

Free from the Salt King,
Emel follows the
vengeful Saalim across the desert to
reclaim all that she has lost.

SON OF THE SALT CHASER

A. S. THORNTON

SON OF THE
SALT
CHASER

SON OF THE SALT CHASER

THE SALT CHASERS DUOLOGY

A. S. THORNTON



CamCat Publishing, LLC
Brentwood, Tennessee 37027
camcatpublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

© 2022 by A. S. Thornton

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, address 101 Creekside Crossing, Suite 280, Brentwood, TN 37027.

Hardcover ISBN 9780744306132
Paperback ISBN 9780744306071
Large-Print Paperback ISBN 9780744306378
eBook ISBN 9780744305678
Audiobook ISBN 9780744306170

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data available upon request

Cover and book design by Maryann Appel

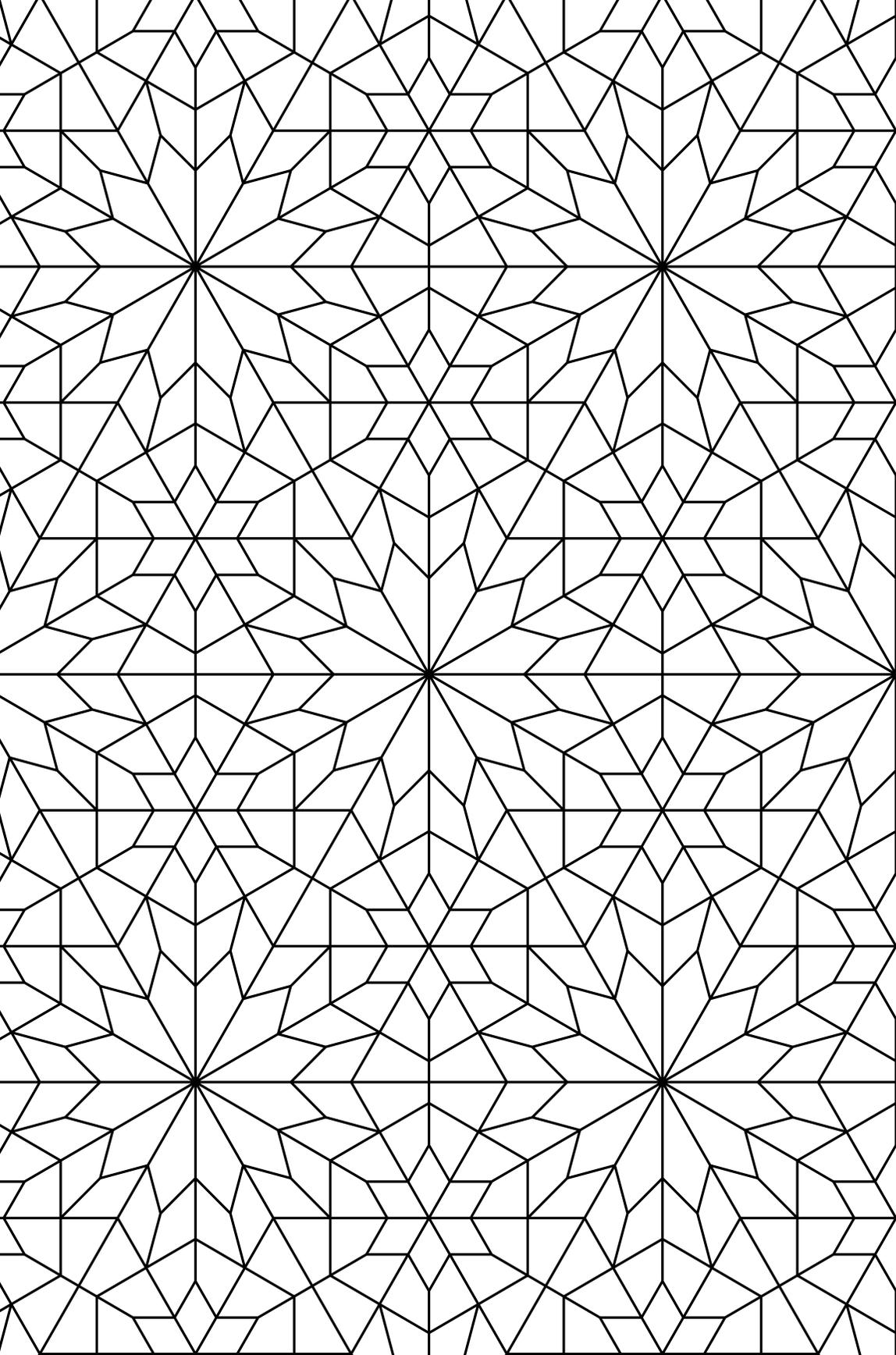
5 3 1 2 4

I.

DECEPTION



ALKHIDAL



Tahira,

Papa won't look at any of us. Mama won't stop crying. I know you are angry, but it won't do to stay there. We can help you take care of it. They only want their daughter back. And I want my sister, my friend.

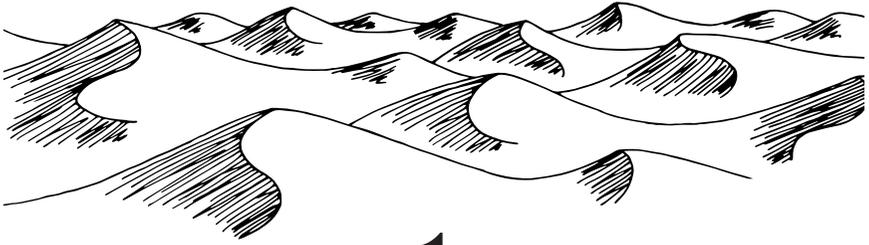
Our caravan moves southeast in two nights. It will be the quarter moon of winter's end when we arrive. We will stay for three dozen days. This should reach you in time, so please come back to us. I have heard Ibrahim seeks another wife. The king's son! A better man than that animal who took your future with his fine clothes and gleaming crown.

