

THE KEEPER



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PROLOGUE

The room was dim, as most rooms in the estate were. Shutters were drawn against the harsh heat of the day, and inside, the shadows lent much needed respite. Soft footsteps crossed the hard-packed floor, and the black-eyed man sat on the side of the simple bed tucked into the corner of the room. He smiled as he reached out and brushed back dark hair from a sweaty brow.

"It's all right, Asif," he murmured. "You have fulfilled your duty, and I release you into the arms of the Savior."

Asif gazed up at the man who had been his responsibility for the last thirty years of his life. A life he had devoted to the duty of his line. "He awaits," he choked out, his vision darkening.

The man smiled, the expression tender, almost loving. "He always waits."

An hour later, the man stood before a semi-opened shutter, the heat wafting into the sickroom. Asif was gone. Thirty years, and he was alone once more. He sighed, shaking his head. Asif's brother had died two years before, but he knew there was a child from Iyas' second marriage, and that lone child's wife had just given birth to twin sons.

Which meant the first son could now be called upon.

Hadi was twenty-four. He'd been sure to follow the young man's life closely, knowing it was only a matter of time before Mirah's fertility treatments would prove fruitful, freeing that branch of the blood-line to continue serving him. He wasn't certain Hadi would fully appreciate his birthright, but Asif—as all the others before Asif—had found a measure of happiness with him in his solitary life. Surely Hadi could do the same.

He left the room, heading to the kitchen to make several phone calls before preparing the estate to receive its new resident.

CHAPTER ONE

The music was a pounding force, driving the pace of the men and women who graced the custom, hourglass runway, their porcelain faces reflecting the passion and style of the haute couture designs they modeled. The pageantry was exquisite, the audience taken in by the scene as, one by one, the models gave true life to the beauty and imagination of the designer. Every detail was on display, scrutinized by the fashion elite of Milan seated in the front row, who nodded occasionally and murmured amongst themselves. If those who walked on the stage knew the importance of certain figures in the audience, they showed none of their apprehension or awe, walking and striking their poses like true professionals, unfazed by the dazzling flashes of admiring photographers.

One would never know from the glitz and glamor of the main room that it was a frantic race backstage. Shouts rang out over murmurs and voices speaking in rushed Italian and French. Clothes were strewn over chairs, pulled from racks, and nearly ripped from bodies as they returned from the runway for their quick changes before putting on their fiery, serious expressions and passing the curtain once more. Straps of heeled shoes snapped, hair designs came undone, seams tore, and hisses of pain could be heard from those who lost their footing or collided in the sea of flesh and fabric.

It was pandemonium. Complete and utter chaos.

And in the midst of it all, Hadi thrived on the indescribable rush of the show, his hands swiftly repairing a carelessly ripped strap before addressing an unsightly hole along the beautifully beaded brocade that trailed behind a female model, accidentally trampled by the backstage traffic. The repairs were swift, perhaps even shoddy, but timing was everything in this world, and the show could not stop for any reason.

He was not a designer, not by a long shot. The role he played was far less glamorous, though it earned him the respect of his peers. It never bothered him to know that others took the credit for the custom-beaded overlays or the fine embroidery he stitched into the couture dresses. The small, metallic additions he made to a line of menswear or the accessories that graced hair styles for a single show were never printed with his name in bold letters. What mattered in the world of detailing were the names of the designers who respected you, and of those, Hadi had slowly compiled a list through hard work and dedication to his craft.

"Hadi!" A voice from a distance yelled for him over the din, drawing closer.

"Busy!" he shouted back, not even lifting his eyes from the quick lacing he had to mend. When the voice yelled again, he shook his head and concentrated on his current task, finishing quickly and all but shoving the male model to the front of the line. Looking around the crowd, he saw that the rest of the models were either waiting for their final turn on the runway or beginning to line up for the finale with the designer.

"Hadi!" This time, the voice was just behind him, and he turned, the question in his eyes needing no words. "Your phone has been ringing since the beginning of the second cycle." His look of annoyance made the man hold up his hand defensively. "I wouldn't have bothered if I hadn't seen the tag on the screen. The caller is from France."

Hadi's eyes widened, and he quickly snatched the phone from the man. There was only one person who would have called from that country so late at night. The screen showed seven missed calls in the last half-hour. Seven! A quick glance around the room revealed no emergency demanding his attention, so he quickly retreated to a relatively quiet corner. Just as he was about to key in the number, the

phone vibrated in his hand, the jingle seeming quiet compared to the noise of the music and bustle. Pushing the button to answer, he pressed the cell phone tightly to his ear, plugging his other ear with a finger.

"Mother? What's going on? Are the twins all right?" he asked loudly in French.

It was surreal, the way everything seemed to stand still for those few moments, the barely audible words registering slowly just as the music of the show faded and the backstage area was filled with congratulations and cheers. His face was pale as he nodded, the gesture unseen by the one on the other end of the line. "Yes," he said, his voice a bit subdued, a stark contrast the the celebration that went on just feet away. "I will get there as fast as I can."

Flipping down the thin half of the cell phone, Hadi took a deep breath and released it. The clean up for the show would have to be handled by his subordinates.

He had a plane to catch.

"What do you mean, I have to move to Algeria?" Hadi demanded, his eyes wide as he gripped the arms of the chair. His mother had insisted that he sit down, and now he was almost glad he had taken her advice. "I'm sorry that I missed the funeral, but I got here as quickly as I could, and I—"

"This has nothing to do with your late arrival," Kazim interrupted in a firm voice, effectively silencing his son. "You know that your grand-uncle, Asif, lived happily in Algeria for decades. Part of our family heritage lies there, which is why you grew up speaking fluent Arabic. A close friend of our family lives there as well, and it was Uncle Asif's responsibility to care for this friend. Now that Asif dwells with Our Lord, our friend needs a new keeper."

"And I am that new keeper? Just like that?" Hadi stood from his seat, outraged. "No disrespect to this friend, Father, but I have a life of my own! I have worked years in Milan, making contacts that most in my line of work would dream of having. I can't just pack up and leave without a trace!"

"You are the only one, Hadi," Kazim revealed, his eyes glimmering with a mixture of disapproval and pity that made Hadi all the more uncomfortable. "The keeper must be a male of our family line not bound by the restrictions of married life. You are the next in line after me. I had hoped Asif would live a bit longer so I could take the responsibility upon myself, but the twins, Hadi. You must understand..."

Hadi clenched his jaw tightly. His father had newborn twins to care for. He could not, in good conscience, deprive his brothers of the love and upbringing he knew they would enjoy with his parents. But his life in Milan, his work, his friends... Was his life not worth equal consideration? He felt his anger seep from him, replaced with a sense of dread and sorrowful resignation. "Please, Father... do not ask this of me..."

Kazim sighed, not untouched by his son's plea. Closing the distance between them, he placed his hand on Hadi's shoulder. "I am afraid it is out of my hands. You must do this... for the honor of our family and the protection of the one who awaits you in Sétif."

Family honor. Tradition. Though Hadi lived a life unlike those of his relatives, he could never turn his back on his family. He could not dishonor them all, no matter how much he treasured what he had built for himself in Italy. He felt helpless, caught in a snare from which there was no escape. It was not fair, to have spent years setting the foundations to a life that would no longer be lived as he had so carefully planned. Then again, who decided what was fair? Fate and Fortune seemed to be conspiring against him.

