?"

"Black." Abu whispered after a moment. "The city of the *Black March*. You were right."

"The Black March?" Kall mouthed the words silently, a cold, cold unease gripping him. The words of a faceless old gypsy crone on a warm southern beach during a minstrel's fair. What had she said? What fortune had she told him- that he had disregarded as the ramblings of a fraud? *All the trials before will be as nothing. When the Black March comes so will come a new era. There is no ice in the desert, so protect the storm.*

He took a breath in panic, whirled towards the gathering at the golden rune seal and cried out.

"DS! Don't let her do it."

Schneider glanced back at him, brow arched in curiosity. He opened his mouth to ask why - and a ripple of heat rushed out from the rune seal. The walls shook and dust fell from the ceiling. The coolness of the underground tomb was suddenly stifling. Obscenely hot. The rippling waves of torridity were laced with palpable power. The gold began to steam. It ran in rivulets down the surface of the slanted wall. Bits of rock began to crumble from the wall. Men cried out in fear.

"I think - I think I will wait outside." Abu stammered, backing away a few steps before he turned and fled, diving into the crawlway that led to this room. Kall wanted out as well. But not without Schneider. He darted forward, catching Schneider's arm, jerking him back a step in his fervent desire to be heeded.

"We have to go. We have to go *now*."

"Are you insane? I want to see what's behind there." He pulled his arm from Kall-Su's fingers, an amused smile on his lips. A chunk of rock the size of a cow hit the floor behind them with a thud. The Moulay's guards cowered back, clearing wanting to abandon this place, but their lord stood rooted to the spot, as intent on seeing what emerged as Schneider.

There was a grating sound, a deep groaning of rock sliding against rock, then the melted remains of the rune seal surged outward, as if blown by an explosion and it seemed as if half the bedrock behind them came with it. Schneider got his shield up a breath before Kall-Su did. They were buffeted backwards anyway. The Moulay, inadvertently protected by their magic was blown into his men. They took the dazed old man and fled with him, even as the tomb crumbled around them. Schneider fought his way forward, debris bouncing off his shield and stepped into the face of - swirling, incomprehensible darkness. Raging hatred and anger that swept him backwards and into Kall-Su, who barely managed to keep to his own feet after the impact.

Whatever had been released was not happy about the end of its incarceration. Or perhaps it was still brooding over the fact that it had been imprisoned at all.

"Please, DS - - -" Kall clutched at his arm, urging him backwards.

The ceiling collapsed. A thousand tons of rock showered downwards. Kall cried out, releasing Schneider and throwing his hands upwards protectively, calling every iota of power he had to strengthen shields. The weight hit and it was like being hit in the chest with a sledge hammer. He gasped, dropping to his knees, nothing but weight and darkness three feet over his head where his shield stopped.

"Shit." Schneider complained. He was still standing. He was not pouring power into his own shields. "Hold that for a second, will you?" he asked and suddenly all of his shielding was gone and Kall was holding up the whole thing.

"What - are you - doing?"

"Trying to track - whatever that was. Its on its way up."

"Fine. Get us out." He gasped, clenching his fists to his chest.

The words of a spell crossed Schneider's lips in a whisper. A sudden surge of summoned power. A sudden flare of blinding light. Kall-Su shut his eyes.

Blinded and deafened by the ripping destruction of earth and stone and sand. Schneider hooked an arm about him and jerked him up. Fast. Shooting up in the wake of the explosion, before the debris could settle back down the fill the ragged hole.

Then they were in the sky over the city and he pushed himself out of Schneider's grasp, hovering under his own power. It took a moment for his vision to clear. When it did, he gaped. The sand around the excavated city was swirling like a storm mad whirlpool, circling ever inward, pulling in buildings and monuments and icons alike. The small figures of men fought against the sands, fleeing outward, but most were pulled in like so much desert flotsam. The sand raged though the air as well, and the only thing protecting them, he realized after a moment, was Schneider's shielding.

"I think it ate my djinni." Schneider said, when there was nothing but a churning sea of sand beneath them. Kall-Su blinked at him.

"I want to leave." Kall said quietly.

"No. Look."

The sand swelled, as if something surged beneath its surface. Then with an explosion of rock and sand something emerged. It rose out of the sand, shaking of debris and dust. Small from this height. A rider on a horse. It might have been one of the Moulay's riders, somehow managing to dig himself free of the sand. Only the rider was armored and not robed, and the horse he rode was a monstrous black steed. And then a second black rider and horse surged up out of the sand. And a third. And another and another. And there were twenty or thirty of them at last. Silent line of mounted warriors that sat supernaturally calm mounts. When the last emerged from the earth the others cried out a war song or a salute or a greeting - and lifted their swords in tribute before him.

"What the hell is that all about?" Schneider complained, clearly disappointed in the results of the affair.

"It's the Black March." Kall said quietly.

"How do you know?"

"It was written on the walls. It was told me by - by a fortune teller months ago." *And I didn't believe her.*

Thirteen

Kall-Su was upset. Kall-Su was babbling about prophesy and ill omens. He was hard to ignore, hovering close enough to feel his unease. He made it damned hard to concentrate on what was occurring in the sands below. The storm had died down. A new dune had been added to the landscape, sucked in by the tremendous winds- the tremendous force that had exploded from the underground crypt beneath a long buried city. A city buried again, and likely to stay that way for a good long time by the look of it.

"We should go while we can." Kall made so bold as to tug at his sleeve. Annoyed Schneider whipped around to glare at him.

"Will you shut up? We're not going anywhere."

Kall blinked at him, great blue eyes disturbed, fair hair speckled with sand and dust. He'd lost his turban somewhere in the cave in. Schneider's was unraveling around his shoulders. He yanked the end of the cloth, ripping it from his head, letting it flutter aimlessly towards the earth.

He followed its path downwards, and his eye was pulled towards movement across the sands. Small dark figures making their way towards the stationary riders that had come up from the earth. Survivors of the devastation. He wondered if the Moulay were among them. He wondered if this was what the old man had expected. If it was, he had lied to Schneider about the nature of this entombed power. How much of anything they had been told was truth? He certainly had no intention of letting the old man get away with playing him for a fool. He had no intention of not finding out what it was that he had helped release.

He began a downward decent. Almost, he expected Kall-Su to protest, but there was nothing. He touched ground, his boots sinking into loose sand and Kall touched down behind him, silent and wary. The desert men approaching the still riders were indeed the surviving guard of the Moulay. The old man was among them supported between two of his men. He barely looked at Schneider in passing. His rheumy eyes fixed upon the riders.

Warriors, surely. Armed and armored. Black. Everything from the leather and metal of their padding, to the links of chainmail that peeked out beneath cuirass and shoulder pad. Their faces were obscured by helms. Ornate helms formed in the shapes of animals both mythical and real. The only color to the lot of them were the faintly glowing eyes of the horses. Demonic, red eyes that held within their depths a preternatural intelligence.

The riders made no move as the Moulay and his followers approached. The old man fell to his knees in the sand, crying out words of worship and devotion. Of great joy at finally releasing them from their eternal sleep.

Schneider trailed behind him, lingering at the edges of the his men, studying the dark warriors, sensing a great, dormant well-spring of power within them. A quiet power. Controlled and harnessed, so that its depth was deceptive. It annoyed him that he could not delve deeper, that he could not perceive what magics they controlled, what manner of elemental alliances they practiced. What he was certain of, though, was that each and every one of them exuded power, some more, some less than others. He knew which one was the leader, for that one fairly burned with latent energy. That one out of the lot of them released himself from unnatural stillness and urged his mount forward, to stand above the old Moulay.

His helm was the facade of a dragon, horned and long snouted, with metal teeth jutting outwards at angles. He said nothing for a long while, the sound of the Moulay's wavering voice the only sound to pierce the silence after the storm. Then slowly, with the sound of creaking leather, he lifted an arm. The Moulay sputtered into silence, tears of reverence streaming down his wrinkled cheeks.

A voice out of the crypt spoke. Eons of silence made it rusty and hoarse, but it reverberated into a bodies bones with the pure force of persona behind it.

"How long?"

The old man cringed back, clutching his hands to his breast. His men cowered, lowering faces to the sand. Schneider took a breath, feeling the power of it himself and not liking it.

"Five - five thousand years since you last walked the earth, my lord Ramalah."

The dragon helm continued to stare. A few of the black riders behind it, stirred, uneasy at the suggestion of such a long sleep. "My ancestors have labored to release you for a hundred generations - we have been loyal -"

The hand went up again, commanding silence. With a creak of leather and armor the leg swung over the saddle, and a heavy body touched earth. Stood in the sand and stared out over the horizon. Dusk was coming on. The sky was streaked red with its onset. The dragon helmed warrior strode to the top of the dune, past the Moulay's cowering men, past Schneider and Kall-Su and stood looking out over the desert.

"It has changed." He said, his voice carrying. "The world has changed."

"Yes, my lord." The Moulay agreed. "Very much so. It will be my honor to guide you in its new ways."

"Guide?" The helm turned slightly, canting to one side almost in curiosity.

"Wrong thing to say." Schneider whispered, quite, quite interested in what the dragon helm would do. *He* would have been most offended by the suggestion that anyone guide him in anything.

"I need not the guidance of a decaying mortal."

He didn't even flick a finger. The Moulay was kneeling in the sand one moment, eyes fixed on the lord of the black march, and the next his body turned to grains of glass. A billion grains of sand that held his shape for one moment in time before falling to the ground, filling the indentation's left by his knees, blending perfectly with the surrounding sand.

Schneider blinked, patently impressed. It was not a spell he knew. He could melt a body where it stood, but the changing of its basic composition was something else entirely.

The Moulay's men whispered prayers, burying they faces in the sand in abject supplication. The creature summoned out of the buried tomb walked past them, as unconcerned for their existence as he might be for a grain of sand under his boots. He paused in his step, the intricate, demonic face of the helm swinging around in the direction of Schneider and Kall-Su, who stood beyond the kneeling desert men. Neither one of them, regardless of grudging appreciation for the nature of the creature's spells, were inclined to prostrate themselves in the sand. It rather made them stand out amidst all the cowering robed forms.

He moved towards them, a palpable fascination pricked. Schneider could feel the curiosity, the none too subtle probe of interest that washed over him. He repelled it, like he might shake water off an all weather cloak. What the creature, this lord of the Black March thought of his denial of his inquiry, was hidden in the shadow of the helm.

He stopped perhaps five feet from Schneider, and the dragon facade stared pointedly at him. Schneider tilted his head, returning the study. Sending out probes of his own to gauge the type and amount of power that lay within this thing they had released from the sands. His efforts were shuffled aside with as much ease as he'd deflected those used upon himself. He took a breath of annoyance and the master of the Black March spoke.

"What are you?"

"What are *you*?" Schneider crossed his arms under the fluttering length of his cloak, lifting a black brow caustically.

No answer. The dragon helm shifted through the sand, displacing a great deal of it, as if his weight were considerably more than the physical shape suggested. His regard turned on Kall-Su, which Kall-Su did not like at all. Kall-Su radiated dislike and hostility where Kall-Su was usually unreadable in the direst of situations.

"Pale." The words echoed out of the dragon helm. "Like the sun and the moon."

Schneider sniffed. Talking about their hair again. As if a little variety in this godsforsaken place were the most unspeakable, unimaginable miracle.

"Yeah, and what do you look like under that helm? A thousand year old, dried up corpse, straight from the grave?" it was a taunt from phrasing to tone, because he was tired of this stagnation and wished to elicit a little response. He wanted to see what else this creature could do.

No recoil of indignity. No snarl of anger. It turned back to him, drifted close enough to smell the faint staleness of old air and cloying herbs, but nothing of rotting flesh or death. It smelled suspiciously of life and boiling energies.

"You are not a child of the desert. You do not belong here."

"I belong wherever I wish to belong." Schneider's lips twisted up into a arrogant grin. "You're the one who was trapped in that tomb all this time. Careless of you, wasn't it. And it took the efforts of that old man you turned to sand to free you. Why'd he bother? What could you have done for him?"

"You -" the gauntleted hand rose as if to touch a fluttering strand of Schneider's hair. "-Have the tongue of a braying ass."

The fingers closed over a stray lock and Schneider snarled, slapping the offending hand away. He felt the whole of the company beyond swell with power. He felt the dragon helm - the master of the Black March - Ramalah, as the old Moulay had called him, ignite with sudden, black indignation.

Schneider did not bother with mouthing the words or summoning an elemental to fuel the strike. He hadn't the time. He pulled straight from his own powerful reserves, performing the dual tasks of creating a shield and launching an offensive strike in the moments between one breath and the next.

Something hit him, like a fist in the chest, even as searing bright lightening smote the earth in front of him where Ramalah stood. The both of them took a step backwards. Wary and suddenly gauging the before unknown abilities of the other. Both of them probably shocked - at least Schneider was - that their individual assaults had as little effect as they'd had.

"You dare attack me?" Soft spoken words from the helm.

"That ought to be my line, you armor plated moron."

At which the sands rose up and tried to consume him and he cursed and created a blast that radiated out in all directions around him and hoped in a side portion of his brain that Kall had had the sense to put off shields before this. The sand blasted outwards and more filled its place, much like the waves of the ocean when the damned brother of the sea had attacked him. Only this wasn't the desert reacting to protect one of its own. This was powered solely and completely by the creature standing before him. The creature that had not been moved an inch by his last spell.

He was vaguely aware of the forces lurking behind Ramalah, the not unimpressive power of the Black March, who were circling on their great dark horses like wolves around a still dangerous prey. Something came out of nowhere, slipped past his magical awareness and slammed full force into him. Shield's shattered, body broke. He screamed in more fury than pain, although the pain was intense, and took to the air, hissing the words to the Forbidden Spell as he went, not giving a damn about the hapless desert men down there, who had lent their full will into reviving this thing.

He had a clouded awareness of Kall-Su, shielding, not far from him. Not healed enough for this. Not in his element enough to combat this. Goddamned if Schneider wanted him as a distraction.

"Get the fuck out, Kall!" All on one indrawn breath between lines of incantation. He didn't have time for more. The last line. The power surged through the conduit that was his physical body and the desert exploded in a white hot mushroom of destruction.

* * * *

Something came at Kall through a storm that consisted of sand and rock and winds so strong he couldn't easily maintain his position, shield or no. A dark figure on a horse that brought down a sword lancing with energy towards his shields. He snarled the words of a reflective spell and the strike rebounded and smacked the wielder in the chest. Enough to knock him off the horse, but not enough to take him out. Or the ones behind him. Strong wizards, all of them. Not just for show, the minions of the Black March. Kall cried out the words of a concessive energy spell and launched it at the storm obscured figure. That knocked it off its feet and into the even fainter form approaching from beyond it.

Get the fuck out, Kall. Rang in his ears. Indignity that Schneider thought he couldn't hold his own fought with the realistic fear that there was no holding their own, him or Schneider either one, against the odds they faced. These were not hedge wizards. These were not even first rate, but still insubstantial battle mages, who had worked for them during their various campaigns back home. These were damned good, damned powerful - enigmas, who did not use practical magic or known magic and who did not stay down when felled. And that did not even begin to cover the master of the Black March. He wondered if they were dead. Walking dead, who were immune to physical harm.

What had they raised? What had they raised, that prophesy said might change the world as they knew it?

A blast that shook the earth, that changed the pattern of the storm and threatened to shatter his shields. It slammed him from the air and into the sands and it had not even been directed at him. He had no earthly idea if it had been Schneider's or Ramalah's. The power was flowing so freely that it was all a haze of hissing static in his head.

Something reared over him, dark and sizzling with energy. He shot both hands out and flung a ripping, hard edged swath of corrosive magic. There was the sound of an equine shriek. The first sound he had heard any of those great, black beasts make, and a roar of pure, hatred, agony, loss from the rider who was flung backwards with the charred carcass of the war-horse.

The ground shook again and this time he recognized the scent of Schneider's magic. Momentarily the storm itself was pushed back, all the winds and flying sand concussively blown outwards. For a moment with the air clear of flying matter, he looked up and saw the hovering shapes of Schneider and the Master of the Black March. Then the winds rushed back in to fill the void and with them the dark, ominous shapes of the March, levitating skywards to back their master.

There was a joining of powers. A melding that made the very air seethe with rancid vitality. A union of forces. A concerted effort that lent everything the lesser members of the Black March had to their master.

He might have been on a level with Schneider before - now one hardly ventured to guess what awesome power he might wield.

The desert felt it though. The desert convulsed and shuddered with it. The earth exploded outwards at the last expulsion of energy and it was all Kall could do to maintain a semblance of a shield. A lot of the residue power got through. It hurt like hell. He shook it off, a little dazed, a little disoriented and looked for the unique magical scent that was Schneider's - and couldn't find it.

He panicked and forced it back by main will alone. Started to take himself into the air again when he realized the lay of the world had changed. Walls rose up about him as far as the storm allowed him to see. He stretched out his other senses and found himself at the bottom of a mind boggelingly massive crater, dug out of earth and sand and bedrock by that last mighty strike. The strike that might have taken Schneider out along with a great portion of the desert.

He stretched his senses further looking for that spark of familiarity that was Schneider, a spark of magic and life that meant he hadn't been blasted straight back to hell.

And found it somewhere through the storm to the east. He thought it was east. His internal sense of direction was groping desperately for equilibrium. But it was not alone. There were more vital, darker points of power occupying much the same space. The Black March. A dozen or more spots of intense energy and one that fairly radiated might.

And out of his desperate mental search he discovered something else. Something that had been buried too deep beneath hundreds and hundreds of feet of sand and bone dry earth and rock. Water. A great deal of water traveling so far beneath the surface that none of its precious life giving strength could nourish the sands above. But the explosion that had created the crater had removed much of that barrier.

Gods, it might very well lend him an advantage he had not had before, withering in the waterless hell of the desert. Most of his spells were ice based and without even the source of water in the air, he had no fuel to cast them. He had given up on the possibility of calling the elementals that before had responded so readily - none of them would dare the desert and even if they had, the arid heat would have made short work of them. But with a source of water he could utilize his own repertoire of spells.

He headed towards the spark that was Schneider, reaching through the bedrock as he did, calling up everything he had to breach that solid obstacle and feeling the stretch inside him - in the mental circuitry that channeled magic - of scar tissue protesting. Almost healed. Almost recovered from the mutilation left by the Prophet - but he hadn't truly tested the bounds of that restoration. Had not expanded the muscle to the point that the scars were shed.

Little choice now but to make the effort. Not to would mean sure death. It burned, like a brand inside his head. He ignored it. Furiously called upon the spell he wanted and forced it to seek the fuel it needed. Demanded it draw to the surface that which it needed.

He passed by the first of the Black March, ignoring them, visibly blind to them from the furor of the storm. Some of the lesser ones reached out for him and he avoided the testing strikes, concentrating on his own spell. He felt that which was Schneider ahead. Listing. Exuding no offensive magic, just the low hum of internal energy that always surrounded him - always protected him to some subconscious degree.

There. Half buried in the sand, a glint of silver. And hovering above the seething cauldron of power that was the master of the Black March. Kall-Su skidded to the earth next to Schneider, extending his shields to take in that limp, bloody flesh. Wrapped his arms about Schneider's upper body to drag him out of the sand. And Ramalah stared down dispassionately, the storm parting to veer around him, as if the windblown debris was afraid to defile his person. The gauntleted hand lifted and the beginnings of power radiated from it.

Kall-Su screamed forth his final demand of the spell he'd been creating and the earth heaved under him. The sand coated bedrock split with a deafening shattering crack and jagged, building sized spears of ice thrust into the air, defiling the heat and the desert storm with their very presence. Razor sharp points impaled unsuspecting bodies. There was fear and shock at this sudden apparition that sprang forth from the very earth itself. This cold death that the desert had never known.

The earth beneath him split and Kall shot airwards, taking Schneider with him, a sheet of ice severing his view of the master of the Black March.

It wouldn't last. The heat worked too diligently to destroy what he had created. It took more effort and concentration than he had at the moment to maintain it. So he fled, diverting some of his strength into covering their tracks, obliterating the mental and magical signature that would lead their enemy to them.

In the distance something slammed against his working and the backlash hit him like a hammer blow in the head. He let go the spell entirely, stunned from the power of that which had tried to break it. Into the sand again, but this time the air was clear, the storm centered around the crater and what had been the ancient city. He still clutched Schneider in his arms, limp and bloody and breathing erratically. Kall shivered, tightening his hold, pressing his cheek into blood and sand matted silver hair. Trying to calm his own breathing and to reinforce the aura of invisibility that he had begun to weave around them.

When he thought it a solid, unbreechable thing, he let himself relax marginally, let his hold loosen somewhat upon Schneider. Made himself settle back into the shifting support of sand and look for what damage had been done to the other wizard. He regretted that healing was the least of his arcane talents. He very badly wanted Schneider awake and aware. Even a weak, battered Schneider was better than no Schneider at all. *If* he didn't bounce up and insist on flying back into the face of adversity. Kall would not put such insanity beyond him. When matters of ego came into play Dark Schneider was not always at his most rational.

There was a shifting in the sand behind him. He spun, letting Schneider fall out of his grasp, a spell on the tip of his tongue. It was a tattered, stunned looking desert traveler. A mortal one and a familiar one. The traitorous little guide, Abu, struggled through the sands, hardly aware that he staggered towards them. Kall was frankly amazed that he had survived the destruction of the city, much less the resulting war of magics.

"Allah - Allah -" the man was muttering under his breath, then his eyes drifted up from the ground at his feet and happened upon Kall-Su and Schneider. Those dark, lined eyes widened in shock.

"Blessed Allah, you live."

Kall glared at him. "No thanks to you and yours. You fool, do you know what you've raised?"

Slowly the little man shook his head. He wrung his hands furiously, to still the shaking. "Not me. It was not my dream. I merely followed the directions of my master. I had no notion - no idea what dwelled beyond those runes. I should have guessed -oh Allah, I should have guessed - from what hints the inscription in Meshed gave. What have we loosed upon the world?" he moaned and fell to his knees, pressing his face into the sands, as if such humility would grant him absolution.

His whimpering irritated Kall-Su's already abused nerves. They were not far enough away from the quickly dwindling storm. He needed to move, yet to sit in the sand with no more draw upon his power than the shield was comfortable. Calling the winds to carry himself and Schneider aloft seemed a wearisome chore.

"Meshed? Is that where you found the inscriptions telling how to raise these *-things?*"

Abu motioned assent without raising his face from the sand. Kall sniffed. "And did these oh so informative inscriptions tell how the ancients put the Black March to rest in the first place?" It was uttered as a sardonic derision, a vent for his frustration.

Abu lifted his brown head, his eyes suddenly glittering with expectancy. "Yes, my most exulted djinn lord, they did."

Kall blinked at him, then shook his head. "I don't care. Gods, I truly don't care. I just want away from here. I want to find my woman."

"But great djinn, if there is a way to -"

"Its not my problem." Kall hissed, "If they consume the whole of this desert I care not."

"I care." Low, ominous voice from below him. He whirled and stared down into Schneider's slowly blinking, blue eyes. Blood ran down from a cut on his scalp, creating a lacing pattern of red across the bridge of his nose and down one sharp cheek.

"DS." Kall whispered. He didn't ask if he were all right. Even if he weren't, Schneider would *make* himself whole in short order. It was his nature. You don't care." He insisted still soft spoken, putting all his powers of persuasion behind that insistence. "You don't care about any of these people. You hardly care for the people back home."

With a grunt, Schneider pushed himself to a sitting position. He swayed and reached out a hand to clutch at Kall's shoulder. Left the hand there, fingers biting hurtfully into Kall's flesh.

"I care about sending *him* back to hell." Just as whispery a voice. But his eyes blared indignation and fury.

"Are you completely daft?" this time Kall's voice rose an octave. He shook his shoulder out from under Schneider's grip and leaned forward to glare. "He beat you. You'd be dead now if we hadn't run."

"*They*. *They* did it. Not him alone. I almost had him, Goddamnit. Those fucking *cheaters*. They lent him their power."

"And they can do it again. I can't pull you out again when they do. Do you understand?"

"How did he do it. Draw their power and use it for his own?" Schneider's look grew contemplative, wondering at an ability he'd never contemplated before. Kall-Su felt a prying touch at the edge of his mind. Schneider lurking around looking for a channel to siphon his power from him. He reacted blindly, in panic, striking out physically when he hadn't the energy left to strike out magically. The back of his hand caught Schneider across the face with enough force to send him toppling back into the sands.

"Stay out." He snarled. "I will have no other hand in my head ever again. Not you. Not anyone."

He expected retaliation, but instead Schneider merely lay there, one hand going to the new trickle of blood at the corner of his mouth, his eyes gone hazy and thoughtful. Calm. Too calm for Kall-Su's peace of mind.

"You're right." He finally said. "I can't just go and take him head on while he has the Black March behind him. This might require some thought." He scowled at that, never much one for tactical planning when it came right down to his power against an opposing force. There had historically been damn few opposing forces that came close to giving him a challenge.

"I think I want to go to this place where these inscriptions are and see what they have to say."

"Meshed is very far away, oh great djinn." Abu said helpfully. Far, far to the east of here."

"How far?"

"Many, many weeks travel under the best of circumstances."

"Damn. And I don't even have my djinni."

At which utterance, the wind stirred a great deal of sand and they all put up hands to shield their eyes, and then in a swirling gust of sand and colored smoke, the curvaceous figure of the djinni in question appeared and flung herself directly into Schneider's arms, wailing and crying as if she had personally brought about the end of the world. Which, considering, might not be that far from the truth.

Chapter fourteen

Meshed. A city that melted into the desert, half consumed by immortally hungry sands. Layered over time, one city over another, over another. Dug out in parts, so that the streets were nothing more than deep ravines, buildings separated by thick layers of sand and dirt, new atop old, atop old.

Malice had been there before. Forever ago. She remembered it as a different place. A colorful place. She complained of the disrepair, but it was clear to tell, she was rattled. Still very much alarmed over the astonishing power she had released. She clung to Schneider obsessively, unusually quiet, unusually restrained in her flirting.

One had to appreciate the change, even if it was brought about by such a disquieting event. Kall-Su walked ahead of Schneider and the Djinni, listening to the little guide, Abu talk about this ancient city. He looked back occasionally to Schneider, who had spoken not at all since the Djinni had transported them here. He had not fully healed, Kall thought. More than physical wounds, from that battle of intense magics had been taken. Kall still felt drained himself and he'd only been at the fringes of the main conflict. All the more reason to find out what they could about the Black March.

The writings were in a place Abu called the Palace. An old place that had been built upon many times. It did not house kings anymore, though it might once have. It was still a relatively impressive structure, with thick stone pillars that disappeared into the sands, and a conglomerate of architectural styles dominating its facade. There were guards before it, and

scrolled iron gates to pass. Some of the guards even held the faint trace of magic. Either wizards themselves or possessed of runes or magical potents.

"They are Sahir." Abu confessed, as they loitered across the square from the impressive facade of the Palace. "Mercenary magicians, who hire out for the greatest of rewards. But not, I am sure, worthy to lick the sand from your boots, most worthy lords."

Kall lifted an eyebrow at him. Schneider snorted softly, leaning against the eroded statue of a dog faced god.

"There are also wards against magic inside." Abu said warily. "Old wards. Perhaps meant to keep djinni or Sahir's from learning the secrets hidden within the depths."

"But not to keep out a thief like you, hummm?" Schneider said.

Abu shuffled his feet. "I went under disguise. As a wealthy merchant. Otherwise they would not have let me within the walls."

"Who lives there?" Kall asked.

Abu blinked at him. "Why no one - exactly. It is the most famous den of pleasure in all the desert. The most exclusive. Only the wealthy and most powerful are allowed to sample its treasures."

"Its a whore house?" Schneider laughed.

"Why yes, built on the ruins of a great palace. Hence the name."

"All right. So Malice gives us all princely clothes and lots of gold and we go and see these damned writings."

"Ah, but it is not so easy. The writings are on the lowest level and patrons are not allowed beyond the first two."

"So what? Who's gonna stop us?"

"There are wards against magics, my lord. And guards who do not need magic to stop a man."

Kall exchanged glances with Schneider, the both of them silently acknowledging that at this precise moment, a strong ward might be more than either of them could deal with. Schneider wasn't happy about the admittance. Schneider ground his teeth and glowered.

"How did you get down there, then?" he snapped.

"I - uh - once did practice the art of burglary, my lord. For a short while. And they know my face now. They would kill me on sight. But all is not lost. The whores can pass that way. Their quarters are on the lower level. This most beautiful lady can simply slip into the Palace and make her way below -"

"I can't read." Malice said, sounding bored.

Abu's face fell. Kall sighed in disgust, and restrained the urge to kick futility at the dust.

"So," Schneider said idly. "Are there boy whores?"

"Faajir's? Of course, what pleasure den would be complete without them?"

"No." Kall-Su said flatly, glaring. "Absolutely not."

Schneider shrugged. "Its a viable notion. You do read the language."

"You do it then."

"I don't read yet. And no one's mistaken me for a catamite yet. Half the people in this miserable place think that you're mine."

Kall sputtered indignantly. Blushed totally against his will and almost did summon a spell to blast Malice with when she laughed at him.

"Oh, my lord, you would make a most believable faajir." Abu beamed at him. Kall turned his glare on him and the little man withered, stepping back a pace. "I mean - I meant - you would hardly be suspected - no one would look at you twice - not that you are not worthy of a second look - but -"

"Okay, okay." Schneider said. "Malice, shut up. Kall, live with it."

"No." There were certain things pride would not allow. He would as soon blast the place to hell and back, as stoop to playing such a charade. He said as much to Schneider. Schneider lifted a black brow at him doubtfully, draped an arm about his shoulder and walked him away from the other two.

"I will not." Kall-Su hissed under his breath before the other wizard could speak.

"I'm tired, Kall. I'm not up to taking down wards I can feel from all the way out here. Not to mention the echoes of such magic might draw things I'm not ready to deal with yet."

Kall-Su shook the arm off, glaring. Since when had Schneider ever admitted to weakness. Never, unless it suited him to do so. Unless he was trying to gain something from it.

"Its demeaning."

"Who says? I love whores."

He hissed wordlessly and stalked away.

Kall-Su was ridiculously stubborn about some things. Where he had gotten some of his prudish values, Schneider would never know. He certainly had not picked them up from him. But of course, no one won arguments with Schneider - well no one except Yoko. And eventually reason and Schneider superior stubbornness won out.

They sat down the street in a grubby sidewalk cafe, drinking luke warm wine and eating sticky sweet pastries topped with chopped nuts, while the little native, Abu went skulking about, for the most innocuous method of entry.

Schneider's head hurt. His physical state had been repaired, but the reservoir that he pulled power from, was severely depleted. It was slow to refill, as it generally was when he over did it. A good long sleep would replenish it faster, but there was neither the time nor the place for it. Damn the dark skinned demon anyway, for exceeding all Schneider's expectations in just how powerful a force he was. And that metaconcert of combined magics - that was an annoying little ploy, Enough to slap him down and hard. He hadn't taken such a hit in - in a very long time. It pissed him off. Running from battles galled him to the core. Getting himself killed galled more. Admitting that it was a distinct possibility was salt on the wound.

He shut his eyes, listening distantly to Malice babble about her own experiences within the scented halls of pleasure houses. He opened himself to the natural flow of energies, willing them to flow into him. There was a distant darkness at the edge of his awareness. A distant, harnessed force of nature that held distinct familiarity.

The Black March. On the move and quickly. One might almost think that it was headed this way, but it was hard to tell. It might merely be the ebb and swell of power.

"DS?" Kall leaned close, speaking softly, a touch of concern in his tone.

"I can feel them. Closer than they were, I think." He said it without opening his eyes.

Kall pulled back, startled. "Coming here?"

"Perhaps. Maybe this place has meaning to them. It predates them, if what Abu says is correct. Perhaps the thing we seek, they seek as well."

Silence from Kall. Silence from Malice, who did not relish the thought of encountering the Black March ever again. "Master, can you not defeat them?"

He cracked an eye to look at her. Pretty thing. Useless since she had no skill at battle. "Not at the moment."

* * * * *

It was embarrassing and infuriating and one mused, quite possibly a necessary thing if they wished to leave this detestable desert alive. He felt the wards the moment he stepped into the cool, stone environs of the palace. Old and powerful and though he might have dismantled them, it would have taken time and energy. He had little enough of either to spare.

He would endeavor to forget this as thoroughly as possible, when it was over and done with. To forget the smirk on the djinni face, and the whispered suggestions of Abu on how one should act to be taken as an authentic faajir.

"Anyone that touches me will die." He snarled at one point.

"Of course." Schneider said blithely, a small smile on his face. "Do it subtly, thought, will you? And wait till after you've found the writings."

Kall glared. And glared more when Abu said. "You can't wear that."

"Ooohh, I can help." Malice chirped maliciously, at which point he gathered energy to blast her to bits - if such a thing were possible and Schneider stepped between them and shook a warning finger in his face.

"Be nice."

But it was damned disconcerting to have the clothes on one's back melt into something different altogether. Different weight, different fabric and less of it. Schneider lifted a brow at him, eyes drifting with casual interest.

"That's good. That's good." Abu was hopping impatiently. "Let's go." He dared to lay hands on Kall-Su's arm. A tiny transfer of magic and the little man yelped, jerking his hand away, shaking out frost bitten fingers.

Into the place through the back, by a service entrance, where merchants brought their wares and carts of produce rolled past scurrying scullery boys, and red faced, turbaned servants. Right through the gates and there was protection of the warded kind. If Kall had even attempted a spell of diversion or illusion, they would have triggered. Abu had better ways. He slipped a man a handful of gold, and the man turned his attention elsewhere when Kall walked through the gates.

How incredibly demeaning to walk in among the churls and the servants, with a hooded cloak hiding his pale hair and skin. He forced himself not to dwell on it, brought to mind the path Abu had traced for him to take. Lowest level. There were multiple ways down. He pulled the cloak tighter and slipped through the halls. The servants inside were of a finer class than those that worked in the kitchen courtyard. Pretty young things that floated about the place, bearing trays or linen, among other things, dressed in silk and gauze and made up like the harlots they probably were.

His eyes hardened in distaste, in disgust at being cornered in playing this charade. A charade which would hardly have been necessary if Schneider ever listened to anyone besides the malicious voice inside him that urged him to do exactly as he pleased, when he pleased regardless of warnings or pleas. One imagined he regretted it now, doubtless sporting a massive magical hangover. Kall had one himself, though not so incapacitating as the one he suspected Schneider was experiencing.

There was a low murmur of music and conversation up ahead. The hallway he traveled and many more like it fed into a great assembly room of sorts. It might have once been the main hall or throne room chamber of this place when it had in truth been a palace. Walls had been knocked out to create more space, and veils draped from the ceiling, from columns, from statuary, created a labyrinth of half concealed niches, from which the various smells of exotic foods, perfumes, incense or the smoke inhaled drugs these people were so fond of, emanated. There were dancers undulating in a cleared central space, and musicians lounging on pillows, playing their instruments.

It was languid and carnal, and reminded him vaguely, though of a foreign flavor of places Schneider had frequented years past, during his quest to conquer the world. Schneider would have liked this place. He had an attraction for decadence. Kall-Su did not.

"Do you have a token, master?" A girl sashshayed up to him, all curves and dark skin, and strategically placed veils. The clientele, according to Abu, purchased a token that let the staff know what level of service he had purchased.

He sighed and draped the cloak over his arm, revealing that he was not dressed as a wealthy client, but rather more on the line of the servants of this den of debauchery.

"No token." He said softly and the girl lifted a brow, then nodded, understanding.

"I haven't seen you before. I would recall." She smiled at him. He was looking over her head, scanning the hall for the main stairwell down.

"No." He murmured in agreement. "Where is the way to the lower levels?"

She lifted a braceleted arm and pointed. "There. You are a foreigner? When were you bought?"

He ignored her curious questions, swept past her the way she had indicated, stepping around scattered pillows and scattered couples and groups openly engaging in acts better done in privacy. He saw the stairway. Two guards stood at either side of it. He passed without even looking at them, and other than the movement of their eyes as he walked past, they did not make a motion to stop him.

* * * * *

Schneider drummed his nails impatiently on the much scarred wood of the table top. They had retreated inside the tavern, where it was marginally cooler. Abu loitered near the bar, uncomfortable in Schneider's presence. Malice, entirely comfortable, pressed against his side, having the sense to know when silence was required of her and keeping her mouth shut. Her prattle had begun to annoy him. Yoko never prattled stupidly. Arshes didn't. One missed a sensible woman. It was a surprising thing to realize, that a woman with a brain and an opinion worth listening to was a thing to be desired.

How long since Kall had been gone? The heat and the impatience made time seem to drag. Probably not that long. Probably no reason to become irritated with the wait. He was irritated anyway. His temples pounded. His muscles ached with a bone deep throb that no amount of healing magic could evaporate. His pride was sorely wounded. He did not appreciate forced retreat or the humiliating taste of blood and sand in his mouth. He refused to dwell on the fact that if Kall-Su had not been at hand, he would have been dead. Again.

"Master?" Malice soft voice reached past his thoughts. "Are you sure you are well? You look pained. Is there nothing I can do?"

