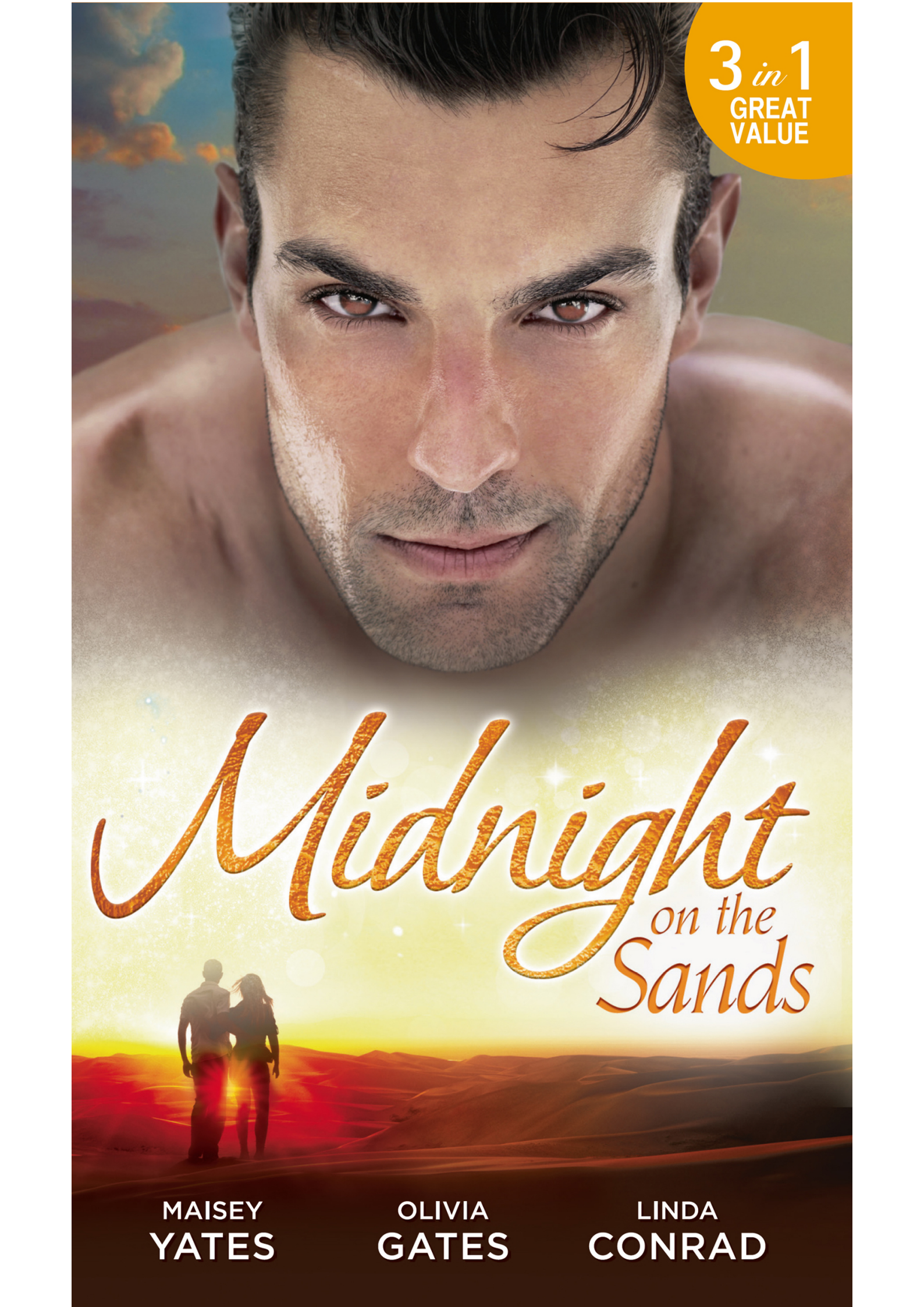




3 *in* 1
GREAT
VALUE

Midnight *on the Sands*

MAISEY
YATES

OLIVIA
GATES

LINDA
CONRAD

Maisey Yates

**Midnight on the Sands: Hajar's
Hidden Legacy / To Touch a
Sheikh / Her Sheikh Protector**

«HarperCollins»

Yates M.

Midnight on the Sands: Hajar's Hidden Legacy / To Touch a Sheikh /
Her Sheikh Protector / M. Yates — «HarperCollins»,

Burning Desert Sands... A Passionate SheikhHajar's Hidden LegacyScarred Sheikh Zahir rules his country alone until duty demands he take Princess Katherine as his bride. And soon the heat between them is burning hotter than the scorching desert sands...To Touch a SheikhKidnapped by the man she loves, Princess Maram knows she has to make Prince Amjad see her as a woman. His woman. But neither is prepared for the aftermath of their desire...Her Sheikh ProtectorRylie has travelled halfway around the world to find Darin. But, when she finds herself in danger, she must trust him in order to survive. Which makes denying her passion harder!

Содержание

Midnight on the Sands	6
Table of Contents	7
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	16
CHAPTER THREE	20
CHAPTER FOUR	25
CHAPTER FIVE	32
CHAPTER SIX	38
CHAPTER SEVEN	44
CHAPTER EIGHT	53
CHAPTER NINE	60
CHAPTER TEN	67
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	72

Midnight
COLLECTION



Midnight on the Sands
Hajar's Hidden Legacy
Maisey Yates
To Touch a Sheikh
Olivia Gates
Her Sheikh Protector
Linda Conrad



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

Hajar's Hidden Legacy

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

To Touch a Sheikh

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

Prologue

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Epilogue

Her Sheikh Protector

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Epilogue
[Copyright](#)

Hajar's Hidden Legacy

USA TODAY bestselling author **MAISEY YATES** lives in rural Oregon with her husband and three children. She feels the epic trek she takes several times a day from her office to her coffee maker is a true example of her pioneer spirit.

In 2009, at the age of twenty-three, Maisie sold her first book to Mills & Boon. Since then it's been a whirlwind of sexy alpha males and happily ever afters and she wouldn't have it any other way. Maisie divides her writing time between dark, passionate romances set just about everywhere on earth and light sexy contemporary romances set practically in her back yard. She believes that she clearly has the best job in the world. Visit her website at www.maiseyyates.com and look for her on Facebook.

For Ellie. There's nothing quite as special as a friend who has always been there, and who always will be. You're that friend for me.

CHAPTER ONE

THEY called him the Beast of Hajar for a reason. Katharine could see that now. Zahir S'ad al Din was every bit as frightening as they said. He was an entirely different man from the one she'd met so many years ago. Cold, completely forbidding.

But Katharine didn't have the luxury of being frightened by him. Anyway, she was used to cold, forbidding men.

"Sheikh Zahir," she began, taking a step toward his expansive desk. He wasn't looking at her, his dark head inclined, his focus on a paper in front of him. "I have been waiting for you to contact me. You haven't."

"No, I have not. Which makes me wonder why you are here."

Katharine swallowed. "To marry you."

"Is that right, Princess Katharine? I had heard a rumor about that, but I didn't believe it." He lifted his head and for the first time, Katharine saw his face.

Yes, he was every bit as frightening as they said. The skin on the left side of his face ravaged, his eye not as focused or sharp on that side. Yet she still felt like he was seeing all the way into her, as if the accident that had served to cloud his physical vision had made him able to see more than a mere mortal man.

That he was a ghost, or a god of some kind was part of his legend, and looking at him now, she understood why.

"I did call." She hadn't exactly talked to Zahir, but she'd talked to his advisor. And she hadn't really been invited, either.

"I didn't think you would travel all the way from the comfort of your palace to have your marriage proposal turned down, as I was certain I had relayed my thoughts on the matter."

She straightened her shoulders. "I thought you owed me a conversation. A personal one, not your relayed response. And I didn't come to be turned down. I came to make sure the contract was honored. The deal was struck six years ago ... "

"For you to marry Malik. Not me."

Thinking of Malik always made her feel sad. But her sadness was for a young life cut short, nothing deeper. He had been her destiny, her duty, for all of her adult life, and while she had liked him, cared for him in some ways, she had not loved him.

At first it seemed like losing him had changed everything, that her horizons had opened, that she might have a different future before her. It was clear now that nothing had changed.

Instead of Malik, it would be Zahir. But she was still destined to be sold into marriage for the sake of her country. She'd accepted it. Ultimately she hadn't felt that the change in groom had mattered all that much.

Although, looking at him now it became a whole different matter than it had been in theory. He was ... he was something much more than she'd counted on.

This was never about you. Never about your feelings. You have to be prepared to see this through.

"That's what I thought. But when I examined the documents a little bit closer ..." Her father had handled most of the legal portion of the marriage agreement that had been drawn up between her and Malik.

It hadn't really been of personal interest to her. Her relationship with him had been nothing more than political maneuvering by their parents. She'd only met him on a few occasions. She'd simply accepted that it was what she could do for her country, that the marriage was what she could contribute. She had never personally studied the agreement.

Until recently.

“Well, yes. But really, if you look at the wording, I am promised to Malik. Unless he is not able to assume the throne of Hajar. In that case, it is his successor that I’m meant to marry. That’s you.”

So strange to be standing before him, all but begging him to marry her when a large part of herself wanted to run out of the room. She didn’t want to marry him, not on a personal level, any more than he wanted to marry her.

But her father was dying. Far too soon, and that put everything on a tight timetable. Her marriage had been pushed to some far off, fuzzy future after Malik’s death, and for a while, no one had bothered her about it. For a while she had been allowed to serve in more of a practical manner, visiting the sick in hospitals, doing vital networking to bring more tourism dollars into the country. It had been liberating in a way, to find some use for herself outside of her gender and appearance.

But that time was over.

Her father only had a few months left, and Alexander, her brother and future king, didn’t reach the legal age to rule for another six years. That meant someone had to be appointed Regent in the event of her father’s death, and she lacked the necessary physical equipment to be considered.

She was over being bitter about that. Now she was ready to act.

If she didn’t have a husband when her father died, the man placed in charge of her country would be her closest male relative. And what her closest male relative would do with that kind of power didn’t even bear thinking about. She couldn’t let it happen.

More than that, she had sworn to her father it would not happen. That she would secure the alliance with Hajar and the marriage to Zahir. That she would protect Alexander.

Failure was not an option. She couldn’t look her father in the eye and tell him that she’d failed. She was a woman, and in the eyes of the authorities of her country, it made her subpar. In the eyes of her father, it seemed to have the same effect. Her father pushed her harder, demanded more and praised her less than he did Alexander. He saw Alexander’s worth as a given; part and parcel to being the only male child. And Katharine had to work and work to prove she possessed any.

And she had welcomed it. She had been up to the challenge, always, to be all that she could be. To serve her family, her country and her people. A good thing, since she was the only hope left.

She wouldn’t trip now, not in this last leg of the race. The thought of it made her insides tremble with sickness and dread. It made Zahir look friendly in comparison.

“I do not want a wife,” he said, looking down again, obscuring his face from her view.

She crossed her arms beneath her breasts and tilted her chin up. “I didn’t say I wanted a husband. This isn’t about want. This is about need. About doing what is best for both of our countries. This marriage will strengthen the economy for both nations and whether it’s Malik or ... you ... it doesn’t change that it’s the right thing to do.”

Her words were cold. Mercenary. They chilled her to the bone. And yet she had to do this. For the lives of her people, the future of a nation.

Anyway, it wasn’t as though she was sacrificing herself on the altar. Though in many ways she might be termed the Virgin Sacrifice.

The thought made her shudder. She would never be that. This was her choice. No one had forced her into Zahir’s office. If she wanted to stand back and watch her country go to hell while she partied in Europe, there was nothing to stop her from doing it. Nothing except common decency, a sense of what was right. Nothing but the need to prove that when it counted, she could be worth something.

That was why she was here. Ready to do what she had to, ready to face Zahir head-on, even while her knees shook slightly.

He looked at her, his dark eyes cold, disinterested. The flatness in them sent a chill straight into her soul, made her feel like she was staring into a bottomless, empty well. His face, distorted by injury, made him seem less human.

He inclined his head. “You are dismissed.”

She looked at him, her mouth dropping open. "Excuse me?" She'd never been dismissed in her life.

"I have been trying to excuse you for the past ten minutes. Get out of my office."

"I will not," she said. Because she couldn't. But for one second she wished she could. Just for a moment. That she could walk out of his dark office and into the bright Hajari sunlight, head to the market, the mall and melt into the crowd.

Just for a second. And then she remembered. Remembered that she had to do this. Because if she didn't, Alexander would be shoved to one side while John claimed the throne, and if he managed to change laws to keep himself on there permanently ... or even the possibility of him spending six years messing with the economy. It was unacceptable.

And it would mean she'd failed. Failed at the one thing her father felt she would be useful doing.

Zahir stood from his position at his desk. She stepped backward, the move instinctive, the action that prey would take when it knew it was eyed by a predator. He was big. Much bigger than she remembered. Broad and toned, his tunic shirt clinging to the muscles on his chest.

"Haven't you gawked long enough? Why don't you go, sell the tale of your encounter with me to the highest bidder?"

"That isn't why I'm here."

"No, of course not, you just want to marry me. Live here, in the palace." He rounded the desk with long strides and his gait languid for two steps before she noticed a break in the rhythm, before she noticed the slight limp that accompanied his movements. He stopped in his tracks then, arms crossed over his broad chest. "With me. Because how could Princess Katharine Rauch, from her idyllic Alpine country ever resist such an opportunity? Do you imagine you'll be having grand, Arabian Night-themed balls? Is that it? I am not Malik."

"I know that," she said, her throat tightening. She was losing control, losing her footing. She couldn't lose. She had given her word to her father. And she had made a blood oath to her people from the moment of her birth. She was born a Rauch, she was meant to protect her country. And this was the only way she was allowed to do it.

That sense of duty was like a weight on her shoulders, her chest. Some days it made it hard to breathe. But it was a part of her, of who she was.

Katharine's heart rate kicked up when he took another step toward her, the light in his eyes dark, his black eyebrows locked together. "If you think it doesn't matter, the difference between Malik and myself, then you live in a foolish fantasy. The reality is this." He simply stood there and she knew he meant him. His scars. The scars he'd gotten in the same attack on the royal family that had seen Zahir's parents, and Malik, killed. Not just the royal family, but citizens who had come to watch the procession through the city.

All because of a power grab from a neighboring country. For money and land. What despicable things men did for both. She was trying to keep the same from happening in her own country.

His lip curled into a sneer, tugging at the scar tissue on his cheek. While part of his lip curled up, the edge of his mouth turned down slightly, fused there by a thick ridge of badly healed flesh. "Is this the man you want in your bed at night? For the rest of your life?"

Her eyes went then, not to his face, but to his hands. Large hands, wide and square, they bore scars too. But they also looked like they possessed strength, confidence. The images in her mind were quick and hot, dark hands on pale skin.

Katharine's body heated from the inside out, warmth pooling in her stomach and spreading slowly through her. The way that he said it was intended to sound like a threat, but his deep, smooth voice made it sound like a promise. Rather than repel her, it fascinated her on a level she didn't quite understand. No, he didn't frighten her, but that feeling did. Foreign and strong, filling her with adrenaline and languor at the same time, weakness and strength.

She didn't know how it had happened. How simple words had affected her like that. She threw it off, pushed ahead. She wasn't here to be intimidated; she was here to get what she needed. "There is an agreement."

"Out," he said, his voice hard, rough.

"I can't do that. I need to see that this marriage happens, for the good of both of our people. If you can't see it, I ... "

He took another step toward her, so close now she could feel the heat radiating off his body. And not just heat. Rage. And for one fleeting moment a grief that she could almost feel echoing inside of her. It went beyond the strength of normal feelings, and she had the feeling that if it ever found its hold in her, in anyone, it would fill them completely. Consume them completely. It made her wonder how he was able to stand.

And yet he did. Strong and tall.

"I want to be left alone," he said, the words flat and cold, final in the stillness of the room.

She looked at him, at his face, at the exquisite bone structure beneath his damaged skin, high cheekbones, square jaw, straight, prominent nose. Smooth, olive skin was still present on one side of his face. Beautiful, compelling, offering a glimpse at the man he had been.

But there was nothing beautiful about the scars that marred the other half of his face. They were evil, ugly things that broadcast his pain to the world.

There was something about his eyes, though. They were still enticing, mesmerizing. Fringed with thick, dark lashes, the color of them so dark they seemed black. Even though it was clear one lacked sight, they were incredible eyes. Intelligent and piercing.

Most importantly, they reminded her that he was a man. Not a beast. She could see him in there this time, Zahir, as he had been before the attack. The man she had once met, so many years ago. She had barely spoken with him, but she remembered him. Always quieter than his brother, his face more serious, sort of aloof. All of him had been beautiful then. Captivating in a way that few people were.

He was still captivating, but it wasn't in the same way.

"This isn't about want, Zahir," she said, using his name to enforce the fact that he was only flesh and blood. Even if he was big, scary flesh and blood. "This is about doing what's right. It's about honor."

He looked at her a long time, his expression unreadable. And yet he was searching her, in her. She could feel it. "You assume, Princess, that I am in possession of honor."

"I know you are." It was more of a hope than a certainty, but it sounded good at least.

"Get out." He spoke the words softly, but the command was as powerful as if he had shouted it.

Failure was a foreign sensation to Katharine. She had never failed. She had spent all her life succeeding, proving that she was worthy of the sort of respect her brother had simply been born with. The highest test results, the most successful fundraisers. If a task was given to her, she completed it.

She hadn't accounted for what she might do if she failed here. As she'd boarded her family's private plane that morning she'd done so with confidence, enough that she'd sent both plane and pilot back to Austrich already.

In so many ways, failure was not an option.

"Fine," she said stiffly.

She turned and strode out of his office, her hands clenched tightly at her sides. He slammed the door behind her and she jumped.

Wretched man. Wretched, wicked, *beastly* man.

She hadn't counted on this. Obviously there was a possibility he would say no but ... she was right. There was no question. She had thought he would see it. That he would understand what had to be done. Instead, he had ... growled at her.

Katharine stood in the middle of the empty hall, arms crossed, trying desperately to hold in the body heat that was leaching from her in spite of the hot desert air. She didn't quite know what

to do next. Where to go. Not home. She wouldn't be welcome anyway, not with the news of such a massive failure.

Footsteps echoed in the corridor behind her and Katharine turned. There was an older woman walking toward her. She recognized her. She'd been the *Sheikha's* personal servant, and had accompanied the S'ad al Din family to Austrich.

She searched her brain for a name. "Kahlah?"

The older woman turned and treated Katharine to a slight bow and a warm smile. There was no surprise visible in her lined face, but Katharine imagined she'd been trained to keep her emotions buried all of her life. She knew the feeling.

"Princess Katharine, it has been too long. Do you have business in Hajar?"

"I ..." Technically speaking, she did, even though she'd already dealt with it, and been met with a resounding no. "Yes, I do."

Katharine's mind started working overtime. Zahir didn't want her here, that much was clear, but she needed to be here. Because she wasn't going home having failed her objective. That was an impossibility.

"I will be staying here at the palace for the duration of my time in Hajar."

"This is very welcome news, Princess Katharine. We have not had guests in ... It has been a long time." That statement had brought a flicker of emotion to the older woman's eyes.

Katharine was certain there hadn't been guests since the attack. Everything in the palace was different than her last visit. Darker. Quieter. An echo with every footstep. It felt empty.

"Well, in that case I am honored to be the first guest in so long." She felt a slight prickle of guilt. But only a slight one. Zahir was being unreasonable and she needed time to come up with another angle. She just needed some time.

"Can you send some men out to the main entrance?" Katharine asked. "My driver is still there and my luggage is in the car. If you could have them install me in the same quarters I stayed in last time that would be satisfactory."

She put on her best regal princess voice. She was a terrible liar. Always had been. Her eyes gave her away. Fortunately Kahlah didn't seem to be paying attention to her eyes.

Kahlah looked unsure, but Katharine knew that the other woman wouldn't dare question her word, not in front of her. Katharine felt like a first-class heel taking advantage of her as she was, but it was for the greater good.

Certainly not for my good, which must mean I'm not being selfish at least.

"Would you like me to direct you to your quarters, Princess?"

"If you wouldn't mind. But don't worry about my luggage. Have my things sent at the convenience of the staff. I don't wish to throw off anyone's schedules."

She'd brought enough clothing and essentials for an indefinite stay, because one thing she'd known for certain when she left home that morning: she was going to succeed. No matter what it took.

She was a princess who couldn't rule. One who had resigned herself to having little value beyond the light charity work she'd thrown herself into over the past couple of years. But this, this was big. This was her chance to change the course of things.

To be something more than beauty and a royal lineage.

"But of course, it is no trouble."

"I very much appreciate it." Katharine caught herself twisting the large sapphire ring on her right hand, nerves and guilt making her twitchy. She put her hands resolutely back at her sides. Princesses did not twitch.

Kahlah extended her arm. "This way, Princess."

Katharine walked next to Kahlah, looking everywhere but at the other woman. She busied herself with memorizing her surroundings, the route they were taking.

There was no matching the palace in the capital city of Kadim for opulence. Every surface made from glimmering marble, trimmed in brushed gold, the floor a glossy mosaic of jasper, jade and obsidian.

It didn't glitter in the same way it had five years ago. But it was still a testament of wealth and craftsmanship, the finest the country had to offer, she was certain.

A good thing. Because if she was going to tempt the Beast of Hajar's wrath, she might as well do it while surrounded in luxury.

"What the hell is going on?" Zahir growled when he walked into the main area of the palace to discover a procession of suitcases being brought in.

There were trunks as tall as he was, large square cases and small leather bags.

The porter stopped in his tracks and looked in Zahir's direction, though not at him. They never did. "We're bringing in Princess Katharine's belongings, as directed, Sheikh Zahir."

"Directed by who?" he asked, ignoring the strange sort of cold feeling that accompanied a breach of his personal space. A loss of control.