Do you know what those sea-people call us? Salt chasers. As if that is what we want! They can't understand that we don't wander to pursue riches; we journey to chase our desires. And we always get that for which we hunt.

If you don't come home, I will search for you. And him.

Zahar

—Unopened letter, found deep under sand



1

EMEL

The moon was only a sliver, and I was grateful I could not see the dunes around us. Watching them shift from the wind's hands would drive me to madness sooner. Already I was sure I could hear the hatif whispering, telling me to turn back. The bones of my knees, my feet, my spine, all agreed.

Instead I focused on the sounds: creaking barrels and crates stacked on grunting camels, the swishing of weary travelers' robes, the tinkling of tack on royal horses.

The ache in my bones would diminish when our journey stopped at sunrise, but there was another pain that would not stop when my feet did. It slid its fingers around my ribs and pulled so hard that, at times, breathing seemed impossible. It was incessant, because it was grief.

Tavi was silent beside me, her breath coming in soft huffs as we walked in the long caravan.

It was the third night of our journey to Madinat Almulihi, and already I regretted the decision to leave home. Without a camel to carry food and water, I would not survive on my own if I turned back. I was trapped in the middle of this desert. What a foolish plan it was to leave everything behind, hoping to find my lost love in a sparkling city by the sea. Stretching open my eyes, I tried

to see the man who rode his horse at the front of the caravan, King Saalim. I saw nothing. The darkness had swallowed him completely.

I chewed my cheeks and stared at the blue-black sand, focusing on each step forward. That was the only direction I could go: forward. There was no going back to the life I'd once had.

My mother and father were dead. The rest of my family—my half-sisters, other mothers in the harem, full and half-brothers—were all to be dispersed into the settlement to try to find their way without their father or their husband. Without the Salt King. And there was no Saalim. At least, not the Saalim I knew. The careful jinni with strong hands. Enslaved just as I was—with cuffs of magic instead of silk—he was kind and thoughtful. That man I loved was free. I should be overjoyed, but now he was someone else.

Saalim was a king who belonged in Madinat Almulihi, his life could not intersect with mine. I had promised I would find him, though. I'd promised we would be together again. I could not give up.

Would it have been better to stay an ahira, bound to a life of seduction and submission, and for Saalim to remain a jinni, no less a slave? If my hand hadn't been forced—if my father hadn't determined to send me away to live as the whore of Omar, a cruel and despicable man—could we have found happiness? It was not a perfect life, but its familiarity was a comfort. And I would still have Saalim.

I shook my head against my traitorous thoughts. *No*. There was no part of that life that we deserved. At least now I had freedom.

The caravan slowed. Murmurs met my ears.

"Thank Eiqab," Tavi whispered as we stopped. "I am so hungry." She sank slowly, aching, onto the ground and dropped her head onto her knees.

Forty days, they had said, to reach Madinat Almulihi. After tonight there were thirty-seven more. We could not survive this.

Tavi and I had been foolishly confident when we ventured on this journey. We had nothing to lose, the world was at our fingertips. At least, that is what I had thought. Did Tavi believe it only because I did? Did she resent me and my role in her choice? Guilt pricked at me.

"I'll be back," I said, and set out after other villagers and soldiers toward the front of the caravan to collect our rations. The hope that I might see Saalim at each stop gave me strength.

Slung across my shoulders was a sack containing my things from home. The gentle clatter of those objects was a balm to the ache in my legs and chest. I touched them through the fabric with the delicacy of a mother with child caressing her belly.

"Your name?" the man said as I handed him my empty goatskin.

"Emel, and my sister is Tavi," I replied, taking my now-full skin and giving him Tavi's. He was generous with our water ration. At dawn we would arrive at an oasis where our water stores would be filled.

He nodded. "Emel and sister Tavi. Parvaz."

It was this way every time. They asked our names, told us theirs. It was strange they bothered at all.

I followed the crowd to the man who handed out our meals. My heart thudded as I leaned around the line of people, hoping to see Saalim.

The man—whose face was shadowed beneath his guthra—gave me two handfuls of dates and two thin slices of dried goat's meat. We could not risk lighting a fire at night to cook, alerting opportunistic nomads to our presence. It was why we traveled at night, slept during the day.

That, and the fact that a foot journey like this would take twice as long under Eiqab's draining sun.

"Emel!" the man said, and I recognized him as Amir.

Behind him, several men were seated with legs crossed in quiet discussion. Their boots were off, set beside them, and their horses were tied to the trunk of a nearby tree. These were men of Almulihi. King's men. At Amir's exclamation, one of them turned toward me. Even in the shadows I knew that man's face. *Saalim*. My stomach flipped; my breath shallowed.

"We should be at the oasis before the sun has lifted from ground," Amir said. "Don't forget to find me."

Dragging my attention from Saalim, I smiled, pleased Amir had remembered his promise to me.

“I will.” I was nudged out of the way by a hungry traveler before I could look once more at the seated king.

Amir had promised to help me with my map when we arrived at the oasis tomorrow. On the first night of our journey he had shown me his bawsal when I asked him how they knew the way. The glistening gold direction-teller pointed north—to Almulihi—as if by magic. I had shown him my map in return, and he’d tutted at its blankness.

My sister was sitting with my friend from home, Firoz, and his lover Rashid when I returned. All were silent in their fatigue. Firoz and Rashid walked further back in the caravan and often only joined us for meals. Rashid was the one who said it was better if we were separated, so we might learn different things about Almulihi.

I was still cold toward Rashid for taking Firoz from me since undertaking our journey, as we might otherwise have lent one another some of our will to move forward, but I no longer had the strength to feel betrayed.

