

A girl of the desert and a jinni born
long ago by the sea,
both enslaved to the Salt King—
but with this capricious magic, only one can be set free.

DAUGHTER
OF THE
SALT KING

A. S. THORNTON

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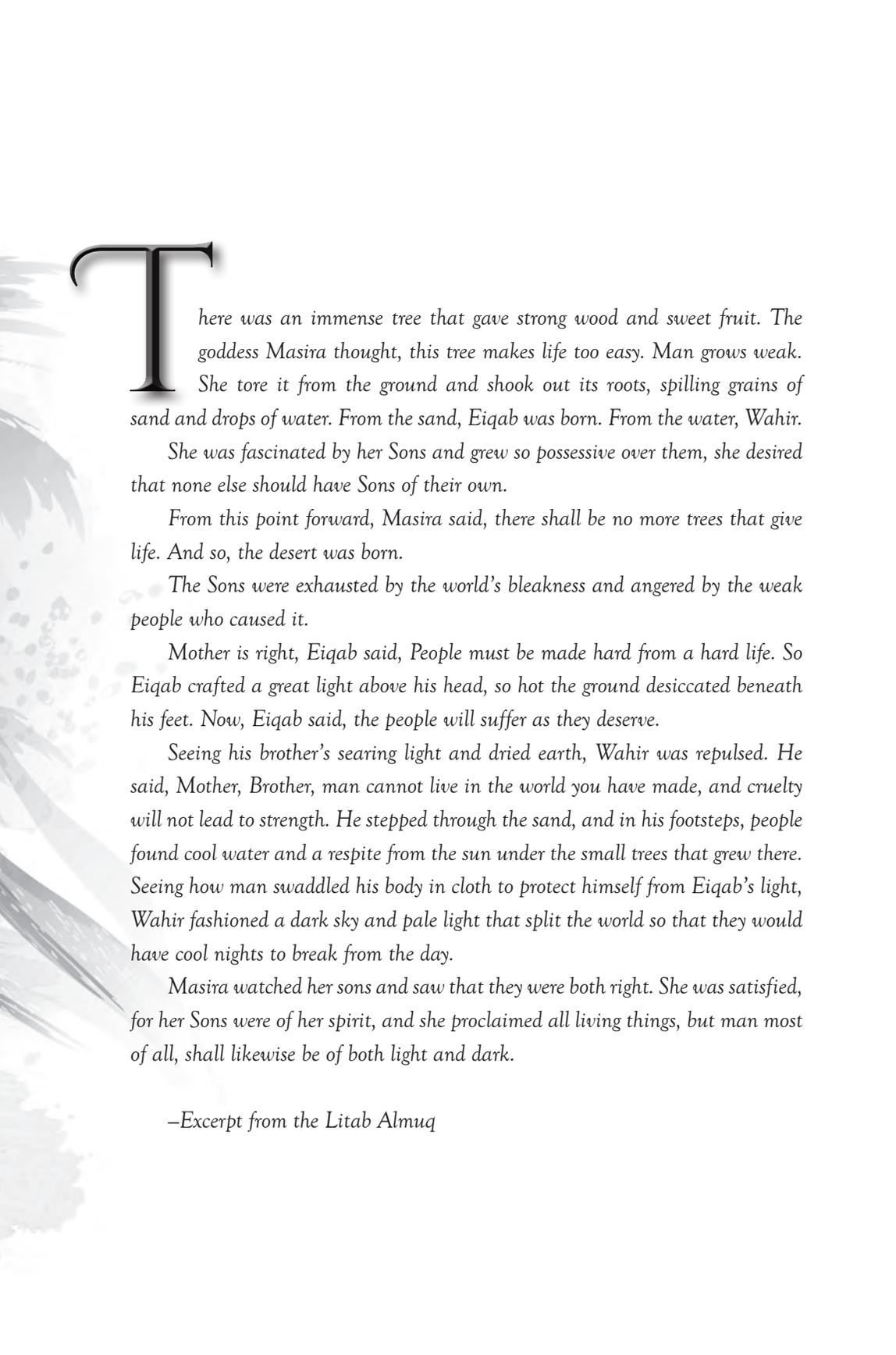
1.

KHALAD



CREATION





There was an immense tree that gave strong wood and sweet fruit. The goddess Masira thought, this tree makes life too easy. Man grows weak. She tore it from the ground and shook out its roots, spilling grains of sand and drops of water. From the sand, Eiqab was born. From the water, Wahir.

