

An Unfettered Mind

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Chapter One

Barcelona, 1494

“Nadira! Quickly! Get up!”

Nadira kicked the heavy blankets from her legs. “What? Is there a fire?”

“No, no, some men are downstairs asking for you. The master has called for me to get you up and to the stable.” Inez dug through the blankets looking for the girl’s cloak.

“Why? What is happening? Why does he want me in the stable?” Nadira sat up on the mound of straw that served as a pallet. Another girl rolled over in the straw and pulled the blanket away. Nadira let her have the covers, rubbing her legs and arms to get

the blood flowing. “Is it the Black Friars? Are they coming for him?” She shivered again, and not from the cold.

“I don’t know, child. Something is going on. Not the Black Friars. Heavens, do you think I would send you to them? Go down and find out.” Inez handed her the cloak.

Nadira frowned. “This is not right, Inez. I can’t believe I’m going out to the stable in the middle of the night to meet strange men?” She pulled the cloak over her shoulders and yanked at the ties. “You can’t possibly... he can’t really...”

Inez blushed. “Do not think that. The master is down there with them. He will keep you from harm. I know he will. But he did say you were to come straightaway.” The older woman turned Nadira around and brushed straw from her skirt. “Hurry.”

Nadira hurried. Her soft leather shoes made no sound on the wooden stairs as she flew down to the ground level. She paused there to make sure none of the other servants had been awakened. They slept soundly, their snores loud enough to cover any noise she made. Nadira tiptoed around their prone bodies lying against the walls. She went through the great hall and past the paneled meeting rooms to a back door that led to the master’s great stables.

Eight men turned to look at her as she stepped through the heavy stable doors. The master’s eyes met hers first, and she saw a guarded wariness there coupled with some amount of fear. The stable was dimly lit with covered lanterns held by the stable boys cowering in the stalls and spitting torches held by the strangers. The horses nickered to her as she moved through the straw towards the group of men. Nadira was relieved to see that the men were not wearing the vestments of the Black Friars. The taller man with the torch was lean and spare, but without the swayback thin men tend to have. His face was dark and dangerous, his eyes cold as he looked her over. The other six men stood about scratching and spitting. They showed only minor interest in her presence. One of them made the same sigh a donkey makes when the pack is taken from his back on market day. The thin man raised his torch, widening the circle of light. “C’mere, you”, he said, squinting at her.

Nadira took an obedient step forward. Between the master and the thin man was a lumpy tarp. The thin man poked the lump with his boot. The lump moved. Nadira drew near enough to see that the tarp was a sail bonnet and the lump was a man. He lay in the

bonnet on his side, curled up like a puppy. When she knelt beside him she could see that he was wounded. Perhaps they just want me to bind his wounds, or make him a poultice, she thought, but Inez usually does that work, not me. She looked up at her master, then reached a hand to pull the canvas away from the man's body and expose him to the light. The thin man took her arm, pulling her back.

"Not yet, missy. I want to ask ye a few questions first." He looked at her from head to foot. "Not very old then, what? Still a maid?" He turned to Master Sofir. "Old man, what is she, fifteen? Sixteen year?"

"No, Massey." Nadira's master answered wearily. "She is clear twenty this year. Does that matter at all?" Master Sofir's face was strained and more lined than usual. Nadira studied him, trying to detect what he wanted her to do. He was wearing his brocade dressing gown and his red velvet nightcap. Nadira suspected he had been awakened much as she had. Now he was working his mouth around his two missing teeth as he did when he was settling difficult accounts and dictating invoices. His face told her that he was uneasy but he would expect her to answer the stranger. A flicker from his eye warned her from questions.

Massey spit again. "Aye, it matters. Word has it she speaks her mother's Saracen tongue. If she be too old, maybe she's forgotten it." Massey licked his lips with a sneer.

Nadira edged closer to her master. "I speak my mother's tongue, and I've forgotten none of it."

"Cheeky, isn't she." Massey snapped. "Jest so you can understand the Saracen gobble, that's all I care about. Come closer and listen to this bugger. Tell me what he's sayin'," Massey wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Nadira looked to Master Sofir. The old man nodded slightly, pointing his bearded chin at the canvas. She knelt and carefully pulled back the sailcloth to reveal the injured man's head. He was a young man, his features once rather handsome, but now obscured by bruises. His hair lay swirled and matted with his blood; his beard was plastered flat around his cheeks with the grisly mortar. As she peeled the cloth from his face, he opened his eyes and looked at her. Nadira was startled by how blue they were. They contrasted deeply in the whites and glistened bright against the dull brick color of his face. The injured man parted his cracked lips. His tongue moved but he made no sound.

Massey swore violently. He pulled his leg back and aimed a kick at his captive's spine. The sailcloth flapped with the impact. The man writhed once then lay still.

"Now ye done kilt 'im," one of the sailors laughed. "He ain't gonna talk now." The men laughed again. "Massey, you always was a dumb cuss."

"Bloody Hell!" Massey pulled his leg back again, and then thought better of it. He glared at Nadira, "We ain't leavin' until he's dead or he speaks." Massey looked around the stable, waving the torch and making the shadows dance on the walls. "Smythe! Get that bucket over there and fill it with water." He turned to Sofir. "You got a well here for the stable, old man?"

Sofir nodded toward the door. "In the yard." His glance fell on Nadira. She read a warning there in his eyes. *Stay calm. Do what they ask of you.*

"Let me see where he is hurt," she said slowly to Massey. "Maybe I can bring him around" She didn't wait for permission, but knelt beside the sailcloth. Massey stopped her.

"He don't need any fixin' up," he growled. "He just needs to live long enough to tell me what I want to know. After that..." Massey made a hissing sound through his teeth. "Here's Smythe with that water." Massey handed his torch to one of the sailors and took the bucket from Smythe. He dashed the water in the wounded man's face. Bloody water splashed over Nadira's smock, soaking her in the cold air. She grit her teeth. The man in the tarp sputtered and rolled over on his other side. He moved enough to let the tarp fall open, away from his body. He held himself tightly with his arms and screwed his eyes shut.

"Talk to him, lass, before he takes the big jump to Hell." Massey prodded. Talk to him in that heathen gobble."

Nadira spoke softly in her childhood language, "Can you hear me?" The man's breathing stopped suddenly when she spoke. For a moment, she thought he had died, but then he began to mumble. His breathing was shallow and his words floated above his breath. Nadira made sense of a few of the words before the poor man sank again into senselessness.

The silence was pierced by Massey's grunt. "So what did he say? Tell me exactly what he says to you," he demanded. "He's been mumbling in some foreign gobble all day."

Nadira winced. "He said something about a book and his brother." He had not actually said anything coherent. Nadira pushed her hair behind her ears and leaned closer to the ruined face.

Massey grinned, showing blackened stumps where teeth should be. "Ask him where the book is."

Obediently Nadira asked, "Where is the book?" The eyelids fluttered. Massey could not wait. He pressed his boot against the wounded man's ribs and leaned into it. The eyelids snapped open as the man gasped painfully.

"Ask him again," Massey demanded.

Nadira complied, though her voice trembled "Where is the book?"

The bloodied man grimaced, and then turned painfully toward Massey. The bloody lips parted and he spat feebly in Massey's direction. Massey's face darkened in anger. He pulled his leg back again. Smythe stood up, taller and larger than Massey. "If ye kill 'im, we'll never get that money from the Dominicans," he said.

Massey glared at all of them. "There's another that knows where it is."

Smythe wiped his nose with his thumb. "Perhaps, but we know this one does. We don't have that one." Nadira and Sofir exchanged glances. The blue-eyed man had closed his eyes. Smythe sat down again, staring hard at Massey. To Nadira he said, "Try again, lass."

Nadira steadied her breath before speaking slowly and clearly. "These men want to know where the book is." There was no response from the blue-eyed man. Nadira repeated the question in Greek, because some of the poor man's mumbled words were Greek. This time the blue eyes flew open in surprise. Both Massey and Smythe jumped up, scattering bits of hay and dust as they rushed forward. Massey shoved Smythe aside, reaching for Nadira's arm. He lifted her up and put his mouth to her ear. Nadira winced when his fetid breath reached her nostrils. His stubbled cheek grated her ear. "What talk was that?" he demanded.

"It was...it was Greek," she stammered.

“Say it again.” Massey released her. Nadira knelt in the straw, slowly reaching for the blue-eyed man who was now staring up at her incredulously. “Where is the book?” she whispered in Greek. Massey pushed forward even closer as the injured man whispered to her.

“What did he say!” he demanded angrily.

Nadira met Massey’s gaze reluctantly. “He says he will never tell you...ever...he will take the knowledge to his grave...” Nadira did not dare speak the rest for the injured man had called Massey the vilest word Nadira had ever heard. It mattered not, for Massey roared on hearing this defiance, his eyes black with fury. He struck Nadira once in the face, knocking her aside before pulling his foot back and savagely kicking the blue-eyed man in the ribs repeatedly. Master Sofir pulled Nadira to her feet, moving her safely behind him. He kept hold of her arm as he positioned his bulk between her body and Massey’s swinging legs. Nadira held a shaking hand to her cheek as she peered around Master Sofir’s shoulders. The light had gone out of the blue eyes, the body lay limp, the brutal assault continued until Massey staggered back, exhausted, but aiming another kick.

“Stop, now, Massey”. Smythe put a hand out and pressed Massey against the wall of the stable. “You’ve killed him. Now we’ll have to get the other and you know what that means, you stupid cur. Maybe we could have persuaded him later, or softened him up with the pretty girl, but no, you scab-faced son-of-a-whore, you had to go and kill him. Bugger all.” Smythe beckoned to the other men and made for the door.

Massey wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He kicked some straw over the broken man’s chest and said, “He’s your rubbish now, Sofir.” Massey grabbed his torch from a grinning sailor and strode through the stable doors after Smythe. The other men followed him out. Not one even glanced at the still form on the floor. Master Sofir moved swiftly to the door and leaned out, looking both ways. He backed up and shut the stable door, sliding the heavy timber bolt down between the iron holders. He shook the doors once to test the fasteners then in two large strides returned to the fallen man and knelt beside him. Nadira watched from the wall, still stunned from the blow and the events that had begun and ended so quickly. Master Sofir felt the man’s body, and then glanced back to Nadira. He beckoned and she came to him.

“Tell me what you think, Nadira. Do you think he’s dead?” Sofir’s voice shook, and Nadira knew he was thinking how it would look if this man was found dead in his stable. Sofir had only taken the converso oath two years before, and there were many besides the Black Friars who looked for any evidence of an insincere conversion or an excuse to investigate. She put her hand on his shoulder before kneeling down beside him. Sofir moved the torch closer, the acrid pitch made Nadira’s eyes water, but in its light she could see faint movement on the man’s throat. She put her hand on his chest, after a long moment there was a slight lift.

With relief Nadira answered, “No, he’s not dead, but he’s not much alive either, Master.”

“Then let’s get him into the house and see what we can do.”

“Can you hear me?” Nadira called for what seemed the hundredth time. The wounded man had been bathed and his few bloody wounds bound, but Nadira knew the damage to his body was inside, under the skin where no leech could help. Helping to wash his broken body she had run her cloth over several broken bones, his arm, most of his ribs, some of the small bones of his face, maybe more too difficult to find on the surface. Inez sat on the other side, both women instructed to call out for the Master if he awoke. Nadira thought it unlikely. His breath was shallow and irregular, his color gray and his skin cool and clammy. Large black bruises covered most of his body. Nadira had never seen such massive bruising, and judging from Inez’s pale face, neither had she.

“What will we do if he dies here?” Inez’s voice was thin and weak. “Child, I’ve never been so frightened.”

“The master will know what to do.” Nadira did not believe her own words. She had been standing behind Master Sofir when he examined this man. He had found a tiny gold signet ring embedded in a swollen finger and twisted it grimly in the light. He had looked up at her and said, “There will be trouble from this.” And indeed he looked troubled.

Inez continued as if she could read Nadira’s thoughts. “No. He told me just yesterday he is thinking of our situation. He seemed very upset.”

Nadira looked up. Inez's wrinkles appeared deeper in the flickering shadows of the candlelight, her eyes larger. She asked, "What do you mean 'situation'?"

Inez swallowed and looked away. She brushed her graying hair back from her face with a shaky hand. "Portia and I went to the square this past Friday." She sat down slowly on the bench by the shuttered window, still not meeting Nadira's eyes. "The fishmonger was taking down his stall. He told us that everyone was going to the race field to see the burning." Inez took a deep breath. "He told us it was our duty to witness the justice of the Lord. He told us we should put away our daily tasks and behold the great cleansing of our fair city." Inez leaned over and took Nadira's cold hand in hers. "Not rats, lice, or vermin. People. He wanted us to go to see people being tied to great poles and burned alive for the glory of his god." Inez whispered the last sentence.

Nadira paled, pulling her hand back and warming it under her arms. Inez's grasp had turned it to ice. "Who is being burned? I had heard that it was criminals."

"Yes, and who told you that?"

"Juana."

"And Juana is a simple girl who believes everything she is told without a thought of her own," Inez dismissed Juana's opinion. "The Black Friars come in the night and take people away. Then they are burned at the race field. Not thieves, not brigands, not murderers."

Nadira frowned, remembering with alarm such talk recently at her master's table.

Inez continued. "The Black Friars do not seek the truth, they do not hear the cries of the orphans. Just last week I heard that Simon Delacort was taken from his home. His house and all his belongings were seized by the priests to be given to the king and queen. He sits in a cell right now, Rachel and the children turned out of the house. Money and position will not stop these men. They take what they want and imprison who they will and there is no one who will stop them." Inez slid the bench closer to the bed. "And Nadira, the richer they are the more likely to be selected." Inez's eyes circled the fine room meaningfully.

Nadira whispered, "Did you and Portia go to the race field?"

Inez sighed. "Portia did. I could not bear it. I told her that I would go to the vegetable seller's booth to get something for our supper. Portia told me about it when

she came back. All the sculleries crowded in the kitchen to hear her tell it. I'm glad I stayed away, though it is now said that those who stay away are guilty of the same crimes themselves." Inez wrung her rheumy knuckles and gazed upward at the ceiling. "Save us." She whispered to her nameless god.

"What else did you hear in the kitchen?" Nadira asked.

"Only that my lord is nervous. It is said that gold cannot be taken out of the kingdom. My lord wants to leave, but does not wish to leave his goods." Inez said grimly. "And now this," Inez nodded towards the dying man. "Master takes a great risk, and for what?"

"Master is a good man. He would not turn someone in need out of doors, no matter the risk." Nadira turned back to the man on the bed. "Perhaps, should he survive, he will tell others of the master's good deed. Perhaps it will save us from the eyes of the Black Friars."

"Does anyone know he is here?"

The two women stared at each other silently. Nadira looked into the senseless face below her on the pillow. *The stable boys know.*

"Can you hear me?" she called again. Her voice sounded dry and flat to her own ears. She took another shaky breath, "Can you..." she choked off the rest of the sentence as the wounded man's eyelids fluttered.

"Quickly, Inez, get the master!" she cried.

She moved closer and cupped her hand on the gaunt cheek. The eyes fluttered and then opened halfway. She could see the pupils staring up, dark pools in a sea of the bluest blue. His chest rose and fell with a jerk, the air whistling in and out of his nostrils noisily.

Inez was still standing over her, staring.

Nadira looked up. "Get the master now, I think he's dying. Hurry!" Inez's eyes widened, but she turned and made for the door, stumbling over the threshold on her way out.

She bent her head over the wounded man's face. "Can you hear me?" she asked clearly and slowly. The blue eyes flickered. With great effort, she saw them focus on her own. His lips parted and she saw his swollen tongue between his broken teeth.

“Pretty,” he whispered. She could see him attempt a smile with his cracked lips. Nadira put a cool hand on his forehead. “Pretty girl.”

The blue eyes closed and he sighed, his chest falling. Nadira could hear the master climbing the stairs. “Please, Sir, please stay awake. He will be here soon.”

Nadira squeezed his shoulder gently. The man did not respond. She shook him sharply.

The blue eyes flew open and he gasped, “Henry!”

She leaned closer. “Is that your name?” she asked.

“Henry.” The wounded man took another painful breath, “Brother. Tell my brother...Henry...has...the...book. My brother. Rob. Little Robin. Robbie.”

Nadira held her breath, she slowly asked him, “What book?”

Instead of answering the man groaned; his frail body shook then suddenly stilled. The blue eyes stared up, unfocused. Master Sofir rushed through the doorway just as Nadira passed her fingers over the man’s eyes, closing them.

Chapter Two

The next morning the body had disappeared. Nadira did not dare ask what had happened to it. Inez’s tight lips and deeper wrinkles warned her off the subject. Instead she spent the day sweeping the floors and wiping the furniture, always with an ear to the street. Nothing happened all day; she ate her bread and was up the stairs to her pallet soon after sunset.

Long past midnight a scratching from the front door snapped Nadira up from her pallet and sent her to the window. Below she could see nothing in the moonlit street but downstairs she heard the rustling sound of many men in the entry hall and the whispers of a few. Footsteps led away from the door and deeper into the big house. The whispering stopped and padded foot sounds moved to the vestibule and away from Nadira’s ears. She crept from the window, stopped long enough to cover herself with her cloak, and slipped lightly down the chilly stairs. She had to know, she had to be prepared to flee. She would not be taken to the fires.

She heard a small sound behind her. Inez was leaning over the banister from above. Nadira raised her finger to her lips and saw Inez's form retreat back into the room. Again, after quickly looking to the right and the left, Nadira continued through the darkened hallways. If the visitors had a light, she did not see it. She stepped over the still-sleeping forms of the servants on the rushes. They were too exhausted from the days' labors to move or care about the night movements of the household. Nadira pulled the cloak tightly around her to keep the hem from sweeping their faces.

A dull thump caused her to stop and press herself against the wall. The odor of smoldering fires burned her eyes. Someone had opened the door to the kitchen and closed it again. After a brief look around, Nadira changed direction toward the kitchen, which was separated from the house by a small courtyard. The handle was high for her, and the door not easily moved. It was usually kept open to relieve the cooks from the heat of the huge fireplace. She rested her hands on the pull and very slowly leaned her shoulder into the planked door. It gave slightly, but with an exaggerated drag on the stones. It moved scarcely enough for the hinges to creak when suddenly it reversed direction and was firmly closed again. Now pushing with all her strength did not move the door all. Perhaps someone was on the other side. Perhaps the cook.

There was another entry into the kitchen, but it involved going outside and around the stable yard. Nadira did not want to go outside; the stable boys slept lightly for the fear of horse thieves and were often posted on watch all night. If she were found outside at night by the stable boys, it might be seen as an invitation, yet she was not ready to go back to her pallet.

Impulsively she pushed against the door again, moving it a few inches. This time an eye appeared in the crack high up, first narrowed, then opened wide. Nadira recognized the cook's face right away. Through the crack behind him she glimpsed the glitter of a mail shirt and the edge of a brown hauberk. Not a priest. Nadira sagged against the door in relief.

"Let me in" she whispered to the cook.

"No." was the whispered answer, "Go back to your bed."

She heard another voice, curiously accented, and then the wide crack disappeared with a scrape and a clunk.

Nadira waited a moment. It was not unheard of for someone to go to the kitchen in the middle of the night. Her status in the household would not normally raise any alarms. She was the master's scrivener.

She waited. If they let her in she could ask the cook what the disturbance was about. After a few moments she thought she heard a voice; she pressed her ear against the crack. There was a faint murmur of whispered voices and the door opened a handbreadth. An eye appeared in the crack again. This time Nadira could see that it was a clear blue, like the dead man's eyes. The eye narrowed and examined her in the faint light. Softly, the eye's owner spoke Castilian in a foreign-sounding voice, "Are you Nadira?"

"I am," she whispered back. The blue eye moved up and down her body again. It disappeared for a moment and the door opened enough to invite her in. She squeezed through the vertical opening pulling the edges of the cloak closer to her body. Immediately the cook closed the door behind her.

When Nadira turned around, the eye now had a matching partner, both of them belonging to a tall soldier dressed in Northern style. He was wearing a brown hauberk over a mail shirt and appeared to be well armed. The leather straps and buckles across his broad chest and around his waist each served some martial purpose, she supposed. His light helm was dented and rust tinged the rivets. Beneath the helm, rangy wisps of dark hair fringed his face and mingled seamlessly into his beard. He had a fine prominent nose and Nadira would have thought him handsome were it not for a long white scar that split his face in two parts from his forehead across the bridge of that fine nose, across his cheek to the hinge of his jaw.

"You are Sofir's servant girl?" The man asked in a low voice.

She felt a cold streak run up her spine. She tried to keep her voice firm when she answered, but failed.

"I...I am his servant," she stammered.

"Remove your cloak," he said shortly. Nadira instantly obeyed, dropping the cloak to her feet. The heavy cloth fell with a dull sound, and sent a cold draft around her bare ankles. The soldier poked the heap of cloth with his booted foot.

"Do you think a servant carries weapons?" Nadira was incredulous. The cook snorted.

The blue-eyed man glanced down at her, amused. “Many a man has gone to his grave with a servant’s knife in his back,” he said. He took Nadira’s elbow in his gloved hand and pulled her roughly to the cellar door. Nadira shivered in her thin chemise.

“Can I not take the cloak?” she asked, puzzled.

“Take it,” he answered shortly as he opened the cellar panel and steadied her as her foot reached for the first step. Nadira was already groping hand and foot down into the kitchen’s cellar.

The enormous cellar was built to store more than just spices and wine. There was enough room for several dozen people and a ship’s worth of payload. She heard more low voices as she descended. As she emerged from the staircase, she was met by the familiar smell of the spices and the sudden light from an oil lamp. She stopped at the bottom, hugging herself.

Sofir called to her. “Come here, Nadira,” he said, slowly reaching out his hand. Nadira went to him obediently. Around him stood five bearded men, each fully armed wearing ring mail shirts and thick leather boots and gloves like the guard above. Their swords hung heavily at their sides, their faces grim. They stared at her silently. Nadira sighed again with relief. Her fears of Black Friars and City Aldermen were unfounded. These were just travelers, perhaps the vanguard of an important merchant. Now she regretted her curiosity and shifted her weight from foot to foot self-consciously.

In English Sofir said, “Nadira, this is Robert Longmoor, Baron Montrose, and his men. Our injured visitor was his unfortunate brother. My lord has come to claim the body. But more, he wants to know what this brother might have said to you before he died. It is very important to him.”

Nadira looked at the soldiers in the faint light. They were all very tall, standing head and shoulders above Sofir. The one with the most confident gaze she took to be Lord Montrose, the dark one. None of the men spoke a greeting.

“Go ahead, girl,” Sofir prompted, waving a hand at her, “Speak English to them.”

Nadira tried to obey. Her throat closed up with the memory of the dead man’s mangled body. She rubbed her neck. There was another problem. “I must have proof that this man is his brother,” she mumbled. “He told me not to tell.”

The dark one spoke calmly, “Who?”

His blue eyes were darker than his brother's, his hair very black instead of brown. She could not see the dead man in Lord Montrose's features, no hint that they were brothers. But then his own mother would not have recognized the ruined body of her son. Robert Longmoor was taller than his brother, and heavier. He wore a short beard; the kind men wear when they would rather be clean-shaven but find themselves without a razor or opportunity. His dark hair emerged from his battered helm and lay on his shoulders, some of the strands curling up around the edges. All the men had the appearance of those who have been traveling for weeks, and not staying in expensive inns, either.

Nadira had long ago learned not to assume that there is love between brothers. She could see that Lord Montrose's face was composed, but drawn. Deep lines were etched in his forehead and his eyes were darkened with sadness. Perhaps he was the brother. She glanced at Sofir, and the older man smiled encouragingly. "Tell him, Nadira, they know enough already and we are in no danger."

"And the proof?" Nadira tried to sound calm with false courage. She was one small girl among soldiers. The memory of the dead man's defiance of his murderers gave her strength. He had trusted her with this deadly secret. She could not betray him.

Lord Montrose frowned, but she could see that he was not angry. He seemed to be considering her demand. After a pause he stripped his leather glove from his hand and pulled a ring from his smallest finger. He handed it to the soldier beside him. The soldier came forward and to her surprise, knelt before her, extending the ring for her inspection.

It was a gold ring, very small. Nadira easily recognized that it matched the one on the dead man's hand. She swallowed hard. "Robbie?" she heard herself say. It had been the dead man's last word.

The kneeling soldier closed the ring in his fist and brought it to his forehead. Lord Montrose looked particularly stricken.

Nadira felt warm tears at the edges of her eyes. She blinked them back as she related her story. She told them of the meeting with Massey, the attempt in several languages to communicate, her administrations of various herbs and poultices. Finally, as she finished

she said, "He was very brave, my lord. He did not tell them anything, though they savaged him terribly."

Lord Montrose made an unintelligible sound in his throat and turned his head away. One of his men reached out and grasped his arm above the elbow, as if to hold him upright.

Nadira lowered her eyes courteously, "With his last breath he told me to tell his brother that Henry had the book." She looked up again.

Lord Montrose's eyes narrowed as he took in this news.

"I'm sorry I could not save him for you, Milord." She bobbed politely, eyes on the floor.

The man who had taken Montrose's arm spoke to her in English. "Did he say nothin' more, Lass? Anythin' about his companions?"

Nadira looked up again. The man who addressed her was curiously colored; his face marked all over with reddish spots like someone with a pox. His hair was a bright orange, very long and tied in several braids, his beard and eyelashes the same strange color. Nadira had not known men could come in this color. She answered him truthfully.

"He did not mention companions, Milord. He was brought to us alone and lived little more than a day. Again, I am sorry."

Lord Montrose shook off his friend's arm "Why was my brother brought here, to this house? Did they tell you?" His voice was soft.

Sofir answered for her. "Your brother was delirious and muttering unintelligibly. He was brought here because Massey knew my girl could interpret for them and write down what he said."

A strange look passed over the nobleman's face. "When my brother spoke to you, what language did you hear?"

"He spoke to me in Greek, sir, and in Moorish."

Montrose exchanged a glance with his friend. Then, "Do you read and write these languages as well?"

"Yes, sir." Nadira answered, puzzled.

"Do you read and write any others?"

"Latin and English. Some French. Hebrew."

Montrose frowned at Sofir. “Where did you get this girl? Hebrew? Jews do not educate their women.”

The old man’s left eye twitched and Nadira felt him stiffen. “Surely you have made an error, my lord. I am a Christian. I attend mass twice a week. Ask my neighbors if you doubt me.” Sofir’s voice quavered. “And she is no Jew either. She was sold to me years ago with her mother, both of them Moors from Grenada.”

Montrose cocked his head, suspicion in his eyes. In two long strides he was upon her and had her right arm in a painful grip. Deftly he pulled her close to him, hard against his body. He twisted her wrist with one hand while opening her palm with the other. She barely heard Sofir’s feeble protests as a wave of fear deafened her. Montrose loomed over her, his chin inches from her eyes as he bent to examine her fingertips. He did not smell strongly like most men, but rather of wood fires and the slight fragrance of balsam as though he had been sleeping in a pine forest. He lifted her fingers closer to his face, rubbing his gloved thumb over their black tips. Her fingers had been ink-stained for years; she could not remember a time when they were not. She did not try to draw her hand back, but allowed him to inspect it while she in turn examined him. His eyes were a clear, icy blue and very expressive. To her great relief they did not seem cruel. His mouth was set in a firm line, the lips pale and chapped. He was not exactly hurting her, though the grip was uncomfortable.

Montrose released her hand, but shifted his solid grip to her upper arm. “We want to take the girl with us.”

Nadira flashed a look of terror at her master. Sofir responded quickly. “My lord, that is regrettable.”

“She will not be misused. We will swear to that. I will personally swear to return her safely to you.” When Sofir did not look convinced, Montrose continued, “I will swear upon my honor and I will pay for her. Put her worth what you will. I pay very well.”

Sofir spread his hands before him, “Accidents befall even the most careful, my Lord. You may protect her from the acts of men, but none can protect her from acts of God. She is safe enough in my house.”

“We need this girl to read for us, as none of us can make out more than his name. Clerics are not to be trusted in this matter.”

“You tell me that none can be trusted in this matter, yet you trust me not to talk? You trust my girl here? I have to admit, gentlemen, this is highly unusual and not to my liking.” His voice rose. Nadira pleaded with him silently. *Do not sell me, master.*

“I trust no one, Sofir, but I have reason to believe that you will not be eager to contact the Bishop. I have eyes,” he gestured with his chin toward a darkened corner. “I see a rotulus there on the shelf behind the barrel of salted fish. You would do well to hide your valuables better, Sofir. The Black Friars will find it as well,” he said. Nadira watched her master blanch; his face tinged almost green at these words.

Lord Montrose continued, his voice calmer now, persuasive. “We are searched frequently. The Dominicans are looking for clerics and manuscripts, never for women. They will not suspect that she is our reader. Give her to us.” He pulled her against his chest; it was like striking the trunk of a tree. “We will leave a gift demonstrating our gratitude for your generosity.”

Sofir took a step back; his eyes darted to the fish barrel. Nadira had never seen him so disturbed. He answered slowly, his voice very faint, “I cannot agree, Lord Montrose. Since the death of my wife, she has managed my house, kept my books and healed my sick. To lose her would cripple me more than you know.” Warmth and gratitude flooded Nadira as she heard her master’s praise. For a few anxious moments she had almost believed he would sell her.

Sofir continued, “Her clever mind has saved me a fortune, has protected me from the wiles of traders, and gotten the best of men who think I am a fool.” Sofir would not look at her as he finished. Instead he felt behind him until his hand touched a barrel of salt fish. He sat down, stared at his hands. Some of the men laughed without humor, and the red-haired one said, “May God save me from a clever woman”, but Montrose did not smile.

“Listen to me, Sofir,” he said. If we do not find this book before it is found by others there is no telling the atrocities that will be unleashed against your people. Do it for them and for your children.”

“My people?” Sofir pretended not to understand, but Nadira saw him glance at the rotulus again. She could see him wavering and it broke her heart. “What evil could come from a book?” he wondered aloud.

Montrose dropped his voice and his men became still. “We are looking for a book so powerful many have died or gone mad from reading it.”

“And you want my girl to read these unholy words?”

“We will protect her.”

“Like you protected your brother?” It was not the most politic thing to say. All the men save Montrose drew their swords with a piercing metallic ring. The sound echoed against the cellar walls in the ensuing silence.

Nadira drew back, trying to break the big man’s grip on her arm. Montrose tightened his hold and pulled her against him again. The fair faces of the foreigners had gone red with fury. Sofir lowered his eyes. “I apologize. I misspoke myself. Please forgive me.”

The points of the swords dropped slightly, but they remained ready. Montrose raised his hand slowly. “These are not the best of circumstances, Friend Sofir. I understand your reticence.” The sword points dropped even lower. “The events leading to my brother’s demise are unique. I daresay they cannot happen again. Your servant has the advantage of anonymity. My brother, on the other hand, was notorious. There were many who wanted him, were hunting him.” Montrose lowered his hand, palm down, patting the air. All the swords sheathed in unison, noisily snapping steel against leather and wood.

Sofir swallowed. “And when this book is found and read?” he whispered.

“We will return her.”

Nadira watched as Sofir considered this. She could see he did not quite believe the outsiders, she saw the doubt slowly creep into his face. Nadira realized she had been holding her breath, for she let it out with relief as he finally turned to her. “I do not know these men, I cannot trust them and I will not sell you to them. You are like a daughter to me.” He turned to Montrose. “You hear my words, my lord. My girl is not for sale at any price. Find a reader somewhere else, and may God go with you.”

Sofir had barely finished speaking when there was a rush swifter than an arrow’s flight. Nadira found herself thrust away from Lord Montrose and into the arms of the

scarred man. Sofir was pushed against the cellar wall with a dagger against his bearded throat, his eyes wide with surprise. She had not seen the signal for this coordinated response.

“We do not trifle with you, Sofir.” Montrose pressed his face close to the old merchant’s until they were nose to nose. Sofir closed his eyes and Nadira saw his lips move in prayer. She felt a rush of anger that these brutal men would threaten her gentle master. She twisted herself to no avail. She was lifted off the ground where she could no longer gain a purchase with her feet to resist. Kicking only bruised her toes against a thigh as hard as oak.

“We will take what we cannot bargain for.”

Nadira was dragged roughly up the stairs; the jagged rings of her captor’s mail shirt were digging into her body. There was the sound of crashing and banging behind her, then silence. She took an enormous breath, but before the scream could escape, the gloved hand of the scarred man was upon her mouth. She tasted the salty leather and smelled the bitter tang of metal where his sword hilt had made an indentation in the palm.

Her hood was pulled over her face and she was carried through the back door and to the stables. She heard Martin the stable boy’s voice, “What?” and then nothing more. There was a scuffling sound in the straw behind her, and then the hard leather of a saddle struck her midsection. Moments later she felt a man mount beside her and the horse move off at a trot. The jolting sickened her and fear of falling off and being trampled flooded her mind to the exclusion of everything else. She could not draw a breath to scream with her body over the back of the horse, and another jolt caused her to bite her lip. Salty blood filled her mouth and almost made her retch. Within moments, they were on the cobbled streets, and then her captor urged his horse to a gallop and the unpleasantness of her situation changed to torment.

Nadira had only been on a horse once as a little girl. The memory was a mere image of being perched before her father on his favorite little Barbary stallion. By contrast, the animal pounding away beneath her ribs was an immense war charger, its legs longer than she was tall. The ground below her seemed miles away and every jolt forced her ribs into her mouth. After what seemed like an hour, Nadira was in so much pain from this ride that falling seemed a blessing instead of something to be avoided. At least the torture

would stop. She began to push on the leather instead of holding it tightly. Within moments, she had some freedom and then she felt herself loose in the chilly air.

The miserable jolting had stopped, but the relief was short-lived as she felt a greater jolt as the ground struck her the full length of her body. She lay dazed for a moment. Dawn had not yet arrived; she could not see clearly in the murk around her. She heard the horses' hooves slow and then stop. She tried to get up but still had no breath in her body. Feebly she pushed against the ground then suddenly a grip on her smock and cloak between her shoulder blades pulled her roughly into the air, her naked feet dangling above the ground. She was yanked around and set down hard.

"You fool! You could have been killed!" Her keeper sputtered, punctuating his words with a shake of her dress. Her hood fell back and Nadira could see that they were out of the city and on the road that followed the river. The moon shown a half-light near the western horizon and it was pink in the east. If she could get free of his grip she could run to the river and hide on the banks where there was overgrown brush and many trees. These men had no dogs. She looked up at the man glaring down at her, his scar now white against the livid background of his face. She did not care that he was angry. The other men pulled their horses up around her and Montrose dismounted forcefully. He strode toward her, heavy boots thumping the packed clay road. He took her arm from the sentry and spun her to face him.

"You may not like it now, but we have done you a great service." He snapped, whipping off his gloves and slapping them sharply against his thigh.

"Killing my master and stealing me from my home?" Nadira answered incredulously.

"Your master is not dead. We did not harm him, but the Black Friars will. Their master Torquemada has poisoned the Queen's ear. No one in Castile or Aragon or even Andalusia is safe from his touch. We come now from Toledo, where even visitors feel vulnerable. You could be returned to your home if you wish..."

"I wish!"

"But first you must read for us."

"I will not! I do not know you and I resent being thrown over the back of a horse in the middle of the night!"

“Kinda feisty fer a servant wench, ain’t she?” The red haired man narrowed his eyes at her.

Lord Montrose pulled Nadira closer against his chest. The brass buckle on his baldric bruised her cheek. You knew my brother for one day,” he said in a low voice, the thump of his heart rumbled beneath her ear.

“Yes, but...”

“And what did you think of him?” Montrose released her. Nadira wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, touching her swollen lip tentatively. She remembered the injured man, this large one’s brother. She glanced up at Lord Montrose. They were very different. This man was large and broad; his brother had been rather slight. Montrose was dark where his brother had been fair. She remembered how his brother must have suffered as he was kicked and beaten. How strong he must have been to keep his secret in the face of such abuse. His body may have been slight, but his courage was considerable. She remembered how his blue eyes spoke to her in the end when his lips could no longer move. He had entrusted her with his last words. Trusted her to tell his brother what he had withheld from his torturers. A great surge of pity swelled inside her.

“You did not stop for his body,” she whispered.

“No.” Montrose took her arm again, and Nadira did not resist the grip. “There is no time, and I have not the heart to disturb his grave.” Now his voice was soft and low.

Nadira stared at her feet. She recalled Inez’s fear and her warnings. She looked back toward the town, long gone from sight. Her day was going to be full of inventorying the buttery and the larder, then perhaps copying a manifest. She looked down the road away from town, a ribbon of road stretched north toward places she had never been. She looked at the men and horses circled around her. Three men sat patiently on mounts loaded front and back with supplies. The youngest-looking man in the back held the reins of two packhorses, he was not much more than a boy. They were very definitely on a long journey. The three other men were dismounted, hands resting on the pommels of their sheathed swords, quietly watching her make this decision. These men were not like Massey’s band of rough sailors.

She looked at their faces one by one. She saw that they knew she must come willingly or be of little use to them. Their patience seemed odd to Nadira who was used

to being told what to do. In her narrow world, men gave the orders. Did it matter to her which men were her masters? What if they were right and it was only a matter of time before the Black Friars visited Sofir? Something else entered her mind, a thought she had not allowed herself to savor for many years. A possibility. Perhaps an opportunity.

“I will come with you for his sake, but I must ride vertically, not as a sack of barley.”

“Ha! She will bargain then,” The red-haired man barked out a short laugh. “Ye’d best ken what the merchant said about her bein’ clever, Rob, lest she get the better of ye.”

Montrose ignored him. To Nadira he said, “Very well.”

“And I must have shoes and proper clothing.”

“I will get them for you at the next town.”

“You must swear not to harm me.”

“I have.”

“Do it again, and make your men swear.”

“Agreed.” Lord Montrose gestured to the mounted men. They joined their comrades on the ground, drawing their swords. “I swear you will not be harmed,” he said. The men repeated his words, pressing their pommels to their foreheads one by one. “Are you satisfied?” he asked her.

“There is more.”

Montrose looked like he was forcing himself to remain calm. “Speak already. We are in a hurry.”

“You will send me home when you are finished with me.”

“Already agreed. Let us not waste another moment.” Montrose pulled his gloves on.

“No, I mean, my real home. In Morocco.” Nadira lowered her eyes, looking up at him through her lashes. She waited for the expected expletives, but she heard only the crunching sound of the horses at their bits. The silence went on so long she began to doubt her new idea. *I’ve asked too much. Now they will just tie me up.* She clenched her fists and looked up boldly. Montrose was rubbing his chin with the reins while he studied the sunrise, then he looked at her hard.

“You will come willingly?”

Nadira nodded.

“You won’t run away?”

She nodded again. He studied her for a few more minutes, cocking his head and narrowing his eyes. “Agreed.” He signaled to the scarred man who immediately mounted his huge horse and scooped Nadira up before him on the saddle. She leaned back against his body as the horse moved into a rough canter. While not comfortable, it was bearable in this position. He kept one thick arm around her middle as the horse thundered down the road. Nadira did not look back. The group continued down the market road, past the empty market stalls and soon they were quite beyond anything familiar to her.

Chapter Three

At noon they stopped for a quick meal of bread and warm ale. *This leathery bread must be at least three days old.* Nadira turned her piece around, trying to find a soft spot to start on. She chewed tentatively and wondered about all the food that must be in the knapsacks on the packhorses. No one had touched those bags, and she did not ask. She thought longingly of the mid-day meals in Sofir’s house. Ample platters fed Sofir and his guests; many of the leftovers usually found their way into her stomach. The memory of yesterday’s roasted apples dipped in honey made her squirm on the hard ground. She glared at the last bite before grudgingly consuming it, forcing the dry morsel down her throat with a swallow from a small tin cup. When the bitter ale was gone she swung the cup absently from her little finger. Her feet were aching with the cold, though the frost had disappeared with first light. The men had ridden silently and with great purpose. The demanding pace was hard on the horses and on her body. Nadira stretched first one limb, then another until she had tested all her aches and pains.

The men reposed in various positions, some squatting, and some leaning against the large stones; the big one was stretched out like a carthorse in its stall at the end of the day. They made no attempt to speak to her but sometimes made furtive glances in her direction. The scarred man seemed to be in charge of making sure she had food and ale. Nadira had twice heard him called Marcus. He sat closest to her and made it was obvious that he was tasked with her care. Her smallest movement would bring his eyes upon her. She smiled at him whenever the glance fell on her, but he did not ever change the cast of

his face in response. Even as he consumed his meal, his eyes lightly touched everything about them; his hands constantly in motion and his boots tapped the ground. Nadira thought it best to be silent until spoken to. She had discovered that even the smallest sigh would stop conversation and bring all eyes upon her. This touchy atmosphere had persisted through the morning ride, the stops to water the thirsty horses and now this break for the midday meal. Nadira suspected that the loss of their companion might be the reason for their behavior. She glanced sideways through her hair at their leader so that even the vigilant Marcus would not notice the direction of her gaze.

Lord Montrose sat with his back against the largest boulder, his elbows on his knees, a piece of bread in one hand and a pint in the other. Beside him sat the red-haired one called Alisdair. Montrose was not eating but stared at the ground between his boots. Nadira watched as Alisdair tried unsuccessfully to hand him more food. Montrose drained his cup and Alisdair was quick to fill it again. Still, no words were spoken. Nadira was relieved when Montrose finally stood, flinging his crust to the grass. The sooner they were on the road, the sooner they might stop for the night. Nadira imagined a warm inn with hot food and a bed with no fleas.

Once mounted again, they passed few others on the road. She saw a farmer and a cart, and a few travelers walking from village to village. It was not the season for travel and not a market day. The roads were dry and in good condition, not normal for this time of year when the rains would soften the earth and the paving stones became treacherous for man and beast. Marcus' horse was a great wise beast and chose his footing carefully, even when they traveled at a gallop. After a few hours on his back Nadira gave up worrying about another fall. Marcus had a firm arm across her middle. When the footing was rough and the party slowed, she could feel the arm tighten as their mount navigated the gullies that occasionally bisected the road.

The road followed the river down and they had not yet reached an inn. Nadira had never been so far from her master's house. Late afternoon the men moved off the road some distance into the brush. They picketed the horses and stripped them of their burdens. The largest man spread a saddle blanket down on the high grass and patted it with his hand. Nadira thought he meant for her to sleep on it. She asked tentatively, "Do

you mean for me to sleep here, then?" The imagined inn faded away. There would be no soft bed, with or without fleas. The man smiled and patted it again but made no sound.

"Garreth will not speak to you, Lass," said Alisdair as he wrenched the heavy saddle from his horse. "Saracens put a dagger up through his throat. Put it right through his neck because he cursed their God." Garreth indicated a thick scar under his chin with a broad finger.

Encouraged by the unexpected conversation she asked, "Why didn't that kill him?"

"Naw, Lass, look at the size of old Garreth there. Saracens are a wicked bunch, but they are small and skinny as a whole. The unfortunate one who stuck the point in never got to slash with it. Garreth put both hands on the bugger's neck and," here he made a twisting motion with his hands and a popping noise with his mouth. Nadira was aware that her mouth hung open in an unattractive way.

Alisdair continued, "We all sat around for the good part of the day staring at the bloody hilt before Rob worked up enough courage to pull the damned thing out. Bled like the dickens, too. It took out a big chunk of his tongue, but he's too big and too stubborn to let a little cut like that take him down." Garreth grunted and flexed his great arms for Nadira to see the bulging muscles. He was half again taller than she and three times as broad. His ruddy face was rough and weather-beaten, his fair hair thin and unkempt. He had bright pale blue eyes and an easy smile made irregular by the absence of a few teeth here and there. He was grinning at her now.

Nadira decided she liked him. She laughed softly. "He is a great beast."

The other men returned carrying skins of water and ale and the bag containing the bread. Montrose was missing.

The dark haired man looked around. "Where is Rob?"

Nadira was relieved someone asked. She had been wondering herself, scanning the copse that surrounded the camp as well as the road before and behind them.

"He will bring us some real food, God willing," said Marcus as he dropped a load of deadfall on the ground beside him.

"Aye," said Alisdair, "He's gone to see what's in that small wood there." He gestured off the road where Nadira could see a line of trees. "I'll be startin' a fire, maybe

we can warm up whatever he brings, eh?" The dark haired man brought another armload of firewood to the circle and dumped it in front of Alisdair.

"Here you are, Alisdair, I'll start a good fire. It'll be cold tonight." He looked around as Nadira had done. "I don't see that this place is too dangerous for a fire. What do you think?"

Alisdair rubbed his chin, then pulled off his helm so he could rub his head as well. "Rob said to build a fire, so I don't think he's worrit. We are protected from the road by this hillock," he gestured toward a rise in the landscape between the camp and the road. "We can post watch from that boulder there," he turned around "and that one by the woods." He tossed the helm toward his saddle where it landed with a metallic clink. To Nadira he said, "I doubt verra serious your Master will be sending his men fer us." The blue eyes were amused. "He seemed fairly pleased wit' the purse Rob left for ye."

Nadira looked away.

The black haired man pulled off his helm and tossed it as well. He pulled a small axe from his belt and went down into a crouch, digging a fire pit in the coarse grass. He glanced at Nadira.

"Can you start a fire with flint and steel?" he asked without stopping his work. He broke up the thick sods and flipped them over his shoulder. Already a dark earthy circle was opening up before him.

"I can," Nadira answered. She took the fire case he handed her and opened it. It was a thin metal box, cleverly worked from tin. The top opened on tiny hinges. Inside were a piece of flint, a smooth block of metal and a braided rope of dry grass. Nadira sat cross-legged next to the dark circle. She picked up a discarded sod, turned it dirt-side up and unraveled some of the braided grass from the rope. When she had a small pile, she looked around for kindling. There were a few dry twigs and branches lying around her. She snapped them into tiny finger-sized sticks until she was satisfied she could get a starter fire going. Nadira deftly sparked the grass until it smoked, then laid the twigs and blew until a tiny flame licked at her fingers. The dark-haired man picked up the glowing sod, placed it in the center of his pit, and carefully laid larger branches on the starter. Nadira replaced the items in the fire case and handed it back to him.

"Thank you," he said courteously as he took the box.

Nadira did not release the tinderbox. "Please, sir," she asked politely, "We have not been introduced."

The dark man blushed to his ears. He released the tinderbox and smoothed his hair, bowing slightly. "John, Miss," he smiled.

"John." Nadira handed him the tinderbox. John tucked the box in his belt.

John gestured to the small pile of deadfall behind him. "Can you tend this fire?"

"I can."

Nadira moved her horse blanket closer to the fire so she could sit on it while she watched for stray embers and tossed the occasional branch in the pit. She chewed on the bread that Marcus had pulled from the food bag and tossed to her. She gazed into the growing fire and stretched her feet out towards its warmth. One by one, the men joined her at the fire as each one finished his work. As twilight brought out the brighter stars one by one in the darkening sky, the sparrows fell silent. The heat from the fire made Nadira sleepy. She was about to doze off when the men jumped to their feet.

Montrose rode up to the fire and dumped something heavy on the ground, then moved away to picket his horse with the others. Alisdair stood and lifted up the carcass of a yearling deer by its hind legs admiring it in the light of the campfire. Garreth and John moved quickly to help Alisdair dress it. Nadira watched as they cut the hide from its body then chopped it into manageable pieces with an axe. By the time Montrose returned to the circle of firelight, they had great chunks of venison roasting on sticks by the fire. The aroma made her middle twist in anticipation. Finally she was handed a piece on a forked stick. It was tough, but was palatable enough after Alisdair passed around a little bag of salt. She devoured it hungrily. There was silence around the fire while the men did likewise.

Then a skin was passed around the circle. When it came to Nadira, she took a drink to find it full of water, a bit stale and tasting of the leather that stored it. The entire deer disappeared within the hour as the moon rose. John threw the bones in the fire, rolled the hide into a tube and buried it, using his handy axe to break up the ground.

Another skin was passed around. Nadira took her drink in turn, eyes wide to find this one full of something else. Not quite wine, but not beer either. Frowning, she passed the skin to Garreth. He smiled at her shyly as he took it.

Alisdair cuffed him, laughing, "Quit makin' eyes at the Lass, you big oaf."

Nadira wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "What was that?" she asked him.

"Mead. From Toledo. We have a goodly supply, Thanks be to God. It's fine stuff."

Alisdair took the skin from Garreth and took a drink for himself.

Nadira lay down facing the fire. She ached from her neck to her feet and the ground was hard. Perhaps another swig of that mead would be called for. She watched the skin jealously as it made its way back to her. This time her drink was not so tentative. She savored the warm softness as the sweet liquid made its way to the center of her body. She sighed deeply. The men drew lots for the night watch. Nadira rolled herself in her cloak and made a pillow with the sods from the fire pit. Garreth and the smaller brown-haired man made their way to the two boulders Alisdair had designated for the watch. They disappeared just outside the realm of firelight, but Nadira could hear them as they arranged themselves comfortably on the rocks. Montrose and Alisdair sat opposite each other. For a long time they just stared into the fire. Nadira felt herself drowsing when she was focused back to the present by Alisdair's gentle voice.

"There was nothin' you could do, Rob." She heard him murmur.

Nadira opened her eyes just a little. The other two men were rolled up as she was and appeared to be sleeping. The sound of the night insects blended comfortably with the sound of their soft snoring.

Alisdair continued, "There was no way ye could have made it there in time."

Nadira watched them from across the fire. Montrose poked the fire with a long stick, sending sparks up with the smoke. He did not reply, but Nadira saw him grimace.

"There was no way t' hurry that ship, and overland would have delayed us still further. Richard kent t' risk."

"Do not speak to me of his risks," Montrose growled, "none know them better than I."

"It's killin' ye, I know," Alisdair pulled his blanket around his shoulders and shifted his position on the ground. "There's naught to be done now, Rob. He's gone. We'll go back and find those bloody seamen. Massey is well known at the docks. We can kill them slowly, peelin' their skin back as one pares an apple." Alisdair's face twisted in the orange flicker of the firelight.

Montrose tossed the stick into the fire, scaring up more sparks. “There is no time. I must get it from Henry before he gives it to anyone else. Then there will be time for vengeance. I have the whole of my life.” Their eyes met across the fire.

“What think ye of the lass?” Alisdair changed the subject quickly. “Do ye think she can read like the old man said? I never thought a woman could learn priest-craft,” he finished doubtfully.

“My mother could read,” Montrose answered him. He picked up a piece of saddle harness and leaned closer to the fire to examine the stitching.

“Aye, and a fine lady she was,” Alisdair said. “She could sing fair well, too. Oft I listened under her window.”

Montrose looked up. “Did you now? Did my father ever catch you in such idleness?”

Alisdair laughed quietly, so not to disturb the sleepers. “Oh aye. He did and flailed me for it, but it did not stop me. I just developed better ears so I could hear him coming.”

There was no verbal response from Montrose. Nadira sighed as the mead worked on her tired body and she was soon asleep.

She was up before dawn to find a place to relieve herself. The watch at that hour was the brown-haired boy who pointed discreetly to a copse of brush not far from where the horses were hobbled. When she was finished, she shook out her cloak and put it on again. The other men were readying the horses and packing the baggage. There would be no breakfast.

Three days passed, each bleeding into the other with the only variations being whether there was meat at supper or not. A few more interesting things were brought out of the baggage. Nadira learned to eat an unfamiliar salted fish and something that tasted like cheese, but she was too afraid to ask what it was. She learned that the two shy boys were Evan and Hagan. One seemed to be squire to Montrose. The other followed Marcus around whenever he was not needed for the various tasks that accompanied a traveling party of their size. Marcus and John were both battle-scarred in disfiguring ways. Nadira had gotten used to the diagonal stripe across Marcus’s face. She tried not to stare at John’s head where an ear used to be. Both men were not inclined to talk much. Garreth of course, did not talk at all. Alisdair made up for them all with his chatter.

While he sometimes annoyed Nadira with his constant commentary on the journey, none of the other men ever told him to hold his tongue, and they seemed genuinely interested as Alisdair told stories after nightfall. Montrose rode at the head of the line, and spoke rarely. Nadira spent her days perched on the low pommel of Marcus' saddle staring at his broad back. Montrose looked back periodically, his sharp eyes taking in the line of horses and men, and then flickering above and behind them. Once the eyes landed square on Nadira, and she ventured a timid smile. Montrose did not change his expression, but turned his gaze back to the front. *Perhaps I remind him that I am in his brother's place.*

On the fourth day they passed through a village. Two small stone houses were built on either side of the road. More thatched roofs could be seen in the distance off the road. Someone was home, for the washing flapped in the breeze behind the larger house. The ground floor seemed to be a blacksmith shop. There was smoke coming from a tall chimney and the occasional ring of striking metal broke the pastoral stillness.

Montrose dismounted and approached the door of the larger building. He banged on the heavy wood with his fist. After a moment, a small window on the second floor opened and a woman's voice called out. "We have nothing here!"

Montrose stepped back and pulled out his purse. Without a word, he removed a small gold coin and lifted it over his head. There was a short pause before the upstairs window slammed shut. Within moments, they heard the bolts on the front door slide and an old man's florid face peered out, rheumy eyes taking in the travelers. He looked Montrose up and down, carefully noting the size of his purse. "Come in, Milord, you are welcome."

Montrose signaled to his men before he entered. The men dismounted and led the horses to a well beside the house. Garreth lifted the bucket with the winch and they all refreshed themselves. The blacksmiths stopped pounding to stare at them silently. Their eyes lingered on her and Nadira knew what a curiosity she must be, traveling with soldiers in her chemise. She tried not to guess their thoughts, but looked away. Montrose emerged from the door with some cloth over one arm.

He handed the bundle of cloth to Nadira, and then gestured for Garreth to follow him. The three men went behind the house and returned with a lumpy sack and what

looked like a wheel of cheese. Nadira looked in her bundle. She had been given a dress of homespun wool dyed a rich brown from nut husks and inside the dress were a pair of soft leather shoes, crudely fashioned. Both the dress and the shoes were warm and Nadira wondered if they had been taken directly off the body of the Goodwife. She pulled the dress over her head, taking care not to get her braid tangled in the laces. A tug at the strings and she had the simple garment tied around her waist. Her chemise kept the scratchy wool from rubbing her skin, and the lacing made a nice fit. The shoes were too large, but she could stuff them with dry grass later to make them fit better. By the time she was dressed the men had packed the cheese and the sack and were mounted and ready to go. Marcus pulled her up beside him and they were off again.

Two more days passed without incident, then as the road curved around an outcropping of rock they halted. The men dismounted and gathered in a circle for another conference. Nadira remained on the back of the charger, looking around as the big horse grazed on the verge. The terrain of the river valley had become gently rolling hills as they turned north. Cultivated fields were gone, and the mountains of Andorra could be seen in the distance. It was the sight of these mountains that occupied the men. Nadira saw them one at a time glancing up at the peaks during the discussion.

Marcus returned and took the charger by the bits. He turned the horse and made his way off the road and into the bracken. The others followed behind, picking their way around the small shrubs and thorny trees until they could no longer be seen from the road. She was glad for the break, but surprised when Marcus began to strip the horse. The other men were doing the same.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “Why are we stopping?”

Marcus glanced at Montrose before replying, “We are camping here for a while. We’ll spend some time repairing the chattel and stocking up. There’s not much ‘till the other side.”

“Can I help?”

Alisdair laughed. “I think not.”

“She can gather firewood. We’ll need a great lot of it,” said Montrose as he pulled the saddle from his stallion. His arms were full so he gestured with his chin. “There’s plenty there by that grove. Just bring it here. We will set up on the east side of that great

boulder.” Nadira climbed the bank to see the copse better. It was obvious why Montrose had chosen this site. The boulder and nearby outcropping of rock hid the group from sight of the road, while allowing the watch to see long stretches of the road in both directions. Even the campfire would be hidden from the unlikely night traveler.

Nadira’s legs were trembling from the long ride. Her feet hung down either side of the horse without support and after a few hours began to lose sensation. She stomped them on the hard ground a few times to get the feeling back. She would need them to be nimble as she climbed toward the grove in her ill-fitting shoes.

Nadira climbed the bank with difficulty, but once on level ground she was able to progress easily to the edge of the wood. Deadfall was plentiful and she made many trips to the boulder before deciding she had gathered enough. As she worked, she kept an eye on the others. She watched as they cared for their horses and set their goods in a circle near the boulder camp. It was apparent that the men had been working together for a very long time. Their movements were coordinated without discussion, and each knew his task. Before the shadows drew long, Marcus and Garreth had started a fire and were roasting hares. John was slicing cheese with his dagger. Nadira moved to her horse blanket between Garreth and Marcus just as she had on all the campsites. Garreth passed her a heel of bread and a hunk of white cheese to go with her meat.

As they ate, darkness fell around them, but it was held at bay from the circle of travelers by the small fire. There was talk of supplies and the state of the saddlery. Nadira was dozing off when something in the fire popped. She jumped to her feet, heart pounding. The others sprang up in response, reaching for their swords. After moment of silence, Alisdair broke the tension with a chuckle.

“We have the girl here on guard for us. Will ye stand first watch, Lassie?” he laughed. Nadira was mortified. She sat down again and apologized.

“I am sorry. I ...”

“No harm, do not fret yourself about it,” Montrose said quietly. “I’m not easy here either.” The men sat down again. There was the rasp of swords sliding back into their scabbards.

“Nor I. There are eyes watching us even now, I gather,” Marcus looked about as he chewed.

“That reminds me of the time we were with the Duke at Nancy. You remember that night, John? Rob was on watch while we were all sleeping with bellies full of ale. He had his sword drawn the whole night. Kept hearing things in the woods. Eyes watchin’ him from the dark.” The men laughed. “Naught but owls.” Garreth slapped Montrose on the shoulder.

“I was fourteen years old.” Montrose shook his head making his hair swing back and forth. “You will never let me forget that.”

Uneasy laughter rippled around the circle. Alisdair took another drink. “Can’t let you forget somethin’ like that. How about the time Richard put a wee snake in yer jerkin while you slept? I like that story too.”

At the mention of Richard, the mirth took on a more somber tone.

“Tis true.” John said, “Richard put a snake in my tunic once. Put a toad in my cup, too.”

“He was always teasin’ someone, that lad.” Alisdair tapped his knee with a thick finger.

“Aye,” John added, “and he never meant any meanness. Not a mean bone in his body.”

“Always looking out for us, too. He brought me my Brigit to me when he knew I was needin’ a wife. He said he thought she looked ‘up to the job’.” This brought guffaws from all and even a quiet smile to Montrose’s lips.

“He taught me to write my name.” Marcus said quietly, twisting his cup.

“Aye,” said Alisdair, “and you past yer thirtieth year. This lass here not twenty and can write ten languages.”

“Six,” Nadira blurted out before she thought better of it. Correcting one’s master is not polite in any language. But the fair stranger merely echoed her response.

“Six, then,” he said with a nod in her direction.

Montrose drained his cup and said to her, “How did you come by this skill?”

Nadira twisted her hands in her blanket. All eyes were on her. Even the two boys stopped their playful wrestling and became still, awaiting her answer. She looked at each one in turn, deciding how much to say.

“When I was seven years old my father lost an important battle.” Nadira began slowly. “My mother and I, sisters, brothers, my father’s other wives and their children were taken to the courtyard and lined up like horses before a race. Men drew lots and took us away. I was permitted to go with my mother,” she paused to test the response from her audience. “She was an educated woman. A poet.” Nadira looked defiantly at each of the men in turn, daring them to challenge her, but there was no sound but the crackling of the fire.

“She taught me to read and write, and when we came to Barcelona, she taught me Latin. Hebrew and Greek I learned from my master after she died. English I learned only last year. I cannot write English well,” she added with a grimace, remembering her struggles with that language. “But I can read an English manifest.”

“Curious,” Montrose said, “Curious that a Jew would permit this kind of scholarship in a female servant.” The challenge had come.

“Senor Sofir is no longer a Jew, my lord. He told you himself.”

“Yes.” Lord Montrose made it sound like ‘no’.

Nadira bristled. “The Master had his use for me.”

Someone beyond the fire snorted. Montrose pointed his finger into the darkness and the laughter stopped. He turned to Nadira, who was now pink with embarrassment.

“I am very interested in his ‘use’ as you put it. Please continue.”

Sofir had been like another father to her. Perhaps a better one than her own. She resented the insinuation. Nadira struggled to keep her voice even. “I wrote his letters, his bills of lading, his inventories.” There was more, but this small list seemed to be enough for now. Nadira did not want to tell them everything all at once.

“Still, it is not the norm.”

“No, that is true, my lord. These are not normal times.”

Alisdair spat. “Normal times? What is ‘normal times’?” He grunted. “Yer quite daft if you think there is such a thing.”

Nadira opened her mouth to disagree, but thought better of it. Montrose asked her, “How long after your master was baptized did he begin to teach you Hebrew?”

Nadira blinked in surprise. “How did you know? It was the very day.”

Montrose did not answer; his eyes were on the fire. Instead he said quietly, “We have some letters and documents we picked up in Barcelona. Perhaps you can read them to us now. It’s time I heard them.”

Alisdair brought one of the large saddlebags from the baggage pile and set it down delicately beside her. He pulled a brand from the fire and lit a candle he pulled from another bag. Lord Montrose opened the bag and took out a handful of folded vellum sheets, two scrolls, and three packages wrapped in parchment. He pulled the largest from the pile, opening the wooden skippet and holding it to Alisdair’s candle to see the impression on the wax inside.

“This one is from the university in Wittenburg,” he said, handing the crisp vellum to Nadira.

She took it, broke the wax that bound the edges together and unfolded the folio, spreading it out over her knees, smoothing it down. Alisdair arranged himself behind her, holding the candle over her shoulder. The letter was densely scribed in Latin in a precise hand. Two columns of writing filled the page from end to end. The first paragraph was a greeting.

“My dear friend and colleague, Richard Longmoor, I send greetings. Below is the catalogue from Count Braslow’s library, both sacred and profane. It is with great pleasure I extend His Grace’s invitation to visit and copy with a free hand anything you desire. Of course, your own collected treasures are welcome here for the pleasure of His Grace’s copyists.” Nadira drew a finger down the lists of manuscripts and codices that followed. “Do you wish for me to read them all?” she asked in wonder.

“Aye, ye must. “We need to know what’s at Braslow.” Alisdair sighed, making himself more comfortable behind her. Montrose nodded in agreement, his eyes low and focused on his boots. Nadira began, reading the author’s name and the list of his works that followed. She read slowly and carefully, stumbling over some of the pronunciations until she had completed the document.

“Ach, well, that saves us a trip up the Elbe,” Alisdair said.

“Aye.” Montrose agreed.

“Here’s another one, Lass.”

Nadira took this one, broke the seal and read it to them. This one was a letter thanking Richard for his help in cataloguing a collection of manuscripts and serving as letter of introduction to a nobleman in Verona.

The next was another catalog, this time from a merchant's house in Constantinople. One by one she went through each letter, some with catalogs of manuscripts, others with invitations, until there was but one remaining. Alisdair put his hand on hers after she reached for it. "I don't know about this one, Lass." He turned to look at Montrose. They waited for him; no one made a sound. Finally Montrose nodded once. His mouth drew into a firm line as he took the letter himself, broke the seal and passed it silently to Nadira.

She read, "Richard, greetings to my beloved son. It is with the grace of God that I am able to put these words to paper and I pray they reach you..." Nadira paused, whispering the rest of the sentence, "and find you safe and well." She looked up, unsure whether to continue. She could not see Lord Montrose, for he had moved back away from the fire when she took the letter from his hand, but she heard him groan softly in the darkness behind her. The other men sat quite still around the fire, waiting for her to continue. The flickering light gave the illusion of movement, but they sat still as stone. She continued in a shaky voice, "It has come to my attention by way of Brother Andrew that there are wicked men in Barcelona, come from Toledo. I wish to warn you to beware of Massey and his men, now sailing under Captain Snead on the *Silvia*. He will be in the southern waters all winter and is likely to be visiting the very houses on which you plan to call." She took a breath, "I remind you with love, that you are my own, my son, my beloved. Kemberly awaits your glorious return. It is with great pleasure that I tell you the Bishop came by this past week, bringing me news of your triumph in Wittenberg. He tells me you impressed the doctors there with your scholarship, your wit, and your gracious manners. You have been extended invitations to all the fine houses in Prague, Berlin, Flanders, Paris, and dare I say, Rome. Even now letters arrive nearly every week requesting your presence at universities all over the continent.

"My darling son, with such accolades and invitations, I find it difficult to understand why you prefer to roam the south countries where the law is weak and brigands abound." Nadira paused, unable to catch her breath. Garreth passed the mead to her. She drank,

easing the constriction that closed her throat. She did not want to read the words that followed. When she hesitated too long, Alisdair thumped the vellum with a thick finger, urging her to continue. Tentatively, her voice weak, she almost whispered the last sentence. “As you well know, I do not share your faith in your brother’s ability to protect you. I urge you to return home at once, come by ship from Venice, not Barcelona. Stay away from the docks there. I have arranged for monies for you with our friends Benite and Bernoulli. God speed. Your loving father, Richard, Baron Kemberly.”

After the sound of his name died on her lips, there was an eerie silence.

Alisdair stiffened behind her. He gathered the documents from her lap and stuffed them roughly back into the leather bag, his breath whistling in his nose. “What now, then, Rob,” Alisdair snarled into the darkness as he snapped the laces of the bag with a jerk.

A tongue of firelight reached past Nadira, reflecting off a leather boot as Montrose moved behind her. She could not help but turn her head to hear his answer, the words were so faint.