Tavi nibbled at the dates. “Oh yes,” she said. “This is the best one I have had in my whole life.”

Smiling, I turned to Firoz. “How has your night been?”

Smacking his lips after a long drink of water, he shrugged. “Quiet.”

“That’s good, eh?”

He didn’t reply.

Rashid nodded. “It is good. No sign of nomads, no sand-winds, no hatifs.” He peered around as if checking to ensure it was indeed still quiet. I scowled at Rashid before looking away, the date in my mouth suddenly losing its sweetness. It was Rashid who had poisoned Firoz with fear.

Firoz was my dearest friend, and like me, had always dreamed of escaping the stifling life of our settlement. But the Firoz I knew and loved seemed to disappear more each day—growing uneasy and taciturn. Did he, too, regret coming on this journey?

After Saalim—not *my* Saalim, the jinni, but this new and distant stranger—had slain my father, the infamously power-hungry Salt King who controlled the salt trade as a means to rule the desert, he told my family we could join him on

the journey back to Almulihi. Villagers were welcome, too. I worried it would be impossible for Firoz. He lived with his mother and younger siblings, eking out a life selling coconut juice at the marketplace. There was no extra coin to support Firoz's desperate dream.

But Rashid had found the money. I did not ask how, nor did I ask Firoz what his family thought of his leaving. I saw his siblings' tear-stained faces when they said goodbye. It was unlikely Firoz would ever see his family again. Did he, too, sometimes regret this journey?

"Sons, my feet hurt." Firoz slipped off his sandals and foot wraps. His knuckles kneaded the curves of his soles.

"Like I've been walking atop a carpet of scorpions," Tavi agreed.

Rashid rubbed the back of Firoz's neck until Firoz leaned into him, dropping his head onto his shoulder. Jealousy hit, and I looked away. Regret would not lurk so near were I taking this journey at Saalim's side.

But Saalim did not remember me, so it mattered not that he was nearby. And none knew what nor whom I had lost. Magic had stolen those memories from everyone. None knew the ahira had fallen in love with a jinni, and both had found everything in their freedom. Except each other.

That I was alone with those memories made the pain all the worse.

"It will get easier," Rashid said.

I looked at him, confused, before I realized he spoke of the journey.

"Yes," Tavi agreed with too much enthusiasm. We knew nothing of long journeys, but hope was our only companion.

"It will," I said. "Our feet will ease into this; our bones will quiet. It will be worth it." I hoped they did not hear my doubt.

"We have been talking about a plan for when we arrive in the City," Rashid said as he looked to Tavi and me. Why did I hear hesitation? "It seems best if we find the baytahira."

I spat a date seed into the sand. "No." The baytahira was where the whores did their work. It was the only place I would have found coin, should I have been cast out by my father for refusing to serve as ahira to gain him powerful allies.

“I don’t like it,” Tavi said.

Rashid at least looked ashamed. “I know. But it’s not for long. It’s an easy place to find work.”

“Work?” I huffed.

He ignored my heaving chest. “We’re likely to find somewhere to stay for a few nab.”

Firoz saw my fury. “It’s just an idea. Until we can figure out something better. Nothing is settled.”

Back home, Rashid and Firoz had spent much of their time in the baytahira. There, they were free to be as they were. There, people knew how to keep secrets. Perhaps they were not completely wrong for reaching for what was familiar and safe.

Exhaling slowly, I picked up my last date.

Rashid continued. “We can’t show up in the bazaar expecting someone to have work for us.”

Tavi asked, “How do you know they have a baytahira?” Then, she looked at me and pointed to the date in her mouth, raising her eyebrows like it really was the best one yet.

Rashid huffed and stood. “Because desperation fuels fortune, and Madinat Almulihi is a city of wealth.” With his teeth, he tore off a piece of dried meat and walked away.

We had so many days left in our journey. Things could change. I would not argue this now.

But I refused to leave my life as an ahira only to settle somewhere else and do the same.



When the sun had barely risen, we saw the oasis.

“Not much farther now,” I whispered to Tavi.

Sand had found its way between the folds of the cloth wrapped around my feet, the grains digging into the raw parts of my foot left exposed by my sandals.

I looked ahead at the copse of trees that protected the water at its center, and counted the steps until I could lie down and finally sleep.

Though I wanted to crawl into a shady slumber right when we arrived, we all assisted where we could to get the caravan settled: guiding the camels to the trees to be tied and fed, leading the horses to water and sparse grass, helping to unload the cargo from the animals' backs.

This oasis was much larger than the one near my home, and once the animals were tended to, the people spread throughout the trees that circled the dark blue pool. Some sought bits of privacy—a lost luxury. Some rushed to the deepest, clearest water and filled their goatskins, drinking heartily. Others waded into the shallow areas to splash their faces and cool their feet. Tavi and I found a large patch of shade and lay down on our cloaks. I did not bother to search for Rashid or Firoz.

So tired, I did not even search for Saalim.

"I don't know if I'll get used to this," I said to Tavi through a yawn, pulling my scarf over my eyes.

"Hmm?"

"Sleeping at day, waking at night."

After a long pause, Tavi said, "I remember when the hardest part of my day was pretending to be more interested in the muhami than the trays of food." She laughed. It was sputtery—little puffs of air.

"Or the wax. I thought it was the worst pain I'd ever felt."

We spoke slowly and breathlessly, our words working their way up through our fatigue.

"Hadiyah. Adilah." Tavi whispered. "I wonder what they're doing now?"

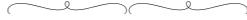
I wondered, too. If I were home, I could go and see them. I regretted speaking aloud of the zafif and our attendants. It only served to bring back the gnawing ache of what I'd lost.

It's already done. There is no turning back.