She was fascinated by her Sons and grew so possessive over them, she desired that none else should have Sons of their own.

From this point forward, Masira said, there shall be no more trees that give life. And so, the desert was born.

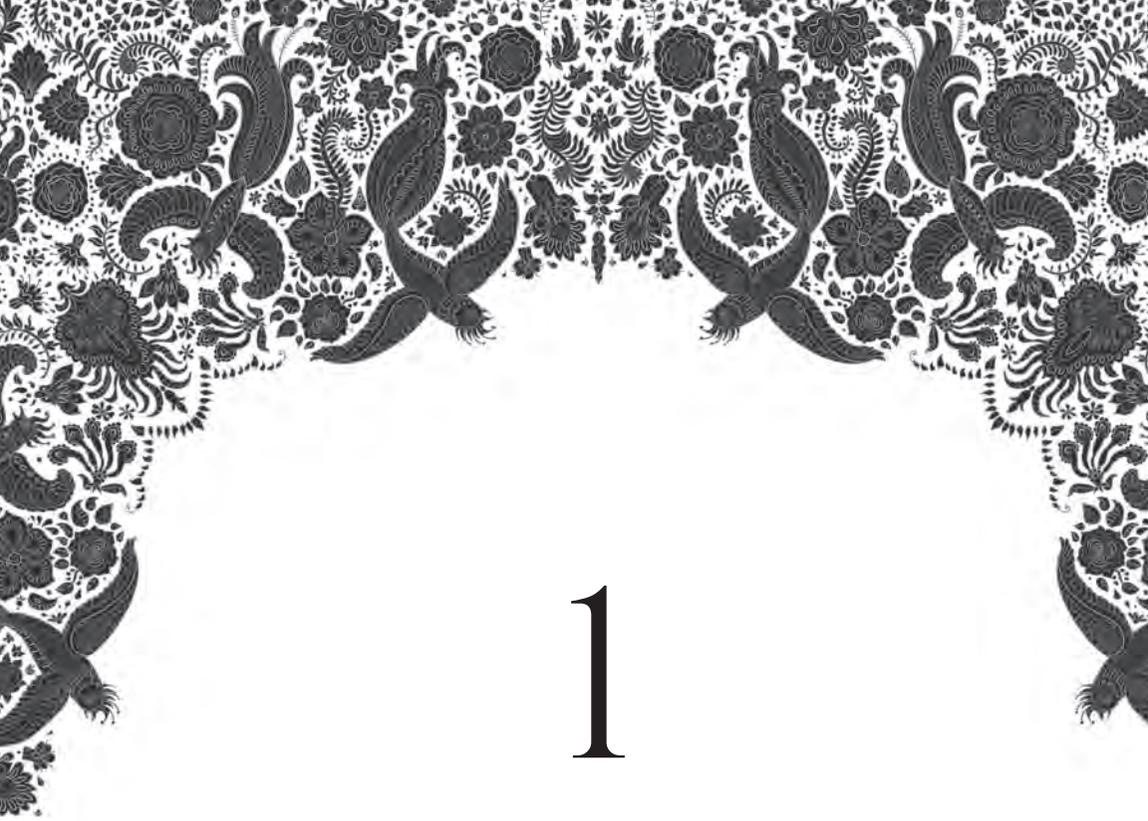
The Sons were exhausted by the world's bleakness and angered by the weak people who caused it.

Mother is right, Eiqab said, People must be made hard from a hard life. So Eiqab crafted a great light above his head, so hot the ground desiccated beneath his feet. Now, Eiqab said, the people will suffer as they deserve.

Seeing his brother's searing light and dried earth, Wahir was repulsed. He said, Mother, Brother, man cannot live in the world you have made, and cruelty will not lead to strength. He stepped through the sand, and in his footsteps, people found cool water and a respite from the sun under the small trees that grew there. Seeing how man swaddled his body in cloth to protect himself from Eiqab's light, Wahir fashioned a dark sky and pale light that split the world so that they would have cool nights to break from the day.

Masira watched her sons and saw that they were both right. She was satisfied, for her Sons were of her spirit, and she proclaimed all living things, but man most of all, shall likewise be of both light and dark.