“I’ll take first watch.”

Though barely audible, this statement was immediately followed by the thump of baggage hitting the ground beyond the fire as the men obediently rolled themselves in their blankets.

Nadira made no move to lie by the fire. Instead she sat in place wrapped in her blanket until the men had settled themselves and the rumble of snores drifted across the fire pit. When peace had settled over the sleeping men she unfolded her legs and crept to Montrose’s side where he sat on a little rise above the camp. He tilted his head to acknowledge her presence, but did not greet her.

Nadira wanted to tell him how brave his brother had been. She wanted to make him see that moment when Massey had made his final malicious demand, that moment when the blue-eyed stranger had called upon his last vestige of strength and defied his torturer. She could not imagine herself suffering so. She would have broken long before; she would have told Massey everything, begged for her life.

She wanted to tell Montrose how his brother had endured monstrous cruelty yet still had the heart to smile at her as she bathed his battered face. She had come to Montrose to comfort him with words of courage. Instead, as she opened her mouth to speak she tasted

the salt of her tears as they dripped into her lips. The memory of Richard's eyes, filled with peace as the life left them, robbed her of her ability to speak. Her hands felt the memory of his cold fingers pressing hers briefly as he slowly died. She was sobbing. She clutched at her face, ashamed to be laid so bare before Montrose, mortified that having come to him she now appeared weak and foolish.

With effort she stilled her shaking, gulping deep breaths of the smoky air, wiping her eyes and nose with the hem of her chemise. When she could see again, she braved a glance up at the man beside her. He looked down at her in the starlight. She saw Richard's eyes, alive again in his. When he spoke his voice was soft.

"All who knew him loved him," he whispered with a sad smile. "You too."

Chapter Four

They were packed and on the trail soon after sunrise the next morning. The road narrowed as they climbed in altitude and became not much more than a path. The men often dismounted to guide the animals around treacherous curves. The sun seemed to jump in all directions, first rising in the east, and then seeming to appear in the south, then the north. The switchbacks confused Nadira so badly she stopped trying to keep track of their progress.

By late afternoon Montrose had them camp beside a tiny mountain stream. They were sheltered from the path by an old tree on its stony bank. They did not build a fire, nor did they waste any time talking. Instead, while the sun remained above the horizon they took out their swords, knives, and daggers and sharpened them with whetstones pulled from the baggage. Nadira cut the bread and cheese and passed the food around. She filled the water skins from the stream and helped move the horses to better forage that grew between the sharp rocks. She was watched silently the whole time as the *zing zing* of the whetstones rung against the steel.

The moon shone bright enough to see clearly the road in front and behind them, but Nadira could not relax this night. She turned over and wiggled in the thin grass, hoping to find a comfortable position on the hard ground. No matter how she lay, a stone gouged her flesh. A few paces in front of her Montrose sat quietly facing the road in the

direction they had come. She knew his ears were doing most of the work even with the bright moon to aid his eyes. Every time she curled one way or the other, his head cocked in her direction. Alisdair could not sleep either. After some time tossing about and grunting, he gave up trying and joined Montrose on watch. Nadira lay still, listening.

“What are ye thinkin’, Rob?”

Montrose turned his body to include Alisdair in his field of vision. “I’m thinking about Richard,” he said shortly.

“Aye.” There was a lengthy silence before Nadira heard Alisdair ask, “Are ye gonna send word to the Laird about it?”

“No.”

“Ach, Rob, ye know...” Alisdair was shaking his head.

“No. Let him think we are both dead.” Nadira saw Montrose relax. He rolled from his sitting position to lie back on the grass arms behind his head, looking at the moon. Alisdair took up the sentry position resting his scabbard across his knees.

“Rob...”

“No.”

“Yer a fool, man. Kemberly will be yours when the Laird’s dead. You have Montrose now, from the Duke fer savin’ his life at Nancy. You could jest go home now and take it. Leave off this fool mission. Richard”, he crossed himself, “is dead, his quest dies with him. You know it. If the Laird thinks yer dead too, then yer rents will stop coming. We’ll starve.”

“If you want to go home, then go. I will not force you.”

There was silence instead of an answer. *What will they do with me if they give up their hunt?* She narrowed her eyes, breathing harder. *They promised.*

“I’ll not leave, ye, Rob, and nor will t’others. I jest want to be sure we all know what we’re doin’ here.

“Richard wanted that book. I’m going to get it for him. That’s what we’re doing here.”

“Tell me, then, do ye believe what they say about it? Did Richard ever tell ye why he wanted it so badly?”

“No.”

“And why he left us to go on alone?”

Nadira heard Montrose roll over again, the clank of his mail and the scratch of leather and steel on stone grated in her ears. “You know as well as I that he disappeared without a word to me or anyone else.”

“Aye, I know it. I was wantin’ to know if ye learned more from the lass. What Richard said t’ her, mebbe.”

“She’s told me what she knows.”

“Talkin’ to you is like pullin’ teeth, Rob. Damn it. Tell me what ye plan t’ do now.”

Lord Montrose answered his friend softly, his voice a murmur, but still it carried clearly to Nadira holding her breath behind him. “I will finish my task. I will do Richard’s bidding, but I will burn the cursed book when I get my hands on it.”

“And when ye’ve destroyed it?” Alisdair’s voice was lower now, too.

“There’s Massey to deal with.”

“Aye. And then?”

“What think you of...Constantinople?”

Alisdair coughed. “Verra fine whores there.”

Montrose laughed, but it was a sad sound.

Nadira awoke long before dawn when she felt Marcus roll onto her, his elbow digging painfully into her ribs. He apologized with dignity before he got up from his bedding, pulling her to her feet with a strong arm. He passed his hands chastely up and down the sides of her body from her shoulders to her hips. “Did I crush anything?” His voice was soft and low, hint of a smile beneath the black beard. Nadira shook her head, pulling bits of dry grass from the dark braid. He bent double, rolled his bedding with hers. “I spend days keeping you from harm only to squash you myself,” he joked, his blue eyes twinkling.

The others were moving about as well, gathering the horses and loading them with bedding and tools. The two boys worked the pack animals while Garreth, already mounted, rode alone up the trail in front of them. Nadira waited until Marcus was ready with his horse, but instead of hauling her up beside him as he had always done before, he

led her to one of the packhorses. The pack was smaller than usual and placed in such a way as to leave room for her on the animal's back.

"You'll ride the dapple today." He said shortly as he handed her up and took the animal's lead. His eyes no longer twinkled at her.

"He has no bridle," Nadira answered, worried. She fingered the rough mane.

"I'll lead him through the pass," Marcus indicated the road ahead with a mailed arm. "If there is trouble, jump down and hide. Brigands want the animals and supplies first. We will find you again soon enough," he said. Nadira noticed he was wearing his heavy helm with the nose plate instead of his lighter one. A knot tightened in her middle as she wound the dapple's mane into a noose around her hand. First?

"Do you expect trouble?" she asked in a very small voice.

"Every time," he answered shortly.

Marcus took the halter rope and led her to his own charger. The horses lined up single file, making the ascent with Marcus last, leading Nadira's horse. She kept looking behind her as the trail twisted and turned on itself. She wondered if brigands attacked from the rear. Would they have placed her in that much danger if that were so? Is it easier to escape from the rear?

The horses were slowed by the poor footing, their hooves slid on the smooth rock where there was no soil. Nadira gripped the bit of mane in her hands tightly. Ahead she could see the men craning their necks as they came over the top of the rise. Montrose raised an arm and they all stopped. The men rose in their stirrups and Nadira felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck.

A sharp cry startled all the horses. Nadira clung tightly with arms and legs as her animal shied away from a dozen dark forms emerging from behind boulders. Nadira knew the brigands must be men, but the creatures coming toward them appeared more like beasts. Animal skins covered their shoulders and heads, but she knew the bushy beards must conceal human faces. Naked arms brandished small axes and large clubs. Some of them had swords.

Nadira quickly counted fifteen attackers before her line of sight was crossed by Marcus's broad chest as he reined his mount to cover her. He didn't take his eyes off the attackers but wrenched her down from the dapple with one heave of his arm, his charger

backing against the pull on the bit. Nadira clutched his arm until her feet contacted the ground and she felt him push her away toward the side of the trail. She fled toward a gully shallowly carved by rainwater and snowmelt. The cleft was not deep enough to conceal her body, but when crouched behind a low outcropping of stone she could remain hidden from the path. She peered around the rock when she heard the first clash of steel. Axes went up, swords flashed down.

Nadira wanted to close her eyes, but they would not blink. The sound of impact echoed off the stones around her. She watched, frozen, as five hairy men separated from the others to pursue the fleeing animals. They spread out across the stony ground trying to surround the packhorses and impede their flight to the tree line. In the other direction she saw the boys Evan and Hagen disappear into the woods. *Where were they going? Did they have orders to hide as well?* The men in the road were standing and falling, leaping and staggering, always accompanied by the ring of metal. Nadira could not watch the conflict and remain hidden at the same time. She pressed herself smaller between two stones, ducking as one of the brigands turned toward her hiding place. It was colder in the shade where the sun had not touched the ground, but Nadira welcomed the shadow. She crouched, arms around her knees behind the biggest boulder. She could stay here, unseen. *Safe. Please let this be a safe place.*

A scream jolted that hope out of her mind. Nadira debated whether peeking was more dangerous than not knowing what was going on. She made her decision quickly. She raised herself to the top of her stone, her heart pounding loudly in her ears. She lifted herself just enough to lean to the side and see the edge of the trail. The fighting mass of men were crowding closer to her rocks. A body lay severed some distance away. Nadira ducked down quickly. *Too close. They are too close.* She looked up at the clouded sky. Now is the time when people pray. They pray to their god to save them. She tried to remember a prayer. Which god? Would it matter? Do gods only respond to their own people? What if someone had no god? She felt sick.

Another scream, then a thud. One of her men or one of the others?

Any moment she might be discovered. Is it safer here or among the trees? Are there more wild men in the woods? Do they have families hidden there? A camp? If she caught a horse could she control it? Ride it away? Marcus had told her to stay put and

wait. Should she obey? If her men were defeated, what would happen to her then? Would she be taken by these wild men of the mountain? Her mind sped through the possibilities one by one. None of them good.

She wanted to see. She had to know. Nadira inched her way around her stone. Her legs tangled in her chemise, the gravel bruised her hands. The sound of steel and the thud of clubs and metal surrounded her. Through a slit in the stones she attained a narrow view of the trail.

Five of the outlaws lay still, their animal skins ripped and bloody, arms and legs askew or detached, their blood pooling on the shale, red rivulets finding their way down the rain tracks to the streams. Her heart tightened as she recognized John lying beside them on his back, his eyes open, mouth gaping. The other men of her party flailed about with glittering steel, contacting flesh here and bone there. All had been unhorsed. They looked like they were tiring. Nadira counted six brigands still struggling against her four. Around her lay a supply of good-sized stones.

Nadira felt around her feet for a stone without taking her eyes from the battle. She tossed it up and down a few times to get the feel for its heft. *Maybe*. The stones here were irregular and sharp, not rounded like river rock. It was difficult to get a good grip for throwing. She watched as one of the wild men landed a fierce blow with what seemed like the branch of a tree to the back of Marcus' head. Garreth let out a roar and swung his axe in a wide arc. He avenged his friend with professional accuracy, the axe descending from the sky to cleave the brigand from his shoulder to his hips. The spray from that blow speckled her rock in a grisly pattern. Nadira was too horrified to move. Her hand tightened on her rock.

She watched as Montrose swung his sword backwards to ready it for a vicious slash that would have cleaved his victim on two had it landed. Instead, from behind him and out of his field of vision a wild man was running at full speed, his axe grasped in both hands high over his head ready for the down stroke. Nadira did not stop to think any more, but stood tall, braced herself with one foot against her boulder and let fly. Her stone struck the advancing attacker square between the eyes, interrupting the deadly stroke, but not stopping it. She watched with dismay as the axe came down under Montrose's arm, slicing him and knocking him to the ground. Worse, the attacker

wheeled about and came for her with a roar, the axe rising again, his other hand to the gash in his face.

Nadira backed against her boulder, crouching down, but never taking her eyes from the wild man. She felt the ground blindly for another missile. Belatedly she thought, that may have been a mistake. The brigand grew larger and larger until he filled her field of vision. His black teeth were bared, blood streamed from his nose and from his forehead where her stone had cut him. His hairy arm was now high over his head.

Nadira could not move; her hand clutched a stone too heavy for her to lift. She followed with her eyes the swing of steel up higher and higher. There were no sounds in her ears; no air seemed to flow into her body.

There was just this one axe and nothing else.

As the axe reached the top of its arc it seemed to Nadira that a circle of darkness moved in on her from all sides. She heard herself screaming, as though her mouth and throat were a separate and distant part of her body. She told herself to run, puzzled by her inability to move. She could not even blink until a hot splash of blood slapped her face.

The stink and the shock whipped her into motion. Her arms and legs now obeyed her commands. Her hand went to her throat, foolishly feeling for the gaping wound she expected, but her neck was whole. She wavered. At her feet lay the bear-like brigand, or half of him, anyway. Montrose bent over him, gasping. One hand was on his ribs, the other leaning on the pommel of his dark sword. Tentatively Nadira took in a breath. *Yes, I can breathe.* Another breath. She wiped her nose with her sleeve.

“My lord...” Her voice was a mere croak, her hand unbelieving, returned to her throat. His helmet and face were red with gore, his short beard matted with bits of flesh. His eyes shone a wild blue and white from behind a mask of death. Nadira reached out to touch him, hardly believing he was real. White teeth flashed at her from behind the dark mouth.

“You hurt?” He turned his head and spat, then wiped his hand across his nose and mouth, gathering up the residue of a man’s life and flicking it distastefully to the ground. His fingers left pale tracks across his face.

She shook her head, speechless.

He reached for her and she allowed him to take her elbow in his gloved hand and steer her toward the path. The brigands were suddenly gone. All of them. Together they climbed over the broken stone and slid down to the road where the bodies lay in grotesque clumps in an obscene embrace. Montrose grasped a wild man's corpse by the hair and pulled it off John's body, kicking it with his boot until it rolled free. Nadira rushed to kneel at John's side. Alisdair and Garreth towered over her, back to back.

"What made them flee?" she whispered.

"Ach. All the horses run off." Alisdair answered as he scanned the tree line.

John was dead. His throat had been slashed along one side, crimson colored his mail shirt. Montrose knelt by his friend. He pulled his gauntlets off one by one and gently closed John's eyes, then squeezed his shoulder. Nadira staggered to her feet, tripping on her bloody skirts and stumbled to the other familiar body in the dirt.

Marcus lay on his back, his eyes closed. His face was so pale that the scar was invisible. Nadira pressed her fingers under Marcus's thick beard where jaw meets neck. She felt a flutter. *He lives.* Hot tears welled up in her eyes. She heard Montrose lower himself beside her with a creak of leather and the scrape of steel. The smell of sweat and blood sickened her. She was afraid to look at him again. Montrose put his hand on Marcus' throat, too. His other hand smoothed the dark hair back from the wounded man's brow, leaving a bloody smear on the pale flesh. Nadira sniffed as the tears dripped into her nose. Montrose turned his head toward her, his blue eyes dark.

"He is still alive," he said softly.

"Yes," she sobbed.

Montrose glanced over the horizon before turning back to Marcus. Nadira felt him squeeze her arm. She rubbed her face with her sleeve and sniffed hard. Marcus had many slight wounds on his body and it was difficult to tell how much of the blood that covered him was his own. His eyes remained closed even when she touched the lids. She laid her palm along Marcus cheek before sliding her hand over his temple and along the crest of his skull to the back of his head. Montrose watched her carefully. She felt his eyes on her as she found what she feared. A large swelling had already begun. When he saw the look of dismay on her face Montrose put his hand there too. He sighed and sat back on his heels. He did not look at her as he spoke but scanned the distant tree line.

“Garreth!” Montrose called as he rose. “Give me your axe! Now lift him up....carefully, carefully.”

Garreth bent down. She helped Montrose lift Marcus into Garreth’s arms. “Now stand,” Montrose braced himself so Garreth could use him as a crutch to get to his feet. He lifted Marcus like an infant as Nadira steadied Marcus’ head against Garreth’s arm. Montrose brought Garreth’s axe to his shoulder and gestured for them to follow him.

“Alisdair ...” Montrose scanned the tree line again.

Alisdair craned his neck to see Marcus, then looked at Nadira. There was no humor in the blue eyes now.

She pressed Marcus’ head against Garreth’s chest again to keep it from lolling.

Alisdair’s cheek twitched. He waved a bloody glove at the tree line, “Weeeell, the horses will head downhill and toward water. I say we walk down now.” Alisdair waited while Montrose made a final sweep of the mountaintop. Nothing moved.

Montrose nodded, “Let’s go.”

Alisdair led them, his hand on his sword. Nadira had seen how quickly that blade could shed its scabbard, but she did not feel safe. She followed closely on his heels beside Garreth. Nadira heard Montrose’s boots crunching the stones behind her. She continued to glance around. Should they be attacked now, she knew they would be savaged if not completely overcome. Nadira moved closer to Garreth and put her fingers through his belt so he could pull her along. She needed the support.

They left the trail, making a crossing through the birch and beech. Before they entered the trees, Nadira remembered with a start that the party was one short. She looked over her shoulder at John’s body lying in the road behind them. Montrose caught her gaze. “It can’t be helped,” he said quietly. She saw a glistening red line on his breeches from his hip to his boot. She had not noticed it before, perhaps because he is doused in blood, she thought wryly, but now she remembered the great slashing blow he took from her attacker. Now that some time had passed only his own blood was bright, the blood of his enemies was cooling dark on his brigandine. She released Garreth and stepped beside him.

“You are wounded too,” she said, trying to see under his arm as they continued down the mountain.

“But I am not dead.”

Nadira looked at his face, puzzled by his response. He shifted the axe head to the other shoulder and turned the blade up so she couldn't see him. “I will see to it when we camp next,” he said quietly. “You must attend to Marcus.”

Nadira was doubtful that Marcus would live, but she would not speak those words. He does not think so, either, but I will not be the first to say it. Her eyes rested on his leg again. The blood was running into his boot. What would happen to her if Montrose died? She glanced ahead at Alisdair. I would belong to him next.

The path became difficult as the drop became even steeper. Nadira tried to help brace Garreth over the rough ground as he picked his way. There was no sign of any continuing attack. They saw nothing but large black birds flying in the opposite direction. Nadira knew where they were going.

Chapter Five

Night came before they could escape the mountain. They built no fire for fear of the wild men, and ate nothing. Nadira doubted she could have choked anything down even if they had the horses and all their baggage. She lay awake on the hard ground most of the night as the men took turns on watch, all of them desperate for the faint glow in the east. Clouds blanketed the sky from horizon to horizon and delayed the feeble sun. She turned her head to the side. Montrose lay stretched out in the dry leaves, deeply asleep. Alisdair saw her move and stepped over to kneel beside her.

“Ah, Lass, look at him.” Alisdair shook his head. “I'll not wake him just yet. Let's leave him be,” he whispered. “We don't need to get movin' any further without the horses. Garreth's gone out to find t' boys and see if the hairy bastards missed one or two.”

Nadira sat up and pulled twigs from her hair. Marcus lay to her left where Garreth had tenderly set him down the night before. He had not moved nor made a sound the entire night, so like a man asleep, yet like one dead. She touched his throat.

Alisdair gestured with his chin. “How does Marc?”

“He is far away.” Nadira whispered, not meeting his eyes. Her heart was tight and felt like it was clutching her throat with long fingers. She had little hope for Marcus. The last time she checked the swelling she felt the bones move under her fingers. She had not mentioned this to anyone. What good would it do? Alisdair rearranged his legs and rested his arms on his knees. He bowed his head. She cast furtive glances at him. He did not appear to be wounded. As with the other men, he was caked with the effects of battle. His mail was dull and brown, bits of leaves and sticks stuck to the rings. Even his bright red hair hung in crusted ropes, most of the braids undone, but glued together nonetheless. Nadira tried not to think about what she could smell all around her, but the pervasive stink of death would not be ignored.

Montrose coughed suddenly and sat straight up, eyes wide, snorting. Alisdair leapt to his feet and stepped over Nadira with his long legs.

“Here, Rob,” he went down on one knee and took Montrose’s shoulders in his hands. “Here. We’re safe.”

The wild eyes focused on his friend, then flashed to the sky, looking for the sun. “Why did you let me sleep so long?”

“Aye, well.” Alisdair shook his shoulder once before releasing him. “Aye, well,” he deflected, “here’s the Lass, ready to tend to ye.”

“And Marc?”

Alisdair did not reply so quickly to that question. “He’s alive, Rob, survived the night.”

Montrose leaned stiffly to the side and peered into Marcus’ face. To Nadira he said, “And you?”

“I am well, my lord.”

“Let the lass see to ye, Rob. You’ve been leakin’ all night.” Alisdair indicated the dark stains in the dry leaves behind him. Montrose lifted his right arm slowly and looked down at his side. With a resigned sigh, he shrugged the mail up far enough for Alisdair to grab hold of the edges and pull it all the way over his head. It dropped it heavily to the ground with a metallic clank. The leather brigandine came apart where the axe had struck him. Alisdair tugged the remaining pieces away from Montrose’s tunic where it was bonded to his side with blood.

The three of them examined the wound in silence. Nadira carefully pulled some of the linen shirt away to expose the flesh further, following the wound's track.

"Musta been an axe, eh?" Alisdair said, extending a finger to nearly touch the long gash.

"He got me when I was on the upstroke."

"Sloppy of ye."

Montrose snorted, then winced. Nadira fought a wave of despair. She was not skilled enough to care for this wound. The ribs were not cleaved, though the cut was deep enough in the center to notch two of them. Montrose twitched as Nadira pushed the lips of the wound together near the top. "My lord, this will have to be sewn," she murmured, struggling to make her voice sound confident.

"I'll say." Alisdair whistled through his teeth as he sat back on his heels. "I'd say the bastard just missed finishin' ye off, Rob."

"It was a small axe." Montrose twisted, trying to see the gash under his arm.

"I don't have a needle." Nadira interrupted.

"Ye kin sew it later, just wrap him up with what cloth ye have. We'll wait tae see if Gar comes back with the boys and t' horses."

At midday, Garreth did return with three of the horses and both boys. The boys had followed the chargers, losing themselves in the treetops when the wild men finally tracked the horses to the stream. Evan and Hagen were covered with dirt and leaves, but were unharmed. Evan was breathless. "My lord, you would have been proud to see Fafnir. The wild men tried to catch him but he kicked at them and bit them, he showed his teeth, he was grand!" This delivery was punctuated with enthusiastic gestures. Hagen nodded in complete agreement. "One took a hoof right in the gullet, sent him down for good. The others ran off, but he let me take his bridle afterwards." Evan beamed at the big bay that stood impatiently over him. The boy shook the bits affectionately. "He likes me."

"Aye, the filthy bastards were no match for the chargers, but they got our nags." Alisdair grumbled. "Now t'war with the French over, there's no escaping these ruffians. Someone ought to start another crusade, lead them all to Jerusalem again." He pulled

open a knapsack from one of the chargers, tossed out stale biscuit to the boys and Garreth.

The boys had brought them all some beechnuts they had gathered while hiding in the trees. Garreth smashed nuts for her with the side of his axe on a flat stone, then shyly handed her the nutmeats. Nadira ate them gratefully, picking the meats from the bits of sharp shells. They ate in silence for a few minutes before Garreth reached over and pushed her shoulder. She could tell he had meant to merely nudge her by the remorseful sounds he made as she righted herself from the ground.

Garreth picked up a heavy stone and threw it against a tree trunk, blasting bark in all directions and startling the birds. He then grinned at her, pointing at her hand. She smiled back. He patted her on the head like she was a spaniel, making her teeth jar and then gripped her upper arm. His eyes touched on Montrose, then swung back to her meaningfully. He knew. He had seen her throw the rock. Garreth picked up her right hand and brought her palm to his lips, closing his eyes as he kissed it tenderly. Nadira patted the huge shoulder, feeling like a little mouse beside a great bear.

After they had eaten the boys stripped the horses and rubbed them down, then cleaned the saddles. Garreth slept. Alisdair paced the small camp. The sky did not rain, though the clouds thickened. Nadira caught Montrose looking at them too. Perhaps he fears snow. That thought chilled her in more ways than one. He might deem it safe for a fire should it snow, but would they stay here another day? Could they? Nadira did not want to ask, she wanted to leave this horrible mountain. Snow was definitely a possibility. Nadira could smell the cold wetness in the air that threatened some kind of weather. Montrose limped up and down, as though testing his legs. He stopped and rubbed his face all over, starting with his beard and finishing by pulling his fingers through his hair with a yank. Finally he turned to Alisdair, "Pack up." Nadira sighed with relief.

The small party was quickly readied for travel. Marcus was wrapped in a horse blanket and then laid in the center of another. Garreth, Hagan, Evan and Alisdair each took a corner. Montrose tied the horses to each other in a line and took the bridle of the first one. Nadira followed behind him. It was too steep to ride.

Exhausted and half starved they emerged from the woods before noon and a few hours later picked up the road again. Not far away lay a good-sized town among cultivated fields. Nadira had no idea what town it was, but it looked like they would get there by dark. Her mind chanted a litany: rest, warmth, food. She kept the image of an inn in her head as she trudged along the sodden road. It had been raining in the valley overnight. The horses slid in the mud and Nadira was covered with the stuff by the time they reached the gates. Montrose stopped the horses and went forward alone to meet the gatekeepers.

After a short wait the gates were opened and they were passed through. Nadira looked behind her as the gates closed again. Bandits must ravage further than just the pass through the mountains, for armed guards patrolled the crenellated walls, and the soldiers watched them carefully as they marched by. Passers by paused to stare as well. Nadira was too tired to care about how they must look, covered, as they were, head to foot in blood and mud. People pressed past her through the winding streets pushing carts filled with everything from fresh baked loaves to dung mucked from a stable. A peddler came up behind them with a cacophony of live chickens, nearly running her down. Feathers drifted over her as he sped by. She heard the boys coughing behind her. She trudged behind Montrose keeping her head down, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other, avoiding dung piles and deep puddles. She did not bother to look up again until they stopped before huge wooden double doors on immense metal hinges.

“Sweet Jesu, I’m famished,” Alisdair breathed as he and the others gently lowered Marcus to the paved entryway. “Warm bed and hot food, God help us, Robbie.”

“Soon.” Montrose mumbled. He banged on the door with the back of his fist.

Nadira looked up. It was a very fine house, among many of the same size built close together along the road. The second floor hung out over the street and provided a narrow shelter for the entry where Montrose stood now, leaning heavily against the lintel. To the left and right were long walls that she assumed contained a courtyard like Sofir’s house in Barcelona. They waited in the street for only a short time before the small peep opened then closed. Then one of the doors scraped open several inches. An old man stepped out. His white hair and his beard were long, but carefully combed. He was dressed in a gray tunic and breeches and wore good shoes.

“Oh Milord Montrose!” he cried. “Come in! Come in! ...Pierre!” he shouted, “Pierre come here and get these horses!” A half grown boy appeared behind the old man. He slipped shyly between the old man and Montrose and took the horses’ reins in his small hand. Evan and Hagen followed him wearily along the road toward the stables. The old man pushed the door open wider and welcomed them to enter.

Montrose reached behind him to pull Nadira through the door first and then pushed her to the side to give the men room to bring Marcus through. Nadira pressed herself against the wall as the men wrestled the blanket across the threshold with grunts and scuffling. The door closed behind them, shutting out the light. Montrose took a moment to adjust his clothing. Nadira watched him, exhausted. There was so little humor in the sight of a man who looked like he had been sleeping in a slaughterhouse for days, straightening his collar and pulling on the cuffs of his tunic. She couldn’t even summon the energy to smile some encouragement for him. He brushed his matted hair back from his face, but this just left a streak of dried mud across his nose.

Nadira touched her own nose, imagining what she looked like. Worse, they all smelled like a byre. She understood his reluctance to enter the house, and also his desperation. She felt it too. The old man beckoned them to follow him. Nadira took her place behind Montrose, who was now noticeably limping, dragging his right leg. The house smelled warmly of many fires and the aroma of something delicious roasting in the kitchen. Nadira’s eyes adjusted to the dim light as the old man led them to a great hall where a fire crackled in the hearth and a long wooden table lay set for supper. As they entered, the master of this house rose from a chair by the fire. She had never seen such a tall man in her life. He towered above them all, thin-faced but with friendly dark eyes. He was dressed warmly in dark furs and velvets. Montrose signaled to his companions to lower Marcus again.

The tall man spoke with a gentle deep voice. “Montrose, my friend. You look horrible. Absolutely vile.”

Montrose grimaced. “Beniste, my friend, I apologize for this sudden intrusion. I thank you in advance for your hospitality.”

“Of course. And shall I call a doctor for your man here?”

“That would be greatly appreciated.”

Beniste took Montrose by the upper arm and squeezed, then greeted them each in turn. He was surprised to see Nadira.

“Greetings to you, my lady” he said with grace, bowing slightly. Nadira opened her mouth to correct him but was interrupted by Montrose.

“Please, Adam,” Montrose appeared unable to keep his feet much longer. “Please... civilities later.”

“Forgive me, Rob.” Beniste beckoned to someone hiding behind a door. A boy of nine or ten crept out timidly, looking up quickly at each of them, but not meeting their eyes. “Fetch the doctor, boy, and quickly.” The boy sped off.

Beniste put a hand on Garreth’s shoulder. “Perhaps your giant friend can lay the injured man on my table. There is more light here and a pot of water already heated on the hearth for my meal.”

Garreth and Alisdair lifted Marcus from the soiled blanket and carried him further into the room. Half the long table was cleared quickly and Marcus was laid out gently on its wooden surface.

Nadira chanced a look about the hall while the men were busy with Marcus. The fine room was paneled in wood except for the wall that contained the great hearth, which was worked by skilled masons in pale gray stone. Who was this Beniste? Likely engaged in commerce, for his demeanor was not that of a nobleman, and he had greeted Montrose with too much honor to be his equal, nor did the servants wear any kind of livery. She saw them peeking around corners and doorways wearing the simple clothing of their class. The hall was very like the one in Barcelona. She was blinking sleepily at the tapestries when Beniste startled her with a clap of his hands. A comfortably large middle-aged woman emerged immediately and stood still in the doorway, her hands in her apron.

Beniste gestured to the table. “Bring some food and wine for our guests. Bring whatever is ready now. Hot or cold, it doesn’t matter. We will prepare a proper feast tomorrow.” Nadira felt ready to collapse with relief. She must have looked it, for Beniste stepped over and took her elbow. He led her to the bench and seated her nearest the fire. She smiled at him wearily. The other men sat heavily on the benches at the other end of the table near Marcus. Garreth lay his head on his arms.

“My friend,” Beniste began, “surely there is a story behind all this. Look at you, all of you. Good God. And a woman with you...and where is Richard?”

“And you will hear it all,” Montrose said in a low voice. “My man John was slain by brigands in the mountains, and Marcus lies near death as you can see. We are too tired and sad to tell it all now.” He breathed in deeply, “And of Richard, we will tell all tomorrow, I beg of you.”

“Of course, forgive me, my friend. Let me get the servants to prepare a room for you.”

Beniste left the room without another word. Montrose rested his head in his arms like Garreth. As Nadira warmed by the fire, she felt dangerously close to sleep herself. Fortunately, the older woman returned with a tray followed by three younger women, also bearing food and drink. The men raised their heads and reached for the food before it had even been set down. Nadira was given half a loaf of bread and a joint of some kind of fowl. A tankard of ale was set near her. So busy was she eating she did not even look up to see how the others fared. Afterwards she drained the cup and sat back.

Garreth fell forward with a thud onto his arms, making the cutlery on the table bounce. Moments later enormous snores erupted from beneath his huge arms. Alisdair, too, was nodding off. His hair had come loose from its braids, tangled in his eyes and crumbs lay scattered in his beard. Montrose was pale and drawn. His tankard was empty as well. Thick black locks of hair fell over his face, making it difficult to see his eyes. He seemed to be staring off into the murky corners of the room.

A young woman entered the room with a pitcher in one hand. She glanced at Nadira, raised the pitcher and her eyebrow at the same time. Nadira nodded and pushed her cup forward. The woman moved closer and poured dark red wine into her cup. As she filled she whispered, “Will ye be wantin’ some fresh clothes?”

Nadira swayed with pleasure at the idea of fresh clothing, perhaps even a bath. She couldn’t keep the eagerness out of her voice as she answered. “Please, if you could, and some hot water for washing and perhaps some clean linen for my master’s wounds.”

The woman stopped pouring, “Lord Montrose is injured?” She turned to look over her shoulder at Montrose.

“Yes.” Nadira answered with a frown, for a strange feeling had passed over her at the sound of the woman’s concern. The woman eyed Montrose thoughtfully as she filled his cup, and Nadira watched her just as carefully

She passed by Nadira on her way out of the room. “I’ll bring ye what ye need,” she whispered.

“Thank you.”

Montrose did not seem to notice the exchange; he had not even touched his wine but was staring straight ahead, as he had been for a while. In fact, now he appeared alarmingly pale, almost gray. Nadira made to move closer and speak to him when Beniste returned. He took in the situation at once. He smiled at Nadira and sat beside her. “You are the only one awake, milady.”

“Sir, you are mistaken. I am no lady, but a servant myself. And I believe my lord is still awake.”

Beniste’s eyes smiled at her. “It pains me to contradict you, but Lord Montrose is quite insensible. Look at him.”

Nadira tilted her head. Montrose had not moved or touched his wine. She leaned forward and waved a hand before his eyes. There was no response. She heard her host laugh softly.

“I can see you have not been traveling with them very long or you would know. My lord Montrose has an interesting habit of falling asleep while appearing awake.”

“Indeed.” Nadira did not dare touch her master, though it was unsettling to see him like that.

“I believe he learned to do that sitting through his father’s lectures, and the old man’s insistence that he attend Mass three times a week.” Beniste smiled sadly and took her hand. “Where did he find you, may I ask?”

Nadira held her breath for a moment, unready for that question. She had no idea how it should be answered, but this was not the time for the truth.

Beniste squeezed her hand, “I see.” He sounded amused.

Nadira felt herself blush. “My lord, I am Lord Montrose’s servant and nothing more.”

The older man released her hand. He sat back and his mouth twitched as he spoke. “You do not have the demeanor of a servant. Your speech is too fine,” he argued, “and my lord never travels with female servants.”

Nadira opened her mouth to argue, but Montrose suddenly came to life, shaking the ropes of hair from his eyes as they heard pounding at the front door.

A boy soon ushered in the doctor. The short man was clad in dark long robes, an elaborate felt hat and long pointed shoes. Behind him trotted another boy carrying a wooden box. The doctor approached the table, and with only a word of greeting to them he pulled down one of the lamps from the hanging chains and began to examine Marcus. Nadira watched him as he felt the lump, Marcus’s forehead, hands and belly. He lifted Marcus’ eyelids and pinched his nostrils.

Montrose also watched him carefully from across the table. When he was finished, the doctor opened the wooden chest and lifted out a leather pouch. He measured out a pile of dried herbs onto little scale, and then shook the tray onto one of the crockery pieces on the table.

He looked at each one of them before deciding to speak to Nadira.

“Boil this much,” he indicated a spoon’s worth, “in this much...” he pointed to the smaller of the tankards, “...water. Try to get it in him twice each day. Give him some meat broth as well. He may recover in time, but he will not if he is not fed. He will starve to death before he heals. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

The doctor turned to Beniste. “I can promise nothing. See that he lies undisturbed in a darkened room and that the girl feeds him and keeps him warm. If he does not wake up and speak within seven days, he will probably not recover. There is nothing I can do for this wound.”

Beniste thanked him and gave the boy a coin. The boy picked up the wood chest and followed the doctor out. When they were gone Nadira let out a heavy sigh. She picked up the plate of herbs and sniffed, but could not identify them. She set the plate down near the tankard of ale as Montrose went around the table and woke up Alisdair and Garreth.

His voice was low and ragged, "Let's get him up those stairs. Can you carry him, Garreth?" After the big man nodded, he asked Nadira, "Are you too tired to try to give him some of that stuff now? Shall I call for Beniste's women?"

"No, I can do it," she answered quickly. She dipped some of the hot water in the pot over the hearth into the small tankard and tossed in some of the herbs. She carried it upstairs following Garreth who lifted Marcus with his hands under his arms while Alisdair had him by his knees. The boy led them to a room at the end of the short hall. In it was one large rope bed with no headboard or curtains and three piles of straw and rushes on the floor. Montrose held the lamp and nodded toward the bed when the men paused. Garreth and Alisdair laid Marcus down carefully on the soft bedding and stepped back. Montrose hung the lamp on its chain. Behind him a woman entered with a bundle of linens, and a child behind her with a pitcher of hot water. She set them both on a low table near the wall. Nadira thanked her with her eyes and the woman nodded toward a folded dress on top of the linens as she left the room nudging the wide-eyed child before her.

"You men sleep now," Montrose said. He did not have to say it twice. Garreth and Alisdair fell gratefully on the pallets of straw. With a large wooden spoon, Nadira dripped some of the herb infusion into Marcus' mouth. Montrose hovered over her, getting in her light. She wiped the spilled drops from Marcus' beard and tried again. On the third try, she saw his throat move as he swallowed.

"Oh Jesus," cried Montrose. He dropped to his knees beside the bed, the palm of his hand on his forehead.

"He is swallowing," Nadira said unnecessarily. "Perhaps there is hope, milord." She was shaking with the lie and hated herself for it. She steadied her hand and tipped a spoonful between Marcus' lips. When she adjusted his head on the pillow she found he could swallow easier. Slowly and carefully, she gave him the infusion drop by drop. She set the cup on the sideboard against the wall, and pulled a blanket over Marcus. Montrose looked drained of life. He leaned heavily against the side of the bed, closed his eyes.

"My Lord, you need some of this simple too," she said softly.

“Tomorrow, maybe. Now I must sleep.” He then slid all the way to the floorboards. Nadira found another blanket for him.

The hot water and the clean dress beckoned to her. She reached for them eagerly.

Chapter Six

In the morning, Nadira was stiff and sore, but before she went to the privy or washed her face she crawled up from her pallet to check on Marcus. She stretched her hand over the bed to touch his cheek. He lived, but barely.

Nadira pushed her hair from her face. Her braid had come undone in the night. She tilted her head back as she twisted the mass of it into a knot and was surprised to see a young girl, maybe fourteen or fifteen, sitting on a stool beside the bed, absolutely silent. Her dark hair was tied up in a white kerchief, her hands busily knitting.

She smiled shyly at Nadira, her hands working without a pause. “Good morning, Mistress.”

“Good morning to you. Have you been here all night?”

“No, Miss. Master sent me in this morning after the guests went down to eat. He told me to stoke the fire and wait for you to awaken, and give you this.” The girl reached over the sideboard and pushed a heavy crockery bowl toward the bed. Nadira leaned over to find hot broth cooling inside. “It’s for the sick man here. And I brought you some breakfast,” she indicated a small bowl of bread and fruit, “and an apron to protect your dress.”

“Thank you. What shall I call you?”

“Sarah, Miss.”

“I think I am going to need a great deal of hot water today, Sarah.” Nadira pulled the apron over her head and tied the strings about her waist.

“Yes, Miss. It is laundry day, there is plenty.” Sarah nodded at the man in the bed.

“Will he live, Miss?”

“I hope so, he is a good man.” Nadira dipped the broth with a spoon from the bowl to his lips.

“But he looks dead now, how can he live?” Sarah wondered, leaning over Marcus and touching his forehead.

Nadira smiled sadly as she took the cloth and wiped the final drops of broth from his beard. “He deserves a chance, and he is very strong.”

The door pushed open softly. Montrose entered followed closely by Alisdair. Both men were clean and combed and Montrose had been shaved. They were wearing clean tunics and breeches as well. She glanced at the window. They must have let me sleep until noon.

Their host entered a moment later, smiling a greeting at Nadira. “Good, good, I see Sarah is helping as I wished. Girl, go to the kitchen and bring back more hot water and fresh linen.” Sarah disappeared like a wraith.

“He is much the same, isn’t he,” said Montrose.

“Yes, but ‘the same’ means he is not dead,” Nadira insisted.

Montrose turned his head to eye her with skepticism.

Beniste interrupted. “Marcus is not the only one injured. I cannot help but see that you, too, are leaking, leaving parts of you around my house. There is blood on the floor and at my table.”

“It is true,” Nadira concurred, “He needs to have it tended.”

Montrose grimaced. “I wanted Marcus tended first, and my wound is small.”

“Not so small from the spoor it left behind,” said Beniste, indicating the stains blooming beneath Montrose’s tunic. “And more is promised I see. Let the girl sew you up, Robert. That is damned hard on the linens.”

“Yes, yes, very well. It must be done.” Montrose grumbled.

Alisdair frowned slightly. “Shouldn’t we have the leech come up fer that?”

Beniste answered, “Is he better with a needle? Have you seen his hands?”

Alisdair gave a short laugh, “Mebbe not.” His smile faded as he clapped Montrose on the shoulder. “I dunno why you want her to do it, Rob. Just make sure she does it right. I’m to t’ stables to check on the boys and the horses.” Alisdair narrowed his eyes at Nadira before he left the room.

Beniste gave her a more encouraging look. “I have a messenger below from one of my contacts,” he said to Lord Montrose. “Please come find me in the Hall when you are

finished.” To Nadira he said, “I am sure you will do an excellent job. Take anything you need.” Then he was gone as well.

Sarah returned to the room carrying a heavy bucket of water in one hand and linens over her other arm. Nadira moved quickly to help her with the bucket.

“Sarah, here, bring the linens to the bed and light another lamp.” Sarah obeyed quickly, getting a straw from one of the pallets and using it to light one lamp from the other.

“I want the girl out,” said Montrose in a low voice. He sat on the edge of the bed, staring at Marcus.

Nadira turned to him in surprise. “You are in quite a temper, my lord. I can use her help...”

“Just go,” he said to Sarah, then turned his face to the wall. Trembling, Sarah hung the second lamp near the foot of the bed and slipped out without a sound. Montrose spoke without turning his head.

“Did you get your needle?”

“No, and you sent Sarah away.” Nadira didn’t try to hide her annoyance.

He didn’t seem to notice. “Have you done this before?”

“Do you mean sew a man’s flesh like I’d darn a sock?”

Montrose glared at her. “Yes.”

“No.” Nadira said truthfully, “I have not.” She felt her insides swirl at the look on his face. She finished feebly, “...but I have *seen* it done.” He turned away from her again with a deep sigh.

Nadira took that as resignation if not direct permission. “I’m going to look at it, now,” she warned him. She lifted his tunic and bent down. Her makeshift bandage had been removed when he washed. The wound lay opened now, gaping over his ribs but not bleeding heavily. The gash oozed from the bottom, and glistened pink and red in the lamplight. Part of a white rib showed through the flesh. Nadira swallowed; glad she had not yet touched her breakfast. “This must be very painful.” She murmured.

He lowered his eyes. “Just sew it.”

“It will need a poultice as well. I assume your friend Beniste has a garden?”

He shook his head slowly. “That I do not know. However, if you can, make sure to bring me a great deal of wine.”

Nadira peered closer to his side; she touched the lips of the wound to test their depth. Montrose sucked in his breath sharply.

She said, “I will go below to get the makings for the poultice and a needle and thread. Are you dear enough to your friend to get fine silk for this?”

He groaned. “Probably. Don’t forget the wine.”

The materials for the sick room were easily found. Beniste indeed had a fine garden. Nadira picked what she could. There had not yet been a killing frost in the valley, so the plants were still tall and strong. Nadira inhaled their green scent, hoping for comfrey and boneset. Yes. She had what she needed. A needle and silk were already in her pocket and she carried a tray of bowls and herbs as well as some soap wrapped in a coarse cloth which Sarah handed to her as she passed the kitchen. Nadira paused before the door, propping the tray on her hip. *Perhaps I will surprise myself.* She leaned her shoulder into the heavy door.

Montrose had removed his tunic and was sitting propped against the wall next to Marcus. He was staring at the low ceiling and did not meet her eyes as she placed the tray on the table. He reached for the leather wine jug with his left hand as soon as it touched the table.

“Don’t you want a cup?” She asked. Instead of answering, he lifted the jug to his mouth and drank deeply. He clearly intended to down the entire contents before she started. Nadira laid out her tools on the tray. When the jug was empty, Montrose leaned back against the wall with another sigh.

In one bowl, Nadira stuffed the wide comfrey and the boneset leaves, pouring the hot water from the kettle over them and watching as they wilted. The acrid smell of the boneset rose with the steam. Montrose turned to her sharply.

“What in God’s name...?” he recoiled.

“It will keep the wound from rotting, my lord.” Nadira tilted the bowl so he could see its contents.

He grimaced. “It does so by smelling worse than the rot. That smells like the Devil’s own privy. Jesus God.”

“I’m sorry it offends you, my lord, but these herbs are the only ones I found in the garden for wounds.”

“No, no. I’m sure you know what you’re doing,” he said. The tone of his voice implied the opposite. He turned his face away from her again.

I wouldn’t want to watch either. Nadira hesitated. Just start. Start easy and build up to it. She picked up the soft cloth to clean the edges of the long cut.

“You will have to move your arm, milord,” she murmured. When it appeared he could not lift it high enough, she helped position his arm over her shoulder. It was heavy and hung down over her back as she bent to her work.

She picked up the threaded needle, willing her fingers to cease their shaking. Another deep breath. With one hand, she held the edges of the wound; with the other, she inserted the gleaming silver through the pink flesh. Montrose flinched with each stitch, but did not otherwise move nor did he make a sound until she reached the lowest part of the wound, where the cut was deepest over the bone of his hip. There, when she reached for the edges he moved his arm and squeezed her shoulder until it hurt enough to bring tears to her eyes.

“Wait,” he whispered hoarsely. She stopped, both of them breathing hard. It was the only sound in the room.

Nadira put down the needle and waited for him. After a long moment, the hand on her shoulder relaxed. She picked up the needle and went back to her work. Montrose now groaned softly with each breath.

“Are you finished?” He mumbled through clenched teeth, but she understood him to mean, you’d better be finished.

“Almost,” she answered tightly. “I will apply the poultice and wrap it, then you may rest.” She lined an empty bowl with a square of linen and carefully poured the warm green boneset tea into it. She lifted the four corners slowly to allow the infusion to drain into the bowl and collect the sodden leaves, then rolled the square into a tube and laid along the deeper part of the wound. Nadira took the long strips of linen Beniste had sent with Sarah and wrapped them around Montrose’s broad chest. She tied the last strip and smoothed the linen with her palms.

“I am finished now, my lord.”

He blew his breath out like he had been holding it a long time.

She helped him lie down on his left side and he was snoring beside Marcus before she was finished cleaning up. She gathered up the soiled linens to take down to the laundry on the first floor.

Alisdair met her on the stairs. Nadira suspected he had been waiting there the whole time. “Well?”

Nadira nodded. “Yes, he will heal. He sleeps.” There was nothing else to say.

Alisdair’s relief was palpable and he seemed to deflate. “Aye, Lass, but I want to be sure ye know what yer doin’.” He leaned against the wall, squinting as he looked up the stair to the room. “I’ll just be checkin’.” He let her go, patted her on her behind and continued up the stairs. She heard the door open and close behind him. Well, I certainly hope I passed that test.

Nadira took the linens to the laundry in the stable yard. She spent a few moments in the fresh air. The autumn chill was refreshing now that she was coming from a warm room and her clothes were dry. *This is a nice place.* She did not look forward to resuming their journey, whenever that would be. In Barcelona, Sofir’s guests rarely stayed an entire week, but sometimes his trading partners might stay the winter when the storms were bad and kept them from sailing.

She wondered how long they would be welcome in Beniste’s house. Sofir’s guests were very generous in return for their lodging. Montrose had plenty of money. She could not help but notice the size of his purse. It was not full of copper, either. She had seen him pull it from behind his belt and search around for the right coin when they stopped to pay a toll before they left the main road out of Barcelona. She looked around. Beniste had large storerooms, a fine stable with every stall filled, a pen full of fowl and rabbits. His granary was full for the winter and the servants were healthy looking. She wondered what Montrose’s own estates were like. Then she wondered where his lands were.

Nadira lingered over her tasks longer than necessary, reluctant to return to the upstairs room. She washed her face and her hair, was offered some food and enjoyed listening to the cook tell stories as he kneaded the bread. She went to the laundry and helped fold the clean bedding and then spent a long hour combing her hair with a wooden

comb borrowed from Sarah. Finally, she could no longer stay away without appearing to be shirking. Servants nodded politely to her as she returned to the hall and slipped upstairs again. Montrose was no longer sleeping. His eyes touched hers in wordless greeting as she closed the door behind her. Garreth sat beside him on the stool. Alisdair must have gone out again.

“You should be sleeping, milord.” she said.

“I should but I cannot.” He rubbed his face. “Perhaps I could get more wine later and that will help. Beniste might have something interesting to put in it. His silk merchant friends bring all kinds of things back from the East.”

Garreth stood up and grunted. “No, Garreth,” Montrose said, “be seated. I don’t want it right now. Later. Alisdair’s gone to see about Richard’s letters.”

Nadira sat on the edge of the bed by Montrose’s feet. The door opened and Alisdair entered with a package in one hand. He closed the door and slipped the bolt.

“What is it?” Montrose struggled to sit up, his hand over the fresh bandages.

“Got ‘em all. Richard’s been havin’ the Venetian stuff sent here. He even sent summat to himself.” He took out a bulky packet, turned it in the light. “This seal is his.”

He handed the parchment to Montrose who examined the red wax stamped on one side.

“Aye. T’is his seal.” Montrose repositioned himself against the wall before using both hands to break the seal and unfold the stiff parchment.

Alisdair looked pointedly at Nadira. “Give it to the lass, Rob.”

“Let me see if it is his hand,” Montrose snapped.

“Tis. Ye can see it on the outside. Give it to the lass.”

“One moment. Give me a moment.”

Nadira held out her hand for the parchment, but he moved it out of reach. She could see that his eyes were barely focused. She doubted he could even see the handwriting. They all waited silently while he stared at the document, his teeth clenched hard enough to make the muscles of his jaw bulge. After a long pause he reluctantly released it. She took the thick sheet from him and leaned into the light from the window.

“My lord,” Nadira turned the document one way, then another, letting the light shine from behind the vellum. “My lord, I think this letter is in code.”

Alisdair snatched it from her before Montrose could put his hand on it. “Nay, that canna be!” Alisdair stared hard at the writing as though he could read it. “No!”

“I think it is.” Nadira insisted. “Most of the letters are Latin, but the language is not. Nor is it any that I know. And see here,” Nadira indicated a passage with her finger, “there are numbers here interspersed with the letters as well as Hebrew letters mixed with the Latin. Here there is Greek mixed with Moorish script. Together they are not a language, not even sounded out will they make sense.”

The two men exchanged dark looks. Nadira took the document from Alisdair’s hands. “But there is one line in Latin at the end. It says, ‘Robin. You must track our quarry. The white hart bends her head and yields to your bow. Give her to Malcolm.’” She bent over to show Montrose the word “Robin” with her finger. *Maybe he can read his name.*

“Malcolm.” Montrose frowned.

“Yes, Milord. It says ‘Malcolm’ here.” She moved her finger along the line.

Montrose lowered the parchment away from his face so he could see Alisdair. “And you wanted to go home.”

“Ach. Godswounds. What was he up to?”

“The white hart. He doesn’t want me to destroy it.” Montrose’s face twisted and darkened.

Nadira felt it might be better to sit on her pallet and avoid that storm. She got up from the edge of the bed and sat on the straw by the wall while Alisdair and Montrose leaned together and conversed in low angry voices, Garreth turned his head side to side as he followed the exchange.

When they were finished, all three men turned to her.

Montrose spoke. “I need you to read my letters to us. But I require an oath from you that this one may remain secret.”

“It cannot be a great secret if you want me to read it to you.” Nadira spoke too quickly.

“Great saucy wench,” Alisdair growled. “A woman’s oath.”

Montrose pointed a finger at Alisdair. “You want Beniste to read it for us?” Nadira had never heard him sound so vicious.

Alisdair raised both hands. "Nay. God love him, but nay...Jesu we are in trouble, Rob."

"There is no helping this." To Alisdair he asked, "Do you agree?" to Nadira, "Do you swear?" Everyone nodded, even Garreth.

Nadira said, "I promise to hold your correspondence in confidence." Of course she would. It had never occurred to her to reveal anyone's personal affairs.

Montrose leaned back and closed his eyes wearily. "There is a book the brothers brought back from the Holy Land some years back," he began. "They held it for themselves for a century, but it was stolen. It was then stolen from the thieves and repeatedly so until no one knows where it is now. The new Pope has charged his men with securing it for him, along with other books and scrolls. The librarians at Toledo are wary of his agents and advised us. Several documents have been stolen this summer. My brother discovered this from a priest and was warned to intercept it before it made its way to Rome."

Nadira interrupted, "Why would he not want it to get to the Pope?"

"What I have been told is that the Holy Father intends to use its knowledge against his enemies in the name of Christ."

"The enemies of Christ are the Jews and Mohammedans," she frowned, thinking of home.

"Among others. I believe he would use the forces of Hell to subjugate all of the earth to his own will. I daresay Christ would fall far from his thoughts."

Nadira was silent, then asked, "Who told you this?"

"Does it matter to you?"

"It does," she answered boldly. She had shared the threat of death with him. He could share this secret. "My whole life I have heard many men talk as if they had the answers to all the world's problems. There is nothing like tables laden with food and wine for talk of this kind. I have filled many cups, my lord, and heard many stories. I do not believe all I hear. I would know where this story comes from."

"Then you are wise, indeed. I, however, have the word of my brother, and he was a great scholar." Nadira watched his cheek twitch as he said the word "brother". "Richard

saw the book, held it in his hands and read parts of it. He told me that it must not ever reach a cleric's eyes. I would go to my grave on his words alone.”

“Your brother had this book in his hands and lost it?” Nadira was aghast.

Montrose sat up carefully, holding his side, and tried to find a more comfortable position so he could look her in the eyes. “It was not his book. He was in a room full of men who brought him in to read it to them. When he had finished, he was sent away. Some of the men wanted it copied entirely in Latin; others argued that none should be able to read it easily, especially not the clerics. There was a great disagreement and fighting broke out. My brother was seized and carried away by the Duke of Bergars at Coix. It would be difficult for them to find another who can read both the Hebrew and the Arab tongue.” He looked at her pointedly. “Not many Jews or Mohammedans would do such a thing for the Pope, eh?”

“I am no Mohammedan, nor a Jew. I am nothing.”

“So you have no allegiance to any doctrine?” His voice echoed his disbelief.

Nadira answered, “I was a servant to a spice merchant in Barcelona. My opinions have never been any man's concern. If I read and write and keep the cups filled I am spared much notice by anyone.”

“And yet Sofir seemed over-fond of you. He did not require you to worship his god?”

Nadira hardened her eyes, remembering. “I believe he loved my mother,” she answered. “I was not mistreated, but neither was I exalted above my station. My mother rejected her god when my father was murdered, and my master saw little to gain in training me to a religion he abandoned himself.” She shrugged, “I lived, that is all. My godlessness was of no concern to anyone.” Nadira wanted these uncomfortable questions to end.

“And your mother taught you to read?”

His persistence was maddening, but she had promised to obey. She answered with a patience she did not feel, “My mother was a clever woman, my lord, and had been the honored wife of an Emir. She could see it was preferable to read and write and do figures than to work in Sofir's' kitchen or the laundry. She had a beautiful hand in three

languages.” Nadira could not help but add bitterly, “She did not eagerly embrace her new role as slave.”

Montrose nodded as if he understood, but Nadira knew he could not possibly comprehend her mother’s motives. She made a wry mouth. *He is a lord, a master. He gives orders. What does he know of servitude?*

“And she wanted the same for her daughter. I see”.

Nadira answered carefully, “I was taught to read and write because my mother told me that in this world the only things that cannot be stolen from me are my thoughts. She was very bitter, my lord. She had been a princess, yet through the rash and thoughtless acts of men, she became a slave and a whore. She had no expectations that my life would be better than hers.” She was determined that no matter how miserable I might find my body, my mind would be free.

She remembered how her mother had written her a poem about lovely turtledoves and insisted she memorize it. She made Nadira repeat it back to her until the words and cadence were perfect. The words seem to lift and fly and sing like those birds. Her mother had then said to her, “When the time comes and a man takes you to his bed, as you are being defiled with his wickedness you will have this poem inside you to repeat over and over while he works his evil on your body. If you are fortunate he will be finished after the second recitation.” So far Nadira had not needed that poem. Sofir had told her he did not want her to share her mother’s fate. The other servants and guests were forbidden to touch her.

Montrose cleared his throat. “What happened to her?”

Nadira tilted her head. “It is sad, my lord, but not uncommon. While my mother kept the ledgers for my master, but she also kept his bed. She was too small to bear him a large child and succumbed as many do.”

“Sofir must have been...” Montrose paused.

“Yes, my lord, he was mad with grief for months. It was unseemly among his people for him to have shared his bed with a servant and a non-believer. It was well rumored in his synagogue that the child was his and he was disgraced. In his defense, my lord, he became apostate in his own religion for it, choosing to convert to Christianity rather than remain faithful to his people and his god.”

Montrose was silent, thinking, then “How old were you?”

“Oh, I believe eleven or twelve. I do not know.”

“And the child?”

“Dead.”

Montrose nodded. “I was twelve when my mother died. I was away in fosterage at the time. It was months later before word came to me. I had not seen her in some years.”

“I am sorry.” Nadira meant it.

Montrose nodded. “It is the natural way of things.”

“Perhaps,” Nadira answered listlessly, her thoughts far away in Barcelona.

“But self-pity is inappropriate now. We are too old to mourn parents.”

Nadira looked up sharply, “Not too old to mourn a brother.”

Montrose paled. “No. Never too old for that.”

Garreth grunted angrily, leaped to his feet and raised his hand as though he might strike her. Alisdair put an arm out across his chest to stop him. Nadira shrunk back against the wall.

“Garreth!” Montrose reached for him as well.

Garreth scowled at both Montrose and Nadira. He stomped out of the room, banging the door behind him.

“Ach, Lass, ye have a cruel tongue.” Alisdair took Garreth’s place on the stool.

Nadira did not answer. Her world was darkened with her own loss. She did not like remembering her childhood. Those long nights after her mother’s death, wondering what would become of her, worrying that the Rabbi would come and convince Sofir to throw her out, or have her sold at the block, or given to one of his tradesmen. She cringed. *Curse him for reminding her of those dark times!* She glared up at Montrose from the floor.

“He can be angry if he pleases!” she cried. “No one is ever too old to mourn.”

Montrose winced. “I was wrong to say so. I am sorry. Forgive me.”

She did not answer, feeling surly. She hugged herself tightly, sitting on the floor.

Montrose rubbed his face. “T’was not my intention to anger anyone at all. I am completely misunderstood.”

“Yes, you are!” Nadira could not suppress an angry retort. She was still aching inside. Let them try to punish me for impudence.

“Well now, I am relieved ‘tis not a serious disagreement,” Alisdair raised an eyebrow.

Montrose stretched out his hand to her from the bed. “Take it Nadira. I would make a promise to you now.”

She stood up, petulant, and walked slowly to the bed, placing her hand in his as instructed. His blue eyes looked like Richard’s now. She felt some of her anger fade away. Just a little.

“I apologize for dishonoring your mother’s memory”, he said. Nadira tried to pull her hand back, but he tightened his grip. “I am not finished. I need you; Nadira, and I want you to understand how important you are to this task.”

Nadira nodded slowly, wanting her hand back. He gave her hand another squeeze, and then released her. “Am I forgiven?”

Nadira set her mouth in a firm line. She stared hard at him before answering. “I will do as you ask since I have little choice in the matter. I must go with you under your protection, or I am alone. I know very well what awaits me in the streets, my lord.”

“Aye,” Alisdair nodded. “Not so nice fer a pretty lass like you.”

Montrose gave them both a pained look. “Nadira, I would hope you cooperate more for the goal, than just for your own safety.”

He never heard her response, for suddenly Marcus’ body jerked, shaking the bed with a great spasm. “Jesu!” Montrose was knocked in the head by an arm and Alisdair rose to catch him as he nearly fell from the bed.

Marcus jerked again, this time flailing his legs as well.

“Hold him!” Nadira cried out. She leaped to the bed and placed her hands on the sides of Marcus’ head. Alisdair leaned upon the bed holding his legs until the fit ebbed away. She stroked the dark beard and smoothed Marcus’s hair from his forehead, murmuring comforting words. Montrose leaned over his friend anxiously. Marcus took a shuddering breath, and then lay still, his eyes stared wide. He was dead.

“Oh God! Oh God,” Montrose breathed.

Nadira drew back in shock. It was not unexpected, but there is no good time for death. She watched silently as Alisdair tenderly closed Marcus' eyes; his big hands trembled as the fingertips brushed the lids. Nadira could not help herself. Hot tears dribbled down her cheeks as fast as she could wipe them away. She tried to cry quietly, but soon she was choking and coughing with sobs. She could only remember Marcus's strong arm about her waist as they rode, and the kind way he handed her food and drink. He had not been a talkative man, but his steadiness and courage had been evident throughout her brief time with him. She remembered how he lifted her up and brought her down from his horse countless times as though she were no heavier than a puppy. Not once did he ever touch her inappropriately, but treated her with great respect, though she had not yet earned it. Nadira covered her face with her apron and wept.

Montrose climbed weakly out of the bed, limped to the door and bolted it. He staggered back and pulled the blankets to expose Marcus' body, head to foot.

"My lord, why did you bolt the door?" she whispered, snuffling. Surely they must fetch Garreth and Beniste.

"Be silent. Turn him, Alisdair." Puzzled, Nadira wiped her eyes as she watched Alisdair roll Marcus over until he lay face down on the soft feather tick. Montrose went to the low table where Nadira had piled his clothing before she sewed his wound. He fished around in his jerkin until he found his hunting knife. He returned to the bed, holding the knife. He swayed dangerously before Nadira could reach him and prop him up. Alisdair took the knife from him and without a word, used the knife to rip Marcus' tunic from the neck to the waist. Nadira gasped. Written on Marcus's broad back were letters, numbers and some symbols she had never seen before. Montrose leaned heavily on her shoulder. In a hoarse voice he said, "I want you to copy these exactly. Can you do it?"

She stared at the muscled flesh spread out before her on the bed. A servant never refused. "I can," she answered automatically. "I...I'll need ink and parchment, more light, a quill...and a pen knife."

"Alisdair will get them for you. Bolt the door behind him and let no one in." To Alisdair he said, "Do not tell them Marc has died. Not yet."

Alisdair nodded and left the room. Nadira helped Montrose sit on the low stool and sheathed his knife for him, then she bolted the door as instructed.

The two of them sat in silence while they waited for Alisdair. She took a deep breath and stared up at the ceiling for a moment. It was easier to think of the words as part of a scroll, than as part of a corpse. *Look again.* It was easier this time. Some of the writing was Latin, some Greek, and some was in Moorish. The ink appeared to be henna, but she could not be sure. A few letters were Hebrew, which Nadira could read, but the combinations did not make sense to her. In addition, there was one line of writing that was in no language she had ever seen. In the place of letters were drawings of birds and body parts and what looked like flowers. What she could read said, "Knowledge comes not from words, seek ye the river's edge for the key to understanding." Then came the strange symbols. She smoothed out the skin over Marcus' lower back where the muscles made a valley of his spine. The flesh was eerily cool to her touch. In the small of his back were wavy lines and an arrow. Nadira remembered his scarred face, his quiet smile and his great strength. He had carried this cryptic message for his friends. Died for it. Nadira touched the words with her finger. The words seemed sacred now, when sacred had never meant much to her before.

She jumped when she heard a scratch at the door. Montrose made to get up, but she beckoned him to remain on his stool as she went to the door. She put her ear to the crack. Alisdair whispered, "Lemme in, quickly, Lass, the servants are on my heels." She unbolted the door, letting him slide in and closed it behind her. He did not bolt it, but took her arm. "Ye must go out and say that we dinna wish t' be disturbed. Give 'em the chamber pot and the crockery. Take the food and ale an' tell 'em ye'll tend ter us alone." She moved quickly to obey. She went to the sideboard and grabbed the empty flagons from last night, then pulled the chamber pot from under the bed. She went obediently into the stairwell with the crockery. A small girl carrying a tray and an older man with fresh linens met her there.

"Please, my master is ill and wishes to sleep undisturbed. I will take the linen and food to him," she said with as much authority as she could. The old man took the chamber pot from her with a nod. The little girl smiled as she gave Nadira the tray.

“Please tell your master that Lord Montrose wishes to sleep undisturbed until the evening meal.”

The old man nodded again and padded back down the stairs, the little girl following carefully. When they were out of sight, Nadira breathed a sigh of relief. She pushed open the door with her foot, and then closed it behind her with her hip. Alisdair was there to bolt it.

She set the tray on the sideboard next to the ale cask. Alisdair filled a cup and handed it to Montrose, then lowered himself to the floor at his feet. The two men sat quietly drinking the ale as Nadira inspected her pen and ink. She carefully copied each letter and symbol from the corpse to the creamy parchment. The symbols and birds were more difficult and she took pains to copy them exactly, pausing many times to hold the vellum against the pale skin for comparison. One of the lamps burned out and the quill had to be trimmed several times before she was finished. Marcus had stiffened by the time she finally set her tools down and blew on the last few marks she had made. Montrose sighed deeply and cleared his throat. That was the first sound anyone had made since the start of the grisly task.

