

∞ PROLOGUE ∞

The man took her elbow gently and guided her. It was a polite gesture, but there was no choice; Ana would go wherever he chose to lead her because she was his prisoner, in his fortress amidst his private army. This time there were no Elim to rescue her, nor any of Boaz's elite mute guard ... and she was a long, long way from Spur Lazar's protection.

Ana was alone for the first time in her life since she had been found as a newborn in the desert after a Samazen storm.

She had been here, by her reckoning, for perhaps three moons. She couldn't be sure, for her existence had been solitary. She was kept in a locked chamber that was positioned high within some sort of fortress. The monotony of hot, stifling days and freezing nights was interrupted only by the twice-daily delivery of simple but surprisingly nourishing meals and fresh water and the removal of her waste pail. Treatment had been mostly silent, broken solely by her barrage of questions at the various robed men who took care of her needs. The men were rotated constantly, she assumed to ensure that no relationship developed between prisoner and keeper. A brief but courteous enquiry as to her health was a daily ritual, and Ana had been tempted to claim she was ill in the hope of a change of scenery or to engage any one of her captors in conversation beyond the cursory question. But experience had taught her that lying rarely led to the desired outcome, and so she erred on the side

of caution, leaving alone the minions and waiting instead for the man who had taken her captive, their leader, to make his move.

He finally had on this day, fetching her himself, leading her silently through a maze of chambers and corridors and along many sets of stairs until they emerged into the searing heat of the afternoon. She was blinded by the intense light and dizzied by the sudden inhalation of fresh air and high temperature. Her gloomy chamber with its tiniest of windows, affording her the barest of draughts, had its advantage in being cool by comparison.

Blinking beneath the ferocity of the sun's brightness, Ana was struck by the irony of her situation. Isn't this what she had craved? Wasn't the tantalising lure of freedom a drug for her . . . something she had risked her life for in the past? And yet here she was, free from all palace constraints for the first time in more than a year of her young life, and she was trembling with fear as the mysterious Arafanz led her out across the rooftop of his fortress.

She felt the dry caress of the breathless desert heat kiss her grubbied skin but she knew that it did not love her, did not love anyone. The desert's treacherous welcome was one of death if you were naive or careless, as the royal party had surely been when Arafanz and his men had stormed their camp. She realised now that she had always been their target — Arafanz and his Razaqin had intended to abduct her; the killing and the humiliation of the royal party and especially Spur Lazar had been nothing more than sport. She remembered how many of Arafanz's own men had died; from her recollection of that night he had not so much as blinked in sympathy. Clearly this man was ruthless, so there would be no escape, not into this seemingly endless panorama of parched emptiness.

It was as if he could read her thoughts. 'Look out here, Ana,' he said in flawless Percherese, his free arm sweeping in a wide arc to encompass the wilderness stretching out before them. 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

'It is. The desert frightens many but not me.'

'That is because you belong to it.'

Despite her anxiety she liked the sound of that sentiment. 'I was born in the desert, the day of a Samazen, I'm told.'

'Yes, I'm aware of your story. It wasn't just any day, though, Ana. It was Midsummer's Day. An auspicious day.'

'Because of the superstitions surrounding it, you mean?'

'They are not idle. That is the day when powerful magics are rampant, can leak through one world into another.'

She nodded, distant memories surfacing. 'Where the sea meets the land it is most potent, I believe.'

'The edge of worlds,' Arafanz said, his voice heavy with portent. Then his tone lightened and he swept a hand aloft. 'Isn't this what you have hungered after for so long?'

'I have longed for freedom, this is true,' she said with care, tearing her gaze from the landscape to focus on the narrow, softly lined face of her captor. He was hard to age behind that closely shorn beard but a glance at his unblemished hands told her he was likely of an age with Lazar, perhaps slightly older. A bead of perspiration slipped down her back and she couldn't be sure whether it was only the heat that provoked it. Fear was coursing through her.

His gaze, dark and rarely still, briefly danced upon her before moving to another point over her shoulder, returning to her in an instant. 'I give you this,' he said. 'I have freed you from the entrapment of the corrupt royals and their debauched ways.'

'But I am not free, sir,' she said. 'I am as much your prisoner as I was of the palace.'

'No-one here will force you to lie down with a man.'

'But you do oppose my will.'

'I ask only your obedience.'

'Then are you so different from Zar Boaz, sir? He asks nothing more from me.'