His thoughts cycled, though he knew it was useless to waste time begging further or prolonging the inevitable. Still, there were tears in his eyes as he bowed his head respectfully, submitting to his father's will with the simple gesture. "How long do I have?" he whispered, dejected.

"He is without a keeper, Hadi. You must leave as soon as you are able."

Struggling to keep his dignity, Hadi simply nodded his understanding, not daring to raise his eyes to see the pity he knew to be on his father's noble face. "I will make the necessary arrangements."

Friends, workers, employers, designers, the landlady. He had a hundred different people he would have to contact. Painful as it would be, he would make it work.

He had no other choice.

CHAPTER TWO

Hadi slowly made his way to the man who held a sign with his name clearly written on it. He was not nearly as graceful as he tended to be, shuffling forward with his two large suitcases in tow and a heavy pack slung around one shoulder. The delay to his flight out of Milan had been torturous, forcing him to linger in the place he had called home for three years. He had loved Milan, and he knew he would miss it terribly. The evidence of that was written on his face, which was drawn and exhausted from too little sleep. Making his way over to the driver, he spoke softly. "I am Hadi Rahal. I hope you were not waiting too terribly long."

The driver took the two bags from Hadi's hands. "Sayyid Dhakir is eager for your arrival." He turned and walked towards the doors, leading Hadi out into the dying light of late afternoon.

It was hot and muggy, and Hadi sighed as his bags were loaded into the car. He may have been well dressed when he left his flat in Milan, but the flight and weather were now working against him. Smoothing the crumpled linen of his shirt, he thanked his escort when the door was opened for him, and he sat within the car. It seemed even hotter inside the vehicle, and he felt himself begin to sweat. It was a fitting welcome to the country in which he was doomed to spend the rest of his life.

The drive from Algiers to Sétif was long, the heat of the day giving way to the oppressive humidity of night. Though the windows of the car had been rolled down, both men sweated through the eight hour trip down the highway, silence hanging as thick as the air in the cab of the car. When they were perhaps an hour away from the city, and midnight loomed, the cellphone beside the driver rang. In clipped tones, he informed the caller that yes, he had picked up Hadi Rahal, but the flight had been delayed. No, everything was in order, and yes, they would arrive shortly after midnight.

Once the call was completed, silence descended once more.

Hadi could not remember ever having been more uncomfortable while traveling. Though his hands usually itched to busy themselves with the random projects of his trade, he found that the dampness of the night served to heighten his exhaustion, making his limbs feel heavy. He wanted nothing more than to fall asleep and wake to find himself back in Milan amid the hectic schedule of the fashion industry, but he couldn't maneuver into a position comfortable enough to doze. The last hour seemed to move as slowly as those that preceded it, and he was pulled from aimless thoughts when the car finally halted in front of a small estate. The grounds were lush, the foliage adding to the appeal of the main dwelling, which appeared well kept, though he was certain that any imperfections were masked by the soothing hue of moonlight. Stepping from the car when the door was opened for him, he stretched his limbs and fought the sudden urge to simply remove his shirt, which stuck unpleasantly to his skin every time he moved.

A man walked from the shadows of the front door, dressed in simple trousers and a white tunic, his feet bare as he crossed to Hadi. He smiled, though the expression was drawn in appearance, and bowed respectfully to Hadi. "Welcome to my home, Hadi."

"Sayyid Dhakir," Hadi greeted in a voice that could hide neither his exhaustion, nor his sadness. Regardless of the emotions he felt, however, Hadi showed respect where it was due, bowing to his host in return.

His first impression of Dhakir confused him. The man moved around well, and though it looked like he had endured the two weeks that had passed since Asif's death just as well as Hadi had, Dhakir did not look like a man in need of constant care. In fact, the man couldn't be more than a decade his seni-

or, placing him somewhere in his thirties. Perhaps Dhakir had an ill father. Hadi shook his head to clear it and ran a hand quickly through his hair. "My apologies for the delay in my arrival."

"You can hardly be held responsible for the airline's delay." Dhakir nodded to the driver. "Take his bags in. Fourth room on the left." When they were alone, Dhakir gestured for Hadi to follow him. "You look exhausted and very hot. Are you hungry as well?"

"Yes, Sayyid. We stopped once for food, but that was shortly after exiting Algiers," Hadi said, falling into step behind the man. Though he had been careful to drink plenty of fluids, his stomach rumbled quietly with hunger.

Dhakir laughed, the sound soft and rich as he led Hadi into the house. "I have prepared a simple meal for you. I hope it is to your liking. Through the hallway there. I will be with you shortly." He bowed again and disappeared down another hallway, his footsteps silent against the dirt floor.

Hadi watched Dhakir leave, and then continued on his path to an informal dining room, which connected to the kitchen by a doorless arch. The humidity seemed to carry the scent of food to his nose the moment he stepped into the room, and he sat instantly at the section of the table that was set, leaving the head of the rectangular table for his host. The plate before him was filled with fresh vegetables and a small cut of lamb over couscous. His mouth watered, and he looked at the doorway before taking up his utensils and beginning the meal without his host. It was not the most proper thing to do, but his stomach demanded no less of him at the moment, and he didn't want the steaming plate to grow cold.

After a handful of minutes, the front door shut with a definitive sound, and Dhakir appeared in the doorway to the dining room. He stood, watching Hadi eat, a small smile on his face. "There is more if you would like it," he murmured, taking his seat at the head of the table. "I had nearly forgotten how young you were."

Black eyes glanced from plate to host, and Hadi felt his cheeks heat with a mixture of embarrassment and agitation. Swallowing his mouthful of food, he bit back a disrespectful remark. "I'm twenty-four, Sayyid," he said, taking a piece of bread from the center of the table and dipping it in the dish of peppered oil next to his plate.

Dhakir smiled, the expression blandly pleasant. "Call me Dhakir. We will be together for quite a long time. There is no reason to stand on formality between us."

"Dhakir," Hadi repeated with a small sigh. He paused when he finished his slice of bread, the energy boost from the food causing his mind to turn around the circumstances once again. He looked suspiciously over at his host. "You are the one I was sent to care for, aren't you?"

"Yes," Dhakir said over steepled fingers. "I am."

Hadi wasn't sure how to take that news. His brow furrowed, and he looked down at his empty plate. "You don't look ill," he mumbled. It didn't make sense. His grand-uncle had lived in Algeria caring for this man since before Hadi was born. What sort of illness could the man have contracted as a child that warranted constant supervision?

"Did your father say I was ill?"

"Well... no," Hadi admitted, sitting back with his arms crossed. "I just assumed. Why else would you have needed Uncle Asif so long? Why else would you need me, now that he is gone?"

Dhakir tilted his head curiously. "Because it is your family's duty as the keepers. Were you never told of it?"

Hadi's eyes narrowed as his jaw clenched. "Maybe, when I was *five*," he said. "I didn't expect a fairytale of family honor to come back and haunt me twenty years later."

"You are displeased to be here." Dhakir sighed, sitting back in his chair. "I cannot change that I need a keeper, and you, Hadi, are that keeper."

Hadi grew silent, his eyes downcast. There was no use in arguing. The decision had already been made, and he had packed and left Milan as quickly as he could without absolutely destroying the relationships he had developed with the designers who hired him. Now, he was here in Sétif, and there was no going back. Sadness overcame him, the tension of his jaw and shoulders loosening while he stared mutely into his lap.

