

ONE THOUSAND AND ONE
HAREM NIGHTS

By

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CHAPTER ONE

In the spring the long, calm days were disturbed by the onset of her first menses, and premonitions. Inner destinies intersected. Suhayla, and her mother, Aisha, were like vines growing together. One seeded from the first, yet growing side by side, newly green tendrils, climbed upon the older sturdier vine, and Aisha found her way down the lovely, elastic body of her young daughter.

It is said, Egypt is Um ed-Duniya, Mother of the World, yet the Aket lion of past and future held Suhayla in its paws. Aker, the twin lions joined at the haunches, their tail curved over their spotted backs: one facing east, yesterday, Sef; the other looking to the West,

tomorrow, Tuau. Pass between the paws of either of these lions and one walks into the shadow world, into the world of the dead, trapped in time.

As each morning, Baba, Mama and Suhayla sat on cushions, upon a carpet, for their early meal. Black tea accompanied goat's cheese on bread, warm and pliable, that had been dipped in olive oil. Suhayla took a handful of dates from the bronze platter and stuffed her mouth. Fresh and juicy, from their own trees next to the garden, the sweet taste stuck to her mouth and clung to her tongue.

Mama stood, and handed the empty platter to their serving girl. "Come daughter, we shall give the lilies a look and see their progress." Mama stroked Suhayla's hair and at the door way grasped her hand.

The hairs arose on the back of Suhayla's neck, she felt vaguely uneasy but all the while curious; for a breath, her world hung suspended, timeless. A current, a force she did not understand, that had been coiled like a living creature inside her--the creature long asleep, had awakened.

A vision came unbidden: sphinxes' stared; their yellow eyes glowed, luminous in a moonless sky. Intently they watched as if studying her. They ruled the dark: royal, proud and defiant, peered into her soul, and stirred

some ancient being in the unconscious depths. As if an owl in flight, she saw below her the remains of a temple, columns and tumbled stone blocks, open to the sky. Stars reeled above, yet one star, garnet hued, grew in size. From hollow sockets Mama's dead eyes stared at her from a dusky-moon face, the tip of her pink tongue visible in between pomegranate colored lips. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. They assaulted her very being and made her shake like the needle fronds of palms in the wind.

"No!" Suhayla cried out instinctively pushing her Mama away. She ran from Mama into blinding sunlight.

Mama ran screaming for Baba. "Mustafa! What have I done to deserve this?" Her wails echoed in the house. "Why does my only child push me away! Cook," Aisha said. "Do not let Suhayla out of your sight."

Cook shook her head and sighed. Her small, dark eyes peeked over fleshy cheeks. For two days Mama kept to her rooms weeping quietly, muttering prayers, lighting incense and candles. She did not come out.

Suhayla felt different. Shameful. She had thought her upbringing was comparable to other girls soon to be of marriageable age. Like a mirage her days of childhood careless ease hung in her mind, yet she could not ever regain that state again. And as travelers in the desert

find, the closer you think you approach the watery pool, it is always ever so far, luminous and trembling, unattainable. Why did this happen to her? Why had Allah chosen her to deliver even the least divine vision? Or was the curse of an evil djinni to blame? If Mama died, would she be the cause? This Suhayla feared more than anything. Yet because of the horrible images she had had in her mind, she felt different.

What is this mystery Mama had woven about her like a spider? After all she and Mama were two females spun from the same lineage, the same ancestral line of mystics, poets, alchemists, and apothecaries. Both were born of the poetical mother-city—Cairo. Suhayla shivered when she remembered the vision. How does one render a vision faithfully, and make it fully understood? Its interpretation eluded and terrified her. Perhaps she and Mama were reconstituted and reinvigorated lion's dust; like old bones, from beneath a gold-smiling death-mask, or pottery shards from an ancient civilization, unearthed from the sand or a stone tomb and brought to light; like a lost history incarnate.

After Mama and Baba went to bed, Suhayla crept out of the back door of the house careful not to disturb the

servants. With a clay dish of dinner scraps held in one hand, she went outside. Her sandaled feet softly padded on the sand.

Out in the garden at night, Suhayla stood shaking next to the garden pavilion. She feared Mama's death more than anything in the world. She could easily envision a djinni approaching in the guise of a burst of desert wind whirling like a dervish. Her senses were alert, like a cat's, she listened: the wind nibbled at the fronds, and the woody, thorny twigs of the sprouting bougainvillea that rose up from the wall. The shifting currents carried the distant barks and howls from dogs, those domesticated jackals of the ancient world.

Cats had waited by in the shadows of the pavilion. She scattered the contents of her bowl onto the ground. Over walls into the pale-moon light, expectant and hungry, with an occasional hiss at each other, they crept toward her like tigers. The cats: golds, blacks, and smoky tigers, gobbled up the bits. After searching the ground with their noses for any extra tidbits, they purred and brushed their soft fur against her legs.

"Will I ever be able to tell Ma I saw her dead, blood trickling from her mouth?" It seemed perverse, a daughter telling her ma of her demise. Why oh why did Allah allow

her to have such a vision? Even if Suhayla could blame the family 'curse', as Ma called it, why her? Was the vision purely a warning? Or was it fate? Why did the sphinx peer into her soul? All the questions reeled in her mind, and left her tired and forlorn.

Pebbles crunched and vines moved near the pavilion. A dark, cloaked figure appeared, the same figure upset her Ma. Suhayla's heart raced. Goose bumps covered her arms. She wanted to yell out 'stay away' but her tongue stuck to her mouth. She darted into the house and shut the door. Anger overcame her fear. Anger at the intrusion, at him, a madman, for frightening Ma.

Suhayla pressed her back against the door; it seemed the visions had happened to somebody else. Inward she shook with fright. Somebody else screamed and ran from her Ma. Somebody else had sworn to never have another vision, to never again touch her Ma.

She oversaw the servants and Najmah. More than a servant; related distantly to Baba on his mother's side, Najmah helped cook at times and gave Suhayla companionship.

Najmah and Suhayla made sure Baba received his tea as he liked it: with a bit of lemon and honey in his study. The afternoon sun glimmered through the thick layers of jasmine leaves and branches that were twisted and entwined

into the shutters.

CHAPTER TWO

Speckled-gold light filtered into the room, setting the threads of the cinnabar carpet shining. Suhayla's hands shook as she brought tea on a tray and set it on the narrow table. She had the courage to sit with Baba. Together they perched on embroidered-velvet cushions facing the squat table and the towering shelves lining the wall. The mustiness of volumes and scrolls of ancient texts, some strewn across the red lacquered table, filled her nostrils.

They ate honey pastries in silence. Although Cook's were good, Mama's were juicier. No one made honey cakes like hers. Suhayla loved how the honey dribbled down her chin and left a sweet taste on her tongue long after eating them.

She watched Baba's face for signs of emotions, but she saw only bafflement. He waited patiently for her to speak. "When Mama took my hand I saw. . . I was frightened." The words choked in her throat. She could not even describe

the terrifying images. "Is God mad at me Baba?"

He looked up, a gentle but sad expression on his face. "God understands all. It is we who do not understand him." He considered her with a serious look, and then emptied his glass of tea. With slender, long fingers he placed the cup slowly on the silver tray; she detected a slight trembling. "The human heart has many phases, some light and some dark, like the moon."

On the edge of the ancient city, not far from the embankment, their house sat. Built of mud brick, the second story balcony, hung out over the lower. Date palms threw sharp-needled shadows upon the white lime wash of the house; the wall and stone steps, held onto the steep bank and snaked down to the river, bathed in opal light.

The river, that endless, dreamy river—the Nile, an endless glassy ribbon, that on the appearance of the star Sirius, overflows its banks offering its life giving milk to the starving sand, stretched between the garden and the Giza plateau. The apexes of the pyramids, pierced the heavens, stars and the moon slowly orbited hanging close to the dark bulks of stone.

Every morning, after breaking of the fast and prayers, Suhayla took the goat-skin sack down to the steps to retrieve water from the Nile and watered the garden. On the

third morning Mama was about to trek down the worn steps, a goat-skin sack in hand.

"Aye. My roses!" Mama cried throwing her arms up, striking her palm to head. "What is this?"

Suhayla ran out, and Cook scuttled faster than ever. The stray greens of shredded onions, roses, and remaining stems of tulips ripped from the soil, bougainvilleas hashed, as if a battle had occurred in their little plot.

"A mad dog or an evil djinni visited last night," Cook said.

"God is punishing us!" Aisha cried out. "First my daughter, now this."

Later that evening Mama called Baba. His eyes were rimmed in red from reading in a lamp's light, and ink stained his fingers. A tuft of hair sat upon an almond shaped face, webs of fine lines gathered around his eyes and mouth.

"Mustafa, send for the Shaykh, we need his prayers to cleanse this house." Aisha's sorrowful voice strained the air. Her moans and occasional sobs echoed.

Baba went and later returned with the Shaykh and invited him into the receiving room. Khilwati's deep timbre, Mama's and Baba's low voices filtered through the rafters and floor to the upper bedroom chambers above.

Engulfed in shame and humiliation for being the cause of Mama's pain, Suhayla lay on her bed, wiping tears from her eyes. She listened to the mutterings, chants, quotes and prayers the Shaykh sang and read from the Quran.

After the Shaykh left, a sensed but unacknowledged tension lingered.

Afraid to upset or touch her, Suhayla kept a distance between herself and Ma. Cook watched them and clucking shook her head. That evening, Baba had been called to the Mosque; Suhayla watched Mama and Baba embrace for a fleeting moment. Whenever Baba went away Suhayla noticed how Mama started at every noise, eyes were wild like a caged animal—a Tiger she had once seen in the market, hair bristling.

When night descended, Cook leaned toward the door open to the cool air. "Who is out there?"

Suhayla heard only the wind sighing, the crackling of flames under Cook's pot. Sweat beaded Cook's brow, and with fleshy arms she stirred the lamb stew.

Mama glided toward the door, gave a shadow of a grimace. "Suhayla, help cook." Body rigid, head held high, eyes round with fright, Mama disappeared into the shadows of the garden pavilion.

Cook said, "Light that other lamp Suhayla, I can't see the mint. My eyes are not what they used to be."

She lit the lamp and helped Cook scraped the mint leaves from the woody stems into a bowl. Suhayla was glad to be of use to somebody. Sweet, astringent mint scented her fingers, hands and the chamber.

Mama returned with tears in her eyes, slowly they vanished as she sipped tea. She turned her solemn mouth to the discussion of Cook's daughter. "How does Zainab do in her new home?"

"Her husband complains she is too generous with the porters and servants, but they are happy." Cook gave a hint of a smile as she stuffed mint into lamb and set it in a pot of water.

Aisha knew she must not ever tell her husband. He had never listened to her concerns and worries about the manuscript before, why would he now? She alone had to carry this burden for since she had been appointed the guardian of the Book of Causes, guardian of the Sphinx and Gebel Gibli. All seemed chaos, in the house, in the streets always chaos, and uproar; and her mind as well was seized by panic, restlessness, nervousness and fear. Aisha anticipated the bustle and the confusion of the city with repugnance; its care-worn and cadaverous countenances of

men, women and children haunted her like a vision of judgment.

Fear also of him descending upon them, upon her with that marrow-chilling voice demanding for the book, for her daughter, his threats were a constant plague. Aisha had never seen his face, hidden in the shadow of the turban, he always wore a robe of the fellahin, and face wrapped as if a desert camel driver. His person possessed bad humors; the air of an evil djinni. She did not need to know, could not know-how he disappeared as quick as he arrived like a ghost or a thief in the night.

Before something happened to Aisha, she knew her daughter had to know of the feminine mystery that empowered her to have a child, and the secrets the Copts learned from the Priestesses of the ancient temples. The ancient knowledge must be passed on at any cost.

"We will leave soon."

"Where?" Suhayla gazed wide-eyed at her with hazel, guileless eyes. 'White of heart' the Arabs called it—full of love and innocence.

"The desert," Aisha said.

With alacrity Mama packed a sack of bread, dates and cheese. After throwing her veil over head with one swing

of her arm, she yelled to Cook. "We'll be back by sundown."

The busyness of Cairo made Mama nervous; Suhayla could see that plainly as they hurried. Mama suffered real pain in the turmoil of civilization. She scurried before Suhayla, constant glimpses backward, through the alleys, behind the suk filled with merchants from distant lands.

Suhayla found the city exhilarating: she liked the contrast of the ancient worldliness; even with the newer houses, merchants' stalls and squares, the place breathed an ancient life; burgeoning, the suffocating streets of dust, animal dung, rotting refuse heaps, the smell of spiced meats cooking, and the dome and turrets of the great mosque—arising out of the white washed houses, veiled women watched children playing, and shops that nestled together like doves—soaring up to and meeting the marbled sky of heaven.

Spring plunged into summer, the air—almost too hot to breathe, a tideless weight, forced fresh dew to cling to Suhayla's face, arms; chest, between her swelling breasts.

Once on the other side of the river Aisha would be able to relax. A nagging fear drove her on like a mad woman and she would not find peace until she stepped on the sacred sand. There the spirits of the ancient ones, the

rock dust of the crumbling temples would calm her nerves, her rushing heart.

CHAPTER THREE

On the ferry they were squished by bleating sheep, mothers and children, a crying infant, men robed in black, peddlers carrying their wares, hollow pans and cups rang; donkeys with full packs; an old toothless crone, covered in dusty brown, grinned at Suhayla. She slid around her mother, careful to keep from brushing against Mama's robe of striped crimson. Suhayla squirmed up a low railing, and bent her belly, leaning over the railing. Suhayla looked over the edge and she saw a girl, average, staring: her face fluttered on the mirrored surface, skin the hue of cloves; hair streamed downward, black as the bottom of Cook's pots; eyes, the green of reeds that grew along the banks and sprouted from the muddy depths. The white and crimson stripes of her outer robe wavered like pennants on the Sultan's palace, in an absolute perfect cloudless sky of azure. For a moment Suhayla shimmered on the glassy surface suspended between earth and heaven; her little self caught between two realms.

Aisha tugged her chador around her face to hide herself from him. He had the uncanny stealth of a ghost. She would see him in a city street or market and then poof! Gone. When the ferry reached the buff sand, the desert's edge, she pushed the sheep and the old shepherd out of the way to get off first. Once away from the river and crowd of people, once out in the purity of the desert air, even though the heat oppressed, Aisha's mind found ease.

Calmness, inherent peacefulness, and the silent thrum of energy that welled up from below the surface hummed through the belly of the sphinx, along its spine, tail to head. And in the two largest pyramids and even the fallen temples, there is a vibration, no matter how still and silent to the ear; inaudible but there never the less, a hum ever so soft that pulsed in Aisha's heart and bones. She looked about for the three Coptic women she had become friends with. She wished to speak of her plight to her friends, but they had not yet reappeared. Where their tent stood stones were laid bare to the sun on bleached, wind rippled sand. "My friends called the morning sun, Kheperi, the Scarab beetle; Ra the disc at noon, and Atum in evening when it sank toward the horizon."

Suhayla tried to imagine the late morning sun in the form of a beetle as it caused waves of heat to snake along

the sand. She glanced at Mama, whose clay-colored face was darkened by deep lines at the corner of her eyes, like those dried cracks in the mud on the bank of the Nile.

Mama's dusky, small hand clutched rose buds she had salvaged from the garden, the stems wrapped in a strip of cloth, a remnant, yet still some thorns pierced her skin she had held them so tight. She pointed to the temple before the sphinx. Two lone travelers, they snaked their way across the sand, down the bedrock plateau, to the ruined temple. Mama walked around stone blocks, looking, examining, stepping back, and shielding her eyes from the blazing sun.

"Here she is," Mama said.

"Who?"

"The one called Isis. She brought you to me. She embodies earth's regenerating powers. And will help you. You must ask her."

With a cracked brick Mama created a make-shift altar before a jagged, upright slab. Suhayla could just make out the outline of a regal woman in a style of art she had never before seen. Isis held herself with confidence, breasts bared to sun, nipples erect. Long, thick braids hung over her shoulder. Her forehead had a prominent slant which continued down her sloping nose and full lips.

Mama unwound the cloth from the rose stems and with care gently laid them on the brick. On her knees Mama burst into song, eyes closed, she swayed and murmured as if possessed.

Isis lady of the way
Beauty and magic precede you
Mysteries act on your command

Mama sang to Isis with a beauty and grace in her voice Suhayla wondered at, she had never seen Mama's face so calm or at peace. Suhayla, grateful and amazed she was allowed to participate, watched Mama to know what to do. Suhayla knelt in the hot sand, rocked forward and back, hummed. She yearned to be close to her mother, to protect her from the gruesome fate Suhayla's mind had envisioned—death—to make her happy. She, just a girl, a little self.

The blaze of sunlight on the faces of the sphinx and vestiges of temples, stumps of columns, rock quarried centuries ago, looked eternal in the bleached, sand sea with its preternaturally blue sky, as if no storm had ever dared to approach the Giza plateau.

Mama then rose and looked around her like a woman in a dream. We stood before the remnants of the temple at the foot of the sphinx in silence; feet sunken into the searing sand, Mama oblivious to it, near to the heart of the

ancient civilization. The breadth of the stone layered chest and sculpted head above them awed Suhayla. With a hand over her eyes, she followed Mama's gaze to the Gebel, a hill, a rocky ridge that arose like a dark spine from the endless sea of white sand.

"Upper Rostau."

"What does that mean?" A gust of the Egyptian wind carried Suhayla's words away.

The long, high, steep escarpment of stone, arose from the desert like the remains of a skeletal spine from some long dead, unimaginably huge bird, a beak of a bird was formed by rocks that protruded from the summit. The mound was in gebli, South, the direction of prayer. The drone of the Muezzin, noon prayer, drifted over the plateau, and we knelt with our heads pointing to what Mama said was the First Place. "My Coptic friends said the ancient priestess' called it 'The Splendid Place at the Beginning of Time.'

"For those who do believe, the earth and stars holds the past and future in them," Mama said.

"How?"

"You will understand one day my daughter."

Mama stood and brushed sand from her chador. They picked their way around stones and tombs in the cemetery to

the well. Wind whispered among the tombs, nibbled at the palm's fronds and shook the leaves of the Sycamores. Mama threw down the sack tied to rope and quenched their thirst with the cool spring-fed water. After resting in the shade of trees, they walked toward the Nile, their previous tracks invisible, swept by wind. Ever so amber, Atum, the sun disk waned past its zenith, sinking like a leaden weight toward the horizon, the western desert. The long sweep of a sandy plateau separated them from the Nile.

As if spelled by an evil djinni, a horse and rider appeared. The rider, wrapped in a dark galabiya and head wrap, galloped on a black horse toward us. Aisha shrieked and ran a little way but the deep sand exhausted her, and she looked behind at her daughter. "Stay close!"

The man pulled on the reins so hard that the horse grunted, reared up on muscular haunches, sweat glistening and frothing at the mouth. Horse and rider blotted out the sun.

Like a mother bird protecting her young, Aisha threw her arms out, wide crimson and striped sleeves flapped in the wind, keeping Suhayla behind her.

Suhayla peered over her Mama's arms to this bearded man on the black lathered horse. The whole of the man's face was hidden in shadow, dark skin turned to pitch. His

eyes glinted from their inky depths, sharp and piercing like those of a lone and gloomy crow—an omen, unsettling.

“The book, where is it?” The voice sent a chill through Suhayla.

“It’s been out of my hands. . . For long. Gone. . . Turned to dust!” Mama spoke in a high-pitched, desperate tone.

“I will have it!” He yelled and spun the horse around on its hind legs. “I have come to Cairo in order to know the secret!”

Mama kept looking side to side for a means of escape, like a frightened animal. No use to run trapped like an animal. In the oppressive heat, sweat ran down her face. The plateau, stretched, a barren plain of bleached sand, devoid of people, of birds even. She looked to the distant ferry docked beyond the sandy embankment; that ribbon of broad azure river, where the white-half moon sails of feluccas glided peacefully, as the Nile, the river of Isis, with gentle determination, flowed north.

Suhayla watched her mother bend forward, list sideways, then slide to the sand in a crumpled heap. Suhayla’s scream, when it came, seemed to belong to someone else.

Cook clucked and shook her head at the appearance

Of Mama; she held onto Suhayla like a child, or an old woman without sight. For days she refused to go out and resorted to many explanations. Mama said to Cook, "my bodily humors are out of sorts," and "I saw a raven in the garden, a malevolent sign." A little fatigued gasp, which Mama did more and more often these days, escaped her lips.

In the harem, the women's living quarters, fiery, late afternoon light filtered through carved screens covering the tall windows, threw dappled shadows upon the vermillion carpet and tiles. A priceless carpet hung on the wall--crimson with tendrils of gold.

"I inherited that from your grandmadar, a gift from the Sultana--May Allah Bless."

Mama sat on her couch; Suhayla stretched out on the low divan, head and one arm propped up on tasseled cushions. Except for the occasional shout, bark, or cart rolling by on the street, silence enveloped the room.

Deft with experience Aisha's delicate fingers pulled the needle and the silky embroidery thread through the fabric. Silk whispered through silk. Suhayla read mystical poetry. Aisha observed her daughter quietly with wariness, and could hardly bare the thought that in the future Suhayla would be more at risk. Especially since her grace and beauty were evident: her perfected cheekbones,

lashes falling on smooth, cinnamon hued skin; a stunning woman blossoming out of the child. The thought disturbed and chilled her-- to her bones.

Suhayla became acutely conscious of Mama's breathing, the rise and fall of her plump breasts ensconced in a silk, crimson-striped-over-garment.

As usual Mama wore her ebony hair twisted up under a fringed scarf. Her face though was marred by hollows under her olive-black eyes, as if she never slept. Suhayla felt partially to blame. Her vision, her curse. . . And the man on horseback they had encountered in the desert.

There was a distant pain in Mama's eyes. Behind all their fatigue her eyes were full of warmth and sorrow. Suhayla noticed how worn and thin her face looked these days.

Mama startled easily. After the noon meal a dish had been carelessly dropped by the maid; the clay shattered into pieces upon the tiled floor.

Mama jumped shouting, "Allah have mercy!" Her hand flew to her heart, her bosom heaving. A gloom had settled over her as if something terrible, inevitable was about to happen.

Fear settled in Suhayla's belly.

Like a silent vow, she and Mama never spoke-of the man

on horseback who asked about 'the book'—to Baba, or between themselves. This horrific nightmare they pushed to the back of their lives, to the recesses of their minds where shameful, haunted, degradating, visions, dreams, and broken taboos go--were locked behind a secret door.

Long after Atum had sunk and had been swallowed by the goddess Nut, Suhayla found Mama embroidering, as she often did in the evening. That night Mama sat still with her head bent, dropping over her hands, not upright and examining her threads and stitches with her keen eye. Suhayla could not tell from the doorway whether she was intently looking at her work in the light of the lamps and the brazier, or simply trying not to doze.

Mama's form cast a great shadow on the wall, the figure of a woman slumped. If Suhayla had not known her fatigue and the familiar posture of Mama at her embroidery, she might for an instant, not knowing her—have thought she was dead.

Suhayla took a seat on the nearby divan.

Mama looked up and set her embroidery on her lap. "You are my beautiful daughter." She sighed. "May God bless you with an easy path."

Mama reached out about to touch Suhayla's cheek; she drew back, afraid of what Mama's touch would bring. Suhayla

sought to protect Mama from her plague, her curse, and did not desire another round of evil images.

Returning to her needlework, Mama's shoulder's drooped. "We will find a husband, like your Baba, who will love and care for you. You are intelligent, know how to run a household, and you have memorized the verses of the Quran."

With sad eyes Mama glanced up. "Life is like a pomegranate, daughter." She did not believe in austerity. "Do not be afraid of its juices. Drink and eat and live with a full heart." Her voice had an ominous tone. "Love God and take your time in everything. Be guided by your own heart, not fear—and not by the will of others, although"—she smiled warmly, her face softening with her motherly love—"I cannot imagine anyone diverting you from your path, my tender lion."

Heaviness lay on Suhayla's chest. She did not know what Mama had meant yet she felt uneasy, odd after Mama gave her advice on how to live. Mama spoke as if Suhayla would not see her again.

She knelt before Mama and pressed the corner of her robe to her lips. Smooth, striped ruby satin, Suhayla's fingers slid on it like water. She wanted to be held, to feel the beat of Mama's heart, the gentle rising and

falling of her bosom. Suhayla could not find any words to comfort her. Words would have broken the spell.

Mama reached out to caress Suhayla's head; Mama's hand, smelling of coffee and almond oil, hovered in the air for a moment. With reluctance she returned her hand to her lap. Shadows moved across her face. Finally, Mama lifted from her lap a string of blue clay beads. "Here, this will help protect you." A strand of indigo beads hung from Mama's soft, dusky fingers. "They will keep evil away."

Suhayla took the necklace, and looked at them in the light of a lamp. From each bead an eye stared: black outlined each eye, and a vivid, onyx pupil, stared from the white, almost gruesome--thirty or so ancient goddess eyes--as if gathered from death masks of ancient tombs--stared, unblinking.

CHAPTER FOUR

Weeks later Suhayla searched for Mama in the afternoon. Like a cat, she had her favorite resting place, in the harem. Stretched out on the divan in her silk chemise, emerald vest and gold pantaloons; her head lay on an extended arm. Her hand hung over the Persian carpet, rings shining like quicksilver on relaxed fingers.

Mama's cup of tea in the silver rimmed glass had spilled and rested on its side. The contents wet an oval upon the vermillion and saffron carpet.

Fear fluttered in Suhayla's chest; she felt coldness in her belly. Mama did not stir. Suhayla put her ear near Mama's nose and heard no breathing; her chest did not move. "Mama?" She whispered. She wanted her to wake and tell her that everything was all right. Coldness crept up inside Suhayla as she examined her. The end of Mama's tongue stuck out, pink and flaccid, from between her lips. Glassy olive-green eyes stared.

"Mama!" She cried.

One of the young maids entered the room and screamed, dropping her cleaning cloth. She ran out of the house, flailing her arms like a mad woman.

In one single moment Suhayla's life changed irrevocably. Before this she did not know what death meant to one's heart. Yes, she had seen dead beetles, locusts, the heads of sheep oiled and basking in the sun, waiting for ovens; but nothing she had loved.

A wild grief took her over; Suhayla broke down in an agony of weeping.

Najmah attempted to hold her and comfort her. "No, do not touch me," Suhayla cried. "I . . . I am cursed!"

Mama's dearest friends, three elder women who lived close by, washed Mama's body. Her ebony hair threaded with silver, fine like a precious robe, was cleansed in a bowl of rosewater, scented with sandalwood oil and ambergris. They laid her on a white sheet, with tears running down their cheeks, they bound her body, swathed her in the white shroud. Soon all of her was hidden, wrapped in white, terrible bone white. A wild grief took Suhayla over; she broke down in an agony of weeping. The songs, chants, and drum beats from the women, and Cook, echoed in Suhayla's heart.

Najmah attempted to hold her. "No, do not touch me," Suhayla cried. "I . . . I am cursed!" She ran out into the garden and sat with her back against the date palm.

Aunt Rabbati, Baba's youngest and unmarried sister, arrived in the back of a bullock cart the next day with one satchel. Although plumper and possessing a milky skin compared to Mama's, Aunt's face embodied seriousness to the point of being grim, never laughing or smiling. Oval faced with small ebony eyes, her rotund arms sprouted tiny hands.

"Auntie." Resenting her interference, Suhayla gave her the required quick kisses on her plump cheeks. In her company, Suhayla said little, wanting to keep to herself.

After Mama's death, she locked the visions and haunting images into her heart.

The day came when Mama was laid on a cart, swathed in white linen. Baba led the procession in a face stricken by shadows of grief. He made an attempt to pull but his friends and the dried wood gave him something to lean on. Six other men took the burden. The wheels squeaked and shuddered as if in complaint of its use. The Shaykh Khilwati intoned passages from the Quran. All the women were draped in raven black. Aunt Rabbati walked close to the end of the cart. A wheel caught on a rock, aunt almost fell upon the end near Ma's feet. Looking through the inky fabric everything appeared as if Suhayla peered through a cloud of dust. She stumbled along. Cook and Najmah appeared as hazy, ghostly figures even though they were at Suhayla's side. The baked sand burned her feet; tears scorched her cheeks. Behind her, the cries of the women who lived nearby, arose and drowned out the prayers. They walked out of the city to the desolate desert which Suhayla now preferred to the city. The cart rumbled over the broken loins of sandstone which protruded from the bleached sand.

In their wake, the women from their neighborhood, and the mosque, wailed and cried and beat their chests.

Suhayla assumed Aunt's laments were an appropriate amount for a seldom-seen sister, yet she felt nothing but repugnance for her. A vision of judgment, the ivory stone tombs tilted or sat upon the gritty sand, a deep trench waited for Mama. She really should be buried before her Sphinx, by the well. Did Mama's spirit wander there or was she with Allah? Streams coursed from Suhayla's eyes and tumbled down her cheeks. She wiped her face with her black veil.

In the oppressive heat Suhayla watched as they lowered Mama, wound in tight linen which Baba could afford with ease, into the womb of the desert. With each shovel full powdery sand blew up, caught by the invisible fingers of the wind that like a hot blast blew from Africa, carried with it the heat of an oven. Ma's pale figure was lost, embalmed under the bleached sand. Her Ma's fear of the world outside, her panics and prayers, were the only things that seemed real. This shrouded thing no longer was her mother.

The cries of the women wove up around Suhayla and were swept up into the gritty wind. She stared at the veiled heads bobbing, hands throwing sand into the air, and beat their chests. Motionless, Suhayla stood, hands at her sides, staring at the grave, the mound of bone-pale sand

heaped over Mama's body. Through her watery eyes all seemed a blur, unreal.

Suhayla ached to bring her mother back, to reverse time to that evening when the horizon streaked crimson and amber, she and Mama went down the stone steps. Mama said, "Careful now my daughter, do not fall in the river, there are crocodiles and snakes." Mama would squat down on her sturdy legs and throw the sack into the Nile, shimmering blue, and heaved up the sack from which water slipped over the edge and dripped. Suhayla held her palms under laughing. And hand in hand they ascended the steps, ancient stones inserted into the embankment. With a firm grip Mama held the taut furred skin that dripped, and using an old clay cup, Suhayla would pour the precious liquid around their little plot of green: the onions, garlic, cumin, roses, lilies and tulips and pomegranate tree. The rest of the water would be poured into a large ceramic bowl for washing their hands. These were the blessed moments before Suhayla's vision had changed everything irreparably; when Mama smiled at her, and had left her troubles behind.

The ghost of her memory constricted Suhayla's throat. The wind tore at the black veil that embalmed her, she was glad to be hidden. The cries and screams, the murmured texts of the Quran read by the Shaykh died away with the

furtive gusts.

Baba's eyes were red. "Allah be merciful, she has gone to join God."

Suhayla imagined the silver necklace around her neck resting on her crumbling breastbone, the carnelian ring sliding off the bones of her fingers. And in her dreams, when she looked down at Mama, she smiled--cat's lapidary eyes--deep in twin sockets.

Through her tears and weaving of ash, Suhayla looked toward Cairo. The tawny walls of mud brick were blended into the buff sand, but the lofty minarets pierced the perfect blue of sky. Cairo changed for her, on the edge of desert, the aromatic truth of the past lived, that like bitter melon or Artemisia, taints all tastes afterward, lingers in the mouth, bothers the mind--an indigestible pit.

Najmah helped Suhayla change into her night chemise.

When she first climbed into bed, Suhayla's buttocks and back and legs were chilled from the coolness of the blankets. "I am cold."

"I'll bring ginger tea." Her head bobbed back and forth. "It is an unusually cold spring night."

Sipping tea Suhayla watched the moon sail, a pale eye that looked through the screen of panels. Without being asked Najmah carried in an armful of wood for the brazier.

Suhayla warmed huddled under the layers. "Sleep here."

In her white chemise Najmah climbed in under the wool and sheet. Wind blew the date palm against the house, the sword like leaves scratched the window lattice like claws or the fingernails of djinn trying to enter. "Perhaps the souls of the wandering dead are desperate to get in."

Suhayla trembled. The girls threw the blankets up over their heads. "What if Ma wanders the desert alone and wants to be comforted?" Suhayla cried and Najmah hugged her.

Suhayla peeked over the wool. She imagined the moon searched for her, casting a multitude of eyes upon her embroidered counterpane pursuing the part of her that saw Ma's death preternaturally. "What do you want?" She looked over to Najmah.

"My own house, a man to love me, a garden for vegetables, a herd of sheep and goats for milk, cheese and meat." Najmah's eyes were alive with a deep glow from the dying embers. "What about you?"

"I want to understand the secrets of the stars. . . and--to be loved." Suhayla's voice rose in pitch, an unexpected lightness. "To be with a man who will love and cherish me and allow me to make decisions for myself."

Najmah spoke of her Baba who died fighting in the

mountains, and her Ma who cried ever since. They threw their arms around each other. "We must promise. . . We will never be alone," Suhayla said. She gazed over at her friend. "Promise."

Najmah's dark eyes were lit up by the moon. "I promise." Her high voice wove through the shadows.

"I will always have you with me and neither of us will ever be alone. Say it."

Najmah repeated. They wound their arms around each other and kissed each other's cheeks.

During the new moon, near the end of the mourning period, Rabbati began her complaints as the three of them sat around the dinner mat. Aunt leveled her gaze to Baba. "Your daughter ought to stay in the house. She wanders around, wild and silent as an animal. Look at the dust on her clothes."

Baba glanced at his daughter's black pantaloons. "We are mourning and you are worried about dust?" He glanced up to the ceiling. "Allah be merciful!"

For days Baba kept to his library, surrounded by his scrolls of the Quran, texts of the prophet and poetry. Suhayla roamed the library browsing in quiet, so as not to

disturb him. She was comforted by his proximity, and knew her nearness did the same for him. She sat or lay on the worn Turkish carpet, pillows tucked under her. The scent of dust, old paper, mustiness of the ancient calfskin bindings, became a temple that eased some pain. Yet, a dark stone pressed on her heart.

Baba's words were few. But one day he glanced over his Quran, laid out on the low table. His blue eyes were streaked red and full of water. He said, "You and God are my only comforts." Suhayla reached hugged his shoulders that were more boney since Ma left.

Baba receded from life and her. During the nights, Baba went to the dark room, guarded by imposing ebony doors, rarely used before Mama died. In the mornings he came out disheveled, sleep still lingering; pain and sorrow evident in his eyes. No longer did he use his bed chamber upstairs. Days turned to weeks. Baba locked himself away behind the ebony doors, the windows shuttered.

Mustafa had waited till night fall when all the other inhabitants of the house were asleep. He locked the twin doors. It was the sort of night when everyone prayed for their health, the health of their wives, children, flocks, livestock. . . With every hour the night grew cooler. It was the way of the desert air. It was the sort of night

when the Bedouin's kept a fire going in the camp to ward off the chill, ward off evil djinn.

He knew now that Aisha had been right. This knowledge ate at him like a worm in his soul. Someone had found out about the story of al-Awalin and traced the manuscript to this house given to Aisha's Ma by the late Sultana. Someone had been hungry for the Book of Causes.

Mustafa had studied for many years with a Shaykh, a Sufi mystic who believed in leaving everything up to God. In the realm of the world of the cosmos, the earth, mountains, the stars, and humans, were all formed by the divine elements and essence. All was watched over by the sacred.

Mustafa went to the chest with the faded weaving over it where he stored the bronze disc and the book given to him by al-Awalin for safe keeping. On his descent into madness, al-Awalin had a moment of clarity and had a trusted servant bring the small chest to the house. He had a black smith fashion a lock and key.

"They must never find this," al-Awalin had said, with that far-off stare of a soul who had either just spoken directly with God, or a djinni, or was totally insane—meaning possessed by an evil djinni. Perhaps after al-Awalin's wife had been beheaded, he could not abide

society. Mustafa understood.

His hands shook as he uncovered the box hidden under the faded length of weaving. How could he have disregarded Aisha's worries and fears so easily? He would never be able to forgive himself. If his daughter knew, she too would blame him. For the last two weeks of Aisha's life, she had been anxious to be outside alone after sunset.

After years of not having anyone ask about the book, Mustafa felt all their worries were behind them. Everyone at court had forgotten about the stories of al-Awalin and his sacred text, the Book of Causes. The vizier and other officials had been removed and their names, once associated with power and authority, dwindled into insignificance and forgotten. Mustafa cursed himself. He should have been more protective, more vigilant. These condemnations ate at him like maggots in his mind and soul. Who had killed his beloved Aisha? When hugging her limp form to him, he felt the cut at the back of her head at the base of her skull. A precise dagger wound. He had hidden the details of Aisha's death from Suhayla.

Mustafa's hands trembled and tears wet his cheeks as he removed the manuscript's chest from the larger, its resting place, that had sat on the floor against the wall for years, since al-Awalin had it delivered. The oil lamps

threw their amber light upon the old, beautifully carved wooden chest.

For the past months Aisha had been jumpy, nervous, he had asked her if something troubled her but she brushed her fears away with a wave of her hand. After a sigh she had said, "We should have moved away when our daughter was a baby. We should have sent the book away." It was the first time in years she had even mentioned her Baba's manuscript.

Mustafa had thought no more about the book and disc for years. He had an important role as Shaykh at a mosque, wrote a Gnostic thesis, *The World-Revealing Cup*; as well as commentary on the Quran, and the nature of the Divine, and the soul. During all this, his eyes had been veiled to Aisha's pain and suffering. He berated himself for her death.

Mustafa lifted the silk wrapped book from the inner chest. So much myth, so much pain was attached to such a sacred manuscript. He set the bundle down and with reverence lifted one layer of silk and then another. Bronze glinted. The disc was cool in his fingers. He held it up to one of the oil lamps, and squinted to make out the strange language of bird shapes, snakes, and other symbols in relief. He noticed tiny holes scattered over the disc.

Light shone through the holes. He inhaled in amazement.

He knew that whoever was after the manuscript would not stop at one death. He knew to protect Suhayla, the household the disc and the manuscript must be entombed and put out of the house. The bronze disc, al-Awalin had been told, was found in a tomb, not far from the Sphinx, mingled with some forgotten, collapsed clay bricks, a mustaba, the rectangular burial mounds of the Ancient Egyptians. Al-Awalin had guessed at its purpose; he had mumbled something about light and the Sphinx.

Mustafa opened the delicate wood cover of the book. He was shocked to find that only the latter half of the pages were intact, their threading tight and solid. The ink was black and clear, and in al-Awalin's lettering. But the first half of the text had been removed with precision. The threads of the binding had been cut neatly, individually, so as not to damage the fine pages they had bound. Mustafa knew it had been Aisha who had hidden the first half of the text. She was the only one who knew where it had been stored. The cuts had been made by her small fingers. She had foreseen the day when the manuscript became hunted. Where had she hid the pages?

Nights like this he could not sleep, or if he did slumber, beneath wool blankets, his dreams were not what he

expected. Mustafa sank down onto the pillows on the divan. He lit the diminutive brown ball at the end of his long, ebony pipe and puffed on the end. A veil of a dream soared into his mind: He was young. Aisha and he had just been betrothed and signed the marriage contract. Aisha smiled, laughing and took his hand and they danced in a circle before her father and mother, their relations, servants. He and Aisha sang:

Beautiful eyes

Beautiful eyes

Tell me the truth

Do you love me dear? Tell me your love is true! Ah.

Tears coursed down his cheeks. Mustafa inhaled the opium smoke as if starved. He sank back and dreamed. He galloped on a flea-bitten grey horse over an endless desert, he did not grow tired. He heard the heavy breathing of the horse; he felt the heat from the horse's body radiate through the blanketed saddle. He was high up on a plateau, where the moist air refreshed him. He saw a tent lit by lamps that from the inside set the tent a glow. Through the opened flap, he saw a desk where an ancient scroll lay, and a disc of metal glinted.

Mustafa gasped as he woke into the inky predawn to

find himself in his wife's home, in his private chamber. He stared up at the window where he had a workman permanently shut the screen to keep out all intruders from reaching the precious book.

With an ear pressed against the cool, dark wood Suhayla pleaded with him. "Please Baba, come join us for dinner. I will read poetry to you after."

Suhayla was able to coax Baba out sometimes. Rabbati passed around the bread and lamb. Baba ate in silence, eyes glazed, seeing but not aware. His hands shook slightly, fingers tips stained with burnt sable.

Rabbati cleared her throat. "It is time for your daughter to be married."

"Auntie, give Baba time to eat."

"It is true. Can you find her a good husband?" Aunt said, with an urgent wave of a plump hand.

"Allah willing, Allah willing." He did not raise his voice as he would have done. He stared into nothingness. "Am I to have no peace--" He breathed heavily and spoke with a rough voice. Dispirited, like an ancient man Baba pushed himself up from the mat with much effort and walked down the hall, disappearing behind the ebony doors. The

sound of a key turning in the lock echoed in the hall.

Anger burned inside her. Suhayla did not look at Aunt and with much effort tempered her voice. "Aunt, Baba is in pain, please do not aggravate him so."

"You have weeks of mourning yet, but soon you will be married off," Aunt said.

"My life is not yours to dispose of as you see fit." Suhayla stood clenching her fists.

"Marriage is honorable."

"I don't want to marry yet." Suhayla glared. Aunt's small, deep eyes peered out of her face, long and oval like a brown nut. "I will stay here with Baba."

"Suhayla, this is not a life. Your life is one of indolence. What do you have here?" Aunt threw up her arms.

"I read, wander in and watch over Mama's garden, write poetry and study verses written by the prophet. Don't forget Baba is a well-respected scholar, and Shaykh."

"Your father has lost his wits, Allah forgive me." Rabbati looked up to the ceiling.

"You never married."

"My circumstances were different." Lines creased Aunt's forehead. "I had no dowry and my parents had no one else to help them with their herds." She continued to eat. No amount of upset ever affected her appetite. "You are

beautiful; you need a husband and family of your own. Your Mama wanted that for you. She said so in her letter."

"Mama's loss pains him. If I leave now, Baba will be lonely."

"I am here." Aunt threw up her hands.

"Oh, if only Mama--." Suhayla turned and left the room.

"Allah have mercy!" Aunt yelled, her voice echoed.

Baba would not come out of his room again for several weeks. The dutiful daughter, Suhayla brought him trays of food and tea. On the occasion when he did open the door, barely an arm's width, he appeared ashen in the shadow. When he turned toward the dim lamp the sharp planes and hollows of his face were accentuated, skeletal. Baba had aged dramatically since Mama's death. The sickly, sweet scent of opium issued from the room filling her nostrils. "Baba, I have food for you." Suhayla coaxed the door open with an elbow to bring the food in and he took the tray with shaking hands. She closed the door behind him.

Other times, he would not open the door at all.

Ashamed of his growing addiction or he simply did not hear

her, Suhayla did not know. Yet his moans, prayers, and chants were discernable through the doors.

At dusk Najmah and Suhayla stood before the bed of lilies attempting to peer in but the windows were shuttered. Instead they went and sat in the garden. Sipping tea, they watched vermillion wash the upper sky; amber and rose streaked the horizon. She glanced to Najmah, more a companion to her than a servant. "I am worried about Baba."

"Not many people recover from the opium flower," Najmah said.

"What do I do?" Suhayla's throat was congested by guilt and worry for Baba.

"Grandmadar always gave opium addicts herbs, I do not know what kind. And Pray to Allah."

In Suhayla's mind, Aunt Rabbati's voice echoed: "I will make inquiries for eligible men, if your Baba won't." Her words soured in Suhayla's belly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Every night Suhayla watched her prayers puff up from the glowing embers of the brazier and condense in hazy incense. The smoky skein of a snake stretched out across the room searching for the window, an intricately carved

lattice to escape. Like a held breath, her prayers found release.

Her thoughts and dreams were coaxed from her by the melody of a distant flute. The huddled tents of Bedouins sat near the edge of the city where the desert's carpet of sand wove seas of rippled dunes. The notes changed in a plaintive love song. Tears pressed against her eyes for Mama; for Baba's loneliness. Before Mama's death, Suhayla thought love and beauty were simple and assumed they would always be in her life. What a childish belief.

She wondered at the messengers who came on horses, the sound of their hooves clattering over rocks and pebbles as they galloped away. They were far from any neighbors.

One evening she coaxed Baba to sit with them at the evening meal. Rabbati's relentless badgering of her Baba did have an effect, but certainly not the one she desired. He made an announcement while staring, blankly, at Rabbati.

"A guest for dinner tomorrow."

Rabbati gloated with pleasure.

"A wealthy employer--"

"Kadid Wajib," Baba said. His pronouncement left Suhayla numb. She choked down a chick pea that lodged in her throat. "You shall serve coffee." He departed to his darkened room as had become his custom.

Smiling, Auntie nodded at her. Suhayla glared.

Dinner the next evening proved boring. Kadid had a thick, inky mustache that curled up at the ends. His obsidian eyes, pierced, and had the look of a falcon about to strike.

He had no trouble at all carrying a conversation by himself. He talked on and on about politics, his business ventures, a merchant trader. He spoke of the Caliph as if he were intimate with him, and court. Aunt nodded her approval and grinned. He commented on the food, "the best common fare." He licked his fingers, belched and looked down his nose as Cook and Najmah sat with them after serving. Suhayla sensed Kadid looking at her, sizing her up as a cook would look over a leg of lamb for a feast.

Baba said nothing, and ate little. The dark shadows about his eyes deepened his gloom.

Once the men retired to the receiving room, Rabbati hurried Suhayla into the kitchen. Aunt winked and tried to pat her arm but Suhayla pulled away.