The man edged away from Zahir, his nerves palpable. "By Princess Katharine."

Zahir didn't let the man finish his sentence before he turned and stormed out of the entry chamber and went toward the women's quarters. Of course, for all he knew she had gone and installed herself in *his* room.

In his bed.

His body tightened at the thought. A near alien sensation, one that was only half-remembered at this point in time. No, she wouldn't do that. Not even she was so bold. Or so perverse. As a woman would have to be to pursue a night in his bed.

He saw one of the maids slipping out of one of the bedchambers, closing the door behind her before she rushed off in the opposite direction, acting as though she hadn't seen him. She probably had. But even the staff tried to avoid him when possible.

He approached that door and pushed it open. And there she was, standing in the center of the room, her pale strawberry-gold hair loose around her shoulders now. Her simple blue dress, belted at the waist, was demure enough, and yet, the way it skimmed her lush curves easily set fire to a man's imagination.

Especially when that man's imagination had been left to dry up for so many years.

"What exactly are you doing here, *latifa*?" he asked, the word *beauty* escaping his lips before he had a chance to think better of it. Because, as simple as that, she was beauty. She embodied it. It was a shame that the desert withered beauty, the intensity too much for anything so delicate and soft.

She turned to look at him, green eyes icy. Perhaps she was not soft. Though she looked as though she would be to the touch. Her skin pale like cream, her curves lush.

His body stirred. His gut tightened. It had been a long time since a woman had affected his body like this. Since he had been affected in almost any way. Any way beyond the endless loop of torment that seemed to play on repeat inside of him.

"I'm staying," she said, her neck craned, her expression haughty.

"I told you to get out."

"Of your office."

"Of the country. And you knew what I meant."

She folded her arms. "I'm afraid that's not acceptable."

He moved to her and he saw her shrink slightly, her shoulders tucking in just a fraction. She wasn't immune to him, to his face, the ugliness that ravaged his looks, no matter how confident and unaffected she tried to pretend to be.

Her scent caught hold of him, light and flowery. Feminine. As he'd been reminded just a moment before, even the maids stayed far away from him. How long had it been since he'd been so close to a woman? It had been before everything, he was certain of that.

“What isn’t acceptable is you parking your pretty royal ass where it’s not welcome,” he growled, using crude words to intimidate, since his looks alone hadn’t done the job. Most people shrank away when they saw him, fear evident on their faces. Not Katharine.

She arched one pale eyebrow, her expression placid. “Compliments will not move me, I’m afraid.”

Any fear and uncertainty she’d shown had been momentary, and now she met him face on, her gaze unflinching, her posture straight. He couldn’t remember the last time that had happened, either. His staff avoided looking at him too closely if they could help it. And his people ... they didn’t seem interested in having him as a public figurehead. So long as he kept things moving.

His looks bolstered his reputation, or perhaps it was the other way around. Either way, rumors of their sheikh, scarred, possibly mad, kept the majority of them from wanting him to make public appearances. Those who did, who had attached some sort of idea of him being beyond mortal, a savior of some sort, they were the fools. And they were too afraid to approach him, too. Either one suited his purposes. It kept people out, and it allowed him to rule from within his palace.

It was not his people he set out to intimidate, but anyone who might try to attack them again. So far, it had worked.

But Katharine the Great didn’t seem to care. She was all prickles, ice and confidence. Standing in his home as though it was her domain.

It was time to make the most of his beastly reputation.

“You want marriage, Katharine?” he asked, his voice a low growl. “You want to be my woman?” He drew closer to her, reached a hand out and ran his finger along one pale, petal-soft cheek. She was like silk. He wanted to touch more of her. All of her. He squashed the impulse. He had denied, no, he had been absent any of those desires for five years. It wouldn’t hurt him to ignore them a while longer. “You want to warm my bed and have my children?”

Her face flushed scarlet. “No.”

“I thought not.”

“But I don’t need to. Not for my purposes.”

“You don’t need heirs?”

She faced him with a hard stare. “Not from you. And if everything goes according to plan I won’t need them at all.”

He gritted his teeth, trying not to envision what creating heirs with her would entail. As he tried to keep his blood ice, keep the fire at bay. He had to keep hold of his control or ... he didn’t want to know what might happen. “Why is that?”

“Because, if my father dies before Alexander reaches legal age, I need you to be named Regent, not my cousin. I’m a woman, and I can’t do it. I can’t protect my brother. If John ends up on the throne ... we’re facing possible civil war, a hostile seizing of the throne. If it comes to war it’s bound to affect your country, at least as far as trade is concerned.”

“So what exactly are you proposing?”

“Whatever you want. I need this marriage, for my people. I will be your wife in your bed if you want, or your wife in name only. But the choice is up to you. If you refuse, the blood of my people is on both of our hands.”

CHAPTER TWO

BLOOD. Enough of it had already been spilled in the world. Enough of it seemed to stain him. It never seemed to come clean. No more. There could be no more.

“Explain,” he said.

She took a breath, her breasts rising and falling with the action. “If my father dies before Alexander comes of age, a Regent must be put over him, ruling in his place until he is able to take the throne. If I am married, the position will go to my husband, if not, it goes to the nearest male relative. It so happens that if my closest male relative even gets the tiniest bit of power, I’m certain he’ll do all he can to keep it. With him in charge at best we’re looking at a total economic collapse, at worst, civil war as he attempts to make his position permanent. I will not stand by and watch that happen. Not while I have the power to change things.”

Katharine’s words carried fire, a passion that nothing in him could match. She didn’t just care for her people, she took the mantle of leadership wholly and completely on herself. As Malik had done. She would have been well-suited to his brother. As always, thoughts of Malik, of his family, brought a heavy, oppressive weight to his chest. Reminded him that he wasn’t the right man to stand here.

He wasn’t made for massive parties, drafting laws and keeping the delicate balance between neighboring countries. He was about action. Physical action. A joke now, as even that was limited, not just by his position, but by a body that, even after five years, didn’t feel like it could possibly belong to him. It was like being locked in a prison cell. But there was no key, there wasn’t even a door.

“Find someone else, Katharine. I’m sure there are all manner of titled men who would fight to the death over the *honor*. I, however, am not one of them.”

“That isn’t the point. The agreement is done, everything lined out, from the amount of power you will possess over Austrich to which of our children would inherit what, not that that will be a concern for us.”

There was a moment, so brief he might have imagined it, that he saw vulnerability in her deep green eyes. And that brief moment nearly hit him. Nearly made him lose his grip on the internal shield he held so tight.

He tightened his jaw. “Your situation is regrettable ... for you.” He turned to go and he heard Katharine’s high heels clicking, quick and sharp, against the hard floor.

“For both of us,” she said. “If John takes control of my country he’ll change everything. We have a good thing going between our two countries now. We’re a huge buyer of your oil supply and you depend on us to supply produce, meat, wool. I don’t see him keeping up with trade agreements. He’s a blind, selfish fool. He’ll be the downfall of Austrich and he’ll do his best to shake Hajar with his incompetence as well.”

He stopped and turned, his pulse pounding hard. One thing he had done as a leader was his absolute best to create a secure country for his people. To prevent the possibility of more attacks. Of more death. Katharine painted a bleak picture, one that made flashes of light go off in his mind.

Explosions and chaos. Confusion. Pain. Darkness.

He tightened his hand into a fist and squeezed. Hard. Working at bringing the walls back up.

He didn’t want this to be his problem. He wanted to go on as he had, maintaining the balance, living alone. And yet he wasn’t sure it could be ignored. A hot surge of adrenaline pumped through him, the automatic fighter’s instincts filling him, fueling him. There had been a time when he’d been a warrior, when he’d been on the front lines.

He could picture what civil war would be like. He’d experienced a taste of that hell.

“In name only, and then what?” he asked.

“You can divorce me as soon as Alexander turns twenty-one.”

“And what of your cousin then?”

“He’s power mad, but he doesn’t possess the wealth or connections to cause any trouble on his own. However, if he can get into power and start war ... incite riots ... he can declare a state of emergency and keep himself on the throne. That I can’t have.” She took a step toward him, extended her arm, her fingers hovering just above his forearm. She moved slightly, grazing him with her fingertips. “I will do whatever you ask of me.”

He was hard as rock in an instant. His body’s reaction nearly made him laugh. If she planned to use seduction to make her case then he would win, no question. She would never be able to bring herself to go through with it. And he would have the chance of watching her recoil in horror when she saw the extent of his injuries.

More than the injuries, it was the horror she would feel when she caught a glimpse of the man beneath the iron control. Hollowed out. Unfeeling. Left damaged and bleeding, wounds that would never heal into the blessed, hardened scars that had formed on the outside of his body. There was nothing whole left in him. All he had left was the will to go on, to rule his country, to do as his father would have wanted. As his brother would have done. Anything more was too much. Impossible.

Katharine braced herself. For him to yell. For him to do ... something befitting a man with his reputation.

The idea of a temporary marriage had only just come into her mind, and now, she was desperate for him to take it. Because the idea of staying here, with him, for the rest of her life ... she didn’t think she could handle that. The palace felt abandoned, the staff at a minimum and Zahir ... his disdain for her presence was palpable.

He almost made her long for her father’s chilly presence.

And if she did marry him in name only, at the end, her job would be done. A feasible term instead of the life sentence she’d always imagined. A glimmer of hope she hadn’t realized she’d wanted.

If she could change things ... if she could give Alexander time to grow up then she and Zahir could divorce and everything would be set to move forward smoothly.

She could do something else. Be someone else.

Her pulse pounded in her temples. She hadn’t really let herself hope for that outcome. That her marriage to Zahir really could be nothing more than paper. A paper easily destroyed later.

“A legal marriage only,” he said, his voice hard.

“So much the better,” she said, trying to keep the relief from showing through in her tone. “We can both go our separate ways later. And this way we preserve the peace between our nations.” She started pacing, nervous energy demanding that she find a way to relieve it. “And when we do separate it will be amicable, naturally, so the link between Austrich and Hajar will remain strong.”

Zahir turned his head slightly and she realized he was tracking her movements that way. She’d forgotten about his sight for a moment. Or at least the issue she’d assumed he had with his sight. She truly didn’t know for sure.

“It must look real,” he said.

She inclined her head. “Of course it must, if not like a love match, then like a permanent marriage. To my father, to John, to Alexander. None of them can know.”

His upper lip curled slightly. “My people cannot know.”

She realized then that it was a matter of his pride. She felt a slight pang in her chest. This would cost him, this man who lived in the shadows. But she couldn’t even contemplate what the consequences would be if she didn’t pull this off.

“No one,” she said, her pledge to him.

“You will remain here.”

“What?”

“What did you imagine would happen?”

"I had thought ... my father is ill. I had thought to return home."

"Ah, and you do not think anyone will see that as strange? That my new wife has abandoned me?" He reached out and curled his fingers around her arm, just above her elbow, his black eyes burning into hers even as her flesh felt branded by his touch. "No one will know."

She explored his face visually for a moment. The ravaged skin, the slashing scar that interrupted the shape of his top lip. He could not be called handsome, not now. But he was compelling, fierce. And for a moment she was almost overcome by the desire to skim her fingers over his ruined cheek, to feel the damage for herself.

She clenched her hand into a fist and kept it glued to her side. "You have my word, Sheikh Zahir."

"As tradition dictates, you will stay here in the palace to cement the engagement," he said. She could tell that cost him. That he truly didn't want her here. She also knew that he wanted to keep up appearances.

She swallowed hard, feeling as though a judge had just lowered the gavel, sentencing her. *At least it's not a life sentence.*

"I will stay." It took every ounce of strength she had to speak, to not shrink away.

But she would use every shred of it that she had in her body to get through this. To see her country—her brother—through. To the other side. For freedom for her people. A new kind of freedom for herself. One where duty to the masses wasn't so much more important than living her own life.

It was a dream. And yet it was a dream that kept her going. That spurred her on now. She would rest later. She would have the chance to, something she'd not thought possible.

"I was planning on staying," she said. "For a while at least."

"I know, I saw your procession of belongings coming in earlier."

"It was too important. I wasn't going to back down."

"Why is it so important to you? Why are you the one who has to solve this? A matter of honor?" He regarded her closely, and she knew he truly wanted an answer.

"What would you do to ensure Malik's success, Zahir? If he lived, what would you do to make sure that he was able to fulfill his destiny? To make sure he was safe?"

His Adam's apple bobbed and she watched as his hands, both marred with scar tissue, flexed into fists. "Anything. I would give my life."

"As I'm giving mine."

He tilted his face up, angling the smooth side to her. "So noble of you." She was struck again by how beautiful he was in part. By how handsome he had been. The reminder was there. That square masculine jaw, perfect olive skin. There was no light in his eyes though, no emotion to read.

"I don't know about that."

"Modesty does not become the sort of woman who would storm the palace of Hajar and take up residence without permission," he said. And for a moment she thought she saw one side of his mouth curve upward. An expression of good humor. Although, that couldn't be. It really didn't seem possible.

"My apologies."

"One thing you must understand, *latifa*. The palace runs in a certain order, I do things on a certain schedule. You will not interrupt that."

No. Of course not. She wasn't important enough to interrupt the Almighty Schedule. Though, why that should bother her at all, she wasn't sure. Yes, she was. Common courtesy. She wouldn't say that to a regular palace guest, let alone one she was engaged to be married to. Even if it was going to be strictly a legal marriage.

"It's a big palace," she said. "I'll bet you can avoid me altogether if you like."

"A theory I am tempted to test."

“If we’re going to pretend this is real you’re going to have to work on treating me as though you want me around.”

He leaned in and she pulled away slightly. His masculine scent teased her, made her heart accelerate. He had a scent all his own. Sandalwood and spice mingled with the musky, unique essence of Zahir. It made her head feel fuzzy.

“And you are going to have to pretend you aren’t repulsed by me.”

“I’m not,” she said. It was the truth. He was scarred but all the nonsense about him being a beast, somehow something other than a man, that was just plain ridiculous. “I won’t lie and say I’m completely comfortable with you, but by the time we have an engagement party ... “

“There will be no engagement party.” The light in his dark eyes was fierce, almost wild.

“There has to be,” she said. “It is tradition for brides in Austrich to ... “

“You are in Hajar now,” he said, his voice hard, unyielding. “You have come into my country, and I am now your sheikh. You made this choice. Remember that.” He turned and walked out of her chamber, slamming the door hard behind him.

And for the first time since her plane had touched down in Hajar, she truly felt like she was in over her head.

CHAPTER THREE

KATHARINE finished pinning her hair in place and stared at her reflection. She was pale and red-eyed from lack of sleep. She looked like the walking dead. Very attractive. Fortunately her future husband didn't seem to care how attractive or unattractive she was. And she didn't care what he thought, either.

It was all about politics. All about what the union could bring both of them. Their countries.

She blew out a breath and turned away from the mirror, walking out of her room and into the vacant hallway. She wasn't going to stand around all day.

She should call her father. She'd picked up the phone about eight times since getting out of bed, but she just hadn't been able to bring herself to do it. Not yet. It would make it all too real.

How ironic that now she'd achieved her goal she was having trouble accepting it.

It's nothing more than a ceremony and a piece of paper. At least you're not expected to stay with him forever, have his children.

Now that would have been a harsh reality. One she'd thought she'd been prepared to deal with, but one she was certain now she hadn't been. Not if the thought of a marriage ceremony was affecting her this badly.

She headed down the long hall, the sound of her high heels echoing off the high, domed ceiling. The corridors were extensive, weaving through the massive palace. But she knew where Malik's quarters had been, situated on the opposite end of the palace from where the women stayed. It was likely Zahir stayed in them now.

Yes, last night she'd spoken to him about avoidance. And then he'd tried to intimidate her by reminding her whose country she was in. But she wasn't easily intimidated. She'd spent her life surrounded by strong men, holding her own against a father who expected the worst and never praised her for her best. She always had to show strength.

She would never inherit the throne of Austrich. She was a woman, and for some reason, her lack of male member made her ineligible. But she was involved in the politics of her country, and she did not have a reputation as a shrinking violet. She didn't avoid conflict. She faced them head-on. And right now, she was looking for the tall, muscular conflict she'd tangled with the night before.

She looked into a couple of empty rooms before pushing open a door that revealed what could have been a modern, state-of-the-art gym. A lap pool, every sort of exercise equipment anyone could ever want.

And there was Zahir. Flat on his back on a weight bench, his breath hissing between his teeth as he pressed two massive dumbbells up over his chest.

She crossed the room tentatively, her mouth dropping open slightly at the sight of his body. Every muscle was chiseled, as though it were carved into rock, the only sign it could possibly be part of a real man, and not a statue, was the bunching and shifting that happened with each breath and movement.

Golden skin, some smooth and perfect, some ravaged by injuries, all of it fascinating. Unlike any man she'd ever seen.

She blinked and took a sharp breath. "Aren't you supposed to have a spotter or ... something?"

He stopped midmotion and swung his legs over the side of the bench, sitting up quickly, his abs putting on a show with the swift motion. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to find you."

"What made you think that would be well received?"

"I didn't really think it would be," she said, fighting to keep her eyes on his face. She traced the scars on his cheek with her eyes, hoping it would keep her mind off his naked chest. "It didn't really bother me."

The tendons in his neck stood out, a muscle in his jaw jumping. "It wouldn't."

Her eyes drifted lower. "No ... I ... well, that's not really the point ... I ... "

"Seen enough?" He voiced the question in a near growl.

Her eyes flew back to his face. His expression was cold. Closed. His lip curled into a sneer.

"Yes," she said, feeling heat creep into her face. It wasn't that she'd never ogled a man before. But they weren't usually this naked, and she'd never been caught. Or at least, the men in question had been too polite to say, because she was a princess after all. Zahir didn't seem to care.

He bent over and picked up a white T-shirt from the floor, his fingers trembling slightly as he held it out. And then her eyes were drawn to an intricate web of scar tissue, places where she knew he'd been hit with shrapnel, burned by fire, and her stomach tightened.

He pulled the shirt on and covered her guilty pleasure and the pain that was threatening to steal every last rational thought from her head.

"I thought you might show me around a little bit today," she said. She hadn't thought any such thing but now she had to say something because it was awkward.

"You thought wrong, *latifa*. I have work to do."

"What sort of work?"

"The kind rulers do—you must know something of that."

"Truly, not so much. The royal family makes appearances, and gives speeches." It was a lie. She did a lot. Organized charities, budgets, fundraisers, and yet, it was what he seemed to think of her.

"Ignorance isn't your color," he said.

"Got me there," she shot back.

"I thought I might."

"I think we need to go over the original agreement drawn up by our fathers and make any alterations we see fit," she said.

"Do you?"

"Better now than after the vows, don't you think?"

"Are you always like this?" he asked.

"Yes. I've been told I'm impossible to deal with. I'm okay with that, actually, because I usually get my way." In some circles anyway.

He made a sound, short and harsh, that might have been a laugh. "I imagine you have your ways of making sure your needs are met."

She frowned. "If you're implying what I think you were, don't. I don't use my body to get what I want. I use my mind. Or were you not aware that women were capable of that?"

"I wasn't making a commentary on women, only on you."

"Well, I don't like the commentary."

"I've been told I'm impossible to deal with," he said, repeating her earlier words back.

"I'm imagining that's very true."

"I always get my way," he said, turning away from her.

He was so broad. His shoulders, his back. All the better to carry the weight of the world on them. And he did. She sensed that. Mostly because she felt like she did, too, sometimes.

"I promise you can get back to the business of ignoring me ... after we go over the agreement. And after you give me a tour of the grounds because I'm tired of feeling like I'm lost."

He wanted her gone. That much was clear. But she was committed. To seeing this through, to doing the best she could.

To proving she could do this.

"I'll go shower and I'll meet you in my office." He strode across the gym, headed to the shower, she supposed. He would uncover that amazing body again. For a moment she let herself envision it. Just for a moment.

"I'll see you there," she said, hoping he didn't notice just how delayed her response was.

The woman didn't take hints well. When he walked into his office, she was there, perched in the chair adjacent to his desk, her posture perfect, her legs crossed at those dainty ankles of hers. She didn't wear nylons, though. Her legs were bare.

That stuck out to him. Mostly because it was rare for a woman in her position. But then, it was much hotter here than it was in Austrich. It could also account for what seemed to be a wardrobe entirely populated by brief, fitted dresses. All very modest in the technical sense, but showing just enough to light his imagination on fire.

It would almost have been better if she'd been dressed in something completely transparent. At least then the mysteries would be solved. If she was as pale and smooth all over as she looked, how full and round her breasts were without the aid of undergarments ... important questions that were now overtaking his brain.

If he had known that all it would take was the presence of a woman to reawaken his hibernating sex drive he might have brought one in a long time ago.

To what end? To treat her to a front row show of your inner demons? To watch her run away screaming?

Like Amarah had done.

He couldn't even blame her. He might be edging into beast territory now, but then ... just after the attack ... he had been nothing short of a monster.

He pushed all thoughts of Katharine's body to the side and chose instead to embrace the extreme annoyance, the muscle-clenching tension that crowded in on him when she was around.

"Don't look at me like that," she said.

"Like what?" He rounded his desk and sat in the plush leather chair that was positioned behind it. It was too short for him. Made for another man. His brother. He had never replaced it.

"Like you're shocked to see me here. I said I'd meet you here to discuss the agreement, and I am. It's complicated stuff. With my father's history of health problems there has always been the chance that whoever I married would have to stand in as Regent until Alexander reaches age, and that was, of course, taken into account when Malik was selected to be my ... "

"Let me see." He held out his hand, palm up, and she produced a folded stack of papers, placing them in his hand.

He skimmed the documents. Most of the information pertained to the marriage. Heirs. Alliances and trade agreements. Toward the end was the section talking about what might happen if the king died prior to his heir coming of age.

"The decision-making power is yours. I don't want it," he said. "Write that in." He pointed to the spot.