When sleep found me, I dreamt of a bird with two broken wings flapping sadly at the bottom of its cage. It had soft gray eyes that pleaded with me. People watched as I pulled it from its cage. Speaking softly to it, I ignored them. Then,

I clamped my fingers over its neck, fragile and soft. It thrashed as if begging me to stop. But I didn't. I didn't stop until it was lifeless in my hands.

When I awoke—my face wet with tears—I was still swimming through the question: Had I ended the bird's suffering? Had I done any good at all?



Leaning back onto my hands, I pushed my feet into the cool water. My raw, blistered skin welcomed the relief.

“What do you think they're doing?” Firoz asked, nudging me with his own submerged foot.

Soldiers from Madinat Almulihi stood across the large pool. I would have assumed they were cooling themselves, too, but the longer I watched, the more I saw that there was a pattern—almost a rhythm—to the way they dipped their hands into the water and pressed it to their brows, wrists, and necks.

“Praying,” a voice said from behind me. A voice so achingly familiar it took all of my strength not to jump from the ground and rush to him.

Slowly, I turned to Saalim.

In our few days of travel, I had come to understand that he and his men behaved differently from my father and his court. It still surprised me that their king—my king—could appear so unlike a royal. His dark sirwal was rolled at his calves, his feet bare. He wore no weapons, and the black tunic across his chest was dust-covered and almost tattered at the edges; the guthra that loosely wrapped his face, equally worn. Had Saalim himself not told me tales of the wealth and allure of Madinat Almulihi, I would not believe that it was a city worth seeing at all.

“Eiqab will strain to hear,” Firoz said.

Saalim looked away from his soldiers down to Firoz. “We worship the giver, not the punisher.”

“Wahir,” I said. How strange it was to see someone praying to the lesser god. How wrong.

Saalim's gaze met mine.

A rush of cold and hot, longing and desperation, and . . . Sons, how didn't he feel it? Couldn't he see me as I saw him? I felt as I had the first time he looked at me after he became human again, when he had killed my father and his eyes locked on mine. I stared back, willing him to feel, to remember as I did . . . the set of his jaw hard beneath my fingers, his lips against my own, his breath warm as I pulled it into my lungs. His hands so careful against my skin, his heart beating against my breast, the tremor of his voice as he said my name.

"Emel, isn't it?" he asked.

The memories scattered. I bent my head to the ground, not wanting him to see my grimace. He felt nothing, remembered nothing. Sons, he did not know me at all.

Masira was a devious goddess, giving so much but taking as much in return. Damn her magic that she unfurled like woven rug! Something beautiful to cover all of the ugly scars and secrets, to distract from them. But that was all the magic did, wasn't it? What it tried to remove, it did so sloppily. Everything still lay underneath the threads.

"Yes, she is Emel," Firoz said loudly.

I looked back to Saalim, brushing away my thoughts like sand on my palms. Saalim continued. "Today, you and . . ."

"Firoz," he said.

Saalim paused at the name, his brow pulling together slightly before he continued.

"Firoz. I am still learning. You both will help with the cook-fires." Then he turned from us and continued around the water's edge.

"Well, I at least know food is cooked *on* a fire. What do you know about cooking?" Firoz chuckled. His mother always cooked for his family, and I had had no business working in the palace kitchens as an ahira.

I forced a laugh as I watched Saalim walk away.

"What bothers you?" Firoz asked.

I shook my head.

"He's just a king, Emel. Same heart that can be pierced by blade." He stabbed the air with an invisible blade.

Pressing my lips together, I rose. "Tavi will help me with the fires. I'm sure she'll be awake soon."

"No, let her rest. I'll help."

I shook my head. "She will want to be with me. You find Rashid."

Firoz winced at the sharp way Rashid's name fell from my tongue. I walked away, regretting any mention of his name.

Firoz followed me. "Why does he anger you?"

Walking as swiftly as I could, I said, "You don't know?"

"The baytahira is just an idea. Besides—" He put his hand against my arm as he caught up to me. "There is work there that isn't bedding others. I wouldn't let you do that."

I grunted and continued walking.

"I'm no fool, Emel. I'm still your Firo. Your *friend!*" he called after me as he slowed. "I know something is not right with you. You can tell me."

I stopped, letting him catch up. I did not want him to shout any louder. Already people were turning in our direction.

"We left together, remember? As we promised each other we would. This was *our* plan," he said, his voice quieting as he closed the space between us. "I know that something has changed with you. I can see it. *Feel* it. You are going to have to trust me . . . trust Rashid. Trust people, Emel. You can't do it all alone."

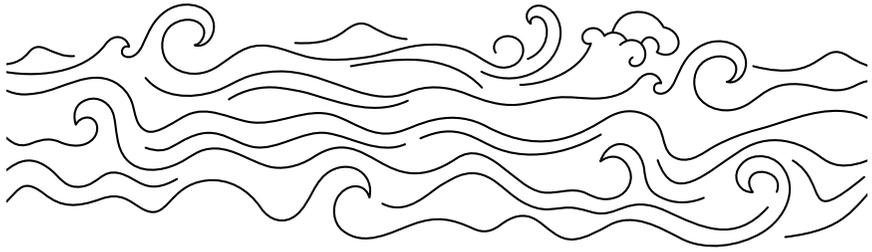
I could say the same of you, I wanted to tell him.

I had told him everything. When I had accidentally freed Saalim—I had told him what I had done, whom I had loved, how I had ruined everything with a wish. It was right before these soldiers tore through our village. Right before my father was killed, and we were freed.

He had never mentioned what I told him. Did he not believe my words, not believe that a jinni was real? Did he think I was crazed? Or like Saalim, had he forgotten as the ripples of Masira's magic spread?