Montrose stood unsteadily to look over her shoulder at her work. “Well done,” he said quietly. “They look the same.”

“Yes milord, I was careful.”

“Can you read this?” He smelled strongly of the ale.

Nadira told him what she could read.

“Yes, that is correct. When we get the book you should be able to read it all for me, for this is part of the code that will tell us if we have the right book. Now...”

She looked up at him when he didn’t finish. He pointed to the words on the cold flesh. “I cannot let him be buried with this on his back.”

“What do you mean?”

The two men exchanged dark looks.

“You can’t mean...” Nadira’s eyes widened as Montrose unsheathed the knife again.

Montrose rubbed his face with the other hand, but the chafing brought no color to his cheeks. He looked as dead as his friend. “Marcus was my squire, my companion,” his voice broke, “my foster brother. Now I must flay him. Jesus God, I hate this.”

Alisdair put an arm on his shoulder and took the knife away. "I'll do it, lad." He steered Montrose to a pile of straw. "You sleep. I feel a fever on ye already. Ye can barely stand."

"No..." Montrose put a hand on the wall to steady himself against Alisdair's insistent push. "You can't do it alone."

"Garreth will help."

"Oh God..."

Alisdair gave up trying to get Montrose onto the straw. "C'mere Lass, and take him downstairs to the Hall. Put him in that big soft chair. Tell Garreth t' come up." To Montrose he spoke softly as one would speak to a child, "Go on, then, Robin. Go with the lassie."

Nadira took a tentative step forward. Alisdair gestured with his chin toward the door. Montrose no longer protested, his eyes had the same far away look as they did at the table the first day in Beniste's house. Nadira took his elbow and led him unresisting to the door. Alisdair had taken a whetstone from his bag and the sharp tsing tsing of the blade on the stone followed them down the stairs.

Chapter Seven

Their host had not asked any questions when Nadira left Montrose in the hall, so Nadira assumed he knew their grisly business or had been fed a likely excuse. No one had come to disturb her in the garden where she now wandered, touching the plants as if busy with a task. No one called for her. She thought about her options. Her agreement to cooperate had been given under desperate conditions. She shouldn't have to honor it now. *I didn't swear...did I?* Nadira tried to remember that morning on the road from Barcelona. They had sworn. She had promised. *There is a difference.* Should she offer to stay here as Beniste's servant? He had looked at her across the table in a manner she knew very well. He would probably welcome her as an addition to his household, though perhaps not in the position she preferred. Beniste's apparent admiration of her was not limited to her skills as a hostess or even a bookkeeper. He seemed to be evaluating her

breasts rather than her penmanship when he asked her to take down a letter for him after the meal.

Nadira sighed. This was the same miserable decision her mother must have made so many years ago. From what she had overheard at the meal, the road ahead would be even more perilous. She wiped at the tears that squeezed from her eyes. How did this happen? Last month her only distress came from avoiding the stable boys in the evenings. Her fear of the Black Friars might merely have been like a child's fear of the dark. *This is real. I may not live through the week.* Running would be easy enough. There was no guard at Beniste's door. She wiped her nose on her sleeve. Would they try to find her? Would some tradesman turn her in? Would she be beaten or sold? None of the prospects pleased her overmuch. She rubbed her chin. She knew she did not want to go with Montrose and his companions. Wherever they were going. Whenever they were leaving. She sat down on the stone steps that led into the back of the house and pulled her cloak over her head.

Nadira heard her name called from above. She glanced up without moving her head. She did not want to talk to anyone. She did not want to wash anything or fetch anything or even read anything. She pulled the cloak tighter about her shoulders. After a short while she heard the heavy sound of footsteps in the house behind her. *He has found me.* The sounds stopped and the door opened. A pair of scuffed and patched brown boots appeared directly before her. She stared at the thick leather, at the creases and cracks that wove in and out from the soles. The toes and heels still held bits of dirt and mud from the graveyard and smelled musty. She swallowed hard, keeping her stomach steady. Stubbornly she kept her eyes on the ground. While she could not feign sleep, she could, in fact, be obstinate.

"Nadira." Montrose spoke softly as if he were calming his horse. She did not respond, but turned her face to the wall. She heard her name again. "Nadira. We leave day after tomorrow. If you want to bathe you must do so as soon as you can. I need you to gather some supplies. Beniste has generously offered to give us whatever we need, at least for the next few days. Take what you want from his garden and his larder."

"I'm not going," she murmured. There was a frosty silence. She did not move.

"You are." The cold words came down like stones rolling from a great height.

“I’m not.” She shrugged defiantly.

A pair of knees joined the boots with a creak and groan as Montrose lowered himself to a squat before her. He smelled like a cellar after a hard rain. Her nostrils twitched.

“Nadira,” he said softly again.

“Go away. I will not go with you.”

“You gave your word.”

“I did not.”

The horse-calming tones were gone. Montrose growled, “You did! On the road from Barcelona, you did!” His breath was heavy; she could hear the rasp as he inhaled. Nadira imagined his face was quite red with fury as well, but she resisted the temptation to prove it to herself by looking at him.

With a twist of her wrists, she flipped the hood of her cloak up so it covered her eyes. “You swore not to harm me,” she said, “and to bring me home when you were finished with me. I did not swear an oath, and I have now changed my mind.” He reached out and grabbed the cloak, yanking it back from her head. Nadira quickly turned her face away from him.

He hissed at her, “What do you want, Nadira. Tell me, I will get it for you. Do you want money?” He shook the purse hanging from his belt. The coins jingled convincingly. “What do you want?” he insisted furiously.

She snapped the heavy wool back over her head. “I don’t want your money!” Her shout was ineffective, muffled by the cloak. “I want to go home.”

“You do not have a home, you fool.” Montrose sighed. His big hand reached out and squeezed her shoulder. “Sofir won’t take you back. Not after you have been gone a fortnight with six men. He will not take you back. He will not want to give back the purse I left with him. You cannot go home. It will never be the same, Nadira. Things have changed for you. You can never go back to the life you had before.”

She heard the truth in his words, wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“Come now. This is bad, but it is over.” The horse-calming tones were back. “We will have fresh horses. No more walking. I know you are afraid, but...”

He is weary, Nadira thought. He is weary and I *am* afraid. She breathed in deeply; the scent of his wet leather was now strangely comforting. She pulled the cloak back from her face and looked up at him with red eyes.

“Why? Why should I go? I will be killed, or worse. Why?” Her fists balled up in the wool. The more she thought, the less she wanted to continue. She felt desperation around the edges of her mind. If she did not go with Montrose what would she do? *I cannot go; I cannot stay; I cannot go; I cannot stay.* The words whirled around inside her head. Her breath came faster, yet at the same time her chest tightened as if barrel hoops were squeezing her. The sky began to spin. She felt her wits leaving her. Lights flashed before her eyes, whirling dots of white and red.

She became aware of the scraping of rough calluses across her palms. The discomfort reached through the thick fog of her mind. She pulled her hands away and opened her eyes. She was lying on her back on the bed, now. Staring up at the rafters.

“Nadira.” She turned her head toward the sound. Montrose was sitting next to her, his face sallow in the orange light from the sunset that crept through the narrow window. “Nadira, can you hear me?” he asked.

Nadira did not answer. She still felt slightly dizzy. Instead, she searched Montrose’s face. His eyes were tired, his mouth thin and tight. He seemed honestly concerned. A wave of remorse rolled over her. She must have fainted. *He must have carried me up the stairs.* She thought about the pain that must have cost him.

“I can hear you,” she whispered. “I’m sorry. I’m behaving like a child.”

She was surprised to hear Montrose laugh. The sound was more like a choking grunt than a real laugh, but his eyes brightened and he flashed his teeth.

“You are a child. What, you are sixteen? Fifteen?”

“Near twenty, Milord. Old enough to behave better.”

Montrose’s smile faded. “Twenty? Good God.”

Nadira made a wry face. He looked uncomfortable. The oppressive atmosphere closed in around them again. The brief moment of levity faded quickly, dissipated by the reality of the situation. I really don’t have a choice.

She sat up, and Montrose did not prevent her from swinging her feet over the edge of the bed. She leaned against the headboard. Her stomach hurt. Shame filled her with resignation. She realized with some dismay that she was a coward.

“I will go with you, my lord,” she whispered, though everything inside her rebelled at the thought.

Montrose did not look at her as she had expected. He sat there, head bowed, with his hands dangling between his knees and he sighed again. Nadira looked down on his broad shoulders as he sat hunched beside her, the leather of his vest stretched taut across his wide back. She could see how worn and patched it was. There were some unended cuts, some water stains. His clothing is like a book, she thought. Every chapter was written in wear and tear. Even now, she could see where the recent battle on the mountain had left a new slice in the leather. His own blood had left spatter stains that had not been rinsed out. New chapters were written every day, and not only on his clothes.

Finally he turned his head to look at her sideways. The eyes were hard and determined. The lines on his forehead and around his mouth had not appeared so prominent last week. Already there were gray streaks at his temple over his ears among the black strands in his hair, yet he could not be much over thirty if he had even reached that age. Clothing can be discarded, but the enduring march of time was recorded in his face and each new experience changed the look in his eyes. Those blue eyes narrowed now as he studied her face in turn.

“Aye, and will you stay the course? Will you go to the monastery and read for me? Will you change your mind again? Must we have this same wretched conversation every time...” he turned away and his fist came down on his knee completing the sentence silently.

Nadira looked away. She stared at the wood beams on the ceiling, then on the shutters swinging open against the last of the day. An icy draft ruffled the blanket around her feet. She heard the faint sounds from the yard outside and her own troubled breath. She was afraid to look back at him, but she forced herself. A quick glance told her that his eyes were fixed on her, the blue depths intense, his jaw set hard. She could not meet his gaze, but dropped her eyes at once. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

He spoke to her quietly, in an even and measured tone that spoke to her of his resolve. “You must swear to me this time,” he said. “You must swear to me by your God. I must hear your oath and you must give me a token of your faith to me. Once and for all time we must get this understood between us.”

She thought about Barcelona. Would she want to go back? A few moments ago that was all she wanted. Would she grow old there, weaving, sewing, and pushing acrid laundry around a tub? When would the stable boys stop looking for her in the evenings? Next year? The year after? When would they begin thinking of her like Inez? What was before her? Fear? Death? Hunger? How safe was she from those spectral friars in Barcelona? How long until the robed figures stopped at Sofir’s fine house? How long before even his generous bribes could no longer keep them from coveting his property? His wine cellar? The barrels of spices? His ships? The truth was that there was no safe place for her to go. Even her wish to go home to Marrakech was a foolish little-girl fantasy. Her uncles would not welcome her, not delivered to them, like she would be, by a party of infidel soldiers. They would pull out their great curved blades and...*I am an abomination to them*. Self-pity threatened to engulf her again with a tide of tears. Nadira fought it back, angry with herself. Montrose obviously needed her. Sofir needed her in Barcelona, yet it was not the same. Anyone could bake bread or stir the laundry. Sofir can even do his own correspondence or find another clerk to do his figures.

Nadira realized she liked being needed. It felt good to know that her welfare was important to others; that someone must entreat her to benefit from her skills. There was a difference now. A change from being ordered, directed, and forced to being cajoled and humored. She put her hand to her eyes as she entertained a thought she had not permitted herself, the thought that had burned behind her eyes on the day of her mother’s death. A thought she had pushed away every day, refusing to allow it to grow in her heart, paining her with its hopelessness. She pulled it forward now, stood it before her eyes, and linked it to this man Montrose. She might not always be a slave.

Her hand came down revealing her eyes. Would he look in them to measure her worth? But he still studied his boots. She touched his arm. “I will swear to you, but I demand an oath in return.”

“Done”

“You haven’t heard it yet!”

“Demand away, girl. If I have it in me it is yours.” He slowly came to his feet, favoring his right side. He drew his sword with effort. She remembered with a twinge how easily he had pulled it from its scabbard just a few days ago. The sharp tising of metal on the scabbard’s rim cut her ears. He planted the tip in the space between the planks of the floor with a solid thump then leaned painfully on the hilt. She fixed her eyes on the cold blade. The sword could not lie, nor betray, nor deceive. She looked in his steely eyes. They had sharpened in intensity. He was waiting for her demands.

Nadira took a deep breath. “You must free me. I must no longer be a slave to anyone.” There were many honest women living independently in the cities. She could become a brewster, a spinster, a weaver, a midwife. She'd had dealings with such women herself.

He nodded. “Easy enough. Let us swear.”

Nadira slid off the bed to her feet. “I swear to follow you where you go, to where you take me. I will do as you say, obey your commands. I swear to honor you until you release me. All this I swear on my mother, let her hear my vow. Let me not join with her upon my death should I betray my words.” She nodded at Montrose to indicate that she had finished.

Montrose knelt before his sword. He grasped the hilt between his hands and interlaced his fingers. “I swear to protect this woman with my life. To feed her and keep her, free her and take her to wherever she asks when my task is finished. All this I swear.” He stood and reached out to her.

Nadira drew back. “Will you not call upon your God?” she asked.

“You did not.”

“I have no God. I swore on my mother, dearer to me than any God. You must swear to something other than your life.”

Montrose’s face darkened. “Will we quarrel about the very oaths we take? Is there no end to your perverse....” he dropped off in frustration, turned his head and cursed soundlessly, squeezing the hilt of his sword until the knuckles turned white.

“See here,” his voice was slow and deep, fighting exasperation. He looked directly into her eyes. “See here, I will swear. You swore on your mother, I will swear on my

brother, now in the grave not even a fortnight.” He started again, “I swear to protect this woman with my life, to feed her, keep her, and at the end of my task free her and carry her to wherever she asks. All this I swear on...my brother, Richard Longmoor. So, be it. Shall I break my vow, let me forever burn in the fires of hell with Satan as my...” The door burst open with a bang and Garreth filled the room. “...tormentor.”

Montrose finished. He looked up at his friend. “Witness this oath for me, Garreth.” Garreth immediately obliged by dropping his bulk to one knee and meeting his master’s gaze with a nod. Montrose reached into his belt with one hand and pulled out his dirk. Nadira stepped back against the wall.

“That is not necessary,” she whispered.

“Aye, it is,” he snapped. He pulled his left sleeve back over his solid upper arm, hooking the cloth in the cleft between the muscles, leaving the arm bare, then he turned to her and looked her directly in the eyes. “There will be no doubt, no second guessing, no change of heart, not the flicker of uncertainty. What we swear here in this room will take us to our graves.”

His blue eyes narrowed. With the dirk in his right hand he laid the blade carefully over the smooth skin on his inner forearm and drew a line. Dark blood welled up and chased the blade, but never caught the silver edge. Garreth took the dirk as Montrose cupped his hand over the dripping blood. “Come here.” Nadira was afraid not to obey; besides, she had just sworn an oath of obedience. She stepped up. Montrose met her eyes with a frightening intensity. “What I am is what I give you as my token of my faith in you. Hold out your hands,” he ordered.

She did so. He cupped them, then slowly tilted his hand until his blood spilled over the edge and into her trembling ones, forming a crimson pearl on her palm. He closed her fingers carefully over the red jewel. “There. I have sworn a blood oath on my very soul. Let us hope that is enough to convince you.”

Now she would have to bind her oath to him. How? She gazed at the circle of cooling blood in her palm. *How do I do it?* He was not asking for her blood. How do women swear? She remembered playing at the window in the women’s quarters in Marrakech. Her child’s hands held a tiny red finch, a pet that sang for her mornings and evenings. Her mother, young and beautiful, brushed her hair before the open window. In

the air, the sweet smell of sandalwood tinged her nostrils. In the women's quarters there were also very young boys living as promises of faith to her father or other men's oaths. Those flesh and blood children sealed the bond man to man, she thought. How did a woman prove her faith to a man? She blushed. That she would not do. She thought about her mother, how had she sealed her oath to her husband and master? Thursdays her mother spent at the baths with the other harem residents, bathing, washing her hair in henna, perfuming her skin. Her mother's night with her father came but once a week, yet preparations for it took the better part of two days. Nadira put her other hand to her hair, caressing its smooth warmth. Her mother had told her often that beautiful hair was a woman's greatest treasure. She remembered how her mother would comb out her hair for her and braid it, all the while singing happy songs.

The black braid now swung low past her hips. Nadira squeezed her hand into a fist, until the red oozed between her fingers. Then quickly, before she could change her mind, she grasped the root of the long braid with her bloody palm. She snatched Montrose's dirk from Garreth's hand and with a few hard jerks, cut her braid from behind her neck. Garreth gasped as she severed the last strands. She laid the long rope of her hair across Montrose's knee as he knelt before her. The freed remnants of her hair touched her shoulders in a ragged arc.

"I have sworn on my mother's soul and given you my token of faith," she said, standing over him. She stood now as a free woman, not as a slave.

Montrose fingered the heavy braid silently, examining it along the entire length even to the end that now hung lifeless on the floorboards. Then he wrapped the braid around his knuckles like he would the reins of his horse until it was a shining ball. He stood shakily and tucked the braid into his jerkin. "It is done," he said quietly without looking at her. "We depart day after tomorrow. Your first task will be to pack food from Beniste's larder. Three days for three men and a woman. The boys are staying here."

Chapter Eight

They rode out early in the morning, Nadira on a dull brown mare with the reins in her hands for the first time. She didn't need them, as the mare followed the stallion in

front of her without direction. Still, it was a new experience for her and she played with the leather in her hands, pretending she had control. The boys had sniffed and rubbed their eyes as they handed the horses over to the men. Montrose rubbed them both on the head and told them to be good for Beniste. Nadira remembered the look of shock on both their faces as Montrose had lifted her up, set her on the mare, and given her the reins. He had given her some boy's trousers and a tunic that morning and told her that she must look a boy for this part of their journey. The ragged ends of her shoulder-length hair were gathered up in a little blue cap and she wore soft leather boots on her legs. She had been given a warm cloak with a hood to cover everything else. She smiled to the boys and gave them a little wave, shaking the reins. Her mare turned one ear back as if to ask what she meant by that.

Alisdair rode directly behind her, she listened to him breathing, heard the occasional snort from his horse. Or maybe Alisdair snorted. Nadira never turned around to check, she did not want to meet his eyes. Alisdair's face had faded to a dull mask of its former bright features, difficult to look at, harder to fathom. Better to stare ahead at Montrose's back. He did not turn around either, though if her mare stumbled on the rough road he would tilt his head a bit to the side, listening. The creak of leather never ceased and the *clop clop* of the horses remained steady as a heartbeat. The sky was clear and the few travelers they met were friendly. Nadira took a deep breath and sighed as quietly as possible. Still, Montrose's head made that little sideways dip. He turned his head just enough for her to briefly see the outline of his jaw.

By late afternoon Nadira saw their destination. Gray stones and empty windows. She sighed again.

At the portcullis a faceless gatekeeper called down from above.

"Who goes there?"

"It is I, Robert Longmoor, Baron Montrose, here to speak with Father Bertram. I am expected." There was a long pause.

"Forgive the delay, my lord. I must call Father Bertram to the gate, as I have orders to allow none to pass."

“Very well,” Montrose called up. He turned to face his companions. “I want silence from all of you. Speak only out of courtesy. No one is to know our business. Understand?” There were nods all around. “Very well, then. Be sharp. Listen.”

A hooded face appeared on the rampart of the watchtower. Montrose looked up, “Hail, Father Bertram. It is I, Robert Longmoor.”

The hooded figure stood for a few moments, and then disappeared. A minute later, the clanking of the portcullis broke the silence as the wooden bars rose on a heavy chain. Nadira followed it all the way up with her eyes.

The stone walls of the entry passed them with echoes of the closing portcullis. The mare’s hooves sounded unnaturally loud on the paving stones. Eerie voices were raised in song and prayer as they neared the front door. Nadira pulled her hood forward to conceal her curious eyes; still, they missed nothing. Monks moved in rank and file about the courtyard. In the fading light she glimpsed the garden near the stables. Above, the three stories of the great hall stared back at her through black holes, hardly windows, merely shuttered eyes in a cold stone face. She shivered. I hope our business here is quickly done, she thought.

After the horses were stabled, Alisdair stayed with the animals and the baggage. The brothers promised them a warm meal. Montrose took Garreth and Nadira with him as he followed one of the brothers into the great hall. Nadira kept close beside Montrose’ left arm, close enough to brush against him now and then. She did not want to be separated. Garreth brought up the rear, uncomfortable without his great axe. He clenched and unclenched his hands as they marched through the hall. The hall was drafty enough to need the protection of her cloak, so staying disguised would be easy. They were led into a huge chamber with an amazing vaulted ceiling.

Nadira tried not to look too eager, but her hungry eyes took in all the architecture and statuary. There were many fine things in Sofir’s house, but nothing on this scale. Large walls, large ceilings, large statuary. The walls held niches to house the tall statues of disapproving saints. Cold eyes looked down on Nadira from every side. They came to the great fireplace where Father Bertram was waiting, seated in a chair large enough for two.

He was an old man, withered and wrinkled; his face long, his whiskers sparse and badly shaved. He had no need for a tonsure; he was completely bald, the hood of his monk's robe hung down his back. His eyes were bright and rimmed with red.

Montrose knelt at his feet and crossed himself. Father Bertram laid a heavy ringed hand on his forehead and mumbled a few words. Bertram glanced up at Nadira and Garreth. She quickly knelt and crossed herself as she had seen Montrose do. She felt movement behind her and knew Garreth had done the same. Under her cowl, she watched as Montrose raised himself with effort. Nadira wondered if his wound was bothering him, she had not looked at it since the day before they left Beniste's fine house. Behind her Garreth did not move, so she did not either.

"Father, I have come with my companions, Garreth of Montrose and...my servant to discuss some important business of my brother's."

The old man peered intently at her and at Garreth. Nadira stiffened, but kept her eyes as low as possible while still taking in the scene around her. Father Bertram was satisfied, for he turned his rheumy gaze on Montrose. "Your brother...?"

"Yes, Father. He is with God, gone this two weeks past, in Barcelona."

The old priest blanched. His mouth trembled and his voice cracked with effort. "My sincere regret, I knew him as a fine man, and an extraordinary scholar." His whole body began to shake as though he had the palsy.

Montrose bowed. "He is gone, but his urgent task remains undone. I mean to finish it. For his sake and for all of us."

Nadira watched carefully as the old man's eyes narrowed. The fuzzy white brows knit together beneath the baldpate. His jaw worked back and forth and Nadira heard his teeth grind. Father Bertram drew in a great breath that seemed to inflate him to twice his size before answering in a deep rumble. "That is impossible!"

"Father, do not stand before me in this matter. You know what is at stake."

The old man rubbed his jowls, and closed his eyes. "I stand not before you, Montrose my son, but beside you. None but your brother can stave off this threat. I fear all is lost without him. We must prepare for the worst." Some color returned to his face as a bright red circle on each cheek.

Bertram stood suddenly, with no trace of infirmity and began pacing to and fro on the raised dais. "What shall we do?" he muttered. "And then? And then? I do not want the infernal thing here, in this house. Unless it can be rendered harmless, it is dangerous to acquire it. Without your brother to read it, I daresay it must be harmless before bringing it here. At least to us. It will only destroy those who fail in the attempt... maybe..." He sounded doubtful.

"So it is no longer here." A look of pain crossed Montrose's face. "But to keep it from those who would use it? Others may yet decipher its contents"

"No. The book is gone." Father Bertram paused in his pacing. "We must think of that. It must be destroyed, but do not bring it here. I've had enough of it," he said.

"With all due respect, Father, we cannot destroy such a thing before reading it."

The old man's face erupted with fury. "You do not decide the fate of the world or this Church, little man! Do you know what it did to Brother Henry? It is not for you to say what is destroyed or saved!"

Montrose's reply was no less heated. "I am to risk and perhaps lose all? Yet have no say in the matter?"

"Do you plan to use it? Have you acquired the power of knowing? What use to you can this book possibly be without the knowledge to read it? Why not destroy it?" Father Bertram looked suspiciously at Garreth and Nadira.

"No, Father," Montrose snapped, in order to return the old man's attention to him, "I merely cringe to think of my brother's quest as futile."

"It was lost when he drew his last breath." Father Bertram was nervously fingering his rosary.

The last sound of the word 'breath' echoed eerily in the great hall. Neither man spoke. Nadira's knee was beginning to ache from the hard stones. Behind her, she felt Garreth fidget uncomfortably. The old man and the younger man stared at each other for a long moment. Nadira dared not even breathe, lest the sound rupture the room.

Finally, "Go then. Find it. Nevertheless, do not bring it here. You have my blessing. I assume you will need bursary?"

"No, Father," Montrose let his breath out slowly. "We are adequately funded. However, I will need to speak with Brother Henry."

Dark clouds filled the old man's face again, but then the relief of not having to part with any gold wiped away his intended refusal. Instead, he pulled on his chin with skeletal fingers. "Henry is in seclusion."

"Yes, I know, Father. I must speak to him about the book ... " Montrose let the words drift.

"Henry has not made a coherent sound in some months, Montrose. I don't know how he can help."

"Please, Father. I beg you. How can I possibly continue without seeing the last man who has read it?"

The old man turned his back and after a moment, waved his hand. As he made his way into an alcove, another brother stepped forward. This one was much younger, but still showed some gray in his tonsure. He smiled feebly at Montrose and beckoned. His hands were plump and pink inside his wide sleeves. Montrose motioned for Garreth and Nadira to follow. They did so as quietly as possible. The monk pulled a lit taper from a sconce and held it above his head as he led them through the archways out of the hall. Nadira glanced behind her, but Father Bertram had gone.

Montrose's boots were loud on the stones, the brother's footsteps silent. They passed through the vestibule and up a long staircase. Nadira glanced about, but in the fading light, she could see only directly in front of her where the brother's candle illuminated the walls. She matched her footsteps with Montrose's larger strides and kept herself at his arm with some trouble. She was close enough to feel his body's heat on her face. Garreth brought up the rear with his reassuring heavy tread.

At length they reached a long hallway that seemed to stretch for a mile. Nadira was weary from the climb. She had a day's ride and an hour kneeling on a cold stone floor behind her in this day already. Ahead of her lay an expanse of endless gray stone, pockmarked at regular intervals with the slanted pink light of a setting sun as it shone through the casement windows. Here there was no musty smell. They were high up in the third story where no water would stand. Instead, there was a dry dusty smell of long stale straw and unwashed bodies.

She tucked her chin closer to her chest and inhaled the aroma of her cloak, still fresh from being outside and mercifully carrying faint whiffs of the pine forest. She thought

she might faint before they finally stopped beside a cell. A narrow wooden door barred their entry. The monk handed the taper to Montrose while he fumbled on his belt for a heavy ring of keys. He held the ring up to the candle and squinted as he selected the correct one.

Nadira felt Garreth's palm in the small of her back. She took his massive arm in the darkness of the twilight and leaned on him while the monk fumbled with the lock. There was a rasp and a click. The monk took the candle back and then gestured for Montrose to open the door. Montrose took hold of the handle with both hands and pushed. The door opened into a tiny cubicle, barely four feet wide and six feet deep, bare except for a wide bench.

On the bench lay a pile of rags. As the monk entered with the candle, the room was lit end to end. Dust filled the air as the pile of rags started up. Something vaguely resembling a man emerged from the rags crying out and putting his hands over his face. The monk quickly lowered the candle and shielded it with his hand. The man in the cell began to sob, the rags shaking even more dust into the air. There was not room for all of them to stand together. Montrose took a long step forward, placing a hand on the monk's chest to keep him and his candle out of the cell.

"Brother Henry?" he whispered to the rags.

Garreth pushed Nadira in front of him so she stood on the lintel. Behind her, the monk set the candle over her head in a waxy niche in the wall.

The rag man stopped shaking for a moment, and then began to cough. Montrose moved over and sat on the bench beside him. He pulled the rags from Brother Henry's back revealing a worn and tired habit beneath. "Henry," he murmured, "do you know me?" Brother Henry lowered his hands from his eyes for a moment, and then quickly replaced them, blocking Montrose from his view.

"Little Robin." It was a toad's croak, not a man's voice. The brother in the hall was impressed, however. He whispered "Mother of God" and crossed himself quickly. Montrose looked up.

"Friend, Brother," he said to the monk in the hall. "We do not require your assistance any longer."

“Gracious Lord,” was the reply, “I am instructed to stay with Brother Henry during his audience with you, lest he injure himself or others.” He glanced meaningfully at Nadira’s small form. Obviously, Garreth was in no danger.

“And your devotion is exemplary. However, my man Garreth will easily protect us. Can you not see that Brother Henry recognizes me?”

This development strained the brother’s ability to come to a decision. Montrose, seeing his difficulty, proposed a solution. “Brother, take my request to Father Bertram. Ask if I may seek counsel with my old friend privately.”

The brother nodded silently, seemingly unaware that leaving to ask permission was, in fact, giving it. He lit another candle stub from his taper and moved down the long hall. The sun had long since set behind the mountains. Only the faint glow from the candle could be seen moving slowly down the narrow hallway. After a moment, the light disappeared down the stairway.

“Is he gone?” Montrose asked.

Garreth nodded. Montrose beckoned to Nadira to enter the room then gestured for her to sit on the floor. Brother Henry remained seated with hands over his face. From her position on the flagstones, Nadira could see that Brother Henry was very thin, almost fragile. The cell had a strong odor like a stable. Henry had been here a long, long time.

Montrose put his strong arm around Henry’s shoulders and squeezed him. “Henry, look at me.” He whispered. He gave the monk a shake. “Henry.” The monk brought his hands down slowly, revealing two teary eyes.

“Henry, I have to talk to you about Richard’s book.” Henry slapped his hands back to his face and let out a cry. He began to moan loudly, the sound echoing from the cold stones. Nadira withstood an impulse to cover her ears. Montrose looked about in distress. His eyes fell on Nadira on the floor.

“Richard is dead, Henry. I have brought another reader. I have to talk to you. You must talk to us. You must try to help. Soon the other monks will join us, and then you know we must hold our tongues. Please, Henry.” His face was lost in the dancing shadows of the faint candle that struggled to light the room. Nadira did not move.

The monk pulled his hands down again and wiped them on his knees. He sniffed loudly then glanced at the doorway. “It’s terrible,” groaned. “I find I cannot speak of it.”

“You must. We have little time, as you know, my friend.” Montrose squeezed him tighter.

“Oh, aye, there is no time. All is gone. Nothing remains, nothing...” the monk began to sob, his open mouth ghastly in the weak light. Nadira shifted on the floor. The movement caught the monk’s attention. The bright eyes locked on to her.

“A woman! You brought a woman here...” his face twisted for a moment then he burst out laughing, a harsh and unpleasant sound. “How nice to see a woman again. It has been a long time.”

Nadira hunched deeper into her cloak. How could he tell she was a woman? It was very dark and her form was not more than a lump of wool. She grimaced. Montrose would be upset that their façade had not lasted a day. She glanced up guiltily to meet his gaze, but instead of the anger she feared, he was smiling softly at the older man.

“Henry, look at me.” Henry obeyed turning his face from Nadira toward his friend. “Henry, When did you last have the book?”

“Two months past, maybe more. It was hot...summer. There was still light after vespers.” Henry turned to smile at Nadira.

“Tell us,” Montrose continued, “Who took it away from you?”

Henry’s face took on a lost look, as though everything surrounding him was fading away. In his dark eyes, Nadira saw him searching, searching. He did not answer directly, but spoke in a monotone, staring through Nadira into the wall behind her.

“I read the first page. It was easy, Aramaic. The book told me I would know it all. Everything would be revealed to me. But I had to consume the book first. In my eagerness I read page after page, painstakingly deciphering each letter, each symbol, each mark. I copied countless possible translations. Some of the pages were in Latin, some in Hebrew, some in the Saracen tongue. Those words I could not read. There are other signs, pictures and symbols. Some are of birds and people. I could not read them either. I do not know anyone who can.

“Oh, there were profound thoughts, some mathematical figures, but nothing I had not seen or read about in other books. For days I pondered its mysteries. I burned so many candles into the night I was given penance for my extravagance. But still I could not release the book.” He paused, but his eyes remained unfocused. “I thought I had

‘consumed the book’. He laughed a short laugh, like a cough. “Then one night after praying for the answer for hours and hours, it hit my mind like a blow from a staff. I had to eat the book, consume it literally. Maybe I was going mad, but as I turned the leaves, I could see that the last page was not vellum like the others. The last page was brittle and yellow, perhaps made from flax, or some kind of reed, I do not know. I could see fibers pressed one way and then the other. It was translucent and devoid of any writing. I thought it was just the endpaper. It was spotted with black dots, like fly specks. I could see that hands before mine had torn bits out of this page. They were torn in half circles, squares, cut with knives and scissors. Fully a third of the page had been eaten away like that.”

Henry rubbed his face, making a scratching sound on his sparse beard. “I tore a huge piece out of the page. Not content with tiny bits as other readers had, I tore half the page away and swallowed it with the abbot’s finest red wine. Then I sat, saying my rosary for four bells, waiting. Like a fool.” He began trembling again.

They heard the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. More than one monk coming this time.

Henry looked to the door. “They will not understand,” he said sadly. “They do not see. They think I am mad. Perhaps I am. But they are the dead ones, not I.” He turned away.

The familiar monk returned with another brother and a torch. They seemed quite surprised to see Henry sitting docile on the bench. The flame was thrust into the room with a roar of spitting pitch lighting the tiny space with a violent red.

“Brother Henry?” The taller monk asked tentatively.

Henry smiled. “I am fine, my brother. Thank you for your concern. I am happy here, talking with my old friend Robin.” The two monks exchanged incredulous glances.

“We are all having a very pleasant conversation, honored brothers. Please allow us this small concession. Surely we do no harm.” Montrose said in his most courteous voice.

The torch was placed in a holder and the two brothers backed out of the crowded cell. Garreth followed them out far enough to encourage them to sit a little ways from the door. He kept his bulk in the doorway, though, blocking the residents from view.

Montrose leaned out over Nadira to see through the small doorway. “We must speak quietly, as they will not leave us alone.” He looked at her meaningfully before returning to his seat beside Henry. The monk was staring off into space. Montrose took his arm. “Henry,” he murmured, bringing him back.

Brother Henry sucked in a great breath of the smoky air as he turned to Montrose. “My friend, it is all you have heard. More than you have heard. Much more. Too much,” he closed his eyes. “You should go home. Leave the book be. It will destroy whoever tries to use it. Do not worry. It protects itself.” He shook his head slowly side to side. “It destroyed me,” he whispered.

Montrose stretched a long arm across Henry’s shoulders. “You feel that way now, but you are not destroyed. I am talking to you right now. You are just the same as always. You are the same man who taught Richard his Latin and Hebrew. The same man who dined every winter in my father’s keep when we were children. You are the man I need now. We need you.”

Henry sighed. He was still for a moment, then his head came up. “Why did you bring a woman here?” he asked quietly. “You know it is forbidden.”

Montrose was taken aback by the shift. He glanced at Nadira. “Woman?” he said weakly.

“You fool.” Henry whispered. Nadira scrunched down in her cloak.

“How did you know?”

“My friend,” Henry sighed again. “I can’t explain, but knowing and seeing...and seeing things and hearing...” his voice faded away.

“Henry.” His friend looked at him. “Henry, you must help us. Tell me what happened. You swallowed half the page with the abbot’s fine wine,” he prompted.

Henry nodded, looked at his hands. He began in a soft voice, Nadira strained to hear. “I was sitting with just a candle. As I sat,” he paused, absorbed in the memory, “as I sat the candle grew larger. The light flooded my cell. I looked up and from my little bench I could see every crack in the stones, every mark. If I stared too long at a crack, I could feel myself going into the crack as though I were an ant. It was frightening.”

Henry wiped his eyes with his sleeve. He continued in a stronger voice, “I picked up the book with wonder. I turned to the first pages and read them. This time everything

became clear. It was as though before the words were in anagrams and now they were in their proper order. I read the book cover to cover. I do not know how long I was there. It felt like days and at the same time just an instant. I heard voices talking to me, telling me what the words meant.

“I cannot explain it. I saw the world. I looked out the window and I went out the window! Everything I looked at I went there to it right away. Every question I asked was answered. I saw through things, Montrose, I saw into men’s minds, I felt their hearts. I spoke to a spider and it spoke to me in turn. When the book was finished, I looked up. My candle had gone out. It was dead cold; the wax was brittle. The cell was like a tomb, black as soot, yet I had just finished reading for hours. I think. I couldn’t see the book in my hands, yet I had been reading it.” He trembled. “I felt exhausted. I slept for a day; I could not eat. I was weak as a kitten. Brother Martin brought me bread and broth. They say I was ill for three days. I don’t remember.” He sighed. “When I had the courage to do so, I picked the book up again, but the words were cold and flat. They sounded stupid to me when I read them.”

“What sort of words?” Montrose prompted.

Henry studied his face. “Words like ‘Only the eye fears darkness; the ear, silence.’”

“What does that mean?” Montrose asked him.

Brother Henry just shook his head as he looked down at Nadira. “Who are you?” He reached out and pulled her hood to her shoulders. Her head remained bowed; she hugged herself to hide her breasts.

Montrose’s arm moved out deliberately, pulled the hood back over her head, and let it fall forward to conceal her. “She is my reader, Henry. As you know, I can merely sign my name and badly at that. Maybe I can make out a few words, some names, but you know very well my father forbade me to study. You were there, Henry. Do you remember?” Henry stared at him.

“She can read Latin? Hebrew? Aramaic? Moorish? Greek?”

“Not Aramaic,” Nadira said from under the cloak.

“Not Aramaic.” Montrose repeated. Nevertheless, she can read what you cannot, for she knows the Saracen tongue and are there not long passages in that language? Richard told me so.”

Henry did not speak but continued to stare at Nadira's unmoving form on the floor. He pushed her hood back again and leaned down to raise her chin in his hand. Nadira did not resist, instead she allowed herself to look back at him. She searched his face to see what the book had done to him. He said he was mad. Was he? Could she see madness in his eyes? Had the book ruined him? Did a spirit possess him? Would this happen to her? It did not show in his eyes.

"What a lovely girl, Montrose. Who is she?"

Nadira cleared her throat to answer, but Montrose cut her off. "She is mine. I bought her off a spice merchant in Barcelona."

Henry released her chin and threw his head back to laugh, "You liar! It's a sin to lie to a priest, don't you know?" He chuckled, looking at Nadira. She smiled weakly. "You didn't buy her off a merchant in Barcelona. Jesu. You stole her." He rubbed her head. "This is remarkable." Nadira felt a trembling warmth from the priest's hand when he touched her. "Where did you learn to read, child?"

Nadira swallowed, "My mother taught me my own language. My Master taught me Castilian, English, Hebrew, Greek and Latin."

"Are you fluent, then?"

"Only in Castilian and Moorish, Brother Henry. I am merely competent in the others."

"Why would your Master teach you to read and write so many languages?"

"I kept his accounts, Friar. He wanted me to read the bills and manifests and post the shipments." Henry seemed genuinely impressed.

"So you really haven't read many books."

"No, but a great many accounts, Friar"

Henry laughed again. "What a clever Master. I imagine in all those years you did not cheat him once."

Nadira gasped. "My Lord, of course not!" Nadira thought back on those long hours bent over books, turning pages with ink-stained fingers, feverishly happy that she was not stirring boiling laundry. Henry was staring at her.

“I see you were extremely motivated,” he said kindly. She looked up, startled. “Yes, as daunting as Hebrew may seem, boiling laundry is many times worse. Very well, then. What a crew you have assembled for this task, Little Robin.”

Nadira’s mouth hung open. Henry reached out and closed it for her. When his warm fingers touched her chin, she felt a shock. Shivers moved up and down the back of her neck.

“When was the last time you had the book, Henry?” Montrose prodded gently.

“It’s been some months, Robin. I am sorry. Father Valentine from Toledo rode through with some kind of permission from the Holy Father. It required all manuscripts containing the bird script to go to Rome. I tried to hide the book, but he knew I had it, so did Father Bertram. I did not mention the interesting endpapers. One day it was gone. I woke up, looked for it. It had disappeared.” Henry leaned back against the stone wall behind him. “It’s just as well. They will never understand what they read, and if they try the endpapers...well, let me just say that the world will never be the same.”

“It’s not so easy, my friend,” Montrose rubbed his face, the black stubble of his three days beard made a scratching sound. “I’ve heard that the Holy Father intends to use the book and is collecting readers from all over the world. He may even get a pagan priest from Africa to read the bird script.”

“So? It will do him good.”

“What? I heard all who read it become...” Montrose paused. “I heard all who read it come to harm and he who wields its power deals harm to others.”

Henry regarded him with interest. “If that’s true, then His Holiness will be struck down with some affliction before he can wield its ‘power’.”

“Maybe. But not if he has made a pact with the Evil One”

Henry chuckled again. “You have heard that one uses this book to summon daemons.”

“Yes, I have.”

“Well, it summons daemons, but not the ones you are thinking of.” Henry’s face twisted into an unpleasant smile. “I cannot explain this book. I know that before it came to me, men were killed to acquire it. I know those trying to understand its secrets have

done great evil. However, Robin, great evil is punished with or without this book. It is not this book that punishes or directs evil. It is men.”

“Then why did Richard want it so badly?”

“Why does any man desire knowledge?”

“Someone wanted it badly enough to kill Richard. Someone believes it holds tremendous power. I was told it contained the secret to the Philosopher’s Stone...”

Henry laughed again. “I will tell you right now it does not have the secret of turning lead into gold,” he smiled.

Montrose frowned. “Why in God’s name am I chasing this for then, Christ.” He cried in frustration, pounding the bench.

“My friend, it is still a noble cause. I do not care if His Holiness Alexander the Sixth goes mad. It would be a just punishment for such a cruel and degenerate man. I do not care if a thousand men read this book. I know what I know. I think if someone tries to use it for evil they will find themselves in the very pit of Hell.”

“How many will be injured before His Holiness makes that journey?” Montrose shot back angrily. “How many other men will lose their land, their fathers? Their brothers?”

Henry’s eyes were sad. “Or their minds.”

Montrose paused, rubbing his face and pulling his hair.

Henry waved a pale hand. “Robin. Go to Rome. Father Valentine was traveling there to join with the Black Friars. I tell you it is not worth your efforts. The book takes care of itself. This I know firsthand. Chase it if you would, but you will not benefit from its wisdom, nor save anyone by destroying it.”

Montrose stood abruptly and pulled Nadira up with him, shaking her like a doll. His breathing became rapid and coarse. His temples throbbed with fury.

She stood, head bowed before his rage, afraid to look at Henry.

“Damn! Damn this whole task.” He jerked her arm painfully for effect. “My brother Richard told me to get this book. He told me that to allow it to be used by others would be the downfall of all kingdoms. He told me life would become death and death would become life if this book was not found and returned to him. Henry, he made me swear on our mother’s grave on Midsummer’s night.” Montrose punctuated each sentence with another jerk of her arm. Nadira’s hood fell back on the last yank.

The sight of her reminded Montrose of more unpleasantness. “I’ve stolen this girl from her house, Henry, I committed acts of treason, murder, betrayal. I’ve been busy with death since Richard was so foully murdered and you tell me not to worry about it any more.”

In disgust, he shoved her arm back and released her. Nadira quickly stepped to Garreth’s side, lest Montrose reach for her again. The big man put an arm around her protectively. Montrose had fire in his eyes and the red flush of its heat had spread over his face until it was terrible to look at. In his rage, he reached for Henry’s habit now that Nadira could no longer be shaken between sentences.

As his huge hands closed on the rough fabric Nadira felt a flash of heat. There was a snapping sound just before Montrose’s body flew backwards and impacted the hard stones full on. Nadira was blown into the hall. Immediately the two monks ceased their quiet conversation. They leaped to the cell and pulled Garreth and Montrose from the tiny room. Without a word they slammed the cell door shut and barred it with a timber plank.

“The visit is over,” one of them said unnecessarily.

Montrose and Garreth pulled themselves up from the floor timbers. Montrose paused, kneeling; Garreth tightened his belt. Where Montrose’s face had been red, it was now pale. Garreth looked no better. Both men leaned on each other, panting. “What happened?” Montrose gasped.

“My lord, Brother Henry ended the meeting,” was the laconic answer from the taller monk.

“Rather abruptly, I may say,” answered the shorter one. “Perhaps you would like to retire to your sleeping quarters for the night.”

Montrose ignored them. He located Nadira behind Garreth, reached out and pulled her to him. “Are you hurt? Are you injured? Are you bleeding?” The rapid questions appeared rhetorical. His dark eyes darted over her body, his large hands swiftly feeling her shoulders and back through the heavy wool, knocking her about. She was glad she was not injured, as his exploration would have been exceedingly painful. Rough as it was, his searching hands revealed no broken bones or serious bruises. “Thank God,” he breathed a heavy sigh. He kept her arm in an iron grip as he tried to rise to his feet.

“I must see Father Bertram immediately.”

“I’m afraid that is not possible, Lord Montrose. It is midnight. Father Bertram has retired for the evening. Please allow us to show you to your sleeping quarters.”

Montrose grimaced as he considered his options. He glanced at Garreth. The big man darted his eyes from the window opening to Nadira and back before staring meaningfully at Montrose. Nadira looked out the window where the half moon dominated the view. She guessed that Garreth was referring to the lateness of the hour. She herself was half dead from the day’s journey; she could only darkly imagine how these two men could want to continue further into the night. Apparently, Montrose understood his friend perfectly, for he nodded once. The two monks lit another torch and without further comment escorted them through a labyrinth of hallways and staircases to a small chamber.

There were three wooden benches against three walls, each covered with a straw-filled mattress and a wool blanket. Under one of them was a chamber pot. Moonlight and cold air drifted in from the window, which was merely a high opening in the wall. The monks left a candle with them for light, but withdrew with the brighter torches. As they moved down the darkened hallway, warmth and light departed with them. Nadira stood in the cold darkness. Garreth moved to a bench and began to make his large frame as comfortable as possible on the narrow planks. Nadira felt a stab of pity for him; he probably never slept comfortably except perhaps in a haystack in a warm stable. She felt a slight push from behind as Montrose, gently this time, moved her wordlessly toward her bench under the window. She saw that he sat gingerly on the bench by the door. In the square of moonlight that fell on him from the high window, she saw him probing his ribs.

“My Lord,” she whispered.

“Hum,” came the absent reply.

“My Lord?” she kept her voice soft. Garreth was already snoring.

“Go to sleep, Nadira.”

“My Lord, please. Is it the wound? Has the stitching...?” He did not answer, but she heard his heavy breathing between Garreth’s snorts and grunts. “Let me see, my Lord.”

“You cannot see in this darkness, Nadira. Get some rest.” He sounded resigned, like a child shown a bright toy and then told to play with it on the morrow.

Nadira moved quietly from her bench and went to him. She felt his thick arm under the wool cloak. He held his breath, moving his arm out of the way so her small hand could burrow into his tunic. She moved her hand under the linen of his tunic until she reached the warm flesh. He caught his breath again at that moment and the muscles of his abdomen tensed.

She concentrated on the remembered map of his body. Here are the bandages. She loosened them, pushed them aside. Slowly her fingers tenderly probed the wound. He flinched as the searching fingers were moistened in his blood. The flesh over his ribs had pulled through the stitching, as she had thought, when his arms took the brunt of his fall. Carefully she moved her hand above the injured side, seeking the extent of the damage. Nadira was alarmed at the amount of blood. Already her hand was wet with it. The candle sputtered out. She could do nothing in this darkness. The entire stretch of ripped flesh had come apart, the careful stitching a matted mess of thread. Montrose grunted.

“My Lord,” she whispered, “your wound is larger now.”

He whispered back, “I know.”

“I can’t help you in the dark, we must call for the monks to return with light and cloth.”

“No.” He sighed softly. “No. Did I not tell you to go to sleep?”

Nadira’s hand was sticky with blood. She pulled the bandages down over the open wound as lightly as possible, wiping her hand as she did so. When she pulled it out from his tunic, it was still sticky. She wiped it in the folds of her cloak.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered truthfully

“There’s naught to be done. Sleep.”

“If I had our baggage I could make you a draught.”

“If only, if only...” he said quietly. Another sigh told her how tired he was.

“My lord...” Nadira felt helpless. The events of the day, punctuated with this episode, fell upon her like a crushing load. She took her arm and linked it in his, moving closer to him on the bench. He did not resist, nor did he repeat his admonition that she return to her bench. She felt tiny against him. She leaned against his good side,

wrapping her cloak around them both and pulled her legs up under her. After a few minutes, she felt him move his arm under the wool and snake around her waist. He pulled her closer, but did not speak. As she warmed against him, she felt the long day fading from her mind.

Chapter Nine

Nadira opened her eyes when she felt her shoulder being shaken. Garreth's concerned face blurred in front of her. Nadira shook her head to clear the haze that seemed to permeate the room. Garreth glanced toward the window where faint pink light tinged the gray cell with color. He shook her again.

"I'm fine. I'm not hurt." Nadira said.

He pointed his chin toward Montrose who lay crumpled and pale against the wall. "Let him sleep," Nadira warned.

Garreth shook his head. He placed a hand on his lord's shoulder and squeezed, causing Montrose to jump awake and nearly topple from the bench. Nadira caught him with both hands on his chest and braced him back against the cold stones.

"You are safe, my lord," she murmured.

"God, I feel terrible," he groaned. He rubbed his eyes and then his beard as if that would help, then feeling his ribs up and down the tunic with both hands. "We must get an audience with Father Bertram before we leave." He leaned forward to stand but fell back against the wall, his face gray. "Oh God."

"Garreth, help me. I cannot move," he whispered. Garreth braced himself with one hand on the wall. Montrose grasped his wrist and Garreth lifted him slowly to his feet. Nadira watched his face contort. She reached out a hand.

"No, put him down," she said.

"I make the decisions here, not you." Montrose said between clenched teeth. "Get me to the stable, Garreth, and then tell Alisdair to get the horses and baggage ready."

Nadira opened the door into an empty hall. Yes, she was not the one in charge, and yes, she swore to obey Montrose, but no, she did not promise to submit graciously against

her own better judgment. They all needed a long rest. No one had completely recovered from the events on the mountain pass.

With a resigned sigh, she strode across the hall and leaned out the window. Below her lay the monastery's quadrangle. The stone stable buildings were opposite her across the leaf-strewn yard. In the early morning chill, monks were traveling about in groups of three and four, huddled in their thick robes against the weather. From the tower she heard bells tolling, the echoes from the courtyard walls clashed raucous and discordant to her ears.

She looked back over her shoulder at the men. Garreth raised his chin, questioning her; his treelike legs planted firmly to support Montrose like a dead branch hanging by the bark. Nadira pressed her lips together.

"We need to go down two floors. The stable is across the way to the south," she said.

She heard Garreth dragging Montrose behind her, their irregular footsteps echoing on the stone as they made their way slowly to the staircase at end of the hall. She led the way carefully down the steps, pausing to allow Garreth to find secure footing on the uneven stone.

Outside the yard was deserted. The muffled sound of chanting told her where the monks had gone. She hurried through the dried leaves to the stable doors, anxious to get them open and a place prepared for Montrose. She might still convince him to rest. As she strained to open the heavy door, Garreth came up behind her carrying an unconscious Montrose across both arms. He set his back against the stubborn door and with a heave, shouldered the heavy timbers against the wall with an authoritative thud. He marched past her and lay Montrose down in a pile of straw near the horses. Alisdair rose immediately from where he had been lounging. Garreth pushed him back when he reached for his friend and dragged Nadira up by her tunic instead. He set her down hard at Montrose's side and pointed at the dripping wound.

"What do you need, lass, Alisdair asked, his eyes wide at the sight. "I wondered what happened when ye didn't come back last night."

Nadira looked about. It was rather dark inside the stable, but no lamp could be lit. “Someone open all the shutters. Would you remove his jerkin and shirt?” she asked Garreth.

Montrose was a big man, and dense. Taking off his heavy cloak and tunic would be nearly impossible without help. He was also wearing some leather straps here and there. Nadira assumed they served some kind of arsenal service; she didn’t want to reach in somewhere to find a dagger or some other sharp object.

“I’ll need hot water. Bring me at least a kettle full, and some linen,” she ordered. “I have needle and thread. Bring some bread and broth and wine if you can get it.”

Nadira did not have to wait long. As soon as her tools were assembled she began. The water in the bowl had cooled, she selected a wad of linen and soaked it thoroughly. She set to work wiping dirt and blood from Montrose’s body. Garreth had removed all of his clothes above the waist. His skin was white and taut beneath the grime, a marked contrast to his arms and neck where the sun had bronzed him. Old scars crisscrossed his chest, leaving white trails in the curly dark hair that covered him thickly from just below his neck to disappear into his breeches.

She worked quickly, changing the water in her cloth as necessary until the bowl was dark with blood. Garreth took the bowl from her. “Can you bring more?” she asked him. He reached for the kettle. Nadira felt each rib with deft fingers. She had to press hard to feel the bone beneath the solid muscles, watching Montrose’s face to see if he would revive. He didn’t even twitch. The flesh over his ribs was darker with a developing bruise, and two of the bones moved unnaturally. She pressed the lips of the wound as close together as possible. The swollen skin resisted her and it felt too warm. The line she must sew seemed impossibly long. She sat cross-legged like a tailor and threaded her needle. With one hand she held the wound together at the top as the other hesitated with the needle. Trembling, she pushed the silver needle through the bruised flesh.

Immediately she found herself face down in the straw that covered the hard dirt floor. She clutched the needle lest she lose it as a heavy weight that felt like an elbow pressed her harder into the ground. Around her she heard shouts and felt the elbow disappear as hands pulled at her, setting her back up again. She shook her head. She

guessed that Montrose had come alive and knocked her down. Now he lay on his back gasping with Alisdair holding his arms pinned to the ground.

“Are ye hurt, lass?” Alisdair puffed.

“No,” she lied, wincing as she pulled the needle out of her palm. “I’m not hurt.”

“He didn’t mean it, lass.”

Nadira leaned over Montrose, smoothing his long hair back up and over his forehead so she could see his eyes. He stared up at the ceiling, dazed. “My lord, you must be sewn up again,” she said.

“God, “he breathed, “Jesus Christ. Then do it.”

Nadira slipped a leather strap between his teeth and Montrose squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

“Will it take ye long?” Alisdair asked, concerned.

Nadira shook her head. “I don’t know. Hold him down, anyway.” Nadira poured wine over his ribs, soaking the straw beneath him, then took up her needle. This time Montrose didn’t flinch as the needle pierced the purpled flesh, instead his whole body went hard like stone, the muscles under the pale skin bunching into knots. Nadira hurried. Garreth moved out of the light so he wouldn’t have to watch. Alisdair held Montrose down with both hands on his shoulders as Nadira brought the lips of the wound together and ran the thread as quickly as she could, like she would hem her skirt. Neither the torn muscles that lay beneath the ripped skin nor the cracked ribs could not be repaired with thread. Montrose jerked as she pushed the needle through the last bit of skin. Alisdair shifted his weight in order to hold him firmly. She left the bottom of her seam open two fingerbreadths to drain and covered the long wound with wet linen.

“Lift him up, Alisdair.” She wrapped the bandages around his chest as quickly as possible, tying them as they played out. When she finished she sat back and wiped her sweating face with her sleeve.

“Good job, Lassie.” Alisdair lay Montrose back into the straw, kicking more of the bedding under his shoulders so he might lay more comfortably. Even so, his lord’s face was tinged green beneath his eyes. Nadira tried to pull the leather strap from his mouth. She tugged at it, and when it did not budge, she resorted to sliding her finger between his

lips like one does to remove the bit from a horse. Teeth marks evenly peppered the leather. In two places he had bitten clear through the thick strap.

“My lord,” she whispered. It is over.”

His eyes were so dark the blue could scarce be seen. “This is not going well at all,” he murmured. Nadira touched his cheek with the back of her hand.

As his temperature rose, he was less and less interested in drinking the broth and wine she forced on him. The last time Alisdair lifted Montrose for her his head lolled on his shoulders and she could get nothing down his throat. As the moon rose on the second night, the night chill settled in the stable, but Montrose had thrown off his blanket, Nadira sat near him, warmed by his emerging fever. He did not sleep, nor was he fully awake, but shifted restlessly on his pallet. Nadira took his hand in her small one and stroked it until he lay quietly. Garreth and Alisdair sat on either side of her, huddled in their cloaks.

“What d’ye think, lass?” Alisdair said in a low voice.

“The fever is to be expected. Three days.”

“Aye. Sometimes it’s not the wound that kills a man.”

“No, no,” Nadira said quickly, “He will live.”

Alisdair glanced at Garreth in the moonlight that sifted through the shutters. “Rob. Can ye hear me, man?”

Montrose blinked. “Aye. I hear you killing me off,” he whispered.

“Nay, man. Just bein’ cautious. You remember Martin, poor lad.”

“Aye.” Montrose sighed.

“Carried off with a splinter in his heel. His own mum scarce finished wrappin’ it up when he stiffens and dies right there.” Garreth nodded in the darkness. “You remember that, Garreth? The poor woman was screamin’ like a banshee. I had a hell of a time getting Martin buried with her hangin’ on me. She doted on that boy.” He pointed at Montrose. “Just a splinter in his heel,” he repeated. The finger wagged at Nadira. “Don’t ye be tellin’ me not to worry about a fever.” Alisdair leaned closer and felt his forehead. “I could cook haggis on your head, Rob.”

“God, Alisdair, don’t talk about food.”

“You’ve said yourself haggis is hardly food.”

“Ah, ah,” Montrose gasped, wincing. “And don’t make me laugh.”

“I’m just checkin’ ye to be sure you’re alive. Ye are. I’ll let ye sleep now.” Alisdair leaned back against a stanchion. He and Garreth exchanged glances in the dim light.

Nadira hugged herself. With a frown she thought about her choices should he perish. She looked at Alisdair, his face drawn with worry despite his attempt at levity. Garreth sat sullenly glaring at his left foot. These men might take her and keep her. She was certain they would not sell her, for they had sworn...but what had they sworn? She struggled to remember. They had promised not to harm her. They did not promise not to sell her or give her to anyone else, or even leave her in the wilderness. They were good men, honorable men. They would honor their lord’s oath. Nervously she put a hand out and felt Montrose’s cheek below his eye. He turned his head toward her and blinked. It was too dark to read his expression. Nadira smoothed her hand over his forehead again. He was very warm.

“Go to sleep,” she ordered softly.

“I can’t,” he whispered, though he closed his eyes obediently.

Nadira realized she would mourn him, should he die. This was an uneasy feeling in more ways than one. She lifted his hand up between her breasts and pressed it to her chest. “Don’t die,” she whispered.

The next morning the bells again awakened Nadira. She found herself on her side pressed up against Montrose as he slept beside her, sharing his blanket. Without disturbing him, she slowly sat up and pushed her hair back from her face. She lay a hand on his neck softly so as not to startle him with a cold touch. The fever was there, but not as high as yesterday. Nadira breathed relief, then stretched her arms and shoulders, stiff from sleeping on the hard ground. The others were waking as well.

Just then the stable doors pushed open with a loud scrape. They all jumped to their feet, even Montrose opened his eyes. A group of monks strode toward them, their leader spread his hands in a gesture of greeting. Alisdair came out from the stalls to meet them before they could get too close to Montrose and Nadira. Their leader looked at each one, raising his hand with a benediction before he spoke.

“You have not been properly placed in comfortable rooms here at Coix,” he said in a gentle voice. “I extend our sincerest apologies to you all. We plan to remedy this situation immediately. Proper rooms have been prepared and await you now. If you

would accompany us, we will take you to them right away. Food and drink have been delivered there for you already this morning.

“Aye, then. “Thank ye,” Alisdair answered warily.

The monk frowned at Nadira and she quickly pushed her hair back with a nervous hand, then crossed her arms over her chest in a futile attempt to cover her breasts. She felt her face flame.

The monk continued. “The delay concerned your woman servant. Henry’s caretakers relayed to Father Bertram that your boy is not what he seems and this has caused some trouble. However,” the monk bowed very slightly from the waist, “Father Bertram has seen fit to make an exception to the rule in this particular case. You all will be housed together and in a remote room usually reserved for foreign merchants.”

By foreign merchants Nadira suspected he meant non-Christians. She nodded politely.

Montrose struggled to sit up. Nadira pushed on his shoulders and held him upright. He addressed the monk. “We did not intend,” he said, “to stay,” he took a shallow breath, “even this long, Friar.” Nadira moved behind him as he began to sag. “As you can see,” he took another breath, “my injury has delayed our departure.”

“Yes. Your condition has been relayed to Father Bertram. It was he who asked that you be given our highest courtesies regardless of your companion. If you make ready we can go now.” The monk made a courteous gesture. “Will my Lord be able to walk, or will you need to be carried?”

“Ah,” Alisdair stepped up between Montrose and the monk. “He can walk, kind friar.” He answered, gesturing to Garreth to gather their things. Nadira helped Montrose to stand. He leaned on her until she felt her knees nearly collapsing from the weight. He swayed at first, but with her arm around his waist he was able to walk the several paces to the tallest building on the quadrangle. The monks showed them into a spacious room on the first floor that contained three large beds and a table and several chairs. Hooks on the wall took most of their belongings, and as promised, the table was laden with bread and fruit and bowls of steaming porridge. Nadira and Alisdair met at the window. He laughed tonelessly as he pushed the hinged shutters out and spread them wide to bring in light and air.

“Ye checkin’ out the escape route, too, lass?”

“No, I just wanted to see the view from here.” But she was indeed checking out the escape route and wondered at herself. What was there to fear?

Two days later the fever broke. With relief they sent word that Montrose was ready for an audience. Nadira and Garreth changed him into another tunic, re-applied all his weapons and leather and unpacked his better cape from his baggage. Garreth had to put his lord’s boots on his feet for him.

“Shall I stay behind, Milord, or change into my gown?”

“You are not staying behind,” he winced, waving Garreth away. “I did not bring you here to stay behind.” He tried to tie the laces on his tunic, fumbling with the grommets. Nadira gently pushed his fingers away and threaded the leather thongs deftly. She felt his warm breath in her hair as she worked.

He spoke to her softly, “We have to be ready for anything. They had time to send messages. Stay alert.”

They were escorted to a small chamber with high ceilings and tapestries on the wall. In the center of the room, a table was spread with a fine white cloth and several drinking vessels.

Thick wax candles warmed the air with the scent of honey and made Nadira glad to have jettisoned the woolen cape. She examined the tapestries carefully as they waited for Father Bertram to arrive. One was a hunting scene with stiff dogs chasing a wild-eyed doe. Another was a garden in full bloom. Garreth stood nervously one first one leg and then another. Montrose leaned heavily against the third wall, the tapestry behind him now distorted into folds. Alisdair stood patiently by the table, trying to see what was in the pitcher without touching anything. The door opened and an initiate bowed Father Bertram into the room. The priest entered and strode directly to his chair in front of the window.

“Please,” he said, “be seated.”

Long benches flanked the sides of the table. Nadira immediately sat herself on the far end from Father Bertram on the left side of the table. Montrose took the seat to Bertram’s right hand. Alisdair sat opposite Nadira, and Garreth, opposite his master.

The priest bowed his head and began a long prayer. Nadira watched the others over her clasped hands. Garreth was listening with eyes closed; Alisdair's quick eyes darted back and forth from person to person. Montrose was watching her watch them.

“Amen.”

“Amen,” they echoed.

The amens signaled the beginning of the meal. Acolytes entered carrying platters of food and poured the wine into their cups. Alisdair's eager eyes made Nadira smile. She waited silently. She had chosen to wear her brown gown and slippers. Alisdair had used her scissors to trim the ends of her hair, now it hung just below her shoulders, no longer ragged. She had made a small veil out of leftover linen bandages, wrapping it at her crown with a bright blue silk handkerchief that Montrose had given her. It was strange to her to be sitting as a guest at such a table. She pulled her feet in under her and kept her hands in her lap. They all waited for Father Bertram to pick up his cup.

“A toast, Lord Montrose. May your trail bear fruit.”

“Bear fruit,” they echoed. The wine was warm and sweet. Nadira tried to take it in small sips, but the taste was so smooth and delightful it was gone in a moment. She set the cup down and it was immediately refilled. She glanced up in surprise at the young man who bent over her. He smiled but did not meet her eyes. The others were enjoying the wine as well, but Montrose still had most of his first cup. He passed the cup back and forth between his hands but did not drink more than the obligatory toast.

“My friends, I heard about your discussion with Brother Henry. I'm sorry you were injured, Lord Montrose.”

“Father, it is but a scratch,” Montrose dismissed the blood and broken bones with a tilt of his head. “We are practical men. Let us not quibble. I am interested to hear about what happened to Brother Henry after he read the book.” Father Bertram appeared not to be offended by Montrose's sudden change of subject. Nadira could understand that Montrose might not want to indulge in small talk.

Father Bertram laced his fingers. “Do you wish hear this strange tale? Then I will tell you.” He nodded to the two young men standing against the tapestries. They moved in tandem out the doors, closing them behind with a metallic click. Father Bertram looked at each one of them with grim interest before he began.

“Brother Henry brought me the book early this spring, showed me its beauty. It was bound in leather and wood, inlaid with Lapis Lazuli and gold. I could only read the Latin, of course. It said, ‘Herein lies all knowledge of the world. Read with caution, for what you know you do not know and what you do not know, you know.’ I thought it was gibberish, and told him so. Nevertheless, Brother Henry was so eager I gave my permission for him to translate the book and keep me updated with his progress. He took the book to his cell along with a month’s worth of candles and a substantial amount of paper and ink.”