"Asif was unhappy when he first came to me." Dhakir stood, taking Hadi's dishes to the kitchen. "After a few years, though, he found joys in the life he shared with me. Small joys at first, but he discovered other, larger ones that he reveled in."

"I am not my uncle," Hadi murmured.

Dhakir leaned against the wall, crossing his arms and ankles. "No, you are not."

"Will that be a problem?"

"Perhaps." Dhakir smirked. "You do not look like Iyas."

Hadi's frustration grew, seeing that expression. "I am not my grandfather, either."

Dhakir frowned. "Your grandfather and grand-uncle were more enthusiastic about their duties within the family."

Standing quickly, Hadi took a few steps to look out the window. "Forgive me for having a life I already treasured."

Eyes softening, Dhakir murmured, "Can you not learn to treasure this one as much?"

Hadi looked down, a polite smile on his lips that did not match the sadness in his eyes. After a few moments of quiet reflection, he turned to face his new ward, resignation clearly displayed on his face. "We shall see, won't we?"

"I... am sorry, Hadi."

"Do not trouble yourself," Hadi insisted, putting on a more cheerful front. He could not let sadness overwhelm him; to do so would shame his family, would give a terrible impression to Dhakir, if he had not already done so. "I can work with my hands anywhere, not just Milan."

"We will be together a long time. Your troubles are mine."

Hadi shook his head. "No, my troubles are my own. The transition will be difficult... but I will manage." Somehow, he would manage to continue his work. He would make new friends, establish himself in this new place, which was such a far cry from the hectic streets he had grown to love.

Dhakir's brow furrowed. "It will be difficult to live together and do what is necessary if you keep yourself from me."

Sighing softly, Hadi walked slowly to the entrance of the dining room, indicating without words that he wished to be shown to his room. "What is it you would have me do?"

"Look at this as a new opportunity... as a new possibility."

Hadi looked back over his shoulder. "Proof that life throws us about like leaves in a mercurial wind. What can the leaf do to withstand the gale?" He knew that he had to submit to change, but he found it so difficult to do so with grace.

"I do not wish for you to feel as if you are kept prisoner here," Dhakir murmured.

"You are not keeping me prisoner. I know that much. My feelings of isolation and confinement will pass." After all, Hadi could leave whenever he wished. He certainly had the money for it, and the family's ward would not stop him. But the *shame* of it. The shame he would bring his family for refusing this duty, no matter the cause, would be unbearable.

Dhakhir pushed away from the wall and slowly approached Hadi. "Do you know who I am?" He paused but a foot from the young man. "What your duty is? The conditions of that duty? Did they tell you anything before instructing you to come to me?"

"Only that it is imperative that I live out the rest of my life in your service. They told me it is sacred, part of the religious heritage of the family, but they could not answer when I asked for details." That had annoyed Hadi. He had a mind for details, and having them withheld had set him on edge.

"Many of them don't know since the secrets themselves die with each member that resides with me," Dhakhir murmured. "All it is, really, is legend at this point."

"A legend?" Hadi asked. His brow furrowed, and his dark eyes focused on Dhakhir. "How long have you been in the care of my family?"

Dhakhir's burning eyes held Hadi's. "Since the beginning."

Hadi's eyes narrowed farther, until he was nearly squinting. "The beginning of *what*?" A sense of unease washed through him.

"Since the very beginning of your line. When Ya'akov walked this earth, he made a promise to his brother, swearing that he and his line would protect and keep me," Dhakhir said, his eyes turning to the midnight landscape beyond the windows of the dining room. "Since the beginning."

His eyes suddenly widening, Hadi stared at Dhakhir as panic took root in him. This man had to be insane. The beginning of his line? There was no way he could be serious! But... why would others of his family clearly have served and died? What could possibly have been the point of dying for a madman, who did not look nearly as old as he attested to be? "What are you?"

Dhakhir lifted his chin proudly. "I am the most beloved of His Apostles. Many nights, I sat and listened as He spoke. Many days, we ministered while He healed the sick. History calls me The Betrayer; He called me Brother."

Apostles. Christianity. The Betrayer... 'beloved'... that reverence in voice and eyes that gleamed with both pride and sadness. Hadi didn't need to be religious to know. "Judas? Judas, the betrayer of Christ?" It was so outlandish and insane that it could not be fabricated. He suddenly needed to sit and found himself in a chair just as his legs gave out, not quite knowing how he made it the few steps back to the table. "Dear God..."

Judas went into the kitchen and poured Hadi a glass of water. Standing beside the young man, he set the glass on the table, always speaking with commanding softness. "Before I betrayed Yehoshua, he came to me and told me of my part in the saving of humanity. He told me I would grieve, that I would be cursed for generations, but that I would, eventually, be permitted entrance into the Kingdom. Until that time, Ya'akov had agreed to keep me, protect me, and I became the ward of his descendants." His eyes gazed down at Hadi. "You are his descendant."

Hadi's shock was absolute. He was descended from the brother of Jesus Christ? It was impossible! It was *impossible*. Tears stung his unseeing eyes, though he did not understand why, and his hands shook almost violently. His mouth opened as he tried to breathe past the congestion of his tears, and he leaned forward, cradling his forehead in his hands. He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them a few times, as if the intentional blinking would carry him back to his cramped flat in Milan and prove this all a feverish dream after a drunken night during fashion week.

When the flooring remained the same, though blurred to his eyes, he panicked, rising so swiftly from his seat that he all but tripped over his own feet. "You're telling me I'm...? That you're..." He

caught his balance at the wall a few feet away, but his eyes locked onto Dhakir as he struggled to steady himself. "No. This isn't possible. You cannot be Judas. No man could live two millennia... and Judas hanged himself, or was stoned, or burst into flames. You *can't* be him," he babbled, leaning against the wall as one of his hands pressed to his forehead again.

"It is a shock. I understand." Judas watched Hadi, sympathy shining in his eyes. "I *am* Ioudas, and one should never believe all they read. I live. I have lived for a very, very long time. Your family has ever been my keepers, a single male plucked from a generation each time the previous died. Asif died, and you, the eldest of his descendants unwed and of age, were the next to be called."

"But why male? Why my family? Why *me*?" Hadi demanded to know, his fear causing a rush of defensive anger to overtake him. "You killed him, didn't you? You slowly killed my family just like you sent Him to His death!" In the back of his mind, he knew he had no room for argument. He was anything but righteous. He may have been born into a relatively religious family, but he could count the times he had been to church or mass in the last five years on a single hand. "Am I being condemned? Am I now cursed like you are?" He felt adrift, lost, abandoned without a light to follow in the darkness.

"Because Yehoshua asked His brother to care for the one the world would not care for, and Ya'akov took the burden upon himself and his line." Judas' voice was calm, as soothing as it could be in the face of such accusations and demands, Hadi assumed. "Why your particular family? It is a branch I have been utilizing for the last century. Why you? Because you are the eldest of the line. Asif died of congestive heart failure, just as your grandfather did. He lived a good life here. He lived his duty, and we were friends. I grieved upon his death. Condemnation is not my duty, and you are not cursed." He tilted his head and clasped his hands behind his back. "I loved Yehoshua. I loved him... very much, Hadi. He was my dearest friend, my confidant, my brother in all ways but blood... and He was my Savior. How could I not do as He asked?" Judas shook his head. "How could I turn Him aside in fear and selfish desire to remain good in the eyes of the world? Yes. I sent Him to his death, and I grieved that death. I miss my friend. I miss Him terribly, and Asif died a natural death at the end of a long life filled with joy and laughter, for never did I keep him from his friends, his family, his work, or his hobbies."