She blinked rapidly, looking a bit like a stunned owl for a moment before shaking her head and leaning forward in her chair. "I can't. Not without bringing it to parliament. And I would need my father's permission and I ... I don't think you'll get it."

"Is he too ill to hold a pen?"

Color crept up her neck, into her cheeks. "He would rather have the power rest with you."

"He doesn't trust you?"

She sucked in a breath, her hands clenched tightly in her lap. "Well, I'm a woman."

"I fail to see why that should matter. You have more guts than most men I've met."

Her lips curved slightly and a strange, heated sensation, almost like satisfaction, spread through his chest. It was warm, almost too much after so many years of experiencing nothing more than bitter cold.

She almost made him want to feel. Made him want to let go.

"He's a product of a different generation," she said. "I don't hold it against him." And yet he could tell she did. That it lived in her, drove her forward. He knew about things like that. All too well.

“This is my responsibility as far as he’s concerned. Protect the country by marrying a man capable of serving as Regent.”

He looked at her face, so earnest, so determined. So beautiful. His pulse sped up, the heat spreading through him. “I have my own country to run, I would be absentee at best, negligent at worst.”

“You couldn’t be as negligent as my cousin would be in your sleep.”

“Austreich will be your responsibility, whether we write it in the paperwork or not.”

“I ... thank you.” She looked down at her hands, feigning an interest in her fingernails. “We have a parliament in place. It isn’t as though I can change laws or budgets or anything like that. It’s not terribly involved. Stand on the balcony and wave to the crowd.”

The crowd.

He closed his eyes and braced himself, a sharp flash, hazy, fast-moving images assaulting his mind as reality, his office, the desk, broke away piece by piece to make room for the memories. The crowd. Thick and loud. Surrounding the motorcade. It took a moment to realize that the barricade had been broken. That the people surrounding them weren’t citizens offering their greetings to the royal family.

It was all he could see. The sound deafening, roaring in his ears. The smell of smoke and sulfur filling his nose, the smoke choking him, his lungs burning. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think.

“Zahir?” Her voice broke through the fog.

He opened his eyes again and saw only his office. And Katharine, sitting there, looking at him. He could see concern in her clear green eyes. She had noticed. What had he done? He realized then that his fist was clenched tight, resting on the desk, so tight that his tendons were screaming at him.

He had lost himself for a moment. Lost where he was.

It didn’t happen as often now as it had. Because he knew better than to let his guard down now. Than to let emotion take over control. She had distracted him. And now she’d seen him ... She had seen his weakness.

“I don’t do that,” he said, his throat constricted. *Dammit*. “The crowd thing, I mean.” He took a breath and tried to reorient himself. “I have more of a face for radio.”

She smiled again, this time the expression was tinged with a bit of discomfort, as if she wasn’t certain what the appropriate response was.

“You can laugh, it’s okay,” he grated.

She did then, a soft laugh, but it brought that feeling back, the warm one, stronger, spreading. He stopped it this time, cutting it off with the force of a tourniquet on a wound.

“Well, I make a lot of appearances,” she said.

“I know. You always seem to be in the news. Your fashion sense is much written about.”

She nodded. “Of course. Although, I often wonder if anyone would care what color tie I wore if I was a man, but I can’t really complain. It’s nice to have my country featured in international news. Even if it is just for my shoes. It boosts tourism.”

“Do you have a lot of tourism in Austreich?” He reached deep for control, for total control, to find that kind of blessed numbness he was so accustomed to.

“Only recently. But that’s been part of what I’ve been involved with over the past five years.”

Since his brother’s death. She needed to stay busy, he supposed. If everything had gone according to plan, she would have married Malik on her twenty-first birthday.

She seemed to miss his train of thought, because she breezed on. “We have a tram system that takes people up into the Alps. You can’t beat the views. And then there’s various resort properties I personally have funded the development of. We were in need of luxury vacation spots, and now, Austreich has become a very popular spot for vacationing royalty.”

“And that is partly due to your personal campaigning, I would think.”

“Do you think I go to all those parties for the canapés?” She arched her brow.

“I did. But I would not think so now.”

Katharine swallowed, hard to do around the sudden lump in her throat. Zahir, who wanted her here about as much as he might want a root canal, had just had a longer conversation with her about what she did than anyone in her family ever had.

Not only that, he seemed to understand. To see her as more than just a peripheral. Oh, her father was counting on her, he'd made that very clear. But he was counting on her to marry someone. Not to do anything that required her specifically. This had nothing to do with her skills or talents.

You're beautiful. Of course he will say yes.

Oh, yes, she was beautiful. Her father had been confident in that being her ticket to marriage with Zahir. Funny, but Zahir didn't seem to care at all. And if she didn't possess anything more than a pretty face she would have failed.

Something her father would probably never know. She loved him, she truly did, but he saw so little of her it was stunning at times. Heartbreaking at others. But she didn't have any energy to waste on feeling sorry for herself. Dealing with Zahir took everything she had.

"You might be surprised that some people *do* invite me to parties, though. Seeing as you've spent the better part of two days hoping to evict me."

"I have agreed to this now, Katharine, I will not back out. You have my word. My protection, as does your country. I don't give any of those things lightly." His hand tightened into a fist and she wondered if he was going to pound it on the desk again, as he had done a few minutes earlier. It had been so strange, as though he wasn't looking at her anymore. Like he was seeing something else. And then he'd been back, she'd seen the change in him.

It had scared her a little. Not for herself, but for him.

"This agreement," he said, "it is what my father saw as the right thing for Hajar. What Malik saw as right. Who am I to disagree?"

"Then I suppose it's time for me to call my family with the good news."

Zahir looked at her for a moment, those searing, dark eyes boring into her. "Why exactly are you doing this, Katharine? For honor? Truly and simply for the good of your people?"

"Yes," she said. She thought for a moment about whether or not this was the place to speak words she'd never dare say out loud before. But why not? In this room she'd given him honesty, and he had listened. He hadn't pretended there was no way she could have accomplished what she had.

"For that, and because it's the light at the end of the tunnel." She couldn't believe for a moment she'd truly said it. Because it was something she'd hardly acknowledged to herself. She'd been too afraid to. Afraid that if she admitted she was becoming unhappy with a purely duty-filled life she would find herself unable to complete the tasks set before her.

"In what way?"

"After our marriage ends ... Alexander will be king. And I'll be ... I will always feel responsibility for my people, loyalty to my family. I will always work for the improvement of my country, but ... It won't have to be my sole focus anymore." Maybe then she would be free of that feeling. That gnawing sensation that no matter what she did, she wasn't doing enough.

He only looked at her, his expression unreadable.

"What about you?" she asked. "Do you have a light you're aiming for?"

His hands curled into fists again and his gaze shifted slightly, his throat working. "I'm glad you see a light, Katharine. For me, there is only darkness." He looked down then, shifted his focus to the computer screen that sat on his desk. "Now that we have all that settled, I have work to do."

CHAPTER FOUR

KATHARINE hated being at a loose end. She never was back in Austrich. Her days were packed from start to finish. She reviewed their budget for charitable contributions, went to committee meetings and spent time volunteering at the largest hospital in the country. She never had a moment of her own, and that was fine with her. It made her feel ... it made her feel useful.

But in Hajar there was nothing to do. No, specifically, in the palace there was nothing to do. She could only read for so long during the day before her eyes felt scratchy, and it was too hot in the middle of the day to do anything in the garden. She'd been out earlier, cutting flowers to add to the vacant vases she'd noticed when she'd first arrived. But the weather had moved past the point of sweltering, so now she was wandering the halls, staying cool thanks to the thick stone walls and that lovely air-conditioning they'd put in when they'd brought the palace out of the dark ages.

She was used to much cooler weather, crisp mountain air, not air that burned your lungs like fire when you sucked in a breath. Another part of the arrangement she hadn't calculated. Not back when she'd been intending to marry Malik in the true sense of the word, and not when she'd come and proposed to Zahir.

Everything was so different. And *she* was starting to feel different.

A loud curse and shattering porcelain broke the lull of boredom she'd fallen into.

She quickened her pace, weaving through the labyrinthine halls until she saw Zahir, standing in front of the massive stone table that was placed against the wall there, the antique vase she'd place flowers in earlier shattered into uncountable, unfixable pieces. The flowers didn't look like they'd survived the attack.

He looked up, his eyes black with rage. "Did you do this?"

"Did I do what? Maul those flowers?"

"Did you put the flowers here?"

"Yes, I put them in three vases that were empty. Here, in my room and in the entryway. Is that a dungeon offense these days?"

He walked over the ruined vase, his hard soled shoes grinding the shards of ceramic into powder, his gait uneven, the slight limp more pronounced than normal. "Do not change things like that without my permission." He spoke slowly, his voice low, deadly. "You had no right to do this."

A trickle of fear dripped through her, followed by a flood of anger that washed it away with its hot, fast tide. She stood, hands planted on her hips. "Don't be such a ... "

"Beast?" he growled.

"I was going to say bastard, but whatever works best for you. You might not mind living in that dark, sparse palace but I do. And it's my home now, per your royal command, and it's going to be my home until the end of our arrangement. I am not asking your permission to make changes in my own home."

"It is not your home, *latifa*, make no mistake."

"Is this some kind of stupid testosterone thing? Have I impinged on your territory there, lone wolf?" Anger was controlling her now, making her reckless, making her heart pound hard.

"Do not mock me."

"Then don't behave in a way that's so ... mockable."

"You don't understand. If you move things ... "

"I didn't move anything I ... "

"You moved this." He slammed his hand, palm down, onto the stone table.

"And?"

"And I ran into the damn thing!" he roared.

His words echoed in the corridor, hanging there between them, the reality slowly sinking into her mind. It stopped any response she might have had cold in her throat.

He lifted his hand from the table and she noticed, for the first time, that his palm was bleeding. Both of his palms were bleeding.

“What ... ?”

“Stay back.”

“Zahir ... “

He swallowed. “I know where things are in my home. I should not have to worry about anything being misplaced.”

She felt dizzy, mortified. A heavy weight crushed her chest. She had moved the table out from the wall, maybe two inches, so that the blossoms wouldn't be squished. Such a stupid, shortsighted thing.

Now it made sense. Now she could picture it. Him coming out of his room, turning left. It would have been in the line of his blind eye, where he could not see. And he would have no reason to think anything had changed.

“I'm sorry,” she said, her voice muted. “Your hands ...” She almost choked. He had fallen into the glass after knocking the vase over. What if he had hit his head? All because she'd wanted to add flowers to the room.

“Don't move things,” he said again, a tremor running through his rough voice as he stood looking at her, black eyes fierce, his chest rising and falling sharply.

She tried to speak again, to say more impotent words of apology, but he turned and left her there, alone in the hall, pain spreading through her chest.

Not exactly a stellar way to start the day.

The best thing to do would probably be going after him But she didn't want to. She wanted to curl up in a ball and hide from her own uselessness. From the whole situation. She hadn't ever resorted to that tactic before, and she wasn't going to do it now.

On a shaky breath, she bent down, careful to avoid the glass, and gathered the flowers back up. She felt sick, defeated. Like the kind of idiot woman her father imagined her to be. Although, failing at household tasks like decorating might make her even lower on his personal totem pole.

For one, terrifying moment, she believed it. She believed she couldn't really do anything right. That she couldn't do this.

No. You have to. You will do this.

Her own personal pity party wasn't the important thing here anyway. What did matter was what that had cost Zahir.

“I'm sorry,” she said to the empty space, her throat tightening over the words.

He didn't want to hear it from her, she knew that. He walked with a slight limp, one he did his best to mask, but she had noticed it. And she knew that something like this, something that forced him to acknowledge a weakness, a limitation, was the worst of nightmares. It was his pride that had suffered worst of all.

She just knew it, deep in her bones, as sure as she knew anything about herself.

She'd caused a problem, made a mistake, and now she was going to fix it.

* * *

Zahir took his fury, his humiliation, out on the pool in his gym. At least in the water his movements were smooth. He knew the length, knew just how many strokes it took to get to the end. Here there was no limp, his sight didn't matter.

He stopped and gripped the edge of the pool cursing loudly, dragging his hand and droplets of water down his face, his palm burning where his flesh had been left raw and cut by the broken vase. But he welcomed that pain. Physical pain meant little to him. He'd survived more of it than any man should be able to.

But making such a fool of himself, showing such weakness, that was a true blow. He never did that. Now he had done it twice with her.

He looked up and saw pale, delicate ankles, then up farther to a set of shapely legs. Had she been any closer to the edge of the pool, he would have been treated to a lot more.

The woman had no sense of boundaries. “What is it you want, *latifa*?”

He tightened his jaw, grinding his teeth. His towel was across the gym, and she was there, standing, staring. Another chance to shock herself with his ravaged body? She hadn’t run the first time, but he did not go out of his way to show the scars that marred his body. Not out of vanity. But because they shamed him. Reminded him, every day, in every way, that he was less than he had been. That he shouldn’t be here.

Survivor’s guilt, his first doctor had called it. Naming it didn’t change anything. How else was he supposed to feel? Should he forget? Move on from the event that had taken everyone? If he forgot, who would remember? Who would carry it with them? He felt as though he was keeping them here. Anchoring them to this world.

Impossible, he knew. And yet the feelings remained.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

He placed his palms flat on the rough cement surrounding the pool, welcoming the pain it brought, the distraction, as he hauled himself out of the water in one fluid motion, bracing himself for the less than agile feeling that came with having his own two feet beneath him. Putting weight on legs that didn’t feel like they belonged to him.

Her eyes were glued to his torso and he fought the urge to cover himself. A strange, weak response. It should not concern him, what she thought of his body, of the scars that marked his skin, the deep groove that showed the loss of muscle and strength in his thigh.

He simply stood for a moment, daring her to look away. She didn’t. But then, she never did anything he expected—why should she start now? He would almost be disappointed if she descended into predictability. Almost.

He reached over to the nearby towel rack to pull off a black towel, dragging it over his chest, then around to his back. She watched him the whole time, and he felt his body responding to the open, female appraisal. It had been so long since he had felt a woman’s hands on his skin, and just as long since one had looked at him as though he were a man.

No one, other than his physician, had ever seen his body uncovered since the wounds had healed. Amarah had seen him when they were fresh. When there had been a hope of healing. They had been too much for her to handle then. Or, perhaps she could have handled the scars if the attack had only stolen his physical attraction. If it had not taken the very soul of who he was. Good that she’d run early so he hadn’t had the chance to bring her down with him.

Of course, unlike his ex, Katharine wouldn’t be running.

“It means *beauty*,” he said, discarding the towel, crossing his arms over his chest.

She looked slightly surprised to hear the translation. “Oh. Well, I thought it might mean ‘pain in the rear’ or something.”

A sharp twinge of amusement forced a laugh to climb his throat. “Not quite.”

Full, pink lips curved into a smile and cut through the defense he’d put up between them. She appealed to his body, as a woman did to a man. A whole man. And for a brief moment, he felt as though he were.

It only took a sharp, shooting pain from his diminished thigh muscle to remind him that wasn’t the case. Just like the desert would wilt a rose, he would wither Katharine, would steal the life from her.

Her pretty face contorted. “Oh, no, that’s from the table, isn’t it?”

He jerked his head back. “What?”

“The bruise on your leg and ...” She moved toward him and he took a step away. “Your hands.”

“What?”

She moved forward another step. “Let me see them.” She reached out and took one of his hands in hers, palm up, examining the torn skin, moving the tip of her finger around one of his injuries. “Painful?” She was so soft. So warm. Alive.

It made him want to ask why she was touching a dead man. A man who was dead in all the ways that counted.

“Not in the least.” He pulled his hand back, the burn of her touch lingering. “I have endured worse. This is nothing.”

“It wasn’t nothing earlier.”

“I was angry.”

“I know. At me. And my flowers had to die a horrible death because of it. Not that I really blame you. I didn’t think, and I’m ... I’m very, very sorry.”

He held his hand up. “This? This will heal.” Unlike the rest of him. That was the unspoken portion of that statement, hanging in the air between them.

He stood before her now, defiant, daring her to look away, she was certain. But she couldn’t. He held her captive. He turned away first. “What is it you want?”

“I have ... I want you to have dinner with me.” For the first time, she faltered, showed a hint of true nerves and vulnerability. His first instinct, one so long suppressed, was to reassure. And yet he couldn’t figure out a way to do it, couldn’t find it in him.

She pressed on. “I had your chef prepare some of your favorite foods. And some of mine. I thought we might ... get to know each other a bit better.”

The last thing he wanted. He needed her life and his life to remain separate, for his routine to be uninterrupted. He needed to keep his control, his order. He didn’t need her making him want to ... comfort. Because when the heat spread through him, his control slipped. And when his control slipped ...

“How much money will be saved annually by the trade agreements our marriage will enact?”

Confusion flashed through her eyes. And he felt nothing. He embraced that. Embraced the void and the security it offered.

“Ten billion, conservatively.”

He chose his next words carefully, designed to keep distance. Designed to make her as disgusted with him as she should have been from the start. “That is all I need to know about you.”

She looked at him for a moment, eyes glittering, a determined set to her jaw, arms crossed beneath full breasts. “I’ll be there. In the dining hall in half an hour.”

Zahir cursed himself as he buttoned his shirt midstride, making his way through the maze of corridors toward the dining hall. What had happened to routine? And distance?

He cursed again.

He rarely ate in the formal dining area. Only if he was forced to entertain visiting dignitaries. Even then, he tried to send his advisor in his place. He wasn’t the best face to put forward for Hajar. Most of his people—at least those in control of the media—would attest to that. He was no diplomat, no master of fine negotiations. He was a strategist, a planner. He had built up his nation’s economy from behind the doors of his father’s office. But when it came to physical meetings ...

He was not the man to handle things in person.

He only had to think of Katharine’s face when he’d slammed his bloody palm down on the table to drive that point home. He had frightened her. And he cared. He had no idea why he cared. Or why the image of her sitting at the table alone in that knee-length, red silk dress she’d been wearing made him feel ... anything.

And yet it did. And he could not afford it. He knew it, knew the cost of a weak moment. A weak moment, a lax moment, could mean the difference between life and death. It had for his family. And now ... a weak moment could mean the loss of his control.

Still he had come.

He walked through the arched doorway into the ornate dining area. The table was low with cushions lining it on all sides. Katharine was there, at the head of the table, naturally, her pale legs curled beneath her, her expression neutral. Her plate was empty, despite the fact that there was an abundance of food laid out on the table.

He knelt at the other end. "Sorry I'm late."

"No, you're not. You're late on purpose."

"No. I'm here on accident," he said.

She laughed, an annoyed laugh, if there was such a thing. "What does that mean?"

"That I wasn't going to come."

"I see." She stood up and took her plate with her, walking slowly down the side of the table until she was right in front of him, the view of her legs from his position on the cushions an intoxicating and unexpected sight. She was close enough that he could reach out and touch her. Feel if those long legs were as soft as he imagined.

He had a brief flash, an image in his mind and he braced himself for the inevitable. But it wasn't a picture of chaos and violence. It was him, curling his fingers around her calf, pressing a kiss to her thigh, running the tip of his tongue up along her skin until ...

He clenched his teeth together, fighting to keep himself, his body, on its tight, self-imposed leash.

She sat next to him, her arm brushing his, and his fantasy was disturbed.

"I'm not sitting across the room from you."

"Why not? Most people would." He picked a tray up from the table and put some figs, meat and cheese on Katharine's plate before serving himself.

"I'm not most people."

"Yes, I'm aware of that."

She always met his eyes. Always looked straight at him. No one did that. Not even staff who had been here before the attack. Though there were few of those left. It had been too hard for them to stay. Too frightening. Always wondering if the same people responsible for killing his family would come for Zahir. If they would be caught in the cross fire.

Amarah hadn't been able to look at him. She had tried. She'd worn his ring, was meant to be his wife, had professed to love him. And she had tried to take on the responsibility of caring for him.

He'd been half out of his mind then. Not wholly in the past or present. Not certain of what had happened. Sometimes sickeningly certain of what had happened, everything playing in his mind with horrifying clarity. From beginning to end, like a film he couldn't stop.

Even now, he only kept it all down with years of practice. Of keeping total, full control over his mind at all times.

Amarah hadn't been able to endure it. Had not been able to handle the changes that had happened in him. If the woman he loved, the woman who loved him, couldn't stay ... couldn't face him ... it was no surprise when no one else could, either. He was glad, in a way, that no one had ever tried. There was no point bringing them into his personal hell.

"This is my favorite," she said, reaching past him and picking up a platter. "Obviously it's not like my mother made it for me, but our chef did. Wild rice with pecans. Not a state dinner type of thing but ... sort of comfort food for me."

"I'll try it." He lifted his plate and she served him a portion.

He wasn't certain he'd ever eaten this way before. It was strangely intimate, serving her, having her serve him. His family had been formal. Distant in many ways. And yet their absence was profound.

"I don't suppose your mother did the cooking, either?"

The thought of his mother, always so beautiful and serene in her long, jeweled robes, her black hair pinned up in an ornate style, made his chest feel tight. "No. She was good at delegating, though."

Katharine laughed, happier this time, a sound that worked to loosen the knot inside him. “Oh, me, too. Notice I didn’t claim to cook any of this.” She paused then tilted her head to the side, a shimmering, red-gold wave cascading over her shoulder. “Maybe I will cook someday.”

“Once you reach the light at the end of your tunnel?”

“Yes. Maybe then. I’m going to move out of the palace. Traditionally, an unmarried princess would continue to live there, under the protection of her family, but I suppose a divorcée might do what she wants.”

“You suppose?”

“No one in my family has ever divorced.”

“No one?”

She shook her head, her strawberry waves catching the light. “No. I will be unique.”

“I’m certain you already are.”

“Perhaps too much, to the despair of my father.”

“And you aren’t concerned how that will be received?”

“My mother died when I was ten. My father will be gone soon ...” Her voice was thick with sadness. “Only Alexander will be left and he won’t care what I do. You know how younger brothers are.”