Beneath the beard a smile ghosted across his surprisingly generous mouth and she was struck instantly by how that small

gesture changed his intense expression from severe to almost welcoming ... almost. 'Perhaps not, except that I win absolute loyalty from those who surround me, unlike your precious Zar.'

'He is not mine, although we are married. He belongs to his people and they are all loyal.'

'To the death?'

'Who can say until they face it?'

Now the creases in his face deepened as genuine amusement touched his restless gaze. 'Well done, Ana. That was truly the right answer. Come. I wish to show you something.' He walked her to the very edge of the rooftop and Ana looked down, not to the sand as she expected, but to another rocky roof below. Twenty or so men were assembled in neat, silent rows. They wore the dark robes she remembered and, as before, she could not see their faces. 'These are some of my loyal subjects,' Arafanz said.

Ana remained quiet but felt a fresh tingle of fear climb up her spine.

'I wish to demonstrate what true loyalty is,' Arafanz continued. 'Choose one of these men, Ana.'

'Why?' Her voice shook.

He shrugged. 'I want to explain something.'

'Can you not simply tell me?'

He gave a short laugh. 'I was told you were clever with words.'

Ana swallowed, hoping to steady her voice. 'Forgive me, sir, I wish only to understand.'

His eyes glittered now, their gaze finally resting upon her, turning into an intense, unsettling stare. 'I want you to understand in a way only something visual can explain. Choose one of these men, Ana.'

She shook her head slowly. 'I cannot.'

'Give me a reason.'

Ana knew there was no rational explanation, for hers was an irrational fear. She gave an excuse instead. 'I do not know them. I cannot even see them.'

‘Would it make it easier if you did or if you could look them in the eye?’ Aranfanz didn’t wait for her answer, immediately barking a harsh order in an ancient language that Ana recognised and it chilled her despite the heat.

She watched the men instantly move at his command, waiting in awkward silence during the minute or so that it took before the men emerged onto the same rooftop that she and Aranfanz shared, arranging themselves once again in straight rows.

‘I will have them take off their headdresses.’

‘No. Do not.’

‘But you said —’

‘What do you want of me?’

‘I want you to choose a man,’ he said smoothly, his tone untroubled by her capriciousness. ‘Walk towards one, pick one. He will thank you for it, I assure you.’

Ana felt hope flare inside. She looked away from Aranfanz to the gathered men, anonymous behind their head-to-toe robes. She moved hesitantly.

‘Take your time, walk amongst them. One will call to you for one reason or another,’ he urged. ‘The choice is yours alone.’

Did she hear cunning in his voice? It mattered not; she was on a path now from which she couldn’t step aside. If she refused she was sure there would be recriminations — Salmeo had taught her this, if nothing else — and it was clear she was not in a position to deny Aranfanz anything.

She passed down two of the rows of men before a flash of brightness caught her notice, sunlight glinting off a curved blade at his hip as one of the men lifted his chin, shifted position at her approach. In that small movement he had drawn her attention, unwittingly committed himself to her.

Ana stood before him, stared up into dark eyes that did not see her, would not look at her, and with a heart filled with dread she raised her hand and laid it against his hard chest, hoping somehow

to reach his heart through her touch. 'I choose you,' she said, feeling faint with fright.

'Return to my side, Ana,' Arafanz said and she did as she was asked. He swapped to the ancient language. 'Are you prepared?' he said to the chosen one, his voice taking on a more sonorous timbre.

'I am, Master,' the man answered.

'Show yourself, then!'

The man emerged from the rows and peeled away the linens that covered his face and body. He undressed to billowy dark pants and soft boots. His hair was tied loosely back, accentuating a face whose youth was not very well disguised behind a sparse moustache. He displayed proudly his lean, hard body, burnished from the sun.

He undid the scimitar from his side and handed it to Arafanz with a reverential bow. 'What is your command?'

'Do you see that blade, wedged between those rocks in the distance?'

The man squinted slightly to pick out the weapon and Ana swallowed hard, her legs shaking as she too followed his line of sight to where Arafanz had pointed. She could see the blade winking at them ominously.

'I do,' the man said.

'Good. I wish you to impale yourself upon it.'

'It is done, Master,' the man said, turning briefly towards Ana and bowing. 'Thank you,' he said before striding away across the rooftop from where the men had first come.