On the horizon I imagined I saw the sharp peaks of my village jutting out from the sand. I wished I could turn back, not to what I had hated there, but to what I had lost in my pursuit of freedom.

A wind blew, and in its breath I thought it whispered *patience*.



2

SAALIM

Travelers we had met on our journey warned of worsening sandstorms in the east and of nomads who sought out kings. One group of traders insisted they'd found a skull so large someone could live in it. "There was a si'la inside. Stay clear; it's on your path," the man told Amir, pointing at his map to a place where no route existed. Stifling laughter—there were no such things as shapeshifting creatures that lead nomads to their death—we sent the crazed men on their way.

Sixteen nights left of our journey, and we had encountered nothing. Wahir had blessed us, or all nomads were indeed mad. Under the moon's light, I saw more travelers approach from the north. While I had no expectation that their tales would differ at all from those who had come before them, I could not help but notice that they were different. They drew near so quickly, they were surely on horseback. They had not come from far.

"What are your orders?" Nassar said.

"Stop the caravan. I will go to meet them."

Nassar called back to the soldiers and villagers behind us. The message carried through the people like a hatif.

With my mare Farasa's reins in hand, I met Tamam at the front. Tamam was my best soldier, and swiftest with his blades. Broader than the palace bricks

and taller than me by a hand, he intimidated with presence alone. When he saw me, he broke the line without a word and mounted Hassas.

There were three travelers awaiting us up ahead, all in dark cloaks with faces hidden in shadows. Their hands, too, were covered as they gripped the reins. Their mounts were a small desert breed, used to sparse grass.

“What do you seek?” I asked.

“Ah. A sea citizen, then,” the man at the center said, ignoring my question. The two who flanked him hummed with interest. The man’s voice was deeper than I expected from his small stature, and though I could see no weapons on either him or his companions, I placed my hand on the hilt of my sword. I could not discern where they were from.

Farasa was calm beneath me, but Tamam’s horse grew agitated—swishing her tail and moving her head from side to side. I loosened my fingers on Farasa’s rein, willing her to ignore whatever it was that Hassas found disturbing.

“Who are you?” I pressed.

“Desert dwellers, slaves to the sand. *You* might call us salt chasers.” He hissed the words.

Their act was leaving me with little patience. “You can see my face, but I cannot see yours. Respect would have you lower your hood.”

The flanking travelers moved to show their faces, but the man at the center raised his gloved hand to stop them. “I am the one who speaks.” He threw back his hood.

He did not appear as someone of the desert, despite his claim. His skin was as white as the polished stone in the throne room. As if he’d never seen the sun. His hair had been shorn to the scalp, and in the dim light, I could see the deep scars that arced across his skin with intentional design.

I wanted to turn from him, his face and bearing twisting my gut. “Why have you come to us?”

The man smiled now. “To see if you, too, bring promising accounts.” He turned to the rider at his left and nodded.

I was surprised to see that it was a woman who lowered her hood. She was more repulsive than the man—her scalp scarred and shorn the same, but she

was so thin I felt that it was a skull I peered at in the night. Tamam whispered to Hassas as she backed away from the foreigners, growing more agitated. Their own horses stood still. Had I not seen their narrow chests heave, I would have thought them to be of stone.

“She doesn’t like us,” the woman said, watching Hassas. Her words rasped against her tongue and grated against my ears. Even Farasa chuffed at the sound.

Tamam grew impatient. “Promising accounts of what?” he asked.

“The return of the goddess,” she said, a smile leered across her hollow face. “We have been waiting for her. She told us to keep it safe until she has returned.” The words spilled out of her like blood from a slaughtered goat. “We’ve kept it safe in the keeper’s hands—we have done what the goddess has asked. For lifetimes, we have kept it safe waiting for her! And now we hear—”

“Kept what safe?” I asked.

She did not hesitate. “The box.”

“Ghurab!” the man in the center said, turning in his saddle to glare at the woman. She cowered.

“They could not take it, Wahas,” Ghurab said, finding again her will as she leaned toward him, scowling. “Even if they wanted to, they could not find it.” She smiled again, seeming pleased with what she had done. I cared not what they hid and what they sought. Ghurab continued, “People say the goddess walks amongst us again.”

Wahas turned to me. “Elders speak of a cricket that climbed into a treed nest and became a bird. At the desert’s edge, a man saw a griffon dive into the waves. She never resurfaced. A thirty-year ruler was lost in the south, and the sands shifted. What have you seen?”

I bristled. South was Alfaar’s settlement. He had been a thirty-year ruler. The “Salt King,” they had called him. His settlement was under my rule now—or Usman’s, who acted as ruler in my absence. Had these people been there, or, Sons, was that where they were headed?

“We have seen nothing,” I said. “So if that is all you seek, it is time you leave us.”

At last, the third traveler spoke. He did not remove his hood. "Can you spare some water? Or perhaps, something to eat? Our journey home is long."

Nothing about their appearance suggested that they were incapable of fending for themselves in the desert, in spite of what they said, and their manner left me even more suspicious of their purpose. Tamam and I backed our horses away. Tamam shook his head. "We have nothing to spare."

I tightened my grip on my sword, waiting for them to depart.

"We are poor travelers," Ghurab said, her boasting transformed to begging. "Anything small."

"No," I said, lifting my sword from my waist. I edged forward, feeling the need to take blood, to protect my people and home. "Do not ask again."

Wahas's eyes widened when he saw my blade. "He does not carry the scimitar," he whispered. "He is from the City."

Ghurab said cheerily, "Madinat Almulih." "

"Madinat Almulih," the hooded man repeated.

Wahas looked beyond me as if seeing the caravan for the first time. "If you are from the City . . ." He considered me, then Tamam. He looked south. "You must be the ones they spoke of. The slayer of their Salt King." Wahas laughed. "Then the king is amongst you now." With the slightest press of his heel against his horse, he moved closer.