Montrose interrupted, “Did Brother Henry keep you updated on his progress as he had promised?”

Fixing Nadira with a perplexed stare as though just now noticing her presence, Father Bertram continued, “Yes, yes, he did. He came to my chambers every Friday after vespers to read to me what he had found. I admit it was not something I looked forward to. Every Friday for about an hour I had to sit and listen to *non-sequiturs* in Henry’s excited reading voice. He read to me things like ‘Tell me the sound that one hears when one hand applauds’ and ‘Only the eye fears darkness.’ I felt he had forgotten the purpose of this project in favor of his own personal interests. I tried to end the assignment. I was astounded at the hysteria this caused. That is the moment I realized the book was evil. Brother Henry had stopped attending mass. He stopped coming down for meals or attending to his chores. He did not participate in prayers or meetings. He stayed in his cell day after day, night after night. I tried to take the book away, but he would not release it no matter my threats. I had five of my strongest brothers enter the cell one morning to hold him down and take the book. They came back to me with their heads and arms broken, faces pale, habits ripped. I saw the fear in their faces and realized something terrible had happened to Brother Henry’s mind.”

Father Bertram paused, waiting for the murmurs to die down. He waved at the laden table. “Please, eat, drink.”

The men reluctantly picked up bread and fruit from their plates, but only Garreth put food in his mouth. Nadira could see the bread in Montrose’s hand trembling. From weakness or excitement she could not tell. His eyes were glassy but his jaw was firmly set. She lifted her glass and took a sip. Montrose tapped his bread on the table.

“Father. Brother Henry does not have the book. How did you get it from him?”

Father Bertram smiled. “I had him drugged. Henry had stopped eating at table, but had bread and wine brought up to him. Some opium in his cup and an hour later he was asleep. The book was brought to me and Brother Henry was locked in his cell.”

“There must have been a scene when he awoke.”

“Ah, yes. We had anticipated that Henry would be upset, but we were not ready for what did occur.” Father Bertram paused mysteriously. He turned to Nadira. “I hear you can read the Saracen script, and Hebrew too.” Nadira did not like the way his eyes challenged her. She found it difficult to look away demurely.

“Yes, Father,” she answered.

Montrose interrupted, impatient. “And the book?”

Father Bertram frowned at him. “My Lord Montrose. Please. The book is not here, as you know.” He leaned towards Montrose. “And it will not come back here. If you plan to chase it down, then you will be traveling to Rome. However, I cannot see you wasting your time. The Holy Father probably has the book by now. He knows its reputation, he will be keeping it safe, and out of the hands of curious monks and scholars. In any case, please give him my most respectful greetings.” Bertram leaned back in his chair, picked a bunch of grapes from his plate. “Brother Henry is now a ruined man, Montrose. He sits and rots in his cell, and he will until the day God calls him. I pray that you see the sense in my words and leave the book be.”

There was an uncomfortable silence at the table. Father Bertram’s demeanor was quite different from before. What had changed? Nadira watched Montrose carefully, though he seemed to blur as he moved. Nadira shook her head. Right now, she did not care. Her thoughts turned to a warm bed and soft blankets. The room blurred around her. Didn’t Montrose tell her to do something? She fought to stay awake, focusing on Montrose. He was saying something to Father Bertram but she could not hear him clearly. She tapped her fingers lightly on the table, but could not feel the hard wood. She began to worry. *If I fall asleep at table, my lord will be mortified.* She tried to focus on a candle. Its light wavered yellow and gold. *He told me to stay alert.*

Chapter Ten

Nadira opened her eyes, uncomfortable, her gown twisted around her legs. She had to go to the privy. Then she remembered the wine. She tried to put her hand to her head, but found her hand would not move, nor would her feet. Alarmed, she blinked and focused. She was lying on her back, tied to the corners of a wagon bed. Above her, a canopy swayed back and forth. As she became fully conscious, she could hear the clip *clip* of a team of horses and the jolting of the boards beneath her. She thought to cry out for help and drew a breath to do so, but as she did a face appeared above her.

“Don’t. No one will hear you. We are miles from the monastery.” The man sat beside her. He was small and slight with a pocked face. His breath was bad and his habit stained with mud. Nadira wrinkled her nose. She stretched her neck to look around inside the wagon. Above her swung lumpy sacks of supplies tied with cord, there were grain sacks on the sides of the box. She pulled on her tether. She was tied with leather cord. The monk smiled. “You’re not getting out until we stop at noon.”

“I have to go.”

“Not until noon.”

“Then you’ll enjoy cleaning up the straw. I can’t wait until noon.” The pocked monk frowned as he thought about this possibility. He seemed to come to a decision quickly.

“Time to stop,” he shouted to the other man.

The driver, a larger monk with oversized hands and a narrow face led Nadira to the side of the road. Father Bertram must have sent his best men, she thought ironically as she tried to keep her feet dry. He had her hair in his fist to keep her from fleeing and looked modestly away until she was finished.

He marched her back to the wagon, a small two-wheeled cart pulled by two large ponies. Left and right, the road stretched out as far as she could see. There was no sign of the monastery, no village, no town. The track the ponies followed was overgrown and unused. That was all she could see. The large monk handed her up into the back of the wagon. The pocked monk took her and trussed her like a goose, this time in a sitting position. He looked at her curiously, but made no attempt at conversation. They traveled on past noon, stopping only for water.

The long hours were filled with worry and conjecture. The pocked monk would not speak to her nor answer any of her questions. She thought she should not be surprised to be kidnapped yet again. *It must be Father Bertram's plan.* She thought back to the dinner. He did seem interested in her literacy. He did seem to have changed his mind about the book. She tried to remember if anything else had been said. Nothing significant she could remember, but that Father Bertram had seemed particularly annoyed with Montrose. She narrowed her eyes. What would he have done with Lord Montrose? Would the priest kill him? Could he be tried for treason or heresy? Nadira did not know enough of law or the Church to say.

She thought she remembered that a priest could not draw blood. She heard that often enough from Sofir. Were the others also drugged with poppy juice? It would take a great deal to drop Garreth. Bertram must have had someone come in and overpower them when she fell asleep. He could not possibly do it himself. She frowned. That seemed unlikely as well. She would get nothing from these monks. They had obviously been told not to speak to her. After more interminable hours the narrow-faced monk pulled the ponies off the track and set up camp. They ate a cold, silent dinner, and then both monks climbed in the back with her. She was exhausted and sleep was the only escape for her troubled mind.

They traveled like this in the warm autumn days with its chilly nights, silence, and a stop at noon for a cold meal of dried fruits and bread, then a stop at nightfall for the same monotonous dinner. She was tied to the wagon except when she was given time to relieve herself, but the bindings were not harsh or punitive. She had been fitted with leather cuffs and the cuffs were bound to the wagon or to a tether.

Nadira fell into a dull reverie by the long days, made longer by the lack of conversation or even change of scenery. They traveled on a remote track, not frequented by locals. They did not see but one other traveler on that long road, and when the lone horseman was spotted, they immediately left the track to hide in the hollows of the creek bank. Nadira was briefly gagged for that side trip. When the danger had passed, the monks returned to their pattern.

On the third day just after their noon break, Nadira could see a stone structure far ahead through a hole in the canopy. This time, instead of leaving the path to avoid being

spotted, the gangly monk drove straight toward the building. Her eyes, hungry for a change, fixed on the gray blemish on the horizon. Clouds were moving in as they ascended the hill towards what now appeared to be a round tower. The canopy blocked her view of the surrounding area, but the obvious excitement of the pocked monk told her that this tower was their destination. Nadira had no fear that she would be harmed. Why haul her all this way to hurt her or kill her? These things could be easily accomplished at the monastery.

She suspected she would be questioned. Torture? She desperately hoped not. She had no secrets; she felt she could easily tell what she knew about the book, but would they believe her? Would it be enough to keep the hot irons off her flesh? Had she committed a crime? The memory of the sight of smoking stakes flashed before her. Her eagerness to get out of the wagon instead turned to dread. Where were they?

Nadira searched her mind for memories of maps. All her knowledge was focused on sea travel and the ports along the trade routes. She could tell anyone how long a sea voyage from Barcelona to Rome might take in the summer, in the autumn, how many stops, how much food, how large a crew. Overland she was blind. None of her memory maps were of caravan travel.

Why would she be taken this far to be tortured or tried? She leaned toward the canopy hole to widen her view. The tower was completely round and very tall, maybe five stories. She saw openings in the stones starting on the third floor in regular procession in a spiral around the tower. The top was crenellated; small forms were visible moving between the stones. Beside it a low building flanked the tower, another and another appeared over the hill as they approached. The pony cart had been seen from a long way off. The wagon creaked up the last embankment and stopped before the main gate, a huge wooden structure reinforced with metal braces. A portcullis hung down before it, black and foreboding. The pocked monk pulled her back from the canopy hole. He untied her from the iron ring and pulled her roughly from the wagon. A tall soldier met them at the gate.

“Name your purpose!” he shouted.

The tall narrow-faced monk answered. “We are from the monastery in Coix. We come on an errand for Father Bertram.” The monk produced a roll of parchment from his

sleeve and slipped it to the soldier through the portcullis. The soldier disappeared, but another, just as fierce, took his place. Nadira stood quietly, rubbing her chafed wrists and stretching her cramped legs. They waited only a few minutes when the tall soldier returned, this time with another man, not a monk. She realized she was tired of looking at monks. If she never saw another one she would be pleased.

This man was middle aged, his beard was dark, but streaked with gray, his body stocky and powerful. His sharp, piercing eyes examined her through the bars. Dressed in thick, rich velvet, he wore a great chain on his chest. Suspended from the chain was a gold amulet of some kind. Nadira couldn't see it well in the folds of his robes. On his head was a tall hat made of some kind of fur that almost exactly matched his beard. He lifted the parchment to his face and read it again, lowering it to stare incredulously at Nadira. No doubt Father Bertram had written something about her that this man did not believe, as he did not try to hide his skepticism.

“Open.” The velvet-clad man spoke in quiet authoritative tones. “Get the gate open and take this wagon to the stable. Bring the girl to my chambers after she has been washed.” He gave her one last curious look before he disappeared through a tall door to the left.

The soldiers had the portcullis up in moments. One of them came forward to take the ponies' bits; Nadira was dragged inside by the other. The men took her to the laundry where she was instructed to wash up. She was given soap and cloths and a fine wool dress which was dyed a pleasant blue. As she walked out of the laundry, her guard, another anonymous soldier, handed her a heavy woolen cloak. She gratefully accepted its warmth as he helped her adjust it around her shoulders. The cape was too long to avoid being dragged on the flagstones. Nadira was careful not to step on it as they climbed the stairs to the master's chamber.

The door opened into large room, half the size of the tower's diameter. Nadira paused in the doorway allowing her eyes to adjust to the light. As her eyes widened in wonder the Master approached and took her hand. Her guard was dismissed, but she heard the clanking sounds as he settled himself outside the door. The Master pulled her into the center of the room as the door slowly creaked to a firm thump and a metallic

lock. The man was looking at her with a mixture of curiosity and barely concealed excitement.

He extended his hand and Nadira took it. It was large and warm and soft. The only calluses seemed to be on the fingertips. "Come and sit. It is time for us to talk." He spoke to her in Latin, a challenge in his dark eyes. Nadira smiled guardedly and answered him in kind.

"You are gracious, Sir. Thank you for your hospitality."

He laughed lightly, the dark eyes lightening up as he then spoke in Castilian, "Please, may I offer you some wine?"

Nadira placed a hand over her heart, "I think not, my Lord," she answered in Castilian, "for I believe wine has not been a friend to me lately." She smiled politely. The Master laughed again.

"Perhaps some water then, or beer?" he said in English.

Nadira's English was not as good. She could understand most of what was said if it was said slowly, but speaking was more difficult. She knew the word for beer. "Yes, beer, Sir."

The Master sat her in a chair with a high curved back. He took his place across a small empty table in an even larger chair and poured beer from a large pitcher into a ceramic mug. He stared at her over the candle while she took a drink. Nadira was famished; her eyes darted above the rim looking for any food in the room. The master caught her glance. He lifted a cloth on the table and produced a bowl of fruit. She plunked the beer down suddenly, too hungry to worry about good manners. The Master smiled and pushed the bowl toward her. Nadira reached for an apple and a handful of plump grapes. She tried to eat daintily, but merely crunched the fruit while the master watched. When she was finished, he pushed a napkin toward her and she took it appreciatively.

"Now, Mistress...?"

"Nadira, my Lord."

"Please call me 'Monsieur'. I am no 'Lord', calling me so is disagreeable."

“Monsieur. I am no ‘Mistress’ either.” She smiled again and finished her beer. Monsieur laughed pleasantly. Nadira hardly dared to hope that the small talk would last. She tried to appear as harmless and polite as possible.

“Then let us get acquainted,” he said to her, his eyes eager. I am Signore da Salvo.” He took a sip of his wine.

Nadira watched him curiously. He reminded her of Master Sofir with his easy intelligence and rich dress. She did not quite fear him now, and might actually admire him, for the proof of his surroundings told her he was a man of learning. Perhaps she would be safer with him than with the monks. Nadira smiled, as she knew he expected her to, but her thoughts turned to something more alarming. What did he want? She was confident she could fend off stable boys, but she knew she would be at this man’s mercy. Her face must have betrayed her thoughts, for Da Salvo leaned back quickly, his hands clasped over his chest.

“Forgive me, Mistress Nadira. I did not intend to alarm you. Please, I will not touch you. My interest lies in another field. I will leave yours to be plowed by another.”

Nadira laughed. The sound startled her, for she had not laughed aloud for many weeks now. His coarse humor contrasted sharply with his elegant appearance. Perhaps she was safe after all. Surely such a learned man could not be a torturer of maidens?

“Please, Monsieur, tell me what I can do for you,” she asked tentatively.

He chuckled with her before answering. “Some time ago a monk from Father Bertram’s monastery rode through here, stopping for the night. He had in his possession a very fine book, a fine book that he could not read. I encouraged him to stay for a while. My wine cellar is quite famous, you know. This monk was encouraged to stay here for exactly as long as it took to copy the book while he slept off this wonderful wine.” Da Salvo was grinning broadly. “And Father Bertram’s letter tells me that you can read the parts that I cannot,” he finished.

Nadira took a deep breath. So. Now she knew what Father Bertram had been doing while Montrose recovered, and why he changed his mind. Carefully she said, “I have heard ill of this book, Monsieur.” She left the rest of the sentence hanging in the air.

Da Salvo rubbed his chin. “I have been reading this copy since the monk continued his journey on to Rome. I am not afraid to admit that it makes no sense to me so far.

More than half the book is in languages I cannot decipher. The monk did mention that the book was cursed, that it was used to summon daemons,” he paused thoughtfully, “but I haven’t seen anything like that. Please do not succumb to rumor or superstition.” He looked at her meaningfully. “I do not believe this is an evil book. I have not been harmed and I have been studying it for months.”

“Monsieur, I am at your service.” Nadira said graciously. “Bring me the book. I will do my best.”

Da Salvo looked surprised. “Is that it? You do not need to be convinced?”

“Monsieur, your hospitality has convinced me of your veracity,” Nadira was not above flattery herself. She must see this copy, and learn where it is kept. Should she be reunited with her companions, this information would be greatly appreciated. Da Salvo sat back, silenced.

“Of course, I would be very grateful for your help,” he said quietly. He raised his eyebrows.

Nadira understood immediately that he was asking her price. She was only too willing to tell him. “Monsieur. I have companions at Coix.” Her voice wavered. “I do not know what has happened to them.”

“Ah.” Da Salvo stood and began to pace back and forth before the dark window. “Perhaps I can send word back.” He stopped. “You can read the Saracen script?” he asked with emphasis.

Nadira nodded. Da Salvo continued back and forth, his fingers to his lips. He stopped again, “You can read Hebrew?” He narrowed his eyes as he peered at her.

“Yes. Quite.” Nadira deliberately radiated confidence.

“Very well. Very well. Very well.” His face flushed. He stopped at one of the shelves on the wall. He pulled off a wooden casket and brought it to the table. With great reverence, he carefully opened the curved lid and withdrew a sheaf of parchment. Each page was carefully numbered, but unbound. Da Salvo placed the stack in front of Nadira, moved his chair around the table and sat beside her. Nadira watched him as he turned the leaves over to catch the light from the oil lamp on the table.

“I have read the Latin and the Greek, Nadira. Here it says, ‘all is one’, here it says ‘as above, so below’. Here is some Plato. Here is some Virgil.” Da Salvo turned the

leaves over until the one facing up remained. Nadira recognized the Hebrew. Da Salvo looked at her.” And this one?” he prompted.

Nadira leaned closer and lifted the page closer to her eyes. “It is very poorly copied, Sire. I will do my best.”

“Yes, yes,” he whispered eagerly.

She read, “Seeing that there is a world made of three parts: elementary, celestial, and intellectual, and every inferior is governed by its superior and receives the influence of the virtues thereof, so that the very original, and Chief Worker of all does by the angels, the heavens, the elements, the plants, metals and stone convey the proof of his ascendancy over all three worlds and everything else in the Universe.” Nadira took another drink of the beer. Da Salvo turned another leaf over. Nadira continued, “That Magic is the greatest of the pursuits of knowledge, for learning to control the elements, to learn the language of the metals and the stones, to hear the cries of the plants and the animals, to use what you have to influence the entire world to your own will. This is the meaning of existence: To learn what is and what is not, to hear color, to see sound, to know God, to speak to Him, to hear His answers in the world around you, to see His voice in the wind and in the grass. This you can do, you need...” Da Salvo turned the leaf, but the next page was in Aramaic. Nadira stopped. “I cannot read this, Monsieur,” she said sadly.

Da Salvo’s hands were visibly trembling as he flipped the pages through the stack. He stopped and slowly turned one of the pages face up. He spread it flat then looked at Nadira expectantly. “My dear?”

Nadira looked long and carefully at the Moorish script in front of her. It was a strange dialect, and some of the words she did not know, but she began bravely, speaking the words first, and then translating them for Da Salvo. “It is true that men may ascend beyond their flesh to the heavens and converse with angels. There are dangers there as well as wonders. This book will warn of the former while enticing with the latter. First, you must understand the wisdom of the book. You must consume the book with your heart, your inner self, your mind, your teeth...” Nadira stopped and looked into Da Salvo’s face. “Monsieur, she whispered, “You could not copy the endpapers.” He frowned. “The endpapers?” he questioned.

“The speckled papers at the end of the book.”

Da Salvo sat back in his chair. His hand went to the gray beard once again. “The endpapers...” he mused. “They were very unusual. Ragged papyrus and spotted with black mold,” he remembered.

Nadira closed her eyes. Here was a test. This man was rich, powerful, and was better an ally than an enemy. She searched her heart. Montrose believed the Abbot to be his ally and was sorely betrayed. This man—she opened her eyes, searching his face—is a scholar, a lover of knowledge. His face radiated a deep understanding and confidence of his place in the world. *He is truly excited to hear my words as I read. I can feel it.* She had not been sworn to secrecy. Her currency was literacy. Her ransom was knowledge.

“Yes, Monsieur,” she decided, “we can read these pages, but you will not be successful without the endpapers. These words can be copied and read, but what is unique about this book will not pass through a copy.” Nadira remembered with a twinge how Henry had said that the book would defend itself.

Da Salvo cocked his head, “And how do you know this, child?”

“I had the good fortune to sit and listen to Brother Henry explain the meaning of the endpapers...”

Da Salvo interrupted, “Did Brother Henry consume the endpapers?”

Nadira nodded. “Yes, Sir. He did.”

Da Salvo leaned forward on his elbows and cupped his chin in his hand. “Did Henry mention consuming anything else, perhaps?”

Nadira thought back to that late evening a week ago. “No, Monsieur. He talked about how he had swallowed half the page, when he should have tasted but a bit of it.”

Da Salvo laughed heartily, shaking the table.

“I imagine he was quite sorry for that!”

Nadira cried out, “Oh, Monsieur! You know about this madness? Brother Henry lost his mind! You should see him now, stuttering, shaking, incoherent, even violent,” Nadira remembered Montrose flying through the air and the sickening thud as he struck the wall. Montrose was twice Henry’s size. She shuddered. “The endpapers are some kind of poison!”

“No, not poison, but not for the timid or the weak. I am annoyed that I missed something so obvious. I was so intent on having it copied before the monk departed that I missed it.” He set his mouth firmly, and then wiped his chin with a napkin. “I’ve heard of this black mold. What did Henry tell you about it?”

“He told us,” Nadira thought hard, “he was like a bug, that he flew out the window, talked to spirits, he was rambling on. He warned us not to seek the book,” she finished sadly.

Da Salvo was musing, not looking at her. After a moment he rose, scraping the heavy chair on the wood floor, and reached for another scroll. He brought it back and unrolled it before her, tapping it with his heavily jeweled fingers.

“Can you read this?”

Nadira focused her eyes on the curling parchment. Before her lay a diagram of ten circles arranged like a boat with the prow facing downward. Inside of each circle was a Hebrew letter and lines were drawn connecting the circles to each other. Nadira frowned.

“I can read the letters, but I don’t know what they mean.” A hand came down over her shoulder and rolled up the parchment. A moment later, it disappeared.

“That’s marvelous, Nadira. Thank you.”

“Monsieur?”

“Don’t trouble yourself with this, Nadira.”

“Monsieur, if I may ask?”

“Yes?”

“Do you know the fate of my companions?” It was time for Da Salvo to pay the piper for his song.

Da Salvo took his seat again. “I was led to believe they were your kidnappers, not your companions. Father Bertram says that you were stolen from a spice merchant in Barcelona.”

Nadira did not wonder how Father Bertram had come by that information. She reached for her beer mug to give herself time to think about this. He was right; they were her kidnappers. The mug was empty. Da Salvo reached over to refill it for her. She took a long pull. She felt a hand on her head.

“They did you no harm, then?” Da Salvo asked gently, as if he cared.

Nadira shook her head, “No, they were very kind to me.”

“I suppose they were. You are quite a jewel, Nadira. The mind is not easy to control once one has learned to read.” He looked thoughtful. “Were they all illiterate?”

“I believe so, Monsieur.”

“Well, then. You probably fascinate them. Many simple men believe that just the ability to make sense of letters and words is magic.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Though I must say that Lord Montrose and his men are not simpletons. It is true, for I have noticed this fascination among other men. My Master would bring me out some evenings when he was entertaining guests and have me read. I knew he was showing off. I would read poetry to the sound of the lyre. I saw how they looked at me.”

Da Salvo sat back in surprise. “How did they look at you?” he asked.

“Oh, with great admiration. Many of the sea captains must have been very impressed with Homer and Ovid. I imagine they desired the ability to read these great poets themselves.” Nadira tightened her lips. “Some asked me to read to them later in their chambers, but Master forbid that.”

Da Salvo chuckled.

“My lord.” He held up a hand to stop her words, but she insisted. “My lord,” she repeated with emphasis, “I am your servant. What is it you desire?” She lowered her eyes so he could not see how he had disturbed her. What was he thinking? He had said he would not bed her, yet he was not too old for lechery. He was obviously no monk.

She clenched and unclenched her hands in her lap. Should she resist? The many possible scenarios swept through her mind faster and faster. He was powerful. The bulk under his heavy clothing could not be fat, as it did not show in his face as heavy jowls. He could force her, though he had professed not to harm her. Through the years since her courses began she had jealously guarded her maidenhead. There was no reason to. It had no value to anyone except to her. Sofir had understood when she had begged him for protection from the other servants and his guests. The sea captains and merchants were offered the other servant girls while she slept safely in the locked buttery. It was Sofir’s gift to her in return her honesty and loyalty, and she knew he did not want to lose her to childbirth as he did her mother.

“Nadira, you are safe here. I told you I have no designs on your person, and I speak the truth. I will call for you tomorrow to read more for me. I have some other interesting scrolls I have not been able to decipher. Please allow my servants to show you to your chamber for this evening.”

Chapter Eleven

Nadira found her breakfast by her bed. She had been put in a very comfortable chamber on the second floor. She awoke late in the morning, not eager to come out of the soft bed. No one had called for her, no one had demanded she bring them breakfast, or clean clothing. She sat up and rested back against the thick pillows behind her. This was the first time in her life she lay in a real bed, alone and not shared with others. The room, though small, was opulent with embroidered wall hangings, thick rugs on the floor, and generous bedding. Nadira slid down between the sheets, feeling the substantial padding of the feather mattress beneath her and the bulky coverlets above her. The delicious feeling spread along her tired muscles and her aching back. She stretched full length, not able to touch the footboards. The food beside her convinced her to sit up and eat. Her breakfast was nearly gone when there was a tap at her door.

“Come in”

A timid head in a stiff white wimple peeked around the door. “I have come to help you dress, Milady.” The girl pushed the door shut behind her with her hip. Her arms were piled with fabric.

“What?”

“Yes, Milady. Please choose a gown for today.”

“Please, I am not a lady. Are you certain you are in the right room?” This response elicited squealing laughter from the girl. She covered her mouth before she spoke.

“My lady,” she giggled, “you are the only lady here in the keep. The Master was quite firm. He said, ‘Take these to Milady and let her choose.’ Here I am. What would you like? I have red, brown, white, and this lovely green one.”

Nadira considered. “Still, I am no lady. Please call me Nadira. What’s your name?” she asked.

The girl blushed. "I'm Maria, miss."

"Maria, you say I'm the only woman here?"

"Oh yes, miss." Maria set the pile of clothing down gently on the bed.

"Where am I?"

"Why, this is Andorra."

"Monsieur is the lord of Andorra?" Nadira reached for the pile of clothing, pulled the brown dress out.

"No, miss, you don't want the brown." Maria dug in the pile. "You want the white or the green, miss. My Master is the guest of the Lord of Andorra. He has been here for many years now."

Nadira pulled the green out slowly, feeling the luxurious fabric. Could it be silk? She felt the hem, squirrel or fox?

"I'm glad you like the green, Miss. I wanted you to choose that one."

Nadira looked up. "Where did these gowns come from?"

"Oh," Maria's face fell, "My Lord's lady, Miss. Long dead. A fever. Long ago."

"How long?" Nadira wondered aloud, plucking nervously at the silk.

"Ach, nigh to three years." Maria pulled the bedclothes back. "Come out, miss. And get you dressed. The Master wants you in the study after you have eaten."

Nadira reluctantly slid out from the comfortable bedding. "That will be nice, Maria." Maria smiled in return and picked up the green gown.

"This color will brighten your eyes." Maria peered into Nadira's eyes. "Mostly brown," she said, "but some green there, Miss. I have been waiting to see this gown on somebody. The fur trim is really so lovely."

Nadira smiled. "Have you been here long?" She pulled the dress over her head. Maria took the laces.

"Yes, Miss. Since I was ten year. That's when I was brought here to serve Milady." Maria gave her a shy smile. "Ah, Miss. What terrible thing happened to your hair?"

"I was traveling in disguise, Maria."

"Oh! How exciting!" Maria picked up an ivory comb, "How were you discovered?"

Nadira sighed. "Well, it didn't work at all. The monks saw through it immediately."

Maria laughed. "It's hard to fool the monks. They are very smart."

“Do you see many monks here, then?”

“Oh, yes. At least once a week one comes through to see the Master’s books. We have a friar too.”

“Really? Has anyone said how long I would be staying?” Nadira asked, pretending to be uninterested in the answer.

“Well, I heard you would be reading some of the queer languages in some of the books. Master told me to get this room and clothes prepared as though you would be here a while. It is getting to be winter, Miss. Where else would you be going?” Nadira did not reply to this reasonable question as Maria walked around, straightening the dress and then crouching to tug at the hem.

“Did your Master arrive here with these books?” Nadira asked.

“No. After Milady passed, he left and was gone all winter. I am not sure where he went. He came back with several books and scrolls, then every winter he would do the same. He spent the spring up in the tower, reading or copying them. He would lock himself in, so I do not really know.” Maria straightened up. She pulled a few strands of Nadira’s hair from the laces at her nape.

“I think you’re ready to go. It’s near the time, and better to be early.”

Nadira followed Maria up out of her chamber. The keep was small; it was larger on the outside than Sofir’s house, but it seemed smaller inside. It appeared to be just a round tower, five stories high. There was a small separate building a few steps from the tower that contained the kitchen and laundry and the blacksmith’s anvil and forge. The stairways were attached to the inner walls and merely spiraled up around them. From the second floor, built of heavy wood beams, there were openings in the stone allowing light and air into the stairways. As one passed through a hole in the wood floor, one could choose to get off the stairs and enter that level or continue upward. Maria led them around and around to the fifth floor. There, they were blocked by a trap door overhead. Maria knocked at the planks over her head. With a groaning of heavy hinges, the ceiling panels slowly opened up and allowed them to continue up the stairs.

Nadira’s eyes came even with the thick wood, and then passed above the floor into the room. A young man in a light brown cassock stood behind them supporting the trap.

As they moved from the stone stairs to the wood floor, Nadira had to lift her skirts above her knees. Maria pulled her up then addressed the man with a curtsy.

“Brother William. I have brought the Saracen woman as instructed.” She smiled reassuringly at Nadira.

“Thank you Maria.” Brother William made the sign of the cross in the air. “Bless you,” he said. With the same hand, he gestured to the hole in the floor. Maria curtsied again, and then obediently went below. Brother William lowered the planks down carefully with a heavy chain attached to an iron ring.

“Greetings, Mistress Nadira,” he said with a warm smile. He was handsome and very young. The thick hair around his tonsure was a light golden brown, the same color as his eyes. Nadira sighed with relief, for he wore the cassock of a Franciscan. She knew that only the black and white robes of Dominicans were to be feared. Inez had taught her that. A heavy belt circled his slender waist. Nadira was fascinated with the many items hanging from it. She recognized a pair of scissors, a mug, and a spoon. Some of the other metal items were unfamiliar. A stiff leather case hung on his hip, its circular lid tied shut with a thong. He saw her looking at it.

“Pens and ink,” he flipped the lid up deftly and tilted it so she could see the rods and quills inside. “I am Monsieur’s copyist.” He barely had any beard hairs growing on his chin. Nadira guessed he might be her age, but it was hard to tell. His Castilian was heavily accented with what she guessed was English.

Taking her cue from Maria, Nadira dipped a polite curtsy before speaking to him in halting English. “Brother William. I am honored to meet you.”

His face lit up in surprise. He answered her in kind, "And I you. Are you fluent in English as well?" he asked eagerly.

"No, I am sorry, I speak it very badly."

He smiled again and offered his hand. "Then we shall speak Castilian."

She took the offered hand. It was warm and soft. Heavy calluses and dark ink stains on his fingertips confirmed his occupation as scribe. He led her to the table beneath the largest window and sat her on the bench. Nadira spread her soft skirts and remembered to sit up straight. Her eyes wandered around the remarkable room. William sat opposite her. His eyes followed hers along the walls.

“This is Monsieur’s study,” he said with great pride in his voice, as though it were his as well.

Around the round walls were set heavy boards built in a sturdy frame. Heavy square books lay face up on shelves, the lip of the shelf keeping its valuable contents from sliding off. Chains attached the larger volumes to the wall. Other shelves, built in a diamond shape like wine racks, held scrolls of different sizes. A little tag dangled from the spiral end of each scroll. The room was furnished with thick tables in seemingly random positions, with their attendant benches. Some of them supported strange flagons and vessels; others held bowls and cups. A heavy rack of shelves stood alone in the center of the study. Each shelf was crammed with interesting items: jars of herbs, bottles of colorful liquid, skulls of different animals, piles of stones and crockery. Nadira stood up and stepped closer to peer at the curiosities. William let her stare, but stopped her when she reached her hand out to touch a human skull set in a dark grotto in the wall.

“Not that, ma chère, let us leave Monsieur Skull alone today.”

Nadira stepped back obediently. “I hear footsteps on the stairs below,” she said.

William cocked his head to listen, then went to the trap. With a heave from his slight shoulders, he pulled the chain up and opened the hole in the floor. Moments later a familiar velvet hat appeared followed by the rest of Da Salvo.

“Ah! Children,” he greeted them fondly. “Here we are now, on the first day to begin our work. Are you ready?”

“Master, I’ve been here since dawn,” William lowered the trap. “I’ve been checking my work and mixing the ink and trimming the parchment.” He followed Da Salvo to the table, still talking, “I’ve swept the floor and adjusted the mirrors. I have found the texts you asked for yesterday. Here they are on the table...”

Da Salvo laughed. He held up a hand to silence him. “You, I know, are ready, my dear friend. I have no doubts about your eagerness to begin,” His hand remained up to stop the next torrent of words. “I’d like to know if our guest is prepared.”

“My Lord,” Nadira began, “I’m afraid I’m at a loss as to what specifically you want from me. Of course I will try.”

Da Salvo laughed again. “Mistress Nadira. I am more than pleased to have you as my guest. William and I have been poring over these manuscripts for months now.” He

waved his hand to encompass the room. You can imagine how distressing it is to have in your possession something wondrous, yet not be able to make heads nor tails of it. Here and now, Father Bertram has answered my pleas and sent you here.”

“Father Bertram?”

“Yes, I had been asking him repeatedly for more than a year now to send me a monk who knew Hebrew, and finally he sends me not a monk, but a girl. Not what I expected, of course, but just the same,” he stopped when he saw the change in Nadira’s face.

“What is it?”

“Monsieur, “she said slowly, “We spoke of my companions last night.”

Da Salvo became somber. “Yes. I have sent a messenger back to the monastery with a letter asking about them. However, it is not within my authority to influence the residents there, you understand.”

Nadira nodded slowly. She understood. Worry gripped her with the change in Da Salvo’s face. Did he know something? The very method of extracting her from her companions did not bode well for her friends. If freed, would Montrose come after her? She was certain he would. He would not give up his mission so easily. Was he free? Probably not. Montrose was a formidable fighter, even wounded, especially wounded. Garreth alone would be an obstacle, the two together with Alisdair would be more than the monks could handle.

If they were drugged as she was, then they had to have been confined. Montrose’s wrath upon awakening would most likely preclude peaceful negotiations. Could they have been killed and then dragged outside the monastery walls and dumped? No. The monks could not kill them. Could they? If they were only trying to separate her from her companions, it would seem to be an easy solution. She glanced up at Da Salvo watching her. She would have to worry later.

William interrupted, “I have the Hebrew documents here, Monsieur.” He laid a pile of scrolls gently on the large table.

“Yes, William. I know you are eager to get started. Let us make Nadira comfortable first. Here, Nadira, sit in my chair. Put your feet up. You are our honored guest.” He pushed a great chair toward the table and reached for her hand. Nadira pushed back the bench and obliged. The chair enveloped her. William unrolled a scroll before her on the

table and placed a smooth stone on either end to keep it flat. She leaned over it as Monsieur opened the shutters wide. He reached out the window and adjusted a gimbaled mirror. A bright shaft of sunlight illuminated the manuscript before her. The Hebrew letters danced before her eyes.

“You can read this?” William could barely contain his excitement. He would not sit, but stood beside her, careful of the light, almost bouncing his weight from one foot to the other.

Nadira began, “Herein lies the words copied without error by Moses de Leon...”

“I knew it! I knew it!” William could not contain himself. He was nearly jumping with excitement. “Master! It is the Zohar! It is! It is!” Nadira stopped, startled. Da Salvo put his arm around William’s shoulders. He, too, was smiling, but his dignity prevented him from jumping up and down.

“Read! Read!” William cried.

Nervously, Nadira continued, reading the Hebrew and translating slowly as she went. The two men stood behind her, arms over each other’s shoulders. Tears were streaming down William’s face. Nadira had to pause and restart every time he sniffed loudly.

“...Collected from the ancients and copied herein for the benefit of all who...” Nadira squinted, “I think this says ‘All who love knowledge’, but it might say ‘All who desire knowledge’. There is a difference, you know.”

The two men did not answer. Da Salvo gestured impatiently toward the manuscript again and Nadira continued. “I have seen the Great Work of Moses de Leon and have the privilege of writing it here.”

A cry of agony escaped from William as he collapsed on the floor, his hands over his ears. Shocked, Nadira stopped reading.

Da Salvo sighed. “Do not be startled, child. William is very excitable, as you can see. He suffers from a great imbalance of the humors, which is one of the reasons he is with me here in this keep.” Da Salvo patted Williams shaking shoulders with a jeweled hand as the young man spread full out on the floor, weeping.

“What’s wrong with him?” She asked.

“Well, this manuscript is not an accurate copy of the Zohar. It appears that someone read it, and then wrote it down from memory. It may contain valid information, but it is not what William and I had hoped it would be.”

“Shall I stop reading?” Nadira looked at the crumpled heap of brown vestments on the floor.

“No, no. Please continue. What William cannot hear through his sobs, I may find useful enough.”

With a doubtful sideways glance at the floor, Nadira continued in a shaky voice, “There is male and female in the entire world. The entire world is two, and the entire world is one and the entire world is four’, this doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, Monsieur.”

“Keep going, Nadira”

“There is a table Monsieur, explaining correspondence between the four directions and numbers and letters of the Hebrew alphabet.” Nadira read until she was interrupted.

“Read the direction of the East.”

“That is Kether, the number one.”

“Very well, Nadira, I am familiar with what this manuscript is by reputation. We will work on that later when William has recovered from his disappointment. Let me get you another.” Da Salvo bent over her, rolled the scroll back up and with the quill on the desk carefully wrote on the tag “Kabbalah”. He reached over and set a small stack of parchment leaves in front of her, this time the script was in Moorish. “Read here.”

Nadira smoothed the first leaf of parchment. Very carefully she sounded the words to herself, then translated, “The Beneficent, The Merciful, the King, the Holy, the Peace, the Faithful, the Protector, the Mighty, the...” William stopped weeping and appeared silently at her elbow again. He blocked some of the light from the window, so Nadira had to stop.

“William, you are in her light,” Da Salvo whispered. William obediently stepped back. Nadira continued.

“The Repairer, the Great, the Creator, the Maker, the Fashioner, the Forgiver, the Dominant, the Bestower, the Provider...” the list went on and on. Nadira read faithfully, and when her voice started to crack, a flagon of ale appeared by her right hand. She

continued turning the pages over as she finished them. After a number of pages, finally, “The Everlasting, the Heir, the Guide to the Right Path, the Patient.” She took another drink. Da Salvo and William were silent. The only sound was the crinkle of the parchment as she turned the last page over. She looked up. Both men had tears in their eyes. William was sniffing; Da Salvo patted his back.

“Thank you, Nadira.” Da Salvo steered William over to the bench and sat him down. He carefully picked up the stack of parchment, tapped the edges on the table and set them right side up. He took his quill and wrote on the margin of the first page, “The 99 Names of God”.

William was smiling beatifically. He reached for a scroll; Da Salvo stopped him. “Let’s have some food first, William.”

William’s disappointment was obvious. “Monsieur...”

“A break, William. The bells tell me a visitor has arrived below. I must go meet with him.”

William frowned. He had heard no bells. Nadira cocked her head. A moment later, a faint tinkling came up through the open window. Da Salvo smiled as he pulled the rope that ran along the wall. Below they heard a bell respond. “Maria will bring you up some luncheon while I am engaged. Please take your time. William, keep your hands off the manuscripts until I return.” Da Salvo smiled again as he descended through the trap. He shook a silent finger at William before disappearing.

Maria did bring up some pastries and breads. After finishing the last crumb in the basket, William pushed himself back from the table with a sigh. “This is much better than the monastery,” he said. “There I was lucky to get a thin gruel and gritty bread.”

“Did you come from Coix?” Nadira asked, fully sated herself.

“Yes, but only briefly. I was in Toledo for three years, then spent a year or so in Grenada before Monsieur brought me here. Now I don’t ever want to leave.”

“Are you just a visitor, then?” she asked.

William bunched up his face, “Not really. I am not exactly sure what I am. I’ve been here almost a year, I arrived in the spring.” He thought a minute, “Monsieur treats me as a guest, but sometimes as a servant, so I am careful to behave as both with as much courtesy as possible. I have a feeling he was asked to remove me from my last position.”

He looked at her sideways with humor. “You wouldn’t mind just peeking at one of these…”

“That doesn’t sound courteous to me.” Nadira said flatly, “Monsieur specifically warned you from touching any manuscripts until he returned.”

“I cannot contain myself! If you only knew how many hours we have worked on these to no avail! Having you come is light a bolt of light from heaven.” William looked around the room. “And now, to have to stop after only two of them.”

“Just for a few minutes, for goodness sakes.”

“Two minutes are an eternity.”

Nadira touched her lips with the corner of the napkin. “What exactly are you two looking for? If I may ask,” she added when William turned startled eyes on her.

“Where do you come from, Nadira?” He asked, changing the subject.

“Barcelona.”

“No, I mean where. I mean, how is it that you can read the Hebrew? I heard that the Moorish is not taught to women either. How is it you can read both? Is this not amazing?”

Nadira eyes twinkled with amusement. “Never did I think of it as remarkable, William, and here you make it seem miraculous. I will tell you, though. My mother was literate in her own tongue, so Moorish can be taught to women. She was the daughter of the Emir. She was brought up among men of letters and was considered a jewel to her father and to her husband. When we came into the service of our Master Sofir, my mother kept his accounts for him in Castilian, which she learned very quickly, and Latin, which she learned over time. She had a neat, quick hand. His accounts and correspondences were the envy of the other merchants.” Nadira said with pride. “She taught me these languages and I assisted her in her work. After her death, Master Sofir had me learn Hebrew that I might scribe for him. It was difficult, and I was taught in private by a tutor. At that time Master Sofir had many, many letters sent all over the world in Hebrew. He had me start keeping the books in Hebrew as well, instead of the Latin and Castilian. I did not know why, but it was very important to him. I was not permitted to read the Torah, or anything of the sort. My knowledge was sequestered to facts and figures, greetings and news. I suspect,” Nadira paused, “that Master Sofir was

clever enough to know he needed to keep his business private. Then there was an increasing royal aversion to those of the Hebrew faith in Spain, and I think my Master was beginning to feel nervous and wanted his business in something undecipherable to the lords of commerce. This I deduced after overhearing a discussion he had with one of his ship captains. Then, all the Jews were exiled two summers ago. The Hebrew was hidden and I was forbidden to read or write it. My master became a Christian and I wrote only in Castilian and Latin. He had me learn Greek to compensate.”

William rubbed his chin. “I have been trying to find a tutor for Hebrew for many years. The Rabbis will not teach Monsieur or me. They will not teach Christians at all. We have a few words we have transcribed and we look for those repeated patterns, but Nadira, I must say that some of these scrolls have all the words run together. It is impossible to decipher this! We are often discouraged in this way.”

“So the two of you have been in this tower poring over manuscripts.”

“For months without result”

“And this book, this special book, contains what you have been searching for?”

William blushed. “It is very exciting, but I cannot say what is in this book. The very fact that it is written in many tongues tells me that it is not the work of one mind, but many. If it is the collected insight of all the wisest men who ever lived, do you not find that an exciting endeavor? Don’t you want to know?”

“Know what?”

“Why everything!” William exclaimed.

“Is that possible?” Nadira laughed.

William sobered. “It drives me mad. I have been trying for my whole life to understand why. No one has satisfied me.”

“You want to know why?”

“Yes, why does a rock fall to the ground when I throw it? Why does it not fly off like a bird? Why does a man die without water? Why does he die from too much? How does one die from sickness? Why are sicknesses different? How is it that one man may have his leg off in battle and live for years after, yet another succumbs to death? How is a child formed inside its mother? How does it get out? Like calves and lambs? I do not know. I think about it. No one can answer me,” he finished, dejected.

“How does it get out?” Nadira repeated merrily. “How old were you when you went to live with the priests?” she asked him.

“Nine.”

“Do you know how the child gets in?” she asked him mischievously.

William laughed. “In great detail! That is something I have been warned about daily for ten long years. All of the priests can tell me how it gets in, none can tell me how it gets out.”

“I assure you, it gets out the same way, though with a lot more trouble.” They both laughed.

“Very well, then, Nadira.” He wiped his eyes, “you admit that if some things can be learned, then cannot everything?”

“And this book would answer all your questions?” Nadira was incredulous. She often wondered about some of these same questions, but did not think there were answers. She had always been told it was “God’s plan” that such and such are so.

“Maybe. Someone must know the answers; I just have to find the book he has written about it.”

“You will not be satisfied that it is ‘God’s Plan’?” she asked.

William colored hotly. “You test me, Nadira. Leave those questions to the Inquisitors. It may all be ‘God’s Plan’ indeed. And why did He not in His infinite wisdom leave the plans on parchment here for us?” The opening of the trap interrupted William. Da Salvo came through laughing.

“And is not the Holy Bible His plan in parchment for us all?” he asked.

“Not ‘for all’ as you know, Monsieur.” William shot back. Nadira surmised that this must be a familiar topic of discussion between them. “And nowhere does it tell me what clouds are made of.”

Da Salvo came to the table. “Forgive him, Nadira. Can you?”

Nadira smiled, “But of course, Monsieur. I, too, have had my moments of curiosity. It has never occurred to me that these answers could be found in books. I have enjoyed stories and fables. I have even read a small book about figuring, using the number symbols from India, but to think that a book could contain the entire knowledge one seeks...”

“That would be a long book, indeed.” Da Salvo added.

“Or the shortest,” said William bluntly. He brought another scroll to Nadira and silently spread it before her. He reached around and refilled her flagon, and adjusted the mirror to catch the afternoon sun, then sat next to her on the bench.

“Now read,” he said.

Chapter Twelve

Nadira leaned back in the big chair and stretched her legs. She rotated her feet around in circles to bring some feeling back into them. This time she was ready before Da Salvo. William was there of course. The library was kept very securely locked and only Da Salvo and William had keys. William’s enthusiasm could not sustain him, however. He had taken to sleeping in the Library on a thick pallet and he looked somewhat worse for wear. The honey-brown hair below his tonsure was mussed, standing out at odd angles, and his frock, normally clean and pressed, hung from his shoulders in wrinkled folds.

He told Nadira that he was spending his time going through every manuscript in the tower and organizing them according to their importance so that as soon as Nadira had read one, there would be another waiting to be unrolled. William had to copy as she read, so the going was slow and Da Salvo was not always in attendance. William was to contact him when they had finished the copying and were ready to begin a new manuscript. Nadira would read it all the way through with both men hanging on every word. Then Da Salvo would go attend his business while William and Nadira worked several days copying it out. Nadira spent these autumn days in such bliss as she had never known. Da Salvo and William treated her like a princess. She could barely grasp the change in her fortunes. She had a real bed; no more sleeping rolled in blankets on the floor. She had three and sometimes four hot meals a day. Her ribs no longer showed unless she drew in a deep breath and her bosom had filled out enough that the lips of her shift showed a gap in the laces. The constant ache in her middle was gone, something she had lived with so long she forgot what a great blessing it was to not feel constantly hungry. Most amazing of all, Maria had been assigned as her own personal servant.

Nadira reveled in the irony and strove to be a kind and thoughtful mistress, never shouting or asking Maria to do anything unreasonable.

Nadira smoothed her hair. It was longer now, almost between her shoulder blades. She smiled, thinking that when spring came again it would be long enough to wear in a coil on her head. She played with it, testing the length. The thick plait would take years to re-grow. With that thought, her smile faded. There had been no word from Montrose or any of his men these long weeks. She thought about the plait in his vest. Was it still there? She blushed, thinking of it. How foolish to imagine such a man keeping a wad of hair in his shirt. He probably packed it with his baggage to keep as proof of her oath and nothing more. The blush deepened, for Nadira could not stop thinking of him, and not as her lord and master, either. She took a great breath and stood up, shaking her mind from him.

He probably has gone on without her, perhaps changing course and taking off to avenge his brother. Perhaps gone to Rome to chase down the book. She knew that even if he could not read it, he would remove it from his enemies. He just wouldn't know if he had the right one. How many books would he burn before he would stop? She winced at the thought of the fires. She reminded herself she was trying to shake off his memory, not indulge in it. Still, worry pecked at the edges of her mind constantly. She began to stride the length of the room, twisting the ends of her hair. Was he caring for his wound? Had it healed properly? His body was striped with scars. Obviously, he knew how to care for a wound. He had been fighting since he was fourteen, he told her when she had asked. Surely he knew what to do. She turned at the wall and marched back. This was small comfort to her burdened mind. If she knew how he fared, she could be thoroughly content. Not knowing kept her awake at night.

William noticed her distraction when she came to a stop at the table. "What? Have you forgotten something? Do you need to go to the privy?"

Nadira flashed him a wan smile. "No, William. I am just stiff from so much sitting," she lied.

"Yes, that does get painful sometimes. Perhaps if the weather is fair we can go for a ride this afternoon."

“I do not ride unless I must,” this revelation brought another memory with it. Nadira felt her throat tighten. She forced herself to sound cheerful. “A walk would do me better than a ride in these circumstances since it is my nether regions that are already sore. I do not look forward to antagonizing them further.”

William nodded in agreement. “A walk then. Monsieur should be here soon. It is a short manuscript we are to read today. Perhaps he will allow us an outing afterwards.”

“I would like that very much, William. Thank you.”

The young man smiled at her with affection. Nadira counted this as another great change in her fortunes. She could merely look long at something, a pitcher of beer, a bowl of fruit, even a quill or other small item and it would be given to her with a flourish. Once she admired a tapestry in the entry. The next afternoon she found it hanging in her bedchamber. Maria eyes were wide as she told Nadira how three men had carried it upstairs and hung it for her while she was in the study reading for Da Salvo.

The sound of Da Salvo’s boots on the stone steps below the trap sent William over to the heavy chain. With a grunt, he lifted the trap as the Master’s fur hat ascended through the floorboards.

“Good morning, children.” The same greeting they received every morning. “I see you are ready to begin again.” He turned to William, “What have you pulled out for me to hear today?”

The big man dragged a bench to the table by the window and adjusted the mirror to throw a beam of sunshine on the center of the table.

William placed a thin book, bound in smooth wood and leather on the table. Tiny jewels glistened on the cover and silver hinged clasps held the fore edges together in a tight vise.

“Ah, the Plato,” Da Salvo frowned, “But this is all in Latin, William. We have both read this one cover to cover.”

“Forgive me, Monsieur, but remember there are handwritten notes in the back that we have not been able to decipher.”

“That is just one reader’s comments. It may be a matter of curiosity...”

“Intense curiosity.”

“But not necessary to spend precious time on such a matter when there are dozens of manuscripts more deserving of our attention.”

“Humor me, Monsieur. Master. As you say, they are short and can be quickly dispensed with.”

Da Salvo looked at Nadira, and then glanced out the window. “Very well. You have been a good boy. It is a clear day and the sun will hold long enough to indulge you. Proceed.”

William unclasped the book with expert movements and gently opened the volume to the back. He flipped a few of the creamy vellum pages until he reached a familiar place. Interlined among the print was a fine script in a neat and beautiful hand.

“It is Moorish, is it not?” he asked Nadira eagerly.

Nadira leaned closer. The script was fluent and steady, the mark of a learned person well practiced in calligraphy. She read for them: “Such a silly idea, that man makes the image of the world in a mirror and calls it real.” William and Da Salvo laughed loudly, the latter slapping his thigh with a ringed hand.

“Please, I don’t understand,” Nadira said.

“If you wish, I will read Plato to you in the evenings if Monsieur will spare the candles.” William offered. “Then you will see the humor.”

“Don’t make her wait, William. In short, Nadira, Plato relates a conversation between Socrates, a great thinker, and Glaucon, his student, concerning what is real and what is imitation. He says that while God created the world, man can create the same world by holding a mirror to its form.” Da Salvo swung the gimbaled mirror so the image of the book lay in its metallic circle. “There. I have created a book.”

“I see,” said Nadira, “You have created a book, but not one we can touch or read. The words are backwards and we cannot turn the pages! One could argue that you really have not created even the image of the book, as you have no control over the light from the sun. “As the light fades,” as she spoke a cloud passed over the face of the sun and dimmed the image in the mirror, “like so. At night you could create nothing.”

“Yes,” said William, “Which begs the question ‘what is real?’ Is it what you see? At night, you see nothing. Does everything disappear? I cannot see the ocean, though I know it exists. Does it disappear because now I live in the mountains?”

“You can feel the table at night.” Nadira ran her hands over the smooth surface of the table, “So you know it exists even in the dark.”

“And the ocean? I cannot see it nor feel it in the dark” William challenged her with bright eyes.

“Others come and tell about it. Books are written which describe it”

“So the image of the ocean exists in your mind, yes? However, what if you have never seen it with your own eyes? Is that image in your mind the real ocean?”

“No, of course not. It is the imitation of the ocean, for me to use as a reference to the real one. Like one might use a map. A map is not the land it describes, but a representation of one.” Nadira tapped the table with her finger.

Da Salvo nodded. “She is a clever one, William.” To Nadira he said, “And yet you have not studied philosophy?”

She blushed. “You disparage me, Monsieur. I have not studied what you call philosophy. It seems like nothing more than common sense.”

“Ah, my dear girl, you will find that ‘sense’ is far, far rarer than it is ‘common’.”

“Here, here,” assented William.

Nadira pursed her lips and adjusted the mirror to allow the sun to shine upon the page again. She drew a slender finger along the marginalia. “Here the writer says, “Plato agrees that what is above, so is below. What is unreal becomes real through the eyes and mind of man. Nothing exists and everything exists.” She looked up at William.

“Explain that one.”

William scratched the back of his neck. Da Salvo pulled on his beard. William spoke first. “Is there more? Does the writer say anything else on this page?”

Nadira indicated the script she had just read. “No. That is all.”

William addressed his master. “How can nothing and everything exist at the same time?”

Da Salvo closed his eyes. They sat quietly for several minutes until he opened his eyes again.

“The writer says ‘Plato agrees’. Agrees with whom?”

“Whoever said, ‘what is above, so is below’, William answered.

“Perhaps. Perhaps there is more. I am thinking that the writer is saying that anything that can be imagined in the mind of man does already exist.”

“You mean like Plato’s analogy of the bed, or the painting of the bridle and bits?”

Da Salvo frowned. “In a way. You remember how he emphasized that it was the flute player who tells the flute maker how to make the flute better, and that a painter could paint a picture of the flute without knowing how to play one or even how to make one that plays. It is the idea of ‘fluteness’ that has no limits while an actual, physical flute does have limitations.”

William nodded, deep in thought.

“The implication is vast in scale if it means what I think it does,” Da Salvo continued, “I suspect there is more to this than playing with ideas. You should spend some time looking at where we acquired this book, William. See if we also purchased other books from the same source. It would be gratifying to find more of this man’s comments.” Da Salvo closed the book and pushed it away. “That was a pleasant diversion, little ones, but we must proceed a bit quicker if I am to hear a new manuscript today as well as meet with my guests below.”

William looked up from where he was removing a scroll from the latticework shelving. “We have guests?” he asked.

“I have guests.” Da Salvo’s eyes twinkled. He poured Nadira a cup of ale from a pitcher on the table. “Take a drink, my dear, and get ready to read to me.”

Chapter Thirteen

Today will be chilly, Nadira thought as she shuttered tight her small window. Maria would be up with her breakfast soon and a steaming cup of posset. The thought of the hot milk made her feel the cold. The turn of the season had come with a great storm last night. She put on another dress over the thin brown one and laced it. She wrapped her feet in some strips of linen before putting her leather boots on. She would be wearing her cloak indoors this day.

Nadira picked up the heavy cloak and sniffed it. It was heavy with the musty odor of dampness and the sharp scent of smoke from the fire in her room and those in the other

rooms of the tower. With a heavy sigh she wondered when it could be washed and dried in this weather. She swung it around her shoulders, and then froze in place. Two months ago, she would have been ecstatic to enjoy two full meals a day and been kept out of the rain. Now she was disparaging of a fine woolen cloak and resenting the delay of her breakfast. Shamed, she sat down on the expensive bed and pulled a thick down-filled pillow to her lap to warm her hands. She shook her head and looked up at the rafters. “What a fool I am.”

“Miss?” Maria pushed the door open with her hip and carried the tray to the bed.

Nadira reached for the steaming cup on the tray. “Nothing, Maria. Thank you for the posset.”

“Oh, Miss. I’m sorry I am late, but Monsieur has important guests and I was needed in the kitchen.”

“Oh? Who are they?” The reading might be cancelled if Monsieur and William were engaged with guests. She took a sip.

“I wouldn’t know, Miss. They arrived yesterday noon and we are just now finishing with their baggage and settling them in.” Maria began pulling Nadira’s clothing from her trunk. “There is a great deal of laundry to do so I am going to take your clothes down. They won’t even notice these extra bits.” Maria stood to shake out the linens.

“So you have no idea? Can you tell from their clothing?”

“Oh yes, the men are clerics and soldiers and no women are traveling with them, so you will not be disturbed by a bed partner.”

“I wasn’t concerned about that, Maria. It has gotten so cold I might welcome a bed partner tonight. I was just wondering what their business might be and if I would be going upstairs to the library today.”

“I was told to get you fed and dressed, so you should go up. I saw Brother William in the larder this morning, so he is already out of bed. I would think you are expected as usual.”

Nadira made her way to the top floor as she did every day but Sunday. There was a great deal of noise below, but the two top floors were nearly deserted. She paused as she spiraled up to look out the casement. The sky was a steely gray and the wind was sharp. She thought fleetingly of winters in Barcelona, so warm the water never froze and

flowers bloomed in February. A gust slapped her back to the present, where winter in the mountains was proving to be quite different. *At least it isn't raining.* Down below tiny forms were moving horses out to the better forage in the orchard. She saw linens and clothing flapping in the cold wind. She rubbed her hands. But for the written word, she herself might be chapped and burned from such heavy labor in the laundry. She blessed her mother as she continued up to the familiar trap door.

William was there as usual. He greeted her warmly.

“Nadira, you are shivering this morning.”

She smiled as she gave him her hand to pull her up through the trap. His hands were soft and surprisingly warm. No fires were permitted in the library, not even a candle. She looked around. “How are you keeping warm this morning, William? If it is a trick, please teach it to me!”

He laughed. “It is a trick, Nadira. I have some heated rocks here in some blankets. I pull them up from below in the laundry where they are heating gallons and gallons of water this morning. Paolo puts them in this bucket...” he leaned out the window to show her a long rope attached to a metal bar in the sill, “and I pull them up. He puts fresh ones in there every hour and I lower down the ones that have cooled. Here...” William reached into a pile of blankets and pulled out a smooth stone the size of his fist.

“Ah!” The stone was not burning hot, but a comfortably warm like putting her hands around a warm cup of mulled wine. She held it in both hands and felt the delicious heat soothing the pain in her fingers.

“I have a flat one I use to keep the ink from freezing.” He pointed to the table where his inkbottle rested on a slab of rock.

“You are delightful, William. I suppose you have a hot rock for my freezing feet as well.” She smiled as he pulled a larger stone from under the blankets and placed it on the floor by her chair. She sat down and placed her feet around the stone. “Will Monsieur be coming up today?” She asked.

“Absolutely. His guests have brought manuscripts and books. I do not know exactly what they have, but at the very least, he will be bringing some up for me to copy while they are here. You can help. I have two sets of writing tools and I have noticed your fine hand, Nadira. Monsieur assures me he trusts your ability to write.” There was a whistle

from outside. William moved to the window and leaned out. A moment later, he pulled the bucket up hand over hand. He brought it in and set it on the table. Inside were a covered crock and more stones. "Monsieur wants us to stay warm for him today," he smiled as he unloaded the bucket and sent it back below. "I am eager to see the new manuscripts, are you not?"

Nadira settled in her chair, but Monsieur did not come up. After pacing about awhile under the excuse of waiting for better light as the sun rose higher, William sat down across from her and pushed a sheet of rough paper towards her. "Let's at least get something done." He showed her how to use a flat stick that had been planed smooth to guide her light graphite marks on the paper. He held her hand in his as he lightly scored the paper from one end to the other with the graphite, making guidelines for the ink lettering. Between the two of them, they prepared paper sheets until the sun was past meridian. Nadira adjusted the mirror again to direct the light to her page. As she bent over the paper to score another line, she heard a great disturbance below.

William stood so abruptly he toppled his bench behind him. "Sweet Jesus! What can that be?" He rushed to the trap and pulled it back with a bang. Nadira heard many footsteps quickly ascending the stone stairway. She put the cork in the ink and hurriedly stacked the precious paper away from the ink and the window where there was a greater possibility of accident.

Da Salvo emerged from the floor followed by two smaller men in black and white vestments. One cleric was older than Da Salvo, the other near his age. Both were well-fed and had pale faces from years in the scriptorium. Nadira tried not to show the fear she felt as she recognized the Dominican habit of snow-white robes and black cowls. All three were panting with a combination of excitement and exertion. Da Salvo took the elbow of the small florid man and nearly dragged him to the table. Nadira rose quickly from her seat.

"Nadira, I am honored to introduce you to Father Septimus, and Father Matteo," Da Salvo said breathlessly. Nadira dipped low and averted her eyes in as modest a posture as possible. Her heart pounded in her chest so loudly it was difficult to hear. William was brought forward and bowed to each of the newcomers. "Please, gentlemen, please be seated." Da Salvo spread his hands and William lifted the fallen bench and positioned

it for them. Father Septimus never took his eyes from Nadira and his gaze was so intense she felt her face flushing with embarrassment. Da Salvo came to her aid.

“Nadira, please sit here.” He sat her back down on her bench and pulled his heavy chair to the end of the table. William remained standing in the rear. When the men were all seated, he spoke. “Nadira has come to me from Barcelona where she served as secretary to a Barcelona spice merchant.” He paused as the two clerics murmured, heads touching. Father Matteo spoke.

“Is she a good daughter of Christ?” he asked seriously.

Nadira clutched the edge of the table. Her eyes darted to Da Salvo and then to William. This could be the end, she thought. *I should have never been lulled into thinking I deserved my good fortune.*

William paled, but his eyes bore steady courage into hers from where he was standing behind the guests.

Da Salvo evaded the question. “I speak for her honesty. She has been a faithful and modest servant to me, gentlemen.” Septimus appeared deeply upset by this deflection but he held his tongue. Something greater must be at issue here. Nadira looked to Da Salvo for clues. He was showing some strain around the corners of his mouth and his eyes did not twinkle but were dark and serious. Under the table, his booted toe came down very slowly on her instep. She froze. She tried to look as faithful and modest as Da Salvo had assured the Dominicans she was.

Septimus spoke. “She can read this document as you have said?” His eyes moved up and down Nadira’s body. “She is but a girl, Da Salvo.” Doubt oozed from his voice.

“Please,” Da Salvo spread his hands, “let us not delay. Lay out the document and we shall see.” Father Septimus stared at Da Salvo a long moment before placing the parchment roll on the table. It was tied with a red ribbon. Nadira was too frightened to be curious. As the parchment unfolded, she prepared herself for failure. *Perhaps it will be something I cannot read.* Different languages often use the same alphabet. Her Greek was rather weak. *Perhaps they have a document from the Rus.* She trembled as she felt Da Salvo’s boot press harder on her foot. Septimus slid the loop of ribbon from the document and with one confident movement flattened the page before her eyes. Father Matteo leaned forward to place his hands on the two sides to keep the roll from curling.

At first, the black markings on the parchment appeared to be scribbles, but as she focused her eyes on the emerging words, a new horror enveloped her. She was unaware of the absolute silence that gripped the room. Not a sound came to her ears but the rushing of her blood. She was staring at her own handwriting. Before her on the table was the copy she had made weeks before of a dead man's back. Icy spears shot through her limbs and she feared she would faint. The pressure on her foot increased to painful levels. She swayed on the bench.

"What is it?" cried Father Matteo. "What is wrong with her?"

"It is a wicked writing, as I have told you," came the ominous voice of Father Septimus. "Just looking at it has caused her to fall under the spell of the Evil One. Look at her face, it is as pale as death!"

William cried out, "Then roll it up again!" Father Matteo raised his hands in the air. The parchment immediately rolled itself back into a white tube.

"I will no longer touch the cursed thing!" Father Matteo crossed himself.

Septimus scooped up the document, glaring at all of them. "Fools," he said, "If this is an evil document, how can we stop its influence without knowing what it says? This girl is no help. Anyone can see she is an idiot. Da Salvo, I am displeased, greatly displeased that you have wasted our time with your imprudent claims to be able to decipher this." Septimus waved the roll in the air over the table. Nadira clutched the table tightly, for the room was spinning and she did not want to fall. Where were Montrose and Alisdair and Garreth? She swallowed. How could these men have their baggage while they still lived? William came around the table, placed both hands on Nadira's shoulders, and squeezed.

Da Salvo released her foot under the table. "My girl is no idiot. She is merely frightened by what she can see and you do not." He stood and reached over their heads to retrieve the parchment roll from Septimus. The old man let it go, a wary eye on Da Salvo. Da Salvo laid the document on the table again and murmured to Nadira.

"Courage, girl. Obviously, you recognize this manuscript. Tell us what it says."

Nadira breathed in carefully. She did not want to read anymore. She raised stricken eyes to meet Da Salvo's. He smiled at her and pushed the parchment closer. Resigned,

she licked her dry lips and began in a weak voice, "Knowledge comes not from words, seek ye the river's edge for the key to Understanding."

"And the rest?" Septimus growled.

"None can read the bird script, My Lord. The Hebrew says: "Knowledge comes not from words, seek ye the river's edge for the key to Understanding." The Latin says..."

"I can read Latin, you silly fool," Septimus spat.

