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NAKED EMPIRE

Chapter 1

"You knew they were there, didn't you?" Kahlan asked in a hushed tone as she leaned closer.

Against the darkening sky, she could just make out the shapes of three black-tipped races taking to wing, beginning their nightly hunt. That was why he'd stopped. That was what he'd been watching as the rest of them waited in uneasy silence.

"Yes," Richard said. He gestured over his shoulder without turning to look. "There are two more, back there."

Kahlan briefly scanned the dark jumble of rock, but she didn't see any others.

Lightly grasping the silver pommel with two fingers, Richard lifted his sword a few inches, checking that it was clear in its scabbard. A last fleeting glimmer of amber light played across his golden cape as he let the sword drop back in place. In the gathering gloom of dusk, his familiar tall, powerful contour seemed as if it were no more than an apparition made of shadows.

Just then, two more of the huge birds shot by right overhead. One, wings stretched wide, let out a piercing scream as it banked into a tight gliding turn, circling once in assessment of the five people below before stroking its powerful wings to catch its departing comrades in their swift journey west.

This night they would find ample food.

Kahlan expected that as Richard watched them he was thinking of the half brother that until just recently he hadn't known existed. That brother now lay a hard day's travel to the west in a place so naked to the burning sun that few people ever ventured there. Fewer still ever returned. The searing heat, though, had not been the worst of it.

Beyond those desolate lowlands, the dying light silhouetted a remote rim of mountains, making them look as if they had been charred black by the furnace of the underworld itself. As dark as those mountains, as implacable, as perilous, the flight of five pursued the departing light.

Jennsen, standing to the far side of Richard, watched in astonishment. "What in the world ... ?"

"Black-tipped races," Richard said.

Jennsen mulled over the unfamiliar name. "I've often watched hawks and falcons and such," she said at last, "but I've never seen any birds of prey that hunt at night, other than owls---and these aren't owls."

As Richard watched the races, he idly gathered small pebbles from the crumbling jut of rock beside him, rattling them in a loose fist. "I'd never seen them before, either, until I came down here. People we've spoken with say they began appearing only in the last year or two, depending on who's telling the story. Everyone agrees, though, that they never saw the races before then."

"Last couple of years ..." Jennsen wondered aloud.

Almost against her will, Kahlan found herself recalling the stories they'd heard, the rumors, the whispered assertions.

Richard cast the pebbles back down the hardpan trail. "I believe they're related to falcons."

Jennsen finally crouched to comfort her brown goat, Betty, pressing up against her skirts. "They can't be falcons." Betty's little white twins, usually either capering, suckling, or sleeping, now huddled mute beneath their mother's round belly. "They're too big to be falcons—they're bigger than hawks, bigger than golden eagles. No falcon is that big."

Richard finally withdrew his glare from the birds and bent to help console the trembling twins. One, eager for reassurance, anxiously peered up at him, licking out its little pink tongue before deciding to rest a tiny black hoof in his palm. With a thumb, Richard stroked the kids spindly white-haired leg.

A smile softened his features as well as his voice. "Are you saying you choose not to see what you've just seen, then?"

Jennsen smoothed Betty's drooping ears. "I guess the hair standing on end at the back of my neck must believe what I saw."

Richard rested his forearm across his knee as he glanced toward the grim horizon. "The races have sleek bodies with round heads and long pointed wings similar to all the falcons I've seen. Their tails often fan out when they soar but otherwise are narrow in flight."

Jennsen nodded, seeming to recognize his description of relevant attributes. To Kahlan, a bird was a bird. These, though, with red streaks on their chests and crimson at the base of their flight feathers, she had come to recognize.

"They're fast, powerful, and aggressive," Richard added. "I saw one easily chase down a prairie falcon and snatch it out of midair in its talons."

Jennsen looked to be struck speechless by such an account. Richard had grown up in the vast forests of Westland and had gone on to be a woods guide. He knew a great deal about the outdoors and about animals. Such an upbringing seemed exotic to Kahlan, who had grown up in a palace in the Midlands. She loved learning about nature from Richard, loved sharing his excitement over the wonders of the world, of life. Of course, he had long since come to be more than a woods guide. It seemed a lifetime ago when she'd first met him in those woods of his, but in fact it had only been little more than two and a half years.

Now they were a long way from Richard's simple boyhood home or Kahlan's grand childhood haunts. Had they a choice, they would choose to be in either place, or just about anywhere else, other than where they were. But at least they were together.

After all she and Richard had been through—the dangers, the anguish, the heartache of losing friends and loved ones—Kahlan jealously savored every moment with him, even if it was in the heart of enemy territory.

In addition to only just finding out that he had a half brother, they had also learned that Richard had

a half sister: Jennsen. From what they had gathered since they'd met her the day before, she, too, had grown up in the woods. It was heartwarming to see her simple and sincere joy at having discovered a close relation with whom she had much in common. Only her fascination with her new big brother exceeded Jennsen's wide-eyed curiosity about Kahlan and her mysterious upbringing in the Confessors' Palace in the far-off city of Aydindril.

Jennsen had had a different mother than Richard, but the same brutal tyrant, Darken Rahl, had fathered them both. Jennsen was younger, just past twenty, with sky blue eyes and ringlets of red hair down onto her shoulders. She had inherited some of Darken Rahl's cruelly perfect features, but her maternal heritage and guileless nature altered them into bewitching femininity. While Richard's rapt gaze attested to his Rahl paternity, his countenance, and his bearing, so manifest in his gray eyes, were uniquely his own.

"I've seen falcons rip apart small animals," Jennsen said. "I don't believe I much like thinking about a falcon that big, much less five of them together."

Her goat, Betty, looked to share the sentiment.

"We take turns standing watch at night," Kahlan said, answering Jennsen's unspoken fear. While that was hardly the only reason, it was enough.

In the eerie silence, withering waves of heat rose from the lifeless rock all around. It had been an arduous day's journey out from the center of the valley wasteland and across the surrounding flat plain, but none of them complained about the brutal pace. The torturous heat, though, had left Kahlan with a pounding headache. While she was dead tired, she knew that in recent days Richard had gotten far less sleep than any of the rest of them. She could read that exhaustion in his eyes, if not in his stride.