—Excerpt from the *Litab Almuq*



1

THESE CARDS WERE WORN to fatigue like everything we had, and I cradled them with my fingers, the better to keep them secret from my sisters. Three cards lay on the ground between us, awaiting mine—the last. The images had long ago begun to fade, so I surveyed them carefully before making my next move: a spider in a glistening web, a buzzard above its carrion, a vessel of fire.

I looked back to the cards in my hand, and a greedy smile spread across my face. Next to the others, I placed a golden eagle soaring beside a blue moon. My sisters groaned.

I had won, again.

“Praise Eiqab for this embarrassment of riches!” I held out my hand, and they dropped their chipped glass beads and cowries into my palm. The cards were collected and shuffled while I added the tokens to my pile, now the largest. My smile widened as I picked up my new hand.



There was a rush of air and shock of sunlight as the tent's entrance was pulled open. Our attendant, arriving just as I won, of course. I huffed and turned to her, waiting to see whom she would call so we could return to our game.

"Emel, come." She did not look at me. She tossed my name at the twenty-six of us who sat inside—daughters of the Salt King, my full and half-sisters—and disappeared behind the fabric that sealed the entrance.

Sons, I was not prepared to hear my name. My heart quickened, and like the sand of an hourglass, dread filled me. I had hoped the suitor would choose one of my sisters so I would not have to endure another failed courting—to face lengthy preparation before an evening of pretense, only to conclude in a morning soaked with failure. Then again, a suitor was the only answer to my wish for escape. Sighing, I set down the limp cards.

"Open that tent back up, eh?" Pinar called to the guards outside. "We could provide drink for the gods if you collected our sweat!" She wiped at her hair, a wet lattice on her forehead.

"Store it in silver bottles and perhaps Father could sell that for dha, too," Tavi muttered under her breath.

The request would go unanswered. We were not allowed to draw open the tent, lest palace visitors glimpse us in our home. We were the Salt King's most protected jewels. The mythical ahiran, whom powerful men from across the desert came to bed and, if satisfied, carry home astride their camels. Each daughter married was another jackal leashed. Father's reign strengthened every time he transformed a would-be contender into a son.

I pushed my winnings to the center of our circle with shaking hands, the pile spilling.

"Better to end when the sun is high. Let's all remember that I was the winner, eh?" I stood slowly.

"Good luck tonight," Raheemah said as she divided my prize among the remaining players. My sisters watched me go. Some mumbled under their breath, wishing they had been chosen in my stead.

“If you aren’t choking on his dagger, you aren’t doing it right,” Pinar said. The girls giggled from their sand-strewn mats. My lips twitched.

“If he talks too much, just shove those udders in his face,” Kadri added, “Or your kuz.”

Riotous laughter now. Even I succumbed. “Quiet!” I hissed. “You’ll get us all in trouble.” My sisters fanned themselves with the corners of thin blankets as they bantered about the best bedding techniques, ignoring me.

I lifted a dark wool abaya from the basket and patted sweat from my brow with its embroidered edge. The intricate designs marked us as belonging to the King, but the tattered and fraying hems revealed, to the keen observer, our worth.

I shook my head at my sisters’ ribaldry, but I was grateful for their distractions.

“Maybe this time you can get him to request you for a second night?”

My smile disappeared at Sabra’s bitter words. She always found a place to sink her stinger. I did not acknowledge her and pulled the cloth quickly over my head so that my amber-dyed fustan was completely covered. I tied a threadbare black veil over my hair. The setting sun sizzled outside of the tents. Though our walk would be short, the sun punished those who did not protect themselves from its glare.

My attendant waited for me outside. The veil covering her face did not conceal her disapproval as she listened to the advice my sisters were still hollering through the fabric walls.

An adolescent boy, as swathed as the attendant beside him, was more discomfited by the obscenities. He shifted his weight from side to side, absently brushing his fingers against the hilt of his rusted scimitar. He was one of my many half-brothers. He was also my guard. Our eyes met. His shoulders tensed, and I quickly looked away. Make no mistake, he was not there to protect me from others.

I nodded to the pair. “Hadiyah. Bahir. Shall we?”

Hadiyah strode away with a huff, her robes billowing like clouds behind her. Indecent shrieks and groans emerged from behind me now. I looked back to my tent. Beside the entrance, two guards' eyes watered and shoulders shook with mirth.



WE WALKED briskly through the narrow path between rows of palace tents. Bahir trailed close behind me, his chest puffed and chin raised high.