Cook shook her head. "Aisha must be turning in her grave."

Najmah scowled at aunt, while her back was turned. Cook and Najmah did not like Kadid any more than Suhayla, and resented aunt for badgering Baba about marriage.

Kadid watched Suhyala as she entered the room and served him first as proper... She felt naked before him. When she held the etched silver plate with glasses of coffee in front of him, his hunger radiated to her as the steam arose from the pools of black liquid.

His long, twig like fingers were stained brown, reached out for his drink in an insect grabbing sort of way. She found him revolting. Her stomach knotted; her chest tightened. She wanted to recoil, to throw a veil over her face and run to her room, never to see him again. However, such would bring shame to her Baba. The thought of marrying him filled her with disgust. She wished however, there to be a thick wall of stone between them.

There must be another way.

If Suhayla had only her father's teachings to sustain her faith and hope, her dreams and prayers would indeed be directed one way. Obedience. Yet, her Ma's offering in the temple before the Sphinx to the ancient Egyptian goddess, Isis; how Isis helped make her pregnant and her belly grow embraced Suhayla with warmth as a warm wrap on a cool winter night. Her mother's tale of the power of Isis had given Suhayla insight to other possibilities of reality: the hope of being in charge of her own destiny, of studying with a Sufi master, and learning how to

interpret her visions, if in fact that is what they were.

She and Najmah sat in the garden in the evening, sipping tea with lemon. They stared out at the desert where the veil of stars and night descended behind the bulks of the pyramids. The air was redolent with night-blooming jasmine and sweet lilies. Suhayla could almost imagine Ma's diaphanous robes around her like wings of a moth. Ma had strolled in her garden each night in the evening.

The thought of Kadid soured the moment. "Kadid repels me," Suhayla said.

Najmah grinned. "Of every fruit there are two different kinds, large and small, black and white--sweet and sour."

"Yes, and we know which kind Kadid is," Suhayla said, they laughed. "If you were not here, I would be very lonely."

In her sisterly way Najmah smiled. "Run away."

"I have fantasies of running away but where will I go? I can't leave Baba all alone. I can't abandon him."

"Come with me to my family's village."

"I do not know anything about farming. I am a poet and once among sheep and goats I would hunger for paper and ink and the great mosque. When I was a girl, Ma used to say how she hired an astrologer to chart the stars of my birth.

I am destined for greatness. How will I find my fate out there?" She said. "Besides, I need to watch over Mama's grave."

"Pray," said Najmah. Her answer for every problem.

"I do." Her voice tinged with defensiveness. "I have not received answers."

Najmah's mother's people were from the Magraib, her stories were rich and mysterious. Suhayla loved to savor them like the many layered sweets of Halwa, a delicate pastry of nuts, rosewater and dripping with honey.

"Before my Baba was killed in the mountain skirmish, we traveled far for my sister's wedding. She was feeling ill and the groom's mother called on a near bye woman. Veiled completely in black, even in the privacy of the large tent, this village woman chanted, sprinkled herbs and water about, and danced around my sister. Through the veil jewels glittered in the many lamps that had been lit to keep away the evil djinn. 'Dance while we sing.' The woman bid all of us women, even little girls to join in." Najmah, in the tribal way, rocked her head from side to side. "My sister's illness vanished."

"Really?" I asked. Dogs barked in the distance.

Najmah shrugged. "Later I learned the woman was a wise woman, and the village midwife. During the dancing, the

wind blew and I heard the moaning of the djinn. Grandmother used to say the djinn were drawn to jewels that glint in the light, fires, and the wild thumping of drums."

Shivers flew up Suhayla's spine.

If only a wise woman or the djinn would aid her. She stared out across the distance to the tiny candle-like campfires dotting the desert like stars. Even now the aroma of cardamom and spices tinged the air. Music and clapping floated on the breeze.

Suhayla imagined herself a princess. A handsome Prince, a swarthy man, with clove-colored skin, rode into her Baba's camp on a fine Arabian stallion. The gaze of the Prince's ebony eyes appeared gentle yet penetrating. The thought of his kiss--her heart blazed with the dream.

When she retired to her bedroom on the second floor, she flung open the narrow doors overlooking the garden on the side of the house and stepped onto the balcony. The stars glittered in their celestial raiment. The summer air was hot and dry as sand. Nary a breeze stirred. With ease she pictured the djinn flying around, watching and helping the faithful.

Fluttering amongst the fragrant acacia trees caught her attention. A melodious song floated from a nightingale. But the sound of approaching horse hooves clattering upon

the stones disrupted her peace. A horse and rider drew up at the front door. Suhayla listened intently.

A male servant greeted the guest. "Kadid Wajib." Disgust filled me. The door shut and locked with a thud rattling the whole of the house and her insides.

As she lay on her sleeping mat, in the soft glow of pale lunar light, she gazed upon the small, carved chest inlaid with ivory and silver, Mama's wedding gift from Baba. It called. Suhayla had not opened the cache since Ma died.

The sound of horse's hooves clattering over rocks and pebbles drifted away. She sighed not able to sleep. Her thoughts flew to her Ma's chest. In the light of an oil lamp she carried the small box to her mat and opened it upon her lap. One by one she lifted each treasure out: Ma's garnet ring, she slid onto her finger; a band of tiny bronze coins; a short feather from a peacock's chest. She picked it up and twirled the quill between her thumb and finger. She stroked the downy feather against her cheek. Ma had once told her it fell out of a peacock the morning of their wedding.

Petals and bits of brittle, crimson roses covered the bottom of the chest. A tiny onyx pot held vestiges of musk oil and, at the very bottom, on the smooth cedar wood, she

uncovered a small pendant. A smoky moon cabochon, opalescent and milky, crafted delicately with silver filigree surrounding—resembling a rose. She held this to my heart with both hands.

"Mama, help me please," she whispered.

With the pendant in her palm, she went to the balcony. Beyond the towering date palms and their stiff branches, she had a clear view of the desert beyond. The sand, a bone bleached sea, stretched as far as she could see and met the velvety sky. There in the mysterious world the djinn lived, sang in the sand storms and with the jackals, and flew with the night falcons.

Suhayla breathed in deeply and said softly into the night, into the realm of the unknown. "Allah, help me. Answer my prayers." In the effervescence of the moon the silver sparkled and the stone glimmered. "Djinn of good, help me. . . Isis, you helped Ma. . . Help me."

Before retiring to bed, Suhayla wrapped the pendant in a veil and set it under her pillow. Her eyes became drowsy as she gazed at the stars. The Milky Way was a river of stars. Najmah called it the 'Path of Souls'.

CHAPTER SIX

The next morning Najmah entered my room. "Allah give thee good morning."

"What is good?" Suhayla said.

"Cheerful today."

"My prayers are not being answered."

"Be patient," she said.

Najmah carried in the morning meal on a tray. Steam arose from the glass of tea; the bread and goat cheese filled my stomach. "Nothing sits well. My stomach is knotted."

Najmah fluffed the pillows with more agitation than usual. Suhayla noticed a crease on her forehead, a look of worry in her eyes. "What do you know?"

"Last night I overheard Kadid tell your Baba he will bring him all the opium he wants, once you and he are wed. He owns an opium farm outside of Istanbul."

"He is evil."

"And--" Najmah stood stiff by the door.

"Yes?"

"Your Baba wishes to speak to you. He is. . . In the library," she said.

Downstairs Rabbati stood, examining Suhayla, hands on her rotund hips, looked her up and down.

"Suhayla, what is troubling you?"

"You know."

Najmah followed Suhayla to the library. She stood before her Baba and the red lacquered desk.

"Shut the door Najmah," Baba said. Suhayla hoped she would listen to the conversation through the door. Pouting, Suhayla watched Najmah close the carved, plank doors behind.

The room darkened as a result, the tall bookcases towering over her vault like, gloomy with the window shuttered. The stench of ancient, decaying parchments more evident than usual bothered her nose.

"Kadid wants to marry you." Baba's red eyes were glazed. "Once he delivers the bride price." He wheezed with every breath. "You will be engaged."

Her heart thumped and all her breath escaped. The meaning of his words abandoned her as unthinkable. Suhayla heard him yet, emotionless, stared at his dark stained

fingers. Nearby on his red desk sat a silver goblet, a memento of her parent's wedding.

The threat rolled and settled in the musty stench of old books, camel skin bindings, some thread bare like ribs of a decayed carcass, Mama's copy of the Quran; all these brought Suhayla back to her senses. Her courage waned yet her heart gave her the strength to speak.

"I do not wish to marry him Baba."

With an emphatic gesture of his trembling forefinger Baba said, "I wish to see you taken care of. Kadid is a good, reliable man. He will provide comforts and a family of your own. I will not have to worry. . ." Legs shaking, he pushed himself up from his cushion. "If anyone else tries to win you, a blood-feud will result." The edge in his voice sliced the air as he walked away leaving the doors swinging on their hinges. He shut himself into his opium den; abandoning her to despair and tears.

Claiming head ache Suhayla isolated herself in her bedroom for the evening meal. She pecked at her food, set aside the remnants of her meal and looked out the arched doors open the balcony.

"Oh Allah, All-knowing Prophet, guide me, and make my way easy, remove all obstacles from my path." She directed

her prayer to the indigo firmament; stars glittering like beads on a rich coat of velvet, descended upon the desert.

Najmah returned, stacked the clay cup and bowl on the bronze platter.

"How do I find a wise woman?"

"In the market place, they usually have a belt or the hem of their sleeves embroidered with eye-like designs."

"But how will she know my future? Surely only Allah knows such things."

"Sheep's entrails."

"Ugh."

"Or cards, or bones. Each of them has their own methods. You will need to pay her." Najmah's ebony eyes were wide with expectation.

Suhayla sighed, and moved her mother's cedar box onto her lap and lifted the lid. In her fingers she entwined a smooth, soft cord from which the pendant, a delicate silver filigree of rose petals around a pearl center, swung.

"Mama gave this to me when I became a woman."

"You never know what will happen after one's future is revealed," Najmah said.

All her attention centered on Najmah, ever the fount of wisdom, namely from her Grandmother. "Grandmother said they prefer coins. . . A jewel might do. Trickery can be

involved, especially with one connected to the djinn and spirits. It may be a dangerous sort of business but, I believe you will triumph--if it be the will of Allah!"

"You are a true friend, Najmah." Suhayla twirled the pendant on the velvet cord. "Perhaps I should go to the bazaar and procure a flying carpet of green silk, or a text on alchemy, which I have never studied. I have not the powers of Solomon or of the ancient Persian magicians."

Najmah stood up straight, platter and dishes in hand, and gazed down, eyes sparkling in the light of the single lamp. "You have a will, a heart and wit."

"You are right. Perhaps my mother's love will guide and protect me." She examined the pendant in the light, the pearl luminescent and mysterious as the desert moon.

"You will triumph if it be the will of Allah," Najmah said.

In the morning we arose at dawn and with celerity dressed. With slippered feet they stepped softly, almost silently, down the stairs, before Cook and aunt Rabbatti were up.

"We must go to the Suk; there is something I must find." Dressed and veiled Suhayla led the way to the door, halted and Najmah bumped into her.

Rabbati blocked the door with her bulk, arms crossed

under her breasts. "Where do you go at this hour?" Like a bull she did not give way. Suhayla half expected her to snort or scrape the floor with a foot.

"To the Suk, shopping, bridal accoutrements."

"Ah, so you've come to your senses, Allah give thanks." She threw up her arms and glanced upward.

"Do not forget," she wagged her fleshy finger, "Your Kadid, will join us for dinner again," she said.

"He's not mine."

As Suhayla strode away, the weight of iron shackles fell. Najmah followed in her wake.

Maze like streets of the market were full with merchant's wares, tables, and carpets strewn upon the ground. Children ran, shopkeepers called out prices, women and men in throngs, heat, dust, noise all pressed upon her. Minarets and the gold domes aspired to the heavens here and there. The scent of curries, roasting meat and spices sweetened the air. Secret alleyways led off from the riddle of lanes, some of them too narrow for carts.

The urgency of her task moved her legs and feet beyond her usual pace. Najmah clung to her like her own shadow.

"What is the hurry?" She asked, panting.

"Each day brings me closer to doom." Suhayla said over her shoulder, adjusting her red veil.

"I don't have a good feeling about this," she yelled over the din of the city's noise.

Suhayla scurried from one shop to another and another looking for a wise woman with the eye of knowing sown onto a hem or sleeve or bit of ribbon. They walked by the wares of each stall: blankets covered with jewels, bowls of frankincense and myrrh, spices; perfumes in green and blue bottles from Venice, baskets from Morocco, silk from the Orient, and ivory tusks. "I search for a grain of sand in the desert."

One merchant motioned to the baubles arrayed before him. "What do you look for fair one? Perfume, jewels, a gilt-paged copy of the Qur'an?"

"No." Suhayla shook her head, the fringe of my veil swayed.

"What about these," he said. "Or a treasure box," he pointed to a rather plain little chest of carved soapstone. "Or--" His slender, crooked fingers held up a round palm-sized bronze tin, encrusted with gems.

Suhayla and Najmah walked away as he called out, waving. "Allah have mercy, buy one of my treasures and you'll be blessed."

"Remember what Grandmother said, 'The Ghawaze can't always be trusted.'"

"Believe me, those words are written on the scrolls of my mind."

Poor Najmah began to lag behind as the day progressed. In a ravenous search Suhayla walked up one street and down another, as if followed by frightening specters.

Disheartened and exhausted they rested our feet in a shop and drank tea with honey cakes. Suhayla's head spun with the all the women she had seen, young, old; women with children grasping their skirts. When the sun hovered, a golden orb in the west, they went home.

Upon entering, Rabbatti met them at the door, in a black and gold embroidered robe, kohl-lined eyes flashing; a primeval goddess of the underworld. "Suhayla." She waved her arms wildly and hissed. "Look at your feet, you must bathe and change before the evening meal. Think of our guest, who will be here soon. Don't just stand there staring like a fool!" Auntie scowled at both of them.

"Don't blame Najmah!" Suhayla attempted to bolster herself by the fact that many more places were still to be searched.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Najmah whistled as she pulled the sleeves of Suhayla's chemise through the outer brocade coat. "I prayed to Allah

that Kadid's horse would be lame or business would prevent him from coming." The sound of a horse galloping approached the house, and stopped at their door.

"I am afraid he has arrived at the appropriate time." Najmah made with her hand the ancient sign to keep evil away.

As Suhayla descended the last of the stairs, Rabbatti winked at her. "Kadid bin Nazr has arrived."

"I know." She rolled her eyes.

"Help Cook. Knowing how to run a household is a bride's duty."

Suhayla groaned.

"—You too Najmah. Make yourself useful. You will eat with Cook tonight."

Najmah nodded.

"Come, Najmah, let us see what there is to eat."

Suhayla grasped her friend's hand and went to the kitchen.

The scent of spices, mints and almonds wafted into the air. "I am hungry but I'm not certain I will be able to eat with Kadid present."

"Eat something now," Cook said. "Not a good sign for the groom."

Suhayla picked at some lamb and lentils. When Najmah and she carried the steaming platters of food to the dinner

blanket, Baba, Kadid and Rabbati were seated.

"Come, sit." Rabbati patted the space next to her, between herself and Kadid.

Suhayla lowered herself between her and Baba.

"--harvesting takes the whole village and then some," Kadid said. His many faults revolted me: wrinkling lines around his eyes--he appeared to have aged since the last time she saw him and. His lecherous smile revealed yellow and brown stains on his teeth. "After, I must journey to Baghdad and attend the Merchant's assembly to have right to sell there," he continued.

His eyes bore through her vest and chemise to her bare skin and breasts. The gleam in his eye and barely polite grin bespoke of the web he had woven to trap her. "--it is a poor businessman who does not have fingers in many jars." He laughed.

"You are so wise," Rabbati said.

Suhayla wanted to roll her eyes. Instead she just looked up and sighed.

Baba hardly ate. He took a bite here and there, yet chewed endlessly as if he were a camel chomping on its cud.

The next day Najmah and Suhayla journeyed to the suk once again. "I will not be his bird locked in a house or a

marriage, to only peck at the bars."

"Allah has mercy."

They went up and down the alleys and into the shops they had not yet seen. By the afternoon it became apparent

"I will have to go into the forbidden quarter."

Suhayla started toward the ancient archway.

Najmah called out from behind. "What are you doing?"

"I must look in here for a wise woman. You may stay behind if you like."

"I'm not letting you go in there alone," she said.

Suhayla pulled her veil tighter about her face, hiding all but her eyes before embarking on a journey, searching for a distant star. Side by side they strode into the gloom of the disreputable market, leaving the crowds and noise behind. The vaulted ceilings above blocked out all the light. All remained dim except for a small courtyard here, a single tree there. They passed silent alleys and passages hidden in deep shadows. Boys peered out of the darkness of their carpet shops. A group of ragged men gambled, leered and called out to. Najmah stayed close.

Muezzin proclaimed Azan, the cry of prayer. They stopped and recited their verses to Allah amongst the dirt; cobblestones layered with rotting vegetables and refuse. They covered their noses for the stench.

They peered into the stalls all without success.

Najmah tapped her on the shoulder. "A man follows us. He has been watching our every move."

Suhayla looked behind but did not see anyone.

"Let us return to my father's house."

When Suhayla and Najmah hid in a shadowed alcove they saw him clearly. A thin, short man with a beak nose, dressed in stained clothing, stalked them. He peered and darted into different alleys. On the way back home Suhayla purposefully waylaid the man by weaving through the maze of streets and dark passages.

Finally rid of him, they traveled home. That very evening, when Suhayla had retired and the night's sky cloaked the house, Kadid paid a visit to her father. Suhayla heard him gallop up to the house on his horse, hooves clattering over stones.

In the morning Najmah said, "By morning Kadid had left, I did not hear him leave. Did you?"

"No." Najmah pulled Suhayla's chemise over her head. "We must return to the forbidden quarter today."

"Is that wise? What of the man who followed us yesterday to do only Allah knows what."

"Wait here then."

"I will not let you go into that viper's den alone."

Worry filled her eyes.

"Najmah, I know you are right—but I must go—I must."

"Then, I will walk by your side. Allah protect us."

By the door they threw their veils over their heads.

Baba approached from the dark hallway; a sickly sweet cloud surrounded him. His eyes stared, pupils dilated and large as moons, seeing but not seeing me. Suhayla knew the symptoms well. It was enough to bring her to tears.

"Daughter." He spoke in a raspy whisper. "Why do you go into the disreputable quarter of the Suk? You bring shame to me, to our family."

"To escape the fate you are forcing me into."

"I forbid you." He wheezed. "To go!"

Najmah stood behind her, strong yet silent.

"You know in your heart I do not love Kadid. Mama would not want me to marry a man I did not love," she said gently as if to a child.

"Aisha!" Baba threw his arms up and cried for Mama. Suhayla went to him and put her arms around him.

"Baba, oh Baba, for Allah's sake, for Mama's sake, let me go."

"Send Ahmed." Tears wet Baba's eyes.

"There is something very important I search for, only I can tell of its whereabouts."

"Kadid has some failings but he is connected to the Sultan," Baba said. "He travels around the world. He returns with, with. . . mysterious objects for the Sultan."

"Aisha, Aisha. . ." Whimpering like a child he meandered down the cavernous hall and shut himself behind the ebony doors. The key turned and clicked in the lock.

Suhayla's eyes watered. "Oh, Najmah, perhaps I am being too critical of Kadid." She shook her head. "—But he repulses me."

Suhayla turned and with Najmah strode out of the house and down the road quick before anyone else tried to stop them. Dust swirled up in small clouds, around their feet as well as behind carts and donkeys. The sun's heat blazed; sultry waves of heat rose up from the stony, sandy road.

They walked under the ancient stone archway entering the disreputable market. Suhayla's eyes adjusted to the dimly lit stalls and shops. "I feel as if I clutch my last hope." She pushed more tears back. "If I do not find a Ghawaze. . ."

"You will, Allah protects you."

At one shop there were a number of small, beautiful items. Jewels for ears and wrists gleamed in the dull glow of a nearby lamp; varieties of colorful silk purses, combs of bone, and vials filled with perfume, were displayed

nearby.

"Sandalwood, Mama's favorite."

"I've never seen so many jewels," Najmah said.

The merchant, a grey bearded man, older than Baba, stood behind his wares. He nodded, simply dressed in a white robe, and a large black turban wound around his head indicated he was a descendent of the prophet.

His eyes were white-milky discs, pearlescent like the moon. With a mysterious grace, his slender fingers picked up a bronze box and he held it out to Suhayla, smiling.

"The young lady seeks."

"What? How do you know?"

His smile faded and he stared--as if he could see. "A summons will bring you closer."

Najmah tugged on her arm to pull her away, whispering. "He is strange."

"But he knows--something." Suhayla wrenched her arm from her. "I look for a wise woman. . . for my sister."

The elderly man stood silent, expressionless.

"See?" Najmah said. "Nothing."

The next dimly lit shop, consisted of stacks of bolts of cloth. As she neared, Suhayla realized a man stood, stone still. He took two steps toward her with the sure gate of a lion. He lifted a lamp up, and the glow revealed

his ruby-colored djellabaya, and a proud and regal face.

Black cats separated from the shadows and surrounded him. "Ask and Allah delivers," he said.

Suhayla did not answer or even look at him, sleek felines rubbed against her legs. She stroked the cat's backs, and found pleasure having her fingers in their soft, warm fur. One meowed up at her and then strode back to the tall man. She stepped closer to him. His face radiated a glow she would have expected of a holy man; his eyes were the beautiful shapes of almonds.

"We move on and on in search of mystery. God says, 'Let me in, you cry at my door.'"

"I cry to Allah every night. And I search, yet I do not prevail," Suhayla said.

"Perhaps you look in the wrong place, perhaps it is not time."

"Not time? Time is turning on me. Its walls shrink each day with the certainty of a heart beat, with the speed of a falcon. Each day looks more and more like a prison."

"Often there are workings of God we do not see, cannot see. Faith keeps us going."

"My faith is worn thin."

"You need to speak with my grandmother. She is inside."

A short, round woman appeared in an inky tunic with silver embroidered stripes. Dark little eyes peered out over fleshy cheeks, framed by large gold earrings.

She waved. "Come child."

"I am a young woman." Suhayla raised her head and peered at her with perfect calm, using the tone she had heard mother use with servants. She followed without hesitation, without care.

Grandmother gazed up at the ceiling and murmured what sounded to her like unsavory oaths.

"Quick, quick, where is the jewel you promised me?" She walked into the darkness of the shop and motioned to a low couch.

"How?" Suhayla wondered if the woman was the kind of Ghawaze, who played tricks with snakes to coerce people out of silver coins. She sat on the other side of a low, round table with carved paws for feet. She cocked a thin, kohl black brow.

"How did you know?"

She shrugged round shoulders.

"Are there many of you?"

"We are here, we are there." She pointed her finger at Suhayla, who leaned back afraid the woman might turn her into a mongoose or worse. "Let us see the pretty treasure."

I hope it is worth my trouble."

Suhayla thought a moment. She could not look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Quick, quick, we don't have all day."

She untied the kerchief and held the pendant up to her. When the woman tried to grasp it, Suhayla pulled it back.

"My, my," the woman clucked like a hen. "What a pretty gem." She rubbed his hands together in glee.

"It belonged to my mother." Suhayla set it on her lap. Not having dealt with a Ghawaze before she did not entirely trust her. Leaning back, Suhayla blinked and wrinkled her nose. The woman had a most peculiar smell, not malodorous, but odd--perhaps a strange herb or spice she had yet to learn about.

"Mmmmm." She brushed imaginary wrinkles from her kaftan. "So my dear, what is the trouble? You need gold, silver, or a magical potion I suppose." Her voice had a squeak.

"What do I do? How do I avoid marrying Kadid?"

"Soon, all will be revealed," she said.

"Must you be so cryptic?"

"I help you, you give me pendant. Fair is fair," she said. She fanned the embers of a tiny bronze brazier, and tossed on pebbles of resin. A blue skein of smoke lifted

and curled around them.

"I wish to marry a kind man of learning."

"Aha!" Her right brow lifted up. "Love"

"Yes." Suhayla could not stop now, desperation nudged her forward. And as one of aunt's favorite sayings goes 'once camel puts nose in tent, the rest is quick to follow.'

After straightening her robe and clearing her throat, the grandmother spoke in a serious tone. "Look into the coals."

Suhayla crouched down by the bronze brazier, her gaze drifted into the embers. Therein, as if a dream, a faint memory rippled across her mind like a melody. Cat like eyes, full of reflected flames, looked back at her. Around her wild murmurs were intoned, chants filled her head, and transformed into flute notes sweet and piercing, haunting. Suhayla's pulse quickened. She heard a name, a merest whisper of a breeze. Sek-met. Heaviness hung onto her chest and she tried to pull herself away from the melodies. She pushed herself up from the table and staggered back. Deep grief overwhelmed her. "I don't know why. . ." She wished to know the reason behind the chants and flute notes, and the images of cat's eyes. Shivers ran up and down her spine.

"The moon's phases tell of your time, not immediate-- not old age. . . For she who sees all the good that dwells there and in the stars will be wise. Beware!" She held up a forefinger. "There is one who hunts. . . for secrets and something else. . . Love." She grinned quite pleased with herself. "The pendant if you please." Her short, dusky fingers fluttered with excitement.

In a daze Suhayla became aware of movement near by. A cat.

The wise woman peered down at me, one eye wide. "You would not trick a gypsy would you? Terrible things would befall you."

Suhayla handed her Mama's pendant.

"Did you ever hear about the poor widow with three daughters?"

Suhayla shook my head.

"Once there was a widow who had mended the last remnant of her husband's clothing to sell at the market. The sale of the garment would feed her and her three daughters for another week.

"On the way to the market a large raven swooped down and grasped the cloth in its talons and flew away. The widow cried out, pointing to the raven and attracting attention. People in the market watched as the raven flew

away over the boats and ships to the sea.

"One of the women in the market who saw the spectacle said to her, 'There is a pious woman who Allah has blessed with wisdom. Go see her, she will give you advice.' So the widow took her daughters and went to the sage. At the sage's hut, the widow cried out all her woes. 'We will starve. My daughters and I depended on the sale of that cloth to eat.'

"The wise woman gave them food. 'You stay here, eat and sleep in my hut.'

"Two days later there raucous arose in the market place. A boy, who knew the sage, ran up to the wise woman and said, 'A ship captain arrived in port a moment ago and said a miracle had occurred. A magnificent raven had dropped a piece of cloth and saved him.'

"'Bring this captain to me,' the wise woman said.

"The captain arrived and said, 'My main sail had been torn in a storm, and we would have been smashed upon the rocks and not have been able to return to port, had it not been for the cloth dropped to us by the raven.' He handed a bag of coins to the sage.

"'Oh no, it was not I who saved you. It was Allah. He worked his grace through this poor widow's cloth. It is God, who you need to give thanks to, and the widow, the

coins.' And so the captain gave the widow the sack of coins and it was many more times the amount she would have received at the market."

"So you see," the woman in the black robe said.

"Often, Allah has plans we cannot divine."

"Yes, but what do I do in the meantime, until my destiny is revealed?"

"Trust the next step will be shown you and give thanks."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I wasted my Uma's pendent on a tale." Suhayla brooded. Her anger shrank and cooled into sullenness. How could she have been such a fool? Was her future doomed to a marriage of revulsion and wretchedness?

"No advice or prophecy?"

"I could have guessed." Suhayla led the way past the same trinkets and tables and cloths laid with goods. All the metal appeared duller, the jewels lost their luster. Once out of the old market Suhayla saw the street ahead filled with people. Ordinary people, men, women with children, merchants, stained their necks, and murmured.

"There are guards," Najmah said.

Indeed men with daggers tucked in wide belts held swords. Light flinted from the carved blades. The guards eyed the people, kept scanning the crowd as if at any moment a person would charge them or attack. Beyond the

soldier's backs other men held up a tunnel of gold silk leading to a litter. Tasseled curtains of crimson hung in the windows, and the roof, ornate and gilded gleamed in the midday sun's blaze.

Najmah pushed her way to the front and Suhayla slid in behind. She leaned near her servant for a better view. The tinkle of little bells rang out as a dark veiled figure glided under the diaphanous fabric. Suhayla glimpsed a porcelain-white foot with pearly toenails. The litter rocked as the woman stepped into and settled onto the seat. A milky hand peeked out under the crimson curtain and rested on the edge. Her fingers willowy and pale appeared to be boneless. Gold and silver rings sparkled in the intense sun: a ruby, another an emerald, a blue topaz, an oval jade shone; and specked with gold, lapis, the deepest blue Suhayla had ever seen.

The people around her wandered away. Suhayla watched as the men folded up the silk, placing it in a pocket at the back of the litter. The men who had arms the size of palm trunks lifted the litter in unison. Suhayla stood a few steps away. Metal struck stone and glinted.

Najmah pointed, "Look there, her ring."

Suhayla bent down and picked up a gold band with a blue sapphire the size of an almond. She stared into

crystallized water shimmering with each slight movement. The ring still held warmth from the woman's skin, and a sweet scent lingered. She stepped toward the window.

"Your ring. . . majesty."

A high little laugh. A hand, so pale it appeared bloodless, moved the curtain aside. From a stone-white face, inky eyes slid; black brows arched like calligraphic strokes. "My ring."

Suhayla placed the ring in a palm that reminded her of a moth's wing.

"What is name?" The woman's imperious voice, smooth and sultry, wrapped around Suhayla. She gave her name.

"I remember you for princess." Pouted lips, almost as crimson as the hanging silk, revealed her ivory teeth. As her white fingers withdrew into the shadowed interior, the curtain fell.

The litter and the guards disappeared. A sweet, sweet scent lingered, more redolent than Suhayla's mother's lilies in full bloom—the richest perfume intoxicated her.

The busy trill and the frantic restlessness of the market place thrummed and hummed with exuberance around Suhayla. Merchants called out bargains; tall, thin people as dark as coals hurried; people talked, shouted, squatted and ate, chased their children, yelled at their dogs. In a

square courtyard, the paving stones uneven and cracked with age, Suhayla stopped and stood breathing in deep. Behind the suk and the domed mosque arose the towering ivory turrets of the royal palace. Although tired from her day, she itched with anticipation.

"Najmah, you may be right. Perhaps anything is possible." She saw herself riding in a litter with so many weighty jewels, they fell from her fingers. "Wealth is freedom."

A layer of fine dust like talc powder coated the draping flowers of wild bougainvillea, and poppies; well past their prime, their fat heads hung toward the gravel. Neither Suhayla nor Najmah spoke or had much to say on the return trip home.

Just inside the crumbling stone gateway towering over them, her mother's old, loyal servant Ahmed sat under the shade of a cedar tree. As Suhayla reached him, the red in his eyes and the sack on the ground next to him became apparent. When he noticed her, he stood quickly and bowed touching his hand to his mouth, then his forehead, in a gesture of obeisance.

"What do you do here Ahmed? Why are you not at home?"

He cleared his throat. "I am no longer required."

"What in Allah's name has happened? I leave for an afternoon and evil visits our home." She glanced to Najmah.

"Come!" Suhayla stomped off in anger toward the house. Swirls of dust rose up under her feet.

"Wait," Najmah called. "Ahmed has something for you."

She walked back. He thrust out to Suhayla a red cloth bound book. The edges were thread-bare and fraying. The spine had been charred by flame. "What's this?" I asked.

"Rabbati gave me sacks of tattered rugs and old clothes to burn. I did not see it at first; I pulled it from the fire." He paused solemn. "The writing is your mother's hand."

"Blessed be Allah." Suhayla took the proffered book and immediately opened it.

Indeed the ink script floated across the page in neat and well-formed calligraphy. She knew Ma's flourishes well from a book of verse and prayers she had copied.

Delicate, handsomely drawn rosebuds, doubled-petalled blooms and leaves scrolled and twined at the perimeters of both pages. The stamens and pistil, were life-like; a butterfly fed there, so exact in fine-black lines as if it

could fly off the page. Suhayla hugged the journal to her chest. "Why would Rabbati want to burn this?"

Ahmed shrugged.

She placed the journal in her wrap and marched toward the house. Najmah and Ahmed followed in Suhayla's wake at a distance. They did not want to be present during the storm.

Upon entering through the heavy front door, Suhayla looked for Rabbati. She passed the empty parlor and went to the kitchen. Aunt sat upon the rug chopping mint and scraped the mound of green from the board into a tea pot.

"Ahmed says he has been dismissed." Suhayla glanced to Cook who shook her head and wiped tears from her eyes.

"He is a lazy servant." Rabbati waved her arm without looking up. "I will not have such help in this house any longer."

Suhayla noticed a gold bangle glinting about her wrist, one she had not seen before. "He had been with Mama's family before she and Baba were married. Where will he go? Who will care for him? He will be forced to beg in the streets. He is too old to start over. No one will hire him."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Allah has mercy."

"And who will take care of the garden?" Suhayla

demanded. "Mama's lilies and roses need constant attention."

"We need new servants and new flowers," Rabbati said. "Where is Najmah? She needs to help Cook with dinner."

Suhayla glanced behind. Both servants had vanished.

"How can I run a household with servants who cannot be found?" Aunt threw her hands up in disgust.

"I forbid you from touching my Ma's roses or lilies." Her hands shook at her side and she felt the journal pressed against her ribs.

Aunt turned away and tossed the woody mint stems into a basket. Suhayla noticed her cerulean satin pantaloons.

"How did you get the new clothes and jewelry?"

"My future son-in-law is a very generous man. He also brings a new servant tomorrow. It would benefit you also if you paid him more kindness."

"If you want a husband and house, why don't you marry Kadid?"

Rabbati stood up and spun around like an angry dervish. "I am too old! Kadid wants you for a wife--not me. I have cared for you since your mother died, Allah bless her. Is it too much to have a few beautiful things for myself? Must I forever wear my dead sister-in-law's clothes? Am I supposed to reject all gifts given in the

name of Allah?" She turned away from me and cried.

Suhayla went to auntie and patted her fleshy arm. "I want you to have nice things and be happy. But I do not like Kadid. I do not wish to marry him, yet you and Baba both have ignored my protests."

Rabbati shrugged her shoulders and, sighing, sat on the rug. Her round bottom took up much room. "Think of your poor Baba. Your mother, Aisha, Allah bless her, was his light, his sun."

"That is why I wish to stay with him here."

Rabbati shook her head. "He wants to see you married and settled and know that you are cared for."

"It is not the idea of marriage that is so repugnant. It is the man."

"Your father chose a man of wealth for you. There is honor to be found there. Kadid's family worshipped on this soil for thousands of years, and their lineage goes back to Anatolia as well. It is an honorable lineage."

Suhayla sat next to her. "I must follow my heart. Mama taught me that."

"Kadid works for the Sultan, may Allah bless him. Kadid worships God, and he owns three houses: one here in Cairo, one in Anatolia and a villa near the sea. There can be no shame in that; you will want for nothing."

"Every mirror has two sides. It is what is on the dark side that worries me."

Aunt sighed. "It is up to God."

"Wealth will not fill my heart. I want a love as strong as Mama's and Baba's."

Rabbati frowned in dismay. "I am tired, out."
Rabbati waved her away.

Suhayla went to her room and locked the door.

Later the aroma of stewed lamb with apricots wafted about her door. She opened the door for Najmah. Suhayla unrolled the eating blanket and placed the bronze platter on the yellow embroidered cloth.

"Have you seen Ahmed?" Suhayla sat down crossing her legs.

"Yes, he stays under the tree and hides in the bushes when Rabbati is outside."

"Take him a platter of food."

"I will, once your aunt retires."

"Health to your head. I cannot bear what she is doing to this household," Suhayla said.

"Allah is merciful."

Silence pervaded while Suhayla brought food to her mouth and ate, but did not taste. She stared off into mid-air. She pushed the platter away. "Share my food."

Najmah ate, and plucked a few dates and crimson grapes. "Have you read the book yet?"

"Not yet." Exhaustion weighed on her. "I will begin tomorrow." She gazed at the red cloth book on the squat table. "My learned Sheik once said, 'Faith gives us the strength to continue on when we see our dreams shrunken by drought.' He did not like to end lessons on a dismal note and so he finished by saying, 'Allah is all-knowing.'" She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ears. "But--a desert storm swirls between faith and me."

CHAPTER NINE

The next morning when Suhayla came down after breaking the night's fast, she heard Rabbati's unusual laughter echo throughout the house. "Hamdan bring Mustaffa tea," Rabbati said.

Suhayla encountered the new serving boy. He carried a tray of tea with thin hands and fingers and a towel draped over one wrist. She glanced into his eyes and thought she saw disdain, superiority. "Have you seen Najmah?"

Hamdan shook his head, and walked past her, with a straight back, and his head held high. He walked with purpose on his errand as if he were the only serving boy in the world.

CHAPTER TEN

Hamdan cleaned with efficiency and speed and turned up in unexpected places and times—behind a couch, in the hall. Suhayla encountered him once in the corridor and they were caught in a dance of awkwardness. She attempted to dodge

him, he tried to get out of her way. He tsked and flattened against the wall. As she passed him, she smelled the heady mixed up scent of him soap, tobacco, mint and cedar oil. She looked again at his lithe body, the smooth angles of his face, the almond shapes eyes and slight shadow of a mustache. Flipping the silky length of her hair, she disappeared around the corner. His scent lit a little blaze inside her. A little hope.

Evening shadows crept into the corners of Suhayla's bed chamber. "You are the only person I trust. You are the only friend I have in this world." Najmah nodded. "I will runaway before marrying Kadid—I must prepare."

Najmah gasped. "What will you do?" Creases appeared between her brows.

"I will find my way into the palace. I am young and pretty. I will find a prince to marry, who is powerful and love me." Suhayla glanced to her friend. "You like Hamdan?"

She nodded and looked down to her hands. "We meet sometimes. . . Behind the garden house. No one sees us. He kisses me," she said in a hush. "I tingle all over."

"Does he like Kadid?"

Najmah shook her head.

"Is he loyal to him?"

"No," Najmah said. "Hamdan despises him."

"Does he know anyone who works in the palace?"

Najmah shrugged. "I don't know such."

"Would you ask him for me?"

"Yes, of course."

Rabbati took interest in the parlor. Strong men came in one day and Rabbati ordered them about. "Move that there, put that there." They took away the old carpet and carried in a new one: gold tendrils and palm green arabesques wove together on a pomegranate background.

The divans were moved to different walls, and the divan on which Ma died had been covered with cloth. A deep indigo with white stripes; pale circles reminded Suhayla of her Ma's dead-staring eyes. She shuddered every time she looked at it and would never sit there. "Where is the old antique mirror Ma bought when she first married Baba?" Suhayla clamped her crossed arms to her chest. "I don't recognize my own home anymore." She sneered as she inspected the gaudy, gilded mirror, a luxury that ill fit the rest of the house: old, smooth beams and delicate, aged mahogany screens; the floors were cedar wood, polished and darkened by wear and age. Her Ma's scent of wild jasmine and rose had been totally eradicated by Rabbati's perfume

musky and floral that drifted about instead.

Rabbati put down her tea cup with a clunk. "We must make the furnishings comfortable so the house will be welcoming for the wedding guests."

"What wedding guests? We have no family around. I did not invite anyone, I doubt Baba did."

Rabbati shrugged. "Maybe Kadid does." Hamdan appeared in an instant as if conjured by a djinni. He picked up the cup and saucer and disappeared.

"Where is Najmah? Whenever I need her, she is nowhere to be found?" Suhayla said.

"Najmah works harder now than before. All she did with you was lay around and drink our tea. She is more useful than ever," said Rabbati. "It is good, you'll be leaving soon anyway."

Rabbati heaved herself from the divan and as she sauntered by Suhayla, reach out to pat her head.

"Don't!" Suhayla ducked but tendrils of hair caught in Rabbati's rings. The stones flashed in the light blazing in from the open door. "I am not a child."

"For once in my life I am happy," Aunt said, as she extricated her jewelry.

"You would sell your own daughter for wealth."
Suhayla stamped a foot.

"After all I've done for you and your Baba," said Rabbati.

"You have not done anything for me except construct a prison." Suhayla clenched her fingers.

"We'll see. Once you are living in a wealthy manner, you'll change." Aunt's wide figure swathed in layers of robe seemed to glide out the door as if royalty.

Suhayla went to Cook. "Have you seen Najmah?"

"She might be hanging laundry. But my dear, my Aisha's daughter," Cook said, "Kadid may not be the most handsome of men, but is it not better than being on the street?"

Suhayla stared at her. "How is it you can see what other's don't?"

"My own Uma was a seer and mid-wife don't forget." She kissed Suhayla on each cheek then went to stir food in a large bowl with an unusual intensity. "May Allah be with you."

The top half of the narrow stairs were flooded in light. As Suhayla went up to the roof, laughter drifted to her. The sun blazed and baked the flat expanse of limed-mud brick, waves of heat snaked above. White and yellow and blue clothes hung from string between poles. The smell

of laundered cloth surrounded her. "Najmah?"

The sound of scurrying and giggles erupted. Najmah peeked out from behind some pantaloons. She squelched a laugh. The tinkling of bracelets on Najmah's wrists infuriated Suhayla even more. "What are you doing?"

"Hanging laundry."

"Who gave you those bracelets?"

"Hamdan."

"Ugh. Kadid buys Auntie, and Hamdan buys you."

Najmah stepped nearer, clasped her hands together, eyes cast downward and bit her lips in a nervous way. "It is not like that." She glanced back. "He is kind to me."

Suhayla was sure Hamdan stood listening.

"Only two days before the wedding and I have to dress myself. Where was my food this morning? Its as if I am already gone." Emptiness swallowed Suhayla as each night she slept alone and cried herself to sleep. Only the stars and moon were her dependable companions.

Najmah cast her eyes down. "I am sorry, you are my friend."

The next day she found Najmah in the library dusting, Hamdan polishing the wood floor. Suhayla noticed every nuance when the couple worked in the same room or near, every look between them. She witnessed the almost

indiscernible caress of Hamdan's fingers on hers. Suhayla's insides squirmed; a hot flush fluttered inside her. The lingering glances between them made Suhayla feel invisible and irrelevant. Najmah and the young man surrounded themselves with a net that left Suhayla outside and lonely.

Suhayla drank tea in the kitchen while Cook prepared lamb. So many butterflies flew in her stomach she could eat but little. "Do you have extra cheese I may have later?"

"That cheese and bread is for you." Cook motioned with a plump hand. "May the djinn, under the agency of God and the angels, protect you."

"Look after Baba, won't you?"

Cook shook her head. "He is under God's hand now."

Suhayla's feelings of concern for him had not abated. She managed to get him to unlock and open the door to his opium room. His cheeks were gaunt, his cough chesty and congested. She went to him, he looked fragile, vulnerable in the ash-stained robe. He sat on a low divan surrounded in smoke. She kissed him. A vision flitted into Suhayla's mind--one she had not sought nor willed. She saw Baba lying on a pillow in the darkness of a closed room. A dense cloud of hazy smoke billowed in the room as flames

lapped around him. His eyes stared up, open but unseeing, with an incomprehensible look. "Baba--" she shrieked. "Be careful." She wanted to cry.

"Allah. . . Watches over you." He wheezed.

Suhayla gazed down to Baba's watery eyes. "Keep well."

Why did images of death suffuse her mind when she had touched her parents? The shadows of guilt and fear crept within her. Her prayers and attempts to bring Baba back from the opium had been useless. Allah and all the angels and djinn watch over Baba; prevent her vision from coming true.

Desperate for companionship, Suhayla searched for Najmah. In the parlor Hamdan pulled Najmah's head back and bent his face over hers. He saw Suhayla in the vulgar mirror then and he moved away from Najmah. He stepped away and took up a rag and went on dusting, unfazed. Suhayla's body trembled. Her servant and companion had love and someone to talk to. She stared at them trembling, half mad. At night she dreamt of escape and being admitted into the palace and falling in love with the prince. Suhayla wanted to taste love for herself, wanted a man to put his mouth at her ear and whisper about their next tryst, a secret meeting place where they would have a few stolen moments of love. "Did you ask him?" She glared.

Najmah jumped up from the divan wringing her hands. Her eyes darted to Hamdan. She nodded and gazed downward. "He does not know anyone." Najmah squinted and wrinkled her nose.

"Of all the people in the world, I never thought you would betray me," Suhayla said. "We made promises."

Najmah ran to her, hands out in front in a pleading way. "I care for you like a sister. But. . . I love him." She whispered. "He worships me." She blinked.

Suhayla hissed. "What am I to do?" She threw up her arms.

Suhayla hid a sack under her pillow and stored away dates and figs wrapped in remnants of cloth. She added extra clothes, a blanket, Ma's journal. She tossed and turned in her bed as anxiety and fitfulness consumed her. She thought she would burn up with all the nervousness. She ended up crying herself asleep knowing what choice her heart, her life depended on. Later in the dark hours of the morning, when the household slept, she crept down the stairs. With her arm around her sachel, she let herself out of the house.

CHAPTER TEN

At first the cool air and the stars overhead refreshed her, gave her a new found confidence. But she had never walked about at night alone. Distant dogs bayed, insects chirped, a silky breeze skidded dry leaves across the street. She went in the direction of the palace, her ultimate destination. From her Ma's balcony she remembered the direction of the moon shaped dome not far from the great mosque. When sleep weighed upon her, she found a stone bench, and curled upon the cold rock wrapping a blanket around her and using the sack as a pillow.