He did. He had been one. Looking on Malik with nothing but respect. Never once had he envied him his position. Never once had he wanted to be him. And now look at him. He had stepped into his brother’s life. He was even marrying his brother’s intended bride.

The thought was like burning steel in flesh. Nothing fit in this life. Nothing was his. A constant reminder that the wrong man had lived through the attack on his family. It should have been Malik sitting here with Katharine. Ruling the country as their birth order dictated.

“I do.”

“So, he’ll accept what I’m doing with my life and be ... happy for me, I suppose.”

“Have you always resented your duty?”

She sat still then, the only motion the fluttering of her pulse at the hollow of her throat. “I have always accepted that I would marry someone for the sake of my country. When I met Malik ... I felt good about what I was doing. It felt right. He was a good man and the alliance between the countries would provide so much protection for both of our nations.”

“And when he died?”

“My heart felt torn in two.”

Katharine looked down at her hands. It was the truth. The day she’d found out about the attacks, she’d felt that it had happened to her own family. She’d grieved the loss of the S’ad al Dins. Had grieved for the country, for the one who was left.

She hadn’t loved Malik, but that didn’t mean his death was painless for her. He had been a good man, one she’d been confident would do the best by his country and hers.

It had been devastating to lose that. And she’d felt aimless. Like she’d been searching for new purpose. Because she’d known, from day one, that it had been her duty to marry advantageously for Austrich.

With that gone, she’d had to find something new.

She had. The past five years she’d had more freedom, more aim than ever before. She’d made changes, had made valuable friendships. Had worked at proving herself in a way that went beyond her worth as breeding stock.

Coming back to the marriage part, that had been jarring. But again, she knew her place. But now ... now that she’d tasted something else, something that was hers ... it made her want more. It made her want to find out if she might find some contentment there.

“I did not know you felt so strongly for him,” Zahir said, his words stiff, his dark eyes closed off.

"I felt very strongly about the arrangement. That's one reason I fought so hard for it. It's the right thing."

"And yet ... since I will give you an out, you're more than willing to take it."

Shame made her face hot. "Yes," she said, the words a whisper.

"What's changed?"

"The thought that maybe I could have something else. Something more."

A muscle in his jaw ticked. "And in the meantime, you make yourself a human sacrifice."

"Haven't we both?"

"True. I know why you do what you do. Do you know why I am the Sheikh of Hajar? Why I didn't pass it to one of my distant relatives?" His voice was rough, his words halting. "Because I am the only one left to fight. And even if I have to fight for my people from a desk, I will do it until there is no more breath in me. Because I'm all that's left."

Her heart seized in her chest, the aching, emptiness of his loneliness swept through her, left her breathless. The move to touch him was reflexive, an instinct she couldn't fight. She covered his hand with hers and his body jerked, but his hand remained there, beneath hers.

He didn't speak, he only looked at her. But the look in his eyes became more focused as he did. His gaze drifted down to where her hand covered his, so pale next to the deep golden tone of his skin.

"I am sorry about before," she said, her voice a whisper.

He was silent for a moment, his hand tense beneath hers. "As am I."

She slid her hand away from his, but she felt the lingering heat from him. From his skin. "I spoke to my father and brother today."

"And?"

"My father is thrilled, of course, well, in his way, and ... Alexander doesn't really know the circumstances. I don't want him to. He'd hate to know that I was doing this for him. He's only sixteen and he simply wouldn't understand. And neither of them know that this is ... temporary."

"I see. When did you understand you were to marry a man your father selected?"

She laughed softly. The memory of that day was one she tried her best to block out on most occasions. "Maybe twelve.

It came up at dinner. My mother had passed away just a couple of years earlier and Alexander was just a toddler. My father mentioned that he'd begun looking for ... I think he used the words *appropriate suitors* for me. I was appalled."

"I would imagine so."

"I had posters of my favorite singer on my wall and I was going to marry him. Somehow I didn't think a pop star would pass muster."

She was gratified when his lips turned up into a slight smile. "I would think not."

"What about you?"

"Malik was the one who had to think about advantageous marriages."

"Yes, that was meant to be me."

He looked at his wineglass. "I was going to marry for love."

Her stomach tightened. Before the attack, he meant. "You still can. After."

He shook his head. "I think not. I don't believe in it anymore. And even if I did, I know I can no longer feel it." He pushed up on the edge of the table, his movements jerky. "Thank you for dinner."

"Thank the chef," she said, trying to suppress the sadness that was mounting in her.

"I will." He inclined his head and turned away from her, leaving her sitting at the table alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

KATHARINE had been in Hajar for more than a week and the walls of the palace were starting to crush her from the inside out. She was feeling a definite need to get out and see more of the country, or at least see more than the inside of the palace, beautiful though it was.

She'd heard they had some magnificent upscale shopping centers in Kadim, the capital city, but she'd yet to see anything beyond the airport and Zahir's home.

At least now she was on her way out. She'd spoken to Kahlah that morning about obtaining security detail for a shopping excursion and her needs had been met quickly. Now, just an hour later, she was headed into the city.

She hadn't spoken to Zahir, but he hadn't been in his office or the gym, and it wasn't as though he'd given her a way to contact him. She was beginning to wonder if he ever left the palace.

A sickening weight settled in her stomach. He was like a prisoner in some ways, and yet, he was the one who'd sentenced himself. But she could sense it. Could sense that there was a dark energy in him that was boiling beneath the surface. And that he held it back, along with so many other things.

She could see the skyline of the metropolitan city beyond the highway, providing an elegant and unexpected backdrop to Old Kadim, which was still prominently in the foreground. The buildings made of stone, the narrow roadways lined with open-air markets.

There was a flavor to it, unexpected so near the modern, gleaming brilliance of the city beyond. It fascinated Katharine. Called to her.

As the car passed one of the markets, Katharine craned her neck to see. It was crowded, people out doing daily errands, and tourists who were enjoying the Old World atmosphere of the open-air shopping.

"I'd like to stop here for a while, if that's all right."

The two men in front exchanged glances, then nodded and the driver pulled the car into the nearest parking spot—a spot Katharine was a bit skeptical was in fact designed for parking, but that seemed to be driving in Hajar. People following their own arbitrary rules.

The security team got out before her, in a move that seemed a touch obvious, then came and opened her door. "Thank you," she said.

The men were glued to her side as she made her way from the car down into the main hub of the market. "You can walk behind me," she said. "Just a little bit."

When she went shopping in Europe she always had security with her, but they weren't usually so big. Or hulking. Or obvious.

She breathed in, the sharp scent of meat, spice and dust mingling together, tickling her throat. It was loud here. Talking, laughing and music melting together, indistinguishable from each other.

"I'm going this way," she said to her detail.

They followed silently, their expressions stoic, their manner no less obvious than it had been a moment earlier.

The crowd was thick and people rushed past her, some nearly running into her. Strange to think that this would be her home for the next few years. It was so different to anything she was used to.

She watched as a mother bent down and picked a screaming child up from the ground. So different, but the same, too. She smiled and turned to one of the stalls, touching one of the glittering necklaces that was tacked onto a flat of velvet with a small nail.

"What is this?" Zahir's voice, hard, angry, cut through the noise of the market like a knife.

She released her hold on the necklace. "This is me ... shopping. How did you know where I was?"

"Kahlah. I certainly didn't hear it from you. Why didn't you tell me where you were going?"

People were pausing to stare. Truly, they were gaping openmouthed at Zahir. From what she knew of him, he never made public appearances. He had a face for radio he'd said, and he addressed his people that way. There had also been very few pictures taken of him since the attack, none close up.

But they knew who he was. And it was clear that some were awed, others horrified. Frightened. Because so many of them believed him to be a devil. A beast. Zahir didn't seem to notice at all. His eyes were on her, and her alone.

He closed in on her and took her arm. "This isn't safe."

"I have security with me."

"I had security," he roared. "We all had security. It didn't do any good."

"Zahir ... "

His hand tensed around her arm as more people began to crowd around them, people who had walked through her as though she was invisible. Not now. Add Zahir to the equation and everyone was riveted to the drama unfolding.

He paused for a moment, his body stiff. She saw the same strange, distant look in his eyes, as though he wasn't seeing her, as though he wasn't seeing what was around. His eyes locked with hers, bottomless wells of dark emotion. He was like a hunted animal, all fear and rage and primal instinct.

That was when she knew he saw her, unlike the time in his office. But there was something wrong. He wasn't in this moment. He was in another time, gripped with an emotion so strong that it had dragged him down into the depths of it.

He pulled her away with him, out of the crowd, to one of the crumbling brick buildings behind a market stall. She stumbled, and he held her steady, his strength enhanced by the adrenaline she knew was screaming through him.

They rounded a corner, slipping into a narrow alleyway, and he pressed her against the wall of one of the surrounding buildings, his big body acting as a shield. From what, she didn't know. His hands were pressed flat against the brick on either side of her, his chest against hers. He was hunched over her, the gesture protective, feral.

His breathing was harsh, unsteady, each gust of air bringing a near growl with it that seemed to rumble through his being. His entire body was rock hard with tension, every muscle, every tendon straining as he fought to keep himself strong against her.

"Zahir," she said, her voice soft.

He didn't move, he only stood, braced, a human barrier between her and whatever danger he thought they faced. She lifted her hand and put it on his chest, felt his heart beating hard against her palm. She felt his pain. His fear. It was in her, squeezing around her heart, suffocating. Horrendous.

And she could only imagine what it was to be in Zahir's body now.

She slid her hand up, her fingers curling around his neck. He lifted his head, his dark eyes blazing with something wild, intense. She moved her hand upward, resting it lightly on his cheek, his skin rough beneath her fingertips. "Everything's fine. We're just in the market."

He shuddered beneath her touch, his eyes closing for a long moment before he opened them again.

She lifted her other hand, resting it on the smooth side of his face, and looked into his eyes. "Zahir."

He swallowed hard, and she felt him shiver, the muscles in his body spasming. "Katharine."

He pulled away from her. Katharine was relieved to see that the crowd had dispersed, thanks in part of Taj and Ahmed and their ham-handed style of security, she imagined.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Get in the car," he said tightly.

She nodded once, moving ahead of him. She kept her head down, ignoring the stares and the conversation in languages she didn't understand.

"No," he said. "My car."

She turned and looked in the direction Zahir was focused on. The sleek black car was identical to the other one, part of the royal fleet, she imagined. "You didn't drive, did you? Because you shouldn't drive."

He shot her a hard look. "I do not drive anymore. I should think the reason for that is quite obvious."

He jerked the back door open and she slid inside. He rounded the other side and sat next to her, his posture stiff. The driver pulled onto the road and turned back in the direction of the palace.

Katharine's heart was hammering hard, her hands shaking. Her entire body shaking, from the inside out. From the surge of adrenaline brought on by the whole situation, and from Zahir's nearness.

Silence filled the space between them. She waited as long as she could before all of the questions swirling in her mind had to escape her mouth.

"How often does it happen?" she asked.

He turned his head to look at her. "Much less frequently than it used to."

"It happened in your office last week."

He pushed his hand through his hair, a slight tremble visible to her, making her feel like she should look away. To let him regain his pride. To let him have back what he'd lost in that true, unguarded moment. But she couldn't.

"A short one." He didn't want to talk about it, she could see that. It was written in every tense line of muscle in his body. And yet she had to ask. She had to know.

"Are they ... flashbacks?"

"It's the crowd," he said, his voice tight. "I saw ... I thought you were in danger." He flexed his fingers before curling them back into a fist. "I'm not insane," he ground out.

"I know. I never thought you were." She played the moment over again, his eyes, his face, the true, deep fear in them. It had been real to him, what he had felt and seen. It hadn't been an overreaction or overprotection. It had been bone deep for him. "I ... Is it posttraumatic stress? I've volunteered at a lot of hospitals in Austrich. Seen people who have been in accidents. It's common when someone has gone through something like you did."

He turned, angled away from her, his eyes on the passing scenery. "It probably is."

"Haven't you seen anyone?"

"They gave me medication to help me sleep. That's all."

She swallowed. "You don't take it, do you?"

He let out a short laugh. "Already you know me better than my doctors. No, I don't take it."

"Do you sleep?"

The corner of his lip curved up. "No."

"Maybe you should take ... "

"No. Drugs to suppress it. To make me tired. What does that fix? Nothing. It just masks it. Another thing to control me when I ... I should ... I don't want this. I don't want to be affected by it," he said, his voice harsh.

She wanted to offer comfort, to touch him, and yet, she knew he would reject it. Reject her. "But you are."

"It's gotten better."

"That was not better."

He snorted. "Sure it was. You should have seen me at first. Ask Amarah how it was."

Her chest felt tight and she almost didn't want to ask the question. But she had to. "Who's Amarah?"

"She was my fiancée. She was there when I woke up, by my bedside. For all of five minutes before she turned and ran from the room. She came back, of course. She tried, for two days she tried, to deal with me, to help the doctors. But I would ... I would black out. Or have a flashback and I was ... unpredictable."

Katharine put her hand to her stomach, trying to calm the wave of nausea that washed through her. “Did you hurt her?”

He shook his head. “Never. I was trying to protect her but ... how safe did you feel just now?” He laughed, a dark, humorless sound.

Katharine could see how Zahir might be frightening in that circumstance, but she had only been scared for him, not of him. She’d known, from the moment he’d pressed her up against the wall, that he was putting himself between her and whatever danger he thought was there.

That he’d been putting himself in harm’s way. For her.

“Yes.” It was honest, absolutely. “I felt safe with you.”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple moving up and down. “Well, she didn’t. And can you blame her? I didn’t hurt her any of the times it happened. But if I lost too much of myself? If she were there during a night terror? When I imagined there were enemies all around? What would I have done to her then? Amarah was smart to leave.”

Katharine didn’t want to ask her next question either. “Do you miss her?”

He turned away from her. “I don’t feel anything for her. About her.” He looked back at her, his expression stoic, and she could see, from the flat look in his dark eyes, that it was true. He’d said he didn’t feel love anymore. He didn’t seem to regret the loss of it, either.

“Don’t leave again,” he said. “Not without telling me.”

“I’ll try to keep you in the loop, Zahir, but I couldn’t find you. And I’m not a prisoner. Anyway, Kahlah knew and I had security with me. I know that doesn’t keep you safe, not completely, but it’s the best I can do. And I’m used to moving around freely.”

“And now the entire country will know.”

“That you were concerned for my safety,” she said. “Nothing more. The truth of the matter is between us. Although, I think if people knew ... I think they would understand.”

“Some would,” he said. “But here ... there is a mix of old and new thought. Those out in the tribes, the bedouin ... There are already rumors amongst the more traditional people that it was not Zahir who rose from the attacks, but the devil who now possesses him. I’m sure some of the people in the market believe it now. Or at least believe their Sheikh is insane, that my position as leader reflects a certain ... weakness.”

“Then we will show them otherwise.”

“Katharine ... “

“Why not, Zahir? Why not? You’re going to have to handle the wedding.”

“I *will* handle it,” he said, his voice hard. “I am not a child.”

“I know you aren’t. I don’t doubt your strength, not for one moment, and that’s why I believe that you can take this and defeat it.”

“As if I haven’t tried?”

“You stay alone. Your solution has been ignoring it, and we found out today that doesn’t work.”

“It has. It did before you.”

“But I’m here now.” And part of her was sorry she was. Sorry she had burst into the order that Zahir had created for himself. Sorry for what she had done to his pride. He was strength, he embodied it, exuded it. Even in the moment when he’d been in the flashback, he had been bravery and honor, working to protect her above himself.

And she had exposed him to ridicule and shame.

“Yes, you are.”

“What happened that day, Zahir?”

He tightened his jaw, then relaxed it, tendons in his neck shifting with the motion. “Read the articles about it.”

“I have read the articles about it. I went to the funeral for your family, but I want you to tell me.”

He shook his head. "I don't remember all of it and I can't ... I can't remember it without seeing it. Like that. Like it was out there. I can't just remember it. I have to live it. Again and again."

The thought of that, of reliving that hell, made her feel cold all over. "All right. You don't have to tell me. But we can work on you going out."

"I've been out. I go to functions when my duty dictates I must."

Zahir fought against the rising rage that was filling him, threatening to drown him. To be seen in such a way ... it was weakness beyond what was acceptable. He despised it. Despised that it lived in him. That it could overtake him.

That she had seen him that way. At his most vulnerable. That there was vulnerability in him ... He had let his guard down. When he'd discovered her gone, when he'd found out where she went ... Adrenaline had taken over, and from there it had broken down. The thin veil between the present and past rent, allowing the past to flood in.

Terror, pure and real, had filled him, and Katharine had been all he could see. *Save her. Save her.* It had pounded through him like a drumbeat, a constant directive, drowning out the terror, any concern for himself. It had been about her.

And then he'd seen her face, heard her voice, and the flood had receded.

"But the wedding will be more than that and ... we need to go to Austrich. To be officially blessed in the Orthodox church. If not then we will not be legally married in the eyes of the people. Custom dictates it and my father has reminded me that it was a part of the original agreement."

The demand that it be altered was on the tip of his tongue and yet he could not bring himself to issue it. To do so would be to admit defeat. No one had asked him to do more than what he had been doing for the past five years. Everyone had been content to leave the Beast of Hajar in his cave, to wallow in his misery.

So long as the economy kept moving, nobody cared. And they didn't have to face the shame of a damaged ruler. Half of the people imagined him blessed by God. The others imagined him to be a demon. Most days he imagined the latter half was closer to the truth.

No one had challenged him ... except for Katharine. She'd walked in challenging him and hadn't stopped since. His pride wouldn't allow him to turn her down. His pride also wouldn't allow him to go before a crowd of people and ... lose himself like that.

The flashbacks were like waking nightmares. His subconscious taking control and forcing him to watch what he'd already experienced. He was still there, but the pictures in his mind ... the memories ... they made him feel what he'd felt that day. The acrid taste of panic on his tongue, the knowledge that he was powerless. The horrible, debilitating helplessness.

It took him right back to the worst moments of his life and forced him to not simply remember them, but to relive them.

The simplest thing had been to avoid anything and everything that might trigger the flashbacks. They had been hard to predict at first. A noise that was too loud, the scent of sulfur from a lit match, could all send him back down into hell. So it had been better if he simply stayed in the palace.

Even now that they had grown so few and far between, they weren't triggered by the obvious.

"It's the crowd," he said. He hated talking about it, liked explaining it even less, but it was preferable to her thinking he was crazy. "It's the last thing I truly remember of that day. We were driving through the city. It was a parade, a national celebration. So many people were there.

"And I noticed there was a crowd around the car ... I thought they were just citizens but ... there's always a barricade. By the time I realized it ... "

He had to stop there. Had to. Because if he went too far into what had happened next, if he forced himself to remember, he would have to relive it. It was the way it worked.

"You couldn't have done anything different."

Such a tired refrain. One he had heard from every doctor, every visitor. He believed it no more from her than from any of them. “I could have died instead. Malik could have lived. It would have been better.”

CHAPTER SIX

KATHARINE let Zahir retreat to his quarters. Not that anyone really *let* Zahir do anything. He did what he pleased and he didn't seem to care what anyone thought. Least of all her.

Except for when it came to the flashbacks.

Her heart squeezed when she remembered that moment when he'd looked so frightened, so lost. How he had protected her, his instinct to save her, even through that fear. He had placed himself between her and the world, and it had been instinct.

I could have died instead.

He hadn't spoken those words like a man looking for sympathy, or one out to shock. It had been steady, matter-of-fact. And that's what had made it truly frightening. Because it was obvious he had thought them before. Obvious that he believed them.

Things had moved on in her life. Austrich had changed, she had taken on new projects, found different ways she could serve. But in Hajar, time seemed to have stood still.

And Zahir with it.

No, maybe that wasn't true. He had changed. He had grown so dark, so bitter. Lost in his own personal hell, and no one had come to retrieve him from it.

A sharp twinge of anger stabbed her in the chest. She couldn't fathom how his fiancée could leave him like she had. She would have stayed with Malik, and she hadn't even loved him. Because she'd made a promise. And promises mattered, commitment and honor mattered. At least to her they did.

What would have happened if Amarah had stayed? Well, Zahir might not have Amarah, but he had her. And she had given her word to him now that she would be his wife. And even if she was a temporary wife, she would do whatever it took to be there for him. To build a strong union. They needed it for their countries.

Katharine made her way toward Zahir's quarters, her footsteps too loud in the empty corridor. It was late, and the staff was gone, which added to the cavernous feeling the palace possessed. It didn't escape her that she was always the one looking for him. That he had only come to her room once, and that was to tell her to leave.

But the distance between them didn't seem right. Not when they were supposed to be working together. It especially didn't seem right after today.

She pushed open the door and found the gym area vacant, which she'd expected. She walked through, brushing her fingers along one of the exercise machines as she did. His body was strong, he worked at it, intensely. To show no weakness.

She'd forced him to show weakness twice in the same week.

The thought made her feel sick.

There was a short corridor in between the gym and Zahir's room. His room was empty too, not just of him, but of almost anything. There was a bed in the corner, a large armoire and very little else.

There was a chin-up bar in the doorway that led outside into the courtyard. Something else physical for him to do. He seemed to need the outlet.

She looked at the bed, pillows pushed to the side, the bedspread and sheets tangled. He had been here. And he hadn't been able to sleep. He'd said he couldn't sleep. She felt the twinge in her chest again.

She walked across the room and bent over the bed, tugging the bedding into place and arranging the pillows again. It was an idle thing to do, something to keep her hands busy while she decided what to do next. But it was her way of trying to put something in his life back together. Since she'd come in guns blazing and torn it apart.

It was torn apart already. You did what you had to do. And anyway, it isn't as though you forced him.

No. He'd agreed. Because it was the right thing to do. Because duty was important, honor. It mattered. It had to, otherwise her whole life had been geared toward ... nothing. It was the only thing she knew how to do. The only thing that gave her purpose.

"What are you doing?"