The sheer emotion Hadi could hear in Judas' voice was overwhelming, and he could not keep his ears from taking in the brief words that deconstructed all he thought he knew about the vague personage of Judas in the holy texts. The loss of that ignorance was devastating, and he couldn't remember the last time he wept with such force or felt so isolated. His shoulders shook with silent sobs, his legs slowly giving out beneath him. He crumpled against the wall, drawing his knees close to his chest so he could hide his face against the rumpled cloth of his trousers.

Judas slowly approached and crouched beside him. "Through you, Hadi, I live. The blood in your veins..." His eyes glanced to Hadi's wrist. "It is the blood of Christ, diluted though it may be."

"Christ was divine. He was holy. I— I'm *not*," Hadi protested with a weak shake of his head.

"All are holy, for we are all created in His image," Judas said with a smile, reaching out to stroke Hadi's rumpled hair.

The touch of Judas' hand surprised Hadi, and his head jerked up from his knees. He eyed the hand in his hair, and then the face of his captor, his charge, Christ's friend and betrayer. Somehow, he had expected the touch to be deathly cold, but it was still warm, undeniably human... undeniably alive. It was in that moment, his distress met with the calm of experience, that he knew nothing would ever be the same for him again. The wind had swept him away. He was at its mercy.

"There is only one thing I need from you, something that is non-negotiable, and I am sorry to say, it is quite often... uncomfortable," Judas murmured. "There are things that can be done to mask the pain. To... make the memory fuzzy."

Fear entered Hadi's gaze, though he tried so hard to be brave while he faced so much all at once. "What?"

"We can speak of it in the morning." Judas stood. "You should shower and sleep. Things will be easier after rest."

Sleep. Sleep had always helped Hadi in the past. He had once been faced with horrific deadlines in the middle of the night back in Milan, the work before him staggering, but he always managed to tackle the worst shocks or stresses after a good night's sleep. He nodded at Judas, forcing himself to his feet, though he was a bit unsteady. "Water," he requested, his voice a bit strained.

"Of course." Judas retrieved the glass of water, placing it firmly in Hadi's hand. "You should shower before bed."

Hadi wasn't shaking as badly as before and took the glass without spilling anything. He sipped at first, and then drank more steadily until the glass was empty. He stared up at Judas for long moments, wiping his mouth and cheeks dry before taking a few steps and setting the glass on the table. The empty glass drew his attention for a second, though his thoughts were so scattered that he couldn't pinpoint what about it captivated him. "Shower," he whispered, coming back to himself. He nodded, taking slow steps as he followed Judas from the room. "I feel unclean... Judas."

"That can be easily remedied with a cool shower. Rid yourself of the sweat and dirt of travel." Judas smiled, taking hold of Hadi's arm and leading him down the hallway. "Your room should be adequate, and it has its own bathroom."

Hadi barely heard the words that Judas spoke to him, letting the calm tone and gentle cadence of the Arabic help him detach from the reality of the situation. His mind had taken in all it could and refused to absorb more. Before he knew it, he was standing in the room that would be his, a soft 'Good-night' and the click of the door signaling Judas' departure.

As if in a trance, he retrieved the necessary items from his suitcase and took his shower. Oddly enough, it was not the cool water that shocked him out of that blissful state of detachment, but the sight of his room as he entered it again. It was empty, devoid of his personal imprint, and he felt tears threaten again as a wave of homesickness crashed into him, pulling him back to reality.

He did not feel his twenty-four years as he pulled back the blankets and slid beneath them, barely pausing to kick off the sandals he wore from his shower. He did not feel the weight of his experience in the frantic world of fashion, the calm that he had honed. All he felt was shock and the terrible beginnings of futile acceptance. Sleep, he reminded himself. Sleep would help the wind settle, help the facts congeal so he could grasp them, so he could throw them away or hold them close. For the first time in years, he whispered a prayer to his pillow, and for the first time in even longer, he believed someone was there to hear it.

CHAPTER THREE

Judas set out the khubuz, lebneh, olives, feta cheese, and oil, along with a plate of cucumbers and tomatoes and a hot pot of tea. Sleep had been beyond him, and so he'd spent most of the night pacing the hallways and rooms, pausing occasionally to look at his carefully kept birth records of Ya'akov's line. There were a handful of males scattered across the world that would be suitable to replace Hadi, but Judas found himself wavering. No, Hadi was not his prisoner, but he was bound by duty, and that was duty Judas could release him from. He sighed and sat at the head of the table, rubbing his dry eyes. Yehoshua had never promised him this would be easy, but he'd never thought it would be this hard. The older he became, the more tired of living he was.

And now there was Hadi.

Young, beautiful, having lived a fast-paced, modern life, Hadi was his newly appointed keeper in the rather slow life he lived.

Not for the first time, Judas lamented how unfair it all was, and he whispered a silent prayer to Yehoshua that there was some brightness in the situation he'd yet to see. That there was some redeeming value to ruining Hadi's public future and private life through this marriage of necessity.

A metallic click and creak announced that Hadi had finally woken from his slumber. Judas could hear him moving quietly down the hall, closer and closer. Hadi stopped short when he saw Judas waiting for him. Judas looked up and tried to summon a welcoming, warm smile for Hadi.

"Uhm..." Hadi cleared his throat softly. "By what name should I call you, Sayyid?"

"Judas. It is what Asif called me." Judas folded his hand upon the table and nodded to the place set for Hadi. "Eat." He could see lines of exhaustion still etched in Hadi's face despite the long hours of sleep. "Did you not sleep well?"

"The bed is comfortable," Hadi murmured. "I just had unpleasant dreams. It happens sometimes when I sleep in a new place. It will pass." Taking his seat next to Judas, Hadi poured himself a cup of tea and helped himself to the light meal.

Judas watched Hadi eat, silent for a long time. He could see the tension in Hadi's posture, as well as the shadows of defeat around the dark eyes. "Is there anything you have need of?"

Hadi set his cup down, refilling it with more of the mint tea. "Have the packages of my other belongings arrived yet?"

"Yes. They arrived the day before yesterday. I placed them inside your closet." Judas stared at his hands, the burning inside his flesh returning with insistent determination. "Will you continue working?"

"I am going to try," Hadi said, a spark of fire lighting his eyes from within. "I assured my regular employers that my change in location would not affect the quality or timeliness of my work for them. I... won't be able to help during their fashion shows, of course, but I can buy materials and send out my work without much trouble, I think." He took a sip of his tea and looked down into the cup. "Some of the designers told me to contact them again if I came back to live in Milan. They made it clear that they valued my work, but could not outsource all the way to Algeria. Too many variables. I admired their honesty. At least the others are willing to... take a chance on me," he finished, a small smile curving his lips.

Judas glanced out one of the windows. "I am sorry you have to compromise your work to be here."

Hadi shrugged, his eyes lifting to watch Judas. "It was unavoidable. In such a fast-paced industry, delays are an annoyance at the best of times and intolerable at the worst." He paused, as if searching for something more to say. "Perhaps my being so close will enable a local designer to spread their wings."

"Perhaps." Judas smiled, the expression meant to be encouraging. He admired how Hadi continuously tried to find something positive to say in the wake of so much negative. It was a trait too few people Hadi's age possessed. "I am certain there are many opportunities here."