Her soft breast pressed up against his arm and the jasmine scent of her hair was quite enough. He shook his head once. "No."

Time would do it. If he had time. Ramlah was getting closer. He wondered if the djinni could sense the Black March as acutely as he could. She had released them after all.

"Do you feel them coming?" he asked.

She blinked up at him, owl eyed and startled at the question. "Are they coming?"

Obviously her senses were not as sharp as his. He sighed and nodded. "Yes."

"Here? Do they follow us?" she straightened, looking about the tavern as if she expected Ramlah to walk in and order a drink.

"I don't know." It was an inadvertently poignant question. Did Ramlah and his Black March sense Schneider as clearly as he sensed them, or did this place that held the history of their imprisonment have as much, if not more meaning for them, that it did for Schneider?

"Abu. Come here." Schneider snapped at the little man. The guide scuttled over nervously.

"Yes, oh great one? How may I serve?"

"Is there a reason he'd have for coming here?"

"Here? They're coming here?" Abu's eyes followed much the same route that Malice's had. Schneider hissed and snagged the front of the little man's robes, yanking him forward.

"Why would they give a damn what was here?"

"There are many things in the depths of the palace." Abu stammered. "Many histories."

"Which one's would interest Ramlah?"

"I don't know. So much of those writings were overlooked, having no bearing on the location of the tomb of the Black March."

"He knows where he was buried. He probably knows how it was done and he sure as hell doesn't give a damn about how he was released - so what else?"

"Well - well there was the part about his wife."

"He had a wife?" Malice asked.

"I believe it was she that led him into the trap that imprisoned him." Abu stammered. "Perhaps he might be interested in discovering where the spirit of the traitress lies."

Schneider let Abu go, sat back thoughtfully and mused. "I would be. I hope Kall reads that part."

And then, rather unexpectedly a lash of power laced premonition hit him. He blinked, a vision of howling wind whipping up the sands of the desert, of a center of darkness within the storm. Of riders crossing the distance at a rate no mortal steed could reach. Of that arcane storm

descending upon this very city, of people scattering at the outskirts of town, cowering as riders emerged that this world had not seen in millennia.

"Shit!" he surged to his feet, chasing the vision away, forcing the tingling feel of foreign awareness away. "They're fucking here." He snarled. And he was in no wise prepared to meet them.

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Abu, if nothing else gave precise and reliable directions. And he was right about the runes being stronger the deeper one got into the bowels of the palace. The upper levels were newborn compared to the ones that reached under the first layer of the earth's bedrock. Very old, very potent, very much imbued with the power of the earth's own magic to power the runes that were carved into the stone of the walls. Kall would have liked to linger and study the construction of those runes. Foreign things and unusual in their making. They perked his interest as nothing so far in this land had. Any strange magic held an fascination for him.

There was only storage below a certain point. The living quarters were a level above him, and now the halls and the small rooms off them were filled with a mountainous assortment of goods. There was no one down here save for rats and spiders and other unsavory denizens of the dark. He had been forced to appropriate an oil lantern, not even able to call the small magic of a witch light because of the runes.

The passages became narrow and claustrophobic, low ceilinged and crumbling. Built for a smaller people that existed eons ago. He found the beginnings of wall script and upon brief inspection found it to concern more the building of this place than the reason for its being. There was a hall dedicated to the kings that had maintained this temple. And one concerning the many and varied gods of this land. And there ahead a landmark that Abu had told him of. A shattered statue of a animal helmed man of titanic proportions. Beyond that was a hall made of obsidian, bare of everything save the walls that were covered from ceiling to floor in small, even hieroglyphics. It was like a library unto itself and more than he might be able to decipher in a reasonable amount of time. He held up the lantern to illuminate one section of wall and audibly sighed.

He hoped that Schneider's patience held out for this was going to take a while.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Somewhere along the tenth mammoth wall panel filled with tiny, time worn hieroglyphic script that would be convoluted and wondering even to someone proficient in understanding the mental as well as the linguistic aspects of the language, Kall-Su's temples began to pound. His eyes began to ache and his patience began to wear thin. He hated reading by the light of flame. Despised it. The flickering light made the wall script dance with shifting shadow. He would have given much for a simple witch light, the steady glow of which he had spent many a long night reading by.

Damn the runes anyway. He was almost tempted to work his way around them, dismantling the age old components of the things - but that would have been even more grueling work that at the moment, his wavering patience and his pounding head were not up to.

He had discovered quite a bit of interesting information anyway. A great deal of off topic explanation of magics from a time gone by that he had allowed himself to be distracted by in his search for lore about the Black March. *Al-Zahif Al-Asouad*, as they had been called. The Demon Company. The Army of Darkness. The Devourer of Lands. The Black Death. The Sword of *Al-Vaharr* the Dark God.

All those things and more. He did not know all the names of the gods mentioned. Most of the formal titles and names meant nothing to him. But there was enough that he did understand to make him catch his breath on occasion and shiver in awe over what the holy men - the magicians - the loremasters of the ancient world had been capable of. And they had hidden so much of their power. They attributed so many of their feats to the miracles of the gods, of which they had hundreds.

He could have stayed for hours more, had the pain in his head not driven him to bypass the non essential rows of writing. Had the some sixth sense that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end, made him eager to quit these cool tombs and take what information he had gleaned back to the surface and the sunlight.

So he slipped back through the dusty lower passages, past the rubble strewn floors, up past the storage level and the living quarters where silken creatures of both sexes wondered to and from duties of the flesh upstairs.

He passed the guards and they did nothing more than shift their eyes at his passing, more interested in watching the behavior of the clientele than of the staff.

Back through the maze of silken partitions and pillows and far to many uninhibited bodies. A rotund, brown skinned man in striped overrobes than fell open over his protruding belly laid a hand on Kall's wrist as he passed. He looked down at the sweaty fingers on his skin, then up to the drug hazed dark eyes. The man had a chain with a gold token swinging from about his neck, the sign of a valued customer that had paid his dues at the door.

"Ahh, you're a pretty one. Foreign?"

As if the distinctions were not perfectly clear. Kall-Su's lips curled in distaste and he twisted his wrist out of the moist grip easily.

"Join us." The man said and indicated with a jerk of his flabby chin a cushioned alcove where a mostly naked, brown skinned boy that could not have been more than sixteen or seventeen, lay inhaling the drug they seemed to prefer in this land through a tube connected to a brass pot over a small brazier. It occurred to him, that through the weird play of genetics passed down to him from his demon sire, that he did not outwardly look much older than that boy. It repulsed him, the gleaming eagerness in this man's eyes and in others like him - to defile the young.

Almost he called up a nasty, painful little spike of magic - and he forced the urge back, recalling where he was and what he was about.

"No." He said simply and stepped around the shorter, broader figure. The man did not attempt to stop him. The man was drug lulled and already had a willing - one assumed willing at any rate - partner to toy with.

There was a commotion of some sort at the main door. Some heads turned, some were to wrapped up in their sport to care. A few guards in their gaudy belts and white pantaloons hurried that way. He veered a little that way himself, interested to see what caused the sudden, eerie ripple through the runes that protected this place.

A glimpse of black robed men melting through the gathering at the door, the guards falling back as if burned. A vague sense of reminiscence that stopped him in his tracks for a frozen heartbeat.

Then someone's arms wrapped about him from behind and spun him about, feet neatly hooking his ankles out from under him, slamming him down to pillow cushioned floor. His back hit a moment before his accoster's heavy body slammed down on top of him, driving the air out of his lungs. He shoved his palms outward, gathering lost breath to utter a spell, runes and anonymity be damned.

Schneider knocked his arms aside and pressed hands to the sides of Kall's face, forcing him down and still.

"Be still. They're here."

Shocked, Kall-Su blinked up at him, magical protests dead on his lips. The trailing material of Schneider's turban fell down around his head, concealing his vision, but he felt the disturbance, though the runes muted it. And heard the rolling wave of unease as people realized that there was something other than human among them.

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Malice had pulled a bag of gold out of the air for him. And he had tossed it nonchalantly at the gate guards who had gaped at the amount and hastily given him a gold token on a chain and fawningly told him that any pleasure he wished with these walls would be his and if he didn't find it here, they would procure it for him. At another time, he might have liked to linger and sample the fruits this place had to offer. The glimpses of the girls he caught as he stalked through the scented, silken aisles were quite literally mouth watering. Thoughts of Yoko kept getting caught in a mire at the corner of his mind. His promises to her were irritating harassment's that could not quite be ignored.

A pair of dark skinned lovelies slid up to him as he was trying to navigate the vast warren of cubbies and dens, offering refreshment among other things. He idly brushed aside the tray of sweetmeats, craning his head to try and catch a glimpse of a particular blonde head. One of the girls slid her hand inside his caftan, pressing her body against him and looking up with the most alluring dark eyes. He lost his train of thought for a moment, conscious deliberation fleeing as the singular and insistent entity between his legs roused at her expert touch. The girl was good. Better than Malice, who's sly experience left him neutral. This girl had innocence in her face and eyes, even if her hands knew exactly what they were about. Innocence made his gut clench and his blood run hot. It was one of those things that had driven him mad about Yoko, all that time before he'd actually gotten her.

"I'm looking for someone, sweet." He said, not bothering to dissuade her from what she was doing, bending over her silky dark head to whisper in her delectable little ear. "A young man. Golden hair. Blue eyes."

A hint of a pout lingered on her lips. "Blue like yours?"

"Lighter."

"What do you need a *boy* for?" Her fingers did something entirely erotic and he had to reach down then and catch her wrist before he lost track completely of what he was supposed to be about.

"He's a very pretty boy. Have you see him?"

She pouted. "I might have. He went downstairs."

"Show me?"

"You can't go. No clientele allowed."

There was a surge of power that caught him unawares. He blinked, straightening, bringing a hand to his head as it reverberated through the channels that were sensitive to magic. He turned his head towards the door even as the strangled cry of one of the wizard guards traveled into the palace proper. A brutal stab of power that set the runes to signing and had the two guards on the ground outside the doors, dead or wishing they were. He couldn't tell what magic had been used, the runes distorted it. The fact that magic had been used within the portal, almost under the influence of the runes was impressive enough. He didn't need to see the black robed figures that swept past the stunned inner portal guardians to know who they were. And since he was in no wise up to breaking the runes, much less confronting them, he stepped back into the anonymity of a silken partition - and caught sight of Kall-Su, walking straight up the main aisle towards the dark intruders.

He cursed, stepped over a writhing trio on the floor and snaked out an arm, wrapping it Kall's waist and snatching him backwards before he had the chance to register the movement. Schneider had plenty of practice in gaining the upper hand in the bed cushions. Granted, women were easier to handle, but he had weight and height on Kall and managed to maneuver the both of them down upon the pillows as the first of the black robed intruders strode up the central aisle from the door.

"Be still. They're here." He hissed down, a whisper of breath against Kall-Su's cheek. Kall went still beneath him, realization taking the struggle out of him. Schneider bent his head, letting the flowing ends of his turban hide his hair and Kall's.

"How?" Kall asked. "Do they have the same powers of teleportation as the djinni?"

"Shush." He pressed a hand over Kall's lips, not able to see the passage but sensing how close their enemies were. He shifted to gain a more comfortable position. Got a knee between Kall's legs to gain a little leverage and felt Kall shrink away a bit at the familiarity, felt him instinctively try and shift out from under Schneider's weight. Schneider caught one wrist and pinned it, delivering a warning squeeze for Kall-Su to be still. He slid his hand away from his mouth and whispered very close to his lips.

"Stop it."

"What are you doing?" A breathless, indignant whisper.

He blinked down at Kall-Su, for a moment not understanding. Wasn't it perfectly obvious what he was doing? Trying to avoid notice by creatures that at the moment neither of them were up to facing. Then he realized what Kall meant. Through the thin silk of the harem boy costume Malice had so gleefully given him, Kall must have very obviously felt the erection left over from the little whore's handjob. Kall-Su's wriggling under him didn't make it any less sensitive. More so in fact, after he was kind enough to bring it back to Schneider's attention.

"If you don't hold still," he hissed softly, with a touch of maliciousness, "I'll have to use it."

Kall's eyes widened, then narrowed to glare accusingly up at him. "Get off me, DS."

"Sorry, can't. They're still around." He felt the lingering presence. Not Ramlah, though Ramlah himself might have been with the first to pass. It was hard to tell. But there were still black swathed members of the March up here, waiting for their master's return.

He hated this. He hated hiding like a rabbit in the brush, waiting for the fox to wonder past. He dropped his forehead in frustration and Kall-Su's soft hair brushed his cheek. "fuckfuckfuck..." He murmured angrily into the pillows. He felt Kall-Su relax under him. Felt some of the angles of tense muscle melt into softer more comfortable contours as the younger wizard shifted just a little to better endure Schneider's weight.

"I discovered some very interesting things." He whispered against Schneider's ear.

"Tell me some of them were about Ramlah's wife?"

A pause. "Yes. There was mention."

"Good boy. I always knew you were the good one."

Kall-Su sniffed disdainfully. "That's not what you told Arshes."

Softly, Schneider laughed. That was because Arshes had curves and softnesses that Kall didn't have. Of course, with his hand idly resting on Kall's ribs, bared by the open front of his tunic, he discovered a preternatural softness of the skin there. Pale as cream, smooth as silk skin that hinted at not entirely human heritage. He had never quite noticed before. He trailed his hand down to Kall's hip, a connoisseur of anything that felt that nice to the touch.

Kall shivered silently and Schneider had to lift his head to see what was in his eyes. Thick, gold tipped lashes trembled against his cheeks, teeth worried at his bottom lip, those finely made brows were drawn, a faint worry line marring his brow. He wondered if he were thinking about his Lily, and how he would manage to get to her with the blossoming danger of the Black March to impeded them. Just as Schneider ought to be considering all his promises to Yoko in this den of inequity that so aroused him, instead of wondering if instead of Lily, Kall-Su was perhaps concentrating on Schneider's fingers splayed out upon his hip, fingertips testing the loose lip of his silk trousers. It was merely the unknown that intrigued him. The sudden realization of just how comely the body under him was, even if it didn't have all the parts he generally required.

He slid his hand up, let his thumb brush against Kall's nipple, and Kall made a startled little sound and his eyes snapped open.

"DS! Please - - - can't we go now. Slip out past them?"

A flustered Kall-Su. A very worried Kall-Su from the sound of his voice. But about what?

"I don't want to take the chance." He murmured, close to Kall's mouth. "Wait it out, hummm?" He trailed his hand back down idly, slowly savoring the feel of skin that he could just swear was softer than Yoko's, watching the panic form in Kall-Su's eyes. The need to bolt and the pragmatic realization that he could not.

"DS. Don't -"

Don't had never stopped him. *Don't* had always tended to encourage him in whatever he was about.

"Have to make it look convincing." He said, lips very close to Kall's. It was merely a matter of slipping a little to the side to taste the younger wizard's lower lip.

Kall hissed through his teeth and jerked away, and Schneider wound the fingers of his other hand in his hair to keep his head still, whispering into his mouth. "Don't make a scene."

"Stop - mmmnnn." It came out muffled as Schneider covered his mouth with a hand, his attentions suddenly and completely drawn elsewhere. At a rumbling surge of power, of tearing, ripping runes that screamed like dying banshees. He cringed, the ethereal sound of it hammering to the core of him. He vaguely felt Kall curling under him, pressing hands ineffectually to his ears to shut it out. And failing.

The runes were being shredded. Not a clinical, methodical dismantling, but a pure battering ram of power that crumpled them. Most of the people here had no notion what was happening. A few startled exclamations from folk who might have been more arcanelly sensitive than the normal man, but otherwise sex obliterated the underlying violence being done.

Until the ceiling started to shake and bits of rock and dust began to sprinkle down. Then, folk began to take note. A large chunk of stone fell, shattering on the floor, and screams broke the air. The music stopped and for a moment there was devastating silence before the muffled sound of an explosion deeper underground shook the floor.

It was the trigger that sent the room into a panic. The floor buckled towards the center of the room and silk and pillows and people spilled into the crevice. A column nearby crumbled, crushing more fleeing folk. People scrambled desperately for escape. With final death of the runes, the screaming wail inside Schneider's head stopped. His head still rung with echoes of it, but he was mobile, as he had not been minutes before. He surged up, hauling Kall-Su in his wake, shoving the younger wizard into the streaming mob trying to escape. If there were members of the March among this mass, then they were not likely to pay attention to the faces of the cattle rushing for escape. He spared a small surge of power to move a stumbling, terrified knot of people of their way, scattering bodies against the wall. The ceiling fell in before them, raining death down. He called up a shield, broad enough to protect himself and

Kall, managed to inadvertently save the people closest to them, and veered around the carnage.

As he passed, he saw the staring dead face of the girl with the innocent eyes. Half her body had been crushed by falling debris. He faltered, growling, eyes scanning the dust filled great hall for members of the Black March.

"What are you doing? Come on." Kall pulled at his arm. Kall had regained his senses. Kall was shielding, both physically and mentally, making the both of them invisible to other magic sensitive minds.

"I just need to kill one of them." He hissed, shaking off Kall's hand.

"So do I, but not now." Kall snapped angrily. "You're the one who wanted to avoid attention, damn you. Avoid it now!"

Schneider glared into the chaos. Cursed and spun about, cutting through the crowd like a scythe for the main doors.

They retreated beyond the crowds who gathered to gawk at the crumbling palace. At the destruction of something so very old. Its final gasp was spectacular. An explosion of stone and sand and debris to the mortal eye, and to the wizardly, an expulsion of vast power that swam amidst the debris and dissipated finally into the air above the city. And with the final explosion came the March. Out of the dust and the settling wreckage, they walked. Perhaps ten of them, striding through the madness as if they had no care in the world for the cowering people that crawled over each other to get out of their path. From down the avenue their great black horses came, trampling all in their path.

Schneider and Kall-Su watched them mount and ride off, back towards the desert where no doubt the rest of their number waited. Dust and sand rose up in their wake, as if the very magnetism of their presence stirred it to mad intensity.

"Fuck." Schneider said and slammed a fist into the sandstone wall beside him. The stone cracked and crumbled.

"What was that?" Kall hissed at him.

"What do you think it was? The fucking March."

"No, you ass. In there. What were you *doing*?"

Schneider blinked, taken seriously off track. It took him a second to register what Kall was talking about. Kall's furious eyes and red cheeks made it perfectly clear. He took a breath, letting anger melt away, and met those glittering ice blue eyes with a slow, lazy smile, then let his gaze wonder down the open front of Kall-Su's thin silken tunic.

"What do *you* think I was doing?"

Kall-Su snarled and hastily pulled the tunic closed, crossed his arms over his chest when he couldn't belt it and turned his embarrassed glare elsewhere.

Prude. Schneider thought in a brief flash of amusement, before the anger seeped back.

"Where in hell is that djinni?" He snarled, looking over the turbaned heads of the mulling crowd. Now that the Palace had settled and the March had departed without inflicting too much damage, the common mortals became braver and ventured to poke into the wreckage.

"Master?" A small, scared voice proceeded a wary, and surprisingly timid Malice as she slipped around the corner and peered worriedly at the ruins of the once great structure.

"Where's the little desert rat?" Schneider asked, looking behind her for Abu.

"He fled, my lord, when the demon company came."

"The Demon Company?" Kall lifted a curious brow at her. "Where did you come by that name?"

"I remember hearing tales of them - before I was trapped so long in the bottle. I never saw them."

"I saw that reference." Kall mused, eyes drifting off thoughtfully, then they refocused and he asked in a very civil tone of voice, considering how he generally addressed Malice. "Would you give me some decent clothing, please?"

* * * * *

"Naqada. Does that ring a bell?"

The little desert guide huddled in the sand outside the city of Meshed, hands raised defensively to protect his face. As if mere flesh could prevent any harm Schneider wished to inflict. He didn't mean to inflict any at the moment, the little man's fear was understandable and his flight had not put them to any great trouble. They had found him rather easily on their own way out of the city.

"Naqada? " Abu stammered. "I have never heard of such a place. What is it?"

"It is the place where Ramalah's sorceress wife was supposedly sealed away, very much like he was, from what I gleaned." Kall explained patiently.

Kall had not uncovered the whole story behind the tale Abu had spun, about this wife betraying the husband into imprisonment, but he had discovered facts about her holy sect and where she had gone after the Black March had been banished. A place called Naqada. The only clue was that it was west of Meshed. Which covered a damn lot of ground.

"Naqada? Naqada?" Malice, who had been dutifully studying the state of her cuticles, lifted her head with a curious expression on her face. "I seem to recall that name -"

The lot of them stared at her, while she silently chewed on her lip.

"Well?" Kall finally snapped. "Does it mean anything to you or not?"

She drew her brows and frowned. "Don't rush me, its been a long time. Oh, I remember now. It was my second master. He took me there. He was a merchant and had a great deal of business along the river. That's where Naqada is."

"What river?"

"*The* river. The Nile of course."

"There is no Naqada upon the Nile." Abu said sullenly.

"Maybe not now." Schneider said. "How long ago was this, Malice?"

She sighed and shook her head. "I do not know. Many, many years before I was banished to the bottle."

"Can you take us there?"

She shrugged. "It may not be as I remember. It may be all sand now. Meshed was very different. This little man says Naqada is not there at all."

"Does it matter? If its under a thousand feet of sand, it still rests in the same place, does it not?" Kall-Su inquired. Kall-Su sounded put upon. Kall-Su was holding grudges. He had not said a thing to Schneider that had not expressly needed to be said, since their escape from the Pleasure Palace. He would not meet his eyes.

It systematically amused and annoyed Schneider. That affrontage. That preciously hoarded indignity. As if Schneider being Schneider was some great, earth shattering shock.

"I suppose not." Malice admitted.

"Then take us there." He commanded.

"Not me. I do not wish to go." Abu cried a moment before Malice sighed, shut her eyes and the world swam around them.

Chapter Sixteen

Schneider let the dust slide between his fingers and down to the floor of the musty tomb. It had taken most of the day to find the place, after Malice had teleported them to it, most of the day to blast sand and earth and crumbled architecture away from it, for Kall-Su to painstakingly translate the writings on the walls and figure out just where this sorceress was supposed to be sealed away. And then after all that, they find that whoever had done the sealing had done a lousy job of it.

Dust. She was gone to dust and there was no power on earth that would bring back a millennia dead woman. Sorceress or not.

He picked up another handful of her mummified remains from the open top of the stone sarcophagus. Not even a scrape metal of clothing left. The tomb had been raided years ago by

bandits. The seal had somehow been broken, by some natural catastrophe most likely. The land had the feel of some great upheaval. It didn't help their cause. It was just a waste of time.

With a snarl, he flung the dust away, causing Kall-Su to look up from the tablet he was scrutinizing, causing the little sand rat to cringe and huddle deeper into the shadowed corner he had found. The djinni was outside, having declared a dislike for tombs and the like.

"Tell me, you've found something useful. Anything?"

He stalked over to Kall, and the younger wizard looked up, face highlighted by the blue witchlight that hovered over his head. Slowly he shook his head.

"I think she died a natural death. I think she was mortal and nothing more than that. She was not what he was."

"Which is what? Anything about that?"

Again a slow, negative shake of the head. Kall lifted a hand to squeeze the bridge of his nose, lids fluttering down for a moment in weariness. "No, not here. They made her a holy woman after she *banished the demons* - so to speak, and they only mention the evil she courted in her youth. It speaks more of her accomplishments afterwards."

"Bah, I don't care about any of that. What good does it do us. What good coming here at all." He hissed a few more curses between his teeth, and stalked out of the tomb. Up the slanted walk, littered with crumbled debris from his none too gentle entrance and out into the dizzying heat of the desert.

And this place they had discovered the remains of a city built around a tomb was most certainly in the midst of a wasteland. Nothing as far as the eye could see and the senses could uncover in all directions. Nothing but bone dry earth and unforgiving weather. It plainly unpalatable, this land, and he found it trying to even his endurance. It had Kall-Su wilting in misery. Even in evening it was still unbearably hot. It was only marginally cooler inside the shadows of the tomb. A mastaba, Abu had called it. A flat topped tomb from the older dynasties, that had been hidden under hundreds of feet of sand, that Schneider had only found by the faint trace of the last remaining runes that graced the outer facade of the structure.

He slid down the against the rough, stone wall, digging his boots into the loose sand that piled in drifts against the sides of the thing and sat there, glaring at the brilliant colors of the sitting sun.

A movement from the ragged opening they had made, and Kall-Su came out, stood for a moment, one hand raised to shield his eyes from the sun, then he too slumped down against the wall, a few feet from Schneider.

"There's nothing. You're right, it was a waste of time. We might as well have gone -" he broke off, looking away, half in anger, half in frustration.

"What? Looking for your minstrel?" Schneider finished for him.

Kall said nothing, he idly scooped up a handful of sand and let it trickle through his fingers. Finally he said. "I would forgo retaliation, to find her."

Schneider snorted, annoyed. For the life of him he couldn't see anything in the common, disrespectful little former slave that could so enrapture a wizard of Kall-Su's stature. He supposed she was pretty - more so when she performed, but not that *pretty*. Kall could find better. But he didn't say it. Kall had gotten rather unreasonably mad the last time he'd mentioned such a thing. He was too tired to spar at the moment.

He leaned his head against the stone and looked at the younger wizard. There were cobwebs in his hair, dulling some of the pale golden gleam. Malice had given him proper, desert robes again, but honestly Schneider thought he had looked better in the other. Quite surprisingly appealing. He'd hardly ever noticed before with Arshes or Yoko to distract him. Young men did not generally catch his eye, but pretty was pretty and Kall had looked and tasted sinfully good. It made one wonder - about other things. It made one rather pleased with the looks - or the non-looks - cast at his back. Wary and embarrassed and quite quite baffled. Kall had no slightest notion what to make of the incident. Kall was quite confused by the whole thing.

Schneider liked causing confusion. If he had not been so tired, and so admittedly troubled by Ramlah and his minions, he might have put some effort into exploring the possibilities. As it was - he didn't know what to do.

He just did not know what to do. And he hated that indecision. In this place, with only himself and Kall-Su who as clearly at a disadvantage both from the nature of the desert itself and his healing mental injuries, they were the weaker power. Nasty thing to admit. Repugnant notion that retreat might be the wisest course of action. God knew he wanted to engage the Back March and their enigmatic master, but even he had to admit that common sense warned against it. Not if he wanted to come out in one piece. Not if he wanted to protect Kall-Su. If Arshes and Gara had been here, he might have been more optimistic of their chances. But they were a half a world away.

And he needed to repower. He needed very badly just to plunge himself into the deep slumber of rejuvenation, so that he even had a chance in hell of standing up against Ramlah alone, much less Ramlah backed by his dark minions. He wondered how much time they had?

"Kall, I'm going to sleep."

Kall-Su blinked up at him as he rose, dusting sand off his cloak, shaking out the mane of his hair.

"What?" Kall asked stupidly. "Here?"

"Here. Don't bother me." As if they could, when he entered the trance like sleep of healing that he needed. It took a second, Kall was tired and Kall's mind was still whirling with hieroglyphics and ancient histories, but understanding dawned, of what Schneider was doing and why. He nodded slowly, absently burying his hands in the sand.

"You should too, while we have the chance." His one bit of helpful advice. Kall nodded again, distracted by the sunset and the glittering bits of glass powder in the sand.

Schneider left him, walked into the cool depths of the tomb and cleared a place of sand and dust with a mental sweep of magic wind. He lowered himself down, flat on his back, and shut his eyes, clearing his mind of everything mortal. Of doubt, of worry, of lust, of love. All of it gone, swept away by a fierce will and iron control. In a matter of heartbeats he was gone so deep within himself that the roof could have come down upon him and not disturbed his repose.

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Abu had skulked out of the tomb earlier, chased away by Schneider's mere presence. The little man perched atop the crumbling mastaba, staring mournfully into the purpling horizon. The Djinni lurked about somewhere, sulking and displeased with this desolate place. Kall would have gone back inside himself, to assure that nothing disturbed Schneider's rest, but the sand had become a comfortable, shifting seat, and the slant of the wall felt good against his back. His head hurt from too much reading of indistinct script and the whole of his body felt parched. His soul felt parched. How could anything have ever thrived and grown in such a land? He hated it. Hated it with all his heart and wanted nothing more than to find Lily and have her and Schneider and himself gone from this place, back to the fertile, temperate lands of the east. He was tired of roaming. He wanted the stability of a place he knew and a routine that was familiar to assuage the unease. He wanted back to Sta-Veron despite the reasons he had left. He wanted Lily there and Schneider and all the other things - few as they were - that offered comfort and safety.

He lay his head upon his arms, shutting out the multi-hued sunset, imagining the cool winds and the snow capped highlands of the northern mountains. Even in the depths of summer the heat was never oppressing. The air was always heavy with moisture. He wondered if Gara and Arshes Nei had been troubled by bandits. By the threat of bandit and nomad invasion from the Tundra. He should have stayed and dealt with it himself, it would have been the responsible thing to do - even bereft of magic as he had been - but responsibility had seemed a foreign thing for a while there. The walls of Sta-Veron had seemed stifling. The only thing that had offered contentment had been Lily's arms and even that had been taken away.

There was a shifting of sand beside him and a wafting scent of jasmine.

"He says you are after a girl?"

Almost as if she had sensed his melancholy over Lily, the djinni descended, very little of concern in her voice, nothing of honest curiosity. A great deal of not so subtle spite."

He shifted his head a little to cast her a withering look. He said nothing, not caring to honor her with an answer.

It mattered little to her. She settled down into the sand a few feet away, the gold trinkets on her person tinkling as she moved, creating a melody of their own in the still desert air.

"He says you crossed all the vast ocean to follow her?"

He said nothing to that either, letting his lids flicker down again to shut out the sight of her, if not the sound of her voice.

"She must be a beautiful girl, to inspire so much." Said the djinni who was supremely beautiful and well knew it.

"Beauty is not everything." He murmured. "Go away."

"She's ugly, then?"

He cast a glare at her from under gold tipped lashes, refusing to rise to her dangled bait. Despising her as much as this desert he was trapped in.

"He hates her, you know?" Malice purred, leaning towards him, midnight dark fall of hair dripping over her shoulders.

That surprised him. He half opened his mouth to deny such a thing, but he was not certain it was not true. Malice smiled, and her eyes glittered with a certain smug victory, a certain frustrated bewilderment.

"I think its because you love her more than you love him. He can't understand that."

"Go away." He said it on a trembly breath.

"Why? Because I state the obvious? He would not harm her, I think, because it would be like harming you. You are of great concern to him."

"Shut up. You know nothing." He thought about casting a spell. Summoning some destructive force to eat away at her bones and her flesh and his misery of her. But it probably would not succeed. She had already proved quite sturdy in that effect. And it might disturb Schneider's sleep and he'd not be accused of a petty squabble just to rid himself of the djinni. Especially when it would not work to begin with and he'd only gain her derision for his efforts. He thought about getting up and walking away, but that would be retreat and admission of defeat. He was not willing to admit that either. Not to her.

She laughed. "I see how he watches you. Especially after Meshed. Does the notion of you as *faajir* intrigue him?"

He hissed, rage and embarrassment flaring. Instinctively he whirled on her, flinging the handful of sand and backing it with a charge of pure explosive energy. It hit, a thousand tiny crackling shards of destruction, the crack of it echoing in the desolation. Malice shrieked and winked out of existence. Her action, not his. Her escape from his tantrum. If she came back, he'd do it again. But she didn't. One hoped she was licking her wounds in some other place, one hoped he had at least managed some small bit of damage. One hoped she stayed cacooned in the bottle Schneider still carried on his person forever. He doubted he would be that lucky.

Faajir. Complete indignity there. Complete embarrassment over that unlikely incident. Bad enough he'd had to do it - he didn't wish to dwell on the other. On what had happened with Schneider, which had taken him completely off his guard. Which still did, after the fact.

A breath to clear his head and chase away the unease. To chase away the ire that Malice had stirred. The sun sank low and eventually dropped beyond the rolling dunes. He heard Abu stirring about in the small camp Malice had created for them, making do for his supper with

what supplies were at hand, since the Djinni had still not made a appearance. Maybe that last spell had done her in. Kall-Su's lips turned up in a cold smile at the notion. He didn't particularly care if it upset Schneider. He was not used to letting such blatant impertinence go unpunished.

"My lord?" Abu crept up to him. "Some wine? We've some left in the canteens?"

He was parched, otherwise he'd have refused it, preferring to fast in solitude. The little man scurried off to retrieve it. The wind changed direction, blowing sand and dust with it, invisible swirls in the darkness. The air felt electric, filled with static energy that made the hair on the back of his arms stand on end. It was oppressive almost, the rapid change. He sank a little lower into his slouch as Abu brought the canteen.

"Is there a storm brewing?" he asked, not familiar with the nature of desert squalls. The little man paused, looking into the darkness, robes fluttering around his legs.

"Perhaps. They descend quickly, the desert tempests. If this turns into such, we should retreat within the mastaba."

Kall-Su took a sip of the wine, then lowered the canteen. It was bitter and strong, tepid from the heat. Not to his taste. It left a bad aftertaste and he glared into the night, as if the absence of daylight were at fault.

It felt wrong - the essence of the disturbance rolling along the sands towards them. The pulse beat in his ears, a rapid, breathless tempo that had come upon him unawares. He dropped the canteen to the sand and rose, staring northeast uneasily. The power that issued from that way was more than a force of nature. They could not have come so fast. Could they?

"I don't think it's a storm." He said, more to himself than Abu. The little man squinted into the darkness nonetheless and asked breathlessly.

"The demons? Is it the demons, oh great lord?"

"Maybe."

"We should wake the *Sahir bil-kamir*." Abu said worriedly, wringing his hands. The wizard of the moon. A descriptive enough term for Schneider and his moonlit hair. Yes, he thought, he probably should, but he didn't know if he could shake the healing trance the other wizard had sunken into. Especially if it were for nothing. If this were nothing more than a storm and it was Kall's own disquietude with this place that made him sense otherwise. Go and see first, he thought. Go and see if it is truly the approach of a sand storm or something else entirely, before he attempted to wake Schneider.

"I'm going to go and look." He said.

Abu stared at him as if he were insane. "Go and look? But - what if -?"

He ignored the rest, silently reciting the incantation that would summon the air spirits to lift him skyward. Those elementals at least had no distaste for the arid desolation of the desert. They were in fact quite willful and strong, wanting to play in the winds stirred up by the

oncoming force, which might in fact have pointed towards this unnerving energy he felt being nothing more than a freak desert storm. Air elementals were always mischievous in the midst of bad weather.

Over the desert which was a consistent, unchangeable pallet of rolling sand, gone to shadows in the night. The wind was harsh, whipping his hair and robes. In the distance he sensed the crux of the disturbance. A rolling wave of oncoming pressure. It was storm based. He felt the link with the elementals that kept him aloft, the basic, intrinsic analogous components that made up the very essence of a storm. Of any weather front. Only this was centralized and directed. A controlled force. He tried to send his senses past the outside turbulence and found - magic. Sheer, broiling magic, rolling in on the sands like a wave towards a beach.

He cursed and sent himself back towards the tomb as fast as he could. Hit ground without missing a beat and pelted into the tomb, hastily calling a witchlight to guide his way. He skidded to his knees in the dust next to the place Schneider had made for himself, grabbing the other wizard's shoulders and shaking urgently.

"Wake up! DS, wake up, now!"

Only Schneider wasn't responding. Schneider had plunged himself too deeply into the healing trance and Kall was not getting through. He cursed again, and spun, fingertips still in the dust, trying to think what to do. At full power, he wouldn't be up to this. At full power, he and Schneider both were not up to this.

How had they come so fast?

"Malice!" he cried out into the still air of the tomb. "Where are you? We need you now." He hated calling to her for aide, but she was the only creature that could whisk them out of here with the blink of an eye. But she did not respond. The only response he got was a frightened little whimper from Abu as the man slunk into the tomb after him.

"It is them, isn't it?"

Kall-Su took a breath. "Yes."

"Out - outside - the sand whips as if a great storm has already descended upon us."

"It has."

"What shall we do?"

Kall stood up, forcing calm, banishing panic. "Wake him if you can. I don't care how."

"And you? What will you do?"

"I will go and tell them that what they seek is not here."

He walked outside, letting the witchlight bleed away, buffeted by tremendous winds before he fully left the shelter of the mastaba. He formed a shield, at first a small one about himself, then let it expand to take in the exposed structure of the tomb itself. The sand within that

dome of protection fell of a sudden, bereft of wind to keep it aloft. He added to it, layer after layer, building it so solid that almost one could see the shimmer of it. It would have kept out a mortal army, that shield. A year ago he could have created one twice as solid, six months ago he could not have made one at all.

He stood before the small opening to the tomb and faced the swirling darkness of the storm. And through the sand, a line of shadowy figures emerged. Dire silhouettes with their horned helms, upon their black war-horses. They stopped outside his shield, a half formed circle, peering inwards, like wolves, he thought. Silent and patient and deadly when they hunted in a pack.

One rider moved forward, swung down off his steed and took a step towards the mastaba. Ramlah, from the dragon helm.