Katharine turned sharply and saw Zahir standing in the doorway that led outside, his chest bare and glistening with a light sheen of sweat in the pale moonlight.

"I just came to ... "

"You cannot leave me alone, can you, Katharine?" The words were torn from him, a desperation laced through them that shocked and frightened her.

"How can I? After what you said?" she asked, her pulse pounding in her temples, making her feel dizzy.

"Easily. Leave me be as everyone else has done for the past five years. I agreed to a marriage on paper only because I wanted to ignore you as much as humanly possible." He growled the words, rough sounding and feral, the rage behind them barely leashed.

"Why did you agree to it at all?"

"Because it is best for my people. I may not be able to go out in a crowd of them, but that doesn't lessen my responsibility here."

"I ... I'm sorry about today."

He moved into the room, his body taking up an amazing amount of space in the cavernous surroundings. "You're sorry about today, sorry about the table. Is that what you're here for? To show me just how sorry you are?"

He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him. He leaned in, his lips skimming the curve of her neck. Katharine felt her legs start to shake, not from fear, from something else. From the attraction that had assaulted her off and on from the moment she'd seen him in his office.

Even now. With all of his rage directed at her, she felt something else vibrating between them. Something even more powerful.

"Have you come to show me how sorry you are with that beautiful body of yours?" he whispered the words, his lips touching her earlobe lightly, a slight tremor in his fingers. "How appropriate. A virgin sacrifice to appease the Beast." He flexed his hand, fingers spreading wide on her waist, his thumb brushing the underside of her breast. Her breath caught in her throat. She wanted him to let her go. And she wanted him to pull her tightly into his body.

He stayed like that, his face so close to hers, his breath feathering against her cheek, hot and intimate. He slid his finger over the line of her jaw, the gesture so gentle and subtle, at odds with the rage vibrating from him. Rage was the surface emotion, but when she looked in his eyes, she saw something else. Need. So raw and real it was a palpable force.

He dropped his arm from her waist, pulling back sharply, the sudden shock of cold as the distance widened between them making goose bumps break out on her arms.

"I don't need your pity," he spat, taking another step back.

Anger boiled in Katharine's stomach, anger and unsatisfied desire, and she had no idea what business either of them had existing beside the other. Although, it seemed it was the same for Zahir. That, at least, provided its own satisfaction.

Zahir's eyes were cold on her, glittering in the dim room.

"You don't have my pity," she said tightly. "I'm sorry for what happened to your family, I'm sorry that you had to go through it. No man, no woman, no one, should ever have to see the things you've seen. But right now, you're just a jackass. And I don't pity a man who acts like a jackass just because he thinks he can get away with it. We're getting married in eight weeks. I'm willing to

help you. But no matter what you choose, you need to think of a way to civilize yourself. And the flashbacks have nothing to do with that.”

Zahir watched Katharine turn on her heel and stride from the room, her posture stiff, her footsteps hard and loud on the marble floor.

A flood of regret, so real and unfiltered it shocked him, filled him. He gritted his teeth against anger, and the painful arousal that was still making its presence felt.

Five years and he hadn't felt the slightest twinge of sexual desire. Nothing. But Katharine had brought it roaring to life the first time she'd come into his office. And when he'd come in from his ride in the desert he'd seen her, bending over his bed, her tight butt on display for him, looking like every man's perfect fantasy ... it had been too much.

The need to take her, to push her onto the bed and shove that little dress up around her hips ... it had been so strong he'd honestly wondered if he stood a chance of resisting. It had tugged at his control, tearing the threads of it, leaving a mangled mass of desire and lust.

Before, he would have showed his interest. He would have seduced her, and he would have been confident in her desire for him. He'd been a playboy, at least until he'd met Amarah. And women had been easy to come by. Willing and fun, giving of their bodies and pleasure, as he gave of his.

But the man he was now ... If there was even a woman willing to bed the Beast, a woman who roused his desire, he would deny it. Because as important as sex and release had been then, control was needed now.

And Katharine had shaken it. If he gave in to the lust, threw off the shackles he had willingly locked onto himself, he didn't know what might happen.

If she wanted to heal him, she was welcome to it. The truth was, he did have to stand up at their wedding without being assaulted by flashbacks. And he would do it. He wasn't foolish enough to think it was a simple matter of being strong enough, though he wished it were. It went beyond that. But he would do what he had to.

He would master it. And he would master his feelings for her.

There was no other option.

“What is it you propose we do?” he asked, walking into the courtyard the next morning.

Katharine was already there, her hair pulled up into a neat bun, a cup of coffee frozen midway between the table and her mouth as she looked up at him, green eyes owlshly wide. She set the mug down. “Excuse me?”

“What is it you propose we do to stop the flashbacks. You seemed to have an idea yesterday?”

“And you seemed to be on the verge of throwing me out of the palace last night.”

“That was last night.”

“And so it doesn't matter?”

He waved a hand in dismissal of her words. “Not anymore.” He was moving past it. Past that strong wave of lust and the anger that had been tangled up in it. He was ready to fight now, like the warrior he was. The warrior that had been lost in the guise of a king for the past five years. Control wasn't enough. He had to strike out, take the things holding him back by the throat and crush them.

“It does matter. Because it matters to me. I'm not your enemy, Zahir. Your enemies have been dealt with, haven't they?”

He nodded curtly. Those memories were clear. The men who had thrown grenades beneath his family's motorcade had been dealt with in the harshest terms the laws allowed.

“I am not one of them. I'm not fighting against you. I'm fighting for my country, for yours. For my brother. And I need a man who is capable of being a strong Regent for Austrich.”

“I am capable. More than. Have you taken a look at the progress that has been made in Hajar since I was appointed?”

“Of course I have. I've known ...” She averted her eyes. “I've known for a while now that there was a possibility I might have to marry you. I've been paying attention to what you were doing.”

“While avoiding ever seeing me.”

“It’s not like you’re renowned for your lavish and lively parties.”

“Point taken.”

“And I was ignoring this part of my job,” she said.

“Job?”

“Don’t you consider being Sheikh a job?”

“Of the most demanding variety. Paperwork that never seems to end, and constant ... trivial-seeming things that take every last moment of time,” he said.

“And it’s the same for me, even if my responsibilities are different. Marriage was always in the job description. Marriage to forge alliances, at the very least, at most for the reason we’re marrying.”

“But you were ignoring it?”

“Yes. When it was delayed I ... took the delay. For as long as I could. In truth, I left it too long because I waited until we were at a crisis point. It was wrong of me.”

“It was better that you did. Wait, that is, because it was your crisis that decided for me.”

“It was?”

“Trade is one thing. It’s advantageous, of course, and it’s important. But I could not condemn your country to civil war. To more spilled blood. I could not face having more on my hands.” He flexed his hands into fists as he said it. He felt the stains there. He should have been able to stop it. At the very least, he should have shielded his brother.

“There isn’t any blood on your hands, Zahir. I’m not your enemy, and you’re not the enemy, either.”

“Enough,” he said, shutting the door on the discussion. On the memories. He couldn’t afford to think about it now, to lose focus. “Back to the original reason I’m here. How do you plan on preparing me for the wedding?”

“I have a few ideas.”

She met his eyes; they were so deep, so lovely and green. Still so filled with emotion and possibility.

“We’ll beat this. We’re going to keep fighting.”

“Ready?” Katharine looked at Zahir’s strong profile and she knew that there was no way he would ever claim to not be ready. His pride wouldn’t permit it.

“Yes.”

Which told her nothing because she’d already known what his answer would be. “Good.”

The driver pulled the car forward and out of the palace, heading toward the city center. “It isn’t as though I don’t travel,” he said.

“I know you do. A little bit. And I also know you avoid driving near places like the market, where people might crowd the car.”

“I’m not afraid,” he said, his words short. Clipped.

“I never said you were.”

“You think it. There is nothing for me to be afraid of. I have faced death and if it came again, I would fight it, and if I couldn’t fight it, I would embrace it. What I don’t like is having my mind taken over. Having no control over what I see. Over what I do. I would much more happily face death.” His entire body was tense, each muscle tightened. “Do you know what it’s like ... to have to spend so much energy keeping the demons at bay? To never have one moment of peace? I relive it. Daily. Not to the degree you witnessed in the market, but it is never truly gone.”

She swallowed, her throat tight. “Why?”

“I ... I have to remember it,” he said, his voice rough.

“No, Zahir, you don’t.”

“Everyone is dead, Katharine. Malik, my mother, my father, the guards in the motorcade who were there to protect us. How can I let it go? Should I get over it? They never will. They’re gone.”

The pain in his words burned into her, marking her. In that moment, she understood. He carried the memory of his family's last moments because he felt that not doing so would diminish the tragedy. She understood, because she felt like she had to shoulder some of his pain. That she had to share. So he wouldn't be alone.

"They are gone," she said softly. "But you're here. And I need you. Your people need you. And that's why you'll beat it."

He focused on his palms. "I thought I had." He looked away. "No, I knew I had not. But I thought I had them managed. The two I've had since you've arrived were the first true flashbacks I've had in over a year."

She tried to force a laugh. "So ... it's me then."

Dark eyes locked with hers. "You make it hard to concentrate, that much is true. And yet somehow—" he looked away again "—your voice ... your face ... brought me back."

Emotion rose in her fast and fierce like a tide. "Good. We'll go with that." She rested her hand on the seat between them. "Hold on to me if you feel it coming."

He looked down at her hand, a dark eyebrow arched, his expression filled with pure, masculine stubbornness. It was welcome compared to the bleak, grief-stricken look that had come over him when he'd spoken of his family. "I will block it out."

"If it were that simple that's what you would always do."

His expression was fierce. "It should be that simple. I should be stronger."

"You should be stronger? You should bear all this weight and somehow heal at the same time? How should you be stronger, Zahir? You survived. Not only that, you're ruling your country in a way that would make your father and Malik so proud."

"They were made for this life. They were born to it. Men of diplomacy, men of the people." He laughed, a sound that was cold and humorless. Laced with a kind of bitter pain that was so real and unvarnished it hurt to hear it. "We both know I am not a diplomat, to say the least."

"You care for your people. Just because you don't spend your life in the public eye doesn't mean you don't. Just because it isn't as easy for you doesn't mean you don't do just as well as Malik would have."

"Why exactly do you want to fix me, *latifa*?" he asked, ignoring her earlier words.

There it was again. Beauty. The entire sentence was dripping with insincerity, and yet she found herself clinging to that one word, turning it over. She'd been called beautiful so many times, mostly by the press. The same press that might turn around and call her ugly the next day if she wore a shade of yellow that didn't flatter her skin tone. It had never mattered. If the insult could be a lie, so could the compliment.

Her father used it, too. Sincerely, and yet it always seemed to undermine any value she had as a person. It had become an annoyance. A near insult in its own right.

But for some reason, hearing it from Zahir's lips made something happen inside of her. A warm kind of tingling that spread through her body, pooling low in her stomach.

She blinked and looked up at him, into his flat, black eyes. "I ... because I have to. The wedding. We have to show strength."

Her words were clumsy. And they were wrong. There was so much more to this now, to what she was feeling. But she didn't know what else to say. Always, she had worked for her country's betterment. Even her time in the hospitals had been in service of their military men. She didn't really know how to separate what she wanted from what she was supposed to do.

Except for those light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel moments where she had some vague, exhilarating sense of freedom. Whatever that meant.

Although now, sitting with Zahir, even with the tension and sadness, she felt peace. A kind of peace she never felt.

The car turned, taking the more densely populated route that would lead them into the heart of the city. She sensed Zahir tensing next to her and stretched her hand out so that her fingertips rested against his. She'd said the wrong thing, but the physical touch seemed like the right thing.

And he accepted it.

The road narrowed and became more crowded with vehicle and foot traffic as they neared the market, and everything slowed to a crawl. She could sense Zahir's anxiety as the people closed in on the car, weaving around them so they could cross the street.

"Look at me," she said.

He turned his head, his forehead glossed with sweat, his jaw set tight.

"Look at me," she said again. "I'm here. So are you."

His hand drifted closer to hers until it engulfed it, his thumb lightly moving over her knuckles. He tightened his hold on her for a moment, then released, then squeezed again. Her chest felt tight, too tight. Watching him fight like he was, she felt like she was seeing strength beyond anything she'd ever witnessed. Because he was battling inner demons that went well beyond what most men would be asked to face. Beyond what anyone should ever be asked to endure.

"I don't really know what I'm doing," she said softly.

"Just keep doing it," he said, his teeth gritted. "Because it seems to be working."

Her throat tightened. She was angry. So angry that he was dealing with this. That someone had done this to him. And she didn't know what sort of help or hope she could offer.

"What did you do last night?" she asked.

He blew out a breath, his jaw loosening slightly. "Caught an intruder in my bedroom."

She felt the corners of her mouth tug up into a smile. "Before that."

"I was riding. My horse. She makes up for what I can't see. And while there are cars with the technology to help with that ... it isn't the same."

"No, it couldn't be. Animals have an intuition that technology can't possess. I like to ride, too." She took a breath. Took a chance. "I'd like to go out with you. Riding, I mean."

He nodded slowly. "In the evening sometime," he said. "When it isn't too hot."

"I'd like that."

They were through the center of town, through the crowd of people. He relaxed, pulling his hand away and placing it in his lap.

"Are you ready to go back?" she asked, wondering if they'd pushed hard enough for the day.

"I'm fine," he said.

And she knew that he meant it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ZAHIR stopped in the doorway of the library. Katharine was there, sitting by the fireplace, an orange glow bathing the pages of her book, and her pale skin. The fire wasn't really necessary, even though the desert did get cooler at night. But he had a feeling Katharine had lit it for ambiance, comfort. She was that kind of person. The kind who enjoyed moments, small, simple things. Like flowers in vases.

When it didn't irritate him, it amazed him. Made him ache for something he didn't truly believe he could ever find for himself.

It made him feel like he should turn away from her. To go back to where things were numb.

But he didn't want to. For the moment, he would take the ache with the pleasure of seeing her. "Come riding with me."

She looked up at him, a smile spreading over her face. "I'd love to." She stood from the chair she'd been sitting in and set her book on the side table.

It did strange things to his stomach, to have her say she wanted to do something with him. And she smiled at him. Very few people smiled at him.

But then, Katharine was like very few people.

"Not in that," he said, looking at the brief sundress she was wearing. It was her standard uniform, and one he wouldn't complain about, because he could look at her legs all day, but it wasn't workable riding gear. Even if the thought did make his blood pump faster, hotter than it had in years.

"I'll change."

She walked past him and his eyes were drawn down to the shapely curve of her hips as they swayed with each step. Fierce hunger gripped him, lust tightening into his stomach like metal hooks, digging deep, painfully so.

He wanted her with a need that defied logic. A need that defied reality. Katharine had an untouchable beauty, ethereal and earthy at the same time. The kind a man could only dream of tasting once in his life.

The kind he could never touch.

And she was to be his wife. But not his wife in any true sense of the word. A woman still so far out of his reach, she might as well be back in her own country. A woman he had no right to touch.

He'd been crazy to force her to stay in Austrich as part of the arrangement. At the time, he'd been trying to punish her. Now he could see it was only punishing him.

She had offered herself to him once, offered to have a marriage with him on whatever terms he desired. Right now, he desired whatever terms would make stripping her of that little dress and losing himself in her body acceptable.

"Just a second," she said, slipping into her room and closing the door behind her.

He rested his palm, still raw from the day he'd fallen into the broken vase shards, on the cold, painted wood of the door. It was a poor substitute for the warm, soft flesh of a woman. But it would have to do.

It had been so long since he'd touched a woman's skin. But he would rather live as a monk for the rest of his life than force a woman into his bed. Not physically, and not through manipulation. He would have a partner who desired him. An impossible desire, perhaps. Pride still lived in him, as much as his injuries would allow. That, and humanity. He would never sink to such a base level. He might be known as a Beast, but he was still a man. No amount of sexual frustration would strip him of that.

He curled his fingers in, making a fist that still rested against the cool surface of the door. He was a man. He would not use her need for marriage, her altruistic intentions to save her country, to get her into bed.

But he was tempted. So much he shook with it. Tempted to disregard what she might want, how she might feel about him, what letting his guard down to that degree might do to both of them, and think of his desire alone.

“Ready.” She opened the door and stepped out in a pair of figure-hugging sand-colored leggings and a structured olive-green jacket. It was like the runway version of a riding outfit. Fitted, sleek and eye-catching.

It was also the antithesis of a solution as far as getting his libido reined in was concerned.

“Come out this way.” He started to head out toward the back of the palace, the exit that was nearest the stables, where the horses were waiting, already tacked up.

He looked down at her hand and was tempted to take it in his. As he had done yesterday. She had been his anchor then. Had kept him from slipping over into that abyss that always came just before his mind was assaulted by violent flashbacks.

He tightened his hand into a fist and denied the impulse, letting her simply follow him.

“I haven’t been out to the stables yet. I didn’t ... I wasn’t really sure if it might be off-limits to me.”

“And yet you find my bedroom a nice place to pass time in the evening.”

“Well, I was looking for you. And I ... I know I’ve made a mess of some things here, Zahir.”

“The mess was already made, Katharine,” he said, having to force his words through his tightened throat. “Why do you do that?”

“Why do I do what?”

“For a woman with such confidence, you seem to take on more than your share of fault.”

“I just ... I want to be useful.”

“Is that all?”

She was silent then, no witty comeback to that response. For the first time, he felt sorry for her. She was doing what she felt was right, what she felt she had to do, and yet, by her own admission, this experience was comparable to being in a darkened tunnel. And she was waiting for the light. That moment when she could be free. Of all this. Of him. Of the disaster that he was.

“Perhaps,” she said, finding her witty comeback, he assumed, “you see it in me because the same tendency lives in you.”

“I have earned every ounce of my guilt.”

“No,” she said, “you haven’t. The guilt belongs to other men, Zahir. The men who attacked your family. All for what?”

“Money,” he said. “Power.”

“All things you don’t seem to care about. Or even want. I don’t see how you think you have a stake in this.”

“Because I am left. I had to have committed a sin to manage that,” he said.

“Or maybe you were blessed.”

“That’s the last thing I feel, *latifa*.”

He opened the door to the outside and relished the feel of the cool evening wind on his face. This was when he felt normal. Alive. Otherwise he just felt ... nothing, either that or a crippling guilt. Well, he could add lust to the list now. Nothing, guilt and lust. It was a small step, but it was a step.

The horses, one bay and one black, were waiting just outside the barn, tethered to the fence. He walked over to the larger, black mare and stroked her nose. The horses didn’t fear him. “This is Lilah. You can ride her. She’s very gentle.”

“The sentiment is appreciated, but I don’t need gentle.”

That statement made a dark cascade of erotic thoughts spin through his mind, made him pause for a moment as he thought of all the hidden meanings her statement could possess.

“Noted,” he said, jaw clenched tight.

“And who’s your handsome gentleman there?” she asked.

He put his foot in the stirrup and swung his leg over his mount. “Nalah doesn’t appreciate being called a he.”

“Sorry. I assumed—” she pulled herself up onto Lilah “—that a big strong man like you would ride a stallion.”

“Oh, no, definitely not. Not a good idea to have two stallions together, you know?”

She laughed, a shocked burst of sound that echoed through the paddock. “Did you just call yourself a stallion?”

He felt a smile teasing the edges of his lips, such a foreign feeling, even more so the small bit of contentment that accompanied it. Such a strange thing to talk to another person like this. To find that barrier of fear and uncertainty absent. Pride grew in him, mingling with the surge of warmth that was trickling through his veins. He had made her smile, after she had looked so sad.

“I did,” he said.

“Mmm ... quite the ego.”

“If you can beat me to that last fence post over there, the one just in front of the large rock formation, you might just put a dent in it.”

She grinned at him and urged Lilah on with her feet, not waiting for further word from him. Fine as far as he was concerned. He could watch her shapely backside rise and fall with the motion of the horse, and then pass her at the end, of that he had no doubt. He couldn’t drive safely, couldn’t walk without a limp, but on the back of a horse, things were seamless. Easy.

The sand pounded beneath Nalah’s hooves, a beat that resounded in his body, in his soul. It made him feel complete. Healed in some ways. The sun dipped completely behind one of the few flat mountains that dotted the Hajari skyline and bathed everything in a purple glow.

He could still see Katharine clearly, pale ankles and face visible in the dim lighting. She had such a delicate look to her, and yet nothing could be further from the truth. Delicate, she was not. She was strength personified.

But she wasn’t going to win the race.

He overtook her at the last moment with ease and she let out a short, sharp curse word when she came to a stop just behind him, her hair wild around her face, her breathing labored, cheeks flushed pink.

“Oh, you knew you were going to do that, didn’t you?” she said, gasping and laughing at the same time.

“Of course I did.” He slid off of Nalah, grimacing as pain shot through his thigh when his feet made contact with the hard ground. The sand was thinner here, the terrain a bit rockier, and his muscle noticed the lack of extra cushion.

Katharine dismounted, too, and shook her main of coppery hair out, sending the faint scent of vanilla into the air, into him. It was like a sucker punch straight to his gut.

“Fair enough. If we’d been on my home turf, I would have done the same to you.”

“Speaking of home turf,” he said, ignoring the tightness of desire that was making itself felt at the apex of his thighs, drowning out any muscle pain he’d been experiencing. “I want to show you something.”

This hadn’t been part of the plan, but now that they were here it seemed logical somehow. She would want to see this. She’d been connected to Malik, too. There were so few people in his life that were.

There were so few people in his life, full stop. But it suddenly made sharing this seem vital. If someone else knew, then the memory would have a better chance at living. And maybe it wouldn’t feel quite so heavy on him.

He led Nalah to the post and tethered her to it, more of a precaution than he probably needed to take, but he didn’t chance things with his horses. Katharine followed his lead.

“All right, lead the way.”

“This way.”

