



*Nights of Silk  
and Sapphire*

A M B E R J A C O B S

# Chapter 1

HEAT.

It beat against her like a live thing, hungrily sapping the moisture from her body, leaving her drained and weak. Her pale skin, a stranger to such harsh exposure, was blistered and burned. Fine blonde hair, once lovingly brushed and tied into elaborate braids, now tangled about her face in sweaty snarls. Her throat was dry and parched; the few sips of water the slavers allowed her each day only teased at the thirst that plagued her, the thirst that sat in the pit of her belly like a stone. Thirst like she had never imagined could exist. Manacles of rough iron bound her wrists with a rusted length of heavy chain, opening sores where they rubbed against her soft skin and serving as a constant physical reminder of her helpless bondage. Wild, stinging winds lashed her relentlessly with whips of grit and sand, making her eyes swollen and sore. She had learned to walk with her eyes cast down. There was nothing in this godforsaken desert she wanted to see.

For the first week after the attack, Dae had cursed the slavers who slaughtered the caravan she'd been traveling with. She had begged, demanded, and pleaded with them to release her for the ransom she assured them her parents would happily pay. Her efforts were wasted, however, and she had cried herself to sleep every night. Those tears were gone now. She hadn't the energy to think, let alone feel sorry for herself. This land was strange, and to a mind accustomed to endless green pastures and placid lakes, hellishly evil. The slavers had dragged Dae and the few dozen others they had captured into this barren land, forcing them to march across the shifting sands and stretches of jagged

rock. They stopped only a few hours during the hottest part of the day to rest wherever they could find shade. The captives—mostly young women and girls—were fed only enough to give them energy to move. None of them spoke of the fate that awaited them on the other side of the desert; ignorance was a blessing they had no desire to cast aside.

Dae struggled to keep pace with the others, but it was an arduous undertaking. Raised to a life of luxury and privilege, sheltered by doting parents from anything the least bit harmful, she had barely had to walk more than a mile on her own in a single stretch. Her legs felt like boiling lead had been poured into the muscles of her calves and thighs. Her feet, clad only in delicate shoes designed for beauty rather than practicality, were swollen and bloodied where the blisters had formed, cracked, and reformed. Every breath of scalding air was a trial. Yet for all her suffering, she didn't dare complain. The ugly men who had captured her held whips and carried fearsome-looking swords, and while so far the worst they'd done was threaten, Dae had no intention of raising their ire. The memory of her escort, slaughtered as they sought to protect her, was still vivid in her mind.

Stumbling along exhausted, Dae fought to place one foot in front of the other. The sun was lower on the horizon now, and she eagerly encouraged its descent, knowing that darkness would bring some measure of respite from the dizzying heat. She found the bitter chill of night far easier to bear than the fire of day. Dae licked her dry, cracked lips, tasting the salt of her sweat, and glanced about at the shimmering heat waves that played across the land. They teased at her mind with phantasmal images of trees and oceans of cool, refreshing water. Her gaze drifted away from the taunting dreamscapes, bleary and unfocused, and it took her a long while to notice the appearance of something out of place in the bleak landscape. She blinked and squinted, realizing she wasn't seeing another mirage.

Up ahead and to the right, perched on a sharp ridge of wind-carved stone, three dark, mounted figures stood silhouetted against the evening sky, watching the slave caravan make its way across the desert.

Chancing a glance behind her, Dae saw the slavers hadn't yet noticed the watchers. The idea occurred to her that perhaps she could signal the distant figures for help, for rescue, but she had no idea how to

accomplish this without attracting attention from her hated captors. Anyway, from the stories her maids had told her as a child, the people of the desert were more savage even than the slavers, blood thirsty barbarians who warred among themselves and delighted in torture and plunder. Yet, against her will, a small bubble of hope bloomed in her heart, and she pulled instinctively against the chain binding her hands. How much worse could her situation be, she wondered bitterly?

Biting her lip, indecisive, Dae plodded along, keeping a furtive eye on the watchers. Under her breath, she whispered to any gods who might be listening a brief prayer for some kind of savior to rescue her.

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Zafirah Al'Intisar watched the small caravan with narrowed eyes. The outlanders were moving slowly, their feet doubtless weary from trekking this far into the merciless Jaharri desert. Zafirah's great warhorse, Simhana—a beautiful white mare with solid black markings—sensed the tension in her rider and pawed anxiously at the stony ground, anticipating action and battle.

“Slavers, Scion,” observed the man to Zafirah's left, running callused fingers through a wiry, dark beard that gave his face a perpetually frowning expression. Zafirah glanced at him, hearing the distaste in his voice. Rehan Al'Carin was the ruler of the Tek, one of the many tribes owing allegiance to the Scion, and Zafirah's distant cousin. His features held the worn, sandblasted ruggedness that came from living in the unforgiving, arid wilderness. His body was tough and lean, powerful as the desert made those who could brave its savage temper. Zafirah liked the old brute, as crude and hot-tempered as he could sometimes be. She nodded and looked back at the caravan.

“They choose a dangerous path, tempting the sands on foot,” remarked the tall, dark-skinned woman watching from her customary place at Zafirah's right-hand side. Falak was the leader of Zafirah's elite scouts and chief military council, and the hunger in her sharp gray eyes made it clear she was eager to attack. She cradled the arch of a massive recurve bow crafted from layers of horn across her lap, and a quiver of arrows fletched with raven feathers bristled above her right shoulder. She studied the slave caravan a moment longer, her slender, powerful

fingers plucking at the bowstring in a tense rhythm, then looked to Zafirah in hopeful expectation. “What shall we do, my Scion?”

One of the slaves, a young girl with pale hair and shredded clothes, slipped in the rocky sand and fell to her knees. Instantly one of the slavers was on her, dragging her to her feet and shoving her forward, gesturing with his whip in an obvious threat. Zafirah’s lips pulled into a tight line, the expression hidden by the white cotton *haik* that protected her face from the wind-blown sands.

These slavers were an unwanted distraction, but one Zafirah knew she could not overlook. She had come out here leading a small army of *spahi*—the feared desert cavalry—in order to quell a simple civil dispute. The Tek tribe had been feuding with their ancient rivals, the Sakaran, a conflict Zafirah would not normally have concerned herself with. The desert tribes were made up of fierce warriors, and such blood feuds were a source of constant quarrels and skirmishes. This time, however, the Sakaran had threatened more aggressive action, and so Zafirah had left the coastal city of El’Kasari to remind those under her authority of the risk they took by proposing war. The two tribes had balefully retreated to their respective corners like chastised children, and Zafirah had been leading her men back to El’Kasari when reports came in of these strangers.

Not that strangers were uncommon in the Jaharri desert. The barren stretch of sand lay between two nations of great wealth and abundance. While the trek was perilous, crossing the desert directly was still the fastest way to trade between east and west. Sailing around the southern coastal route was safer but added months of expensive travel time to an expedition. In the past, before the city of El’Kasari had been built, the various nomadic tribes of the desert preyed mercilessly upon these traders. For hundreds of years, however, since the Scion Peace, travelers paid a tribute to the desert people and in return were left unmolested. Zafirah’s people had grown wealthy from such payments, and most were satisfied. Most...though not all.

“Scion?”

“Hmm?” Zafirah glanced at Falak, her attention distracted by the pale-haired girl as she struggled along on weary feet.

“Do we attack?” The scout grinned hungrily. “Slavers have no place—”

“Slavers or no, the business of outlanders is not our concern,” Zafirah interrupted softly, “provided they honor the desert and its guardians. But by the reports of your scouts, these men took water from the Kah-hari oasis without offering tribute for their passage.” She frowned. “These men know not the ways of our people. They were fools to enter the desert without such wisdom.” She drew a flashing, curved sword from her side and spun it quickly through the air. “A pity they shall not have a chance to learn from their folly.”

Rehan and Falak grinned at one another as Zafirah wheeled her steed about and set off carefully back down the rocky rise to where the rest of the *spahi* were waiting. The people of the desert lived for battle and glory, and while this pathetic band of foreign slavers would hardly be a challenge, both were eager to enjoy the sport.

Zafirah selected two dozen riders from the army and ordered them to follow her with a gesture. The shifting sands and shimmering heat were disorienting to those unfamiliar with the desert, making it hard to judge distance or depth. Taking advantage of a shallow depression in the land, the *spahi* were able to ride to within a hundred yards of the slavers without being detected. When they were in position, Zafirah raised her hand and, tilting her head back, pierced the still air with a shattering, ululating war cry. The *spahi* answered it with calls of their own as they spurred their mounts forward. In seconds, they had fallen upon the panicked slavers, their swords painting crimson stains across the white sands.

Zafirah charged one of the terrified men. Simhana swung sideways at the last moment as she had been trained, a move which afforded the Scion the room she needed to dispatch her enemy. A single powerful stroke of her scimitar relieved the slaver of his sword, and the return stroke relieved him of his head. As Simhana wheeled about, Zafirah turned just as a second man charged her with a hoarse shout, raising a wickedly barbed spear in line for a throw. His body froze in the act, however, as three slender arrows sprouted suddenly from his chest, and after a second he fell face-first to the ground. Zafirah flicked a glance behind her, raising her sword in a salute of thanks to where Falak and

her scouts were coolly notching new arrows to their bowstrings. The dark-skinned woman gave a curt nod even as she drew a bead on another target.

The fight was over in moments; the slavers could offer only pitiful resistance against the elite desert horsemen, who gave no quarter or mercy in the slaughter. In short order, the only figures left standing on the blood-soaked sands were the clustered group of terrified slave girls, who huddled together and eyed the fearsome masked figures on their prancing horses with expressions of shock and awe. Dismounting gracefully, Zafirah strode over to the cowering prisoners, immediately seeking out the young blonde she had observed from the ridge. The girl was kneeling on the ground, looking around dazedly, swooning from exhaustion and what the Scion recognized as the symptoms of exposure. Eyes the color of deep emeralds struggled to focus as Zafirah's shadow fell over her. She blinked, recoiling a little as though expecting a beating.

"Please...d-don't hurt me..." she whimpered. Then her eyelids fluttered, and she slumped forward in a dead faint.

Zafirah quickly gestured Rehan to her side. "Find some horses for the girls. We shall take them with us. They can serve your tribe to earn their freedom."

"But Scion, I cannot take this many into my tribe," Rehan protested. "I have not the means to feed more mouths!"

"El'Kasari will supplement your resources if it is required," Zafirah allowed. She knew that each tribe could only maintain positions for so many servants before the burden would drain their precious water. Still, the law of the desert was clear: those who were rescued from death or slavery owed a debt that must be repaid with service to the benefactor. In a harsh and unyielding world such as this one, nothing was ever given away freely. "And do not fear, Rehan, I do not expect you to take all the girls." Zafirah's soft smile as she studied the comatose figure lying in the sand was hidden by the folds of her *haik*. "This one, at least, will be returning with me to the city."

Rehan glanced at the wretched girl, then winked lasciviously at Zafirah. "Your tastes have altered little, I see."

"My tastes have not altered at all, Cousin," she said with a smirk. "I am certain a home for her can be found in the seraglio. Now go, get the horses." She dismissed him with a wave of her hand.