The servants' homes were held open with thick camel's hair rope, in hopes that the wind would find ingress to carry away the heat. Goats were spun over fires, milk poured into big vats for cheese, and pots set out to harden in the sun. Servants called to one another, shoving reels of fabric into each other's arms or dousing the flames of the smelting fires with sand. The flurry and sounds of the palace collided around us. All for the Salt King.

My stomach turned on itself as we walked, my nerves a pestle to my insides as I prepared for my role in the King's court. I envied the servants in that moment—how simple their lives must be, to roast or weave or hew, then be done for the day. Sure, there was no great glory, but too, there was no great risk. And security, a clear future, was favorable to my unknown.

The servants looked up from their work as I passed, carefully positioned between my attendant and guard. This procession, the embroidered clothes on my back, revealed what I was, and they knew what awaited me. Did they watch me, thinking of my past failures? I'm sure they laughed behind my back—a waste of time for the King. I was to be a “forever ahira,” until I was twenty-three and thrown into the streets as used and useless as the playing cards.

A little girl ran from her home into the path, shrieking with laughter, chased by two boys not much older. A red birthmark trailed from her eyebrow to the edge of her lip. I remembered when she was born, how I had thanked Eiqab I was not cursed with the same mark upon my skin. But now, I saw that it was she who was lucky. The trio whipped past Hadiyah, who

grunted in disapproval, before they flew past me and further down the lane. A laughing woman emerged from the tent behind them, and upon seeing us, fell to her knees.

“Forgive me, forgive them,” she mumbled over and over, brow pressed to her clasped hands.

Bahir barked at her, his boy’s voice suddenly harsh like a man’s. A bird cried out as it soared above us in the purpling sky. Oh to be that bird.

Finally, we arrived at a large tent the color of sunrise—the zafif—where I was to be prepared. I followed Hadiyah in, leaving Bahir to stand guard outside. It was time.

Scents of crushed roses and warm honey met my nose. Attendants in flowing, colorful fustan stood from cushions and thick mattresses at my arrival. They rushed to greet us as Hadiyah whisked off her coverings, revealing braided graying hair and a camel-colored dress, which I eyed enviously. Because she was a servant, her clothes were simpler than mine—no bright patterns nor embellishments that signified she belonged only in the palace. She could go anywhere in those.

Hadiyah’s eyes softened when she smiled—the stern charade had been cast off with her abaya and veil.

“Beauty.” She smoothed the hair from my face. “It’s been too long.” Her hand moved down my back. She tapped my bottom and winked. “You should listen to your sisters; they give good advice.” She walked off and began fussing with the various jars and vessels they would need to ready me that evening, calling over her shoulder. “This will be your husband, I just know it. Eiqab has given many signs today.”

“Did you see the clouds on the horizon this morning? They were so dark, perhaps promising rain,” Adilah said.

“And the vultures that circled the bazaar,” another attendant added. “There were three. One who searched for his mate.” The women trailed off, discussing the good omens bestowed on us that day. Of course, I had seen none—ahiran were forbidden from leaving the palace.

Their hope smoothed my unease, but still, the pressure of the evening was too great to smile, the knot in my chest too tight to speak. I had met the suitor that afternoon at the courting where he surveyed my sisters and I like a meal to be savored. He was stiff and proud, and when he finally spoke to me, even his curious accent was not intriguing enough for me to take interest. Evidently, I had played my role well. He'd chosen me tonight.

Hadiyah saw my face and banged her open hand against the copper basin, a loud ringing startling us all.

"Well, come on then! The prince needs more than a hand to keep him company."

I slipped off my sandals and flexed my toes into the soft, woven rug before I went to the jasmine-scented water.

The water's surface rose to my neck as I lowered myself into the bath. The pain in my chest eased as I relaxed against the basin wall, my shoulders falling back. I listened to the attendants' gossip, their words a calming cadence as I closed my eyes.

Then, "A runner arrived today."

My eyes flew open.

"The caravan arrives tomorrow," the attendant continued excitedly.

"From where?" I asked.

"Emel," Hadiyah warned as she scrubbed my skin.

The woman pursed her lips. "North, I think."

North! Hoping she was right, I mused about what and who the caravan might be bringing. Hadiyah dunked a bowl full of water over my head. I sat forward, sucking in a startled breath.

"Look at you. A woman of the court." She emphasized the last words. "I remember when you were just a girl." She took my hand to clean under my nails. "You were so excited when you were requested the first time."