The morning call to prayer rang out over the city and awoke her. She sat up and stretched. She nibbled upon bread and a bit of fruit. When she reached the mosque, she dipped her hands into the pool located in the forecourt and rinsed her face. People thronged the street, shop keepers opened their doors, and merchants displayed their wares, fruits, spices upon tables and blankets.

Behind the walls and a row of verdant fruit trees, the

palace extended before her a series of white marbled columns topped with domes gleaming gold and turquoise in the cerulean sky. Waves of heat arose from the marble paving. Cicadas in the trees hummed a high-pitched susurration.

Before the palace gates, a crowd gathered. Officials of the Sultan's court were carried by litters. Guards of thick girths and limbs pushed back the on lookers and let the officials in. As they passed, people stretched out their arms and hands and yelled: "Do you need a Cook? I am a carpenter! I am a blacksmith! My husband died--pity the poor!"

Suhayla shouted, "Does your wife need a maid?" But her words were lost in the din. She tried to stand her ground but people pushed and jostled her out of the way. Each time an official, or servant or any person left the palace the crowd would throng the gate again and repeat the same shouts.

Evening descended and a handful of people remained, a woman missing her front teeth, a man who walked with a cane, men with ragged beards, and black-robed women. All searched for a place to rest. Some, Suhayla noticed, had sacks and blankets on which to lie at night. By a wall of stone near the palace Suhayla smoothed out her wool. She

pushed over some dried leaves which were scattered here and there; the intricacies of the veins were like the wrinkled faces of the three old women. They covered themselves in all black, neck to their black skirts from which black toes peeked out of. They bowed and ducked their heads at her.

With her sack in her arms, Suhayla gave to them some dried figs. The three smiled showing brown teeth and ducked their heads again. "Bless you child, all we have is goat's cheese." They handed her a piece. One woman reached out with her pale, plump hands and kissed Suhayla's cheeks. Her skin tingled and images slid through her mind. An ivory tower, moon lit; a red corridor swirling with dust motes, a bloodied dagger with a hilt set with prescious stones. Suhayla gasped, mumbled "Thank you," and returned to her blanket, shaken. What do the images mean? Where do they come from? These were questions she that ran through her mind and circled like mice.

Two more days passed as the previous and Suhayla grew more anxious as her food dwindled. All she had left were some dates, a small bit of cheese, one lamp chop, and one fig. Each day Suhayla watched the crowd before the palace gates grow in the morning and at night diminish to the same or similar people who appeared to be desperate for food, shelter or work.

After the sun sank in the west and the lunar eye shone, Suhayla ate the last of her food. One of the three women, all sisters she found out, called out, "What do you want with the Sultan?"

"To serve, or sew, or. . . I want to meet the prince."

Two of the women giggled. "Sh. . !" The third sister held up one finger. She smiled and winked an eye. "All dreams are the seeds of something bigger, believe and it will come true." She nodded. "We want the Sultan's help to build an orphanage."

Suhayla picked up her sack and walked toward the mosque. Although she believed what the sister in black said to be true, her faith in herself and her hope of finding a way into the palace crumbled like ancient wood. She cried for her Ma, Baba, the loss of her friend Najmah. Her eyes must have turned as red as the goat livers Cook used for divination. Hardness seized inside her chest, desperation squeezed her lungs and her breath came in short gasps. She had planned all this. She loathed herself for her stupidity and the need for freedom that drove her to this state. She decided to sleep, and pulled her blanket out and threw it around her shoulders. She rocked herself. When she awoke sand stuck to her cheek. Her ribs hurt from sleeping on that one side, and whether it was the pain that

brought her to the sharp edge of wakefulness or the screaming she did not know. She sat up in the shadows with the wall of a house against her back. She crawled a few steps to peek around the corner of the house.

In a moon lit courtyard, four men with white turbans about their heads, and cloths covering their faces, wrestled with a young woman. Her cries echoed amongst the buildings. The man Suhayla had seen near the palace gates hobbled toward the courtyard. His cane thudded in cadence between each step. "Leave her be!"

Suhayla yelled. "No!" To him and to the men. "Stop."

The girl tried to kick and elbow the men but they overtook her, slid a black bag over head, and two men scuttled away with her. Her muffled screeches disappeared into the night. The other men took the cane from the man and beat him on the face and body. Suhayla screamed, "Leave him be!" The men left him in a crumpled heap.

After Suhayla thought the kidnappers had gone, she crept as silent as possible to the courtyard staying hidden in the dark. She stepped by refuse heaps stinking of vegetable waste and excrement, unseen mice or cats scurried.

Suhayla's heart thudded in her chest. Tears came to her eyes, 'that poor, poor girl, and poor, poor man.' She

knelt down by his collapsed form. "Oh Allah, are you alive?"

A groan. Something glinted from the paving in the square. She reached down and picked up a medallion of some kind, slid the object into her sack.

"If you are able—we must go—in case they come back." She helped the man up. In the pale light of night Suhayla examined the man's face. One eye shone, glistened with a blackish moisture. She helped lift him up and hobble to the side of the building hidden from light. "I will go get some water." From her sack she took a cloth then fluffed the sack up for him to rest on. "I'll be back soon." She knew the way to the mosque. The rectangular pool shone like glass. She wet her cloth and hurried back. "I tried to warn you." She whispered and dabbed at the man's face. "Your eye is bad, Allah willing it will heal."

"I have survived worst," he said. Suhayla threw her blanket around them and tried not to think about the hunger that gnawed at her.

They awoke when the Muzzein's droning call echoed through out the city. "Can you move, walk?" She said.

"God willing." The one eye had swelled shut colored purple and blue. "One tooth is missing."

"You are lucky to be alive."

"Not easy to kill an old dog like me."

"Can you make it to the palace gate?" She helped him up.

"Ja'afar is my name." He nodded. "I fought in wars for the Sultan and I am reduced to this."

"I will have to start begging soon; I am Suhayla, the daughter of a poet."

The sun and oppressive heat beat down. Doves flew up from the street. Already people gathered about the entrance.

The usual officials were carried by litters, stepped out and were admitted by the guards. A gilded litter, surrounded by armed guards, and carried by six men in crimson robes, passed. The red curtains were embroidered with the Sultan's insignia, a gold crescent moon and star. People yelled to them: "I am a cook, my son is ill! Et. ."

Suhayla clutched her satchel, all her worldly belongings in one arm, and in the other held up her friend. She did not shout out, her words would have been eaten by commotion. "I am a poet," she said to him.

"Do you sing?" He eyed her.

She shrugged. "I believe so."

"Sing then."

"Doves fly

To blue depths." The people quieted to listen to the clear tone of her voice lilting in the air.

"The roses root

Deep in rich mud,

Butterflies, indigo lift up

From arm and heart,

All nature is filled with divine radiance." The litter halted. Ja'afar said, "Keep Singing."

Men and women commented. "'She sings like a song bird', 'what a voice', 'a gift from Allah'."

"What other songs you know?" A woman's raspy voice rang out. A veiled head peeked out of the red curtain.

"Songs about the stars, about the divine," Suhayla said.

"Come." The woman motioned with a milky hand with rings that glittered in the sun's blaze.

Suhayla thought she recognized the voice, the pale, thin fingers, the crimson and yellow hem of the oriental woman's sleeve.

"Pretty." Her painted brows rose. She snapped open the fan and aired herself. "A handmaid?"

"Yes, thank you your highness," Suhayla bowed.

A throaty chuckle. "For Princess." The woman said to

another woman who sat beside her and giggled.

"Qamar!" One of the guards next to the litter approached. He had a pockmarked face, with slit eyes.

"Girl--" She snapped her fan shut and pointed at Suhayla. "Bring to Bahar, handmaid for Princess."

Qamar bowed.

"What about my Baba?" Suhayla looked over to Ja'afar near the gate. "He is a skilled cook."

Qamar waited for the woman's answer.

She waved her fan. "He go in."

Suhayla's breath caught in her throat, her shoulders and her whole body relaxed. 'Oh Allah I give thanks.'

The oriental woman tapped her fan on the side of the litter. The guards and litter proceeded down the avenue. If Suhayla could be as beautiful as the woman in the litter, a prince would fall in love with her.

She followed Qamar to the arched gate. "He was attacked by robbers!" The guard said nothing but strode ahead.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Suhayla could not believe her good fortune as they walked through. The entry circled around a fountain peacefully echoing its sound. Colossal doors were pulled open by plump guards, arms as thick as tree limbs. Scimitars dangled from their crimson belts and flashed in the light of midmorning.

A veiled woman, in a plain brown robe, met them at the forecourt. "You come." She waved to Suhayla.

"Good luck Baba." Suhayla hugged Ja'afar.

"Thank you," he said.

She turned and walked with haste into an immense hall, girded by towering pillars, painted with Quranic quotes. Suhayla followed the woman through a warren of corridors.

They stopped before a set of inner bronzed doors where a gigantic African, of aubergine skin, stood with arms crossed.

"Salaam," the woman said. She waved a wrinkled hand.

The giant nodded, staring at Suhayla with charcoal, beady eyes, as he pulled one door open, an abundance of muscles rippled under an ebony sheen.

An immense salon lay before her. Down the steps Suhayla went into the seemingly endless chamber of Persian carpeted floors. She had never before seen such lavish interiors. Bronze braziers shone with much polishing, columns of marble, and gold-edged mirrors: every surface shone bright as if the chamber embodied the light of God. The splendor of Allah radiated upon her that day. Her hopes were great for a new life.

"Keep your eyes down when in the presence of royalty." The woman said over her shoulder.

Beyond a set of gilded doors Suhayla followed her into a chamber of delicate furnishings, divans covered in embroidered silk. A young woman with bright, olive-hued eyes glanced up. Suhayla averted her gaze. The veiled woman bowed.

"Princess Dunyazad, I present Suhayla Bint al-Tahir."

Suhayla made her obeisance to the princess, looking only at her feet ensconced in ivory silk slippers. She stood. Silence ensued.

"You may go." Dunyazad waved her hand at the woman.

Suhayla felt the princess' gaze examining her as if

she were a foreigner. Suhayla heard her heart beating, the purring of a cat, and the princess' silk garments rustling with each movement. Out of the corner of her eye she watched as the princess reached over and stroked the sleek, short-haired cat stretched out on the divan.

Without looking up, the princess spoke. "You must go everywhere I go and only speak when I ask you."

"Yes, princess."

"I will show you where you will sleep."

She led me through adjoining chambers. Dunyazad's delicate bump of a nose and mahogany eyes were framed by plaited braids of obsidian hair entwined with ropes of gems. The rosy glow of her cheeks and lips brightened her cinnamon-hued skin. With slender hands she stroked the ivory feline.

With one arm she held the cat draped over her shoulder. And with a ringed finger, she pointed at the canopied bed under the vaulted ceiling. "My bed."

Suhayla's jaw dropped. Canopied gauze silks, shot with gold, flowed around the bed and pooled on the floor.

"You--." She pointed to the mat rolled up in the corner on the floor. "--will sleep there."

"There?" Suhayla put her fingers over her mouth and immediately looked down.

"Yes. . ." She hissed. "Your things go there in the corner."

She circled Suhayla, looking her up and down with clear distaste. "You will be given new clothes... And slippers." Suhayla glanced at her dusty pantaloons and chemise. Although not the height of fashion, they were serviceable, or had been.

"After the noon meal we retire to the harem or attend to mother. My lessons with the learned Shaykh Abdullah al-Balkhi are tolerable, but you will be attentive. There, there Neesha." The cat stirred and wanted to jump down. "My mother or the Sultan occasionally asks me questions concerning my studies."

"Yes, princess."

Suhayla envied princess only of her Shaykh. The lessons were gifts from Allah and she intended to remember each word that passed through the Shaykh's lips.

Princess set the cat down on her bed. Neesha stretched, fanning out its claws, and then jumped down to the carpeted floor. Tail high and curved at the end, the cat walked to Suhayla about to brush against her leg.

"Neesha, no!" The princess scooped the cat up and cradled it to her breast as if a baby. "He is mine."

Suhayla missed Najmah with her ready smile and wit.

At once she heard a fluttering from outside. Her gaze drifted to the arched window as white doves flew up between glistening minarets. In this opulent new world, loneliness became a quick companion.

In the dream world, Suhayla hovered disembodied and became aware of an ancient power, a beast of untold age. A black cat, barely visible in the moonlight, separated from the charcoal shadows and sniffed at the air.

He prowled in the ashen umbrage, skirting the glow thrown from the braziers, and sleeping guards; he padded softly through the silent and cavernous warren of corridors. Suhayla felt his presence nearing and sensed somehow--he searched for her.

Light streamed in and flooded Suhayla's awareness as a call, caused her to jolt upright and awake. "Up--stop being lazy," Dunyazad said.

Suhayla broke the fast tasting princess' food before she ate. She helped her dress as Najmah once helped her. She followed princess after they both were dressed and met Dunyazad's mother in the garden. Suhayla clutched her Mama's journal in one hand. In the intense morning light, Sultana Perihan looked her over for the first time.

"Mmm. . . Not half as pretty as you, I suppose you will do." She looked down her thin, arched nose. The Sultana brushed Dunyazad's ebony hair, gleaming like jet silk in the fiery light of sun.

Perihan threaded her daughter's arm through hers and walked out under the stippled shade of the pomegranate trees. "You shall be Sultana someday."

Suhayla proceeded to walk behind them and Perihan looked back over her shoulder. "Servants stay two steps behind."

In their wake she proceeded as a slave, insignificant as a sparrow. Suhayla overheard bits of conversation. "The bridal gown. . . Your uncles are arriving in three days."

The sun warmed Suhayla's face and the gardens and turquoise sky lifted her spirits. Under her new pale-satin slippers crunched the tiny pebbles and bleached sand. The paths between the rows upon rows of rectangular floral beds were the width of two persons, for the sake of intimacy.

Vermillion poppies, fringed sky-blue blossoms, sun-gold dazzling circular heliopsis, magenta trumpets with peridot throats, bloomed. At the center water glistened and poured over a fountain's basin and fell into the pool below. The tinkling sound soothed her mind.

At the opposite end of the garden, Perihan and Dunyazad sat under a bower of roses entwined with flowering jasmine. On the outside of the bower Suhayla rested on a white, flat stone and waited for them.

Mama's journal had been warmed by her hand and the sun. Around the binding, ribs of white threads were exposed under the faded red velvet. With her own hands Mama had embroidered on the cover an ivory dove holding a rose in its beak.

Suhayla separated the thick pages.

"He stole into the garden. Must happiness be forbidden to me? Is being guardian worth my life? I long for my rightful home. My heart cries out for joy."

A dim memory flitted across her mind: when a small child, she and Mama were out in the garden. Suhayla played in the shade of the garden pavilion, behind the lattice; a pale and chalky moth fluttered inside her fingers. Through the holes she watched Mama, in her white robe, weeding her lilies with her fleshy fingers, head bent toward the ground.

A man in black approached Mama. Suhayla did not

recognize his voice, his low murmur. "Then your daughter-."

"No, not now—not ever." Ma's voice tensed into a high pitch. "Over my dead body."

"Then it will be the worse for you." He disappeared around the corner of the limed, mud-brick house.

Mama came to her and gathered her up in white robed arms, tears wet her face. "Let's think of a desert camp--" She kissed my cheek. "Where no one will find us." Mama carried Suhayla under the scented jasmine and into the house. "Tonight we'll look at the moon. It will be a pearl."

Suhayla sang. "The moon will be a pearl."

She stared out over the rich tapestry of the garden. "Oh, Mama, who was that man? Why did he want me?"

Viewing the palace from this vantage, she saw a great hulking expanse of white marble, domes and turreted towers. In back of the pavilion, the garden wall extended far. Behind the perpendicular wall stood a lone tower with an indistinct turret; one solitary window in the upper most part of the tower looked out over the garden. A turbaned man appeared in the window and did not move.

When the princess rose, Suhayla glanced back to the tower and the man had vanished. Perihan and Dunyazad

talked intently to each other as she let them walk out ahead. Suhayla did not mind. The water in the fountain glinted in the sunlight. In the middle of the path she stopped to examine the tower again, but the glare of the sun from the water blinded her. Suhayla held her hand over her eyes.

Perihan looked in the direction of Suhayla's gaze and narrowed her eyes. "That is where he will stay until he dies." Perihan and Dunyazad turned around.

"Now my daughter, in only two weeks you will see your beloved Farir, and the official engagement ceremony will be performed. I made preparations for our guests. Chambers will be readied, the food supplies are being brought into the storage rooms, and the musicians instructed." Perihan put a finger to her chin. "But I am disappointed the orange trees won't be in bloom."

"What jewels shall I wear for the ceremony?"
Dunyazad's eyes widened.

"The Sultan will provide those my dear, and I am sure the prince will gift you some as well."

A butterfly fluttered before Suhayla, its wings, petal thin. Onyx eyes stared out of the deepest indigo and emerald. She laughed forgetting herself.

Both women turned, their faces ugly with disdain.

"How beautiful." Dunyazad leapt after the butterfly. "It's mine, it's mine!" She tried to enclose it in her hands.

Suhayla stepped toward her and the creature to look closer upon its jeweled beauty.

"No, Suhayla." Perihan grasped her arm. Suhayla had the image of a scimitar glinting in the sun and slicing through a delicate neck. Blood spurted and poured out onto an embroidered ivory chemise. A head rolled away; staring, dead eyes turned in their sockets.

Her mind reeled: eyes, ebony pupils in their pools of white and edged with kohl were life like. She saw a red corridor of crumbling walls, and could not help but gasp pushing the Sultana's hand away. Suhayla's stomach churned; the vision faded.

Suhayla put her hand on her chest to calm her rushing heart. She looked away to the emptiness and peace of the garden, wishing to seek refuge alone.

Oh Allah, what is this terror?

"What ails you?" Perihan's voice hung around her. "Go to the shade, leave us."

Her pulse steadied, leaving Suhayla with a hollow emptiness inside. She stumbled away from them and stood in the shade of a tree until she regained her balance.

Whether it was the shock of her mother's death, or a sickness she did not know. Or was she haunted by evil djinn, as Najmah's grandmother warned?

The cry of a flute, a plaintive song of love, pulled at her soul. She glanced around to find the musician, and discovered the music issued from the lone tower.

In the window sat the same young man she had seen before but without a turban. His long hair, darker than the shadows behind him, fell upon his shoulders. His beard hid some of his pale tunic. With deft fingers, he continued to play. Solemn notes of spun silver filled the air.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The salon stretched a dizzying length, a forest of marble columns supported the vaults overhead. Polished bronze braziers and Venetian mirrors reflected the patches of speckled light from the distant windows, lit the shadowy interior with a dim glow.

Women filled the scarlet carpet, lounging on pillows, or on the low couches that extended the whole of the room under the windows open to the courtyard and gardens.

A hush descended upon the hall as Dunyazad and Suhayla walked past. The women focused upon them as dogs eye raw meat. Whispers and words were murmured as they walked by.

A large group gathered around a charcoal-skinned woman who was elevated higher than all others on one of the round velvet divans in the center of the room. She held court as if queen.

The African watched Suhayla silently through half lidded, piercing black eyes. She was tall and statuesque, with a broad, flat forehead. Although her eyes were

creased with age, they were hypnotizing, deep ebony, sharp as flint. Her fleshy lips punctuated a long face. Flashing gold, her arms draped from the divan and her black feet dangled in beaded slippers. Her gaze bore into Suhayla. She could not hide; secretly she was intrigued. Suhayla returned her attention to the princess. When they passed into the smaller chamber, chatter resumed and resembled the chirping of birds.

Beyond, in a private sitting room with one shuttered window, a few oil lamps shed doubtful light. The sun's rays threw a pattern of star-like shapes before the divan.

"Stand there." Princess pointed.

So Suhayla stood with her back to the wall, at least she had a peak at the courtyard and gardens. She rocked from toe to heel--never able to keep still for long--in her slippered feet.

"The darkest one," Dunyazad said, "in the center is from Ethiopia; originally a slave, Fatima is the Sultan's favorite. She advises Sultan on matters of state occasionally, and rules the harem when Mama isn't there. Mama detests those women." Serving women set down platters of food, glass cups and a bronze pitcher of tea before princess.

"Suhayla, the tea."

On soft, silent feet Suhayla darted to the princess and knelt. Suhayla held up an oriental porcelain bowl of sweet smelling rose water. Princess dipped her fingers, a ruby flashed. She set down the bowl and dried the princess' delicate fingers with an embroidered silk cloth.

From the brass pot Suhayla poured the hot liquid into a venetian glass. Aromatic steam arose into her face. "Open the screen, I wish to view the garden." Suhayla arose and parted the two panels of lattice, swinging them out. Resuming her position, she looked out under a colonnade.

Beds of poppies, roses, and other flowers delighted her eyes. From the fountain water flowed, spilling into the pool below, and filling the room with its tranquil sound. Suhayla thought about what the Sultana and Princess had said about the man in the tower. All the beauty belied any cruelty, or sadness. Who could the man, the flute player be? And why did he need to stay there until his death? She stared beyond: the distant wall, the solitary turreted tower. The prince sat in his one window, high above the ground near the top of the turret. How could he be evil or dangerous, locked up in a prison from which there was no escape? What did he do during all those interminable hours as the sun rose, sailed ever so slowly

across the sky, to then be swallowed by the veil of night.

A shiver of cold went down her spine.

When Baba kissed her, she had a vision and an ominous feeling. When the Sultana grasped her arm, in her mind's eye she watched a beheading. Each time someone had touched her, she had a vision, a brief glimpse of some event. And why did she keep seeing a corridor the color of blood? Was her fear bleeding horrible images? Was she causing ill? Did the djinni connect her to some ancient curse unbeknownst to her?

She longed for home, for Baba. Yet even he felt almost as distant as Mama.

Music floated in the air amidst the fiery, late afternoon light. A slow hypnotic melody, beautiful yet sad, a song of love and desolation; she wanted to cry.

"Oh, do sit and stop swaying like a camel."

Suhayla perched herself on a pillow.

The princess sipped from the silver edged glass.

"Sultan allows Fatima too much power, even if she is the first wife." She plucked grapes and dates from the mound. "Mama says Fatima uses an evil djinni to keep the Sultan in love with her." She laughed. "Her magic didn't bring her a son. The cheese and the dates are mine. Eat the figs, I don't want those."

Suhayla lifted a block of juicy, herbed cheese to her mouth and swallowed. "My family is originally from Bylbos. The Sultan's army crushed the ruling family and installed my father's family in their stead. Our lineage is old, going back to the time of the Prophet. We are said to be descended from one of Mohammad's early wives. That is why I am a princess and am to marry the Sultan's son, Prince Farir." She shook her head toward the salon. "They are fond of stories and will take a silk knot and weave it into a shawl."

The fragrant tea tasted of roses and jasmine and slid down Suhayla's throat easily, warming her belly. She looked to the other end of the grand salon where the group of women were resting, laughing, and talking. Again, she had the sense someone watched me.

"Don't talk to them."

She choked down an olive. Inside she groaned.

All Suhayla said to her was yes, princess, no, princess. She treated her hardly better than a slave. How was she going to manage living in this place if she could not speak? How could she live by answering solely to her? My heart cried out for freedom to run in the garden, read when she wanted, and talk to others. Every day her mind revolted with each of princess's commands. Suhayla yearned

for someone to talk to.

"Mother will want us to attend to her." Princess drained her cup and handed it to Suhayla. She arose. "Wait here, I must fetch Neesha."

"Yes, princess." Suhayla's curiosity entreated her to turn and walk out into the corridor to look upon the harem women.

In the center of the crowd, the Ethiopian held court. Conversations and murmured debates, the timbre of their voices drew Suhayla closer. Amid the gloom in the center of the hall, glints of jewels and beads accompanied their movements. Kohl lined eyes peaked out from blackened brows, turbans, and shimmering, beaded veils. Limbs were entangled and pungent smoke from their hookahs drifted.

"You are the new handmaid." Fatima's voice echoed. All heads turned to me. "The quiet one who follows the princess like a shadow. She let you off your tether."

"I am no one's slave. I could leave if I wanted." Titters escaped the smiling lips of the women.

"Perhaps you put up with her to procure yourself a husband of a higher station?" Their chatter arose as if from a bevy of doves.

"No, I do not want a husband, not yet anyway. I will return to my father's home and look after him."

"Ah, the dutiful daughter. I'm sure we can find a steward, or perhaps you need a warrior, handsome and muscled, to cause your flower to open," Fatima said. A grin slid across her face.

"And make her fat with child." Another woman added, giggling; and struck Suhayla like an out-of-tune instrument. A warm blush arose in her cheeks.

"My studies and my father are all I want."

"The young woman knows her mind, but does she know her heart?" Fatima grinned revealing ivory teeth, and her gaze slid from Suhayla to the hall. "The heart is the place of secrets."

Princess approached, sweeping past her without a glance, chin in the air. Suhayla followed in her wake and almost had to run to keep up with her down corridors and through heavy doors.

Once in the princess's private sleeping chamber, Neesha jumped from her arms and ran from the room. Dunyazad slapped me hard. "I told you not to speak with those women."

"You said I was not to ask you anything, or begin a conversation with you. I am a free person and not a slave. When I am not with you as your serving maid, then I will speak if my heart and mind desire it."

She threw open the lid of her chest throwing old, worn veils at her. "You are nothing. You are not royalty, not even a noble." Silks swished to the floor pooling around Suhayla's feet. Hands on her hips, she glared at me. "If you do not do what I wish, you will go and be a cleaner of the palace scrubbing floors from morning till night—your hands turning into prunes and your knees turning to leather!"

She stomped out of the room. Mama would be proud of her. Mama had often said, 'To gain respect one had to listen to one's heart and mind and the whisperings of Allah.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In the grand salon, fifteen women gathered about a different woman, an Oriental one whom I had met before.

The woman lay on the divan usually reserved for Fatima. Heavy gold bracelets round her wrist rang as she picked up a strange instrument. With one long thin rod, she rubbed the taut string against the others along the neck, and plucked or pressed the strings down; with long, curving, talon-like nails. Her ivory fingers appeared to

be so delicate, they looked as if the bones would snap at the least amount of effort. Her lips were pressed together and colored as if by cherries, that combined with her black locks contrasted sharply against her porcelain skin.

"My song--a girl travel long distance, live in husband's house. Never see mother again." Her high-pitched voice was tinged with a slight rasp, and her narrow eyes appeared lidless. Suhayla could imagine some sorcerer fashioned her from the Orient's whitest gold.

Suhayla tried not stare.

The instrument whined like cicadas. Her voice mimicked a high-pitched birdsong mingled with the creaking of trees in the wind. When finished she looked down a minute, sighed and rested the instrument on her lap.

"My Mama is with Allah," Suhayla said.

"I not remember Ma. Where is she?" She shrugged and continued with another song.

Preceded by chatter and high pitched voices, Fatima and her procession approached from the main corridor, which ran from the women's apartments to the grand salon. In a rustle of silks, Fatima strode toward them with confidence full of coiled grace. If daggers could kill, Husniya, the Oriental woman would have been dead.

She stopped playing and with a slow defiance removed

herself from Fatima's divan. Head held high, she stepped down. Husniya walked three steps away from the divan holding her instrument. She turned to Fatima. Her voice rose in pitch. "You may have. Each full moon bring me closer."

Bold and regal, Fatima gave a deep chuckle. "Don't forget, Husniya, I am the one named after Fate. None of your endless prognostications have come true."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"So you are already a favorite of his."

"I don't know what you refer--" Then at the edge of her vision Suhayla saw him. Neesha had silently followed her. The ivory-sable cat sat near her and looked up with his large yellow eyes as if wanting her to do or say something.

"I gifted him to the Princess when she first arrived, a pleasant child then," Fatima said. "He likes you."

"I don't know why, I've never touched him."

"Oh, they can sense all. Soon he'll be begging your gentle strokes." She grinned, motioned to her servant. "Dania, new fruit and cheese. Wipe down the platter; it may have been poisoned." Within moments the serving girl returned with a brass tray mounded with fruits, bread, and

cheese. "Ah, Allah be with you Dania." She bowed and went to the corner and stood.

"Come closer." Fatima patted a pillow next to her.

Suhayla hesitated.

"I won't bite," she said. With her slim, ebony fingers, Fatima poured tea and motioned toward the food.

Suhayla settled herself on a pillow and watched Fatima. Like a lioness she quietly observed all the women: who came and went from the harem, what they said, as if the world were hers to command. She embodied some kind of inner power that piqued Suhayla's curiosity. They all greeted her politely, following Fatima's lead.

"How is your Baba?" one woman asked.

She nodded. She pushed away the image of him surrounded by a thick cloud of smoke.

"Where are you from?"

Fatima looked over at me. "Let me see your hand."

Suhayla did not trust this woman nor did she want to have any terrible foreknowledge of her life. She felt burdened enough.

"Oh, come," she entreated.

A young woman in white and green silks smiled to Suhayla. "She is a palm reader. She does this with everyone she meets. Fatima lives up to her name. She

foretold my future."

"Give me your hand." Fatima had a serious glint in her eyes. She could not think of a way to say no, and cringed when she clasped Suhayla's hand.

Swirling mists filled her mind's eye. Lioness statues lined an avenue in the desert. Haze drifted into the realm and hid all: a young woman with the face and grace of Fatima turned toward her, but with hollow cheeks and eyes, sickly skin; sorrow filled her tearing eyes. Suhayla jerked her hand from the warmth of her grasp not wanting to see more. Oh God, why must she see these things?

"My, my." A deep voice entered Suhayla's awareness "Your face went pale. It's not as bad as that." She clucked. "Look, the band around your wrist represents your marriage. It is deep and sure, a strong union." Her ebony, slender finger pointed to my upper palm. "See? And there is your heart-line. It clearly joins together with your lifeline. Obstacles, yes, I see many crosshatches. In the end--" She pointed again and attempted to tap her ebony finger on Suhayla's palm. She moved her hand away.

"The end?"

Creases rippled across her forehead. "Mmm, I've never seen this before—two pillars. Once the obstacles are overcome--" She flashed a smile. "--An immense star;

happiness and fulfillment will be yours."

Suhayla's mind lingered upon the vision, an avenue of lions. The young woman clearly was Fatima's daughter; Suhayla had not seen her in the harem. She gazed down at her hand; flesh and skin were all she saw.

The other woman between us giggled. "She has a gift, does she not?"

Suhayla nodded.

"I wonder who you'll marry," Fatima said. "No doubt living in the palace as the princess's shadow is part of your fate."

She looked up to Fatima.

"Where is your daughter?" Suhayla's question silenced the room. Anger then a mask, slid over Fatima's face; and for the first time she appeared to be an old woman haunted by grief.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Leaning over an ancient manuscript, Sheikh Jalal Fahd al'din, looked up as Dunyazad and Suhayla waited at the door. He welcomed them with a long benediction to the Sultan and Allah. He wore the Sufi's garments: baggy trousers and robe of white. His slate, watery eyes were rimmed with red, from much reading, and reminded me of Baba's.

We bowed.

Upon the desk before him, he held in his hands an ancient scroll. Manuscripts and other scrolls were gathered around him. Behind a screen and at a long, low table, they settled. Suhayla had her own clay-ink pot, reed pen, a thick sheet of paper, and the Quran: a manuscript, of yellowed paper with tattered edges, and opened in the middle to a prayer. Silent, one of the Sultana's ancient attendants, dressed in a black robe, sat behind.

"Copy the prayer." He spoke in a low monotone voice as he rolled and unrolled the scroll.

It had been many months since Suhayla had copied prayers or sacred poetry. She was comforted by the feel of the reed pen in her hand: the dipping of the pen in the ink, the tapping off the excess--the jar rang with a hollow sound, and the pen's scratch across the paper was familiar.

With care she wrote the letters of the prayer and finished with a flourish to Allah. As she stared at the paper, her calligraphy became invisible and an uncomfortable feeling overtook her.

Strange shapes and symbols took form on her paper. As if from another time, from another people, a language wholly foreign to her appeared: A crane, an inked circle, a black oval, two arms with open hands, a small hook, a falcon; a single, vertical feather; an eye with a brow over it--looked at her--unblinking. As she gazed at the symbols and shapes, there was an inkling of familiarity. The only two symbols she recognized were the five-armed star and the lion. But where could she have seen them before? What could they possibly mean?

As quick as they had manifested, they disappeared. The prayer she had copied, written clearly and without any smudges or drops of ink lay before her on the paper.

Adjusting her veil, she looked up to see if the Sheik or princess noticed anything awry. Suhayla let out a

breath she had not realized she held, fidgeting and shifting her seat on the cushion.

"Sit still. You are distracting me and shaking the table," Dunyazad said. She pinched.

"Write four qualities that, according to the Prophet, bring you closer to God and the truth." Sheikh had such a vaguely disquieting gaze, Suhayla felt as if he could look through her flesh into her inner most thoughts and feelings.

She had dreams, strange dreams she wanted to tell him.

"What is the point to all this?" Dunyazad whispered in my ear.

She ignored her and wrote: gnosis, to know the spirit; mahabbah, love, devotion; Sakinah, divine peace; and 'alam al-mithal, the world of the imagination. She finished and put her pen down.

A moment later Dunyazad grabbed Suhayla's paper, smudging the ink with her fingers. The Sheik asked her to repeat what she had written. Her voice was a murmur to me. Suhayla clutched her pen with her fist as if she held a sword.

"Truth hath come and falsehood hath vanished away," the Sheik said.

Suhayla blurted out--, "Falsehood is ever certain to

vanish." Princess stabbed her with her pen. Suhayla flinched, but did not cry out.

"Ah. . . You know the words of the Prophet," Sheik said. "Visions are given by the divine. Allah be with you." Sheik said, never looking up.

His words turned over and over in Suhayla's mind, and sunk in her heart.

"You are a little sorceress? The Sultan knows how to deal with those," Dunyazad said. "He beheads them."

Suhayla's tongue hurt, and the taste of blood was bitter.

In the world of dreams a single cat, black as ink, prowled the columned halls and the warren of marbled corridors. He followed a scent, ears flicked back and forth, alert, always alert.

The cat paused at the door to the princess's chamber and in an instant appeared at Suhayla's side. He sniffed at her cheek. Whiskers, like the legs of a spider, brushed her skin; his breath, a faint breeze.

Leaving her slumbering body behind, she flew into his ochre eyes. It seemed a time long ago, and colossal temple columns towered up into the sky. Her heart surged,

trembled with light. Beside the sacred house, an immense marshy pool, edged with reeds, reflects the white visage of the night-sun as in a mirror. The stars shimmer with exceeding brilliance.

Her heart felt settled and calm, restless no more.

"Wake up, lazy!" Dunyazad's voice hailed Suhayla from the dream.

After eating a quick meal, they went to the baths, and then returned to the princess' apartment.

"Tonight is the first of my engagement celebrations. I must look enchanting. Where is my green silk chemise?"

"Right here." Suhayla opened the cedar chest and lifted a thin silk garment.

She shook her head. "No--another."

She chose the rose silk tunic; it slid through her fingers like water.

"No. What else?" She had her hands clenched at her sides.

"A ruby colored--?"

"No." Princess cried out in frustration.

"Peacock blue." Suhayla held it up. "See how the threads of silk catch the light from above, appearing deep indigo one moment and violet the next."

"Yes!" She clapped her hands. "That one and the

saffron coat with pearl buttons over it. Dress me, and then call Zari to plait my hair."

Dressing her grated Suhayla's nerves. Careful not to touch her, she encouraged the silk up, holding it with her finger tips. "My fingers are all a fumble. Yes, Zari is much better at the delicate braiding and will make quick work of the pearls and glass beads."

Zari, a thin, anxious girl a bit older than her, worked her wonders. Suhayla finished Dunyazad's attire and hooked the veil over her ears using the end of a comb.

Under the thinnest wrap of beaded Muslin, Dunyazad looked like an apparition. As she walked, the veil drifted out behind. Sultana, opulent, dressed in an elegant rainbow of sweeping silks, led the procession of her women and servants.

In the Great Chamber, to the left of the Sultan's throne, Suhayla sat on the long, cushioned dais next to the Princess. In strict order of precedence, Fatima, with her attendants, took her position behind the royal women. Husniya, and her retinue, followed. All the women were dressed in their best garments of silks, satins, and brocades, all dazzling with beads, gems and gold.

At both ends of an intricate screen, tiny braziers had been lit. The sweet, fragrant scents of sandalwood and

cedar perfumed and cleansed the air.

When Zari tapped Suhayla on the shoulder, she jumped. "What will you do once the princess is wed?"

"I pray to Allah for guidance."

A great fanfare of drums, flutes and castanets resonated as the doors at the end of the hall opened admitting the Sultan. All rose and bowed as he strode down the middle aisle, on a path strewn with rose petals, to the throne. A river of grey hair flowed from under his turban, and his white beard contrasted with the gold-threaded indigo robe. He fingered a loop of amber beads, the size of pigeon eggs, a sign of religious devotion and adherence.

Men hailed the prince. He walked with long strides, his panther like gate seemed curiously familiar to Suhayla. He carried himself with rather a serious, worldly countenance. Jaw taut, fist clenched around a loop of beads, he looked as if with each moment he had to consciously constrain himself—as if he would explode. Alert, dark eyes under straight black brows took in the crowd. His lean face, the color of dark cloves, angled to a point obscured by a black mustache and beard. A moderate turban capped thick, wavy hair.

When the prince sat on the dais, he gazed straight ahead, and splayed his pronged fingers apart on his knees.

Chills ran up Suhayla's spine. She remembered Kadid, the man who wanted to marry her, and how he sat the same way. She clenched her hands together in her laps. Could it be true? She would examine him when closer.

Could they really be one and the same? Did her eyes deceive her?

Sultana said, "Servants told me that Prince Farir, as if Sultan himself, rode through the gates on a magnificent white stallion."

Another woman said, "I heard it from a guard, the prince is an alchemist and an astrologer, and has brought all his library and wondrous things with him."

"My husband oversees the slaves. Enormous chests were moved into the Prince's private study, and it is larger than all our apartments put together."

"His servant is a strange dwarf; both he and the prince are secretive."

"His face is smooth, like the sweetest honey. It begs a woman's caress." Laughs rang out.

One woman said, "Perhaps we should offer to let him study us."

The more Suhayla studied the prince's face and gestures, and heard about him the more puzzled. How could Farir have disguised himself as Kadid? Why? Tears rimmed

her eyes when she recalled the excess of opium that made Baba distant and irrational. She wanted to shriek and cry.

Amid the warbling, Husniya's raspy voice was distinct. "Bee cannot keep from peonies."

When Suhayla looked behind, Husniya's gaze caught hers. "Soon--." She leaned toward her and whispered. "He'll have all." With a flick of her wrist her fan blossomed. A thin smile spread across her lips.

Sultana and princess approached the Sultan; yet stayed behind the screen that extended to the left of his throne. Suhayla stood in their shadow.

The prince bowed to the royal women, and said to Dunyazad, "You have become beautiful as a rare bird." His voice had the timbre of a large drum. His voice crawled around Suhayla, an invisible serpent.

His eyes caught Suhayla's. She sucked in a breath. His gaze penetrated her, a sense of heaviness dampened her chest. She wanted to search his face, to know for sure; to watch his every move and gesture. She could not stop herself. Her throat dried as if she had swallowed sand. What a stupid girl she had been, what a fool. She could have been wife to a prince.

She looked down and away as she felt his gaze linger over her, from face to feet. Flattered that he would

acknowledge her presence, she took offense that he would scrutinize her within the princess' presence. The princess missed nothing and Suhayla knew she would be punished later.

The prince grinned at the princess. "Shall we enjoy the night air? The garden is lit and the stars are magnificent to behold."

Suhayla followed with meek obedience behind and in a daze. The night's dewy air, redolent of jasmine, clung to her. A row of braziers, flickering with flames, lit the central path. The fountain's rain glistened like ethereal beads. Fireflies blinked and winked in and among the flowers, shrubs and trees. In the greenish umbrage, she paused breathing deep. Away from the press of hot bodies and watching eyes she tried to calm herself to make sense of the emotions careening inside her. Her penumbra, reflected like a dark moon in the water of her heart, forced the recollection of Mama, lying there dead on her divan.

Princess strode close to the prince. Her eyes never left him.

"Dunyazad, catch a firefly for me," the prince said.

Giggling, the princess leapt. She followed one bug, a spark sailing slowly above her head and the garden.

Sultana followed her.

Suhayla stood alone in the wedge of shadow. She wished to have a prince courting her, envied the princess her ease of commanding others, her knowing and expecting exactly what her future would bring.

Prince Farir approached and stood near, blocking the light. The pungent scent of cloves, tobacco, and mint mingled with the sweaty animal scent of him.

"You are a precious gem."

"I am her handmaid."

"I will have you and the manuscript." She knew the words and voice as she knew her own heart. Her chest tightened.

"What manuscript?" Suhayla should have screamed. Tears rimmed her eyes. She would not show weakness by crying, but pushed back the fear and anger and confusion.

"Come. . ."

He reached out a hand to her, and she drew away, with quick strides putting distance between them. "I cannot wait any longer. I have searched for years."

"Never would I betray--"

Crickets and the high-pitched whine of other night insects rang out. "I think of you every night. You are my lotus flower. Your Baba is sick, anything could happen. He

smokes too much opium."

Stunned, Suhayla stared at him, unable to believe what the prince had just said. "How. . . How do you know?"

"It is my business to know."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The festivities continued, as did the lavish feasts, and She already had tired of them. Dunyazad slid her hand under Suhayla's arm. She gasped and pulled away.

Dunyazad said. "The prince adores me, does he not?"

Suhayla needed to recapture her breath and wit. "Yes. . . princess." She gulped. Dunyazad's delicate brows knit together, her forehead creased.

"It must be I drank too much of the honey water."

Suhayla glanced to the crowd gathered on her left. The prince stood there grinning at her. A seductive smile slid over his lips; she abruptly turned away to the princess.

"He has affection for you."

"Don't ever forget--he is mine." Dunyazad hissed and spit upon her face. "Now go!"

Wet dribbled down Suhayla's face. With an abrupt turn, humiliated beyond belief, she struggled to run through the crowd. She used her veil to wipe the warm phlegm from her forehead and corner of an eye.

"Are you looking to have your head removed from your body?" Zari said.

"I have no interest in him."

"That may be so, but his admiration for you is clear." Zari adjusted her veil. "Allah have mercy on you. Perhaps you will become a concubine."

"And be his?"

"You must have strong djinn to work that magic. When he is Sultan, and it could be any day, he will have any woman of his choosing."

Suhayla continued to stare out at some of the dancers twirling, their skirts and veils flying around them as the drums thumped faster and faster.

"He would not be the first, nor the last Sultan to have a woman's husband sent away to battle or simply have one beheaded."

With so many people pressing against Suhayla, the heat of bodies, the smell of sweat, she felt suffocated. "I need to escape."

"Suhayla. . ." She ignored Zari's call and walked into the cool air scented with jasmine and cedar. The weighty grief of Mama's death, and the uncertainty of Baba's health, and her own life, heaved upon her. Under a cedar she crept, hiding in the back of the garden, at the base of

a trunk. She unleashed all her sorrows into the night and earth, wetting the cool sand, brittle branches and leaves.

In the air drifted the lilting, plaintive song of a lone flute, which she had heard before. She ducked out from under the tree's limbs, and saw a dim figure of a white marble bench at the end of the path. It did not matter-- she was quite lost--somewhere in the immense garden. She moved closer to the bench when suddenly a cat appeared in her path. Before her, black as charcoal, the cat stood, tail twitching. Yellow eyes gazed up at her. She attempted to walk around the creature, yet the feline moved, blocking her way.

"Shoo, shoo, go away," she whispered. But the animal would not relent. Behind her someone stumbled, humming a tune. A very short, round man, Farir's dwarf, chuckled to himself. Suhayla turned abruptly to see him. The man put out his arms to her.

"Ah, a lady, a pearl in moonlight. Come, give us a kiss." He quickly closed in on her moving faster than she thought he was capable. The stench of alcohol preceded him.

The cat dashed for a shadowed area behind a tall shrub. The imp of a man attempted to reach for Suhayla, but she leapt away toward the wall where the cat had

disappeared.

In back of the shrub, she noticed a wide crack. She slid her hand along to find a portion of the wall had crumbled. The gap was wide enough for her. She hoisted herself up, and slipped easily through and jumped down on the other side. The drunkard called out to her in his slurring high-pitched voice. He could not have fit through the hole. She doubted he could even find it in his present condition.

An ancient tower looming over her and threw shadows all around. The hairs on the back of her neck tingled. Cool dew dampened her skin and raised goose bumps.

Pale and massive, the tower in the center of the walled enclosure appeared ghostly in the moonlight. She walked to it and put her hands upon the rounded, mud-brick turret. Rough, pock marked with age, bits of the outer stone layer crumbled under her fingers, and fell to the ground. She slid around sideways and found a huge iron lock hung from the door.

From above, the soft voice of an elderly man spoke thus: "There are entire limbs in the desert, jutting out of the sand; I have seen them with my own eyes! Ancient pharaohs of stone moan and whisper—I believe—sacred spells."

Suhayla backed away from the tower until she saw the window high above. The scent of tobacco clung to the air. The figure of a man filled the window. An amber glow from the interior lit his white tunic and thick black mane of hair as he leaned over the window's sill.

Suhayla gazed up at a dream.

"Al-Bey--" he glanced inside. "Perhaps the spells have worked." He pointed to her. "I am Aziz." He bowed.

She forgot about the humiliation, to watch for a sign that a vision or dream was becoming real. She forgot about which stars flashed in the firmament above. He and his window seemed to descend from the abode of heaven.

"What is your name?"