While Rehan jogged away to locate mounts for the still-quivering girls, Zafirah knelt beside the fallen blonde and studied her more closely. The girl was young—Zafirah guessed not much past her eighteenth year—and even with the ravages of wind and sun marring her perfection, her features held a rare and unique cast of beauty. The shredded rags she wore did little to hide her curvaceous figure from Zafirah’s appreciative gaze. Reaching out with a gloved hand, Zafirah ran her fingers through the long, shimmering gold strands of hair that were currently matted with sweat and grit. Blonde hair was unknown among the desert tribes and was looked upon as a strange and foreign feature that was greatly prized. Zafirah had a well-known penchant for women of exotic appearance, and this girl was certainly too enticing a creature for her to overlook. Her smile grew wider as she nodded, pleased with her find, and with the day’s work in general.

Zafirah stood as Falak approached, the dark archer casting the girl a knowing look before she gestured toward the butchered slavers. “What shall we do with them?”

“Detail a group of men to ride the bodies out to the Kah-hari spring,” Zafirah ordered. “Have them hung from the trees as a warning of what happens if the desert is not given its rightful offerings.”

“As you wish, my Scion.” She relaxed a little and indicated the young blonde. “A new plaything, perhaps?” she joked.

“Perhaps”—Zafirah pulled aside the cotton *haik* and grinned rakishly at her chief scout—“if she asks nicely.”

Falak laughed and shook her head. “Let us hope the other girls do not grow jealous. It has been some time since you added to the harem.”

“Do not be concerned, Falak. I am quite capable of satisfying the desires of all; I do not think one more will tax my abilities overmuch.”

Falak leaned closer to study the girl for herself, giving an approving nod before throwing Zafirah a wink. “With luck, the pale beauty will at least give you a chance to tempt her to your bed. These fools”—she gave a contemptuous nod to the fallen slavers—“were journeying from the eastern kingdom. It is a land rich in water but ignorant of passion. The girl may take some convincing.”

Zafirah shrugged as though the issue were of no importance. “Whether she is swayed or not matters little to me,” she said. “Her



loveliness will be better appreciated in the palace harem than in the slave markets of the western empire. At least with me her perfection will not be marred by lashes and chains.” She considered the rough iron manacles binding the girl’s wrists with disapproval, not liking the open, cruel welts they had worn into her soft flesh. Zafirah looked away to the horizon and the setting sun. “We should not linger here on the open sands,” she said. “The girl needs proper healing, and it is at least a day’s ride back to El’Kasari. Go...attend the slain so we can be moving again.”

Falak nodded, as familiar as any other Jaharri with the dangers of letting such heat sickness go untreated, and left to detail a detachment to return the bodies back to the oasis. Zafirah watched her go, then knelt beside the unconscious blonde once more.

“Such a pretty flower,” she whispered, running her fingers over the girl’s body as much to check for other injuries as to simply admire her perfection. She smiled, finding no whip marks or excessive bruising, and again brushed the tangled mass of pale hair away from the girl’s face. “Have no fear. I will not allow the sun to wilt your petals.”

Zafirah watched in silent contentment as the rest of her warriors freed the other captives. She wrapped the *haik* back over her face as the wind blew fiercely in the fading light. It was fortunate that the slavers had not possessed the common sense to pay tribute for their passage across these lands; Zafirah would have hated to see her newest prize slip from her grasp.

It had been a good day indeed.

## Chapter 2

DAE STRUGGLED TO SHAKE OFF the fog that clouded her mind, cracking open her eyes and blinking several times before she was able to make out anything of her surroundings. For a moment what she saw made her think that her ordeal had been blessedly no more than a night terror and she was back in her own room at home. Richly embroidered cushions lay everywhere, and the walls of the lavishly furnished room were decorated with expensive tapestries and hangings. The air was heavy with the sweet scent of perfume—jasmine, she identified fuzzily—and cool satin sheets caressed her skin. The wonderful illusion lasted only a moment, however, before Dae felt again the terrible thirst as she tried to swallow and the burning in her cracked skin. Confused, she tried to sit up and was overcome by a wave of dizziness.

A cool hand pressed against her forehead soothingly. “Easy now, little one,” said a feminine voice tinged with a heavy, exotic accent. “The desert did not take kindly to you. It will be some time before your full strength returns.” Something rough and cold was pressed against her lips, and Dae recoiled. “Drink,” said the voice gently. “You must replenish what the sun took from your body.”

Feeling sudden moisture lap against her parched lips, Dae quickly opened her mouth and reached up to clutch at what she now recognized as a ceramic jug. She struggled to swallow as much as she could, choking and spluttering in her haste to accept the offering before it was revoked. Hands like silk eased her efforts.

“Slowly,” instructed the voice. “Take smaller sips, or your stomach will cramp and reject the water.”

Dae did as she was told, sipping slowly until the jug was taken away, her thirst only moderately slackened. Whimpering, she lay back and tried to look up at her savior.

“Wh-who are you?” she asked, her voice raspy.

“My name is Inaya.” Delicate hands caressed Dae’s face tenderly. “*Tsharraafna*—I am honored to make your acquaintance.”

Blinking painfully, Dae finally brought the features of her benefactor into focus. Inaya looked to be not much older than herself, and she was quite possibly the most beautiful girl Dae had ever laid eyes upon. Her olive-toned features were framed by hair blacker than midnight, so dark that the highlights shimmering in it shone blue in the soft light. Her deep, liquid brown eyes held a sense of mystery and seductive promise complemented by full, sensuous lips that smiled far too easily.

Inaya was dressed in an outfit comprised as much from jewelry as it was from cloth, exposing most of her firm, dusky body while covering just enough to maintain some semblance of modesty. Dae had never in her life imagined such a scandalous wardrobe, and she couldn’t help but stare. When her gaze slipped helplessly down over Inaya’s body, she immediately noticed another oddity: a bejeweled metal stud pierced the skin of the girl’s navel, its shiny gleam contrasting against her sun-darkened skin. *How barbaric!* Realizing her unblinking reaction might be bordering on offensive, Dae quickly returned her attention to Inaya’s face.

“Where am I?” She looked around the strange, exotically decorated room in bewilderment, remembering only the dark, shadowed figure standing over her as she knelt on the blazing sands, surrounded by bloodcurdling screams. “How did I get here?”

“You are in the harem of the Scion Zafirah Al’Intisar, in the great city of El’Kasari,” Inaya explained slowly. “You have been unconscious for a day and a night. From what I understand, the Scion rescued you from slavers in the desert. You were brought here by the guards, and I have seen to your recovery.”

“The slavers?” Dae asked in confusion. “What happened to them?”

“The Scion dispatched them for failing to pay tribute on their passage across the sands. I heard that none survived the slaughter.”

*Dead.* Dae breathed a sigh of relief. *I'm safe.* Then, she suddenly recalled Inaya's words more clearly. "Wh-where did you say I was?"

"In the harem of the Scion Zafir—"

"Harem?" Her eyes flew open in stark terror. Dae had heard terrible stories of what happened in such places. Harems were said to be havens of debauchery and hedonistic sin. Panic engulfed her and she struggled to sit up, but Inaya had little trouble pressing her gently back down again. "What... Why am I here?" Dae asked.

"The Scion was extremely taken with you," Inaya explained. "I can understand why. Your beauty is of rare quality. You are to remain here as a servant."

"But I...I want to go home!" Dae pleaded.

"The Scion rescued you. According to our laws, since she saved your life, it is her right to take control of your destiny. If she wishes you to stay here, then it shall be so. There can be no argument against it."

Dae felt a fresh surge of depression and loss well up inside her. "Are you a slave here as well?"

"Not exactly." Inaya smiled softly. "I am one of the harem girls, a pleasure-servant of the Scion."

It took Dae several moments to process that information, and when she did, her jaw dropped in horror. "You're a...a whore?"

Inaya's expression stiffened instantly. "No," she corrected a little coldly. "A pleasure-servant is very different to a whore. I provide for the desires of the Scion, whatever they may be, and I do so willingly and with great pride and joy! It is an honor that I should be chosen for such a position in the palace." She gave Dae a hard look. "You would do well to remember that, since it is a position, and an honor, that you yourself now hold."

Dae shrank back from Inaya's displeasure. "I-I'm sorry," she stammered quickly, not wanting to alienate someone who was being so nice to her. "I just... This is all so strange to me. I don't understand."

"Understanding will come with time." Inaya's features softened quickly. It seemed almost as though the stern expression had difficulty holding its place on the beautiful girl's face. She reached into a bowl that rested on a small table nearby and retrieved a moist towel. "Here,"

she said, placing the cloth on Dae's burned face. "This will help soothe your skin."

Dae accepted the ministrations shyly, still trying to come to terms with the sudden and inexplicable changes in her life. "So...you're expected to..." She hesitated. "To...bed with this Scion?"

"You can put it that way if you like," Inaya said, her tone of voice suggesting she found Dae's innocent phrasing amusing. "It is not so bad as you might be imagining."

Dae shivered fearfully despite the consolations. "I've never...done such things before," she admitted quietly.

Inaya nodded. "I had guessed as much."

"What's he like?"

"He?" Inaya looked confused. "*He* who?"

"Well...the Scion, of course. Is he gentle?"

Inaya laughed lightly, a pleasant lilting laugh that sounded almost childlike. "Oh, my child, have you not listened? Scion Zafirah is no man. She is a woman!"

"What?" Dae sat up in surprise, confused by this revelation she had somehow missed. "But I thought you said—"

"I did indeed," Inaya agreed cheerfully, watching the expression on Dae's face with interest. "Zafirah is an extremely talented and generous lover, a woman of great passions."

Dae shrank back in horror. "You mean you...you sleep with... another *woman*?"

"There is precious little sleep involved, I assure you!" Inaya laughed. "Of course I take pleasure with other women. It is a common practice among the Jaharri people." She tilted her head to the side curiously. "I have heard that such things are forbidden in your land, that to even speak of them is not permitted. Is this true?"

"Of course it's true!" Dae's nose wrinkled in fearful distaste. "It's an unnatural and disgusting perversion!"

Inaya stopped her gentle ministrations and lifted a delicately plucked eyebrow haughtily. "You are very quick to condemn an act of which you have neither knowledge nor experience," she scolded quietly. "Perhaps when you come to understand the beauty that can be found within such a taking of pleasure, you will not be so harsh in your judgment."

“I-I didn’t mean—”

“Yes, you did,” Inaya interrupted. “But have no fear, child, I am not offended. It is natural for you to carry with you the same intolerances and foolish propriety that I have heard are so common among the people of your land.”

Dae considered this new information and felt renewed despair and terror. “I could never do such a thing,” she whispered almost to herself. “I couldn’t ever do...*that*...with a woman!”

Inaya smiled mysteriously and gave Dae a reassuring pat on the shoulder, her fingers caressing lightly. “Do not concern yourself. The Scion has no need to force her attentions on the unwilling. There are more than enough women who will go to her most joyfully. If you do not wish to take pleasure with her, she will not take you against your will.”

“Are you certain?” Dae’s features lit up with a tremulous hope.

“Of course. Zafirah would never wish to taint the beauty of such an act with force. There can be no pleasure for her if her partner does not take equal joy as she herself.”

“Then why would she keep me in the harem?”