"Must you remind me?" My free hand covered my eyes.

"You talked and talked about what kind of wife you would be for him and how you would please him. Where has that girl gone? Now you want

to talk of salt trade and politics.” She tutted disapprovingly and pulled my hand from my face to clean that one, too.

“I was naive. Not such a fool now.”

“You weren’t a fool,” Hadiyah said. “You were smart, focusing only on that which affected you.” She narrowed her eyes at me. I bit my tongue as she continued. “And you were hopeful, too. As you should be still.”

It was true. I was not yet finished as an ahira, with over a year left before my father would cast me out. There was still a chance a man would choose me for a wife, still a chance I would finally leave the palace. But finding hope was difficult when it was buried beneath the rejections of dozens of suitors who had come before. Perhaps I’d have better luck if I doused flame with salt.

What was it they saw to make them turn from me every time? I looked at my knuckles. Too boney? My palms. Too many lines? Or did they see that I did not want them? That I only wanted what they could offer me, that I only wanted to be free from the palace?

When my bath finished, my skin dry, Hadiyah brought me a large goblet of wine. I consumed it dutifully, barely tasting it.

An attendant waved a fan of palm fronds toward me as I lay back onto the feather-stuffed mattress. I shivered beneath the breeze.

“Thank you,” I sighed. I wanted to stay there forever, never feeling heat again.

The wine hit me swiftly, and the world began to shimmer and spin. I closed my eyes and smiled lazily as my worries began to recede. A sharp burn splashed against my thigh and my eyes flew open. Hot honey wax. With a terrible rip, it was removed. I clenched my teeth and my eyes watered. It was repeated again and again and again.

“You need a stronger drink,” Hadiyah grunted when the women finished. She mixed two liquids in a curving vessel and decanted it into a small goblet. Arak. It smelled of anise and looked like camel’s milk. My father’s favorite spirit could unsteady even the strongest carouser. I sipped it slowly, disliking its bitter taste but needing it to soothe me. I knew with it, I would perform better. The world twisted and tilted.

“Stay still,” Hadiyah put her hands on my shoulders to stop my swaying. Hadn’t the world been moving under my feet? My hair was braided as she held me, kohl was lined around my eyes.

“He will want to devour you whole,” Adilah said as rose-scented oil was smoothed into my skin.

“And I will let him,” I purred, touching a droplet of the oil and pressing it to the bow of my upper lip.

I stumbled when I stood, Hadiyah’s quick hands holding me up. “Careful.”

An unblemished, diamond-studded garment of shining green silk was taken from a copper box. Besides the jewels that decorated our necks and wrists, it was the nicest thing an ahira would wear. All loans from our father for courtings only. Strings pulled at my back, tightening the clothes onto my breasts and hips until I could take deep breaths no longer.

Soft slippers cocooned my feet. Hadiyah placed my headpiece, from which hung delicate chains that veiled my mouth and jawline and tickled my skin.

“Everything sparkles, and I sparkle, too,” I slurred as I gazed at my reflection on the basin-water’s surface. The attendants sighed in admiration.

Hadiyah said, “How can he say no to a beauty like you?” Then whispered into my ear, “Don’t spoil anything by talking of that which doesn’t concern you, and you will be sealed into marriage.”

There it was again. Marriage. Like a hook, it pulled back all of my dread, my fear of failure.

“The Buraq?” I searched around the room for that which I knew would help.

Adilah rushed to a table to collect a tarnished silver tray. Hadiyah worked efficiently with the metal instruments there—igniting, scooping, adjusting. I watched, entranced by the deftness of her hands. She held out a curved pipe, and I slipped it between the strands of my veil, seating it between my lips. Tasting the tang of metal, I leaned over the lamp until the dried petals burned. Hungrily, I inhaled.

Charred honey filled my mouth, filled my lungs. The burning desert rose was named after Buraq, the winged steed of legends, for its effects on the mind. The one who inhaled the rose would feel light enough to fly. I gulped in the smoke, eyes closed, clutching the pipe like it was my only tether to the world.

“Take me to him,” I said when I was finished.

“Good girl,” Hadiyah said, her hand rubbing my back. “Can’t take your pride into those halls. Best to leave it here with us.”

Alcohol swirled in my blood; smoke spun in my chest. I floated inches above the ground. This suitor was my only chance out. I could not let my fears and worries of failure tarnish my performance. Tipping up my chin, I left the zafif and strode into the palace.