"She is not here." Kall said softly, and knew he would be heard, even through the rush of the storm they brought with them outside his shields. "She's been dead a thousand years. You can not take vengeance on dust." If it was even vengeance they wanted. What they wanted at all was a mystery.

The dragon helm lifted and the eyes behind it momentarily fixed on him. Then beyond him to the crumbling structure of the tomb. The rider stepped forward, and into the influence of Kall's shield. The shield wavered, trying to repel invasion. Kall felt a back lash of something along his nerves that made his head reel. He ground his teeth and strengthened the barrier.

Ramlah paused. He raised one gloved hand and the riders shifted behind him. His eyes glowed pale red within the confines of his helm and the eyes of all the riders behind him flared in harmony. He stepped forward again and this time the shield melted before him.

Chapter Seventeen

The little guide, Abu, had never in all his life been so afraid. He had been many things in his forty years. Thief, trader, guide, merchant, slaver, assassin on occasion, translator and most recently the running dog of the Moulay, whom the demon sent company outside had killed in a most disturbing manner. He had never quite had the faith the Moulay had, that what they sought would be anything more than ancient runes, holding ancient relics. He had certainly never expected the Black March. Djinn as a rule were unpredictable, unsavory beings and he'd rather have nothing to do with any of them for love or money. But of course money held a draw that love and loyalty did not and for a great deal of it, he had tracked down the charmingly curved, spitefully tongued Djinni that had bypassed the seal that kept the March imprisoned. And with her had come the two foreign Djinn, who had been frightening at first, but upon comparison with the *Al-Zafif Al-Asouad*, were by far the lesser of two evils.

So much so, that he hesitated not to lay hands upon the long, inert form of the *Al-Mookamir*, the one with the moonlit hair and shake with some vigor. That one did not move. It was as if he were dead already, strikingly handsome planes of his face in peaceful repose, black lashes a stark contradiction against pale flesh.

Outside he could hear the strangely muffled sounds of the storm, though no wind wormed its way into the interior of the mastaba. The other one was out there, facing his death at the hands of the March. Daring to stand in their way. Abu wouldn't have cared, it meant one less djinn

to deal with after all, save that the slumbering one would take great offense and might very well take out his vengeance on poor Abu. He had no notion where the djinni, Malice, was. Sulking somewhere, he supposed after a spat with the sun haired one.

The ceiling shook and bits and pieces of rubble fell down, littering the already debris cluttered floor. He shook the djinn more forcefully, begging in his native tongue for the creature to awaken. Abu did not wish to die here. He most certainly did not. Not in this time forsaken tomb, not even rich enough in artifacts for tomb raiders to have plundered. He might have thrown himself on the mercy of the March, save that he did not think they had any. His hope therefore, lay with the foreign djinn, but the one outside could not do it alone.

"Please, please wake." He pleaded in the djinn's tongue, thinking perhaps he might respond better to that. "*Al-Zafif Al-Asouad* are here and they'll be the death of us all. You'd not have them kill you while you slept, would you? There's no honor in that."

He lifted a hand then, in desperation and slapped one pale cheek. The head turned listlessly. Wind began to whistle through the mastaba, as if whatever had held it back outside had failed. Abu lifted his fist and struck again.

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Kall-Su took a staggering step backwards, struck by a combined force of casual power that made his head reel and his magic crumble. He shook it off with an effort, drawing power away from the shield he had erected around the mastaba and pooling towards his own personal shields.

Ramlah took a step forward, so that he stood adjacent to Kall-Su, the facing outwards towards the line of dark riders, the other staring into the crumbled entrance to the tomb.

"What do you know of it, *Al-Shayhtaan bil'Sha'ir Al-Shamcii*." Sun haired demon.

He took a breath, a trembling, ragged breath and fought back the pressure in his head, against his body. Ramlah spoke to him - at him - as if it were nothing more than casual conversation, but the power spilled out of him, pressing against Kall-Su, testing his limits, seeping beyond them.

"She betrayed you and she died. She was mortal and there is nothing of her left to exact vengeance upon." He kept his voice low, calm, kept his eyes upon the unnaturally still figures of the March. He felt the dragon helm turn slowly to look at him.

"You know not the vengeance's I might take."

He shivered to dwell upon it. What power it might take to torment a soul long dead. He knew of no such power - that existed today. What might have been possible millennia ago, when the world reveled in magic and the arcane - that was a mind boggling thought. It was a morbidity intriguing one. He glanced to the side, to that metal encased visage and found its dark attention focused upon him still.

"Is that all you wish for? Vengeance?"

The wind sifted through the remnants of his shield and whipped hair into his eyes and sand against his face. He lowered his lashes to protect from that mundane attack.

"You made the ice?" Ramlah asked bluntly.

Kall blinked, taken off guard, recalling what he had called forth from the stingy heart of the desert when he'd been so desperate to get a wounded Schneider away from the combined attack of the Black March. He thought he might have taken a toll upon the March with that attack. He was not certain admitting to such was a wise notion.

Warily, he inclined his head.

"Lower your shields, *sahir saghir*, or I will crush them and you as well."

"No." He would not willingly move aside and let them into the tomb while Schneider was defenseless. He felt the static stirrings of accumulating power and thought he might not have the choice for very much longer.

And just as suddenly he felt them subside, as Ramlah's attention riveted to the mastaba entrance.

"Is this what you want?"

Kall swung around. Schneider stood there, a little dusty, a faint, patronizing smile on his lips, balancing in his palm a withered, mummified head. He bounced it once and a bit of powder fell from sunken eye sockets. He tossed the thing at Ramlah and the dragon helm's gauntleted hands came up to catch it. It was a reflexive movement and it diverted both Kall's and Ramlah's attention a hair's breath of time. That was all it took for the deafening, blinding blast to issue forth from the air before Schneider's hands.

It hit Ramlah dead center. It almost took Kall's shoulder off, personal shield or no. The shield kept him whole at least, even in its last gasp of existence. He was thrown backwards from the impact though, into the midst of thick horse legs and dangerous sharp hooves. He didn't even have the time to see what Ramlah did in response to Schneider's attack, for the earth heaved up under him and the mounted members of the march and the supernaturally calm steeds began to scream and scramble for purchase.

The sand swirled as if alive, and he resurrected his shield to protect himself from the stinging attack of it. A curved sword came at his head, backed by arcane force. It almost sliced through his shield. It lodged there a moment, giving him the time to see the black robed, helmed wielder. A faceless attacker that sought to take him out from behind with a sword through the skull. He snarled and retaliated. A tremendous burst of energy that he channeled through the very shield that imprisoned the sword. The sword was a mystical thing. He felt it try and repel his counter attack, but his blast was more than it could handle. The shock wave went through steel and into the flesh of the wielder. The dark wizard screamed, unprepared for the assault, and toppled off the back of his horse, steam coming from the openings of the helmet.

Not dead though. Through the swirling storm, Kall-Su saw the creature stagger to his feet and make a lumbering grab for the reins of the prancing horse.

Damn. Damn. Even the members of the pack were preternaturally strong. The others were circling; dark figures in the growing gale.

A crackling finger of energy descended from the sky and the earth beneath them all disintegrated.

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That had been a goddamned big blast. He had another like it, maybe two up his sleeve then he was reduced to fighting with a less overwhelmingly destructive arsenal. He'd taken the fight away from the mastaba a bit. The crater in the desert he'd created from that last strike did not quite encompass the edge of the tomb. The sand from the backwash covered most of it though. He didn't give a rat's ass about the little Arab who'd awakened him, who was cowering in the depths of the mastaba in fear of a life that probably wouldn't last that long anyway, or the djinni for that matter, wherever she might be, but he had a concern for Kall-Su, who had too many disadvantages working against him to be up to his usual standards. That concern divided his attention. Made him go out of his way to draw an enemy away and gave that enemy one more chance to strike at him in the process. Damned annoying to give a damn about something enough for it to put him at a disadvantage. If it had been Yoko down there, obscured by a raging sea of sand, he'd probably have been dead by now, trying to protect her and deal with an enemy that just - blew his mind. An enemy that wasn't slowing down, that kept drawing power from reserves that Schneider just didn't have. That was taking hits that had rocked the god of destruction itself and shrugging them off. That had a damned big shitenno down there that was feeding him energy, while's Schneider's was down to one and he hadn't a notion where in hell he was at the moment.

He hoped he was distant enough that the fire bomb he was about to drop didn't catch him in its ravenous reach. He uttered the words that would summon the elemental, a nasty tempered, hard to control at the best of times creature that had taken him two dozen years to fully master. The air sizzled around him and flared into flame. The tongues of fire never burned him, though they lapped about him greedily. With a hissing command he directed it to find his enemy and it rocketed away, igniting grains of sand with the intensity of its heat as it went. He could see its path through the sand, though little more.

His sense of the other powers out there was muddled. There were so many and they merged and dispersed from each other like mingling water. In the brief moment of respite, while he hovered far over the desert, yet still within the range of the swirling sandstorm, he stretched his senses trying to locate the central points in this game. Found Kall-Su easily, a burst of frigid power that Schneider was intimately familiar with. The others were too numerous to pin down. He stopped trying, blocking out the lesser ones and seeking the greater. Found it of a sudden as the desert flared into flame. His elemental had found its mark. Schneider screamed in triumph and swept down through the battering barrier of sand towards the heart of the inferno. He built another high power strike as he went, not willing to go into this with anything but his most powerful attack.

He saw his enemy. Saw the twisted horns of the dragon helm, as the man stood with arms outstretched in the center of his conflagration. Schneider let loose with his blast. Sand, earth and rock spewed up, creating a ragged crater a hundred feet in diameter, half that deep. The fire demon roared, seeking fuel for its fire, but sand and stone did not burn for long. It faltered, wailing its frustration. It wanted combustible matter to feed upon. It wanted flesh to

burn. Schneider kept it there from sheer will alone, kept the fires burning as he sat foot on jagged earth and stepped towards the black heap that was his enemy. A leg was gone, the armor was half eaten away, exposing blackened ribs and glistening insides. The dragon helm had been knocked a dozen yards away, bent and charred.

Schneider smiled, letting out a breath of relief that he couldn't stop. He moved closer, almost to the point of letting his elemental free.

The heap on the ground shifted. Lifted a splay fingered hand and slowly made a fist. Schneider took a sudden, painful breath, and quite suddenly couldn't take another. It wasn't an attack on him, he could have shielded against that. It was an attack on his elemental. His enemy stole the air from the crater, and bereft of oxygen the elemental writhed in pain, but it couldn't even scream as it withered and died.

"You - are a worthy adversary." The words came out hoarsely from the bent figure. The sand stirred under it, flowing into the ragged ends of the charred stump, into the gaping wound in its side, and where sand filled, flesh was made anew. He pushed himself to his feet and Ramlah lifted his head to meet Schneider's eyes. Shoulder length, straight dark hair clung to dark skin. Deep, black eyes glittered beneath slanted brows. A trim beard graced a long, strong jaw. He parted his lips and smiled. A startlingly white smile against bronze skin. "I shall remember you well after you are dead."

"In your fucking dreams." Schneider snarled, then whirled at a shifting of rock from behind him. Through the swirling sand, dark figures appeared at the edge of the crater. Not all of them, perhaps only ten or fifteen of the March. But it was enough. He felt them lend their power. Felt Ramlah gather it up and thought desperately that he didn't have the endurance left to counter this.

There was a echoing crack of explosion from the south, a slight trembling of the earth as some battle proceeded on another front. Which meant Kall-Su was still in play and that if Ramlah took Schneider down, he'd be the only other target left. And the hell if Schneider was willing to let the bastard have the both of them. He wasn't crazy with the possibility of his own defeat, but damned if he would back down while he still had the capacity to fight.

He shot skyward, beviwed by fierce winds. At the very least Ramlah's storm lent him some of its power. Perhaps he could harness more of it. Sand storms were not his foray, but for the sand to rage, there were winds to carry it along. He could utilize those winds and the ferocious weather system that had been created to bring them to life.

"Malice!" he bellowed her name into the storm and again, willing the djinni to him. He wondered if she could fly. Wondered if he were not calling in vain, then the eruption from below caught him.

He put up every shield he had and still it battered him. The sky went dark, the sun blotted out. Or was that his vision? Even with the shield, it shattered him. He heard the cracking of his own bones as that malignant force washed over him, felt the bursting of blood vessels, the rupturing of flesh. He screamed. He couldn't help it. Lost all control over the currents of air that held him aloft and plummeted like a wounded bird to the ground. He was trying to heal himself even as he did, but the power bled out of him, even as the sand soaked up his blood and clung to the wetness on his face and hands.

He cursed fluently, anger lending him strength. He called the djinni's name again.

And she was there, terrified, scrambling in the sand to cling to him. It hurt, her hands on his broken body. He shrugged her off violently.

"Find Kall. Get the hell out of here."

"Yes. Yes." She agreed frantically, reaching out for him again.

"Not me, you stupid bitch." He hissed. He was pulling himself together even as he spoke. Each breath mending a bone. Sealing an artery. "Don't give him the chance to say no. Now *GO!*" He slashed a hand at her, backing it with a precious backwash of hurtful magic. She squealed and dissipated.

And in the wake of her disappearance, shadows moved out of the storm. A good many shadows. Some on horse back, others afoot. Ramlah moved at the fore front. He had his helmet in his hand, but he might as well have been wearing it, for all the expression his dark face held.

Schneider rolled to get leverage and something hard poked against his hip. The bottle strapped to his belt. He shifted in annoyance, pushing himself laboriously to his knees. Hair as well as sand clung to his face, getting in his eyes. He spat a strand out of his mouth, but made no other move to brush the tangle of it away.

"So," he said to the lot of them. "Shall we try this again?"

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They were deserting him, save for a few, which should have been a blessing, but that he knew where they were going and what they would lend their strength to do. And he hadn't a chance of stopping them. It was all he could do to survive and even at that he was slowly failing. There were too many. Any one of them was his equal in this place, where their power was aligned with the very sands and his was avidly unaligned. There wasn't even a vein of water under the sands to draw upon. And he hadn't been able to lure an ice elemental here since he'd first stepped foot into the desert.

He thought he'd killed one of them. It had taken the most powerful blast he had in him, and even that had seemed inadequate here, where it was hard to tell how much destructive power was actually being unleashed with nothing but sand to feel the impact and the storm fogging the issue. But he'd seen smoldering lumps of man and horse littering the sand and assumed that the creatures couldn't come back after something like that. He hoped.

He'd taken a slice across the back observing his handiwork though. A sword that got through shields and cut through cloth to score a hit. It burned. It bled down his back. He'd whirled, striking out with the sword he'd stolen from his victim, and clashed blades with his dark attacker. The helm made the man look larger than he was. But he was still a better swordsman than Kall, who much preferred magic to melee. If he'd had the Ice Falcion things would have been different. That unearthly blade was a power unto itself.

He staggered back, loosing his footing and went down. His shield saved him from the first blow. The sudden, darkening of the sky saved him from the second. The world went black. A great crashing wave of power surged in the near distance. Kall cringed from the backlash of it. Curled and brought his hands to his ears as if that could shut out the deafening mental wash of energy. The helmed attacker staggered, going to his knees in similar shock.

It faded slowly, and the light came back, fighting its way past the storm. Kall got up, swaying slightly, veering around his recovering enemy, more intent on the direction of that awesome strike. He knew who the target had been. He'd felt the resonation's of Schneider's and Ramlah's battle all along. But this had been something different. Something more. Not an easily recoverable thing, he thought, panicked. He was having a hard time sensing the power that was Schneider. He didn't think, if he waded into the heart of that maelstrom that he could get him out again. He had no magic at his disposal this time to distract the Black March.

There was something else building. He felt the stirrings in the eather.

The djinni appeared before him, wild eyed and frantic.

"Out of my way." He brushed past her, desperate himself suddenly as that building power released and the world shook again.

"No." He cried out, because he felt Schneider's magic trying to repel it, indomitable and stubborn, and then it was just washed away and there was nothing of his scent left.

The djinni clutched at his arm. He went to shake her off, and quite suddenly the sand disappeared from under his feet and solid reality went hazy and indistinct. Her damned djinni magic, taking them elsewhere. Taking him from the place where Schneider was struggling. He cast about savagely, blindly trying to free himself of her influence and quite abruptly found himself sprawled in the sand, entangled with Malice.

"Get off." He shoved her away and she rolled a few feet down the slope, only to glare back up at him indignantly. There was no storm here. No sand filling the air. That massive dark front broiled in the distance. Miles away perhaps. She'd taken them that far, before depositing them in the desert.

"What have you done?" he screamed at her.

"Only what my master asked." She hissed back.

"What he -?" He tore his eyes away from the distant darkness to stare at her. "Why didn't you bring him?"

She flung a hand at him angrily. "Because he did not wish to come. More the fool, him."

Kall took a breath. Then another, gathering calm. Gathering what power was left him.

"I'm going back."

"More the fool, you too, then." Malice hissed.

But she followed.

It was worse this time than it had been the last. Dying, that was. It hurt like hell, but that wasn't the most grating part of it. The worst part was that it was done by an enemy he hardly knew, that he didn't understand in the least, that was loose by a mournfully bad decision of his, and who laughed in his face while he did it.

The laughter was the worst. The laughter made him flare up when his body and the power at his command was spent beyond reason, and retaliate with one more destructive spell. It didn't phase Ramlah, but it took out several of the black armored wizards behind him. Just tore them to pieces in the backwash of what Ramlah himself deflected. That pissed Ramlah off. That stopped the triumphant laughter and sent the dark skinned demon into a rage.

That's when Schneider began to loose his grip on physical reality. Unfair really, that he was so badly outnumbered. Unfair that the majority of his crucial defeats were the hands of coalitions instead of individuals. If he'd had the breath, he would have flung that in Ramlah's face. That he hadn't been able to do this without the support of his followers. But he didn't have the breath. That was slipping away with the rest of it.

He did not wish to die again. He truly did not wish to tempt the powers that be one more time and perhaps end up in a situation where he was not in an advantageous position. There were only so many times that a body could avoid fate and he'd had his share of evasions. So this time, as the powerful spells of his foe ate at him and destroyed his defenses, he flung about desperately for a method out of this madness. He should have used the djinni when he'd had the chance. Stupid not to. But at the time his ire had been up.

There was a great ripping separation of flesh and bone. His left arm ceased to be. He screamed and curled up, a tight knot of pain in the center of the storm. Something came at him out of the sand storm, a body and a blade that ripped past his defenses and sliced into skin and organs. The maelstrom swallowed the attacker. He hadn't even seen who it was.

He was dying and he sought escape, not caring at the moment where he found it. Something beckoned. Something odd and distant and infinitely unfamiliar. There was the faint outline of a doorway, that he perceived on the level where he recognized magic and magical things. He was not certain he trusted that unknown, but he was left little choice.

So he fled towards it. And it opened and accepted him. There was a change going in. Something happened to his being. To his substance. Physicality became an abstract concept. It was there was but not.

He was afraid for a moment it was death after all. That he'd crossed to the other side in a manner he'd not encountered before. But after a moment's consideration he thought not. His soul had not separated from his body. His body was here, only he didn't quite know where here was. There was no sand. No desert. No sensation save the distant throbbing pain of his hurts. He'd brought those with him, but nothing else.

He was in limbo. But it was limbo with restrictions. Faintly he became aware of walls. Of opaque walls. Mental or physical, he couldn't be sure. He looked for the doorway out and found nothing. The walls were seamless. Another panic hit him. Of being trapped and

helpless. He surged against the walls, but was either too weak to make an impact or the walls were impervious.

He sagged into the eather, exhausted, injured and not having at the moment to strength to repair himself. He stared up at the strange walls of this prison he had plunged himself into and thought perhaps there was sand beyond them. But it was fast obscuring his view. There was nothing more to see. No essence of his enemy to concern him. So he shut his eyes and drifted.

The bottle rolled down a shifting slope of sand, unnoticed by the men that dwelled within the storm. The hoof of a great black horse kicked it aside, its rider more interesting in tracking down prey that had disappeared without a trace. The storm swept sand across the ornate surface of the bottle, burying it beneath layers of grit. Soon, it was completely gone, another victim of the storm that had reburied the square structure of the mastaba in the distance.

Chapter Eighteen

Kall-Su lost balance for a moment as loose sand shifted under his boots. It took him longer than it should have to regain it. He went down on a hand and a hip on the slope of the dune, vision swimming and senses threatening to depart. As if they were doing him tremendous good as it were. As if the sun and the heat were not sucking up what vitality he had left to him after the chaotic battle with the Black March. He might have attempted to fly, but the air spirits were untrustworthy with his control so ragged, with the turmoil of the storms the March brought with them so close by. So he walked and drew power he didn't have to buffer himself when the desert and the fight threatened to overwhelm him.

If the djinni was behind him, he paid her no heed. He paid no heed to anything save the shields that protected his presence from the ominous ones in the distance and the desperate search for some sign of Schneider. The latter eluded him. There was nothing. No scent, no essence of power, no spark of the tremendous life-force that was Dark Schneider. Death did that. He'd experienced the cessation of all that was Schneider before. Twice before. He ought to know the feeling of it by now. He ought to be able to accept - but he still had to see for himself.

In the distance he saw the blocky shape of the mastaba. He slid down involuntarily to sit in the sand, bereft of a sudden of any reasonable notion of what he might do next. It occurred to him that his life was not a thing he could throw carelessly away. His life was the only thing standing between Lily and a life of slavery in this miserable land. Without him, she was lost. So he could not - even in an act of vengeance - cast his existence aside.

He ground his palms into his eyes, cursing Schneider for abandoning him. Cursing Schneider for stupidly rushing into a thing that common sense said was too much for the both of them. He shocked himself to no ends when moisture leaked from beneath his lashes. He hadn't thought he had enough of it left in him to expel.

He'd come this close looking for a trace and found nothing. He put everything he had into a last desperate search for a familiar presence and failed. He drew a trembling breath. Forced calm upon himself, forced a wall up between needless emotion and cold rationality. To stay here was death. He could not afford it, so he turned to seek out the djinni. The sand shifted behind him and bulged upwards, a huge black form erupted upwards, spraying sand outwards as it did. Kall scrambled backwards and into the shifting disturbance of yet another large

figure emerging from the desert. Great black horses with ominous helmed figures on their backs.

Earth magic, he thought, to conceal them so, to allow them to travel so. Earth magic, yet not. Just as they were wizards, yet not.

They had sensed his presence despite his shields. Or perhaps the desert itself had betrayed him to them. Regardless, he was lost. He hadn't the strength to fight them alone and the djinni had disappeared.

He found himself the center of a cluster of them. Six, perhaps eight of the silent, helmed wizard warriors. He did not know if they were capable of speech. He had heard no word uttered by any of them save Ramlah, not even to cast spells. If he spoke, would they even understand him?

Islim. They could speak. The word was an archaic form of the language he had absorbed. It took him a moment to figure it out. Submit? They wanted surrender from him, which was rather surprising since they'd killed everything else in their path so far. It was a better choice at the moment, than attempting to fight them, and without the djinni escape was an impossibility. Slowly, he inclined his head.

Before he'd even lifted his eyes to see what further requirements they had of him, something hit him in the small of the back. No spell, but a physical blow that knocked him forward and onto his knees. He growled and spun, on his back in the sand, ready to throw up a shield if it was their intention to kill him after invoking an agreement of capitulation.

Taoud Al-sih'r. Sa'tamout. There was a sword in his face, held by a large, helmed warrior. It took him a second to figure out the gruff command. Use magic. Die. They were not particularly glib, these followers of the Black March. But they very much held the upper hand in this place that sucked power from him like a sponge. He glared up at his accoster, but nodded again regardless. They hauled him up then, with grips that went beyond mere human strength and dragged him along in the midst of the great, demon eyed horses towards the mastaba.

He was frankly afraid to go in. He was afraid he might see the desiccated remains of Schneider that they'd dragged there like beasts dragging prey to their cave. But there was nothing dead there that had not been dead a thousand years or more. There was nothing there but the silent, patient bulk of the March and at the desecrated tomb of the priestess whom this mastaba had been built for, the master of the March himself. He was without his helm and blunt cut, dark hair hung past his shoulders. He held in his and a pile of ash, that he slowly let fall into the gaping mouth of the stone sarcophagus.

The March shifted a bit, when Kall-Su entered in the midst of their fellows. He felt pale and out of place among the overwhelming cadence of black. Black cloaks, black armor, black eyes beneath the helms. They were quintessentially creatures of the desert, creatures of the dry wasteland, and he so far from that, that it was laughable that he was even here at all.

Ramlah turned, and black, fathomless eyes fixed on Kall-Su. He moved forward, silent and predatory, even in the bulk of his armor. He waved a hand and the warriors holding onto Kall's arms backed away. He did not flinch from the stare. He had to tilt his head back to meet

it, Ramlah was as tall as Schneider at least. Broader perhaps, but that might have been the armor. Most certainly considerably more imposing than Kall-Su himself. He did not turn his head when the man - he supposed even if he were some sort of demon, the term applied - circled him. He merely stared straight ahead, waiting to see what move might be made or what might be expected of himself.

From behind him, Ramlah leaned close and asked softly.

"What are you called, *sahir saghir*?"

Little wizard. He ground his teeth and lifted his chin and very calmly spoke his name.

"Kall-Su? A foreign name for a foreign devil, humm?" Ramlah's hand snaked around his neck, jerking his head back against the hard metal of his shoulder guard. "A foreign devil who killed men of mine. I did not know there were such sorcerers in the world, that could kill one of us."

"It is not the same world." Kall hissed.

"No. Apparently not."

He was released. He spun and took a step backwards then, thinking that this place would probably be his tomb as well.

"I had no wish to fight you." He sought after reason. It was his last resort.

"Then you should have run away."

He opened his mouth, shut it abruptly in frustration and pain. With Schneider there was no such thing as running away. No such thing as retreat if he had the will to avoid it.

"Ah, but it was your master's choice, not yours, was it not?"

He blinked at the voicing of his thoughts. He did not bother to deny the association. It was true enough, or had been at one time or another, he supposed.

"He died well." Ramlah stated. There were motions of assent from the shadowy figures of the March. Men who respected powerful adversaries then. "How well will you die?"

"I suppose," he said carefully, a sinking desperation setting in, an overwhelming fear for the life of his beloved that he would not be able to save. "That will depend on you. I seem to be at a disadvantage."

Ramlah stared at him. Ramlah laughed, teeth starkly white against the black of his beard. "So you are, *sahir saghir*. So you are. How do you wish to die, then?"

"I do not wish it at all. I have obligations I would very much like to fulfill."

"What obligations, that would take precedent over a glorious death?"

He would not utter Lily's name, or breath of her existence to these creatures. He spoke his first lie to them and hoped they might honor it, hoped that Schneider's death might give him some benefit after all.

"You say my - master - died well, then allow me the grace to tell his clan of his honorable defeat at your hands." He thought clans and honor meant a great deal to these men. They seemed actually to consider it. Ramlah tilted his head in contemplation and Kall held his breath, some scrap of hope leeching back.

"He lies." And then it was dashed. The djinni appeared in the midst of them, all curves and soft flesh among the armor and weaponry. The Black March shifted, and power pulsed in the air at the shock of her arrival.

Kall glared at her, feeling sick, baffled as to why she felt the need to appear here and reveal the mistruth. It was hardly even a lie, he would have to tell Yoko and everyone else that cared about Schneider, he merely had more important things to do before that.

Djinni. The word was whispered around the tomb. Malice swayed towards Ramlah, her lips curved in a sensuous smile.

"He seeks a woman, oh master of the Black March. He lies if he says otherwise."

"What business of yours, creature of air and magic?" Ramlah caught her wrist and dragged her towards him. She willingly went, pressing herself up against his armor.

"His master was mine as well. If you've killed him, then I've no purpose. Will you give me one?"

"You betray the confidence of your allies so easily? Fickle female. All of you are. You think I would trust one of your ilk, after spending an eternity trapped in limbo because of one?"

Power heated the already stiflingly hot interior of the mastaba. Malice squirmed, trying to pull away, her eyes gone very wide.

"No." She whispered, then with greater vehemence. "No! Let me go, evil creature."

Almost she managed to fade, but the magic of Ramlah snared her and kept her solid and the flesh about her wrist where he held her, and her torso where it touched his armor began to crack and wither. Like so much dried, crumbling earth, she began to fall apart. Her screams died as the slender column of her throat buckled and crumbled to sand. In the end there was nothing left of her but a pile of it at Ramlah's boots.

He stepped over it absently and strode towards Kall-Su, who was staring at the remains of the djinni in something akin to shock, remembering all too clearly his failed attempt at destroying her himself. A gauntleted hand caught him across the side of the face, flung him backwards against the open coffin.

"You gave me a lie?"

He struggled to gain his feet. Not to show weakness that these creatures would pounce upon.

"Yes." He said.

Ramlah caught his wrist, yanked him forward and held him there with a hand tangled in his hair. He stared down with eyes hard as stone and said softly.

"Are you afraid to die?"

"Yes."

"Because of this woman?"

"Yes."

The eyes continued to bore down at him. The hand in his hair tilted his head to the side.

"*Jalaab*. If you lie to me again, you shall prey you meet the djinni's fate." Ramlah said and let him go. Kall took an unsteady step backwards and caught hold of the lip of the funerary box to hold himself balanced. "You made the ice. I've never seen so much of it. Do it again."

Kall blinked at him, off his guard and confused now. *Jalaab*. Ramlah had called him captivating. Ramlah indicated that death might not be forthcoming. Ramlah wanted to see him perform an ice magic. The master of the Black March stood with his arms crossed, waiting. Kall took a breath, thinking that if he could prolong his life by entertaining the creature, there might be hope yet.

He hadn't the strength for anything large. Hadn't the fuel in this desolate place. So perhaps something subtle and intricate. He whispered the words of an incantation, and molded the influx of power to his own needs. He drew the water from what he could. From anything that wasn't a living body, he demanded the gathering of moisture. The stone had none to give and the sand was devoid of it, but the air - the storm the March had brought with them, and the weather patterns that Schneider had altered in his battle with them possessed the trace of moisture. He drew it down and channeled it into his crafting.

He knew what these people found sacred. He had read enough scripting on the walls to understand the omens they lived by. They formed on the floor. Dozens of small, oblong shapes. Scarabs that began to writhe and scuttle along the floor, peddling as fast as their small legs could take them outwards from Kall-Su. There was an appreciative gasp from the dark figures of the march as the ice beetles crawled up onto boots. They pooled at Ramlah's feet, scurried up his body. He picked one up off his shoulder and held it in the palm of his gauntleted hand at eye level. The ice scarab made crackling, clicking sounds even as the heat slowly melted it into a pool in his hand. The others were meeting a similar fate, absorbed into the sand and the dust which lay in thick layers over the stone floor.

Ramlah looked at him, water slowly dripping from his hand. The corners of his mouth beneath the beard and mustache twitched.

"Pretty. You make pretty things. But not like the daggers of ice that came out of the sands before."

"This place lends me no fuel for such magics." Kall said carefully. "There is no water running beneath the surface of the desert that I might use to create such a thing."

"And such water is plentiful in the lands you call home?"

"Yes." He said it without hesitation and regretted it a moment later, when Ramlah tilted his head curiously in contemplation.

"The mother Nile lent bounty to the lands surrounding her. Is she still vibrant, in this distant era?"

"I know not."

"Perhaps we shall see, hummm? Perhaps we shall see if our old enemies still pollute the lands."

"Who were your enemies?"

Ramlah smiled then, a full showing of white teeth. The members of his company hissed among themselves. He didn't know if it was at the mention of their ancient foes or his impertinence at asking.

"The Assyrians who spilled like plague into the middle lands, who we drove back like curs in the end - I might have taken all of Assyria and Babylonia save for the witch who betrayed me."

"You - you were a king?"

"I was a king. Then I died and slept for many years in the palace of the gods until she and her ilk called me back to fight their wars. I brought the Black Company with me and now - as then, we are immortal."

Things he had read on the walls of the palace turned brothel began to make sense. A desperate land besieged by a greater power - forever fighting off a relentless enemy. The spirit of a warrior king had been called back from the dead to animate a body created by magic and witchcraft. His company had been created the same way, of heroes and warriors that had died with this ancient Pharaoh. And they had driven off the Assyrians in a final great battle and being creatures summoned for no other reason than war, they had turned their sights upon other things. Those that had summoned them quite suddenly had no use for them. Quite suddenly feared their creation and sought to banish them back to whence they came. Only it was not so easy and trickery and betrayal had come into play. Three thousand years ago they had been merely powerful, merely warrior wizards capable of spearheading an army that drove an aggressive enemy from the lands of Egypt. They were something quite more than that now. They had done more than sleep in hibernation during their imprisonment. They had grown.

"What will you do now?" They had done nothing so far but destroy and seek vengeance on the sorceress who had betrayed Ramlah.

"That remains to be seen. A new world brings new possibilities, does it not, *sahir saghir*?" Ramlah smiled again and moved forward. He was quick and silent even in all the armor.

Kall-Su did not back away. He wanted to. He didn't like the smile or the predatory look in Ramlah's eyes. But to retreat would most certainly be a mistake.

"My army is dust and bones. Every king needs an army, no?"

Ramlah's breath was stale, a thing out of the grave. The eyes were so black they were almost like looking into the eyes of a serpent. Dead eyes. Merciless despite the smile. Power brewed behind them, waiting for the chance to strike out. It emanated from him like an exotic scent. And he wasn't even trying to summon it. Sometimes Schneider exuded the same thing, that essence of power that went beyond the reasonable bounds of magic. But he didn't do it if he was just standing about. He wouldn't do it at all anymore. A little of the pain seeped past Kall's barriers. A little crippling flash of grief that made a lump form in his throat and made him for just an instant turn his eyes away in fear that Ramlah would see the hurt. He forced it back. No time for grief, no room for it here in this position he found himself in.

Ramlah's fingers gripped his chin so fast he didn't even see the move. He started in reflex and the grip tightened, gauntleted fingers pressing into the flesh behind his jaw. It hurt.

"Will you pledge to me, *sahir saghir*?"

Pledge? He would have laughed in surprise, if he'd had the breath to do it, if he hadn't thought it would have gotten him killed.

"Why?" He had to ask. It was too baffling not to.

"You've taken from me members of my company. As I said, a king needs his army. You've a power that is foreign to me. Intriguing. I would add it to my own."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you will die." The smile came back, and Ramlah bent his head close, wrinkling his nose as if taking in the scent of Kall's skin. "But perhaps I shall take my time about it, hummm?"

Not an encouraging prospect. "You would believe me, if I offered such a pledge?"

"When loyalty is given to me, little wizard, there is no breaking of covenant."

"I - I have fealties that I will not betray." He was grasping. Death loomed all about him and the choices were becoming more and more limited. "If I swear service to you, I will not betray them."

"Your master is dead. Bow to the hand that killed him or meet his fate."

There was a time he might not have done it. Lily or no Lily. There had been a time that pride and ego wouldn't have allowed it. That had been before the Prophet and the hard learned knowledge that pride was nothing but an illusion and ego was a thing that could be stripped

away at the right prompting. Not to bend was to break. He'd learned that from Lily. If he'd taken her advice when it had first been given, perhaps Angelo might not have damaged him the extent he had. Perhaps he might have had the power to get himself out of this instead of being forced into bending knee to a creature that had been dead three thousand years ago and for all he knew, still was dead.

"All right." He said, fighting to keep his face and voice calm. "I will pledge service to you."

There was a rustling of armor and cloaks as the March shifted. There was danger in the air and anticipation. He kept his eyes on Ramlah. Ramlah released him, black eyes studying him.

"You will serve me before all others."

"No." Ramlah demanded honesty, Kall-Su would honor him with it. "I've told you I have existing fealties -"

"No, you do not." Power slammed into him, it made his knees buckle and his vision go gray about the edges. Ramlah's hand - free of the heavy gauntlet swept towards him. Kall-Su reared back, and came up against the sarcophagus and the naked palm slammed into his forehead, smashing his head back against the stone. The impact was not what took the rest of his vision away, it was the power that invaded his soul. It was like a plague. Like a swarm of black locusts that ate away at integral parts of him and tried to forge new ties to the immense power that spawned it. In that instant he knew that even at full strength - even on his best day - he could not have taken Ramlah. He didn't think Schneider could have. What lurked behind those black eyes had ceased being mortal or living so long ago he could not fathom it. A personality had been brought back to serve a purpose, but only the shell of the personality not the soul of the ancient king that had died, but something from the depths of a hell long forgotten that had come in his place and taken on the remnants of his personality and his desires. Something that could infect a man's mind and his soul in order to make his body a tool of the master of the Black March.

The world dimmed. Kall felt himself detached, distantly aware of the heat and the pain and the dark figures that were only houses for entities that had no business on this plain of existence. Ramlah drew him up and there was no fighting it, nothing but compliance. Ramlah put his teeth to his own palm and ripped the skin. Blood flowed, thick and dark.

"Share my blood, and become one with my essence." It was not a request. It was a command. The palm covered his mouth and the blood seeped between his lips. It carried with it the essence of what inhabited Ramlah's shell. It carried a disease which sought to reinforce the infection the power that had already invaded him.