Inaya shrugged. “It is her wish,” she said simply. “You should consider yourself most fortunate, child. The position of pleasure-servant is held in high regard within the palace. We have respect and honor from others, and we are provided a life of great freedom and luxury. We want for nothing—water, fruit, entertainment... We are permitted to indulge in whatever activity we so desire. When you have properly recovered from your ordeal, I will introduce you to the other girls and take you to see the rest of the seraglio. The gardens and pools are quite lovely, I promise, and a rare sight you will find nowhere else in the desert lands. For now, lie back and relax. You must allow your body to heal itself, so be calm in the knowledge that you are safe. I am sure the Scion will wish to see you when you are well again.”

Feeling exhaustion rise suddenly to reclaim her, Dae did as Inaya suggested, lying back into the silken caress of cool sheets and pillows, letting the soothing ministrations of her new friend ease away her pains. In a few moments, her eyes had drifted shut and she fell into a healing sleep.

Wetting the face towel in the bowl beside her, Inaya smiled softly to herself and enjoyed the task of providing for the sleeping girl. The other inhabitants of the harem were all intensely curious about the Scion's latest find, and Inaya knew they were envious that she had received the privilege of tending to the needs of the foreigner. Gently letting her fingers comb through the last few tangles that remained in the silken locks, Inaya hummed a soft, lilting melody to herself, watching the lines of tension ease from Dae's face. She was already looking forward to getting to know the refreshingly innocent and naïve girl better in the coming weeks.

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Over the next few weeks, Dae slowly regained her strength and equilibrium as she recovered from her harsh experience in the desert. Her blistered and cracked skin soon flaked off and was then soothed with scented healing oils until it was healthy once more. Calluses had formed around her wrists where the rough iron manacles had bitten into her skin, and she knew these final marks of bondage would be a long time fading. Eating strange but delicious fruits and drinking water sweetened with wine soon gave her back her strength. But as Dae's health returned, the initial surge of relief she had felt at being rescued from a life of slavery gave way to despondence at the new fate the Gods had set before her. Dae had never been away from the embrace of her parents for more than a few days, and her sense of loss was overwhelming. Many mornings, her pillows were stained with tears of grief and homesickness.

Inaya remained by her side almost constantly during this time, always ready to serve. The desert girl did all she could to help Dae adjust to her new life, easing her fears and melancholy with empathy and understanding. She was extremely considerate of her charge's well-being, slowly drawing Dae away from depression with her happy chatter. During her visits, she spent a lot of time explaining the way of life in the palace harem. Dae wondered why her new friend seemed so eager to serve her, but she accepted being waited on easily; it was something she had grown used to at home, and the attention was reassuring. Sometimes Inaya spoke of the Scion, but Dae was determined not to think about anything involving the woman who, in her opinion, must surely be a

savage and lustful demon to indulge in such terrible sins as were hinted at by the darkly enchanting girl.

During this time, Dae was provided with a new wardrobe made from fine silks, exotic and brightly colored. Inaya also brought her new jewellery—gifts of welcome, she said, from the other pleasure-servants Dae had yet to meet. The worth of the jewels must have been considerable—they sparkled brilliantly with diamonds, emeralds, and other precious stones—but when Dae protested this generosity, Inaya insisted she accept them. She also overrode any objection regarding the new clothing that was offered.

Although Inaya assured her painfully self-conscious ward that her outfit was the most modest and reserved one she could find, Dae was still embarrassed by how much of her body it revealed. Her entire stomach was left bare, and the embroidered green silk that covered her firm, ample breasts seemed designed to enhance her cleavage rather than conceal it. Loose gossamer pants shimmered about her legs in almost transparent waves, and gold bracelets and chains adorned her lithe figure. With her hair brushed by the ever-attentive Inaya till it shone in the lamplight and her eyelids dusted with a faint indigo powder, Dae barely recognized herself in the mirror's reflection. She fidgeted often, uncomfortable with what seemed an immodest display of flesh.

Dae did not venture from the room during her recovery, and Inaya informed her that the chamber would be her own private quarters from now on. As her depression faded, Dae's curiosity about her new home grew, and eventually Inaya agreed to show her the rest of the seraglio where the other girls usually spent their time.

Following her new friend—guiltily mesmerized by the way Inaya's hips swayed enticingly beneath the thin beaded chains that hung about her waist and how the motion constantly revealed vast planes of smooth olive skin—Dae found herself walking down a long, expansive corridor with rooms evenly spaced on either side. There were no doors, she noted, and looking into the rooms, she found each to be similar in design to her own. From that, Dae concluded these were the quarters of the other harem girls.

“Um...how many other slav—Um, I mean, ‘pleasure-servants’ does the Scion have?” she asked Inaya.



“Not including you and me, there are twenty-two other girls in the harem,” Inaya said over her shoulder. “Of course, the Scion sometimes takes a lover from outside the seraglio...and those she takes to her bed are honored to be chosen. We...” she gestured to the other rooms, “are those more dedicated to her service. Though every girl in the seraglio came here by a different path, we are all special...each of us chosen by Zafirah as more than a simple tryst. We are her companions as well as her lovers.”

“Oh.” Dae tried hard not to dwell on the terrible images her imagination conjured of what the poor girls must endure. “Does she only ever take other women as lovers?”

Inaya nodded, her earrings jangling musically as she did so. “She has no desire to bed with men. Zafirah’s passion runs strongest for young women of great and exotic beauty,” she flicked an admiring glance at Dae, “just like you.”

Dae swallowed hard, praying that the terrible Scion would be as unwilling to rape her as Inaya had promised.

The corridor led the two young women to an enormous hexagonal-shaped room with intricately carved walls and a vaulted ceiling. The center of the floor dropped into a large sunken area filled with plush cushions and lounging chairs, and around the perimeter were tables laden with platters of fruits, breads, sweetmeats, and other delicacies Dae could not identify. Three young women lay sleepily among the cushions, all dressed in a similarly-provocative manner as Inaya. The three looked up as Dae and Inaya entered, their eyes widening a little when they fell upon the fidgeting visitor. In a moment, they had crowded around the uneasy girl, reaching out to touch her skin and hair excitedly, exclaiming over her exquisite beauty.

Inaya shooed them away and stood protectively in front of Dae. “Enough,” she said sternly. “The poor girl has been through a great deal already. She does not need you all fawning over her right now.”

“But Inaya,” one of the girls protested with a deep pout, “you’ve been keeping her hidden away for too long. It’s not fair.”

Inaya sighed. “Very well.” She gestured for Dae to step forward. “Dae, this is Shadiya, Firyaal, and Husn.” Each girl bowed in turn, and Dae nodded shyly.

“It’s nice to meet you all,” she said politely, feeling very self-conscious among these people. Dae considered herself quite attractive, but each of these women was absolutely stunning! Shadiya and Husn both had similar features to Inaya, with dark hair and olive skin, while Firyaal had pale skin and thick, lustrous hair the color of flame. Next to them, Dae couldn’t help but feel like an ugly duckling.

The girls of the harem didn’t seem to think so, however, and they were soon reaching out to touch her again in wonder. Inaya let them “ooh” and “ahh” for a few minutes before she rescued Dae from their admiration and guided her around the sunken area to a doorway on the other side. The three women followed, asking questions of Dae’s homeland and her life, and of how she came to be in the desert when the Scion rescued her. A little overwhelmed by the attention, Dae didn’t have time to answer before she found herself being led through the door and into sunlight and laughter.

Blinking in the sudden light, Dae found herself in a great garden surrounded by trees and plants she had never seen before in her life. The air was heavy with the scent of water, and she smiled as she looked around. The sight of the garden was comforting to her, being a similar environment to the homeland she’d been stolen from. A short waterfall nearby cascaded into a deep pool of crystal clear water, around which grew ferns and palms of every description. Several laughing nymph-like figures splashed about in the pool, their carefree play stopping the moment they noticed Dae. Other girls were lying around happily, eating or dozing in the sun. Though they were all of different heights and coloring, the women were all young and extraordinarily beautiful...and they all instantly stopped what they were doing when they saw Dae and rushed over excitedly.

Before Inaya could offer a protest, the girls had flocked around an embarrassed and shy Dae, seemingly amazed by her hair and skin, exclaiming over the color of her eyes and her remarkable beauty. Uncertain what to do, not wanting to insult anyone, Dae stood still as wondering hands reached out to caress her face and body, the touches curious and gentle. Though the intimacy of their admiration made her uncomfortable, she had the impression it was a natural custom among these strange desert people. They seemed to express themselves with

such touches and physical contact; she had seen that much from her dealings with Inaya. In Dae's homeland, such behavior would have been looked upon as barbaric and uncivilized. Cultured people expressed themselves with words, not actions. Still, she accepted the fascinated touches as calmly as she could, trying to ignore the display of so much bare skin surrounding her.

Before Inaya could free her charge from the avid admirers, the sharp sound of steel ringing against steel brought an instant hush to the garden. The girls immediately stopped their fawning and, pouting a little, returned to their previous activities, most casting curious looks back at the confused girl. Suddenly left alone, except for Inaya, Dae looked around to find the source of the noise.

Two female guards stood on either side of one of the doorways leading into the garden, drawn swords pressed against their wrist-shields. They watched the harem girls retreat, then brusquely sheathed their weapons. Dae watched as a new figure emerged from the doorway, her breath catching a little in her throat at the magnificent sight.

The woman was tall and slender, yet she carried with her a quiet air of assurance and power that revealed her true strength. She wore a fringed and slitted skirt which revealed the smooth expanse of her bare legs with every stride and a single length of cloth which wrapped around the back of her neck, crossed diagonally over her breasts, and circled around her waist like a sash. Long, ink-black hair was tied into a thick braid over her left shoulder, and eyes the color of burning sapphires looked around the seraglio garden briefly before they settled on Dae. Her hard features softened into a pleased smile, and Dae could only gasp at her incredible beauty—a beauty which seemed almost to outshine that of the other girls.

Glancing at Inaya curiously, Dae saw a playful light in the girl's eyes. "Who is she?" she asked quietly as the magnificent woman approached.

"She is the Scion, of course."

Dae's mouth hung open in shock. "*That's* the Scion?"

"Indeed."

This was not the twisted, perverted demoness Dae had been picturing in her mind. This woman was radiant and glorious; the look about her was regal and commanding, yet at the same time, alluring and playful.

As she neared the two, the woman's dazzling gaze wandered over Dae's pleasantly displayed body and her smile grew a fraction wider. Inaya bowed deeply as the Scion stopped in front of her, and Dae clumsily did the same, wishing she possessed a fraction of her companion's grace.

"My Scion," Inaya greeted.

"Inaya." Zafirah accepted the homage that was her due before turning her attention back to Dae. "I trust your charge is recovered from her ordeal?"

"She is, Scion. I was just now introducing her to the other girls for the first time." Inaya grinned a little. "They have been anxious to meet her."

"So I would imagine." Zafirah cast her eyes over the rest of the garden, seeing the other girls still watching their new friend curiously. She knew they must be eager to learn more of their new playmate... and she also knew that their ideas of "play" often included activities of a nature she was certain the painfully innocent blonde would not understand or enjoy. Zafirah encouraged her pleasure-servants to engage equally with each other as with herself, but she could tell that it would take the young girl time to come to terms with the strange new world in which she found herself. That taken into consideration, Zafirah decided it was time to have a little talk with the latest addition to her harem. She faced Dae and addressed the trembling girl directly.