'What?' Ana screamed, using the ancient tongue. 'He's to kill himself?'

Arafanz did not look at her. 'I am impressed that you understand. We shall discuss that later. Now, watch, Ana.'

'No! This is madness.' She ran to her captor, beat at his chest. 'Stop this! You cannot do this.'

Arafanz was unmoved. She could feel how strong and wiry he

was beneath her fists. He turned to her. 'As he said, it is done. And as I promised you, he knows only gratitude to you. Look.'

Ana wheeled around, desperately wishing she could shield her eyes but knowing that respect was the least she could give this man she had chosen to give his life. She watched, nausea threatening to overwhelm her, as she saw the man running blindly at the blade, howling a war cry not dissimilar to a chant of prayer. His devotion to Arafanz became complete as he thrust himself as hard as he could at the vicious blade, its tip expertly parting flesh, bone, sinew and organs in its cruel passage through his body, finally breaking through the skin of his strong, flawlessly sculpted back.

The man's body halted against the boulders but it didn't rest, trembling and twitching for an agonising few moments until his brain accepted that his heart had stopped beating. The initial burst of blood slowed to a trickle, its stain bright against the golden sand as the young man slumped forward.

Ana choked back a sob. 'What was his name?'

'What does it matter?' Arafanz replied. 'He is happy. He has gone to Glory.'

'Glory?' The despair was still evident on her pale, unveiled face, despite her contemptuous tone. 'Glory, did you say? I think not, *Master*.' Ana loaded his title with every ounce of derision she could pull together. 'I think he has gone nowhere but to hell, on your orders. There he is, heaped against the unforgiving rock. You make a mockery of his young, beautiful life, whoever he was.' She was breathing hard and knew she must sound as if she were babbling.

Calmly he turned to her. 'He didn't think so.'

'How would you —'

'Choose another!'

Ana stared at him, mouth agape. She could feel a ringing in her ears and the blood pounding through her head. She glanced over at the corpse. The man's helplessness — and courage in the face of it — reminded her of Lazar after his whipping and she felt rage rise

within her, quashing her fear and steadying her nerves. She turned back to Arafanz. 'No. I refuse you.'

'Then you shall die.'

Her courage intensified as she laughed at his threat. 'Do it!' Ana had been prepared to die for many moons. The thought of it did not scare her. But even as she baited him, she knew in her heart that Arafanz had not brought her to this place, wreaked so much havoc, revealed himself to the royals and to Lazar, simply to kill her. He could have done that back at the camp — he could have killed them all.

'I had heard you have spine.'

'From whom?'

'Someone I trust. Someone who walks the corridors of the Stone Palace but goes unnoticed.'

Ana's mind raced. Who could that be? Mentally dismissing it, she declared, 'Then if this person advises you truly, you will know that Spur Lazar —'

'I know all about Spur Lazar, Ana. And you should know that his life was never in danger. Shall I tell you why? Because he was always going to make the decision he did. I knew that; that's how well I know him.'

Her thoughts fled to weeks previous when she had lain in the warmed sand of the dunes with Lazar, when they had made love and bound themselves to one another in a way no other vow or act of marriage could. She bristled at her captor's presumptuousness. 'You have all the answers, and all the power over me. But I will not bend to your will. Kill me now as you threatened.'

Unfazed by her scorn, he fell back into his other tongue, the ancient one he had used earlier. 'It's true, my threat was empty but there is still a point to be made. You!' he said, pointing at a man. 'Throw yourself from the roof onto the rocks below. You,' he said to another, as the first man nodded and began preparing himself, 'swallow your blade.' To that man's companion he pointed. 'Kill the man to your right with your scimitar and then kill yourself. You!'

'Stop!' Ana screamed.

Arafanz did not so much as look her way as he continued barking orders; within moments she was witness to several men's death, either by suicide or by a companion's hand. And each man, before his passing, bowed reverently to Arafanz and thanked him for the opportunity to offer sacrifice.

By the time the last of the chosen warriors took his final, rasping breath, Ana had withdrawn into a squatting position, her eyes closed tightly, her hands pressed to her ears to shut out the groans of death, tears trickling down her cheeks as she made an involuntary soothing sound to herself in a vain attempt to block out the hideous noise of swords being drawn, of Arafanz's voice hurling sadistic new torments at his men. But she could not blot the tangy, harsh smell of spilled blood from her nostrils.