Kahlan realized, then, what it was that had her nerves so on edge: it was the silence. There were no yips of coyotes, no howls of distant wolves, no flutter of bats, no rustle of a raccoon, no soft scramble of a vole—not even the buzz and chirp of insects. In the past, when all those things went silent it had meant potential danger. Here, it was dead silent because nothing lived in this place, no coyotes or wolves or bats or mice or even bugs. Few living things ever trespassed this barren land. Here, the night was as soundless as the stars.

Despite the heat, the oppressive silence ran a chill shiver up through Kahlan's shoulders.

She peered off once more at the races barely still visible against the violet blush of the western sky. They, too, would not stay long in this wasteland where they did not belong.

"Kind of unnerving to encounter such a menacing creature when you never even knew such a thing existed," Jennsen said. She used her sleeve to wipe sweat from her brow as she changed the subject. "I've heard it said that a bird of prey wheeling over you at the beginning of a journey is a warning."

Cara, until then content to remain silent, leaned in past Kahlan. "Just let me get close enough and I'll pluck their wretched feathers." Long blond hair, pulled back into the traditional single braid of her profession, framed Cara's heated expression. "We'll see how much of an omen they are, then."

Cara's glare turned as dark as the races whenever she saw the huge birds. Being swathed from head to foot in a protective layer of gauzy black cloth, as were all of them except Richard, only added to his intimidating presence. When Richard had unexpectedly inherited rule, he had been further surprised to discover that Cara and her sister Mord-Sith were part of the legacy.

Richard returned the little white kid to its watchful mother and stood, hooking his thumbs behind his multilayered leather belt. At each wrist, wide, leather-padded silver bands bearing linked rings and strange symbols seemed to gather and reflect what little light remained. "I once had a hawk circle over me at the beginning of a journey."

"And what happened?" Jennsen asked, earnestly, as if his pronouncement might settle once and for all the old superstition.

Richard's smile widened into a grin. "I ended up marrying Kahlan."

Cara folded her arms. "That only proves it was a warning for the Mother Confessor, not you, Lord Rahl."

Richard's arm gently encircled Kahlan's waist. She smiled with him as she leaned against his embrace in answer to the wordless gesture. That journey had eventually brought them to be husband and wife seemed more astonishing than anything she would ever have dared dream. Women like her—Confessors—dared not dream of love. Because of Richard, she had dared and had gained it.

Kahlan shuddered to think of the terrible times she had feared he was dead, or worse. There had been so many times she had ached to be with him, to simply feel his warm touch, or to even be granted the mercy of knowing he was safe.

Jennsen glanced at Richard and Kahlan to see that neither took Cara's admonition as anything but fond heckling. Kahlan supposed that to a stranger, especially one from the land of D'Hara, as was Jennsen, Cara's gibes at Richard would defy reason; guards did not bait their masters, especially when their master was the Lord Rahl, the master of D'Hara.

Protecting the Lord Rahl with their lives had always been the blind duty of the Mord-Sith. In a perverse way, Cara's irreverence toward Richard was a celebration of her freedom, paid in homage to the one who had granted it.

By free choice, the Mord-Sith had decided to be Richard's closest protectors. They had given Richard no say in the matter. They often paid little heed to his orders unless they deemed them important enough; they were, after all, now free to pursue what was important to them, and what the Mord-Sith considered important above all else was keeping Richard safe.

Over time, Cara, their ever-present bodyguard, had gradually become like family. Now that family had unexpectedly grown.

Jennsen, for her part, was awestruck to find herself welcomed. From what they had so far learned, Jennsen had grown up in hiding, always fearful that the former Lord Rahl, her father, would finally find her and murder her as he murdered any other ungifted offspring he found.

Richard signaled to Tom and Friedrich, back with the wagon and horses, that they would stop for the night. Tom lifted an arm in acknowledgment and then set to unhitching his team.

No longer able to see the races in the dark void of the western sky, Jennsen turned back to Richard. "I take it their feathers are tipped in black."

Before Richard had a chance to answer, Cara spoke in a silken voice that was pure menace. "They look like death itself drips from the tips of their feathers—like the Keeper of the underworld has been using their wicked quills to write death warrants."

Cara loathed seeing those birds anywhere near Richard or Kahlan. Kahlan shared the sentiment.

Jennsen's gaze fled Cara's heated expression. She redirected her suspicion to Richard.

"Are they causing you ... some kind of trouble?"

Kahlan pressed a fist to her abdomen, against the ache of dread stirred by the question.

Richard appraised Jennsen's troubled eyes. "The races are tracking us."

Chapter 2

Jennsen frowned. "What?"

Richard gestured between Kahlan and himself. "The races, they're tracking us."

"You mean they followed you out into this wasteland and they're watching you, waiting to see if you'll die of thirst or something so they can pick your bones clean."

Richard slowly shook his head. "No, I mean they're following us, keeping track of where we are."

"I don't understand how you can possibly know—"

"We know," Cara snapped. Her shapely form was as spare, as sleek, as aggressive-looking as the races themselves and, swathed in the black garb of the nomadic people who sometimes traveled the outer fringes of the vast desert, just as sinister-looking.

With the back of his hand against her shoulder, Richard gently eased Cara back as he went on. "We were looking into it when Friedrich found us and told us about you."

Jennsen glanced over at the two men back with the wagon. The sharp sliver of moon floating above the black drape of distant mountains provided just enough light for Kahlan to see that Tom was working at removing the trace chains from his big draft horses while Friedrich unsaddled the others.

Jennsen's gaze returned to search Richard's eyes. "What have you been able to find out, so far?"

"We never had a chance to really find out much of anything. Oba, our surprise half brother lying dead back there, kind of diverted our attention when he tried to kill us." Richard unhooked a waterskin from his belt. "But the races are still watching us."

He handed Kahlan his waterskin, since she had left hers hanging on her saddle. It had been hours since they had last stopped. She was tired from riding and weary from walking when they had needed to rest the horses.

Kahlan lifted the waterskin to her lips only to be reacquainted with how bad hot water tasted. At least they had water. Without water, death came quickly in the unrelenting heat of the seemingly endless, barren expanse around the forsaken place called the Pillars of Creation.