"You are feeling well, child?"

Eyes the color of wet emeralds stared blankly at her for a long moment, the girl appearing nervous and almost on the verge of fainting, before she managed to stammer, "I-I am, S...Scion."

"Excellent. I wish to see you in my chamber in the *aseau*, after meals." She glanced at Inaya. "See to it."

"As you wish, Scion."

"Thank you." Zafirah allowed her eyes to wander over the contours of Dae's body for a few lingering moments, then turned and departed the garden, her two guards trailing behind her.

Dae breathed a sigh of relief once the tall figure was out of sight. Inaya—casting a warning glare at the other girls, who looked ready to flock forward once more—gathered Dae into her arms and led her back

into the now empty hexagonal room, where she settled her on one of the lounges.

“Not quite as you expected her to be, is she?”

Dae shook her head. “She was...” She struggled to find an appropriate descriptive for the woman. “Amazing.” Suddenly, she considered the reason why the Scion must have summoned her, and her muscles tensed with alarm. “She wants to see me alone in her chambers! She must want to bed me, I know it! She—”

Inaya placed a delicate finger over Dae’s mouth to forestall her growing panic. “She wants to talk. You may believe me, Dae, Zafirah means you no harm. If you tell her you do not wish to take pleasure with her, she will respect your decision. Never has she forced herself upon another woman, and never shall she. It is not her way.”

“But she will be angered if—”

“She will not harm you,” Inaya insisted. “Now, put the matter out of your mind. The others will not leave me be until I have allowed them to see more of you. Do you feel ready to face the jackals?”

Dae took a deep, calming breath, wanting badly to believe Inaya’s reassurances but still uneasy about what would be expected of her. She needed a distraction from what might lie ahead, so she forced herself to focus on the more immediate—and less intimidating—situation. “I suppose so.”

“Excellent. They will not hurt you, so you need not be fearful. Do not let their curiosity overwhelm you. It has been some time since another girl was welcomed into the harem, and they are naturally excited and anxious to know you better.”

So saying, Inaya led her charge back into the garden and the impatiently waiting flock who quickly gathered around once more. The flood of questions and introductions that followed effectively stole Dae’s attention from her fears.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, after a meal she’d been too fretful to eat, Dae was escorted through the palace to the bedchamber of the Scion. She was far too consumed by her dread to notice the beauty of the palace architecture, though she did note absently that it was constructed mostly

from white marble that was pleasantly cool in contrast to the heat of the seraglio gardens. The guards escorting her led her into the expansive room, which, like all the others, had no door, and announced her to the woman waiting therein.

Zafirah turned from the window she was looking out of and smiled in welcome to her guest. "Leave us," she ordered the two guards, who saluted and returned to their duties. Zafirah slowly approached the trembling girl, her eyes warm and curious. She studied the freshly-healed skin and radiant hair, pleased to see the outlander girl restored to full health.

"It seems Inaya's efforts have been well rewarded," she said softly, her voice deep but still feminine. "You have recovered from your ordeal with the slavers with little lasting damage."

Dae found herself captivated by the seductive pull of the burning eyes that held her, and though she sensed no threat or malice from the tall, dark-haired woman, her mind still conjured nightmarish images of what she might be forced to do in this chamber. She swallowed hard, wishing she were home in the safety of her parents' arms.

Zafirah ran her eyes over Dae's body. "I trust you are pleased with your quarters?" she asked. "Is everything to your satisfaction?"

"Um...everything's fine, m-my Scion."

"And the other girls? They have treated you well?"

Dae nodded, remembering the somewhat overwhelmingly enthusiastic welcome she'd received. "They were very nice, yes."

"Excellent." Zafirah gazed with fascination at Dae's blonde hair, then at her shy green eyes. "What is your name, child?"

It took Dae a long moment before she managed to open her mouth. "Dae. Dae of Everdeen."

Zafirah clapped her hands in delight. "As the night is to the day?"

"Um...no, it's not spelled the same."

"Spelled?"

"Yes...you know, the letters are different."

Zafirah shrugged. "We of the desert have no written words," she said dismissively. "Our customs, laws, and history are passed down from generation to generation by oration. We do not trust dead words written

on dead parchment, as do your people. Such words can lie without guilt or shame.”

Dae didn't know what she should say to that, and so remained silent.

“You are from the eastern lands, are you not?”

Dae nodded. “From the Heartland, yes.”

“‘The Heartland,’ is it?” Zafirah's expression turned faintly contemptuous. “The eastern kingdom changes its name every time a new king usurps power from the old. It has failed to hold the same title for more than a few generations, as each man in power seeks to glorify his rule by renaming it. Given that changeable tendency, we Jaharri have always referred to your homeland simply as the eastern kingdom.” When Dae made no comment, Zafirah continued. “Based on your demeanor and health, I cannot imagine you had been in bondage long. How is it you came to be captured by the men I rescued you from?”

“I was traveling to the monastery in the city,” Dae explained. “It was a few days after my birthday, and my parents told me I needed to be blessed by the priests. The men...” She shuddered at the awful memory. “They attacked my escort...I don't know if any survived. Then they grabbed me and took me away.”

Zafirah nodded her understanding. “And how old are you, child?”

“I just saw my nineteenth summer,” Dae said softly, fidgeting nervously.

“Nineteen?” Zafirah's dark brows rose in surprise. “I would not have guessed so many years by the youth of your face. You have been treated kindly by the Fates to be blessed with such beauty.” She reached out a hand to caress Dae's face, stopping when the girl recoiled, her eyes wide. Zafirah's features softened. “I mean you no harm, child. Surely Inaya told you as much?”

“She did, but...”

“You were uncertain whether or not she spoke the truth?”

Dae nodded.

“I understand.” Zafirah moved closer, settling her hands lightly on Dae's shoulders and urging her to relax. “Does it make you uncomfortable that another woman would look on you with desirous eyes?” she asked, her voice low and seductive. “Does it repulse you that I would wish to bed you?”

Dae shuddered, the warmth of the taller woman's hands and the hypnotic tone of her voice having a strange and disturbing effect on her body, as though a fever ran through her blood. "I do not like... such things," she said hesitantly, not wanting to incur this powerful woman's wrath, but fearing more the uncertain terror of giving in to her seduction.

But the Scion only nodded a calm acceptance. "I have learned from ambassadors that it is forbidden in your land for women to share pleasure with other women, and for men to share pleasure with men. Indeed, many ambassadors from the eastern kingdom have been shocked to hear that such things are accepted in the desert—shocked and disgusted, for some reason. One such man refused to agree to a treaty and then demanded I pay him restitution simply for offering him hospitality in my home." Zafirah's smile grew cold, and her eyes flared dangerously. "I could forgive his ignorance, but the insult cost him his head."

Dae did not doubt for a moment that this commanding woman was entirely capable of carrying out such a punishment personally. Zafirah stood very close to her now, close enough that she could smell the scent of incense and perfume that clung to her like a vaporous robe. Close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from her, a heat that felt almost enticing. Dae drew away a little. "I don't mean to be rude, but..." She hesitated, glancing to the enormous bed that seemed to dominate the bedchamber. "I...cannot..."

The sapphire eyes darkened to an almost purple shade, Zafirah's lashes lowered not in anger but desire. "You do not wish to take pleasure with me?"

Dae studied her feet intently, but shook her head.

"Because I am a woman, or because you do not find me attractive?"

"Well..." Dae was confused for a moment, wondering how to answer that question. "I-I think you're quite attractive," she stammered, looking up now. "In fact, you're probably the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, but..." Zafirah brightened at the praise. "I'm just... I don't like..." She trailed off.

Zafirah lifted a hand and ran a single finger down along Dae's face, from her temple to her chin. Her glittering eyes flickered down over the young girl's well-displayed body, appreciating the generous curves and



exotic coloring. “You are very beautiful, Dae,” she whispered, her voice a caress. “I do not deny that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to tear the clothes from your body, throw you onto my bed, and spend the rest of the night introducing you to the joys of another woman’s body.” Dae’s eyes widened in terror, but Zafirah’s expression was more reassuring than predatory. “Yet I cannot force you to enjoy something against your will, and there would be no pleasure for me unless you were a willing participant. I shall not ask you to warm my bed if you do not wish to do so.”

The panic in Dae’s eyes dissipated a little. “You really mean that?”

“Of course.”

“Then...” Dae’s brow furrowed. “What do you want with me?”

Zafirah shrugged and drew away a step. “You will remain in the seraglio,” she said simply. “It is a good life. You will be well cared for, provided every luxury I can offer. I wish for you to be my pleasure-servant.”

“But I cannot serve you as the other girls do.”

Zafirah laughed—a rich, throaty laugh that was quite pleasant and which had the effect of dissipating much of the tension in the room. “My dear child, there are more pleasures in life beyond the sharing of one’s body.” Her eyes slid lingeringly over Dae. “It is a great pleasure for me simply to look upon the radiance of your form, even if you will not permit me to sample your delights more intimately.”

Dae squirmed. The way Zafirah looked at her was so uninhibited—so unreservedly sexual—she wasn’t certain how to respond. Though her mind recoiled in horror and disgust at the notion that this strange woman desired her, for some reason her body wasn’t inclined to follow the same path. She was uncomfortable with the strange warmth that flowed through her belly as Zafirah studied her with obvious admiration.

“If there is anything at all you require to make your life in the palace more enjoyable,” the Scion continued, “do not hesitate to tell the guards. They will do all they can to accommodate your needs. I want you to be happy here.”

“So you won’t let me go home?”

Zafirah shook her head. “Though it was not by your will, you entered the land of my people. Had I not intervened, your fate would have been

one of misery and great suffering as a slave. According to the laws of the Jaharri, you owe a debt of service to me for saving you from that fate.”

“But if you contacted my parents, I’m sure they could pay any ransom.” Dae folded her hands pleadingly. “They are wealthy and—”

Zafirah raised a hand to calm her pleas. “Wealth holds little interest to me...and your debt can not be purchased with coin or jewels. The laws of the desert have served my people for centuries, and by those laws your fate is now bound to me.”

Dae’s expression shifted from fearful to helpless and finally to sad resignation, the knowledge that she would likely never again see her parents or her homeland clutching at her heart painfully. She felt her eyes misting with tears and turned from the Scion to stifle a quiet sob.

“Do not be upset, little one.” Zafirah took a step closer, her tone no longer seductive but compassionate. “Your life here will be one of ease, and you will be accorded every honor by my people. I understand that this world is strange to you. I know our ways are not the same as those of your people. It will take time for you to become comfortable with the customs of the desert and with the way of life here in the palace.” Tender fingers lifted Dae’s head. “Perhaps, with time, you may come to accept and appreciate those things that you have been taught to revile.”

Dae saw something like hope in Zafirah’s expression and realized what the Scion was referring to. She shook her head, moving quickly past any despair at her situation. “No matter how long I stay here, I will never bed with you or any other woman so long as I have any choice in the matter.”

Zafirah smiled a little dejectedly, then shrugged. “If that is true, then so be it,” she accepted. “However, if you change your mind—”

“I won’t.”

“Well, the offer stands nonetheless. And I would still like very much to be your friend, Dae, even if you will not permit me to be your lover.”