Katharine followed Zahir, her heart still pounding, from the exhilaration of the ride, and from the intense adrenaline high that came just from being with him. Zahir was an experience all on his own. Infuriating, fascinating, arousing. She'd never known anyone like him.

Certainly Malik hadn't been like this. He'd been fun. Easygoing. Truthfully, five years ago Zahir hadn't even been like that. He'd been more of an enigma, always a bit more serious than his brother, but nothing like the man she'd got to know over the past week.

She followed him to the outcropping of rocks that seemed to have been placed there, everything around it flat and desolate for miles.

There was a small space between the rocks, just big enough for them to pass through.

“What is this?” she asked, looking at the green surroundings. The rocks curved inward and offered partial shade, and water trickled down the side of the natural walls.

“*Amal*, the Oasis of Hope. This was what drew the first band of my people here to Kadim. Hajar is mostly flat and shelter from the elements is hard to find. They had been walking through the desert for weeks with no reprieve, and they found this outcropping. There was water, shelter.”

“And eventually a palace nearby. And a city,” she finished.

“The city came first. But this has always been a special place to my family. Malik and I used to come here as boys. A place we could play, escape the heat and the indoors.”

She could picture them as they'd been. Boys with no cares. “Things must have seemed simpler then.”

He shrugged. “Yes and no. I always knew. Always knew that Malik had a heavy burden to carry. I was always grateful that it wasn't me.” He laughed, the sound cold and flat in the enclosed space. “I have wondered ...” He looked down, then back at her. “I have wondered if that's why I'm left. A trick of fate. I was always much more content with my lot. So happy that it was my brother who bore the responsibility of leadership.” He cleared his throat. “I was a military officer. I should have seen the signs. I should have known.”

She touched his forearm. “You should have known what?”

“I should have known what was coming. I've seen war. Usually, I ... feel things in my gut. That day, there was nothing. I was blindsided. We all were. And I was the only one who had no excuse. It never should have got past me.”

“You couldn't have known, Zahir.”

“I know,” he said harshly. “I know.” He softened his tone. “But sometimes I still think I should have been able to stop it.”

“No. The only people who could have stopped it are the ones who did it. They could have turned back that day. They didn't.”

“All for power. Fools. Power is an empty thing.”

“Not if you use it right.”

“And spare few do. Power, the lust of it, is why you're here and not at home. Why you have to guard Alexander. Because of people who will do anything to get it.”

“So it's the ones who don't want it who do best with it. That's why you're such a good leader, Zahir.”

“And what about you, Katharine the Great?” She arched her brow at the nickname and he pressed on. “What about you and all the responsibility you take on? Is it your job to fix everyone?”

“Yes. Maybe. I don't know what else to do. Unlike you, I do feel called to rule. And yet I can't. I never will. I have to ... do something. Find a way to ... matter. And if I fix things to accomplish it, then okay. I'll be the one to fix things.”

He looked at her for a long time, his dark eyes assessing her, causing prickles of heat to fire beneath her skin, making her want to close the gap between them, then share her warmth. Because he looked cold, and she wanted so badly to make the cold go away for him.

“You do not need to fix me,” he said, his voice flat.

Suddenly she realized she didn’t know how. She offered him platitudes. They were even true, but they weren’t ... enough. She’d been taught to lead with her head, and it wasn’t enough with Zahir. She wanted to put a bandage on it and call it better, when she doubted if that were even possible.

She looked at him standing there, a warrior, even if he was a warrior scarred by battle. The scars inside were so much worse than the ones that covered his skin. And she had the swirling, helpless sensation of knowing she wouldn’t be enough for him. That she would never be able to reach him.

“It was easier today,” Zahir said, entering the library.

Katharine set her book aside and treated him to one of her easy smiles, a sight he’d become more accustomed to than he should have. More than he’d like to admit.

“I’m glad.”

The drive into town today had been easier. They had been getting progressively so. The touch of Katharine’s hand, her face, they anchored him. Kept him in the present. Ironic since he had attributed the flashbacks to her, to his losing control.

The wedding was another matter. Hundreds of people with their eyes trained on them, the chance for him to either emerge in triumph, or humiliate his people. His family name. It was hard to explain, even to himself, what he thought might happen in that situation. The possibility of lost time, a loss of control, with an audience, was more terrifying and more likely than the chance of another attack.

And that he had control over. At least he was finding he did. That there were touchstones he could reach out to. That Katharine’s voice could keep the gates that held back the memories locked up tight. That there were things other than the exhausting, all-consuming use of his self-will to keep himself from experiencing them in crowded spaces.

“The wedding will be easy,” he said.

“Easy?” She pushed up out of the chair and stood, arms folded. He allowed himself a tour of her curves, welcomed the tightening of lust in his gut. “Weddings are never easy, no matter what the circumstances.”

“I thought you were trying to make me feel better about all this.”

“I’m just trying to get us through,” she said.

“A lofty goal.”

“I think it’s all any engaged couple can hope for.”

“You may have a point there,” he said. “Although my first engagement was brief.”

“Oh ... Amarah.”

The venom in her tone amused him. “Amarah wasn’t evil.”

“I can’t imagine her as anything else,” she said. “She should have stayed with you.”

“So you didn’t end up having to deal with me?”

“No. Because she made a promise to you.”

He gritted his teeth, hating to tell the story, yet feeling he had to. So she could understand. “You remember how I was the first time in the market.” She nodded. “I was like that all the time after. Moments of lucidity followed by endless screaming, raging. I was in pain, and the medication I was given to manage either made me sleep or made reality become blurred. I was not the man she knew. I didn’t even look like the man she knew. The skin on my face was so badly burned I wasn’t recognizable. And for a while they thought my mind was gone, too. I thought it was. There was so much grief. So much pain everywhere, inside of me, my skin felt like it was still on fire. And when I started to shut it down, my memories, my emotions, then I could function. Then I could learn to walk, learn to deal with losing the vision in my eye. How could I have asked her to stay? How could I have asked her to live with the Beast?”

“You aren’t ... “

"I was. Then especially." He had never spoken these words to anyone. Never told the whole truth of it. But he wanted her to know.

Her green eyes were filled with pain. Not pity. Nothing so condescending. It was as though she felt what he'd felt. As though she shared in it. "How did you even go on, though? To lose your family ... and then her?"

"I had Hajar. And I knew that I had to protect my people. That it was left to me. And as much as I am not a ruler ... I had to do what I could. I started with homeland security, moved into hospitals for children who had been victims of attacks. We treat children from all over the world for free. Of course to support that I had to work on new ways of bringing revenue in. It's kept me going."

"How can you think you aren't meant to be a ruler, Zahir? Your people ... "

"Are afraid of me."

"Maybe because you haven't shown them who you really are."

She said it with such earnest sweetness, as though she truly believed there was something in him worth valuing, even after his admission of how ... dark and empty he was inside. Maybe she just didn't understand. He'd been told that could be part of the PTSD, too. The absence of emotion. But it didn't go away. Other things had gotten better, but the blank void inside him remained. And knowing that it might have a medical cause did nothing to make it less acute.

He looked at her, studied the way she looked at him. And he longed to change it. He turned away from her. "So I have been preparing to deal with the crowd. Is there anything else?"

"We ... we'll have to dance. We don't have to dance, actually. If your leg ... "

His stomach tightened. He'd been damned if he'd take the easy way, the handicap or whatever it was she was offering. "I thought we had to."

"Not if you ... I don't want to ... "

"You told me you're not fragile. Neither am I," he said. "I used to dance. I didn't take lessons or anything, but especially during my university years in Europe, I danced quite a bit." Not that he'd enjoyed it for its own sake. It had been more of a pickup technique. But it had worked.

"That surprises me."

"It shouldn't. Women like to dance and I always liked women."

"And they liked you."

"It seems another lifetime ago, but if I can ride a horse, I'm certain I can dance. Unless you don't want to dance with a man who might limp through the steps."

She frowned. "That's not it. I don't want to tax you, I ... "

A shot of competitiveness sent a spark of adrenaline through him. "*Latifa*, you are welcome to try to tax me. I doubt you will be able to."

A stubborn spark lit her eye, an answer to his challenge. Good. He wanted her to challenge him. To see him as a man, and not her patient. "I'd like to see some of these dancing skills," she said.

"Not up to par with what you're used to, I'm certain. But I know I still can."

He held out his hand and she simply stared at it. "I'm not really used to anything. I haven't done a lot of dancing."

"That surprises me."

"Why?"

"You're a beautiful woman."

Katharine cleared her throat and looked away, the compliment making her feel self-conscious. "Well, I am a woman who was promised to a sheikh in marriage. And who anticipated being used for another political union so ... I was never really encouraged to dance."

"And you need encouragement to do things? I thought you did as you pleased."

"I do what my father asks," she said quietly. "What makes him see some kind of value in me."

Zahir's eyebrows locked together, his expression fierce. He leaned in, cupping her chin and tilting her face up so that she had to look at him. "If he does not see the value in you, he is a blind fool. No, not even blind. I can't see out of one eye, and yet I see your value."

Katharine swallowed hard, her eyes riveted to his. "Do you?"

"You are the only person who has challenged me, on this side of the attack or the other. You have more tenacity than any man I have ever met."

"Same goes," she said, fighting to keep from crying, to keep from melting over the words he'd just spoken. They were balm on a wound she hadn't realized was so raw. "Now," she said, trying to change the topic before she dissolved, "dance with me."

Eyes trained on her, Zahir bent and picked up a flat remote from the side table, pointing it upward and hitting one of the buttons. Slow, sexy jazz guitar filled the air. Not what she expected against the Arabic backdrop, but maybe even more fitting because of that. Because none of this was what she expected.

Zahir advanced on her slowly, his black eyes on hers, his movements languid, despite the limp. He held out his hand and she took it, warmth flooding her when his fingers entwined with hers. He pulled her to him, her breasts meeting his chest, and he wound his other arm around her waist. For a moment she saw it, the playboy he'd been. The man who'd had women falling at his feet, into his bed.

It coupled with the other things she knew about him, the intensity of the trauma he'd undergone. How far he had come since. As sexy as he had been before the attacks, as attractive as he'd been when he'd been a playboy dancing his way through the clubs in Europe, she knew that Zahir couldn't touch the man he was now.

This Zahir possessed a fire. An intensity. He had clawed over every obstacle in his path. He had emerged with a strength and honor that made her feel so safe with him. That made her respect him in ways she'd never respected another human being.

And on top of all that, when he held her to the heat of his body, she felt a kind of desire she'd never even dreamed possible.

It made her shivery inside.

His movements weren't completely smooth, his limp impossible to disguise entirely. But he had rhythm, more naturally than she did. Then, as she'd told Zahir, she hadn't done a lot of dancing. This made her wish she had. Made her wish she'd pursued a little more than what duty asked of her.

This was a layer of life she'd never explored. She was starting to fear that there were many of them. Beneath that thin layer of what royal life offered her, there was so much more. A richness and depth she'd never yet reached.

She'd never been conscious of it before.

He moved his hand from her lower back, around to the curve of his hip, his fingers tightening there, gripping her. She looked up, met his dark gaze. She didn't want to turn away.

She tightened her arms around his neck, bringing herself in closer. Needing to be closer. Needing to simply be near him. Needing something even more than that, and not quite knowing how to get it.

This wasn't part of the plan. Any plan. Human touch, human warmth, was unfamiliar to her. And right now, Zahir was hot. And so very close.

She unclasped her hands and wove her fingers through his thick, black hair. A deep rumble echoed in his chest, his eyes hot on hers.

She slid her hand forward, up the side of his neck, cupping his cheek, his skin rough from stubble beneath her palm. She needed more. She needed closer. Needed to satisfy the empty well of longing that had opened up in her. A well she was afraid might be impossible to fill.

But she could try. She had to try.

She stretched up on her toes, pressing her lips lightly against his. It was like an electric shock, the current starting where their mouths met and skittering through her veins, sending a shot of adrenaline straight to her heart.

He was still beneath her lips, his fingers curling around the skirt of her dress, the material bunching in his fist. The rumble turned to a growl, low and feral. Sexy on a level she'd never imagined something like that could be.

Granted, her experience with men and kissing was limited. So limited it could almost be called nonexistent. Because she'd known that she would have to marry for her country. For many traditional leaders a virgin bride would be expected. It had been written into the contract hers and Malik's fathers had signed.

She wondered why she'd stood for that now. Why she'd calmly let them decree something like that. Something so personal and *hers*. Because it had seemed right then. Like she had to do the best thing for Austrich, and if that meant not ever having a real relationship of her choosing ...

She had done that. Sacrificed ever pursuing a man she was interested in because of a marriage contract drawn up six years ago.

The realization was obvious, but stunning. The sudden understanding of what personal, private things in her life had been controlled by those she trusted.

No one was making her do this. She wanted this.

She deepened the kiss, parting her lips and sliding her tongue over the outline of his top lip, over the slashing scar that ran through it. He shuddered beneath the touch, every muscle in his back shivering beneath her fingertips.

He tightened his hold on her, brought her tight against his body. She could feel his erection pressing firmly against her stomach. She broke the kiss to suck in a sharp breath and he took advantage, pressing a kiss to the hollow of her throat, the curve of her neck. Teeth nipping, his tongue soothing.

He moved his hands from her hips to her waist, his hold tight, but good. She loved the intensity of it, him clinging to her as though she was bringing him life, as though she were water in the desert.

He was to her. His touch, his mouth. It was heady, intoxicating, far beyond anything she'd ever imagined possible. It was like having a veil torn from her eyes, seeing everything clearly for the first time.

Seeing how little she'd truly felt in her life.

She turned her head and captured his mouth again on a rough moan that would have normally shocked her, embarrassed her. But it didn't. And it wasn't because his kiss made things fuzzy—far from it. It was all sharper, more defined. Raw and real and all the better for it.

It was all instinct and feeling, lust and need. He was devouring her and she was willing, more than.

He slid his hand down and gripped her thigh, his fingers wrapping around at the sensitive spot behind her knee. He pulled up gently, opening her to him, wrapping her leg around his hip. It brought the blunt head of his arousal against the bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs that was screaming for attentions, dying for satisfaction.

She rocked against him, following her instincts for once, leaving her head out of the equation.

This was about feeling. Not logic. Not duty. Not about pursuing worth.

She gave a slight growl of protest when he abandoned her mouth, and he laughed, pressing kisses to the side of her neck, her exposed collarbone.

"Zahir ... oh, Zahir," she whispered, tightening her hold on his shoulders, her nails digging into his muscled body.

He froze, pulling his head away, the expression on his face dazed, clouded. And then clarity returned.

He pushed away from her, his chest heaving. "Enough."

“Zahir ... “

“Why are you here, Katharine?”

“I ... I wanted to read so I came down after dinner and ... “

“No. Why are you here? In Hajar. With me.”

“Because of Alexander. Because ... because I need a husband to protect the throne of Austrich.”

“If not for that, would you have come?”

She shook her head. “No.” She spoke the word on a whisper, her entire body trembling.”

He looked at her for a moment, his eyes bottomless wells of ink. Flat and empty. Her stomach tightened in on itself, making her fight to keep upright.

He nodded curtly and turned and walked from the room, leaving her standing there, cold and more alone than she'd ever felt in her entire life.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHE wasn't used to saying the wrong thing. Or maybe she wasn't used to people showing their disapproval as openly. Unless of course it was from her father.

This, with Zahir, went way beyond disapproval, though. She'd hurt him. At least, she thought maybe she had. She wasn't certain that Zahir felt hurt anymore. She wasn't sure if there was anything behind that granite wall of his.

Oh, no, there's ... there's all that passion.

Just for moment, she'd seen Zahir as he'd been. Effortlessly seductive, charming and sensual. As he had been? He still had it. He'd all but turned her to mush.

But that was just physical. A kind of physical she wasn't used to. But she knew enough to know that men didn't really need emotion to get into the physical. She wasn't entirely certain she needed it, either, considering how she'd responded to him.

Not that she was entirely void of emotion where he was concerned.

She thought back to that day in the market, his eyes like a hunted, wounded animal until she'd touched him. And when they'd cleared, in that moment, something had shifted in her. And it had only kept on shifting. The oasis. The dance. The kiss.

Nothing like the few chaste kisses she'd shared with Malik. Theirs had been an attempt to find some passion between them, and she'd been certain that she could, but it hadn't been anything like being in Zahir's arms.

With him, she'd gone up in flames.

She still burned. She squirmed slightly in her reclining position on her plush bed, a slight sheen of sweat breaking out over her skin.

She could still feel the imprint of his hands on her, sliding over her curves, his tongue against hers. So sensual, in a way she hadn't imagined it could be. Her body felt overheated again, just like that. Just the thought of him.

Blinking hard, she turned her attention back to her tablet computer and swiped her fingers over the screen idly, flipping through a few more wedding gown designs. She wasn't certain it really mattered what she wore, but her usual dresser had sent her some amazing sketches, and it would be great publicity for him and the fashion designer who'd created them. So in that way, it sort of mattered.

She frowned. She was always doing that. Looking for the meaning in what she did. The weight. A way to make herself matter. She rolled over onto her stomach and pushed the tablet out of the way. She would just have Kevin pick one. Because she really didn't care. What did it matter anyway?

Zahir would rather not be having the wedding at all, and he wouldn't care if she walked down the aisle in clear tape and packing peanuts. So truly, the wedding gown was moot.

It didn't represent anything. A legal union that didn't go beyond the piece of paper they would both be signing. A different set of documents, another pair of signatures, and they'd be unmarried just as easily.

She'd leave the cake flavors and the canapés up to the wedding coordinator, too. Because it just didn't matter.

And it would matter even less if her groom couldn't stand there long enough for her to make it up the aisle. If a flashback hit him there and then and he was assaulted by the kind of fear she'd witnessed in his eyes before.

He'd been doing well. They hadn't taken a drive in a couple of days. Not since the kiss. But he had been doing well on them. His tension not as evident in his posture when they moved through crowded portions of the city.

If not for that, would you have come?

No.

The words repeated in her head over and over. Growing more and more acrid with each replaying. Of course, she'd had no other reason to come, but in that moment it had felt like a rejection to him.

It had been, but it had been to protect herself. Because she could so easily get lost in the kissing. In the passion and the desire, and forget that this was a temporary marriage. And that he wasn't able to feel emotion for her. That he would never want her in his bed night after night. That even if they gave in, the arrangement wouldn't last.

"I wouldn't want it to anyway," she said into the empty room.

She was headed to the light at the end of the tunnel. Except when she closed her eyes, she didn't really see a light anymore. She saw a man with bleak eyes and an obvious despair that seemed to reach deep into his soul.

"Katharine."

Zahir's deep, strong voice pulled her out of the fuzziness of her dreams and back into the stark reality of wakefulness. The afternoon sun was pouring through the window and spilling on the edge of her bed, where her hand was resting, steadily burning it to a bright pink.

She tugged it back and flexed her fingers. "Yes?" She turned to face him and her heart nearly stopped. He was just so powerful, his presence so full.

"Why is there an army of press at the door?" "I don't ... my father," she said, moving into a sitting position and scrubbing her hand over her face. "Such a good public showing, I'm sure, is important to him. A message sent to John. Letting him know that his hopes of gaining the throne are completely over."

She looked at Zahir, at the wild look in those dark eyes, and she felt a sharp stab of pain her stomach unlike anything she'd ever experienced. She wasn't helping here, that was for sure. She was dragging him into hell. For the sake of her own feelings of accomplishment?

No. This had been important. Real. John couldn't take the throne, and he couldn't be allowed to have influence over Alexander.

But the fact that Zahir had to get pushed into this ... She gritted her teeth. "We can tell them to go away." She watched him, his shoulders straight, his eyes glittering in the light. He slowly curled his fingers in, the tendons on the backs of his hands standing out, showing the extreme pressure he was putting on them, on his body. "No," he said, his voice hard.

"Then we can ignore them." She could picture it. They could go out the back. Ride to the Oasis. The Oasis of Hope. It could be their refuge. It was tempting, very tempting to just ride away from everything. But in her mind, she was with Zahir, not away from him.

"No. We will go and make a statement." He flicked a dismissive glance over her. "Make yourself up, and meet me in the front corridor in twenty minutes."

Katharine was in the entryway two minutes early, her hair pinned up, wearing a bright yellow dress with a thick white belt that cinched the waist in. It was sunny. Chipper, even. Maybe it would make her feel a little perkier. A little less like she was leading Zahir to the executioner.

Zahir walked in, clad in white linen pants and a sand-colored tunic that molded to his well-defined chest. He didn't go in for traditional dress, which didn't really surprise her. He wasn't the type to do something simply because it was what others had done before him.

His short dark hair looked like he'd simply combed it with his fingers. He hadn't tried too hard. In short, he looked like a man who didn't really want to be here.

But he'd come. And that was really what mattered. That was where the bravery was.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes?" she said, her voice hesitant.

"Better than that, Katharine."

"Yes. What exactly are we saying?"

“That we are getting married.” He turned and walked back to the door, his posture straight, the injury in his leg giving his gait an uneven rhythm.

Her heart swelled in her chest, so big it was nearly painful. She felt his effort in her, felt the strength it took him to walk with his head held high.

She had never seen a bigger accomplishment than she saw in those few steps from her side to the door.

Two of his security staff pushed the doors open and flanked them on their way out into the courtyard. The press was behind the gate, their cameras aimed at Zahir. There was a rapid clicking of shutters and she saw the faintest twitch in the muscles of Zahir’s face. But it was barely traceable. His expression remained mostly passive, his body stiff and straight.

“We don’t have to do this,” she said. “We can have a representative ... “

“I will not walk away. I am not a coward, Katharine, whatever else I might be.”

She nodded once and took three quick steps so that she was at his side.

“We will take three questions,” Zahir said, standing in front of the massive, wrought-iron gate, his arms folded over his chest. The questions wouldn’t matter, not to a media obsessed with seeing the Beast of Hajar, the man who had sequestered himself in the palace for so long, never having more than a blurred photograph taken of him since the attack that had shaken a nation.