The look they exchanged eased some of the tension in Hadi's face. He finished his second cup of tea before speaking again, the words slow, cautious. "So, you really are Judas... not just some mad-man having delusions?"

Judas laughed, the sound soft and devoid of amusement. "No. I am not a madman. Sometimes I have questioned my sanity, but I am Judas Iscariot. I was born in Kerieth in what these days is commonly referred to as 3 BC. Of course, we didn't call it 'BC' at the time." He snorted. "By the Hebrew calendar, I was born in 3758. In the winter, though even winters in Kerieth were mild. My mother was grateful I came early rather than when the weather turned."

Awe was clear in Hadi's voice. "It must have been difficult, living over two millennia..."

"It has been." Judas turned his eyes to Hadi. "Every keeper I have had has died in my care, and that wears on one's soul after a while. I've always become a valued friend to my companions, and they to me, and so to lose them brings about an exhaustion I don't believe many walking this earth can fully empathize with."

With those words, Judas watched Hadi's eyes grow sad once more. "Uncle Asif's death must have been difficult for you, then," he murmured. "I may not empathize completely, but I know what it is like to lose a close friend."

Judas bowed his head a moment. "Though it was expected, it was the definitive end of a three-decades long friendship."

"I am sorry for your loss," Hadi said, sincerity ringing in his voice. "You knew him better than I did. I'm sure it was a comfort to him, having you close near the end."

"I would like to think so." Judas smiled fondly at the memory of his previous companion. "After the rough beginning, he and I found comfort in each other's company."

"Is it always rough at the beginning?"

Judas pressed his lips together for a moment. "Yes. My keeper has always left behind a life he cherished."

"I will... try to live up to the legacy left by those who came before me," Hadi whispered.

Judas smiled. "You will." He simply knew that Hadi would adjust, no matter how difficult the transition was.

Hadi was silent for a time, and Judas respected his need to process things. He knew then that Hadi was not a rash boy. No, Hadi would think everything through four times over before he spoke, and it made Judas inwardly smile.

"What will my duties be here?" Hadi finally asked. "You mentioned one of them would be painful."

Judas averted his eyes. "It is the only thing I require you to do." He glanced at Hadi's wrist again. "Blood... once a week."

Hadi stopped breathing for a moment. "My blood?" he asked in a rush of breath, his eyes wide. Fear darkened his eyes, and Judas hated himself for, yet again, inspiring that emotion in another human being. "I'm a sacrifice..."

"Sacrifice implies death." Judas shook his head. "You will not die through what we do."

Swallowing thickly, Hadi scrutinized Judas. "Once a week? What have you done the past few weeks since Asif passed away?"

Judas clenched his teeth. "Endured."

"Then you are... thirsty right now?" Hadi asked carefully.

"If you could equate the burning beneath my flesh as thirst," Judas muttered, "yes."

"Then you should drink from me," Hadi breathed, ever the honorable man.

Judas shook his head. "If I do that, you will lose this day to bed rest."

Hadi bit his lip. "Tonight, then, if you can wait a bit longer."

"I can wait." Judas stood and began clearing away the dishes. "Are you allergic to any medication?"

"Cefaclorum," Hadi said with a small nod, "but that's just an antibiotic. Why?"

Judas set the dishes in the sink. "Asif preferred that I mixed crushed diazepam with wine before... taking what I needed."

Hadi took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Valium with alcohol." He laughed sharply. "Why not?"

Judas winced, but he nodded, wiping his hands. "Tonight, two hours after you eat. The diazepam can sometimes upset a stomach," he said. "You will sleep through the night."

Hadi rose from his seat, and Judas wanted to hide from the grave expression on the young face. It was like the sacrificial lamb accepting his fate. This was not the first time Judas wondered what lesson it was Yehoshua had intended him to learn through the blood of his descendants.

"I will see you tonight, then," Hadi said. Taking a couple pieces of fruit from the basket on the end of the table, Hadi walked slowly back to his room, the door shutting quietly.

Judas sagged against the counter, that dry, burning sensation moving under his flesh, like fire in his veins. "Yehoshua," he prayed, closing his eyes. "Please, give me the grace to accept this fate, and the courage to face another lifetime with one of your nephews. Give him strength and courage, Brother, and bless us in this time of need."

He opened his eyes, the burn within easing somewhat, and he turned around to clean the breakfast dishes. Remaining busy until after supper would be key to him keeping his sanity, and his sanity was hanging by a fine thread at the moment.

CHAPTER FOUR

It had been a long day, an even longer evening, and try as he might, Hadi couldn't stop the nervous quivering of his hands. He had compensated during an eerily silent dinner by gripping a bit harder at his food than needed, but now that the meal was over and he had been sitting without a distraction, the trembling was leading him to fidget. He had thought about leaving several times throughout the day, but such thoughts immediately led to thoughts of dishonor and shaming both himself and his family. Like a coward, he'd hidden after the evening meal, but he couldn't hide anymore.

It was time.

He walked down the hall, ending in the sitting room, where Judas waited for him. His heart raced, and he wrung his hands nervously. All he wanted to do was run back to his room and lock the door, pretend this wasn't going to happen.

That it didn't *have* to happen.

Judas stood in the center of the room, his eyes moving over Hadi's tense form. "We can wait, if you prefer," he murmured.

"No," Hadi protested. "You need it, and I agreed. I'm just a bit—" He cut himself off, not wanting to admit to the intensity of his fear.

"You are afraid." Judas smiled with understanding, picking up a glass of red wine. "Drink this. It will help, though you may wish to sit down first."

Hadi's eyes fell to the low table by the divan where Judas had placed what they would obviously need for this little ritual. Bandaging, salve, herbs, and a long, slender knife... The bottom dropped out of Hadi's stomach. He walked quickly to the other side of the small sofa and took the wine glass from Judas. He sat down obediently, his free hand picking and pulling at the leg of his loose, linen pants. "What exactly will it do?" he asked, eyeing the crimson liquid in the cup. "What exactly will *you* do?"

"It will calm your mind, and when you wake up in a few hours, you will hardly have any memory of the event... if any at all." Judas' eyes kept returning to Hadi's wrist. "As to what I will do? Are you certain you wish to know?"

Hadi began to have second thoughts, but he couldn't just consent without knowing what he was getting himself into. "Tell me."

Judas nodded to the knife on the table. "I will cut your wrist and press my lips to the wound and drink."

Swallowing, Hadi suddenly became acutely aware of the pounding of his pulse. "How much will you... drink?"

"It will be more than usual, since Asif... I cannot say how much it is. I just know when the pains stop. That is all I take." Judas met Hadi's gaze. "You will not be compromised in any way. I... need you safe, healthy, and alive."

Hadi looked down, not knowing whether he should feel cheapened or religiously elevated. He was frightened. That much was clear in his dark eyes as he brought the glass of drugged wine to his lips. He drank swiftly, letting the alcohol warm his throat and the drug travel quickly to his stomach. The final mouthful, he held a bit longer, trying to savor a bit of the taste before swallowing.

"I know this is strange, but in time..." Judas whispered.

The effect of the alcohol was almost instantaneous, and with it, the drug entered Hadi's system. "The new covenant," he breathed, feeling his mind start to wander oddly. "His blood poured out for you." He set the glass aside on the table and rested back against the divan, closing his eyes. "Drink."