In her torment her mind fled from this place — as it had once before when she felt under siege. *Pez!* Her voice screamed in her head. But he did not answer and, remembering the dwarf's still body at the campsite, she wondered if he were dead. She tried once more calling his name but received only silence, causing her to weep harder.

How long Arafanz left her to her own comforts, she did not know, but finally she registered a soft whisper and then strong arms first cradled and then lifted her. She opened her eyes to realise she was in the embrace of one of his men and that the remaining warriors had been dismissed. As the man lifted her, the linen covering his face slipped aside momentarily and she recognized him.

'How —' she began, confused.

'He will see to your needs,' Arafanz said, gently stroking the hair from her damp cheeks. 'We shall talk again soon. But this is your home now — at least for a while until that babe you carry in your womb is born.'

Unseen midst the chaos of carnage, perched on a high point of the fortress, Iridor shared the horror and the revealing conversation.

To hear Ana screaming for him and to feel so helpless was almost more than he could bear, but to reveal himself now would be unwise. The only help he could provide was to remain unseen and take news of her back to Percheron. His only comfort lay in knowing that Lazar had survived the attack in the desert. Now it was left to be seen whether the Spur had got himself safely back to the city. Without him, surely they were lost.

Iridor had failed. He had failed everyone loyal to Lyana.

Silently, but heavy of heart, he lifted into the sky. It would be a long and perilous flight back but he had to find Lazar. As he turned east towards Percheron he began to pray, begging Lyana that the Spur had survived the desert itself.

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Herezah slapped away the ministrations of her slave. ‘Stop fussing! It’s hot enough without your feverish activity.’

The attendant was saved further criticism by the arrival of an Elim, who bowed. ‘Valide.’

‘What?’ Herezah’s brow creased with annoyance. ‘Can you not see I have taken to my bed?’

Annoyingly calm, the man simply blinked. ‘Grand Master Salmeo wishes to see you, Valide. May I show him in?’

‘Oh, do what you will. It’s like the bazaar here today anyway. I can see that I shall have no peace.’

The Elim withdrew and moments later the doorway was filled amply by the chief eunuch, giving his best gap-toothed smile.

‘Valide,’ he began, bowing more extravagantly than his size could comfortably permit. He’d brought her delicate ferlise blooms, fragile bells in the palest of mauves and pinks, found only in the alpine regions of the very far north.

She couldn’t imagine how he’d amassed so many. And they were beautiful but she wasn’t going to let the fat eunuch know how exquisite she considered them. Instead the Valide sniffed. ‘I thought you’d forgotten me.’

‘How can you say that, Majesty?’ Salmeo said in a tone of feigned injury. He handed the flowers to Elza, who arrived on cue, bobbed a curtsy and hurried off to find a vase. ‘I have

visited no fewer than a dozen occasions and have been turned away on most.'

'I am in pain. Does no-one realise that? And this heat! It cannot be summer already.'

'The weather is curious for sure. And we do appreciate your pain, Majesty, but the physics need to understand the extent of it. They are not keen to reduce your discomfort with their herbs and medicines until they are sure of what is happening within.'

'Because they are cruel!' she hurled at him.

'Because you are too precious to risk, Highness,' he soothed. 'Their methods are sometimes challenging, I grant you, but you must persist and let them take care of you in the way they know best.'

She heard the soft lisp and gave him a scornful glance. 'I returned with a broken ankle, Salmeo. It can't be that hard for the physics to work out.'

'Nevertheless, Majesty,' he said, a finger raised to suggest caution. He smiled again, his chins quivering. 'You seem ...' He paused, frowning, searching for the right word, 'restless.'

She knew it to be true; her ankle was not so troublesome any more — although it did still hurt — but she wasn't going to allow Salmeo any sense of smugness at knowing her so well. 'Restless? Do I?'

'Is there anything I can do for you, Valide?'

'You can turn down the sun's heat, you can mend my ankle, you can tell me about my son — who I haven't seen in days — or you can stop second-guessing my moods. I don't mind which you pick.'

Salmeo's bright demeanour dimmed slightly but he ignored her sarcasm, smoothing out the folds of his pale silks as he replied. 'Ah, the Zar is very busy with war preparations, Majesty. I am told he eats little, his temper is short and his periods of wanting to be alone are long and frequent.'

'What is the new estimation on timing?'