For a moment, Dae wondered if Zafirah was joking with her. Having been born to a noble family, she knew that rulers did not spend time with their servants in a social capacity, and they certainly didn’t become friends with their slaves. But studying the Scion’s sculptured features carefully, she found no trace of guile or jest. “You want us to be friends? But...you’re the Scion...”

“So? I am friends with all the girls in my harem. They are more to me than simply lovers and servants. They are treasured companions.”

Zafirah’s sincerity seemed honest enough, and Dae was even more confused than before. Still, thinking it would be best not to offend this strange woman with hostility, she offered a faint nod. “I suppose that would be okay.”

“Excellent.” Zafirah clapped her hands, apparently satisfied. Placing a hand on Dae’s shoulder, she gently guided her past the bed and onto an expansive balcony that opened beyond. “Come, you may look upon your new home from here.”

Dae fought the impulse to draw away, knowing she would have to get used to such physical contact if she was going to be living among these people, and looked out from the balcony without any real interest. The view, however, drew an involuntary gasp from her, and she stared in awe at the magnificent sight below. Seeing her reaction, Zafirah smiled with pride and pleasure.

“You look upon the majesty of El’Kasari, first and last city of the Jaharri,” she said softly. “It is a sight few from the watered lands have ever seen.”

The city spread out before Dae like an intricate mosaic, perfectly symmetrical, its design resembling a blossoming lotus flower, with the palace forming a jeweled bud at the center. Dae was surprised to see shimmering water in the distance and realized the city was built on the coast of the northern sea. Throughout the streets, glimmering in the last rays of the setting sun, hundreds of artificial ponds—or *hauzes*—sparkled like dewdrops on the petals of a flower. The buildings were all constructed along similar lines, with walls and towers carved from white marble and strange, tiled roofs that looked to Dae like giant onions. Everything was alive with exotic colors: blue and orange silks, the green and brown of the desert plants, and the rainbow of the many market stalls below as the traders sought to hawk their wares on the last customers of the day. To Dae’s eyes, the city and the palace grounds were amazing—a fanciful, beautiful design unlike anything she’d ever seen before.

“It’s magnificent,” she breathed, wondering if she would ever be allowed to explore the wondrous city on her own.

“It is the jewel of the desert...our greatest treasure.” Zafirah spoke of the city with the same loving pride a parent might use to praise a child. “Many centuries ago, the people of the desert lived in tribes, banding together to fight over the meager water supplies. Bloody wars were fought over the few oases and springs that gave us life. Then one day, one of my ancestors discovered the secret of purifying the waters of the great sea. He joined many of the strongest clans together, offering an alliance in exchange for sharing this secret. El’Kasari was built in the spirit of that alliance, its purpose to protect the water we are now able to make drinkable, and to defend those tribes who joined under the Scion banner.”

“Defend against whom?”

“Many of the tribes refused to help with the building of the city,” Zafirah said. “Ancient blood feuds and arguments ran too deep, too bitter, for them to let go. At first, they sought to destroy El’Kasari, but the task proved impossible. Now, they content themselves with raiding the weaker tribes, and then retreating before the army can retaliate. Since the Scion Peace, the Jaharri people have made treaties with those inhabiting the lands to the east and west and even those across the northern sea. Most of my people still dwell in the sands; they feel trapped and stifled within the city. But still, they often journey here to trade with the merchants or to collect water when times grow hard. Here, and nowhere else in the desert, water is freely given.” She pointed to the *hauzes*. “The great sea provides us with limitless bounty, and the method of purifying its water is still our most closely guarded secret.”

Dae smiled genuinely, amazed by the sight of the desert city. “There are no walls,” she noted.

“El’Kasari knows better than to defy the desert with walls. We embrace the sands, and the freedom of the horizon. There is no need for us to make our city a cage.”

Dae found such thinking difficult to comprehend, differing as it did from what she was accustomed to. “I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“Your people do not build such cities?”

Dae shook her head. “Not like this.” She’d only seen the city that lay several days’ ride from her parents’ estate a few times in her life,

and there were few similarities between it and the sight before her. Dark, foreboding walls surrounded the whole city, and the streets were filled with beggars and thieves waiting to prey on the unwary. It was a dangerous and dirty place, especially for an innocent young maiden like Dae, who had been carried around the entire duration of her visit in a covered palanquin surrounded by a retinue of armed guards. Compared to the magnificent spectacle of the open desert city, the memory of that place seemed cold and ugly. "It's beautiful."

"If you would like, perhaps one day you would allow me to show you more of the city. Its beauty does not fade as one draws nearer."

Dae glanced at the tall woman uncertainly. "You would let me out of the palace?"

"Of course. You are not a prisoner here. Put such thoughts out of your mind. I want for you to be happy in your new home, child, and if you wish to see more of El'Kasari, I would be greatly pleased to take you."

"Oh." Dae was doubtful if the offer was truly genuine, but she nodded anyway. "I would like that...someday."

"Excellent." Zafirah turned away from the window and back into the lavishly appointed bedroom. "Now, since you do not desire any more personal pleasures with me this night..." She paused and raised an eyebrow at Dae, inviting her to change her mind. Dae quickly shook her head, blushing again at the hungry look in the Scion's sapphire eyes. "I suppose you should be returning to your quarters in the harem. Do you have any questions of your own before we part?"

Dae was about to shake her head again when she suddenly stopped and cocked her head curiously. "How old are you?" she asked, half expecting her question to anger the Scion.

Zafirah, however, just smiled and answered honestly. "I have seen the desert rains come twenty-six times, once for every year of my life."

"Twenty-six?" Dae's jaw dropped in surprise. "But isn't that young for..."

"I was barely twenty when I first took the reins of power and became Scion. The desert nourishes the strong and kills the weak. Wisdom is granted to the elderly, power to the young; thus it is that the young rule while the aged advise. It is the way of things in the desert."

“Oh.”

“Anything else?”

“No, thank you.”

“Most welcome.” Zafirah clapped her hands, and instantly two guards materialized at the doorway. The Scion addressed them. “Escort the girl back to the harem and then return to your duties.”

They bowed and gestured for Dae to precede them into the corridor. With a few backward glances, Dae led the way out of the bedroom and back to her own quarters. Once again, her mind was too preoccupied to enjoy the stunning architecture of the palace halls, although no longer was it filled with expectant terror. Now, Dae was silent and thoughtful as she contemplated her meeting with the Scion. While her fears of rape and mysterious tortures had been largely alleviated, she was now faced with concerns of a far more subtle—yet even more disturbing—nature, as she struggled to understand the way her body had responded to Zafirah’s overtures.

\* \* \*

The deep desert was a deadly and merciless region, as many a foreign traveler had discovered to his great regret. Centuries of blistering winds had carved the outcroppings of rock into lethal sharp ridges that sprang up out of the barren white sands like knives thrust into an unsuspecting back. There was little shelter from the glare of the sun; heat killed quickly out here, and a fallen body never sat long before it was found by the scavenger birds and mangy jackals that called this land their home. Water was scarce and fiercely guarded by those nomadic tribes who had refused to let ancient blood-feuds die so they could join the Scion Peace. Those few merchants and explorers who were brave or foolish enough to venture into the deep desert, and were graced with such luck as to return alive, brought with them stories of the ugly, inhospitable land and warned others never to test the murderous sands themselves.

But to Shakir Al’Jadin, the Jaharri desert was home, and its many perils and hardships were a comfort to him that he wouldn’t have traded for the wealth of a thousand kingdoms.

Shakir breathed in the vastness of the ocean of sand and stone around him. He loved the nights out here; the half-moon and the

brilliant sparkle of a million stars filled the heavens with silver light, and the air was cool and silent except for the faint clip-clop of hooves passing over stone. The desert at night had its own particular beauty, its own peace that could be found nowhere else in the world. Scanning the surrounding wilderness, he searched among the many granite and sandstone escarpments, eventually finding what he sought: a faint crimson glow at the base of a not-too distant cliff. Shakir grunted, and turned his horse toward his destination.

Shakir Al'Jadin was Calif of the Deharn tribe, a small but tough group of nomads who made their home far from the structure and order of El'Kasari and the Scion Whore. For hundreds of years before the Peace, the Deharn had lived well, plundering the trade routes between the western and eastern lands without mercy. They had been feared as cunning and vicious warriors, and as such had earned the enmity of many of the most powerful tribes. When the first Scion had forged the Peace, however, things had changed. The Deharn refused to ally with its ancient rivals and had led many charges against the then-weak city on the northern coast. All their attacks had been rebuffed, and now Shakir was the leader of a tribe forced to rely on speed and stealth to attack its enemies. He was a handsome and charismatic leader, skilled in the arts of warfare his people prized so greatly. In his younger years, he had learned how the power of words could fan the flames of hostility into a roaring blaze, and over time, he had mastered the skills of oration and used them to garner a fanatical devotion among his people.

Shakir was also a leader constantly seeking a way to restore his tribe to their ancient position of strength...and who believed he had finally found it.

Crossing the stretch of desert before him, Shakir arrived at his destination: a shallow-mouthed cave carved by the wind into the rock wall of an escarpment. Dismounting, he strode purposefully into the cave, waving aside the two guards he was pleased to note were standing outside the entrance with drawn scimitars. The men were loyal and disciplined warriors of his tribe, and he had sent them ahead to mind his path and prepare the scene for his coming demonstration.

Inside, a gathering of fifteen men and women sat around a flickering fire in various positions. They all looked up as he entered their ring,

some smiling and offering respectful nods, others greeting his arrival with glum disinterest or suspicious caution. Though he was young, having seen the rains come only twenty-three times in his life, Shakir had earned a reputation for his brutality and quick temper. His hatred of the Scion and the city ran deep, as it ran deep in all those who were gathered here.

Shakir met the eyes of each person in turn and nodded in satisfaction. “My brothers and sisters, thank you all for coming,” he said, opening his arms in welcome. “Some of you have traveled a long way to be here this night, and I hope to make your journey worth your while.”

“How?” demanded Brak, a grizzled, scarred elder whose tribe lived closest to the great salt desert in the south. “Will you offer food or water for our troubles? Or only more talk of useless war?”

Shakir eyed the older man steadily. “War against the Scion or El’Kasari is never useless.”

“Bah!” Brak spat on the ground, the reason for this assembly now clear. “For centuries we have spilled our blood for the sands, trying to break the back of the Scion Peace, and have gained nothing for our efforts! We could not defeat the city when it was but an unstable alliance. What has changed, except that they have grown stronger, and we have weakened? Tell me this!”

Shakir offered a smug, enigmatic smile. “Much, which I will reveal to you if you would allow me.” Brak was critical to the Calif’s plans; his tribe bred the finest *merharis* in the whole of the desert, and those swift camels would be invaluable to Shakir in the coming months.

The old warrior snorted but settled himself once more and glowered at the assembly.

“Brak is right,” Shakir stated more loudly, letting his presence fill the cave. “We throw ourselves against the might of El’Kasari and the Scion Whore, only to perish to her forces time and time again. Our raids against those who dare trespass into the desert glean fewer rewards each year, and the other tribes grow fat and strong while we starve like jackals on the rocks! We cannot continue on this path, my friends. We will destroy ourselves, and our enemies will laugh at our extinction. Would you have this?”