Ramlah spoke ritual words. He didn't know if a reply was expected of him. He couldn't at the moment utter the will to speak. He hit the floor and propped himself up on hands and knees, head hanging, the taste of the blood still in his mouth. A normal mortal man would have been lost. Would have been overcome and overwhelmed. Would have most certainly have become a creature of Ramlah's body and soul. Kall-Su was neither mortal nor completely human. The part of him that shared blood with his demon father fought the infection off, refusing to be tainted. He took a breath and another, shuddering. But he was his own master still. There were no unbreakable ties. He wondered if Ramlah could tell. God help him if he could.

Chapter Nineteen

For a time, Kall-Su lost track of himself. The essence of Ramlah that he had taken inside himself corrupted him. Though not to the extent that the master of the Black March might have hoped, it still had an effect not unlike extreme inebriation. He lost touch with time and place and self, having only the vague awareness of hands supporting him and of magic swirling about him like wind.

He shook it off overlooking a parched village in the desert. He hadn't a notion how he'd gotten there, on the dunes overlooking a bone dry collection of stone huts. There were camels clustered to one side, and a string of small, fine boned horses. A few robed figures shuffled about in the heat, but that was the extent of the activity.

The heat was abominable. He felt as if he were being suffocated by it. He hated the voluminous robes that were a necessity here. He hated the feel of sweat and grime on his skin.

There was an arm loosely about his waist. In his disorientation and his discomfort from heavy robes and heat, he'd hardly noticed. He was also on a horse - if one could call the demon spawned beasts which carried the March horses. He stiffened, reflexively searching for the strands of power that might feed his magics, then fought down the urge, remembering that they had taken him unto themselves. Hardly fitting for him to lash out at mere close contact.

It wasn't Ramlah who shared a mount with him. He was grateful of that. It was merely one of the faceless others. He wondered if they were all as human appearing as their dark lord under the helms. He hoped as much. He'd an abhorrence for familiarity with demons. He would conquer them, and use them to his ends, but he'd no fondness for fraternization. Hypocritical perhaps, considering his heritage and his profession - if one could call being a wizard a profession. He'd given up his right to be liege lord. He wasn't sure he wanted it back.

The horse under him shifted, goaded in action by some unseen and unfelt signal from the helmed rider. The March was a line across the ridge of the dune. They flowed forward like sand rolling down the slope. The horses seemed to meld and shift with the very granules. It was odd, that lack of proper horse gait.

God, he thought, they're going to destroy this village. He remembered what they had done to the town outside the ruins where they had been resurrected, what they had done to the palace brothel and very likely the surrounding city before the djinni had whisked them away.

But no destructive magic swept over the village. The March descended, but they did no more than that. Men came out from the thick stone huts, robed and suspicious, hands on curved swords and hostility in their eyes. A few others - softer, less dangerous looking huddled in the doorways, watching. The armed ones did not dwell here, Kall-Su thought. They belonged to the horses and the camels. Nomads perhaps, stopping in this small village for the precious gift of water.

It was clear they were baffled at the appearance of such armored riders. Of such fiercesome beasts. Hands twitched at the hilts of numerous swords.

Ramlah urged his mount forward. He'd put his helm back on and was a most impressive, frightening creature, perched in the saddle of his red eyed steed, gauntleted hands crossed on

the saddle bow. The air crackled with power around him. The nomads grew restive and exchanged uncertain looks. Fingers gripped swords. Afraid they might be, but these were not men that let fear rule them.

Ramlah spoke and when he did, the power seeped out. Kall-Su almost cringed with the excessive waste of it. Even mortal, mundane men might feel it and be impressed. The words were foreign, evidencing a trace of the tongue that Kall had absorbed, but unintelligible to him nonetheless. Ritual words perhaps. Whether the nomads understood or not was questionable. They shifted nervously, exchanging wary glances, murmuring among themselves.

"Sons of the desert," This time Ramlah spoke words that Kall-Su could understand. "To whom do you hold legion?"

"Legion?" A dark robed man stepped forward, weather beaten face, that looked older than the voice that issued forth from his mouth. The sun did that to a man. Sucked the vitality right out. "We hold legion to no one, great lord." There was wary respect. These men were no more fools than they were cowards. The aspect of the Black March was in no way subtle in its manifestation of power.

"No king, or pharaoh? No great war leader?"

The nomad shook his head. "There are no kings or pharaoh's here anymore. Not since Allah took his great vengeance and caused the Cleansing."

One might assume the Cleansing to be destruction wrought by Anasla some three hundred years past.

"Then it is a truly wondrous thing that the Black March has returned to bring greatness back to the lands."

A great deal of shifting and whispering then. A great deal of uneasy exchanged looks.

"*Al-Zahif Al-Asouad*?" The spokesman for the nomads said, his voice trembling with reverence.

Ramlah inclined his head. The March was a steady line of black coiled destruction behind him.

The nomads quite abruptly folded to their knees in the hard packed earth of the village, whispering honorariums. The people that dwelled in the village had long since scurried into hidy holes.

The March had no interest in the village. Ramlah's interest lay in the nomads. Ramlah's interest it seemed, was in the gaining of followers and these hardened son's of the desert appeared to appeal to him. They had a temporary camp set up some twenty miles from the little village. A handful of tents staked out under the merciless sun. A few children tended the animals. Veiled and robed women looked after the camp. An entire nomadic tribe. Twenty men, warriors all from the harsh look in their black eyes. Perhaps half that many women and half again that many children. Not a large tribe by any means. But it seemed a beginning.

Their leader made a quiet ceremony of offering Ramlah the hospitality of his tent. The largest of the five tents. Despite the diminutive number of this tribe, Ramlah afforded the offering respect. He inclined his head and invited the chief into his own tent to parlay. The woman looked on silently, while the men settled about the communal center of camp, drinking from skeins, solemnly offering wine to the ominous members of the March. Kall-Su was surprised when some of them accepted. He had begun to believe they had no human weaknesses. The young boys were eager to see after the great black horses and the March let them.

Kall had no real notion what to do with himself, in the midst of these people, in the company of the March. The lot of them cast him curious, speculative glances, clearly as uncertain of him, as he was of them. So he lingered at the fringe, half listening to the talk, immersed in his own quandary. He wondered if he dare ask any of the nomads if they knew the location of the city the old sheik had promised Lily had last been. He sat with his back against the canvas wall of a tent and wondered if she were still even alive. She was, he thought, she was not weak. She had survived a lifetime of slavery, the ordeal of being in the prophet's care and so much more. She would not shatter, but she could be hurt and he had nightmares about the things that might be happening to her. Things that he doubted she would ever admit to him, because she did not think him capable of understanding and accepting. Perhaps she was right. When he had pressed her about her past life and she had reluctantly told him tales of some of her former masters - of abuse suffered - he had reacted - badly. Quite badly. He was still determined to extinguish the life of one particular master if ever he had the opportunity. She said it was bygones and that vengeance would accomplish nothing. He was of a different mind. They agreed to disagree. She politely avoided the details of her life as a slave and he avoided the promise of death and destruction upon the men that had inflicted it upon her within her hearing.

It was an amenable enough arrangement, though frustrating. Having been reared by Schneider, forgiveness for insults and wrongs was hardly high on his list of priorities.

The sun was setting. The strange cool that came over the desert began to slink over the land. There were foods prepared by the veiled women and even the members of the March cautiously tasted what had not passed their lips in many millennia. Some of them. Others remained silent and stoic, never removing their fiercesome helms. Upon closer inspection - a careful magical probe sent out to lightly brush the auras of Ramlah's dark followers - Kall discovered that some were very close to human, while others quite alarmingly far from it. The ones that stood at the outskirts of the fire, dark and silent, were the most alien. The most powerful. Or perhaps they merely made no efforts to curb the stench of the otherworld that still clung so strongly to them, while the others, the majority, really, were curious of this new world they found themselves in. Curious of the new followers their master had recruited. Under their helms they were as dark as the nomads, and as weather worn. They seemed normal men almost, until one sensed the underlying magic.

The nomads seemed in awe of them, and rightly so. They were as careful of him. The March might exude power, but they were of the same land, of the same features and coloring. He was foreign. Starkly, obviously foreign. They cast glances at him and whispered. The women giggled behind their hands. He ignored them. He blocked them out, blocked out thoughts of Lily and misery over Schneider and retreated to that calm place that he had found within himself where he could heal. Where he could assess what strengths he had available to and hoard away power. He did not delude himself into thinking he could overcome Ramlah, or the conglomeration that was the March, but he needed the comfort of being able to hold his own.

A young girl crept up to him, holding out a bowl of whatever aromatic food the nomad women had created. She might have been twelve, her face was small and brown and her eyes intensely curious, but holding the fearlessness of the very young. She went veiless, not yet considered a woman.

"You don't look like them." She cast her glance back at the dark figures lurking about the tribal fire, then back to him.

"No." He agreed. He had no appetite, the smell of the food made his stomach vaguely uneasy. He took the bowl from her small hands anyway, compelled by politeness. She produced a small skein that smelled of wine when she uncapped it. That he could tolerate. It was watered down, but sweet and thirst-quenching.

"Why do you stare?" He finally asked, uneasy under her avid gaze.

"I've never seen anyone like you before."

"And you've seen the likes of them?" he indicated the March.

She shrugged. "Sahir's. Very old ones. But they look like we do. You are pale and soft."

"Soft?" he lifted a brow in surprise, never having thought of himself as such.

The girl touched her own skin. Even so young, the sun had toughened her. No wrinkles yet, but she had lived under this harsh sun day after day for all of her young life.

He looked away from her, not willing to discuss the state of their differences. Not a willing participant for company of any sort. The girl went away. The sun dipped below the edge of the horizon and the nomads eventually sought their beds. The March did not. They remained mostly silent among themselves, awake and aware. He wondered if they slept at all.

* * * * *

He came awake with a start. Disorientation assaulted him. A sense of unreality and un-self. His body felt - odd. There was a certain lingering sense of pain. A certain vague sense of memory that made his brow wrinkle in perplexity. He wondered if he were dead and thought that if he were it was not a sort of death he was familiar with. He was an old hand at it by now - passing over into the other side - and this did not feel like it had before. This felt - strangely euphoric.

He felt his lips curve upwards in a smile. He felt the urge to laugh and fought it, lying there - he was certain he was lying prone upon something - in a state of not quite feeling, not quite *not* feeling. It took an effort to open his eyes. He blinked, dazed, surrounded by a kaleidoscope of brilliant color. Like a thousand little chips of stained glass that made up the ceiling to his world, all reflecting a different hue of light down upon him. It was beautiful. It surrounded him. After a while he began to feel trapped by it. He forced his body to move and gasped in pain when he turned to his side. The pain was reality. The pain brought him back to himself. It felt as if his body had been ripped apart and haphazardly glued back together. It felt as if integral parts had been left out. He spent a moment trying to organize his thoughts

and his magics, healing himself cognizantly, while before his body had done it out of animal instinct. The magic felt odd when it came. The healing left him strangely lightheaded.

He pushed himself into a sitting position, hands sinking into the plush cushions he had been lying upon. It took a moment for the unreality to sink in. There were walls that were not walls surrounding him. The softness that supported him was insubstantial. It was a mimicry of a room, but in truth it was more than that. It was a prison. He discovered that as he thrust out a mental probe and had it absorbed. Completely, utterly swallowed. There was nothing of the reality he had known in this place.

He cursed and surged up, slamming body and magic against the multi-hued barrier. He might as well have been an gnat beating against the solid immensity of a cliff face.

He cursed again, more fluently and finally called out for succor.

Kall. Kall, can you hear me? He screamed it in voice and mind and had no answer No slightest sense of awareness. It did not so much rebuff him as ignore him. Infuriating. For a while after he had exhausted himself he simmered in a fit of rage.

After that he began to worry. He was not dead. He was increasingly certain of that fact. And if he were not, then he had a nasty suspicion of where he might be. He beat against the walls of his prison to no avail and collapsed exhausted back into the soft embrace of the pillows. Were there more of them now? And were they more of a color and pattern to his liking than they had been before? Was there the slightest hint of jasmine in the air? A favorite scent of his, the scent that Yoko poured in her bathwater. It was as if the prison subtly changed to suit him. Interesting.

But , it didn't matter. If he was trapped here, then his enemy was still without. And Kall-Su was without, which was not a pleasant thought.

He rallied and sent his magics against the walls of the prison again, and failed. He remembered the amazing things the djinni had been capable of doing and for millennia she had been trapped in a bottle, unable to free herself of confinement. The djinni herself dwindled in amazement when one considered the power of the bottle that had held her. That now held him.

There was a scream in the nomad camp. It came with the dawn, as the sun started its laborious journey across the harsh desert yet one more time. Kall-Su had wondered if these creatures of the Black March were wholly human - if they had human needs such as sleep and food - he found out that morning that they most certainly retained human desires.

He jerked out of the light doze he'd allowed himself, and blinked disorientation and slumber out of his eyes. The scream repeated, more of a frightened whimper this time. The starkness of it against the silence of the camp was eerie. He rose, tense and wary, gaze drawn this way and that to the mostly reclined figures of the Black March. Some of them had stretched out upon the sand. Others still sat in quiet groups about the burned out fire. A few of the natives also had made their beds outside. None of them seemed to care about the cries. Even the

nomads only shifted, afraid perhaps to risk the displeasure of their esteemed guests by running to see what was about. Or perhaps they knew.

Kall stepped cautiously into the camp, ignoring the sedate one's - looking for the cause of the disturbance. There, movement by the line that held the horses. It was the young girl that had spoken to him the night before. She was in the process of taking two desperate steps in flight when a great dark hand reached out and caught her by the black braid trailing down her back. One of the March. Helmless, dark eyes showing the first sign of life Kall had seen out of any of them save Ramlah himself. There were gold rings through his nose, and more lining his ears. There were a series of tribal scarring down one side of the man's dark face. There was very clear lust on his face.

The girl was terrified. She squealed and twisted in his grip, young enough to be slippery for even a grown man to hold. So he stopped trying. He yanked her back and lashed out at her with the back of one gauntleted hand. She stopped crying. She thumped to her knees in the hard packed, dry earth and sat there, dazed.

She was twelve. And she had been friendly to him, which was more than he could say of anyone else he'd met in this wretched land. He was of a mind to prevent a rape if he could, having so recently entertained the miserable thoughts of the same thing happening to Lily.

"Stop." He stalked forward, and the warrior wizard paused in hauling the girl off towards whatever private place he planned to use her in. If he planned a private place at all.

Those dark eyes fixed on Kall-Su. The dark head tilted just a bit in interest.

"You will not have this child." He subtly gathered power as he said it, expecting his declaration not to be accepted passively.

"No child, this." The man said, giving the listing girl a shake. "Will you take her place, *Sahir bil-Jaleed*?"

Kall drew his lips back in a snarl. The Warrior wizard threw the girl at him, and on her heels the ripping destruction of a spell. It cut up the ground under her feet, trailed her all the way into Kall's arms where it halted, rebuffed by his hastily erected shield. It was the wrong spell to send at him. It wasn't elemental, just destructive energy that without a strictly governing hand could be redirected by a subtler caster. He was more adroit than the man who had created it. He took the reins effortlessly and sent the thing crashing back to its sender. The wizard hadn't been expecting that. Wasn't prepared to repel it. It hit him and sent him crashing backwards and into the flimsy obstacle of a canvas tent wall. Man and tent went down in a huff of dust and cries of surprise.

It had been the women's tent and their screams. The struggling figures could be discerned from beneath the collapsed canvas. The girl cowered behind Kall, clutching at his robes, pressing her face into his arm.

The dark warrior sprang up, shaking off the effects of the blast, face now impassioned by anger rather than lust. He was not alone. Where his comrades had ignored his assault upon the girl, they did not ignore Kall's retaliation. They gathered, some helmed still, others not, like a silent pack of hunting wolves.

The one, he might have dealt with. The lot of them were beyond his capabilities. He pushed the girl away from him. Her fingers clung to his sleeve.

"You do not want to be here now, little one." He said softly. She shuddered, but she was wise enough to back away. The March had no interest in her. Their attention was fixed upon the outsider in their midst. Ramlah had gathered him in, like he had gathered these nomads. A tool to use in the construction of whatever powerbase he sought. But he was little more than that at the moment, little more than the first in the Lord of the Black March's collection of followers. He was not of the March and the March had no hesitation in preying upon him. As they had no hesitation in preying upon the innocents of this tribe that Ramlah had gathered in.

He took one careful step back, assessing his options. The notion of flight irked him - a ridiculous prideful habit that he supposed had rubbed off from too many years association with Schneider. The desert would have taken him anyway, even had he attempted it. He was too well aware of his disadvantages in this place. He had no talent for surviving in such an environment. Drying up in the desert, he thought, would be a particularly unpleasant method of demise.

The air was static with power. Theirs, his own. Theirs mostly. He thought perhaps his wisest choice of action might be to throw all his strength into defense. The majority of his offensive arsenal was elemental and there was damned little chance of drawing any of the ones aligned with his ice based magic to this place. And damned little water under the dry earth to use his non elemental ice magics. Which left a handful of destructive magics that were both taxing on himself and more than likely too easily recoverable to these ancient wizards.

"What is this?" The aura of gathering power was swept aside, dwindling in the presence of a greater force. Ramlah strode towards the assemblage, loose black robes adorning a body devoid of the heavy armor. It hardly made him seem less intimidating. More so with the realization that even without it he radiated a frightening amount of energy. The March stood down like obedient dogs at the sound of their master's voice. Kall did not so easily let go the power he'd gathered. He no more trusted Ramlah than he did his minions.

Ramlah's dark eyes took in the scene. Swept across the impassive faces of his March, then settled upon Kall-Su.

"Do you cause strife?" He asked. It was an ominously pleasant tone of voice.

Kall lifted his chin, holding back anger and tempering his voice with respect. At the edges of the camp, the nomads had gathered. The woman had extracted themselves from the tent and watched with even more interest than the men. He thought he saw the girl clutched to the bosom of one veiled, matronly female.

"You take these people under your protection and yet you will allow the rape of their children?" He waved a hand towards the girl. Ramlah's eyes followed his gesture. The master of the March tilted his head curiously.

"That is no child. Girls this age were married and bearing young in the days of old."

"Then shall we arrange a marriage? Rape is another matter altogether and honorless." Some of the respect left his tone, replaced by frustration. He was uneasy over that loss of cold rational.

There had been a time when he'd been the most passionless of negotiators. He'd had to be to smooth over Schneider's utter lack of tact.

Ramlah's lips pulled back in a humorless smile. His straight fine hair was loose about his face, falling to his broad shoulders. It was so dark that it almost blended with the material of his robes.

"Nur-ili," he did not quite look at the pierced wizard who had attacked the girl. "The Sahir bil-Jaleed has a valid point. These people have pledged to Me and should be afforded My protection. Take no congress where it is not welcome."

The wizard, Nur-ili, inclined his dark head. Ramlah swept a hand to disperse them, then fixed his level gaze upon Kall-Su.

"Come with me, *Sahir bil-Jaleed*." He said simply and turned, gliding over the sand with his long robes fluttering about him, towards the tent he had taken.

Reluctantly, Kall followed. There was little choice in the matter. He supposed there would be retaliation for his display. For his affrontage to the March. That he was still alive gave him the hope that death was not to be the choice of punishment. So he squared his shoulders and ducked under the flap of the tent.

It had been the leader of this tribe's domain. The man and his women and his children had moved out in favor of Ramlah. He'd seen them carrying their personal possessions into other tents the prior evening. There had been vows taken. Vows similar to the ones that had been forced on him. Not so much magic enveloped. These people were not wizards and there was little need to shackle them with bonds of blood magic. Bonds of blood were quite enough for these fiercely honor bound folk.

It was not a rich tent. But it had its comforts. A brazier and thick rugs to cover the ground, a divided area towards the back were pillows and thick blankets made up the sleeping area. Ramlah's armor sat neatly next to the his horse's tack.

The master of the March stopped in the center of his new abode and asked without turning about to face Kall-Su. "Do you seek to make me lose face?"

"No." He was on dangerous ground. He would have been with any powerful lord that had been forced to back down due to actions of his. If a subordinate of his had done the same to him, he would have reacted - badly.

"You show a certain lack for respect." Still Ramlah did not turn. "Perhaps it is the way with your people." He turned then, the look in his dark gaze assessing, considering. "I'll grant you the grace of allowing it this one time. Again and I will show no mercy."

There was something in his gaze that made Kall flinch, that made him wish to put distance between Ramlah and himself. The man spoke of mercy, yet there was very little of it in his eyes.

"I understand."

"Do you? I think your former master was remiss. I think he was as derelict in the rituals of respect as you. More so. I think you speak pretty words to suit you, those you think I want to hear, but that you do not understand at all. Let me show you."

"No -" he shook his head, fighting the reflexive urge to summon protective shields, knowing that if he did it would be taken as offense. Ramlah closed the distance between them. He did not quite lay a hand on him, but he raised it.

With no magic to protect him the attack shot into him with ease, like a knife sliding through the unresisting surface of a calm pool. The pain took his senses away. It ran the circuit of his nerves and scraped them raw. He was no stranger to suffering. He had endured more of it recently than he cared to recall, but a body never really got used to it.

He found himself on his knees, his mouth full of blood where he'd bitten his tongue, hands shaking so badly that he could hardly use them to support himself. Ramlah crouched over him, elbows on knees. One big hand reached out, caught the back of his hair and jerked his head back. It was an awkward position, on his knees and forced backwards, with nothing to support him but Ramlah's fist in his hair.

"You, little wizard, are bound to me as a vassal, do you understand?" Ramlah leaned so close that Kall could feel the whisper of his breath on his face. "If you attack what is mine, I will kill you. If you speak against me ever again, I will kill you. If you so much as hesitate when I command you, I will kill you. And it will not be an easy death. Do you understand this?"

He could not nod, the hand at his neck held him too securely.

"Yes." He mouthed the word, hating himself for the capitulation. Hating Schneider for putting him into this position with his stubbornness.

Ramlah shifted, forcing him further backwards. Kall had to put a hand out behind him to try and catch himself. Ramlah swung a leg across him to straddle his knees and the other hand came up to brush his face.

He shut his eyes for a moment in sheerest panic, at a loss as to how he might deal with this.

"You have the skin of a child." Ramlah said. "As soft as a newborn babe. Is it so everywhere?" the hand on his face stole down his throat, slid down the front of his robes seeking entrance.

"My lord - please -" he said hoarsely, dread making his heart thud in his chest and his breath come harsh. "There is no honor - in this."

Ramlah used his position and his weight to press Kall against the rough weave of the rug. His legs were bent painfully under their combined weights. The master of the March worked a hand within the front of his robes. The rough skin of his palms grazed over Kall's ribs. A callused thumb brushed his nipple.

The urge to release the surge of fear induced power that coiled within him was hard to fight back.

"Please -" he heard his voice break. "I've taken vows of allegiance to you, if you demand I honor them, then afford me no less protection than you would these nomads." His thoughts were becoming chaotic. Flashes of memory of another time, of other unwanted hands upon him assaulted his mind's eye.

Please god, please god, please god -

There is no god for you. God hates you -

Ramlah hesitated. Ramlah stared down at him, frowning. "Already you defy me." But there was little real threat in his voice. There was most certainly a great deal of interest.

"No, no. I will honor my vow. But you did not have me take it for - this." Oh, he hoped dearly that he was correct in that.

"You would not, to please your master, be my *faajir*?"

A whore. He shook his head carefully. "It is not my - nature. Anything else, you may have of me, I swear."

"You swear. I find your word to be highly - flexible." Ramlah laughed and rose off of him. Kall scrambled up hastily, stomach churning with relief. "All right. You may have your honor now. I'm in the mood for charity at the moment. Perhaps we shall bargain for it later when I'm of another mood, hmm?"

He fled from the tent, with Ramlah's laughter following him. He took himself to the edge of camp, feeling the urge to vomit. He needed escape from this place and these people. Vow or not, he would take the option if it offered itself. He was desperate for it, but at the moment, nothing stared back at him but the relentless expanse of desert.

Chapter Twenty

There was a crumbling landslide of sand. Grasping fingers made their way up out of the dry earth into only marginally less dry air. With the passage pierced, more sand cascaded down, falling into darkness below and uncovering the turban headed figure of a man. A small, wiry form that scrambled desperately out of the mostly buried remains of a long forgotten tomb and into the desolate afternoon of a barren landscape.

The little guide, Abu, stood on shaky legs, clutching the empty water skin to his side, shading his haunted eyes from the sun as he surveyed the land. Nothing. As far as the eye could see nothing but sand and pale desert sky and the shimmering waves of heat that only emphasized how desperate a place this was to be. He'd gotten here by magic means, and the magic that had carried him here was gone. Everything was gone. And he was alone and lost. The last of the water consumed a day ago as he'd worked to claw his way out of the reburied tomb.

He'd laid hidden in a crevice when the ominous figures of *Al-Zahif Al-Asouad* had come inside. When his own *Kajir Djinn* had wisely chosen to bend knee to the conquerors. What choice with the silver haired one gone? With the shapely Djinni reduced to dust before them all? He feared the Black March and he regretted ever having worked to bring them back to

this world. His former master the Moulay had been a fool. A dead fool, which was the worst type.

Now Abu himself was lost. The desert would suck him dry in short order for his folly. Three days digging his way out of the tomb. Already he was tired and weak. He doubted he'd last another under the merciless rays of the sun. But he was stubborn, was Abu the guide. So he began walking. Sometimes those that had faith were rewarded.

A half hour of trudging through the sand and he doubted if he could last the day. The sand sucked at his boots and made his legs leaden. He wiped sweat out of his eyes with the end of his turban, cursing his body for riding itself of even so small an amount of fluids. He lost his footing on the downside of a sloping dune and sand cascading down with him as he fell. Something else did. A bottle. Colored glass encrusted with precious metals. He recognized it as the one the Silver haired demon had stolen from the Moulay. It was stoppered. For a moment a wild hope sprang up in him. The djinni had retreated to her bottle. She could save him. If he freed her, he would be her master. It was the way of such things.

With shaking fingers he unstopped the cork. Nothing happened. In dismay he shook the bottle, then pressed his eye to the mouth. Nothing but dark, tinted glass within. With a sobbing curse, he tossed it aside, sitting there half buried in sand bemoaning his terrible luck. Then something happened. Light sprang forth from the discarded bottle. A strong breeze stirred the sand. A crackle of static made Abu's hair stand on end. The female djinni had exited her prison in a cloud of colorful smoke. This one burst forth like a strike of lightning.

Abu cried out and huddled away, shielding his eyes from the light. When he dared look up again, the silver haired demon stood spray legged in the sand, bloody and torn and very much worse for the wear. White hair tangled about his face and shoulders and from beneath it, dark blue eyes glittered with a dangerous passion. Magic radiated from him. Abu could feel it in his bones. Perhaps, he thought, his luck was not so bad after all. One djinn was as good as the next he supposed. Although Malice might have served him in other ways as well.

"Djinn?" Abu spoke up hesitantly and those blue eyes swung his way. Abu took heart. "I have freed you. Will - will you serve me now?" He supposed he ought not to have asked. When one was the master of a djinn, one ought to portray confidence, other wise a djinn might think it could get away with disobedience.

One black brow rose. The eyes widened just a fraction - - in surprise perhaps - - before narrowing. "Serve you as what?" The silver haired demon asked. "Roast desert rat?"

"Ummm - no. No." Perhaps the foreign djinn did not understand the ways of the world. Abu cleared his dry throat and explained it to him. "Don't you know, that when a man frees a djinn that the djinn must serve the man?"

"Really? And *you* want *me* to serve you?"

"Like - like the female - like Malice served you?" Abu was beginning to feel a bit of uncertainty. He rather wanted to crawl into the bottle himself. There was a particularly unsavory look on the Silver haired demon's face.

"Where the hell is she?"

"Gone. He killed her."

"Are you sure?" Interest now. The djinn bent over him, hair falling between them like a tangled silver veil.

"Y-yes. I saw it. I order you to take me out of here."

"I don't do orders." The djinn said matter of factly. "Where's Kall?"

"He's gone too."

The djinn froze for a breath, then reached out and snatched Abu up so fast the little man never saw it coming.

"Dead?"

"No! No, not dead. He went with them. They took him away."

"Where? Took him where?"

"I don't know. Put me down, I command you."

"I'm going to break every bone in your body if you don't stop trying to give me orders. What happened. Get it straight, because if I don't like what I hear, I may break you into little pieces anyway."

* * * * *

Schneider was not in a good mood. He kicked the bottle long and far, when a lightening strike wouldn't shatter it. The only thing the bottle had been good for was the fact that it had helped him heal himself in record time. With the beating he'd taken, it would have been more than the few days the guide claimed had passed before he was able to gain his power back. The little man huddled in fear on the side of the dune while he stalked about throwing a fit of sheerest frustration.

He had been defeated. The humiliation of that did not stand to be dwelled upon. He only spent long enough on it to convince himself that it had not been fair - that they'd ganged up on him and that next time he faced them he'd damn sure make certain not to take them on as a group. Gangbangs were most certainly not a favorite pastime of his. Not when he was the focal point of the effort.

And Damn it, they'd taken off to parts unknown with Kall-Su in tow, a fact that made his temple's throb and his blood boil. Not only did the bastards trounce him unfairly, they stole from him as well.

Finding them was the bitch. He didn't know this land and he couldn't pick up a sense of them unless they decided to perform some major magic. He might be able to discern Kall if he practiced a spell. If it were him, and he were trying to raise an army, which was what it sounded like Ramlah was trying to do to him, if forcing a vow out of Kall-Su was any indication, he'd head in the direction of the nearest populated spot.

"Which way is the closest city or large village?" He asked the little guide.

"That way, master. I think." The little man stammered, lifting an arm. Schneider had gotten the matter of just who was master and who was not straight.

"Okay. How far?"

"I don't know. I don't know exactly where we are."

"Thrilling." He kicked at the sand. He was thirsty. He was hot. He was dirty and tired. He didn't know if he could cover a vast amount of distance without remedying at least two out of the four complaints. The djinni had been damned useful to have around. The mere magic of creating food out of thin air was amazing. He could do clothes, but he couldn't eat clothes, and besides, he was not creating matter, he was merely converting existing matter into something more useful to him.

"You better be right." He muttered warningly to Abu, following the threat with the whispered words of a Raven spell. It would take more effort to cart the guide along with him, but he thought he might need the little man's local knowledge, so was hesitant to leave him here to rot.

* * * * *

The Black March rode east and gathered an army as they did. A week and they had drawn the sons of the desert that they passed, the wondering nomadic tribes that proudly owed allegiance to no city bound lord to them. To Ramlah, who exuded power and some dangerous personality that these harsh desert men found appealing. There were perhaps four hundred mortals in his wake now. And a handful of men that were slightly more than that. There was magic in the desert. There were shamans and magicians who practiced what arts they could. Some of them were wild eyed fanatics who traveled with the nomads, others Ramlah had found living at the fringes of the small towns they passed. He drew them to him and well. And those of magical bearing he made pledge the oath of blood and magic. It worked more thoroughly on mortal men than it had on Kall, with his demon blood. Those dark skinned shamans looked upon Ramlah with unshakable devotion after the return of their senses.

The March looked upon them as contemptible tools that were to be endured, but not respected. They used the women and the boys that were willing, true to the word that Kall had managed to squeeze out of Ramlah. They took their more savage pleasures out on the inhabitants of the villages they passed, who's people Ramlah had no use for. They often left destruction in their wake.

What prompted Ramlah to spare a town and what prompted him to raze it was baffling to Kall-Su. He could find little difference between one sorry little village and the next. The people all cowered in fear. They all would have given their last drop of water, and their last crumb of bread to the army of the Black March. Only sometimes all Ramlah wanted was their screams.

They didn't use true magic to destroy a town until they reached the river. For some time the land had began to grow less harsh. And then as if some invisible boundary had been crossed,

there was greenery. And life. And a great city that had sprung up in the fertile lands fed by the fresh water of a great river.

The nomads and the Black March alike spoke the same name. The Nile. The name of the city was inconsequential. It was not an old city. It had grown after the coming of Ansasla, from the looks of it. Ramlah said it was inhabited by the descendants of his enemies.

Kall heard and bit his tongue on asking how he knew. How he could possibly tell from viewing it from afar. Ramlah would not have taken the question well. Ramlah's patience with him was a short and changeable thing. Kall did his best to avoid him.

The melee began with the blood of dawn streaking the morning sky. There might have been several thousand souls living in that sturdy city by the shores of the river. Certainly none of them were equipped with the magic to repel what the March send down upon them.

The desert was Ramlah's ally and he sent it to destroy his enemies. Building's shattered as a sandstorm swept in out of nowhere to smash against the outer structures. A hurricane in from the sea might have been less destructive. The startling cries of a city awakened from slumber were faint whispers past the storm. Ramlah broke the city in that first massive pass of his desert summoned magic, and when the survivors struggled out of the destruction the March employed more mundane magics to strike them down.

Women, children, the aged. They held no mercy. Kall was no stranger to the atrocities of war - he had waged them himself once upon a time. He had killed without hesitation. Brutally and unforgivingly. But never gleefully. And somewhere beyond the shields shown to the world, he had held remorse for all the countless deaths. There was no remorse here. There was a stark, glimmering - appreciation - for the slaughter in Ramlah's eyes that surpassed Schneider at his worst. Schneider had always had a soft spot for women. Ramlah cut them down hideously.

There were boats on the river, everything from small rafts to larger merchant vessels. Kall was given a task. Destroy them. Destroy the only means of escape that the desert affiliated March might not pursue. A handful of the March were already wreaking havoc to the docks. Destroying those vessels close enough to shore to hit with missiles of destructive magic. The water close to docks was red with blood and bodies bobbed gruesomely in the debris filled waves.

There were several boats that the current had carried out towards the middle of the broad river. One of the helmed figures stabbed a finger towards them, and uttered one word.

"Destroy."

He was sworn to Ramlah's service. To refuse would have meant his death. Even here where his powers swelled with so much fresh water to fuel his ice based magic, he had no illusions about his ability to escape the fate that would come with disobedience.

So he did it. He distanced himself from the act, pushing emotion away to that place where it had always hid when he had carried out the deeds that had gained him his reputation as the dreaded high king of ice. He took the air with a whispered command to the air spirits that were so playfully attentive here. It took only a little effort to summon the ice elementals to

perform the task he wished. They balked at the heat, and would not last long in this climate, but they were capable of the chore. They had the fuel at hand for what he required them to do. He called two lesser ones to carry out his magic and sent them zipping along the surface of the river to find the solids that floated atop the waves. And when they did, the boats turned to ice. Crystals started at the hulls and rapidly worked their way up the deck, freezing everything in their path. Wood, metal, flesh. It made no difference. The weight made the now glimmering white vessels flounder in the water. First one capsized, then the next, until they were all being drawn beneath the surface. Then they were gone and maybe fifty or a hundred souls were gone with them. All in a few breaths time.

He kept to the air for a while after that, detached from the violence taking place in the city below. The desecration of a place that had slept in peace not so long ago. The faint sound of screams rose from the narrow streets as the survivors of the arcane storm that had taken the outer rim of the city fell prey to the mortal as well as immortal minions of the Black March. He destroyed another large boat that sluggishly tried to break away from the city. He let a smaller one, a mere canoe housing several small, huddled forms, slip away through the reeds close to the shore line.

A small rebellion and a small mercy.

When he did touch ground again it was full day. The looks he got from the few members of the March that had seen the ease with which he had destroyed the ships and the totally foreign method, were - calculating. Calculating and peculiar, as if he had proved to be a creature completely different than what they had first assumed. They made way for him, whispering at the flurry of lesser elementals that still flocked about him, drawn by the aura of power he had exuded. The nomad shamans hissed at him and made signs against evil. They spat on the ground that he walked and called him an unbeliever and a foreign devil. He'd heard both terms applied to himself before, but not with signs of witchery to back them up. Where the Black March were silent apparitions of hidden power, these native wizards were impassioned fanatics, who had no fear of death or the sense to back down from a greater sorcerer. He wondered if Ramlah would take offense if he killed one of them? The discourtesies they afforded him were beginning to wear thin.

By the time evening approached, Kall-Su was sickened. No matter what atrocities he had participated in within the tangled skein of his past, he found he had little stomach for the brutalities that took place in the dusty, crumbled remains of the city now. There was a hate working here that he did not understand. He thought perhaps that the inhabitants of this were of a different faith than the nomads. He heard enough vile desacrations of the victim's beliefs before they were killed. He could not imagine Ramlah shared the same faith - the time frame was too far removed. With the March it was ethnic. The people here hailed from some place or people that had been at odds at one time with the powers that had summoned the March. Or perhaps they were just different. Perhaps their ancestors had never been at odds at all with Ramlah's people. Perhaps they were simply not of Ramlah's origin and therefore deserved to die.

Kall-Su didn't ask and no one offered the information. The hoarse screams of women being raped and eviscerated, of men burned while they still lived, of children skinned by both magic and mundane methods - all of it made him seek solitude elsewhere. It made him wish that Lily was far far distant from this river and this madness. He'd rather the desert swallow him and the Black March up, before they ever journeyed close to where she might be.