Jennsen slipped the strap of her waterskin off her shoulder before hesitantly starting again. "I know it's easy to misconstrue things. Look at how I was tricked into thinking you wanted to kill me just like Darken Rahl had. I really believed it, and there were so many things that seemed to me to prove it, but I had it all wrong. I guess I was just so afraid it was true, I believed it."

Richard and Kahlan both knew it hadn't been Jennsen's doing—she had merely been a means for others to get at Richard—but it had squandered precious time.

Jennsen took a long drink. Still grimacing at the taste of the water, she lifted the waterskin toward the empty desert behind them. "I mean, there isn't much alive out here—it might actually be that the

aces are hungry and are simply waiting to see if you die out here and, because they do keep watching and waiting, you've begun to think it's more." she gave Richard a demure glance, bolstered by a smile as if hoping to-cloak the admonishment as a suggestion. "Maybe that's all it really is."

"They aren't waiting to see if we die out here," Kahlan said, wanting to end the discussion so they could eat and Richard could get some sleep. "They were watching us before we had to come here. They've been watching us since we were back in the forests to the northeast. Vow, let's have some supper and—"

"But why? That's not the way birds behave. Why would they do that?"

"I think they're keeping track of us for someone," Richard said. "More precisely, I think someone is using them to hunt us."

Kahlan had known various people in the Midlands, from simple people living in the wilds to nobles living in great cities, who hunted with falcons. This, though, was different. Even if she didn't fully understand Richard's meaning, much less the reasons for his conviction, she knew he hadn't meant it in the traditional sense.

With abrupt realization, Jennsen paused in the middle of another drink. "That's why you've started scattering pebbles along the windblown places in the trail."

Richard smiled in confirmation. He took his waterskin when Kahlan handed it back. Cara frowned up at him as he took a long drink.

"You've been throwing pebbles along the trail? Why?"

Jennsen eagerly answered in his place. "The open rock gets blown clean by the wind. He's been making sure that if anyone tries to sneak up on us in the dark, the pebbles strewn across those open patches will crunch underfoot and alert us."

Cara wrinkled a questioning brow at Richard. "Really?"

He shrugged as he passed her his waterskin so that she wouldn't have to dig hers out from beneath her desert garb. "Just a little extra precaution in case anyone is close, and careless. Sometimes people don't expect the simple things and that catches them up."

"But not you," Jennsen said, hooking the strap of her waterskin back over her shoulder. "You think of even the simple things."

Richard chuckled softly. "If you think I don't make mistakes, Jennsen, you're wrong. While it's dangerous to assume that those who wish you harm are stupid, it can't hurt to spread out a little grave just in case someone thinks they can sneak across windswept rock in the dark without being heard."

Any trace of amusement faded as Richard stared off toward the western horizon where stars had yet to appear. "But I fear that pebbles strewn along the ground won't do any good for eyes watching from dark sky." He turned back to Jennsen, brightening, as if remembering he had been speaking to her. "Still, everyone makes mistakes."

Cara wiped droplets of water from her sly smile as she handed Richard back his waterskin. "Lord Rahl is always making mistakes, especially simple ones. That's why he needs me around."

"Is that right, little miss perfect?" Richard chided as he snatched the waterskin from her hand. "Maybe if you weren't 'helping' keep me out of trouble, we wouldn't have black-tipped races shadowing us."

"What else could I do?" Cara blurted out. "I was trying to help—to protect you both." Her smile had withered. "I'm sorry, Lord Rahl."

Richard sighed. "I know," he admitted as he reassuringly squeezed her shoulder. "We'll figure it out."

Richard turned back to Jennsen. "Everyone makes mistakes. How a person deals with their mistakes is a mark of their character."

Jennsen nodded as she thought it over. "My mother was always afraid of making a mistake that would get us killed. She used to do

things like you did, in case my father's men were trying to sneak up on us. We always lived in forests, though, so it was dry twigs, rather

than pebbles, that she often scattered around us."

Jennsen pulled on a ringlet of her hair as she stared off into dark memories. "It was raining the night they came. If those men stepped on twigs, she wouldn't have been able to hear it." She ran trembling fingers over the silver hilt of the knife at her belt. "They were big, and they surprised her, but still, she got one of them before they ..."

Darken Rahl had wanted Jennsen dead because she had been born ungifted. Any ruler of that bloodline killed offspring such as she. Richard and Kahlan believed that a person's life was their own to live, and that birth did not qualify that right.

Jennsen's haunted eyes turned up to Richard. "She got one of them before they killed her."

With one arm, Richard pulled Jennsen into a tender embrace. They all understood such terrible loss. The man who had lovingly raised

Richard had been killed by Darken Rahl himself. Darken Rahl had ordered the murders of all of Kahlan's sisters. The men who killed Jennsen's mother, though, were men from the Imperial Order sent to trick her, to murder in order to make her believe it was Richard who was after her.

Kahlan felt a forlorn wave of helplessness at all they faced. She knew what it was to be alone, afraid and overwhelmed by powerful men filled with blind faith and the lust for blood, men devoutly believing that mankind's salvation required slaughter.

"I'd give anything for her to know that it wasn't you who sent those men." Jennsen's soft voice held the dejected sum of what it was to have suffered such a loss, to have no solution to the crushing solitude it left in its wake. "I wish my mother could have known the truth, known what you two are

really like."

"She's with the good spirits and finally at peace," Kahlan whispered in sympathy, even if she now had reason to question the enduring validity of such things.

Jennsen nodded as she swiped her fingers across her cheek. "What mistake did you make, Cara?" she finally asked.

Rather than be angered by the question, and perhaps because it had been asked in innocent empathy, Cara answered with quiet candor. "It has to do with that little problem we mentioned before."

"You mean it's about the thing you want me to touch?"

By the light of the moon's narrow crescent, Kahlan could see Cara's scowl return. "And the sooner the better."

Richard rubbed his fingertips across his brow. "I'm not sure about that."

Kahlan, too, thought that Cara's notion was too simplistic.

Cara threw her arms up. "But Lord Rahl, we can't just leave it—"

"Let's get camp set up before it's pitch dark," Richard said in quiet command. "What we need right now is food and sleep."

