

Tonupu? And Zimma. ...”

“You know I will. Jeff. ...” What he wanted to say could not be expressed.

Jeff quickly turned and walked from the room. La'ani accompanied him to the suite's door.

“Always and forever you are mine, La'ani-love.”

They shared breath, shared their spirits in agonized farewell.

“Go with ocean-deep spirits my J'frey-love. Return to me.”

“If I may.”

In the hallway Jeff stalked along with Bakket at his side, Balko a few steps ahead.

“I must query the prisoners. It will likely require both of their lives.”

“So be it.”

Deep in the dungeon, Jeff had the two prisoners brought into an empty cell. He had left Balko and Bakket one level up. The prisoner's wrists were shackled and their ankles chained loose enough so they could hobble. One was male, the other female. Both appeared to be in their twenties and had various wounds that had been crudely bandaged. Jeff dismissed the guard.

“Now you will tell me where the Lady Raiella has been taken.”

The male simply stared at him, the female spat.

Pulling the Ruger, Jeff waved it at the man.

“Tell me.”

The man rattled his shackles and sneered.

“Release me, then perhaps I will lower myself to spit on you.”

Jeff dropped the muzzle and shot him in the left knee.

The man spun to the floor and whirled around screaming in agony and terror. Passing through the knee, the flattened round whined and shrieked as it ricocheted off bars and walls.

All pretense ripped away, the woman jerked back into a corner with drool leaking from the corner of her open mouth. He looked at the sobbing, terror-stricken man, then at the woman.

“Tell me.”

She screamed in fear, but shook her head.

Jeff shot her in the right knee.

Thirty minutes after leaving them, Jeff walked into the small office where Bakket and Balko had been waiting. Bakket had counted each shot with an involuntary jerk—shots that seemed to go on and on.

“Let us go. I know where they are hidden.”

Jeff related the directions to Bakket.

On their way out Bakket shouted orders to the white-faced lieutenant in charge of the dungeon then hurried to catch up with Jeff and Balko.

Bakket spurred out of the stable ahead of Jeff and Balko to clear the way and they went down the hill as fast as the horses could take it.

“The location you describe is close to the waterfront and near the river,” Bakket shouted over to Jeff. “It is a maze of falling down buildings and old warehouses that are rarely used. It is also home to the worst scum in Al Harad.”

Jeff did not reply, only urged Etoka on with careful pressure to his flanks.

Bakket guided them to a run-down stable where they left the horses. Jeff backed the stable hand into a corner at the point of his knife.

“If these horses are not here when we return, I will twist your guts out with this knife.”

Leaving the stable hand on his knees in dirty straw, they moved into the night. Balko crouching ahead, they darted from building by building. This night the fog had made a deep incursion on the waterfront. Shrouding buildings, it oozed by in thick blankets that stank of open sewers.

Bakket grabbed Jeff’s arm, and hissed, “There! That is

the building.”

*“Wolf-brother. The building just ahead—that is our goal. Will you assure that no sentries remain alive to give warning?”*

Balko disappeared in the fog without a sound. It wasn't long before he suddenly reappeared.

*“The way is clear. Two of these writhing maggots no longer take breath.”*

First Jeff then Bakket sprinted across the unlighted street and into the darker protection of a wall. Balko led off, lifting and putting down each paw with consummate stealth. Jeff nearly stumbled over a body lying grotesquely sprawled on the pavement. A few steps more and he discovered another body huddled over in a doorway. Putting his ear to the door's panels, Jeff listened with total concentration but heard nothing. After testing the latch's action, he slowly lifted it. The door gave one dry rasp and opened to total darkness. They slipped inside.

Pausing briefly to allow their eyes to adjust, Jeff eased down a narrow hallway behind Balko. There seemed to be some loose boards, and he tested each one before putting his full weight down. He suddenly bumped into Balko.

*“There is a large open space directly ahead, wolf-brother. The spoor of your she lies heavy in the air.”*

*“May you locate her more closely?”*

*“I must search diligently. Be patient.”*

Balko disappeared again, and Jeff whispered their status to Bakket.

The minutes dragged by in endless procession. Their night vision continued to improve until vague shadows became apparent and they could get some sense of the room's dimensions. It was about the size of a basketball court. Abruptly, something hit the floor nearby and thrashed for a few moments. A rectangle of light suddenly speared through the room. Jeff and Bakket dodged back into the hallway.

*“Saleem, what was that sound? Saleem!”*

Sprinting from cover, Jeff covered the distance to the door in a silent rush and ran his saber through the man's throat with a grating rasp. Before he could fall, Jeff caught the man and lowered his body to the floor with Bakket's help.

*"My apologies, wolf-brother. I did not detect the second two-leg."*

*"Your skill is unsurpassed, my brother. He was hidden. None of the brethren could have exceeded your stealth."*

The open door revealed a wooden stairway that wound its way down out of sight around a corner. What had seemed to be bright light was shed by two sputtering torches set in wall sconces.

*"Now the danger becomes extreme, wolf-brother. Stay close ahead, attacking only if you must."*

*"I hear."*

Step by step they descended, wooden framing giving way to ancient stone walls that dripped moisture and stank of mold. Rounding the corner, the steps continued down another seven to a door. Its panels were made of hardwood and bound with iron. The massive wrought-iron latch moved easily and silently under Jeff's hand. He put his mouth to Bakket's ear.