'The doomsayers would have us believe that war has begun but the word on the streets is that the Galinsean fleet is not yet close

to our waters, Majesty. The fishermen are keeping the palace well briefed . . . but it can't be long before enemy ships return.'

'When was the last time you saw Boaz?'

Salmeo shrugged. 'Not in more than a week. He is preoccupied and has not called upon anyone at the harem.'

'That shouldn't surprise you, eunuch.'

'Well, your news that Ana is likely pregnant is playing heavily on his mind, I suspect, from what the Elim tell me, although the looming war must be taking a toll also. He is, of course, assuming she is still alive.'

Herezah nodded, tapping an elegantly buffed nail against her teeth in thought. 'She has the lives of a cat, that girl. And he probably misses that wretched dwarf as much as anything else. Still no word of the freak's whereabouts?' The huge man shook his head. 'And the Grand Vizier? Is he fully recovered now?'

'He was not injured, as you know, Valide,' Salmeo replied pointedly, before softening his tone. 'He is working closely with the Zar as I understand it. Has recently been away, I gather.'

'Well, I wish to speak with him,' she said, pouring herself a glass of chilled minted tea and yawning, feigning distraction as she waved a hand carelessly. 'Set it up, would you.' She phrased her next question carefully, keeping her voice disinterested and remote. 'And what news of Lazar?'

'None at all, Majesty.'

'But surely the palace needs his input now more than ever?'

'From what my sources tell me, the Spur refuses to emerge from his house.'

'What, still?'

'He is sickening, I hear, although I cannot substantiate this.'

'Well, you certainly are the bringer of glad tidings, Salmeo. Not a single positive item have you given me.'

'I have learned not to insult Your Majesty with idle gossip. I have lived long enough beside you to know that the running of the realm is your only true interest.'

She eyed him with a look that combined contempt for and amusement at his slippery manner. 'Help me up, Salmeo, I'm going out.'

'Out? Valide, you are in no fit state.'

'Oh, tosh! I'm bored. I can be in pain outside the palace just as easily as I can inside its walls, and I cannot sit around and do nothing.'

'But what do you plan to do?'

'I'm going shopping,' she lied. 'Now leave me and go make preparations for the Elim to take me where I wish. And send in Elza. She has no mistress for the time being; she can help me ready myself.'

The owl alighted on the balcony, exhausted. Would he ever remember the way back from where he'd flown? He prayed he would — as he was the only one who knew where Ana was — and with that last thought in his bird form Iridor shifted shape and became Pez, Jester to the Zar of Percheron.

The doors had been carelessly flung open to welcome the breeze off the Faranel into the house. He could see stray leaves from the nearby Lashada trees had blown in and also evidence that the late blooming reeka had blossomed deeper into the season than normal, for its petals were strewn over the tiles. Going by the litter inside the house these doors had obviously been open for a while. He tiptoed around the debris, surprised he could walk as steadily as he was after the long journey, and moved across the familiar chamber.

'Ho!' he called. He anticipated only silence, but heard a muffled sound from the bedroom. 'Lazar?' he tried.

The voice was clear now and Pez smiled despite the tone. 'Go away, whoever you are,' growled the occupant.

Pez stepped into the room, and peered into the murky darkness. 'Lazar?'

The figure on the bed didn't move although the voice managed some semblance of a roar. 'Begone, I said!'

‘It’s Pez,’ he replied.

Lazar remained silent for a long moment, then croaked, ‘Prove it.’

Pez limped to the bedside; he really was fatigued. He took the Spur’s cool, dry hand and placed it against his own rough cheek. ‘It is I, old friend, and I have found her. She’s alive — she’s all right.’

A low groan met his tidings and Pez couldn’t be sure whether Lazar wept at the reassurance or was in pain.

‘Forgive me,’ Lazar said, composing himself. ‘Welcome back — I’m glad you’re safe. I’m feeling low — I think losing Jumo is only just making its impact; I miss him. And I thought Ana as good as dead. So many lives lost that night,’ he said, as mournful as the atmosphere in his sleeping chamber. Light seeped through the shutters but not enough to illuminate and so Lazar was living in a curious void. ‘And this wretched illness makes my mind as weak as my limbs,’ Lazar admitted.

‘Is it the same thing that afflicted you after the whipping?’

The Spur nodded.

‘It will pass then. Ellyana did warn that it would shadow your life.’