"Do not come any nearer," I said, again flashing my blade. Farasa moved toward him at my command. One swing and Wahas' life would pour from his neck. Another and Ghurab would follow.

"*You* are the king." Wahas whispered it, leaning toward me.

"Leave us," I said, the tip of my blade a fist away from his cheek. Tamam followed suit and aimed his sword.

Finally, Wahas nudged his horse back.

"It is the City's king!" Ghurab hissed.

I should kill them now. The moon glinted off the flat of my sword.

"Is there none upon the throne, then?" the hooded man asked gleefully. "When the king crosses the desert . . ."

I will kill them. Farasa stepped closer and closer.

"The goddess has returned! We must go back," Wahas said finally, turning his horse. "Make haste!"

In a few breaths, their backs were to us as they fled.

Tamam waited for me: I felt the question. Do we kill them? His blade was still ready, Hassas's muscles trembling as she waited for Tamam's call.

"We let them go," I said finally. Regret filled the space the words had left behind.



"I should have killed them," I said, hating myself for seeking Nassar's approval, but knowing I needed it all the same.

Nassar had an uncanny ability to understand the motives and ways of salt chasers. It was why my father often sent him for negotiations with *those* people. I would use Nassar for the same.

"They are no threat," Nassar said when I finished telling him what had happened with the nomads.

"They left talking of the empty throne."

"It is not empty," Nassar said patiently. "Azim is there with your army, and he would sooner die than let anything else happen." Like the death of my family.

My brother, who had always been quick to settle disputes with blade, would not have been so lenient with them. They would be dead, and I would be left without worry. His tactics might not be so barbaric.

"Saalim," Nassar warned, as if he knew my thoughts. "These are salt-chasers, not the army that attacked Almulihi."

Ignoring Nassar, I squinted ahead. I could almost make out their silhouettes. It was not too late; I could follow them still. "I would rather not lose more civilians, nor the head of my army."

The longer I considered it, the more I realized Nassar was wrong.

"We go now," I called to Tamam. "They cannot live."

"Careful," Nassar hissed at my back as we left. "This is a mistake!"

Ignoring him, Tamam and I rode into the night, following their trail.

Though Nassar was angry, when I glanced back, he had lit the guide light. We would know where to return to when the deed was done.

Though I thought I could see them ahead, the faster we rode, the more trouble I had finding them. Staring at the ground, I saw three lines of hoof prints. We followed the trail until . . .

No.

Their tracks were gone. The sand looked as though it had never been touched. I stared at it, confused. A sand wind could not have passed through; we would have felt it. I had failed, and now the nomads were gone with the knowledge that Almulihi was without a king.

I could not be responsible for more blood lost. This was too soon after the attack on Almulihi. The attack that had stolen my parents from me—the king and queen—and my sisters and brother. Was it these people who had tried to bring my home to its knees, who thought to steal from us our fortune? Visions of my home being invaded, of civilians and soldiers falling to the ground, and blood pooling between bricks clouded my mind.

“We will shorten our passage,” I said to Nassar when we’d returned.

“It is impossible.”

“We will find a way.” I went to the head of the caravan.

Although I wanted to believe Nassar’s plea that they were no threat, the nomads left threads of unease pulling at me.

Thinking of all I had lost brought to the surface a loneliness that clung like a shadow. It had been there since arriving in the Salt King’s settlement. It called to me—the fathomless darkness. Arriving home would settle it, at least in part. It had to.

We needed expedite this journey. No matter the cost.



When we stopped at daybreak, the people talked. Some had seen my hurried chase across the sand, and they were drunk with curiosity, asking questions about who had come, what had happened.

“They have spent two dozen nights staring at sand and sky. This is a bit of excitement when there has been no change for so long,” Amir said, seated across from me. He stared at his map, the edges held down by piles of sand. Sighing, he said, “There is nothing we can do to safely speed up the journey.”

“We must.” I thought of Helena, who was set to arrive only days after we did. What would her family think of their daughter being queen of a threatened city?

Amir’s narrowed eyes angled at me briefly before returning to his map.

“There is a small oasis here.” He pointed to an isolated, marked area. The arcing lines that indicated the long-trusted trade routes did not cross through it. “But I do not know its condition. Going through this oasis might save us two or three days, but there is great risk if it is dry.”

“We take it.”

Amir exhaled, pouring the sand from his map, and began to roll the parchment. “I do not think it wise.”

“We tell everyone to ration food and water, to prepare if need be. There should be enough for us and for the horses to get by.”

He shook his head. “We’ll have no opportunity to fill stores before the change. If we’re to shorten the passage, we change course tonight. There’s nothing left to ration other than what remains in our barrels. People could die. Horses could die, even your Farasa.”

Our eyes met. He knew where to strike as Farasa had been given to me by my father when I was a young man, but I could not be swayed in this. “We will make do with the water stores we have left. We take the shorter route.” I rose and looked to the caravan. It was a calculated risk: Almulihī or these people. I could not place Almulihī’s value beneath my soldiers, these salt chasers, nor myself.

“It is reckless,” Amir called at my back.

More villagers than I expected had chosen to make the crossing to Almulihī—close to thirty. I could not blame them; their settlement was ragged. I had never seen so many worn and weary people in one place. Their numbers left us little room for mistakes. We had additional barrels for water stores, a number of

extra camels, and enough preserved goods to make the planned journey decent for everyone, but still, it was not much. My soldiers had grown thin, and I, too, was tying my belt more tightly.

The sun had barely risen and already I could feel the sweat at my brow. It would be another miserable day. If it wasn't worthwhile to make a swift return to Almulih to safe-keep it from potential invaders, then at least we would sooner return to where there was movement to the wind, salt in the breeze, the coolness of stone streets. And no damned camels.