“No!” One of the women stood and gestured fiercely. “But pretty words and tired rhetoric will not avail you here, Shakir. What can we do? I have seen young men like you before, filled with anger and arrogance. I have seen them lead others to an early grave! Do you offer any more than they did? Can you bring down the *spahi*? How? They have training and weapons beyond our means! A single rider of the Scion is worth five of our own men!”

“Perhaps this was true...once,” Shakir said. “But I have come across a means by which we might at last strike back against the Whore and her forces—a means I would share with you if you would agree to my plans.”

The woman studied Shakir a moment, her head cocked. “What means?”

Shakir clapped his hands once, and immediately the two guards at the cave mouth hurried in, bearing between them a heavy wooden chest, the design of which was obviously not of the desert. They placed the chest on the ground before Shakir, bowed, then left.

Shakir spread his arms wide in joy. Kneeling almost reverently, he lifted the lid on the chest and proudly displayed its contents to the gathering. The people moved closer, curious, as Shakir reached in and pulled out a strange device.

It was a long pole of dark cast iron set into a wooden brace with several intricate-looking levers attached. Although none of them had ever seen such a device, every man and woman in the cave recognized a weapon when they saw one...though its method was beyond their comprehension.

“This,” grinned Shakir, shouldering the weapon, “was traded to me by a traveler from the far west. My people attacked his caravan when it crossed into our lands, and he offered us his help if we would spare his life. After seeing this marvelous weapon in action, I could not help but agree to his parlay.”

“What is it?” demanded Brak. “I do not think you will defeat the Scion with an iron club! Her army wields swords crafted by the weapon masters from across the seas. Her scouts are armed with powerful bows that would cut you down before you could strike!”

“This is no club,” Shakir corrected in a dangerously soft tone. “It is the power of the storm made flesh! It is thunder and lightning! In our hands, this great weapon can bring that bitch who calls herself Scion to heel! Come, my friends, and I shall demonstrate what power I offer.”

Leading his fellows outside, Shakir made his way out onto the rocky sands a short distance before he stopped. His two guards had made the arrangements he asked for: perhaps a hundred paces from his position, they had planted a stake into the ground, bound to which was the skinny, weakly struggling figure of what had once been a man. Slaves of the Deharn typically lived brief, tormented lives, and this one had grown too weak to serve much usefulness any longer. He had been dressed in the uniform and armor of a *spahi* rider of El’Kasari for this occasion, the captured garb hanging loose on his shrunken frame. As the others looked on, whispering among themselves doubtfully, Shakir hooked the wooden butt of the weapon into his shoulder and sighted along the length of the iron rod. “Watch the slave, my friends,” he instructed. “Watch carefully as I strike him down.”

The group observed through narrowed, speculative eyes. A moment later, the sound of a thunderclap boomed across the desert, shocking them all. They cried out in fear and confusion, searching the empty skies for signs of a storm, only to be met with laughter from the young Calif.

“Relax, friends. The noise was not that of a storm approaching... it was the weapon. See what power it unleashes.” Shakir pointed to the bound slave, now hanging limp against the stake, and when the gathered tribespeople moved forward to investigate, they gasped in unison at the sight.

A wide hole, about the size of a man’s fist, had been blasted through the wretch’s chest, leaving a bloody mess beneath the ruined, torn armor.

“What magic is this?” breathed Brak in awe, now eyeing the strange weapon with more respect.

“No magic,” Shakir assured him easily. “This weapon works as a bow, striking an enemy from afar...however, with far greater accuracy and from a good deal further distance. It fires these”—he held out his hand, showing the people a collection of small lead projectiles—“with sufficient force to penetrate armor, steel, and flesh with ease.”

“How?”

“It uses a powder of unique ability, whose formula I will share with you if you will but agree to help me strike back against the Scion Whore!”

There was much muttering at this, but Shakir let it go. Most were excited by his demonstration, as he expected—the nomads needed little incentive to want to war—but others were still cautious, and he respected that. It was no small thing to propose an attack against the mighty Scion.

“How many of these weapons have you managed to steal?” asked Brak.

“A hundred...but with more to come, and enough projectiles and powder to inflict tremendous harm.” Shakir eyed his fellows smugly, unconcerned by the accusation of theft. Unlike the tribes aligned under the Scion Peace, the renegades still survived largely by raiding merchant caravans or the camps of their rivals. All those assembled understood that the only style of “trade” Shakir would ever engage in with an outlander would be tribute given in exchange for mercy. Watching their faces, it was clear to Shakir they were impressed by the spoils he had won. “With these, we can strike with great speed against the *spahi* and the scouts, and disappear back into the desert before the Scion has time to retaliate. We will chip away at the mountain until it is weakened, slaughter the tribes of the alliance one by one so their support is empty...then we shall ride against the city itself and cut down the citizens who have allowed themselves to grow soft and complacent under the Whore’s rule.” He held up the weapon proudly. “This is our destiny, brothers and sisters! It is time for us to take back our strength and honor, and cast our enemies to the jackals!”

Again the murmurings began, but this time with a more excited edge. Brak came forward and asked that he might test the weapon for himself, and Shakir graciously showed him how it was used. Smiling as he watched the elder fumble awkwardly with the foreign weapon, the Calif felt warm pleasure course through his blood.

The winds of change were blowing...and he meant to whip them into a storm that would crush El’Kasari into dust!

## Chapter 3

LIFE IN THE PALACE HAREM, Dae soon discovered, was a curious affair. On the one hand, she found the long days seemed to drift by tediously, and during the fierce midday heat it was often difficult to muster any energy at all. During the early mornings and late evenings, however, when the sun wasn't quite so intent on baking the earth beneath its withering gaze, the girls would play like children through the seraglio gardens and the maze of rooms appointed for their use. Everything was provided for their comfort: fruits and meats to nourish their bodies, puzzling board games to challenge their minds, and a beautiful environment to soothe their senses. Musicians and scholars would often come to entertain or enlighten them, and most of the girls would dance provocatively to the tune of reed pipes, hypnotic drums, and intricate stringed instruments. It was only during the long hours when the sun was at its hottest that the girls tended to shelter beneath the branches of the garden trees, lounging sleepily on silk cushions or frolicking in the cool waters of the great pool.

The pleasure-servants proved to be polite and humorous companions for Dae, and she found herself quite liking their ever-cheerful presence. They treated her kindly, offering to do anything they could to make her more comfortable in her new home. Dae was fascinated by their strange, exotic accents and manner of speech; they were eloquent and articulate, rarely abbreviating their words as most people did in the eastern lands. Where she had expected to find ignorance and barbarity, instead she found intelligence and insight, compassion and beauty. Although few of the girls could read or write, Dae found that their skill as storytellers

more than compensated for their lack of literary education. As Zafirah had said, oration was clearly an important and valued skill among the Jaharri. The telling and retelling of traditional fables and legends was an almost daily activity for the pleasure-servants, and Dae enjoyed the adventurous, often bawdy tales very much. At times, she wished she could have access to some of the books she had grown up with in her homeland; she sensed the other girls would have enjoyed hearing tales not native to the desert, and it might have offered a forum for her to engage with them in a meaningful way. Still, for the most part, she kept to herself, feeling out of place and awkward around the more worldly pleasure-servants. As the weeks became months, Dae found herself spending most of her time with Inaya, who seemed to take the greatest interest in her. The two gradually settled into a solid friendship, the edges of their vastly different personalities and backgrounds somehow fitting against each other with gentle ease.

The life of a pleasure-servant was one of great decadence and luxury. The harem was spacious and airy, but the pleasure-servants were not permitted to roam freely about the palace—much to Dae’s disappointment. Female guards—the most trusted in the Scion’s army and chosen for the fact that they had no interest in bedding with other women—guarded the entrance to the seraglio at all times and escorted the pleasure-servants whenever they were required to venture into the palace proper. These guards were also polite and courteous, despite their stern profession, and treated the women with great respect.

In truth, Dae found the culture of the desert people to be quite interesting and pleasing...as long as she didn’t dwell too long on certain of their practices. Everything here seemed so much more intense than in her homeland; the colors were brighter, the foods more delicious and spicy, and the environment more active and physical. The air was filled with the scents of gardenia, jasmine, and wild rose. At times it was almost overwhelming; she could feel her senses struggling to take it all in. Dae’s parents had always been very protective toward her, particularly as she grew older, and she had never experienced this type of intense communal living. So little was forbidden here: there were few rules, few restrictions. The girls of the harem were utterly carefree and insouciant...and, Dae noted bashfully, extremely affectionate. They

expressed themselves in a very physical way, their hands seeming to gravitate toward skin-on-skin contact whenever they were near each other...or near to Dae herself. She tried her best to be polite about the constant caresses and lingering touches, not wanting to offend anyone over what she believed was a cultural habit, but at times it was a struggle. And as the weeks passed and she grew to understand more of this strange new world, Dae found her mind constantly straying back to ponder on a single point of focus—that of the enigmatic Scion, Zafirah Al'Intisar.

Zafirah was unlike anyone Dae had ever associated with, and certainly different from any ruler she had ever heard of before. As the daughter of a noble family in her homeland, Dae had some measure of experience when it came to the ruling class. She had been taught that it was unseemly for a ruler to interact with a subject as an equal. To actually socialize with the servants would be vulgar; it undermined the ability of the noble class to rule their underlings, made them more human and thus more capable of human error. While Dae knew without question her father was greatly respected and deeply loved by his people—she had seen as much in the devotion shown to him by the commoners and the soldiers—it was very different from what she saw in Zafirah. In the eastern kingdom, nobility equaled superiority.

In stark contrast to this ideal, Zafirah spent every spare moment she could in the harem with her pleasure-servants, mostly just talking and laughing, but occasionally joining in their play with childish abandon. While she always carried with her the quiet air of regal power and command that Dae found so strangely mesmerizing, Zafirah seemed to enjoy relaxing in the seraglio gardens with her harem, often just watching the girls as they splashed in the pool or chased each other across the sweet grasses, a slight, contented smile curving her sensuous lips.

Of course, her presence would inevitably lead to a seduction of one or more of the girls as soon as night began to fall. Many times, Dae watched with wide eyes as Zafirah wove a spell of temptation on a pleasure-servant, whispering enticingly into a delicate ear and running a persuasive hand along smooth thighs, eliciting giggles and chaste blushes that were, in truth, far from innocent. The chosen girl—or, on some occasions, girls—would be led away from the seraglio shortly after, and

Dae had noted that their expressions the next morning always spoke of great satisfaction and languid bliss. Her mind had trouble rationalizing this phenomenon, and she found herself puzzling more and more on what exactly went on during the mysterious dark of the night.

Sitting under the shady branches of a fig tree, Dae watched Zafirah and the other girls as they laughed and played by the pool. Tonight it seemed the Scion had set her sights on Inaya; the raven-haired pleasure-servant reclined against the taller woman, eating slices of persimmon from Zafirah's hand. This was the first time Dae had witnessed her friend in such a situation, although Inaya certainly seemed to enjoy flirting with the Scion whenever she visited. Just watching the subtle, intense display of seduction in so public a forum made her feel like she was intruding upon a private moment, but it was impossible to look away. Only when Zafirah turned in her direction and an alluring smile flashed across painted lips did Dae hastily turn her attention to the girls who were dancing suggestively to the pulsing rhythm of drum music on the clipped lawn. When she noticed movement before her, she glanced up and cursed silently, seeing Zafirah rise from her place at Inaya's side and start to wander over.