‘It will pass but not soon enough. I shall need some more drezden — I’ve finished the stocks that I took from Zafira’s hut. Tell me about Ana, so I can go after the murdering bastard who abducted her.’

Pez hoisted himself onto the bed and took Lazar’s hand again. He wondered briefly how many other men the Spur might permit to be so intimate with him. He’d never seen Jumo touch Lazar; the Spur was not exactly easy to be affectionate with. But Pez felt his energy returning just to have Lazar’s presence in his life again. He was still convinced Lazar was the ‘difference’ that Ellyana had warned about for this battle between Lyana and Maliz. Clearing his throat, he pushed away his private thoughts and focused on the present moment. ‘Well, she is safe, that’s the main thing. It took me a long time to so much as glimpse her. I suspect they’ve had her

locked away. The strange thing is that I couldn't reach her via a mind-link, but when I finally sighted her a few days ago, she did not look mistreated in any way. And then I dared not trust the link; I couldn't be sure who might be listening. The truth is, from what I could see, they were treating her with deference.'

Lazar frowned. If the news made his heart leap, it wasn't noticeable to Pez. 'How many?'

'Hard to tell. I watched him organise the slaughter of perhaps twenty of his men.'

'What?'

'His way of showing Ana what true loyalty means. He was criticising Boaz — I'm not sure how the two points match up but I think Arafanz was demonstrating his power over his people as a means of displaying to Ana that the Zar of Percheron did not have similar loyalty.'

'So we still know nothing about Arafanz?' Lazar asked in frustration.

Pez shook his head. 'An enigma. I've never heard about him in all of my years around the palace and he reveals little, other than his contempt for the Percherese, although he speaks the language like a local. I suspect he is older than he appears but that is purely a private feeling — I could be wrong. I got the impression that he has abducted Ana for reasons of faith more than anything else.'

'A mystic?'

'Possibly. He has amassed his own renegade band of fighters and he is not at all frightened to lose them. You saw how he allowed his men to be decimated at the camp for no good reason. And again, in front of Ana just days ago, I watched him promote the slaughter of twenty or so men simply to make a point. He is mad.'

'He is ruthless, I know that much.' Lazar tried to sit up and only half managed it, falling back onto his pillow.

'What does he want with Ana?'

'Apart from the obvious attractions of a nubile young woman?'

Pez ignored Lazar's sneer. 'I fib. I don't think he has any carnal

interest in Ana whatsoever, not by the way he behaved towards her. She is pregnant, by the way.'

Lazar's closed eyes shot open. He gripped Pez's hand so tightly it hurt the dwarf. 'So it's confirmed. She carries Boaz's heir. You're sure?'

'I'm sure that she's with child, yes. Her belly is swollen and Arafanz mentioned her pregnancy openly.'

'If he lays a hand on a single hair of hers or the baby's I shall tear him limb from limb, I will raze his fortress to the dust of the desert, I shall —'

'Well, you can't do anything lying in bed. You need to —' Pez stopped talking suddenly, cocking his head to one side. 'Hush, I hear something. Let me check.' He waddled over to the window, opening the shutters slightly to sneak a look. He returned to Lazar's side, his large mouth in a lopsided grin. 'You're not going to believe who has just arrived. I must hide. We shall speak later.'

'Wait! Pez!'

'Say nothing of my return,' Pez warned and disappeared before Lazar's disbelieving eyes, adding silently: *Remember, I can't hold this trick for long.*

Moments later, Lazar heard a small commotion at his front door. More muffled sounds were audible before the doors of his sleeping chamber burst open and Herezah swept into the room.

'Leave us!' she commanded her accompanying Elim and they dutifully closed the doors behind them. Lazar knew they would be standing on the other side, that the house would be fully secured by the elite harem guard. 'It stinks in here, Lazar,' Herezah said, regarding him from a distance and wrinkling her nose. 'You stink.' She bowed. 'Forgive me. Good morning, Prince Lucien.'

He hid his shock as best he could, along with his nudity. He dug deep, covering his vulnerability with sarcasm. 'Hello, Valide. Bored at the harem?'

'Yes . . . can you tell?'

‘The desert can do that to you.’

‘What do you mean?’

He let his head fall to one side, holding her gaze steadily, not permitting it to roam, mindful that he was naked, save the scant covering of the corner of a sheet.

‘Are you restless?’ he asked, forgoing the scathing tone he usually adopted with Herezah and hearing his own restiveness in the question.