I was an emerald goddess and ahira of the Salt King.

And I would find my freedom.



MY STEPS were silent in the hallway. Only the chink, chink of the chains hanging from my clothes could be heard as I staggered through the narrow corridors, trailing the guard.

Mesmerized by the torch flames that danced in the air, the patterned carpets that covered the sand, and the pristine fabric walls that towered above me, I took slow, unsteady steps. I was within the opulent heart of the palace, the King’s tents. It was the most heavily guarded, entered only by wealthy visitors and royalty.

Holding my arms out to the side, I spun in the hallway, pretending to be a bird flying through the sky. I was a kite with green feathers soaring above the tall, white peaks of Father’s tents. Circles of servants’ quarters and workrooms surrounded Father’s private chambers.

I imagined how it would appear on a map. How *did* maps get made if people could not fly? I stopped to consider this seriously. Birds were

somehow involved. I strutted around like a walking bird, a map-making bird. I giggled.

The guard whipped his head around. "Sons be damned," he muttered. "Stop that!" He stopped and reached his hand toward me. I backed away from his grasp.

The drunken fantasies fell away. "Forgive me," I mumbled. I took measured steps forward, now using my arms only for balance.

We entered a soaring room that glowed golden from its glinting metal lanterns. Servants waved palm fronds toward the center. The softly moving air sent the fires into violent fits that demanded my attention.

"Not bad!" boomed the King. I jumped at the sound and tore my gaze from the flames. My father sat upon an immense gilded throne, peering at the goblet in his hand as he licked his lips. "They said they'd be bringing more?"

"Twenty bottles, and if you found this to your liking. You get first pick before they're sent to the bazaar," Nassar, my father's vizier, said from his seat at a small table nearby.

My father took another long drink. He was not a large man, but in that chair, he was tremendous. Heaps of white crystalline granules and stacked gray slabs surrounded him.

Salt. His wealth displayed so all who visited could see the worth of their ruler. It was why the caravans came, and what the rest of the desert needed so desperately. The Salt King was the only one who had it.

Neither he nor Nassar acknowledged me, though I now stood before them. They continued their conversation of the runner that Nassar met earlier in the day and of what the caravan promised to supply. Father nodded absently, tapping his goblet until Nassar filled it again. Finally, as if an afterthought, he turned to me. I stared at his feet, willing the world to stop its revolutions, and knelt before the Salt King.

"My King," I said, sweetening my voice. I pressed my forehead to the rug, my palms flat on the ground. Tightly closing my eyes, I stretched my arms in front of me, slowly reaching until I felt it: the edge of a salt pile.

Moving slowly so I wouldn't be seen, I pushed my fingertips into the heap until the coarse salt swallowed them.

"Very good. Up," Father said, bored.

I curled my fingers and scooped the fine crystals into my palm. Standing, I raised my eyes to him slowly. His white, silk-lined boots had rubies that sparkled at the end of curling toes. The folds of his red and ivory robes cascaded around his large belly. A long beard draped from his face of deep, waxy creases. His black eyes—the eyes we shared—were yellowed from life at a decanter. He stared at me with furrowed brow.

Cold panic swept through me, washing away the liquor, and I dropped my gaze to the ground, chewing my cheek behind the veil. Had he seen my theft?

"Aashiq will be pleased with her." The vizier's voice dripped with honey. I nodded toward Nassar, but Sons, I wanted to spit on his silk slippers.

The King set the goblet on the table and dabbed sweat from his face with his handkerchief. "They are never pleased," he said. His thick bejeweled fingers twirled the fabric, his long nails snagging the threads as he leaned back in his chair. The accusation in his gaze was quickly replaced with apathy.

So he did not see me steal his salt, he simply wanted to remind me of my inadequacy. Of course. I stopped grinding my cheek between my teeth.

"Aashiq's time has begun," the King said, gesturing to the tall hourglass whose narrow stream of sand was just beginning to fill the base. "But your own time is short, Emel. If he is not satisfied when I speak to him tomorrow, I will urge him to request one of your sisters and not waste further time with you. No doubt with another, he will find his wife."

One night? My heart sank. If the suitor desired it, I could have three nights to show how I would be a suitable wife. If my father convinced him to choose someone else after the first night, there would be no hope for me.

Nassar butted in, flailing his hands. "When you have had such successes with your other daughters, we must ask if perhaps it is not the sire, but the dam."