For once, Cara saw the sense in his orders and didn't object. When he had earlier been out scouting alone, she had confided in Kahlan that she was worried at how weary Richard looked and had suggested that, since there were enough other people, they shouldn't wake him for a turn at watch that night.

"I'll check the area," Cara said, "and make sure there aren't any more of those birds sitting on a rock watching us with those black eyes of theirs."

Jennsen peered around as if fearing that a black-tipped race might swoop in out of the darkness.

Richard countermanded Cara's plans with a dismissive shake of his head. "They're gone for now."

"You said they were tracking you." Jennsen stroked Betty's neck when the goat nudged her, seeking comfort. The twins were still hiding under their mother's round belly. "I never saw them before now. They weren't around yesterday, or today. They didn't show up until just this evening. If they really were tracking you, then they wouldn't be gone for such a stretch. They'd have to stick close to you all the time."

"They can leave us for a time in order to hunt—or to make us doubt our suspicion of their true intent—and, even if we keep going, they can easily find us when they return. That's the advantage the black-tipped races have: they don't need to watch us every moment."

Jennsen planted her fists on her hips. "Then how in the world could you possibly be sure they're tracking you?" She flicked a hand out toward the darkness beyond. "You often see the same kind of

birds. You see ravens, sparrows, geese, finches, hummingbirds, doves—how do you know that any of them aren't following you and that the black-tipped races are?"

"I know," Richard said as he turned and started back toward the wagon. "Now, let's get our things out and set up camp."

Kahlan caught Jennsen's arm as she headed after him, about to renew her objections. "Let him be for tonight, Jennsen?" Kahlan lifted an eyebrow. "Please? About this, anyway."

Kahlan was pretty sure that the black-tipped races really were following them, but it wasn't so much an issue of her being sure of it herself. Rather, she had confidence in Richard's word in matters such as this. Kahlan was versed in affairs of state, protocol, ceremony, and royalty; she was familiar with various cultures, the origins of ancient disputes between lands, and the history of treaties; and she was conversant in any number of languages, including the duplicitous dialect of diplomacy. In such areas Richard trusted her word when she expressed her conviction.

In matters about something so odd as strange birds following them, she knew better than to question Richard's word.

Kahlan knew, too, that he didn't yet have all the answers. She had seen him like this before, distant and withdrawn, as he struggled to understand the important connections and patterns in relevant details only he perceived. She knew that he needed to be left alone about it. Pestering him for answers before he had them only served to distract him from what he needed to do.

Watching Richard's back as he walked away, Jennsen finally forced a smile of agreement. Then, as struck with another thought, her eyes widened. She leaned close to Kahlan and whispered, "Is this about magic?"

"We don't know what it's about."

Jennsen nodded. "I'll help. Whatever I can do, I want to help."

For the time being, Kahlan kept her worries to herself as she circled an arm around the young woman's shoulders in an appreciative embrace and walked her back toward the wagon.

Chapter 3

In the immense, silent void of night, Kahlan could clearly hear Friedrich, off to the side, speaking gently to the horses. He patted their shoulders or ran a hand along their flanks each time on his way by as he went about grooming and picketing them for the night. With darkness shrouding the empty expanse beyond, the familiar

task of caring for the animals made the unfamiliar surroundings seem a little less forbidding.

Friedrich was an older, unassuming man of average height. Despite his age, he had undertaken a long and difficult journey to the Old World to find Richard. Friedrich had undertaken that journey, carrying with him important information, soon after his wife had died. The terrible sadness of that loss still haunted his gentle features. Kahlan supposed that it always would.

In the dim light, she saw Jennsen smile as Tom looked her way. A boyish grin momentarily overcame the big, blond-headed D'Haran when he spotted her, but he quickly bent back to work, pulling bedrolls from a corner beneath the seat. He stepped over supplies in his wagon and handed a load down to Richard.

"There's no wood for a fire, Lord Rahl." Tom rested a foot on the chafing rail, laying a forearm over his bent knee. "But, if you like, I have a little charcoal to use for cooking."

"What I'd really like is for you to stop calling me 'Lord Rahl.' If we're anywhere near the wrong people and you slip up and call me that, we'll all be in a great deal of trouble."

Tom grinned and patted the ornate letter "R" on the silver handle of the knife at his belt. "Not to worry, Lord Rahl. Steel against steel."

Richard sighed at the oft-repeated maxim involving the bond of the D'Haran people to their Lord Rahl, and he to them. Tom and Friedrich had promised they wouldn't use Richard's and Kahlan's title around other people. A lifetime's habits were difficult to change, though, and Kahlan knew that they felt uncomfortable not using titles when they were so obviously alone.

"So," Tom said as he handed down the last bedroll, "would you like a small fire for cooking?"

"Hot as it is, it seems to me we could do without any more heat." Richard set the bedrolls atop a sack of oats already unloaded. "Besides, I'd prefer not to take the time. I'd like to be on our way at first light and we need to get a good rest."

"Can't argue with you there," Tom said, straightening his big frame. "I don't like us being so out in the open where we could easily be spotted."

Richard swept his hand in a suggestive arc across the dark vault above.

Tom cast a wary eye skyward. He nodded reluctantly before turning back to the task of digging out tools to mend the breeching and wooden buckets to water the horses. Richard put a boot on a spoke of the cargo wagon's stout rear wheel and climbed up to help.

Tom, a shy but cheerful man who had appeared only the day before, right after they'd encountered Jennsen, looked to be a merchant who hauled trade goods. Hauling goods in his wagon, Kahlan and Richard had learned, gave him an excuse to travel where and when he needed as a member of a cover group whose true profession was to protect the Lord Rahl from unseen plots and threats.

Speaking in a low voice, Jennsen leaned closer to Kahlan. "Vultures can tell you, from a great distance, where a kill lies—by the way they circle and gather, I mean. I guess I can see how the races could be like that—birds that someone could spot from afar in order to know there was something below."

Kahlan didn't say anything. Her head ached, she was hungry, and she just wanted to go to sleep, not to discuss things she couldn't answer. She wondered how many times Richard had viewed her own insistent questions in the same way she now viewed Jennsen's. Kahlan silently vowed to try to be at least half as patient as Richard always was.