His voice sounded smooth, gentle for having been locked in a tower. She wanted more than anything to see his skin, his face, and his eyes. Yet all were undefined, blurred by distance and shadow.

"Suhayla." She bit her lip.

The sound of heavy footsteps approached her, as did the light from a blazing torch. She looked back up in a panic and in so doing stumbled over a large stone in thin, satin slippers.

He motioned for her to go. "Hide."

The guard with the torch moved around the base of the

tower. She kept moving with the deepest of shadows around the base. Isis, do not let him see her.

She threw her hair over her front with her spine pressed against the warmth of the bricks. Releasing her breath, she watched through the strands of dark locks as the guard's light retreated and disappeared.

She tossed my hair back. Daring to venture out the way she entered.

A fiery ball, a ray streaming of sparks, hissed and crackled overhead; the strangest light she had ever seen. She crouched down as dying embers rained down onto the sand before her. What an unearthly, bizarre fire. What kind of evil is this? What mischief of moon eclipse is this?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Suhayla abandoned her clothes in the anteroom and walked with care; the tile was moisture laden, and worn from countless women's feet.

In the great hammam light streamed down from round windows at the perimeter of the soaring dome. A series of lapis pillars lined the pool, a ghostly forest disappearing into a cavern of steam. Beyond the thick columns were alcoves with benches partially hidden in shadows.

Slick steps led her down to water, green-blue slipped, around her, enveloping her in warmth. She laughed for the sheer joy. As she breathed deep, and sank back against the rim of the pool, Suhayla rested the weight of her head upon the cool tile. The attar of rose and the scent of Myrrh filled her nostrils. Her troubles and tension dissipated as she exhaled. Wisps of bodies protruded from the steam, hints of limbs and heads, like ghosts. She was lulled by the gentle cadence of feminine voices. And she

wished she could sink into the silky heat and disappear for ever.

"Ah. . ." Husniya's voice reached her through the haze, and jarred her from peace. Her red lips against her white face looked like a mask. She closed the distance between them. Suhayla felt crowded against the edge of the pool. "Heat removes bad humors."

She tossed her onyx hair, as she draped her thin, ivory arms on the tile, her gold bangles ringing. "Musk of a man--" A hint of a smile played upon her lips. "The Prince already has eyes for me. Have you seen him? A handsome brute. Verile." A pale blue cleft shadowed her nearly flat chest from which erupted her ivory-porcelain peaks. Rosy nipples played at the glassy surface. "Have you ever smelled it?"

Suhayla's breasts were swelling, but were not substantial mounds of soft flesh. She could hear the sound of water spilling from the clay pipes into the pool. The continuous flowing and splashing, mesmerized her, and combined with the heat, coaxed her into a doze.

The steaming hammam, the sea-like water, thoughts of Ma made Suhayla think of the first time she bled. She awoke in her room, in her parent's house one morning; a warm stickiness clung to her inner thighs. She put her

fingers down there and brought them up, tips moist with blood.

She called Mama. She hurried, and a servant carried a ceramic basin of warm water and floral embroidered cloth.

The water shimmered, and from the bottom a peony--a honey-jeweled center, and a ring of cobalt petals tinged with saffron--wavered.

With gentle strokes, Mama washed her thighs as if she were a baby. "You are a woman. We will celebrate." Suhayla looked in the basin each time Mama rinsed the cloth. Blood disturbed the glassy surface as it pooled, curled around as if in arms, spiraling . . . and dispersed.

The Egyptian sun blazed through the jasmine vine clinging around the balcony and window, and reflected off Mama's bracelet, gold enhanced with mounted cabochons of ruby and emerald like enamels. Reflections colored the walls, rounds and ovals of hibiscus and peridot; and are forever etched in Suhayla's heart. Sadness bubbled up from the depths of the pool, from the pipes, and underground cisterns, from the Nile, the mother of all of Egypt. Tears filled her eyes.

A slight current rippled around her, held her in its arms. The sea green under the mist comforted her, buoyed her up. A sliver of sadness though, from the darker,

deepest part of herself, floated upward and emerged as tears. Suhayla squeezed her eyes shut. Oh Mama, she was so alone. She wound one arm around her chest and hung onto the edge of the pool with the other, her cheek resting against the cool tile.

"You want a husband of your own." Husniya's voice broke the silence.

Reluctant to unwind from her dream and her inner lament, Suhayla kept her eyes shut for a moment longer. She did not want to be bothered with conversation but she had so few friends.

"Be first wife—you have power then."

Suhayla opened my eyes.

"Love by one man is best—must be paradise." Husniya licked her thin lips. "Does princess have husband for you?"

"No." Suhayla shook her head for emphasis. "She will not choose a husband for me."

"You have wit, more than most girls here."

Suhayla studied Husniya's inky, narrow eyes, her marble-like face. She looked Suhayla up and down for a moment.

Suhayla wanted to sink into the depths of the pool and hide.

"Once your body swells to full womanhood, men will desire you for wife."

"Will I want them?" She longed for knowledge having to do with men, and love, for guidance from a trusted source.

"It is said the Yellow Emperor, was taught secrets by the Three Ladies Immortal: Sunnu, the Simple girl; Hsuan-hu, the Mysterious Maiden; and Tsai-nu, the Fancy girl. The Emperor, by honoring all three, attained long life. We need love and mystery as well, or we have short life, flower in heart--" she pointed a delicate finger to her chest, "--dies."

"My father--." Grief overwhelmed her; threatened to pour from her eyes and throat. Suhayla held this all at bay for as long as possible. Once out of the pool, her body weighed heavy, her limbs were clumsy. She found a bench and lay down to cool. A nearby fountain, with water bubbling up from the great storehouse below, ever flowing, spilled into its basin, and punctuated the air. She allowed her sorrow to flow.

Alone in the darkened alcove, Suhayla stretched, peering out and around a massive column, and stole a quick glance of other women, ghosts, limbs draping off of benches.

A bath attendant set a glass of hibiscus tea next to her. One woman lay on her belly as a woman rubbed her with scented oils, her skin shone. The crone's ancient breasts hung like empty sacks and flapped during her ministrations.

Suhayla closed her eyes and walked her fingers down to her sex. The warmth of her inner body surprised her. Soft like petals of a rose, she stroked. Urgency bubbled up from her silence, her Mysterious Maiden. She brought myself to a sea of waves, mounting ecstasy, narcotic; the tightness in her heart and her pelvis drained away. Dew moistened her fingers, a fragrance similar to honeyed yogurt, but wholly unique. Suhayla's thoughts drifted to Aziz, would he find her beautiful? Of all the men she had met so far, he was the one she would want to know. His plaintive flute songs lived in her mind and nestled in her heart, where the black pith of fear and grief lingered.

In the grand salon, Fatima read a scroll on her lap, the morning light shone through the screen, a pattern on the Persian carpet. "Come, sit beside me."

Reluctant, Suhayla conceded, somewhat surprised by her request. But as mama used to say, 'even sour milk is good for something.' She did not want to be enemies with the

Chief Concubine. Fatima offered her fruit. "Tomorrow is the full moon of Hamash. It is the anniversary of the death of Umm 'Abdallah, a mystic. I make a pilgrimage to her shrine annually. Would you like to accompany me?"

"I have not been out of the palace since I arrived."

"Ours is a closed world within a closed world. I have obtained permission from the Sultan. The change will do you good." Fatima looked up and signaled to one of the servants. "Sada, we shall travel in a litter." The serving girl bowed and went.

Surrounded by heavily armed guards, their weapons glinting in the sun, they proceeded. Although her veil extended from head to waist, she could see through the delicate gauze. As distance broadened between them and the palace, Fatima visibly relaxed. Suhayla pulled the curtain down with a finger.

We passed alleys, narrow streets of a labyrinthine city. The cry of a baby echoed. Lone figures disappeared around corners. The aroma of citrus preceded the cart of an orange seller. Dust and noise of the Suk arose around them. Stalls and shops crowded together.

Outside a butcher, stacked in a mound were goat heads: blank, frozen eyes stared: bared incisors, thick tongues protruded and twisted, like pallid dead snakes.

The image of Mama's dead face, welled up, vivid: glazed ebony eyes, a pink tongue between lips, glass of spilled tea. How Suhayla had shrieked and cried an unending river then.

A sob escaped. Nauseousness swirled in her belly.

A hand on her shoulder. "Sh. . . Sh. We have passed." An embroidered cloth fragrant with rosewater, one Suhayla always carried with her that had belonged to Mama, absorbed her tears.

Suhayla recovered her composure.

"Umm 'Abdallah and her husband were seekers of inner knowledge. They both learned through dreams."

Suhayla thought of her dreams of the mysterious black cats, and the strange other worldly glimpses of an earlier time in Egypt.

"Life is a strange journey."

The litter was set on the ground. They both stood and stretched their legs.

The shrine, a non-descript block of red granite had only her name carved on the front. Before the tomb, a fleshy woman sat on a crudely woven cloth upon the sand. Cross legged, she rocked from side to side as she sang, eyes closed, waving one hand.

Heart dreams

Find hidden routes
Nectar of God
Shape our destiny
Fill us up with the fragrance of love

On the shores of the Oxus river
I found inner knowledge
The golden light
Revealer of beauty
Dreams of the faithful
God is refuge.
Silence is refuge.
Who sees me
Sees God.

Fatima and Suhayla stood, surrounded by the guards, behind the crowd that congregated around the Shayka. Fatima nodded. "She has been here every day for five years."

"What is her name?"

"Shayka Zaynab Al-Latif, she is Umma reincarnated."

Women with children in their arms, children hanging onto their skirts; men, a few with brocade robes; and all manner of common people, waited before the holy one.

One woman, about Suhayla's age, forehead creased with worry, and a crying baby in her arms, approached and knelt before the Shayka.

The woman touched the young mother and her baby, and reached into a basket at her side, pulling out a half loaf of bread. The Shayka pressed the food to the woman's heart murmuring a prayer.

A man approached, with wild, white hair and a beard, knelt down before the saint. With watery eyes he asked for "more customers," clasping his hands together in prayer.

An elderly woman, robes complete black, sank at the Shayka's feet and cried, "My Naseem lies on a bed day and night, give him grace, give him his life back!" She clutched a string of beads. Two other women, covered in black chadors, went to her, and helped her up. They murmured, "Allah will prevail. The Shayka heard you Meena. Come with us."

Suhayla knelt before the wise woman. She did not speak until she looked up at her. The Shayka's intense gaze met hers. Suhayla felt as if the Shayka saw into her heart, the truth—her horrible vision that preempted Mama's death. Baba's sickness.

"Abandon," the Shayka said and smiled.

Suhayla stood, stepping a few strides away, making her

way for Fatima, walking backward. Suhayla turned and peered at the sky; she forgot about the crowd. Potency burned in her: she had desired to run till she could not breathe, till she had thrown herself into the Nile, and sunk.

A flock of white doves whirled, flapping as a single cloud, into the blazing, late afternoon light.

A man cried out. "I am in exile!"

"We are all exiles of the world," the Shayka said, her voice calm and soothing. "Do you have children?"

"Yes, yes, holy seer-four."

"Go home. Cradle your youngest in your arms. Look at the child, how she smiles, content at just being. It is an image of your true self."

"Bismi'Llah." In the Name of God.

"What could she mean? Abandon."

"We each receive a blessing. It is individual—a gift." Fatimah said and sighed. "I keep praying for my daughter, for knowledge of her existence, her home, but I have received none." Her shoulders dropped. "Allah reveals some things and yet not others."

"Abandon my past?" Suhayla's heart held a black, hollow hole. She leaned her head against the door frame of

the litter. Rocking with the motion, she stared out through the parted curtain.

"We are different from the other women you know," Fatima said.

Suhayla stared out to the children running by heaps of refuse, mothers yelling, and shop keepers watching over their wares.

"We are nightingales in an aviary of sparrows, and more in touch with our hearts. We are connected to the natural world, more awake to the powers within us."

"You are referring to your palmistry abilities?"

"We are more aware of our lives—the possibilities—of the past, lives which may have been. . ."

"Oh," Suhayla said, not at all clear about which she spoke.

Fatima leaned over, the scent of jasmine potent. "You spoke of a vision about my daughter which disturbed me much."

Suhayla glanced at her. "I spoke impulsively, without feeling. I--"

"No, no. You do not understand me. It is I who must say, 'health to your head.' I do not complain; your vision is the same as mine. . . . The dagger in my heart—twisted." Deep creases formed in her forehead. She turned

away.

"Oh Fatima, I am. . ." Fatima held up a hand.
Patiently, Suhayla waited for her reply.

"In my dreams I chase after her. I watch her being pulled behind heavy doors, her face full of horror."
Fatima lowered her pain-tinged voice. "Only ten when. . . Jawhara. I have not spoken her name since. I no longer count the years." Fatima touched at her eyes with the tip of her veil.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"I have seen the prince in the tower."

"I knew his mother," Fatima said, her pitch deepening. Suhayla's ears almost burned. "The first wife, Nourhan, hated her and was extremely jealous of Yasmina's beauty. She had long ebony hair, like silk, and emerald eyes. Nourhan did everything in her power to subdue and subjugate Yasmina, so she would lose the Sultan's favor. Eventually Nourhan found a way to have her condemned. There are not many left who were at the palace in those doomed, bloody days. None of us in the harem dared breath. Nourhan's wrath was unrelentless. She died sometime later."

"Of What?"

"Old age, her health gradually declined."

"Nourhan gave birth to Farir?" Suhayla wanted this all to be clear.

"Mmmm. Handsome brute of a man isn't he? He studied

alchemy and medicine with men in China."

"Does he have a pure heart?"

Fatima turned to her. "--Rumor began and brought down the beautiful Yasmina. She lost her head quite soon after. One can't be too careful. Nourhan is long gone, but there are other powers waiting, watching for just that kind of rapacious rumor; and they would think nothing of sacrificing an innocent, such as you, for their dire purposes."

Suhayla felt fully chastised and pulled her veil tighter about her face.

People thronged in the city of tiny shops, under the ancient roofs and surrounded by hundreds of establishments. Maze like streets of the suk were full with merchant's wares, tables, and carpets strewn upon the ground. Shopkeepers called out prices, and haggled with customers. Children ran, women and men were packed in the narrow alleys; heat, dust, noise all pressed upon her.

A guard walked next to her door, a tall and swarthy man, he brandished a shield and spear.

Minarets and gold domes aspired to the heavens here and there. The scent of curries, roasting meats and spices sweetened the air. Secret alleyways led off from the riddle of lanes, some of them too narrow for carts.

They strode through an ancient stone archway into the gloom of the old market. Vaulted ceilings above blocked out all the sun except for a small courtyard here, a single tree there. Boys peered out of the darkness of their carpet shops.

The litter halted and waited by the entrance of one shop. One of the guards went in and announced, "Make way for the Sultan's Family." Women left the shop, looking at the litter, trying to see them.

"The fabric at the merchant's shop is of such quality to befit us and the rest of the royal family."

In a flourish of silks and brocades Fatima entered; Suhayla followed quietly behind glancing up at the roof of hanging fabric and heavy stones. Lean black cats skittered out of her path. Even in the gloom of the cavernous shop, such fabrics as she had never seen, glowed: silks flowered and striped; thick brocades, satins, thin gauzes in all the colors of a garden or jewels: carmine, emerald, peacock blue, indigo, canary yellow, ruby, and garnet.

As Suhayla intently gazed at the different textiles, caressing them with her fingers, Fatima rounded the mountainous stack and threw her hands up in excitement.

"Ah, that is what I am looking for." She pointed to an exquisite carmine at the top of the stack.

The elder merchant reached up and held the bolt of rose before her. He unwound a bit of the silk.

"How lovely. What do you think?" Fatima asked.

"It is more beautiful than any flower."

"Sister," Fatima said, "Take the silk into the light of the farthest lamp, the brightest, and see if it glows and shines." Suhayla did her bidding with sincerity and on her return heard the low timbre of Fatima's hushed voice mingled with one distinctly male and deeper. A young man bowed to Fatima most regally. Bearded, the onion like turban emphasized his height, even in the dim light.

Suhayla gave him the round of fabric, which he added to the bundle already tucked under his arm.

He flashed Fatima an unabashed smile revealing even, white teeth. "Take with thee my blessings and those of Allah's, may he watch over you and bless the Sultan." He touched the fingers of his right hand against his lips and then his forehead in the sign of respect.

"Allah watch over you." Fatima whirled dramatically and with all the pomp of a Sultana. A black cat, Suhayla had not noticed, jumped down in front of her leaving a stack of black cloth behind.

Once in the litter and moving, Fatima said, "We must return to the palace. For the prince in the tower--"

"You know him?"

"A gift for him, so he does not lose hope."

"You are allowed?"

"No," Fatima said. "But you know how."

"How do you know?" Suhayla asked.

"We all have our ways." She grinned. "Dress as a simple servant."

A serving girl Suhayla had never seen before forced a small pouch, a swathe tied many times with tawny silk into the hollow her palm. Therein a small, hard object was wrapped.

Suhayla wore an old, plain robe, draped in a dark veil. A cook who thought she was a serving girl, gave her a basket of food for the prince and the tower guard. After unlocking the heavy gate, he grabbed a handful of bread and half the cheese, stuffing his mouth. The heavy cedar door groaned open, and he waved for her to enter.

"Salaam." Suhayla stepped over the threshold and into the bowels of the tower. The ordure stunk of human waste and food refuse, the smell made her feel sick. She clutched a handful of her veil to her nose.

A stone staircase, lit by the dim light that shone

through a barred window, ascended from the back of the chamber. The stones under her feet tilted and almost threw her forward onto her face. Suhayla trembled with excitement, and she felt a siren of the evening; not knowing what to expect, what response the Prince would give her, as she stepped on the worn, cracked stones coiling upward. Her legs wobbled under her.

By the second floor landing, light issued forth from a room. Silent, she stepped into the soft amber glow. The prince and another man were bent over scrolls, murmuring to each other.

The prince faced me. He and Suhayla stared at each other, surprised, shocked, even stunned. She had not envisioned him to be so tall. Although hair and beard were tangled, and his robe tattered, his eyes and clove-hued face were infinitely more appealing than anything her imagination had envisioned. He gave her a broad toothed grin.

"I, I. . ." She immediately cast her eyes down as it was not proper for a woman to look at a man directly, especially a royal one. "Your food."

The older man said, "I will take that." She handed him the basket. "-and bring tea."

"Allah be with you." The Prince touched his fingers

to his chest, mouth and forehead.

"Salaam." She bowed.

In the upper most of the tower, the light of a single lamp glowed.

"Please make yourself comfortable." The Prince motioned. "If I am awkward it is because we rarely have visitors." He motioned for her to sit. She made her way around the table, and gently sat on the divan. The brocade, once fine, was thread bare at the edge.

Through her indigo veil she studied him. Hair, black as the darkest raven, curled in ringlets to his shoulders, and contrasted with the pale tunic and pants. A deep scar marred his face, yet his lithe form embodied an underlying strength, a quiet, still power like a lion's. He settled on a rickety chair. The scent of tobacco and smoke mingled with vestiges of frankincense and myrrh.

What struck Suhayla most about him were his eyes, a bronzed jade, distinctly almond-shaped, as if he were from a foreign people, or another world entirely. They mesmerized her. A deep wedge of wrinkled skin, as if hit by lightning or cut by a sword, trailed the left side of his face, from bearded chin to brow. The flesh at the corner of his left eye was pinched ever so slightly.

Despite his scar, the angles of his face, his cheek

bones were sculpted, dark as cloves. At the base of his neck, an oval hollow was disclosed by a robe, remnants of gold embroidery around the neckline, shimmered.

She felt shy. He gazed at the whole of her—as if trying to perceive the curves of her body—under the ankle length swathe. She wanted to squirm under his scrutiny, and felt awkward not knowing what to say.

“Our appearance is far unbecoming for such a lady . . . or djinni whatsoever you are.”

She could not contain my smile. “I assure you I am quite as mortal as you.” She wanted to ask the prince about life, how he could be content staying in the tower and not loose hope. She could not think of how to begin.

“—And a courageous one at that.” He gave to her a chain with a pendant.

Suhayla laid the shinny onyx against her skin, the fire opals, eyes of the cat, glistened and sparkled in the lunar glow.

“The cat--.” She blurted out in her uneasiness; she had never been so close to a man, or to such a scarred person. She felt sadness for him, for such a handsome man, the lightning strike of pale skin that pulled his eye and the corner of a lip. She fingered the pendant. “I love this.”

The Prince shrugged. "It waited for you. For all these years I prayed to Allah for a new friend, a woman."

Suhayla looked down at her fingers and the black smooth of the stone, not knowing what else to do or say.

Through the one window, the moon's effervescence shone, revealing the veins of cracked limestone. Walls curved into a cavernous dome high above her head, the apex hidden in the gloom of charcoal shadows.

Over the divan hung an immense artful tapestry, wild roses, single-petalled flowers, stems entwined with each other, wound about the outer edge. The moon in all her phases circled inside the gold threaded perimeter which encased a scene: a pair of proud, regal looking lions hunted in the desert with the gold disc of the sun behind them.

"This is for you." Suhayla lifted up the tiny bundle.

Aziz's eyes, tinged with mirth, met hers. He leaned over, extending a long arm, smooth fingers and palm cupped. She placed the wrapped object there, held her trembling hand above his for a moment.

He rolled the clothed object in his hand and unwound the fabric. The jewel, he held to the lamp's light.

"Who?" He almost choked.

"Fatima."

The prince cried out a strange sound. He held his head. All the while his body shook.

She had not an inkling of what to do. Tears welled in her eyes. "Please. . . How can I help?"

The one small bronze lamp on the circular table was her only comfort. She twisted an end of her hair in her fingers and stood, walked over by him. She put out a hand but dared not touch him. She did not want to foresee his horrible death, or even worse, perhaps bring his death about. The terrible visions she had when she touched Mama, Baba, the Sultana all came crashing in on her.

He looked up at her hoping, searching for a touch, comfort. In slow motion, with both hands, all the while gazing at him, she reached up to her veil, and felt for creases below her face. Suhayla grasped the tissue-thin fabric between her trembling fingers. She slid the length of the indigo over her face, down the front of her robe, a breath of a swish. Softness nestled on her feet.

His eyes drew her in to their pools as if by secret enchantments: bespoke of desert nights under a star-studded blanket of velvet. This primeval force, called to her.

They both hung, wholly absorbed in a world of spirit, soul connected to soul, where distant flutes sang of love;

and drums thrummed, dervishes whirled, as if a hundred djinn had meant for them, after a thousand years of solitude, to be together once again, as if they had reunited after a thousand years apart.

She did not want to let go. Did he experience this same intensity between them? The slightest sliver of doubt and fear filled her mind.

Heat from the moment dissipated, yet inner warmth still clung to her body.

His voice wavered. "I have dreamed of you. Before me stands beauty, such as I've not seen for . . . You are a nightingale, a rose."

When he stood, she gazed up at him, quite taller. "I knew the moment you arrived at the palace."

"How?"

"There are so few of us here, we have a greater presence than the others." Suhayla thought of her visions and dreams, and Fatima's gift of reading palms.

"I dreamed you." He said as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Those were words she did not want to hear. Chaos threatened her, and the world she thought she had just begun to understand had been turned upside down.

"My mentor and friend, Shaykh Al-Bayawzi copied these

from inside one of the ancient temples." Aziz pointed to the text he had copied with a reed pen on the back of an old scroll. With fine precision he had created the strange symbols and shapes. Some resembled birds, animals, some people kneeling or sitting. Some of the diminutive symbols he repeated several times. The language pulled me in with wonder and delight—certain shapes seemed familiar.

"How beautiful, graceful, and defined," she said.

"We are not sure what each stands for but some seem to be self explanatory: rope, tying; a box with a door, a house; a lion; an owl; a snake, a serpent or viper; bundles of wheat, food; a musical instrument." His voice reverberated in the room, filled the dusty, dark chamber with life. His words, the symbols conjured a world hazy around the edges, misty; one she had not only dreamed of since her mother's death, but crept around her mind and visions: temple columns--a gilded forest--a murmurous chant drew me up the marble steps, into a massive hall pulsating with prayers. Lions dozed in the shadowed interior. Aziz's deep timbre reawakened her awe of him, the first time she had seen him sitting in the window of his tower playing the flute.

The sound of footsteps echoed from the stair well. At the top step stood the elderly man, in a white robe; his

eyes filled with mirth. He held a silver tray with three glasses of steaming tea.

"Have tea with us to celebrate this occasion." Aziz took the tray from the servant's hands and set all on the table. He poured jasmine tea into delicate glass cups, the edges chipped above the rings of silver.

"My trusted mentor and friend, Shaykh Al-Bayawzi."

The Shaykh bowed with reverence. Aziz leaned back on the divan. "Sit my friend, sit."

Al-Bayawzi pulled on his beard. "What news from the lowly world?"

"The princess will be wed soon. In a few weeks."

"Allah help us. And the Sultan?" The Shaykh sipped tea.

"He is aged but still rules."

Al-Bayawzi sighed and looked upward. "Allah is all knowing and has brought us together on this auspicious day."

"Auspicious? Explain yourself my dear friend," Aziz said.

"Mars has just appeared in the evening sky--" He stood and walked to the window. "--In the seventh heaven and will, within six months be conjunct to Venus."

"The planet of war and the planet of love." Suhayla

said, as all the parts of her predicament whirled in her head. Both men looked at her. "My father taught me."

"Yes, when the constellation of Leo hovers above the horizon," Al-Bayawzi said.

"—Thank you for the pendant." She placed my fingers around the warm obsidian.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Days later in the grand salon, Suhayla perched on a cushioned divan sipping steaming tea from a silver-rimmed glass. She had a few moments rest from serving the Princess, and was grateful to have some time to just be still. The din of women's chatter, their timbre of voices, the swishing of silk against silk, women coming and going drifted about her.

Fatima occupied the central divan, her women gathered around her. Husniya and her friends, and servants, gathered nearby.

Suhayla's thoughts swam with Aziz: the mirth in his eyes, his attentiveness warmed her heart, yet his predicament overwhelmed her.

"You look as if you are in a dream." Fatima broke her spell.

"Mmm, musing on something, that is all."

"Must be pleasant," she said.

"Yes." She said, not wanting to divulge her deepest thoughts.

Fatima looked up with excitement. "Ah, someone has a delivery."

A woman drew toward them carrying a parcel wrapped in rough fabric. "For you, Fatima."

"No, it is not for me." With glee Fatima motioned to Suhayla. "This is for you, sister."

"Me?"

"Yes." Fatima smiled.

"How lucky! A gift by the Chief Concubine. What an honor," Husniya said. She smiled sweetly, her limbs and fingers were especially imbued with delicateness, fragile. She handed Suhayla the package.

"I believe, you have met my newest sister, Husniya." said Fatima.

"Ah. . ." Husniya said with certain coolness. "She is becoming my closest confidant."

"Go on, open it." Fatima shook her elegant ringed hand.

Many of the women craned their necks eager to see what was contained as Suhayla untied the rough outer fabric. The stiff cloth fell away like outer protective petals

revealing the glow of rosy carmine.

"Oh Allah, this is the most beautiful. Fatima, thank you." The murmur of agreement echoed through out the room.

"For a new skirt and chemise perhaps?" Fatima said. "You could wear them for the princess' wedding. My servant, Attaya, will sew it; she is the best seamstress in the palace."

"Allah bless you sister." Suhayla revealed to her a large smile.

"We visited the merchant at the perfect time," said Fatima.

"Why?"

"The incidents of highway robbery are occurring with more frequency. The Sultan is worried, for the amounts of goods and money seized on the raids, is mounting. Some of the traders are ruined; some were assaulted and killed." Murmurs rang out among the women.

"Is the Sultan taking measures against these thieves and barbarians?" Husniya asked.

"Yes, He has increased the police in the streets especially at night. May Allah protect us," said Fatima. "If the marauding continues however, we may not be allowed to venture out until the thieves are caught and beheaded."

Husniya plucked olives and goat cheese pieces from an

bronze platter. "I am sure Sultan's men will catch the rouges and hang their heads at the city gate."

Her attention returned to Suhayla's gift, the petal soft silk. Husniya leaned over to me. "Lovely. With such garment you need jewels." She removed the strand of pearls. "I shall gift these to you."

The rope of pearls, the color of the moon peering through mist during a rare storm in winter, rolled in between Suhayla's fingers.

"Your kindness--"

"A rare gift indeed." Fatima fanned herself.

Husniya smiled.

Fatima lifted her head after sipping tea. "Suhayla does not like to be touched."

Without allowing her fingers near Husniya's, Suhayla clasped the glassy beads about her neck and glided her fingers over the cool, mirror-smooth spheres. Watery and dreamlike, Suhayla could well imagine them from the depths of the glassy sea.

"Pearls suit you," Fatima said.

Husniya winked at Suhayla. "They match your coloring, a true embellishment, owned by very few women in the Orient." Her eyes went up and down the length of her.

"Oh, but what is the other necklace? Surely it cannot

compare. You must remove it, the pearls must be worn alone; they will not suffer competition."

Suhayla's hand flew to her bosom instinctually. "I will not, cannot possibly forsake my pendent, it is my sacred talisman." The deep seated passionate stirrings for Aziz even surprised her.

Sorrow for him only grew and at the same time so did her frustration. Many powers blocked her progress; none of which she had even begun to have understood. She will pledge her loyalty to him.

Husniya's eyes flashed with amazement. "Ah, a secret lover."

Suhayla did not deny her statement.

Husniya held a black olive before her cherry rouged lips. "Love is like food, to be savored upon the tongue, allow all the flavors and juices to awaken, meld and bring one to joy. To engorge oneself on love is to be filled as a goblet overflows with plum wine."

Fatima sighed with boredom. Husniya then popped the olive into her mouth and rolled her eyes with dramatic pleasure. A little moan escaped.

Her ring, a faceted blood-red ruby of exquisite clarity and purple crystalline depths, caught Suhayla's eye. The crimson velvet vest over her gossamer white

chemise made the stone's hue more prominent.

Before the Shaykh, as was the usual custom, Suhayla perched on a cushion, her legs crossed under the table. She fidgeted, Mama's journal open to a page she had not before read. Inside the shapes of rose petals, she sought ancient symbols. Are those circles only her imagination run away with her or are they similar to the ones that appeared on her paper that one time—just to disappear again.

In the dove with a branch in its beak, Suhayla saw the shape of a crane. And in a fancy flourish at the end of a prayer, a snake riggled.

A sadness so deep it seems an unending river of tears, a river that leads to a sea—her heart. She could not say she would ever be really happy again—if her heart will ever feel light again or content. Allah, open a path, make my way beautiful, help me to find happiness.

"What bothers such a young heart?" He asked. A truly pious man; he observed me from watery blue eyes in a non-judgmental and unoffending way. He held his ink pen with a boney hand and squinted quizzically exposing tea and coffee stained teeth.

Suhayla let out a breath she had not realized she held. Perhaps the scholar could vanquish some of the

chaos, may be there were answers in his ancient pages of inky script.

"I . . . I cannot touch. . ." A pulse quivered in my throat, I would not cry. "—Ever since my mama went to join the prophet." She looked down at the thick, stiff pages waiting for an answer.

"Faith is an anchor in a bottomless sea." He spoke softly, gently, his breath dampened with the odor of onions and cardamom. "One Sufi mystic said, "Darkness sees to it that our essence is veiled, and this veil cannot be dissolved except through immense efforts of many kinds."

"If I found the Ism-el-Aazam, the hidden name of God, could I command my path and life? Is God also manifest as lions, the moon, fish and. . . women? With all the constant, complex modulations of the astronomical bodies—surely, God must be there too."

He dipped his pen in an ink pot and scratched letters upon a narrow piece of paper. "Take this hizb. Every morning and evening recite this prayer to Allah with firm inner belief for He is the One who bestows with noble generosity: 'There is no power for any creature before the creator.'

"Mingle with friends who have turned their face towards God and have turned away from this world."

Aziz. She should trust him above all others; he had the finest heart compared to all other people around her.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Before the Shaykh, as was the usual custom, Suhayla perched on a cushion, her legs crossed under the table. She played with her reed pen; Mama's journal lay open to a page she had not yet seen. She examined the stylized, swirling letters; the shapes of roses with petals unfurling where she sought to discover ancient symbols disguised therein. Were the circles and glyphs only her imagination or are they similar to the ones that appeared on her paper that one time—magically as if an invisible djinni scribed them—just to disappear again.

Within Ma's writing, she sought the story within the story: in the dove with a branch in its beak, Suhayla saw a crane, a stork like bird with a slender arching neck and long beak. And in a fancy flourish at the end of a prayer, a snake wriggled.

She stared at the inky script searching for answers but the letters and drawings blurred as tears stung her eyes. Like when she sank under the water in the pool in the hammam, she lost focus of the outer world; her body and innards cooked, pushing all emotions to the surface, a kettle boiling. "Allah, open a path for me, make my way beautiful, help me to find happiness. I have a hole in my

heart; I hunger for the peace and life I had before Ma
died."

"What bothers such a young heart?" The Shaykh asked seated behind the carved and pierced cedar screen. His watery eyes observed her as a loving father. Holding his ink pen with a boney hand he smiled exposing tea and coffee stained teeth.

Suhayla let out a ragged breath she had not realized she held. "I . . . I cannot touch. . ." A pulse quivered in her throat. "—Ever since my mama went to join the prophet." She looked down at the thick, stiff pages waiting for an answer.

"Faith is an anchor in a bottomless sea." He spoke softly, gently, his breath dampened with the odor of onions and cardamom. "One Sufi mystic said, "Darkness sees to it that our essence is veiled, and this veil cannot be dissolved except through immense efforts of many kinds."

"If I found the Ism-el-Aazam, the hidden name of God, could I command my path and life? Is God also manifest as lions, the moon, fish and. . . . women?" She said.

"With all the constant, complex modulations of the astronomical bodies and stars, the divine light exists there too." He dipped his pen in an ink pot and scratched letters upon a narrow piece of paper. "Take this hizb.

Every morning and evening recite this prayer to Allah with firm inner belief for He is the One who bestows with noble generosity: 'There is no power for any creature before the creator.' Mingle with friends who have turned their face towards the divine and have turned away from this world."

Friends? She almost laughed. Only Aziz floated to mind. Would he perhaps use her? Yet, she remembered his slender face, his gentle gaze, his flashing smile as guileless. With him she felt an ease despite the tension, the fear and gnarled wants to touch him. And the harem women she sensed she had only seen the surface of their minds and souls. They were entangled in their own wants and needs, trickery and invisible webs, nuances, she wished to know their hearts, but perhaps it would take years or was a hopeless task. She could only trust herself and her visions.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Farir led Dunyazad down the long cavernous corridor, Suhayla lagging behind. Stark, somber ancient columns stretched up to an arched doorway. The keys Farir wielded, dangled, and accompanied the echoes of their footsteps. Suhayla could not help but feel stirred by Farir's heady

and overwhelming scent of tobacco, mint and cloves. And this mingled with Dunyazad's sweet, intoxicating cloud of perfume: oil of rose, night blooming jasmine, and ambergris.

The heavy door creaked on brass hinges and air rushed at them reeking of odd, peculiar smells, of ash, smoke, rot mingled with an odor. The scent reminded her of burnt refuse and the rotting of eggs.

Farir put his arm under Dunyazad's and encouraged her forward. He looked back to Suhayla. She saw his drowsy-edged glance, his charming grin, that the harem women talked about finding irresistible; princely. "Alchemy is the future, not the sword. I will have all the secret books housed here," he said. His gaze settled on Suhayla.

"Refuge I take by the Lord of Day Break," Dunyazad said. She walked in ahead and pulled her robe around her as if she were about to walk amongst lepers. "What filth, what are all these strange bottles—and that smell—"

Suhayla sighed at the princess' needless fear and checked herself from shaking her head and calling her an 'ignorant woman.'

"This room contains my life's work." His stern, hawkish profile faced forward, and he extricated his arm

from the Dunyazad's grasp.

Light poured in from three bay windows and as the Prince strode to the center of the chamber dust arose in his wake: particles glistened; motes took to the air, and floated like dead, feathery djinn caught in a sleepy invisible current. Webs, like some ancient widow's hair, scalloped the apexes and the cornices of the windows.

"You ought to have servants clean in here, ugh,"
Dunyazad said.

"They are not allowed here. No one is." Farir's expression betrayed his whole life of being the heir apparent, and schooled in warfare, languages, history; and except instances of demands from the Caliph, he had his way. His eyes, restless with excitement, were dark with hundreds of years of breeding in the Levant. His family lines had swallowed Bedouin and Arabic tribes, to be constrained and ruled by his Turkish blood.

Excited, Suhayla went her own direction for a moment. Rows of long tables were laden with a variety of tear-drop shaped bottles, thin flasks, brass tubing, and other sundry metal items she had never before seen.

Princess stepped closer to the Prince and spoke with an imperious tone. "Surely God is the greatest power and abhors humans attempting to best his."

He rose to his full height, much taller than any woman, with an icy glare. "If you do not care to see my chamber, return to the harem at once."

Without a word, Dunyazad attempted to slip her arm Under Farir's, but he shook her away. She followed after him cross, her lips set in a pout.

"The holy prophet has said: 'Verily the men of knowledge are the inheritors of the prophets!'" Farir walked to the vast chest filled with small drawers, red paint worn at the pulls. "Distillation, reduction,alchemy wipes away the vast accretion of the unbridled dust piles: philosophers have frittered away their whole lives ruminating over such--science clears the way for new light--chemical substances and their reactions makes the world of God known to men."

Suhayla examined the different compounds. She had walked into a foreign world where the powers of the djinn could be seen and their fires bested. She burned to see, to know, to understand. "I have read that each is ruled by a planet, or Qamar, the moon--"

Farir stared at her amazed. "My dear, yes, yes. . . . The sun contains nar, fire, and acts upon other compounds, ruling many." He was a different man, a true alchemist, and he gazed at her with a white-toothed grin, charming.

She could not deny the attention he showered upon her was pleasant.

"And what of the stars?" Suhayla said.

Dunyazad stepped between them, her expression stormy. There was a moment of impasse; they observed each other. Dunyazad's eyes slid to Suhayla and narrowed. She raised a hand as if to push or pinch and hissed at Suhayla's trespass. Suhayla stepped away.

Farir laughed, a low sound but not a harsh one. For a moment Suhayla felt the distinct sensation of danger. Dunyazad's eyes harbored a dark, glassine look. Again Suhayla found herself hating the Princess.

Unfazed he strode to his chest. "Like our sun, they are ruled by nar, fire. The Hermetic principle teaches, 'As above, so below'. These boxes contain the various bodies of the world metals, stones, and salts—and the volatile liquids, or spirits." Like a school boy eager to display his knowledge, Farir went to the table strewn with strangely shaped sort of glass jars. "I have a range of alembics and crucibles." He inhaled. "Ah. . . to breathe the smoke and dust of creation. . . and destruction."

"Fire burns under the crucible for melting of the various bodies." He gazed at Suhayla. "The alembics refine and transmute ground minerals, salts, volatile

liquids. With these I sometimes make elixirs, transmuted materials into desiccative powders. This chamber contains my life's work—my search for the exactness in God's world, I experiment with the different bodies to make compounds and record my results. They seem to possess invisible djinn, but--I control them. I form them." His voice low. "I am their father, their lord to command them to do what I will them."

Farir took a grey stone and struck at it with another. Sparks flew and ignited a flame under a diminutive black iron pot perched on three spidery like legs.

"How do you command them?" Dunyazad asked, with a coy tilt to her head.

"Their measurements must be precise; the proportions of each body according the others. By doing so, I command the effect, their transformed behavior when all are together."

"Like a soup of many ingredients in a cook's pot," Suhayla said. "But the lamb must be in exact measure to the amount of rice and saffron."

"Yes, yes." His eyes widened, his face brightened.

As he went to his chest and pulled out a drawer, Dunyazad glared at Suhayla with eyes narrowed into dark slits. She reached back and tried to strike Suhayla.

Farir spooned a red powder into a bowl and hurried to them. "Look, watch the substance in the pot." With great care he poured one spoonful inside. Red shiny particles fell. "Experience confirms all and only by viewing a phenomenon is it real."

They shuffled closer to look.

"Some substances are volatile. The effect of combining of minerals with chemicals can be violent, one must be careful," he said.

Puffs of smoke curled up before their faces and emitted a strange, acrid smell. Sparks spit out in a fiery surge. Dunyazad screamed and with all her strength slammed the palm of her hand into Suhayla's shoulder, knocking her back into the table behind. The alembics rattled and shook, pestles clattered, and glass struck glass, rolled and shattered on the stone.

Cool marble pressed against her backside, hip and arm. For a moment Suhayla found she could barely breathe. Farir bent over her. She looked up at him, aware of his scent of smoke, and tobacco and something else, less definable, like the sun and wind. He reached out a hand, finely shaped, strong, and smooth. Once upright, Suhayla rubbed her arm and hip.

"Are you alright?" He gazed at her, his forehead

creased.

"I, yes, I think so."

He turned to the Princess. "You will never be admitted again."

For days after Suhayla endured, stood against the wall, with the other handmaids, two young women about her age, and a young girl, a child of about seven.

"He worships me," Princess would say from time to time. And her nose would wrinkle with the thought of it. Her face would flush and she made her hands busy with beads, a little girl's game. When bored the princess would think of another task, and give a dismissive gesture without looking. "Fill the water ewer," which Suhayla had just filled a moment ago; "Fetch my other mirror". And when she had brought the princess' favorite almond sweet, Salloo, she said, "I want Baklawa not that, and tell Cook I want lamb tonight."

On the way to the kitchen Suhayla stomped, clenched fists on the platter and ate a handful of sweets. In the kitchen she inhaled a drought of the cooking bread. "My Princess is treating me like a common slave."

Nessim gave a jovial laugh. His pot belly, and the white stained cloth wrapped about his middle, shook. "What

did you do?"

"—Oh! If she changes her mind again, I hope you will put curdled rats in her pastry!"

He bowed as if she were royalty. His laugh eased her mind.

"You know I will do anything for you my spry one."

"I hate how everyone tries to put walls around themselves, around me."

"Life limits. Do what you are able in the life Allah gave to you." He touched a floured finger tip to her cheek. "Now go, before you irk her more."

The wall of the veil separated Suhayla from God and from the spirits of her parents. Walls separated her from the outside world. Hidden, invisible walls were more painful, immovable; hatred and jealousy were like double-ended blades between Princess and her. Suhayla considered herself a *naqtu'a*, a tree cut from its roots, no children, no husband, and no relatives—nowhere to go but stay inside these walls.

Aziz and she were separated by the tower, walls, the paths, the courtyards and palace gardens, so much so, as if they were a desert.

She sought comfort in the pages of her mother's journal which she kept safely tucked in the bottom of her

sack, away from the Princess' sight. Suhayla would not doubt Princess, in one of her fits of anger when she thrashed her arms, would think twice about tearing the book asunder.

Suhayla smelled the rib-exposed binding and it smelled of ash, fire, and a vestige of rose. It had been stored for years in Ma's chest. Suhayla read from its fragrant pages.

Summer, new moon:

My father, the wealthiest and most famous Apothecary, imported scents from the Orient: honeyed cinnabar, peony, orchid. Rose petals—crimson and magenta with centers of saffron gold—that had absorbed the sun's heat, and the rich, black silted mud of the delta, the trembling light of the sapphire water. All this he pressed into the highest quality oils available, whispering and singing all along, as if imbuing them with enchantments, and captured like a djinni in diminutive and delicate glass bottles from Venice. When he came home, I hugged him and the air around him wafted of flowers.

My mother, Zubeida, may her name be blessed by Allah, the daughter of a Bedouin Shaykh, could name all the constellations of stars: Algol, the demon star in Perseus; the crow, the raven's beak; the swan, Cygnus. She knew how

to navigate in the desert by their illuminations. "Allah's gift to us so we would not become lost."

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

In the morning, Suhayla's thoughts drifted to Aziz. How could she help him? Would he help her? He must, he must help her. If he were Sultan--but how? She finished helping the princess to dress. A serving girl entered and bowed.

"Speak," Princess said.

"Royal one, I have a message for your handmaid. Suhayla, Fatima wishes you to join her in her private chamber."

Suhayla nodded.

"So, you have made friends in the harem. Against my wishes I see," Princess pouted. Suhayla sensed her glare.

"I descend from Babylonian Kings. You must associate with your own kind I suppose."

"I must be friendly," Suhayla said, stepping away.

"You are my friend; I am the only friend you need!" Suhayla held her tongue; jaws clenched, looking up at the ceiling of stone and sighed.

Princess swung her plaited hair around, it whisked across Suhayla's face. Her scent, luxurious, musky and floral saturated the whole chamber. "They are all jealous

of me. They all wish to have my Farir to themselves. If they could those women would crawl all over him." Princess fingered a loose thread on her sleeve; started a small tear, worried it to ruin--yanked the seam open more. "They all strive to catch his eye to win future favors. Disgusting. I pray Allah will give him strength not to be tricked by their cunning arts."

Gritting her teeth Suhayla laced the front of Princess' coat careful not to let her fingers brush against her.

"Every one of the concubines, the little harlots, desires the Sultana's power and position." Suhayla held the gilt-edged mirror up for her. "When Ramadan is over, I shall be wed." She sighed. "--to my true love. And I will give him many strong sons. What will you do I wonder?" Princess turned her head and looked at Suhayla, who lowered her gaze.

"I--"

Princess clapped her hands with glee. "I will find you a husband from the men in the palace, not too highborn or too low." She smoothed her black plaits down near her rosy cheeks. "We will have children and they will play together."