"Why do you sit over here all alone, little one?" inquired the Scion, kneeling beside Dae. "Do you not care for company this night?"

Dae shook her head. "No, I just... I wanted a little space, that's all." In truth, she felt ill at ease being around the other girls when they were dancing like this. Invariably they would encourage her to join in, and while she could admit to herself privately that the provocative moves were strangely fascinating, she was far too shy and modest to ever think of attempting them herself.

Zafirah accepted her explanation without comment, however. "There will be a full moon tonight," she observed, looking at the brilliant orb hanging low in the skies. "I always enjoy such nights. When I was but a girl, my mother would take me out into the city and we would wander the *souks* for hours, watching the street performers practice through the dark." She sighed. "There is something about a full moon that fills me with energy and joy." Her eyes darkened noticeably as she let them slide along Dae's ill-concealed figure, lingering over the swell of her breasts

and the curve of her hips. “These nights should be filled with reckless passion, not squandered in idle solitude.”

Dae felt her cheeks glow with a sudden rush of blood. In the last few days she’d found herself unable to control her body’s reaction to Zafirah’s continued overtures, and the feelings that washed over her were deeply disturbing. “I prefer the peace of my own company.”

“Perhaps tonight I could entice you to try something different?”

Dae swallowed nervously, wishing she could control her racing heart. “L-like what?”

“Inaya and I were about to retire for the evening. I wondered if perhaps you would care to join us?”

Surprised, Dae stared wide-eyed at the Scion, then over to where Inaya was watching their exchange with interest. “I-I-I...” She struggled to form a response, caught completely off guard by the offer. “I don’t... don’t think so, my Scion,” she managed to get out after a moment, letting her hair fall forward to hide her face. “I don’t like such things.” Those words had become her creed in this new world.

“So you have said.” The tall woman shifted closer, and the conversation became suddenly more intimate. “You would not have to join our pleasure if you do not wish to. I thought perhaps you might simply deign to...watch?” Zafirah raised an eyebrow. “It may prove to be an educational experience.”

Dae very nearly swallowed her own tongue. Images of naked flesh and tangled limbs flashed unbidden across her mind, and she hoped fervently for their dismissal. Seeing Zafirah watching for a response, she shook her head firmly. “I have no interest in such an education,” she insisted, wondering if tonight would be the night the Scion would abandon her sense of honor.

But Zafirah merely smiled mysteriously. “As you wish, my little Tahirah.” Leaning in close, she ran a single finger along Dae’s collarbone, her breath a caress against her skin. “But I could promise you the lessons would be most thoroughly enjoyable.”

Rising again, giving Dae a last lingering once-over, Zafirah returned to her place beside Inaya, who regarded Dae with a curious expression for a long moment before turning her attention back to the Scion.



Left alone once more, Dae tried to reclaim her former peace of mind but found it had been shattered beyond repair. For some reason, every time Zafirah so much as glanced in her direction, she felt her stomach churn excitedly, her palms begin to sweat, and her blood grow warmer in her veins. Struggling to bring her body back under control, Dae considered the request carefully, wondering whether Inaya had known it was being offered. What did the pleasure-servant think about the idea? Watching Zafirah lead Inaya from the seraglio, Dae wondered for half a heartbeat what things she might have witnessed had she accepted the invitation. As soon as the thought entered her head, she stomped it to death immediately.

Gnawing her lower lip thoughtfully, Dae consigned herself to what she knew would be another restless night of troubling considerations.

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“*Salaam aleikum*, little one,” greeted a lilting, feminine voice cheerfully. “Such a serious face you wear for such an early hour.”

“Huh?” Dae glanced up from her work to find Inaya studying her from a few feet away. She raised a delicately plucked eyebrow at the sheaf of parchment spread over Dae’s lap.

“What are you doing that has you so focused?”

“This?” Dae shrugged. “Just some drawings. It helps to pass the time.”

Inaya immediately settled herself on the lawn beside Dae and leaned over to get a better view. Her arrival brought with it the strong scent of rose, jasmine, and wild musk, and the musical jangle of jewelry. “May I see?”

“Um...sure, if you like.” Dae offered her friend the papers. She had asked the guards for the materials yesterday and spent all morning carefully sketching out remembered images from her homeland with a sharpened stick of lead that served as a pencil. Somehow, it helped her feel more at ease in this alien environment to maintain those memories of a world that was green and alive, where water was plentiful and life was structured and orderly.

Inaya flicked through the many pictures curiously, pausing often to study them in greater detail. “You have great talent.”

Dae looked away modestly. “They’re not really that good.”

“Oh, but they are!” Inaya held up a scene depicting a tranquil lake surrounded by enormous, ancient trees. The detail was indeed very good; Dae’s knowledgeable hand had perfectly captured the motion of a gentle breeze as it whispered through the variegated leaves, and the rippling waves that disturbed the still waters of the lake. “This is your homeland, yes?”

“Uh huh.”

Inaya stared at the picture, fascinated. “I have never seen such a place,” she whispered. “What is this?”

“Well...it’s a lake, of course.”

“And what is a lake?”

The question was so unexpected that it caught Dae off guard. “A lake is...well. It’s like a pool of water that lies over a vast area of land... sort of like a small ocean.”

“Ooh.” Inaya studied the drawing with fresh understanding. “Sometimes when the rains come in the springtime, the water flows so fiercely down the dunes that the sand cannot drink it all, and it pools in the valleys and chasms. That is like a lake, no?”

“Sort of. But a lake is always filled with water. It never drains away completely.”

Inaya smiled wistfully at the thought. “I think the people of your land are very lucky to have such bounty. I do not think they realize just how fortunate they are to be so blessed.”

Considering how much she had taken for granted in her homeland, Dae nodded. “I think you’re probably right.” She watched her friend peruse each of her drawings in turn. When she reached the last picture, Inaya’s expression became teasingly playful.

“I see not all your thoughts find focus on your homeland.” Holding up the parchment, she presented Dae with the image of a familiar face.

Dae grabbed the drawing away from the grinning girl. “It’s not what you’re thinking,” she said, studying the elegant lines and shadings that had perfectly captured the fierce yet enticing features of the Scion. “Her face lends itself well to paper, that’s all.”

“I see.” Inaya’s grin told Dae she wasn’t convinced.

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping after last night’s activities?”

Inaya sighed languidly and lay back on the soft grass, closing her eyes and letting her long fingers toy idly with the jeweled stud in her navel. “Perhaps. But I want to enjoy this feeling for as long as possible before I allow sleep to diminish the memory.”

Dae noted the contented, satisfied air about Inaya and, despite her best efforts, could not help but be curious. “So you enjoyed yourself?”

“Mm, indeed.” Inaya purred. “I am most thoroughly sated. Zafirah was in an unusually vigorous mood last night; her passion was quite voracious.” Her dark gaze rolled in Dae’s direction. “You should have joined us.”

Dae averted her eyes immediately. “How many times must I say I have no interest in such affairs before you will believe me?”

“I know not. How many times will it take before you believe yourself?”

The gentle challenge in Inaya’s question made Dae look up in surprise. “What?”

Inaya propped herself up on her elbows and regarded her frankly. “I have eyes, Dae,” she said. “I have seen the way you watch Zafirah when she comes here. I have seen how you respond whenever she glances in your direction.”

“I...You...That’s not true!”

Inaya shook her head. “You may deny it all you wish, little one. Your tongue may speak lies, but your eyes tell the truth. I have seen the signs of arousal and interest enough times to recognize them when they are so evident. You reject your own heart because you are uncertain and afraid. You have been taught that such desires are wrong, and because you know no better, you believe those teachings. One day, however, you will have to accept that you are curious about what it is Zafirah offers so readily.” She paused and then added softly, “That is why I say you should have joined us last night. At least then you would understand better what it is you deny yourself.” She smiled at the hesitant, wary expression her words elicited. “We have a saying in the desert: ‘It is better to see the truth than to imagine it.’”

Dae stared hard at her friend, but Inaya just smiled back at her. Eventually she shook her head and turned away. “I would rather remain ignorant,” she said primly. “The only thing I feel for Zafirah is a

gratitude for saving my life from the slavers. Whatever you *think* you've seen exists only in your mind."

Inaya sighed. "As you wish." Sitting up fully, she crossed her legs and watched a group of the other girls playing among the spreading branches of an aspen tree nearby. "There is nothing wrong with being curious," she continued in conversational tones. "Zafirah seems quite enchanted by you. Her eyes always manage to find you immediately whenever she comes here."

Dae remained silent, determined not to be drawn into making any further comment. Inaya watched her a moment longer with quiet, undaunted certainty, only looking away when movement drew her attention to activity high in the aspen tree. She grinned and pointed.

"Look. Johara and Hayam have found themselves a new place to enjoy one another's company."

Dae looked where her friend indicated, and her jaw dropped in paralyzed shock at the sight. Perched high in the branches of the tree, two of the harem girls were entwined in a tangle of arms and legs, engaged in a passionate kiss that seemed likely to last forever. Even from a distance, their ardor was unmistakable, and Dae stared unblinking at the couple. This was the first time she had witnessed such an intimate act between two women, and she couldn't tear her eyes away. It had not occurred to her that the pleasure-servants would willingly engage in such a fashion with one another.

Inaya studied Dae's shocked reaction. "You see? It is a beautiful thing to share passion with another woman, not something to be feared or reviled. They do not lock their desires away as I have heard people do in your land; they express them, give them life and power."

Dae had never seen such an open display of love and desire. Certainly her parents, who she knew loved each other a great deal, had never kissed with such carnal hunger. "They seem so unaware of anything around them," she whispered almost to herself. "It's like they're in love."

"Well, of course they are." Inaya laughed merrily at her. "Johara and Hayam have been lovers for three years now. They are very much committed to one another."

"They are?" Dae glanced around to check the entrance to the harem, wondering what the guards would do if they saw the two women trysting. "What about Zafirah?"

“What about her?”

“Wouldn’t she be angry if she knew?”

Inaya shook her head, chuckling, and Dae knew her innocence and naïveté were once again showing. “Of course not, little one. She presided over their joining ceremony just last year!”

“Joining ceremony? You mean...” Dae struggled to understand this latest twist to harem life. “A marriage?”

Inaya shrugged, clearly never having heard the word before. “They exchanged vows of devotion and love, and tokens to symbolize that they were now one in the eyes of the great Goddess Inshal. The Scion was most honored to play a role in the consecration of their love.”

“So they don’t bed with the Scion then?”

“I said no such thing,” Inaya waggled her eyebrows saucily. “Their union makes them one being, inseparable. When Zafirah takes pleasure with one, she knows to include the other as well.” Nimble fingers toyed absentmindedly with a silky lock of blue-black hair as she regarded the two lovers. “Johara and Hayam are quite a couple. Their love only brightens the flame of their passion, and they eagerly share that passion with others.”

Dae’s mind struggled to comprehend this notion of such freely offered sexual favor, the idea making her almost dizzy. “And Zafirah doesn’t mind that her pleasure-servants sleep together?”