"The thing is," Jennsen went on, matter-of-factly, "how would someone get birds to ... well, you know, circle around you like vultures over a carcass in order to know where you were?" Jennsen leaned in again and whispered so as to be sure that Richard wouldn't hear. "Maybe they're sent with magic to follow specific people."

Cara fixed Jennsen with a murderous glare. Kahlan idly wondered if the Mord-Sith would clobber Richard's sister, or extend her leniency because she was family. Discussions about magic, especially in the context of its danger to Richard or Kahlan, made Cara testy. Mord-Sith were fearless in the face of death, but they did not like magic and weren't shy about making their distaste clear.

In a way, such hostility toward magic characterized the nature and purpose of Mord-Sith; they were singularly able to appropriate the gifted's power and use it to destroy them. Mord-Sith had been mercilessly trained to be ruthless at their task. It was from the madness of this duty that Richard had freed them.

It seemed obvious enough to Kahlan, though, that if the races really were tracking them it would have to involve conjuring of some sort. It was the questions raised by that assumption that so worried her.

When Kahlan didn't debate the theory, Jennsen asked, "Why do you think someone would be using the races to track you?"

Kahlan lifted an eyebrow at the young woman. "Jennsen, we're in the middle of the Old World. Being hunted in enemy territory is hardly surprising."

"I guess you're right," Jennsen admitted. "It just seems that there would have to be more to it." Despite the heat, she rubbed her arms as if a chill had just run through her. "You have no idea how much Emperor Jagang wants to catch you."

Kahlan smiled to herself. "Oh, I think I do."

Jennsen watched Richard a moment as he filled the buckets with water from barrels carried in the wagon. Richard leaned down and handed one to Friedrich. Ears turned attentively ahead, the horses a

watched, eager for a drink. Betty, also watching as her twins suckled, bleated her longing for a drink. After filling the buckets, Richard submerged his waterskin to fill it, too.

Jennsen shook her head and looked again into Kahlan's eyes. "Emperor Jagang tricked me into thinking Richard wanted me dead." She glanced briefly over at the men engaged in their work before she went on. "I was there with Jagang when he attacked Aydindril."

Kahlan felt as if her heart came up in her throat at hearing firsthand confirmation of that brute invading the place where she'd grown up. She didn't think she could bear to hear the answer, but she had to ask. "Did he destroy the city?"

After Richard had been captured and taken from her, Kahlan, with Cara at her side, had led the D'Haran army against Jagang's vast invading horde from the Old World. Month after month, Kahlan and the army fought against impossible odds, retreating all the way up through the Midlands.

By the time they lost the battle for the Midlands, it had been over a year since Kahlan had seen Richard; he had seemingly been cast into oblivion. When at last she learned where he was being held, Kahlan and Cara had raced south, to the Old World, only to arrive just as Richard ignited a firestorm of revolution in the heart of Jagang's homeland.

Before she'd left, Kahlan had evacuated Aydindril and left the Confessors' Palace empty of all those who called it home. Life, not a place, was what mattered.

"He never got a chance to destroy the city," Jennsen said. "When we arrived at the Confessors' Palace, Emperor Jagang thought he had you and Richard cornered. But out in front waited a spear holding the head of the emperor's revered spiritual leader: Brother Narev." Her voice lowered meaningfully. "Jagang found the message left with the head."

Kahlan remembered well the day Richard had sent the head of that evil man, along with a message for Jagang, on the long journey north. "'Compliments of Richard Rahl.'"

"That's right," Jennsen said. "You can't imagine Jagang's rage." She paused to be certain Kahlan heeded her warning. "He'll do anything to get his hands on you and Richard."

Kahlan hardly needed Jennsen to tell her how much Jagang wanted them.

"All the more reason to get away—hide somewhere," Cara said.

"And the races?" Kahlan reminded her.

Cara cast a suggestive look at Jennsen before speaking in a quiet voice to Kahlan. "If we do something about the rest of it, maybe that problem would go away, too." Cara's goal was to protect Richard. She would be perfectly happy to put him in a hole somewhere and board him over if she thought doing so would keep harm from reaching him.

Jennsen waited, watching the two of them. Kahlan wasn't at all sure there was anything Jennsen could do. Richard had thought it over and had come to have serious doubts. Kahlan had been amply skeptical without Richard's doubts. Still...

"Maybe" was all she said.

"If there's anything I can do, I want to try it." Jennsen fussed with a button on the front of her dress. "Richard doesn't think I can help. If it involves magic, wouldn't he know? Richard is a wizard, he would know about magic."

Kahlan sighed. There was so much more to it. "Richard was raised in Westland—far from the Midlands, even farther from D'Hara. He grew up in isolation from the rest of the New World, never knowing anything at all about the gift. Despite all he's so far learned and some of the remarkable things he's accomplished, he still knows very little of his birthright."

They had already told Jennsen this, but she seemed skeptical, as if she suspected there was a certain amount of exaggeration in what they were telling her about Richard's unfamiliarity with his own gift. Her big brother had, after all, in one day rescued her from a lifetime of terror. Such a profound awakening probably seemed tangled in magic to one so devoid of it. Perhaps it was.

"Well, if Richard is as ignorant of magic as you say," Jennsen pressed in a meaningful voice, finally having arrived at the heart of her purpose, "then maybe we shouldn't worry so much about what he thinks. Maybe we should just not tell him and go ahead and do whatever it is Cara wants me to do to fix your problem and get the races off your backs."

Nearby, Betty contentedly licked clean her little white twins. The sweltering darkness and vast weight of the surrounding silence seemed as eternal as death itself.

Kahlan gently took hold of Jennsen's collar. "I grew up walking the corridors of the Wizard's Keep and the Confessors' Palace. I know a lot about magic."

She pulled the young woman closer. "I can tell you that such naive notions, when applied to ominous matters like this, can easily get people killed. There is always the possibility that it's as simple as you fancy, but most likely it's complex beyond your imagination and any rash attempt at a remedy could ignite a conflagration that would consume us all. Added to all that is the grave peril of not knowing how someone, such as yourself, someone so pristinely ungifted as to be forewarned of in that ancient book Richard has, might affect the equation.

"There are times when there is no choice but to act immediately; even then it must be with your best judgment, using all your experience and everything you do know. As long as there's a choice, though, you don't act in matters of magic until you can be sure of the consequence. You don't ever just take a stab in the dark."