"His blood poured out for you, too," Judas murmured as he picked up the knife and Hadi's hand. He knelt beside Hadi on the divan, pausing to look into the dazed eyes. "Thank you, Hadi." He pressed the sharp blade to the inside of Hadi's wrist and drew the point across tender flesh, blood welling brightly along the wound. There was a sharp intake of breath when the blade penetrated Hadi's skin. His jaw clenched against its quivering, and his opposite hand balled into a tight fist to keep from shaking. He was frightened, more frightened than he could remember ever being in the past, but he didn't want to show it, didn't want to lose his composure. His breathing quickened despite the alcohol, and his heart pounding in his chest. Judas looked up as he set aside the knife, and Hadi saw such shame and compassion in the ancient eyes. "*Thank you.*" Judas bent his head, his hands cradling Hadi's wrist and hand with soft tenderness, and he sealed his mouth over the wound. Each beat of Hadi's heart dispersed the drug and alcohol through his system, and it wasn't long before his jaw and hand released, the muscles relaxing as pain was dulled. He slumped a bit more in his seat, his eyes fluttering as blood seeped steadily from him. His mind became increasingly hazy and he slowly felt the pain subside to an almost dismissible discomfort.

He didn't know how long Judas sat, hovered over his wrist and suckling from the wound, but eventually he lifted his head. After a moment, Judas swiftly bandaged his wrist with herbs and salve, binding the wound tightly. Hadi knew it was happening, seeing it from a distance. Only when there was nothing else to do did Judas lift his eyes.

Hadi's head rested at an odd angle against his shoulder, and try as he might, he couldn't focus his eyes. Judas was a blurry image before him, his mind fogged and heavy as sleep whispered to him. He couldn't raise his hands, and he couldn't force his tongue to move so he could speak. If he could speak, he didn't know what he would say. Thought was too difficult, and his eyes slowly closed. Unnatural sleep called to him, pulled him closer to the warmth of oblivion and the promise of waking without this frightening memory.

Judas' hand cupped his cheek, and he felt Judas' press a brief, chaste kiss to his lips. At least, he thought that's what happened, but he wasn't sure anymore. What he heard, as if through cotton, was Judas' voice whispering again, "Thank you."

By the time Judas pulled him into his arms and lifted him from the divan, Hadi was giving in to the drug. He let go, let darkness swallow him whole, and he willingly sacrificed the memory of this moment on the altar of his mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

Judas sat in the late afternoon light beside the lush gardens behind his home. It was his respite in the city landscape surrounded by farmland. A large pond surrounded by succulents and shrubs, desert flowers and the gentle summer wind were his source of tranquility. It was a tranquility he'd not felt since Asif's illness made taking blood from the man an impossibility. He'd honored Asif's life, abstaining from feeding those last, long weeks... and then not feeding until Hadi was ready. Judas wasn't even certain Hadi had been truly ready, but the need to soothe that painful burning inside his flesh had driven him to swift action. He closed his eyes, sipping his wine and exhaling a long, quiet breath.

Asif had come to him from a different time, a different place in life. The man had been in his middle years, having experienced so much already by the time Judas had called him to his side. Hadi, though, was young. He was young and solemn, and Judas didn't think that solemnness existed before he'd come here. In a way, Hadi was a sacrifice, but not just in blood. In *life*. A whole life given up to him just so he could exist.

He'd tried once not to call for a new keeper when the old one had passed. Oh, how he'd tried. Weeks had worn on, and the burning had become fiery agony. Not only had his body ached with the pain of that strange sensation he called hunger, but his spirit had been nothing but black anguish. He'd wept for days at a time, unable to sleep, to eat, to move. It was the sacrifice of Ya'akov's line that allowed his betrayal of the one he'd called Brother to recede into a faded memory. The hunger was the betrayal made manifest.

And the sacrifice of the line he'd betrayed offered him weekly absolution.

It was the only theory he had as to why he had to take their blood. There was no other logical reason, though Judas had to question why he thought logic played any part in this life of his.

Hadi was simply one in a long, long line of men who offered that absolution, even if they never understood what it was they absolved him of.

How long would it be before Hadi laughed with him as Asif had? How many days would pass before a meal together was more than strained silence? Would Hadi ever sit with him in the evenings and speak softly of the dreams he'd had, the dreams he'd left behind, and of the dreams he still held to?

It was maddening, being thrust from the comfortable life he'd shared with Asif into this. Thirty years of habit, of comfort and friendship, lost, replaced with youth and questions and uneasy acceptance.

Judas shook his head, finishing his wine and setting the glass on the concrete slab his chair sat upon. "Time," he murmured to the setting sun. "All we have is time, don't we, Yehoshua? You always said that was the gift God gave to mankind. Time."

Hadi leaned back against the headboard of his bed, sighing his frustration. The past few days had been slow and tiring as he recovered from the first of what he now termed Judas' 'feedings'. Not that he remembered the feeding itself, but he did remember the emotion. He didn't know which was worse, having the full memory or just remembering he'd been afraid and in pain.

He had to admit, Judas had tended to him like a professional, making sure he did not incur any lingering effects from the medication and that the incision on his wrist was healing with relative ease. Judas had also spent each meal with him in the informal dining room, but, other than that, had made

himself scarce. It was clear to Hadi that he was being given time and space out of respect, so he could sort through his feelings and come to terms with his role as Judas' keeper.

There was, however, one major problem: with his wrist the casualty of the feeding, he could not handle doing most of his detail-work. The second day, when he had tried to crochet, he had found himself barely able to thread the needles correctly. Beading was an impossibility, and he didn't have the strength to bend or hammer metal. It was like slow, psychological torture. His only saving grace had been the few friends who had taken the time to call his cellular phone to chat for a couple minutes. Everyone was always in a rush, however, and he was barely able to speak beyond the superficial before each had to make a deadline or hang up.

He looked over longingly at his crafts, wishing his wrist was capable of handling the tools of his trade. The loneliness seemed to hit him full-force in those moments, and he clenched his jaw, rising from his bed. There was only one other in this estate, and it was time to close the distance. If he was going to be around Judas for the rest of his life, he wanted to know the man and move quickly beyond the strained silence. He simply couldn't take all the quiet anymore.

Hadi was breathless and tired when he finally made his way out of the estate. He hadn't thought to look outside until he had discovered that the entire house was empty. It was another frustration that he channeled into his search, and he slowed when he pushed through a small bit of shrubbery that stood between himself and Judas. "There you... are..." he gasped, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"What are you doing out here?" Judas rose to his feet, quickly making his way to Hadi's side. "It is not yet time for supper."

Hadi didn't have the strength to make up an excuse, so he simply glared at Judas. "I was lonely, and I didn't want to wait for supper."

"Lonely?"

"Yes, lonely!" Hadi huffed, but his excitement was starting to make him feel a bit faint and he leaned against Judas. "I'm used to crowds, to noise and chaos. It's so quiet here, and you've been distant." There was a distinct edge of sadness to his voice that he didn't try to hide.

Judas helped Hadi over to the chair, easing him down. "I have not wanted to impose more than I have," he admitted. "You needed time to recover."

"I need *company* to recover."

"I did not realize." Judas crouched beside Hadi. "Forgive me."

Hadi shook his head. "You were being respectful," he said quietly. "I appreciated the time and space at first. I just... need help. I need someone to talk to while I can't work."

Judas frowned. "Why can't you work?"