Da Salvo rose to his feet, towering over the smaller priests with his height and presence. He glowered dangerously. "Guest or no, Inquisitor or no, I will not have me and mine derided in my own house." He slammed the flat of his hand down on the table for emphasis. William dove for the inkwell. The priests pushed back the bench. The men faced each other across a table; a small piece of parchment lay limp between them and a frightened young woman cowered beneath them. Nadira slid lower on her chair. It did not appear that any of the men were armed, though she suspected Da Salvo had a small blade under his jerkin. The atmosphere tingled with the strain. In a very small voice Nadira continued, hoping the words on the scroll would diffuse the hostility. "The Moorish says 'The fruits of the garden are the key to Understanding. What is in you is without you. The hungry man sees the world as the falcon sees the sparrow. Seek ye the Black Land. The daughter of Apollo shall be your midwife.'" The men were watching her; the tension had subsided. William spoke.

"Is that all, Nadira?"

She looked up at him, "As my lord says. He can read the Latin for himself. I have read the Hebrew and the Moorish as commanded."

There was a long silence. Father Matteo reached over Father Septimus' head and retrieved his document. "It does us little good to have this deciphered when it makes no sense whatsoever."

Da Salvo gritted his teeth. He deliberately sat down slowly. "I think I know what it means."

Septimus exchanged a glance with Matteo. "And?"

"I prefer not to speak until I am certain."

"Do not toy with us, Da Salvo. I have neither the time nor the temperament."

Da Salvo looked at Nadira when he said, "Allow me some time with the original owner of this parchment. I will find out for you what we wish to know."

Nadira's good sense did not desert her. She made no outward sign that these words drove a dagger through her heart. Her eyes began to burn. The room blurred about her.

Da Salvo continued, "I think this had been enough of a shock to Nadira today." He turned to William. "Take her to her quarters. Make sure she has bread and beer, son." He stared long at William until the young friar gave a slight nod.

Every time Nadira opened her door, a different face turned to peer back at her. At first, she recognized the guard from the gate, but afterwards she saw a series of faces from the gardener to the man who emptied the chamber pots. All afternoon she was isolated in the bedchamber. No more beer was brought up as the sun began to glow red as it touched the top of the western mountains. No supper appeared after the servants slowly moved through the tower lighting the torches in their daily dance of light and warmth. Nadira splashed frigid water from her basin onto her face. Was Lord Montrose here, in the tower? If he was, then he was safe. But again, maybe he was not. She crushed her head between her hands in frustration. The Dominicans frightened her. Without Da Salvo as her host she would not be safe from them, yet she had often spoken of Lord Montrose. Why did Da Salvo not tell her he was here? Montrose must be somewhere else. Or Da Salvo is deceitful. She remembered the warning look he gave her when he mentioned the previous owner of the document. He wanted her to know Montrose was alive. One cannot consult with a dead man. *Or could he?* She thought about the strange things in his cabinet, crystals etched with strange symbols, glass vials and twisted tubes. *No. Certainly not.* She found a fingernail that was not yet completely chewed and started work on it. *Am I now a prisoner?* She wondered.

She leaned out the window, which faced to the south. A half moon slowly rose above the treetops on her left. To the right the red glow streaked higher overhead as the sun disappeared. There was no sign in the dark yard that anything was different today than in the days before. The cattle were returning to the byre, ambling around the low building. The first night watch was in place. She could see their torches as they paced off their patrol. The laundry flying on the lines had been brought in long ago. She closed the shutters tightly even though it purged the room of the last of the light. She sat on the bed

in the dark, her fingers sore from twisting them. She placed them impatiently on her knees to keep them from each other. Footsteps passed by on their way up to the next floor. She tried the door again. Another face turned to greet her. This time it was the goatherd's son, Martin.

“Martin?” she whispered.

“Yes, Miss?” he was half grown, full of freckles and stiff brush-like fair hair. His oversized hands and feet promised he would eventually be a big man like his father. Now he appeared jumpy and uncertain. He would not meet her eyes directly, but glanced continually around and down the stairs as he spoke.

“Am I to stay inside here with no supper and no light?”

“I don't know, Miss. I was told to stay here while Father fetched our supper. He might bring yours as well.”

Nadira looked up and down the stairs. Torches burned bright in their sconces. It was noticeably warmer in the stairwell.

“Are you to keep me from coming out?”

“Yes, Miss. I am to cry out if you try to go downstairs.”

“Downstairs?” Nadira thought quickly. “May I go upstairs?” Nadira asked sweetly. The boy blushed.

“He...he didn't say anything about going upstairs, Mistress.”

“I am going to go upstairs now, Martin. Is that agreeable?”

“I guess. I'll tell Father you have gone upstairs when he gets back.”

Nadira took her bedside candle and lit it from the torches on the wall before taking the steps slowly upstairs. She did not want Martin to think she was running away. As she ascended the glow of the candle made sharp shadows on the stones. The cooks were getting supper down below. Her nose crinkled as the smell of roasting meats drifted up the stairwell behind her. No doubt a great feast would be laid before the visiting priests. She lifted the candle higher. She moved through the third floor, which was the sleeping chamber for most of the men-at-arms. A fire burned in the large fireplace set in the wall there. A few men were lying on pallets close to the fire lounging near their fellows. Those men followed her with their eyes as she brought the candle up through the floor. She glanced around the room as she rose higher. The stairwell had no rail to protect the

climber from falling into the room as he or she passed through the hole and ascended towards the ceiling so Nadira chose her steps carefully. She stopped at the trap. It was locked, as she suspected. The heavy padlock swung just above her head as Nadira turned and sat on the step. She placed the candle beside her and rested her chin in her hands. Perhaps she should try going downstairs and see what would happen when she was caught. At least she would know if she were now considered a prisoner.

She stood and carefully walked back down. The stair wound around the wall, and before she reached the bottom of the third story a blast of wind blew her light out. She stopped, afraid to place her foot on the next step, now completely invisible without her candle.

The blast had come from the casement a few steps below her. She moved carefully, feeling with her slipper before resting her weight on the stone. When she was even with the casement, she looked back. She was still high above the third floor. Below, in the torchlight, she could see Martin sitting faithfully by her door and the few soldiers resting. The walls curved away from them, and in the shadow she hoped they could not see her. She leaned out the window to get her bearings. Another gust blew something slithery toward her. She recoiled before she recognized the rope that William used to get his heated stones from the laundry below.

Again Nadira leaned out over the sill and this time looked up. The rope was attached to the iron bar that supported the shutters. Down, she could see a round form that must be the bucket on the ground.

Nadira reached out into the cold night and pulled the rope in through the window. She tested it. Slowly she brought her knees up until she rested her entire weight on it. *Bless William. He ties a magnificent knot.*

She glanced down at Martin. Every so often, the young man would stand and peer down through the hole in the floor, looking for his father. Nadira knew he would be beaten for allowing her to come out of her room, but that could not be helped. She waited until he was bent over the floor again before climbing out onto the rope. With one push, she was outside. The stones of the tower were set with a thick mortar. The chinks were not wide enough to accept a man's boot, but were just wide enough for a small woman's large toe inside a silk slipper. It was enough for her to get a toehold with both

feet, which took much of her weight off her hands. Still, it was difficult, and the coarse rope burned her palms as she lowered herself slowly to the ground, inserting her toes one by one in the cracks and descending them like a ladder. Half way down she lost a slipper. Nadira paused with her naked toe in a sharp crevasse and watched with dismay as the shoe seemed to float to the ground and land with a soft thump. When she finally touched ground she spent a few moments feeling around the base of the tower for it before proceeding.

Where to now? No one had seen her or there would have been an alarm raised. She was outside the laundry. A glance inside the doorway told her that the servants had all gone, perhaps for their evening meal, or to prepare for the feast. The great fire pit was banked for the night, though coals still glowed red among the ashes and the great cauldron steamed above them. Nadira moved closer to the hearth and warmed herself. That the cauldron was kept full of heated water implied someone would be bathing tonight. She ducked behind a large basket of folded linen when she heard a sound from the doorway. Two men opened the door and waved a torch inside.

“Oh, and they have us looking for a girl in this great tower.” He snorted. “Why, she’s probably rolled up in someone’s blankets.” His companion guffawed. “Anyhow, she’s not in the laundry.” The torchlight faded and went out as they shut the door behind them. Nadira allowed herself to breathe again.

They were looking for her now. She thought about where to go. She wanted to hear Da Salvo and his guests talking about her manuscript. Where would they be? She had explored the third floor, and the fifth floor library was locked. The first floor was storage and kitchen and laundry; Da Salvo’s solar was on the second floor over the laundry to take advantage of the warmth of the ever-present fires. She looked up. Access to those areas would be impossible. Except from below. She slid along the wall to the door and listened. There was no panic, no disturbance. Servants were working as usual, intent on their own tasks. Where would the guests be served their supper? Nadira straightened. This tower did not have a great hall; William had told her that this fortress was built to guard the one good road that stretched over the mountain from France through Andorra into Aragon. The Prince of Andorra lived somewhere to the south in a much finer keep. The infrequent guests and tired travelers were usually fed where they slept. When a

special meal was served, it was usually in Da Salvo's solar. Where was Maria? And William? Where was he? He often came to her room to talk with her or recite poetry and other remembered bits from his beloved books with her in the evenings. He usually had no tasks after dark in order to spare the candles.

Nadira looked up again at the strong beams above her head. The two long beams bracing the walls were also used for storing supplies. Sacks hung from the rafters filled with rags and cloths to be mended. Various tools and husbandry implements swung from iron hooks. If she were brave enough she could climb up there and walk along the beam to position herself beneath the solar. Nadira winced. It would be difficult in a gown, and unpleasant with the dust and spiders. As her eyes followed the beam from corbel to corbel, she heard footsteps on the floor above. The lone walker was soon joined by many more feet. Something heavy was set on the floor, shaking a curtain of dust from the ceiling.

Her mind made up, she hitched up her gown, tucking the hem into her belt on each hip. By climbing the storage chests she could pull herself up to the rafters. She tried not to mind the spiders that scampered away from her or the dirt that fell into her eyes. With a great deal of effort she found herself sitting on the main support beam an arm's length from Da Salvo's solar. Inside she heard low voices. Her victory nearly ended there. In her excitement, she slipped in the loose dirt on the beam and had to catch herself before she fell. A small landslide of dirt and dust rained down upon the stone floor. The voices stopped for a moment and Nadira held her breath.

A moment later and they started up again. Nadira held very still.

"He is very resistant. The very devil is in him." This voice was tense and low. Nadira thought it might be Father Matteo.

"I think he knows nothing. He can barely read his own name." This voice belonged to Da Salvo.

"Or he pretends such." This was spoken with vitriolic hatred.

"Nay. I know him," said the other voice, calm and steady. "He is Robert Longmoor of Montrose. He accompanied his brother Richard to the monastery at Toledo each winter. I know for a fact he never studied. He is honest when he tells you he has not read the manuscript."

“Why would he go to the monastery if not to learn?” Nadira caught her breath when she heard William’s voice.

“That is an appropriate wonder for you, my friend. You cannot conceive of a life beyond your books.” Nadira heard Da Salvo laugh softly. “Montrose was sent by their father to keep Richard. Richard had no mind but for books and languages, much like yourself, William. Their father did not want to lose his favorite son and his precious heir to bandits, battles, or an unsanctioned bride. Montrose was his way of indulging the family scion without endangering the bloodline.”

“You can see where that got him.” The icy tone chilled Nadira.

William’s voice, “So you know him as well, Monsieur?”

“I knew his brother quite well. Richard was a brilliant man, lively and skilled in many languages, but his bodyguards did not spend any time with us in the libraries, and rarely at table. With Richard now dead, this brother Montrose is now his father’s heir. I remember he had already been gifted his mother’s dower when she died and then became Baron Montrose after saving the life of a Duke in battle. I’m not certain where, it was not important to me at the time, but I warn you that his father has powerful friends in the Church. What do you intend to do with him?”

“He will tell me where he got that manuscript. I just need more time.”

“And if he doesn’t tell you?”

“He will tell me. They always tell me. And if he does not, he will be no one’s heir.”

“He looks like Death himself, Father Septimus. Do you plan to kill him?”

“No. Do not be foolish. If he is a heretic then he will suffer God’s justice.”

Nadira swayed on her beam. She did not hear the rest of the conversation for the roaring in her ears. The Dominicans did not know that she had been part of Montrose’s party. Da Salvo had not told them. She steadied her breath. This is probably why she was not under a more stringent guard. They must have wanted her out of the way while they tortured their prisoner. Her throat tightened.

The whole time she had been in the tower, Montrose had been a prisoner somewhere. She counted back. *Two months*. Two months he must have been confined. She slept in feathers and nibbled on cake. *Where is he now?* The tower had no real dungeon, just a cesspit and root cellar at opposite ends of the structure. Nadira steadied herself on the

beam and stood slowly, pulling herself up by leaning against the central pillar that thrust its way up from the floor to the ceiling. She listened. The conversation had paused while the men ate their supper. The few words she could discern concerned only the quality of the victuals and the passing of the wine. She doubted very seriously Lord Montrose was in the solar with them. Where then?

In a flash, it came to her: the stable. There were no other private rooms in the tower. She and Da Salvo were the only inhabitants who did not share space with others, and even she shared with Maria on the nights when it was too late for her to go to her home in the village. Da Salvo must have given over his solar to the visiting priests. She held to the rafter and swung down. The drop was more than her height, but the laundry softened the fall and deadened the sound. Torture must be a noisy business, she reasoned. If a man had been brutalized within the confines of this tower, there would have been some sound, and even a careful Inquisitor would be hard pressed to keep servants and soldiers from talking about it. Nadira was certain she would have heard from Maria had it been happening within these walls.

She slid along the wall to the outside door and peered out toward the stable. It was a goodly distance from the walls of the tower, close enough for the soldiers to guard, yet far enough to keep the odor of manure from the residents. The cattle were gathered around the low building, but none were inside.

A soft light flickered from under the door. This alone was unusual. Like the library, no fires were permitted in the byre. The stable had no real windows, but merely small openings along the roofline for ventilation. She would not be able to peek inside, but must actually enter through the wide doors. After a final glance around the room behind her, Nadira was off across the yard.

The ground was not level, but sloped gently away from the tower. The dairy was a small building near the well, the stable itself a bit farther from there. Nadira kept to the far side of the outbuildings. None but the cows would see her in the darkness. The entrance to the stable was a sturdy over-and-under double door. Both were closed but not bolted; if someone were inside the bolt would have to stay upright lest he or she be locked in. Nadira pushed the upper door in a finger's breadth.

Chapter Fourteen

Inside she could see, between the stanchions, Maria sitting on a milking stool in the corner, knitting. No one else seemed to be inside. Nadira waited. Soon the expected gust of wind blew through the yard. She timed her move and pushed the top door all the way in and waited. There were no guards. She entered the barn and closed the door behind her.

Maria stood as Nadira approached; her knitting placed in the basket beside her. “Mistress! I am so glad to see you. Gerald has forgotten my supper. I’m glad Monsieur sent you to relieve me.” Nadira did not answer. Her whole world focused on the still form in the straw beside the milking stool.

Maria sighed as she followed Nadira’s eyes to the ground, “Yes Miss, it is a sad day for this man. They brought him in here and chained him to the wall where the bull usually stands.” Maria waved a hand at the sturdy ring set in the wall. Nadira could not answer. The ring was linked with heavy chain that dangled from the wall and ended in a shackle around the man’s wrist. She knelt in the straw beside Lord Montrose.

“No Miss!” Maria pulled her back up and away with a strong grip on Nadira’s arm. “He is injured. I’ve been told not to touch him.” Nadira pulled her arm free.

“What exactly were you told to do, Maria,” she asked very quietly, keeping her voice steady.

“I’m to watch him. If he wakes or cries out I am to run and fetch Monsieur.” Maria picked up her knitting. “I am glad you are here now; I have been cold and hungry since the sun went down.” Maria gave the man a look of pity. “He has not moved since noon.”

Nadira forced herself to wear a wan smile. “I’m here now, Maria. If you’d like to go to the kitchen and get a bite to eat you may.”

“Thank you, Miss. Oh, and please, Monsieur warned me to be careful of the candle.” She nodded to the thick pillar on a milking stool near the wall where the straw had been carefully swept aside.

Nadira waited until the door had closed behind the servant before she knelt again. Montrose was lying face down in the straw, his legs and arms splayed out and only the faint movement of his ribs to assure her he was not dead. An inadequate blanket covered

him from his shoulders to his thighs. Nadira reached out and lifted the lank and filthy hair that covered his face, laying the long strands gently across the back of his head. His face was covered with dense mottled beard, Nadira did not remember there being so many white hairs among the black the last time she had seen him. She stroked his cheek, combing the chaff from his beard with her fingers. His eyes remained closed, but his lips parted as he breathed in and out with slight breaths that merely made the straw tremble under his chin.

Small sores were peeling around his lips. Dried blood splotched his cheeks, though it was obviously days old. She touched his throat at the jaw, feeling his heartbeat, then lifted the blanket over his ribs. With her other hand she lifted the tattered fragment of his shirt. It was in frightful condition and he smelled as though he had not washed in all that time. Miraculously, his side was well healed. She saw the angry red scar that marked him from armpit to hip, but no sign of wound rot. The wound had healed, but in its place the surrounding skin was discolored with bruises in all stages of healing, from fresh red splotches to week-old greenish tinged rings. She did not wish to move him.

A more thorough examination would have to wait. She dropped the cloth, scanning the ground around him. There was no blood in the straw. He was not bleeding, at least not on the outside of his body. Nadira frowned as she plucked at the rags that covered him. These were the same tunic and leggings he wore to the fateful supper at the monastery. She blew her nose with the hem of her chemise and wiped her eyes. That tears had come did not surprise her, but the twisted feeling in her chest disturbed her.

She told herself she would feel badly seeing any human being in such condition. She told herself she had sworn Lord Montrose her obedience and service. Nothing more. Here was her benefactor in need. It was her duty to help him, just as he would protect her should she be in danger or injured. Nadira shook her head. She knew she was fooling herself. She was feeling true and honest grief. There could be no rationalizing this pain. She put a hand over her stomach where the pain was the greatest and wiped her nose with the other. A great wave of shame crested before the sobs broke. Shame that she had been safe and warm while he suffered so terribly. She could not stop the tears, though she struggled to keep the volume low. She had not wept like this in many years. Not

since the night she watched the light fade from her mother's eyes as the silent infant was wrapped up and whisked from the room. That painful memory only intensified the torrent. Nadira bent over double with the effort to remain silent, squeezing herself with both arms as if she could choke out the hurting.

Montrose's lids fluttered, then opened slowly. "Nadira! Jesu, holy Christ." His voice was rough and hoarse and hardly more than a whisper. He blinked again, bringing his free hand up to rub his face as though he could not trust his eyes.

He reached up and touched her cheek. "You are real. Where are we?" he murmured, staring at her hard as though he believed she would vanish at any instant.

"My lord," she blew her nose untidily into her hem, "Andorra."

"I must look like hell if you are weeping so hard." The blue eyes flickered in the candlelight. "Am I dying?" He asked calmly.

Nadira put up a hand to his lips to stop him from speaking until she had collected herself. When she felt confident that she could look at him without breaking, she answered with a steadiness she did not feel.

"I do not know, my lord." She took a shuddering breath. "How...where...is the pain?"

"I am beyond pain." He winced as if to prove it to her. "My body burns from head to foot. Am I bleeding anywhere?"

"No. Not that I can tell." Nadira could not contain a sob.

"Then I am probably not dying. You do not need to weep for me."

Nadira reached out and took Montrose's big hand. It was heavy and rough like wood, but thankfully warm. She stroked the palm touching the calluses and raised scars with the smooth tips of her fingers. "You are speaking, and your hand is warm." A big tear dripped down the curve of her cheek. She let it go.

He looked at her for a few moments before speaking. "You smell like lavender and are as soft and smooth as damask. I so worried that you had been ill-used." The beard on his throat moved up and down.

"My lord," Nadira put his hand between her small ones and raised it to her breast. "And you have been confined and mistreated this whole time."

“You are well?” He demanded, squinting to see her. Nadira nodded. He continued, “...and Alisdair and Garreth?”

Nadira could not stop the tears. She squeezed his hand instead of trusting her voice to answer.

“You do not know.” Anguish in his voice.

Nadira wiped her face with the now soaking hem. “What shall I do?” She grieved. She realized she had not completed her plans, for even if her bold ideas bore fruit and she successfully freed Montrose from the wall, what then? Should they try to flee? It was early winter. The nights were bitter and the mountains no longer offered much but nuts and water. Montrose could not hunt in his condition and Nadira had never killed anything larger than a rat.

The nearest village was a mile away and firmly controlled by Da Salvo. The villagers would not hide them. Any search would be in that direction and towards the valley below, yet there the weather was still mild. Olives and grapes had been harvested and stored away; the grain was threshed. Nadira’s throat tightened. Would they search with dogs? Stealing a horse was a capital crime. She would prefer not to intensify any search by piling more crimes upon her head. Hiding in the mountains with no food or shelter would be brutal. But it must be done.

“First I must free you....” Her words were interrupted by a smashing bang from the front of the barn. The two doors had been crashed open, and still swung uneasily on their hinges. Da Salvo stood in the doorway flanked by William, the Dominicans and one of the soldiers.

“What in God’s name!” Father Septimus strode forward, whipping his cassock against the stanchions. He reached Nadira first and yanked her up and against the stones by her arm. Montrose’s hand was stripped from her grasp and fell back into the straw. He staggered to his feet faster than Nadira thought possible, dragging the manacle and heavy chain.

“Unhand her.” Montrose had not the strength to shout, but his voice was all the more dangerous for being jagged and low. He was answered with a backhand from the soldier that sent him spinning back to the ground, sending dust and straw into the air.

Numbly, Nadira watched the golden straws float gently to rest upon his dark hair. A few weeks ago such a blow would not have even made his mouth twitch.

“Stop!” Da Salvo stepped forward, pushed Septimus aside and grabbed Nadira’s arm from the priest’s grasp. She was pressed into his warm furs. The old priest was red with fury, panting and blowing like a bellows.

“Septimus, calm yourself.” He said. “You do injury in more ways than one.”

William’s soft eyes were on Nadira. “Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head. “No.” She rubbed her arm where the old man’s nails had pinched her.

“What are you doing in the byre, Nadira?” Da Salvo asked slowly.

“You can see what she was doing!” Septimus growled, “She was trying to free my prisoner.” Septimus pointed at Montrose who was now sitting upright. Montrose did not look up at the word “prisoner”. He crouched with one knee under his chin and his free arm around his ribs. His hair fell over his face, covering his eyes. Nadira could not tell what he was thinking.

“Is this true, Child?” Da Salvo asked softly. Nadira was about to confess when she was interrupted.

“How could she free me?” Montrose murmured. He shook his wrist, clanking the links.

The heads turned from Nadira to Montrose. He leaned his shoulder against the stone and used it to leverage himself to his feet, his boots scraping the ground as he rose with difficulty. He looked even more terrible in the added torchlight. His beard was matted and uneven, the unkempt hair still striping his pale face with black bands. Even as he was diminished in vigor, he was a full head taller than all but Da Salvo, and still formidable in size. Nadira noticed a subtle shuffling of position of the priests to distance themselves beyond Montrose’s reach. He glowered at them from behind the hank of hair in his face. “Your servant merely showed her compassion for an unfortunate,” he finished.

Nadira sobbed, “No, my lord.” She turned to Da Salvo. “Monsieur, do you not know Lord Montrose? My companion and guardian?” Her eyes begged him. She had

heard him with her own ears admit to it. Da Salvo averted his gaze. Nadira turned to Septimus. “Did you not know the name and title of the man you held prisoner?”

“Be silent. I answer no questions from you,” Septimus snapped.

Nadira narrowed her eyes. An unaccustomed feeling was welling up inside of her. She wanted to lay hands on the old priest and twist his cassock into wads. This intense desire must have shown in her face, for Septimus turned his back on her and appealed to Da Salvo. “Surely you stand with me in this matter.”

All eyes were on Da Salvo as he pulled his beard. He did not look at Nadira, small beside him, nor at Lord Montrose sagging against the byre walls, but at William. After a long and uncomfortable pause he answered, “I suggest we discuss this inside by the warmth of my fire, Septimus, with some of my fine wine. Let us allow the girl to bring your prisoner back to some semblance of humanity.” Septimus stiffened. “And then,” he looked pointedly at the Dominicans, “perhaps some arrangements can be made which will be advantageous to all parties.” Relief flooded though her body. Nadira knees went weak.

“Monsieur...” she exhaled.

“No, Nadira. I will speak to you later. William, you help her with this task. Father Septimus,” he turned to the old man and held out his hand. “Give me the key to his shackles.”

Septimus scowled, but dug in his sleeve for an iron key and handed it to Da Salvo. “It is only your long and trusted friendship which permits me to listen to your proposal,” he snarled.

William lifted the chain while Da Salvo inserted the key and twisted it. The heavy iron ring fell to the straw, clanking the chain sharply as it went. William met no resistance as he pulled Montrose’s left arm over his shoulders. Nadira took his right side. She felt eyes boring into her back as they made their way slowly to the door, Montrose moved as though he had to think about each step before he took it. William did not hurry him. When they were halfway through the yard, William stopped. “Where do you want him, Nadira?” he asked. His eyes were bright with curiosity and adventure. Nadira felt a wave of affection for her friend.

“The laundry, William.” That is where they could have some privacy and still be near the hot water, linen and food located nearby in the kitchen and buttery. Nadira did not want an audience for what was to come next. She freed herself from under Montrose’s shoulder and made for the kitchen fires for a light. When she returned she found that William had set Montrose down beside the cauldron. William pulled her sleeve. “What now, Nadira? You seem to know just what you are doing,”

“Oh, William!” She put her hands to her cheeks. “We must get him some beer and some food. I want to put him in a bath. One of these tubs...” Nadira looked around the laundry, then indicated the wooden tub she wanted, a half hogshead stained purple inside that must have once been filled with grapes. William rolled it over to the cauldron by the fire. Nadira went to Montrose. He opened his eyes when she swept to her knees at his side. “My lord,” she called softly, brushing his hair from his face and exposing the broad brow.

“Nadira, he sighed. “You must know,” he watched William stirring the coals and laying on more wood, “you may heal me only to make this last longer.”

“What more do they want from you?”

“What do you mean?” He looked at her strangely, exasperation evident in his voice. “They want the book.”

Nadira frowned. “My mind has been with you. I have completely forgotten that cursed thing.”

His mouth turned down at the edges. “I have not forgotten it. It has been the sole topic of conversation for some days now.” He winced as he shifted his weight on the flagstones, “Intense conversation.” He held up his right hand. His thumb was swollen and purple, the end crushed and misshapen.

“For pity’s sake, you should have just told them where it is.”

“I don’t know where it is. By God’s Wounds I would have told them,” he answered between clenched teeth. “You’ll need leeches.”

“There are no leeches here,” William answered from the fireplace. “Not in the mountains.”

“Too late for leeches. This was done days ago.” Nadira indicated the colorful bruising along his ribs gently with her finger, “and we would need a leech the size of my arm.”

“No leeches, then. Perhaps some ale if you have it.”

“We have wine and beer.” She reached for a flagon that William silently set at her elbow. Montrose rose tremblingly on one arm to receive it. “Let me help you.” Nadira positioned herself behind him and helped him sit up enough to drink the beer. “Drink. I will hold you up.” She watched him empty the flagon. William hurried out, presumably to get more.

“How long were you in the byre?” she asked.

“I do not know. Some days. I did not count. I was longer in a cart, and before that in some hovel.” He blinked. His eyes traveled around the room. “This is the tower of Andorra?”

“Yes. Have you been here before?” Nadira laid him back down on his back.

“Many times. But never in the byre or the laundry,” he said wryly.

William returned and knelt beside her, “Here is some bread and wine from upstairs. The buttery is locked now. Do you want me to fetch the cook?”

“No. I do not want him to eat too much tonight, he would be sick. This will be enough,” she lifted the half loaf and weighed it in her hand. “Help me get these rags off him,” she said. William took the scissors from his belt and carefully clipped the tattered woolens from Montrose’s body. He paused every now and then to pull the strips of fabric away.

“Just throw them in the fire,” Nadira said. “I can’t see saving them for anything. They are nearly rotted as it is,” she finished in disgust. She poured hot water from the cauldron into the wine tub, ferrying the water in a bucket until the tub was half full. Montrose would fit inside if he tucked his knees up. She bent to help William with the last of the rags. While William carried the cloth to the fire, Nadira pulled at Montrose’s boot.

“Careful,” he murmured.

Nadira paused, looking at him as he lay nearly naked on a pile of bedding and kitchen cloths. “What?” she asked, puzzled.

“Careful pulling that one off.”

Nadira pulled gently as instructed, loosening the leather with her fingers as necessary to ease the boot from his leg. Something soft and black fell out as the leather cleared his heel. It was her own braid of hair, twisted and matted. “You still have it,” she marveled.

Montrose took it from her and laid it next to him. “Aye. It binds you to me,” he said in English.

Nadira tilted her head. “Aye. It does,” she answered in kind.

William helped her put Montrose in the wine barrel and the two of them finished filling the tub with warm water. With warm wet cloths she wiped his chest and arms, wringing the filthy cloths into a bucket. At first Montrose grimaced, but after a few minutes made no response as she scrubbed his limbs, reaching deep into the water for his legs and pulling his feet up one at a time on the edge of the barrel. She was totally soaked by the time she was finished. They pulled him from the cooling water and wrapped him in clean linens and lay him back down on the soft pallet. When they were both dry, she held an oil lamp close to his skin, checking him from head to foot over every inch of his body. William watched with curiosity.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asked softly, not to disturb her concentration.

“Do what?” She answered absently, poking with her finger around Montrose’s feet. She moved back along his ribs where the thick red scar marked him up and down like a pillow seam. She pushed the lamp up close and felt the scar with the tips of her fingers.

“Know what to do...” William trailed off, at a loss.

“Is that something one has to learn?” She asked him as the flickering light rippled over the muscles of Montrose’s chest. There were no more open wounds here, but there were terrible bruises, which spoke of a brutal beating sometime in the past week. His right thumb was at an odd angle. Nadira turned it over in her hand and held it closer to the light. She had not noticed it in the byre as it had been hanging in the manacle. Montrose’s arm jerked when she touched it.

“Don’t,” he said.

“What happened to it?” she whispered.

“Thumb screw.” He set his mouth in a tight line. The word itself conjured the image of the horrors of his torture. She lay the hand down beside him. Nadira reached for the

tunic William had retrieved for her. “Help me get this on him. He is shivering as it is.” They struggled to pull the heavy wool over Montrose’s head and get his arms through the sleeves. He groaned softly. Nadira paused, “I’m sorry,” she whispered as she pulled his right hand through.

She lifted and positioned Montrose’s elbow so the damaged thumb lay gently on his lap. The three of them stared at it silently in the lamplight for some time.

“What can you do for it?” William broke the silence. Nadira’s confidence wavered. The end of the digit was crushed, the swelling and dark color were so disfiguring that only the fragments of shattered nail remained as a landmark to identify that this was once a man’s thumb.

“I can brace it with some thin bits of wood then wrap it with comfrey and boneset.” Nadira decided tentatively. Immediately William went to the pile of kindling and pulled out his penknife, searching for the perfect splints. Nadira looked up at Montrose helplessly. “It’s all I can do.” She poured the hot water over the herbs in the bowl. His hair and beard were clean now, but still need to be trimmed, but that could wait.

William watched the whole procedure with great interest, constantly asking questions at every step. She tied off the linen strips, gently running her fingers over the now-mittened hand to smooth the material down. Not too tight lest there be more swelling in the night.

“I think I could do that now, if I had to.” William said, impressed. “You are full of wonderful surprises, Nadira. Do we feed him now?” He nodded toward the bread and wine beside him.

Montrose answered for her by reaching for the bowl with his left hand. “I am a wolf,” he said.

William poured some wine. Montrose, true to his word, consumed both bread and wine like a famished animal. Afterwards, he dropped to sleep so suddenly Nadira bent over his face to determine if he was still breathing. A great snore removed any doubt. William helped her cover him with the blanket.

“Now you can tell me what’s been going on,” Nadira pulled William down to sit beside her. “Who is this Father Septimus and why is he here?”

William glanced up at the door, and then settled in conspiratorially. "It's like this," William glanced up at the door again. "These men came three days ago with a hay cart and baggage. This man," he gestured to Montrose's snoring form, "was in the cart. Da Salvo put the priests in his chambers and has been bedding in mine. Father Septimus is an inquisitor from Seville. Father Matteo is from Toledo. They came to see the copy of the book I made. You remember," he prompted, "the one you've been reading for us." Nadira nodded, so he continued, "Father Septimus was very excited. He wanted to know where the book came from and if there were more copies. Monsieur told them what you had said about Brother Henry so they wanted to question you."

Nadira went cold. She tucked both hands inside her dress.

"But Monsieur forbade it." William finished. Nadira rubbed her icy thumbs together under her smock.

"Bless Monsieur," she said in a shaky voice.

William put a comforting arm around her. "Monsieur will not allow you to come to harm. I watched him in that meeting, Nadira. When Septimus demanded to have you brought to him, he sent Miguel to put you in your room and guard you. Monsieur and Septimus nearly came to blows over this matter. There was much shouting and shaking of fists. Do not fear."

Nadira would have liked to believe him, but she could not calm her trembling.

"Now it is my turn." His eyes lit up. "You must tell me about this man and how is it that you two are so...friendly." William squeezed her shoulders.

"Just as Monsieur is keeping me to read for him, Lord Montrose retained me to read for him this past summer. You see?"

William nodded. "He's been kind to you, then," William twisted to see her face. "Tell me. If I am to release you to him it must be with confidence he will care for you and never hurt you."

Nadira looked at him with surprise. "Release me? You misunderstand. I am indentured. Lord Montrose is my master."

"I meant released from my heart," William answered shyly. He averted his eyes so Nadira had to look beneath the golden lashes to see them in the lamplight. "Can it be that

you do not see that he loves you?" William flicked his hand at Montrose lying on the floor beside them.

"William..." She made to protest.

"No, Nadira. "You see him as a servant sees a master. I see him as a man. He looks at you as though it kills him not to take you up in his arms and consume you with kisses. I recognize that look."

"You imagine..."

"You are blind."

"I swear, William..."

He held up a hand to stop her. "And your tears. You would weep thus for any man? For any master? It cannot be so. Why do you deny it?"

Nadira opened her mouth to answer, but nothing of any sense came to mind.

"Did you not notice how his eyes did not stray from your face the entire time you were working on his hurts?" William cocked his head. "I wish you could see your face now, Nadira. You are red as a beet. You truly didn't know, did you? His eyes were not the eyes of a master watching his servant, even a master watching a pretty servant. I saw no lust in his face and I was waiting for it. Even as the splash of water soaked your gown and brought your breasts out like a sculpture of Venus and placed them nearly in his eyes as you bent over his head, I never saw him take his eyes from your face."

"You were looking at my breasts..."

"I admit it," he laughed, then turned serious, "but I would never renounce my sacred vows, as much as I have bent them and twisted them, never have they been broken. I do my share of penance as it is." His sad smile was a faded copy of the habitual grin he usually wore. He squeezed her again. "I had hoped to keep you here for years and years. I was going to teach you more Latin so you could help me copy the books." His eyes became distant. "It is sad to be so alone. There is no one, save Monsieur, who can talk to me about what I read in the manuscripts. None to share my little triumphs. None to argue points of scripture or philosophy. Monsieur is here only over the winter. Summers I sit alone copying, copying..." He turned his eyes on her again. "This summer I was copying Plato. There is a line," He quoted, "'Few persons ever really think that from the

evil of other men something of evil is transferred to themselves. And, the feeling of sorrow that we feel for others becomes our own sorrow.”

“I think it means that we feel the pain of others differently than we feel pain ourselves, and not necessarily less. Perhaps we feel it even more. In addition, that we can be contaminated by evil not only by experiencing it ourselves, but by observing it in others.” William sighed.

“I wanted to talk to someone about this, so I went to the stable. Jack told me to get out of the way; he was mucking the stalls. I went to the kitchen. Cook told me to shut up; I was interfering with the timing of his baked meats. I went to the battlements. The guards listened politely, but when I asked them what they thought about it, they laughed at me.” William covered his eyes with both hands. “I tested you that day in the Library. I asked you about Plato, and even though you had never even read his words, you had something to say about them. You thought about what I said, you understood Plato’s meaning. I knew then I wanted to keep you here forever with me. God is punishing me for the sin of pride, Nadira.” He sounded so forlorn Nadira could hardly bear it. “And now I see that this man has your heart, and you have his. He will take you away from me.”

“Do you think he will be freed?” Nadira glanced at Montrose, snoring softly beside her.

“He must, Nadira. Already what Father Septimus has done is troubling. He won’t be able to keep Lord Montrose in chains without bringing suit against him, and there is no evidence but that copied manuscript found in his baggage, and it is proven Lord Montrose is quite illiterate. Father Matteo told me that Father Septimus has previously been chastised by his own bishop for,” William searched for the right words, “being overly enthusiastic about his work. Lord Montrose’s worse offense might be dealing in stolen manuscripts.”

“He didn’t steal it,” Nadira blurted defensively.

“Don’t tell me you know where it came from?” he cried.

“Yes,” she whispered, covering her mouth.

“God. Don’t tell them, Nadira. Don’t breathe a word of it.” William took her hand in his. “I mean it.” His eyes burned her.

She could not speak, just shook her head. She would never tell.

“They would go to that place and make trouble for the scholars there. You understand?” She nodded again, imagining more deaths like Richard’s, more torture. She glanced down at Montrose again.

“This man will take care of you; I know I do not need to fear that they would take you away. Monsieur is unyielding on that issue. He won’t give you up, but I can’t help but grieve at my eventual loss. I thought you would be here forever, Nadira. I have imagined the texts we could study, the discussions before the fire in the evenings when it is too dark to read on winter nights. For I know you will one day be leaving with this man never to return and I will be sitting alone up there in the tower room for years, copying, copying, and never speaking to anyone of what I have seen. I can weep for my loss. The sin of selfishness does not reach into my heart and control my tears.” He did weep then, and Nadira held him with one arm around his shaking shoulders. She had much to think about.

Chapter Fifteen

The weak sun climbed reluctantly over the east mountains as Nadira stood on the laundry threshold rubbing her backside and pulling her fingers through her hair. It was still very cold, but thankfully there was no wind. She pulled a few wisps of straw from her hair, tossing them into the dirt. Montrose stood behind her, studying the yard.

“There seems to be an entire contingent here.”

“I don’t know, my lord.”

“A hundred men?” Now he was scanning the crown of the tower.

“Surely not. Fifty perhaps.”

“Horses?”

“Yes, My lord. The horse stable is to the north.”

He stood a few minutes longer looking north, until he made eye contact with a guard posted near the stable. The guard immediately swept back his cloak and put a hand to the pommel of his sword.

“I will fetch some breakfast, my lord.” Nadira repeated, tugging at his arm to pull him back inside. A few minutes more of Montrose’ defiant glares and there would be armed men inside the laundry with them. “Stay inside, my lord. Do not show yourself like that. Please. You antagonize them.” She tugged again.

Montrose ducked at the lintel, pausing just out of sight in the doorway. “Nadira, I must go.” He searched the room with his eyes until they fell upon his boots by the fire. “I’m going, and you are going with me.”

“No. William told me to stay. I will stay and you should stay too.”

He tugged at his bootstraps with one hand. “Don’t be a fool. It is only a matter of time before they will come for you, too. You will not be spared.” The other boot slid up his calf. He had trouble setting his heel; Nadira knelt at his feet and adjusted his boot for him.

“You cannot leave,” she said without looking up. “You will not get past the guard. You cannot run far or fight with one hand, your left hand. You are here, warm, clean, fed and alone because I vouched for your compliance.” Nadira sat back on her heels, finally meeting his eyes. “Would you foreswear me?”

He stared at her a long time. Nadira watched his mind working. He wanted to flee; his whole body was poised to flee. She could see it in the tension of his shoulders, the set of his mouth, and the way his eyes were never still. She watched as he considered her words. He tested his feet; he rubbed his bandaged hand. Finally he sighed, the shoulders slumped, his eyes closed. Nadira felt a curious sorrow, for in her victory was the defeat of this proud man.

“Trust me,” was all she could think to say, patting his foot as she rose to fetch their breakfast. “Let me feed you and shave you. You will feel differently then.”

He just shook his head, eyes on the ground.

Later, two guards entered with swords drawn, flanking the doorway. The guard captain, Juan, strode toward them with his sword sheathed. Nadira knew him from the Saturday competitions. He always took the top prizes.

He nodded to her. “You will accompany me to the solar.”

Nadira rose, straightening her skirts and extending a hand to Montrose. She pulled him to his feet, and steadied him. The two guards fell in behind them. They ascended

the stairs to the solar and entered through the opened doors. Nadira noticed a long table set up at one end and extra chairs brought in. William sat quietly in one of them. Father Matteo in another. Both Father Septimus and Da Salvo stood at the ends of the table. The guards remained posted outside in the hall. Juan closed the door and bolted it, then drew his heavy sword and positioned himself square before it, the blade planted firmly between his boots.

“Please be seated, Nadira.” Da Salvo made a graceful movement toward the chair to his left, beside William. Nadira sat obediently, her hands in her lap. All eyes turned to Montrose, tall and defiant before the table. His face was pale and his back not as straight as a man in full strength, but his former abilities were apparent in the breadth of his shoulders and the grace of his movement. Da Salvo pulled a chair out for Father Septimus, and then seated himself, addressing Montrose.

“You are Robert Longmoor, Baron Montrose?”

“I am.”

“Why have you come to Andorra?”

“I was passing through on my way to Rome.”

“And what is your business with Rome?”

Montrose did not answer.

Da Salvo continued without waiting for the answer. “We know you and your companions stopped at Coix to speak with Father Bertram. We also can see that you were well armed at the time. Your baggage contains a great many weapons, enough for a dozen men.” Da Salvo paused. He leaned over to see past Montrose and locked eyes with Nadira.

“We also know you had this young woman in your party disguised as a man.” Da Salvo caressed the tabletop with a ringed hand. “She was separated from you at the monastery.”

Montrose turned to look at Nadira as well. She responded with an uncomfortable smile, twisting her hands. All eyes were on her like coals.

“Aye. We had her in our party,” Montrose answered dryly.

“Then perhaps you will tell us what you are doing with her. Where is her family?”

Montrose did not answer. Nadira thought, he cannot answer, for there is no family. She opened her mouth to speak, but Da Salvo held up a hand for silence.

“Your cooperation will do nothing but aid you, Lord Montrose. Obstinacy will only cause you grief.”

Montrose stood straighter and turned a cold glance at Septimus. “Of that I am fully aware, Monsieur. I have no intention of being obstinate. There is no answer to your question no matter how it is phrased. I am a traveler to Rome, waylaid and disrupted by the corrupt priests at Coix; my baggage stolen, my men dispersed and my servant abducted and transported to your authority, Monsieur.”

“You lie!” Septimus was on his feet, his face mottled red. Nadira jumped up without thinking, startled by the outburst. William quickly pushed her back in her chair.

Septimus waved a ringed finger in Lord Montrose’s face. “Admit you are dealing in stolen manuscripts. Heretical manuscripts! You had one in your baggage and you pursue another! This girl is your captive,” a bony arm flew out of its sleeve and the appended finger indicated Nadira. “You serve no purpose withholding the information I want from you. Nothing but stubborn, irrational, obstinate, impudent ...”

“Father...please,” Da Salvo’s forced courtesy did nothing to stop the flow of invective.

“And here he stands, as though he is the innocent victim of conspiratorial powers intent on destroying him. This rough, ignorant, son of a bitch dares to defy me again and again. Do not listen to him. He is a liar and a thief; the Devil himself supports him and inures him to God’s holy fires! I will take him to Toledo, where no man can resist the Inquisitors ...”

The sound of the enraged priest faded to a low rumble in Nadira’s ears. Montrose’s face, at first impassive, had begun to twitch with the strain of maintaining his composure. Now she could see all manner of emotions flicker across his face, one chasing another in a flurry until all that remained was a murderous passion. Her heart pounded too loudly now for her to hear what was being said. Did these men not see what was coming? Nadira again leaped to her feet at the very instant Montrose spun about and lunged for the sputtering priest. Montrose’s hands were around the old man’s throat and in the time it took Juan to take the three strides into the center of the room the priest was quite dead,

his neck snapped with an efficient twist of Montrose's still powerful arms. The English lord dropped what was left of Septimus derisively to the floor before slumping to his knees beside the corpse, his energies spent.

Nadira intercepted Juan, hurling herself upon Montrose, knocking him the rest of the way to the floor with the force of her assault. She lay on him stretched out, her gown billowing over his legs, her hair in his face holding his arms to the floor. She had acted without thinking, seeking only to separate Montrose from Septimus; to stop Montrose from making that fatal impetuous and irrevocable act. The decision to fling herself upon him, made when she saw the glitter in his eye, came too late to benefit either of them.

Now she screwed her own eyes up tight, waiting for Juan's sword to cleave her in two. Instead a hand clutched her hair and heaved her up like one would seize a cat by the scruff. Juan sat her down hard in her chair. There seemed to be no sound in the room, though she could clearly see the mouths of Da Salvo and Father Matteo moving. Juan had the point of his sword on Montrose's neck, but had not yet thrust the blade through his throat. The dead priest lay close enough to her that she could touch his side with her slipper had she dared. Nadira pulled her feet further under the chair and William's arm kept her from falling out of it.

Her ability to hear returned as her heartbeat slowed. Juan placed his boot upon Montrose's chest. William was intent upon Da Salvo. Da Salvo and Father Matteo conversed in a language wildly punctuated with waving arms and pointing fingers. No other guards had been called. Nadira glanced at the door. No running footsteps, no bell ringing, odd that no alarm had been raised. She made to stand, expecting William to halt her, but he did not. He merely pleaded with his eyes. Nadira took tiny steps in her green silk slippers across Da Salvo's prized Bukhara, winding her way past the discolored face of the dead priest and to Juan's side. She had to know.

Juan glanced down at her before slowly removing his boot from Montrose's chest. "He lives," Juan said low, under his breath. "For now."

"My lord," she whispered. Nadira crouched beside the fallen man's head. He lay staring straight up, blinking regularly but did not answer. She touched the pale flesh of his cheek where the beard had been. He was icy. His eyes wavered at the touch but they did not seek her out. He was insensible in a strange way, as though his mind had left

him. The thick Castilian steel of Juan's blade swung past her to touch his throat not a hand's-breadth from her knees. She froze. Montrose did not react to the touch of the cold steel any more than he had to the soft caress of her finger. She realized he expected to be put to death any second, and welcomed it.

Nadira clung to the comforting stability of the thick table leg beside her. The ornate carved furrows lent their crevasses to her searching fingers. Above her, the voices that had been shouting in staccato Latin had calmed to the sibilant murmur of Castilian. She felt weak, leaning against the table, trying to listen. She heard the words, but they made no sense to her. Da Salvo's face appeared beside her. He reached for her with both hands, placing them gently on her shoulders.

"Nadira, this is an unfortunate and unforeseen development," he said unnecessarily.

She noticed the hands on her shoulders were cold, the fingernails almost blue. Standing behind him, Father Matteo's face had a pallor of its own, though he did not show the outrage Nadira expected. She herself was numb and found it difficult to be aware of any sensations. Cold hands pressed on her body, waved before her eyes, and then a sharp slap brought her back.

"What?" she shook her head.

"Can you hear me, Nadira? Look at me."

Nadira made an effort to focus her eyes on Da Salvo. He squeezed her shoulders. "I will give you Lord Montrose. Do you want him?" This seemed like a strange thing for Da Salvo to say. She blinked.

"Nadira." He shook her until it hurt.

"Yes," she heard herself say.

"Give her some wine. Pass me that wine. Nadira, drink this." Something warm and sharp was pressed between her lips. Nadira coughed and the wine burned her throat. In a moment she felt her head clear.

"I'm sorry," she looked at Da Salvo over the rim of the cup, "what did you say?"

"I said I will give you Lord Montrose if that is what you want. His life is mine at the moment. Father Matteo would like to have him as well. We can come to terms but I need to know your desire."

"Why?"

“Give her some more, William. This was quite a shock to her, Father. Perhaps we can discuss this matter at length in a few hours after she has had time to rest.”

“No.” The remaining priest had a face of stone and a voice to match. He tapped the table with a bony finger. “There will be no more surprises. In a few hours I wish to be far from this cursed place. We will settle this now, and no one will leave this room until I am satisfied.” Father Matteo sat down, folded his hands, and assumed the air of a man considering a weighty transaction that would turn in his favor. With a start Nadira realized that was exactly the situation. She quickly drank the rest of the wine William poured for her.

“Nadira,” Da Salvo spoke slowly to her, as though she were a small child. “Lord Montrose has just murdered a priest before multiple witnesses. It is my duty to turn him over to the authorities. Father Matteo wants to take him back to Toledo for imprisonment. I believe that doing so would distress you. Am I correct? Answer me, Nadira.”

Nadira looked at him over the rim of her cup, then at the priest and William. With great deliberation she forced herself to say calmly, “Monsieur, I would prefer that Lord Montrose not go with Father Matteo.”

“If I let you keep him, do you swear to remain here with me until I release you? Would you swear to do my bidding with good humor?”

“Will I be a prisoner?” she asked.

“No. Not a prisoner, but not free either. In turn I will swear to keep you from,” here he paused searching for the right words, glancing at Father Matteo, “the interest of the Church.”

“And my lord?”

“He must swear...”

“A murderer?” Father Matteo slapped the table. “I will not accept an oath from him.”

Da Salvo spun around, “You will be well compensated as agreed, Father. Leave the details to me. I give you my word.” To Nadira he moderated his voice, extending his hand to indicate Montrose’s body stretched out on the carpet. “Lord Montrose must

remain here, in the tower. Should he attempt to leave, he will be killed. He will be my prisoner. Do you understand?"

"I do, Monsieur," Nadira set the wine down on the table. "Will he be in irons?"

"No, but he will be my prisoner until I release you."

Nadira leaned down to look at Montrose at her feet. "I understand."

Da Salvo passed a hand over his face and sighed. He turned to Father Matteo. "We will discuss terms, Father. What do you wish done with the body?"

"A proper Christian burial, of course." Father Matteo made a point of looking out the window and away from the twisted body of Septimus.

Da Salvo raised his eyebrows. "And then?"

"I will retain custody of the documents."

Da Salvo nodded. He lurched to his feet, bringing Nadira up with him. He continued, "And I will provide everything you need for a safe and swift journey to Rome." To Juan he said, "Keep your sword on Lord Montrose." To William he said, "Have some servants help our guest prepare for departure, and send Raoul up with a shroud. Then I want you to go to the library and get the Lombard manuscript, the Wittenberg manuscript," he touched each of his fingers in turn, "the Toledo breviary with the handwritten addendum and..." Da Salvo looked pointedly at Father Matteo. The cleric nodded slowly. Da Salvo sighed, "and the copy of Henry's book from Coix."

William's face was painful to see. Nadira could hardly bear the sight of his agony. She averted her eyes. She knew intimately the works that encompassed Lord Montrose's ransom. She knew them like they were her friends. She had read them, felt their soft vellum, admired their illuminations and puzzled over their strange recipes. She knew that, for William, losing those documents was like having his heart pulled through his chest.

Father Matteo interrupted, "I'll keep all the manuscripts we found in the murderer's baggage as well. And I want the Byzantine Codex," he added.

Da Salvo's face darkened, but he did not protest. After a long pause he nodded to the stricken William who then flew from the room before Father Matteo could make another hateful addition to the list.

When the door had closed behind him, Da Salvo turned to Nadira. “Help Lord Montrose into my bed. We’ll keep him here for the time being. You will stay with him in this room until I come for you. Maria will bring you anything you need. Juan, you are to establish a post outside this door. No one but Maria is to go in or out without my order.” Nadira nodded as Juan sheathed his sword and strode to the door.

“Father,” Da Salvo gestured with his hands that Father Matteo should precede him. Nadira did not move from her chair until both men had stepped carefully around Septimus’ body and disappeared.

As soon as the thick bolt clanked in the jam Nadira was on her knees beside Montrose, still prone upon the thick floorboards. “My lord,” she put her hands on his face. He opened his eyes for her, but she did not see any life in them.

“I am dead,” he said.

“No, no. Father Matteo and Da Salvo have spared you.”

“You are naïve.”

“No. Did you hear? Could you hear them? Monsieur has ransomed you...”

“Ransomed me?” Montrose rose up to kneel beside her. He leaned heavily on the table leg as she had done. He stared into her face.

“With what?” he asked dangerously.

She flinched. “Some manuscripts.”

“No!” He was on his feet and to the door, leaping over the body of the priest. She knew the door was bolted. He slammed against it with his shoulder.

“Stop! Please!” She cried. She thought of the bruises and welts she had washed so tenderly the night before. He was in no shape to be throwing himself against anything.

“My lord,” she begged, placing her body between him and the planks of the solar’s door. He ended the assault on the boards. Breathing heavily, he stooped over, his hands on his thighs, then sank to his knees, leaning his head against the door. Nadira bent to touch his shoulders.

“You are exhausted, and I fear for your life. It is madness...” she did not know how to continue. What she wanted was for him to lie down in Monsieur’s bed as instructed. She wanted him to be asleep when the gardeners came for the corpse. She wanted him to obey her. She wanted him safe. She wanted him.

This revelation made her stand up straight. She had made the decision. Monsieur had asked her, ‘Do you want him?’ There could be no halfway answer, no maybes. She had, with one sentence, ransomed this man for a fortune in manuscripts. Someone else’s fortune. Why? At the time, she only knew that she did not want him to go to the Black Friars. Now she put a hand out to steady herself against the door, her arm only inches above Montrose’s head. What price did she just pay? The skin on her arms tingled.

She did not try to steady her voice. “My lord,” she said shakily, you will come to the bed.” She did not expect him to respond, and he didn’t. She reached down and put her hands under his arms, tugging. “My lord,” she repeated.

Reluctantly he leaned against the door, unfolding himself to his full height, staggering in his weakness. He towered over her. Nadira encircled his waist with her arms careful of his ribs, and led him to the great curtained bedstead. He followed where she led without protest, collapsing finally on the soft down bedding that covered Monsieur’s thick straw mattress.

With each touch of her hand, he obliged by moving his body where she directed. She laid him out as though he were a child, arranging his limbs and bringing the coverlet up to his chin. When she looked at his face, his eyes frightened her. They looked dead to her, like he had passed some point where she and the room and the tower were no longer a part of his life. When she had him where she wanted him, she climbed in beside him, standing to pull the thick red draperies around the bed. She did not want to see the gardeners do their grisly work. Already she heard noises in the hall. Part of her plan was to make it difficult for Montrose to bolt when they opened the door. She wasn’t sure he could make the rush, but she knew Juan’s sword would make certain Montrose never made it to the stairs. She sat on the edge of the bed near his head, ready to fall on him should he move. The blue eyes had told her that he would welcome death. She had seen the same message in his brother’s eyes; so similar, yet so different.

“My lord?” she whispered, stroking his hair.

“Hmm,” he murmured.

“You will stay here, in this bed.” She put her other hand on his chest to emphasize her words as the door opened. Nadira peeked through the slit in the heavy fabric. Three

men in dirty tunics and muddy guilliches entered with a length of white cloth. Nadira let the drape fall back. It was dark inside, and the air close around her.

“They are taking the body away,” she whispered.

“They will not let me live.” His voice was softer than usual.

“They promised.”

He made a desultory sound in his throat. “You place great store in men’s promises, do you not?” The soft voice broke. “You little fool.”

She felt her way to his cheek, stroked him. His hand came up to capture hers. Breathlessly she watched as he brought her tiny hand to his mouth and brushed her blackened fingertips over his lips. She watched with amazement as one tiny tear leaked from his eye and tracked its way down the side of his face into the pillow as he whispered,

“What will they do to you when I am dead?”

Chapter Sixteen

Da Salvo allowed William and Nadira to minister to Montrose in the solar. Nadira fed him, bathed his wounds and altered some clothing for him that William obtained from somewhere. Probably Monsieur’s, she thought as she fingered the fine weave.

Montrose slept almost continually. She had to awaken him to feed him the porridge and broths Maria brought her. After eating he would drop to sleep again. Nadira lay beside him, listening to his snores. A fever had warmed him on the second day alarming her, but the heat did not intensify and by the fourth day she was certain he would fully recover. The morning of the fifth day Maria woke her with the news that Nadira would be expected in the library after breakfast. She dressed quickly after waking Montrose and giving him his breakfast. Juan passed her through the door and she made her way to the top floor, slapping the trap with her palm as she reached it. William opened it and handed her up through the hole.

“Nadira, Monsieur wants us to continue with the copying. In fact, he seemed annoyed at our recent disturbance. He has actually issued me two thick candles of

beeswax, mind you, not tallow. He expects us to make up for the lost time, even after sunset.” He watched her face carefully, as though afraid she would be angry.

Nadira brushed down her skirts; coming through the trap always covered her with dust. “Certainly, William. My lord is doing much better. He does not need any more coddling.”

William sighed with relief. “I am thankful to hear that. I’ve set out the next group of manuscripts.”

Nadira went to her place by the window. The table was laid out even more carefully than usual. She sat at the bench, pulled the first leaf of paper, and positioned it in the mirror’s reflected light. William took his place and sharpened his quill. She read to him the first line of a Hebrew parable about a Father’s love for his son. As she read, translating carefully and slowly from Hebrew to Castilian, William copied her words into Latin, for he was an expert at that language. They paused every so often to read back what was translated to make certain the meaning remained. Sometime they discussed the choice of a certain word, sometimes their work stopped, as there seemed to be no corresponding word in Latin for a Hebrew or a Moorish one. Nadira would have to think about the last time she heard the word used, and describe its meaning to William. Sometimes these conversations moved into new territory.

“What do you think this means, Nadira: ‘chase the little man, catch him up, make him squeal, force him to tell you everything.’”

Nadira made a face. “I don’t know. Perhaps some kind of fairy or elf?”

William frowned. “I don’t want to put that in ink. Maybe we do just not understand what the writer is saying. That document is in Moorish? Yes?” Nadira nodded. This document was linked to others that seemed to be instructions for creating potions of some kind. “Maybe it is not really ‘little man’. What else could that word be?”

Nadira read the line again.

“Try to translate into a different language. Instead of Castilian try,” he paused, thinking, “What other languages do you know?”

“I am only fluent in Castilian and Moorish. I can read most Hebrew as well, but do not speak it. I can understand Frankish if I am in a room where it is spoken and if the

men are slowed down with wine, otherwise I have trouble. I can understand some English and some Greek, but I cannot read or write those languages well."

William looked at her with admiration. "No wonder Monsieur speaks of you as if you were a great treasure."

Nadira smiled. "I cannot take much credit for this, William. Except for severe and unpleasant lessons in Hebrew, I learned these languages imperfectly and incompletely. After all, it would have been more reasonable to teach me fine Latin, do you think? I could have gotten by much better."

William moved over to her side of the table. He pulled a heavy book down from the stand behind her and opened it to the middle, leaning closely over her shoulder. "Here is the Plato. It was copied in a clear and straight hand. Sometimes the writers use a slanted and linked script that is hard for beginners. Their words run together making deciphering difficult for the uninitiated." He pointed to the text. "This one is easy. The writer separated each word with a space between them."

Nadira leaned over the book, feeling the creamy white pages. William read it slowly to her, his ink-stained fingers lightly touching each word as a lover might stroke his mistress. He read it in Latin, then Castilian for her, indicating each word with his finger. His voice was smooth and even. She did not stop him but allowed him to turn the pages one by one. Then suddenly his voice thickened and he stopped.

"What is it?" she looked up alarmed. She had lost herself in the philosopher's arguments, enjoying the dialogue between this man Socrates and his student Glaucon.

William wiped his eyes and closed the book.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he said, replacing the book on its stand.

"What's wrong, William?"

"I've forgotten why we are up here, Nadira. Reading this book is for pleasure only. Look outside." Nadira glanced up. The sun was nearing the western mountains. He was right. Normally this time of day they would have moved their work across the room to sit at the western side of the tower and use the light from the fading sun until the last beam disappeared behind the crest of the familiar peaks. William spread his hands. "We have spent the afternoon discussing philosophy instead of copying. Monsieur will be angry."

Nadira tried to smile reassuringly. “Let us finish the Moorish medicine page. We are nearly done. When Monsieur comes in, we can show him this work. Perhaps use the translations to prepare something in the kitchen. He will not even notice we have not produced as much as normal.”

William considered this and decided it might work. He helped Nadira carry their things to the other side of the tower room. Nadira picked up the Moorish scroll again. William smoothed out his paper and dipped his pen. She read in soft measured tones, allowing extra time between lines for William to catch up. Her ears monitored his progress by the sound of the scratch of the quill on paper. When the scratching stopped, she looked up to see him examining his right hand and the quill he held delicately in his fingers.

“What is it, William? Do you have a cramp?”

“No. I’m just thinking.”

Nadira laughed. “You are *always* thinking. You are the thinkingest man I have ever known. How do you sleep at night? You must drive your bedmate to violence.”

William spoke as if he did not hear her, his eyes fixed on his fingers. “I watched you change Lord Montrose’s dressing yesterday.” He glanced up at her. “Will his thumb heal, do you know?”

“I think it will. It looks better each day. The swelling has gone down. Why?”

“What would I do if I lost the use of my hand?” he wondered.

“Oh, William.”

“No. I mean, has Lord Montrose thought about it? Has he said anything to you about using his hand again?”

“Not really, I mean, he does use it. He did use it...” she trailed off remembering what he did to Septimus with his bare hands.

“I was just thinking that for a swordsman to lose his right hand would be like me going blind. I could not bear it.”

“You might be surprised what one can bear,” she answered bitterly, not liking where this was going.

“I would not. I have thought about it before.”

“You worry too much.”

“No. I once had a terrible headache that lasted hours. I could not see even a lighted candle put to my face. I was terrified.”

“But it went away.” Nadira snapped the manuscript impatiently, reminding William what he was supposed to be doing.

“Yes,” he ignored her, “When the headache was gone my vision returned, but I spent an afternoon in Hell, Nadira. So now I am supposing: what is Lord Montrose thinking right now while we were here enjoying Plato.” His eyes were sad as he watched his fingers flex. Nadira sighed as she reached across the table and squeezed his hand gently.

“A moment ago you were afraid of Monsieur’s wrath. You have your mind on everything except your task. Is this document so dull?” She rattled the paper in her other hand. “Soon it will be time for supper. My lord is well enough to join us this evening. Perhaps we can talk about his hand and put any fears he may have to rest.”

William proved to be prophetic. When Nadira went to fetch Montrose for supper in the hall, she found him sitting alone in the near darkness, examining his hand in the light of a single candle.

“Milord?” she asked him. “Are you in pain?”

He glanced up at her briefly. “Will this heal, Nadira? Do you know?”

His words were so like William’s that Nadira faltered. Alarm spread across Montrose’s face. “Tell me!” The chair scraped the floor as he got to his feet.

“No, yes, I mean, sit down. Let me look at it.” Obediently he sat and held the hand out for her to see. He had unwound the strips of linen and removed the splints; they lay in a heap on the table. She took his hand, careful of the thumb, and turned it in the candlelight. The thumb was still purple, but the swelling had reduced to merely a minor distortion of the digit. The remnant of the crushed nail had fallen off days ago. He winced as Nadira ran the tip of her finger lightly over the joint. She realized he was holding his breath. “My lord, there is no sign of poison, and the swelling is reduced considerably. These are the signs of a good heal.”

“But will it be useful again?”

“You are asking, ‘will I wield a sword in this hand with the same strength and skill I did previously?’” He nodded.

“That I cannot tell. I do not know everything. Give it time. Stop worrying,” she urged.

She saw his eyes narrow dangerously. His chest rose and fell several times before he began moving the fingers one by one. The fingers seemed to move fairly well. The thumb waggled a bit from the base joint. Montrose sucked in his breath and met her eyes, questioning.

“You are rushing things,” she said quickly. “Let me wrap it for you.” Nadira moved closer without waiting for permission. She picked up the pieces of the dressing he had discarded and began to carefully reassemble them on his hand. He did not protest, and she avoided looking at him while she wrapped. Tenderly she smoothed the linen strips in place, hoping her touch would comfort him, for his breathing was labored and told her much about his thoughts. She tried to think of the best way to speak to him on this matter, but was loathe to provoke him. She had not spoken of the torture since that first night in the byre.

He spoke to her softly, almost absently. “After the thumbscrew they hung me from the wall of a cistern. I do not know how long. I daresay I was not conscious of time. When the cistern began to fill with water from the storm, I was brought out to the byre.”

“How can this be?” Nadira shook her head as she finished the wrap. “These are men of God, doing His work here in the place He made for all men because of His love for them. How can this be?” She despaired.

Montrose murmured, “You told me you had no God.”

“I do not. Not anymore. But the Black Friars do, and it is of their beliefs that I speak. It is their own words that are twisted, not mine. I marvel only at the hypocrisy.”

“Marvel on, then, my little one. You have been fortunate to belong to an honest man. It is only because you did not see the wickedness around you that you marvel at all. I tell you now that there is more wickedness than good in this world.”

“If that is so, then surely the world will destroy itself,” she said.

“Some say it is happening now as we speak. Whole villages have been wiped clean by the Black Death. Lately an earthquake toppled a whole city south of Rome and I heard tell of a town in Bavaria swept away in a great flood.”

“Yes,” Nadira admitted. “These stories and more like them have been preached from the street corners for years.”