Kahlan knew all too well the terrible truth of such an admonition. Jennsen seemed unconvinced. "But if he doesn't really know much about magic, his fears might only be—"

"I've walked through dead cities, walked among the mutilated bodies of men, women, and children the Imperial Order has left in their wake. I've seen young women not as old as you make thoughtless, innocent mistakes and end up chained to a stake to be used by gangs of soldiers for days before being tortured to death just for the amusement of men who get sick pleasure out of raping a woman as she's in the throes of death."

Kahlan gritted her teeth as memories flashed mercilessly before her mind's eye. She tightened her grip on Jennsen's collar.

"All of my sister Confessors died in such a fashion, and they knew about their power and how to use it. The men who caught them knew, too, and used that knowledge against them. My closest girlhood friend died in my arms after such men were finished with her.

"Life means nothing to people like that; they worship death.

"Those are the kind of people who butchered your mother. Those are the kind of people who will have us, too, if we make a mistake. Those are the kind of people laying traps for us—including traps constructed of magic.

"As for Richard not knowing about magic, there are times when he is so ignorant of the simplest things that I can scarcely believe it and must remind myself that he grew up not being taught anything at all about his gift. In those things, I try to be patient and to guide him as best I can. He takes very seriously what I tell him.

"There are other times when I suspect that he actually grasps complexities of magic that neither I nor anyone alive has ever before fathomed or even so much as imagined. In those things he must be his own guide.

"The lives of a great many good people depend on us not making careless mistakes, especially careless mistakes with magic. As the Mother Confessor I'll not allow reckless whim to jeopardize all those lives. Now, do you understand me?"

Kahlan had nightmares about the things she had seen, about those who had been caught, about those who had made a simple mistake and paid the price with their life. She was not many years beyond Jennsen's age, but right then that gulf was vastly more than a mere handful of years.

Kahlan gave Jennsen's collar a sharp yank. "Do you understand me?"

Wide-eyed, Jennsen swallowed. "Yes, Mother Confessor." Finally, her gaze broke toward the ground.

Only then did Kahlan release her.

Chapter 4

"Anyone hungry?" Tom called to the three women.

Richard pulled a lantern from the wagon and, after finally getting it lit with a steel and flint, set it on a shelf of rock. He passed a suspicious look among the three women as they approached, but apparently thought better of saying anything.

As Kahlan sat close at Richard's side, Tom offered him the first chunk he sliced from a long length of sausage. When Richard declined, Kahlan accepted it. Tom sliced off another piece and passed it to Cara and then another to Friedrich.

Jennsen had gone to the wagon to search through her pack. Kahlan thought that maybe she just wanted to be alone a moment to collect herself. Kahlan knew how harsh her words had sounded, but she couldn't allow herself to do Jennsen the disservice of coddling her with pleasing lies.

With Jennsen reassuringly close by, Betty lay down beside Rusty, Jennsen's red roan mare. The horse and the goat were fast friends. The other horses seemed pleased by the visitor and took keen interest in her two kids, giving them a good sniff when they came close enough.

When Jennsen walked over displaying a small piece of carrot, Betty rose up in a rush. Her tail went into a blur of expectant wagging. The horses whinnied and tossed their heads, hoping not to be left out. Each in turn received a small treat and a scratch behind the ears.

Had they a fire, they could have cooked a stew, rice, or beans; grid-died some bannock; or maybe have made a nice soup. Despite how hungry she was, Kahlan didn't think she would have had the energy to cook, so she was content to settle for what was at hand. Jennsen retrieved strips of dried meat from her pack, offering them around. Richard declined this, too, instead eating hard travel biscuits, nuts, and dried fruit.

"But don't you want any meat?" Jennsen asked as she sat down on her bedroll opposite him. "You need more than that to eat. You need something substantial."

"I can't eat meat. Not since the gift came to life in me."

Jennsen's wrinkled her nose with a puzzled look. "Why would your gift not allow you to eat meat?"

Richard leaned to the side, resting his weight on an elbow as he momentarily surveyed the sweep of stars, searching for the words to explain. "Balance, in nature," he said at last, "is a condition resulting from the interaction of all things in existence. On a simple level, look at how predators and prey are in balance. If there were too many predators, and the prey were all eaten, then the thriving predators, too, would end up starving and dying out.

"The lack of balance would be deadly to both prey and predator; the world, for them both, would end. They exist in balance because acting in accordance with their nature results in balance. Balance is not their conscious intent.

"People are different. Without our conscious intent, we don't necessarily achieve the balance that our

survival often requires.

"We must learn to use our minds, to think, if we're to survive. We plant crops, we hunt for fur to keep us warm, or raise sheep and gather their wool and learn how to weave it into cloth. We have to learn how to build shelter. We balance the value of one thing against another and trade goods to exchange what we've made for what we need that others have made or grown or built or woven or hunted.

"We balance what we need with what we know of the realities of the world. We balance what we want against our rational self-interest, not against fulfilling a momentary impulse, because we know that our long-term survival requires it. We use wood to build a fire in the hearth in order to keep from freezing on a winter night, but, despite how cold we might be when we're building the fire, we don't build the fire too big, knowing that to do so would risk burning our shelter down after we're warm and asleep."

"But people also act out of shortsighted selfishness, greed, and lust for power. They destroy lives." Jennsen lifted her arm out toward the darkness. "Look at what the Imperial Order is doing—and succeeding at. They don't care about weaving wool or building houses or trading goods. They slaughter people just for conquest. They take what they want."

"And we resist them. We've learned to understand the value of life, so we fight to reestablish reason. We are the balance."

Jennsen hooked some of her hair back behind an ear. "What does all this have to do with not eating meat?"

"I was told that wizards, too, must balance themselves, their gift—their power—in the things they do. I fight against those, like the Imperial Order, who would destroy life because it has no value to them, but that requires that I do the same terrible thing by destroying what is my highest value—life. Since my gift has to do with being a warrior, abstinence from eating meat is believed to be the balance for the killing I'm forced to do."

"What happens if you eat meat?"

Kahlan knew that Richard had cause, from only the day before, to need the balance of not eating meat.