Herezah gestured at a small wooden seat. ‘May I?’

‘Of course,’ he said, tugging the sheet further across his body. ‘Forgive my poor manners, Majesty.’ He felt so weak he couldn’t be sure he could make it through whatever conversation the Valide had in mind. And he no longer had the strength to fight her. ‘How is your foot?’

She waved away his apology, limped to perch on the stool’s edge and sighed. ‘Lazar — I prefer to call you that, by the way — to tell you the truth I don’t know what’s happening to me. My ankle is healing fast, although I can’t say the same for my mind. I seem to be sharing Zaradine Ana’s plight in chafing at the bonds of the palace. I would hardly describe myself as one of its easiest members. I too craved freedom, but of the kind that power brings. Ana could never appreciate that, I think.’ She gave a sad laugh. ‘And still, in spite of her complete disregard for the ways of the harem, she has achieved the high position of Zaradine faster than most.’

Lazar remained silent, unsure of where this was leading. For it seemed to him that the Valide had set out to say one thing and had in fact said something entirely different. He could sense her confusion and unhappiness. In spite of their past differences, he found her new vulnerability refreshing.

Herezah looked up from her lap to regard him. ‘Something must be wrong with me if I am being this candid with you, of all people. Can you believe it, Lazar? Us two talking like old friends?’ Lazar did not answer. She sighed. ‘Yes, I am restless. And I think you’re

right. The freedom that the desert allowed me to glimpse has done this. I still desire my position as Valide, don't get me wrong, but suddenly everything at the palace feels utterly tedious and my moods are out of kilter.'

'War is coming, Valide. You may live to desire the monotony of harem life more than anything else.'

'Maybe I will, but right now discussing whether one girl has learned her steps of the Shezza dance accurately enough seems altogether pointless. There are such bigger things at stake and it galls me that I am being kept from them.'

'Have you seen Boaz?'

'No. My son is avoiding me. Not deliberately, I don't think. He's preoccupied with the Galinsean threat and rightly so. How could I, a mere woman, help him?'

'A woman has two arms, two legs, a brain . . . just as a man does. Save for brute strength, she is his equal, Valide.'

'Zarab save me. Lazar, do you really believe that?'

He nodded against his pillow, his stare earnest. 'I always have.'

'And yet there is no more chauvinistic man in Percheron, I believe! You keep the company of men. You certainly show no interest in women in general to my knowledge.'

'I am not prejudiced, Valide. To your knowledge you know only the interest — as you call it — that I do not show in you. Unless you're spying on me then you know nothing about time I have spent with women, or your spies are hopeless.' He watched her bristle, unsure of whether it was the barb about having poor spies or the fact that he might be engaged in amorous pursuits with other women that irritated her. He continued, but in a more soothing manner. 'I do believe men make better fighters. They can be more ruthless — save present company of course.'

She smiled ruefully at his cutting praise.

'Women undoubtedly make better carers. I generalise, but I think we all have roles we can shine in though I still say we are equal. We balance one another; we need one another.'

‘You don’t seem to need the balance of a woman, Lazar.’

‘Oh, but I do. You just told me how much I stink and my house stinks. A woman, better than any, can fix that.’

She reacted girlishly to his sarcasm, rather than angrily, smiling as she hurled her silk purse towards him, loving the feeling of freedom it gave her to act so thoroughly out of character. ‘How dare you!’

His mouth twitched in genuine amusement that Herezah was capable of taking the jest and laughing at it. He tried to move his head but was far too slow. The soft silken sack landed across his face, lightly; there was nothing in it save a square of voile.

‘Oh, Lazar, forgive me,’ Herezah said, standing quickly to remove the purse.

He laughed beneath the silk despite his mood. ‘That’s about as uncontrolled as you’ve ever behaved, Herezah. You should reveal yourself more often in this way.’

She bent into a crouch by the bed, took the purse that he handed her. ‘I could say the same for you. I do like it when you call me by my name.’

‘I shouldn’t,’ he said.

Herezah unhooked her veil. ‘I like it even more when you are not snarling at me.’

Fresh, spicy perfume wafted over him and she was close enough for Lazar to smell on her breath the fragrant herbs that so many of the Percherese chewed.

‘I snarl at everyone,’ he said.

She shrugged. ‘Well, I suppose it’s reassuring that you know you do, but I do believe you save your worst for me.’