Walking down the caravan line, I checked that my men were comfortable. Those resting had made tents with their cloaks and sticks—the villagers had shown them this clever trick when they couldn't find shade—and were sleeping beneath them.

My gaze traveled past the soldiers, and I searched each villager closely. Though I knew I should go back to my station, I did not.

I wanted to see her.

"Emel," I whispered to myself. I liked the sound of her name when I said it.

After I had slain Alfaar, his family had wept and writhed and peered at me like the predator I was. Not Emel. She looked at me not with anger but with curiosity, almost an understanding. It was like she knew me. *Why did she watch me that way? What was she seeing?*

I thought I would never see her again, but then I learned she would join our caravan. Inside, I was excited as a boy when I saw her at our departure, but after all this time, I still found it impossible to approach her. I was a betrothed king, and she was the daughter of the man I'd conquered.

So far, she also maintained her distance from me. Did she think me an abject king? But the way she watched me created a palpable closeness—as if we shared a history—like I could reach out and examine whatever it was.

I clenched my fists.

Why did I think of her at all? Sons, she was just a salt chaser! Being drawn to her felt out of my control. Like there was something I was not understanding. This was shameful. I resolved to call for Dima as soon as I was home. A few nights spent with her would settle me until I wed Helena.

I tried to shake it off, shake *her* off, but it was an unquenched thirst, and it would burn until I could sate it.

Just beyond a cluster of yoked camels, Emel sat with her sister. I relaxed my fingers, watching her stare at her hands, her mouth downturned. I wanted to touch her, press my thumb to the edges of her lips.

A nearby soldier looked up from the horse he fed. His thin, shadowed face told me he was tired, hungry. "Is all well, my king?"

I shifted from foot to foot. *King*. That was my father. It was not me. Not yet. I still needed to earn that title after I had proven such a failure to my family, to Almulihi. How else could I fail? I thought of my decision to change course. "You heard of the planned route change?"

The soldier nodded slowly and glanced to the goatskin on his hip before looking back to the horse.

I turned from the soldier and strode toward Emel despite my better judgement. My heart quickened.

"Did you hear?" I asked, too loudly. At my question, the camel nearest to me startled and rose to its feet, the others following suit. I staggered back from them.

"Woah, woah," Emel called, scrambling to grasp their lines. They tossed their heads and opened their mouths. I felt a fool as Emel tried to settle them herself. It was clear she did not have much more experience working with them than I had, and another salt chaser soon ran to take Emel's place. He handled them with experienced hands, tutting and whistling, and pulled them from the line to settle.

Emel and I stood staring at each other. It felt as though it was just us standing there. I wanted it to be just us.

"I'm sorry, my king," she said.

I stepped toward her. "Saalim."

"I know." Her eyes stayed on the ground.

Then say it. "Will you be able to ration?" I pointed to her goatskin.

She shook it. It was nearly full.

"You've drunk almost nothing. We've traveled all night."

“It is easy to conserve when it’s cool.”

“Cool is not how I would have described last night.”

She smirked. “This is tepid compared to summer.” With dark, heavy robes she looked to be more comfortable under the high sun than I felt in my thin clothes.

I balked, imagining summer. Dirt layered on sweaty skin, the scent of dust and camel dung, buzzing flies sticking to my hands and face. No respite. I hoped I would never experience it myself.

She said, “But then, I was born to endure this.”

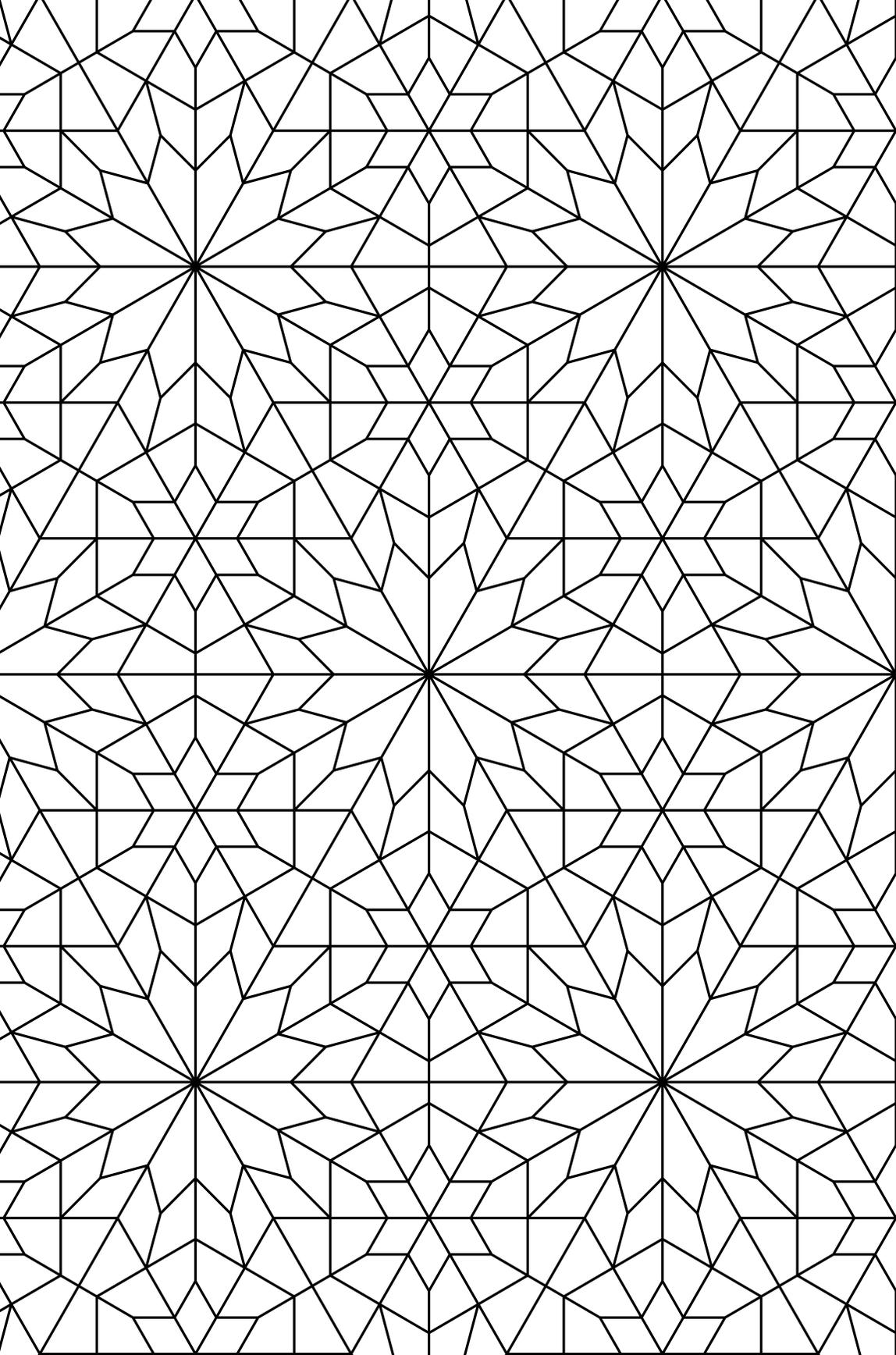
What else had she endured? I could not imagine her life as a daughter of Alfaar. The man had whored up his daughters to power-hungry men for his own gain. My sisters’ lives in Almulihī had been so different, so easy by comparison.