One of them found him in the deepening dusk at the edge of the city, where stone buildings had been reduced to nothing more than dust and sand. One of the silent members of the March who never removed his armor and helm as some of the more human of them did.

"Ramlah." One word spoken. The creature waited ominously while Kall-Su collected himself enough to follow. He'd not found himself in Ramlah's presence in many days. Had avoided it meticulously. Ramlah had let him. Ramlah wanted him now and he clenched and unclenched his fists on the walk towards the interior of the city where Ramlah had set up his base camp.

The fires burned bright around the master of the march's conquered domain. The screams had worn down to nothing but the sound of flesh crackling in the flames. The city smelled of blood and cooked meat. The sand and dust absorbed the former, the later would cling for days yet. There was a building still mostly standing. That was where he was directed. In the outer chamber some of the March loitered. There were bodies there among them, being used in various ways. Whether they still lived Kall did not know. He focused his gaze away from their activities, through the beaded curtain that partially hid the inner chamber.

Ramlah was there. Reclined in a pillow laden chair, with a young boy at his feet holding a decanter of wine. Ramlah held a goblet in his one hand, the other idly twined in the boy's dark hair. One of the nomad younglings. Kall had seen him among the growing following of the Black March. The boy looked pleased with the stature of serving personally the master of the March. It was no doubt a great honor to serve Ramlah's wine and whatever else Ramlah might wish. There were others. Dark, faceless minions of the March, a few of the robed nomads. A handful of the wild-eyed shamans. They were speaking of the slaughter. Speaking of the righteousness of the act, of the glory of it. Ramlah sat in silence while his mortal minions discussed the day's events. They spoke of other places where the unfaithful or the unjust or the foreign, dwelled. A great swell of humanity, it seemed dwelled along the shores of this river. Countless bodies to fuel the fires of their individual hates.

They hesitated in their conversation upon his entrance, a dozen pairs of dark eyes turned his way. The outsider among them. The anomaly that Ramlah had chosen to make serve him rather than destroy as he destroyed the other alien things they encountered. He paused in the beaded doorway, trailing strands of colorful glass suspended over his shoulder, snared by their hostile silence and their harsh stares. The approval of Ramlah's mortal minions meant nothing to him. He ignored them. It was harder to ignore the March, for the power beaded upon their aura's like water upon a sweating goblet. But still, they did not frighten him. Not singly, at any rate. Ramlah made his nerves twine. Ramlah's assessing stare made him want to turn tail and retreat. Ramlah wanted things of him other than the ordinary obedience of a vassal to lord.

"You wished my presence?" he bowed slightly, a showing of respect, avoiding Ramlah's eyes, avoiding looking at the boy, who looked smug and hateful. He had to say something in the midst of the silence. He kept his voice neutrally cold. He did not want to be here. He most dearly did not.

"I did." Ramlah drawled. "I have heard you performed great foreign magics on the river."

"It was your order." Kall responded flatly.

There was a murmur of conversation from the nomads and shamans. Ramlah lifted a hand and the casual gesture gained him silence and the rapt attention of his followers.

"Yes." He purred in agreement. "The harshness of the desert drained you of your powers. Does this lush and fertile strip of land bring them back?"

"It - it is more beneficial to my methods, yes." Kall agreed slowly, warily.

"The Nile giveth life, does it not? Yet her great depths of water stifle the power of the desert. She does not stifle you, does she? She fuels you. Will you seek to break your vow to me now that your magics have swollen with the power of the Nile, *Sahir bil-Jaleed*? Do you think you can?"

"No." Kall -Su said softly, disliking the malice in Ramlah's tone, disliking that he brought up the possibility of such a challenge to his authority in the presence of his minions, both mortal and immortal. The cruel jest in his eyes that reminded Kall of a cat torturing its much smaller prey before it tore off its head. It was a test of some sort, to see how well Kall had learned the dangers of showing him disrespect. He had not forgotten, it seemed, the loss of face at that first nomad camp they had stopped at.

"No?" A dark brow lifted.

"No - my lord. I do not believe, even now, that I can break with you."

"Come closer." Ramlah lazily lifted a hand and beckoned. Kall drew a breath and stepped forward. Close enough to touch. Close enough to feel the electric pulse of power that always seemed to exude from Ramlah.

"Have you changed your mind?"

The fingers drifted up the side of his arm. The touch made his stomach clench. Ramlah's lazy smile did. Repulsive. The master of the March was high on the slaughter. The passing of so many souls had made him sanguine and hungry. He'd seen Schneider that way sometimes, after a victory, drunk almost off of the magic and the atmosphere and a bloodlust quenched. Kall blinked in shock, unprepared under the eyes of so many, to have that question posed him.

"No - my lord. Have you?" He answered quietly, fighting to keep himself from stepping back out of reach.

"Perhaps." Ramlah said softly, he rubbed the back of his knuckles across his closely bearded chin in thought. "Perhaps honor has no meaning to those not of the People. Perhaps your presence in this land is an abomination. Perhaps the thought of taking your white body is wicked. Do you think it wicked little Imil?" he asked of the boy.

"He's a foreign devil, oh lord. Wicked. Wicked."

"Yes, wicked. But who shall judge me?"

"None shall judge you, mighty Ramlah." One of the shaman's cried. "Unbelievers are nothing in the eyes of the people."

"Rid the world of them all." One of the more rabid of the shaman darted in and hissed at Kall-Su. He lifted his chin and stared emotionlessly down at that dark, sun creased face. Ramlah laughed and shooed the man away.

"The *Sahir Bil-jaheed* denies me and will cry that honor is befouled if I choose to force the issue." Casually said.

"Kill the creature." A shaman screeched.

"Sit him among the fires that blackens the flesh of the other unbelievers." Another suggested. They gathered closer around him. He did not want them close at his back, but he dared not turn away from Ramlah. Dared not have that threat out of his line of sight.

Of a sudden, Ramlah rose, so close that his black robes brushed Kall-Su's legs. Reflexively he began to step back, his personal space sorely violated. Ramlah caught him by the lapel before he could, and drew him forward.

"I prefer your flesh not to be blackened and crisped. It would hinder my usage of you." A very soft whisper against his ear. Kall took a breath and found it lodged in his throat. He felt light headed and didn't know if it was from fear or magic's making.

"Not," he said quietly, absolutely certain it was true. "While I am alive."

"What?" Ramlah lifted an amused black brow. "Will you abandon your woman, then? Leave her to the whim of fate - or me - because your ego will now allow you to bend?"

Shock that Ramlah spoke of the fear that ate at the depths of his heart. Shock that Ramlah was right - that for a moment, for pride's sake - he would have forgotten Lily to protect himself. He blinked and took a step backwards, breaking out of the lax grip on his robes. He shook his head, at a loss for words. Not knowing his own mind in this sudden onslaught of guilt and panic.

Ramlah laughed at him. He waved a dark hand at him in dismissal.

"Flee for now, *Sahir bil-Jaleed*. I'll find you later when the mood strikes, fear you not."

He did not hesitate. He forced himself to keep a dignified pace, forced himself not to look at the faces as he passed, to ignore the bodies that did not move for him, that he had to veer around or use his weight to shove past. Forced himself to stride through the ante-chamber with nary a look at the other members of the March who were very obviously looking at him. And when he got outside he headed back into the darkness. When he'd cleared the fires, called the air spirits to lift him into the air and take him towards the river, where the air was moist and cool and he could think.

How ironic that the lushness of this strip of river fed lad bolstered his magic and his power and yet with a few words Ramlah stripped the strength from him leaving him shaking. Perhaps it was magic. Perhaps the magic and blood vow that the lord of the Black March had forced upon him had indeed taken root within him somehow. It felt that way. It felt as if he had no control over the apprehension that welled inside him.

Perhaps that was exactly what Ramlah wanted. His uncertainty.

God. DS, why did you have to leave me mired in this alone? He sent a petulant, frustrated spike of concussive energy out of the water. The waves surged and sprayed white foam into the air, then settled back down. If Ramlah persisted in his torments, he did not know if he could endure it. Not again. He wasn't as strong now as he used to be. The Prophet had seen to that. The Prophet had put cracks in his armor that might never be hammered out. The Prophet had put a fear into him that he had never known before and Ramlah eased his way through the seams of it as if he'd been privy to the making.

Lily, he thought miserably, If I die here -- and it was becoming a more plausible possibility each day - forgive me. Please forgive me.

Chapter Twenty-one

There was a great sprawling river that cut through the arid lands of the desert like a blessing from god. If there was a god. Schneider had doubts.

It was nice to get out of the desert though. To breathe in air that hadn't had every trace of humidity sucked out of it by the dry sands. To see greenery on the earth and to see a thin veneer of civilization. There were planted fields and pastures on the land alongside the river. There was a city across the wide expanse of dark water. He'd been flying for two days since the last little outpost of humanity they had come across and carting the trembling, prayer murmuring form of Abu with him. The little man seemed to have taken up religion. The little man had developed a great deal of fear for the arcane. Schneider would have left him behind, but he needed someone who knew the land and the people. As much as he might want to go in blasting, a bit of delicacy might not be out of order.

So Abu got to live. And Abu had led him in the right direction. He descended upon the port town with no one the wiser. No one had the leisure to stare skyward in the bustle of the very busy port. There were water vessels of every size and type crammed about the docks. Everything from great masted ships to small reed canoes. Too many boats for the docks to handle. They rocked against each other in the tide, the outside vessels tied to the inside ones, the larger boats drifting at anchor in the river's current.

There were too many people for the size of the town. Too many brown bodies crowded within the narrow streets. There were shanties set up on the sidewalks, and small tents which overflowed with humanity in the middle of the streets. People walked around them, hardly seeming to mind.

Schneider moved among them, with Abu scurrying warily ahead of him and thought that this place had the look of a refugee camp. The people had the look of devastated survivors on their faces and in their hollow eyes. He was well familiar with such looks. He had caused enough devastation in the past to know the symptoms now.

"Find out what happened?" He directed Abu. He was half a head taller than most of the people here. He scanned the crowd for signs of military presence, for signs of anything out of the ordinary other than the number of folk and the desperation in the air. There was nothing. Only hundreds and hundreds of shell shocked natives. Even the children weren't playing.

They huddled in the shade of buildings, in the lee of their thread bare tents or in the protective arms of their mothers.

Victims, most certainly. But of what? He had a notion.

"I don't understand." Abu came back, frightened. "They say that the desert rose up and ate the villages down river. They say that the gods have come down from heaven to smite us here on earth. They say that only a few have escaped but that the gods will follow and kill them too. That they will kill us all."

"Gods." Schneider sneered. "Not likely. Is that what they're fashioning themselves as? Even I was never so egotistical." He stared towards the river. Stared south along its gleaming surface and tried sense the presence of power. He'd felt it off and on over the last few days. There was very little now. Whatever was up there was dormant.

He'd felt nothing of Kall-Su at all. It bothered him a great deal; the not knowing if Kall were alive or dead. It disturbed him dwelling on the latter. He rather thought he was alive, though. Kall had a knack for survival, even when he had no care for living. Kall had the advantage of a bloodline that was not so easy to kill. Yes, Kall-Su was alive. He refused to think differently.

"So we've managed to get ahead of them on the path of whatever it is they're about. How far south are they, do you know?"

Abu shrugged. "The people here are scared and much of what they say is tinged with hysteria. They say that an army of the god's warriors have encamped at Dasmadren, which is some two days good sailing down the river."

Two days sailing. Less than one by air. If he wished to throw caution to the winds and thrust himself back into the line of fire. He was bold and he was confident of his own prowess, but he had never been a blatant fool. It grated that his common sense warned against confronting Ramlah again without some sort of better plan that he'd had the last time. Without separating the master of the Black March from his minions who fed him power.

"Find me a decent place to eat." He snapped at Abu, short of temper and testy because of it.

"I think that there is a very fine establishment two streets down from the docks." The little man was always ready to serve in such matters, always the consummate guide. Schneider sniffed and waved a hand at him to lead the way. He missed his *djinii* and her ability to conjure the most scrumptious meal out of thin air. He most certainly would have to look into finding out how she had managed such a thing.

The restaurant was not that fine, but the smells coming from it were not unappealing and there were dancing girls gyrating on the carpets in the center of the floor and cool wine in pictures on the low tables. Abu procured him a select spot before he had to procure it for himself. A very nice view of the three dusky skinned dancers. The music was poignant and oddly melodic. It struck an unusual chord compared to the music he was used to hearing. The dancers struck another chord. They were very good. They oozed sensuality. They made him want to see Yoko so very badly. Made him think about the private little dances she performed for him.. And what they did after.

Ah, damn her and her cursed promises. It would kill him keeping that faith. Especially now, when exhaustion and frustration triggered urges that needed release.

"They are available, for a small price, you know?" Abu said helpfully and Schneider glared at him. He had never paid for a woman in his very long life. Well, at least not in money. He supposed there were other methods of extracting payment that women knew. Yoko was damned good at it. Arshes had had her moments.

"No." He said shortly. It was tempting though.

"Oh." Abu said, brows drawn. "You don't like women? There are boys here that might be of service as well."

"Are you trying to end your miserable life?" Schneider's glare turned patently deadly.

"Ah- But I thought that you and your young friend -"

"Don't think. Don't speak. Go away and I might forget to turn you into something crisp and bubbly."

Abu blanched and backed away, white rimmed eyes looking for the quickest route of escape. He scurried away like a rabbit with a fox on its tail. Schneider slouched into his cushions and simmered. Angry at the assumption, angry that the thought of what Abu had suggested had actually occurred to him. Well, perhaps not angry at the thought itself as much as the notion that Abu had perceived it of him.

Kall-Su had felt - *intriguing* - in that overdone bordello. He had felt nice with his soft skin and smooth body. He had tasted -good. The apprehension in his eyes, the agitation of his body language, the pounding of his heart through the thin layer of sheer material had been interesting. If he had not have been beautiful, Schneider never would have bothered to take him under his wing to begin with, but he'd never quite noticed just how appealing that fragile, pale beauty was before this past year. He'd never quite realized that he could find as much jealousy in his heart over Kall-Su as he could with Arshes-Nei or Yoko. He'd never had the opportunity before. Kall was the only one out of the small cliché of people that he considered his own, that had never dared to put another above his devotion to Schneider. Not until the minstrel girl at least. It bothered Schneider somewhat to see the adoration in Kall-Su's eyes when he looked at her. As much as it bothered him to see the warmth in Arshe's eyes when she looked at Gara. The only difference was, it would have mattered to him if Gara ceased to exist. He couldn't give less of a damn if Lily disappeared from the face of the earth. Except that it would devastate Kall-Su. And it occurred to him that Kall-Su's pain made a difference to him.

He stared sullenly at the man who brought him his food. He picked at the spicy stuff with something of a diminished appetite. He consumed great amounts of the wine. The strong beer that this establishment brewed was quite good as well. His irritations dimmed. He had a dancer in his lap within an hour and another pressed against his back, rubbing his shoulders. The both of them were fascinated with his hair. He was quite mollified by the feel of their shapely forms so close. Yoko had never made him promise not to look and he'd never said he wouldn't touch. There were just differing levels of touch that a body could participate in.

"What is it about you, that our women find so appealing, *Jamad ja'da*?" The vaguely familiar, vaguely amused voice drifted up from behind. Schneider didn't turn. The women did, the one shifting to look over his shoulder, the other pausing in her delightful massage to see who had spoken. He knew. He swirled the beer in his mug and let a small, humorless smile cross his lips.

"How fortunate for me that you've come, water rat." He said. "I've needed an outlet for my frustrations and here you are. Have you wearied of life?"

The tall form of Amir, the brother of the sea who had brought them to his hellish land to begin with, moved around to stand in front of Schneider. He was dressed very much as he'd been the last time Schneider had seen him, save that now, there was a look of weariness on his bearded face.

"Not quite yet, land snake." Amir said. "I'm not here to fight you."

Schneider lifted a brow. "Do you think it would be much of a fight? You're not in your element. Not that the ocean could save you."

Amir shrugged. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. I would prefer to find out at some later date, if its all the same to you."

"And if its not?"

"Then there would be one more body for the river to consume, no? Whether it would yours or mine, I cannot say."

Schneider's smile widened. Amir shifted uncomfortably.

"I thought you might have been dead anyway." The sea captain said. "When I heard tales of the Moulay's death and the deaths of all his men I thought perhaps you might too have perished at the hands of that which he summoned from the beyond."

"Nooooo." Schneider drawled. "None of you were that lucky. Too bad you weren't there. You could have gotten a taste first hand of what you helped bring into this world."

"I helped with nothing." Amir snapped. "I am a trader. A merchanteer. I transported an item and that is all."

"You're a slaver and a pirate and you brought the key that released the Black March."

Amir paled. The women stiffened and backed away, making signs against evil, huddling together. Amused, Schneider watched them go.

"Ah, everyone knows the name now, don't they? A little wholesale destruction will do that to a reputation. Ramlah's building his back up rather quickly."

"Ramlah?" Amir whispered. "Is that his name, the leader of *Al-Zafif Al-Asouad*?"

"Yes."

"I came up the river from the river from Wadi Halfa and passed - I cannot describe it. There were great cities along the Nile that are dust now. They have leveled everything from tiny fisher villages to cities that have been on this river since before the great destruction. They've left nothing alive and only these few people have escaped their wrath. They are demons."

"Maybe." Schneider agreed. "Very likely. You passed the March? How far away and how come they didn't blast you?"

"A night past. They encamped in the ruins of a city. We could not make out the size of their force, but it was great. Desert dwellers follow them. The wild nomads who seldom come into the cities of men. We slipped by in the dead of night and they did not see us."

"Wise of you." Schneider remarked.

"You were there when the Moulay summoned them?"

Schneider shrugged.

"You saw them and survived?"

"I'm not that easy to kill."

"Are they?"

He didn't have an answer to that question. It unnerved him that the response was probably no.

"They cannot be allowed to destroy this land." Amir said solemnly.

"What do you care? You had no problem wrecking havoc to my lands."

"As you no doubt, have no care about destroying the lands of your enemies." Amir grinned humorlessly. "But these are not the lands of my enemies, these are the lands of my people and I'd rather they were not taken by the desert."

"Why tell me? I don't care."

"You are here, are you not? If you are in a place, it seems to me that you might prefer if it were not reduced to so much sand. Where is *Al-Shayhtaan bil'Sha'ir Al-Shamcii*? Did the Black March consume him?"

Al-Shayhtaan bil'Sha'ir Al-Shamcii. The sun-haired-demon. Interesting terminology. He wound a lock of silver hair about his forefinger thoughtfully. "What does it matter to you?"

"It doesn't particularly. The Moulay set me to find his woman before he left to resurrect his demons. It would seem a shame if I had wasted me time."

"You found her?"

"Where she is at. Yes."

Schneider twined the hair tighter. He'd almost rather not have known. He'd almost rather she was swallowed by the desert. If he killed Amir now, he'd never know and Kall-Su would never know where she was.

"Where?"

"She was taken inland from the city of Wadi Halfa. As far as I know she is safe. I left word that she was not to be harmed on threat of the Moulay's vengeance. Of course that threat is an empty one now."

"What do you want?"

"The same thing you do. For this Black March to find its end."

"What makes you think I care?"

"I think you care what happens to your friend."

He lifted a brow in curiosity, wondering how Amir knew. Then it occurred to him that it was probably the same way he'd known Schneider was here. Abu had been employed by the Moulay, just as Amir was. He'd most likely run into the little guide and been given the pertinent details.

"What good are you if you're not on the ocean? Does the river lend you its power too?"

"Somewhat." Amir shrugged. "But it seems to me that I should be a most welcome comrade considering what it is we face. I hear that in addition to the demons of Al-Zahif Al-Asouad itself, that many mortal sorcerers have also taken a vow of allegiance."

"He's collecting sorcerers?"

"I have heard as much."

"Hummm. Interesting. It doesn't matter."

"Are you so powerful as not to care?"

"We'll see."

* * * * *

"Foreign devil!" the screech of moral outrage came from behind him. Kall-Su just had the time to whirl before the finger of black death shot out at him. It wasn't that impressive a strike. The spell was laced with disease and plague and would have stricken a normal man with a most gruesome and lingering death. Kall-Su deflected it with hardly a thought. He'd been avoiding little nasties from the fervent mortal magicians who worshipped Ramlah for the last few days. They were all fanatics. All unhinged and mad as far as he was concerned and not a one of them had tolerance for anything foreign. At least anything foreign that was not beaten down and whimpering in submission at their feet. He hated religious fanatics. He had rather understandably developed an overwhelming distaste for zealots in general.

He didn't hesitate in retaliating. He whispered a word and flicked a finger and the fertile ground sprouted spikes of ice that pierced the mortal flesh standing upon it. The ice melted quickly enough in the heat but it had done its damage. There was a good deal of blood soaking the ground in addition to the water he had summoned forth. People shied away, and men fingered weapons. Anyone close enough to witness the demise of the crazed sorcerer had also seen his attack on Kall-Su. They had to have realized the retaliation was only fair, but of course none of them saw it as such. All they saw when they looked at him was pale skin and hair and eyes that mirrored the sky on a clear day. Foreign. Foreign and dangerous. They made signs against evil when he passed, which completely frustrated him since they groveled like obedient dogs at Ramlah's feet and at the feet of his ominous immortal followers. If ever there was evil then the Black March reveled in it. Some of the things they did made the brutal beastmen that Schneider had utilized in his armies years ago, seem civilized. He had watched those beastly armies at work, he had commanded them for years and even still, watching some of the pleasures taken by the Black March and by Ramlah himself made him sick and weak-kneed.

Perhaps it was him. Perhaps he had changed since those days when following in Schneider's footsteps had been all that had occupied his mind. Perhaps somewhere along the way, despite overwhelming odds, he'd developed a conscience and a sense of morality. Or perhaps he'd just grown weaker. Regardless of the reason, it didn't make the bile taste any better when it surged up the back of his throat.

"What did you do?"

He stiffened and stared defiantly up into the blank, dead eyes of one of Ramlah's lieutenants. Helmless the creature was no less intimidating than he might have been with his fiercesome horns and molded metal snout.

"Nothing that was not deserved."

The broad, flat mouth twitched. "You take great liberties with those that are blood bound to Ramlah."

"I am blood bound to Ramlah, yet it does not stop them from attacking me." He pointed out coldly. "If a hand is raised towards me then I shall not hesitate to strike it down."

He did not flinch from the dark stare. He challenged it, feeling sullen and defiant. A moment's silence, then the creature shrugged, as human a motion as Kall had ever seen from this particular one.

"I will be sure to tell Ramlah as much. He will be interested to hear of it, I'm sure."

"You do that." But he felt a little shiver of dread inside at the prospect. Anything that threatened to draw him into Ramlah's presence made him nervous. Anything that gave Ramlah reason to practice the extent of his power over him was to be avoided. Ramlah didn't need an excuse to lay a hand on him and the notion of that made him as miserable if not more so than having to watch the torturous pleasures of the March and their followers.

The screams of the short lived survivors drifted through the shattered remnants of the city they inhabited. Fires still burned here and there. The smell alone of burned human flesh was

sickening. Thank the gods that most of the bodies had been swept out into the desert when Ramlah had called on the power of the desert to crash down upon this unlucky town like a wave from an angry ocean. It was earth magic, there was no doubt of it, just an unusual brand. Everything about the magic of the March was unusual. Tainted and archaic, but very, very strong.

Despite all of his revulsion he was drawn towards the cries and the pain. They had found a few more survivors somewhere and worked diligently and with the skill of true craftsmen to make the last hours of life the most despicable of all. The March was never so animated as when it caused pain. Even during sex, which they practiced openly with the willing nomad women who followed them, and the unwilling women and young boys that survived the initial destruction of their homes. They rutted with the instincts of animals, but they tortured with the honed practice of artisans.

The victim this time was a woman. She was huge with child. Her condition had not stopped her rape or the torture. They had cut her open and done things to the life she carried that did not bear dwelling on. She was still alive. It reminded him, sickeningly enough of Yoko, after the Prophet had caused her to loose her baby. The blood and the gruesome little body yanked before its time from the safe womb of its mother. The look on the mother's face that told that none of her pain and agony mattered as much as what her unborn child had gone through before it died.

They could have drawn it out longer, but the constriction inside Kall-Su's chest was so tight that he might not have survived it himself if he hadn't ended it then and there. All it took was a simple concussive spell to shatter her heart and her moans stilled and her body sagged on its makeshift cross.

Most of the onlookers had no notion that a spell had been cast at all. They merely bemoaned the loss of a victim and went in search of another unlucky creature. An old man was dragged forward to entertain them.

An arm slipped around Kall-Su's shoulders, an aura of power enveloped him in a suffocating cocoon. He drew a breath and didn't attempt to twist free.

"You rob us of our pleasures." Ramlah purred in his ear. Ramlah had the smell of wine on his breath and the sense of lazy indolence about his essence. He had been whiling the night away in the shadows, then, enjoying the spectacle.

"Pleasures? There's little honor to torturing pregnant women." He murmured.

"You tire me with your talk of honor." The other arm slid around his waist, palm flat on his belly, moving up his ribs to his back, forcing him to turn and face his accoster.

Oh, please, please, let him take his hands off me. Let him find interest in the screams of that poor old man. Let me melt into the night and escape from his notice.

"You've killed another man of mine." Ramlah chided. He didn't sound angry. "I've warned you."

Kall said nothing. He stared into shadows past Ramlah, trying not to focus on the dark face or the hands on his back or the broad, hard body that leaned against his.

"You are ever disobedient."

"Tell them to stop attacking me, then." He suggested softly. "Let me loose." He pressed his hands against Ramlah's chest and attempted to push the larger man away.

"Is she beautiful, your woman? Would she scream prettily if she were in that woman's place you killed?"

Kall froze, blinking in shock. Ramlah laughed. His hands tightened on the material of Kall's cloak. Of a sudden he pressed his mouth against Kall's. A hurtful assault of lips and teeth and tongue. He drew blood in the process, and stole breath.

Kall fought against it, in panic and fear and pain, and Ramlah forced him back a few steps until his back hit the rough stone of a wall and Ramlah pressed him against that, smashing his head into the stone, grinding his body against Kall's. Ramlah, who stood Schneider's height or taller and might have outweighed him by a good sixty pounds was too strong to physically through off.

Kall ceased to reason in his alarm. He lashed out in the only way left him. He summoned the magic, and struck. Ramlah started, grunting, breaking the brutal kiss with a hiss as he staggered backwards. Kall leaned against the wall, panting, frantically gathering the power for a more thought out spell. Gathering power for shields.

"If you do it, I will kill you and hunt down your woman with my last breath." The threat came out a sibilant hiss. There was anger in Ramlah's eyes. There was a trail of blood running down from his nose.

Kall hesitated. Clenched his fists in consternation. In helpless rage at the threat to Lily. "You'll kill me anyway." He hissed back.

"Maybe." Ramlah agreed a moment before the jolt of magic hit Kall dead center. Without the benefit of a shield, he couldn't even manage the breath to scream. It ate up everything he had, shredded it and spat it out again. He crumpled to his knees, mouth filling with the taste of copper. Vision spinning out of control. The desire to erect a shield was so strong it hurt not to.

Ramlah struck him again and this time he let it wash over him, figuring the sooner he passed out, the sooner the pain would stop. Gratifyingly enough, he was right.

The only problem was he woke up again. The impact against the ground did it. And Ramlah's knee in his stomach as the master of the March fell upon him. He wasn't in the same place. There were the tapestry covered walls of a tent, the dim light of a brazier, the rough brocade of hand woven pillows under him. Ramlah's tent.

Gods. Gods. Gods. Pain or no pain, fear of retaliation or not, he bolted for freedom, trying to scramble out from under Ramlah's weight, trying to use his own to throw the man off balance. A physical blow this time, a fist to the side of his temple that made him see stars, but didn't quite divest him of the urgency to flee this horrid situation.

The magical impact that followed worked better. He lay sprawled among the pillows floating in a daze of hurt and disorientation as Ramlah's dark form hovered over him. Hands pulled at his robes and he hadn't the wherewithal to fight them off. He hadn't the sense to do anything save lay there blinking hazily at the tent's peaked roof while Ramlah lowered lips and tongue to his neck, taking his leisure in sampling the taste and texture of Kall's skin. Teeth fixed on his nipple. Not gentle at all, but hurtful and insistent. Blood was drawn there as well. It brought him out of his stupor somewhat. Blindly he tried to gather magic. Ramlah's head lifted. His black eyes glittered dangerously.

"You are a fool *Jaleebi*, to try my patience so." He pressed his hands down onto Kall's shoulders, murmuring the words of a chant that were foreign sounding and ancient. A wash of something not entirely painful fell down around him. Vision went dark and wavery. Thoughts spiraled into a void that sucked will and initiative away like the desert drank up water. He could hear, he could feel, he could smell the scent of Ramlah's sweat and the incense burning in the brazier. He just couldn't reason. He couldn't think. He couldn't summon the will to do anything to lay there passively while Ramlah untied the belt of his robes and pushed them aside.

"So beautiful. So white and soft." Ramlah murmured with some amazement, following the path of his fingers with the wet trail of his tongue and lips. The clarity of Kall's awareness shifted in and out of focus.

"You could have enjoyed this, if you were not so stubborn." Ramlah trailed a bit of silk across his skin, teasing his flesh, causing goose pimples to rise. "But I shall take pleasure in it for the both of us, hummm."

* * * * *

It was daylight when it began to wear off. It had been an enchantment of some sort. He was sure of that in his gradually clearing awareness. Enchantments cast without the benefit of herbs and the tools of witchcraft were rare. The fact that Ramlah had the knowledge and the ability was yet another thing to fear.

He was sprawled in the pillows of Ramlah's pallet. He was unclothed. He was sore in places that made him blush to dwell upon and he was sorely lacking in restful sleep. He wasn't sure, but he thought it had been well after dawn before the master of the Black March had tired of his sport. When Kall had finally been allowed to drift into sleep, Ramlah had been there. He could only thank whatever gods still had any awareness of him at all, that Ramlah wasn't here now.

He brought his hands up to cover his face and lay there trying not to be sick. Trying not to let his body fall into a fit of shaking that he wouldn't easily be able to recover from. There was blood on the pallet, staining the pillows and the silken sheets. His. From a variety of places.

He wanted to die. At that moment he would have welcomed an offer of a quick death. Shame ate at him and helplessness. It overwhelmed the anger.

Enchanted and raped. The words echoed in his head. It wasn't like it hadn't happened before. The latter at least. It wasn't like he didn't know the feeling. It wasn't like Ramlah had been

trying to destroy his soul in the process. Ramlah had been rather straightforward in what he wanted.

It should have made a difference. He kept trying to convince himself of that, curled in Ramlah's pillows, aching in body and spirit. This was not so huge a thing to give for his survival and Lily's. Was it?

And if Ramlah wanted it again -? What then? He rose with a start, the shaking he'd tried to circumvent assaulting his hands. He looked for his robes and saw them a little distance away on the floor. He dressed, stiffly and went for the flaps leading out. There were men in the antechamber, as there were always men there. He wondered if they had been there during the night when Ramlah had -

He couldn't finish the thought. His face flushed red and he stalked past. And was stopped at the door by a member of the march.

"No. You are not to go. He wants you here when he returns."

Kall stared up, mind blanking for a moment in the panicked need to escape. To distance himself. He could not endure this again. He knew he could not.

"I'm not going far." He kept his voice neutral. "The call of nature." He explained.

The inhuman sorcerer stared at him, gauging him in a new light. Not just a foreigner to be tolerated, but a personal possession of Ramlah's now. *Jaleebi*. Ramlah's foreign slave. His personal property. As if one egotistical wizard who thought he'd owned him hadn't been enough. The desire to bolt, to just blast his way past this dark obstacle was so strong he had to fight it down. That would only draw attention he didn't want his way.

"I'll be back shortly." He said reasonably, haughtily, as if the man were a fool to even suggest otherwise. The bluff worked. He was let past without incident. The man even moved aside for him.

It was bright outside and hot. It was always hot. The heat made him crazy. It never let up. He got enough distance between himself and Ramlah's tent where he thought it was safe to stop and moment and get his thoughts together. To force a bit of rationality.

He could not stay here. He realized that now. Even if the desert ate him alive, he could not stay here and be subject to this again. Even if it meant his chances of finding Lily were less. He honestly didn't think Ramlah could find her. He didn't think Ramlah would really try. She was a threat to use against him and that was all she was. For all he knew, she might already have been a victim of the March's destructive journey north up the river. She might have been one of the lucky ones that died quickly.

He had to flee regardless. He would die otherwise. One way or another he would die. He'd use no magic in the endeavor. Not yet at any rate. Not where it could be sensed and he might be stopped. So he walked. To the edge of the encampment where the horses and camels were kept. Where scouts were coming and going all the time, looking for refugees. Looking for resistance or new victims. He wrapped a turban about his hair and the edge of the cloth about his face and just appropriated a horse. No one paid him any heed. It was that easy.

The day was half gone before there were any signs of pursuit and by that time he'd resigned himself to die before they retook him. He'd been dwelling on what spells to use and what elementals to summon all the day long. He had a last one reserved for himself. Something he thought might work to snuff out his own life. It might work, it might not. There was only the one way to find out.

Chapter Twenty-two

There was a settlement so small it hardly deserved the name village. Five low buildings that had seen better centuries, a hard packed road running between them, a small fenced in area behind one where a single swaybacked donkey stood dozing in the shade cast by the building. A few chickens pecked industriously at the barren earth. There seemed to be no people. The door to one building stood open, swinging idly on its hinges. Perhaps the human folk had fled, having heard tales of the horror that seeped up the river towards them. Wise people.

He dismounted and led his horse to the small well. They'd poisoned the water when they'd left. He sensed that even before he'd drawn the bucket all the way to the surface. He could feel the taint in it.

He leeches the poison away with a murmured spell and drank long from the luke warm liquid. He tipped the rest of it over his head, reveling in the momentary wetness, then drew up a second bucket for the horse. Then as an afterthought drew up a third and filled the small trough in the paddock for the old donkey.

He was tired. He'd evaded pursuit all the night long with subtle spells of invisibility, both physical and magical. The heat exhausted him by far more than any mental effort he was putting forth. The flight did. He went inside the buildings looking for foodstuff, but doubting seriously anything edible had been left behind. There was dried grass for the horse in the paddock, and he gave it a portion to munch on while he sat in the shade of a building and tried to ignore the heat and the utter dryness of the air.

He hadn't had the time to concoct a healing spell on himself, or the patience. Healing was his weak point. Healing one's self was harder by far than performing the same act upon another. His inherent magics might reflexively repair critical, life-threatening damage, but they were blissfully ignorant about minor things. Like bruises and abrasions that agitated him to no ends, that were made more annoying by the heat and the sand that insinuated itself inside of robes. Like the sore spots from an attack that he had been attempting not to think about, but kept creeping back into his mind anyway.

He put a hand over his eyes in an attempt to block out unwelcome images. His head hurt from the heat. His head had been hurting for quite some time now. He'd almost forgotten what it felt like not to have a stabbing pain behind his eyes. He shut them, and between his hand and the thin veil of his eyelids, some of the harsh sunlight was averted.

The sound of the horse rustling in the dry grasses lulled him into a sort of semi-doze. He didn't come out of it fully until the rattling of distant tack seeped through his lethargic senses. He slowly lifted his head, tenting his palm over his eyes to squint into the sun. Not too distant was a group of riders, stirring up dust in their wake. Men on horseback and a good number of them. He felt the tell tale trace of magic in their midst. The insidious scent of a tracking spell. He'd let his guard down when he'd dozed. For a disoriented moment his mind wondered,

debating how long he'd sat there asleep. It could not have been that long. Yet his moment of weakness had allowed this band of mortal men and their mortal shaman to track him down. Shameful. He was getting sloppy. He continued to sit there, contemplating the motives of this band that pursued him. Wondering if they meant to simply kill him or take him back to Ramlah. If they were following Ramlah's orders then it surely must be the latter. Even if Ramlah decided to take his life, the master of the March would most certainly wish that pleasure for himself.

Which meant, of course, than men were going to die here today. Truth be told, he rather relished the thought. Truth be told, his frame of mind was ripe for a little butchery.

He rose, dusting off his hands carefully, straightening his robes as if he were about to make some formal appearance. For mere mortals he needn't even waste that much power. The shaman in their midst was a minor annoyance.

He let them almost reach the border of the scant little village. Stood there quietly in the shadow of his building while his horse and the donkey raised their heads in curiosity of the newly arrived creatures. Very slowly, he smiled and whispered a word between his curving lips.

The first line of men fairly exploded in their saddles. Blood gysered as one, then the next, then the next imploded. A simple offensive magic. They had no defense against it. The survivors screamed and brandished swords, then died writhing in pain as their insides froze between one breath and the next. When the desert offered no water to fuel his ice magics, then he had to suffice with what a man's body offered.

The shaman cast a spell at him and he brushed it aside like it was a sluggish fly. The man's shields were nothing and Kall-Su ripped them apart with ease and finished him much the same way he'd finished the others. Blood soaked the ground. He felt giddy with the shedding of it. Rational was a foreign, unwelcome thing.