Anger burned through the rest of my high. I collected bloodied spit in my mouth, rolling it between my cheeks, imagining a life where I could really do it. Where I could reach his feet from where I stood, damn all the consequences.

“It is no flaw of mine, of that I am sure.” The King waved his hand toward his vizier, keeping his gaze on me. “Emel, let me remind you that these men are threats to our home. Weak ones, sure. I could destroy their settlements if I wanted. But what good would that do me? Your mother will be so ashamed if two of her daughters fail. Sabra? Well.” He shrugged, dismissing her so casually, even I felt stung. “You’re almost what, two and twenty? I cannot bear the thought of throwing such a beautiful bird out to the foxes.” He pouted and looked down at his sash, from which several blades and trinkets hung. Carefully, he detached a glass vessel wrapped in golden bands.

I said, “I will try harder. I will not disappoint you or mother.” I pressed my hands together and took a step toward my father.

He paid me no more attention, distracted by the vessel he held in his palm. Inside, tarnished gold smoke churned lazily with nowhere to escape. His eyes followed the billows and swirls of the smoke possessively. I followed his gaze. I could not deny its allure as I, too, was entranced by its beautiful movement. Even Nassar peered at it curiously. My father was never without the thing, and I did not let myself linger on the thought that my father found wine and a trinket more worthy of his attention than his own daughter.

Tearing his gaze from the vessel, he said, “Aashiq is from a strong family. He would be an asset to me, and it is your duty to secure him. Eiqab has blessed you by allowing you to share his bed tonight. Do not squander this gift.” He waved his hand to dismiss me and rose, unsteadily. Nassar jumped up to support him.

“Isra!” My father shouted, and with Nassar at his side, left the tent, a train of slaves at his heels. His absence sent a ripple of relief through me, and my shoulders fell forward as I waited.

A woman entered the room, and I turned eagerly toward her. Her flowing dress, fastidiously decorated with bright stripes and zig-zagging lines, barely concealed the curves she had acquired as a mother and a wife. She held her head high, the coins and colored beads on her beautiful veil—the veil of a king’s wife—glinting as she approached. I mirrored her strong posture. The kohl lining her eyes swept up to her temples. The corners of her mouth pulled up into a tight smile, as if secrets were waiting to tumble from her lips.

“Mama!” I ran to her.

She stepped forward, arms stretched wide, and we collided. Frankincense clung to her hair and clothes.

“You’re lovely.” Her fingers pressed the jewels on my head, my hips, passed over the skin of my arms, my shoulders. Her touch lingered on the metallic veil that covered my mouth. “And, how are you?” She asked with eyebrows raised. A test.

“I am much better now—”

“You do not sound sincere,” she interrupted. “Try harder.”

“Mama . . .”

“I am trying to help. Don’t get mad at your mother.”

“This is pointless,” I spat. “It isn’t my fault they don’t choose—”

“I don’t want to fight. I just want . . .” She hesitated and closed the distance between us. “For you to be wed—to get out of here.” She said it quickly and quietly into my ear. To any guard it would have seemed as though she had simply pressed her cheek to mine. She stepped back, “Are you ready to meet him?”

“Of course.” I squeezed the salt in my left fist more tightly.

She put her arms around my shoulders and pulled me close, her scent surrounding me.

“Be your very best tonight, Emel.” I did not understand the plea I heard in her words. Why did she seem a touch more desperate to see me gone than before? Had she heard that Father was allowing me only one night with Aashiq?

I pulled away, not wanting to hear more when I seemed destined to fail. Unable to meet her eyes, I dropped my gaze to the golden medallion she always wore around her neck.

She grasped my shoulders one last time, taking in every detail, then she said, "Show him why he must take you home."



POURING THE salt into a leather pouch I hid beneath the beaded fabric on my hips, I followed the guard. He led me through the palace until we came upon the private courting tent.

"He waits," the guard said and parted the entrance.

I pushed out my chest, lifted my chin, and stepped into the dimly lit space.

"You're here," Aashiq said, stepping on his robe as he stood in a rush. I maintained my composure. Most suitors did not feel the need to acknowledge our arrival with such fuss.

He continued with an apologetic shrug, "I have been waiting so long, I am afraid I've drunk almost all the wine." His accent had been notable at the courting, but now, slurred with drink, it was enchanting. I wondered what life was like where he was from, but I promised Hadiyah I would not ask of such things.