“And you do not fear the end of the world? Why are you not running to the priests for the safety of your soul?” He whispered into her hair as he pulled her into his lap.

“My lord, something tells me that there is more to the story of the world.”

“And you are here to read the rest of it, is that it?”

“I am, and I will.”

“Be sure to tell me when you do, for it has weighed heavily on my mind.”

“What has?”

He turned his face away from her. Nadira smoothed the lank hair from his face in a gesture that might be considered too familiar. Ever since the murder she had not resisted the urge to touch him whenever he was close. It comforted her, feeling his returning strength beneath her fingers. He no longer flinched at her caresses.

“I do not know what to do.” He actually sounded forlorn. Nadira sat back so she could see his face. The blue eyes were troubled.

“What do you mean ‘do’? Do what?” she asked, incredulous. “You are to stay here. Remember?”

He flicked a glance at her and then looked away. She sighed.

That evening for the first time since the visit from the Dominicans, the four of them sat around the large table in the solar. Montrose had put away as much food as Nadira permitted; even so, she had to push platters of beef away from his reaching knife.

“You will regret it later, my lord, if you eat any more than you have already,” she told him. Grimly he tore bread and sopped it in the juices she collected for him. He glared at her between bites. She knew he was waiting for a time when she might be distracted by the conversation and he would be able to snag another joint from the platter in the center of the table.

In contrast, William had barely stopped talking to eat. His meal lay cold in front of him.

“My lord, Montrose, you have seen the great library at Toledo?”

Montrose nodded, chewing.

“Ah, what a glorious sight,” William sighed. “I have many times tried to persuade Monsieur to allow me to return there and copy for him.”

Da Salvo laughed lightly. “I would never see you again, my friend. Do I not have enough work for you here?”

William smiled. “Plenty of work, Monsieur.”

“And what do you have planned for me, Monsieur?” Montrose wiped his knife on the edge of the tablecloth before very deliberately setting it down in the center of the table. Da Salvo’s eyes followed the glint of metal to its resting place.

“You are not free to go, of course.” Da Salvo reached for the knife and placed it carefully next to his own.

“I plan to go as soon as I can. I will take Nadira with me. She is mine.”

“Lord Montrose. I find that highly extraordinary. Any claim you may have on her, no matter how sincere, has no legal binding. Not here, not anywhere.” It seemed as though the light from the lamps dimmed in the heavy atmosphere. Montrose scowled, his blue eyes darkening in the dim light. Nadira recognized that look and quickly attempted to disarm his gathering rage.

“Please, Monsieur,” she interrupted. “I have sworn to serve you. Lord Montrose is understandably of two minds. I have urged him to be patient.”

Da Salvo was as upset as Nadira had ever seen him. He stood and began pacing, his boots echoing in the empty hall. Montrose’s left arm moved to pull her toward him. Clearly, something of great consequence was churning Monsieur’s mind. Puzzled, Nadira looked to William for an indication of what it was, but the young priest was watching his patron with stricken eyes and could not catch hers. Nadira felt a chill. This trouble was not about her legal status at all.

Da Salvo stopped his long strides and leaned forward on the table addressing Montrose intently. “I will not allow her to leave. I understand your desire for her. You do not understand my need for her. We can come to an agreement, however.”

All eyes were on Montrose’s dark face. “You do not plan to take her by force, then,” he said flatly. “And I have been impressed with your ability to come to agreement. But

in this case, I will not relinquish her. She is not for sale to you or to anyone. Not anymore.”

“She would be little use to me if I held her against her will.”

“What ‘use’ do you plan to make of her?” Montrose pulled Nadira closer. She was squeezed uncomfortably against his left side, but did not protest.

Da Salvo paused, then straightened and continued his pacing without answering.

“Monsieur?” Montrose insisted.

William had been watching the conversation disintegrate with unusual self-control, but now he spoke up. “Monsieur, why do you not answer? Surely Nadira’s tasks here are no secret.” He turned to Montrose earnestly. “Believe me, my lord, Nadira has been well-treated and has been aiding me in copying the manuscripts Monsieur procured over this spring and summer. There is no...”

“Be silent, William.” Da Salvo returned to his seat on the bench across from Montrose and Nadira. He placed both hands palm up in front of Montrose. “William does not know what you and I know about this book, my friend.” He stared meaningfully into Montrose’s eyes, as he wiggled his right thumb. Nadira watched Montrose’s expression change. He seemed to turn inward, his eyes lowered to the table and the flush of anger that had settled on his face now faded to pallor. The arm around her waist tightened. Alarmed, she looked from man to man but there were no answers in either of the faces.

Without looking up from the table, Montrose intoned slowly. “Do you still have the book, Monsieur?”

Da Salvo pulled his hands back and placed them in his lap. He spoke so low Nadira had to strain to hear. “You might instead ask how I could have permitted Septimus to interview you knowing what I know.”

“Interview?” Montrose moved so swiftly his tunic generated a breeze that extinguished one of the candles on the table. He leaped up and had Da Salvo by the throat with his good hand. Da Salvo fell backwards onto the stones with a grunt, the bench falling to the floor with a solid thump. His cries were cut short when his air ran out. Montrose straddled him on the floor, his bandaged hand thrust into Da Salvo’s face. “This was no ‘interview’ you son of a whore!” Da Salvo’s hands went to his throat,

digging at Montrose's grip. William and Nadira pulled them apart with difficulty. Montrose stood doubled over, panting with the effort as William pulled Da Salvo to his feet. Nadira stood between them, one hand on Montrose's chest, and one on Da Salvo's.

Da Salvo coughed, held up a hand to stop William who moved to support him. "I regret your encounter with the Inquisition, Lord Montrose."

Montrose growled and lunged again for Da Salvo. Nadira pushed him back with all her strength. Any more aggression from Montrose would bring in Juan and the guards. She was amazed they had not already been summoned. "My lord, please." He staggered against the table, trembling with repressed rage. William righted the overturned bench. Nadira helped Montrose down, and then sat on his thigh, more to keep him seated than to comfort him. William led Da Salvo, rubbing his neck, to the other end of the same bench.

After he sat Da Salvo down William relit with a shaking hand the candles that had been disturbed. "I have had enough!" William was wild. "Right now, right now in this room at this time! I want to know the truth of this matter." He turned to Da Salvo. "Do you hold me against *my* will? Do your plans depend upon my good will as well?" He thumped his chest to punctuate his words. "I must be appeased. You will clear this up right now. Right now. Why such secrecy?" He pointed a slender finger at Montrose. "And you my lord, there will be no more murders, attempted murders, assaults or any other kind of violence!" His golden eyes flashed.

Nadira came off Montrose's knee. She took the little priest in her arms. He was shaking with emotion, but calmed to her touch. His body was small and soft and he smelled faintly of wine and cinnamon. Nadira led him back to his seat on the bench, put his wine in his hand.

Da Salvo nodded as he reached for the wine on the table and poured himself a cup. "My friends, please be patient."

"Do not plead for time, Monsieur. None here have the stomach for it." Montrose said wearily as he took the cup Da Salvo poured for him.

"I plead not for time, but for understanding. I find it difficult, if not impossible to convey, even to you, William, what needs to be said."

“It is time to try.” William took a long pull on his own cup and stared defiantly at his master.

Da Salvo looked at each of them before beginning. “I first learned of this infernal book when I was in Wittenberg. The scholars there were speaking of a book brought back from the last Crusade that had the answers to all questions within it. Such a thing was hard to believe, but it is harder for a man to call a priest a liar. I asked at every stop I made that summer. Many had heard of this book, though none had seen it or read it. There were many different stories as to who possessed it and how it came into their hands. By the time my season’s journeys were over, I was convinced the book existed and I was determined to find it.” Da Salvo took another drink of his wine, rubbing his throat. He made a wry face at Montrose.

“I had to be careful, as I was met with suspicion for my questions. As the next summer progressed, I was able to determine the book had traveled to Toledo or Granada. I hurried to reach those cities before winter put a stop to my travels. The Prince was kind enough to permit me to reside here in his tower until the book could be located. Of course, there is a price for his hospitality. His Highness expects a copy of this book when it is found.

“William was procured from Father Bertram at Coix to aid in my work. He has been an exemplary scholar and copyist.” Da Salvo gazed at him with real affection.

“But I must say,” Da Salvo continued, “I was not prepared for Brother Valentine’s visit this spring. He carried with him what I was sure was the book. He said he had come from Coix and that he had removed the book from Brother Henry against Henry’s wishes. He said he must flee for Rome, as the book was an item greatly desired by the Holy Father. Of course, Valentine’s departure from the Tower was delayed by an onset of some kind of bowel trouble...” Da Salvo’s lips stretched into a wicked smile. “A bout just lengthy enough for William to copy as much as possible.”

“And I wrote day and night for three interminable days,” William added.

“As did I. Fortunately, the book is not long, and we did not copy the parts we had acquired from other sources. Father Valentine recovered and set off with his prize for Rome none the wiser having spilled some of his treasure into our coffers.”

“So you have read the book,” said Montrose.

“Parts of it.”

“And you find your sanity intact?”

“Parts of it,” laughed Da Salvo, trying to lighten the mood in the room. “It is like this, my lord. We men believe what we are told. Few of us bother to test these beliefs, especially when so much of what we are told is obvious in the world around us. Fire will burn you if you touch it. Ice will freeze you and water will wet you. These things we learned at our mothers’ knees, and tested in uncomfortable and uncompromising ways.

“But how is it that some things we are told are not able to be tested? Where is God? Why does the rain fall? How does a bee fly? Why do some fall to plague while others are untouched? We are told the answers to these mysteries as well. Instead of our mothers’ skirts we turn to men in long cassocks, somberly intoning in obsolete languages. In our fear and ignorance, we turn to those who appear confident that they know the answers. And we believe them. And our minds become tarnished with their answers.” Da Salvo took a deep breath and patted William’s hand, as the priest was visibly upset by what he was hearing.

“Other shining, untarnished minds have come before us, lighting this path to understanding. But the sword of fear and ignorance has cut down their mortal forms, dissolving them as time does to all of us, to dust. Yet, their minds remain on paper. Their thoughts come to us in ink and parchment, packaged in tiny receptacles of light and wisdom. These vessels of knowledge have encoded in them the only thing immortal to a man: his soul. I have collected the minds of many great men, and a few women,” Da Salvo smiled at Nadira. “Perhaps later we shall read the poetry of some of them one evening. I find the minds of women to be particularly ethereal.”

He turned back to Montrose, “But now I will answer your question. When the great minds are encountered by the ignorant, a change takes place, a struggle in the minds of the men who read them. In that struggle lies the danger of madness, for should one idea take root where a conflicting one resides there can be no peace for that man. He will fall into a fear that ultimately leads to despair. This is what happened to Brother Henry. I went to Coix to interview him after Valentine’s departure. He was raving, as you remember, and violent. In his mind battled the two most terrifying thoughts for such a

man: his complete reliance on God, The Father, and the direct experience of knowing that there is no god.”

“Surely you jest, Monsieur,” William said quietly.

Da Salvo leaned over to lay his arm across William’s shoulders. “William, you see why I appear to be secretive. This knowledge is no secret to the initiated, but to those still living in the ignorance of childhood it is a great evil. To admit there is no god is to damn the world to cycles of despair and destruction with no hope of ending. That is how it appears to the simple man. It is not the truth, however. Far from it.”

“I have heard these humanistic arguments before...”

“Yes, but not from me. And not in this context. I want you to know, that had this confession not been forced on me by our passionate guest, I would have broken this to you gently, and in a more meaningful way.”

“I would still have resisted.”

“Perhaps. However...”

“Gentlemen. I do not mean to be rude.” Montrose interrupted with some sarcasm, “but I still demand to know to what use you plan to put this maiden.”

Da Salvo sighed. He leaned forward and took Nadira’s hand. “Nadira, your mind is unfettered by any dogma. Only you can look into the phial of light that is this book and tell me what you see without the danger of madness. I want your eyes and your heart to see what I cannot and bring it back to me, that I may understand more of what I desire.”

Montrose took her wrist and pulled her back from Da Salvo’s touch. “I, too, have retained Nadira to read this book for me,” he said, “but not for any desire to see its truths, but to identify it so it may be destroyed. My brother told me it would be used to summon daemons that will bring death and pestilence upon the world through the evils of its words. He told me the Holy Father would use the book as an instrument of his lust for power and bring suffering, not enlightenment, to all men.”

Da Salvo spread his hands on the table. “As with all great instruments, there is good and evil in how it is played. A horn’s delicate tremuloso can be made to pierce the ear with pain by the inept player. So it is with this book. In the hands of the wrong man, the power of its liberation can cause great suffering. Even to an individual as Brother Henry. No daemon sapped his mind. The book did not torch him. Brother Henry is a victim of

his own ironclad beliefs. He could not open his awareness for the torrent and the waves then crashed through the barred doors of his mind, breaking it.”

Montrose thought about this, rubbing the short stubble of his beard. Nadira looked to William, but the priest was staring unseeing into his cup, which he held clasped tightly in both hands. Da Salvo leaned back, stretching his arms. Nadira met his eyes and he smiled at her.

“I have heard from all but you, little one. Do you feel your mind stretching?”

Nadira smiled thinly. She pointed her chin toward William staring unmoving. “It is his mind that should worry you, Monsieur.”

“This is naught but a philosophy lesson, taught by the ancient heathens, my friend,” he said with great compassion to the little friar.

“No. It is not.” William’s face twisted as though he felt a great pain.

“Drink your wine, William, then to bed.” Da Salvo gently pushed his cup toward the little friar.

“No, Monsieur,” Nadira interrupted. “Do not send him to such a dark place when his thoughts have taken him there already. Look at me, William,” she commanded. His gaze lifted slowly from the dark cup to the liquid of her eyes. She peered into his heart, his eyes darkened by doubt and fear. “William. What did Plato say about such things? Surely, such a wise man had something to say about the minds of men in the face of the unknown. Remember his words and tell me now.” She held his face up to hers insisting. Slowly she saw a glimmer appear and grow. William reached up and removed her hands from his face, but held them together in his own.

“He said, ‘Let each one of us leave every other kind of knowledge and seek and follow one thing only: perhaps he may be able to find someone who will make him discern between good and evil, and so to choose always and everywhere the better life.’” William quoted unsteadily.

“You are seeking knowledge, William. This cannot be evil.” Nadira pressed her cheek against his.

“Oh, Nadira,” Da Salvo chuckled. “You are such an innocent and I do so love you for it. There is a story in scripture about the first man and the first woman God created.

He placed them in a beautiful garden for His most important test. He said, “You may eat the fruit of all the trees save one.”

“I know this story, Monsieur,” Nadira said dryly. “Everyone knows this story.”

“Then you can understand how William must see the search for knowledge as inherently evil.”

“Yet I know he does not. Do you, William?” Nadira asked him, intent on his eyes.

William sighed and released her hands. “I have been indulging myself these many years. Always wanting to know more, to see more, and to share the ideas of others. Tonight, however my journey has taken me back to the beginning. I must think about this.”

“It is late.” Montrose stood. “Where shall I sleep, Monsieur? I shall not take your bed forever. It is time I return it to you.”

Da Salvo bowed low. “I will not separate you. I have no objection to your claim on her, Lord Montrose, only to the spoiling of her mind.” To Nadira he said, “Take him if you determine he is fit to leave this room. I know you have much to discuss even at this late hour. Try to make him see this tower as a sanctuary and not so much a prison. Tell him you have been the recipient of my finest hospitality for these long weeks. I ask this of you, my dear, for his eyes tell me he will not hear me say these things.”

Da Salvo grasped William’s shoulder. “And you, my son. You must not trouble yourself over this matter. Tomorrow will be like today and the day after. You can be comfortable in the stability of your place here.” He squeezed.

Nadira looked into each of the three faces. Da Salvo was uneasy. Montrose was weary. William looked ghastly in the candlelight. She moved closer to him and embraced him from behind around his shoulders as he sat huddled over the table.

“William,” she whispered into his ear, “we will talk tomorrow.” William did not answer, but he reached up and squeezed her hand.

Nadira released him with a pat on his shoulder and said goodnight to Da Salvo. She led Montrose up the cold stairs to her chamber. He followed wearily on her heels. Maria lay sleeping on her pallet by the fire. Nadira did not disturb her, but lightly knelt beside her, stirring the dying fire and placing another log end on the glowing coals.

Montrose fell heavily into her bed. “My head hurts,” he said simply.

Chapter Seventeen

Montrose was asleep almost the moment he fell into her bed. Nadira stared at him for some long moments, weighing her decision. She glanced at Maria sleeping before the fire on her pallet. *Plenty of room there.* She turned back to the bed. *But softer here, and warmer even than by the fire.* She smiled, covered him with a blanket and crawled in beside him.

She lay awake, looking at the rafters and thinking. Monsieur had excited her with his ideas, and the prospects of learning. New thoughts. New ideas. A realm beyond eating and sleeping and keeping dry and warm. She turned her head. Montrose lay on his back, his mouth slightly open, snoring softly. *And he is thoroughly distressed.* She thought about his unexpressed grief for his brother, his visible worry for Garreth and Alisdair, and his despair over his crippling injury. Nadira frowned. *This is a realm I cannot explore in a cart or on horseback. This is real, but untouchable. No poultice will heal this hurt. But what will?* Her eyes darted back and forth as she searched her memory for an answer. What can ease his anguish? She startled, blinking as the answer came to her. *Only action.*

That is why he wants to go. Nadira rolled over to study his face. He must keep moving or drown. If he stays too long in one place his thoughts will pull him down to murky depths. *But I do not want to go. I want to eat those endpapers one day.*

Beside her the snores became louder, then Montrose woke with a start, sitting up and fumbling in the dark for his imagined sword. The searching hand came to rest on her thigh instead of his blade. She smiled and whispered, "Touché, my lord."

"Jesus, God. I was in some dark wood." He shook his head.

"You were dreaming."

"Am I still? Are you in my bed?" The hand on her thigh squeezed gently.

"No, my lord, you are in my bed," Nadira lifted his hand and placed it on the blankets between them.

"Then I am in Hell if I lay beside you and cannot touch you."

Nadira nodded in the soft light, unsure if he could see her. “I fear your touch, my lord,” she whispered hoarsely. “And I desire it.” For all the hours she had spent at his side caring for him, cleaning him, feeding him, touching him, she knew that this moment would come. She had been over and over it in her mind.

He was silent. Nadira could see the glitter of the low firelight reflected in his eyes. He nodded to himself, then his hand moved to touch her again. “I know what you fear,” he whispered.

Nadira raised her eyebrows. She had imagined arguments, entreaties, even a chase around a room, but not these words. “You do?”

His voice was low and even, careful of the sleeping Maria. “Your mother, my mother...I know that love is death.”

Nadira sat up quickly. That was not what she feared. This is what he fears. *Not my fear. His. My fear is bondage, not death.*

He continued in a broken voice. “You are so small. So small.” One finger traced her thigh from her knee to her waist. “My child would kill you.”

Nadira tried to calm herself; the sound of her breath was loud in the dark. She took his hand, no longer warm but chilled with his fear. “Robert,” she spoke his name for the first time, “Love is not death.”

“It is.”

“It is not.” She squeezed his hand. “I will prove it to you.”

“No.”

Nadira leaned over his chest; his hand tucked between her breasts, and kissed him gently on his mouth. He let her. She pulled back to smile at him.

“Are you dead?” she teased.

“Yes.”

“Rob...”

“You cannot understand...I...”

Nadira interrupted by bending over and kissing him again, this time harder and with intent, lying nearly full across his body. She took his shoulders in her hands, then moved her kisses along his bearded jaw and toward his ear. He halfheartedly tried to move her

off but Nadira resisted, resting her teeth on his earlobe until she felt a firm masculine response against her thigh.

“There,” she whispered. “You are very much alive.”

“Jesus, God, woman.”

“Do not move,” she warned. She moved her leg, lightly brushing the proof, feeling him shudder against her touch.

“I cannot without embarrassing myself.”

Nadira kissed his cheek. “Good. Then you concede defeat?”

“Yes. Please. Stop...”

“You are defeated with your own sword,” she teased, removing her leg from that sword.

“Oh God, no. Don’t make me laugh. No...” He gasped.

Nadira felt him shake with the effort to suppress his laughter. She hugged him close, burying his mouth in her short hair. She put her lips to his ear again. “Never tell me that love is death. Never.” She squeezed his shoulders for emphasis. “We all die, Robert. All of us. Whether we live short lives full of love or long ones filled with fear. Do you understand me?”

He took her by the waist and lifted her over him so he could see her face. Nadira watched his eyes dart over her, searching. She smiled her love for him.

“Woman,” he swallowed. “Who are you?”

Winter marched on day by day. Some weeks there was snow, some the ground lay bare and frozen. Every day but Sunday found Nadira in the tower with William reading and copying as before, but now there was a difference. Montrose spent his time there, too, listening, fingering Da Salvo’s curiosities with his left hand, his right still healing slowly.

Nadira examined it every day. It appeared the joint would never fully bend again. He could hold items, but not securely. Montrose had no chance to test his grip with a real sword, but he lifted scrolls and parried the air with them until William protested. Nadira

laughed as the little friar chased after the big man trying to snatch the precious manuscripts from his hand.

Some days Da Salvo joined them, but more often, he was in the solar doing work of his own. Nadira knew he was preparing something, but never had the courage to ask. She thought he may refuse to speak of it, and she feared greatly that he might wish to discuss his work. She knew that whatever the task he had set for himself, it must be complete by the spring. Montrose was restless and never warmed up to Da Salvo's offer of friendship. His eyes lay suspiciously on Da Salvo and on William whenever the two were in the same room together.

Montrose glowered from the window where he sat massaging his thumb and watching the guard practice in the yard. "You do not wish me to claim her, cleric, when you cannot have her for yourself."

William reddened. Nadira rolled her eyes. "Please." She squeezed William's hand. Montrose antagonized the scribe whenever he was bored or agitated. This jibe was merely one of many Nadira and William had been forced to endure in the past month. "He is jealous of you, William," she whispered.

"I know," he whispered back. "He is right."

"I can take her elsewhere to marry her."

"You cannot marry her, my lord, and you know it very well." William bent over his pen, also tired of the familiar repartee. "No church will post the banns. No court will honor it. She will not inherit your lands. Your children will not."

Montrose grunted. "So be it. I have not seen my land in more than fifteen years. My brother-in-law holds it for me now. I have no wish to return. He pays me well to stay away." Montrose turned from the window. "As for children, I do not desire them either. I resist the urge to bring innocents into this wicked world." He shook out his hand, inspecting its condition for the hundredth time. "Soon I will be doing the Devil's work. Or the Lord's. I shall know which soon enough when I am dead."

"What do you mean?" Nadira asked softly. His tone frightened her. He was prone to melancholy, and periodically needed to be brought back. Nadira pushed back the bench in case she needed to get up.

Montrose tilted his chin in her direction. "Only that when this business of the book settled, there are other tasks I have set before me. There is the matter of my brother's murderers. There is Alisdair and Garreth. None can tell me where they are, if they live or lie cold in the ground this winter. I have things to do." He looked out the window again, "I cannot wait for spring." He flexed his hand.

"Then you plan to leave here." Nadira smiled at the glee in William's voice.

Montrose did not answer, but turned from the window and looked her full in the eye. "Come as my wife. I will honor you as such regardless of the law. I will swear an oath to you today if that will secure your faith and trust in me."

"I do not need another oath. You have my trust. I fear only that by traveling with you without legal claim, I may be taken from you at some point."

"Anyone who tries would be a fool. Then they would be dead."

Nadira quickly lowered her eyes so he could not see them. She did not have the heart to remind him that she already had, in fact, been stolen from him once. As much as she loved him, and trusted his sincerity, the specter of such a repeat occurrence frightened her more than anything else she could imagine. She moved too late. He saw the fear. Montrose was at her side in two great strides of his long legs. He took her in his arms.

"I cannot be fooled again. From now on, I trust no one. Not a priest, not a friend. No one. It will not happen again. Not on my life." He lifted her chin and bent to kiss her. When he finished, he searched her eyes to see if she believed him. "I would die first. Do you believe me?" he asked.

She nodded. She believed him. The fear did not leave her, however. He would die defending her, but then she would remain, belonging to whoever claimed her as his body lay cooling on the blood-soaked earth. She had seen it in the mountains. John and then Marcus. She did not try to stop the tears that squeezed from her eyes.

"Please, both of you." William spoke without looking up from his work. "Monsieur remains lord of this tower. None depart except by his leave. He has been courteous to you, Lord Montrose, but I swear, should you try to leave with Nadira you will find yourself at the point of a knife. You may be powerful, but no man, no matter how strong, can fight his way past an army. Monsieur has set the entire guard on watch for you. You might be able to leave alone, but with Nadira you would be stopped."

Nadira could see that Montrose knew this already. He barely changed his expression. Instead, he picked up the book William was reading. “When will Monsieur be finished with the services of my wife?” he asked.

“Ask me directly,” Da Salvo emerged though the trap. Montrose looked up, his hand returned the book to William.

“When will my wife’s services no longer be required?” He repeated.

“She is not your wife. Nor is she your property. However, I will acknowledge your claim on her, Sir, but your cooperation is the price for your room and board, and my patience.”

“And if I refuse to pay?”

“There is a place for debtors...”

Nadira could bear the parrying no longer. “Gentlemen. We can come to an agreement.” She tugged on Montrose’s arm until he stopped glaring at Da Salvo and replaced his sour expression with one that was merely cross.

“I have found what I need,” Da Salvo continued. “William and Nadira have translated the documents pertaining to the elixir...”

“The poison, you mean,” Montrose took a long step toward Da Salvo. Nadira held him back.

“Listen,” she soothed.

“Your threats are beginning to annoy me, Montrose.” Da Salvo’s face lost all of its good humor and he no longer made pretense of courtesy. “I will not be hindered. If necessary I will have you again in chains!”

“My lord, you do us both a disservice to our host,” Nadira chastised Montrose, hanging on his arm as his glower deepened. “Please. Would you feel better in the kitchens or the stable? Maybe to your chamber to sleep.”

Her entreaties were effective, for Montrose must have realized he would rather be nowhere else than in this room.

His face softened, though his eyes remained hard. “Forgive me, Monsieur, for my rude behavior and bad temper. I will strive to keep a good humor from now on.” He bowed. “And hold my tongue.”

Da Salvo looked doubtful, but did not retort. "We shall have a very light supper, then retire to this room. Nadira will consume the elixir," he watched Montrose carefully for a violent reaction. When there was none, he continued, "Then read to me from the copy. William will take down what she says."

William began to clear his table. "I will be ready. I prepared more ink yesterday, and Cook brought me a handful of goose quills."

"Very well. Preparations for you, Nadira, will be more involved. I have had Maria fill the cauldron in the laundry with fresh water from the spring. She will bathe you in salt water and selected herbs, then dress you."

"Now?" Nadira puzzled.

"No. After supper. I must have more candles brought up and the floor swept. Perhaps all of you should rest now. It will be a late night." He looked long and hard at each of them in turn before disappearing through the trap. Montrose waited until after he had completely disappeared before exploding.

"We are getting out of here, now! Get your things, Nadira. What, shoes? Cloak? We are leaving." He was pacing back and forth before the windows rubbing his hands together, but not attempting to actually leave the room. William and Nadira watched him quietly from the table until his strides shortened somewhat. He turned on them. "What? Why aren't you moving?"

"I know you are frightened..." Nadira began slowly.

"Bugger that! I'm terrified."

"Please," she sighed. "I'm not afraid. I can do this."

"But I cannot. I cannot allow you to endanger yourself in this way."

"I will be here the whole time. I will not be going anywhere. You can stay here with me," she pleaded.

"But you will, won't you. And you will be going somewhere where I won't be able to protect you." He stopped pacing. "I keep thinking of Henry. Richard."

William cleared his throat. "I won't let Monsieur harm her, my lord."

Montrose face darkened. "What can you do, Cleric?"

"I will be praying."

“You do that, Priest,” he growled. To Nadira he said, “You are right. I will be right here the whole time. If anything happens to you, Da Salvo will follow on your heels.”

Their supper was light, as planned. It consisted of some weak broth and coarse bread. Da Salvo watched her eat, pushing more bread to her when her bowl was empty. He gave her some grapes and watched her eat each one. Nadira was uncomfortable with the scrutiny and Montrose did not make it any easier. He ate not a bite, though she thought he must be famished. He stared malevolently at Da Salvo throughout the meal. Nadira sighed, and popped a smooth grape into her mouth. She had given up trying to reconcile the two men. So be it.

Later, the three of them waited uncomfortably for Da Salvo in the study. The sun had just set, and William lit several thick beeswax candles and set out his writing supplies on the table. Her own preparations had been lengthy but pleasant. Maria had drawn a bath in the great tub. She sat soaking in the softened water, fragrant with dried lavender. Maria washed her hair with a mild soap and rinsed it several times. Nadira closed her eyes with pleasure. When the bath was over, Maria dressed her in a clean white gown. “What is next?” Nadira asked.

Maria indicated a small wood bowl filled with a dried herb. Nadira reached a languid arm out and brought it to her nose. She did not recognize it. It smelled somewhat like camphor, but much more pleasant.

“What are you to do with this?”

“I’m to brew a rich infusion, then strain it, then pour the cooled water over your head and into your hair, then carefully allow your hair to dry without rubbing with cloths.”

“He doesn’t think I have the scratchies, does he?”

Maria had laughed. “Nay, I thought the same thing and told him so. He thought that was funny too. No, this herb is for some’t else.”

Da Salvo entered through the trap, ending the reverie. Several servants accompanied him carrying a number of items in baskets and crates. Da Salvo had them set their bundles near the table. Nadira watched as one man set down an impressive wine jar and four cups. Da Salvo gestured for the men to hurry. He shifted impatiently until they filed one by one down through the hole in the floor. Then he closed and locked the trap by putting a bar through two iron rings in the floor. They watched unspeaking as he moved

the table to the center of the room and placed a waist-high candle rack at each side of the table. William moved to place a thick yellow pillar on each stand and lit each one.

“If you would, please be seated.”

Montrose sat on the bench and pulled Nadira into his lap. William sat across from them.

Da Salvo drew some items from the baggage near the table. First, he set a short wide candle in the center of the table, then a large, shallow black pottery bowl next to it. Into the bowl he poured a greenish brown liquid from a spouted pot. The odor escaped immediately filling the room with a rich, but sharp scent. Nadira recognized the herb in her hair rinse. It made her eyes sting in this concentrated form. Montrose sneezed.

“Mugwort.” William poked a finger into the liquid. “Fascinating.”

“Do not get too close, yet,” Da Salvo warned them. “I’m not ready.”

He pulled a heavy sack from the floor and set it on the table. Carefully he pulled a fragile covered ewer out and placed it near the candle. Next came an earthenware cup with no handle and an hourglass. Lastly, he pulled out a smaller sack tied with string. He bent to carry the crates to the wall of the tower and pick up a book from its place on the shelf. He brought it back and set it carefully beside the other items, and then stood back, hands on hips surveying the setting. William poured wine into each of the cups.

“Yes, that’s it.” Da Salvo nodded to himself. He remained standing as he lifted the tiny lid from the ewer and poured a viscous brown fluid into the cup. Nadira felt all Montrose’s muscles go rigid around her. His arms tightened and he put his cheek to the side of her head. His breath labored in her ear. She squeezed the arm that encircled her waist, reassuring him. Da Salvo handed the cup to her, his brown eyes danced with excitement; there was a flush to his cheeks above the grizzled beard. Nadira took the cup and looked into it. It smelled like dirt. With a grimace she drained the cup, gulping quickly so as not to taste it. Montrose squeezed her tighter. In her ear she heard him murmur, “You are mine.” Da Salvo smiled, then handed her a cup of wine. “To take the taste away,” he said. Nadira downed the wine as well, though the taste of the elixir was not as bad as she expected.

“What now?” she asked. Montrose was hurting her; she wiggled a bit to get him to loosen up.

Da Salvo settled himself on the bench across from her. “You sit there quietly. There will be some time before it takes effect.” He reached across the table and turned the hourglass over. She felt a tingling in her middle, whether from the excitement, the wine or the elixir she did not know. Her eyes followed Da Salvo around the table as he wrote on some paper. William was deep in prayer at his end. Montrose was quietly grinding his teeth in her ear. Finally, Da Salvo finished his notes and pushed the book across the table to Nadira. “Start reading here,” he indicated with a jeweled finger. “Tell me when the words begin to blur.”

Nadira complied. Da Salvo had indicated a passage about peace being the natural state of being for mankind, and how violence and oppression were the forces of the baser instincts and to be ardently resisted. She droned on, the warmth of the large candles and Montrose’s body lulled her along with the low sound of her voice. As she read, the words began to swim together. She continued to read until they seemed to break apart into the individual letters, which then chased one another across the page and onto the table. She looked up.

“Good, good,” Da Salvo murmured in low honey tones. “Listen to her, William and write down every word. Nadira, hear the sound of my voice. Allow it to bring you back should you get lost.” Nadira heard the sound of his voice as though it were far away, or behind a closed door. She felt Montrose’s arms around her as though they were on fire. She resisted their burn, resenting the confining pressure on her body.

Suddenly she was free. She floated up to the ceiling of the tower and looked down. Three men were staring intently at a young woman in a white dress. Her mind felt thick and slow. How could she be so dull? The woman in the white dress was she. She could not see as clearly as she wanted to. She thought, “I’m too far away.” As soon as the thought left her mind, she found herself hovering just over their heads.

Each man had a faint glow around him. William was shimmering blue, Da Salvo a golden yellow, but Montrose emanated a disturbing ruddy brown. Every now and then, a flash of white would shimmer around his form. Fascinated, Nadira put out a hand to the woman in his arms. Her eyes were open, but not seeing. A faint white light surrounded her. Her hand went into the light and simultaneously a shiver spread over the floating

body. A thrill passed through her and her thoughts cleared. At the same time she saw the light around her other body thicken.

Nadira was filled with joy. Looking from man to man, she saw Da Salvo's lips moving. He was talking to her other body but she could not hear him. She reached out and touched the brown and red surrounding Montrose. Instantly she was overwhelmed with an intense terror. She pulled her hand back. It passed. Tentatively she stretched but the tip of one finger into that red maelstrom of swirling color. The heat of the fear passed to her finger and she realized with wonder that she was feeling Montrose, not herself.

This thrilled her as much as the floating sensation. By willing herself, she found that she could move. She stretched a hand to William's blue light. He was excited and alert. Her hand moved to Da Salvo's golden light. Da Salvo was full of joy and curiosity. The red lights of Montrose's body drew her back with an intense swelling of pity and love for him.

Da Salvo was still talking to the white form, his beard moving up and down. Nadira heard not a word. She reached her hand out again, allowing it to go completely through Da Salvo's head. Nothing. She touched his throat and felt a hum. She placed her hand through his chest and felt his heart beating. In her mind appeared an image of a book. It was large, but not thick, and covered with glittering jewels. Nadira released Da Salvo and tried to touch the image. Yes, she touched the beautiful book, it was smooth and cool, the jewels like little freezing bumps. When her hand was in the image, a thrill resonated in her middle. She clutched it with both hands, desiring it.

She felt a rushing and heard the sound of a gale in the trees. There was a sharp flash and she was no longer in the tower room. *Where am I?* She looked around. She was still hovering a man's height above the ground. Around her were tall walls hanging with glorious tapestries. There was no boundary between the wall hangings and the space between them.

Nadira stared, fascinated before her eyes fell on a stand in the center of the room. The edges of this object, too, were blurry, but there was no mistaking the glittering book on the stand. She willed herself closer, imagining the book in a larger image. There it was. She reached her hand out, but it went right through the cover. She felt the leather and the wood of its binding, heard the lowing of cattle and the rustle of leaves as though

the book were alive. A shiver went through her. She had never felt such bliss before. It was as though there could be no more mysteries. Everything she could imagine was spread out before her like a spectacular feast.

As she was about to propel herself through the tall window, she felt a strong tug at the back of her neck. She frowned to herself, saying 'no', but it was no use. She knew she was being called back. In a blink of an eye, the *whoosh* of wind in the trees blew through her ears and she heard a sharp crack, like the ring of an axe on a cold day... she was back in her body, and sitting tightly between the knees of a large man.

Nadira gasped.

"Nadira, speak to me!" Montrose's voice was loud in her ear, the first sounds she had heard since the elixir took effect. She took a few deep breaths, feeling herself again. As her vision cleared, she saw first Da Salvo, then William across the table. Montrose was kissing her head repeatedly with relief.

"I'm fine. Do not worry; I am well," she whispered.

"It worked, didn't it!" Da Salvo's exaltation was palatable. It seemed strange now to look at him and not see the golden aura about his form.

"Yes. What did I say?" She looked at William. Before him lay the creamy sheets of paper, blank.

"Not a word." His weak smile trembled.

"What did you see?" Da Salvo leaned forward eagerly. "Did you hear me talking to you? Asking you questions?"

Nadira smiled blissfully. She would tell it all, but first she turned and leaned back so she could see Montrose's face above hers. She looked at him for a moment, he was pale, the blue eyes had become nearly black in the dim light from the candles. The eyes were moving rapidly across her, up and down.

"I am well, my lord," she repeated. She put a hand to his lips. He kissed the fingers, closing his eyes with relief. "Don't worry, so. I saw you, Milord. I saw you worrying. I am fine. Did you feel me telling you that?" she finished dreamily, remembering.

To Da Salvo she said, "I saw you speaking Monsieur, but could not hear you."

"I was asking you to find the book. Did you see it...there?"

Nadira told them about her journey. Their eyes did not move from her face in the telling. She told them every detail, smiling with the recollection of the blissful state between worlds. The moon had set before she finished. Da Salvo began tapping his hands on the table with glee.

“Let’s do it again!”

“No! Damn your eyes, you bastard,” Montrose’s weary voice lacked the energy behind the words. “Can you not see she is exhausted?”

Da Salvo ignored the outburst and eagerly picked up the ewer. His face fell when he looked inside. “You will get your wish, Montrose. We will have to wait for next time. Go to bed, then. Meet me here tomorrow night. I will prepare another potion.”

William stood. Da Salvo started up and captured her in a great hug. “Thank you, Nadira,” he said to her.

Montrose took her arm and pulled her away from Da Salvo and toward the stair. They made their way quickly down to the next floor. Nadira still feeling a little like she was floating. The walls seemed to move out of her way as they descended. She was surprised to see Juan at her chamber door. The guard stood from where he had been lounging on the stones.

“Juan?” she asked.

“Monsieur has me here to keep you safe in your room,” he glanced at Montrose.

“I’ll keep her safe,” Montrose said shortly.

“Nay. Monsieur said she might wander out and fall. I will not leave this post.”

The two men stared at each other. Montrose opened the door and gently pushed her inside, too tired to argue. Maria met them at the door.

“Did it go well, Miss?” she asked brightly.

“Yes, Maria. We are just very, very tired.” Nadira answered. The bed looked lusciously soft to her now. She climbed in, pulled the blankets to her chin. Montrose sat heavily on the side of the bed. Maria came over to help him remove his boots. One by one, Nadira heard them drop to the floor. When she closed her eyes, she still saw colorful swirls and patterns before them. She watched the pretty shapes float to and fro. She felt a little light-headed as well. She seemed to roll back and forth, as Montrose shifted, removing his outer clothing. Without opening her eyes, she could see Maria

carrying his breeches and jerkin to the chair by the fire. The sounds tasted sweet and a little spicy. She licked her lips, floating.

Her dreamy reverie was interrupted as Montrose joined her beneath the blankets. She sighed as he caught her up in his arms. She snuggled against his chest, the wiry hairs scratched her cheek, but it was a good scratch. She sighed again with pleasure.

“Were you frightened?” he asked softly.

“No. Not at all,” she answered.

“Not even when you were hanging above our heads?” He was incredulous.

“No. It was great fun. I’m eager to do it again.”

“I’m not,” he said unnecessarily.

Chapter Eighteen

The next night found them in the same situation and again Nadira drank the dirt-flavored elixir and a cup of wine. This time, however, instead of having Nadira read from the book while she waited, Da Salvo wrote a series of questions in large letters on William’s paper.

“Since you cannot hear me when I speak, try to read this instead.”

Nadira looked at what he had written. ‘Where is the book?’ and ‘Who is using it?’

“Can you write a question for me?” Montrose asked. Nadira and William looked at him with amazement.

“Certainly,” Da Salvo was pleased to be asked.

“Ask where Alisdair and Garreth are.” Nadira watched Da Salvo write in large block letters, ‘Where are Alisdair and Garreth?’

The letters began to link their serifs and dance. She laughed. As the room began its familiar spin, she leaned forward on the table, ready. Montrose quickly got up and took her in his arms again. She relaxed against him, letting her body sink down and fly up at the same time. Again! The thrill!

She looked about the room. Again, she saw the vibrant colors, but was disappointingly deaf. The three men were looking up at the ceiling, instead of at her white-clad body. She laughed, but it made no sound. Instead, she saw blue ripples

emanate from her floating body and encompass the room. She laughed again, but then remembered her task. It seemed so pointless now. She wanted to go flying.

A movement caught her eye. Oh yes, Monsieur wants her to do something. What is it? He wants me to go flying! I am a bird, she thought. White wings flapped at the corners of her eyes. Then she saw that movement again, that fluttering. It was Da Salvo, tapping at a piece of paper on the table, looking up at the ceiling. He was getting so tiresome. Nevertheless, he was the one who had given her the potion. He was the originator of this wild ride. She swooped down and tried to read the paper.

The dancing letters would not hold still. She reached her hand out to grab them and make them stand at attention. Her hand went through the page, but as it did, her finger touched a large 'A'. In that 'A' she smelled sweat and saw a flash of red hair. Yes, this 'A' was Alisdair. She thought about him, called his face to mind. He was the one always laughing and telling jokes. In her mind she embraced him, greeted him with a kiss on his cheek. There was a familiar *whoosh* and the blur of color before she burst out coming to a sudden stop over the tops of some trees in the moonlight. She looked down upon an army encamped by a large river. She brought the 'A' to mind and allowed her body to gracefully float through the trees to a small tent. It was really just a large blanket held up with sticks. It had been raining, but it was clear now. Men moved back and forth among small campfires, she could hear nothing, but the images sharpened as she made the effort to look at everything.

Before this small tent were two sleeping forms rolled in blankets before a dying fire. She peeked inside. The tent did not shelter their bodies, but their baggage. She reached an ephemeral hand into the nearest rolled form. Images exploded in her brain, Battles, journeys, heat, cold, damp, some kind of ship voyage rolled her side-to-side, she felt a twinge of nausea from that image. The images flew fast by her, allowing her only a peek before metamorphosing into something else. An image of a red-haired woman appeared. She was young and pretty, her face full of freckles and a wide, playful smile. Nadira saw her embracing a large man. They were laughing and rolling on the ground. Large fires burned all around their images. The man pulled her dress off then reached for her massive breasts. Nadira pulled her hand out of the roll. This must be Alisdair. Her body floated to the larger roll. A tentative finger pushed through this man's head. She got the

images of roasted meats and huge crocks of ale. This must be Garreth. Her heart expanded with love for her companions. They were with an army. Whose? Robert will ask when I get back.

She looked around, willed herself to rise above the trees again. She was learning quickly how to manipulate this environment. She closed her eyes and formed this thought, 'whose army is this?' She did not flinch as the *whoosh* took her to a larger tent. This one had support poles holding sturdy canvas and was taller than a man. A pennant flew from the top post, blue and gold. The French. 'Where are they?' The flash took her inside the tent before a camp table where two candles burned on the edges of a rolled-out map. She leaned over the table, but as with the words back at the Tower, these words and lines swirled and danced before her eyes. She looked around the tent. The French commander lay sleeping in thick furs, a guard standing at his side. She moved her hand through the commander's head. His dreams were of a delicate woman in green silk. She had smiling green eyes and golden hair not yet faded, though she was no longer young. Nadira pulled her hand out. How would she find out where they were? She concentrated 'who can show me where they are?' she asked. The *whoosh* shot her like an arrow through the tent to the edge of the encampment where two guards stood leaning on spears gazing off into the river valley before them.

She placed a hand through the larger one's head and immediately received the image of a great city, walled with crenellated towers. This still did not tell her what she needed to know. 'Where!' she demanded impatiently. The *whoosh* was more violent this time and lasted longer. When she stopped moving she was poised over the enormous bed of what must be a very important man. Great quantities of drapery swathed the bed all the way around, the coverlets were of the finest embroidered silk. The bright colors called to her, 'Touch me'. She did and felt their pride at being the coverlets of *the Holy Father*. She pulled her hand back. The Holy Father. So, the French army was marching to Rome. This reminded her of Da Salvo's task.

Determined, she called to mind the book. Instead of the *whoosh* she had braced for, the room instead spun around her slowly, rotating with her as the pivot point. The room stopped when she saw the sleeping Pope. Behind him, she caught sight of a richly carved

pedestal. A very familiar pedestal. She remembered seeing the book on her first trip, but had not known where it was. Now she knew. In the Holy Father's sleeping chambers.

Her mission completed, she thought of Montrose, thinking it would take her back to the Tower. She brought to mind his face in better times, before the color had drained from it. She tried to remember him smiling.

Instead of the Tower, she found herself outside on a summer's day. Below her two young men were fighting with wooden swords. The fight was playful, for the faces were filled with joy and the animal pleasure of rough exercise. She watched as the taller slapped the smaller with the flat of the wooden sword and sent him sprawling to the grass. Both boys laughed heartily until a shutter snapped open in the wall behind them. A huge man leaned out raising his fist and shouting angrily. As before, Nadira could hear not a sound, but the look on the boys' faces told her what the older man must be saying. The taller boy hung his head, the wood sword dropped limply into the grass. The defeated boy got up, brushed himself off and raised both hands over his head, as if to show the angry man in the window that he was not hurt.

Nadira moved closer to the window. The angry man's face melted with tenderness. The scowl was replaced with pride and affection. He smiled and waved back to the smaller boy, then withdrew, closing the shutters. Below her, the small boy embraced the taller one, and then bent to pick up the fallen sword and tenderly curl the other boy's fingers around the hilt. She could see the face of the smaller boy as he looked up admiringly at the taller one. Those icy blue eyes...this was Richard, the elder but smaller brother, his father's precious heir.

Nadira did not have to see the face of the taller lad to know Montrose. The shoulders were still those of a boy but promised the breadth she knew now, the legs long and lanky, soon to be the striding pillars of a powerful man. She kept the image of those shoulders in her mind as the *whoosh* shot her back to the Tower this time, poised over Montrose's neck. She saw her own body cradled in his arms. She saw her own sleeping face smile sweetly as she smiled in her floating body. She blinked, and opened her eyes. She was back.

"Nadira! Thank God!" William was the first to speak, "You've been gone forever!"

Montrose greeted her with a kiss. She hugged him. Da Salvo pushed a glass of wine toward her across the table.

“Are you quite well?” he asked.

“I am. I would like some of that wine.”

“I think we all would,” Montrose said, reaching for a cup. William’s hand was shaking as he tried to get his cup to his mouth. The wine spilled all over his fingers, threatening the paper below.

“Have a care, Will.” Da Salvo slid the paper out of danger.

Nadira drank her wine and thought about her adventure. This time there was no residual dreaminess. She felt alert and clear. She finished her wine. “First things, first,” she said, looking at Montrose, “Alisdair and Garreth are healthy and well fed. They are warm and secure. I cannot say they are exactly safe, for they are traveling as soldiers in the French army.” She was prepared to discuss the particulars, but all three men were looking at her with such amazement she faltered. “What?”

Montrose shook his head as if to clear it. “You saw them?”

“Yes. Garreth dreams of roasting mutton and casks of ale. Alisdair dreams of his Brigit. I saw them. The French army is marching on Rome. They have a huge army, many fires. They are camped by a large river. I cannot tell you which one.” William began to cross himself, but Da Salvo’s hand stopped him before he completed the last sweep across his chest.

“She is no witch, William. You know this yourself. Don’t you,” he added with emphasis when William’s face drained of blood. He released William’s hand. “And the book? Did you find it?”

“Ah, yes, Monsieur. It rests in an honored place in the Holy Father’s bedchamber.

Da Salvo looked grave. “I hope he has trouble finding a Turk to translate these recipes.”

“What do you mean?” Nadira asked.

“The book has many items of interest in it. Most can be found in other sources. However, the ingredients of that elixir are in Moorish. Most of it in code, as well.” He rubbed his chin through the thick beard. “The last Pope was surrounded by fools.

Perhaps this one is as well. It may be years before that text is deciphered.” He smiled hopefully. “Yes, it will be ages before this secret gets out.”

Montrose made a wry face, “Rome keeps a circulating library, Monsieur. Surely you know that.”

Da Salvo’s eyebrows went up. “Certainly I know that. I’m surprised that you do.”

Montrose shook his head; “I have been my brother’s bodyguard for ten years now, Monsieur. I have seen every great library on the Continent. Unless the Holy Father keeps this book away, there will be hundreds reading it very soon.”

“And then hundreds flying about at night watching us as we sleep and spying on our dreams.” William said with a shaky laugh.

“Among other things,” Nadira teased.

“No, no. There is little danger of that. At least the hundreds you worry about. He will keep this book near him. If it were that easy I would be out there spying on the Prince’s wine cellar or finding the best truffles.” Da Salvo joked. “But there is a reason I am not flying about at night, and that reason is why Brother Henry is a ruined man,” he finished seriously. “The danger is that there may be just one man, one dangerous enough to use this ability to harm others, not in the harmless hundreds who may just pick up this book, or brew a partial potion.

“Nadira is special. She does not have the fears we all carry.” Da Salvo turned to Nadira earnestly. “Is it not true that as your thoughts flow through your head, the very images of those thoughts appear before you?”

“Yes, that is how it is.”

“In another person,” Da Salvo explained, “panic would bring forth visions of monsters and daemons which would terrify the poor soul, seemingly for an eternity. Nadira told me this morning that to come back to us in the tower she only had to think of us or of her body to steer herself home. A man being savaged by the hideous monsters of his fears will not stop to think clearly or plan his next thought. He will be tortured until the elixir’s power over him ceases. By that time his mind would be gone, destroyed by the visions he saw and experienced. Even if he were not totally destroyed, he would not willingly taste the elixir again.”

“That is what Henry meant, then, about the book taking care of itself.” Montrose said thoughtfully. After a moment, he turned suspicious eyes on Da Salvo. “Then what was your need for the book, Monsieur? What was your purpose for intercepting it?”

“To be honest with you, Lord Montrose, and you have earned my honesty, I deeply desire the answers to all my questions. If I had Nadira here in the tower for a season, there is no end to the use I could have made of that book. It was filled with recipes for different elixirs, each producing a different effect. I did make copies of the recipes for my own use.” He turned to Nadira, “Did angels or spirits talk to you, my dear?” he asked.

Nadira made a face. “No,” she said, “I did not imagine there were spirits or angels.”

“See?” Da Salvo said, “She did not imagine them, they did not appear. The elixir I prepared was not for speaking to spirits. With training, I could get her to converse with anyone and anything I chose. I could ask God himself why he created mosquitoes,” he smiled.

“But at any time, she could imagine a great monster and be frightened to death,” Montrose challenged.

“Perhaps, but unlikely.”

“Hmm.” Montrose rubbed his eyes. They were all silent, then, thinking. Suddenly, he raised his head. “Why is King Charles marching on Rome?” he asked.

“I didn’t ask,” Nadira looked surprised. “I didn’t think about it.”

William was busy scratching at his paper, his tonsure bobbing behind a waving feather. In the abrupt silence of Montrose’s question, William’s scratchings dominated the room. Da Salvo leaned over. “What are you writing, William?” He asked.

“All the questions I have to ask Nadira, one by one.” William did not look up except to dip his quill.

Da Salvo smiled at Nadira. “He has filled half the page already,” he said. “But I am afraid to disappoint you. I have no more of this elixir, and there will be no more until spring.” William’s pen stopped. Sad brown eyes lifted slowly from the table.

“No. Say it’s not true,” he whispered.

Da Salvo shook his head. "The main ingredient has been exhausted, and there is not hope for it until the gentle rains and warm breezes of spring." He reached across the table and lifted Nadira's hand. "While we wait for Nature to grow us more, there are other recipes in those manuscripts. We shall try them all and see how they differ. I want you to stay at least until the weather changes."

"You'd be better served asking me." Montrose pushed back the bench and lifted Nadira to her feet. "She is mine."

Da Salvo's hand dropped to the table. "Must we have this conversation daily?"

"We shall have this conversation every time you take liberties with her."

Da Salvo's gaze rested steadily on Montrose for along moment before he turned meaningfully to Nadira. "Only you can stop this game of chess before Lord Montrose sacrifices his queen in an unwise gambit. I suggest you have a discussion with him concerning his play."

Nadira nodded. She suspected Montrose wanted to join Alisdair and Garreth immediately. She glanced up at his glowering face as he held Da Salvo's eyes in a vise. "Milord. Let us to bed." She said softly. She watched him sag. He took her elbow and moved her toward the trap without a word. Again, Juan rose to greet them from the doorway. Maria gave them each a cup of warm spiced wine and removed their shoes.

Nadira lay back on the pillows and sipped her cup as Montrose made his lengthy sleep preparations. Maria yawned as she folded his clothing and laid them on the chair by the fire. The wine was sweet and smooth. Nadira wanted to drink it quickly as Montrose had, yet also linger over the pleasure. She gazed into the ruby depths as she inhaled the spicy fragrance. Deep in the center of the wine, where the candlelight did not penetrate, she saw a swirl, then the cup became like a window. She saw Montrose in a cage. The bars were the slender poles of saplings braided together. He was sitting in a pile of straw. His body looked whole to her, but his face was twisted in agony. A flash of pain washed over her. The cup shook in her hand and tiny waves washed the image from the surface. She set the cup down, no longer wanting to taste the wine. It had become bitter in her mind.

Montrose slid into the bed with her, lifting the heavy blankets. He reached for her cup and drank deeply. Nadira sunk lower in the bed, watching him warily. Maria blew

out the candle and arranged her pallet again by the fire. Montrose set the cup down and whispered. "We must find a way to escape, and quickly."

His strong arm gathered her up and pulled her to him, a small soft form enveloped. She did not resist, but allowed him to tuck her up against his chest and rest his chin on her head. As he spoke, the rumble from his throat was loud in her ear. She whispered in turn, unwilling to include Maria in their plans. "Is that the best idea?"

"Don't you want to go? Can you not see that you have fulfilled your promise to him?"

She could not tell him that she wanted more of the elixir, more flying. "Let us stay until spring. Perhaps we can convince Da Salvo to permit us horses and provisions. Would that not be better than walking and starving? Think of how quickly we would be able to achieve your goals with horses. Perhaps I can journey again to see Garreth and Alisdair. We will waste no time searching for them. There are advantages to staying."

"And the disadvantage? That Monsieur is lying to us. That he does not intend to release us at all? That the Black Friars will return?" Montrose scowled in the darkness. "Nay, little one. The danger is too great."

"How is your thumb?" She asked softly. This was her trump card, and she cursed herself for having to use it so soon. Montrose was silent, though she knew he was not asleep. His jaw was so close to her head, she heard the grinding of his teeth like wheels on gravel.

"I can scarce hold my knife at table." He answered. His voice held no inflection. It was cruel to bring it up. She felt sick inside. "I am crippled." His words were just a puff of air in her ear.

"It will heal in time," Nadira whispered with a confidence she did not feel. She turned around again, finding the damaged hand in the blankets and bringing it to her face. She kissed the fingers one by one, lingering over the thumb. Montrose groaned faintly into her hair. She had been gentle, touching him as lightly as a moth. His groan had not come from some pain in his thumb, but from somewhere else. Nadira lay there, still, and waited uncomfortably for sleep to take her.

Her trump had been well played. There was no more talk from Montrose about leaving the tower before spring. Nadira continued to read for William in the tower's top

room, while Montrose sat near, listening. She knew he was unhappy. There was little for him to do. Nadira tried to include him in the lively commentary she shared with William whenever they translated a particularly interesting passage. Montrose's practical insights were a healthy balance to their overly philosophical viewpoints, but he remained uninterested in most of their discussions, preferring to look out the window, or pace endlessly around the small room. There were more fingers of silver growing at his temples. Nadira could not look at the gray streaks without remembering the Black Friars.

Once a week they convened in the tower to try another of Da Salvo's elixirs. Nadira was not asked to help prepare any of them. She knew Da Salvo guarded that information jealously. In the solar, weirdly shaped glass bowls and globes bubbled all day long, dripping their distilled liquids into tiny flagons and vials. Each one was slightly different in flavor and effect, though all of them sent her between worlds. She grew more and more agile; sometimes the mere scent of the potion would send her out. Many questions had been answered, many more had been asked. She never tired of the experience and looked forward to each week's excursion. Now wintry weather loomed ahead.

Nadira sighed, for rain had been falling steadily since first light. The dreary chill distracted her from her study, for the light was weak and the damp annoyed her. The roof overhead was excellent, for Da Salvo wanted no chance of damage to his library. Even still, the repeated drip drip drip past the windows began to drive Nadira mad. William was no better, making so many copying errors he had to re-write an entire page. Montrose's pacing had not ceased the whole morning, adding to Nadira's irritation. The only bright spot of the day was her discovery that the vital ingredient to the elixir might be a gaudy mushroom. Nadira did not blurt this out, preferring to keep this tidbit to herself. In fact, she read out the line from the text exactly as it was written, in code, without bothering to tell William that she thought the writer was referring to the mushroom and not to an elf. She knew "the little man in the red cap". He was not one of the fair folk, or a gnome. She smiled to herself, fingering the text.

Da Salvo knew and had not told them. This was a revelation just for her. She turned another leaf of text, and then looked up, startled. Montrose's thumping boots had ceased their rhythmic drumbeat, the final step a sharp crack of heavy heels on the planked floor. He was leaning out the window into the weather. Nadira joined him. His body was stiff

and tense. A shaft of fear shot through her before she even could focus on what he was seeing. Through the mist and damp, an army was approaching the tower. Nadira made out the dark shapes of horses and wagons. There was no sun to glimmer off the helmets, but the unmistakable sound of metal clanking in cadence meant that this company was not traveling peddlers or pilgrims.

She wrapped her arms about her to steady the tremble that had begun through her body. Montrose's face was grim, the muscles of his jaws and cheeks set in hard planes. He did not look at her, but his blue eyes danced over the approaching men and flickered about the yard and outbuildings.

Nadira turned about and moved back to William. "Up, Will. Quickly." She capped his ink and took his quill, for she knew he would argue for 'just one more word'. He began to protest, but froze when he saw Montrose's posture at the window.

"What is it?" he asked tightly.

"Shh, some men are coming." William pulled his cloak around his shoulders and joined Montrose at the window. Nadira came up behind Montrose and put her arms around his waist. He jerked at her touch, but then his mind seemed to come back to the tower room.

"I feared this, Nadira. I would that we were long gone and cowering wet in the woods right now."

"They may be the Prince's men..."

"No." Montrose's answer was unequivocal. Nadira lowered her eyes. He was right. He swung his head and shoulders around the room, his eyes falling on the trap door. "We can bar the trap and will be safe from all but fire, but I fear it may come to that." He began to wring his hands, massaging his right thumb. "I'll need a sword."

Chapter Nineteen

Icy shafts shot through Nadira's limbs. William paled to an unhealthy gray. The sounds of the tower guards assembling before the great gate drew them all to the other side of the room. Below they could see Da Salvo on his charger before the portcullis flanked by Juan and his men, also mounted.

“Shall we flee?” William asked anxiously.

“Where? They have closed and bolted the tower.” Montrose swung his gaze about the room. “I have a dagger or two. A knife, a stiletto. None will aid us against armed men in mail carrying crossbows and broadswords and fire. I must have a sword. I’m going below to get one.”

William nodded, the lump in his throat bobbing.

“Should we come too?” Nadira did not want to stay in the tower room.

“No. It is easier to defend a high place than a low one. If you must, you can escape to the roof. William’s bucket is still outside, though full of water, I suspect.”

Voices below ended their conversation. The rain muffled the words. As Nadira strained to hear the exchange, Montrose disappeared through the trap. On the ground, the army surrounded the tower. Nadira watched as the mounted men circled the building in pairs. Each man was mailed; a few were in full armor. There were an unsettling number of edged weapons. Behind the mounted men was a company of archers on foot. Nadira guessed there were perhaps a hundred soldiers. The clanging of the metal, the sound of the horses and the rain on the roof kept Nadira from hearing any of the exchange. Instead, she strained her eyes to watch. She willed herself to read the faces of the men closest to her. William put a comforting arm around her waist. She hugged him back. His meager warmth did nothing to steady the trembling chill that had started in her heart and now spread throughout her body.

The leader of the armed men rode forward with his lieutenants. His helmet sported a tuft of feathers dyed a gaudy scarlet. She strained to make out the standard that wilted limply from the bearer’s tall staff. It was futile. The two men spoke, occasionally gesturing. Nadira could only see Da Salvo’s back. He sat his horse stiffly in his best velvets. The feathers in his hat drooped forlornly against his cheeks. The leader of the armed men drew his sword. Nadira’s hand went to her throat, behind her she heard heavy boots coming up the stairs. Montrose leaped through the trap, slamming it shut behind him. He reached for one of the benches, brandished it over his head and brought it down with a crash against the flagstones of the wall. William and Nadira both jumped. Montrose pulled the splintered wood apart and selected a stout piece to slide between the rungs of the trap’s lock. His long hair swung from his eyes, his face wild.

“They are coming. There are no swords left in the armory.”

Nadira’s gaze flickered to his hands. He was unarmed. They were helpless. She leaned out the window. The drawn sword of the enemy’s leader was making wide arcs in the air. Juan and his men had leaped into the melee. The three of them stared out the window as the drama unfolded far beneath them. In the mass of mud and men, Nadira picked out the bright colors of Da Salvo. He lay face down in the mud before the portcullis, unmoving. Horses stepped over him, men moved around him, their arms waving flashes of metal in the drizzle. There were barely fifty men in Da Salvo’s guard. They were his personal guards, not an army. It would not end well.

With Da Salvo down, perhaps dead, there was no one to speak for them. They watched from the high window as one by one Juan’s men fell into the ruddy mud. The portcullis came up. It would not be long. Montrose took her in his arms and kissed her long and tenderly. She allowed tears to fall freely from her eyes into his beard. His massive embrace enveloped her entirely. She felt William’s hand on her arm. The sound of mailed feet on the steps below rang heavy in her ears like the tolling of bells. Montrose pulled her and William to the great cabinet where Da Salvo had kept his curiosities.

“Stay here. Use the cabinet as a shield as long as possible. If you must, leap from the west window. The ground there is paved and will kill you quickly. You risk a lingering death from the other windows, for the ground beneath is soft. Make sure you dive head first.”

“No! My lord! Rob!” Nadira held him as he tried to pull away. Already there was pounding at the trap. Then a long pause. No doubt they were bringing up a sturdier ram. Montrose cupped her chin in his left hand. He brought his mouth down to hers. His eyes were almost black.

“Good-bye,” he whispered.

The trap flew up; splintered wood sailed across the room. The ram flew up through the hole as well, crashing against the stones of the wall. The first man through the trap was kicked soundly in the neck with the pointed toe of Montrose’s thick boot. His sword clattered to the floor. Montrose had it in his left hand in moments as the second man came though the trap, more cautious than his companion. Nadira watched as the sword

made a high arc, severing that man's head from his neck. William made a strangling sound beside her. Blood covered the floor and stairs in a frothy fountain as the third man emerged, wisely with a shield over his head. Montrose's back swing crashed heavily on the shield with a sharp whack. The soldier was able to get inside the tower room, despite the slippery footing. He and Montrose exchanged blows, steel to steel. A fourth and fifth man emerged through the bloody opening in the floor. William and Nadira crouched low behind the opened cabinet door.

The grunts and clatter of the struggle faded in her ears as Nadira's eyes fixed themselves on Montrose's dancing form. He was wearing tunic and trousers. He had not a glimmer of protection against the flying metal.

Already he was bleeding from a dozen cuts. Nadira watched incredulously as he severed a soldier with a mighty blow, then blocked another with the blade of the sword. He kicked the closer of the remaining two soldiers down the trap. Nadira heard the metallic clanking of the soldier's heavy body bouncing down the stairs to the floor below. The last soldier was more formidable. He was clever with his feet, sparring only when there was no danger of slipping in the blood that covered the wooden beams and never taking his eyes from Montrose's.

Nadira looked about for something heavy to strike him with. Beside her, William was on his knees. She made out the airy sounds of his "Ave Maria". He would be no help. A crash brought her back to the duel. The soldier had picked up a stool and had flung it at Montrose's head. Montrose was still holding his own with the sword left-handed, but Nadira could see he was weakening. Blood flowed down both legs in long red streams from cuts on his waist and hips where his enemy's deflected strokes had slashed him. He slipped in the puddles it made at his feet. Soon he would fall.

She made her way slowly toward the writing table. The iron candleholders were nearly as tall as she. They were heavy enough to be a formidable weapon, yet light enough for her to wield. She had her hands around the nearer of the two when she heard Montrose cry out, his sword was knocked from his hand by a slash from his opponent. The blood-spattered weapon slid toward her at an alarming speed, spinning like a wheel. Montrose fell back from the blow.