*"Ready?"*

*"Let us find justice this night, Milord."*

Instead of a room as he had expected, Jeff discovered another hallway on the other side of the door. Holding the door, which had a self-closing device, Jeff allowed Balko and Bakket through before allowing it to snick shut. Several steps down the hall he heard a faint rumble of voices, then sharp laughter.

Urged on by the sound, he had taken only another step when a frantic scream of pain shredded his mind, followed quickly by another and yet another. More laughter, this time female. Wild with fear for Raiella, Jeff ran down the corridor. Just as he spotted another door to his right, it suddenly swung open. Throwing himself against the wall, Balko

crouching a few feet ahead, Jeff forced himself to freeze.

“Orbul! Why are you not at your station?”

Another voice called out, “What is amiss?”

“Naught, I suspect. Orbul is given to wine—tonight it will be his death, for too often has he given in to its call.”

A dark figure emerged from the doorway. At the same time a snickering laugh cackled from the room followed by a grunt and a heart-wrenching shriek of pain that went on and on.

“Kill them all!”

Jeff lunged forward impaling the man in the doorway, who fell to the floor with a high-pitched scream. Balko leaped over him and into the room with Jeff and Bakket a step behind.

As he burst into the room, Jeff took in a scene that drove him mad. Raiella was chained to a stone table, stretched out on her back and spread-eagled. A man stood between her legs with pants down around his ankles, hips lunging back and forth as he raped her.

Another man and a woman were standing on either side.

One held a glowing iron rod, the other a whip raised over her head. Blood trickled over Raiella's body from crisscrossed lacerations; seemed covered with whip scores. Her face was a mask of vivid bruises, filth and so swollen he hardly recognized her. Standing around the perimeter of the room were eight or ten men and women waiting their turn.

Shrieking insanely, Jeff drove his sword through the rapist's back and released the hilt. Drawing the Ruger he head shot the man holding the branding iron blowing brains over the table. The woman tried to turn the whip on him but he chopped down with the barrel and sent her to the floor.

Balko crouched over two Quoreem, savaging them while they screamed and thrashed in an attempt to get away. But there was no escape. Bakket had engaged two more and had them backed against a wall.

Incoherent screams of hate mixed with explosions as Jeff

walked the Ruger around the room pulling the trigger as quickly as he was sure of a target. Balko's snarling growls mixed with the clash of swords, thunderous muzzle blasts and searing tongues of orange flame. When no one was left standing, Jeff holstered the automatic and retrieved Berold. The woman he had clubbed was trying to crawl away, but he grabbed her by the hair and hauled her erect.

Slamming her against a wall, he looked into her eyes for a moment then slowly pushed the saber through her neck. Choking on her own blood, she fought to get away. Lips drawn back from his teeth, Jeff held her pinned to the wall with a strength born of insane fury. Only when the blood flow was a dribble did he jerk the saber out and let her tumble to the floor still kicking.

Bakket had finished off his opponents and was wrenching at the chains binding Raiella to the table.

“We must free her and be gone! Others will soon be upon us!”

Jeff pulled back from the brink of insanity and they searched frantically for keys to the iron cuffs. What seemed an eternity later, Bakket dug them out of the rapist's clothing. Raiella was unconscious, but between them they got her over Jeff's shoulder. Loud cries and thundering feet were drawing close as they left.

*“Stay behind me, wolf-brother, for now the killing will be swift and terrible.”*

A mixed pack of men and women came slamming through the heavy door, swords in hand. Leaning against a wall for support, Jeff let the Ruger buck and spit in his hand. Bodies seemed to carom and tumble everywhere. Stepping over the bodies, they started up the stairs but more came running from behind. Balko was in their midst with one bound closely followed by Bakket. It was over in a brief moment of deadly chaos. Three men and a woman went down before the remaining two turned tail and ran howling.

Halfway up the stairs Jeff felt a stabbing pain in his right

leg and stumbled, but recovered with a heaving of muscles. He fired blindly up the stairwell, the shot whining off stone slabs. A body cartwheeled into view with blood gushing from its mouth, lung shot.

Step by step they fought their way higher. With a sudden sprint, Balko shot up the last five or six steps and disappeared into the warehouse. Instantly, a chorus of screams and terrified shouts for help accompanied the moans of wounded and dying in the stairwell.

At the landing, Jeff set Raiella down before he dropped her. He gasped for breath and had to brace himself against the wall. Bakket stumbled into him.

“Are you wounded, Bakket?”

“Naught to remark upon. And yourself?”

“A knife or dart got me in the leg, but it still works. Balko is raising hell out there and needs help. If we do not quickly clear a way to the street, we will never leave.”

Slamming in a new magazine, Jeff tried to hoist Raiella but his leg crumpled and he fell.

“Allow me, Milord.”

With Raiella draped over Bakket’s shoulder, they tottered into the warehouse proper. Vague figures seemed to move everywhere. Picking a likely spot on their exit route, Jeff fired chest high to avoid hitting Balko. The flash of light lasted long enough to reveal the warehouse was crowded with milling Quoreem. He fired five more times, using the lancing fire of each shot to pick out the next target. A lane opened to the outside door.

*“Wolf-brother, we must leave!”*

Silence.

Returning reason was stripped away in an instant. Jeff stumbled into the darkness mumbling, “Dirty bastards!”

Between sobs of anger and fear, hardly attempting to select targets, he emptied the remaining nine shots in quick succession. Holstering the Ruger, he drew the Colt .357 and blindly hobbled around looking for Balko. A shadow loomed