

## 49 A Caged Animal

Whitte's eyes burned. Azra'il was staring into them, through time, from the shack located in the jungle outside of Belize City. The shack stank of bile and urine and decomposing biological material, probably plant, animal, and human. Anais was in another room. He would hear her screams from time to time but he never saw her again during that ordeal. His hands were bound, his eyes blindfolded except for the few times when Azra'il wanted to make sure that Whitte saw what he was going to do to him; what he did to him.

The beatings became commonplace. He would be beaten around the face, in the ribs and stomach until he passed out. They would insert objects into his rectum. The only object he was sure of was the last one; it had been a glass test tube and once all the way in, was shattered by repeated lashings against his buttocks. The damage they did to his scrotum insured he would never have children from that moment on. The physical healing took months; the emotional healing never took place.

Whitte sat on the couch feeling the warmth from the medication and liquor ebbing out as fast as they had flowed in.

Al-Fa'sad droned on: "Yes. I beat my daughter on numerous occasions. It was before we knew better, I grant you that. Maybe had I not beaten her she would have been fine with that Brighton fairy but I guess I couldn't fault her for not wanting that man to touch her." He turned abruptly toward Whitte who was still staring at the image of Azra'il. The barbarian began preparations to do to Amber what he did to Whitte all those years

before.

“I beg of you, Al-Fa’sad. I will do anything but you get that monster out of the room with her.” Whitte turned his attention to McIntosh who still held the gun in his hand. Whitte began calculating odds and he didn’t like the handicap. “Give me to him. Azra’il can have me. Let the girl go.” Al-Fa’sad’s passive demeanor did not change. “If he touches her, I will find a way to kill you. Do you understand?”

Al-Fa’sad seemed to be oblivious to Whitte’s protestations. “There was the devil to pay, you know?” he said in a sober voice, “For my daughter was pregnant by this bastard and she gave birth to twins.”

There was a slight rap on the door and then it swung open. A woman stepped into the entry. Whitte’s heart was trust into the back of his throat and tears formed around his bruised and bloodied eyes. She was disheveled with years of apparent neglect; her dark hair, streaked with gray, seemed to be screaming out against her as it haphazardly fell around her shoulders. Her once olive skin was dingy, almost gray. Her face was fleshy with tiny blood vessels competing for space along her upper checks and nose. If he didn’t know any better he would believe her to be some bewildered junky trudging the wicked streets of any downtown in any nation throughout the world. But he did know better.

It was Anais.

She stepped further into the room; her vacant, dewy eyes searching for a reason to be where she was. They moved from Al-Fa’sad, lingering briefly on Inara, seemingly focusing on the familiar, and then they moved to Whitte and halted. They widened and there was brief terror in them that melted into shame, as if they wanted to burrow into some

empty space. Tears formed and for a brief moment, her eyes reflected hopefulness; they said to him: *It is a paradise and it should last forever. Can we make it last forever?*

They say you can never go home again but in one twinkling of an eye Jack Whitte realized that their brief encounter together was never a home: only an excuse, an invitation to the darkness. He shook his head slowly.

Brighton stood behind her and nudged her further into the room. It was like trying to push a kid toward a ninety-year-old, toothless aunt who wanted to give the kid a big wet kiss.

Then she spoke: "Jack."

The lusty lilt that he still recalled was no longer there. It was a pained voice. Her eyes began to crystallize. "They always hold the children over me." She shut her eyes and began to shudder, her plump arms quivering. She turned to Inara. "They always tell me they will kill you."

Whitte glanced at Inara. Her eyes were melting, the empathetic replacing the stoic.

"Nino, as well," Anais added, biting her lower lip.

"Well, this is certainly heart warming," Al-Fa'sad said. His lips were crooked, searching for a natural resting place. His nostrils flared and then he withdrew his head with an air of indifference.

"Yes, Whitte, you are a father. We had hoped it wouldn't come to this but since you do have a blood heir it is only natural for him to take over after you resign." He turned to McIntosh. "Or die. That's your choice. Of course your father can't stand in the way since, to the world, he's already dead."

McIntosh smiled. “You have decided that the strain of the false accusation against you has become too much to bear so, after introducing your son, Nino Brighton, to the world, you will announce that you are leaving the day-to-day duties of managing the Whitte interests to Nino who will bring his extensive education and youthful exuberance to the company to take it into uncharted territories, blah, blah, blah.”

Al-Fa’sad glared at Whitte with his slit like eyes. “I will give you an hour to reacquaint yourselves.”

“Azra’il,” Whitte whispered, begging Al-Fa’sad to remove the devil from the cage.

“One hour.”

Al-Fa’sad began to move behind Anais who continued to look dumbfounded, not knowing what to do or say next. Brighton was at the door.

Whitte opened his arms and moved toward Anais. She bit her lower lip and, quivering, moved toward him, allowing a small passageway between her back and the wall that jutted out from the door, enough of a passageway for Al-Fa’sad to squeeze through. Whitte now moved quickly. Using Anais as a blocker, he thrust forward, pinning her between himself and Al-Fa’sad. Whitte drove home a vicious punch across Al-Fa’sad’s left ear and with his own left hand, grabbed the gun from under Al-Fa’sad’s jacket and swung it toward Brighton and tried to fire but it wouldn’t; he realized the safety must be engaged and so with his right hand he closed the loop around Anais’ neck and, while pulling her in front of him, found the safety catch and released it.

Brighton had reacted slowly but recovered quickly as he moved toward the jumbled mess of humans in front of him, withdrawing his own gun and beginning to bring it up to

firing height. Whitte pulled the trigger first. The explosion tossed his left arm up and away from Brighton. Brighton's chest was thrust backwards, his hand losing his gun. As he crashed against the wall, a vapor of smoke smoldered on his tweed jacket. He twitched twice, his eyes wide open. He died.

Anais screamed and pulled away from Whitte while Inara jumped forward and pulled her mother toward her. McIntosh leapt to his feet, gun in hand, and moved forcefully toward Whitte.

Inara stood. "Stop, Henri," she commanded McIntosh. "You work for Señor Cordero and in his absence, you work for me. Put the gun on the desk and move away."

He lowered the gun slowly, calculating his next move. Whitte was sitting. He had the gun in his right hand now, haphazardly trained on McIntosh who then placed the gun on the desk and moved toward the windows. Al-Fa'sad remained on the floor behind Anais, his hand to his head, his eyes closed shut.

Anais turned toward Brighton. She spat on his corpse. Whitte pulled himself to a standing position and turned away from the mess he had created on the floor in front of the door. The gun dropped from his hands. He was shaking.

"Why you?" Whitte mumbled, his back still to Anais. "There had to be all kinds of women he could have hired to trap me."

"There were more," she answered, "just in case I failed. But I was selected because I was being punished."

As suddenly as all of the action had started and ended, the next round began. There was an explosion and Whitte jumped back, as if hit but he wasn't. He turned quickly and

saw the smoldering gun in Anais' hand. She was shaking and Al-Fa'sad no longer had a face. All she could say was, "Bastard." She dropped Brighton's gun.

Now that the immediate shock was departing, Whitte turned his head to the television screen above the built in shelves. His father was still in the chair, his head drooping toward his lap. Amber was still laid out on the operating table and Azra'il slapped her across the face. Whitte turned to Inara.

"You've got to help me."

"Why?" she spat out as a cat would a hairball. "Because you are my father?"

Whitte shook his head. "No," he said motioning toward the screen. "Because she's a human being that doesn't deserve what is about to happen to her."