Nadira quickly thrust her candlestick into the soldier's belly to keep him off Montrose. He was not expecting the blow and bent over double, falling clanking to his knees. Nadira reached out the candleholder as the spinning sword swept past her. The heavy sword crashed against the iron bar and slid sideways. The pommel spun into her hand neatly. With a great effort, she whipped it toward Montrose, who was unsteadily regaining his feet. She saw Montrose reach out with his right hand for the weapon; his left had been slashed by his opponent's blade when he was disarmed. The gaping wound flowed bright red down his arm, now hanging limp and useless. The soldier picked up the candleholder with one hand, brandished his sword with the other.

Nadira reached for the second candleholder. She was not prepared to watch Montrose cut down. The soldier had learned something too. His eyes were on Nadira now. As Montrose struggled to get a grip on the heavy sword with his weak hand, the soldier strode past him without a glance, focused on Nadira. She raised the candlestick in a defensive position, determined to ward off the expected blow. The blow never came; instead, the soldier dropped his candleholder, reached for hers, and caught her other wrist with his free hand.

Nadira struggled to free herself from the soldier's hold, twisting her body against him. Her wrist was in a vice; the soldier pressed her against his side, the rings of his mail shirt pinched her. Montrose advanced on them with the sword in a bloody hand. Nadira jerked her arm to bring the soldier between her body and Montrose's sword.

With a slash, the soldier was brought to his knees and Nadira was knocked to the floor. Montrose brought the point of the sword down through the collar of the soldier's mail, skewering him. He had not the strength to withdraw the blade as the dead man toppled forward. Montrose went down on one knee as the weight of the dead soldier pulled him to the floor, gasping. He was finished. Blood flowed from more cuts on his arms and chest; his tunic was red with it. Nadira reached for him as two more men came up through the trap. Montrose staggered to his feet and put her behind him. Nadira held his tunic twisted around her hands holding tightly to his waist, pressing herself up against his back. The great blow had ripped his tunic from shoulder to waist, laying bare strips of flesh in its wake. Montrose's blood covered her hands and arms as she clutched him. He seemed to waver, swaying slightly from side to side.

She circled his waist with her arms to steady him as more enemies approached them. These two new soldiers carried crossbows, the bolts in place and ready, the points aimed at Montrose's chest. A final soldier emerged from the trap. He moved slowly, his sword sheathed, a commanding air to his movements. The dyed feathers on his helmet identified him as the leader Nadira had seen strike Da Salvo below. His eyes took in the bloody scene, coming to rest on Montrose.

"Lord Montrose," he said. His eyes touched Montrose's wounds. "I see you are no longer a threat." He looked at Nadira. "Ah. The Prize. I am pleased to see you are undamaged." He scanned the room. "Come out, Priest!" he called to William. William peered from behind the cabinet. One of the bowmen strode to the case and lifted William by the cassock, dragging him to the center of the room. Two more men came up through the trap. The leader addressed them next.

"Pack up everything in this room. Everything, even the furniture. I want even the smallest splinter. Pack it all in the crates and load it all into the great wagon. Cover the lot with the sailcloth. Take care that nothing gets wet." To Montrose he said, "I will be taking the girl now, my lord. Unhand her. She will not be harmed."

Nadira clutched Montrose tight. "No, my lord. You promised. We will not be separated." She looked out at the commander from behind Montrose's shoulders like a squirrel on a tree. "Let us make for the west window. Now." There was no reply. Nadira shook him. Instead of an answer, his body came down on her like felled timber. She set her feet solidly as he fell back against her, but he was too heavy. He brought her down with him, pinned by his weight. He lay senseless across her legs, his head lolling against her breasts, eyes closed, and skin white behind the bloody locks that striped his face.

Alarmed, Nadira smoothed the hair over his forehead and pressed the flesh under the corner of his jaw. The flutter of his heart bolstered her courage. The two bowmen lowered their weapons as the leader advanced toward them. He went down on one knee beside her.

"He is quite dead, isn't he?" The leader brushed Montrose's body with his gaze. "I should expect so. If not, he soon will be."

Nadira did not answer. Through her thighs she could feel his breathing, faint but definite. He had lost too much blood to remain conscious. With good care he could survive, she ran her hands over his chest. If he could avoid wound rot and rest he would live. She could sew such cuts. Montrose had survived such cuts in the past; he had the map of battle scars on his body to prove his resilience. Nadira's mind, in a panic, ran through all she knew, hot water, bandages, vinegar, honey. Her thoughts raced faster and faster, and then were brought to an abrupt stop as she finally heard the commander's words. He saw a dead man before him.

She felt her rising hysteria ebb with a tide of tears. Her reaction seemed to satisfy the leader that she, too, believed Montrose was a corpse. The man pulled her roughly from beneath Montrose's body and to her feet. The only sounds in the tower were her mournful sobs. If she cried loud enough, perhaps they would not hear Montrose's slight breaths. "Take her to the wagon, get her some clean clothes, blood on a woman offends me. Leave the priest. He is of no consequence. After the books are packed up, burn the tower with the bodies in it."

Nadira did not resist as she was handed to one of the soldiers. She was lowered through the trap. Her last sight was of William bending over Montrose's body.

Once more strangers had stolen her.

Nadira opened her eyes-- a prisoner again. She did not attempt to stifle the fierce emotions raging inside her. Her eyes flashed at the face of the soldier who bore her in his arms. His leer disappeared quickly, replaced by alarm. Yes. Fear me, she thought. She kicked, but found she was securely bound. She bit at the rough cloth that had been squeezed between her teeth. Nadira wriggled until her bearer had to stop and reposition her in his arms. He picked up speed as he neared the baggage wagons. He had not the courage to disobey his orders, but Nadira could see that he wanted to toss her in the wagon. Instead, he lay her softly down before tying her tightly to the wagon bed.

Another soldier got in and sat beside her, his booted heel on her rope. She could see the gray sky above her. The rain had ebbed to a mist. The men were preparing to fire the tower even in this damp. She watched the casements as torches moved up the spiral

stairs. She especially watched the top floor. They stayed in her sight for only minutes before the lurching wagon tipped down on the path towards the valley below.

It was a long ride punctuated by frequent stops to rearrange harness, or select a clear path. Nadira had been cleaned up and dressed; she remained trussed on her back in a wagon. She stared straight up. She could hardly look anywhere else. Her anger had faded to a simmer, her mind to a saunter. She began to sense the meaning of the book's curse. Da Salvo had once said that if the book had been cursed he would have reaped his reward by now. She remembered the bright silk and velvet trampled in the mud. William, too, is tasting this fruit, she thought. I shall call myself 'Eve' from now on, for I have a role in this quest for knowledge.

Her grief overwhelmed her. She thought longingly of the elixir and the peace it conveyed. She closed her eyes and imagined herself back floating. If she could just die, here in this wagon. Her soul would be free. She smiled. *I am finished with these troubles. Let me go.* Before the darkness of her eyelids, Nadira could make out a tiny speck of light. As she stared at it, curious, it moved toward her, like a torch tossed in a well. When it passed, she found herself floating above the wagon, greatly amazed. Her mind, as sharp as ever, immediately steered her to the tower room. Elixir or no, this was a valuable opportunity. The tower was empty. Soldiers were streaming down the stairs to escape the fires on each level. Nadira concentrated on Montrose. Where was he? She leaned willingly into the blur of movement that accompanied her request. She stopped, hanging above Montrose's head. She breathed a sigh of relief. She put her hand through his heart. It was beating hard, she felt his mind working, his body struggling to function. He had revived when the smoke began to curl up the tower stairs. Now he was making his way down, his hand over his mouth. She moved to the window. The soldiers were gone. Where is William? She flew to a huddled mass of brown wool. William was hiding in the middens at the base of the tower. *Montrose needs you.* She put her hand through his cowl. *Look for him.* She watched as William found him, collapsed at the base of the stairs. She could not hear their conversation, but understood from William's behavior that he was going to get help from the village below. William lifted an arm and tried to pull Montrose out of the burning tower.

With a sharp crack, Nadira was shaken back into her body in the wagon. A soldier was removing her gag and offering her a heel of bread. She bit the bread with strong teeth, glaring at him the while. She knew something now. Her body was bound but not her mind. She spit the crust at him.

Two day's travel brought them to small town near the shore. The men charged with her care spoke a language she did not know. It was sonorous and lilting. She found she liked the sound of it very much and could make out a few words as she listened. The men kept speaking of Fiorenza and Napoli. She assumed they were from the peninsula. She did not see the red-plumed leader. He did not appear to be in their party. In his stead was another leader. This one was silent and had the face of a toad. He was coarse in his movements, yet quick with his eyes. Nadira noticed that the soldiers did not ride near him and made wide swathes when they had to move past him. She made a point to stare at him whenever possible as her gaze seemed to cause him intense discomfort.

On the third day, she was loaded on a ship like cargo. She had three guards.

One was to bring her food and water, blankets and privy pots, one tested and re-tested her bindings, and the third stood over her, his eyes scanning the horizon back and forth. The three changed duties occasionally, though Nadira could not find a pattern to the variations. During the night, another man came to watch as they slept.

To her great relief, she was not sent below decks, but sat in a kiosk near the stern where she could watch the waves and sea birds. Nadira had tried twice more to travel to her friends, but was thwarted each time. She came to realize she did not need the elixir to travel, but was dismayed that she apparently could not go as she willed. However, her dreams were rich with visions of William and Montrose. In her heart, she knew they were not captives, though she worried ceaselessly for them both. The sea breeze filled the sails as a steady wind drove them eastward.

One sunny morning the ship entered the tributary of a large river. Nadira was instructed to wash and dress in a fine gray linen gown, and then rowed to shore. She was escorted to a fine carriage, and though no one would answer her questions, she was able to discern a coat of arms above her head as she entered the vehicle. By evening she had arrived at a villa.

Nadira was brought into a large dining hall. She glanced side to side as her escort gently but firmly led her by the elbow to the table. Unlike the table at Benite's manor, this table had individual chairs set along each side. As her escort left the room, she passed her hand over the smooth surface of the table. The room was very simply furnished. Merely this long table, some intricately carved chairs and a smaller low table against the wall upon which rested decanters and glass bottles. On the floor lay a thick Berber rug. A massive fireplace dominated one end of the room. The high windows along one side were designed to let in air and light.

She waited a long while before a door at the end of the hall opened and a small man entered the room. He carefully turned and locked the door behind him with a large iron key that he afterwards tucked in his sleeve. He was richly dressed in black with gold and red trim on his doublet. Slashed sleeves revealed a glimpse of scarlet silk. Nadira watched him approach with no sense of fear. He had a pleasant face, finely wrinkled with age. His ample hat obscured his hair, but his mustache and beard were nearly white. "Please, be seated," he said pleasantly in Latin. Nadira sank back into a cushioned chair. "You are Nadira the Reader?"

Nadira laughed softly. "Nadira the Reader"? Is this what they are calling me?"

The old man smiled by way of an answer. "I am Giovanni Di Marco. His Holiness has sent for you, but I am to interview you first, here, in my house."

"Am I a prisoner?"

"In a way. You cannot leave, but you are also not in chains. Let us say you are compelled to be my guest."

Nadira smiled grimly. "As you wish, my lord." She looked about the room to give herself time. Another interview was in store for her. What were her options? Silence? Truth? Lies? After her months with Da Salvo she was getting a taste for what these powerful men wanted from her. And the consequences? Only the Pope himself could save her from the Black Friars. She knew she must be implicated in Septimus' murder. Someone sent the hundred soldiers who came to fetch her from Da Salvo's tower. Someone knows. I need to humor these new masters, she thought. Like Da Salvo, I must make myself valuable to them.

Di Marco drew her attention back to him. "Let us get acquainted. I can tell from your responses that your Latin is serviceable, but not refined. Let us speak Castilian. You have not been formally educated?" He asked her in that language.

"No, my lord," Nadira answered demurely. "I have had tutors for the lessons I have learned, and those lessons were chosen not with the aim of educating me, but with the desire to train me to task."

"And why were these lessons given to a girl and not to a man?" Di Marco could not contain his interest.

"My master had no man he could trust." Nadira answered simply and truthfully.

"How extraordinary. Who is your master?"

Nadira hesitated. Di Marco gracefully added, "Perhaps you can tell me about your master, then. I am interested in knowing how you were made, for you are quite a curiosity. Surely there is no danger in that?" He leaned forward, attempting to be conversational rather than intrusive.

"My lord, I was the daughter of a servant to my master. She was the daughter of a great Emir, now long deposed and replaced by his cousin. When my father was defeated, his harem was dispersed by the conquerors. My mother was sold in Andalusia to my master."

"How old were you, then?"

"Perhaps five years, or maybe six."

"Fascinating. And your education?"

"My mother was quite literate, my lord. She was very fond of poetry."

"You say 'was'. I take it your mother has departed this world?"

"She is dead, my lord."

"I see. And she taught you to read and write?"

"She did."

"Latin?"

"No, her native tongue. What you call Moorish."

"Ah, then you are a Mohammedan."

Nadira sighed. "No, my lord. My mother cursed god when she was taken from her home, when He did not answer her prayers to deliver her from the enemy. She forbade

me to practice the religion of my people. She was very bitter.” Nadira looked at her hands, she did not want to talk about the very dangerous subject of religion. Di Marco perceived her discomfort and changed course.

“Who gave you your Latin?”

“My master brought in a tutor for me. He is now a priest in Madrid, my lord.” Nadira answered obediently, but her mind was elsewhere. Who was this Di Marco? What was his relationship to the Pope? What would the Pope’s questions entail? She glanced up from her hands. Di Marco was rubbing the thin beard of his chin, deep in thought.

“And your Hebrew?”

“My master taught me Hebrew himself, and hired a tutor when he could not spare the time.”

“This is remarkable. That he would do such a thing. The Jews do not even teach their own women.” Di Marco leaned forward and covered her hand with his. “This is the greatest secret of all. Tell me why he did this? Do you realize how difficult it is to find a good teacher of this language?”

Nadira paused, remembering the lessons. “You are mistaken, Maestro, for my master is not a Jew.” She had a vision of Sofir in his frustration whipping off his cap and stomping it with his heel during their very first session. “I can’t say he was a good teacher. I learned my lessons well enough.”

“If he is no Jew, how did he know the Hebrew? Tell me, girl.” Di Marco’s eagerness was palpable.

Nadira frowned. “I must admit, my Lord, that you are not the first to remark upon my odd curriculum. My master was baptized some years ago. I assure you; at the time, I was merely following the orders of my master to learn what he set before me. His motivations he kept to himself, though I admit I believe he had once been betrayed by his bookkeeper. Thousands were lost and more was suspect. My master took my mother to the counting house and set her to work. After her death, he sent me there. When I satisfied him of my skills, he had me keep his books and write his letters. It takes no leap of reasoning to see that he trusted me. He had kept all his own documents in Hebrew. This proved to be fateful, however.” Nadira’s voice faded away, remembering the visits

of the Black Friars to Sofir's warehouses. "I had to translate his old documents from Hebrew into Castilian. He did not have the time for it. There were no more Jews left in Andalusia to do it for him."

"Yes, of course." Di Marco intoned, deep in thought. There was a long silence while he digested this material. Nadira waited patiently, rubbing her hands. "Did your master ever teach you more than just the Hebrew you needed to read and write his accounts?"

"My lord. My master was apostate from his religion for taking my mother to his bed. Then came the Black Friars. I am certain he renounced his religion some years ago. I am no expert, truly. These questions will not tell you what you want to know."

Di Marco leaned back, scraping his chair on the floor. A great grin brightened his face and he laughed, shaking the feathers in his hat. "Clever girl. I suppose you know what it is I am searching for!" He chuckled gleefully, and then rolled his eyes. "You are correct. Even in the face of your abilities, I treat you like the innocent girl you appear to be. However, appearances are deceiving, are they not? One can appear to be the trustworthy secretary of a spice merchant, yet be a thief. One can appear to be a harmless servant girl and yet be as sharp and dangerous as a sword."

"One can appear to be the faithful servant to a Pope..." Nadira interrupted boldly.

Di Marco went white beneath his red hat and the feathers froze. His eyes hardened. He looked at her as if he was seeing her for the first time. "Yes. Tell me, Nadira. Tell me what it is I want to know." His voice was no longer cajoling, but had taken on a serious timbre. Still, his eyes had not become dangerous. Nadira allowed herself to extend to him, remembering the feeling of stretching her hand into the bodies of her friends and feeling their thoughts. She stared hard at him, imagining a finger of light connecting her heart to his. She saw him startle and clutch his chest with one hand. Nadira quickly pulled the finger back into herself. Di Marco stared at her with astonishment and a little fear. He relaxed his hand slowly, never taking his eyes from hers.

"Well, well, little one. Did you find what *you* wanted to know?" he asked with a voice like silk.

She had not. But she had learned something new. Others possessed this ability to know without seeing, to see without doing. She cocked her head, looking at Di Marco with new eyes. “I see we have an understanding, my lord.”

“Indeed.” He took his hand from his chest and rubbed the fingers with his other hand. “Try again. I will not stop you.”

Nadira met his gaze warily. She took two deep breaths, then extended the finger from her breast across the table. Di Marco flinched as the spindly shaft of light entered his chest, but he did not move. He closed his eyes as she inserted the shaft deeper until she felt his heart beating. There she stopped. Nadira closed her eyes, feeling the other man’s heart. He felt like William, full of curiosity. His mind was sharp, there were pages and pages of manuscripts in his head, she saw them move by one by one. Pages and pages. It seemed this man did nothing but read, and in the few moments when he rested his eyes, his fingers took up a quill.

Nadira slowly squeezed the beating heart with her mind and heard Di Marco gasp. She opened her eyes. They were connected across the table; the two enveloped in the light of her mind, Di Marco gazing at her with an incredulous look on his face. Nadira detected no malice, only surprise and apprehension. She withdrew the finger slowly. Di Marco could not contain himself, but clutched at his heart with both hands as she withdrew her finger of light.

Tears fell from his eyes and made dark splotches on his silk sleeves. Nadira shifted in her seat as the other man wept, rubbing his face. She waited uncomfortably, but Di Marco, rather than ceasing, began to weep harder, lowering his head to the table and cradling it in his arms. His shoulders shook with the sobs and he pressed his head between his two hands. Nadira shifted again, made to rise, then thought better of it. She waited until Di Marco lay motionless before reaching over the table to touch him. He jumped up as if she had touched a brand to his arm. His face was splotched and his eyes red. He backed slowly away from her.

“My lord?” she asked, rising.

“No,” he said hoarsely, putting a hand up between them. “Please, don’t ever do that again.”

“Did I hurt you?” Nadira grew alarmed, as it had never occurred to her that she might harm someone with her mind.

Di Marco opened his mouth to reply, but no sound came out. He opened and closed it several times while Nadira waited patiently. “No. No, I am not injured.” He said as if saying so made it true. He rubbed his chest absently as he moved toward the sideboard. He kept one hand up between them and poured himself a cup of wine with the other. He drank it in one smooth motion. Refreshed, and his courage restored, he lowered the hand and looked at her again; this time sideways like a lizard contemplating a fly.

“You do not know what you did, do you?” he asked.

“I was testing you, to see if you are true.”

“Am I?”

“You mean not to hurt me.”

“That is true. What else did you learn?” He poured another cup and drank it as quickly as the first.

“That you are a great scholar. You must have read thousands of scrolls.”

“More?”

“Not really. You were obviously upset at my intrusion. I withdrew as soon as I was confident you meant me no harm.”

“So you did not read my mind, Nadira the Reader.”

“I guess not,” Nadira replied, shocked. “I had not the intention.” Di Marco’s hand shook as he tried to pour the next cup. “Allow me, my lord.” Nadira moved to the sidebar and took the decanter from Di Marco. She poured him a cup and offered it to him. He took it, drained it, and handed it back to her.

“You have some,” he offered.

Nadira smiled and set the cup down. She did not want any wine. “My lord, for some months now I have been carted here and there by interested parties. Men have tied me, gagged me, starved me, fed me, bribed me and threatened me. Each one has been using me to achieve the goal of mastering some obscure power supposedly contained in one small book. Yet, at this moment only have I come to realize something and you have provided me with the key. Tie me if you would. Carry me somewhere else if you wish.

None can harm me ever again. You know it now, too, don't you?" Nadira smiled again, but without humor.

Di Marco nodded. "Do you know what I have learned? I also have learned that you will not harm me."

"Yet you weep, my Lord."

"Ah, but not from fear."

"From what, then? We are not enemies, but neither are we friends." Nadira sat down in a chair, pushed her hair back from her face. Inside her swelled a great surge of confidence. She had his heart inside her.

Di Marco rubbed his face again; the flush of his emotional outburst had faded with the wine. "Nadira, you do not know how remarkable you are. It is true what you say. Once a person has realized his abilities he no longer needs to fear anyone or anything. How long have you been working for someone else? How long have you been giving yourself to another, living in the fear of his favor or disapproval? This key you say I have given you, you have had it all the while but would not see it."

Nadira frowned. Di Marco made a short laugh like the crackle of dry leaves. "Even now you listen too closely to my words. Who am I to tell you what is or is not? Do you see what I am saying?"

Nadira did not like the turn the conversation had taken. She realized the truth in his words, but the weight of the truth was heavy. She shifted in the chair uncomfortably.

"What say you then, my lord, for I am still waiting to hear why you weep." Nadira turned the conversation back to Di Marco, as deftly as a return of the ball in a game of toss. Di Marco examined the ring on his small finger.

"I weep for me, Nadira. I weep for all the hours I spent in the study of philosophy. Those years I spent huddled over dusty scrolls squinting in the feeble light of an oil lamp or tallow candle. All those years have not prepared me for the shock of feeling your mind in my heart."

"I pained you, then. Forgive me."

"No. On the contrary." Di Marco opened his mouth to say more, but instead positioned himself in the chair again.

Nadira sighed. She wanted to go home. *If I had a home.* Quickly her mind skipped over the leagues she had traveled. *Back to Barcelona? To Coix?* The tower was gone now. What had happened to Master Sofir these long months? Had the Black Friars paid a visit to his house? Nadira knew that the wealthy were the most at risk from the Dominicans. Sofir was an attractive target for their greed. Her mind flew to Montrose, recovering in the small settlement in the valley below the fallen tower, then to William, sitting in a cleric's cell somewhere. *Why isn't he with Montrose?* Di Marco cleared his throat; the sound cracked the image. Nadira brought her eyes back to Di Marco's face. He was looking at her curiously.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I'm sorry, my lord."

"You looked as though you were a thousand leagues away."

"I was. Perhaps not a thousand. Is the world that big?"

"It is many thousands of leagues around. Nadira, I want you to do something for me."

Nadira sighed deeply. "Yes, my lord, you and all the others."

"You were reading for Monsieur de Salvo, were you not?"

"I was."

"And he paid you how?"

"With his mercy."

"His 'mercy'? Then he paid you not at all."

Nadira wagged her head slowly, "He kept me very well, my lord, and he gave sanctuary to my..." she stopped.

Di Marco's eyebrows had gone up, meeting the trim of his cap. "Your...?" he prodded.

"Never mind. I was satisfied with my compensation."

"Would you continue to be satisfied if I sent you back?"

Nadira looked at her hands clasped now on the fine table. She had been wringing them without realizing it. "You must know, my lord, that Monsieur Da Salvo is dead. The tower is gone. I saw it torched myself as I was driven away. I cannot go back even should you send me this day."

Di Marco poured another cup of wine. “Then to whom do you belong?”

Nadira stretched her fingers out over the cloth. The urge to twist her fingers had passed. She glanced up at Di Marco again. With a sad smile she remembered the countless times Montrose had said, 'she is mine'. They were the first words out of his mouth whenever a man looked at her. “I belong to Montrose, Lord Montrose.” So be it. She said it too.

“I see. What do you want, Nadira?”

“What do you want from me?” She countered.

“I want you to go somewhere for me. Come back and tell me what you saw.”

“I want my freedom, and passage to Andorra.”

“You are not my prisoner. I do not have the power to release you. I do have much at my disposal, however, and I am known as a generous man.”

Nadira rolled her eyes. “Please, my lord, I have little love of gold, for I have seen it used for more ill than good these last few years. Those who possess it worry over it, perform black deeds to keep it, and darker deeds to acquire more of it. My own desires are modest. I dislike being cold and hungry. I dislike fear and uncertainty. Now I am warm and fed and you have satisfied my concerns for my safety.”

“Do you imply that there is nothing at all you desire, save your freedom and a boat ride?” His lips curled slightly at the corners.

Nadira opened her mouth to reply in the negative, but a thought intruded before her tongue could speak. She closed her mouth, eyeing Di Marco shrewdly. “There is something.”

“Speak.”

“I wish to be reunited with my companions.” Nadira watched his face.

Di Marco stared at her, narrowing his eyes, considering her proposal. Finally, he sat back and joined his long fingers over his stomach, twiddling the thumbs absently.

“You must know the Holy Father gave orders that your ‘companions’ are to be removed from consideration.”

“Such euphemism,” Nadira snorted. “Lord Montrose is not easily killed, as many have discovered these last few months. Even now he is not dead.”

“But considerably decreased in capacity.” Di Marco’s smile lengthened. “You ask me to stand against the Pope, risk my fortune, my position...”

“My lord, we are negotiating.”

“I cannot allow you to leave. His Holiness expects you to come to him for an audience. I must have you there. Ask for something else.”

“Bring Lord Montrose here.”

“Ah!” Di Marco threw his head back and laughed, “Right here? Never.”

“Do you fear him, then?” Nadira turned her head slightly so she could look at him from the corners of her eyes. With a smooth motion, she took his cup and drained it. The wine slid down her throat and went directly to her head. She felt giddy.

Di Marco tapped the side of his nose. “Who should I fear? The Pope? Montrose? You?”

She smiled at him and pushed her hair back over her head in a gesture that had become more common since the loss of her braid. The inconvenient length made her hair difficult to control. Di Marco followed the movement with his eyes. Nadira saw him making a decision. Slowly, a smile crept across his lips like a cat stalking a bird. Nadira ruffled her feathers.

Di Marco reached out and took her hand. “Come with me, Nadira, my dear friend. I have something to show you.”

Chapter Twenty

Nadira smiled back and followed him with curiosity. She moved with him through a long corridor, he pulled her behind him faster than she liked. He allowed her very little time to peek into the rooms along the hall. Some of the ornate doors were closed; others were standing open revealing luxurious rooms with large windows and sumptuous draperies. Nadira was jerked past them as Di Marco accelerated around a corner.

He stopped suddenly, buffeted as she collided with him before a very plain door. Di Marco fumbled in his sleeves for a large iron key. Nadira looked around as he struggled with the lock. After a moment, he pushed the heavy door inward, and then pulled her in with him, closing the door and locking it with great care. The room was dark. Nadira

stayed close to Di Marco's elbow as he finished securing the door. When the metal clank assured him that the lock had set, he surprised her by reaching over and pulling a heavy beam down and positioning it across the egress in the fittings bolted on either side. He pulled on the door to test the seal before turning to her.

"Open the drapes, Nadira, but just a little."

Nadira moved to the window and pulled the heavy velvet aside. A bright beam of sunlight penetrated the murky atmosphere of what now appeared to be a small room in the intersection of two walls of a large house. Nadira looked out the window. She thought she might be on the third floor. She leaned over to look up. Yes, the eaves hung just above the tall window. Di Marco pulled her back from the glass.

"I said pull back the drapes, not hang yourself out there for everyone to see!"

"I was just looking around. This is a very nice house," she added conversationally.

Di Marco frowned at her. "Do not tell me you have lost all sense now.

You had me convinced you are not what you seem, then you go and say something like that." He looked piqued. Nadira laughed, "I did not mean to offend, dear Di Marco. I am merely playing your game."

"This is no game, Nadira. This is of the greatest importance. Please be serious."

The light from the opened draperies assailed the darkness. Nadira turned about, looking at the walls. Each wall was painted floor to ceiling with figures, plants, animals and landscapes. Each wall was different. One was a seascape, one was an erupting volcano, one was a vineyard and one was an open view from the top of a high mountain. Nadira moved closer to examine the color and the technique of the artist, but Di Marco grabbed her arm. "No time for art appreciation today, my dear. Please have a seat and I will bring your refreshments."

"I'm not hungry. You are a fine host, but please do not stop me from looking at these fine..." she lost the word.

"Frescoes. I am not offering you food for your body, but a feast for your mind. Wait here. Remain seated. I beg you, do not disobey me."

Di Marco paused to be sure she heard him. When she did not answer, he moved to the great cabinet against the vineyard wall and unlocked the doors, keeping one eye on Nadira as he did so. She leaned back in her chair and studied the ceiling, which was the

wheel of the zodiac painted in bright colors. Di Marco pulled a dusty brown jug from the back of the cabinet and brought it to the table. His other hand clasped the neck of a wine bottle. Nadira met his eyes.

“What’s this?” she asked pleasantly.

“An elixir.”

“Ah, yes, you alchemists. Busy, busy, busy. All the time bubbling, cooking distilling...”

“This is a special elixir, Nadira. Perhaps Monsieur Da Salvo shared some of his with you?”

“What does yours taste like?”

“It’s bitter, yes, it tastes sharp.”

“Maybe not. Monsieur’s tasted like dirt.”

“Ah, so you’ve had some of that one. This one is different. Very different.”

Nadira stared at him, reading his thoughts. She saw the excitement in his face. He poured a glass of wine from the bottle he had also removed from the cabinet. He was clearly exhilarated by whatever he was planning for her. “How is it different?” she asked slowly.

Di Marco sat down across from her. “Well, first of all it is stronger. It does not take as long to work. It is brighter and there are more colors where you go. And Nadira, you will be able *to hear* with this one.” Di Marco’s fingers tapped on the table. “Say you will try it.”

Nadira raised her eyebrows. She pushed the hair back from her face again, stretched out her legs. She was not afraid to try this new elixir; her curiosity was too strong to pass up such an opportunity. What did Di Marco want?

“And what do you desire, my lord,” she asked him.

“I only wish for you to go somewhere, listen and come back. Tell me what you heard.”

“How will I get there?” Nadira knew that navigating required a visual landmark. On the other journeys she had directed herself.

“I will guide you with my voice. I will bring you safely back. I have no desire to do you injury. In fact, my life depends upon your safe delivery to His Holiness three days from today.”

Nadira narrowed her eyes, feeling him with her mind as she had learned to do. He was excited and he was eager; she did not detect any malice. “And my terms?”

“I will see what I can do.”

“No, my lord Di Marco. That is not enough. Send someone to find him and tell him where I am. Bring him to me.” Nadira nodded to herself. Now he is mine.

“As you say, he is not easily captured.”

“He will come without struggle if he knows I have sent for him.”

“And how will he know?” Di Marco raised his eyebrows.

“I will send a message.” Nadira thought. Montrose could not read, but he would recognize something she sent him. She reached for the elixir, but stopped when her fingers were a tantalizing inch away, keeping her eyes on Di Marco.

The old man was deep in thought, probably used to political machinations of this type. Nadira was patient.

“I agree to your terms. I will send a man to de Salvo’s tower to find your companion, and you will do this thing for me.”

“Excellent! Give me some paper and I will make a message for Lord Montrose.”

Di Marco opened a drawer in the table and brought out a beautiful sheet of creamy paper. He pulled out a pair of shears and carefully trimmed the paper so that all four sides were smooth. Then he uncorked the inkbottle and pushed it toward her. He pulled a quill from the drawer and examined its nib before handing it over to her as well.

“Explain to me how you can write a message to a man who cannot read,” he asked.

“He cannot read, but he can think,” Nadira answered, bending over the paper. With a steady hand she drew from memory a few figures from the bird script she had copied so many weeks before from Marcus’s back. When she was satisfied, she reached for the shears and cut a lock of her hair from close to her scalp.

Di Marco frowned. “What are you doing?” he asked.

Nadira did not answer. She laid the glossy black strands on the desk and plaited them. When she finished, she tied off both ends with more hair and smoothed the tiny

braid flat. Nadira tucked the tiny braid into the sheet of paper and folded it into a small packet. “Have the messenger give this to him. He will follow.”

Di Marco took the packet and tucked it into his wide sleeve. “I will.”

“Let me have the elixir, now.” She reached for the tiny bottle.

Di Marco pulled it back. “Not so fast. This is a powerful potion. We must prepare you first.”

“How is that?” Nadira leaned back in her chair.

“You must relax, we should keep it dark and cool in here.”

“I am relaxed. It is dark and cool in here.” Nadira was impatient.

“Shall we pray for guidance and protection?”

“To whom shall we pray?” Nadira asked.

Di Marco looked shocked. “Why, to God, of course.”

Nadira smiled. “You go ahead. Are you afraid?”

“Of course not.” Di Marco made a face, looked up at her again, and then glanced away. “I shall pray for a good outcome and for our safety.” He knelt, his elbows on the bench, hands clasped. Nadira watched as he crossed himself, then mumbled his prayer. She took a long breath as she waited for him to finish. He closed his eyes, his lips moved silently for what seemed a long time. Nadira shrugged a little as she saw him cross himself again. The prayer was over. Di Marco opened his eyes and moved to sit on the bench.

“I am ready.” Di Marco poured a tiny amount of the elixir into a shallow little porcelain dish. Someone had painted a little fish on the bottom. The dark elixir covered the graceful image slowly until the fish was completely submerged. Di Marco lifted the vial, measuring how much remained with a practiced eye. He lifted the tiny dish carefully and offered it to Nadira. “Drink it all at once. It is very bitter. I have some honeyed wine for you to wash away the taste.” Di Marco lifted the small wineglass. Nadira took the porcelain dish from him and swallowed the brown elixir. Immediately she reached for the wine. The soothing sweetness of the rich wine chased the bitter bite of the elixir down past the point where she could taste anything at all. She gasped for air.

“That was wretched!” she coughed. “Nasty. More wine.” She pushed the wineglass toward him.

“Not too much, you should not be inebriated,” he answered, but he obediently poured a half cup for her.

“I know what it tastes like, Nadira.” Di Marco smiled, showing his teeth through the thick beard. Nadira drained the wine quickly, moving her tongue around inside her mouth to get at any corner that might not have touched the sweet wine.

“Very well, then, my lord. What is next?” Nadira leaned closer to the small man.

Di Marco reached out for her and took her hands in his. “Come with me. I have a soft place for you to lie while you are gone.” He led her to a velvet couch beneath the volcano fresco. Nadira allowed him to arrange her neatly on the couch and cover her with a light shawl he pulled from the back of the chair beside her. “This will keep you warm, should you have a chill. How are you feeling now?” he asked.

“I’m fine, my lord.”

“Let me know immediately when things start to look different to you. Then I will know it is time.”

“Very well. Will you tell me where I am to go?”

“Not yet. Just lie quietly here for now. Can I get you some water perhaps?”

“Yes, I think I will be grateful for it later.” Di Marco stood and left the room.

Nadira heard the tumblers fall in the lock as he left. She lay back and relaxed herself, looking at the fresco above her. The volcano was spewing a lovely orange fan of molten rock from its summit. On the shoulders of the great mountain, villagers were fleeing their houses, running toward the shore where fishing boats waited to take them away. In the clouds angels drifted above their heads wielding mighty swords. “I suppose there were great sinners in this poor village,” Nadira mumbled. She looked across the room at the ocean. There was turmoil in that painting too. Waves crashed against a cliff, spraying a cottage with foam and pulling a craggy tree from its precarious perch upon the cliff. Angels floated above this painting too. The room blurred at the edges and it seemed that all four frescoes came to life, all coming into extreme focus as they backed away from her.

Nadira blinked. The angels began to fly back and forth across the volcano, their arms waving the swords up and down just inches from the heads of the fleeing villagers. Nadira shifted to get a better view of the drama. Di Marco entered the room with a

scratch of his key and a clink of glass. Nadira tried to look at him but the room spun about confusingly. She could hear him, but which painting was he in? She looked at the ocean painting. There he was coming out of the cottage with a tray and glasses. She reached out a hand to steady the tray for him.

“Nadira. Can you hear me?”

That was very interesting. Di Marco’s voice did not come from his mouth, but from somewhere overhead. Nadira looked up. The cherubim on the ceiling smiled down on her as they fluttered about the roundel.

“Nadira!”

Nadira focused her eyes with effort. Di Marco coalesced into her line of sight. His mouth was moving, but it was a few seconds before the words made a sound, then a few seconds more before the meaning became clear. “Yes?” she whispered. Her voice sounded bumpy to her ears.

“Nadira, listen to me; hear my voice as I speak. Look here.” He pointed to the center of his forehead as he spoke and Nadira obeyed. It was so easy to do as he said and so difficult to move her eyes anywhere else. “You will go to the place where this person is.” Di Marco held up a miniature of an ugly little man wearing fine robes and a crown. Nadira looked at the picture, trying to focus so that the image stayed still. Di Marco spoke again, “Go to this man, tell me what you see. Go now.” Di Marco emphasized the last word, and as he did, Nadira felt the familiar snap and blur as part of her obeyed Di Marco without question.

She found herself moving through bright colors until she abruptly stopped outside a tent by a stream. Unlike her other journeys, she could hear everything that was going on around her. She heard the twittering of the birds above her in the trees as well as the tinny sound of the brook rippling by her feet. The beauty of the woods on this winter day distracted her. She knelt to examine a brilliantly colored leaf, but found with disappointment that her hand moved through it quite without purchase. Beside her, the tree spoke.

“Nadira, go into the tent.”

Nadira obeyed the tree immediately. Inside the tent sat the ugly king surrounded on three sides by larger, fierce men in armor. They were speaking French. Nadira knew

several languages, but very little French. Merely enough to read some items on a manifest, she knew no verbs, no articles. Her eyes crossed, but the tree reached into the tent with a branch and tapped her shoulder.

“Repeat what you hear out loud, Nadira. Now.”

Nadira opened her mouth to protest that she could not understand this language especially when spoken so quickly, but to her surprise her tongue produced the French words without her having to think at all. She just stood there, incredulous as she heard herself echo the words spoken by the ugly king and his generals. Presently they all stopped talking and the generals left the tent. The king’s servants entered soon after with food and wine for him. Nadira remembered something. She turned and ran from the tent, ran right through other tents, trees, baggage, a horse. As she passed through each object, she could feel the object inside her like a flavor. It was fascinating and she made a mental note to explore that facet of this elixir later. Now she moved with a purpose toward a shining light near the edge of the camp.

As she ran the tree called her back, but she ignored him. At last, she found what she was looking for. A small tent beside a smaller fire, beside the fire sat a very large man. “Garreth!” she cried. The man immediately looked up and scanned the faces around him. He waited, but the call was not repeated. He went back to oiling his boots. With joy, Nadira moved to embrace Garreth. As before, she passed right through him. Disappointed, she sat beside him instead, watching his face. She could see that he sensed her presence, for he stopped his task and looked around suspiciously. Nadira did not want to frighten him, but she had to know. “Where is Alisdair?” She asked loudly. She saw Garreth frown and rub his ears. “Yes, Alisdair,” she said slowly. Garreth looked up, squinting into the distance. Nadira followed his gaze. Another head rose above the seated men a few tents away looking in her direction. Nadira allowed a squeal of joy to escape her lips and she was instantly beside Alisdair at another fire pit. She threw her arms round him, knowing she would end up hugging herself. Alisdair stepped back, crossed himself.

“Jesu!” he breathed.

“What is it?” another soldier looked up from sharpening his sword.

“I don’t know, but I felt something clutch my heart!”

The other men laughed, continuing with their tasks. “Aye, it was that dinner. They say it was beef, but I think it was that cart horse went lame yesterday, eh, François?”

“Nay,” Alisdair rubbed his chest, his eyes circling around him. The men laughed again.

“Yes, that is exactly what that cart horse said when the cook led him away!” Guffaws cycled around the fire, but Alisdair did not laugh. His eyes narrowed a bit and he crossed himself again. Nadira was so excited she wrung her hands and bounced on her heels, but refrained from touching Alisdair. It was exciting to hear him speak, and though she did not understand most of the French, here were a few mercenaries speaking English enabling her to share their conversation. This new skill flashed another memory for her, and though the tree beside her called her name, she closed her eyes and thought of Montrose.

Without any sense of movement, she opened her eyes. She was in a dark cottage; the only light came from a lamp which hung in the center from the crossbeam. Below her on the floor a man lay sleeping on a pallet. She knelt down and caressed his head. He startled her as he immediately awoke and sat up, the thin cloth that served as a blanket dropped to his lap. His eyes were bloodshot, his hair unkempt. She reached out to touch his face, and as she did so, he flinched.

“Rob!” she called as her heart twisted with grief at finding him in such a miserable place. Montrose looked about, his eyes resting briefly on the shuttered window and the drafty fireplace beside him. He got to his feet stiffly. Nadira reached out to steady him, but moved through his body and then through the wall until she stood outside. “Oh no,” she thought, then moved back through the wall. Montrose was opening the shutters and peeking out the window, then the doorway. He heard me, she thought, or at least he thinks he heard me. Montrose walked outside where the light was better.

Nadira could see that the cottage was really a woodshed, the fireplace just a pit with an opening in the wall, and the shuttered window was where the kindling was shoveled. Montrose stood before the door, his eyes moving side to side as he scanned the horizon. Nadira could not resist another call. She deliberately stepped inside him and remained quite still, feeling his heart beat inside her throat, for she was so much shorter than he. Montrose froze and then slowly put a hand to his chest. Nadira closed her eyes and

willed herself to think of her love for him. She brought back memories of eating together, talking in the evenings, how he lifted her onto her horse. Very carefully, she said his name.

“Rob.”

Montrose started; he stepped out of her and looked back. Nadira saw his face twist in frustration. Nadira followed him as he strode aback into the woodshed and sat heavily on the pallet, his head in his hands. She glanced at his hands as he did so. The thumb has healed. The other arm was black and still sore from the wounds he received in the tower. Nadira could see no sign of rot on either wound. She sighed with happiness. Nadira floated just behind his head. She spoke to him softly.

“Stay here.” She knew that last part would not be heard. She tried to blow through him again, but as she just touched his sleeve, a tree reached out a barky finger and snagged her back. She stopped; clearly, nothing should be able to touch her when she was traveling, yet this tree had her in its grip. She struggled to free herself, but another branch snaked about her waist, scratching her with its rough bark. Nadira pushed back as the trunk drew near to her face. She was astonished when the bark parted and the tree spoke.

“Nadira. You were not to digress. I have other places to send you and you traipse off to tend to your business. Trust me. I told you I would get him for you. You are traveling for me, now.” A moment later Nadira was back on the divan in Di Marco’s secret room. “Nadira.” Di Marco took her hand and tapped her wrist.

“My lord.” She sat up carefully, but still the room spun about her.

“Lie back. It takes a while to wear off. How do you feel?”

“Tired, and thirsty.”

“I knew you would be. Here is the water I have ready for you.” Di Marco produced a green glass goblet and steadied it as Nadira drew it to her lips. “You went somewhere else, didn’t you?”

Nadira released the goblet. She could not resist a guilty look. “I did.”

Di Marco sighed. “Well, I suppose it can’t be helped.” He looked so dejected Nadira felt pity for him.

“What about the French? Didn’t I give you what you wanted?”

Di Marco brightened. “Yes, that was remarkable. I wrote down exactly what you said and you did speak for some time. You say you don’t know any French?”

“I can say a few words, mostly terms of politeness, but my master did not deal with French merchants. He found them arrogant and treacherous. He preferred the Turks and the Lascars.”

Di Marco raised his eyebrows. “Really? Less treacherous?”

“No, less arrogant.” They both laughed. Di Marco rubbed her hand between his two.

“You spoke perfect French to me with a very aristocratic accent. I am very pleased.” His mouth smiled, but Nadira saw that his eyes did not. She stared at him until he looked back at her.

“What did I say?”

He bent low over Nadira’s head. “You have told me where he is and why he has come,” he whispered. “Thank you.”

“And the Holy Father? Will he be asking me these same questions? Will I have to drink this elixir for him as well?” Nadira was nervous about that prospect. She could envision a dozen churchmen in long robes standing around her demanding she speak to spirits or frighten an enemy for them. Her stomach fluttered.

“I do not know. It is possible, though I have expressed my doubts about subjecting you to that kind of scrutiny. You see, you must be relaxed and calm to get excellent results. I have seen the wreck of those who were frightened or unhappy after drinking the elixir. There is no antidote but time, and sometimes time drags the traveler through great stretches of hellish territory before releasing him.” Di Marco’s voice trailed off and his eyes lost their focus. After a long pause, Nadira spoke.

“You have been there, haven’t you?”

The feather in Di Marco’s tam quivered. He lifted his eyes to Nadira’s. His mouth thinned into a flat humorless smile. “And I will never go back.”

“Do you think His Holiness will insist?”

“I fear that possibility. Alexander is not someone I feel comfortable refusing. He is a great and powerful man. I fear his son, Cesare. There is more to this Pope than a ring and a crook.” Di Marco rubbed his face. “But I say too much, Nadira. None of that

should concern you. I will have you cleaned, dressed, and brought before the Holy Father as I have been instructed.”

Three days later, it was as Di Marco said. They stood before the great doors of Pope Alexander IV’s banquet hall.

“What will happen tonight?” Nadira asked him.

“There will be a banquet. Many men will talk about politics and matters concerning the French king. Afterwards the guests will separate, each to his own diversions. I will take you to a smaller room where His Holiness and a few men he has selected will interview you.”

“You will be with me the whole time?” Nadira asked with some anxiety.

“Yes. You are my mission. The others fear the elixir and I hold the only key to that door.”

Nadira frowned, “So you will be responsible should my performance not please these great men.”

Di Marco squeezed her hand. “You cannot fail to please them. Your information concerning King Charles has been supported by the information gathered by spies. The Pope is impressed with your ability. He is unlikely to be displeased.”

“I fear I may say something that will greatly displease him. I cannot lie when under the influence of these potions, as you know.”

“I will protect you; it is important that you not allow worry to color your performance.”

“How can you protect me?” Nadira’s voice sounded shrill to her own ears. She lowered her voice and repeated. “How can you?”

“It is easier than you think. I merely have to say that any unfortunate words were spoken by a demon, and you are merely the mouthpiece.”

“Then I shall be burned as a witch.”

Di Marco laughed and hugged her harder. “Not here. The Pope is perturbed by the efforts of Torquemada and Savonarola. He understands the need for extraordinary methods of gathering information. It has been said that he consults a witch from his childhood on occasion. Did you know that?” Nadira was too shocked to respond. Di Marco laughed affectionately. “You rest until the banquet is over.”

Chapter Twenty-One

They were the first to arrive in the Great Hall. Servants were about, setting the tables, which were laid out in the shape of a T, and preparing the meal courses. Others were arranging the seating. Nadira paused in the doorway looking about the Hall. The room was enormous, though completely empty except for the small table grouping at the far end. The painted ceilings were so high she could barely make out the details of the frescoes. Lavish drapery lined the walls. Nadira assumed windows were behind them, though they were very definitely covered. The floor was polished marble; so slick she made herself take tiny steps to avoid slipping.

Di Marco released her hand and moved along the tables, examining each place setting and the centerpieces. He ran his hand along the back of a camel-backed couch that was placed at the top of the table next to the grandest chair. Nadira assumed the Holy Father would be seated in this elaborate throne. He smiled at her when she joined him.

“This is where you will perform tonight,” he said.

“I’m not looking forward to the experience,” she said feeling the smooth wood and the soft cushions. “Will I have some wine first?” She turned a coquettish eye on Di Marco.

He laughed shortly. “As much as you like, as long as it is no more than two cups.”

Nadira smiled and moved to the throne. The back rose up high over her head, the dark wood carved in a similar pattern of swirling vines. She touched this chair and felt its great age. The servants had polished the wood to a warm shine in the candlelight. Behind her, the sound of tinkling bells made her look up. Di Marco was looking toward the sound as well. A servant entered carrying a musical instrument of some kind Nadira had never seen before. Di Marco took her hand and led her before the table.

“Wait here. They will enter shortly. When you are presented to the Cardinals, a deep curtsy will be suitable. However, it is best if you do kneel and kiss the Pope’s slipper, and the ring he will offer you.”

The sound of trumpets announced the end of their reverie. Di Marco squeezed her hand as musicians filed into the room and took their places to the left of the entry. Behind them the Cardinals entered, their long red robes sweeping the polished marble. Nadira curtseyed as each one passed. Since she was looking at the floor, she did not see their eyes upon her. Di Marco squeezed her hand to signal her to look up as the Pope finally made his entrance. He was dressed in white and wearing no cap. Nadira realized she had been expecting him to look like the Pope in the paintings scattered along the many hallways in the palace. Instead, he entered rather disappointingly in very plain robes and bareheaded at that.

He came up to her, smiling, and extended his hand. Nadira kissed the huge ring, and then knelt to kiss his slipper. Di Marco raised her up. The Pontiff smiled as he examined her. He made the sign of the cross over her head mumbling the sacred words, and then turned to take his place at the table. Di Marco led her to her seat very near the Holy Father, next to a decrepit Cardinal with a long nose and hair sticking out his ears. She smiled deferentially as she lowered herself into her chair.

The Pope spoke. "It is time. Di Marco, my friend, please escort your lady to the couch." The Pope patted the couch that had been moved even closer to his great chair. Nadira felt Di Marco lifting her from her seat, but her mind felt strangely distracted. It might be the wine, but she suspected it had more to do with the fear in her heart. Di Marco led her to the couch and set her down gracefully. He bowed to the Holy Father and pulled a vial from his voluminous sleeve.

"Your Grace. I have the elixir as you requested." The Pope took the vial and held it closer to the massive candle that burned brightly on his left. He moved it about and shook it gently to see the liquid move inside the thick glass. The nearest Cardinals leaned forward to peer at the small bottle as well. She willed the fear to leave her body and rejoiced as she felt its biting pinch on her heart fade to be replaced by a smooth calm. Another breath and she almost felt like floating. She began to draw the next when the sound of a low voice in her ear stopped the process.

"It is not time for the trance yet." Di Marco leaned over and took her hand in his. "I know it is difficult, but stay with me." Nadira opened her eyes. Most of the Cardinals were staring at her. She looked from one face to another. One Cardinal frowned, another

appeared more pale with fear than she. The older Cardinal with the hairy ears snored, his chin tucked to his bony chest. The three farthest from the Holy Father were having quite an animated conversation, complete with broad hand gestures. The Pope himself looked grim as he handed the vial back to Di Marco. He glanced up and nodded to the Captain of his guard who stood in the doorway. Nadira watched as he backed out of the room, closing the heavy doors behind him. The Cardinal nearest the doors walked over and barred them from the inside, sealing the small group within the great Hall.

Di Marco handed her the vial, then took up a cup of wine with the other hand. “Drink it all, then chase it with the wine. I gave the same to you last week. Do not be afraid.” Nadira took the vial obediently and lifted the stopper. She heard gasps around the table and paused, raising her eyes to the men around the table. What were they thinking? That she would not go through with it? Two men crossed themselves. Hairy Ears woke up with a grunt and a start. Nadira met their eyes one by one, as she brought the vial to her lips. With a flick of her wrist, the bitter fluid dripped down her throat. She anticipated the acrid flavor and did not flinch. Di Marco pressed the wine into her hand. She tossed it back with one motion and wiped her bottom lip with her thumb. Di Marco took the glass from her hand and laid her gently on the couch, arranging her silk gown to cover her feet. Nadira began to breathe deeply again, but Di Marco touched her shoulder.

“Not yet, you don’t know where you are going.”

“Of course,” she mumbled sleepily. She blinked in the candlelight; already it was too bright for her.

“Look at how her eyes grow so large,” one of the Cardinals whispered. “I cannot see the color anymore.” The other men drew closer until a sea of faces dimmed the candles. Nadira smiled.

“Where am I going?” she murmured.

“Tell her to go to the French king,” the Holy Father instructed Di Marco. Nadira heard the words and was gone, the room disappeared around her and she stood before Charles VIII, King of France. He was even shorter than she; Nadira looked down upon his head. She turned to see what he was seeing. To her astonishment, she was looking down on the city of Rome from the top of a hill. “He is here,” she heard herself say. Behind her an old oak whispered, “Find out what he wants.”

Nadira reached out and put her hand through the king's chest just as she had Di Marco's, Garreth's, and Alisdair's. The king was hungry, and dissatisfied with the quality of the meals his stewards were providing. In the distance, she heard laughter but was not sure if the sound came from the room full of priests, or from the generals and courtiers surrounding the king of France. She moved her hand around. There. The French king would allow the sack of Rome, but was merely moving through to Naples. He wanted to go on a Crusade to Jerusalem. He wanted the Pope's blessing and support for that plan. He wants Naples. He hates the Spanish Ferdinand and Isabella. He wants... here she stopped and moved closer to the small man.

The king had turned from the view of Rome and was making his way with his entourage back to his tent. She moved to keep up. He wants to know who are his enemies and who are his friends. He did not trust any of the men around him. Nadira looked about at the serious faces. She reached out her hand to an important military man. He was trustworthy. She touched a courtier. He was harmless, but was just along on the campaign to enlarge his estates, hoping for favors. Another passed by, walking through Nadira's hand. He was tough one. She stared at his face. This man resented the king and would betray him if given the chance. He had slept with the French queen! Nadira gasped. The vista faded and was replaced with the Great Hall. Di Marco tapped her shoulder. "Good. Now I want you to go to Naples and see the Duke." He held up a small portrait.

Nadira sped away again, this time to a great palace. She allowed herself to pass through the walls to the dining hall of a wealthy man. Military men surrounded him. Instead of food, large maps were spread out on the table. They were all bent over the parchment pointing and speaking. Nadira repeated some of the words she heard. Di Marco squeezed her shoulder and brought her back again. "Excellent. Come to me now, Nadira."

She opened her eyes, back in the Great Hall. Di Marco leaned over her with a tankard of water. She drank deeply, sighing with pleasure as the cool liquid quenched the fire in her throat.

She looked up to see the Cardinals staring intently at her. Each had a slightly different expression, but all appeared dumfounded and a little frightened. The Pope

himself was intensely pleased. He fairly beamed across the table, nodding and pounding the nearest Cardinal on the back. “Excelsi! Excelsi!” He cried. “Now for the book! Bring it to me!”

Nadira’s vision was blurred, but became sharply focused as the now familiar book was brought forward by one of the Cardinals and placed reverently on the table in front of her. Di Marco pulled her to a sitting position. Nadira reached for the book with both hands. The elixir was still on her senses, narrowing her vision to the tunnel with her mind at one end and the book at the other. She felt her breathing increase with the excitement of finally touching this prey which had eluded all for so long.

The Cardinals leaned back, crossing themselves as she reached for the massive cover. She turned the book over and pulled the back cover open to reveal the endpapers. Yes, they were there, just as Henry had said. Two torn sheets of flimsy paper made from some kind of reed, speckled with black, as though a copyist had flung his pen spraying ink spots over the page. Nadira touched the tear. Here is where Henry pulled his ration from the book. She glanced at Di Marco. He nodded. She tore out a piece as big as her thumb while the Cardinals cried out in protest. The Holy Father raised his hand and they quieted. The room was still as Nadira carefully placed the spotted paper on her tongue. Di Marco handed her the tankard. Nadira closed her eyes as a swirl of colors reached for her mind and took it. Enormous hands turned the book right side up and opened the heavy cover to the first page. Without thinking, she heard her voice reading the words on the page. In a blurred mixture of sound and sense, it seemed as though her voice faded away to be replaced by another voice, a sweet, soft feminine voice that spoke only to her.

“Nadira.”

“Yes?” she heard herself answer.

“I am pleased you have found me.”

“Who are you?” Where?”

“You have crossed. You are with us now.”

Nadira blinked, she was surrounded by light, more intense than the candles, but she could see nothing. “Where?”

“Here, of course. There is no ‘where’. You are always where you are. You have come at the bidding of others, however. This does not please me. I wanted you to come by yourself.”

“Who is with me?” Nadira asked, confused. There was no one she could see, no one else she could hear.

“You have tendrils of malice entwined in your heart. You must break those bonds before you travel any closer. We will not allow their pollution here.”

Images of the Cardinals and the Holy Father passed by her eyes. The French king and his minions passed. Monsieur’s face drifted by.

“Go back. Tell them what they want to know. Truth carries with it a powerful weapon. Whatever will be, will be. It is not of your concern. You will not be harmed by Truth”.

Nadira was not ready to go back. “Wait, please. Tell me, what is my concern?”

The voice paused so long Nadira feared she was gone. The sound of little bells tinkling as if on a breeze soothed her mind. The voice spoke again, but softer this time.

“Come to me. Come to me at Elysium. You will see me there. Release them. I will tell you what you want to know. The White Hart kneels before you.” The voice faded with the light. The room came into her vision around her, the table the couch, the book; all materialized as solid objects surrounding her, protecting her. She looked up. The faces of the Cardinals were dangerously white. The Pope himself was a deathly shade of gray. Absolute silence blanketed the Hall, and even Di Marco looked shocked and shaken. The once tall candles sputtered at their nubs. Two had burned completely down to nothing but molten wax.

“What?” she asked. Her voice sounded thunderously loud in that cavernous room. She glanced down. The book was open to the last page. The words, in Hebrew, danced across the page. “The spots are still here with me,” she thought. One of the younger Cardinals at the end of the table pushed his chair back with a loud echoing scrape, as though he would stand. Instead of rising to his feet, he collapsed under the table with a thump. His neighbors bent down to attend to him, but the other Cardinals turned their eyes back to Nadira crossing themselves in a flurry of hands. The Pope was the first to speak.

“Do you know what you said to us?” he asked, trembling visibly.

“No, Sire, she answered honestly. “I have no memory of it. Did I not read the book as you required?” She glanced at Di Marco, who had sunk to her couch beside her. He did not return her glance, but stared off into space, his face devastated. Icy fear began to creep up Nadira’s arms, yet did not the woman’s voice tell her not to fear?”

The Pope took several deep breaths until his face became pink again. Then he brought himself to his feet, though still clutching the back of the throne he spoke to the table.

“This book will be burned. You will not try to salvage the stones on the cover. No one will pull a single page from its binding. None of the gilt will be peeled, cut or torn. I want this entire book destroyed down to the very elements of which it was made. When it is burned, the ashes, stones and gold will be thrown into the sea. Upon pain of death and eternal damnation, my order will be followed.” He turned to Di Marco, whose eyes now bloodshot and bleary, were raised up at the Holy Father’s face. “You will see this done, as I decree that no priest shall ever touch this cursed tome. I will have guards on you to report to me when it is finished. So it shall be, Amen.”

The Cardinals began coughing, some reached for water, others wine. Water was splashed in the face of the fallen man. The Pope nodded and the door was unbarred. Servants poured in after the summons and began to escort their shaken masters to their rooms with great candles on high sticks. Di Marco gathered the book into the box with which he had brought it. He had not spoken a word, his face never recovering from the shock of whatever she had said. Nadira would ask him later. Now the Holy Father was staring at her with a strange expression. The Holy Father looked at her as though he had tasted something particularly vile.

“And you...”

Di Marco looked up quickly. “Your Grace?”

Pope Alexander stared down at Di Marco and Nadira for a long moment. When he spoke, it was low and steady, full of extreme self-control. Nadira held her breath. “Take her to your house. Keep her there until you hear from me. Let no one see her. Let no one speak to her. Get her out of this holy place immediately.” He sagged against the

table, a trembling hand to his eyes. The Holy Father lifted his arm and pointed to the doors where servants waited with candles to escort Nadira and Di Marco away.

Reluctantly Di Marco pulled back from the wrapped box containing the book. One hand lingered on the wrappings, and the other reached blindly behind him for Nadira. She placed her hand in his and stood, watching, as the Pope swept through the doors taking three of the servants with him. Di Marco hugged her to him tightly.

Nadira squeezed his hand, “What did I say? Why are they so upset? Is the French king coming now? Are we in danger?”

“Oh, Nadira,” he turned around so she could see his haunted face in the dim light. “It could not be worse. No doubt you told the truth, yet it was not what they wanted to hear.”

“I am not being sent to the prison, though. Surely had I said something truly wicked I would be carried away in chains,” Nadira paused. “I am to go to your house, sequestered. Is this not true?”

“There will be pressure on the Holy Father to have you burned. He does not want to lose you, however. I fear he plans to use you again in secret for his own purposes.” Di Marco lifted the remaining candlestick and pulled her behind him toward the doors. “I saw it in his eyes.”

“What did I say?” Nadira insisted, pulling on his sleeve. “You must tell me.”

“I will. Let us get to a safe place first.” He pulled together his notes, stacking the crackling papers nervously, then tucking his pen and ink kit into his sleeve. “They are all still so shocked they are not thinking properly or they would have taken my notes.” He took Nadira’s hand and pulled her toward the doors, nodding to the guard captain as he passed. Di Marco fairly dragged Nadira down the long hall, the guards falling in to step on all sides of them. They were escorted through the evening drizzle to Di Marco’s carriage and then through dark and bumpy streets to his fine house. The guards walked alongside the carriage the entire distance, swords drawn, looking fierce in the cold rain. Nadira was glad to retire to the warmth of her room. She took off the fine clothes as quickly as possible before wrapping herself in the blankets of her soft bed. She lay there awake long into the night.

Dawn broke heavy and dull. The sleet had turned to a steady rain, the houses of Rome were all tinted the sickly gray of winter. Nadira turned from the great window, letting the heavy drapes fall to the floor. She pulled her dressing gown close around her, for the dreary sight had chilled her more than the air. She had been locked in her room eight days now.

Her only visitor was a weary maid who took her chamber pot and brought her food and drink. Nadira remembered the prison dungeon of Monsieur's tower and refused to allow herself any outwards sign of self-pity. A comfortable prison was still a prison. Di Marco had sent up a book for her to read, mercifully understanding her need for some kind of activity. She turned a few more pages. It was Plato. She sighed, pulled a chair to the window, and lifted the heavy drapes over the back of the chair. The light was poor, but she settled herself in for another day of reading and thinking. After a few paragraphs, she looked up again trying to remember the declensions and conjugations. She could see the general meaning, but the tenses were unclear. Will it have happened? Did it happen yesterday? She shut the book with a snap and rubbed her temples.

What did she say to the Pope and his Cardinals? Nadira rubbed harder, as if she could physically bring the memory to the surface. Two days of pacing and thinking had not cleared her mind. Attempts to leave her body and soar through the thick windows were unsuccessful. Going over the events of that evening bore no fruit. She pulled her knees to her chin and sighed again. Her memory stretched like a wasteland before her, the gnarled roots of the barren trees were her thoughts, and the blowing sands her emotions. Why was it blocked? The more she struggled, the farther her landscape retreated until finally it seemed she was looking through a reed at the ocean.

The metallic click of a key in the lock of the door brought her up and over the edge of the chair. Nadira positioned her robe quickly as the door opened and Di Marco entered, followed by three maids and a manservant.

"You have been summoned, Nadira." He said perfunctorily. "My servants will get you a bath and some suitable clothing. You depart immediately." With those words he spun on his heels and retreated, leaving Nadira with the servants, already busy in the wardrobe. She narrowed her eyes. Did Di Marco not look wretched? On the other hand, was this her mind projecting its inner desert onto the canvas of his face? She felt a flush

of excitement tingle in her bones. Anything was better than this room. She hoped she never saw it again.

Nadira was lifted up onto the front of a large charger that came for her, this time surrounded by ten armed men, all mounted. She felt small in their company. Each man was tall and blond, a contingent from the north. She glanced up at the man on her right. She could see the bottom of his chin, his beard a tangle of sandy-colored wires, his eyes hidden by the rim of his helmet. He smelled like smoke and sweat. Her hands had been bound lightly with a soft cord. This man on her right held the end of the cord easily as though she were a spaniel, and mounted behind her. Nadira had no intention of escaping. The other men took up positions on all sides of her. She knew that her life was not in danger. She puzzled a moment. *How do I know?* She was well treated. Condemned prisoners were rarely kept in warm rooms and fed fine food, nor were they given wine and fruit. Nadira had been dressed in lovely silks. She glanced down and the modest gown she was wearing today. It was a fine silk dyed a somber brown that matched her eyes.

The weather was dry and still, the first in a week. The fine weather probably the reason today she should leave her handsome prison. The party moved out past one of the northern gates. It was still early enough that there was little traffic in the streets. Nadira admired the fine road beneath her, looked carefully at the houses and shops as they passed. Rome was much bigger than any city she had visited before, and the sun was rather high in the sky before her party passed through the northern gate. Outside the city there were more people coming and going. Some were camped directly outside the gates, others moved by prodding a donkey heavily laden with baskets. Nadira absorbed the sights eagerly, famished for the outside world after her long confinement. The fresh breeze, laden with moisture from the recent rains, tossed her hair playfully, pulling locks from their pins and whipping her nose. The fine road was a pleasure due to the paving stones and deep ditches and they made good time. As the sun neared the tops of the trees on the western horizon, the lead guard veered off the stone and onto a dirt track. Nadira held on tightly to the saddle as her mount leaped the transition rather than dirty his hooves in the mire that had collected in the ditch. Behind her, the others also took

position, almost single file on the narrow track. They were moving away from the setting sun, the long shadows pointing toward a cottage not far away.

“Is that where we are going, then?” Nadira asked when she was handed down from the horse in front of the cottage. She was not surprised that there was no reply. Instead, the guard reeled her in and positioned her against his thigh as he knocked his pommel to the door.

A man in drab vestments pulled the door open. Nadira did not know what kind of priest he was, though relieved he was not in black and white. He looked at her with fear and curiosity as he took the cord from the guard and led her into the room. Nadira looked back as the door closed. The guards stayed outside. The cottage was small, only the one room. Nadira and her minder were alone now. The walls were plain, the plaster colored a dove gray. Fine tapestries hung on all sides, and a prominent altar stood at one end of the room. Several chairs took up the rest of the space. Opposite the altar stood a low table and a larger chair obviously for whoever had called the meeting. Nadira turned around, looked up at the ceiling, then at her minder. He was staring at her with the same deliberation she had put to the room. She smiled at him. Immediately he lowered his eyes and blushed heavily.