“Why would she? The Scion would never wish to deprive any of her people of pleasure. In fact, she encourages us to share our bodies equally with each other as with herself. As I have said, she is a most generous lover.” She paused and regarded Dae with a coy expression the young girl had learned to dread. “It may interest you to know that Zafirah’s loins are not the only ones to have stirred at your arrival. The other pleasure-servants take an equal measure of interest in your presence.”

Dae’s eyes finally tore themselves from the ardent couple in the trees as she jerked her head around. “What?”

Inaya’s smile was perfectly innocent, but her dark eyes were sparkling mischievously. “You had not noticed the attention they pay you?”

“Well, yes, but I thought...” Dae’s voice trailed off as she suddenly realized that all those lingering touches she had interpreted as simple expressions of friendship might not have been entirely based on cultural

norms. She stared nervously at the other pleasure-servants climbing through the aspen. “You mean they...?”

“Wish to bed you?” Inaya laughed. “Why does that seem so strange to you? You are young, Dae, and strikingly beautiful...and your innocence serves only to add to their interest, makes you even more attractive to them. There is not a woman in this harem who would not crawl through a pit of scorpions for the chance to lie between your thighs.”

Dae’s jaw worked up and down for several moments in silence before she managed to form words. “B-but I don’t... They can’t...”

“These women have never met anyone like you before, Dae. They have never known a person who does not live for the pursuit of pleasure. A person who, seemingly, avoids pleasure. Here in the desert, where life is so often harsh and brief, such people simply do not exist. Here, every moment is precious. To squander what time we have in this world by denying our own passions and desires is unheard of.” She paused, regarding Dae with a gentle but serious expression. “They do not understand your chastity, but from the whisperings I have heard, it seems they find it every bit as arousing as does Zafirah. For a single night in your bed...for the chance to be the first to introduce you to the pleasures your body has never known... Ah.” She sighed in longing at the thought. “You do not understand how tempting a creature you are, little one.”

Recalling the invitation of last night, Dae narrowed her eyes curiously at her friend. “Do you feel the same way?” she asked timidly, unsure if she wanted to know the answer.

Inaya shrugged, her eyes sincere and honest. “I like you, Dae. I feel that we have formed a bond since you came here and hope that we will be companions for many years to come. But I will not deny that I find you attractive. And though I respect your wishes to remain untouched by the hands of another woman, I would consider it a great honor if you were ever to allow me to warm your bed.” Her full lips tweaked into a slightly sad smile at the confused, almost wounded look that crept over Dae’s face. “I am sorry if you do not understand.”

“No.” Dae held up her hand. “It’s okay, really.” She sat up a little straighter and shook her head to clear it. “I can handle this. It’s no different than dealing with Zafirah, right?”

Inaya's smile brightened a little. "I have no wish to lose you as a friend, Dae."

"I know." Dae returned the smile shyly. "It's just..." She considered carefully, the revelations of this morning only adding to the jumble of thoughts and feelings that seemed to bombard her since she'd come to the harem. A lifetime of indoctrination came to the fore, speaking the words for her. "I mean no offense, but...I can't be with another woman. Not like that."

Brown eyes glanced again at the detailed drawing of Zafirah, and Dae could see Inaya was reading every careful line of her sketch, every subtle shift of shading and focus, with unnerving interest. She didn't like the quiet, knowing smile that twitched at the corners of Inaya's lips, and for a second Dae worried her drawing had revealed something to her friend it shouldn't have... But then Inaya returned her gaze to Dae's face and said nothing more than, "As you wish."

Dae was silent for long moments, half wondering if she should offer further protest and defense, when she suddenly recalled something from last night. "Inaya? Have you ever heard the word 'tahirah' before?"

"Certainly. It is a name meaning pure...chaste. Why, where did you hear it?"

"It was just something Zafirah called me last night."

Inaya raised an eyebrow at her friend. "I think the Scion names you well."

Dae rolled her eyes and, smiling a little to herself, returned to her artwork while Inaya watched with avid interest over her shoulder.

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Whooping wildly, Zafirah leaned over the neck of her horse and cast a quick glance behind her, grinning when she saw she had outpaced the other riders by several lengths. Racing across a stretch of desert sand just in sight of the city's first buildings, the Scion and a group of twenty hand-picked *spahi* churned great clouds of dust into the air as they sped between two markers planted several hundred feet apart. Zafirah's mare, Simhana, possessed a spirit every bit as wild and competitive as that of her mistress and needed no urging to increase her pace. When she reached the marker, Zafirah pressed against Simhana's right flank

with her leg, and the well-trained war horse executed a sudden turn that would have thrown a lesser rider to the ground. Expecting the move, however, Zafirah twisted her body in the light saddle and then watched as the rest of the riders crossed the finish in a tightly packed group.

“An excellent race, my Scion,” said one of the riders, pulling away his *haik* and grinning broadly at her. “You ride swifter than the *sirocco* winds!”

“Bah!” Zafirah returned the grin wryly. “You only say that to ease your pride. I have seen outlanders ride faster than you!”

The men and women all laughed, trading jibes back and forth while they readied themselves for another set of exercises. Zafirah joined in their camaraderie, enjoying the time spent among her troops. The exercise was particularly welcome this day; she was feeling the need to work off some energy.

Since the start of her rule as Scion, Zafirah routinely set aside a few hours every day in the morning to be spent training with the men and women of her army. Sometimes she would ride with the *spahi* out in the desert, other times she would train with the weapon masters who helped perfect her skill with scimitar and spear. The ritual not only kept Zafirah in prime fighting condition, it also served to endear her to the soldiers of the army, engendering a loyalty among them that was almost holy in its power. By demonstrating that she was every bit as willing to fight in defense of her home and her people as she expected them to be, the charismatic Scion had molded an army of fanatical warriors who were feared by all who dared to oppose the Scion Peace.

Watching each man in turn spur his mount through a dazzling series of equine acrobatics, Zafirah suddenly noticed a dust cloud on the horizon. Squinting, she made out a dark, shimmering patch that she knew indicated a group of riders was approaching. Halting the exercises, she called her troops to order, and they waited till the strangers drew close enough to identify. When she saw the flash of green and red that marked the banner held aloft by a forerunner, Zafirah relaxed. As the group drew closer, she rode out to greet them, grinning at the short, grizzled man riding at their head.

“What is the matter, Cousin? Did you come to miss my company so greatly in but a few weeks that you decided to pay me a visit?”



Rehan Al'Carin snorted, wiping his sand-blasted forehead with the back of his arm. "Hardly! I would be a happier man to see less of your face in my life than more." He gestured behind him to a number of pack camels weighed down with sacks and carved wooden chests. "A caravan of merchants traveling east paid well for its use of the Kah-hari oasis. So great a tribute as this called for a personal delivery."

Zafirah's grin widened a fraction, knowing Rehan could have entrusted the delivery to one of his many sons. But she bowed her head in a show of thanks. "I am most grateful to you, then. Will you be staying in the city during your visit? I would be honored to offer you a room in the palace if you wish."

"My thanks, Cousin, but my men would prefer to camp in the desert. However, I would gratefully accept an invitation for dinner. It has been some time since I feasted in the great palace."

"Of course." Zafirah understood well the way of the tribal people—walls and ceilings made them feel caged and edgy—so she was not offended that Rehan declined her offer. "I will see that you are supplied before you return...and rest assured I have not forgotten your favor of taking in the other girls we rescued. You will be compensated."

Rehan bowed his thanks; his dislike of those who dealt in the slave trade was well known. In fact, it was a point of contention between the Tek and several of their neighboring tribes. Slavery was not universally outlawed among the Jaharri, and practices varied between the tribes depending on their individual traditions. Indentured servitude, however, was widely regarded as an acceptable and honorable means by which a person could repay a debt to another; the girls would be released in a few years and given the means to resume a life where they chose.

"How have they fared?" Zafirah asked, joining the older man at the head of the procession as it made its way toward the city.

Rehan grunted. "As well as can be expected, I suppose, given the trauma they suffered. A few have adjusted well and may even decide to remain among us, but it will take time for the others to recover from their ordeal." He raised a bushy eyebrow at her, his smile slightly lecherous. "And what of the flower you plucked from the pack? I wager you have been most solicitous after her experiences, eh?"

Zafirah's face was impassive as she replied. "She is well, to be sure... though she is not so easily wooed to the pleasures of my bed."

"Indeed?" Rehan smirked. He knew as well as any the power of the Scion's seductive lure and seemed impressed that the girl had withstood her charms. "Perhaps then, if you have no use for her, she could be persuaded to join with my tribe? One of my older sons will soon be of age to take a wife. If the girl holds no interest in entertaining your affections, she might find such a union preferable to remaining in the city."

Zafirah regarded him with amusement. "You know me better than that, Rehan, to think I would part so easily with a flower of such rare and wondrous beauty. Though she denies me the chance to sample her delights personally, that does not mean I am not pleased with her company." She laughed at the disappointed look on Rehan's face. "She will remain in the palace with the rest of my harem."

In truth, Dae's presence in the palace had been causing Zafirah some discomfort recently. She was not accustomed to having her advances rejected, and the young girl's exquisite beauty and innocence only served to add fuel to the already impressive blaze of Zafirah's sexual appetite.

"Hmph." The grizzled nomad scowled a little but didn't press his hopeful suggestion further. "You will be pleased with the tribute given by the foreigners."

"Truly? I have seen enough gold and jewels in my lifetime that their sparkle does not easily impress me anymore."

"As have I, Cousin. As have I." Rehan leaned closer to Zafirah conspiratorially. "These merchants were doubtless wise about our ways. They offered items of lesser value, but far greater worth."

A dark brow lifted interestedly. Usually, travelers crossing the desert gave riches like gems and gold and fine cloth in exchange for their passage—items that were of limited use in the harsh Jaharri desert. Zafirah regarded the grizzled nomad chief with curiosity. "Such as?"

"Spices and coffee from across the seas, steel weapons crafted by the masters in the far west. They even left a sack of *brehani* leaf among the offerings...proof enough that they knew exactly how to win the support of the desert guardians."

Zafirah's brilliant eyes widened with delight. This was indeed a treat! *Brehani* leaf—the Breath of Inshal—grew only in the dangerous, barren salt flats that bordered the Jaharri desert to the south. Difficult to collect, the herb was prized among the desert people for its intoxicating qualities that could—so the priests claimed—sometimes provide visions from the Goddess herself. Zafirah had not enjoyed the herb for a long time now, and she gave Rehan a broad smile. “This is a great tribute indeed,” she agreed, knowing the weapons and other useful items would be a welcome gift to her people. “I will be sure to see you receive a just share before you return to your tribe.”

Rehan bowed in the saddle, obviously not doubting she would be more than fair in distributing the wealth. “Thank you, my Scion. Your generosity is greatly appreciated.”

Zafirah rejoined her *spahi*, and the two groups marched into El'Kasari together, their entrance met with much delight by the citizens who flocked to greet them. Leading the procession, thinking happily about the rich tribute, Zafirah was all smiles as she touched the hands of the people who reached out to her. Already her quick mind was deciding how best to distribute the new wealth...and she concluded that it was past time she gave her pleasure-servants a gift they would truly appreciate.

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# NIGHTS OF SILK AND SAPPHIRE

BY AMBER JACOBS

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