Duty compelled Suhayla to bow. Yet, revulsion filled

her and bitterness rose in her throat. A chill convulsed in her heart. She did not want her children to be ruled by the Sultana.

Suhayla would shape her own life and did not need Princess or anyone else to do that for her. At that precise moment Suhayla realized she needed more than knowledge. She required some way to elevate herself above the princess' control. The answer, power. And to that end, she needed Aziz.

Dunyazad arose. "I must go see mother and assist her with the wedding. There is so much still to do. Accompany me."

They wove their way through the warren of corridors to the central grand salon. Screams and cries echoed in the massive columned hall.

The Sultana met them. "A crowd has gathered before the palace gates."

"What is all that noise?" Dunyazad said, she craned her neck to see who wailed.

"Do not distress yourself my daughter, the common people are never happy with their lot and give complaint with little thought to the Sultan."

Dunyazad did not turn away so readily.

Before Fatima, a shrieking woman, covered in the black

veil of mourning, kneeled and beat her breasts. "My husband is dead, murdered by bandits! My only daughter kidnapped. I have no sons. I am forsaken! The Sultan allows such evil to befall his subjects!"

"Come daughter." Sultana grasped Princess' arm. "We have much to do." The exalted one eyed the crowd of women gathering with disdain. Sultana waved Suhayla away and led her daughter down the corridor.

Fatima lifted her skirts and squatted. "Raqqiya, I am here," Fatima said, in a low voice.

Suhayla shivered. The woman reminded her of the women who beat their breasts, pulled their hair and scratched themselves in anguish at her Ma's funeral. Raqqiya beat the carpet with her blood streaked fists and grasped Fatima's feet.

Raqqiya put her hands to her head. "A million curses on the Sultan's police! What do they do? Fat and lazy, they take our coins and still they do not protect us!" Her wail sounded like a hawk's scream. The great hulk of the black eunuch opened the door and stepped inside. He scanned the great chamber with his beady eyes and an aubergine face of stone. One brow lifted.

Fatima raised her ringed hand to him. "Tafa, leave us be."

The towering black giant turned and pulled the great door behind him.

"I am here. My heart is with you," Fatima said, and held Raqqiya's hands as tears and blood mingled.

Suhayla knelt and rubbed Raqqiya's trembling shoulders and arms. Many of the harem women, some Suhayla did not yet know, keened. Through Raqqiya's damp and stained veil streams of tears washed the plump face. "My only daughter is missing. Nine days now. My husband, dead. And now? I have nobody. What will become of me?"

The woman lifted up a bloodied white tunic and smeared the blood over her veil. "Death came like a thief in the night!" With a high pitched wail she pressed the bloodied tunic to her breast and face. The salty smell of blood, the scent of death clung to the crimson stains. Raqqiya's broad, bloodied face hovered at a level with Suhayla's. Blood specks sprayed as the widow shook her head and hair back and forth with a hopeless, desperate look.

The pain of Suhayla's parent's death she had locked away in her heart erupted. She felt like she might suffocate; she might be sick. Her eyes stung with tears. She realized how fragile their lives really were. In one breath a person can be living and carrying on day to day tasks and the next--dead. Her skin tensed over her bones.

What if Aziz were poisoned or murdered? What would she do and be left with? Nothing. She could not endure the thought. In that moment Suhayla knew she needed to plan and think and act for her future.

Fatima eyed her. After Tafa had shut the great brass door behind him, Fatima reached into her robe and produced a small leather pouch. From one of her slim, ebony fingers she slid off a band of pure gold, and with quick work enclosed it in the pouch. She pressed this into Raqqiya's palm. "If I hear anything, I will send a message." She called to her servants.

"Allah bless you. . . and your friend." Raqqiya's sobs slowed; her face was streaked with tears and blood.

Suhayla nodded her throat too tight to speak. Serving women gathered around Raqqiya, their hands on her arms, shoulders, head, and helped her up.

Fatima held Raqqiya's hand. "Do you wish to go to the hammam?"

Raqqiya shook her head.

"My private salon then." Fatima called to her servant. "A basin of hot water and clean clothes, also tea and food."

Raqqiya's soft weeping, like that of a child's, died away, as the serving women led her huddled form, Fatima and

Suhayla followed.

Night carried black wings of despair to the whole of the harem. The fire inside the bronze-tiered brazier crackled casting the winter chill from the room. They lounged comfortably upon pillows, propped on elbows as in silence they drank tea, nibbling on dates and cakes soaked in honey. Fatima's ebony eyes were tinged by melancholia. Her beautiful mouth drooped slightly at the corners.

Later in the evening as the stench and shadows and hues of death withdrew, only Suhayla and Fatima remained. She exhaled deeply and spoke in a hushed voice, her long, ebony face lit by the flames. "Raqqiya was my own hand maid, years ago when Perihan first arrived at the palace, before she became the Sultana."

A knot formed in Suhayla's belly. "I must attend the princess." But she did not move.

Fatima's brows knit together, lines creased her forehead. "Wait. Don't go." She sighed. "Who? Who would do such and act?"

"Who would benefit from kidnapping young women? Do you have any idea?"

She moved her slender, dark fingers about the tea cup. "I do not know."

"I would have given anything to see my daughter

before she was kidnapped." the elder woman's eyes shone with tears. She swallowed, and pressed her finger tips to her full, aubergine lips.

"As if I had control over her destiny. Sultan refused to allow her to marry a nearby noble, afraid some upstart would use her influence in an uprising." She shook her head and breathed deep. "What a foolish woman to have dreamt for her happiness, for my daughter to have a normal life and be near enough so I could visit. But when she was on the way to her betroth's province. . . Oh. . ." Fatima set her cup down on the silver platter. "The caravan was attacked. She was taken, only Allah knows where—Istanbul for all I know." Silence. "If it were not for her, the chance of her being found, I would--" She leaned toward Suhayla conspiratorially, "--Leave."

"No, don't speak so." Suhayla whispered. Tears erupted, thick with unshed pain.

Fatima raised herself up. "You know not of what you speak."

Fatima placed her hand upon her heart. "Only my daughter keeps my heart here." Her bottom lip trembled. "Raqqiya lived here when my daughter was a child and loved her as if she were her babe." She bit her lip and pressed her hand to her forehead. Crimson pigment stained the tips

of her fingers; and lines zigzagged, diamonds and dots covered her palm. "The only man I truly loved—it is too dangerous for you to know his name." She looked away. "He has a shop in the city."

"What about the Sultan?" Suhayla said.

Fatima lifted a shoulder. "The Sultan sent me a flower every day for a year."

"Over the years I have watched wives, concubines and sons covet the throne and vie for privileges and favors. All this occurs within the palace as greater wars wage beyond the Sultanate's borders." She shrugged. "Rarely does he visit the harem. Occasionally he comes to me for advice on official duties or simply to rest in comfort, listen to music or watch the other women dance." She leaned back against the divan, solemn. "He is weary. He has one foot in this life and prepares for the next worshipping a God he shed much blood for."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO BARREN

Crescent Moon, summer:

I trudged up the hill to the stone hut with a bowl of curried lentils and bread wrapped. Sweat dripped between my breasts.

Before the doorway the Sufi saint, Sidi el-Semman, stood gazing at the sky. "The doves circle and circle the Sphinx today." He shook his head.

"I brought you food."

"Maybe the doves were waiting for you?" He laughed.

"Come."

I did not know what to say.

The Sufi saint, Sidi el-Semman, blew upon the coals and coaxed a flame.

"I made offerings to Zahra Venus during the full moon." A long, hoarse breath shuddered out of me. "I have been married for four years now--" I had to look away. "Allah has turned his eye from me. My womb is a dead tree, it does not produce fruit."

He chewed with few teeth. He pointed a gnarled and arthritic hand out the door. "This land is sacred—for us and as it was for our ancestors. The graves of ancient gods are buried under this rock, the plateau of mysteries."

He leaned over and from a shadowy alcove produced a small bundle. "Down near the well, Bir Hamid, I found this. As if he undressed a baby, he removed the cloth, faded, dung colored, piece by piece. "Look--" He waved. "Look closely."

Smooth in my hand, the red granite stone had been

carved with deep lines. Fruit bearing branches surrounded a pair of Egyptian eyes, lined with kohl--they stared--riveting. From the full trunk, two breasts, circles with dots in the middle, hung. I could no longer withhold my sadness, and cried out till my tears no longer flowed. A hand pressed on my shoulder.

"I call her the 'Mistress of the Southern Sycamore.' It is said the well is watched over by her, long before I arrived; an ancient goddess, in her guise of the Sycamore grove."

He grasped a handful of resin pebbles, dried leaves of aromatic herbs, and sprinkled them over the coals. Sparks spit up like shooting stars, and blue smoke, fragrant of cedar, hung in the air around. "It is good you came. I have been waiting. The great recumbent lion sleeps but is stirring. The wind and desert sand are constantly shifting, revealing the ancient temples. They have been silent for so long. They whisper in the wind. . . Ancient chants fill my dreams." He sighed.

"The burning winds of Patriarchy have made humanity blind and deaf. Women and men must awaken to their true natures, their heart songs. What you desire, you will achieve."

"How?"

"Whenever you really want something, it's because that desire is birthed from the soul of the world. . . the divine radiance." A hint of a smile played upon his lips. "You are to become the Bir Hammid's next caretaker. The position is never chosen by a person, the ancestors choose."

I thought my knees would crumple under me. I could not see his face through my tears.

Suhayla hugged the book to her chest. "Oh Ma, oh Uma, why did you keep this to yourself? Oh Ma, I miss you."

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Veiled and robed, thin gauze caressed her ankles and wrists, as she glided up to the outdoor fires. Neseem's wide back bent toward tiers of lambs on spits. Smoke drifted, piquant and spicy, mingled with the fresh, green of mint and sweet cloves.

"Ah. . ." He put down a basting spoon dripping with a dark sauce. He tsked to a boy, who sat by the spits turning the lamb. "Go fetch tea," Neseem said. He flicked his fingers waving him away.

"I must see Aziz."

"My head is not worth much. There are a thousand men who could baste lamb and cook bread," Neseem said. "If something happens to me, my wife and children will suffer--"

"I have dreams." Suhayla blurted out. "He cares for me. . . I think." She hung her head, her hands clasped together.

"We are all plagued by various djinn."

--I must go to him."

"Oh?" He lifted a bushy black brow.

"He understands--"

"What do I know?" Neseem shrugged his shoulders.

"Allah knows all mysteries."

"It is what you speak of, he can help me with deciphering my Ma's--" She gazed at her hands, and felt the weight of her Ma's beads upon her chest, around her neck.

He looked upward, hands on his round hips. "Allah protect her." A sigh escaped. "Truth contradicts, how much do I care to know?" He handed her a basket, a square of white cloth covered the fruit. "Little as possible." He leaned forward, his breath heady with mint and onion, and gave Suhayla a chaste kiss on her forehead, like her Baba used to.

"Go now, let me cook."

The same guard got up from the ground when she

approached. Suhayla did not say anything to him, but held up the basket, hands trembling. She looked down.

The guard only grunted as he looked under the cloth.

"Mmm." He stuffed his mouth with grapes, dates and figs, tucking extra figs and some pomegranates inside his robe. She put the choicest fruit and meat on the bottom for Aziz, knowing the guard would take the top half.

He unlocked and locked the gate after her.

In the bowel of the tower, the order of human and refuse made her gag. She hurried to the stairs imagining the rats that moved obscurely in the dark corners.

Al-Beyawzi bowed; Aziz touched his chest, mouth and forehead. He smiled. "What have you there?"

"Fruit." She flung the cloth off and held up the basket with pride.

"Ah, what beauty." Aziz smiled. "Come."

In the upper most chambers Suhayla set the basket on the round table and made herself comfortable on the divan. "The grapes are from the Sultan's own vineyard."

The Shaykh plucked some grapes and figs.

Aziz chose a ripe pomegranate rather than the other fruit. He brought the fruit to his lips, pressed the orb to his cheek, and kissed it. He put the ruby fruit to his mouth and bit a hole. Red juice gathered and dripped on

his hand. He sucked until the skin became an empty pouch of leather. Aziz smiled, rosy moisture clung to his lips, and drops glistened on his beard. He laid the skin on the table and grinned.

Suhayla blushed, relieved she had not yet removed her veil. "I heard your flute playing last night."

"Music soothes me and I study the stars." He cleared his throat.

"Which stars?" She said.

He pointed to the sky visible in the window. "They are also my companions, 'the Little Gazelles', young girls, virgins. 'The Night Maidens' are the sirens who relish in. . . Fertile potency." He murmured the last two words.

"Have you met a young woman named Zehra?"

"No." Suhayla eyed him. Her body tensed. And although jealousy demanded she ask 'who is Zehra?' She did not wish to end this aching moment; a deep need, half mad, slithered upon her back and over her shoulders like jeweled serpents, looking for a chink of light.

"She is about your age by now," Aziz said. Warmth as if from the fiery sun enveloped her as he turned his slim body toward her at an angle.

Why is he speaking of another woman? The beast of fear slunk in Suhayla's heart; she pulled back into herself

and wound her arms around her chest. Even with her veil draped around her face she felt naked in her awkwardness, the ignorance of womanhood that left a void in her heart, her whole inadequacy of knowing what to say, and how to speak to a man. She questioned herself, her desire for Aziz and to discard her childhood once and for all, throw away the veil of naiveté and virginity. She would know pleasure as a woman and return such delights to a man. But did this canopy of need cloud her intellect? She could not decide.

Suhayla turned the name, Zehra, over and over in her mind. She smiled at Aziz and said, "Friendship has no bounds." But she felt her joy sink down into her feet as if into an abyss.

"Al-Bey, tell our guest of your secret."

The elder man cleared his throat. "Before I was locked in the tower I had many years of life. I searched the temples of the ancient ones and copied some of their symbols and pictures painted on the walls. I found scrolls hidden under a fallen statue."

"The powers, the names of the ancient Gods and Goddesses have been exiled to being djinn," Aziz said.

"One of the scrolls portrayed erotic pictures, and another describes Isis in all her magic." Shaykh pulled his beard.

"Her bodily ability to express her love engendered her magic, her power and is how she healed Osiris, and became pregnant by him." Aziz's gaze met Suhayla's.

When she gazed upon the image of Isis, Suhayla heard distant peals of laughter, as cool and refreshing as the North wind, and around the goddess' head shone the light of twelve stars, like a crown. This made her think of her Ma's journal, which like an ancient epitaph remained mysterious. "I have a book, my Ma's journal, she copied some similar symbols. Would you be able to copy the pages and decipher the writing?"

"Of course we will try," Aziz said.

The question of 'Who is Zehra' died in her throat.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR RAMADAN

During the long days of fasting, as hunger gnawed at Suhayla's belly, she attended to Princess. Suhayla learned to stand still with her back against the wall, so she could gaze through the window at Aziz's tower, his window overlooking the garden. She wished and waited for him to appear, to sit and play his flute, and give her heart ease. After sun set, the evening meal brought all the women together in the grand salon.

"No one is allowed out, during Ramadan, except to pray in the Sultan's mosque," Sultana said. From the satin-

brocade covered couch, the Sultana presided over them all; Fatima and Husniya tolerated each other but kept to their separate groups.

Suhayla kept alert for any mention of Zehra. The hum of a thousand conversations, sought for each other, like roses looking for moisture in the heat of the oppressive sun. He smelled of soap and clean linen.

"Are you comfortable here?" Nila ate with her son, Selim, between her legs. Necklaces of miniature bells, shells and beads of glass were woven about his neck to ward off the evil eye. With every movement, the little bells chimed.

"I do not sleep well." Suhayla pressed a palm to her forehead.

"I didn't when first I arrived."

"I am niq'ti, a rootless tree, lost. I have no more family." Selim gave her a wide grin revealing missing teeth and then played with his bread.

"My family abandoned me to this place. A debt to the Sultan." Nila looked down. "I am from Alexandria, where ships and boats travel; sails catch the cool breath from the North, the great sea. My Baba is a merchant. The Sultan found out he had taken much money from him over the years.

"I was the only daughter of marriageable age not yet married. The Sultan's agent, a giant white eunuch, stood, and spoke to my Baba. 'The Sultan will be generous and will accept a daughter, a prized horse or payment in gold.'

"My Baba called me into the receiving room where the white giant stood. 'She writes, reads and sings,' Baba said. I hated him then. The white giant looked me up and down as if I were an ox. This evil djinni laid a shadow of sorrow over me.

"I ran from the room to my mother's weighty bosom. I thought they would come back for me at a later date. But the eunuch waited for me and drank much of my father's wine and ate our food.

"Mother's hands were shaking as she helped me into my finest pantaloons and brocade coat. Mina, my youngest sister, cried. I knelt down onto the floor where she sat, and hugged her little body to my breast. Mina sucked her thumb, and held onto a lamb: a tight bundle of wool with stick legs, a black neck and head.

"'Don't let them take me.' I tugged at Mama's thick waist and cried, her plump arms encircled me. She smelled of jasmine oil. 'Allah go with you my daughter.' She sobbed." She hunched over; water edged her mahogany eyes. "She screamed and beat her breast at my departure. A soul

for money. How does Allah allow such travesty?"

"I don't know." Suhayla gazed at Nila's hands and wanted to hug her. "Keep your soul alive. Suhayla rubbed the embroidered hem of Nila's abundant ivory sleeve with her finger tips.

"These walls are now my home, my life. I must make the best of it." Nila gave a quick smile, her eyes shone with tears. She kissed Selim's black hair. "His future is all I care about now."

"If ever I have a child, I hope she or he will be gifted with as much beauty and sweetness," Suhayla said. Walls and walls and guards and a Sultan and a brother separated her from Aziz. Would he want a child with her? Should she even dare to imagine such a thing? Or did Aziz reserve his love and affection for Zehra?

"Do not appear too troubled or too happy, or Sultana will order you to sit somewhere else. If she is unhappy, so must everyone else be."

"Like the--her." Suhayla whispered. "She is so shrunken in the heart and poisoned by her riches and upbringing she does not know anything--stupid as a blind and dumb lamb."

Nila's eyes lowered and she gave a slight shake to her head. "There are ears everywhere." She let out a breath.

"My life is here—but my son's? I want him to—"

"Suhayla," the Sultana said. "Attend to Dunyazad."

"Allah keep you." Suhayla nodded to Nilā.

The Princess already had five servants around her waiting on her every whim.

Dunyazad narrowed her eyes, exchanging lewd and unfriendly looks, uneasy grins, signaling to the other servants and women around her that Suhayla intruded, and was unwelcome. "You are worse than a goat always running off. Do I have to put a rope on you?" She flipped her silky-black hair around. Titters of laughter were hidden behind hands.

Something dark and thick rose in Suhayla's throat. She wanted to roll her eyes and scratch Dunyazad's face. If she had been her mother, she would have told Dunyazad those taciturn, unlady-like expressions detracted from her beauty and made her look like an old widow.

Dunyazad and Fatanat laughed together, bodies bent toward each other, whispering in their private world. They led the other handmaids, serving girls and women Suhayla did not know to her private chambers. They sat or lounged as servants brought around trays of honey cakes, fruit and steaming glasses of tea.

"Sada, do you have a story?" Dunyazad asked.

A woman, older than Fatima, with enormous breasts, and hips that would swallow a donkey, sat up, and crossed her legs. Her black eyes sparkled; her hair, white as the full moon, was braided and wound about her head like a crown. "Ah. . ." She waved a plump hand. "I know one perfect for this night. 'Once there was a prince that brought a bride from a foreign land far, far away. On the first night together at his palace the prince said, 'I love you with all my heart but I must leave every night for a while--it cannot be helped--it is a mysterious happenstance that has been handed down through my mother's line, but I will always return to your side by the morning's light.'

The bride kissed him and after they made love rolled onto her side and fell asleep. For five nights this occurred but on the sixth night, after the couple embraced each other and kissed, and after the prince left her, she began to have fears. A little voice in her head nagged at her: do you know what your husband is doing in the night? Where is he going? Why is he so secretive? Can we trust him with our love? Is he being faithful?

The woman concluded she must find out where he is going and what he is doing. On the seventh night they embraced, and then she rolled over and pretended to sleep. When her husband left the bed, she listened for the swish

of clothes. Secretly she watched as he climbed, naked, over the window's stone ledge and disappeared into the night.

The woman puzzled over this as she dressed in an azure tunic, emerald pantaloons and pulled on her outer robe of midnight-indigo. She clambered over the window's sill. She walked over the cool and dew laden grass to the pool at the far end of the plateau.

The moon, a pale pregnant pearl, reflected and trembled upon the glassy surface. The woman heard a strange noise that sounded far away. Walking still farther from the palace she came to the border where the thick forest blanketed the mountains ascent. She peered into the groves of trees, and then, with timid steps, walked a bit closer to the trees. She stood still when she heard a garbled growl followed by a guttural roar.

The wife bit her lip, and glanced back at the palace, the black hulk faded into the dark horizon, then again at the clumps of trees, their trunks and the ground beneath mantled in shadow. She dared not proceed. About to turn back, she saw a lion eating a gazelle. The lion stared at her with flesh hanging from its mouth, eyes luminous in the moon's light. The woman noticed the flash of a gem. The gem was in the same ear, the right ear, where her husband

wore his earring, a sapphire, she had gifted to him on their wedding night. She cried out and ran to the palace and out of breath, climbed up to her window and flung herself over the ledge into bed.

She prayed and prayed to the divine radiance, to God, to her own avatar, Lady Sha'wana, to remove the pain from knowing what her husband did in the night, and what he was--to reverse time. Exhausted, she fell asleep.

During sleep she dreamed. In an oval of radiance her avatar, Sha'wana, stood gazing at her and smiling. All kinds of animals surrounded her: snakes, peacocks and hens, lions (not her husband), tigers and gazelles, white cattle with long horns. Sha'wana pointed to her and she transformed into a peacock and began to peck the ground.

When the woman awoke, she puzzled over this. The dawn light began to brighten the chamber. Her husband sat next to her on the bed, clothed.

She cried out, her eyes red and puffy. 'Oh.'

'Why did you not trust me?' He said.

'A voice in my head doubted you. I had to find out the truth.'

'Now you know my secret.'

'I will tell no one.'

'It does not matter it is forbidden. I must go away.'

'Why?'

'The palace, my reign is in jeopardy.'

'Will I ever see you again?'

He did not answer and left through the window. Weeks later she realized she was pregnant. The kingdom fell to another Sultan. The woman was forced to wander in the forests where she gave birth, never to see her love again. except," she held up a plump finger. "On occasion she heard the long, plaintive call of a wild peacock, which perched in the forest's trees."

Dazzled by the romance of the story, Suhayla loved the dreamy idea of two lovers living away from the palace, away from politics. She imagined her and Aziz, the two of them running away, escaping, and traveling across the desert, on horseback or camel, by oasis and date groves and miles of tawny sand and sky. They would share meals, traveled as husband and wife as commoners. They slept in one tent, draping hands over each other's hips. . . . Suhayla sensed a heady, gathering urge, a growing sense of discomfort--almost dizzying.

Eyes and faces were lit in the flickering light. Everything the older women did reeked of sex and mystery. The smoking of a hookah, the finesse when they stitched

their embroidery, lifted a slender tea cup. The bared, clove-syrupy flesh of breasts dipped into tight brocade coats or embroidered, beaded vests.

The screens were open, and Suhayla gazed at the garden and Aziz's lone tower. The constellations of stars glimmered, a thousand lamps, among the velvet sky.

"What are you looking at?" Dunyazad asked, in that superior voice.

"The stars," said Suhayla.

"Why do they fascinate you?"

"All the stars form pictures, constellations, and each represents an animal or human, and has its own story and meaning."

"Superstitious abominations to God!" Dunyazad hissed.

On her sleeping mat Suhayla thought of Aziz and the ache in the moment when they met in the gloom of the tower. It amazed her to think of all that happened within heart beats as Venus shone in the window. Would he one day claim her for his wife? Or Zehra? The thought lodged in her throat like a bitter fruit.

The scents of cedar and sweet night-blooming jasmine, heady to Suhayla as incense, filled the air. Nights engendered her fantasies; from the first time she had sat

across from Aziz in the top most chamber, the cavernous turret over head, the glow of the lamp in his eyes. The warmth in her grew on those long nights of Ramadan. She remembered when she had lived at home the sounds issuing from Mama's sleeping room, and then she understood her own unfulfilled desires. She dreamt that Aziz would transform into a bird, into an ivory dove and alight upon her breast.

"Nectar, love juice, lotus juice is one of the 'medicines of the three peaks' according to the ancient Chinese Taoist texts." Husniya had spoken about this. "Finding and keeping love, the dream of all women." Her laugh had a ring of bitterness.

How Suhayla desired Aziz to caress her. She dreamt of his succulent kisses, his lips and tongue hungry and feeding at her mouth, wetting her lips; his whispers of love, hot as the desert wind, scorched her skin. His teeth would leave a trail of moist, gentle nips down to her sex and he would drink from the nectar at her very center.

Before sleep pulled her into its hazy waters, she thought only of her beloved prince; imagining his freedom, their wedding, arms entangled in an embrace as they lay, skin against skin. Then the ashen serpent of fear would slither in--the weight of a knife pressed against her throat. She could not call out--the viper hissed and

cackled in a crone's voice: "You will never be able to touch Aziz, you will curse him and bring his death as you did your parent's. You are a nobody. You are a slave." The image of her mother dead, bloodied mouth and staring, glassy eyes turned and twisted in her mind, haunting her. Her tears soaked her pillow.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Suhayla wrote a poem to Aziz and kept it her mother's journal:

I see you as love

Love is my rescue, my salvation

Time is pain, will my love change?

NO.

Does the dove turn black? Does a rose stink?

My love is as inevitable as the turning of the moon in all her phases

And the ever reeling constellations

In the midnight sky

We are meant to be together

To entwine with each other

In a thousand-armed embrace

I am afraid to touch you.

Supplied with tobacco, Aziz sat and smoked into the night. The earthy smelling smoke warmed his throat and nostrils. The tower's window framed a perfect view of the palace and garden, and everyday Aziz was reminded of all that was not his, nor ever would be. Darkness weighed upon his chest.

An array of sparks shot from an upper window of the palace, and hissing, lit the white marble windows and walls for a brief moment. Aziz stood stone still. The alert part of himself listened, smelled, every sense alive as the embers burned up into a tangled skein of bluish haze.

Another long sputtering arc of sparks lit the gurgling fountain in the garden, the precise geometric beds, also lined by ivory stone, boxed in the fragrant Acacias and the Pomegranates heavy with blood-red fruit. Sparks fell in slow motion.

His slippers skidding, Al-Bey walked to the window. "What is that?" He yawned with sleep.

Aziz motioned to the palace. "From the hulking house of misery, some kind of special fire; maybe it will set all to burn and purify the suffering and blood." Aziz breathed

in the smoke, odor like that of rotting eggs, as the vestiges of embers receded into the sky to join the stars. He considered the arched windows, and the moon broken into silver arms off of branches and vines, and shriveled, dried leaves.

A figure in a gauzy veil crossed the courtyard below. Ghostly, papyrus white, she floated rather than stepped. "Our djinni of the night returns," Al-Bey said. A guard led the lithe woman to the base of the tower.

"She is intriguing. Much about her past remains a mystery yet to be solved," Aziz said. He wondered about the magnetism that drew him to Suhayla. "She is much more than a handmaid." Whenever she neared him, a need simmered in him, his loins.

At the door he met her, a sculpted, pale face, and eyes were lit up by the moon.

"Prince Aziz," Suhayla said, as he appeared at the door. The angles of his face shifted in the shadows.

"I do not live or think like a prince, call me Aziz only." He felt ashamed of his bed, the darkness above the rats and mice that came up from below or down from the turret, where he slept and dreamt each night for the last fourteen years. Ropes held the rickety wood frame together, creaking with each movement, rotting cloth, some

filthy bedding stinking, sweat soaked. Often he awoke under moonlight upon veined cracks. All of him, his bed, his books, were secured in the cylindrical prison. Al-Bey and Suhayla were distant stars, each in their own constellations of thoughts and dreams. Why did she risk for him?

He thought perhaps he had been too hard with her. Vermin scurried in the corner. She bowed her head embarrassed. "Please, come." He motioned for her to enter.

She looked up at him again with the basket in her hands.

He took the basket from her hands. "Did you see the sparks over the garden?"

"Yes, Farir's powder," she said, as she ascended the steps. Below, the heavy door grated on iron hinged. She put one hand out upon the crumbling wall of the cavernous tower trying to keep her balance on the worn, uneven steps. The new pages of paper were stiff against her ribs. In between her chemise and tight outer coat, they made a slight crumpling noise with each step. Her secret lay safe, but for how long? A shiver trembled inside her when she thought what Farir would do to her if he knew she had part of the Book of Causes.

"Where did he buy the powder?" In the uppermost chamber Aziz set the basket on the only table, a squat, rickety thing. A little oil lamp burned. Threadbare prayer carpets lay beyond.

"From the Orient," she said.

"How do you know so much about it?"

She greeted Al-Bey who joined them, and bowed to her.

"I managed lamb and lentils today." She smiled, and then turned away from them. She sucked in her breath, and pulled the pages from her robes. "I brought the pages I copied from my Ma's journal."

"Ah. . ." Al-Bey glanced over the pages. "You copied them in every exact detail?"

She nodded.

"There are Ancient Egyptian symbols contained, surely," Al-Bey said.

"On the sill is the figure Al-Bey found buried in sand years ago, that mysterious combination of woman and lion," said Aziz. An old pierced lantern, the door missing--that divine representation of God, shed dim light and accompanied the sphinx.

"My Ma--" she said, not sure if she should divulge all. "--Visited the great sphinx." The question about Zehra roiled about inside her like an impatient serpent.

"For this feast--" Aziz procured a bronze tiny dish within which white crystalline cubes glistened in the glow. "I've been saving the last for a special occasion. Accept this, may we always be on kindred terms."

She took a pinch of salt and sprinkled it on her lamb. Grinning, Aziz followed.

"Ah. . . salt is the essence and preserver of the seas," Al-Bey said. "It is a body compound of various elements and cannot be resolved by humans. Like God--" He held up the bowl. "It is this that which makes it sacred; it is pure and divine."

Silent, Aziz examined the mystery of her deep set eyes, why she risked her safety for him. Ebony hair, like black pearls, curled and snaked and enchanted its way down to the small of her back. "How do you know so much about Farir's fire?"

Suhayla mustered up courage. "Will you marry Zehra?" She gazed at his high forehead and the fine textured hair, his eyes a dark leonine color. She wanted to shout out: 'Why do you think of Zehra when she may not care about you. . . and I am here?' But, she did not want him to think of her as an impertinent child.

He rubbed a palm over the back of his neck. "My Ma desired it." His voice, a strong baritone, rumbled. Aziz

watched Suhayla, who sat across from him looking up every so often to catch his eyes.

Suhayla scrutinized his face, his scar, which like a Wadi, a dry river bed, ran a hollow of lighter skin down the one side of his face. She attempted to unravel his thoughts.

The Shaykh, curious, also waited.

Aziz's jaw twitched. He struggled to hold onto his dignified expression, a fist held the lamb shank. He dropped the clean bone on the table. "My mother, Allah bless her name and place in heaven. . ." He splayed his hands on the table. "With red, swollen eyes she gazed at me as the eunuchs held her. She smiled, 'My son.' She screamed for Bashir Agha to 'take him away, he must not see this!' As I was led away, I heard the swish of the sword and turned. The sword glinted as it sliced her neck. Her shrieks haunted me for years: accompanied by the looming and clear specter of my mother's body, and her rolling head, which has burned a hole here." He placed a hand on his chest. "I've been in the tower ever since. Ma had already chosen a bride, Zehra, for me. But if I am never free--" He shrugged and looked away.

Suhayla froze. All her hopes of having Aziz crumbled in her fingers as if they were ash and dust. The tears she

hid in her heart as best she could but water drops emerged. Tightness seized her chest. With hands cupping her face, she gazed down at her food.

"Do you know her?" He asked.

She shook her head and swallowed. "What will you do when the Sultan dies? He is on his death bed. When Farir takes the throne?"

"I don't know," Aziz said.

"Don't you want freedom?"

"True freedom cannot exist in the mind with the body being shackled."

"That is precisely what we women in the harem struggle with everyday. The mind and the soul must find escape from the body, must be able to fly with divine-- despite the physical prison--they must! Or we--I am lost." She turned to the Shaykh.

His watery blue eyes watched with a keen interest, yet he had remained silent. He focused on Aziz. "If you had the chance to escape and build an army, would you fight for the throne? What about your brother, Farir? Would you fight him for the chance to rule the kingdom of your father?"

"He is not my brother!" The muscles on his jaw twitched. "Since he scarred me with the dagger the day of

my Ma's death."

"I am sorry for your loss. My heart carries a similar pain, but there is a whole world out there waiting for you." With the back of her hand she wiped at the tears. She told him about Raqqiya and her family. "Merchants are being murdered in the light of day. The Sultan's police are ineffectual."

"They are corrupt," Aziz said, "the guilty party no doubt."

"If you discovered the identities of the thieves and murderers, wouldn't the people support you?" Suhayla said.

"Escape I have dreamt of for years," Aziz said. "Al-Bey you know I am a scholar--not a despot."

"Life is a weaving of invisible threads between humans, the stars, the planets and earth--all propelled by the divine." Al-Bey pulled on his beard. "What if Allah chose to call Farir to him? You would be free then."

Aziz stiffened, he stood motionless.

Al-Bey said, "When a boy, I visited the tomb of Dhu'l-Nun, marked by a massive black monolith." Al-Bey sipped water and swallowed. "I prayed for the All-Prevailing, the All-Knowing, and the All-True to be my guide."

"We are in an age of darkness, our only hope is to turn to the light," Suhayla said.

"We must find out who is behind the kidnapping and murdering," Aziz said. "And I need to see this powder from the Orient for myself."

"Yes, of course," she said. If she did this for him, perhaps she he would look upon her with more favor. But, perhaps she was a fool for attempting this dangerous act. Dampness clung between her breasts and to her back. In the light of the lamp, even with a scarred face, he stole her breath. Engrossed, she hoarded all the moments with him like treasure and etched them on her heart. He was about to say something, his lips parted.

At the base of the tower he watched her go, turned away as the door shut. The guard's key turned in the rusted iron. Before ascending the steps, he stood still. The stench of human excrement and urine filled his nostrils. He gagged and held an arm over his nose. There were but two ways out of the tower either through the top window or the bottom. Tomorrow, he decided, he would begin digging.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Princess busied herself ordering servants and seamstresses about in the final preparations of her wedding. Suhayla sympathized with the women, three whose

flesh hung from their cheeks, but who still had nimble fingers. The other women, middle-aged, were just as silent and spoke not one word. They kept their eyes down at their embroidery.

Princess berated them for their laziness and slowness. The Shurs, squares of silk with silver and gold thread, were presents to women: friends, relations, nobles and wives of important officials who would be attending the wedding.

Suhayla waited alone in the Princess's private Salon next door. Iqbal, a short, dusky skinned girl returned from an errand swinging her hips with a coquettish gait as though she were in love. The girl's feet swished on the carpet; jewel colors, lapis and emerald, were brightened by the dapples of sun that shone through the pierced stone screen.

Iqbal hummed, her face glowed.

Suhayla wondered why. "Sh. . . Princess is in the next room."

"I know, I can't help myself." She giggled. "I am in love."

"Who is the lucky one?"

"You cannot tell a soul."

"Love is too precious." Suhayla watched the door.

She leaned over and whispered, "Said Agha."

"The eunuch?"

She nodded and flipped her hair around seductively.

"He loves me."

At first Suhayla puzzled at how to respond; she did not wish to crush Iqbal's happiness. "You are indeed blessed. . . to find joy." But the practicality of the liaison?

Iqbal squeezed her eyes shut.

"What. . . will you do?"

Tears flowed down her dusky cheeks and clung to her thick lashes. "I don't know. It's all hopeless. Sultan--"

"He better never find out," Suhayla said. "He may die, but who knows?" She shrugged. "But then you face Farir."

Iqbal wiped her tears with an exquisite handkerchief: the height of fashion, a token of love, borrowed from the Europeans; the edge glittered with a row of tiny glass beads, and the eunuch's initials were embroidered in ivory thread. She clutched the delicate fabric to her chocolate palm. "Said's predecessor, Bashir Agha, became very wealthy. He owns horses, rams and cocks, he is a regular gambler at races and cock fights.

"When Bashir became too old, my beloved, was elevated to position of Chief Eunuch of the Harem."

"Bashir still lives?"

Iqbal nodded. "He stays at his house most of the time; he cannot walk anymore; sometimes managing business for the Sultan." She stared at me with her gentle eyes. "You mustn't tell anyone."

Suhayla shook her head. "No." She wished she could be alone to shed her own tears and console herself. A great pressure pushed on her chest. She had found love in the tall, graceful man, Aziz, but she could tell no one. She saved her heart for him; it was all she had to give.

To the rest of the palace Aziz was no better than a forgotten corpse left to rot in its cavernous tomb. Although, if Aziz had been forgotten, perhaps he was safer, she could not discern if Allah had plans for him.

She wished to touch him, to feel his finger tips upon her cheek. Fear prevented her. She did not want any part in bringing a curse upon his head or an early death, as she did for her Ma.

"Please don't tell anyone." Iqbal's fingers and bunched embroidered lace alighted upon Suhayla's arm. Beads glinted in the speckled light from the window.

A vision wavered in Suhayla's mind. In the canopy of

deep night the stars lit the Milky Way; the large star Cygnus, glittered amongst a womb of stars. The images shifted to: platters of food sitting on sheets of tea-stained linen, a tiny brown furred creature with large human like eyes chewed on something. Greenish vomit shone upon the carpet. Eyes turned back in their sockets.

"No--" Suhayla jerked away.

She heard the Princess' voice. "--I've waited for Ramadan to end!" In a huff she entered in a flurry of silk and dropped on her pillow-strewn dais in the center of the room. Fatanat, a willowy girl of milky skin and long, gangly limbs, a Circassian, followed Princess in, and knelt before the dais and arranged Princess' skirts.

Swift and resolute, Princess slapped a pillow. She gazed about her like a half-trained animal. "Only two days left, to go to the Suk, and now if the Sultan dies--" She heaved a short sigh. "We'll be locked in here for forty days of mourning and my wedding will be postponed."

Fatanat focused all her attention on the princess. "Soon you'll be the Sultana, Allah will bless you," Fatanat said. She cooed, "You'll soon have your husband." She looked at the other hand maids, and eyed Suhayla in a way she found embarrassing--as if Fatanat were sizing her up.

"Pudding, bring it--Fatanat," Princess said.

Fatanat bowed and left. Iqbal and Suhayla looked at each with silent knowing. Usually, they had the duty of communicating Princess' wishes to the cooks. Suhayla would keep Iqbals's promise; she hoped others had not guessed the secret already. Suhayla did not know how many knew her secrets: she loved Aziz and had visions.

The name 'Zehra' stuck in Suhayla's heart like a thorn.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

As Princess brushed a plait of hair from her forehead, ululations from the grand salon filled the air. "What is all that noise about?" She lifted her black, imperious brows, glaring at Iqbal.

"I do not know."

"Go find out." Princess gave a flip of her hand.

Excitement brightened Iqbal's eyes, and quickened her step as she entered, then returned to a submissive and expressionless demeanor. "There is a strange woman I've never seen attending them."

"Doing what? Who is she? I demand to know," Princess said.

"She is covered in a black veil and cloak."

Princess leapt up faster than they had ever seen her move and hastened to the grand salon, her silk pantaloons and skirts swished. All the handmaids hurried in her wake, they passed the columns shimmering with blue and gold tile.

All the women of the harem were walking into the salon.

Iqbal announced the Princess and women bowed making a path for her to the Sultana's divan. They were joined by Fatanat, and the three of them seated themselves upon embroidered cushions around the Princess.

Princess pointed at the silent, black-cloaked woman. "Who is she?"

"A seer," said Fatima.

Iqbal and Suhayla were awed by the mysterious visitor and were excited to hear her predictions.

The silent, death veiled figure leaned over like a raven feeding, picked at shiny trinkets or stripped bones on the floor. Around her the concubines huddled like a bevy of canaries, doves and peacocks, jeweled and beaded and adorned with silks and brocade vestments.

Fatima's serving women carried bronze platters over; Princess picked sweets, honey cakes and sugared almonds. With one quick wave she bid them to leave. "What is her name?"

"Niya," Fatima said.

All the women leaned toward the dark veiled one in the center, waiting, silent expectation hung palpable in the air.

A deep, throaty moan, as if from an ancient well, issued from the raven. "The Sultan--" And when she straightened up, her Turkish veil covered her totally. A rectangular mesh of fabric allowed her to see. "He will linger a short while, death waits at his bedside."

Murmurs and moans and cries from the women filled the hall, and another hush descended.

"Ah. . ." The Crone's finger nail scraped a bronze platter. "There are some who love those who cannot return love. Many changes. I see blood and storms." She cackled. Silence hung in the air. "Forgotten lineages will be reclaimed and those hidden will be revealed. . . I see a commanding presence robed in a splendid cape."

In her mind Suhayla saw Aziz, tall in his windblown cape, on a white war steed brandishing a sword, and leading an army into the desert to fight Farir. The might of Allah, a column of fire went before him. A black panther, like the one from her dream, stalked and hunted, smelled for its prey. She saw the stone hut her mother visited before her birth, and the towering, sand covered temples,

waiting for the light of the sun to bless them once more.

The crone's arms spread out like bat wings. "The serpent of death strikes not once—twice."

A hush descended over the room, murmurs of worry filled the salon. The raven's head draped in black and faceless turned her head, gazing through her mesh to Suhayla. She thought she glimpsed heavily kohl-lined eyes.

"There are those who need to tread with care. Dreams or plans may crumble like the ancient statues—to sand," said the crone.

The hairs on the back of Suhayla's neck stood on end and inside she shuddered. Would Aziz love her? Is that what the raven woman was attempting to warn her about? His preoccupation with the woman Zehra worried her. Suhayla had been naive to think he did not love and desire any woman until now. Did Zehra love him? Suhayla sank back into her pillow.

"I do not need my future read." Princess rose up. "I know I will have many sons. You would only confirm my thoughts."

The raven moaned and murmured something unintelligible. All the women, as if in a single synchronous moment, inhaled and held their breath in expectation for the crone's reply.

An egg broke, the raven let the yoke and watery whites fall with a plop onto the platter. With a long nail she scratched the bronze plate. The sound rent the air, and a shiver up Suhayla's spine.

"The great one reveals the new Sultan will bless the palace with swelling bellies." The room filled with the sound of a great exhalation, and many women raised their hands and nodded in approval.

The raven coughed and held up a gnarled hand. "Sons will be born to those not yet taken to the bridal bed. Sons will be born who are not of Sultan's seed."

The princess rose up with a stormy expression, and pointed to the raven. "Fortune telling is forbidden by the Prophet." Princess hissed. "Allah will strike you dead for this evil."

The raven woman's raspy laugh rent the air.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

The long, cool shadows of the winter's sun blossomed into early night. The shutters were drawn and the braziers lit to keep the chill at bay. Suhayla was determined to find out who Zehra was, the one who had been promised to wed Aziz. Also she searched for some link in the palace to

the kidnapping of young women. She searched inside herself for answers to the red corridor in her visions, to the large star Cygnus.

On this evening, after the feast finished, platters remained scattered with remnants of halva and fruit. They were blessed with a visit by 'The Flower Water Lady', "Anees al-Ghawzil" one servant announced. Anees's sweet honey, musk and ambergris, roses and myrrh all mingled, surrounded her and made the air redolent. Anees huffed into the room, two younger slave women carrying large sacks.

Moon faced, dressed in all white including a tarha covered Anees's hair, an awesome spectacle. Her skin, the color of yogurt; her pale, lumpy arms must never have been kissed by the sun. In all her layers of ivory satin and brocade skirts and pantaloons, over her voluptuous flesh, she looked like a blanched melon.

She arranged herself, and swathes of white on a generous cushion provided for her comfort.

Husniya murmured to her ladies. "Are slave girls still fetching handsome prices these days?"

Fatima cleared her throat and rolled her eyes. "My esteemed friend, Anees, Do you want for warmth?" Fatima called Saffiya from her bevy of women and girls. "Give

this gift of the rare herb to the 'Floral Anees.'"

The fingers of flames played around the coals in the brazier. "I like the heat, but not too close to my delicate oils and waters, too much heat will destroy the scents before they have touched the skin; even the most beautiful slave girl will be left wanting." She wiped at her dark mustache and chuckled. Before her on a silk cloth of moonlight she arranged her collection of oil filled amphorae, and narrow-necked glass bottles of floral waters on an oval silver platter. "I am just from the house of Uthman Pasha Hamid. He is very wealthy you know." She gave a spirited laugh, resonant.

Anees picked up a diminutive bottle and balanced the glass on her fleshy palm. "Fatima, I have your potion."

"A most spacious courtyard paved with marble and everywhere I looked perched an exotic bird. Their eyes glittered in the lamp light. Pretty white and black slaves lingered, and hurried to greet me with deference." She pressed a delicate cloth to her forehead. "The Lady of the house, Pasha's wife, summoned me. Even her tall slave, wore gold bangles, brought me fruits and sweets before I had even unpacked my goods."

"Tell us your news." Fatima smiled and nodded.

"Huda, the Pasha's wife recounted to me a story about

two young lovers whose family forbade them to marry. The two of them had concocted a plan. At nightfall on the eve of the woman's wedding to another man, she jumped out of the window on the second story. When they tried to make their escape, they were caught and killed."