And then something sparked in the distance. Something more powerful than the magic of the shaman who he had just destroyed. Something drawn by the scent of his magic. Something that came with all the speed that the desert could lend it.

The March.

Reason came back like a slap in the face. He shifted and moved out of the shade, treading on blood soaked dirt, pushing his way past spooked horses, to better see the cloud of sand that rolled towards him.

A great deal of power. But not an unbelievable amount. Not Ramlah. But certainly Ramlah's subordinates. Certainly one or more of the Black March.

He felt the heady pull of their earth magics and shivered, knowing that simple magics were not going to win the day against them. Knowing that the only magics he possessed that would give him an advantage over them were his ice based ones and the ice based elementals at his command.

He'd ridden far enough away from the river and fresh water in abundance that he doubted any of them would willingly come at his summons. Which meant he would have to force the issue. Which meant that not only would he have to battle the March, he'd have to match wills with an angry, reluctant elemental as well. The elemental would have reason to be reluctant, any but the most powerful would probably wither and die in the arid heat. He might very well waste useful tools in this endeavor. It was better than the alternative by far.

* * * * *

Schneider stood at the river's edge, in the midst of following the swaying walk of a young, barefoot girl as she carried the morning's purchases from the scant market back to whatever cubby hole she'd acquired for herself in the teaming collection of survivors this town had become. She drew his attention from the harbor and the bobbing vessels moored there. The largest one was the seasnake's ship. Amir was somewhere along the dock, haggling over supplies, doing what merchants and pirates were best at; getting the best deal possible for his merchandise.

Schneider still wasn't certain he didn't want to melt the man's bones. The idea of an alliance didn't sit well. The brother of the sea was talking as if such a pact were already written in blood.

He'd sent Abu to find him some decent wine. He missed the djinni in that respect, more than any other. The food she created had been of the highest quality. It was just as well though, he supposed. Yoko would have never let him keep her.

"My lord, look what I found." Abu cut in-between Schneider's view of the young girl. He had two skins hanging over one shoulder and a burlap sack of something else over the other. "I found a wonderful bargain, my lord, in the market -"

Schneider was not interested in the haggling of merchants and thieves. He opened his mouth to inform Abu of this when something tingled in the back of his mind. Chill bumps rose on the backs of his hands in response to the faint flavor of strong magics being used. Up river to the west was where the feeling originated. He waved a sharp hand at the little guide to shut him up and the little man stood there with his mouth open while Schneider stared sightlessly northwest.

It was no small magic he sensed. It was a goodly distance away and it still managed to raise the hairs on the back of his neck. It smacked of familiarity and he narrowed his eyes in sudden, focused concentration. He lifted an arm and pointed in the direction whence it came.

"What lies that way?"

"That way? Why, nothing. Nothing of consequence at any rate. Not for many hundreds of miles at least. Why?"

Schneider didn't bother to answer. Even if he were wrong about the source, the magic itself was intriguing enough to warrant his attention.

To the utter dismay of the people around him on the docks, he called the winds and rose into the air.

There was a rent in the ground wide enough to swallow a horse that led a jagged course from the small well out into the drylands where the March had come. There were three of them. Faceless and imposing in their great helms and their dark armor.

One of them was down, shattered by the dying efforts of a not inconsiderable ice elemental that had reluctantly come at Kall-Su's insistence. It had rent the air with its passing, and for a brief moment in time, this small section of desert had turned frigid and cold, and frost had covered the sand like a fine dusting of diamonds. Then the desert had overwhelmed it and it had melted away as if it had never been there. It had taken a member of the march with it though. One enemy in exchange for a valued elemental servant. Kall was not impressed, nor pleased with the bargain. He'd summoned every bit of his own ice based magic to draw upon the water feeding the deep well and use it for his own purposes. It had split the earth asunder when it froze, an unexpected side effect that nonetheless had thrown his foes off their balance. They had hardly expected the chasm to open under the hooves of their horses. One of them had gone down into it even as spears of ice had knifed upwards, piercing his body. He'd obviously not been shielding against physical attacks. It still didn't kill him. He was still active enough to send a devastating rush of impact magic against Kall-Su. The buildings behind him shattered, broken into rubble by the force of the spell. Kall's shields barely withstood it. He staggered under it, holding out both hands to reinforce his protection. The earth erupted under him as the other one, the one that had escaped the chasm cast an earth based magic at him.

Kall launched himself into the air to escape it, but the concussions seeped past his shield and vibrated into his body. Something shattered in his leg. The sudden, intense pain shocked him into a moment of incoherency. All he could do for a handful of heartbeats was stare down at bone protruding from flesh and cloth and blood spurting like it was frantic to escape his body. He wasn't quite certain what had hit him.

They hit him again with the same spell, encouraged that it had breached his shields. He screamed this time and went down, losing all control of his flight spell, losing control of reason as his right arm shattered and ribs splintered. He tasted blood this time. A great deal of blood from a no doubt pierced lung.

Panic took over and he gathered power he was hardly aware of and threw a simple concussive spell. It was backed by enough raw and desperate power to widen the chasm where it hit by twenty body lengths and finally break the magical shields of the one he'd injured with the ice spears. That one shattered more wholly in body than both their spells had done to Kall. There were pieces of armor and flesh scattered with the rocky debris. He was rather surprised, through the throb of his own agony, that he'd managed that much power. He hadn't thrown a spell with that much backing since before the Prophet had gotten to him and mucked about with the internal channels of his magic. Interesting that sheer desperation for his own life had brought it out. But then again, his most powerful magics always had come of their own accord, when he was beyond the capacity of summoning them on his own behalf.

There was one left and Kall-Su sprawled in the uneven earth wondering if he had it in him to call up one more burst of power like the last one. He did not think he had the concentration left him, what with the pain screaming through his body, to force an elemental here against its will.

"Others will follow, *Sahir bil-Jaleed*. Perhaps even our dread lord will be among them. You will die slowly for what you have done." The helmed warrior reined in his dancing mount, twenty yards away, shields so thick Kall could feel them where he sat. He said nothing, hardly in the mood for banter with his enemy. He was shaking. His body falling into shock. His arm was a useless thing at his side. His leg curved unnaturally under him. The pain was becoming curiously distant. He wiped a trail of blood off his lips and smiled.

"No." He disagreed. "I think I will not." He drew power in with every breath, calling upon the last of his own internal source of it, demanding it from the very air around him. One last spell that would wreck carnage blindly. It would surely rend him as well as his enemy, but that hardly mattered now, with others of the march on the way and himself injured beyond his ability to repair.

The helmed warrior hissed a word and the sand flared up around him, obscuring his body and the body of his horse. Kall blinked into the maelstrom, blinded as the air became thick with sand and dirt. He let his shields drop, needing that power as well to fuel his spell, and huddled, covering his head with his arm to keep the sand from his eyes and nose. It scoured exposed skin. Blood began to flow copiously. He screamed, mouthing the words of the spell, summoning a dark power that was not exactly elemental and not exactly not from a resting place that he'd always considered in the past best well enough alone.

Something dark sputtered to life and surged out of the void. Something evil and hungry that searched for the tiniest spark of life. The animals went first, weak and defenseless against it, and Kall had a moment's regret for the valiant animal that had brought him tirelessly across the desert in his flight. The helmed warrior's beast crumpled under him and he cried out in indignation, but scrambled to his feet, fighting off the grasp of the thing Kall had summoned. It swirled around him then retreated, as if the taste of his life was not acceptable to its palate. Kall cried out in frustration as it came for him, sensing his rich life and craving it.

Bad enough to die by a thing he'd summoned, but intolerable not to have his enemy consumed by it as well.

He saw it in the swirling sand before him. A hovering, all consuming darkness that vaguely formed the shape of a man. It reached out trailing fingers towards him and he hissed in annoyance and tried to turn its course back to the not to distant figure of his enemy.

You can't deny me, oh lord and master. The singsong vibrated in his head. It made his ears ring. *I crave your sweet life. It bleeds into the earth anyway, so why not give it to me.* It touched him and he flinched, going deathly cold at the brief contact.

"No. Take him first, then you can have me. My word."

He tastes of dry death warmed over. I'd rather have you.

"Do as I command. *Ahkranal*." He used its name, for names held power that no spell could match. It shuddered and hesitated.

No. You don't have the power left to command me. It finally said and descended.

And rather suddenly it wailed. Just wailed and cringed and withered in upon itself. It took Kall-Su a moment to separate the surge of power assaulting it from the other myriad magics swirling about with the sand and dust. It fled back into the place it had come with its incorporeal tail between its incorporeal legs. For a moment he thought the helmed warrior had done it, for that one was striding towards him with his long curved blade naked in his gauntleted hand. But that assumption proved to be wrong when the creature was quite thoroughly consumed by a ball of crackling energy that ate through its lowered shields and ate the armor off its body before dissolving the flesh from bones and leaving a rather untidy pile of char and melted metal in its wake.

Kall stared through watering eyes.

"Why do you insist on summoning things when you can't control them?"

He blinked past the tears and the grit, confused. He'd rather thought he hadn't died. Now he wasn't so certain.

"Did it kill me?" he murmured into his forearm, not quite feeling up to pushing himself up to turn and face what was most certainly a spirit come to guide him into the realm of the dead.

"Does it hurt?" The crunch of boots on the rubble and a sudden shade. He looked up at Schneider crouching over him.

"Yes."

"Then you're not dead, idiot."

"Oh." He felt giddy, lightheaded. "But you are."

There was a pained sigh. A hand reached down and wiped a smear of blood from his temple. "Not this time. Look at this mess. You know I'm going to stop telling people I trained you if you can't make a better showing than this. Sloppy."

"Oh. You're alive?" he couldn't fathom it.

"What was that thing? That demon. It was damned hard to chase away."

"Ahkranal." Kall murmured, too dazed to withhold the name from Schneider. One never, ever shared the control of conquered demons or elementals with rival wizards.

"Well, he was a pain in the ass. Nasty too. Look at all the dead horses, you should be ashamed."

Kall blinked and shifted to see.

"I'm sorry." He murmured, utterly, truly contrite. "I wasn't thinking about the horses."

Schneider sighed again. "I wasn't serious."

"Oh. Are you really here?" he was only half convinced it wasn't an hallucination or a death dream.

"Tell you what. Don't worry about it, right now. Go to sleep."

Schneider waved a finger and Kall did. Immediately, deeply, completely.

* * * * *

Kall-Su was messed up in a major way. Schneider wasn't ready to deal with it here. Not in the aftermath of a rather loud, rather nasty magical conflict. If it had drawn him, it would draw others. He didn't want to hang around for the Black March to come and see what had happened. As much as the thought rankled, he wasn't ready to face Ramlah just yet. Especially not with a newly acquired Kall-Su in such dreadful condition.

It pissed him off to no ends. He looked around for a trace of enemy life to take the irritation out on, and found none. Kall had taken quite a few of them out. There were parts of bodies scattered all over. There was nothing left to do but retreat. He picked up Kall-Su and took the both of them into the air, shielding as he did, obliterating any trace of his power signature and Kall's from spying eyes.

It had taken him half an hour to get here, flying full out. He sped back at a little less that pace, his concentration on the shields slowing him a bit. Kall was bleeding quite lot, which was soaking Schneider's robes. He'd have to deal with that soon.

He sat down on Amir's ship, rather than the teaming harbor town. The sailors scattered, recognizing him and giving him ample room. He knew where he was heading. Down under the deck to the cabin with the nicest bunk on the ship. The captain's. The second mate made an effort to stop him and got battered aside like a puppet.

"Go complain to Amir." Schneider suggested and slammed the door in the man's bruised face. He laid Kall-Su down on Amir's neatly made bunk. Lifted aside bloody layers of robes to get to naked skin. More blood. More abrasions, more broken things. Bones, muscle, organs. He sifted through them, one by one, careful in his work. A thousand me might be destroyed with a quick flash of raging power, but it took concentration and deliberation to repair a single one's torn and shattered body. He was good at it. Quite amazingly good at the giving of life, considering how adept he was at the taking of it. He mended bones and flesh and organs and then searched for more minor afflictions. And found things that made him draw his brows in speculation, made him tighten his lips in growing wrath. Rather recently done things that had not been perpetrated in the heat of battle. Marks and hurts that were more personal in nature than a good, impersonal battle. He lifted cloth aside to see the fading traces of some of the outer ones. Burn marks on perfectly smooth skin here and there the trailing residue of a skillfully utilized blade; the imprint of teeth. The type of marks that gave pleasure to a certain sort of giver and pain and degradation to the receiver.

"Someone really needs to die." He murmured, chin in palm, jaw twitching in anger.

"You found him." The door opened unbidden and Amir stepped in, wise enough not to condemn Schneider's appropriation of his cabin.

"Yes." He agreed.

"And the Black March?"

He shrugged. "Short a few members, I think."

"His doing or yours?"

"Both. What do you want?"

"Are they close? Should we abandon this place?"

Another shrug. "Do what you wish. I would imagine it might be the wise choice."

Amir nodded. "I'll tell the folk in the town."

"Do that." Schneider merely wanted him gone. He had vengeance's to contemplate and he always did that best in solitude.

* * * * *

Kall-Su came awake bewildered and slightly nauseous. The sickness came from the swaying of his world, the disorientation from the fact that he woke at all, and the unfamiliarity of the place he found himself in.

"God." He murmured softly and pushed himself up. His body was whole. His skin bare when the light sheet slid off his shoulders.

He looked about and saw a small room with a small round window. The bunk was bolted against the wall, draped by curtains tied back to hooks in the wall. It was night beyond the window and the smell of water was strong. On a ship then. One of his least favorite places to be.

Shadow shifted at the head of the bed, movement half hidden by the fold of one of the bed curtains. He spun that way, defensively and saw a shimmer of pale hair in the shadows.

"Schneider?" his voice came out hoarse. Disbelieving. "Is it -you?"

"Hummm. Where you expecting someone else, Kall?"

"I felt you die. I felt you - and then you were gone."

"No. You were wrong."

He couldn't think. He couldn't catch a proper breath. His throat wanted to constrict and cut off all intake of air. "What - happened?" he hated the choked sound of his own voice when Schneider sounded so calm and so cold. As if he were perturbed at him.

Schneider moved, shifted out of his chair to sit on the edge of the bed. "It hardly matters. Are you happy to see me alive and well."

Kall-Su stared, at a loss, floundering and losing the battle to keep his wits about him. He nodded mutely, beyond words to express just how happy. Just how much hurt the notion of Schneider's death had dealt him. How much hopelessness that death had plunged him into.

Schneider opened his arms. An invitation. A peace offering of sorts, like he'd used to do when Kall was very young and they'd had a spat. Kall had always come out on the loosing end of such arguments. Had always been hurt by them and more times than not Schneider had been oblivious to that hurt. But sometimes, he'd offered that scrap of affection that had always been just enough to keep Kall begging for more.

He felt fifteen now. And hurt and bruised and lost. He flung himself into that embrace, pressing his face into the cloth at Schneider's shoulder, into that cloud soft hair that smelled of native spices and incense. The arms came around him, a firm embrace. A hand stroked his hair, his back. It was comfort that he'd dared not hope for and he fought to hold back unbidden tears. He could not express the words for what he felt. He hardly knew what it was even without the benefit of words. Relief, gratitude, adoration, worship - love. They'd all applied at one time or another.

"He touched you." Schneider's soft voice in his ear. Not a question.

Kall stiffened and the arms holding him tightened, refusing to let him go. Refusing to give him distance.

"What?"

"Ramlah. His mark is on you. The stench of his power clings to you. It was inside you. He was."

He shuddered, vision tunneling in his panic. "It was a spell. A binding. A blood oath." He babbled. He didn't want to go into the other.

"I know. I erased what was left of it. You gave him your oath?"

"My choices were extremely limited" he said in defense, uneasy at the tone in Schneider's voice and the underlying buzz of violent power that seethed around him. "I thought you were dead."

"So you gave oath to my killer?"

Kall pushed for release, wanting to see what expression Schneider wore. Wary now and uncertain of his standing. The things that offended Schneider were not always reasonable things. Schneider let him go and he shifted backwards, pulling the sheet with him. He was quite unclothed without it.

"It seemed the thing to do. I had more than my own life to think about."

"Ah. The girl."

"Yes." He agreed.

"I suppose you thought her a good enough reason to abandon me."

Kall blinked, appalled at the accusation. "No!" he denied it. "And no again! Are you deaf? I said I thought you dead. I felt you die as surely as I've ever felt a thing cease to be."

"I didn't *cease to be* - you put things so tactfully - I was swallowed up by the damn djinni's bottle. And I sat in that bottle for god knows how long waiting for someone to let me out and in the end it was your traitorous little guide who did it."

"Well, let me assure you," Kall hissed, irritated now himself. "That I would have gladly changed places with you."

"Hummm. I imagine you would. What did he do to you?"

Back to that again. It swallowed Kall-Su's agitation and replaced it with dread. "Nothing. He did nothing."

"Really? There are marks on you." Schneider leaned forward, his hand snaking out and trailing across Kall-Su's hip, pushing the sheet away from his flank enough to bare the skin. "He rather had a taste for you, from the mark of teeth."

God. He looked down to where Schneider's fingers rested, hardly knowing what to expect. He'd hardly had the time or inclination to inspect the range of his injuries when he'd woken in Ramlah's tent. Hardly thought of anything but escape at the time.

"I erased them. All of them. Shall I show you all the places?"

"No." he whispered, stricken.

"Was it willing?"

"No." Numbly. "It never is."

Schneider lifted a brow.

"He said - he said he would find Lily. He said - various other things and in the end - I don't think I really cared what he might do - as long as it did not involve me. So I broke my oath to him and my vow to protect her and ran."

"You broke no vow to her. At least none she won't forgive you for."

"If she's even alive."

"If." Schneider agreed. He lifted a hand to stroke Kall-Su's hair. There was something predatory and dangerous in his eyes. But it wasn't towards him. "Tell me what happened. From the start. Everything."

Kall shook his head. "There's no need -"

"There *is* a need. I *need* to know. I need fuel for the fire, no? Supply it for me, Kall."

Chapter 23

Kall-Su wanted up and away. Away perhaps from Schneider's uneasy presence, away from the insinuations and the questions that he did not want to answer. Schneider made him answer anyway, just to prove he could. It became important, somehow, to prove his mastery, when someone else had tried to wrongfully assert their own on what clearly belonged to him. He was angry, in a way, at Kall-Su for allowing that mastery. For taking that pledge. He believed him when he said it was for the sake of the girl. Naive of him to think Ramlah wouldn't have killed her outright if he'd laid eyes on her. Schneider was considering it himself. The mere memory of her drew more of Kall-Su's loyalty than his own supposed death had. He wouldn't act on the whim, though. Kall would hate him for it. Yoko would. He did not wish to engender those particular hatreds.

"You're stubborn." He complained, silk voiced and dangerous in his passivity, when Kall refused, yet again to give him the painful details that he wanted.

"Leave me alone." Kall hissed, fed up with the interview, mortally embarrassed at the subject, emasculated by his position in this exchange, pressed in his corner of the bunk, naked save for the sheet he held like a shield in front of him. The lantern light made him all golden and soft, his eyes loomed huge and blue, filled with trepidation and just a tad of uncertainty. Just a tad of fear of Schneider. Which was as it ought to be, really. Schneider hated the thought of himself becoming the passive, domestic creature that Yoko dreamed of making him. He hated the notion of people taking him for granted. His blood boiled for violence. His power was a leashed angry thing inside him. His enemy was not at hand. Kall-Su was.

"Why? It was a crime against you, wasn't it? You didn't *let* him lay hands on you, did you?"

"Bastard." Kall hissed at him, furious. "No. I told you - *no!*"

"Yet you followed him around like a dog on his heels - for how long?"

"Go to hell?"

"Been there. I like it here better, thank you."

"Why are you doing this?" Desperation crept into Kall's voice. Bafflement. He had expected succor and found - what? Suspicion, anger - jealousy? Schneider thought about the latter, curious over the implications. Thought about the utter smoothness of Kall's white skin when he'd run his fingers over it, banishing the wounds. Thought about Ramlah's dark hands on that same lovely skin and ground his teeth in rage.

He leaned forward, resting his palms on either side of Kall's tucked knees, making Kall-Su draw back into his corner, glaring daggers at Schneider for the invasion of his space. He put a knee on the bunk and slunk forward, like a big cat on the prowl. Kall's shoulders pressed into the wood and the daggers faded to a great deal of unease.

"I was afraid you might be dead, left alone to face them." He purred. "I forgot the length and breadth of your resourcefulness. You always were quite adept at whoring yourself out to the powers that be when I was out of the picture."

"Don't -"

He lifted a hand and pressed his fingers over Kall's lips to quell the retort.

"Did he keep you alive for your magic?" he slid his fingers around Kall's cheek, down his neck to the curve of his shoulder. "Or for the use of this smooth body? It's hardly occurred to me before, what a valuable bargaining chip you have, with this skin, and this hair, and this perfect face."

"God, DS- what do you want to hear? I don't know what to say to you, when you won't hear the truth. *Yes*, he wanted my body. Maybe -maybe more than he wanted my magic. But so did you when you took me in, so what's the difference?"

Schneider grinned at the blush staining Kall's cheeks. He ran his hand down the back of Kall's arm, enjoying the discomfort, enjoying the mere feel of his skin. "Yes," he agreed. "But I didn't want to fuck you - at the time."

That did it. Kall cursed under his breath and shoved at Schneider violently. Schneider swayed backwards, clutched at the sheet and took it with him when he toppled backwards onto his ass. Which left Kall-Su with nothing but long, well-shaped limbs to cover his modesty. There was nothing like conflict to bring Schneider's already surging libido to a head. The jealousy, the anger, the possessiveness, the curiosity all melded together and with a lazy grin and focused intent in his eyes he lunged forward, warning as he did.

"No magic. They'll sense it." Which was all fine and well, and probably all too true. Not that he cared at the moment. All he really cared about was not having the ship sunk out from under him when he had other goals in mind.

He had the advantage all round. He was bigger, heavier, stronger, and most definitely had surprise on his side. What Kall was expecting, he didn't know, but he was most certainly more interested in grabbing that sheet back than he was fending off Schneider. Schneider clasped him about the knees and dragged him away from the wall and onto his back before he fully realized what sort of contest this was to be. Then his eyes got wide and his lips pulled back into a snarl of purest frustration.

"DS - *get off*." Kall hissed at him. Kall was all writhing silky skin under him. God if he wasn't softer than Yoko on the outside, but underneath that layer of softness there was all hard muscle and fascinating power. Women didn't have that sort of strength to make the challenge interesting. Women had other things that made it worthwhile.

"You let *him*." He caught a wrist and pinned it over Kall's head.

"You - *ass*." Kall sputtered, enraged, indignant. "I *let* him do nothing. It was against my will. Can you understand that?"

"Would it be against your will with me?"

That stopped him. That made his blue eyes widen. The both of them lay there, panting. Kall-Su aghast or overwhelmed or baffled beyond words.

"But -" he faltered. "You want -?"

"Hummm." Schneider agreed, shifting a bit, lowering his head so that his hair fell like a curtain around Kall's face. He remembered the kiss in the whore house. It had been lingering in the back of his mind for some time now. He covered Kall's lips with his own, open mouthed and demanding. Wanting the hidden secrets inside. Kall's lips parted, but he was passive, allowing the intrusion, allowing the exploration but not participating. He was trembling. Trapped under Schneider's weight, he was merely allowing the inevitable to wash over him. As long as he was powerless, he was a victim, and damn him to hell - that wasn't what Schneider wanted. Not really.

Without breaking the kiss, he tensed and rolled, reversing their positions, felt of a sudden the heady weight and warmth of Kall's body pressing him down into Amir's feather mattress. Kall had to put his hands out for balance. His palms flat on either side of Schneider's head, his fingers tangling in the mass of silvery hair that spread out under him. Schneider kept one hand on the back of Kall's head, and let the other roam down the expanse of his back. He'd had a boy or two before when there weren't pleasant enough looking women about, back in his days of conquering the world - or the small part of it that had been available to him. There had been a time he'd have fucked anything on two legs, as long as it looked good and smelled reasonably nice. Whether it was willing or not hadn't been an issue. He was well familiar with the concept of rape. He'd raped as many partners as he'd had willing ones. He'd rather it not be like this now. He'd rather a little receptiveness from Kall-Su.

And perhaps with the reversal of their positions there was. Perhaps he even heard a little moan issue from the depths of Kall's throat, and felt a definite return pressure of mouth and tongue. His hand slid over the mounds of Kall's rear and he sighed in contentment. It was quite, quite the nice ass and he was in the midst of fondling it more fully when the door slammed open and Amir burst in for a second time, brimming over with some trivial news that was libel to get him killed. The pirate captain stopped, stared and let for a moment a smug smirk spread across his dark face. A rather, *I knew it all along*, smirk that Schneider started contemplating spells to get rid of.

Kall rolled off him with a hiss and a rapid gathering of protective sheets.

"How do you want to die, Water rat?" Schneider laced his fingers behind his head, lying there on his back with a most impressive erection straining against his robes.

Amir made a deep and obviously contrived bow. "As much as I hate to interrupt your pleasures, oh great one,- but there's a sand storm brewing and we've got to get out of here now. Might there be a chance of a little magical wind to help us and the other vessels on our way?"

Kall whispered something that might have been a very nasty curse under his breath.

"Get out." Schneider suggested smoothly to Amir. "Go and put up the sails or pull up the anchor or whatever."

Amir gave him a look and a dark frown, but followed his suggestion nonetheless. Which obedience gave Schneider some small bit of satisfaction until he was kicked rudely and none too gently off the bunk and onto the hard deck.

"You ass!" Kall-Su glowered fiercely down at him. "You self-serving, arrogant ass! What were you doing? *What were you doing?*"

"I thought it was rather obvious." Schneider growled, but it was more under his breath than anything else.

Kall stared, then dug his forehead into his palm like he was trying to compact his skull. "Get out!" he hissed. "Go brew up a wind."

Schneider wasn't sure he liked the tone of command. He wasn't certain he wanted to break this off as it was. He detested starting things that he couldn't finish. The ache at his loins was a damned insistent voice yammering at him to just take what he needed and be damned with everything else. Of course he'd hate to get interrupted in the pursuit of that by the arrival of the Black March. Oh, that would be oh so very annoying. He lifted his brow and tossed Kall-Su an imperious glare.

"We'll finish this later."

"We will *not*!" Kall hurled back. "Gods, where are my clothes?"

"Gone. Find something of the water rat's." Schneider suggested, climbed to his feet and stalked out the door Amir had shut on his way out.

Up on deck and the sense of underlying magic hit him like a slap across the face. There was a darkness on the horizon in the direction from which he'd reacquired his ice mage. Ramlah, no doubt, looking to take him back. He wondered idly if Kall was that good a lay, or if he'd mortally insulted someone to the point that justification of this was warranted.

He called a wind to lift him into the air, taking vague notice of the people scurrying to pile into the ragtag assortment of river vessels moored at the docks of this soon to be extinct town. Figures huddled, crowded upon the deck of Amir's ship.

He sent out a tendril of exploratory magic, testing the magnitude of power approaching and found it to be daunting. He hissed in frustration - forcing himself to listen to the reasonable part of his mind that warned against confrontation at this time and hating it. Absolutely loathing the notion that there was something out there stronger than himself.

He spoke a curse word, then followed it by the recitation of a summoning. He called forth a wild wind elemental that strained and rebelled against his leash on it. He brought it under control with a savage twist of his will. The sails filled with air. Those ships already out into the river's currents sprang suddenly ahead. Those still at dock, pulled at their moorings. Amir's ship broke free, wafting out into the current, its great sails taught with Schneider's wind. He thought he saw Kall-Su on deck, one pale head amidst a hundred dark ones. He swooped down and hovered off the side of the ship. People cried out in dismay at the sight of him, muttering wards against evil, pushing against each other to distant themselves from him.

Kall shoved his way to the rail, face pale and worried. He could feel the power coming their way, too. He'd felt it up close and personal for too long a time.

"The water will deter them." He called over the sound of snapping sails, whistling wind and rushing water. "They've no tolerance for it."

"Stay here." Schneider ordered.

"Where are you going?" Kall looked appalled.

"Up." Schneider said. "To appease curiosity."

"DS -- *no!* You can't face them all."

"I didn't say I was going to."

"They'll sense you -"

"No they won't. Stay." He shot up as if propelled by more than mere wind, not willing to stay and argue with Kall-Su.

Skyward; high enough where the town was nothing more than a diminutive collection of brown splotches and the river was a narrow, gently winding snake, decorated with tiny black scales that were boats. The sandstorm was a rolling tidal wave of earth. A damned lot of earth to move by the force of magic alone. A mile long swath of destruction that left nothing but a cloud of sand and dust in its wake. A cloud impenetrable by the eye. He watched it wash over the town, watched the shapes of buildings disappear, eaten up by the sand. The river almost stopped it short. It coiled and fumed and spilled over across the water, wasting its sand and earth and wind against the currents. Those boats lagging in their retreat were caught by the weakening tendrils of it. Tossed about and ravaged, the sand scouring wood and flesh and bone. People died down there. It surged along the banks, after the fleeing vessels, sacrificing its power and its momentum as the outer edges of it surged out over the water in the vain attempt to catch the boats closest to the shore. The parts of it that lingered over the river withered and died.

"Fuck this." Schneider cursed, offended. He cared not a whit about those people down there, cared not whether they all lived out their lives or died, but he did care about scores being made against a side that he had tentatively taken. Any side that was against Ramlah was his side. And he hated to see resources of his squandered.

He spat out the words of a summoning spell, hovering there in a tense, angry fit while the creature he wanted strained and rebelled against his call. Not a weak elemental this one. A damned surly, damned powerful one. It surged into the sky around him, scattering the wisps of high clouds, whipping Schneider's hair and cloak about him as if he were at the center of an angry storm. He was. It was a wind elemental he had called forth. A massive, broiling one that could do more than whip up winds to carry ships to dubious safety. This one was a brewer of storms. This one had the force of tornadoes and hurricanes at its beck and call.

You presumptuous, pitiful human creature. It railed at him and Schneider smiled grimly and compacted the force of his will, twisted it in his incorporeal hands and heard it bellow in pain.

Yes, hateful master. What do you wish of me?

That was better. Schneider jabbed a finger at the turmoil below. "Stop that. Force it back from the river. Squash it, if you can."

The elemental gazed down, the faint outlines of its features screwed up in consternation. *I cannot stop that.* It stated simply. *The power that feeds it is beyond my ken.*

"I didn't ask for your opinion. I asked for your obedience. Go and try." It enraged him, the calm prediction of its weakness in comparison to what Ramlah had wrought.

The advantage it had, was the river did not daunt it. It swept down over the water and forced the sands back from it. There was a clashing of winds that formed a swirling, snarling black mass there at the shores that rose like a funnel high into the sky. Schneider felt the bitter grate of them and stubbornly refused to put up more shields than he already had. He might have lent a hand, save that he didn't want to fight Ramlah's creation, he wanted to fight Ramlah himself, and to waste himself against that mindless wall of sand would gain him nothing but a disadvantage when the lord of the Black March finally did show himself. Summoning this elemental cost him little but the effort to control it.

His creature sputtered out eventually, no match against the sandstorm, but it had served its purpose. It had allowed the ships to reach the safety the far side of the river afforded. It could rail and sulk on its side of the Nile as much as it pleased.

It was something of a victory. Not much of one, but enough to make him feel a small sense of satisfaction. If he'd had a willing partner down there on that ship, he'd have gone down and assuaged the hard-on that had never quite gone away, and that the small victory had compounded. Fighting always made his blood surge. Arshes had always been more than willing to fulfill his needs. She had understood them. Yoko did to an extent, but was less willing to prostrate herself for the mere sake of his physical urges. He wished she were here now, instead of that annoying, prudish ice wizard who'd gotten under his skin and then refused him the gratification of allowing him to scratch the itch.

He cursed and glowered down at the tiny speck of Amir's ship. Damn Kall-Su anyway. Sex was sex was sex. It didn't make him any less of a man that he wanted it with Kall, who *looked* 18 and was pretty as a girl anyway. A hole was a hole as far as he was concerned and as long as he was the one plundering it, he had no qualms about it. And it wouldn't even be breaking his promise to Yoko. Not really. She'd said no women. Distinctly made him promise not to have another *woman* while he was having her. He remembered the pledge in vivid, dreadful detail. She'd bullied him into it and no one ever bullied Dark Schneider into anything. No one but Yoko, who he had a weak spot for. Who could make him promise silly things like no sex with women other than her. She'd never said he couldn't have Kall-Su.

It was just a matter of getting the damned ice wizard to agree to it. Well, maybe not much of an agreement was required, but he truly would prefer it not to be a flat out rape. Kall had obviously had his fill of that. A fight he could handle, though. A fight he would relish. He'd work on it. If Yoko was his weak spot, then *he* was most certainly Kall-Su's. Always had been, in one form or another. He knew it and had used it to his advantage on more occasions that he could even begin to remember. Now he merely had a different goal in mind.

He dropped back down to the ship. Sat down on a rocking deck drenched with water and stray bits of sand and dirt. The folk on deck were huddled, clutching to each other, holding tight to

whatever was bolted down to keep themselves from being flung over the sides. The winds were still ferocious. From this angle the sky was dark and covered in ominous clouds. He'd been above them before - or they'd gathered at the behest of his dwindling wind elemental. A bit of rain spattered down. It wet his hair and made long strands of it cling to his face and neck. He caught a sailor by the arm and demanded.

"Where's the other wizard?"

The man babbled something, scared witless. Terrified of him as much as anything else. Schneider let him go and stalked for the portal leading down to the lower deck. Kall-Su met him in the narrow dark passage on his way top-side.

"What did you do?" Was the immediate accusation.

Schneider shrugged and kept walking, smiled and refused to turn to the side in order to squeeze past the younger wizard, leaving Kall no choice but to back up and bitch at him at the same time.

"They'll know we're here, now. You weren't supposed to do anything, DS!"

"Oh, well."

"Oh, well? Are you insane?"

Another shrug. He'd been called worse. "He didn't know it was me. It could have been you that called it, for all he knows and he knows you came this way anyway."

"And that makes it all better?" Kall was pissed and a little scared. But not of him. Which could have been a good thing or a bad thing. He caught Kall-Su's shoulder and swung him around and against the wall. Planted both of his hands on the wood at either side of the younger wizard's head and stared down with thinly veiled speculation.

"Much better. It keeps him interested." He allowed a smile to touch his lips. "And if he's interested, he'll follow where we lead, now won't he?"

"And we want this?" Kall licked dry lips nervously.

"A little interest can be a dangerous thing." He leaned closer, grazing his lower body against Kall's hips just to let him know that Schneider's own interest had not faded. Kall got an offended look in his eyes. He pushed against Schneider's chest in frustration.

"DS - this is not happening. Get off."

"I'm not on." He refused to budge, liking the feel of Kall's flat, hard tummy against his oh so sensitive erection. "You'll know when I'm on."

Something jolted into his chest. Cold as hell and hurtful. He took a painful breath and staggered back into the opposite wall. Drew a hand up to the frigid spot over his heart and felt actual damage done to the tissues around that organ.

"You little fuck." He hissed. "That hurt!"

"Good." Kall hissed back. "Keep your mind on the matter at hand."

"This is the matter at hand." He grinned even as he healed frost damaged flesh. "And I was just thinking about having a fight with you. Thoughtful of you to initiate it."

"Damnit -DS -"

"Ah hummm. I do hate to keep interrupting you -" Amir stood at the end of the corridor, a wan smile on his lips. "-But, I've a proposition to discuss."

Kall-Su looked his way blandly. Schneider snarled and wiped damp hair off his face. "It better be a damned good one." He muttered, then as an afterthought, jabbed a finger at Kall-Su and said coldly. "You, I'm pissed at. Don't talk to me for the rest of the day." Then strode down the hall while Kall was blinking at his back in surprise.

Outright physical coercion wasn't working very well, perhaps a little mental manipulation might get better results.

Chapter Twenty-four

Schneider was annoyed at him. Schneider was annoyed at *him*. As if he'd been the one out of line. As if he'd been the one pushing propriety to its limits and beyond. Propriety and Schneider? Ha! Those were two contradictory terms if ever there were.

Kall-Su could hardly focus he was so perturbed at the notion. He picked at the folds of his robes and glowered icily at nothing in particular while he brooded over Schneider's deliberate disregard. At the complete absurdity of Schneider's reasoning. Reason. Another word that hardly served as a descriptive one when contemplating Schneider.

Asininity was a better one. And stubborn. And lecherous. And recently growing a fixation upon him that was - - - frightening - baffling - - disturbing. It made his stomach churn and his palms sweat thinking about it. Thinking about what had almost happened in that cabin before Amir had come in and interrupted it. About what he had almost let happen. But no, he would have stopped it. He would most certainly have come to his senses and put a halt to it. Beyond what was right and moral - he owed it to Lily. Lily was a far better excuse than the former two. After a century or so of living as a wizard and no peaceful one at that for most of that time - right and moral lost a bit of their meaning. Loyalty didn't.