“My name is Nadira.” She said as sweetly as possible. The priest shook his head, turned his eyes on the nearest tapestry. Nadira moved to sit in one of the chairs. The priest played out her tether to allow the extra distance. Nadira sighed and leaned back in the chair, twisting her wrists to reposition the cords along another track on her wrists.

She heard their footsteps before she heard the door open. The simple priest pulled the door further and bowed as the men filed in. Nadira stood and curtseyed deeply, looking up through her hair to watch them come in. She counted ten before the door closed behind her. She could not stifle a twitch as she heard the lock turn. Nadira would not know the men sitting there by sight. Most were not churchmen. One very small and ugly man was dressed in exquisite taste. He was staring at her rudely. She recognized him from her journeys as the French King.

She swept her eyes, head still bowed, upon them all, trying to feel their intent. There was another man, dressed in the fashion of easterners. She frowned. His face looked familiar, though no name came to her mind. He, too, was staring at her with unconcealed

interest. None of the men spoke to her, though low murmurs filled the room with a hum, and all eyes were on her. Nadira remained standing, her hands bound in front of her, waiting. Though she tried very hard to stifle the feeling, deep within her an ominous note of fear began to pulse in her middle. She tried to calm herself, for she knew very well that fear numbs the mind and turns a man or woman into an unthinking beast. Did not the sweet voice she heard while reading the book tell her she was safe? Did she not immediately feel the warmth of security and peace wash over her? Right now, her heart was beating so loudly in her ears she could not hear the words of the prayer.

Her eyes jumped about the room looking for an escape hole like a hare pursued by hounds. Perhaps she was mistaken. Perhaps that lovely voice was the voice of a daemon. Perhaps she is now betrayed. When she began to tremble, she realized she had lost her battle with icy fear. Her mouth was dry, but her throat kept trying to swallow what was not there. She thought of Montrose. *He is not here.* The thought calmed her somewhat. This time she was in danger and not he. He is safe, she thought. Another wave of uncertainty swept through her as the members of this party lay their eyes upon her. She wavered, taking a deep breath. Is this a trial? Nadira did not know enough about trials to tell. There were no instruments of torture in evidence. She scanned the faces for a Black Friar. None wore the distinctive white robes and black cowl she recognized from Barcelona. *Nevertheless, this is Rome. Perhaps the dress is different here.* She felt the warm tingle that encouraged a foray into the hearts of others. This might not be the best time, she thought, but another thought intruded: When is a better time? Nadira blinked.

One of the men stood and the room fell into an expectant silence. Nadira recognized one of the cardinals from the night she read the book for the Pope. He was dressed in a more modest version of his vestments, and covered by a thick cloak. He glanced at Nadira briefly before turning his back to her to address the room.

“Your Majesty,” he nodded to the garishly dressed little man, “and Gentlemen. Tonight we gather to discuss what will be done with this woman, and with the manuscripts brought to us from Aragon. Not all of you were present that fateful evening, though no doubt you have heard of what transpired. Some of you may believe this woman is a witch sent by Satan himself to tempt the Holy Father with words. Others

may be coveting the means to achieve the results promised by this woman. Your Majesty, I know you sent word that you desire to purchase her should her abilities be proven. His Holiness is eager to hear your offer. I assure you, we will not leave this room until every man here is satisfied with a decision. I wish to introduce Father Matteo, late from Toledo, on a mission from God to strike at heresy and the enemies of the Church, and His Holiness' *legate a latere*."

Nadira blanched. She had not seen Father Matteo come in. Like ice, her hands froze at the end of the tether; numbness crept up her arms to her heart. Father Matteo stood up. He was not wearing the black hood of his order, but strode to the front of the room in dazzling white robes. Nadira had not recognized him without the cowl. This gathering was not a legal event, but an ordeal nonetheless. It was, in fact, a secret trial. She scanned the faces again. When she moved her head, she commanded the attention of all the men in the room. The cardinal looked over his shoulder at Nadira and narrowed his eyes. "You will each be given a chance to examine her," he said, still looking at her, "before placing your vote." He turned back to the room. "Your Majesty?"

The king nodded to the man seated next to him, an old man with a full head of white hair and a snowy beard stood and cleared his throat with a slight cough. He wore a black robe with a heavy chain across his chest. Nadira stared into his eyes. He looked at her with some sympathy. She felt that he must be an advisor of some kind. The modesty of his dress in contrast to the others did not suggest nobility, but perhaps a learned scholar. She steadied herself for his questions.

He addressed her directly in Latin. "Please tell me where you were born and who your father is."

Nadira steadied her voice before beginning the oft-repeated story of her life.

The king interrupted, "Have you, at any time, consorted with Satan or any of his devils?"

Nadira opened her mouth with surprise. "Absolutely not!" she answered with disgust. The room buzzed again with discussion. Is this the way the questioning will go? She wondered. *There is no defense against superstition*. There is no way to prove she did not consort with demons, and no defense from someone insisting that she did. In fact, from what she had heard, there did not need to be any proof. Merely an accusation could

send her to the stake. She already had done more than enough to be sent to the stake in her own country. Di Marco had promised she would be under the protection of the Pope. She looked around again. His Holiness had not been invited to this meeting. Nadira felt another icy finger in her heart.

One of the other men stood up and addressed Father Matteo. “Has this woman been physically examined for any marks?”

“She has not. Until this moment she has been a guest in the house of one of His Holiness’ servants.”

“I say strip her now and let us see.” Nadira heard an ominous sound of approval from the men in the room. She narrowed her eyes. Fear or not, she did not like the turn this meeting had taken.

“I am not a witch!” she cried. “You are all foolish to think so!” There was the sound of scraping chairs as most of the men pushed themselves to their feet. In the ensuing din of raised voices and indignant remarks, Nadira felt a tug on her tether. Father Matteo had yanked it out of the simple priest’s hands. He dismissed the frightened man from the cottage with a dangerous look. Nadira twitched as the heavy door shut behind him.

Father Matteo reeled her in to him and held out his hand to one of the nearer nobles. A dirk was quickly laid across his palm, and with one slash of her laces, the lovely brown silk slid from her shoulders and bunched at her elbows. Another cut, and her tether was slashed to allow the dress to fall to her feet. Next, her chemise fell to the knife’s sharp assault. The rush of air that accompanied the fall of the dress did little to cool the hot blush that spread across her skin. Nadira reached down instinctively to cover her nakedness with both hands.

Father Matteo turned her around for the crowd, who now surrounding her to get a closer view. The men did not stand on formality. Even the king had to push someone out of the way to get a closer look. Candles and torches were held disturbingly close to her exposed skin and fingers swept her arms and legs searching for minute imperfections. Nadira closed her eyes so she would not have to see their faces as they violated her with their eyes, but flashed them open as a drop of hot tallow splattered on her arm. The

examination ended, the men backed away, murmuring together. Other than a few brown spots on her shoulders, Nadira's skin was as smooth and unmarred as an infant's.

Some of the eyes upon continued to look suspicious, but to her relief, she could see that at least some of the men had decided that she might not be a minion of Satan. Father Matteo jerked her tether again and motioned her to pick up her dress. With the laces slashed and her wrists bound, Nadira could hardly dress herself. She wrinkled her brow at him. He took the same dirk that cut her laces and freed her wrists. "Put it on," he said shortly. Nadira bent to pick up the dress and pull it over her head. The bodice would no longer fit her with the laces gone. She had to hold it up with one hand.

Father Matteo moved her closer to the seated jury. "If it is determined that this woman is in league with Satan to turn the Holy Father away from Our Lord and Savior, we must then decide her execution. If it is found that she is merely a tool of our enemies, then again, we must decide her fate. Either way she cannot be permitted to return to Rome to be used again, by Satan or by the enemy. Are there any more questions?"

A man stood in the back. "Give us a demonstration of her skills. What did she do for His Holiness?" His brusque demand went unchallenged. There was a murmur of agreement in the room. Nadira tensed. She could not perform a journey for this assembly, and if she could, anything she did would turn out badly. A glance at Father Matteo told her that he did not favor this direction, though the firm set of his jaw told her that he had anticipated such a demand.

"We shall perform no tricks or feats of imagination, nor welcome the Evil One here. The question we must address is to determine if this woman is a witch or a pawn, then decide how to dispose of her with the least amount of trouble." He picked up a piece of parchment from the table next to him. "I have here the names of the cardinals attending the reading in question. I will read this list, then we shall determine the best way to ensure each man's silence." Father Matteo then proceeded to read the list of names one after the other in a dreary monotone.

This dirge was a dreadful omen for those unfortunate men. Nadira watched faces as the list was read. Consternation, fear, empathy; all were evident among the listeners. When he had finished, Father Matteo said, "And Di Marco possesses the original copy of this book. He has unwisely chosen to hide it. Right now, he is my guest." Low laughter

in the back told Nadira that being a guest was little different than being imprisoned. “An inferior copy was also brought to Rome. That one has been burned.” Nadira dropped her eyes. As painful as it was to hear about any book being consigned to the flames, she felt at the same time that these particular men did not deserve to contemplate the riches of the mind. Better that the book be burned than any innocent searcher for truth be burned in its stead.

Nadira took another breath. The copy that Di Marco had was the powerful one. The black pages themselves were missing from all other copies. This was information that these men would not receive from her mouth. She glanced up again as she heard the sound of paper rustling.

“This document,” Father Matteo held up for the room to see “was found in the baggage of Robert Longmoor, Baron Montrose.” Nadira wavered, but made no sound. It seemed as if her very heart stopped beating. She strained to see what Matteo was holding. She willed the roaring in her ears to stop long enough to hear his words. “You can all see the markings of the devil here,” he pointed a long finger at the strange symbols of birds and body parts. “This is proof that Satan is at work here in the world. It is known that Montrose was on his way to Rome with this document. I suspect he was one among many peddling unearthly evil for earthly rewards. It is my duty to protect the Pope from sorcery, witchcraft and the plots of heretics.”

He turned around to Nadira. “Will you read this again?” He emphasized the last word as he indicated the markings, punctuating his demand with a snap of the stiff velum. *The Marcus Parchment appears again.* Nadira could not speak for her throat was clenched shut like a noose around her neck. She shook her head vigorously. Father Matteo saw her fear and lowered the paper slowly. He narrowed his eyes. Nadira began to sway, fearing she might faint. She kept her eyes on the paper as it was placed deliberately on the table. Father Matteo ignored the men in the room, his intense focus was on Nadira now. He closed the gap between them with one step as he reached for her arm. He shook her slightly with an intended meaning that did not escape her. She drew back as he lowered his face within inches of hers. “Read it.”

Nadira opened her mouth, but could not get her tongue to move. The hand on her arm became a vice. She choked out a whispered denial and was shocked when the blow

came. She fell to the floor, the dress in a heap beneath her again. Father Matteo had backhanded her with a strike so sudden she had not time to respond. One of his rings had cut her; she tasted the blood as it dripped onto her lip. The room spun and the bedlam in the room was like the roar of a great wind in the trees. A callused hand closed around her upper arm and hauled her to her feet. Another hand lifted the limp dress up to her shoulders and placed one of her hands over her breasts to hold it up.

She found she could breathe again, and slowly, as air filled her body the blackness that had surrounded her dissipated to reveal the same room, the same men, the same points of light from their candles and torches and lamps. What was not the same was the timbre of the situation. Any sympathy she may have cultivated was quite gone, reaped and consumed by the reappearance of the message on Marcus' back. All eyes were upon her and each one filled with a varying amount of suspicion, but the distrust and speculation was there. Nadira tried to keep her face devoid of any more incriminating displays of emotion.

“Well then,” said the king in Latin. He addressed Father Matteo, “We are satisfied that even if this woman is no witch, neither is she innocent. It is my wish that she be properly questioned concerning this particular document. Afterwards she will be removed from any concern of yours. Since the document in question belongs to me, I claim the girl.”

Nadira understood enough of what he said to become truly afraid. Father Matteo did not like this French king. His eyes hardened for an appropriate reply. “Your Majesty,” he began quietly, “Your claim on this woman's person is a strong one. However, she still belongs to His Holiness. Until the Holy Father releases her, she cannot be surrendered to any man. Even to a king.”

“And your plans to execute her should the mark of Satan have shown upon her body?”

“Explained away as death from the plague.”

“Then the plague has claimed another victim for I claim my rights to her now.” The king was a small man, but not intimidated by the cleric. Nadira wondered which man would be in her best interest. As it was, neither man seemed like a good choice. The

king's bodyguards came forward and took Nadira's upper arms, one on each side. Father Matteo released her, frowning.

"Surely there should be some concession from you, Your Majesty," Father Matteo said quietly. "After all, it was I who brought this parchment to you."

"My army is outside Rome as we speak. Any concessions, I believe, should be made to me." The king stood straighter.

"It would be a great sacrilege to steal what belongs to the Pope," countered Father Matteo.

"Yet you would have put her to death."

"But only after determining that she was a tool of demons, in which case I would be preserving His Holiness from evil. Such a determination has not been made."

"Do you have the authority from the Holy Father, himself, to negotiate this woman's fate?"

"He has entrusted me with everything that pertains to this book. Obviously, he cannot be seen to value it."

Nadira saw the king think about this, rubbing his chin. Doubt crept into his eyes. He turned and nodded to his minister who had remained seated during the tumult. The old man stood stiffly and came forward, pushing the onlookers aside. He looked from Matteo to the king before speaking. "I know, Father Matteo, that you have been promised a mitre for your efforts in this regard. I do know that the Pope wants these secrets desperately, and with equal desperation wants them kept from his enemies." He paused and glanced at his king. "It seems to me, Sire, that perhaps the army might not sack the holy city in exchange for this girl. We are but passing through on our way to Naples, after all. I believe His Holiness may find this agreement acceptable. What say you to this, Father?"

Father Matteo did not like the turn of events. He did not try to shield the anger in his eyes. "If I refuse?"

"We take her anyway. Rome is sacked. You will be reported by witnesses as having lost her to the enemy. The responsibility for the destruction of the Holy City will be laid at your feet."

"And if I cannot convince the Pope to release her?"

“I believe there are quite a few valuable hostages here right now.”

The men in the room erupted, each reaching for some kind of weapon, moving quickly to the windows and the door. They were alarmed to discover the door barred. Outside, surrounding the little cottage, were at least fifty men-at-arms. Father Matteo’s face darkened with rage as he realized this little king had outmaneuvered him. He swept the men from the window to get a better look. Nadira shrank inside her torn dress. Father Matteo strode back to the center of the room. He glared at the French king and his advisor, visibly shaking with rage.

“So be it. Take her. I will explain to His Holiness that she is quite dead. See that he doesn’t find her again.”

“He will not. She will not be making the trip to Naples. There is no chance that she will ever set foot in Rome again.” The king picked up his gloves and slid them on. His advisor lifted the cloak to his royal shoulders, and then picked up the Marcus Parchment from the table, rolling it and placing it carefully in his sleeve. Nadira saw his triumphant smile. So did Father Matteo. Without another word, Nadira was escorted through the door.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Nadira sat in the dark, a heavy blanket pulled over her shoulders. The tent was dry, and the canvas was of good quality to keep out the wind, but she was cold. She had no fire but a tiny oil lamp and when the sun went down the temperature became uncomfortable. She had been given a new dress, this one of wool instead of silk. Without a chemise the rough fabric scratched terribly, but she was grateful for the meager warmth. She was also given a pair of shoes. The shoes would help should she escape and need to run. She had not been disturbed since the clothing was delivered. Her third day inside the tent was the worst. She opened her eyes. Someone was coming. She lifted the flap of her tent to look outside.

The men moved slowly about doing whatever soldiers did in the morning. There was a change of watch. Food was prepared and distributed. Her captors passed a wooden bowl to her through the door. Her breakfast was a piece of flat bread and some dried

fruit. She sat at the door and ate it down to the last crumb, watching. At noon she was taken out and bound at the wrists. A wagon pulled by two horses creaked up to her tent. She was lifted and tossed in like the baggage already piled up the sides. The driver turned around as she settled herself on a bag of grain. A soldier climbed in beside her and stretched out between the casks. He picked up her tether and wrapped the end around his wrist several times, yanking her for effect.

“Yes,” she snapped at him in rudimentary French, “I know I’m not going anywhere.”

“But Madam,” he smiled wickedly, “you *are* going somewhere.”

The driver spun around, waving the whip in the air. “Jacques, you fool, you are forbidden to speak to her. Be silent.” Jacques made a fig with his fist in the driver’s direction, but did not speak to Nadira again. He contented himself with merely leering at her and tugging at her tether to annoy her.

Nadira grit her teeth. The wagon moved off to the north, following the paved road. Three men rode strong chargers in the front, there were six armed men walking beside the wagon, three behind and another horseman in the rear. All the men were mailed save three of the walking soldiers. The knights carried swords sheathed beside them. The footmen were armed with spears.

Nadira looked inside the wagon. Besides bags of grain and casks of some kind of liquid, the wagon held a small locked chest, banded with iron. The wagon guard kept his eyes on the chest, not on her. She figured she must be peripheral baggage, for at each stop the chest was inspected by the commander while he merely gave her a passing glance.

There were no outward clues as to how long this journey would be. *Surely they don’t intend to cross the mountains in winter.* It did her no good to speculate, or even to ask. No one would speak to her. Riding in the wagon was tiring and painful. They switched her guard four times a day, but she still had to endure the jolting and knocking back and forth. Her back ached painfully when they finally stopped to make camp. Nadira was permitted to relieve herself at the end of the tether. Her guard politely looked the other way as she squatted in the brush, but tugged on her when he thought she was taking too long. Nadira sighed as she stood up again; brushing her skirt with her bound

hands, ready to return to the center of the camp. She was led to the main fire pit and handed off to another soldier.

He sat down, rubbing his feet with his free hand. Nadira did not want to sit, but paced back and forth as far as he would allow. *Something is wrong.* She sniffed the cool evening air. There had been no rain, but some fog. The chill was bearable as now there was no wind to bite through her woolen cloak. *Am I worried about the weather?* None of the soldiers seemed uneasy. In fact, they looked thoroughly bored. A few were doing camp chores as the commander supervised, but most, especial the footmen, were spread out on the ground. Nadira didn't even try to guess how far they had come since noon. She shrugged. Being a captive was becoming second nature to her.

The guard holding her tether tossed a branch into the fire sending up sparks. One of them landed on her, singeing her shoulder. Nadira blew on the spark, glaring at her guard. He just yanked her tether again, grinning. She thrust her chin at him, and was gratified when he became angry. *What are you going to do about it?* She taunted him with a look. The next moment he dropped like a stone, but silently as a feather.

Nadira shook her head in amazement, looking down on his senseless body. She yanked her wrists up and away, freeing her tether from the fallen man's hands. She looked around at the camp. Furtive movements in the shadows beyond the firelight caught her eye. The other soldiers had not yet noticed their fallen comrade. She sat down quickly next to him, placing herself between his body and the commander. It would only be a matter of time before the other men noticed that her keeper was unconscious. She kicked a branch out of the fire and touched her bindings to the coal end. A wisp of smoke and her hands were free.

Why did the other men not come? She kept her head still, but her eyes flew about the camp. The glare from the fire kept her from seeing past its light. Men were moving about the camp as usual. Should she be here when they discovered her guard? They would definitely see her walking away. Where would she run? They would be on the horses in seconds and once past the blinding firelight she would be an easy mark in her white dress. She looked at her guard, her brow furrowed in puzzlement. Why had he collapsed? She could see that he was not dead. She dare not touch him lest he recover too quickly.

A soft thud reached her ears, then another. She peered into the blackness beyond the fire. Behind her the commander slowly rose to his feet and drew his sword, eyes and ears alert. One by one the other men stood, their movements punctuated with the metallic tinging of drawn swords. The camp fell into an eerie silence. Nadira waited.

Another thud. The silence snapped in the next instant with the crashing and shouting of men climbing over the baggage and brandishing metal at the invisible foe.

The commander had the presence of mind to pick up her tether as he went by, not realizing she was no longer attached to the other end. He went for the wagon and its precious cargo, sword in one hand and empty tether in the other. Nadira did not stop to think, but took to her heels at right angles to the commotion. She got as far as the road before falling flat on her face, her feet snared by a rope. She kicked viciously, and connected with something soft and heard a grunt. A hand closed on her ankle. She kicked again and again until she freed her foot. Her attacker cursed. Immediately she felt her other ankle in his grip, but she ceased her struggle. The curse was in English. Nadira could not breathe. Behind her she heard the curses and shouts of her French guards. The hand on her ankle relaxed and a soft voice whispered, "Nadira."

She could barely get a sound from her throat. Tears fell unbidden and she felt her heart would burst. A rough hand covered her mouth.

"They will find us very soon," Montrose whispered. "We must fly. When I release you, lift your skirt and run as fast as you can straight down to the river. All the way to the water. I will come for you there."

"But..."

"Shh. Go. Now!" he released her and pushed her hips with both hands.

Nadira flew up from the ground and ran over the stones and branches, dodging the trees. She could not see where she was going, but the ground fell away before her and the river must be there at the bottom. The sounds of the French faded as the bank rose behind her head. Her feet were wet, then muddy, then cold, then the trees were gone and the moon shone on the river. Nadira stopped, looking left and right for a hiding place. She realized she would have to get wetter, but with a deep breath plunged into the river and made her way down until she was hidden by overhanging brush.

She climbed high in the bracken to get as much of her body out of the frigid water as possible, but still her feet touched the edge of the river as it went by. She tucked her feet higher under her and waited. The sound of the river masked any noise she made, but also kept her deaf from whatever was happening above her. It seemed she waited half the night, but at long last she heard the sound of her name.

Nadira leaned out from her sheltered cove. She saw Montrose moving stealthily toward her up to his knees in the cold water. He was feeling the bracken along the bank, searching for her. She coughed softly to get his attention and saw him startle, then pick up speed as he allowed the river to join them together.

He dragged her up to lie on the bank, and then, kneeling, felt her up and down saying “Are you hurt? Are you in pain? Did they harm you?”

Nadira could not answer, but nodded vigorously in the moonlight. Words did not come to her only hot tears and sobs. She had not realized how badly she had stifled her hurt until now when she could release it. Montrose sat down and took her onto his lap and rocked her back and forth until she could speak. The warmth of his body revived her as the soothing murmurs of love were like warm sweet wine. She quieted, half believing she was dreaming. How did he find her? How did he get here?

Instead she heard herself ask, “Are we safe from the French?”

“For now.” Montrose kissed the top of her head. “I have run off their horses and some of the men are pursuing them. The two men who were following me are dead. It will be some time before their bodies are found. We must flee, but I want you to catch your breath. Once we start we cannot stop until I say it is safe.”

“How did you find me?”

“Later, Nadira. There is no time for such a long story now. There are still men out there who are terrified of what will happen when the king is told that his little prize is gone. We have to go now if you are ready to run.”

“I am.”

Montrose pulled her to her feet and steadied her on the steep slope with both hands. “We have to keep to rough country and try to stay in the ravines. Their advantage is speed, ours is stealth.”

He began to move along the river, leading her north. Nadira heard the shouts of the French some distance away. They were beating the bushes with their swords and shouting, trying to flush them like birds. Montrose pulled her down to the ground for a moment.

“Not too bright, are they,” he whispered. Nadira had to agree. After a moment, when he was certain they were safe, he led her for miles back along the river. As the eastern horizon lightened, Montrose directed her toward a crofter’s cottage.

“Will we be safe there?” Nadira asked. “Won’t they search all the buildings?”

“We aren’t going in the cottage,” he answered. “We are going to the barn to hide in the thatch.”

Nadira shuddered. “The thatch? The most noxious vermin live there. Ticks, mites, lice, mice, spiders, snakes...”

“Snakes? How would snakes get on the roof?” Montrose looked at her doubtfully in the wan light and Nadira saw his face clearly for the first time.

“Oh Rob, you look terrible,” she cried. He did. His clothing was filthy, torn at the knees and elbows. His face scratched and bloody above his rough beard. His hair hung long and matted into ropes over his ears and neck, leaves and twigs clung to him and his face was streaked with dirt and sweat.

He burst out laughing. “I looked good enough to you last night. Come on. The crofter is inside sitting by his warm fire and he has no dogs, but soon he will be out.” He led her by the hand behind the low stable and lifted her up by her hips into the straw that covered the roof. Nadira set her jaw against the expected vermin and climbed over the rough stone of the wall. She had to insert her feet through the bundles of thatch and feel for the support beams.

“I cannot burrow under,” she called down in a low voice, “The thatch is too tight.”

“Find a good spot. I’ll throw more straw up for you to cover yourself.”

Nadira set her feet and lay back in the thatch. There were prickles where a straw poked her here and there, but after the chase through the night it felt good to rest. She even conceded that a few spiders might not be too bad, after all. Some loose straw came sailing up over the eave, landing near her feet. More piled up near her and she gathered it into a neat pile, covering her up to her neck. When the straw stopped flying she felt a

shaking of the rafters. Montrose joined her, covering himself with straw as well. He made a straw wall around their heads.

“To keep anyone from seeing us from below,” he explained. Nadira was impressed.

“Are you sure this will work?” she asked.

“I used to do this as a boy when I wanted to hide from my father,” he said. “It never failed. I selected this shed because it is on the highest part of this hill. No one can look down from above to see us. We just have to be still, so we don’t knock straw through inside and make the farmer investigate his roof.”

“You are right. I’m so tired I think I can lie very still.” She moved her hand under the straw until she found his arm, and then slid her hand down to lock fingers with him. He squeezed her hand.

“Nadira, I thought I’d never see you again,” he murmured.

“I am still amazed that you found me. We must be leagues and leagues from Andorra. How did you do it?”

There was a slight rustle as he repositioned himself. He squeezed her hand again. “I received your message. I knew that whoever took you from Da Salvo’s tower would end up in Rome. When I got to the port I asked around to see if anyone knew whose men these were who had recently sailed. I found out that Di Marco had sent this contingent, funded by the pope to fetch you from Da Salvo. It was easy to get passage to Rome and easier to find Di Marco’s house once I was there. There I learned that Di Marco was hiding from the Holy Father for some transgression. I was told that he had left the city by the north gate and might be hiding in the home of one of his friends or distant relatives. I set out...”

“Wait, wait, wait...after I left the tower, you were lying wounded under a tree. Tell me what happened then.”

“Maria took me home. Her mother put me in her uncle’s shed and fed me until I was strong enough to come out.”

“You did not suffer from your wounds?” Nadira rolled onto her side and reached her other hand through the straw to feel his chest and arms.

“Terribly. But I’ve suffered from my wounds before. I do not fear pain as you do. I fear other things.”

“Like what?” she stroked his arm under the straw, feeling the hard muscles through the rough wool. He had made an excellent recovery.

“For a long time I thought I feared nothing at all. You have taught me to fear again.”

“I have?” She could not get enough physical confirmation that he was indeed here with her and not just in her mind. Her hands played up and down his arm.

“I had forgotten the icy fingers on the heart, the clutch in the throat that stops the breath, and the frigid wave of blood that floods the limbs. I gave up those feelings forever. But now they are back, tormenting me but for an entirely different reason and I know I will never be free of it again as long as I live.”

Nadira lay silent for a few moments before speaking. “And you say I have taught you to fear again. You fear for me, now, instead of yourself. I understand this fear. The day they hauled me away in the wagon, when I left you lying nearly senseless in the tower, I felt that freezing hand.” She paused, remembering. “There’s naught to be done about it, is there.”

“Not a damned thing.” His voice was muffled by the straw.

“So, Maria’s mother healed you enough to get to the port. Did you set off with no weapons?”

“They gave me their best pig-sticking knife. I had to promise to return it, and I plan to.” Nadira smiled. The sun had crested the horizon, the weak wintry rays welcome to their chilled bodies. She sighed happily and turned her face to the sun.

“Then what?” She prompted.

“I traipsed about north of the city until I found someone who had seen the Pope’s men hunting for Di Marco. I found them and followed them to his hiding place. It was easy to infiltrate them.”

“How did you do it? Don’t skip over that part.”

Montrose chuckled. “I can understand some Latin. Not much, and I certainly can’t speak it fluently, but my brother did spend a year in Rome using the library that belongs to the Pope. I had plenty of opportunity to learn useful phrases.

“I picked off the sentry and took his clothes. He had a very fine mail shirt and a thick tunic. Very handy. My boots were better than his, so I left them on him. I took up his post and traveled with them on their way back to Rome. Through the gossip I learned

why Di Marco had fled the city. I learned that you had been taken to a secret hearing with the enemies of the Pope to determine whether the Holy Father was dabbling in witchcraft. Before we reached the gates of the city, I had learned what I needed to know and slipped away. It took me only two days to reach the outskirts of the French army. My French is fluent, as you may know, Nadira, and it was no trouble to listen to the gossip about the stolen gypsy girl.”

“Did you see Garreth and Alisdair?”

The roof rocked as he sat up, straw flew from his hair. “No! Were they there?” he cried.

“Lie back! Shh!” Nadira pushed up on one elbow and scanned the horizon, then looked carefully at the crofter’s cottage. All was quiet.

“God!”

“They are not in danger, Rob. Remember Father Bertram sold them to the French. They are part of that army marching to Naples.”

“If they are part of the French army then they are in plenty of danger. I have to go back.” He sat up and looked around. He rose up like he would jump down.

“No! Please,” Nadira reached for him and pulled him down beside her and put her head on his arm. “Please don’t.”

“I can’t leave them there, Nadira.”

“They are safe,” Nadira insisted. “They don’t want to follow the army. They are trying to escape and they will.”

“Do you know this because of, well, you know,” he stumbled over the next words, “that thing that you do.”

Nadira thought for a moment. How did she know? She thought about Garreth and Alisdair marching through Rome. That thought felt cold, like metal. She imagined them hiding in the brush, keeping their eyes on the road, following the French contingent as it regrouped. This thought felt warm, and as she elaborated on the images, it grew into a feeling of excitement. Yes. She did know for certain that Alisdair and Garreth were no longer with the body of the French king’s army and she knew it because of that thing that she did. She smiled in the straw.

“I know it. Trust me.”

Montrose nodded to himself. He turned to face her. The straw surrounded his head like a nest. Nadira brushed a wisp from his hair. He pulled her close and kissed her mouth. She held him to her breast and rested her chin on his head. She felt his warm breath on her throat as he sighed with happiness. He squeezed her.

“Nadira. If Garreth and Alisdair are out and heading back to Andorra, then we must let them find us.”

“And the French?” she murmured, playing with a twisted lock of his hair.

“The French are easy to outsmart. I just did it yesterday.”

“Yes, you didn’t finish the story.”

He stroked her breast with his thumb as he continued. “I followed the road until I saw the wagon party ahead. Then I kept to the scrub, following until nightfall. I watched them until it was very dark and they had posted their sentries. I could see that they were very confident. I take it that the chest does not contain any gold or the royal jewels or anything like that.”

“I don’t know what was in the chest. I suspect it is full of manuscripts.”

“Well, they didn’t guard it like it had money in it. They posted only four sentries, and gave them wine with their ration. Can you believe that?”

“The French?” Nadira laughed softly. “They put wine in their babies’ sugar tits.”

“I don’t doubt it. Anyway, I waited until they had eaten and become bored. There is a point, Nadira, where boredom sets in with every sentry. With some men it is only after several hours, with these men it was immediately after their supper. I imagine marching all day tired them out, but still it was too easy to slip up behind them and,” he made a slashing motion with his hand.

“You killed them?”

“Each one.”

“How many?”

“Three. The first one was farthest from your fire. I made my way in and dropped the other two just as easily. Clearly they were not expecting any opposition.”

“Clearly,” she murmured.

“I had planned on getting all four. The odds would still be ten to one, but after a dead sentry was found I had to work fast. They are aroused and looking for me by that

point. I saw you by the fire. I had planned on running up, grabbing you, and darting into the trees, but the forest there was not thick enough. Instead I tied rope about knee high between the trees nearest my escape route hoping to jump the rope with you and slow my pursuers when they hit the ground behind me.”

“Where did you get the rope,” she asked.

“Oh. Yes, that’s right. You see, they did have the sense to put a guard on their wagon horses, but he was not a good choice. He was stretched out on the ground taking his rest after supper. I just stepped on his neck. After I freed the horses I took their picket lines.”

“You just stepped on his neck.”

“Yes. Pop pop. That was it.”

“And you took the picket rope.”

“Yes. That is how I made the trip lines.”

“Why didn’t you take their horses? We could be riding!” Nadira shook him in frustration.

“No. The horses could not make speed across this country, and we would be foolish to keep to the roads. They would make noise and leave an easy trail. If we had horses right now, where would we be hiding them? How would we feed them?” He touched a calloused finger to her forehead. “Think.”

Nadira did not answer. For the first time in many months she felt safe. She shifted closer to him, draped her arm around his chest, and listened to his steady heartbeat until she fell asleep.

Near nightfall he pulled her behind him as he made a break across the open yard, then ducked them both behind a haystack. “Let’s think about getting out of here and getting something to eat.”

She nodded and followed as he darted out again to find the road. “We will follow the road, but from a distance, north to where the aqueduct crosses the river.” He pointed.

“Where are we going?” she asked. Montrose stopped.

“We are trying to find Garreth and Alisdair. I thought you knew that.”

“Do you know where they are?” Nadira frowned.

Montrose took her hand and led her to a small copse, hidden from the road. “No. I do not. You gave me leave to think they might be on this road pursuing our pursuers. Is this not true?”

Nadira sat down beside him. “Yes, but I think they are in that direction.” She pointed to the east. They sat there in silence for a long while. Finally, Montrose spoke.

“Very well. I will not leave this country if you tell me Garreth and Alisdair are close. Since I cannot say where they are, we must act on your information.” He added reluctantly, “Wherever it comes from.”

“Let us go back, then. When we see the French we will know they are near behind them.”

“You want to go back toward the French.”

“Yes. Toward the French.” Montrose stood up and started back east toward the road. Nadira stood up and ran to him, walking backwards in front of him.

“Don’t be silly. We can go east without walking in the road. Stay covered.”

“Not really, Nadira. Look on ahead. We came from across that country.” He swung his arm out to the south. “If you look ahead, you see there is very little cover. This land is cultivated right up to the sides of the road for acres. There is the occasional tree,” he pointed to the tree as they passed it, “but for the most part, if we are to go east, we must walk along this road. The cover is to the north. Look.”

“Perhaps the French turned back, and will not even be on this road.” She offered doubtfully.

“Perhaps I shall sprout wings.”

“They might. You might.” She was gratified when she heard him chuckle. Encouraged, she kept it up. “They might have returned to camp and explained my escape as aided by demons.”

“Now that’s not funny, Nadira.”

“I think it is. My lord, you wouldn’t believe these people. You won’t believe what they did to me, thinking I was consorting with their devil.”

“Oh yes I would. I’ve been there.” He waved his right thumb at her.

Nadira winced. "Of course. I will be glad to get out of here, but when we find Alisdair and Garreth, where will we go?"

"I think I want to take you home to England with me."

"That sounds nice. Are there no Black Friars there?"

"None."

Nadira sighed. "I'm trying to imagine that."

"It has been a long while since I've been...there." His face darkened.

Nadira was poised to ask him about his home when something like a cold hand clutched at her heart. She stopped. "Look." She pulled on his arm. Montrose stopped and looked far ahead where she pointed.

"I don't see anything."

"Wait. Come off the road." Nadira pulled him sideways. "They are coming." Montrose did not argue, but moved quickly off the road. As he had feared, there was little cover.

"How long until they see us?" he asked.

"Not long. Let's get down in the shadows." Nadira pulled him down the slope and into a gully. Montrose went on alert, his hand on the hilt of his sword; his eyes focused far down the road. Nadira crouched down beside him. The bank of the gully was too high for her to see over but she saw the French coming nonetheless. She saw them approach their hiding place, and she saw the horses snort and shy away as they passed. She plucked at Montrose's sleeve.

"Hmmm," he said, not taking his eyes from the road.

"Rob. It doesn't matter. They will find us here, no matter what we do. Or where we try to flee."

"What?" He looked down at her now.

"The horses. They will smell us and shy. The French will find us in this hollow and there is nowhere else. It is no use."

He did not ask the obvious question; instead he asked softly, "What then, Nadira?"

She closed her eyes. *The horses are coming, they see us, swords flash in the twilight, but I feel no fear.* Nadira opened her eyes in amazement.

"What is it?" He lowered himself beside her, searching her face.

“They are coming, but we are not in danger,” she said incredulously.

“How can that be?” he frowned.

“I don’t know. You will have to trust me.”

“Last time I trusted you...”

Nadira felt a stab of remorse. “I know, I know. But last time I was blind and selfish and childish and petulant. You were right then. You knew it was time to leave the tower. I was only thinking of myself and my own desires. This is different, though.” Tears came to her eyes. “I am so sorry about that Rob. So sorry. So sorry.”

His huge hand came down softly on the top of her head and stroked her hair. “I don’t blame you for that. I blame myself. I should have scooped you up, kicking and screaming, and carried you off. Better me than Di Marco’s men.”

“Oh, you are so right,” Nadira pulled his hand to her cheek. “Let us flee, then. Maybe I am wrong this time, too.”

“I hear hoof beats. We have to decide soon.”

“You decide. I will follow you.”

”Never mind. They are here.” He pulled the long sword from the scabbard and tested his grip on the pommel until he was satisfied. “This is an inferior blade, but the better of the two I took from the French. I should have gone for the leader. He had Damascus steel. This one,” he turned it, eyeing the length of the blade, “it will do.” He lifted the sword and swung an arc out from his body to get its balance. “You say we will win this battle.” It was not a question.

“Yes.”

The sun was low, but enough light remained to see a group of horsemen coming from the east. They were coming fast, at a gallop. In mere moments they would be right over them. Nadira sank back, pressing her back against the gully wall. Clumps of earth fell around her, filling the gaps in her soft shoes. Montrose moved in front of her, the sword and his thigh at her eye level.

The sound of the hoof beats grew louder until the sound was right over her head. Montrose leaped up and was gone. Nadira heard the horses neigh and stomp. More crumbles of dirt cascaded over her face, collecting in her ears and décolletage. She heard the shouts of the French, the sounds of dismounting and pulling on jangling bits. The

stomp and jangle of boots and spurs mixed with the grunts and snorts of the disquieted horses.

Nadira tried to obey his order to stay low, but a gauntlet reached down from above and grabbed her by the hair, pulling her to her feet. A moment later a French soldier was down in the gully with her. She tried to call out to Montrose, but he was down slope, engaged with two more of the French. Her adversary dragged her out of the ditch and up to the road, pinning her arms behind her. Below, she could see Montrose swinging the sword with both hands, keeping both of his opponents from closing in. Nadira could not take her eyes from him. First one stroke, then another. He was using the sword like an axe, forcing the French to move constantly on the rough ground lest they catch the full force of the blow. Behind her the French commander sat his horse watching the melee. Apparently he was confident that no more than two men would be needed to take Montrose.

Nadira knew better.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Her captor was watching the battle below as Nadira scanned the road. Two more horsemen were coming from the east. Dust rose in the air behind their galloping hooves. The commander turned in his saddle to look behind him. To Nadira's surprise, he wheeled his horse about and raised his arm, shouting to the men who were engaging Montrose near the river.

Immediately Nadira's captor yanked her toward his own horse. The two men below backed away and climbed up the slope, leaving Montrose leaning on his sword, panting. He looked up slope at them and Nadira saw incredulity on his face.

The two horsemen rode up and dismounted. One of them immediately drew his sword and took a position in front of the commander, his lathered horse dancing behind him. The other sailed off his horse before the beast had even halted completely; the reins made an arc over its head and slapped the ground at Nadira's feet. His sword was in his hand, and all five men faced the west where Nadira could now see an advancing band of horsemen. She tried to count. From the distance and in the fading light it was impossible

to tell. None paid the slightest attention to Montrose who was making his way cautiously back up to the road.

Nadira's captor squeezed her arm. His eyes darted back and forth. She knew he was looking for a place to tie her up so he could have both hands free.

The French commander raised his arm, "Halte!"

Five horses carrying five mailed knights came to a dusty stop before the French. Nadira's captor began to tremble. He pulled her in front of his body like a shield.

Below her, Montrose stopped climbing and lowered his sword, waiting. The newcomers lined up abreast and drew their swords one after the other. The sound of all the metal scraping together sounded like a chord as all five weapons were brandished. The chord hung in the air. The five were all tall and fair. Their mail glittered in the sun; they wore no identifying marks on their shields. Nadira was struck by the hard look in their eyes. Not one of them appeared apprehensive. They showed no fear, no anger, and no intent. They simply sat their horses with swords drawn, staring at the French as if daring them to make the first move.

The commander shouted once, and with a cruel snap of the reins, wheeled his horse about. He spurred the animal into a great leap and with one bound he closed the distance between him and Nadira. The soldier holding her pushed her toward the oncoming horse and stepped back out of the way. The next stride of the charger would take the commander right over her. She could see his eyes beneath his helmet. He was coming for her. In the next bound he would have her. Already his arm was coming out, his hand opened to grasp her as he flew by. In the instant of her realization the flow of time seemed to stop. The gloved hand was reaching, reaching for her neck in unnatural slow motion.

He was going to grab her and pull her up and ride off with her. He would take her back to the French king where she would be bound hand and foot and guarded with more care. This glove coming toward her would make her a prisoner for the rest of her life. As the glove neared her face the full horror of the situation filled her heart.

She was being stolen again.

The full force of her spirit rejected that possibility. With all her heart, with all her soul, with all her mind she screamed.

“No!”

Her hands flew up, palms out before her face as if she could push the enemy away like an insect. To her utter amazement, the horse, the French knight, his gloved hand blew sideways onto the road, tipped like a great wind might blow a ship on its side. An instant later Nadira could see the gray underbelly and flailing hooves of the breached charger, his rider pinned beneath him in the dust.

The rest of the French broke and ran, tearing up the road with their fleeing hooves. The strange knights took chase at once. Nadira stood in the center of the road, dust settling on her hair like a lacy veil. The breached horse regained his feet, shaking, his reins dragging in the dust, but his rider lay inert. Nadira backed up slowly away from road, trembling. She was deaf to everything but the pounding in her ears. Another step back and she felt a solid blow behind her.

Nadira spun around. She had backed into Montrose. He stood there, staring first at her, then down the road where sounds of clashing steel and cries of pain drifted on the evening breeze. His mouth opened and closed in amazement. She had trouble regaining an order to her thoughts. She shook her head to clear it and reached for him. He drew back, palm out.

“No. Don’t touch me.”

“Rob...Robin, please...”

“No, stay away.” He strode over the road to peer down at the fallen French commander. Nadira saw him go down on one knee and reach out a tentative finger to the prone man’s face. He rose and took the charger by the bits. His face was ashen gray when he turned around.

He asked slowly, “Nadira, what did you do to this man?”

“Nothing, I did nothing.” Tears began to fall from her eyes. She shook all over.

“I know what I saw. Those knights saw it too. You blew this animal down and crushed his rider.”

“No...no.” As she denied it, her heart twisted with the lie.

Nadira’s heart fell as Montrose shifted his eyes away from her and ran his hand over the trembling animal’s neck. He was afraid. She had frightened him.

She felt faint. She put her hand behind her, but now there was no support. She didn't feel herself fall, but only the jolt as the ground hit her. She stared up at the darkening sky. A cloud moved slowly into her field of vision, but she could not move her eyes. It was as if she were bound to the ground. She felt herself breathing, she felt the stones that poked her painfully in the hip and the back, but she could not move. She lay there. Breathing. Staring. A face hove into view like the prow of a ship. It cast a shadow on her in the setting sun.

It was one of the strange knights. His eyes were gray, his beard was gray, and his mail was gray. She stared at him. He looked at her from head to toe, his gray eyes taking in her entire body. She watched him look at her as he pulled the gauntlets off his hands. Then he smiled. Her mind snapped like waking from a deep sleep on a cold morning. She blinked.

Warm hands closed on her and brought her up to her feet again. They steadied her when she wavered. She looked around. She was standing in the middle of them. All five of the strange knights had returned and were there in a circle around her. One by one they reached out and touched her, one on the shoulder, one her hair, another her arm. The gray knight reached out and touched her cheek with his bare finger.

“Nadira of Barcelona,” He said in a deep grave voice. “The Reader”.

She opened her mouth to reply, but no sound could come out. Her eyes darted through the circle to find Montrose. He was by the side of the road, still holding the Frenchman's horse, amazed.

The gray knight spoke to her in Castilian with a heavy accent. “The French were carrying something precious besides Nadira of Barcelona. Can you tell me now where it is?”

Montrose stepped forward, “They had a small chest in their wagon. I don't know what is in it.”

“We do.” The gray knight looked around. “There is no wagon here. How many men started out from Rome?”

“There were fourteen. I killed three.” Montrose answered.

“We killed seven.” The gray knight nodded, then motioned with his chin towards his men. Two knights replied to the unspoken signal by mounting and riding away again to the east where the French had fled. The gray knight took Nadira’s hand.

“I am honored to meet you, Nadira of Barcelona. Please call me Malcolm. Proper introductions will come later. Please call this knight, Lionel,” he motioned to a dark-eyed knight who bowed to her from the waist. “And this one Reginald.” Reginald’s eyes beneath his hauberk were sea green. “Our companions Calvin and Derrick have taken chase for the French baggage. Let us get back to our camp. We have much to discuss.” He pulled her hand like he would lead her away, but Montrose dropped the charger’s reins, stepped between them and pinned her with his arms. “She is mine,” he said.

“She is yours, Lord Montrose,” Malcolm raised both palms. “She is yours,” he repeated as though soothing a madman. Nadira looked up at Montrose, but he kept his eyes on Malcolm.

The corner of Malcolm’s mouth turned up and little lights of amusement danced across his eyes. “I was told you would say exactly that, and that you would resist with violence any attempt I might make to take her. However, I daresay you are hungry yourself, and could use some rest. You’ve had a busy week. Let me offer you our hospitality.”

Malcolm swung his arm out and his great charger moved up into position. Malcolm swung up into the saddle. Reginald and Lionel mounted their horses with equal grace. All three sat patiently waiting as Montrose and Nadira stared up at them. “Come then.” Malcolm coaxed, tugging his gauntlets back into place, “Let’s go.”

“Shall we go with them, Nadira?” Montrose asked slowly without looking at her.

“Yes,” she answered simply.

Montrose released her, retrieved the reins from the Frenchman’s mount and pulled himself stiffly into the saddle. He gathered the reins and cued the beast so he could pull Nadira up behind him, but instead of advancing toward Nadira, it reared with a frightened neigh and backed, its haunches quivering. He regained control, but the animal would not take a single step in Nadira’s direction but continued to back up as fast as it could.

Malcolm called out with amusement as Montrose receded into the distance, “Señor, Lord Montrose. May I have permission to carry your lady upon my horse?”

From far away came the faint answer: "By all means. Be my guest." Nadira put her hands up willingly to Malcolm, who lifted her up behind him.

The knights' camp was out of sight of the road, and so well hidden Nadira was surprised when they came upon it suddenly. She was even more surprised to see a man in a brown robe sitting on the ground near the fire pit. As they neared she could barely contain her excitement. Malcolm rode his horse directly up to the pit, but Nadira didn't wait for the huge animal to stop. She slid off its haunch and ran into Brother William's arms. He hugged her tightly, and she covered his face with kisses until the deepening hue of his blush became alarming. She pulled back to beam happily at him. Montrose rode up moments later and dismounted as well, coming forward to embrace William, patting his back.

Nadira cried, "Oh William! I am so glad you were able to escape from the tower!" He was the same William, but his tonsure was growing stubbly and his habit was travel-worn. He could not stop grinning at her and squeezing her arms and hands.

"I was so worried, Nadira. I didn't know where you were going, or what was to become of you. I was terrified you would go to the stake."

"I almost did."

"Oh, God." He crossed himself.

"Yes, but I am here now, and have the most extreme confidence in these men."

Nadira looked around the fire at the knights.

The men had brought their knapsacks to the fire pit and were doling out bread and cheese and fruit and wine. William led her close to the fire. The wine was warm and leathery-tasting, but there was much joy in the drinking of it. Nadira laughed as the red dribbles rolled down her chin and onto her shift. "Now I know why you men wear beards," she joked as she wiped her chin with the back of her hand, and then passed the wine skin to Lionel. "But now is the time to tell me who you are and how it is that you arrived on this unmarked road precisely when we were to meet our doom at the hands of the French."

Malcolm smiled. "This is Brother William's story, and he should tell it."

"Well, then, Brother."

William took her hand in his and rubbed it back and forth. “After the men torched the tower, I ran to the village and had Maria’s people come to get Lord Montrose in the woods. They carried him away. I gave them a few coppers and left immediately for Coix. It took me a long time, and I was weak with hunger when I arrived.

“At Coix I found that Father Bertram had left for Rome. The priest he left in charge of the abbey would not free up any funds nor would he allow me to borrow any of his monks. I could eat and drink all I pleased, but could not carry anything away with me. In desperation one night I made my way to Brother Henry’s cell. He was locked inside, as usual, but there were no monks posted outside his room. I called to him through the door and told him what had happened. He asked me if you had eaten any endpapers, Nadira. I told him you had not.” William paused, his eyes on her face. His jaw dropped. “But I think you did. You did!”

Nadira could not suppress a peal of laughter. “Oh William! Wait until you hear!”

“Tell me now, oh God, tell me. Please. Don’t make me wait. What happened? Did you...”

“She won’t make you wait, William but I will.” Montrose sat down heavily beside Nadira with a huge loaf of bread in one hand and a wineskin in the other. He gave William a dark look before biting his bread.

Nadira spread her hands in defeat. “Please, William. Continue. Henry...” she prompted.

William took a deep breath and started again, “I explained Monsieur’s elixir and the copies of the book we were working on. There was a long silence and I thought he had fallen asleep or was having one of his fits. Finally he crawled over to the door and put his mouth to the crack. He told me where to find my lord Malcolm and gave me a password. He told me there was a brotherhood of knights who knew about the book and the secrets within it. They have been keeping those secrets for almost two hundred years. He told me to go to them for help. The password would protect me. I sinned, my friend, for I did steal food from the abbey for my journey, and I caused the cooks’ assistant to sin as well.”

“I’m certain the Lord will forgive you, Brother William,” said Malcolm.

“I traveled two weeks, where I got lost several times before actually finding my lord Malcolm. After arriving at his place, it occurred to me that there may have been an easier route...”

“But not the right one. It was necessary, Brother. I hope my hospitality made it up to you.” Malcolm smiled.

William returned the smile. “Absolutely,” he said. “Finer meats and sweetbreads never have I tasted. I was loath to leave his place when the time came. Again, I thank you, my friend.” William patted his stomach, and then continued. “I told Malcolm what had happened to us. He bade me wait two more weeks. While I waited, a party of men assembled in the manor, then finally we embarked on this journey by sea and then overland. I kept asking how we would know where to find you, but they would give me no satisfaction. Even now, today, I cannot tell how we came upon you when we did.”

Nadira sat looking soberly at her hands. “I would like to think that you all loved me so much to go through this turmoil and danger and suffering to retrieve me from my captors. I know my lord Robert was driven by his heart to come after me. I know my friend William is fond of me. The love of these two men, no matter how deep or sincere, is not enough to assemble such a company of knights and baggage and send them leagues and leagues to far lands to recapture one small servant girl. Can you tell me why?” She looked up hopefully at each of the faces around the fire.

Malcolm stood up without answering her. Calvin and Derrick were returning. They rode right up to the fire and dismounted heavily. Both men were covered head to foot in blood and bits of flesh. Calvin carried a bloody leather satchel marked with a red cross. He stepped over the log they were using as a bench and carefully handed the satchel to Malcolm. Malcolm sat down and untied the flap. He pulled a piece of parchment from the bag and unrolled it across his knees. Malcolm frowned as he looked at the document. “This is what was inside the chest?” he asked the men.

Calvin nodded. “This was all that was inside. There are some dispatches and other mail I found among the baggage, as well as what I take to be Lord Montrose’s possessions.”

Montrose stood up. "Is that true? May I look at them?" Calvin nodded and gestured toward his horse. The two men left the fire and pulled the baggage from the animal's back and began to lay it all out on the grass.

Nadira watched Malcolm finger the parchment on his lap. "What does it say?" she asked him.

"Oh, I cannot read this," Malcolm said to her. "That is your task." He handed the creamy manuscript to her. She took it from him, searching his eyes for a clue to his intent. Finding none, she glanced down, recognizing her own clear handwriting and remembering that miserable day when it seemed Montrose's heart had been ripped from his chest and she had been so frightened. She saw the squiggle in the letters of the opening lines where her hand had shaken while she wrote. She remembered the pitiful flicker of the tiny lamp Montrose held over his friend's dead body to illuminate her work. She blinked, and a tear dropped from her cheek and splashed the corner of the document. Malcolm leaned toward her. "You asked why we had come to retrieve you, "Nadira. You are holding it in your hands. Read it to me, little one."

Nadira took a shuddering breath. "It reads: 'The world welcomes the mind of the seeker. All you are asking for is here. All of knowledge is here. All the answers are here. Here the seeker finds peace. Knowledge comes not from words. Seek ye the river's edge for the key to understanding.' Then start the strange symbols. I cannot read those. There is a picture of two flowers next to the word 'understanding', one at either end of the word." Nadira looked up at Malcolm. He had his chin in his hand, thinking. He smiled at her.

"Nadira of Barcelona, I have an idea of where those strange symbols come from. I would like to take you there."

"No!" Montrose came striding up; a scowl darkened his features. He was wearing his own sword again. He leaped the log and sat down between Nadira and Malcolm. "You are at it again. Stop right now. Nadira is going to England with me. No more quests. No more journeys. No more danger. You admitted she is mine."

"Believe me, I am not trying to take her from you." Malcolm took off his helmet and set it on his knees.

Nadira looked from one man to the other and took advantage of the pause. “It is true,” she began in measured tones, “that I have no legal status anywhere. I would hope, however, that after all we have been through I might have some say in the matter.”

“You did say! Just this morning you agreed to go to England!” Montrose’s exasperation was palatable.

“That was before I knocked a charging horse to the ground and killed a man!” Nadira slapped her forehead with an open palm. “Great stinking piles, Robert! You had second thoughts yourself when you saw that Frenchman face down in the dirt. Don’t lie to me! You did! I saw it in your face.”

Montrose put both hands in his hair and pulled hard. “Nadira...” she could hear his teeth grinding.

“Please, please,” soothed Malcolm. “No one has to make a decision today. Or even tomorrow. This document I claim in return for your freedom. And I am sincere. You are free to go as of this moment. I will tell you, however, that what happened on the road today will not fade from your memory.

“You will deny that it happened; you will make up reasons for the Frenchman’s death. You will say the horse tripped on a stone and his rider broke his neck. You will sit in your comfortable chairs on either side of the fireplace, sipping your spiced wine on a winter’s evening. And you will not speak of this day. You will not speak to your husband of the voices you hear in your head, Nadira. You won’t tell him that you know the birth dates of your unborn children, that you know which servant is stealing the beer or which tenant is shorting his rents. You won’t tell him you know what the weather will be the next day. When you ache to relate your adventures, you will be silent, for you know that he fears you.

“Lord Montrose, you will sleep uneasy next to her, for you know that in the deepest night she is not there with you. You will look into her sleeping face and wonder where she has gone and worry if she’ll come back. You’ll wonder every time she looks at you if she sees something you do not, if she knows your innermost thoughts and never, ever, for the rest of your life, will you be free from that fear.”

He looked hard at both of them, Nadira, wringing her hands and staring off at the horizon and Montrose, hunched over, his hands dangling between his knees. Malcolm leaned toward them and whispered. "It doesn't have to be that way."

"How else can it be?" Nadira asked softly. Montrose jerked his head up. He did fear her. She put both hands on his cheeks and stared meaningfully into his eyes.

"I will never leave you," she promised. His eyes softened. He put a hand through her hair and cupped the side of her head. She saw him try to speak, but only his throat muscles moved.

William coughed uncomfortably. Montrose withdrew his hand and stared into the fire.

Nadira nodded to Malcolm. "What is it you want?"

Malcolm gestured to Lionel who brought him a rolled vellum map. Malcolm spread it on the ground so the firelight illuminated the bright colors painted on the skin. "Here is the 'water's edge'." He stabbed the map. "And here is a drawing of the plants we are to find." Nadira could see several flowers painstakingly drawn in the margin of the map. "It is found in only a few places. Its stems are used to make a kind of paper, but the flowers contain something similar to the specks on the endpapers. It is combined with those specks that are grown in grain in a field near Athens. The strange symbols are an ancient language from Egypt. I believe the word is the name of the place we are to find. It is possible to find one who can read this if we go to Jerusalem."

Montrose asked Malcolm, "Can you answer my questions about what I saw today? Do you know what happened to that Frenchman? He did not break his neck. There was not a mark on him. He was dead before he hit the ground."

"I know. I was there. I saw it."

"You have answers for me?"

"You've had that answer for months now, Lord Montrose, written on your best friend's back. The answers are not here but 'Seek ye the water's edge' as it says. Your answer is precisely the reason Nadira has been dragged all over this land. She can read and understand what is written here. She can go where others cannot, and that makes her as valuable as a fortune in treasure. I have seen others do what she has done and I, too, long to know the answers. Did not Brother Henry demonstrate this power?"

Montrose nodded, deep in thought. "I did not know what it meant. Nor did my brother."

"Now you do. Will you come with us?"

Montrose looked up at the clear starlit sky for a long time. When he came down he cupped Nadira's face in his hands. "I never wanted to sit in a comfortable chair by the fire," he whispered to her. Nadira's face lit up with a great smile.

Malcolm took a drink from the wine skin. "We will start out tomorrow to collect your friends Alisdair and Garreth. No doubt they long to be out of France."

"No doubt," Nadira echoed.

"And Brother William, I daresay the scriptorium will never be the same for you." Malcolm's eyes twinkled at the little friar.

"Never. I can never go back. That is the curse, is it not? Once the box is opened..." William drifted off, thinking. After a moment he asked, "Is there a place for a scribe in your party?"

Nadira leaned over to embrace him. "A great vast emptiness in the party if you do not come. Please come."

"I will be honored." William squeezed her hand.

Malcolm nodded to Nadira. "And I must ask you to travel for me before we go. Di Marco has done something terrible for the Pope, I need to know what it is."

"Of course," Nadira answered. "Of course. I could tell you where Garreth and Alisdair are. I could tell you what Di Marco was doing for the eight days I was locked in his house. But," she leaned closer to Malcolm, "I do not know how to prepare any of the elixirs. The alchemists did that."

Malcolm smiled through his gray beard. "We," he nodded around the fire to his brothers, "have known for four hundred years. When Brother William arrived with his news and Henry's password, I took care to bring what we would need to be successful. The night is clear, the stars are bright, and the French will not come within miles of this camp. Tell me when it is time, and you shall fly."

Nadira laughed. "It is time."

Nadira lay limp over Montrose's knees, his arm behind her neck. Malcolm's elixir was sweet and intoxicating, tasting like cherries and filling her mouth and throat with a warm honey stickiness. She swallowed again, waiting for the release. This time she heard a loud snap and found herself in Di Marco's bedchamber. He was asleep.

Malcolm's voice in her ear told her to touch his head, and she did. A surge of heat and light projected before her eyes, and remembering what Malcolm had told her, she focused her thoughts on those eight lost days.

Di Marco appeared in front of her, ghostly and fragmented. He did not look at her but passed through the wall of the bedchamber. Nadira followed, her eyes open to everything around her. As they moved through his grand house, Nadira became aware that everything she saw was doubled one upon the other, offset by mere inches. The furniture, the doorways, the drapery, the occasional servant and guard on duty were all doubled. She blinked, thinking they would merge into one but they did not. She reached out to touch a large vase on a stand and was surprised to see her hand flow through one image, but impact the second. Always before she could only see but never touch.

The vase was cool to her hand. It transmitted a message of identity: "I am Senor Di Marco's vase in the hall near his bedchamber."

Nadira removed her hand with wonder. A voice in her ear said, "Stay on task, my dear."

She thought of Di Marco and in an instant was on his heels again. "Sorry," she whispered, wondering if Malcolm could hear her. Ahead, Di Marco turned as if he heard her. "Show me where you took the book," she ordered him.

He frowned, but both of them immediately *whooshed* to a grand villa beside a river. Di Marco's apparition stopped and turned around as if shocked and frightened to find himself there. Nadira reached out to him. "Why are we here?" She asked him. Her answer was immediate. The room shifted around to reveal a dark man sleeping in a richly covered bed, a servant standing ready against the wall should his master awake. The man lay sleeping on a silken pillow; his double hovered slightly above him, shimmering with rich colors and golden sparkles. He was not yet old, but long past youth, and sported an impressive black mustache and a comfortable smile.

Nadira knew to touch the man, and as her finger made contact with his double, the information came to her. *I am Prince Djem, rightful ruler of Karaman and Konya.*

So, she thought, Di Marco and his Pope have found a reader from among the Turks. She looked for the book. Di Marco's apparition pointed to the bedclothes. *Ah. I have found them both.*

The book lay under the man's arm, tucked close to his body. As she reached for it, she felt the familiar tug at the back of her head and opened her eyes in Montrose's arms.

"I hate it when that happens," she said. "I was going to touch the book, but you pulled me back," she said to Malcolm.

"I did not pull you back, he did." Malcolm nodded toward Montrose.

"What?" Nadira sat up and touched Montrose's cheek.

"We need to teach him some new skills if he desires to hold you while you travel. I could see the trouble building in his face."

"I assure you, great knight, I did nothing with intent." Montrose lowered his eyes. Nadira heard the shame in his voice.

Malcolm answered gently, "Let us hear what she has found. Most likely she was not brought back too soon."

Nadira said, "My lord Di Marco took the book to a man named Djem who claims to be ruler of Karaman and Konya. He sleeps with it under his arm, a great smile on his face."

"Ah." Malcolm leaned back against his baggage, pulling on his beard. "Yes, I know of this man. The Pope keeps him hostage for a great deal of money from his brother, the Sultan. They are friends. No doubt he is to read and translate the Saracen parts of the book. The Pope must have arranged to send the book there, convincing the cardinals it was destroyed. The elixirs are in that language, that's what he wants."

"So you now know where and who..." Montrose began.

"Excellent, and now we can send Nadira after your companions. Go now," he handed her the vial of cherry sweetness, "and find them for us."

Alisdair and Garreth were trudging through the empty fields, heavy packs on their backs and mud on their boots. Both men had heads bent to the wind and moved stiffly, as though in pain from a long march. They were heading north; they were close to the

knight's camp. She touched Alisdair's head to discover where he was going. Alisdair stopped and held up a hand for Garreth. She could hear them clearly.

"Ach, that was strange, Garreth." Alisdair set his pack down and rubbed his forehead. Garreth grunted his question and Alisdair answered. "I just saw the lass in my head. Like a painting." He crossed himself.

Encouraged, Nadira touched him again, this time with her entire hand.

"Sweet Jesu!" Alisdair cried, both hands on his head. Garreth was in front of him now, very concerned. "It's the lass again. She's callin' me. She says to follow the river upstream. Rob is with her." He frowned as he took his hands from his hair. "How did she do that?" Both men exchanged incredulous looks. Garreth made two horns with his fingers and placed them on his forehead. Nadira laughed. Both men looked up.

"Ye hear that, lad?" Alisdair slowly turned around, peering into the darkness. "Ye did, dint ye?"

Garreth nodded, reaching his hands into the air above his head. Nadira touched one of them; it was snatched back.

"Ach, Jesus God, what is happening?" Alisdair cried.

Garreth put his hand to his throat, pointed down to the river and lifted his pack.

"Ye think so, eh?"

Garreth nodded and turned toward the river.

"Ach, then. Ye daft brute." Alisdair shouldered his pack.

Nadira imagined Montrose's strong arms and found herself there. "That was easy," she said.

"And...?" Malcolm asked.

"They will be here by daybreak. How is it that they were so close? How did they know we were here?" Nadira sat up and rubbed her eyes, still dizzy from the potion.

Malcolm tossed a branch into the fire and they all watched the sparks fly up to join the stars. "It seems strange to you now, but in time you won't even question such things. Let us sleep. Calvin has first watch." He got up and left the circle of firelight.

William stood as well. "I am so tired, I may fall into the fire and provide the *auto da fe* I'm sure I deserve..."

"William..." Nadira warned.

“I jest, dear one, I jest.” But Nadira could see his answer was a half-truth. She took his hand and put it to her lips before he pulled away and retreated to his bedding.

Montrose pounded the earth with his fist, “They are safe, they are safe...”

“Yes, my lord, and will be here on the morrow.”

He snatched her up. “And you are here now.”

“I am.”

“Right here.”

“Yes.”

“Not flying about in the dark, haunting the unsuspecting.”

“No, my lord,” she smiled.

“Then I shall kiss you soundly.” And he did. Then he lifted his head so she could see his blue eyes, indigo in the starlight. He whispered, “My love, I so wanted to take you home.”

She whispered back, “You have.”

###

About the Author

Annmarie Banks lives and works in the beautiful state of Arizona. She has spent nearly thirty years researching her interest in the various ways people all over the world and throughout history have searched for knowledge. She is currently at work on the sequel to *An Unfettered Mind*.

Thank you so much for reading my novel. I hope you enjoyed it. Please leave a comment for me on my blog and tell me what you thought. I am working on the sequel and your input may help steer the story.

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