Suhayla inhaled a quick breath. Her palms moistened, as she the story brought to mind her fantasies of running away with Aziz.

"Khanom Huda, was once in love with Zubain, the infamous slave trader--" She raised up a fleshy finger. "She made the right choice in the end."

Anees told them of the Khaleefahs, the brides, courtesans, sirens. . . of the night. Zehra," she said. "I have your favorite."

The mention of Zehra created a ferrous taste in Suhayla's mouth. Despite the scents of ambergris and rose that lingered in the great hall, she smelled an ancient scent: lotus, sandalwood and blood orange. . . and within that the archaic battle over men. Suhayla peered around the room to find the object of her jealousy.

"Salaam and Baraka, blessings, to you Anees," Zehra said. Her lilting voice slid around, through Suhayla.

Suhayla leaned over to Iqbal. "Where did Zehra come from? How is it that she is in the harem?" In the light of

a brazier sat 'his' Zehra. She stunned Suhayla. Her heart bled. Aziz loved her, must be enraptured of her. No wonder he treated Suhayla with kindness, friendliness. . . yet there was distance. Zehra would be his first wife. Her eyes and hair were dark enchantments, bewitching. Her braids, studded with beads and pearls, twinkled in her obsidian hair like the stars, and formed a stellar crown.

"From what I understand she is the daughter of a deceased court official," Iqbal said. "And lives in the harem now, an act of charity I believe. Her Ma died many years ago."

Suhayla listened but stared at this Zehra. If Suhayla were a man she would fall at her feet. Delicate, slender fingers, grasped the narrow-necked bottle of perfume.

Anees held up a small glass vial. "Just a few drops." She laughed. "It will surely build passion in the one you love and drive him mad until he consummates his love."

Giggles rang out. In the back of the room, behind Husniya, a slave stood.

"I buy--" Husniya called out flicking her fan. "--for ruling love!" She gave a pouch to her slave. "And same bottle of other potion."

Anees threw up a ringed hand from her ample bosom. "If I had that I would be the wealthiest woman in the

world, but let me see what I can offer you." She examined different glass vials, amphorae. "Ah. . . This is what you want. Magic. From an ancient text, known only to me of course, used by the Egyptian Queens of old."

In her autumnal phase, the wind blew the dry and harsh air of the desert, carried upon her breath dust the color of blood. Night descended, had sunk premature, over the palace. All the windows were closed, all the doors locked.

The air whipped and moaned and whistled in the shutters. Zehra sat upon cushions near Suhayla. "It sounds as if a thousand demons have been loosened." She yelled.

Suhayla nodded. The air seemed maddened, sounding as if it were a giant djinni twirling with invisible arms holding swords knocking and tossing everything in its path. The wind shrieked, Suhayla barely heard the women around her in the salon scream with fright or cry out to Allah. Zehra grabbed Suhayla's arm.

A vision arose in Suhayla's mind. She saw Zehra marrying a man who appeared to be Aziz. Suhayla heard the droning of the Imam's voice in prayer, and the blue haze of incense smelled of rose and sandalwood. Suhayla could not, would not allow Zehra to be first wife or marry Aziz.

A crash and a huge sucking noise consumed the chamber around Suhayla and brought her back to the khamsun, the Arabic name for this kind of red enveloping sand storm. With the shrill chattering like that of wild animals, the wind churned and tore through the shutters and broke two loose. In an instant, as if the door to a great oven had been opened and the heat unleashed, it sucked from the salon all the fresh air and in its place exhaled the vestiges of charcoal and bone grit and burnt flesh. Suhayla could not breathe. Dust the color of rust surged through the shutters. Her mouth and nose and eyes covered with sand, tasting metallic. She struggled to fill her lungs.

Suhayla had heard of Khamsuns like this, they are said to be a thousand meters high, where horses, camels, dogs, men, women and children drowned; buildings are crushed or buried in the sand. It is said that whole armies and tribes have been lost and never found.

High-pitched cries rose up around her as the bloodied storm poured in. Suhayla pried Zehra's hand from her arm and clasped her sleeve to her face. She crawled her way to the window. At the base of the wall she took a scarf from around her hips and tied it through one shutter. She could barely look, the rusty sand stung her eyes; the garden and

Aziz's tower were nowhere to be found in the red torrent. Only the scarf and the shutter kept her from being blown back. She prayed to the divine and found the strength to grasp the other shutter, bringing them together and binding them shut.

The flames in the brazier were long gone; darkness engulfed all as the Khamsun hovered. All the memories Aziz held of his mother's death, his promise to marry Zehra, weighed upon Suhayla; and this combined with the anger of the desert, the weight of the crumbling city pressed down over the palace, on the salon, like a hellish black raven.

As exhaustion, hunger and thirst extricated her strength, she lay on the carpet. Like a child she cried into her sleeve. Forgive me Allah, Isis; forgive me for what I must tell Zehra.

As if a gigantic snake wound around her chest, she could not breathe, her ribs constricted. Suhayla fought for air. Layered with a gritty, rust colored blanket, she awoke in the morning.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE FIRE

Aziz's freedom consumed Suhayla's thoughts. And Zehra, what should she do about her?

"Salaam." Farir's voice interrupted Suhayla's meanderings.

She pulled back as if burned gasping and jumped up from a bench in the garden clutching her chador tight in her fist as if a sudden chill took hold. The moist air hung, pungent and earthy, scented of Cedar. Thin, slate clouds partially blocked the bone pale moon. "Salaam."

One half of his face was lit by the brazier's fiery glow from the entrance, the other half disappeared in the nestling night. The Prince stood gazing at her in the long, cool shadows, a grin upon his face, his nostrils flared slightly. "You are not hurt?"

"No. Scared, a scratch that is all." When she dared a glance at his eyes, she felt a shivery sort of sense and looked away to the palace, the light. She wanted to get away from him and walked toward the palace doors. A gust of breeze. "Did anyone. . .die?" She never wanted to see another dead body as long as she lived. The memory of her dead Ma, eyes staring, tongue peeking out unnaturally, twisted inside her.

"All survived except maybe a few chickens." He watched her with intensity. Debris from the storm, dried leaves rushed across the paths of pebbled sand. Desiccated seed heads on twiggy branches rattled and shook in the tiny

dervishes of wind. Groups of trees on either side of the doors were lined with dark pockets.

"Studying with Shaykh Jalal is not simply duty to the princess," Prince said.

"No. Knowledge awakens one to the infinite powers of God."

"Come," Farir commanded. "I will give you a private tour of my alchemical chamber."

She hesitated, belly taut, searching for a proper refusal for a prince. She did not trust Farir, and what if Aziz saw her walking with the brother that ruined his life. "I, I—the princess is expecting me." She lied a little, a very little.

"She is with the Sultana taking tea. She does not need you."

"I dare not. It is improper."

"I am the royal prince, and may be the Sultan tomorrow. I decide what is proper."

She could not refuse. All of her being yelled in objection, fear and but held a slight chink of curiosity.

Through the maze of halls he led her to his chamber. "Had I known you have a desire for learning and study, I would have offered to bring you more often," he said.

"You did not ask if I wanted to see your study."

He chuckled warmly.

"I own Byzantine texts and Greek. There is one manuscript, written in Arabic which still eludes me."

"What is it?"

"The Book of Causes. Have you any idea of its whereabouts?"

"No. I have not heard of such a text."

In the dark moon light poured in through the windows. The dark bindings of manuscripts appeared black, full of depth; the pale paper of scrolls formed circles of eclipsed moons on a shelf. Jars of many different sizes and shapes sat on tables and all threw strange and eerie shadows upon the walls and surfaces. The smell of smoke mingled with pungent and acrid odors. Suhayla could well imagine herself in a mausoleum. She hugged herself and shivered.

"There is nothing to be afraid of. I am here," he whispered. "You are my intelligent dove with velvet lashes." He waved a hand. "You are pure, not like the other woman in the harem; slithering vipers of deceit. You are unsullied by my--the dusty, decrepit Sultan." He put a hand out and she moved away. "I will light the powder for you. It is much more beautiful in the dark."

Suhayla watched which chest he kept the powder in. He scooped some out and brought over to the large, long sill

of a window. He scraped rocks against each other. Embers flew. The powder sizzled and flared. Sparks rained upward and outward, colored fire lit up the chamber, the veined marble upon which it burned, and glowed over the garden. Across from them she saw the tower.

"Will it burn wood or paper?"

"Of course."

"Will it move stone or brick?" She asked with Aziz in mind.

"In large enough quantities." He stole behind her and whispered in her ear. "The love of fire; the fire of love."

The heat of his breath warmed her neck, her hairs bristled with alarm. He grasped her shoulder as she attempted to move away. "Stay." His fingers closed into a vice.

In her mind's eye images arose: a startling conflagration of explosions, fiery arms shot up and around her, flames lapped at walls. The din of Farir's hideous laughter resounded as the earth shifted and shuddered under her feet. Torrents of fire consumed the entire world.

With horror Suhayla attempted to twist from his clutch, to run away from him.

"I give you hospitality, teach you about alchemy and why do you turn away?"

The fire died upon the sill and acrid smoke filled the room. Tears pressed against her eyes. She pushed them back; she would not give him the satisfaction of crying. "Let me go, let me go!" She grimaced as she looked up to him. "Please Prince Farir; it is the princess I think of."

"Why do you feel compelled to think of her? I do not." His eyes flashed. "You forget, I have the only key." He grinned mischievously dangling the thick brass piece.

Lead sunk to her belly and her thoughts raced as how to best free herself from this python's coil which he wove about her. "The princess would wish to be here and learn about alchemy also."

"The princess does not give a damn about knowledge. Her head is concerned only with servants and the wedding." His face relaxed and his voice gentled. "She has not the head, my little gazelle, as you do. She descends from a puppet king, not mystics." He walked closer to her; she had the door to her back. He reached a hand toward her chin, she sidled away.

Her lips trembled. "How do you know where I came from and who my parents were?"

"As the heir apparent, Sultan tomorrow, I make sure to be kept abreast of all." He gave a nonchalant shrug.

"Come, give me a smile and I will return you to the harem."

Relieved, she capitulated shyly, not meeting his eyes which she sensed searched for hers. He did not touch her again, kept his word and walked her back to the harem.

"Said Agha," Farir said to the Chief Eunuch, a towering aubergine of muscle and bone.

With a cold expression, the sentry swept his hand in the gesture of obeisance, to his chest, lips and forehead. He pulled the heavy door open. About his massive girth, a tight vermillion sash held a gleaming scimitar at a rakish angle. Beady, quick eyes, observed: as Suhayla entered; watched all comings and goings, actions, the women gathered in the expansive room beyond the arched door. She wondered what Iqbal saw in the towering Ethiopian who seemed to despise them.

"Good bye for now," Farir said. His deep voice echoed in the marbled hall. Suhayla nodded, and as she entered the harem Farir mumbled something to the giant guard.

The heavy cedar door, studded with bronze points, and hinges twice the width of her hand, thudded close.

Hazy, winding drifts of smoke, smelling of Turkish tobacco and cloves, filled the air. Husniya lay upon her side, stretched out on a divan, smoked from a pipe. Other women greeted Suhayla with many salaams as she lowered

herself on cushions.

"Has the princess called for me?"

"No. Sister, you need some tea," Husniya said. Her narrow eyes scanned Suhayla up and down.

"Yes, thank you." Farir's obsession and the need to see Aziz again weighed upon her mind. The danger, the tension with being with Farir twisted around inside her.

Husniya set her hookah down. She waved a languid hand to her servant nearby. The shy girl poured from the bronze pot. Suhayla leaned over and picked up a cup.

"My thoughts are distracted," Husniya said. "A piece of melon or lime?"

Suhayla shook her head.

"Zehra?" Husniya gazed at another woman close by, who also declined. In a silk embroidered coat of saffron, Husniya lay back upon the divan and closed her eyes.

"You are lucky the Prince shows such favor with you," Zehra said. "Some women would hate a beauty such as you, only a handmaid, to have such affection from the prince."

"The last time I had studied with Shaykh Jalal, he told me, 'Anything that can be woven may be unthreaded and torn apart,'" Suhayla said. "The Shaykh also told me a quote from the famous Sufi, Bayazid. 'Those who stab at a person are stabbing themselves.'" Suhayla attempted to

rein in her jealousy, and hid it behind smiles and an expression of ease. All the while she thought of the excitable powder and attaining some for Aziz, and what the vision of the exploding powder meant for her future. . . for Farir's.

Husniya lifted herself onto one elbow and gazed at Suhayla. "One word of advice, sister. Be careful, when those of lower rise too high, too fast, certain powers be threatened. Downfall painful. I would hate to have anything befall you."

"Thank you sister," Suhayla said. But she was uncertain of Husniya's intentions to help or to scare.

As Suhayla finished her tea, she noticed Zehra fingering a ring. "What a beautiful gem."

"When I was a little girl. A gift by the late Sultana, Yasmina—a token of a promise."

"I was about to tell you—Ah, well, it is not important." Suhayla rose and walked away from the women and toward the door to the garden.

Zehra followed. "What, what? Tell me what?"

"I have a secret." Suhayla wrinkled up her nose. "If I touch people, I can sometimes see their future. Such as who they will marry. But, you must not tell anyone."

"Really? Could you tell me my future? I know who I

will marry. If. . .” Zehra looked away. “It probably does not matter. Who knows how long he will live once Farir takes the throne.”

“It must be a secret.”

“Yes, yes.”

Suhayla found a stone bench in a pool of pale light. Insects chirped around them. “Come, sit.” She patted the stone next to her. “The Moon, the feminine orb, will tell us secrets.” She reached out to Zehra who paused before sitting.

Zehra wrinkled up her nose and squinted. “Don’t talk. Give me your hand,” said Suhayla.

Slow, her hand hovered between them. Zehra sighed and placed it in Suhayla’s palm.

Suhayla did not move for a moment. She breathed and relaxed her mind. The same image she had seen before floated into her head. Zehra, dressed and veiled in bridal vestments, stood at the front of a mosque. But she could not recognize the groom beside her. He reminded her of Aziz. He had his back to her, his body, lean, lithe and wiry; a long black mane of hair. She had to make sure Aziz never married her. Suhayla breathed and exhaled. She opened her eyes. “I am reluctant to tell you.”

“Why? Is it awful? Oh then I must know, I must.

Otherwise how will I avoid it?"

"I don't think you will like what I saw," Suhayla said.

Zehra pleaded in a raised voice.

"Sh. . . I will tell you."

"Yes, please, no matter what you saw."

Suhayla gazed at Zehra's dark eyes amid a dusky face.

"Your husband will murder you."

Zehra's glow faded and her eyes rimmed with tears.

"I did not want to tell you, you insisted." Oh Isis, oh God forgive me.

"But, are you sure?" Her lips trembled. "Is it really the future?"

"Only Allah knows." Suhayla shrugged.

CHAPTER THIRTY

In a silence saturated with the scent of earthy musk, Fatima shifted on her divan. Her large aubergine forehead and the sculpted planes of her jaw, high cheek bones all topped a slender stalk of a neck. Blazing onyx eyes were as steady as the orbits of the sphinx.

Suhayla waited, and kept a watchful eye on the beaded curtain that shimmered over the threshold to Fatima's

private chambers in case anyone listened outside. On the mahogany table burned a single lamp.

"Ah, Bibi, there you are." After finishing her tea, Suhayla joined Fatima in her private salon and a black cat sauntered up, meowing. He paused and gazed at her, sniffing. "Bibi, this is Suhayla, Suhayla, Bibi." Her elegant, tinted fingers streaked over Bibi's sleek, shiny coat blacker than pitch. "Mmmmm."

"I don't know what Aziz will do when the Sultan goes to Allah." Suhayla became aware of a growing sense of discomfort, a catch in her chest when she thought of his future, their future.

"Inshallah, it will not be a catastrophe. Oh, if only I could help him, I would." Fatima's eyes widened.

"You know about Zehra?" Suhayla said.

"No, but reality is not always what it seems. Right Bibi?" She smiled down at the feline of midnight fur and stark lemon yellow eyes.

"You believe in djinn and such?"

"Our world is but one, there are countless others." She pointed up to the heavens. "Like the stars above."

"How do you know?"

"I sense them, here." A deep mahogany finger tip pointed to her heart.

"Sometimes I see shadows of other worlds, events. . . They are like dreams yet I am awake. Sometimes I am carried by a bird to the great lion of stone that crouches in the desert." Suhayla gazed at Fatima.

A slight smile spread upon her companion's lips. "The old world that existed before this one," Fatima said. Bibi lay before her, stretched out revealing a tummy of milky fur. He purred a loud rhythm. "The djinn are the Gods and Goddesses of the past. At times, they fly down from the heavens and walk and act among us."

"But, Aziz--"

"Justice has not served him," Fatima said.

"There is still time, but not much. When Farir is Sultan--" Suhayla looked down to the little fire of the lamp.

The worm of the wick lay in the cupped amber pool of oil Fatima focused on the dim flame. "Oduda," Fatima said. She whispered to herself the name of the ancient mother goddess of her homeland. "I have repeated her name to myself each morning and night so I would not forget. We have to work at not forgetting. Oduda, the ebony-skinned creatrix; the embodiment of earth in all her strength and wisdom: lava, caves, bedrock, mountains, soil, trees, water, birds, insects, serpents, mammals (including

humans). To Oduda, humans were her greatest creation, the most complex. Like herself, humans were made of earth and stars, yet sometimes they forgot their place in the harmony of the world. In such instances Oduda would withdraw her powers of life, of plenty until the humans remembered her and called to her again."

In Fatima's mind's eye: images of blackness wavered, a massive bed of rock, smooth as glass, had been spewed up from the center of the earth; from the heart of Oduda. In the ancient volcanic basalt the outline of Oduda's feline form took shape in grooved lines that deepened. Substance rounded up into relief, as if life had been breathed into the onyx rock. The paws, legs, and belly of a great cat, a panther, became more distinct; as did the curve of the jaw, the inset eyes, and the graceful round of the nose. In one heart beat the belly of the beast enlarged with breath and lowered in exhalation. The legs and paws stirred, as if waking from a long slumber, and stretched, struggled to raise its body, to separate from the coal-black rock.

Suhayla's gaze met Fatima's.

"I may have lost a daughter, my heart will ever ache for her, yet in you--" Fatima collected herself. Her eyes watered. "I see hope for change in the palace, in the kingdom. This foreign world has swallowed me. Only my

faith, my ability to vision and dream Odudu, has kept me alive. She stopped me from drinking poison."

"I--"

A hand halted her. Fatima continued, "When I first saw you, I saw a light, a glow around your body. The light also shimmered in your green eyes, like a cat's, and still does. I knew then you are the one that Odudu has been promising me."

"But why then was I not made a man?" Suhayla asked. "So I could be more effective?"

"Love from a feminine heart can be more powerful than physical-brute force, and thus result in change. We share our bodies, our breasts' milk, our love. . .We embody divine grace. Once in my homeland there were two warriors. They fought; they began fighting as children with wooden sticks. They wished to determine which of them was the best warrior, the strongest and most skillful. "When the two were initiated into manhood they each took up a spear and bow to see who among them was the best hunter. When one of the men brought home four antelope, five storks, and four wild goats so did the other. This went on for some time. The people in their villages, when they went to hunt found the grass lands empty: the trees were bare of birds, the wild goats few and weak, and antelope scarce. The

tribal elders called the people of the surrounding villages together and gathered for discussion. The men, the fathers and husbands and newly initiated complained. "There is no game left, the two men are killing everything, and they must stop.

"By now the two young hunters neared legendary status. People murmured in the villages, "Perhaps they are half god.

"The Great Mother, Kanunga-nunga, also called Oduda, after the village of Ado, heard the grumblings of the villagers. She knew the two men, better than most because she had birthed them in secret, far away from all the other gods and goddesses.

"One day, Kanunga-nunga had been walking in the grasslands in a spring evening. The birds' songs thrilled her; the breeze from the East was cool and moist. The grass and trees were vibrant and verdant and lush after all the rains. Above streaks of magenta and ochre accompanied the fiery orb, a giant, magnificent yolk as it slid beneath the ledge at the end of the plains. Kanunga-nunga breathed in the scent of the surging grass, and the sprouting trees and the heady sweet air of flowers. Bees hummed. When she walked, the grass caressed her calves and feet, the breeze her breasts, belly, arms and face.

"Kanunga-nunga came upon a young man, who with a graceful touch loosened an arrow that with one thunk brought down an antelope in the blink of an eye. "What are you doing here?" She had never seen humans in this area before.

"I am on my walk about. To become a man I must prove I have the skills to survive on my own." He smiled gazing at her in all her glory: ample breasts, great pendulous melons; olive-hued skin; smooth, ample curves of her hips and thighs, the beauty of her sex. He delighted in the light that shimmered all around her body and in her eyes.

"She marveled at his deftness with the bow, his sculpted limbs and gentle, thoughtful eyes. As the moon sailed in its silent journey across the velvety firmament, Kanunga-nunga lay with him. She embraced him, straddling him with her long ebony legs, and many arms. (If you had seen this couple from afar you would have said there were too many legs and arms between them.) They kissed and sucked and caressed and loved. Her nectar mixed with his salty pollen. Night birds sang in nearby trees, songs of another world where death does not exist, where the light of the moon and stars is eternal. At this precise moment Kanunga-nunga conceived. And because she had the power of the earth, being the 'Great Mother' she bid the life in her

belly to split into two. This made her so happy that tears flowed up from inside her and created a huge pool that had never been there before.

"Kanunga-nunga kissed the man who fathered her child, and returned to her home before the dawn light emerged. As the two babies grew in her belly she sang to them of the graceful gazelles, the swiftness of the Cheetahs, the dances of the cranes. When the twins were born Kanunga-nunga taught them how to speak the languages of the animals: understand the call of the hawks, the roars of the lions and cheetahs, the howl of the hyenas, the cleverness of the baboons. She taught them all about the plants for food as well as herbs for healing wounds and sickness. "The heavens above are like a great pool held up by magic and reflect the movements in the earth, in my own heart, as well as the seasons. Pictures are created by the scattered clusters of stars: my own image glitters there; your father, the hunter; the bull, the lion, the dog star that calls up the surging water from the south in the Blue river; and the orbs that each travel on their own paths. "You will never lose your way."

"Kanunga-nunga, older in years, called the two men to her hut of branches and hides. Fiery mud churned and bubbled around her as she sat on a pile of blankets in the

middle of her hut. A vermillion glow clung to her hair; and flames, every once in a while, arose in her eyes. She did this just to make sure the men realized the severity of this problem. "Great Mother, you called us."

"They knelt before her, heads bowed, and left their bows and spears behind the door as was proper. Both the young men resembled their father but in different ways. One embodied his ebony, muscled body and green ferny eyes; the other had grown lean and tall, similar to the people who lived along the Blue Nile. He possessed Azure eyes and a grin that revealed ivory teeth--a grin that would warm a woman's loins.

"I am tired and angry with all the grumblings I hear from the villages--my people." The hut and ground shook as she spoke. Both men trembled with fear.

Old Kanunga-nunga knew what she was about. She pointed a fiery finger to the son on her right. "What have you brought to honor me?"

"Oh Great Mother, I dove into the Blue River, that is the ever flowing vein of water, and made for you a necklace of freshwater pearls." He lifted the gift up to her.

"And you," she pointed to the other son. "What have you brought for me?"

"Oh Great One, I give to you a collection of jeweled-feathered birds from all over the land, to grace your hut with color and song." Behind him stood a cage, crafted of branches and twigs, where a variety of birds perched and sang and clucked.

She sat for a moment, still as a tree, ebony hands on her limb like knees, and eyed them. "How could you forget the most important lesson I taught you as children?"

Both the men looked up with questioning gazes.

"This is my decision." She waved to the son who brought her the pearl necklace. "You shall live on the moon and watch over the tides, and the cycles of growth." Kanunga-nunga peered at the son who gifted her with beautiful birds. "You shall live on the sun and keep the earth warm. But--" She held up a finger, "Before you go teach your children to kill only what they need, teach them to love the earth, and be joyful with all the abundance and beauty I provide."

"Aziz and Farir," Suhayla said.

"They both have a claim to the throne. I will support the one who honors the old gods, goddesses," Fatima said. "--And life." She stretched and propped her head on a hand. Her eyes gleamed. "I have a friend who may be willing to help."

The story of Oduda sank into Suhayla's heart, mind and soul. She realized the meaning, tears came to her eyes. "I am their balance, their equilibrium." She personified the element by flying to the heavens, to the stars and back to earth; her visions bloomed a many petalled lotus from her forehead, the center of second sight."

"By incorporating air, I balance Farir-fire-sun with Aziz-earth-lion."

"Aziz means lion." Fatima nodded. "His Ma knew."

"I feel as if the brothers weigh down my arms; on each arm I hold one."

"As air separates sun and earth, but they must be balanced."

"Or I will be torn asunder," Suhayla said.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Journal: Full Moon

After the month of Ramadan had ended, I carried a sack of food and fruit for the Saint. A sacred scroll lay nestled in the bottom, under the bread.

He, the nameless one, for giving him a name gives him too much power, continues to haunt me, and arrives when he

knows my husband is not home. He plagues me for the
'book.'

In the great silence of the moonless nights he watches and waits, cloaked in a black robe and turban, the shadows exude him. He must slink about for the Sultan considers the text heretical. He seeks the Book of Causes. I cannot relinquish it to him. I would be betraying my family, my father, my teacher, my heart.

In my dreams he spears my womb, blood spurts uncontrollably. I awake screaming. How can I have a child in this condition? How can a womb of wreckage be fertile and allow a seed to take root? Does not the Nile bring life to the sand? When there are ever babies growing here they die before gaining size—blood washes my inner thighs, and once again I am left—an empty sarcophagus.

I leave behind the chatter and noise from the city, Cairo, where flies and beggars congregate, and greed feeds, in warrens of dust and refuse—tormented streets. Once I stepped off the ferry I sought solitude from all the mothers with children clutched to their breasts and hanging on to their skirts, sheep fat with lambs and bleating, and eyes staring at me—You barren woman!

A dry desert wind twists and turns and lifts sand up into the air as if in invisible arms; pale and hot sun,

dust and powdery grit found its way unbidden into my nose, mouth and eyes, despite my veil. Ravens circled cackling below wisps of tawny clouds which taunt us but leave no moisture.

It seems as if I walk endlessly but Gebel Gibli, the mound of rock, rises before me. On my right is the recumbent Sphinx; the pyramids pierced the pearlescent sky, are silent.

His stone hut, stacked precariously, was empty. I called out to El-Samman, only the caw of Ravens, the flash of white winged doves. I left some fruit for him on a rock inside. During the descent rocks shifted underneath my feet and I almost fell. Weary, I walked to the well to quench my thirst. There in the shade sat three women, a camel with loaded packs and water sacks rested behind.

The well, and cemetery, Aish el-Ghurob, "Bread of the Crow" were nestled around ancient Gomez, Sycamores; a small oasis surrounded by rock, ancient fallen temples, and sand, before the sphinx.

The women nodded to me as I approached the well. One had startling green eyes, like the lapidary ones some cats possess. She poured water from a jug into a cup and offered it to me. I shared my fruit with them.

"We saw you struggle up the Saint's hill and then down again," The old woman said. Her eyes were small and beady, watchful.

"I came to see the Saint."

"He died--buried over there." She pointed a wrinkled hand to a fresh mound of sand. The other two women waited as if too see what would unfold.

Defeat and disappointment squeezed hope from my heart and despair settled a dense weight again. "He said he would teach me; he named me guardian of Giza."

"Do you have children?"

I shook my head. The elder woman examined me up and down, I felt embarrassed under her gaze. I shook my head and looked away. They must have seen the shame and sadness on my face.

Chama, the eldest woman smiled, a gold tooth glinted in the sun. "There is something we wish to show you."

I followed them over windblown ripples of sand, around great blocks and trunks of pillars. Buried or nearly so in the bleached sand, a scattering of stones jutted up at different angles. Before the lion, silent with feminine reticence, and beside the foundation where a temple once stood, stood a jagged-topped slab. At first in the blazing sun I saw nothing but a cracked fragment, the top missing.

Chama motioned for me to get closer. "When we saw her, we worked her upright. She must always be sitting up to be nourished by the sun and moon and stars, and thereby nurture her child."

In relief, a goddess held her infant on her lap as he suckled.

"She is named Isis." The youngest woman, Mina, smiled and nodded with excitement before the goddess.

I knelt before the goddess, carved on a broken stele, and traced my finger about her smooth arms, rounded and strong shoulders, full breasts and the nursing baby, pudgy with health. Her crown, fashioned of horns, like upraised arms held a disc. At the base of the stone withered a handful of roses. Tears coursed down my cheeks, emptied all the despair and hopelessness and frustration that I had held for so long.

"The emblem she wears is borrowed from the Cow goddess, the disc is the sun but in time forgotten represented the fertile moon," Mina said.

"She is the great mother, and so will you be also," the elder woman patted my shoulder.

Mina had bright, friendly eyes and appeared trust worthy. "We welcome you to our camp."

"Come, we have bread and stew." Chama saw me hesitate. "Our tent is over behind the wall of rock, it shelters us from the cold night winds."

I considered for a moment. "Yes, I will come."

"Chama is my grandmother; she and I are Copts, descended from the Pharaohs. This is Darwah--" Mina pointed to the woman with startling palm green eyes. "— cannot speak. She had been a slave, suffered beatings, and because she complained of her abuse, the men held her down and sliced off her tongue."

I put my hand to my heart. "Health to your head." Darwah nodded.

"It was difficult at first, but now we communicate quite easily with our hands, eyes and thoughts," Mina said. "She is from the Ghawazee tribe. She can read people's futures." Mina whispered in my ear, "she is a healer, Allah has blessed her."

My eyes watered like springs bubbling to the surface. I could not believe my good fortune.

Inside their tent they made me comfortable with pillows and served me bread, stew and tea. Before a brazier, Mina knelt and scraped flint. Resins burned, their pungent smoke surrounded me and filled the tent.

Chama sang songs and clapped. Mina turned to me. "If you lay in the center, Darwah will heal your womb so you may conceive."

They could have killed me, stolen from me. I lay on my back putting the whole of my being in their care.

Mina and Chama sang in unison to the moon, the stars, to my twin soul watching from the heavens. They sprinkled me with the cool water from the deep well. Darwah made a fluttering sign with her hands.

"She wants you to have your skin around your navel bare so she can see better," Chama said.

"See what?"

"See inside your womb."

I parted my robe and gathered my tunic. Darwah smeared sweet smelling almond oil upon my flat belly with gentle, smooth hands. Chama handed a small pot to Darwah; she spread an unguent smelling of honey. Mina sang and clapped dancing a continual circle around me. From a nearby sack, Chama gathered branches, one of vibrant green Cedar, the other an Olive branch with black fruit attached. She brushed me all over: upon my face, hair, chest, arms, hands, belly, feet and legs.

Darwah kissed a diminutive figurine of the Sphinx; the silent lioness made of green clay, touched it to my heart and then placed it on my womb.

Comfortable, I closed my eyes, and in a flash my mind's eye showed me the great mother Isis stood before me and then hovered over me. The outlines of her crown and body, her eyes drawn in black, and the folds of her dress were visible. In a blink of an eye she lay above my body and then sank into myself, entering through the door of my heart. Isis and I became one.

Chama muttered a prayer ". . . to Isis, to the lineage of Sufi Saints at Gebel Gibli, to the Lady of the Sycamores, to the lioness." From lively, wise eyes Chama gazed at me. "I conjure thee to keep my council: the wreckage of your womb has been washed away. A new time is dawning, a new sun of love will bloom on earth, and I invoke the sacred name of old-- "Sekhmet."

Darwah held the lioness up to the heavens. Mina stood still beside her. "Sekhmet, the lion goddess is a fierce protectress."

I looked to my sack. "There is a sacred text I need to hide."

Mina glanced at the elder woman. "We know a safe place," Chama said. "We will take you there."

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO PAPAVER SOMNIFERUM

Nearing the doorway to Husniya's private chambers, Suhayla's belly tightened. Smoke clung to the air, sweet and cloying, a blue haze hung in the room. She recognized the sickly scent. Tears pressed on her eyes as she thought of Baba locked in his room behind the ebony doors after Mama died. Suhayla shook her head to rid herself of the image. If only the past could be dissolved as easily.

Ensnorced in emerald velvet and brocade, Husniya lay on the long divan with her elbow propped on pillows. She puffed on a gurgling hookah and eyed the handmaid through the smoke. "Come." Her voice deeper, huskier than usual, beckoned.

"Eat, my sweet sister." Pipe in mouth, she nodded to the huge platter laden with pomegranates, shiny black olives and honey cakes on the low table.

"I can't." Although the fruit and cakes looked juicy, Suhayla's appetite had been diminished by the smoke. It conjured up memories of her Baba, her parent's death. The image revolved in her mind. Silence. She thought to leave.

"Farir will be Sultan, soon, days. . . Farir already has his lovers," Husniya said. "You need own husband."

She stretched a thin, ivory arm out to caress Suhayla's hair.

Suhayla leaned away from her.

"When women marry—" she let a ball of smoke out and it faded in the air above. "—They have something."

This was the reason she bid Suhayla to visit? Husniya and Princess were eager to see her married. The handmaid shrugged her shoulders. "I will find the right man, I have faith in Allah." The only man she would consider marrying had sworn friendship but not love. It was no good if he did not return Suhayla's love. She would rather wander the earth, a Salik, a searcher looking for the divine on earth. But Suhayla did not trust this concubine enough to reveal all this to her.

"We women want. . . A man of our own." A sly smile played upon Husniya's lips reddened with pomegranate juice. Slender, almost boneless looking fingers held the narrow black pipe; she offered it to the handmaid.

Suhayla shook her head remembering what Fatima had once said. "'Do not touch the poppy's brown sweetness. Once you are in its arms it will never let you go.'"

"Mmmm. . . Qamar will appreciate you. He owns a house, a garden, servants. . . Imagine."

"Who is he?" Suhayla really was not interested in her

pick of a husband but decided to play along for curiosity's sake.

"One of Sultan's guards." A lazy smile spread across her lips. "Handsome." She pointed. "You have allure, innocence, and a bosom. Bloom of youth colors cheeks."

"I am nearly your age."

"He, make woman of you." Husniya grinned in a drugged way. She attempted to slide her ivory fingers up Suhayla's full skirt.

Suhayla grabbed the pillow and was about to hit her hand away. But instead she reached over, and ignored the squirm inside her, grasped Husniya's thin, bony arm. In Suhayla's mind dust swirled. Two people, a turbaned man and a woman pressed together against a tree. . . "Love," was whispered between moans. "Freedom, a new home, slaves, riches." Shadows twisted and twined like blackened arms, and clutched tugging a woman down to the leaf and twig ground. Sparks flew and cascaded onto the depth of night. . . blood pooled beneath white."

Suhayla recovered herself.

A husky laugh. "You come long way." She eyes Suhayla as she puffed out rings of smoke and blew them up into the air. "Touch is enticing." Plucking a ripe pomegranate from the platter, the fruit barely contained its juices as

Husniya gave a chesty laugh and lifted it to her mouth. "Creates longing in lover." Slowly she nipped at the leathery rind with teeth as white as her skin. Juices erupted into her mouth, sweet and succulent, delighting her taste buds. Husniya gazed at the object of her jealousy with hatred. In the dream of the opium she fed that chimera of fear, despair and greed; not the greed for wealth, the desperation for love. Farir's love. And she could not, would not let any upstart of a, a handmaiden be an obstacle. Husniya had been locked in the walls of the harem for far too long. World weary, tired of waiting and waiting for the hope of happiness, for real love and attention, and now that she glimpsed this newfound love, the Prince, she would not let anything or anyone stand in her way. Husniya narrowed her eyes with displeasure; her calligraphic brows angled downward.

"I save myself for my husband," Suhayla said.

"Qamar gives delight."

"You speak as if from experience."

Husniya's lips curved into a lewd grin. "I have many. . . Friends."

"I must go." The handmaid arose and started for the door.

"I will arrange a meeting." Husniya grinned, looking

quite pleased with herself.

"The princess said she would ask the Farir to find me a husband." Suhayla tucked loose hairs behind her ear.

She waved a lily white hand. "He will not have time once he is Sultan," She said.

"Only Allah knows such things."

Husniya let a stream of smoke out of the side of her mouth. A glint appeared in her half lidded eyes. "He gave to Princess, early wedding gift, a child of eight. Slavery saves their families from starving. I bought from family by slaver around same age." A puff of smoke escaped her stained red lips. "Prince Farir care not for child; he care not for you." Husniya held up her milky hand, fingers splayed and examined a ring; a massive ruby-black and crimson-glittered.

It was true; Farir did not care for anyone but himself. Suhayla pitied Husniya as she did most of the women of the harem, and sympathized with their plight. How does a child make sense of the world without guidance and protection from parents? That defused her anger but she held onto her defiance. The women were all like a pack of jackals fighting over the left over bones of a carcass, snapping at each other.

"Be very careful sister—what you say around eunuchs.

It is a private army, eyes and ears everywhere. The chief eunuch is. . . The executioner." Blue smoke choked the room. "From street. . . I raise you--" She pointed a finger upward.

A chill ran up and down Suhayla's spine. She turned toward the door and caught the fleeting glimpse of a black cat's tail. The women were like crazed animals, desperate for love, tormented by jealousy, afraid of losing that which they never had. Perhaps, Suhayla thought, she should stand in the middle of the harem and shout, 'I do not love or want Prince Farir!' But she doubted anyone would believe her.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Ever since the day that Prince Farir had escorted Suhayla back to the harem she felt eyes upon her back, and vile whisperings all about. Many of the women glared with ill-concealed anger. Two additions to the harem relieved, for a short time, the boredom, and the solemnness as the Sultan lay dying.

The new child became known as Doe-eyed. Her moon like eyes were fringed with thick lashes, much like a ghazel's, and her cinnamon skinned face curved almost in a circle as if she held onto baby fat. Her fleshy fingers were nimble

though, and she became admired for her skill with a needle and embroidery.

The other, a monkey, was given by the Vizier, for a wedding present, to honor the Princess.

Fiery light of morning blazed through the carved screen dappling the carpet's arabesques of palm green and saffron in a sea of lapis. Princess straightening her back as she sat on the dais, waited.

Fatanat stood beside Princess and oversaw the large bronze platter carried by two serving women. With a finger Fatanat pointed to the carpet before the dais. She gloried in her new found power. In the short time she had maneuvered herself, only one moon cycle, to become the favored handmaid.

With care she chose the right moment, when the other handmaids were off attending to duties. Fatanat bowed down before Princess. "I pledge my loyalty and devotion to you." She kissed the royal's childish toes that peeked out from the edge of her skirt glittering with gold and silver sequins. Yes. She planted a moist kiss on both rows of toes.

Princess delighted in this display of servitude and submission. "Be my eyes and ears." Princess pressed a hand to her woman's ebony hair. "You will be rewarded for

your diligence; the first will be to make you my favorite handmaid."

Fatanat presided over all her rituals: bathing, meals, dressing, tasting her food, listening to gossip; and the favorite performed all duties to her utmost skill.

Princess Dunyazad, true to her name, spent hours scrubbing her skin, applying clays and oils to her face and body; her thighs and calves and arms were fleshy from inactivity and eating scented fats. She had slaves apply burnt sugar to remove all her bodily hair, although painful, the procedure resulted in smooth, glowing skin, smelling of sandal-wood and spice.

Each time Dunyazad looked upon Suhayla ire rose within her. Farir had been alone with the wench and he was not even Sultan yet. The woman must be cavorting with the djinn for she had Farir lapping at her side. Venom coursed through the Princess and stuck to her throat and tongue like bitter gourd. She would not wait any longer before Farir took the throne. This woman had to be disposed of no matter at what cost. The ways were numerous and the places as well. The desert was wide and quickly swallowed up corpses, but she need not go that far. There was also House of Tears, where old female servants and aged concubines went to die. To be exiled to the prison and

brought back was unheard of.

Dunyazad cooed to the creature in her lap. The monkey's mahogany fur contrasted with bright pink vest and pantaloons, she chattered, dark eyes stared. "You want a fruit? Oh, you do." Princess took a melon slice from the platter and held it away from the monkey. "Titi, look, here it is." After much teasing, she gave the fruit to the monkey. Titi took the melon in her little, human like hands, and ate with relish.

"Have the slaves remove Suhayla's things to the common sleeping room, it is where 'she' belongs. You shall have the honorable position at the foot of my bed."

Quick on her feet, Fatanat wasted no time and ordered the slaves to move fast. She followed the slaves to Princess's sleeping chamber and watched, arms crossed at her chest, eyes sharp, as the two girls bundled up Suhayla's clothes, combs, and a book with a worn red binding. The book had been hidden in a roll of cloth.

"I'll take that." Fatanat opened up the book and looked at the poetry, writing, prayers emphasized with delicate flourishes in the courtly style of writing. Drawings of Ibis', doves, roses caught her eye and drew her in. She memorized as many of the figures as she could. Then and only then she gave the book to the serving woman.

"Put the book back as you found it, and place all these things in the common sleeping area." Fatanat smiled to herself for being so clever.

Suhayla and Iqbal entered Princess' chamber, and bowed. Princess held the monkey. "And what would you like to eat Titi?" The handmaids, including Doe-eyed, waited for Fatanat to taste the food.

Serving girls brought a second platter of fruits and flat breads and placed this before Suhayla, Iqbal and Doe-eyed.

Fatanat sat and picked a bunch of grapes from the mound of fruit, cheese and bread. She nibbled and swallowed. With the watchful and cool disinterest of an owl, Princess gazed at Fatanat. After feeding her pet, Princess waved the signal for them to eat.

The monkey chattered and the girls smiled in silence. The monkey leaped from the Princess' lap and ran to the platter. Doe-eyed reached out a child like finger to pat the creature. "Titi should not eat anymore!" Princess commanded. Doe-eyed leaned over to prevent the monkey from taking any, but with a quick dart of a bestial little hand the animal had already grabbed a melon slice.

"Stop her—Fatanat!" Princess screamed.

Fatanat stood and chased the little being, but the

monkey was too quick and disappeared around the side of an empty divan. "Titi!" Princess yelled but did not rouse her body from the dais.

"She has eaten," Fatanat said, and returned to her seat by the Princess.

The princess slapped her. "You fool! I said to stop her--"

Tears filled Fatanat's eyes. She pressed a hand to her reddening cheek.

Iqbal reached for a slice of melon, lime green flesh shone. She lifted the slice up to her mouth--

Suhayla pushed Iqbal's hand away. "Do not. . .wait."

Sensations of needling stung Suhayla's skin all over. Her ears were filled with a hallucinatory like buzzing. Energy coursed through her. Her mind reeled with images that raced so fast they blurred. She didn't know how to force the images in her mind's eye to slow. In a secluded part of her mind, she prayed to the lioness, the goddess that had performed the miracle of begetting her Mama with child—and was rewarded.

The vision steadied, the images slowed: screaming, Iqbal summoned all her strength and pulled on the black, glistening arms of the Eunuchs who held her, dragged her to the brass studded door. Streams of tears ran down her

cheeks. Piercing cries reverberated in the great salon, echoed in the corridors, in all the women's bones, and permeated into the stones.

Another flash, another picture impregnated Suhayla's mind: Iqbal's neck, a bloodied stump, rolled away from her body. Spatters of blood stained her emerald, embroidered vest, her ivory tunic edged with rows of Venetian beads bought by her loved one. Her head rested on the sand under the blaze of sun. Skin pallid, her mouth made hideous, stained with blood that slid from her lips. Eyes wide open; her pupils were like ebony set in alabaster—eerie.

In her own abyss, Suhayla's vision slid away. She realized her body was rooted to a carpet. Moaning and a strange gurgling noise, someone choking, grew more insistent.

Before Iqbal lay the piece of green melon.

Doe-eyed rubbed her stomach. Sweat beaded and then streaked from her forehead and fleshy cheeks. She swayed, side to side, clutching at her belly, and looked upward as if dizzy with vertigo. Her face transformed into a chimera of nightmares: "What is wrong with her?" Princess demanded.

Iqbal stared in horror as Doe-eyed's face transformed into a chimera of nightmares: flared eyes turned in their

sockets, her mouth foamed, Doe-eyed convulsed, swaddled as a mummy in her ivory veil.

Suhayla said, "Call the palace physician."

The two handmaids glanced at each other with understanding. 'Poison.' They watched poor Doe-eyed; there was nothing anyone could do.

"Where is my Titi?" Princess sucked her lip in a brooding attitude and glared at the handmaids. "Go find her."

Suhayla and Fatanat did not have to look far. Suhayla went to the side of the far divan where a ball of fur and magenta curled. She pointed, not wanting to touch the creature and be blamed for its death. "There, she does not move."

"Bring her here!" Princess's forehead creased with worry. She betrayed her anxiousness by her nervous habit of digging and scratching at her skin, wrists and arms.

Fatanat stood by Suhayla, they both looked down at the poor thing. The favorite handmaid knelt down to where the creature lay against the embroidered crimson of the divan, and she clucked like an old woman. "Poor little creature."

Suhayla unbound a treasured gold-threaded scarf from around her hips.

"No, no," Fatanat said. "We'll use this." She unwrapped from her head a beaded and fringed cloth. "The Princess gave it to me." She spoke with solemnness. "It is more fitting."

Suhayla nodded. Together she and Fatanat spread out the fabric, threaded with gold, and lifted up the little beast whose body's was warm but stiff from the convulsions or poison. Its head buried under the tail and vest as if it had realized the shame of its death, the mistress of its demise.