"Are you listening?" Schneider's voice cut through his musings. Sharp, imperious voice usually reserved for idiots and enemies. Kall-Su blinked and stared at the map Amir had spread out on the table in the center of his cabin.

"What? Kall-Su asked, looking to the captain for a civil answer to the question.

"In two days the Black March and their army will be here, in this valley. It is a fine place for an army to set up camp, for the highland surrounding it cuts off the desert winds."

"And?"

"and -" Amir took an impatient breath, obviously having said this once. "It will be possible to slow them down if we could divert some of the Nile's flood waters that way. Its the season for floods anyway, and with a bit of creative damming, we could cause Ramlah's army a great deal of discomfort.

Kall tilted his head, running a finger down the snaking line that was the great river. Less than a pinkies width away was a broad body of water.

"What's this?"

"the Red Sea." Amir said, then clarified. "No help there, its a hundred miles away.

"Oh. And this tributary? It seems to run from there to here almost?"

"Ah, that. A hatchling river. The earth shifted some thirty years past and that was created. It bleeds into the sea."

"I don't see how getting their feet wet will benefit us." Schneider sipped at his wine, directing his words to Amir, hardly even looking to Kall-Su at all. "I thought you had something a bit more radical in mind."

"It will give us time to evacuate the people from the villages in their path."

Schneider sniffed, disinterested in such a humanitarian act.

"Not our concern. It doesn't get me any closer to wiping Ramlah off the face of the earth."

"Don't confuse your concerns with mine." Kall-Su said coldly. "I refuse to let them blindly wipe out those towns and cities when Lily may in one of them."

Schneider lifted a dark brow scornfully. "Oh, I had forgotten the range of your morality. Of course, once you find the baggage your interest in saving innocent lives will be exhausted, will it not?"

"You are craven and selfish." Kall spat, driven to anger now, as only Schneider could manage.

"Me selfish? You're the one with the agenda" Clam and cold. Schneider was not angry at all. Schneider was out for blood and scoring wounds on a regular basis.

"We've veered off topic here." Amir cleared his throat, glaring at the both of them.

"I've veered off nothing." Schneider said, tilting his goblet again. "I'm exactly where I want to be."

Kall-Su hissed, pushing himself up. Exasperation ate at him like acid. And there was only so far a body could go to expel it at Schneider without provoking appalling consequences. He escaped onto the deck, had to stop and gain his balance as he always did when the sight of so much rocking water assaulted his vision. It wasn't as bad as the sea. God - not nearly so terrible as that, but it was ungainly and uncomfortable and he doubted he'd ever gain sealegs.

At least the water surrounding him was fresh and did not hold for him the overwhelming suffocation that the ocean did.

He couldn't fight with Schneider. He'd never been able to fight with Schneider and win. It tore at his nerves and his self-confidence until he began to doubt the validity of his own cause. Keeping his wits about him was hard enough after his narrow escape from the Black March. After - Ramlah. And to have Schneider pounce on him before he'd gathered abused defenses - was beyond his capacity to easily deal. He cried loyalty to Lily - and would be true to her till the day he died - or more accurately and dismally, the day she did - but for a while back there in that cabin - he'd forgotten all about her, overcome with the amazement that Schneider wanted *him*. *Wanted him!* And maybe that was the thing battering most strenuously at his emotional shields - maybe that was the thing that had him starting arguments and throwing angry words about like petals in the wind. That for a while there, Lily hadn't mattered. That for a while there, he might have let himself drown in something that had never before been offered - something that he'd always before been on the outside of and desperately yearned for. Not the sex part, perhaps - though he honestly couldn't sift through the welter of his confused emotions as a young man growing up under Dark Schneider's tutelage to truly know, but the other - the needing - the physical desire for his presence as something other than a tool or a means to an end - *that* had been an overwhelming realization. To know that Schneider wanted him - and badly - god, it robbed him of reasonable thought.

He gripped the rail and stared blindly at the dark water. Vaguely, he heard the sounds of the sailors moving around him, of the refugees on deck. He couldn't deal with it. He couldn't deal with the utter coldness Schneider was presenting him with now, after being rebuffed. It hurt, even though he tried to pretend that it didn't. He needed something to divert his attention. Somewhere to channel his energies.

He caught sight of the little brown guide, Abu and his attention was momentarily distracted by a familiar face.

"Hello, great Dijin." Abu smile his oily smile and slithered up. "I had feared for your death."

"You managed to survive."

"Yes and was most wonderfully blessed by discovering the other most honorable wizard."

"Honorable?" Kall-Su lifted a brow. He supposed he ought to be grateful, regardless of recent agitation's. He stared at the far shore with its muddy banks and lush greenery. At this juncture, with this moist air and abundance of fresh water, his powers were great. Amazing that less than a mile from here and the desert would rob him of fuel for the most intrinsic of his magics. He thought about Amir's hopes of bogging Ramlah's armies down with diverted floodwaters from the Nile and doubted it would work. Doubted anything so miserly would hinder the Black March. It would take more. Much more. Though water was the key. The March abhorred it.

"Abu, I was shown a map of this river and somewhere ahead of us there was a tributary that split off from it leading towards the sea. Amir said it was created when the earth shifted many years ago. Do you know of what I speak?"

"Yes. I know. It feeds a portion of the desert that had never been fed with fresh water before."

"Can you show me?"

The little man shrugged. "I could. We will pass it soon enough."

"Sooner." Kall said and called the winds. Abu let out a little shrill sound of startlement as his feet left the relative stability of the deck. He breathed a prayer or a curse that Kall-Su couldn't understand, then there was nothing but water under them and that far below and he said nothing in fear that Kall-Su might relinquish his hold on him and drop him to his death.

They sped far ahead of the boat, bullied by the wild wind currents that Schneider had called earlier to fill the sails. Past the mud flats and into canyons that towered over the river and beyond that to the broad mouth of a tributary that spit from the winding Nile and bled east.

"This is it?"

Abu nodded speechlessly. Kall sat him down at the juncture and told him to stay. It would be faster, easier traveling without his weight. Abu watched miserably as he was abandoned. Kall had more care for the tributary. There was a narrow swatch of life around it, a miniature version of the greenness given life by the Nile. A channel opened by some intrinsic weakness of the earth. He could feel the unstability when he plunged his senses below the water and into the ground. Not only did the water flow above, but there were also channels of it below, encased in stone. How far they reached towards the sea would remain to be seen.

He had a glimmer of a plan though. One better than Amir's. Tenfold better, if it worked.

Kall-Su had gone without a word to anyone. The superstitious refugees all whispered about demons and black magics and gestured skyward in the retelling of the departure. That he'd left without bothering to offer an explanation was an aggravation. It didn't quite border on worry. If he ran into trouble the resonance of magic in the air would be warning enough. It merely annoyed Schneider that Kall had avoided his ire by simply flying away. When Schneider was going out of his way to be pissed at a body, he found it infuriating to have that body flee his efforts.

He sat on the railing at the bow of the ship and brooded. Winds partially of his making whipped his hair about his face, obscuring vision, hiding the darkness of his expression. The sailors and the refugee's kept their distance, giving him all the seclusion he wished. Even Amir left him be, after the disheartening response to his plan. Besides, Amir only intruded upon him when he was intent on more serious business, and there was none of that likely to occur what with Kall-Su avoiding his cold shoulder.

Annoying little prude. More frustrating than Yoko when she'd refused to give in to the inevitable. It had been a rather amusing chase with her. Not even once had he contemplated striking her down with a high powered spell merely to have his way with her. Of course she'd never taken a pledge of loyalty to him, never promised the obedience of a vassal to a lord, so one had to give her leeway. Kall-Su had, on more than one occasion and it was perfectly irritating to be so thoroughly rebelled against. Arshes Nei had never once denied him what he wanted -well, except for the Gara thing, but he'd decided grudgingly to forgive her that. One really would think the Ice Lord would have at least as much loyalty as the Thunder Empress.

There was a minuscule flicker of power from the south. Schneider followed the source lazily, identifying it and relaxing back into his slouch when it proved familiar. He waited, as lazy and indolent seeming as a cat in the grass watching a sparrow. The wind brought Kall-Su with it and the ice wizard sat down on the deck with the little native guide in tow. He sent the man off below decks with a word, his own ice pale eyes finding Schneider at the prow, clearly worked up over something. Well, as clearly as Kall ever habitually showed his emotions, which wasn't a great deal and only notable to someone who knew him well enough to spy the differences.

Schneider ignored him, preferring to watch the rippling water as the ship cut through the current.

"I need to talk with you."

"Humm. Maybe later." Schneider waved a hand at him. "I'm not in the mood now."

"It's important." Kall's voice was rigid with forced diplomacy.

"Our notions of important often vary. Go away - boy." He added the last just to let Kall-Su know his present estimation of his status.

Kall let out a frustrated breath and snapped back. "You are the one acting like a child. A spoiled one at that! This is im - - -"

"Don't -" Schneider hissed and whirled off the railing so fast that Kall-Su never saw the blow coming and staggered back from an closed fist, backhanded blow, into the bole of the forward mast. "- Take that tone with me. You want to trade insults? Find someone who won't make you eat them raw."

Kall-Su glared, trying to keep his balance when the coiled rigging at the foot of the mast tangled with his feet.

"You forget who I am. Have I become so indolent that I give the impression of someone who placidly accepts slander? Do you forget - with your carelessly sworn false oaths - who you're sworn to first and foremost?"

He was angry enough not to bother shielding the swirling power that rose in response to his emotional turmoil. He could feel the surge of Kall-Su's answering magics. He stepped closer, using every bit of his height to his advantage, using every bit of his indomitable force of will, every bit of his absolute assurance of his own justification. Kall-Su never had been able to stand up to all three combined. Not for long at any rate.

He dipped his head marginally, an unwilling act of submission. It took a moment for him to gather the calm to speak. "No. I have not. Forgive me my insolence - *my lord*." That last came out a hiss that in no way indicated the need for absolution. He lifted his head, swiping away the trickle of blood escaping from lips smashed against teeth. He didn't quite shoulder Schneider out of the way in his efforts to stalk away. His shoulder did just manage to graze Schneider's chest in the movement. Just enough physical contact to kindle offense with the alpha male dwelling inside.

Kall really, really should have known better. There'd been a time when he'd been so good at placating Schneider with his diplomatic grace. He seemed sorely lacking that of late. The wolf in Schneider let him get through the hatch and below decks before it pounced, not wishing the annoyance of all the frightened sheep on deck. Caught him halfway down the hall towards Amir's cabin. Grasped his arm and swung him into the door of cabin so hard the wood the hinges were bolted to shattered and the door crashed inwards into a dark and tiny space. First or second mate's quarters maybe, for there was a small table with an unused oil lamp, a hammock and a locker to store personal effects. There was no port. When he kicked the door shut behind him and cast a furious and hasty spell to seal it into place it plunged the room into darkness. Wizard sight pierced it.

"I don't think you're sorry at all."

"Goddamnit, DS -!" Kall-Su's back was to the table. He practically glowed with leashed power. It radiated from him, a cool blue aura so very different from the red hot zeal of Schneider's power. "Stop it! We'll sink this ship."

"Think I give a fuck?" He lunged, smashing Kall-Su backwards, shattering the table and sending the both of them down amongst the ruins of it. Kall got an elbow up and slammed it into Schneider's throat, got a knee in his gut, a combination that momentarily robbed him of breath until his magic reflexively soothed the injury. He didn't even have to think about such minor things - his healing faculties were that good. Kall's had never been honed so well. Kall gasped as the shards of a broken oil lamp gouged his back, cried out when Schneider's weight pressed the glass into his flesh deep enough to do real damage. Reflexively he lashed out in response to the hurt. A huge explosion of ice that flared up into Schneider's face, turning his hair and skin frigid, blasting out a good chunk of the ceiling over their heads and putting a hole in the deck that leaked sunlight down into the dark little cabin.

A terrible gouging hurt that kept him from gaining proper breath. That sent screeching fingers of agony up from his lower back and straight into his brain. He hadn't had the sense to pull that spell. It had come tearing out of him unbidden. At least it had gotten Schneider off him.

Not for long. The furnace of heat that blasted through the cabin made the air unbreathable. Kall-Su choked on the blistery heat and curled on his side, putting up shields to protect himself - wondering how in hell he was going to get past Schneider without blasting a hole in the side of the ship. He truly did not want to sink this ship with all the innocents and allies they'd found upon her. And this little argument dearly needed to be taken outside.

Wood was smoldering. Kall pushed himself up and screamed. "You fool, you'll burn the ship down."

"You're the one who put a hole in her deck, idiot!" Schneider snarled and advanced, all violence and barely contained magical fury. Kall scooted back, got his shoulder to the wall, desperately trying to think of way to stop this madness that had sprung out of nowhere and gotten so thoroughly out of control. Bending knee to him might be infuriating when Schneider was in this irrational frame of mind, but it was better by far that fighting with him when they needed their strength to combat the real enemy. Not that fighting would gain him anything but

eventual defeat. He never been able to take Schneider when he'd been at the height of his powers - there was little chance of it now.

"DS - please. I'm sorry. I mis-spoke. It is nothing but nerves - this place and this thing we face - it takes its toll on both of us."

"You think I'm afraid?" An indignant accusation.

"Yes." He whispered it, because he thought it was true. Because he was. Because maybe that intolerable fear was the insidious root at the cause of Schneider's insanity. Dark Schneider wasn't afraid of anything, because there was nothing that existed as powerful as he - until now. Schneider glared at him silently.

"You're not a fool." Kall said softly, tasting blood in his mouth. "You've never been a fool. It's terrifying, this power they possess. More so because it differs so vastly from our own. They've beaten us both. If we can't find something beyond our magics to aide us, what makes you think they can't do it again and I for one - would rather - die - than end up at their mercy again. They have none."

That did it. That triggered the bit of possessiveness Schneider had for him.

"You won't. I will see them back in the ground."

Diffused, Kall thought. Successfully disarmed. He leaned his head against the wall and tried to gather the stamina to reach around and pull the shards of glass out of his back.

"I believe you this time." Schneider informed him loftily. "Look what you've done to yourself."

To argue the point of blame would have been useless. Schneider put one knee to the deck and pulled Kall-Su forward against him, while he plucked out the glass as if he were picking lent off a tunic. It hurt enough to clot lashes with unwilling tears. Then Schneider ran his fingers over his back and the pain went away. God, he had such a soft touch when it suited him. Kall shut his eyes for a breath, digging his fingers into Schneider's tunic, thinking that the insanity had as much if not more to do with him as with anxiety over the Black March. Angry at him. Furious at him - stymied in his wants and hating it.

"Why - why couldn't you have pursued this half a century ago?" he whispered into the folds of cloth. The hands on his back paused. The healing was done, Schneider was banishing the blood from the robes.

"Would you have been receptive?" Curious.

Denying it would have been self-deceiving. Even Arshes knew. Perhaps that intuition on her part had fueled the sublime hostilities that had existed between them for practically all their long lives.

"Probably."

"Ah." A delighted smile radiated from Schneider. Quite the stunning, white toothed smile that made him none the less dangerous in appearance, perhaps even more so. "Let me fix this." A thumb pressed against Kall's split and swelling lip an instant before Schneider's mouth did. The soft/rough muscle of Schneider's tongue pressed against the torn flesh. His mouth sucked at the blood. He'd rather gotten himself into this, Kall had the presence of mind to think. He'd manipulated peace from violence and now paid the price. Schneider was still powered up enough in the magical sense that violent rebuttal might bring the violence back.

The kiss wasn't that bad, really. Rather intoxicating, when a body wasn't too shocked, or too angry to truly appreciate Schneider's unequalled skills in the area. It was like standing in the tide and letting the power of the waves pull your body this way and that and having very little power to chose a direction of your own liking.

It wasn't until he felt his back hit the floor and the heat of Schneider's very obvious arousal was pressed against his lower belly that rational thought came back.

"But -" He turned his head to gasp and Schneider's mouth moved to his jaw, to a juncture of his throat that Lily had already discovered to be a sensitive spot.

" - not -" Schneider had a hand under one of his knees, pulling his leg up so that he could settle between Kall's thighs. The hand drifted down the back of Kall's thigh to his rear, fingers digging into the flesh there with enough strength to make Kall groan and forget his line of thought. Only for a moment though.

"-Now. But not now. I can't now, DS. Lily. I can't betray Lily."

"What she doesn't know, won't hurt her." Reflexive and very distracted reasoning.

"And Yoko? Does the same apply to her?"

Schneider paused, canting his head to stare down, eyes hardly rational in the heat of desire. "Yoko didn't say I couldn't do you."

"You talked about it?" that came out a bit panicked. He shoved at Schneider's chest to get him to move.

"No, we didn't talk about it. She said no women."

Kall gaped at him. "Get off."

Schneider smiled down like a grinning wolf. "No."

"Even if - even if I were willing and I'm not - I wouldn't - do it - on the floor of a cabin we've just demolished. And - and there's a hole in the deck and just anybody can see down if they look,"

"God, you sound like a woman."

Schneider had him well and truly flustered, a fact which pleased Schneider to no ends, that was very clear. It pleased him so much that he actually rolled off. "Okay. We'll go the captain's cabin."

"NO!"

"Yes."

"DS - I'm serious."

A string of furious curses broke into the negotiations. A brown, bearded face appeared in the gaping hole in the ceiling.

"What have you done? You crazy, foreign devils, you've blasted a hole in my ship. Are you trying to kill us all?"

"Live with it, Amir." Schneider suggested pleasantly.

Amir gaped. Amir cursed under his breath and finally hissed in frustration.

"By Allah, just fuck him and get it over with. You'll destroy us all with this cursed foreplay otherwise."

Actually speaking with civility to anyone after that grievous embarrassment was - difficult to say the least. Kall-Su entertained thoughts of actually sinking the ship his self for some while after Amir's repugnant observation, which might not have been half so bad had several of his sailors, Abu and a handful of the bravest refugees not also have crept up to peer down the hole in the deck as he was saying it.

He might have stalked off to the darkest, deepest cubby in the ship to work off the embarrassment had Amir not blatantly given him pause by asking, "Abu says you dragged him all the way down river to look at that tributary and had some sort of new notion?"

Kall had glared with every iota of incivility he possessed at the man's audacity to even speak to him, and even curled his fingers into fists where power gathered like moths around light - when Schneider clapped a hand on his shoulder and seconded the question in a most cheerful tone of voice.

"What notion?"

Which efficiently forced him into a more constructive mode of thought.

"Not here." He glowered at the crowd gathered round the hole in the deck. Amir shrugged and gestured towards the hatch. Back below deck then, past the shattered door and down the corridor to Amir's cabin.

"That tributary leads to the sea," He stated without preamble. "Which is less than a hundred miles away from the river not far from here. Flooding of the river is not enough to deter the Black March no matter what you think. Bringing the sea in might be."

Amir blinked at him, baffled. Schneider tilted his head, interested.

"And how might such a feat be accomplished?"

Kall took a breath and traced his finger along the almost straight line of the tributary. "This was created when the earth shifted a few decades ago. The earth is still unstable, I sensed it. Near the coast very much so. Underneath the tributary is an underground freshwater channel. A very large one, if that was expanded enough, the plates will shift and the band of land separating the tributary from the sea will be torn asunder, creating in essence a new strait. The sea will rush in and with a bit of proper urging, follow the tributary, enlarging it as it goes until it reaches the Nile."

Amir was still blinking. "But - but how? The power it would take to move such a vast expanse of earth - it is impossible."

"Freezing water expands." Schneider said dryly.

Amir was silent for a moment, then his eyes narrowed as understanding dawned. "By Allah - can you do such a thing. We're speaking of miles and miles of river?"

"I can." He put every bit of confidence he possessed into those words. He wasn't really sure. It was more than thirty miles of underground river that would have to be frozen solid to accomplish what he wanted. Not an easy task in any sense. "My question to you is, can you, with your ocean magics, manage to channel the rush of the sea when it hits the Nile. We need it to go to that valley and not dissipate out into the river flooding everything but."

Amir took a breath, not so quick to overestimate his abilities. "Perhaps." He said finally. "Perhaps I can. I will not know until I try, will I?"

"Its going to be noisy." Schneider said, with a slight cold smile on his lips.

Kall took a breath and looked at him. "Yes." He agreed. "And it'll take a while for the water to travel from the sea to the valley."

"They'll need to be distracted."

"Seriously distracted."

"For how long?"

"More than a hour." Kall said slowly. It had taken considerably less for Ramlah and his minions to beat Schneider the last time they'd tangled. What he was asking for now, might very well be a death sentence. He didn't want to ask it, but there seemed so little other choice. And no one was as equipped to handle the task as Dark Schneider.

Schneider sat there, one knuckle slowly caressing his jaw, eyes shielded by too long black lashes. It had seemed such a brilliant plan when he'd thought of it, yet now, when it came down to the decision of whether it was feasible or not - he found he'd rather not take the chance. The prince might be more than he was willing to pay - innocent lives or no.

"We don't have to do it." Kall said.

"No. Its a good plan." Schneider said. "I remember now why I trusted you with so many of my forces. You have moments of sheer brilliance. Is he honorable?"

"What?" Kall blinked, caught off guard.

"Ramlah? Is he honorable enough - that if I call him out for a one on one - he'll do it?"

"He - he's honorable - but only towards his own, maybe - we're outsiders, not of The People, so he might not stick to his word."

"He's right," Amir said. "Some of the desert nomads are so fiercely tribal that anyone not of the tribe is hardly even considered human."

"Okay. That answers my question. You just make sure you can do what you say you can, Kall. I'd hate to waste my time for nothing."

"You'll have the harder job." Kall said softly.

"Yes, I imagine I will. I expect a reward."

Kall opened his mouth. Shut it. Glanced at Amir and felt a blush rising. Amir shrugged and sipped his wine.

"You survive this - and I promise you shall have it."

Chapter twenty-five

Schneider hovered over the dusk shadowed desert, shielded heavily with a casual expenditure of power, watching the movement of tiny figures on the ground. A good many tiny figures that scurried about the sprawling camp of the army that followed the Black March. Thousands. Ramlah's followers had blossomed - the devoted nomads of the desert, the fanatics that dwelled on the outskirts of this arid, dry civilization. He'd recruited some by force, according to Kall-Su. Others had flocked to his banner like he was a god come to earth.

Fools. There were no gods on earth. The gods didn't care enough about pitiful mortal lives to waste their time. He wasn't quite certain just what Ramlah and his elite were.

Demons. Perhaps. Once mortal men granted immortal power by some entity beyond Schneider's experience. More likely. A bit of both. Most certainly. Whatever they were, they would fall. One way or another, they would fall. And Ramlah himself - - he would fall by Schneider's hand.

He cast an ear out for Kall-Su. Could hardly find him at all, the buzz of energy from the camp below was so strong - - but there, in the distance he could sense the familiar humm of Kall-Su's unique power. Building. Slowly building as energy was gathered and crafted and skillfully put to use. Kall had always been the craftsman in his magical workings. Subtle and intricate and so damned brilliant that he could take a body by surprise without a body ever knowing he'd begun to work at it. Lethal when he wanted to be. He damn well hoped he'd healed enough to pull this off. Kall seemed to think so and Kall was so very seldom rash in his estimations. Except when it came to that damnable girl. Schneider sniffed in disdain, narrowing eyes gone indigo with anticipation.

Beneath him to be jealous over a twit of a mortal girl that he'd barely exchanged words with. Beneath him to hate a creature that had perhaps thirty - forty mortal years left her before age ate her up and stole her from eternally young Kall-Su. But then again, Schneider had never been particularly noble. He'd never striven to hold to the unspoken laws of gallantry. If he could have struck the girl down without Kall or Yoko finding out, he would have without hesitation. He rather hoped she'd already been a victim of the March. Wouldn't that be sweet to blame Ramlah for her demise and have Kall seek solace in him as a balm for his grief.

Those thoughts sustained him for a while, took his mind off the movements below. The world growing darker, the sun disappearing over a distant horizon and taking the last of the orange light of its demise with it. That time between sunset and moonrise threw the desert under a blanket of gloom. He waited patiently for his signal. For that elusive tickle at his mind that would be Kall-Su telling him that all at his end was in order and ready to be released.

There. That delicate, cool touch at the edges of his mind. He smiled and descended.

* * * * *

They came in droves, near the fertile lands of the tributary. The larger one's he summoned came trailed by smaller, wild elementals, curious of this place and the power that had snared their stronger brethren. He hovered over the tributary, closer to the widening mouth of it that emptied into the sea than the Nile which fed it, eyes closed in concentration, thoughts flying out in a dozen directions, like the conductor of some large and varied orchestra.

Deep. Deep. He needed them to find the deep water first. The underground river that snaked beneath the one on the surface. Needed them to infest the liquid with their cold. To turn it gleefully turn it solid all down the long length of its path. It was not so noisy a task at first, the mere freezing of water. The elementals were silent in their work and diligent under his command. The underground river froze, yard by yard by yard without Kall-Su expanding anything more than the will to control the elementals. It wasn't until the earth began to protest at the expansion of ice that he signaled Schneider and began to test the limits of his own magics.

* * * * *

"Ramlah! I know you're hiding hereabouts - - come out and face me like a man, instead of the sniveling sand rat I know you are!"

Oh, they didn't like that at all. He'd sat down in the midst of the tents, and began strolling through their camp like it was one of his own, bellowing out his demands for the lot of them

to hear. A brown faced desert dog came screaming at him in outrage of his sacrilege, curved sword raised, a half dozen of his brothers at his back. Schneider didn't even glance his way. Merely waved a finger and cut the lot of them down, showering the sand with blood and boiling chunks of flesh. A great cry of rage went up then, but they still cleared a path for him to walk, even though one or two of them still stupidly tried his patience until more worthy opponents hustled out to attend him.

Two of the March, he was certain. Hastily donned armor, ridiculous ominous helmets. They had up shields and were buzzing with power.

He smiled at them, not armored at all save for a particularly interesting set of silver bracers that the little guide, Abu had found him, and a curved sword that Amir had in the treasure room of his ship. Other than that he was comfortable in loose black silk robes, his head bare of anything but the fluttering veil of his hair.

"Do you really want to die, right now?" he asked. "I can accommodate. It's no problem. Now or later makes no difference to me. It can be later if you take me to Ramlah. Or I can send you back to whatever dark pit you crawled out of now and find him myself." He thought himself particularly kind, offering the choice. He really was getting soft, to be so tactful. All Yoko's fault.

There was a crowd gathering, a great swelling mass of bristling nomad warriors, the majority of which were mere mortal flesh, the occasional one being of a more magic nature and a handful of the undead minions of the Black March. If he called down one of his more nasty spells now, he could take out a good deal of Ramlah's accumulated army. It would take considerably less effort than a good Sartor spell.

A shifting in the crowd. A sudden, overwhelming presence of - - power. It made the sand under his boots almost crawl in response. Definitely, definitely a man in touch with the desert. Or was it all earth magics? Earth magic and air, to create the storms he did.

And there he was. The enemy. Like Schneider, he'd not bothered with armor. He seemed all too human, dark skinned and dark haired with his trim little beard and his gold earrings.

"You are supposed to be dead." A curious observation.

"Humm. You laid hands to something that belongs to me."

"Did I, foreign devil?"

"As a matter of honor, I'd avenge the trespass. If you possess any, that is?"

A murmur of anger at the insult. It wouldn't have bothered him in the least. His enemies had never accused him of being particularly honorable. One could only hope Ramlah was, or this would turn out to be a difficult fight.

"You are bold, to come alone into the depths of my power."

Schneider shrugged. "You pissed me off."

"And is this - *thing* - of yours I trespassed against, intact?"

Schneider tilted his head. "What difference does it make to you?"

"Because, when you are dead, I would take out my vengeance upon he who broke vows to me."

"When I'm dead? You're presumptuous, aren't you?"

"You waste my breath. Once already, I've defeated you."

"No." Schneider pulled his lips back in a humorless smile, irritated at the reminder. "Not by yourself. You had help. You're not man enough to have done it by yourself."

Ramlah's jaw twitched. His black eyes were like chips of onyx. Not a creature used to such insult. There were swords drawn all about, the sound of metal clearing leather a sinuous rustle on the wind.

"Think you can do it by yourself, or are you too much of a coward to try?"

That was it. The air crackled with power, the sand shifted underfoot, making mortal men cry out and scramble backwards. Ramlah cried out something unintelligible and the desert reared up, spilling men and tents alike in its efforts to smite Schneider.

Schneider shielded. Took the air. Turned silica sand to molten glass with a handy little Venom spell he'd been toying with during the initial attempt at conversation. Ramlah disappeared. The majority of the March did in the resulting swirl of sand and dust and chaotic power. Mere human men died.

A lightening-like energy materialized out of the storm and hit his shields, dissipating around the edges. A few strands of his hair began to fly up from the electricity that had leaked past the barrier of his shields. He laughed and dove into the storm, searching out his enemy.

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The tributary was a frozen trail through the rocky land it traversed. It was a dim glimmer of glass in the last dregs of light. Kall-Su felt the earth shiver and groan in protest. Felt the disruption through the link he held with the elementals under his control; through the magics he was subtly beginning to employ to widen the gap. Found all those jagged fractures and followed them, searching out the weakest ones, the most integral ones.

In the distance he was vaguely aware of conflict. Of great brewing power that bled into the eather like blood from a wound. If he'd concentrated, he could have picked out the individual strikes - - the differences between the powers that engaged in that monumental battle. The earth shook once and it was due to no fault of his. One could only imagine the extent of magics being utilized.

Gods. Gods. He hadn't much time. How long Schneider could keep up this most worthy distraction, he did not know. But not long if the whole of the March rose up against him.

Kall-Su found a great winding fissure. An ancient one that ran deep in the bedrock and was only now beginning to feel the strain of the torn earth. Only now beginning to stretch and part as the elementals worked their way upon the narrow stream of water that ran its width and breadth.

It creaked and Kall-Su gathered power to lend to its rending. Chanted the spell of his devising that would create forces to rip it asunder and backed it with all the power at his command. It was more power than he'd channeled in a very long time. Not since before Angelo had crippled him. It hurt, doing very much the same thing to the pathways that routed his magics as he was doing to the age old fissures networking through the bedrock below. It built up inside his head like a fist pounding from the inside, trying to bash its way out.

The first release of power made the earth shake. He could hear the bone deep rumble as stone shattered and the earth ripped. It wasn't enough though. It needed repeating until the thin fabric of land that held the ocean at bay was decimated.

Past the burning pain in his head he began to regather energies for one last concerted effort.

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He didn't even see it coming out of the swirling mass of sand. A fist of incapacitating power that smashed him into the desert, shields and all, drove him down into the earth and pressed him there with suffocating strength. His shields faltered against the tremendous outpouring of energy and for a moment he exerted power to keep them up, involuntarily cringing against being buried once again in the endless sand. Then he got his wits about him, snarled at himself for that flickering moment of panic and let the shields go.

Just let them go and took the brunt of the grinding impact against his own body for the scant seconds it took for him to summon the reserves for a spell. Sand and earth and rock exploded outwards in a great, deafening boom. The force of the expulsion cleared the air for a moment of the sand storm Ramlah had summoned. It clearly showed a desert riddled with the signs of high combat. Craters and blackened pits decorated the ground. The sky was black with smoke, the air rife with that indelible scent of spent magics.

Schneider healed himself with a thought, wiped sand dusted hair from his eyes and searched the area for his enemy.

"Where are you at?" he cried, levitating out of the crater. "Not going so well when its just between you and me, is it? Not that I thought any differently, me being who I am and you being a dusty bag of resurrected bones."

The sand flared up at him like a fist and in its midst was a human form. Ramlah hit him, hurtling the both of them into the sand, Ramlah's fists unstoppable harpoons that drove into his flesh. Schneider cursed, driven into the desert again, the incredible pain of hands and nails tearing through his sides making him loose concentration. He felt the invasiveness of the spell. Felt Ramlah trying to turn his organs into sand, to shrivel him like some dried corpse ravaged by the desert. It hurt like hell.

"Get the - - fuck - - off - - " he roared, spitting blood and Ramlah laughed, plunging his hands deeper, until his elbows were red with Schneider's blood.

Schneider screamed and called the lightening down to himself. The desert shook with the strikes, bolt after bolt that pelted their bodies, until Ramlah's cry joined his and the master of the black march shoved himself away, almost glowing with the storm energy, his clothes blacked, his eyes steaming from the heat.

Schneider took skyward, momentarily on the defensive, hands over the gaping wounds in his sides, blood tears streaking his cheeks. He screamed again, this time in fury, taking only the briefest time to heal the worst of it before mouthing the words of the most destructive spell in his arsenal.

When it hit the earth the air turned black. The sandstorm was swept away and all the small craters were dwarfed by the destruction. Those of Ramlah's army that had not long fled the area were eaten up by the unforgiving energies.

When it settled there was silence. Not even the swirling hollow whistle of the wind. He hovered two hundred feet in the air, hard breathing - - bleeding - - rather thinking they didn't need Kall-Su's rush of ocean after all. Rather thinking he should have known all along that he was all that was needed to finish the job. Whatever demon of insecurity that had possessed him was dwindling fast. He was contemplating going after the rest of the March when the desert began to quake.

He lifted one dark brow and squinted into the rising cloud of sand and dust.

Kall-Su felt the ancient lattice work of rock under the mouth of the tributary feeding out into the Red Sea give way. It crumbled like so much brittle ash under his battering magics and the ocean, held back no more rushed in, filling the rocky channel he had prepared for it.

His head was liken to split from the exertion, but he had one more damn to break. One more fragile fault line that lay deep under the surface to rupture that would shift the way the river lay, that would open up a wider pathway and let the water rush in not like the tides slow approach, but like a tidal wave of destruction.

It was quite literally more than he had to give, that shattering of a isthmus. But he gave it and sacrificed the existence's of a dozen elementals in the working of it. The invasion of the sea - - was impressive. It caught him up in its advance and battered weakened shields as if it had a personal score to settle. Of course it did. The sea and himself had ever been at odds and it resented his attempt to control it. There was no dry ground anymore. The sea ate away at the natural sides of the tributary, tumbling shores and rocky canyons. The rush of it was overwhelming. It pulled at him, wanting him lost within its churning mass. He hadn't the power anymore to deny it. He'd used it all up, breaking through scar tissue in his efforts, so that his mind bled from miss-use.

But from somewhere he felt an influence more in tune with the nature of the ocean insinuate itself. Felt himself withdrawn from the melee, from the wash of cold water and crushing natural power. In the haze of red pain behind his eyes, he realized it was the brother of the sea working his own magic. He'd almost forgotten in his efforts. Almost forgotten Schneider who was playing distraction miles away and who would find himself in the path of the devastation that Kall-Su had unleashed.

At first he thought it was an elemental, risen from the desert - - created out of the desert - - then he caught the familiar scent of its essence and came to the more chilling realization that it was Ramlah himself at the core of the thing. Ramlah himself who was the heart and the mind of the monstrosity that rose up out of the sands like some oversized desert golom.

The sand in the air cleaved to it, making it larger and larger as the storm was consumed. Vaguely man shaped torso that towered some two hundred feet into the air. Arms that were almost half that in length, a lower body that looked like nothing so much as the solid funnel of a sand based twister that ate up everything in its path. Far below the scattered bulk of Ramlah's army scattered and those that did not flee fast enough were swept up into the magnetic pull of the monster of Ramlah's creation, their flesh and blood adding to its power.

He'd have thought such a thing would be sluggish and inept. Anything the size of one of the ancient's skyscrapers should reasonably be. Of course it wasn't. His luck wasn't running that good of late. The arm that slashed out, trailing sand and dust in its wake was fast as a striking snake. It smashed into him, hovering in the air just above its head, like the avenging fist of some irate god. He plummeted into the hard packed earth, creating yet another respectable furrow. Barely had the time to shake off the moment of disorientation before the churning foot of Ramlah's incarnation came for him. He cursed and sent twin bolts of explosive energy at it, which did exactly nothing save scatter sand that immediately surged back to merge with the whole.

"Fuck!" he screamed in frustration and shot backwards, gaining altitude as he went, trying to keep out of the reach of those damned annoying fists. He wove a zig zag course around it, calling down various spells as he did, striking this part of it and that in his efforts to glean a weak point. Enough high voltage lightening strikes hit the head of it to make the pits where its eyes ought to be glow red. But not to slow it down. Which meant the torso held the weak point, but the torso was damned thick and every time he hit it with a spell, the wound he created refilled.

It caught him once when he had to pause to gather energy for a particularly lethal energy magic. Just snatched him out of the air in its giant, sand paper rough fist and tried to crush the life out of him. Bones broke and skin grated raw before he had the concentration to spare for a shield, but by that time his spell had been cast and he blew the arm off up to the shoulder. He healed even as it did. But he knew that chipping away at the outside of the thing was a losing battle. He'd exhaust every spell he had in his arsenal and the monster would still have the desert to fuel it. It was a matter of getting to the heart of the thing.

So he did just that. Drove past the grasping fingers and into the churning mass of its chest. It was an unexpected tactic. He found the source that fed the fiend unprepared for his appearance. He paid Ramlah back for his earlier insult and drove his sand abraded fingers into the sockets of his closed eyes.