‘It’s because you disappoint me.’ He saw the shock flare in her eyes as if she had been slapped. ‘You have so much to offer Percheron. That’s why Joreb chose you in the first place. You raised a son we are all proud of, groomed him perfectly for his royal role. You are arguably the strongest, most talented and most beautiful Mother of the Zar Percheron has ever seen.’

Her gaze intensified as the air seemed to thicken around them. ‘I’ve never seen any indication of this admiration you speak of. I have craved your approval for so long — why are you only giving it now?’

Lazar felt unnerved by her honesty but there was nothing to lose. He might never again have the opportunity to be equally candid. ‘Because you focused on the petty squabbles within the harem as being important, instead of looking outwards to what was crucial — Percheron’s welfare. Our personal history with each other is long, Valide, but you have wanted something from me that I would have been more insane than Pez to give you. That aside, if only you’d put that bright, sharp mind of yours to Zar Boaz’s needs instead of using your cunning to bring down a mere odalisque or to hurt the Zar’s loyal soldier servant, the realm would not now be facing war.’

She stood, her expression incredulous, her hand flat against her chest as though she were suddenly breathless. ‘You blame me for the Galinsean threat?’

‘Partly. You and your cruel, effeminate sidekick. If you had not pushed Ana so hard, frightened her so much, she would not have tried to escape the harem that first time. And if you had not campaigned for her punishment quite so enthusiastically, I might not have had to offer myself in her place. And if I hadn’t done so, Salmeo may not have felt sufficiently maligned to manipulate the use of the Viper’s Nest or the drezden poisoning ... and Horz, a very good man, need not have died, and Jumo would not have rushed off to find my family.’

‘You have no proof of the chief eunuch’s involvement.’

Lazar shook his head sadly. ‘And still we both know it to be true. It’s an old gripe. We can’t change what’s gone but its effects linger. Here I am useless to Percheron for the second time because of the sickness that the drezden provokes.’

‘I don’t understand this malady of yours — what is drezden? I believed you were avoiding the palace because you were so angry about what occurred in the desert.’

‘Nothing so simple. The drezden that was used on the whip has weakened me for the rest of my life and lives alongside me. Whenever I am physically tested I suspect it re-emerges to claim my body again. The long trek, on foot, back from the desert tested me.’ He shrugged.

Now Herezah really did appear shocked. She sat on the side of the rumpled bed, laid a manicured hand against his arm. ‘You mean you will never be rid of this sickness?’

He shook his head. ‘It follows me, hangs around and within me. It waits until I’m weakened and then strikes.’

Herezah turned away. ‘I had no idea.’

‘What is done, is done. We cannot change it. But you can change . . . you can help your son shape a future.’

Lazar had been slowly pulling himself up, the emotion behind his words charging him, giving him a false energy. He groaned and fell back on his bed. ‘I’m afraid I remain useless.’

‘No. This cannot continue,’ Herezah said briskly. ‘We’re going to get you well, Lazar, and you are going to help Boaz. You are wallowing here. You said I can change; well, here’s the first of my changes.’ She strode, despite her limp, to the windows and pulled back all the shutters, ignoring Lazar’s protests as he hid beneath the sheets, covering his eyes from the agony of light.

Get rid of her! Pez suddenly burst into his mind. *The magic dwindles!*

‘Valide, please, I —’

‘Don’t argue, Lazar.’ She had continued throwing open shutters around the room. Now she marched to the doors and flung those back too. She issued crisp orders at the Elim before turning to the shape beneath the sheets. ‘I shall see you back at the palace, Spur. Ready yourself. I am going to nurse you back to full health.’ She left him with that terrifying notion, slamming the doors shut behind her.

Pez winked back into existence on the other side of the bed. ‘That was close.’

‘What did she mean?’ Lazar croaked, emerging hesitantly, blinking.

‘I think it means she finally has you at her mercy,’ and Pez chuckled in spite of himself. ‘I cannot stay here. This place is crawling with Elim.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I’ll go to the Sea Temple. I’ll let myself be found shortly. I think she meant what she said, by the way.’

‘Is it my imagination or did she sound different?’

‘Different, I agree, but don’t trust it. Herezah is too old to change her ways entirely.’

‘Pez, I’m too weak to fight this.’

‘Then don’t. Let her get you well. Once you’re strong again, we’ll think about what’s next.’