"Even the idea of eating meat nauseates me. I've done it when I've had to, but it's something I avoid if at all possible. Magic deprived of balance has grave consequences, just like building a fire in the hearth."

The thought occurred to Kahlan that Richard carried the Sword of Truth, and perhaps that weapon also imposed its own need for balance. Richard had been rightly named the Seeker of Truth by the First Wizard himself, Zeddicus Zu'l Zorander—Zedd, Richard's grandfather, the man who had helped raise him, and from whom Richard had additionally inherited the gift. Richard's gift had been passed down not only from the Rahl bloodline, but the Zorander as well. Balance indeed.

Rightly named Seekers had been carrying that very same sword for nearly three thousand years.

Perhaps Richard's understanding of the need for balance had helped him to survive the things he'd faced.

With her teeth, Jennsen tugged off a strip of dried meat as she thought it over. "So, because you have to fight and sometimes kill people, you can't eat meat as the balance for that terrible act?"

Richard nodded as he chewed dried apricots.

"It must be dreadful to have the gift," Jennsen said in a quiet voice. "To have something so destructive that it requires you balance it in some way."

She looked away from Richard's gray eyes. Kahlan knew what a difficult experience it sometimes was to meet his direct and incisive gaze.

"I used to feel that way," he said, "when I first was named the Seeker and given the sword, and even more so later, when I learned that I had the gift. I didn't want to have the gift, didn't want the things the gift could do, just as I hadn't wanted the sword because of the things in me that I thought shouldn't ever be brought out."

"But now you don't mind as much, having the sword, or the gift?"

"You have a knife and have used it." Richard leaned toward her, holding out his hands. "You have hands. Do you hate your knife, or hands?"

"Of course not. But what does that have to do with having the gift?"

"Having the gift is simply how I was born, like being born male, or female, or with blue, or brown, or green eyes—or with two hands. I don't hate my hands because I could potentially strangle someone with them. It's my mind that directs my hands. My hands don't act of their own accord; to think so is to ignore the truth of what each thing is, its true nature. You have to recognize the truth of things if you're to achieve balance—or come to truly understand anything, for that matter."

Kahlan wondered why she didn't require balance the way Richard did. Why was it so vital for him, but not for her? Despite how much she wanted to go to sleep, she couldn't keep silent. "I often use my Confessor's power for that same end—to kill—and I don't have to keep in balance by not eating meat."

"The Sisters of the Light claim that the veil that separates the world of the living from the world of the dead is maintained through magic. More precisely, they claim that the veil is here," Richard said, tapping the side of his temple, "in those of us who have the gift—wizards and to a lesser extent sorceresses. They claim that balance for those of us with the gift is essential because in us, within our gift, resides the veil, making us, in essence, the guardians of the veil, the balance between worlds."

"Maybe they're right. I have both sides of the gift: Additive and Subtractive. Maybe that makes it different for me. Maybe having both sides makes it more important than usual for me to keep my gift in balance."

Kahlan wondered just how much of that might be true. She feared to think how extensively the balance of magic itself had been altered by her doing.

The world was unraveling, in more ways than one. But there had been no choice.

Cara dismissively waggled a piece of dried meat before them. "All this balance business is just a message from the good spirits—in that other world—telling Lord Rahl to leave such fighting to us. If he did, then he wouldn't have to worry about balance, or what he can and can't eat. If he would stop putting himself in mortal danger then his balance would be just fine and he could eat a whole goat."

Jennsen's eyebrows went up.

"You know what I mean," Cara grumbled.

Tom leaned in. "Maybe Mistress Cara is right, Lord Rahl. You have people to protect you. You should let them do it and you could better put your abilities to the task of being the Lord Rahl."

Richard closed his eyes and rubbed his temples with his fingertips. "If I had to wait for Cara to save me all the time, I'm afraid I'd have to do without a head."

Cara rolled her eyes at his wisp of a smile and went back to her sausage.

Studying his face in the dim light as he sucked on a small bite of dried biscuit, Kahlan thought that Richard didn't look well, and that it was more than simply being exhausted. The soft glow of light from the lantern lit one side of his face, leaving the rest in darkness, as if he were only half there, half in this world and half in the world of darkness, as if he were the veil between.

She leaned close and brushed back the hair that had fallen across his forehead, using the excuse to feel his brow. He felt hot, but they were all hot and sweating, so she couldn't really tell if he had a fever, but she didn't think so.

Her hand slipped down to cup his face, kindling his smile. She thought she could lose herself in the pleasure of just looking into his eyes. It made her heart ache with joy to see his smile. She smiled back, a smile she gave no one but him.

Kahlan had an urge to kiss him, too, but there always seemed to be people around and the kind of kiss she really wanted to give him wasn't the kind of kiss you gave in front of others.

"It seems so hard to imagine," Friedrich said to Richard. "I mean, the Lord Rahl himself, not knowing about the gift as he grew up." Friedrich shook his head. "It seems so hard to believe."

"My grandfather, Zedd, has the gift," Richard said as he leaned back. "He wanted to help raise me away from magic, much like Jennsen—hidden away where Darken Rahl couldn't get at me. That's why he wanted me raised in Westland, on the other side of the boundary from magic."

"And even your grandfather—a wizard—never let on that he was gifted?" Tom asked.

"No, not until Kahlan came to Westland. Looking back on it, I realize that there were a lot of little things that told me he was more than he seemed, but growing up I never knew. He just always seemed wizardly to me in the sense that he seemed to know about everything in the world around us. He opened up that world for me, making me want to all the time know more, but the gift wasn't ever the magic he showed me—life was what he showed me."

"It's really true, then," Friedrich said, "that Westland was set aside to be a place without magic."

Richard smiled at the mention of his home of Westland. "It is. I grew up in the Hartland woods, right near the boundary, and I never saw magic. Except maybe for Chase."

"Chase?" Tom asked.

"A friend of mine—a boundary warden. Fellow about your size, Tom. Whereas you serve to protect the Lord Rahl, Chase's charge was the boundary, or rather, keeping people away from it. He told me that his job was keeping away the prey—people—so that the things that come out of the boundary wouldn't get any stronger. He worked to maintain balance." Richard smiled to himself. "He didn't have the gift, but I often thought that the things that man could pull off had to be magic."