I bowed. "My apologies for keeping you waiting. It takes time to prepare for a muhami such as yourself." I spread compliments like oil.

"Let me pour you a drink," he said. Maybe it was the wine, or maybe it was being away from the piercing stare of the King, but now, Aashiq seemed more at ease, less proud. He turned back to the table where two goblets sat by a silver decanter, but I grabbed his arm. I trailed my fingertips down the sleeve of his robes to his hand where he held his pipe.

"I would rather put my mouth on this," I whispered, taking his pipe and placing it between my lips. I inhaled the sweet honey smoke, feeling a rush of warm air beneath my feet.

“Ah, well...” He watched me warily. “May I remove that?” He asked of the metal veil.

“Aashiq, you may do whatever you please.”

He reached over with clumsy fingers and removed it. I closed my eyes while he did, the world swirling slightly as I leaned forward. The veil tangled in my hair and pulled sharply as it was detached. He tossed it onto a cushion. The sounds of the chains and jewels clattering against each other muted the instant they landed on the carpets.

“You are much more beautiful than your sisters,” he said, “I could see as much this afternoon, and I see it again now.”

“Is that why you chose me?” I asked.

“No. It was the way you watched your sisters and the servants. They held your attention so much better than I did. I had to know why.” He smirked. “It is no wonder you have not been wed, if that was how you act around all of the suitors.”

I pressed my lips together, wondering if he was right. Was that my problem all along? Could they all see that they were only a means to an end? Finally, I said, “Perhaps I have not found the right man.”

“Perhaps it is me.” His shrugged, and I saw that in his hesitance, he was as nervous as I.

Taking my hand, he guided me to the large bed in the center of the room. It was so soft, it took great effort to keep my eyes from drooping closed. We leaned against the pillows, and I faced him, eager to prove him wrong, to show him that I cared for him.

“Tell me of your family.”

“I have two wives, Fadwa and Amani. They are older than you and have given me five children. Four sons and a daughter.” As he told me of his family, he spoke so kindly, I found it was easy to listen, to watch his mouth move and face soften. “My daughter’s eyes are like yours, black as night. She is a child of Eiqab.” He seemed to stare at nothing, but certainly he saw her there beside him. “Always running without shoes, uncaring of the sand’s

heat.” He smiled as he talked, laughing as he described his wild children. He loved his family tenderly. I imagined what it would be like to count myself among them. Would he love me as he loved his other wives? Would we have children who danced in the desert? A little girl who looked like me and ran across the ground with feet bare. Soon, I smiled with him, warming to his words. And to him.

“Are you comfortable?” I fingered the edges of his robes as I curled into him, wanting him to see he had my full attention.

He shrugged out of the robes. I helped, pushing them from his shoulders, deliberately sweeping my fingers over his chest and neck. I dropped my gaze to his mouth as I placed my hand on his thigh. I moved up to his hip.

He pitched forward and pressed his lips to mine.

His heat and scent of dusty, sweaty skin surrounded me. I closed my eyes and moved my mouth to match his as I was taught. His tongue was greedy, and I responded in kind. I hummed softly and reached for the bulge between his legs. He caressed my breast through the beading. I felt little at his touch, but moaned as I knew men liked. He broke free of my mouth and twisted his body so that he lay beneath me. His hands explored me in a clumsy effort, and I was reminded of the young muhamis I had bedded.

I pressed into him rhythmically, faster and harder, harder and faster.

“Perhaps you should...?” He gestured to my clothes, breathing heavily.

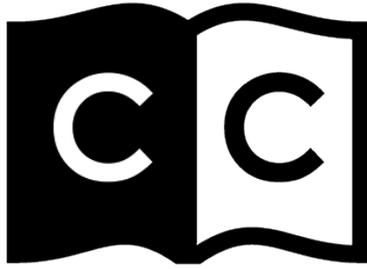
I rose. With my back to him, I undressed methodically, seductively. When I turned to face him, he was already naked. I studied the man who would share my bed that night. His chest sagged and his belly bulged forward.

It mattered not how he appeared, only where he might take me. And if he treated me well, too, then I could not let him slip through my fingers.

I pulled him with me back onto the cushioned bed.

He clambered over me. His body was atop mine, elbows digging into the mattress beside my chest, his breath blowing in my face at quick bursts. I was grateful for the rose oil on my lip. He stabbed between my legs, attempting to find where he fit, and I tilted my hips to guide him.





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