“It’s true? You’re marrying Sheikh Malik’s fiancée, Princess Katharine?” One of the reporters in the back shouted the question over the roar of voices.

“No. She is not my brother’s fiancée. My brother is dead. I am marrying *my* fiancée.” He barked the words, and she saw a group of sweat beads forming on his brow. She stepped closer, running her fingertips down his arm, the rough hair tickling her skin.

She felt him relax slightly beneath her touch.

“When is the wedding?”

“Just over a month away. One more.”

“Princess Katharine! How is it to bed the Beast?”

His muscles locked beneath her hand. Anger burned in her stomach, threatened to boil over.

“I would not be so crass as to answer such a question,” she said. She felt a slight tremor run through the hard muscle on his forearm. “But I will say this, it is a loss to women that I expect, and will receive, fidelity from my husband. A great loss indeed.”

She felt some of the tension ease, at least she thought she did ... somehow. She felt it in her, an echo of his own emotion and stress.

“That’s all,” he said, taking her hand in his and lacing his fingers through hers. She followed him back, away from the gate and back into the cool sanctuary of the palace. When the heavy doors closed behind them, Zahir lifted his hand and ran it through his hair.

His fingers shook as he did it, the one real crack in his strength she’d witnessed.

The security guards faded into the background, gracefully making their exit without ever betraying that they’d seen any weakness in their ruler.

That left Katharine and Zahir standing alone in the corridor. She searched for words. Something about the lack of class some people exhibited. Or maybe a few foul names to call the reporter who’d dared to ask that question. Or a few foul names for her father. For putting them in this position, for exposing Zahir to the scandal hungry European press.

He turned to her and her words dried on her tongue, along with all of the moisture in her throat. Dark emotion blazed in his eyes, a fire, a hunger, that made an answering, heated ache begin to burn in her stomach.

She backed up a step, and he advanced, one step, then two, and she didn’t retreat again. He hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, her breasts crushed against his hard chest.

His kiss was a shock, no preliminaries, no hesitation. He simply took. And she took back. She wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him as he clung to her. His hands were rough on her hips, gripping her firmly, his blunt fingertips digging into her flesh.

He backed her up against the wall, pressing her flat against the surface. She released her hold on him, turned her hands and pressed her palms against the cool inlaid gold and onyx, trying to find purchase, something to keep her from sliding to the floor. He released her mouth and curved his head, pressing hot kisses to her neck, down to her collarbone.

Zahir let go of her hips and moved his hand to hers. She wove her fingers through his, his weight keeping her pinned to the wall. But she didn't feel trapped or frightened. She was with Zahir. And she was protected.

She felt the tension ebbing from his body, flooding away as his passion mounted. But it was replaced with intensity of a different kind. An entirely new kind of need.

And she felt it, too. Her body ached for him, with need of him.

"Zahir," she whispered.

He went stiff in her arms, his intake of breath swift and harsh. And just like last time, he jerked away, his eyes clouded with desire. His erection was obvious, thick and ready, pressing against the filmy layer of fabric that concealed his body from hers.

He stepped back from her, his chest moving up and down sharply, his expression hard. "When you say my name," he said, his voice rough. "I come back to myself."

She didn't know why he said it that way, as though it pained him. She had used it in the alley, had been able to shake him from the flashback that had held him in its iron grip.

"I don't ... "

"I do not want to come back to this body," he said, the words forced out of his throat. He turned and walked away, leaving her there, her arms still pressed against the wall as though he held her there.

Leaving her cold and hot and wanting more than she knew she would ever have.

Zahir wasn't a religious man. He never had been. Still, the habits of his people were ingrained in him, and drinking alcohol, especially to excess, had always been frowned upon by most in his culture. *He* had always frowned upon it.

He was tempted now. To drink everything away until it all faded from him. To find something to numb reality, to make it less ... real.

No. When reality faded, he lost time. He lost parts of himself. He saw that day. Had to watch it all play out from beginning to end.

Ebn el sharmoota.

He couldn't start down that path.

Instead, his thoughts turned to Katharine. He had been rough with her, worthy of his name. And yet she had given it all back to him. Her body so soft against his, soft but aggressive. Kissing her was anything but one-sided.

And she had been sweet. Five years without the touch of a woman. Without anything but the cold, clinical touch of doctors. But she was hot, her touch warm and so much more. Personal. It touched him beneath his skin, deep into him.

The attraction between them was electric. Beyond electric. It was a living thing, threatening to consume anything in its path.

And then she'd said his name. As she'd done that night in the study. As she'd done in the alleyway in the market. And it brought him back. Back from the abyss. Back from rapture.

Because he was Sheikh Zahir S'ad al Din, the Beast of Hajar. And she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his thirty-three years. Everything about her was stunning perfection and he ...

He was a monster. And it had little to do with his face.

Yet he lived. He lived in this shell of himself. No, he was not handicapped like he could have been. Limited vision and a limp were minor when compared to the fate of his family.

But he was not himself. He was hollow. He never moved on, and he never could. He felt nothing. Wanted nothing.

No. That's not true.

He wanted her. So much that the craving was nearly unbearable.

He tugged the tunic shirt off and discarded it, then stood, facing the bar. He could walk over there and get drunk. Wake up with a pounding headache and unsatisfied desire.

Or he could go and get the only thing he'd wanted in five long years.

Two things stopped him. Would she be with him out of pity? Be with him because she thought he'd changed the terms of the agreement? She was so determined for the marriage to go through he wouldn't be surprised. The other thing that stopped him was the fear of losing himself. When he kissed her, everything faded behind the red haze of passion. If he found release with her, if he allowed himself to be lost, he was not sure of what he might do.

He didn't know anymore, how much of him was the man, and how much was the beast.

He gritted his teeth. He might not be the man he had been, no, not even close. But he knew a woman's body. There were things he knew how to do very, very well. Tonight, he would give her every bit of that skill, pour all his desire into her needs.

And he would prove that he would not lose himself in the process. He would not be manipulated or used. He had the control, and he would show her.

Katharine flung the bedcovers back and stalked to the window. She was hot. And the desert wasn't to blame. The night air was cool and dry, and it was usually her favorite time in Hajar. But nothing could extinguish the flame that Zahir had lit inside her.

Nothing had been able to dampen it. The chilly shower she'd taken had only made her blood run nearer to the surface, had only made her more aware of all of the parts of her body. Tender, needy parts that wanted Zahir's rough, insistent hands on them. Without that sweet little yellow dress in the way.

She felt like her skin was too tight. Like she needed to shed it. At least shed her clothing. She arched against the silky camisole top she was wearing and the filmy fabric brushed over her nipples.

She sucked in a sharp breath. The slight abrasion of the fabric sent sensation arrowing down to the apex of her thighs, made inner muscles she had never been overly aware of tighten in response.

She took a handful of hair and twisted it around her hand, holding it up off her neck. It was damp with sweat and some of the coolness in the air finally made its way into her. Like the shower, it didn't help.

"Katharine."

She dropped her hair and let it fall down past her shoulders. Zahir was standing in the doorway, wearing nothing more than those pale linen pants, low on his narrow hips. Showing perfectly defined muscles, gorgeous bronzed skin.

He hid his imperfections in the shadows, and for a moment, it was easy to forget he had any. That made her feel strange. Like she was adrift in the sea without an anchor. Because without the scars—those marks that made him who he was—she didn't recognize him. It was only for a moment, but it was so strange and strong.

She moved nearer to him, breathed in a sharp breath when she saw the roughened side of his face.

"What are you doing here?"

"I am here to finish what should have been finished in the entryway today. What should have been finished last week in the study."

She drew in a shaky breath, just before his lips crashed down on hers. And then there was nothing beyond desperation. It clawed at her, tore at her stomach, creating a frenzied desire in her that seemed to possess her, drive her actions.

He slid his hand down to her backside, his palm resting on the tiny silk sleep shorts she was wearing, his heat burning through the thin fabric. Even that was too much. The barrier was too inhibiting.

“I’m here to show you that there are still ways I can put any man to shame.”

A tremor of desire spasmed in her and she wiggled against him. He locked his other arm around her waist, holding her still as he continued to kiss her, the strokes of his tongue slow and languorous against hers, then ferocious and hungry.

He moved his hand up, pushing her top up, making contact with her bare back. A short sound of pleasure escaped her lips.

“Good?” he asked against her mouth.

“Oh, yes.”

He took both hands and moved them up her waist, his thumbs curving beneath her breasts, so close and so far, teasing her, tormenting her. She arched, begging him, needing him to give her more.

He chuckled, ignored her offering as he continue to move his hands over parts of her body that shouldn’t have the power to send such erotic currents through her.

But they did. Her stomach, just below her belly button, to the top of the low waistband of her shorts, back up, thumbs skimming the plump flesh of her breasts without ever really touching them. Without ever satisfying the ache that burned within her.

He moved his hand to her back again, down so that both palms were flat on her backside. He pulled her into his body, let her feel the hard length of his erection pressing against her stomach. She rocked against him, seeking out any kind of satisfaction she could find, getting nothing but a tease.

And that only made her hotter, wetter, needier for more.

He knew it, too. He broke their kiss and looked at her, his eyes black in the dim light, his smile wicked, predatory. She was his prey, and he was clearly set on devouring her.

She shivered in anticipation. She had no problem with that scenario.

He lowered himself slowly, his lips soft on her neck, then the tip of tongue, gliding down between the valley of her breasts as his hands traveled upward, pushing her top up, his bare skin brushing her stomach, higher, to her breasts.

He went to his knees, pressed a hot kiss to her stomach. He fingered the edge of her camisole. “Assistance?”

She gripped the hem and pulled it up over her head, baring her upper body to him. She waited for embarrassment of some kind to hit, but it never did. She felt cocooned in the space, in the near darkness. It was their own place, and there simply wasn’t room for embarrassment in it.

He pushed her shorts down to her ankles and she stepped out of them, kicking them aside. She was completely naked now, and it was fine. More than fine.

He moved his hands over her bare hips, thighs, around to her butt. “You are incredible.” He pressed a kiss to her stomach again, tracing a line downward with the tip of his tongue. She moved her hands to his shoulders, holding on to him to keep from sinking into a puddle on the floor.

He teased her there, too. His tongue so close to the bundle of nerves that she knew was there just to send her over the edge into total, orgasmic bliss. He didn’t, though, even though she had no doubt he could with the slightest flick of his talented tongue. He simply teased, his tongue moving over tender skin, making her body shiver with delight.

He stood suddenly, pausing to look at her, that wicked smile, the most genuine show of emotion beyond anger that she’d seen, was still on his face.

“The bed,” he said.

And she knew it was an order. One she would gladly follow.

She walked backward, keeping her eyes locked with his, until the backs of her knees hit the edge of the mattress. She sat down, pushed herself backward. It put her in a vulnerable position, like a buffet spread out for a starving man.

He joined her on the bed, his hands moving over her curves as he kissed her mouth with ravenous need.

He cupped her breasts, teased her nipples, sending sparks of pleasure skittering through her veins. He moved his other hand between her thighs, pushing two fingers near her entrance gathering the moisture there and sliding it over to her clitoris.

The slick stimulation was so good, everything she'd been waiting for. She didn't bother to suppress the groan of pleasure that climbed her throat.

He leaned toward her, flicked his tongue over nipple, then laved it with a long, broad stroke. "Oh, Zahir."

She paused then, afraid that she'd make him stop. Afraid she'd ruined it again.

A dark intensity lit his eyes and he dipped his head again, sucking the tip of her breast deep into his mouth, then running his tongue around the edge of her nipple.

"Say it again," he said roughly.

She never thought to do anything but comply. "Zahir."

"Again," he said, kissing her stomach, beneath her belly button.

"Zahir."

He parted her thighs with his broad shoulders, his grip on her legs keeping her immobile. Keeping her just where he wanted her.

He stroked her aching flesh, rubbing the tips of his fingers over her that most sensitive part of her again.

He lowered his head and followed the same path his fingers had just taken with the flat of his tongue. So hot and slick, so much more intense than anything that had come before. He explored her, pleased her that way until she was certain she was going to have to shed her skin to find some relief from the tightening, spiraling sensation that made everything in her feel too large for her body.

He pushed one finger into her and stars exploded behind her eyelids, raining down on her, leaving little prickles of heat where they landed as wave after wave of pleasure moved in her, pulsing in time with her internal muscles.

She felt shell-shocked, numb and sensitized at the same time. Like it was too much and not enough.

Zahir moved up to lie beside her, caressing her face, stroking her hair, scattering kisses on her shoulder. His erection pressing hard and insistent against her hip.

"Now what?" she asked, making a move to cup his shaft.

He caught her hand in his, kissed her upturned palm. "More of the same."

He leaned in and kissed her mouth, and she started to melt again.

CHAPTER NINE

WHEN the last shudder of pleasure escaped her lips, Zahir stood from the bed. Katharine rolled to her side and watched him. He was still half-dressed, and physically unsatisfied, his erection evident, pressing against his pants.

"Come here," she said, more than ready for that next step. He'd brought her to orgasm three times, and it was time, not just for his pleasure, but for her to have him. She didn't know why, but it felt possessive. Like he would belong to her when she had him inside of her.

"I think that's enough, don't you? Not that I haven't enjoyed watching you take your pleasure."

"Come and get some of your own," she said, not entirely understanding his cryptic statement.

"I've had plenty of it this evening. Tasting you, touching you, that was pleasure enough."

"Zahir ... "

He turned away from her, the moonlight filtering through the window, catching the raised ridges of flesh that marred his back. "You are a virgin?"

"I ... at this point only a technicality."

"You should remain that way then."

"Isn't that up to me?" she asked, clutching the bedcovers to her bare breasts and pushing herself into a sitting position.

"And me. If I do not wish ... "

"You don't *wish* to be with me?" She looked down at the clear outline of his arousal. "I call foul on that."

"Tell me, is this virginity of yours a part of my marriage bargain?"

She felt heat creep into her cheeks. "More or less."

"Is that why you're still a virgin? Because you thought you might need it with Malik gone?"

"I ... It's complicated. But I would be lying if I said that had nothing to do with it." It was shaming to admit. She'd never truly imagined any man would question it. Royals tended to have that view of the world. A virgin bride was important, and her being able to qualify as royal bride material had always been essential. A part of her purpose. The biggest part.

It had been ingrained in her that it was the right thing. That it was one of her commodities.

The thought made her sick now. It wasn't something she dwelled on, not usually. Why would she? She hadn't exactly had suitors banging down her door and part of her had been afraid that, if she'd chosen to seek out relationships, it would make her father start looking for someone else to sell her to.

She'd been enjoying her reprieve too much to let it end. But when marriage to Zahir had come up as her best option for protecting Austrich, she'd been ready.

"What if you need it later?" he asked, his tone dark.

"I'll be divorced," she said. "No one will expect it."

Her throat tightened. Was she really doing this? All but begging the man to have sex with her? Was she really thinking of sleeping with him now, divorcing him and finding someone else later?

Rage shook her, mingling with a slow, rolling shiver of shame that seemed to start in her stomach and move through her limbs, making her feel weak. Angry. "Get out."

He inclined his head. "As you wish, *latifa*."

He turned and walked out. She wanted to call him back. So she could scream at him. So she could make love with him.

She lay back down and curled her knees into her chest. She'd never felt so out of place in her own body. A body that was still humming from his touch, still lit up with pleasure, from all he had done. And inside ... inside was raw. Tender and bleeding.

She thought back to the intensity she'd seen on his face when he'd first walked into the bedroom.

I'm here to show you that there are still ways I can put any man to shame.

He hadn't been here to prove it to her. He'd been proving it to himself. On the heels of the comment that journalist had made ... and then Katharine had defended him. His pride had been on the line and he'd used her body to restore it.

He'd given her pleasure, more than she'd ever imagined possible, but it hadn't been hers. It had been his. His retribution. His proof.

She pounded her fist on her pillow and let out a growl of frustration. She had been his therapy yet again. She had proven useful.

Earlier today she might have accepted that. She'd been helpful, after all. Worthwhile. But that wasn't what tonight had been for her. It wasn't what she wanted it to be. She hadn't been out to prove her worth, she'd been in it for herself. For the driving need that made her body ache and her heart race.

But she didn't want to be his bandage. She'd wanted to be his woman. His lover.

And now she was just convinced that there was truly nothing behind the rock wall he'd built around his soul. Nothing but darkness.

Avoidance, it turned out, was easy in the Hajari palace, as long as it was what Katharine wished.

Zahir had hardly seen her in the week and a half since the impromptu press conference. Since he'd come to her room and tortured himself by inches while he tasted and caressed her gorgeous, smooth body.

All he had been able to do was worship her perfection. Because he had not allowed himself to take. He had been too afraid. Of what might happen. Of what he might do or say. Of harming her in some way. Of what might happen if the rock-hard barrier of his control burst and all of the images came pouring through while he was at his most vulnerable.

He had not allowed himself to seek women out. Had not allowed himself to remember the kind of oblivion sex could bring, because oblivion was not kind to him anymore. It made him lose everything. He could not do that to her. Lose himself in her. He would not be a man if he were willing to do such a thing.

He might harm her in the worst case scenario, and in the best, she would find herself without that bargaining chip she had in her virginity.

A shiver of disgust ran through him. He didn't see it that way, but his barbarian ancestors certainly had. His father, it seemed, had too. He doubted Malik had cared one way or the other. His brother had had such a laid-back manner, such an open acceptance and ease to him.

He was not Malik. That was for certain. Katharine would have been better off with Malik. Or with him, if the attack hadn't happened. An ache spread through him, fierce, painful. It was the first time he'd allowed himself to think of what might have been if he and Katharine had been able to meet before the attack. If they had simply been a man and a woman.

"But that isn't what happened," he said into the empty space of his office.

And all of his reasons for stopping himself from having sex with her remained.

But his body was punishing him for it. He woke hard and aching in the middle of the night, his mind filled with visions of her pleasure-clouded eyes, full, parted lips reddened from kissing. That soft, curvy body. Perfect in every way, nothing to mar to her luscious beauty. The sound of her soft sighs filling his ears.

It was better than images of exploding grenades and the sounds of chaos and screaming.

The door to his office opened and he knew it was Katharine. Anyone else would have knocked. Katharine didn't behave like everyone else. She didn't bow and scrape and defer to his every command.

"We leave for Austrich tomorrow."

"I'm aware of that."

"Well, I thought we should formulate a plan." She eyed him as though it was his fault there wasn't one, her pert chin angled out, her lips pursed.

He put his palms flat on his desk and stood, leaning in slightly. Her scent caught him, so warm and inviting. "I am not the one who has been doing the avoiding."

Her mouth opened and closed, reminiscent of a goldfish. "I have not been avoiding you."

"Well, you haven't invaded my bedroom or my gym in nearly two weeks, and it's been the same amount of time since you've invaded my office. Not only that, but you haven't taken Lilah out for a ride. You've been hiding."

"I don't hide," she said stiffly.

"Don't you?" He looked at her haughty pose, at those steely-green eyes of hers. "You're hiding now. Behind this facade. Emotionless, forceful, but I know the real woman. I've held her in my arms while she came apart with her pleasure."

Color flooded her pale cheeks. "Just because you gave me an orgasm doesn't mean you know me."

"That's not why I know you."

He didn't know why he said it, why he pressed. Except that he wanted her to admit that there was something between them. That there was heat. That she was more than the uppity princess that had stormed his castle over a month ago.

Because she was. He was certain of it.

It should not matter. Whoever she is, she'll be gone when Alexander is of legal age. She'll never be yours.

And he didn't want her to be. It was a cruel joke, the mere thought of it. Because she was perfection. She was light and open and beneath that spine of steel, there was strength.

He was darkness. And he wanted to remain in the shadows. How could he do anything else when no one else involved in the attack was able to do anything? They were gone. They could never move on from it. Why should he? How could he? It seemed his duty, his responsibility, to cling to the memory, but it kept him apart.

"Why do you know me then?" she asked, her full lips turned down into a frown.

"Because ... you've given yourself to me."

It was true. She had. She was the image in his mind now, instead of grenades. When the crowd surrounded their town car in the market, he saw her face.

"I haven't given myself to you." She wrinkled her nose, as though the very idea disgusted her.

"I didn't seem so repellent to you the other night in your bed," he said, anger roaring through him immediately.

"That isn't what I mean! Obviously I don't ... Obviously I ... I don't belong to you."

"No, Katharine, you don't. You could never belong to any man. It is far too passive a place for you to be. And you are anything but passive."

"I don't know about that."

"I do. I have the internal battle scars to prove it. I simply meant you have taken time with me. Taken the time to try and ..." He didn't like the word *help*. It seemed weak to him. And yet he'd needed it. And she had given it. "You have helped me."

She looked down. "I needed to."

His chest felt tight. "So that I can make a show of being a strong Regent to your country?"

She nodded, the motion jerky. "Of course." She looked up, her green eyes wells of emotion so deep he could not see the end of them. And he didn't want to. "Remember that it's much colder in Austrich than it is here. The air is thinner, too."

"Naturally."

"What time do we leave tomorrow?"

"If we leave in the morning we should arrive with daylight left in Austrich. Eight o'clock?"

She forced a smile. "I guess coordinating wasn't all that complicated."

Maybe it wasn't. But everything else was. Zahir wasn't the kind of man who did complicated. Everything in his life was simple. Get out of bed, get through the day, try to find some rest in the sleep that always tried to elude him.

Not since Katharine had come. And he could truly say he didn't want things back the way they were before she came.

But he wasn't sure he could stand six years of denying himself while she lived in the palace, as his wife. Untouchable and more tempting than any woman he had ever encountered.

Green trees, capped with pristine white snow blurred together as their private plane landed on the airstrip that was positioned behind the palace in Austrich's capital.

The deep saturation of color, after coming out of the washed-out landscape of Hajar was almost blinding in its intensity. Surreal as Katharine descended from the steps and onto the tarmac, her high-heeled shoe making contact with the icy ground.