Hadi was about to speak when he realized what the consequences of his words could be. He didn't want Judas to feel guilty for his inability to do his crafts. "I just need to recover," he said carefully, trying to sound like he didn't mind the respite from his work. "It will pass."

"You said that about not sleeping well." Judas forced Hadi to look at him. "I dislike lying, Hadi. Why can you not work?"

His brow furrowing, Hadi sighed. He hadn't lied, not really. Looking at Judas, however, he knew it was useless to skirt around the truth. "My wrist is very sore and weak. I can't work a needle and thread or knit or even use my metal-working tools. I can't work with one hand. I'm not ambidextrous."

"Oh." A flush crept over Judas' features. "I... was thoughtless. I should have been aware of that before." He shook his head and looked out over the gardens. "I am sorry. I won't do it again. You need to be able to work."

Something about that humble, embarrassed flush appealed to Hadi. Judas was kind to make such an offer. "You will still need to feed. Next time, just drink from my left instead. I'll be able to at least embroider with my right since I have a stand that can hold the fabric for me."

"And you will forever do one-handed crafts?" Judas asked.

"Well, I..." Hadi's voice faded. He hadn't considered it from such a long-term perspective. He didn't know what to say.

Judas smiled sadly. "I didn't think so." He sat on the concrete just as the sun slid below the horizon.

Resting in the chair, Hadi stared out at the sunset, the clouds coloring vibrantly the longer they sat. His mind was not idle as he took in the beauty with a sense of appreciation. The moments seemed to last a small eternity, and it suddenly occurred to him how rarely he had paused in Milan to simply enjoy something like the sunset. He missed his home in the city, but he had to admit that the sight of the farmland and cityscape in the dying light was as beautiful as one of the shimmering dresses he had helped create for an amazing designer, if not more so. "It's beautiful," he whispered absently, glad for a moment that someone was there to hear him.

"It is." Judas sighed, the sound content to Hadi's ears, as the stars began to dot the sky. "There is peace in the stillness between light and dark. So few take the time to enjoy it properly, let alone appreciate its very existence."

Hadi felt a small moment of peace for the first time since he had learned of his grand-uncle's death. He allowed the feeling to linger as long as possible, simply sitting with Judas. Eventually, he turned to his charge, his voice softened, calmed by the sight he had just been granted. "Would you mind coming inside with me? We could—I don't know—read in one another's presence. Or maybe we could talk a bit. I'm sure you have plenty of stories to tell."

Judas rose gracefully from the ground and held out his hand. "We can do whatever you like, Hadi," he said, offering him a true, warm smile.

Hadi couldn't help but return that smile, and he took Judas' hand, allowing Judas to help him rise. Walking back to the house, hand in hand, he found his smile lingering. The silence didn't seem as oppressive as before.

CHAPTER Six

Hadi brought a small rag to his face and wiped away the sweat that had formed on his brow and neck. If there was one thing he had learned about Algeria in the three weeks he had been there so far, it was that the heat was nearly oppressive. Most of his clothes from Milan seemed pointless extravagances, the fine fabrics holding in too much heat and making the sweat of his body unbearable. When he had gone into Sétif to buy more appropriate attire, he had been astonished by the difference between the city and Milan. It was not just because Milan was so populated, so full of life. Sétif also had a fair amount of people, especially in the marketplace which had been abuzz even in the heat of the early afternoon.

No, it was not the people who made the difference. It was as if time itself flowed differently in Algeria. Everything seemed to drift at a slower pace, even the busy streets and the shops in the heart of town. This was a world seemingly without the deadlines and frantic rush to which he was so accustomed. While it may have been the perfect place to get away for a vacation, despite the heat, Hadi felt strangely confined by the difference. He was not here for a quick excursion to escape the rigors of city life; he was here to fulfill a destiny that had taken him completely out of his element.

Even more disturbing was the way his own life was gradually taking on a sense of slow routine. He maintained what working relationships he had in Milan, making frequent calls on his cell phone and working on his projects whenever he was able. Judas' feedings were regular, though he could never quite remember the act due to the muddling effects of taking diazepam with wine each time. He would remain abed the entire day following each feeding, and slowly recover his strength. He made it a point to remain active when he was not confined to his room, taking walks to explore the grounds of Judas' estate, but the daytime hours that were not filled with small chores or menial tasks were oddly lonely, as were the hours after nightfall when he knew all his friends back in Milan were either on or behind the runway or busy doing go-sees for future employment.

His one saving grace had been that Judas no longer avoided his company. The man was often silent, distracted perhaps, if not just plain distant, but his mere presence was something of a comfort. Judas had continued to feed from his wrist, but he had been attentive enough to switch to his left side, freeing up his dominant hand for his projects. It was a kind gesture, one that Hadi appreciated, but he could not deny that a lingering sense of melancholy seemed to follow him throughout the days when he was unable to work as he once had. Even so, he was rational enough not to blame his state on Judas. It was not truly the man's fault, and it would have been unfair to take out his frustrations on one who was already so removed and alienated from the world.

In truth, Judas seemed a very kind individual, and Hadi was filled with curiosity that he tried to satisfy with small discussions and dialogues. Judas did not shy away from him, answering all his questions with an openness and honesty that astonished him. The world of fashion was one of intrigue, of mystery and the scandal of exposure. Most of those he worked beside were secretive by necessity, and those on the runways who became his friends were caught up in a spotlight that scrutinized them so much that they were prone to locking their internal struggles away and allowing others to only see the superficial.

Judas was unlike his friends in Milan, unlike *any* man he had met, actually. The honesty and integrity with which he spoke captivated Hadi. He found it enjoyable to speak to Judas simply for the pleasure of hearing the man's candid, eloquent voice. And the cadence of Judas' voice seemed perfectly matched to the Algerian estate's flow of time, unhurried.

Hadi chuckled to himself, dabbing his forehead again before taking up his needle and thread again and continuing his embroidery along the collar of a man's shirt with his good hand. He was going to drive himself crazy in this place.

"I suppose," Judas murmured from the doorway of Hadi's room, "I should finally just admit I cannot rightfully... from your wrist." Hadi had noticed Judas didn't like referring to what they did as 'feeding', though Hadi thought what was exactly what they did. "It is not very fair to you, is it?"

Turning his head from his work, Hadi offered Judas a small smile. "I am managing, all things considered," he reasoned.

"You could be doing better than just 'managing'," Judas said with a shake of his head.

"You have been kind enough to drink from my left instead of my right. Unless you feel inclined to choose another spot entirely, this will have to do."

Judas' face flushed, and he looked down at the floor. "If I am careful, I could use your throat. It's just a... very intimate area. It requires the bodies being close."

Hadi's hands ceased pulling the thread for several moments, and he looked once again at Judas, taking in that almost embarrassed flush. He was reminded suddenly of all the children's stories of vampires, those who drank from the necks of their victims, fed by the blood of the living. Only, Judas wasn't one of the undead. He wasn't sure if the idea of being cut at his throat and fed from amused him or worried him. After a few moments, he nodded. "You will be careful. I... I trust you."

Judas lifted his head, offering a watery smile. "Have you tried a cool shower and wearing only trousers? That's what I used to do."

The sudden change in subject was odd to Hadi, since Judas had always tended to draw out their conversations during the previous weeks, but he smiled back at the man. "I have tried the cool shower idea. If I indulged myself as much as I would like, I would never get any work done, lingering instead in the cool respite. Why on earth did you choose to live in Algeria? It seems almost miserable in these hot summer months."