With effort, I said no more and continued down the caravan, checking on the soldiers.

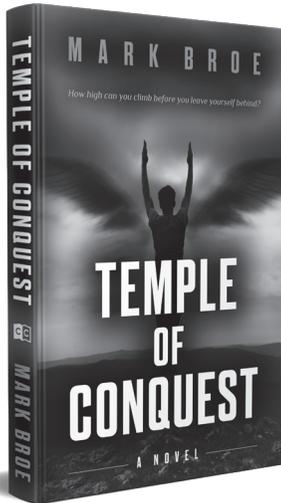
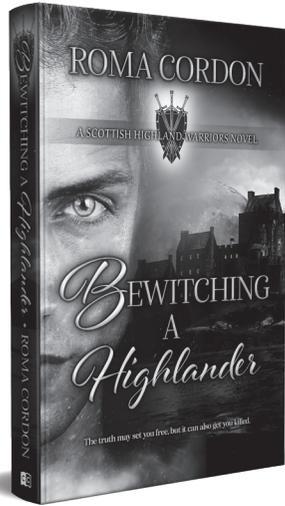
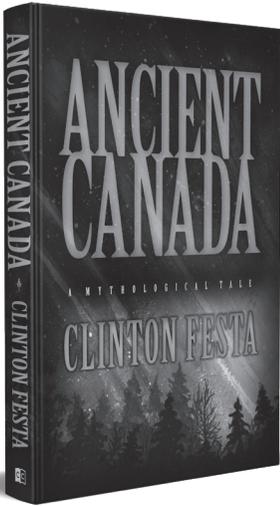
As I walked back to the front, I tried to see Emel again. She was beneath her cloak tent, face in shadows, so I could not see if she watched me as well. Disappointed, I continued by. *Pathetic*, my brother would say if he were still alive.

And he would be right. Almulihī could be my only focus now.

Being out of this damned desert would clear my mind. I would build Wahir the grandest temple in all the world if it meant I would never have to step foot on this sand again.

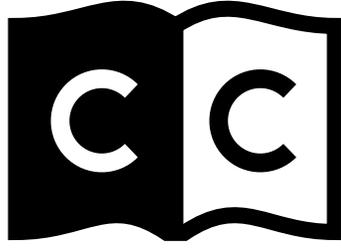


MORE FANTASY FROM CAMCAT BOOKS



Available now, wherever books are sold.





CamCat Books

VISIT US ONLINE FOR
MORE BOOKS TO LIVE IN:
CAMCATBOOKS.COM

FOLLOW US



[CamCatBooks](https://www.facebook.com/CamCatBooks)



[@CamCatBooks](https://twitter.com/@CamCatBooks)



[@CamCat_Books](https://www.instagram.com/@CamCat_Books)

THE GIFT OF MAGIC MAY BE A CURSE

AFTER HER DESERT-TRANSFORMING wish, Emel follows Saalim to Madinat Almulihi to reclaim all she has lost. But the seaside city is not what she expected. When she is tasked with assisting the palace healer, she is faced daily with the reminder that Saalim—focused only on seeking the revenge of those who killed his family—does not remember her at all.

Cursing the magic that destroyed her love and brought her to an unwelcoming city, Emel regrets her decision to leave her settlement. That is, until she meets Kas. Though inscrutable, he is the first person to help her forget her past, and the pull of finding happiness with him tempts her from the life she wished for with Saalim.

But darkness waits in the desert, and not all people in Madinat Almulihi are what they seem. When Emel understands she is entangled in the fate of the city—and of Saalim—she is faced with the realization that magic may be the most powerful card in her hand. It might be the only way to save all that she loves, but if she plays her hand wrong, it could destroy everything.



CamCat
Books

Cover Design: Maryann Appel
Photography: Darko Sreckovic

Fiction / Fantasy

USD\$17.99 CAD\$21.99 GBP£13.99

ISBN 978-0-7443-0607-1

90000



9 780744 306071

BE THE FIRST TO HEAR about new CamCat titles, author events, and exclusive content! Sign up at camcatbooks.com for the CamCat Publishing newsletter.