With a reverent silence the two women wrapped the mahogany fur and pink in the shell colored scarf, and bound the little body in its shroud with many layers, tying the two beaded and fringed ends together. Both women looked upon the spattering of churned spittle, and the green of vomited fruit.

"What a waste." Suhayla shook her head.

"I want my Titi. Where is she? Bring her." Princess said with a voice heavy with emotion.

Fatanat lifted and carried the little creature, Suhayla, in their wake as if in a funeral procession. "Here is your little Titi." And she placed the ball of fabric and monkey in the Princess's hands.

Princess rocked the little creature back and forth as

if it had been a child she birthed into the world. Wetness shone in her eyes.

The handmaids stood waiting for the Princess to do something about poor Doe-eyed who still lay there in her wretched vomit. Fatanat knelt before Princess, and spoke to her as if she were a child. "We must call a eunuch for Doe-eyed."

Princess sniffled, gazed at her through tear laden lashes. "Go then."

The needless death and devastation churned in Suhayla's belly. Prince Aziz's face flashed in her mind. Suhayla took her scarf and with care spread the ivory length over the sad child who's brown eyes continued to stare as if to say: 'I died so you both could live.' The rows of gold threads caught the sun's light and shone like a gold river.

"It would have been me," Iqbal whispered. "If you had not stopped me."

"No matter," Suhayla said. With delicate movements they both tucked the ends of the gossamer scarf around Doe-eyed's cheeks and hair and shoulders.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

The Sultan's ragged breathing permeated the quiet of

the chamber. Dark, windows were shuttered against all sun, only one oil lamp burned on a table in the alcove on the opposite side of the room. The soft glow of the luminous amber light allowed Farir to see the Sultan. Vestiges of burned resins, pungent and earthy, and purifying, clung to the air. The dark hulks of ebony carved chests swallowed the light.

Farir stared at the Sultan. He should be dead, he had no right to linger on: the palace, the throne, the kingdom was his by right, and the Sultan had no right to lay further claim upon them. He whispered, "I will have my wedding, you will not stop me or interfere with my life any longer. You are dead to me, as you have been throughout the whole of my life, Mama's life. So now you will go to Allah.

Disgust contorted his face when he positioned himself next to the bed where the Sultan laid decrepit, disintegrating, half dead body, a bag of decaying flesh hanging onto bones. A fetid stench clung to the air. Nauseousness gripped Farir's belly, he forced his mind to control his body and concentrated all his focus into what he must do.

Grimacing, with both hands he encircled the Sultan's neck which was all bone and loose, papery skin, wrinkled

like ancient paper, folded and refolded, dry. . .

disgusting. The grey hairs of the beard needled his skin.

In the Prince's hands culminated all the pain, rage, hatred, loneliness, coldness, all the injustices severe and slight that had gathered within him since birth till now. All this blazed in a fiery ball, in the foundry of his soul they had been smoldering, each injustice stoking the fire adding new fuel. And it grew like a caged animal as it was fed. A great fire then consumed him and with all the fury and hatred in his hands he squeezed the neck and throat. Sweat dripped from his forehead onto his hands. He had no tears. All the tears had been spent and exhausted when he had been a boy.

When the Sultan's body relaxed and breathed no more, Farir unclasped his hands from the neck. He bent down and listened for a beat of the heart. All Farir heard was his own breath, his own heartbeat. "Go to your God, you are not wanted here."

When Farir walked from the chamber, his footfalls hollow upon the marble floor, doors opened before him. Farir glanced at the physician and the Vizier, who waited and humbly bowed. "The Sultan joins Allah." The Prince continued walking and said over his shoulder. "Perform the usual burial rights." If it were left to him, he would

have had the putrid remains dumped out in the desert for the vultures to feed on.

Farir entered his own chamber and ordered the serving boy to light the lamps, and fetch the dwarf. The columned hall, a rectangular room, glowed with the dim wicks floating in oil of seventy lamps. The many arches of red granite carved by master builders were revealed. The raised platform at the far end, strewn with a carpet and cushions held the object of his desire.

A hashish-pipe rested on a pillow, full of the debris of his life: his self loathing, hatred, his whole existence fugitive as the wind, or a ghost; his childhood a lost memory. Bereft face, eyes devoid of haughtiness, he lit the pipe and puffed, he sank into the relaxed peace he desired so much.

His three hooded falcons did not rouse his interest.

He smoked. His breath and fire—the burning filled his mind and engulfed him like ecstasy. The loss of his childhood, his self, left a void, desperation to relive the dream, to fulfill his insatiable hunger: like a dream gone upon waking with only vestiges, glimpses, lone pictures dusting the corner of his mind.

The chasm inside himself transformed.

Fire. Fire filled this wadi, a dry river bed of his heart, his self. Fire. Beautiful. A gift to him from the Divine Radiance—Allah! He sneered. Damn his father to the demons of hell. It is where he belongs, he who ruled for seventy years in ignorance of knowledge, who wielded sword and spear and arrow in the name of God and the future. The late Sultan had no use for alchemy or the compounds of the earth.

When Farir was a boy of fifteen, the Sultan had taken him to a battle, cities had been sacked, heathen temples burned to the ground, the lucky women and children killed, the rest taken for slaves. One of the Sultan's guards disemboweled a man, a young man, about the same age as Farir. In the man's pleading eyes and face Farir had seen himself. Sultan gave him a sword. "Finish him." He waited for Farir.

"I kill him only to remove his suffering in my eyes." Farir clutched the hilt of the warm metal, speckled with blood and bits of hair and skin. He thrust the sword into the man's heart and threw the blood covered blade to the ground. The Prince glared at the Sultan. "I will never again kill for you!" Farir stole a soldier's horse and galloped off into the dark of night which was suffused with cries of pain, moans of the dying, and the stench of blood.

He went to the Orient and studied with the greatest masters of alchemy and astronomers he could find; there he learned of the excitable powder.

At an arched window Farir stood, the starry night gave birth to the lunar sail. "Fire. Red sulphur. Red sulphur to fill me, my heart. . . Fire." He repeated like an oracle. "I must prepare for the night of Laylat al-qadr, the night of power, the night the fiery stream from God descends to earth. I will capture it, hold its power and fire. I will become the breath of radiance—a burning lamp.

There is never enough light in the cavern where his memories laid confined. His fear of being the fool his father called him, left him dead in the heart, as if he had been stung by a serpent. He would overcome this succubus with the help of fire. . . Light.

At the table Farir picked up the cool, bronze disc. He leaned over and held it up to a flame. Gems encrusted in the metal glowed like diminutive planets in their sacred orbit; a ruby would be Mars; the emerald, Jupiter; and the yellow topaz, Venus. Allah created the universe and planets moved according to his Divine will. Strange symbols in relief circled the entire perimeter. What do these signs mean? What culture did this object originate

from? He swung the disc side to side. Time fermented in him. Restless, he paced around the chamber.

The Prince detected the slight movement of a velvet curtain, and placed on the end of three fingers deadly silver points. He had been taught how to defend himself with the shining metal claws. One of his falcons turned its hooded head to the doorway. He turned body tense, ready to spring. The multitude of little flames flickered. "Who's there?"

Sounds of scurrying in the verminous warrens of night, and the dwarf, that goblinish-saturnine creature, appeared and bowed. "Sultan," Iblis said, voice hoarse. Black bushy brows hung over deep-set, beady crow like eyes. His bestial little hands, covered with matted back hair, reminded Farir of the monkey.

"Enter."

The dwarf caught his breath, he detested running. He regarded his demonic master with hidden condescension. Iblis braved only a quick glance at Farir, he desired to preserve his life. His sharp brows framed eyes cold and dark as onyx, as piercing as his falcon's.

Farir picked up the bronze disc again, gazing at it like a mesmerist. "That opium drunk poet, my gazelle's Baba, had this object stored in his chest, wrapped in

velvet. Even when the house was burning around him, the old fool would not tell me the significance of this." He slammed his fist on the table. "What knowledge do you hold? Why do these gems crouch among the symbols?" Farir had the house burned down after he looked for the Book of Causes. All the scrolls and texts were common alchemical treatises copied from Greek texts he already had read. "You will reveal your secrets." The Sultan held the disc before him. Through the holes in the thin metal shone the light of the lamps, like burning stars.

With wild eyes Farir strode over to Iblis and put out a metal talon to the dwarf's cheek. He drew the sharp point forward leaving a red line. The dwarf trembled and a sheen of sweat glistened on his face. "I need a boy to sooth my passions tonight."

Iblis gave a short, world weary sigh. "Your will is my command."

"Have a bracelet brought to my dove, the one called Suhayla. Set her up in her own chambers, bring her tomorrow night. And get rid of the old women. Send them away—you know where."

Iblis moved with haste to escape on his short little legs. "Dwarf--" Farir turned his back to him and held up one talon. "You are useful."

It was the closest comment to a compliment Iblis would ever hope for from the Sultan. Better useful than dead, thrown into the desert and have his bones picked clean.

Iblis wondered how any women could feel like anything but a frightened song bird when faced by Farir's hawkish gaze. The Sultan had the whole of the harem to himself and worried and spent his faculty on a piece of bronze.

What a waste. Whereas Iblis' youthful body had been born diminished, a man's soul in a monkey body; he had been further chafed by the harsh desiccated winds of life during his youth when he had been deprived of his testicles.

He despised the Prince, for his indifference.

So conscious of the inextricable tangle of human sorrows and sufferings, for Iblis' whole life had been struggle and abuse and held in contempt by common people, people of normal stature. He sympathized deeply with the women of the harem and underneath like a dark river he harbored tenderness secretly. Oh, to stroke the ebony hair of a beauty!

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

Iblis carried the wood box with his two little hands into the harem. The giant of the Chief Eunuch looked down upon him with disdain but never the less opened the door.

Shrill cries and screams rent the air as the other eunuchs dragged the three old ladies out of their chambers and through the massive salon. Their high-pitched wails echoed as the women clutched at the pillars, the divans and their servants, begging for mercy. Concubines hurried out and fought with the eunuchs and pulled on the limbs of the old women. Tears ran down the faces of the women, slaves and concubines.

Suhayla ran to discover the reason for the commotion. She praised Allah for allowing Fatima to stay in the harem. When she saw the dwarf with the little box coming toward her with an odd expression, and his little beady eyes boring into her, she gasped and glanced around as if a trapped animal. She held her hands tightly against her belly.

"My lady." The dwarf bowed with politeness. "Is there a private room where we may. . .talk?"

Suhayla nodded as her insides squirmed and she thought she would be sick. The sounds of misery, sobbing and mourning disturbed the air. She threaded and unwound her fingers over and over as she led him to a smaller, more private place. She chose to sit by the row of arched windows open to the garden and Aziz's tower.

The dwarf set the box on a shining bronze platter upheld by intricately spliced wooden legs. Before her the little stack of minute ebony squares, with inlaid mother of pearl and blue topaz on the lid, waited. Suhayla examined the little imp, a curious black haired man the size of a child, but bestial in looks. With his stubby, bowed legs he climbed up onto a cushion on the opposite divan, spine straight. He pointed to the offering.

"A gift from the Almighty One." With patience he waited for her to open it.

Suhayla knew whatever the ebony squares contained would bring her unhappiness. Her innards twisted and her heart thudded. She reached slowly not eager to know what thing—term of entrapment—the box would reveal. She lifted the lid. A gold bracelet gleamed upon black velvet: all she saw were chains leading to Farir. She looked at the dwarf, whose features were squished, darkened with extensive brows.

"The Sultan is obsessed with a book he calls the Book of Causes," he said.

Suhayla gazed at him, curious.

"He possesses a thin bronze disc that has designs, symbols etched on it. . . and holes." He hoped for a remark by her, and with indifference studied his gold-seal

ring, for signing Farir's name in his absence. "He does not know who he is."

Suhayla glanced at her hands and then at him but said nothing.

"His knowledge, however much he has traveled and been educated, does not ease his soul or mind," he said.

She wondered at the impish man before her. What role he had in her fate, in her balancing Aziz and Farir, if any? Was he to play a part in the ending that her visions revealed? If he tempted her to speak against Farir, she refused. She would not be so easily caught in a trap. She shifted and worried loose a thread on her sleeve.

He sighed. "I am a prisoner here as well." He attempted to find common ground between them so this young woman whose eyes held him mesmerized would know he was not an insensitive beast and ignorant of her suffering. He had to warn this dove, who was quite too fair a lady for Farir's predatory spirit. "His relations--" He allowed himself a satisfying lingering glance, "--with both males. . . and ladies are disintegrated, troubled. . . more of possession. . . they go beyond the nature of intimacy."

No longer could she hold back the tears that strained against her eyes, the coiled fear and worry that choked

her. She wiped at her face with her fringed veil. "What am I to do?" Aziz's freedom held all her hope.

"If I had the means, I would free you," he whispered. "I would be killed immediately if Farir knew of the words I speak."

"He sent you here."

He nodded. "Only to give you that."

"A warning does little good if it cannot be heeded."

She looked out the windows toward the garden. "At the same time--"

"If it is any consolation you have your pick of the available suites."

She nodded, and said, "A bigger cage does not make a song bird free."

The brazier crackled and aromatic smoke puffed from the brass top and spun a lazy tendril of haze above their heads. Fatima poured out tea and handed a cup to Suhayla. Their blue-grey shadows moved upon the tiled walls.

"What if I reject it?" Suhayla said.

"It is a command that you are to be his concubine—but I encourage you to approach the Sultan and partition him to make you a wife."

Suhayla clunked her tea cup down. Her breath caught in her throat. Bitterness filled her mouth. Once again others were attempting to weave her fate. They pulled the threads tighter around her. If she were a horse, she would be crazed with anger, rearing against all restraints. "I, I cannot. To be his concubine or wife is so against. . . I rejected him before and I will do so again."

"Before he was a prince, now he is Sultan. No one can refuse his almighty word," said Fatima. "-and you need power."

"Is this what a lion feels when trapped by hunters with arrows and spears and dogs? The lion lashes out with sharp claws, teeth attacking, and injuring as many of the hunters and his minions. To be bound in a cage forever against his will with never a chance of a dream or freedom, the consequences of his wrath mean-nothing."

"I know how you feel daughter," Fatima said.

It was then that Suhayla knew what she would do, the only thing that pleased her or gave her hope for the future. She would go to Aziz and seduce him. Though by doing so would bring visions, she would fulfill her plan no matter what. Unlike her dreams, her visions were always comparable with her waking moments; she felt she could reach out and feel what appeared before and around her.

Always a strange feeling embodied her before a vision; her mind reeled as she appeared to be transported to another time, the ancient civilization of Egypt. And once there she usually stood inside the forecourt of a towering columned temple, or before an extensive pond, where Ibis' fed and the rippling water shone like jewels. The whole of the other world seemed to tremble and blaze as if in the fiery noonday sun. Disorientation followed.

She go to Aziz before anger, hate and coldness crept over her heart and made her bitter like many of the other women in the harem.

Fatima, it seemed, read the direction of her thoughts. "The one in the tower cannot help you, I had hope for him. But, alas, he is too weak. Now that the old Sultan is dead and gone to be with Allah the All Merciful, Aziz may not live to see the end of the month."

"I believe you are wrong." Suhayla's hand trembled. She was disappointed in Fatima for giving in to the whims of the Sultan, and for not being more supportive. Suhayla pondered on how easy it would be to give up, and let herself be a feather on a breeze, blown at the wind's direction. But, she would not take the easy path; she was not ready to bow down and submit herself to Farir. "I need to borrow some clothes."

"Of course, there may as yet be another way. It is most treacherous, risking life itself." Fatima's voice became a deep, low timbre. She whispered, "If we were found out both our heads would be severed from our necks."

Suhayla gazed at her friend and nodded. "Tell me."

Fatima's face seemed to take on the strength and cunning of Oduda. "A friend who I helped long ago and who has the means to provide us with an alternative. . . A friend who is a merchant. He knows men who have an odd sort of troop, acrobatics, a flame eater, dancers and dwarves. It could be my gift to the Sultan on his night of celebration for officially taking the throne which he has planned on the same day as the birth of the Prophet."

An idea, thrilling as it was terrible, glorious almost, and freeing—easy to imagine slipped into Suhayla's mind. If she disguised herself and participated as one of the troop of dancers, she would pick up a sword, not a wooden sword but a real sword brought by the carnival group encased in a faux, dull sword. And in the excitement and drunkenness, Farir drunk and drugged with his excitable flames, the dancing. . . He is obsessed with fire after all, and her. . . And she could take a sword and--.

"Be careful, daughter." Fatima was about to touch her but with a solemn face withdrew her hand.

Since she had decided to seal her fate with Aziz, a quiet stillness centered her, as if she were a lioness with its sole focus on the prey. Suhayla prepared for Aziz in the hammam.

How she desired Aziz to caress her. Each night she fell asleep dreaming of his succulent kiss, his tongue darting in and out of her mouth, wetting her lips, his whispers of love, hot as Africa, floating around her. His teeth left a trail of moist, gentle nips down to her pubis and him drinking from the nectar at her center. But then tears of frustration would gather, press at her eyes. Withstanding the vision and learning how he would die, would be worth one thousand and one nights of his love.

Suhayla stepped down into the water, hot enough to turn rough skin supple, to purge all emotions. She sank into the pool up to her chin. A cloudy layer of haze hung suspended over the pool. Ghostly limbs and heads moved among the dense vapor, and an undercurrent of subdued conversations mingled into murmurs.

In the mist Suhayla imagined she saw the hollow eyes of her mother's face; the sad, grief stricken face of her

father. She tasted the saltiness of her tears, and lifted a hand up to them. Their features dissolved into the wispy steam. She must risk all for happiness. She did not have them; she could not lose Aziz. If she did, she would have nothing. And she knew she must avenge her parent's deaths somehow.

When Suhayla stepped out of the pool, a bath attendant helped her to a bench of cool stone. A serving girl brought a pot of the hot-sugar mixture which burned Suhayla's skin when applied. She gasped. After the sticky substance cooled a bit, she took a dull knife and scraped the layer off. With it went the hair from her legs. Suhayla pressed her lips together to keep herself from yelling out.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

After fulfilling the Princess' needs, Suhayla dressed in the garments Fatima loaned her. With an indigo chador wrapped around her, Suhayla crept into the shadows of the garden. Twin lamps burned on either side of the columned doorway of the palace radiating a dim glow into the Sultan's earthly paradise. Voices issued from the lightless depths. Around floral beds and shrubs, keeping out of the light, Suhayla made her way toward the gate to

Aziz's tower.

When she heard Husniya's voice, she froze, and crouched down to the ground. "I do all this for you. In return, give to me your love," Husniya said. Silk rustled. "Tell me you love me and you will elevate me wife and holder of the Sultan's seal."

"Chief concubine is enough," said Farir. "Do not be too greedy my pet."

"Having your love and being your wife is worth more than all the Chinese Emperor's gold."

"A pretty lie indeed." Farir laughed. "In seven days I will be crowned officially," he said. "What other plots are you weaving in that Oriental head of yours?" Husniya's giggles became muffled.

Suhayla should have foreseen this; Husniya had always been jealous of her, of Fatima, and anyone else Farir took an interest in. Husniya wove her webs to be made Farir's second wife. She would have more power than a concubine; wives always did. In either role Husniya would have authority over Suhayla, this thought made coldness chill her. This she could not bear.

Suhayla looked up to Aziz's window at the top of the tower. When a hush descended upon the garden she went to the gate that gave passage to the courtyard around the

tower. In her basket she carried a clean tunic Fatima gave her for Aziz, and food. The guard as always picked out the best food and stuffed his mouth.

Inside Aziz's tower silence pervaded. The odor of human excrement and must turned her stomach. She covered her nose with her sleeve because of the stench of human waste, and mustiness, there was a different smell that she could not name, fresh sand perhaps. A hint of light and mingled male voices beckoned her to the stair well. Eagerness pushed her on, yet the nervous energy of expectation turned in her belly.

She trod up the uneven, worn steps. The stench of stale tobacco hung in the dry, chalky air.

Passing one doorway, she moved eagerly round the spiraling stairs. Cold and rank air from another recessed door of lightless depths caused the hairs on the back of her neck to prickle. She wondered what secrets and mysteries were entombed there. She breathed easier when she reached the door issuing a bright glow. Aziz and the Shaykh were bent over a table covered with scrolls.

"Salaam Aziz, Salaam Shaykh Al-Beyawzi." She stepped into the light cast by lamps.

The prince's eyes lit up and a grin lit up his face. He bowed graciously; this always took her breath away.

He cleared his throat. "Salaam, we have missed you. You are lovely. . . In indigo."

"Salaam," Shaykh said.

Aziz motioned to a chair. "We've been pouring over your mother's pages." His eyes went wide with excitement. "This text refers to souls. The heading is 'Souls May Be Contained By Any Number Of Spells'. We'll have to read more."

The chamber enclosed around her like a tomb, rancid with air laden with the smell of paper, ink, leather and rot. Scrolls were piled to the arched ceiling and hid the walls from view.

"There are similarities." Aziz went to the table and leaned over one page and compared it to an ancient scroll. "In places the ink on the primitive reed paper is practically illegible. "'Souls are: I. woven of light; II. Made of an unseen stellar energy; III. The very essence of the soul cannot be destroyed.'" He pointed. "We believe that bird with short wings denotes soul. Ba."

"Souls are not the only substance of God," the elder man said.

"The Egyptian moon, it is said, is full and blesses us with possibilities," Aziz said.

"The entire universe is God's messenger," the Shaykh

said.

"Another of your mysterious phrases," she said.

"Allah guides me to offer you hope." Al-Bay smiled and bowed.

"Yes, yes, but I'd begun to give up hope," Suhayla said. She fumbled in her timidity, not knowing how to approach Aziz. Should she prostrate herself as she had heard the women in the harem do before the Sultan? His nearness gave to her a fullness and fire in her heart. Every time she gazed at Aziz Suhayla wanted to throw her arms around him and cry and beg he forget about Zehra. She could barely stand being so close to him. Her emotions bubbled within her. She bit her nails. She wrapped her arms about her chest to hold the coiled passion and fear. She felt drawn into his orbit. She wondered what it would be like to touch his shoulders, his long arms, and his lips.

"As long as we breathe, there is hope. If it is the will of Allah," said Al-Beyawzi.

"Yes, As long as the stars turn in their firmament, there is hope." Looking up from the text Aziz gazed at her with eyes of deep olive tinged with amber, and longing.

"As long as Zehra stands between us, I have none," she said. Did he see her color? He grinned at her. She wanted to jump into his arms and flood herself with him. She returned a shy, tremulous smile.

"I have spent every night since I saw you last imagining what you were doing; wanting to pull you into my arms. Zehra is not here, you are," he said.

"Whatever consequences, whatever visions I have, I must move beyond them," Suhayla said. "But. . .what if I see your death?" Tears pressed upon the backs of her eyes, for a moment she could not speak.

"I do not fear the future." He looked into Suhayla's face, and seeing the hunger, the pleasure in her eyes, he led her up the stairs to the topmost room, and lit a lamp on the round table in the center of the circular room.

"Touch me." Suhayla hungered for Aziz to envelop her with his arms.

With gentleness Aziz grasped Suhayla's fingers. She held her breath for a moment waiting for a vision, for his death to be revealed. Instead a gleaming temple situated in a vast desert rushed before her and froze; it was as if she were there in body as well as mind. Gleaming pylons soared above her head. On the air was the faint sound of chanting, the tinkling of sistrums, and the rhythmic beat

of distant drums.

Statues of sphinxes lined the avenue before the temple and flanked the two central pillars of the forecourt. A cerulean sky and bleached desert stretched from the temple as far as she could see. And when she looked to the north, suddenly the spiny mount of Gebel Gibli arose before her. And on a stele she saw shapes, an unintelligible language swirled, overlapping, joining and breaking apart, and joining again. They slowed: ibises, the horizon, the wavy, rippled lines of water; the sun, a circle with a dot in the middle; a black dung beetle.

She braced herself for a vision of his death. But as he pulled her into his warm embrace, the tension and fear, with slow reluctance, melted away. He caressed her shoulders, the small of her back, covered her lips with his. She leaned into his body and relaxed with a sigh. His scent of tobacco, cardamom and mint filled her nostrils. The hunger to touch drove them to press together. His heart beat under her cheek and temple. They stood in silence for a moment. Peace, she had not known since before her mother died, soothed her. He slid his fingers into her hair and planted wet kisses upon her neck, and groans escaped her mouth.

"We are never truly without light," he said. He began

to remove his robe and Suhayla helped him, sliding her fingers over his chest, through the delicate curls. Need arose in her. They lay down upon the robe, spread over the divan, and found one another.

He did not rush. Suhayla could not help the tears that fled from her eyes wetting her cheeks. When Aziz discovered her tears, he kissed them, and he said, "Have I hurt you?" She told him her tears were full of joy and that she relished them.

"If I were Sultan, I would make you my Chief Wife."

Suhayla pressed a finger to his moist lips. "Sh. . . Do not speak of the palace."

They clung to each other, and when Aziz grew large again he entered her exquisite slowness. She closed her eyes to concentrate on the senses in her body, to relish the pleasures of love. They cried out together. He flooded her with his happiness; she abandoned herself to him, and covered his body. She wanted to never forget the smell of his dampness that clung to his neck, the saltiness of his sex after coupling.

"This is like a dream woven inside a dream," he said. "I have imagined this moment every night since you first found your way to me. Thanks be to Allah." His husky voice trembled. "Did you have any visions of my death?"

She shook her head. "No." She watched and felt the slight rise of his chest with each breath. She told him of her vision. "It is odd, I saw lots of monuments, symbols. . .no death."

"What symbols?"

She told him.

"You are connected to that ancient people, to those temples. Al-Beyawzi thinks the temples anchor pure love from the divine to the earth, and are high energy containers for healing." He sighed.

She glanced up.

"Al-Beyawzi said my Baba and Ma were lovers. . . such as us."

Suhayla kissed his chest. "But why did he command her death?"

"Al-Beyawzi said there was much deceit involved. One of the newest wives and some of the eunuchs had almost the whole of the harem against my mother except for Fatima. She would not betray her. Father had grown weak from an injury that occurred in battle. After mother's death he found that the current vizier at the time, and wives, and eunuchs were guilty of a plot to overthrow him. Father had them all beheaded. He never forgave himself for Mother's death. I suspect he died with much sorrow upon his heart."

"He kept you locked up here."

"A reminder of his guilt."

Suhayla covered his face with kisses. "It is time that you were free, and claimed your rightful inheritance."

"If I could just live with you in peace that would be enough."

"Farir gave me—" She looked down.

A fierceness flit into Aziz's eyes. "What?"

"A bracelet."

"That demon from hell!" He raised a fist. "I would protect you to my last breath but locked here in the tower—I cannot properly defend you." His voice roughened. "I do not see—. Allah have mercy." He covered his eyes for a moment and murmured. "I am digging a tunnel for us to escape, it is not done yet. Why don't you stay here? Once the tunnel is finished, we'll leave for good."

"They would come looking for me and kill you. All will have been for naught." She spoke to him of Fatima's friend and their plan.

"The risk is great. If you are found out—I cannot lose you." He helped her dress and accompanied her down to the door. "May Allah keep you safe." They kissed and held each other in the darkness. She slid the dark veil over her head.

"On the night of Mulid al-Nabi, the birthday of the prophet, the powder will be of use."

"Yes." She put her hand to his cheek and caressed his scar. With moist lips he kissed her eyelids. He opened the door.

She stepped over the threshold without looking back.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

There was no guard waiting for her at the door that led back to the palace. Suhayla slid the bar up and quickly shut the heavy door behind her. When she turned, her chador brushed against glistening skin, the color of night, and when she looked into the whites of the eunuch's eyes she shrieked. The dwarf came out of the shadow and blocked her way.

"Ah, we all have secrets turning and flowering open this night," Iblis said. "The Sutlan is in one of his moods."

The dwarf led the way to Farir's chambers. He knocked and entered, held the door open. "The Sultan awaits you."

Suhayla took a deep breath and walked in. Jars and jars of fire flies blinked and winked like little stars. The winged insects flew up into the glass trying to fly out. From the hinder parts of their bodies they blinked and

winked like the fluttering of tiny oil lamps in a summer's breeze.

"Ahhh." He chuckled. He reclined upon a low couch at the end of the chamber. "Like you, they embody a mysterious light." Farir, raised himself up, and approached her with all the ferocity of a stalking tiger.

"You have secrets my dove, secrets you have wrongfully kept from me. This book for instance." He held her red cloth-bound book. "Where did this come from?"

"My mother." She looked down at her hands, at his feet as he paced back and forth.

"Why have you hid it from me?"

"I did not know you were looking for it."

"I have spent fourteen years searching for such texts on alchemy." He laughed. "What else are you hiding from me?"

She gasped looking up and quickly dropped her gaze.

"Nothing."

He strode to the table and picked up the disc. "What is this for?"

"I don't know what it is."

"Where is the Book of Causes?"

"I do not know of any other book," she said.

His long, cold fingers caressed my cheek and with his

other he proceeded to wind a thick rope of her hair around his fist. She gasped. He took it for passion.

"I know less than you do." Her voice trembled.

She knew the vision would soon flood her mind, her head was dizzy with vertigo, and her body took on a slight shaking of its own. Suhayla did not try to block the vision with her thoughts, she did nothing. She allowed them to wash over her, through her like the hollow reeds at the Nile's banks. A vertiginous daze of fireworks and cheering enveloped her in a haze of smoke. Rows upon rows of lamps surrounded her, their lights streaking in the night. Dancers circled and twirled their scarlet and midnight skirts billowing out like sails full of wind; gold and bronze flashed, a tall man swallowed fire. Fiery torrents fanned up, and sparks of green, yellow and red sailed upward into the dark.

She herself orbited and when she turned, she saw death. In white shrouds her mother and father stood behind Farir. Mama's head became the head of the ancient goddess, Sekhmet, the lion-headed one. Farir looked down in disbelief. He pulled open his robe of gold and brocade revealing the ivory tunic which was stained crimson.

"You possess something which I seek, I know it—I feel it." He pulled her to him and laid a hand on her breast.

"You have awakened sensuality inside me, a power, fire I never knew existed," he whispered. "See how your small hand nestles in mine? My lamb—my nocturnal work is more important than ever, than the entire Sultanate." He walked in back of me and with my hair pulled my head back. "You torment me. You have knowledge of a secret I have been yearning to know for years. What is the key to unlocking the vault in that pretty head of yours. I have the ability to steal men's souls and curse them forever. But. . ."

His wound his grip tighter. "I am missing something. . . I believe my lamb, you know what it is."

His eyes hungered for her; his strength had her trapped. "I. . ." He jerked her head back. "Stop, you are hurting me!"

His nostrils flared above the line of his mustache. "The heart of the secret is the book, I must find the key." Her heart beat like a war drum. Nearby on the window ledge sat the bottles of fireflies. She could see the glow of the insects' fire.

Suhayla stretched out an arm and felt glass, and cracked it on the sill. Shards flew and scattered about. The fireflies trapped therein flew out blinking in the room.

He had her arms behind her back before she could

escape. She screamed, "Leave me. Let me go!"

"You will give to me your secret, your fire." He dragged her to the carpet before the window and jerked her down to the floor. She struggled in vain. Her head and hip hit the floor with a thud. Slivers of pain rocked her body. He grinned; his eyes were filled with passion and lust.

"Get off me!" Oh Allah, Oh Aziz!

He fumbled with his trousers. "I am the Sultan my bird!" He ripped the seam of her pantaloons and tore her indigo chemise in half exposing her breasts.

"No!"

"It was I who poisoned your mother when she would not give me the book I wanted; and I who disguised myself as Kadid. I watched your father's house burn down around him. You little fool—I will have you anyway."

Suhayla should have been affected by grief. Instead fury stiffened her spine and fanned a rage that fed her strength. "I curse you in the name of Allah for your injustice; I curse you in the name of the ancient ones. You have done murder." She hissed with the voice of an asp, whose fangs deliver death. Her rage, her wounds had been reopened as if her parent's deaths occurred yesterday. As if the moisture in her palms was their blood.

"You have a secret. You are mine." He trapped her arms

under one hand. He pried her thighs apart with his sharp knees. A knife of pain pierced her sex. He yelled his completion.

She looked out toward the window and saw a glint of light and realized there were glass shards nearby. She managed to free an arm and fumbled for a thick piece of glass. She grasped the shard and slashed at his face. He moved away from her, blood dripping down his face.

Stickiness between her thighs mingled with the reek of sweat and salt and male and blood. She ached inside. Tears clung to her eyes. All her pain and bruises were evident as she moved away from him with trembling limbs.

She had lost.

She crawled to the door. On the floor Farir moaned, slowly moved surrounded by a pool of blood.

In a haze of pain and tears she stood and escaped through the door. Her greed for vengeance, caring for Aziz, and Fatima, brought her to this point.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

The chief eunuch, as always, stood squarely at the door to the harem like a great black bull.

A red cummerbund bound his substantial middle, the

hilt of his scimitar glinted. He pulled open the bronze studded door. He glanced at Suhayla once with his small shifty eyes from amid shiny, aubergine skin and then remained staring straight ahead.

Covered in her veil, she went to hammam in a solemn daze. The smell of fluids, the stench of Farir still clung to her and she needed to cleanse him from her mind, body and spirit. Oh Allah, let me carry Aziz's child.

Exhausted, furious, she wanted to pummel Farir with her fists, to scream and curse him. In the steaming water she sobbed sheltered by mist. She wept like a child, wishing Mama were there to rock her.

The bath attendants knew Suhayla preferred to wash and dress herself and let her alone. The hot water washed away some of her aches, and reduced the pain in her sex to a dull soreness. She dared not dally and after drying, quickly dressed into clean garments, a skirt, chemise and a plain vest. Once in her private suite she called out to a servant. "Tea and dates, and after I do not wish to be disturbed." She had to pull herself up from the depth of her core and go on.

For four days she kept to herself.

Fatima visited. "Rumors will begin if you don't make an appearance."

"I don't care." Suhayla shrugged.

"You are not bound to the Sultana anymore. Just come with me and take tea in the open, it is not so good to be alone."

Suhayla looked at her. Relenting, she and Fatima proceeded to cross the central salon to join the other women. The Sultana presided.

"Where is Zehra?" The Sultana Dunyazad reached over to Fatanat. "She went to stroll in the gardens at dusk."

"No one has seen her since majesty," Fatanat said.

A gong sounded, a hollow, booming drum.

The great salon filled with women. On a divan below the Sultana, Husniya perched like a queen. Chatter about the Sultan filled the air.

"The Sultan was attacked."

"Extensive bleeding."

"Was he hurt badly?"

"The servants said he was near death."

As Suhayla looked for a place to sit she sensed Husniya's hawkish glare across the width of the room.

"Suhayla--" All eyes turned on the Sultana Dunyazad and a palpable hush descended. "The Infamous one--has seen fit to grace us with her presence."

Suhayla ignored the comment and found Fatima leaning

on pillows at the back of the crowd. Suhayla said, "I did not know you had been deposed."

"No matter," Fatima waved a ringed hand. "I am glad to be rid of the responsibility. The Sultan's seal did me little good."

Women behind them conversed. "Have you heard what happened to the handmaid Zehra?"

"May God preserve her."

"My daughter--" Fatima's eyes were tinged with sadness. "--Vanished into thin air from her caravan, as if taken aloft by the djinn." She sighed and sank onto her cushion. "The Sultana and Husniya watch us," Fatima said. She straightened a sleeve. "I have had dreams of late—you and the prince Aziz." The Chief Eunuch stood to one side of the Sultana. "I wonder why he waits by the Sultana?"

"His Majesty Sultan Farir the Righteous names me Chief Concubine, Keeper of Household Seal," Husniya said, with a face, white as death. Her inky eyes slid from side to side as she peered over her fan at all the women. Her sulky expression never changed. "Sister Suhayla, according to the precepts of the I Ching your ting cauldron is turned upside down." She snapped her fan shut and pointed the end at her. "Bad omen."

A chill ran down Suhayla's spine.

"Once a cobra is angered, the serpent may strike—fangs bared and venomous—with lightning speed at any time," Fatima said.

"I wish I could run away from them all, but where to?" Suhayla thought of the garden, Aziz? He would be killed instantly. What worse could befall her now than death? She had scarred Farir's face with the shard of glass. It would be a fitting avenger for what he did to Aziz, to her. She leaned over to Fatima. "To what extent was Farir injured? He must have recovered enough to command the decree to his officials."

"He has not yet appeared outside his private chamber," Fatima said.

"The sultan has been kept alive by the powers of God. I command you to pray during next seven days beginning at sunrise. Harem will be silent." The Sultana lifted a slender tea cup.

Husniya puffed on her opium pipe and blew circles of smoke up into the air. "Suhayla, dearest sister, come, sit at my side and attend me."

"Thank you, sister, but I am perfectly content where I am." A hush descended upon the hall. "I am no longer anyone's handmaid."

Husniya's fury was palpable. Her clenched jaw, her

ebony eyes seethed with contempt. If her vehemence had been a weapon, Suhayla would have been killed.

All heads and eyes turned to Suhayla. She would not allow Husniya to have power over her. She wanted the oriental woman to see her strength, to be more respectful of her. "I am not your servant," she said.

The oriental woman turned and nodded to the Chief Eunuch. "Said Taffa, you know what to do." With limbering strides he approached Suhayla.

"You threaten the Sultan," Husniya said. There was an audible gasp in the hall. "You try to poison Princess."

"That is a lie," Suhayla said. The Eunuch smacked her.

"You hold Book from Sultan," she said.

"My own Ma's book!"

"Where is Zehra? Treachery!" Husniya hissed like a lisped serpent. "You not like her."

"I do not know anything of the handmaid's whereabouts." Suhayla yelled.

Husniya opened her fan with a flick of her wrist. She turned and nodded to the Sultana. The Sultana said, "Said Taffa take her away!"

"Suhayla you go! You go to House of Tears." Husniya glared over her fan in an imperious way.

The Chief Eunuch and another pulled Suhayla toward

the main door of the harem.

Suhayla was taken out of the palace, and pulled down a path strewn with brittle, sun baked weeds; leaves, the color of blood, stirred in the slight breeze hot as Africa. As she was led through a series of doors, she sought to awaken from the terrifying dream and escape, fly away like a dove. She felt the distress so keenly that her limbs trembled. Screams surrounded her; she realized the cries were her own. . . unearthly wails.

Tears salted her cheeks and lips. She tasted bile and bitterness. She would never see Aziz again. The plan that she and Fatima had arranged fell through her fingers like tiny bones from a corpse that had been picked clean. Oh Mama, oh Baba. Oh Isis and Sekhmet. Oh Aziz. Oh Allah.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE HOUSE OF TEARS

She stared at a door in the enormous red wall which seemed to sink into the sand and towered upward over her.

"This is the only door through which women can leave. Only the dead are taken out for burial," the Chief Eunuch said. The guards locked the door, the bolt clanged against the iron.

A scream formed in her throat, as the endlessly high

walls, the color of dried blood, rose on both sides. So little sky was visible; she felt as if the building was shrinking in around her and would eventually crush the life from her lungs. Her initial bridges of trust and friendship had been easily splintered for power and ambition. Only Fatima had been true to her.

A leaden chill made her pull her chador tighter. She was glad her veil hid the tears that swam in her eyes. Never, ever in a million years could she have imagined she would reside in the Palace of the Unwanted Ones.

Her footsteps were hollow echoes on the cracked, ancient marble. She felt like she was on a long road to the burial ground. Kismet left her behind, Allah she thought had abandoned her in the house of the dead. And even though she was free from Farir, Husniya and Fatanat, she could not escape.

In the byzantine monstrosity of the older, dilapidating palace all the windows were latticed, the corridors labyrinthine, dusty, and neglected.

As she walked by the little squares of lattice set in the doors, she thought she saw shadows of eyes pressed against the grills. Sobs, laments and hushed wails possessed the dust-laden air.

Her room was a box with one latticed window, high

above. A dusty, faded divan, a mat, a pitcher, a chipped clay cup were enclosed by faded, stained walls. The door hung from one hinge, angled downward, the bottom edge was buried in dirt and dried leaves—partially open.

In her mind fears and doubts raced round and round like a cat chasing a mouse. Sometimes she could not bear sitting still but had to stand up and walk, sway, pace back and forth, stand by the window and gaze up at the sky hoping to catch a glimpse of a dove. In the night she heard a night owl call out, distant dogs barked; rats or mice scurried in the corners, and she tried to banish from her mind the stories she had heard about the djinn and demons that roamed.

Tears filled her eyes, for her shame and her future. What will she do? How shall she proceed?

Alone and empty, she was a walking dead searching for the peace of the grave. She wished by removing all jewels and clothes, she could free her wings and escape the bars of her cage.

Where was her lamp? Where was her book and bundle? What had happened to the flowers, fireflies, and fruit trees, or the soothing murmur of the fountain? Every day she died. And each day she did murder in her heart. Had she something sharp enough to slit her wrists, she would

have done so. Three moonless nights passed.

But Isis and Sekhmet, the goddesses who had made her mother's womb fertile, and gave life to her, had other plans.

In the door across the hall Suhayla saw dark eyes looking out from behind the wooden grill.

"What is your name?" Suhayla whispered to her.

The woman stared, a long blank look full of sorrow and hopelessness.

A person hobbled down the hall, her hair untamed and unkempt, and her ebony face pox-marked, clothes taut over a protruding, pear shaped belly. She looked at Suhayla for a moment with startling large eyes. "Pretty." She pointed a slender, crooked finger. "Like Zu-zu."

Her grin revealed brown, missing teeth. "No escape, no one. . . One way out--" She crossed her neck with her hand. "Only way."

Suhayla wandered out into the long corridor. The edges were lined with the remnants of a once costly carpet of crimson and green tendrils the color of Egyptian grass. Only gleaming dust motes stirred above and around her. She hurried from the old corridor; it closed down around her like arms. Fear propelled her on.

The way opened to a larger central hall, and at the end massive doors stood open to the sun. In the stone-paved courtyard the walls were rough with vestiges of plaster, sections of blue-floral tile. Suhayla envisioned dancers in damascene silk and brocade who twirled, and whose anklets tinkled like notes from heaven. Even during the death of her life the world of appearances continued to show her the hidden world beyond. Once her vision ended, Suhayla wrapped her quivering arms around her chest to still them.

The old gloom of despair and loneliness turned upon her. She sat against a wall. Fallen blocks, tiles, missing stones were interwoven by vines and weeds. She wept for her life, for her Mama, for Aziz. A tawny cat appeared around the angle of the wall making a soft sound like a low wind. Amber eyes looked into hers and then the creature stalked out the gates, and into a weed filled garden of dried stalks and pods.

Suhayla became aware of an ancient fountain where water still ran from the topmost mouth, and gurgled down into the green, mossy basin below. She cupped the cool water in her hand and washed her face, her neck and chest, her arms. She drank from her hand and felt refreshed. At least she would be able to keep herself clean and have

fresh water. The courtyard was surrounded by cracked, leaning walls of stone. A movement caught her eye. An older woman stooped in the garden. Suhayla approached her.

"I just arrived."

The woman stood. Although the lines of age crept into the corners of her eyes, her dusky cheeks shone. Her face radiated peace. Black locks, interwoven with threads of silver, framed her face and tumbled down her back into a knotted veil. "I have spent most of my life here."

"How horrible."

The woman shrugged. "Allah saved me for some purpose." Her simple robe shone ivory in the sun; although clean, the hem had been restitched many times.

"I was unjustly accused," Suhayla said.

"It is their way."

"We do not have the gold of the palace, nor the servants, but we do have peace."

"Peace is worth much more," Suhayla said.

"Ah, you have wisdom at such a young age."

"—But all this time you have been inside these walls, exiled."

"It is true. I missed my husband most of all. Our love was like the fire of amber that forever burns. Does he still live?"

"What is his name?"

"Al-Awalin."

"The apothecary? My Mama's--"

"The one."

"He is, was. . . my grandfather."

Tears welled up in the corners of the elder woman's eyes. She pressed her hand to her chest. "Oh Allah! Oh my granddaughter!" Zubeida threw her arms around Suhayla and wept with joy. Her fingers and arms were strong when she gathered Suhayla to her, and kissed both her cheeks. The woman smelled sweet and earthy with the fragrance of herbs, and grass.

The familiar dizziness embodied Suhayla's mind. Her thoughts jumbled, she could not shake off the careening of images in her mind. A vision bloomed: deserted landscapes, starving cattle, a serpent shedding its papery skin. The images flipped and rolled and Suhayla saw a man carrying a box who strode toward her grandmadar. He put the box down next to a stone well and kneeled before Zubeida. Tears ran down his face, clung to a grey beard, as he kissed her feet. Suhayla knew the man was her grandfather and in the next life, he and her grandmadar would be together again. Grandmadar threw a goat-skin sack down in the well, and drew up water that poured over the leather. Zubeida tilted

the sack and Suhayla looked in. In the blue mirror of water she saw Farir sitting on his throne during the night of celebration. With wide eyes Farir looked down to his chest where a dagger's hilt stuck out.

When Suhayla returned to her normal waking consciousness she was sitting on a rock, her grandmadar's arms around her. Suhayla sighed as her mind cleared from the webs of other worlds and the vision.

Zubeida gave a throaty chuckle. "Ah, my granddaughter has the inner eye of vision which escaped my daughter."

Suhayla nodded, not able to speak yet. She searched for the meaning of her visions? Were the images a sign of her personal death or something else? Her heart, her spirit was restless. And Farir—death finds him, but at her own hand? She was not sure. Or was she meant to stay here with her grandmadar, the only family member left to her, and in this peaceful place, grow food and herbs, stitching up hems, and washing stained garments till the end of her days.