It was never quiet in the desert. There was always the buzz of an insect or the sound of the wind skipping over the sand. But in Austrich, the mountains and trees offered insulation from noise, and brought a kind of silence that bordered on the surreal.

"You all right?" she asked, turning to face Zahir, who was looking at the sky, the gray, overcast sky that must seem completely foreign to him.

"Of course."

"You haven't ... I mean, I know you and Malik went to school in Europe, but you haven't traveled outside of Hajar in ... "

"Five years," he said, turning his focus to the craggy peaks that surrounded them.

"It's very different here. I remember the first time I went to Hajar I was in shock. I felt like I was right next to the sun."

He looked at her then, his dark eyes inscrutable. "You belong here."

"It's in my blood."

She knew he meant she didn't belong in Hajar. Didn't belong with him. As much as she knew it, she couldn't shake the feeling of foreignness that crept over her when she turned to face the castle, rising from the tall pine trees, towers gleaming in the faint glow of the sun.

This place, her home, it felt strange now. Stranger than it felt to be in Hajar.

"My father is expecting us." She turned and strode to the limo, waiting to drive them the thousand or so paces to the castle.

She allowed the chauffeur to open the door for her and before Zahir got in on his side she blew out a hard breath and fought with the urge to cry or scream or something. Something that would tear into Austrich's silence.

Something that would make her feel right.

She hadn't felt right since that night in her room. She wasn't entirely certain she'd felt right since the moment she'd walked into his office and proposed.

She closed her eyes. Had she even felt right before that? It had been a constant feeling, and she'd been used to it. But she wasn't certain it was the way she was supposed to feel. She was finding something else in Hajar, and she couldn't quite put a name to it.

The chill air from outside pierced the cocoon of warmth the limo offered, and Zahir slid inside beside her.

"Nice," she said, touching the dark sleeve of his wool jacket.

"I haven't had occasion to use it for quite a while."

"Not a lot of heavy coat weather in Hajar."

"No."

He turned his focus to the passing scenery and Katharine closed her eyes, trying to shut it all out. Far too soon, the car slowed and stopped in front of the main entrance of the palace.

"How is your father doing?" Zahir asked.

"I don't know," she said, her voice choked. She hadn't seen him in over a month and he wasn't the kind of man who would admit to any frailty.

Their respective doors were opened for them in unison and they both stepped back out into the cold. Snow was falling now, sprinkling over the wide expanse of green lawn that dominated the palace courtyard.

There was no reticence in Zahir's demeanor, but then, her father wasn't a crowd. He strode ahead of her, his steps long and confident, and she tried to match them. Tried to feed off his strength, because for some reason, hers seemed to be failing.

She'd been treating Zahir like the enemy, because he'd hurt her, but she needed an ally now. Desperately.

The castle in Austrich was completely unlike the palace in Hajar. There were domestic staff everywhere, administrative personnel, visiting members of parliament and the occasional tour group. It was always busy, and it was never empty.

There were always flowers. And the most awful, gaudy garlands made of fresh vines and carnations strung over the public portions of the palace. High-gloss white marble floors and bright white, spotless walls with the matte impression of *fleur de lis* impressed upon them.

It felt foreign now, too, like the whole setting of the country had when she'd first stepped onto the tarmac. She moved a little bit closer to Zahir.

"This way," she said, indicating which direction her father's office was in. He would be there, waiting to greet her. Anything else would be far too casual. And anyway, this was a matter of State. Her wedding was about alliances and protection. Nothing more.

It would do her well to remember that.

They stopped in front of the heavy, dark walnut door that stood out in sharp contrast to the white walls, and Katharine took a deep breath, one she'd hoped would fortify her. It didn't.

"Katharine." Zahir touched her hand. "Look at me."

She looked up into his eyes, at his handsome face.

You bring me back to myself.

That was how she felt, like he'd brought her back to herself. She took another breath, and this time, she did feel fortified.

"If you can storm my office like you did, you can certainly do this."

She nodded and cleared her throat, knocking on the door with as much authority as she could muster. He was right. She had stormed his office. And then she'd moved in. She could do this.

"Yes?" Her father's voice sounded thin coming through the door and it made her heart tighten. Because in so many ways she'd never truly thought of him as being human, mortal. But he was.

She pushed the door open and walked in. His office had always been different from the rest of the palace. Expansive, like everything else, but dark. Plush, navy blue carpets and dark wood paneling. He probably thought it gave it weight. It worked.

"Father, I would like to present Sheikh Zahir S'ad al Din, my future husband."

Her father stood, and she noticed how shrunken his frame had become, how much more gray was streaked through his hair. "Sheikh Zahir, I am glad you decided to honor the agreement. Your family was always trusted by mine."

It didn't escape Katharine's notice that it was Zahir her father addressed, not her.

Zahir nodded. "Katharine put forth a convincing argument."

Her father arched an eyebrow. "Did she?"

Katharine gritted her teeth, fought against the burning feeling of ... of injustice that was rolling through her. It was as though she wasn't in the room. And now wasn't the time to be angry with her father. Not when he was sick like he was. It wasn't the time to see, so clearly, just how unimportant she truly was.

"She did. I said no, in fact, but she put forth some very good points." Zahir looked at her, deferring to her. Her father looked even more surprised by that.

"It's true," she said, clearing her throat. And then she was lost for words, unable to find a way to say that she'd been brave or made good points in favor of the marriage. She just felt small. Insignificant. Everything she'd always feared she truly was.

Her father looked back at Zahir. "I can well imagine what might have convinced you."

Bile rose in Katharine's throat. "Excuse me, please, I need to ... It was good to see you, Father." She turned and walked out of the office, striding down the hall without pausing until she reached a segment of corridor that she knew was most likely to be vacant.

She leaned against the wall and took a breath, trying to undo the knot of pain that had gripped her heart.

How had she never realized? How had she never truly known just how little her father thought of her? She'd known he didn't think she was capable of ruling, that he'd imagined her less because she was a woman. But she hadn't realized that the quiet, insidious voice that whispered in her ear, told her how dangerously close she was to total insignificance, had been his voice. That it had been hidden, layered in every word he spoke.

Today it had been clear.

She heard heavy footsteps and she pushed away from the wall, schooling her face into a stoic expression. Zahir came around the corner, his left hand pressed against the wall, his jaw tight.

"I told him never to speak to you, or about you, that way again. Why didn't you tell me, Katharine?"

"Tell you what?"

"What a raging bastard the man is."

"I didn't ... I didn't really realize. Until he started insinuating that I used my ... body ... to talk you into marriage."

"You could walk away, you know." His dark eyes were intent on hers, and for a moment, she wanted to take him up on that. To take his hand and walk out. Walk away.

"I'm not doing this for him. I'm doing it for Alexander. For my people. But I'm not going to worry about proving myself by doing it. Not anymore." She bit her lip and shook her head. "I wanted him to see that I was ... that I could be just as important. But he never will."

"It's different with the heirs. They need confidence. They need to understand the weight of their duties. They need to be prepared to lead. The spares like us ... we are incidentals."

"Were you?"

He looked behind her. "My parents were good to me. When I saw them. Malik was my father's priority, and that is understandable in a sense."

"But *you're* the one ruling Hajar."

He swallowed. "Yes. And you're the one saving Austrich."

She smiled at him, the motion a near impossibility. "When I have children, I won't rank them like that. I refuse to do it."

"I'll never have children, so that isn't an issue."

"Never?"

"They would cry at the sight of me."

"They would love you."

The light in his eyes changed, a strange, deep sort of longing opening up behind it. It reached into her soul, tugged at her heart. In an instant, it was gone, his control returned. "I would not know how to love them."

The bleak pain in his eyes nearly broke her. "You could, Zahir. You would."

"You don't know what it's like in here." He tapped his chest. "Empty. Thank God."

"Because feeling hurts too much?"

“There’s hurt, and then there’s the feeling that your insides are being ripped into pieces and scattered throughout your body. Left to bleed, stay raw and blindingly painful forever. At some point ... you become dead to it. And to everything else. Good and bad. But anything is better than that kind of pain.”

Her heart felt like it was tearing, mirroring what he had described. She put her hand on her chest. “But you still have pain. It finds you still. I’ve seen it. Why deny yourself good things, Zahir?”

“How can I accept all the things in life, my family, our guards, the innocent bystanders who were simply caught in the crossfire, will never have a chance to have.” His eyes were flat again, the connection lost.

He turned like he was going to leave, and she blurted out a question to keep him there. “So, what did my father say when you told him off?”

“Nothing. He is, perhaps, still in there choking on his ire. But he will not push. He needs me, remember?”

“He’s really not bad, Zahir. He has old, set ideas and tunnel vision ambition. He’s done wonderful things for the country. As a ruler, he’s a man of great compassion. As a father ... not quite so much. But I respect all that he’s done here, and I support him in that wholly.”

“And I’m still going to help ensure that Austrich is protected.”

She couldn’t help but realize that he’d only named her country, and not his. That his priorities seemed to have shifted. People and not trade, right and not money.

But she suspected that truly, that had been in him from the beginning. He simply hadn’t been willing to reach in and find it.

Now he had.

CHAPTER TEN

THE snow relented for the day of the wedding, the sun shining down on the glistening blanket of white that covered the entire grounds of the castle.

Katharine adjusted her grip on her bouquet of pale, pink roses and closed her eyes, banishing the butterflies that were swirling around in her stomach.

It had been a long, hectic couple of weeks with Zahir and her father hashing out details, and Alexander sitting in on the meetings, trying to understand his place in a man's world when he was little more than a boy.

She knew sixteen wasn't really a child, and that a hundred years ago, he would have been placed straight on the throne. But he seemed so young. Much too young. It made her grateful for Zahir all over again.

The wedding, though, still terrified her.

She hadn't seen Zahir in twenty-four hours and she didn't know how he was feeling about it. About standing before a massive crowd of people. If his muscles were bound up by tension, as she'd witnessed on drives into town. If he would get lost in another flashback.

Suzette, her one bridesmaid, lifted the train of her dress and dropped it gently, letting the air catch hold of it so that it fanned over the ground, the sun shining through the window of the cathedral catching the delicate lace, the rays shining through the gossamer fabric.

"Totally gorgeous, Kat," she said.

Katharine sighed.

It was perfect. Perfect on the surface, at least.

And that's all that matters.

She turned to Suzette, the only person she could really count as a close friend. The American heiress had gone to the same boarding school Katharine had and they'd forged a bond. It was a bond that had loosened since adulthood, but if she ever needed anything, the chipper blonde was always willing to drop whatever she was doing and make sure she was there for her. And Katharine had always done the same for her.

"Suzette, is Zahir in there?" she asked, gesturing to the sanctuary, hoping the other woman had seen him at some point.

"I don't see why he wouldn't be," she said, straightening the top on her pale green gown.

Katharine sighed. "You're right. Of course. Prebridal nerves."

Suzette's eyes widened. "Not wedding night nerves, I hope. Because if so ... we need to have a talk after the ceremony."

Katharine huffed a laugh, her face heating as she recalled her night with Zahir. The way he'd made her feel, the decadent things he'd done. Yes, she was still a virgin on technicality, but from the cold comments she'd heard some women make about sex and past lovers, she had a feeling she had a better grasp on what was meant to pass between a man and a woman than some with ten times her experience.

"Not that," Katharine said. "Not in the least." Although, now that Suzette mentioned it, she wondered if it being their wedding night would mean anything to Zahir. If he would want ...

No. Likely not. He'd basically said he had no desire to sleep with her, a statement she didn't believe. But there was something behind it, she couldn't deny that.

"Just, actual vow-taking nerves," Katharine said. And nerves about whether or not her groom would do well beneath the pressure, with all those people crowded near him.

She pictured him, walking tall out of the palace of Hajar, going to meet the reporters at the gate. He was strong, her Zahir.

My Zahir? Yes. He sort of did feel like hers. Like a part of her. She couldn't explain it, and she didn't really want to. She didn't really want it to be true, either. Because that part of herself would have to be surgically removed when they parted in a few years' time. And if it was this bad now ...

So much for calming her nerves.

"Just a sec." Suzette walked in front of her and opened the heavy wooden door that led into the sanctuary, just enough to see in. She turned to face her and offered a wide smile and a thumbs-up.

Katharine offered a weak smile back, her stomach dropping into her toes when the music suddenly changed. It was showtime.

Zahir's fingertips felt cold, and he knew it wasn't due to the snow outside. The slow onset of panic was distinct. His heart rate increased, his muscles tightened, his stomach clamping down like a steel trap. And his fingers always grew numb. He didn't know why. He only knew it was far too familiar a feeling for his liking.

It was a small wedding, by royal standards, at Katharine's request. That had been out of deference to his issues, he was certain. Something that galled.

Still, small meant at least two hundred guests, filling the ancient stone sanctuary, along with the music of the strong quartet. It was loud. Packed. He could feel it all closing in.

A curvy little blonde in a spring-green dress began her walk down the aisle. She was Katharine's maid of honor; he nearly remembered being introduced to her the night before, although now, her name escaped him. It had all become very fuzzy. Everything seemed a little fuzzy.

He blinked hard, tried to ignore the metallic tang that coated his tongue. The fear that seemed to be slowly binding his muscle and sinew, making him feel frozen, stiff.

He was not a man given to prayer. But standing there, in a church, he felt it appropriate to send up a request. That he not do this here. He had wanted to do it all on his own strength, and yet it was proving impossible. He would take borrowed strength if he could use it to simply get through.

The sharp change in the music cut through the fuzzy edges of his mind, and he turned his focus to the doors that led from the sanctuary out into the foyer. They parted, and all of his focus zeroed in on the angel that moved through them.

An answer to his prayer.

Katharine looked as though she was floating, her strawberry-blond hair cascading over her shoulders, the frothy, lacy dress flowing and shimmering with each step she took. But that wasn't what held him captive.

It was her face. The same face that had brought him back in the marketplace. The same face he had watched alter beautifully as he gave her pleasure.

As Katharine came into view everything else faded away. It was as they had planned it, of course. But he had not imagined it would work quite so well.

He extended his hand, and she took it, and in an instant, he was warm again.

He leaned in. "You didn't have your father give you away."

She shook her head. "This was my decision," she whispered.

Good for her. Katharine was running on extra strength today, too, it seemed.

The priest spoke in Latin, and at length. And Zahir didn't know the meaning of the entire ceremony. But he did know what the bejeweled goblets filled with sand placed near the back of the stage meant. A Hajari tradition, one that he had not thought would be included here.

The vows were spoken in each of their native languages, and before the priest made his pronouncement, he gestured to the two chalices of sand. One filled with white sand, one golden brown, set on either side of a clear glass vase.

"Now Sheikh Zahir and Princess Katharine have chosen to seal their vows with a tradition from the Sheikh's homeland," he said, his voice thinner in English, his tone disdainful.

"What is this?" Katharine whispered.

“A Hajari tradition. Your father must have seen fit to add this.” Because he’d known what it meant. An unobtrusive reminder, perhaps, that the union was meant to be permanent.

Keeping her hand in his, he led her to the table, where they knelt on velvet cushions.

“What does it mean?” she asked, keeping her voice hushed.

He picked up both cups, and handed the one filled with white sand to Katharine. “The sand represents us, as individuals. Today, we do not leave here as two, but one.”

He tipped his cup over the vase and poured a measured amount inside it. “Now you,” he said.

Katharine did the same, and then he repeated the motion until they had emptied the cups, layering the sand into the vase.

“You are still there,” he said, pointing to a bright streak of sand. “As am I. But, just like the sand, we will be impossible to separate. We are bonded together.”

Katharine’s green eyes looked glassy, her mouth dropped in shock. He leaned in and put his lips near her ear. “I’m sorry. I did not know this would be a part of the service.”

She nodded stiffly. “It’s ... it’s all right.”

He led her back over to where the priest stood, her hand trembling in his. The priest made his pronouncement, and gave the command to kiss the bride. A command Zahir was more than happy to follow. Just for another taste, brief though it would be.

He leaned in slowly, watched her green eyes flutter closed as he descended. He pressed a soft kiss against plump, tender lips. The sensation was enough to take him out at the knees. Explosive in every way. Incredible.

And it was only a hint of the kind of pleasure her body offered. He knew, because he’d experienced much deeper torture at her hands. Rather, his own. She had been ready. And he had been forced to deny them both.

She pressed her mouth more firmly against his and he simply rested there for a moment, caught up in her touch. Just a moment of warmth. Of being surrounded by her.

Then he pulled away, his hand still joined with hers and the guests clapped for them as the priest introduced them as a married couple for the first time. He thought he felt Katharine’s fingers tighten on his, almost imperceptibly.

They walked down the aisle together, the crowd a blur as they passed by. And he kept his eyes on Katharine, and his mind firmly in the present.

“Ready?” Zahir asked, his hand extended.

The crowd had made a half circle in the massive ballroom, preparing for the bride and groom dance.

The reception had been a blur from the moment they’d walked in, so many well-wishers, and cake, and a fountain that was spraying punch. It was everything a wedding should be. Except real.

The sand had thrown her. It had been so symbolic, the depth of it a shock she hadn’t anticipated. It was how marriage should be. Their own color, their own individuality still on show, yet entwined with their partner’s. There would be no easy way to separate the sand, and it had struck her then, how hard it would be to separate herself from Zahir.

But she would have to. As long as she remembered that she would be fine. She just couldn’t forget. The sand was just a thing. Just sand. It wasn’t them.

But in that moment ...

“Yes, I’m ready.”

They moved into the open area that had been cleared for the dance, and Zahir drew her into his body, one arm banded across her waist.

They had a live orchestra this time instead of the slow, sensual music they’d danced to in the library at the palace. But the guitar music was what she heard in her head. She felt everything recede.

Oh, so dangerous. So stupid. And yet, she found she couldn’t fight it. Didn’t want to.

He leaned in, his cheek pressed against hers, the skin rough on hers. But it felt right. It felt like Zahir.

"We made it through," he said, his voice soft, his breath hot against her neck.

"You did it," she whispered.

"I looked at you."

They didn't speak again, they simply moved with the music while Katharine fought the overwhelming tide of emotion threatening to consume her.

She could feel his heart beating against hers, matching hers. She'd never felt so close to anyone before. Had never wanted so badly to hold someone to her. And she didn't want to know what that meant.

So she just wouldn't think. Not now.

When the song ended, Zahir released her. It happened far too soon. If it were possible to freeze a moment, she would have done it with that one. In that moment, the desire to be in his arms was simple. She had accomplished what she'd needed to accomplish as far as the marriage went and she could rest. And be happy for a moment.

"I need a drink," she said, as they walked back off the floor. "You?"

"I am ready to be done." The way he said it, the look in his dark eyes ... she wondered if he wanted to claim his wedding night. In the most traditional sense of the word.

Her pulse pounded, her blood turning fizzy in her veins. And if he did? If he did, she didn't think she'd refuse him. Quite the opposite. He was in her already, mingled in who she was, like the grains of sand in the vase.

"Just ... just a moment." She turned and headed to the punch table, giving a finger wave to a cluster of women she'd gone to school with.

"Katharine?" One of the women, Katharine couldn't remember her name, stepped to the forefront of the group. "You aren't going to live in Hajar now, are you?"

Katharine frowned. "Of course I am. We'll still be here sometimes, of course." Especially if Zahir had to fulfill his duties as Regent. Most of it could be done remotely, especially with parliament in the solid shape it was in. But there would be traveling.

The other woman narrowed her eyes. "Won't you have to wear a veil there?"

Katharine shook her head. "No. Women aren't veiled in Hajar."

One of the women in the back, Ann, Katharine remembered, because she'd always been awful, snorted a laugh. "It's not the *women* who need to be veiled, though, is it?"

Katharine stiffened, anger rolling through her. Anger and the need to strike out, to wound as she was wounded. Because the comment seemed aimed at her heart.

Everything in her itched to slap the smug smile from the other woman's face. But with press everywhere, it would be the slap heard around Europe. And while part of her found that very attractive, she knew it would end up being much more trouble than it was worth.

"If that's your assessment it's clear you don't know what true sex appeal is, Ann," she said, keeping her voice as soft and even in tone as possible. "And my husband has it."

"In that case," Ann returned, "you had better hope you have it in you to hold on to him. I remember how you were in school. Trust me, sweetheart, rule following isn't sexy. And a shy little virgin like yourself, and no point pretending you aren't, is hardly going to hold the interest of a man who's done so much ... living."

A sharp slug of anger and insecurity jabbed at her. She knew Ann was just taking strips off her because it was what Ann did, but that didn't erase the small amount of damage her remarks had done. It didn't help that Zahir didn't seem to have too hard a time resisting her. That he'd been in bed with her, toying with her body, bringing her past the point of reason and control, and then simply walked away hadn't been the biggest ego boost anyway.

Ann's eyes widened and Katharine turned sharply, into the warmth of Zahir's solid chest. His fingers curled into her arms, pulling her more tightly against him, the strength in his touch reminiscent of the day in the market.

She looked into his eyes, black wells of anger, and she knew he was still with her. But he was not happy.

And judging by the wide-eyed fear registering on Ann's face, she knew it.

"If you have upset my bride, I will have no choice but to see you out. And I will not bother to send for the guards," he said, his voice hard.

"It's fine, Zahir," Katharine said, unaccustomed to having someone stand up for her. It touched her, though, made her feel warm. Drew out the venom from Ann's insult.

"Ready, *latifa*?" he asked, the darkness radiating from him in palpable waves.

"More than," she said, caressing his arm lightly before following him out of the knot of people.

When the guests noticed they were leaving, there was major fanfare, and they lined the sides of the ballroom, flinging white petals onto the marble floors. A pathway for the bride and groom, a symbol of new beginnings.

As they made their way out of the massive room she felt Zahir tensing beside her, felt the burning heat of his rage as it warmed his skin.

When the heavy doors closed behind them, Zahir ran his hands over his short dark hair and stood still for a moment, not looking at her, before he turned and stormed out the door that led into the gardens.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.