Friedrich, too, was smiling at Richard's story. "I lived in D'Hara all my life. When I was young those men who guarded the boundary were my heroes and I wanted to join them."

"Why didn't you?" Richard asked.

"When the boundary went up I was too young." Friedrich stared off into memories, then sought to change the subject. "How much longer until we get out of this wasteland, Lord Rahl?"

Richard looked east, as if he could see off into the black of night beyond the dim circle of lantern light. "If we keep up our pace, a few more days and we'll be out of the worst of it, I'd say. It gets rockier now as the ground continues to rise up toward the distant mountains. The traveling will be more difficult but at least as we get higher it shouldn't be quite so hot."

"How far to this thing that... that Cara thinks I should touch?" Jennsen asked.

Richard studied her face a moment. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

"But we are going there?"

"Yes."

Jennsen picked at the strip of dried meat. "What is this thing that Cara touched, anyway? Cara and Kahlan don't seem to want to tell me."

"I asked them not to tell you," Richard said.

"But why? If we're going to see it, then why wouldn't you want to tell me what it is?"

"Because you don't have the gift," Richard said. "I don't want to influence what you see."

Jennsen blinked. "What difference could that make?"

"I haven't had time to translate much of it yet, but from what I gather from the book Friedrich brought me, even those who don't have the gift, in the common sense, have at least some tiny spark of it. In that way they are able to interact with the magic in the world—much like you must be born with eyes to see color. Being born with eyes, you can see and understand a grand painting, even though you

may not have the ability to create such a painting yourself.

"The gifted Lord Rahl gives birth to only one gifted heir. He may have other children, but rarely are any of them ever also gifted. Still, they do have this infinitesimal spark, as does everyone else. Even they, so to speak, can see color.

"The book says, though, that there are rare offspring of a gifted Lord Rahl, like you, who are born devoid of any trace whatsoever of the gift. The book calls them pillars of Creation. Much like those born without eyes can't perceive color, those born like you can't perceive magic.

"But even that is imprecise, because with you it's more than simply not perceiving magic. For someone born blind, color exists, they just aren't able to see it. For you, though, it isn't that you simply can't perceive magic; for you magic does not exist—it isn't a reality."

"How is such a thing possible?" Jennsen asked.

"I don't know," Richard said. "When our ancestors created the bond of the Lord Rahl to the D'Harar people, it carried the unique ability to consistently bear a gifted heir. Magic needs balance. Maybe they had to make it work like this, have this counter of those born like you, in order for the magic they created to work; maybe they didn't realize what would happen and inadvertently created the balance."

Jennsen cleared her throat. "What would happen if... you know, if I were to have children?"

Richard surveyed Jennsen's eyes for what seemed a painfully long time. "You would bear offspring like you."

Jennsen sat forward, her hands reflecting her emotional entreaty. "Even if I marry someone with the spark of the gift? Someone able to perceive color, as you called it? Even then my child would be like me?"

"Even then and every time," Richard said with quiet certitude. "You are a broken link in the chain of the gift. According to the book, once the line of all those born with the spark of the gift, including those with the gift as it is in me, going back thousands of years, going back forever, is broken, it is broken for all time. It cannot be restored. Once forfeited in such a marriage, no descendant of that line can ever restore the link to the gift. When these children marry, they too would be as you, breaking the chain in the line of those they marry. Their children would be the same, and so on.

"That's why the Lord Rahl always hunted down ungifted offspring and eliminated them. You would be the genesis of something the world has never had before: those untouched by the gift. Every offspring of every descendant would end the line of the spark of the gift in everyone they married. The world, mankind, would be changed forever.

"This is the reason the book calls those like you 'pillars of Creation.' "

The silence seemed brittle.

"And that's what this place is called, too," Tom said as he pointed a thumb back over his shoulder, seeming to feel the need to say something into the quiet, "the Pillars of Creation." He looked at the faces surrounding the weak light coming from the sputtering lantern. "Seems a strange coincidence

that both those like Jennsen and this place would be called the same thing."

Richard stared off into the darkness toward that terrible place where Kahlan would have died had he made a mistake with the magic involved. "I don't think it's a coincidence. They are connected, somehow."

The book—The Pillars of Creation—describing those born like Jennsen was written in the ancient language of High D'Haran. Few people still living understood High D'Haran. Richard had begun to learn it in order to unravel important information in other books they'd found that were from the time of the great war.

That war, extinguished three thousand years before, had somehow ignited once again, and was burning uncontrolled through the world. Kahlan feared to think of the central—if inadvertent—part she and Richard had played in making it possible.

Jennsen leaned in, as if looking for some thread of hope. "How do you think the two might be connected?"

Richard let out a tired sigh. "I don't know, yet."

With a finger, Jennsen rolled a pebble around in a small circle, leaving a tiny rut in the dust. "All of those things about me being a pillar of Creation, being the break in the link of the gift, makes me feel somehow... dirty."

"Dirty?" Tom asked, looking hurt to hear her even suggest such a thing. "Jennsen, why would you feel that way?"

"Those like me are also called 'holes in the world.' I guess I can see why, now."

Richard leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I know what it's like to feel regret for how you were born, for what you have, or don't have. I hated being born the way I was—with the gift. But I came to realize how senseless such feelings are, how completely wrong it was to think that way."

"But it's different with me," she said as she pushed at the sand with a finger, erasing the little ruts she'd made with the pebble. "There are others like you—wizards or sorceresses with the gift. Everyone else can at least see colors, as you put it. I'm the only one like this."

Richard gazed at his half sister, a beautiful, bright, ungifted half sister that any previous Lord Rahl would have murdered on the spot, and was overcome with a radiant smile. "Jennsen, I think of you as born pure. You're like a new snowflake, different than any other, and startlingly beautiful."

Looking up at him, Jennsen was overcome with a smile of her own. "I never thought of it that way." Her smile withered as she thought about his words. "But still, I'd be destroying—"

"You would be creating, not destroying," Richard said. "Magic exists. It cannot possess the 'right' to exist. To think so would be to ignore the true nature—the reality—of things. People, if they don't take the lives of others, have the right to live their life. You can't say that because you were born with red hair you supplanted the 'right' of brown hair to be born on your head."

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