Outside the monster roared. Even miles away it sounded like the wailing of the most devastating of desert storms. The sand fell away and two human forms plummeted to the earth; Schneider stunned and raw from the harsh caress of the sand, Ramlah blind and clutching at the bloody wounds on his face.

"Not so easy by yourself - - is it?" Schneider gasped, rolling to his side. God, but he hurt. He actually hurt despite the healing power that came so reflexively to him. He was wasted

mentally. Wrung almost dry. One could only hope Ramlah was in similar straits. One refused to imagine that he wasn't.

Perhaps so from the sounds he made. Angry or pitiful - - hard to tell with the howling of the wind. He didn't immediately jump up and he didn't immediately heal. Not as quickly as Schneider could have at any rate. But then again, Schneider wasn't bouncing back as smoothly as usual. He wasn't quite leaping up to finish this battle.

A moment. He thought, gathering stamina. *Give me a moment and I will.*

They didn't grant him that of course. He felt the stigma of their presence before he saw their shadows at the edge of the crater he and Ramlah lay within. The Black March, helmed and armored upon their immortal steeds. A gathering of power that was very soon to be unleashed upon him. He wiped blood out of his eyes and glared up, wondering if he could gather the energy to get one last killing strike in at Ramlah before they attacked him.

He never got the chance to find out. The earth rumbled. It might have been rumbling for a while now, but no one had had the attention to spare it. With it came a great, breaking wind that did not smell of sand and dust. At the high point of the great valley where the jagged horizon met the sky and hid the lush valley of the Nile a great wave of darkness crested and washed over, crashing through earth and rock in its passage, creating a wider and wider gap for it to invade the lowland upon which Ramlah's followers were camped.

The sea had come calling and the Black March had no defense against the powers of the ocean.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kall-Su had plunged into the tumultuous flood he had created like a spent bird exhausted from too long a flight. Amir had fished him out the first time, distracted himself by the channeling of his own powers - the urging of the ocean to rage with all her might through the narrow path the ice wizard had made for her. And she had. Oh, most righteously she had roared into the desert and created a gulf where no gulf had before existed.

The second time Kall-Su had attempted flight, he was reeling from the aftereffects of the over-extension of the massive splitting of earth that he had accomplished. No small task. Amir quite honestly, had doubted his ability to do it. How mistaken he had been. His estimation of the ice wizard had gone up several dozen notches with that stellar display of power and determination. But it had drained him and hurt him, that was clear enough. He was hardly coherent when he insisted on flying inland in search of the other wizard. Hardly capable of carrying out that plan. Simple flight was beyond him at the moment and again the sea claimed him and again Amir saved him from the mother ocean's sweet caress.

He made a promise to go after the other one himself. The noisy one. The one who had made the whole of the world it seemed, ring with the echoes of the magics he had unleashed. He and Ramlah. Amir's head hurt from the residue signature of so much powerful magic unleashed in such a short period of time. He'd never experienced the like. He shivered to imagine what that battle had been like close up. He had felt the vibrations miles and miles away. The destruction.

If the ice wizard had been concise and particular in his method of magic - - the fire one was sheer destruction. Frightening to recall that Amir himself had attempted to shanghai the two of them. He could only have faith that the luck of the sea had saved him and his from suffering their wrath.

The ocean was devastating in her unleashed fury. The Nile was flooded with salt water, her fertile fields drowned under the harsh bite of the sea. Villages for forty miles in either direction had been simply washed away. Many of them had already been abandoned in fear of the March. Others pre-warned. Some - - had not been so lucky. There was a new bay where before there had only been bone dry desert. It was still fed by the sea. A hundred new tributaries and rivers had been created, but the majority would soon trickle away, absorbed by the sands. It would take years, Amir predicted for the Nile to rid itself fully of the brackish mixture of salt and fresh waters. It would make for hard times for those people who relied upon the pure waters of the mother river to support them.

Of Ramlah's army there was no sign, other than the occasional floating corpse that drifted to the surface. Of the Black March nothing.

Perhaps the power of the sea had overwhelmed them. For a day Amir searched the new gulf for life and found nothing. No scent of magic, no essence of power that hinted that something more than human had survived the flooding.

Almost he had prepared himself to give up the search, jubilant on the one hand that their desperate ploy seemed to have worked, that there was no trace of the desert born March under the lapping waves. Reluctant to go back on the other and tell the ice wizard that his search had been futile. That the water had taken friend and foe. Perhaps not even the water. Perhaps the power of the March had been the culprit, but he doubted it, recalling the stinging flavor of two magics vibrating from that valley up till the very last.

Then without warning, the waters at the center of the new gulf became choppy with turbulence. Amir called men of his in their small craft away from it in a panic. Afraid very much of an enemy resurgence. He himself prepared to call up the power of the ocean one more time to do what he might against what might prove to be an unbeatable foe.

A bubble pierced the water's surface. Small and dripping and hovering over the waves in what seemed wary anticipation. Hardly threatening. Hardly exuding much in the way of power at all. It seemed somewhat neutral in its posture. Amir approached, cautiously and felt the buzz of strong shields as his little boat drifted underneath. Hard to see within at all so thick that barrier. Then rather suddenly, it wavered and failed, disappearing entirely and a body plunged wordlessly back into the waters.

Amir thought he glimpsed pale skin and hair within a tangle of dark robes, but the water ate it up too fast to tell. He called for Her to bring the body back up, but She didn't respond - too overwhelmed perhaps by the residue magic here to even hear his plea. He swore, shed his outer robes and dove into the water's cool embrace. Unerringly down through the murk, as at home here as he was on the deck of his ship. His fingers found material and he hauled his catch back towards the surface - - handed it up to the men waiting at the side of the little boat and dragged himself up over the edge afterwards.

Is he alive? He seems dead. How could a man have survived such? The whispers of his men carried in the breeze. Amir did not have an answer for them, uncertain himself. It was hard to tell if breath stirred at all, but the skin was almost warm and outwardly whole, save for mighty rents in the robes.

An odd breed - - wizards. Quite miraculously durable, as Amir well knew from his own experiences. He could only hope that the enemy still below the waves did not have the same resilience.

Dreams of tides battling with biting sands pelted Dark Schneider's subconscious mind. Of screaming - - not his own - - and death and wholesale destruction. Of pain. Some his and some inflicted by him. It was saved from being a nightmare by the simple fact that in his own indomitable way, he knew he wasn't the victim of the tale. He knew rather unerringly that he was the monster that laughed at the deaths and reveled in the destruction. He was pleased with that knowledge. The tides made him uneasy though. He couldn't escape the rocking motion of them, couldn't escape the slightly queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach that warned of an enemy that had proven his superior. Seasickness.

Even in the depths of his healing slumber, it nagged at him. Better to stave it off with wakefulness than suffer through it asleep.

He opened his eyes to darkness. To the constant creaking of wood, and the subtle lapping of water against the hull of a ship. Ship smells, ship sounds. Wizard sight adjusted quickly to the moonlight enhanced dark. A rough ceiling above his head. A vaguely familiar cabin, with vaguely familiar furniture. His thoughts were still muzzy from his days long hibernation. Piecing together how he'd gotten here was a task not really worth the effort it would take.

There was a body next to him, nestled between himself and the wall, so deeply saturated by that healing coma that sorcerer's who had spent too much of themselves plunged into, that there was no singular trace of his essence for Schneider to pick up on. Still as death, but warm and whole.

Good boy, to have done what he had. Impeccable timing. As always. Schneider folded an arm behind his head and grinned up into the shadows of the ceiling. When that tidal monstrosity had crashed down upon them all, it had been he who'd held the upper hand. He who'd been ready - - well at least more ready than Ramlah - - to get up and finish the fight. The Black March might have made a difference - - would have, brutal honesty, forced him to admit - - but Ramlah, he had gotten the better of.

He laughed. Lay there grinning as he took stock of himself. Body healed for the most part. He felt the strain of the magics. Impossible not to when so much power had been channeled through his physical form. He hadn't bothered much with elementals to carry out that fight - had just gone headlong into it, relying on his own energies. Rash action, but it hadn't failed him. He was frankly surprised he was awake. He still felt the drain. Still felt the great empty chasm where his energies usually resided. They would replenish themselves with a little time. A day ago, he would have been as weak as a backwoods hedge witch. Today, he might give a first rate wizard for hire a run for his money. Tomorrow - - tomorrow would be better. He doubted Kall-Su would be up to casting a spell for many days. Kall never had regenerated energies quite as rapidly as Schneider.

It occurred to him that he was owed a boon for surviving the battle with Ramlah. That itch in his loins that always nagged him after a great victory - - or a minor one - - reminded him of what had been promised and of whom. He rolled to his side, sliding a hand under the silken sheets that covered them to the warmth that lay a hands breadth away.

Ah. Smooth, bare flesh. He felt a fondness for Amir - - he assumed it was Amir who'd put them here in his own cabin - - welling. Considerate to let him wake to a naked bedmate, even a most seriously exhausted naked one. He was in much the same state, but he did seem to recall hazily being very, very wet the last time he was aware. Thoughts of the brother of the sea were fleeting. He was more intrigued by the texture of Kall-Su's skin. The feel of ribs under their veneer of muscle, the hard angles and firm curves sheathed in soft skin. So very different than the plush roundness of a woman - - yet alluring in their own right. He found a flat nipple and leisurely brushed his fingertips across it until the little nub hardened and the flesh around it pimples in agitation. When he tired of that, he ran his hand down the hollow of Kall-Su's ribcage to the flat planes of his stomach, shied away from the sleeping flesh between his legs, not entirely content with the notion of handling another man, even though he dearly wanted to fuck him. Those few occasions when he'd sated his lusts with men instead of women, he'd never been interested in anything other than his own immediate satisfaction. He'd never used them as anything other than a handy substitute for what he really wanted. Never cared to pay heed to what was dangling between their legs, if what was between their buttocks offered a tight, hot answer to his need.

He'd taken a boy once, when he was out to conquer the world for the sheer challenge of it, who'd looked like Kall-Su. At the time, it hadn't properly occurred to him why that simpering little page had held more allure than the pampered ladies of the vanquished court. Blonde and blue-eyed and pretty - - but not as pretty as the wizardling under his tutelage. But certainly more attainable. Certainly less guilt to fuck. He'd held enough guilt those first few months when Arshes Nei had become bed partner instead of adopted daughter to ever consciously contemplate bugging the other lost soul he'd taken under his wing. He'd gotten over it, of course. She'd helped. He still remembered how nice a ride that little blonde page had provided.

Down one well-shaped, lean thigh, back up, pressing his fingers into the soft skin of inner leg, back to the juncture of Kall's legs again. Hesitation. Dark Schneider was nothing if not a bold lover, an overly aggressive one, quite honestly, but still - - it was a woman's place to fondle a man's jewels and the rod that lay between them - - not another man's. He mulled that over, thumb-stroking the indent of Kall-Su's navel - - thinking that perhaps that was a somewhat of a rash rule. Good oral sex, was good oral sex, whether from a boy or a girl. Granted, it wasn't as if he'd let a man that looked like Gara near his crotch - - but it was a rather warming thought of Kall-Su down there. He spent a moment visualizing it and hardened immediately from the mental pictures.

All right, so he was a hypocrite. He'd never particularly denied it. He decided to change his view of things. Great hairy, oafish men were in no way allowed access to his private parts. Nor small, plain ones, or medium sized-leather-faced ones. The occasional pretty one was allowed. This particular one he might even make an exception with, and venture to touch himself.

If it was going to be attempted, it might as well be while Kall was comatose and not likely to witness Schneider's ineptitude. That would be unforgivable. He took a breath and slipped his

hand lower down Kall-Su's belly, fingers plunging into the soft thatch of hair at the juncture of his thighs. Lower still to the warm, pliant tube of flesh nestled within it. Ah, velvety soft and warmer than the rest of Kall's body. Hardly impressive in its flacidity, hardly repulsive. Rather nice, actually, the weight of the scrotum, the way the flesh shifted inside it when he handled it, all of it soft and sleepy and - - Kall-Su.

A bit of life sprang into it at his handling. Blood flowed and Kall-Su murmured, disturbed out of his hibernation by the most primal of sensations. Schneider kept his hand in place, enjoying the power. Wanting to see that first bewildered expression in the younger wizard's eyes when he opened them. Wanting to see the realization dawn of who had him in hand and what it meant.

Other than the slight stirring, Kall-Su didn't wake. Schneider frowned, denied and moved his body closer, skin to skin, pressing the heated length of his own erection hard against Kall's thigh. Taking him while he was out didn't present any particular moral problem for Schneider - - certainly not if it relieved the growing discomfort between his legs - - and Kall-Su had made a promise - - it was just a matter of not enjoying it as much. He *wanted* to see Kall's face and he *wanted* to hear what sounds he'd make during the act. No fair if Kall-Su missed the experience the first time.

He sulked over Kall's unresponsiveness; amused himself with the casual tasting of skin, the feel of a hard little nipple under his tongue, a more thorough investigation of the area between Kall-Su's legs. Found the point of entry with a forefinger and grazed the tight ring of muscle that guarded it. Shifted, lifting Kall-Su's leg to better explore, having second thoughts even as he did about waiting for actual consciousness.

Wake up! He drove that mental command past protective barriers. He really shouldn't have. A body went into this state out of need, not casual want. Never wise to interrupt it before it was healed enough to waken on its own. But he didn't sense any particularly nasty rupture. Nothing really beyond over-extension. The same as him. *Wakeupwakeupwakeupdamn!*

Kall-Su's eyes snapped open in a panic. Dazed. Fogged with sleep and looking for an enemy. It took him a few precious moments to register that there were hands on his body. A few desperate more to realize who they belonged to.

"DS?" he tried to shrug out from under the casual caress. Tried to wriggle up to the head of the bed. Schneider wasn't about to allow escape. He wrapped an arm about Kall's waist and pinned him in place. Used his weight to concrete the effort and looked down with amusement at Kall-Su's bewildered expression.

"Yes. Me. Alive. Victorious. You owe me."

"I owe - -? oh. But - - God, what time is it? What happened?"

"I don't know. Night time. I beat Ramlah. Your water drowned all his minions. Time for celebration."

"No - Ds, wait. Are we on the ship?"

"On a ship, yes."

Kall was breathing hard beneath him. As distraught by his lack of cohesive memory of what had happened at the end as he was of Schneider's body on his.

"I need a moment to think." Kall asked - - pleaded almost. It sounded rather pitiful regardless. Maybe it was the rocking of the ship. He removed one hand from trying to push Schneider away and rubbed at a temple.

"Head hurt?"

"Yes."

"You pushed it too hard. You weren't healed enough, yet."

"I had a choice?"

Schneider shrugged, sliding a hand back down. "I'll take your mind from it."

"DS - -oh." Kall's eyes rolled up. He squirmed, cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "I - - don't think - - this is the time - we should see what - - what's happened."

"Nonsense. This is the perfect time. You owe me, remember?"

Kall blinked up, wide eyed, frightened of that rash promise he'd made now that it was lying naked upon his form. He knew better than to deny it.

"I remember."

Schneider grinned. "Ah, I thought you might. Now be a good boy and spread your legs - -"

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Oh, but he was nice. He smelled a bit of salt water, a bit of the spices that permeated Amir's cabin - - but mostly of that unique essence that was simply Kall-Su. And shy. Like a 14 year old virgin on her wedding night - - only he wasn't 14 and he wasn't a virgin - - though Schneider supposed he might as well be, never having had *willing* sex with a man. God knew what that girl had taught him. Something useful, one hoped. Only reasonable to assume she'd managed to thaw some of that frigidity under the sheets. How to kiss maybe, because as far as he knew Kall-Su hadn't learned it anywhere else and under the duress of Schneider's assault he gave a little and his lips softened under Schneider's and his tongue flicked here and there like a hesitant, wild thing.

A little overwhelmed, a little frightened - - neither of which displeased Schneider. He softened his approach, like he might for a girl he was out to woo into willing cooperation instead of ravishment. A gentler nibbling of lips, a less forceful intrusion of tongue, a sort of leisurely exploration of taste and texture and sensation. Kall-Su went a little loose under him, a little less resistant. Not much choice, backed into the pillows of the corner, Schneider's hands pressing his wrists into the mattress, a gentle but firm reminder of who was in charge of who here. He ran his hands up from Kall-Su's wrists to the inside of his elbows and back again, enough pressure to keep hold of arms that still wanted to reflexively push him away, not enough to hurt.

The foreplay was an annoyance to him, in his present state of arousal. His flesh demanded something other than the weight of his body pressing it into Kall-Su's belly. He wanted to flip Kall onto his belly, pull his hips up to his groin and ram himself home fast and hard - - relieve the initial pressure and then get on with the more casual entertainment of exploration and tactile pleasures. If it had been some inconsequential bedmate, he would have, regardless of any comfort but his own. He felt - - grudgingly - - that he owed this one a bit more consideration. At the very least Kall-Su had earned some bit of regard by pulling off the feat that he had. So foreplay it was.

A slow coaxing out of nervousness - - or at least outright fear. The gratifying spread of the heat that infused him as Kall-Su's flacidity began to dissipate and warm, hard flesh pressed into Schneider's. Oh, interesting sensation that. It made him draw back a bit and look down into Kall-Su's half lidded eyes. Large pupiled and hazy. Rosy lips, swollen from Schneider's attentions parted, giving glimpses of white teeth and pink tongue. That pale, pale skin flushed with what Schneider liked to think as arrousement and not shame.

He had to know. His ego wouldn't allow otherwise. He pressed his lips against the hollow of Kall's throat. Worked his way leisurely up to the soft lobe of his ear and whispered.

"Does it feel good? Do I feel good?"

Ragged breath was his answer. A slight helpless nod of the head. It wasn't quite what he'd wanted. He found Kall's hand and pulled it down, lifted himself up enough to allow space between them. Guided Kall's long, slim fingers to the engorged shaft sprouting from Schneider's loin's, pressing them around it, Schneider's own hand encircling Kall-Su's.

"Ask for it." He whispered into Kall's mouth, catching a soft lip in his teeth, letting it go and slipping his tongue inside to test the slickness of the inside of those lush lips. He propelled the movement of both their hands up and down his shaft, groaning at the way Kall-Su's fingers tightened of their own accord.

"You want me?" he asked, slipping his own fingers away, finding the heat of Kall's erection. Kall-Su made a muffled sound, bit his lip and arched his body up against Schneider's.

"Say it." Schneider demanded. "Ask for it."

"Yes." A whispered admission.

"Yes what?"

Kall's eyes fluttered open, pupils shrinking in sudden sharp irritation. "You know - - what. Stop being - - a bastard - - and just do it."

Schneider grinned, needing little other encouragement. He pushed himself up, caught hold of one of Kall-Su's knees and drew it up and against him. Pushed the other one forward and lay the throbbing length of himself against the enticing rear that had been pulled up close to his body. He took a moment to appreciate the body laid out before him, all slim, lean muscled lines, concave sweep of the belly under heaving ribs, tousled sun-gold hair, uptilted black rimmed eyes half shut, lips pressed tight, hands digging into the bedsheets as if the boy were expecting the most excruciating assault.

"It won't hurt." He said.

"Yes it will." Kall hissed without quite looking up at Schneider.

"Maybe a little." Schneider agreed. "But only if I want it too."

Kall's eyes blinked open at that, focusing on him in startlement. Schneider slid back a bit, forced himself between taught white buttocks and unerringly found the mark he was hungry for. The defending muscle was no match for him. The glistening tip of his erection disappeared from sight and startled flesh stretched thin around it. Tearing, bleeding. And he healed it as he entered, taking the biting pain away and leaving nothing but the sensation of himself, huge and burning with fever inside Kall-Su's smothering flesh.

Kall-Su let out a stifled sound. Shock, dismay, maybe a little aborted pain - - disorientation at the intrusion. The full and biting awareness of having Schneider inside him up to the hilt. And for a moment Schneider merely stayed still, fingers biting into Kall's flesh, hips tight against Kall's firm ass, glorying in the feel of all that tight flesh encasing his penis. So tight it almost hurt, so accommodating that it took him all the way to the balls. It felt like home. It felt like the most blissful welcome and so long overdue. What a fool not to have taken advantage of this most valued possession long ago.

He pulled back and rocked his hips forward again, beginning a rhythm, aware of the sound of Kall-Su's moans in the background, aware of the sound of flesh slapping against flesh, of his balls hitting Kall's rear each time he drove back home, of Kall's hand sliding to cover his own erection, and his cries growing harsher and harsher as Schneider found the right angle and the right spot to graze.

Of course, Kall-Su came first, in no way possessing the stamina that Schneider did. Practice, after all, made perfect. Schneider kept on for a while, enjoying the control almost as much as the sensation. Regretfully he finished and leaned there afterwards with one hand on the back of Kall's thigh, the other one flat on his stomach below his ribs, feeling each shuddery breath as it passed Kall-Su's lungs.

As satisfying a fuck as he'd ever had. The hard won one's always were. He sighed finally, letting himself slide out, flopping down on his back on the outside edge of the bunk with a sly, satisfied smile on his face.

"You may thank me properly later."

Kall-Su shifted, pushing himself up on an elbow, trying to push the hazy expression of the well serviced away in favor of icy indignity.

"Thank you- -? You arrogant ass - - thank you - -?" Was the extent of his vocal poise at the moment.

"Yes." Schneider drawled, as pleased with himself as he could easily recall being. So many victories in so short a time. "For showing you a shining example of a proper fuck. You've had such sorry experiences up to now."

Kall-Su gagged. Something that sounded vaguely like a hasty incantation, but might have been a string of garbled comminations issued from his mouth. He exited the bed via the unguarded foot, grabbing one of the tasseled silk throws on his way.

"I'm not finished with you yet." Schneider admonished.

"You are." Kall hissed, offended. "I never promised more than once."

"The doors open." Schneider said reasonably. "Blown off its hinges, quite honestly. No keeping me out now."

"I told you, I'll not betray - -"

"Lily. I remember." Schneider rose, not bothering with a cover, half hard again by now and padding across the floor with a decided swagger to his step. "How can you betray her when you were mine before she was ever an itch in her papa's pants. In her Grandpapa's? It's me you betray. You wanted me before you ever wanted her, didn't you?"

Kall backed away warily, clutching the throw, trying to regather dignity when he was plainly intimidated by all of Schneider's impressive glory. One could hardly blame the boy. He smiled and Kall-Su narrowed his eyes, lifting his gaze to Schneider's eyes from his crotch where it had involuntarily dropped.

"I love her."

"You love me."

"You love Yoko."

"Undeniably."

"You betray her."

"No. She made the rules."

"Rules? Rules?" Kall-Su threw out one hand in frustration. "You've never followed a rule in your life. You do what you want to and everyone else be damned. Look what you've made me do already. How will I face her?"

"God, you're afraid of that little baggage? Face her and smile and know that by all rights she ought to be groveling at your feet."

"Is that what you think of Yoko?"

Schneider took a quick step in, caught the edge of the throw and jerked it and Kall-Su close. "Yoko doesn't grovel. I don't like it when she does. You - - it wouldn't bother me so much. But only to me."

Kall-Su opened his mouth. Shut it. Looked away, eyes clouded with skepticism. Close enough that Schneider's breath stirred his hair. "I won't betray her - - hurt her."

"But you'll hurt me?"

"You're not that fragile." Kall half smiled, a soft twitch of his lips.

Schneider shrugged, tired of the melodramatics. "Fine. When - - or if you see the twit again - - you may continue with your misbegotten monogamy. Until then - - you are mine."

* * * * *

There was sunlight this time, when Kall-Su blinked back to awareness and a certain lack of disorientation that understandably led to a more peaceful heralding of the day. He was tired. The dull throbbing behind his eyes was a poignant reminder of what had passed. He had yet to discover the extent of it. Had yet to discover the ramifications of his spell crafting. He supposed though, since the day light pouring in from the port was not strife with flashes of wizard light, nor the balmy air filled with sounds of death and destruction, that things had worked out rather to their benefit. The rocking of the boat was not pleasant. It sent little fingers of unease up his spine - - a crafty, malicious warning of the misery he would suffer when the ship began to cross the deep waters of true ocean. Now, they must have been close to shore. He could tolerate shipboard life with the land close enough to give him its strength. He dreaded the notion of sailing back home. Cringed at it, actually, curling his fingers in light silken coverlets and throwing an arm across his eyes to shield the bright sunlight.

Schneider had mentioned something about home last night. Something about missing Yoko and decent food and his villa by the sea. Casual bits of conversation between his more serious undertakings.

Oh, god, but there had been very little of the former and a great deal of the latter. Kall-Su still felt the imprints of it upon his skin. The taste of it on his tongue - - the scent of it everywhere.

Guilt surged up, a bitter bile. Guilt that for a while there, he'd not thought about Lily at all. That for a while, there had been nothing but Schneider and what Schneider was doing - - the magic he wove without even an incantation spoken. And *he* was terrible for taking gratification out of it. Unforgivable that even the occasional pain of it blinded him to all his other loyalties. Maybe it wasn't even the sex - - though god knew it was blatantly better than his previous experiences with men - - maybe it was just the fact that it was Dark Schneider wanting him; focusing solely and intently upon him all the attention he'd withheld throughout a lifetime. Silly notion. A childish and inherently dangerous one. But when Schneider had coaxed him back into that bunk - - he'd felt vaguely like a cat purring under the caress of its favorite human.

Fool. Fool. Fool! He curled onto his side, slamming a fist down upon the vacant cushions next to him. Fool to be seduced by it. Fool to be led into it. There was only hurt to be had from any affair with Schneider, be it short or eternal. Ask Arshes Nei. Ask any number of lovers cast aside or forgotten or betrayed. Ask Yoko. And still, he'd wager a kingdom that any of those wronged lovers would forgive him at an instant. Yoko had. Arshes had on too many occasions for Kall to recount.

Why did he agree to this when he had a love of his own? How much of a fool had he become? He'd weathered Schneider's persistence before - - well, he hadn't always crumbled under it at

any rate. God knew he had no taste for men's hands upon his body, having suffered nothing but violence and pain from them.

He wouldn't tell Lily. He abhorred the thought of lying to her, but there were some things better left unspoken. For her own good, as well as his. She wouldn't berate him for it, he thought. But no reason to feed her dislike of Schneider. No reason to give her cause to let slip a slur against him. Her distaste would start and end with words. Schneider's - - he trusted Dark Schneider's reactions not at all. His words were the least dangerous thing about him. His jealousies were frightening.

If there was a Lily to protect from such things. He wasn't so sure. He wasn't so sure he could even contemplate home and green valleys and snow capped mountains without her safely in hand. Amir and Abu had made promises. Of contacts and favors owed and information gleaned. He didn't believe a word of it - - not until she was before him in the flesh. Asking Schneider if any word had come since the flooding of the valley seemed - - risky at best.

So best to be up, despite the lethargy his body still was plagued with, and dressed and up on deck to find a more reliable source of information. Where Schneider was, he hadn't a notion. He'd rather at the moment he be far away, his presence of late too distracting a thing to sit comfortably on a mind taxed with other worries. It was Amir Kall-Su searched out.

Amir's answer was as blithe as it had been a week ago. *I told you I have favors owed me, Sahir bil-Jaleed, I've arranged for your woman to return. Patience. Patience.*

Kall had been patient too long. The annoyance hardly showed. Just a narrowing of his eyes and a sharp glance towards the not too distant shore. He thought they were at anchor off the mouth of the new channel.

"Where is Schneider?"

Amir smiled at him, the none too subtle insinuation in his dark eyes that he knew exactly what Kall-Su had been doing of late and with whom. He waved a hand towards the shore.

"To see the damage we wrought. Perhaps to seek traces of the survival of our enemy."

Kall-Su frowned, leaning on the port rail and squinting through the mid-day brightness towards land. "And have there been?"

"Not to my knowledge." Amir admitted with a shrug. "The ocean is thorough in her carnage. He won't find anything. He wants to set sail tomorrow for your homeland."

Kall-Su's nails bit into the hard wood of the rail. "Not without Lily."

"You have no faith, do you, *Sahir-bil-Jaheed*? My brother will bring her. We'll find each other on the open seas."

"How can you? Ships are specks upon the ocean." Kall had no trust for the sea. No liking for her impenetrable depths and her vast reaches.

"We know." Amir smiled that secretive knowing smile again. "We brother's of the sea are as intimate with her as we are with lovers. Faith. You'll have a more pleasant journey this time since we are allies now."

Kall cast him a dubious look, not able to conceive how such a thing might be possible.

"You trust me now, yes? He does." Amir spread his hands wide. "The bliss of the red flower will make the sea sickness fade away as if it were nothing. The voyage will be as a dream."

"How comforting." Kall-Su scowled, not believing it, nor easy with the notion of drugging himself the whole of the way home.

Dark Schneider hovered over the calm, dark waters that filled the great valley where an army had once camped. They stilled poured in through Kall's channel. Still flooded the river as far as the eye could see, even from the height he maintained. He searched for a sense of power under all that water and found none. Found nothing in fact but the overwhelming stench of bloated bodies that littered the shoreline. Hundreds and hundreds of them. Men, horses, camels - - various other domesticated animals that traveled with the desert nomads. Freshwater fish killed by the onslaught of salt. Salt water ones washed in from the sea that could not tolerate the weak brine that the Nile made of this new lake.

He burned them. Called down a pair of fire elementals and sent them about the rim of the water to eat up the sodden flesh that bobbed in the current. They went about their task gleefully, eager at destruction as ever fire was.

The destruction was total, the water filling the valley from peak to peak and still, he left with a vague sense of unease. Back to the ship then and her creaking decks and furled sails. Kall-Su was topside, standing with his back to the forward mast, face masked with cool indifference. A ruse to hide his discomfort and his uncertainty. Amir was there, talking to one of his mates. The sea captain looked up and greeted him with a great deal of false deference. Schneider ignored him in favor of Kall-Su.

"Have you eaten?"

Kall looked at him blankly, as if the notion of food were a foreign thing.

"You should. You won't want it once we're out to sea."

"I don't want it now." Kall said, hesitated as if he wanted to say more, then closed his mouth on the impulse "Will you come with me?" he asked instead and led the way to the deck house and the ladder leading below.

Schneider caught him inside the door to Amir's cabin before he could voice whatever grievance irked him. Pressed him up against the wall and let his hands roam under the robes, down that sensuous curve of lower back to the firm globes of his buttocks.

"DS - - Will you - - stop - - please?" Obviously their purposes for retreating here were not the same.

"Why?" he asked, not ceasing at all.

"I needed to - - talk."

"So talk. It doesn't bother me." He lowered his mouth to the juncture of Kall-Su's neck and shoulder, soft skin ripe for the marks of his teeth. His fingers happily slipped inside the band of Kall's loose native trousers and kneaded his rear.

Kall-Su hissed in frustration, having little choice in the matter save to wrap his arms about Schneider's neck as Schneider used his hold on Kall's buttocks to lift him off his feet and maneuver the both of them towards the bunk.

Kall's back hit the cushions and Schneider went down to one knee at the edge of the bed, busily working at the sash to Kall's outer robe while Kall-Su was trying to gather his wits enough to voice whatever grievance was on his mind.

"I don't - - trust Amir." Kall got out. "I can't leave here on his word alone that Lily is safe."

Schneider sniffed, annoyed to have the girl's name brought up while he was attempting to scratch the itch his morning's exertions had brought to the surface. "We leave tomorrow."

"I can't."

"You will. Or you can stay and when the ship carrying her meets this one, I'll send her your regards and tell Amir's fellow captain that we've no longer a need for her and to take her back to whatever slave market he rescued her from. Little matter to me."

Kall glared and pushed Schneider's hand off his stomach. "Unconscionable bastard." He hissed, icy-eyed and wanting out from under Schneider's touch.

"Have you just noticed?" Schneider grinned, more than willing for a little wrestling. Of course he triumphed. Ended up in the most accessible of positions with Kall-Su on his stomach half over the edge of the bunk and himself pressed firm against his rear.

"Do you trust his word?" Kall had given up the fight, and lay placidly under Schneider's weight, weary and sad over the lack of reasonable choices left him.

Schneider shrugged, using a knee to nudge Kall's thighs apart. It was just a matter of loosening his own belt and reaching out for the small glass jar of scented oil so kindly provided by their host. He could do without, but it was so much less effort this way, so much more pleasurable with himself all slippery and slick, and no healing required during and after the act. Kall squirmed a bit when he slipped an oil covered finger into him, pressed his face into the covers and moaned. More vocal than he'd have ever imagined, his ice wizard. Almost he'd have thought him as silent and implacable in bed as he was in court. A pleasant misconception to correct.

"He won't betray me." Schneider finally deigned to answer. "He values his life and his ship too much. And he owes us. I believe this. And its not a matter of you trusting him - - its a matter of you trusting me. Do you?"

He replaced his finger with something much larger, sliding in with enough languor to prolong the sensation. He didn't expect an answer immediately. Didn't expect much more than throaty gasps and incoherent blasphemies.

"Do you?" he asked again, when he'd finished. Kall pulled himself onto the bunk fully, lay there breathing hard, the glassiness slowly fading from his eyes.

"I think - -" Kall-Su said carefully. "That your own interests outshine everyone else's."

"That isn't an answer."

" - - - yes."

"All right then. We sail for home tomorrow."

When the other ship came within easy view twenty days later, Kall-Su cried. Truth be told, he'd become so miserable with sea sickness that tears were a involuntary and oft experienced thing. The opium didn't make them any easier to keep at bay. The opium made him sluggish and hazy, and the nights and days blurred into a long, fever dream that fluctuated between lazy sex - - himself generally a limp, helpless recipient - - and prolonged bouts of nausea.

He staggered up to deck and leaned against the rail, as a good number of Amir's sailors did, waving and calling out to the dusky men across the rolling waves. He leaned over the rail, off balance and weak-kneed, until someone put a hand on his shoulder to keep him from toppling over the side. It might have been Schneider. He couldn't make himself take his eyes off the other ship to find out. He scanned the line of distant sailors for a familiar pale face. He heard Amir hailing the other captain. Heard garbled, unintelligible words that he was too doped to comprehend the meaning off.

And there, at the rail, he saw a flash of pale face beneath long dark hair. Saw other pale faces behind her. A great cacophony of welcome rose up, accompanied by waving arms and smiling faces. Minstrels were ever a noisy lot.

God. God. He needed to see her up close. Needed to see that she was whole and healthy. Needed to hear what horrors she'd survived. But doubted his ability to cross even that small distance without crashing into the sea. He turned back to Schneider, desperation forcing away some of the sickness and the drug.

"I need to go to her."

Schneider shrugged. "Bad luck, then, Ba-Co spells can be tricky."

He didn't' condemn him for that pettiness Just turned back to the rail and stayed there till darkness began to fall and his legs would no longer support his weight. Schneider came and fetched him when it was full dark, supported his weight back below deck, stood over him while he dry wretched into a bucket, then fed him opium smoke and wine till he could no longer keep his eyes open. Vaguely he felt Schneider lay down beside him. Vaguely felt arms pull him close and a hand idly stroke his hair. He sank down into sleep, engulfed in a mixture of relief and regret.

When he woke a hand grazed his brow, bathing his skin with a cool, damp cloth. Soft lips grazed his, feather light and gentle. He blinked up through shadowed light and focused on a pale, oval shaped face, shrouded with long black hair.

"Lily?" he asked, bemused. He reached out a hand and she caught it in her own small one.

"Yes, love?"

"Are you here - - or have I had too much opium?"

Her lips curved in a smile. "Maybe a little of both. He brought you over this morning."

"DS?"

"Yes."

"Oh. And he went back?"

"Yes. He said he liked his quarters on the other ship too much to stay on this one."

"Oh." He couldn't get past the feel of her callused fingers on his palm. "You're here."

"Yes." She agreed again.

He lay there a moment, trying to gather his thoughts and his fears. Pushed himself up with a queasy effort and gazed at her critically. "Are you - - all right?"

She tilted her head, giving the answer some thought. "I've found a spark of power in myself that I never truly knew the depth of - - they wanted to make a slave of me again - - but it was I who captivated them."

He didn't understand. She leaned close against him, wrapping him in her sweet essence. "I sang for my freedom and the freedom of my friends. I sang for my virtue and found that the men who wanted to take it were more enchanted by the magic of my song than the lure of my body. I had a coin and I used it. Selephio was right."

Almost he told her the old minstrel was dead. He chose not to. That news could wait. Now he wanted very little else but to bask in her presence and think of nothing dire and nothing complicated. He could worry about Schneider later. About the truth later. For the moment - - the first moment in a very long time - - he felt free of worry and doubt. The gods willing, all the other problems might work themselves out.

● * * * * *

A month and the flooding began to recede a little. The sands began to dry leaving brittle salt in their wake. The great new salt lake remained. The people survived, as they always had, through lean times and fat.

Something stirred under the murk and the sands, under the weight and the power of the ocean water. Slowly, inch by painful inch, a migration began towards the bone dry earth outside the

*salt lake. Weakened by the sea, made somnolent by her power, but still fed by the fuel of - -
vengeance.*

*There was betrayal to be punished. Honor to be regained. And somewhere along the way a
dark prophesy to be fulfilled*