CHAPTER FORTY

Tears slid down Suhayla's face. "Will you leave me now that I've just found you? I saw you and grandfather together in the land of the dead."

"No, no. You saw our love which will blossom again in the next life. Love is stronger than death. Love is the path to the divine, it is how the earth and people will flourish, and beauty shine." She touched her granddaughter's hair. "If a star fades after millions of years its essence, its fire exists in seed form, not visible to human eyes. Like a seed planted in earth, stars grow again blossoming into balls of light." Zubeida nodded. They both laughed, and Zubeida danced around her. They wiped at their eyes.

"All these years Mama thought you were dead."

"It does not matter now." Zubeida patted her granddaughter's back. "I knew the great sustainer kept me alive for a reason." Zubeida picked up a patched basket of herbs and vegetables. She led Suhayla to another courtyard with a covered portico that ran all around the outer wall. "Here sit." She motioned. They settled upon worn, threadbare pillows upon mats. Zubeida brewed tea in a pot over a small flame.

Zubeida listened as Suhayla recounted all that had happened: her visions, the deaths, her love for Aziz, Farir's rape, the celebration for the Sultan which was one night away.

"I have to find a way out grandmadar."

"Yes."

"I have to—"Suhayla looked upward to the sky, to the ivory feathered doves reeling in azure. "Aziz is counting on me, and Fatima."

"Fatima? She was young when I was there."

"She is out of favor now, and in a dangerous position."

"Allah be with you. You feel you are called to do this act?"

"If not me, who?" Suhayla looked down at her hands, soft and dusky like her grandmadar's. "The other night in my dreams I thought I heard an owl calling to me, 'Who, who.' I have a plan for the Sultan's celebration. I will wear a disguise no one will recognize me, not even myself."

"After the sun goes down we'll do an ancient ceremony," Grandmadar said. "I have not done since marriage. I swore to my husband I would not enact them for fear of people who would not understand and label us sorcerers, me as a witch. I had to break that vow once, but he did not know."

That night crimson and amber streaked and bled up from the horizon. "The ancient Sky Goddess gives birth to the stars and moon," Zubeida said. "The Queen of Stars, Ihsan, is the most beautiful and radiant Goddess." One star

appeared, then another, then another, until the heavens deepened into a mantle of indigo jeweled with a winding river. "In her guise as Cygnus, hovering over the Giza plateau and the sphinx, she will rebirth you."

They picked herbs, and chose the most energetic hen, and tied a loose rope around her legs so she could not fly away and roost to a place they could not reach. Grandmadar showed Suhayla how to cover a black iron pot with a piece of leather over the hollow top, and with a thick needle how to tie the skin taut. Grandmadar hit the skin with her fingers and the pot returned a hollow, high-pitched resonant sound. She fetched the bread she had made that morning, and brought a knife, and a white sheet.

Grandmadar said, "Undress and put this around you. Go to the pool and bath then come back."

Suhayla followed the path to the long pool that glistened in the moon light. She remember a quote her father used to say, "'The one who is purified with love is pure and absorbed in the beloved.'" A rectangular stretch glimmered as if onyx streaked with the last colors of the day's light. Cool water slid over Suhayla's arms and legs like silk. Her fingers found the spongy green of moss in the pool. Once out she wrapped herself in the white sheet and wrung the water from her hair. She returned to her

grandmadar fresh and clean and shining.

“Wazit, Sekhmet, Ishtar, you of many names,” Grandmadar called. She drummed in each of the sacred four directions. “Guide your daughters, for we need your wings of flight, and the ever pulsing lifeblood of the mother earth.” The beat of the drum prompted Suhayla to sway, undulate, and twirl. She turned and turned until dizzy with the stars reeling overhead, and in her mind. Then she lay upon the blanket.

The thuds of Zubeida’s fingers and hands upon the drum beckoned Suhayla’s spirit to leave her body. Her spirit took the form of a lioness. And because she was pure spirit she strode through the heavy wooden doors and all the iron gates with ease. As if a ghost, she walked down the path across the forbidden courtyard and through another gate and into the palace. Bars and walls were penetrable.

Suhayla’s spirit, the lioness, lumbered into the future, the great hall during the Sultan’s celebration

Hunched down, the lioness proceeded into the massive hall. Rose petals rained down, women and men danced their skirts billowing out. Drum beats reverberated, and flutes trilled. Acrobats juggled, and summer saulted off each other’s shoulders. All the movement, all the fluttering of sleeves and veils and jeweled masks on the dancers were at

the periphery of her vision. Her prey sat enthroned at the end of the hall upon a dais, and that is what her mind, her eyes focused on.

Her movement was silent, invisible to all. Like a breeze, the lioness advanced unnoticed, her paws upon the cool marble were soundless. She stalked Farir, approaching and closing in upon him. Her eyes focused with deadly intent. When she reached Farir, his eyes grew wide with surprise and disbelief. Blood pooled on white and filled her vision. She saw the glint of a dagger and thought she had been stabbed. Gathering her haunches under her, she pounced upon Farir. If she was to die, she would take him with her.

The squabbling chicken brought Suhayla back to her body and grandmadar. Zubeida held the hen upside down by its feet, and with a swift flick of a knife cut the head. Blood poured from the neck. Grandmadar slit open the hen's belly and made swift work of the innards. Upon a flat stone the glistening entrails lay. She put the chicken's body to the side and put down the knife. "Oh grandmadar, oh ancestress', oh Lioness of the dessert, wind, fire of stars and sun, water of the Nile, give us your blessing of success." Zubeida held up something in her hands in the moon light. She set the tiny clay jar upon the flat stone

next to the entrails. She studied the chicken's innards, gleaming, with dark liquid pooled around them. Silence. When grandmadar gazed down at her, her eyes were as luminous as polished onyx. "This," she held the small clay pot over Suhayla. "—will free you from here. You will appear dead, but still be living. Your breath will not show in a mirror, your chest will not rise, and your wrists will have no pulse, yet you will be alive. It is the only way. I have been saving this for years. The Sultana Yasmina would not partake of it. In the morning I will wail and call to the guard outside. I will yell to him that old Bynar died, and if she is not removed will bring the plague to all of us including the Sultan and all the occupants of the new palace."

Suhayla, dressed in a clean, white chemise, drank the contents of the clay bottle. Her hands trembled. Zubeida spread the white, moth eaten sheet for her granddaughter to lay on. The death shroud chilled Suhayla. She felt free, though she seemed also to be dying. They prayed. Whether it was a prayer that came to them or from them, Suhayla could not tell.

"All you have to do is follow the hum of my voice, with serenity in your mind, follow the humming song of creation, and serenity of the stars. Love will manifest in

dew, web and wing. The wind breathes through death, and so you will. Let your mind sleep now."

"Listen to my voice." Grandmadar sat beside her and said, "In the heavens and on earth, reside spaces outside of spaces, time beyond time. . . Everything beyond time will come to light." She held my hand. "Follow the distant stars, to the place forgotten--inside you will find your true self."

"Remember. . . . The great sphinx is older than all the cities on the earth. . . Like the sphinx, and the sun and stars, your body is light."

Suhayla's fingertips, head and toes tingled. The coldest water from the deepest well poured over her. Her limbs were turning hard, as if to cold steel. The chill crept up to her belly; torso and soon she could not move her arms or legs.

"Remember. . . ." Grandmadar's voice multiplied into many tiny distant, disparate voices that whispered around Suhayla as if inside a great dome.

Many fears raced through Suhayla's mind. She should have thought about this more. How would she wake up? How would she find a way into the palace? When would she awake? Grandmadar's warm fingers smoothed the lines of worry on Suhayla's forehead. "All will be right. When you

wake up go find Aziz."

Allah forgive, Suhayla called on the ancient Goddesses and Gods of Egypt with Aziz housed in her heart. 'Remember' echoed in Suhayla's mind, a constant rippling, like the nightingale's song she had heard often and memorized at her childhood home. Aziz--for his hanan, ever flowing tenderness. Stars, like a thousand lamps, silent and elusive, flickered in the night's inky firmament. The pale, hollow-eyed moon also called the eye of Horus, by her mother, careened above her. In her mind she saw an ancient land, a temple of the four great pillars but knew it to be immortal, a land of light; an indestructible place where the sun always shines. This was not a knowing of the mind but a deep impression of the heart, a mystery fathomless and at the same time a heartbeat away. These thoughts, this knowing calmed Suhayla.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

An official of the Sultan went to the Chief Eunuch and informed him of the Sultan's decree. Inside the harem the Chief Eunuch lumbered into the grand salon before the Sultana and all the other women. He announced, "Until the secrets of The Book of Changes are given to the Sultan, a woman from the harem will be beheaded each day." Cries,

screams, and fits of tears echoed in the cavernous hall.

Fatanat, the Sultana's favorite, sat close by her majesty, and kept watch of all the chatter, words, demeanors of the other slaves and concubines. The Sultana had told her the new Sultan was unstable and prone to fits of fury and madness but this taking the life of innocent women? But they were all slaves, all stones to be pushed around by men.

Fatima knew she had to send a message to Suhayla, to tell her to give the Sultan anything, even if she had to lie. Fatima had to send a message to her friend, Qassim, in the market place. She would send him a red piece of fabric. He would know what it meant. Until the Sultan's celebration no one had permission to leave the harem. Fatima called her serving girl, a solemn petite child from Persia, with skin the color of clay. "Fetch the Chief Eunuch, and have tea and a platter of bread, cheese and fruit brought to my private chamber." The young girl, bowed in silence, and went.

Fatimah left the grand salon. As she strode to her own chamber, she felt the daggers of hatred upon her back.

Sultana motioned for Fatanat to come closer. "Fatimah just volunteered herself to be the first one to die, if I have anything to do with it." The Sultana plucked a grape.

"Find out what that witch's plans are."

Fatanat crept up to the wall of Fatimah's private chambers. She put her ear to the tiles.

In her private suite Fatimah offered tea and refreshment to the Chief Eunuch. He lowered himself onto her divan.

"We are both from the Great Mother Continent." Fatimah poured steaming black tea into the narrow glass cups, and in slender fingers set one on the palm of his hand. "We were both taken from our families, from our villages. We have an inescapable bond."

The Chief Eunuch nodded. "It is so." He savored the taste of the fine tea and food.

"We both have had things taken from us, my daughter, and your—"

The eunuch looked down to the place where his male organs had been cut from him when he was just a boy. Sometimes in his sleep he could still feel the raw pain, and it chilled him.

"In the next life—" Fatima leaned over, and stretched her dark-burnished arm and laid long fingers upon his arm. "There will be no pain. Kanunga-nunga heals all."

"I have held a knife to my own throat more than once," he said. "Only the juice of the black poppy gives me relief."

"I need a message taken to. . ." She leaned over to his ear and whispered, "Qassim. . ." In her fingers she toyed with a square of fabric that had been stitched tightly. "And this must go to the House of Tears."

"I will find a way," he said.

"To prevent our blood from spilling," said Fatima.

Before the dawn light Aziz finished digging the tunnel. Sand collapsed onto his feet. The cool air of night rushed in and refreshed him. The stars shone from above. Freedom. Sweat dripped from his face and arms and moistened his tunic. The sickening stench of human excrement lingered. He had begun the tunnel months ago, and as he dug the odor and waste followed.

When he came back up into the tower, he threw the clay pot he had used as a shovel to the side where it cracked into pieces. Exhausted, excited he went to wake Al-Bey, and gather the manuscripts and scrolls they would take with them. Without light, except for the moon's pallid effervescence, Aziz and Al-Bey stuffed their robes and

sacks with the books, scrolls, and ancient Egyptian papyrus. Aziz also packed the jars of the explosive powder given to him by Suhayla.

He had spent many days experimenting with the explosive powder and its properties. And now he knew how far back to stand away when setting fire to it. He learned how much powder to pack in paper, to make the whole vessel shoot upward into the air as if a fire from a mad djinni.

He and Al-Bey climbed out of the tunnel into the fresh air of pre-dawn morning and into freedom. Enveloped in their cloaks and the night, and weighed down with powder and texts, they made their way to the merchant's home in the old section of the market place.

"Welcome Prince Aziz," said Qassim and bowed with obeisance fit for such royalty. "You are welcomed into my humble shop and home." Qassim, wiry and tall, and with a proud bearing, closed the door behind them. He wore an expensive black robe that glittered with gold threaded embroidery about the neck and sleeves.

"We are all souls of the divine," Aziz said. "Please forget formalities." He embraced Al-Bey and Qassim.

"Thanks be to Allah that you help us."

"Please make yourselves comfortable." Qassim motioned to the small receiving room.

"God's mercy," said Al-Beyawzi. "To be out of the tower is exhilarating and overwhelming. One accepts the confines of a prison as eternal until escape."

Qassim offered cushions to his company before a table with long-necked bottles, delicate glass cups, and plates of food. They partook of the meal. "I will give you garments that befit your station."

"May God bless you, but I prefer a gallabiya and sandals, the garb of a peddler," said Aziz. And he went on to explain his plans for the Sultan's celebration that night.

"We will meet the acrobats in the square, there in the old section of the Suk. I do not want any connection made to my shop," said Qassim. His voice took on a sorrowful tone. "I received a message from the palace, from Fatima." He glanced at Aziz with discomfort. "The heart of your love has been sent to the Palace of Tears."

"God preserve my faith," Aziz said. "At least her life was spared." Aziz fought his pains and exhaustion from shoveling all night. With sorrow he dwelled upon his love for Suhayla and prayed to the Almighty to keep her safe. He looked to Al-Bey. "My mother's life had not been spared many years ago."

"God grant her new life," said Al-Bey.

"After we take the palace," said Aziz. "I will go and free her, and all the women there."

When Aziz washed at the baths and stared up at the vault of steam where vapors hung like clouds, he saw Suhayla's hazel eyes staring at him. Her sad eyes held his gaze. And in his soul he felt a panic that he would never again see her. He dared not to whisper a word of his fears to Al-Bey or Qassim for fear that it make those thoughts be true.

CHAPTER FORTY TWO

Jarred, the sound of distant voices, drifted around. Pressure surrounded her limbs and ribs. Her head hung loose. She was tossed upon a hard, flat surface. She heard two men. Oh Allah, oh Ma, where are they taking me? She bumped and rocked half dead, half alive. The two voices sounded garbled, as if they mumbled all their words. As time passed, her breath shuddered, the jostling in the cart was bringing her back to consciousness.

"Attiya comes home soon."

"The vultures wait for their next meal." A laugh.

"Don't speak so. . . dead."

"You'll be there someday."

Stillness.

"Help me shovel."

The coldness was leaving; a little fire began to warm her chest, her ribs. Her heart beat throbbed like a drum.

"The sand has blown in the hole."

"Get to work then."

"Oh come on, I can't do this alone." The swish of sand, the grunt of a man. Rocks were thrown and knocked against others.

Her limbs were heavy like bundles of bricks.

"Too shallow."

"The wind will blow sand over."

"Deeper."

Suhayla's mind awoke. No matter how she tried she could not move. Her teeth were clenched, her jaw muscles would not relax. Scrabbling. Would she be buried alive unable to be free? What if she suffocated? Fear drove her to move a finger, a toe. She used all her strength and concentration. She had to move! Her death shroud now was her prison and this feeling of ice in her legs would not go. She could not yet open her eyes. Oh Ma.

"That's it."

"I'll help you with those."

She fell, her breath shuddered, toes, eyelids

quivered. A yell, "Allah! One moved! Come on!" The men ran away. A donkey brayed as it trotted, hooves clattering upon stones.

Suhayla lay like a stone upon a sea of sand and lumps. The horror—the still and dead were under, she wanted to leave, to scream. She awakened in a new world, an open space on the far side of the tombs of proper burial. Warmth began to suffuse her limbs. Like waking up from a long dream, clouds of fog from the land of the dead, the world of the ancestors, lingered in her mind.

Suhayla remembered a dream that still hung on the edges of her mind. Both her parents had stood before her. The joy in their smiles lit up their faces and eyes. Baba held Mama's hand. Mama's moon face glowed as never before. "Make the just decision daughter," Baba said. His eyes sparkled with the luminosity of stars. Curious words as the light of day blazed upon Suhayla's face and body. When she found her strength had returned to her limbs and muscles she tore apart the white death shroud. She lent herself up to the rhythm of the doves that flocked up into the sky wheeling as if one mind, reeling, ever reeling. Like the doves Suhayla felt detached from the ordinary world, dangled above the earth, eternally watchful. She lay shedding tears for which loss? She could not tell.

She found the peace of the desert pleasant but soon realized the dryness of her throat, the strange, bitter taste upon her tongue. As if she had eaten gritty fabric.

She pried herself out of the sheet, and knelt upon the shroud, the sand scorching. When she felt her limbs could bare her weight, she tried to stand and had to sit a while longer. She looked over to the partially covered grave; bodies wrapped in white shrouds were visible. Rotting fabric lay open against sunken skin. Suhayla leaned over and vomited.

The date palms dotted along the Nile's embankment encouraged her. Thirst drove her on. When she was able to stand, she walked to the green tongue of land that rimmed the river.

Water had never tasted so clean, so refreshing and nourishing. She washed all the dust and stench from her, rinsed her mouth, and cleansed the webs and clouds from her mind. She had all but forgotten what she had set out to do until she felt the pendant upon her chest, its cording around her neck. She lifted it up with dewy fingers. The cat pendant carved from polished onyx was a gift from Aziz. "Oh Aziz!" She said to herself, to the river, to the sky, sun and moon. She buried her shroud under sand and was thankful Zubeida had put her sandals and her veil on before

sewing up her death sheet.

She became anxious; she goaded herself into action, and walked toward the city's gate. Forgetting the dangers that abound in her quest, she remembered only Aziz.

Qassim, Al-Bey and Aziz ate spiced food as they prepared for the evening. Aziz pushed the lentils around with his bread and then pushed his dish away. "I cannot eat." Aziz's body was alert with anticipation. "I pray to Allah nothing will go wrong."

"You are the Lion Prince, born under the sign of Leo, God and the Prophet watch over you," said Al-Bey.

Aziz wrapped portions of the explosive powder in paper. With care he placed the cylinders of powder into a small wooden box.

In evening, dressed in dark robes, Aziz, Qassim and Al-Bey met the acrobatic troupe in the courtyard.

The acrobats's leader, a tall, wiry man with quick, black eyes, embraced Qassim. He bowed to Aziz. "I am called Abdul the Quick, my prince."

"God blesses you, but I am a commoner for now," said Aziz. He placed his box into the chest where the acrobats kept their props: swords, balls, sticks for the fire-

eating-man, their wheel for balancing, and their torches. The ten acrobats were a family of cousins, brothers, and brother's-in-laws.

Aziz placed his box in the chest.

"The guards will look inside there before we go in." Abdul waved a hand, "We have other methods for hiding things."

"I will leave that to you and your men. The palace guards won't know what the powder is. Few people have seen it," said Aziz. "We will say it is part of the magic for the fire-eating-man."

Qassim handed out three daggers. "May God allow us victory—the consequence is death."

"This is the performance of our lives men," Abdul said. He hid one dagger inside a wooden sword.

"Once everyone is settled then we act," Aziz said. He, Qassim and Al-Bey dressed like the acrobats, white tunics with red vests, black pantaloons with a red belt around their waists. "Before tonight the Sultan Farir will be dead; I will sit on the throne."

The acrobats cheered, they hoisted the trunk upon their shoulders, and all proceeded to the palace.

At the door to the great hall, a burly guard ordered them to open the chest. He stuck the end of his scimitar

into the large wooden coffer and poked around. "What is this?" He lifted out what appeared to be a child's toy.

"A wooden sword for our performance tonight," Abdul said.

"No weapons." The guard threw it upon a pile on the floor behind him. "Go, they are waiting."

Once inside the hall, Al-Bey and Qassim and Aziz looked at each other. Qassim sighed with disappointment.

Aziz placed a hand on Qassim's shoulder. "Do not worry."

Musicians played drums and flutes, and the tinkling of the dancer's brass castanets resounded from the walls, pillars, and balconies around the hall. About the periphery of the central carpets and pools of water were seated the high level dignitaries, officials and governors waiting anxiously, shouting for the performances to begin.

The acrobats opened the chest at the back corner of the hall far from the Sultan. Some of the acrobats began to perform while Aziz took out his box and passed the explosives out. Qassim, Al-Bey and the others placed them around the pools, up and down the central isle, and at the base of columns.

"Until I give the signal, we dance and take part in the celebration blending in with the acrobats," said Aziz.

He had been kept in life by the miracle of Al-Bey and Suhayla. Yet Aziz's whole life: the horrors of watching his mother be beheaded, his face cut by Farir's dagger, all the years of being imprisoned by his father left a bitter taste in his mouth. And his heart had carried the black lodestone of hate and venom for many years. What purpose had all his suffering engendered? Should he continue with his plan, his desire, to kill Farir with all the bitterness that had chilled the center of his being?

CHAPTER FORTY THREE

At the Sultan's official celebration of taking the throne which occurred on Layl 'Isra, the great hall was filled with people: Chieftains, dignitaries, and generals, Heads of Provinces, arrived from the four corners of the empire to pay homage to the new Sultan.

Ruby encrusted lanterns hung suspended from the ceiling. Round pools were set up down the center of the extensive hall in which floated rose petals and white jasmine flowers. Their sweet scent infused the air with soothing floral notes.

Behind the royal throne lay a tiered-half-circle of divans where the concubines would sit; the highest and most central couch was reserved for the Sultana Dunyazad. Her

servants would be arrayed around and in front of her.

Trumpets and drums announced the arrival of the royal procession. The Sultan walked down a carpet woven of red and gold thread as all his subjects in the great hall prostrated themselves at his feet.

The Sultana and her handmaids, and the rest of the harem, proceeded from a corridor behind the throne followed by their servants and eunuchs, and settled upon their divans screened from all.

The Sultan clapped his hands signaling the commencement of the festivities. Farir waited to see what new act the magicians and the acrobats would perform. He puffed more opium now than ever and in an insatiable hunger sucked upon the pipe drawing in the sweet smoke. He longed to hear from Suhayla, that she had given up and would give him all he wanted to know. Yet, the worm of his center wriggled to the surface. What triumph was there left to him? Desolation edged him on. His wound: the blackness, moldy pith of a fruit, a burnt charcoal trunk, gnarled and charred roots, the smell of singed hair stinking, filled his nostrils. His triumphs seemed vague indeed; his knowledge of alchemy had fallen short. His mind wove about the journal, the pages held by the old red binding.

He longed to see his love Suhayla. She stirred embers

from his pithy core. She, she. . . the one woman who had ever defied him with voice, with threats, with the name of Allah. Not even his Mama had done so. And he still desired this woman, Suhayla, of fire. Ah--her fire, her passion, her anger, her eyes and lips tortured him so. She was like the explosive powder from the Orient--seething, sizzling before the ultimate conflagration. Even though she had betrayed him, he felt a yearning to dig his fingers into her soft flesh, arms and belly, to bite her skin and draw blood, to separate her thighs, and drive himself into her. He wanted to punish her personally, and puncture her delicate, dusky skin. Even her tears were a balm. He showed her who was the master, Sultan and all powerful. And perhaps Suhayla, his dove, his lamb, did not fear for her own life behind the walls of the old palace. He waited for her to give him the secrets and the Book of Causes. A grin spread across his face.

His thoughts wavered to the manuscript--a combination of magic and science. He fantasized about having unlimited power in his hands to command all, to know the spells and the alchemical treatises of creation itself. Yet, fury resided in his opiated mind at the rashness of his decision of sending away Suhayla, the only person who might know the secrets of the manuscript. He would reign with his fire,

his love, Suhayla. He would occupy the throne and his dove his heart. Then and only then would he find true happiness and all that he had gone through would be balanced.

The dancers twirled and flit before him, a hazy whirl. The acrobats twirled and blew fire from their mouths, jumped and rolled, and seemed an endless parade of illusion, trickery, flapping sleeves, men circling like dervishes, heads and eyes peering at him for acknowledgement; a raucous circus of trills and yells and gestures floated by.

Aziz danced and twirled and tossed rose petals in the air as he approached a sleepy looking guard leaning against a doorway. "You look hungry, here have a lamb pastry, it is from the Sultan's banquet table."

"Don't mind if I do," said the guard. He ate the pocket in two gulps. Aziz removed the red vest of the acrobats and threw it next to the wall. He kept his eye on the guard.

In a while the guard gave a wide-mouthed yawn and slunk down to the floor, and began snoring. Aziz took the guard's coat and put it on, he took the man's belt and tied it to his waist; he threw down the scabbard and held the scimitar. In the doorway Aziz stood and waited. In the

center of the great hall, upon a dais, Farir lounged on his throne with a look of boredom.

Suhayla reached the palace as the celebration had begun. She could hear the echoes of the music, the cheers of the crowd in the palace. She had to think of some way to get in. She passed by the water trough near the palace. In the mirror of the glassy water she looked at her self, but did not recognize her face except for her eyes. Her skin on her forehead, and cheeks and neck had retained the blackness of the charcoal-henna mixture Zubeida had caked onto her skin. No one would recognize her. Suhayla went to the gate of the palace looking for her chance. What else could be done?

She wiggled her way through the throng of commoners and peddlers who had not been let in. When she approached one of the two guards at the gate, she said, "I am a seer here to give the Sultan a message."

"Go away, no one else is to be admitted," one guard said.

"I am the great seer of the Copts, and the Sultan has sent for me," she said.

"The Chief of guards has given the order." The other guard said.

"If you let me touch you, I will know your future," she said. Her heart pounded.

One guard eyed her beneath sweaty brows, and thick, black hair. He stuck out his arm through the bars of the gate. "Give me my future, stranger."

The crowd around her quieted in order to hear her prophecy. In his belt she spied the hilt of a small dagger peeking out. "We are all strangers. It is up to us to know the divine presence," Suhayla said, and she grasped his hand. With the other she slid the small dagger out of his belt and up her sleeve. She moaned aloud to attract his attention. Like a vessel open to the rain, her mind filled immediately with images. A slight nauseous feeling rocked her belly. Her head reeled.

"Heart of hearts, love, you desire a woman who belongs to another man, and if you are determined upon this course, your heart will end up burning in the flames of jealousy." Images reeled in her mind. "You will live a long life, and as an old man journey upon the path to Mecca."

The guard's eyes went wide with shock and disbelief. "Let the seer in." He yelled as another guard pushed the crowd away from the gates.

In the great hall Suhayla skirted the crowds and went to the back of the hall where the acrobat's trunks sat.

Inside she found a little red vest which fit her snug, a red skirt and gold outer robe. She donned these. Like an edgy cat, her body taut, her senses alert—afraid of Farir recognizing her even with the disguise. She proceeded down the center carpet toward the other dancers.

The air lingered with the sweet scent of crushed rose petals, the earthy smoke of sandalwood, but was polluted with sweating bodies. The hoard of people slid by and became one mass of eyes, turbans, veils, and glinting jewels. From all the bodies the heat, like a sudden fever, was hellish. All the breathable air had been consumed. Terror burned in her with the crowds and so many dancers and acrobats. She seized with fright and had to stop herself from running out and far away. The entire perilous end stuck in her throat, squirmed in her belly. She directed all her hope and dreams and anxiety into a coiled, manic energy. Halfway to the front from where Farir sat, she began to dance.

As she began turning she saw the darting motion of the acrobats as they leapt and ducked, slinking up over each other, pausing in a stand on shoulders, jumping off, beginning again.

She twirled, like an angry little wind. Her white sleeves billowed out and undulated and caught in the wind

like a great moth. Her skirt and robe bloomed out like a red flower. The room careened. The notes of music and zills faded and approached. The fear of not finding Aziz sucked at her chest. She teetered on a sword of the past and future; their past and future. Did he escape the beheading? Was he alive? She raised her eyes and sought out the faces and eyes of the other dancers looking for the golden-eyed lion of a man. She first needed to find him. The beat of the music hypnotized her, drew her into its promise of love and passion and elation. With abandon she spun and swayed and dipped down the central crimson carpet. She undulated around the pools that reflected the flames of the lamps, and the torches in the hands of the male dancers. She performed arabesques up on her toes, then crouched low. The little dagger pressed against her breast bone, was hidden and hard underneath her breasts which overflowed the tight fabric. The front dais covered in a red carpet loomed before her.

Suhayla saw the acrobats and the men dancing with them. They balanced on narrow wheels of wood, and walked upon wooden stilts the height of men. Where was Aziz? If she were to stab Farir with the dagger now, she would be caught. When was the right time? Oh Aziz! Between her twirling, she glanced at the Sultan.

Farir recognized Suhayla dancing. He knew the way she moved her hips in easy swings and undulations. He knew the shape of her face, her green eyes, the distant, foreboding gaze. Her skin may be colored dark, but he knew her. How did she free herself? His sly eyes reinforced his sneer.

For him she wavered on her toes, fluttered her hands, teased him knowing she would never be alone with him again, knowing that either one of them would soon be dead. And she gathered all her strength, all focus of mind and heart like a prey animal—like the lion she had embodied before her death and rebirth. The energy she empowered herself with now was the lineage of Zubeida and her Ma, the vibrance and eternal powers of the sphinx and ancient temples. She called upon them to keep herself alive, to overpower her foe, so she would be able live out her years with Aziz.

She could smell the sickly-sweet scent of the poppy. Unsure of how to proceed, she danced away from the throne.

A male dancer in red vest caught her eye. She thought he called out her name as they wavered near each other, twirling in opposite directions. But--his eyes were not Aziz's. Oh God, if something happened to him—if he had been beheaded or caught by the guards, she was determined to live ever alone, without a man, remembering his love in her

heart. The acrobats and dancers jumped from each other's shoulders, juggled balls, contorted their bodies.

Aziz watched a female dancer in an acrobat's vest twirl before Farir. He recognized the shape of Suhayla's eyes, the curve of her high cheek bones. How did she come to be in the palace? Aziz wished to reach out to her, to brush his fingertips, his lips against hers. Once their task was completed, if they were able to take over the palace, then there would be time for love. At least she found freedom from the House of Tears and a moment of freedom before the deluge of fate spun its web for their future. Across the hall Aziz watched another guard go down and the acrobat shed his vest and don the guard's coat, belt and sword.

In the hypnotic thrum of the music, lamps, opium and hashish smoke questions bubbled up inside her. She had given Aziz her love. She had been defiled by Farir. Would Aziz still love her, want her? When was the best time to kill Farir? Had Allah allotted Farir's fate to her? Her hand trembled with the terrible thought—she could not, oh she could not.

Suhayla knew Farir was dead to the current of the earth that surged up from the ancient Egyptians, from her blood line—one of seers and healers that writhed through

her. He would never be able to understand her past bursting with pain, with life that is pain transformed.

The Sultan nodded when she neared the raised, carpeted platform again. He demanded her attention and motioned to her with opium stained fingers. Yet, she could not get her mind around the act of stabbing, killing, even Farir.

Farir let his mind wander, let himself believe in the fantasy of his lotus flower, of his beloved smiling with arms extended, dancing for him, reaching for him. Although he had hundreds of people around him, at his command, the ache of loneliness dwelt within him; he could have been in a room by himself.

She approached Farir, draped over the cushioned throne on the dais. Near him she paused. When she looked into his eyes, a shiver climbed up her spine.

Farir reached out a hand, grasping her wrist. He chuckled at her surprise. "You are still mine." He felt her muscles tighten, her rigidity.

Flames and sprays of sparks filled her mind's eye. The golden orbs of sun circled throwing their amber light upon her. "You will die within an arm's length of your greatest love, of the thing you cannot own. Your heart is dead is within," she said. And the multitude of amber suns sailed up into a deep indigo sky and became stars.

His drifting breath of sickly-sweet opium and lamb curry nauseated her. She sensed his hunger, something akin to cannibalism. "The manuscript—the meaning?" She tried to pull away as if burned.

"How did you get free?" Smoke roughened his voice.

She felt the dagger loosen. Her breasts poured forth and the dagger fell out upon the carpet. They both stared at the blade and hilt glinting on the crimson weaving. An audible gasp issued from the harem ladies behind the screen.

A woman from behind the screen yelled, "Kill her Farir, kill her!"

"Guards protect the Sultan!"

Aziz nodded to Qassim, in the guard's coat, on the other side of the immense hall. Swords in hand they both advanced toward the Sultan's throne.

Suhayla realized then Farir had nothing. He only had her; his love only was in possessing. Where anger simmered due to the abuse she suffered by him was tempered by sadness for him. "You will never have me. My soul will always be free." Odd how she pitied him, and felt revulsion. She had never recognized this empty shell of a man for what he really was. She could not kill him. It was beneath her. She stared at the dagger. And pulled

away from him with fury and a strong twist to her wrist, looked down upon him as if on an errant child. "Did you think that you could escape life's challenges?"

"I love you and only you," said Farir. He realized if he put her in a cage, he would never really have her. She belonged to his brother. . . to him. His dwarf had caught her leaving the tower. "I should have killed Aziz when we were children." He sighed. "I missed my chance; Sultan forbid it." Perhaps he should kill her and then himself?

"Did you think to rise like a dove, wings beating, out of reach of life's pain and humanity? Or escape the downward-pulling currents of the sphinx, the ancient symbol of the unconscious becoming conscious?" Suhayla chastised him. He glanced up in a pleading way and appeared to be a man completely misunderstood, unappreciated. A puzzled expression spread across his features. "Love is the eternal fire of all things," she said. "To love is to honor."

Aziz and Qassim pointed their swords toward Farir. Suhayla yanked her wrist from his grasp and stepped back. She had to keep herself from grinning when she realized Aziz wore the guard's coat.

"Guards take her away, lock her up," Farir said. He gave the dagger a brief look.

Screams and yells rang out as Husniya and Dunyazad ran in a flurry of swishing silk, beads and fringed veils to Farir and threw themselves upon him. Husniya saw the dagger. Her full skirt and the layers of scarves wound around her narrow hips covered it. Before Farir she knelt, beside Dunyazad, and Husniya threw an arm and her bosom over his knees. She felt the carpet for the metal and grasped it, slid the little dagger up into her abundance of ivory sleeve and held it there. "Let me introduce your guards," Aziz said. "Qassim," he bowed; "Abdul the Quick," he waved a sword in the air and then made obeisance; "and his acrobatic troupe," the acrobats in the guard's coats nodded. "I am Aziz, the half brother from the tower come to claim my rightful place upon the throne." He thrust the point of the scimitar at Farir. "Stand and hand to me the crown."

The two ladies cried out, "Oh Farir! Oh Allah, give Farir justice!"

"Chief Eunuch return these two ladies to their proper place," said Aziz.

The ebony eunuch lumbered over and grabbed each woman about the arm, and pulled them back toward the screen.

"Mutiny oh, Mutiny--guards have pity on us, on the Sultan," Dunyazad said. "He loves the kingdom!"

Husniya cried out, "My beloved, fight for life--Oh Allah, mercy!"

Farir gazed at Suhayla. "Our future. . . There is always fire. . .The Book of Causes." He reached out to grasp her again. But Aziz stepped between them forcing Suhayla back.

Aziz held the point of his sword to Farir's neck. "The crown."

One by one rays of flaming powder showered sparks above the audience. Yells and screams rang out. Soon the whole of the hall was a multitude of small conflagrations, pillars of smoke flew up into the vaulted heights sizzling as if in the heavens.

Husniya saw her dreams and hopes of having Farir as her lover, of reigning as the Chief Concubine and Holder of the Sultan's Seal, the years of struggle, grief, abandonment of hope, burning up in the flames. She unleashed all her anger and her squelched hatred as she lunged toward Aziz with the dagger's blade pointing to his heart. Suhayla's high pitched warning rang out. Aziz jumped back. Explosions of embers shot up all around them and the hall. The din of the explosions swallowed wails.

Aziz and Suhayla watched as Husniya seemed to pull Farir down to the divan with her. She screamed "My love!" Tears streaked the white powder of her face. The dagger's hilt stuck out of Farir's chest.

The shock of disbelief transformed into shadows of emptiness and flit across Farir's eyes. He began to laugh in a hideous way as powder and flames exploded all around him. "The red sulphur! It is truly Layl 'Isra! Like the Prophet Mohammed, I will ascend to the stars amid fire!" Farir slumped over sideways. A bright red flower blossomed on his white tunic and outer gold-threaded robe. Dunyazad too ran to Farir and tried to pull him up.

Tears watered Suhayla's eyes for the loss of one that could have been beautiful, compassionate, but she knew karma had to be balanced. And she acted in his life, in this kingdom as the fulcrum.

"Ay. . ." Dunyazad wailed.

"The Sultan is dead," said Aziz. He stepped toward Farir and lifted up the crown that had fallen to the carpet. "I am Prince Aziz and proclaim myself heir to Sultan Shahriyar's kingdom."

The harem ladies cried out, "Farir is dead!"

Suhayla went to the ladies behind the screen. She reached out a hand to Fatima. "Come, friend, it is me, Suhayla. You are free to go."

Suhayla pulled Fatima up off the divan, disbelief etched in her ebony eyes. "Suhayla?" Fatima walked as if in a dream.

"Yes, it is me--come." Suhayla pulled her along. Suhayla surveyed the other concubines gathered on the divans. "You are all free."

The women stood, followed by their servants, and went to Dunyazad and Husniya who were on their knees huddled over where Farir's body lay. They watched the women with mournful eyes cast down, hands clasped before them. Fatanat held Dunyazad who sobbed and rocked with grief.

As Suhayla neared, Aziz reached out to her hands and grasped them. He planted a moist kiss upon each palm. "We are both free." They found each other's fingers.

"Yes," she said.

"You are my heart, love."

Aziz and Suhayla and Fatima and their friends and the acrobats grouped together and cried out in joy. "Aziz is Sultan; God Bless Aziz and Suhayla!"

"A new dawn will emerge in this empire!" Aziz said. "One of freedom for all people! Knowledge and love shall be valued."

"My love," Suhayla touched his arm. "My grandmadar Zubeida is in the House of Tears and needs to be freed. Then I am must go to the desert to the temple before the sphinx. I realize the sphinx has been calling to me in many visions. I must answer the ancient lioness, as my Ma did before she transpired to heaven."

"Chief guard, Yusuf, free the Sultana's grandmadar, and all who abide there." The guard, a giant of a man, with deep set eyes and black straight hair, bowed and left.

"Here is your Ma's journal, and a curious flat circle which I found in Farir's chambers," Aziz said.

"Oh, Aziz it is strange indeed." Suhayla held up the strange circle of bronze and noticed symbols around the periphery.

Zubieda entered the great hall, tears streamed down her face. "Oh my granddaughter, you have the goddess' gift of second sight. This is sacred form of wisdom has descended down the female line from our ancestors. Bless you, bless you." She touched Suhayla's cheek.

Suhayla gave to her new silk robes. "Do you wish to eat and change first before we go to the desert?"

Zubeida's eye brightened. "Let us go, I am too excited."

"Guards ready the horses and bring many lanterns," Aziz said. The chief guard bowed.

Litters were brought for Aziz, Suhayla, Al-Beyawzi, Zubeida and Fatima, and carried them to the ferry. The horses crossed first and waited for them on the western bank. They floated on the bosom of the great river; the water glittered as if strewn with silver jewels. Around the ferry, the lanterns threw gold light upon the slow moving water.

The embrace of the Nile was sweet and cool, and a slight breeze blew strands of hair from Suyayla's forehead and face. The silk veil caressed her cheeks and nose. "The last time I crossed this river I was with Ma, she visited the temple," said Suhayla.

"What did she do there?" Zubeida asked.

"She prayed and chanted songs. She was oddly quiet and reflective. She gazed for a long time at the rocky hill, Gebel Gibli, and spoke of the Sufi hermit who had lived there."

"Did she hide the Book of Causes somewhere in this vicinity?" Aziz said.

Suhayla shrugged. "Not when I was with her; perhaps previously. The book may be hidden in any number of places—a rock chamber in the sphinx, the underground burial chambers of the birds, a forgotten tomb—only Allah and the djinn know."

"Perhaps it will be found again years from now when more people are open to the knowledge contained therein." Zubeida said, eyes shining.

"When Aziz went to Farir's chambers to retrieve Ma's journal, he found an odd bronze disc. They are safe and secure in my sack." The book and metal were cold and hard against her ribs.

They neared the bank, a shadowy band above the river. The horses pawed the sand and snorted with impatience. Once mounted upon the horses, they galloped across the pale sand. A distance from the sphinx Aziz put up his hand. "We walk from here."

The guards held the snorting, winded horses as the riders dismounted.

"The temple is before the sphinx," Suhayla said. "I can't see anything." The area before the sphinx dipped into shadows. Beyond the pyramids rose, their apexes pierced the star laden robe.

"Guards--the lanterns!" Aziz commanded.

The lamps swung gently from thick cords and their luminescence radiated out in circles.

As Suhayla walked, a tingling began to grow in her feet and hands, the energy moved up into her belly. "We are nearing." She glanced to Aziz; his closeness comforted her.

He closed the distance and clasped her hand. Ahead in the penumbral light stones jutted up, pale sentinels of antiquity against the depthless shadows. "Here, come closer!" Aziz pointed. "The ruined temple." The lamps' glow shone on the tawny sand, jagged rocks, and massive columns lay on their sides like fallen trees.

"In many of my visions I flew to the sphinx, and saw the stars over it." Suhayla gasped. "I remember this." She put a hand up to her lips and brushed tears from her eyes.

"My dear?" Aziz touched her shoulder.

"Ma knew I would return to this sacred place," Suhayla said. "She was so happy here. She sang chants and gave to the goddess Isis an offering."

"There is a lintel with hieroglyphics," Al-Bey said. "And a stele."

Suhayla and Aziz looked over Al-Bey's shoulder.

"See if any of those symbols match the ones in your Ma's journal," Aziz said.

With a flurry of excitement Suhayla extracted her Ma's journal and the disc from the sack. She gave the disc to Aziz, kissed the book and clutched it to her heart. The glow of the lamps illuminated the book's pages which were stiff and rough in her fingers. "Look Aziz, a lotus flower, a crane, a pair of eyes surround the winged disc." Suhayla held the book up to the lintel and stele. A smile curved her lips. "In the rose petals I see the lotus."

Aziz looked at the pages and then at the hieroglyphs. "Yes, and the winged disc is centered in the dove's heart with both its wings on either side. Amongst the rose petals and leaves is a pair of ancient Egyptian eyes."

"What do you think it means my dear?" Aziz gazed at Suhayla.

"The winged disc—the balance of opposites, light and dark, male and female, logic and intuition, the light of the divine frees us; the lotus flower—peace; the two eyes the balance of emotions and knowledge to see the truth," Suhayla said.

Aziz gathered her in his arms, he spoke into her ear. "I have deciphered the secret of the Book of Causes

contained in your Ma's pages, 'The scarab beetle transforms dung into new life. The dark to the light; it is the alchemy of spirit.'

"And what of the flat circle of bronze?" She said.

Aziz held the cold metal disc up to the sky. "These holes in the disc must signify something." Over the great pyramid in the Southern sky flickered Orion, with Sirius below. Aziz scanned the heavens and looked to the North. He recognized Ursa Minor dipping down; and Draco, the cobra's tail ending and pointing up into the deeper firmament. On the other side of the cobra's tail shone Ursa Major. Aziz held the disc up to Al-Bey's lamp for a moment. "It is as I thought." Aziz pointed to the stars. "This disc is a star chart. The holes are in the exact patterns of the group of stars around Ursa major and minor."

"The seventh star forming the top of the ladle is called Dubhe," Al-Bey said. "The ancient Egyptian's associated that star with 'Ah' the eye."

"In the orient they call the star 'Heaven's Pivot,'" Aziz said. "The sixth star is called Mizar." Aziz looked at Suhayla and smiled.

"Mizar is the mother of the heavenly child." Suhayla rested her hand on her belly.

Stars glinted in the mantle of the heavens. A thin belt of Azure hovered on the horizon. Aziz and Suhayla walked arm in arm on the great moon lit sea of the Giza plateau. With each step they neared the ruined temple before the sphinx. Columns and blocks shone a pale ivory among the ochre shadows and the sand.

Two stars arced toward the temple. In her mind's eye Suhayla saw violet rays encompass the ruins. Contained therein she discerned the smiling faces of Aisha and her Baba, each formed by their own heavenly light. "Oh," Aziz gathered her in his arms, he spoke into her ear. "I have deciphered the secret of the Book of Causes contained in your Ma's pages, 'The scarab beetle transforms dung into new life. The dark to the light; it is the alchemy of spirit.'"

Suhayla said in wonder. Ma's night-blooming jasmine and rose perfume blossomed around her in the air. Tears glistened in Suhayla's eyes and wet her cheeks. Ma carried a babe, fashioned of the same star light, and held it up to Suhayla. She absorbed the babe into her spirit, and understood Ma had forgiven all the tribulations and misunderstandings. Suhayla's heart brimmed with gratitude, joy and blessings.

As if by an invisible chariot, Ma and Baba were taken aloft in a flame of light. And in the air Suhayla heard the echoes of her name, and her Ma's voice, high and sweet, singing of Isis—the ancient mother of magic, rebirth and immortality.

“Ma I will guard the sphinx, the ruined temple, and your sacred well.” She looked up to the sphinx, gazing upon the eyes, and the mouth, drawn by the umber shadows. Her gaze shifted to the heavens. The Milky Way, a river of infinite stars shimmered in the indigo depths. “The starry womb of the Cosmic Mother, may you guide us always.” She looked down to her belly and knew she would be with child.