Judas sighed, looking out at the hot afternoon light. "It's... peaceful. There are modern niceties, but overall, it's primitive and quiet. No major war to speak of at present, no angry, religious conflicts that make my soul cry out. It's ideal for a man like me."

Hadi suddenly felt guilty for thinking so harshly of the place he was now to call home. Judas didn't seem like the type of man prone to rash action, and he should have had more respect for the man's choice of abode. "You... don't get out much, do you?"

"Where would I go?" Judas chuckled. "I occasionally go to supper somewhere or to church."

"You go to church?" Hadi asked with a raised eyebrow.

Judas raised his own eyebrow. "Of course I do. On occasion. When I need time to think, to meditate. Church is a very peaceful, quiet place when services are not in."

"Forgive me. I meant no disrespect," Hadi said. "It just seems a bit strange that you would go there, with all the distortions that have been made. I mean... you were *there*. You don't need some priest to tell you something or reassure you. You were there by His side. Though... I can't deny that it is a very quiet place, somewhere I suppose you could go when you want to get away and think." He did a few more stitches of his work before pausing again. "Don't you get lonely?"

For a while, Judas stood with his head bowed. "Yes." He lifted his head. "How could I not? The only one allowed close remains, usually, no more than thirty, maybe forty years, if I am lucky, and then they die and someone I do not know replaces them. When I become close to that one, trust them—even love them—they die and another replaces them. It's hard," he whispered. "It's hard and a heavy burden. Yes, Hadi, I am lonely."

Hadi looked at Judas for several moments, but he grew silent, eventually looking back down to his embroidery, though his fingers didn't resume the stitches.

Judas shoved off from the door frame. He walked to a window and gazed out over the sienna landscape. "I try not to think about it. And sometimes I succeed." He smiled sadly at the sky. "But then I blink and remember, and I force myself out of bed."

"Am I no comfort to you?" Hadi asked softly.

"You are."

"I'm glad," Hadi whispered, the words barely audible.

Judas smiled and turned around. "Am I a comfort to you in a country so different from Italy?"

The smile that graced Hadi's lips was gentle and genuine, and he nodded. "You are."

"I am glad." Judas tilted his head, eyeing Hadi's work. "When did you know you wished to work in fashion?"

It was the first personal question Judas had asked of Hadi, and he readily answered. "God... I was still a young boy. I always liked doing detailed things with my hands as a child, and my mother taught me how to knit and crochet. We were on vacation in Paris one year during fashion week, and... when I saw my first fashion show, I simply knew. It was a strange desire, but one that was so clear in my mind. I wanted to help make clothes like the ones that I saw, with all the details that provided texture and movement. My father wasn't thrilled by the idea, but it was my goal from that day forward to work in haute couture fashion."

"And you have reached that goal." Judas looked away from him, but Hadi caught the darkness of guilt in the dark eyes. "Were you happy in Milan?"

"You mean, just... generally?" Hadi asked, and when he received Judas' nod, he thought a couple moments. "Well... It is a fast-paced world, the fashion industry, and I think I liked being so busy, so rushed at times. It gave me a better appreciation for those times when work was slow, a better love of those quiet moments in the midst of great activity. I've worked on pieces for major designers before, and I take pride in seeing those outfits worn or sold."

"I get annoyed sometimes in the obsessions of the industry, the darker points of setting an unobtainable standard for male and female beauty. I disliked seeing models who were obviously unhealthy, drowning in couture gowns I had embellished that were already set at a size two. I disliked those who were willing to sleep their way to the top in order to appear popular or get their ten minutes of fame by demeaning themselves or others." He made a few relatively swift stitches without thinking and had to undo them when he saw he had skipped a part of the pattern he was forming on the collar. "But generally? I was happy, I think. Lonely at times, even with the bustle around me, but it was a pleasant way to live, making others look beautiful with simple things like beads or knotted, patterned string," he said, holding up his embroidery with a small smile.

Judas was silent for a long time before he asked his next question. "Was there someone you left behind in Milan?"

"No. I was between relationships," Hadi said, but the slowness of his words and the obvious care he took in choosing them made it clear that there was much he was leaving unsaid.

"Is that tone an invitation to probe deeper at the meaning behind those words, or a carefully chosen shield and I should retreat?"

Hadi hesitated for a moment. "May I ask you a question?" When Judas made a welcoming gesture, he looked down at his needlework. "How do you know which sins you should ask forgiveness for, and which were never sins to begin with?"

Judas tilted his head. "Yehoshua gave only one rule that should govern all, the greatest law to abide by: Love thy neighbor as thyself. It is only when I disobey that law that I seek forgiveness, when I have shamed myself through ill-thought of my fellow human beings or my lack of forgiveness towards others. That is all Yehoshua cared about. That is all Yehoshua hoped to see come to be: love for all. The lack of love is the only sin, Hadi."

Hadi breathed a slow sigh of relief, and it seemed a small weight was lifted from his shoulders.

"If I may ask," Judas said as he sat in one of the chairs scattered about the room. "What sin were you frightened of?"

Setting his materials aside, Hadi paused once more out of habit and remembered shame than anything else. Eventually, he met the inquiring gaze. "I'm gay."

Silence fell between the pair, and Judas could do nothing but stare at Hadi for a long time. Eventually, he cleared his throat. "That is no sin."

The stare made Hadi uncomfortable, but he smiled as he averted his gaze again. "I'm glad to hear that. I was between relationships when I received the call from my parents. My last long-term boyfriend was only with me because he thought I could get him in with a few important designers. When I openly refused to further his career just because we were sleeping together, it ended rather violently. I have had shorter relationships since then... friends who have become partners, then reverted back to friends, and one..." He cleared his throat, the tint of his cheeks deepening a moment. "It was a very short-term arrangement. But no, I left no significant partner behind in Milan."

Judas chuckled softly. "I must admit relief to hearing that."

"Trust me, nothing would have kept me here if I had a serious relationship in Milan," Hadi remarked.

Judas smiled sadly. "I suppose not."

Hadi's smile faded a bit, and he felt that he had said something wrong. His hands began to become restless, so he picked up his needle and continued the winding design of his embroidery. "Outside the fashion industry, I often had to hide my desires from others. It has been difficult, even in a place as passionate as Italy. Or, maybe *especially* in a place like Italy."

"Are your parents aware of your preferences?"

"I am relatively certain that my mother knows, but I have never mentioned it to either of them. I have never brought a boyfriend home to meet my family." Hadi wasn't sure that his father would approve, and he would rather not have troubled them with the knowledge.

Judas gazed evenly at Hadi. "Are you ashamed?"

"Ashamed?" Hadi's brow furrowed. "No. I wouldn't say I am ashamed. I am as I am, and I do not want to change that. There is a certain sadness, though, that comes with the knowledge that my parents won't understand... that my religion has rejected me, as does half the civilized world. And I know so many who would blame it on the fashion industry, or try to justify it with my profession. The fashion industry doesn't make people gay; it just provides some gay people with a place where they don't have to be afraid to admit it, where they can be who they are and not have to apologize for it."

"I didn't ask you to apologize for it," Judas said.

Hadi blinked. "Oh, no; that isn't what I meant to imply. I just meant to clarify that I'm not ashamed for being who and what I am."

Judas smiled. "That's good. Shame is an... unpleasant thing to live with."

"What do you feel shame for?" Hadi questioned softly, taking a risk.

"I didn't say I lived with shame," Judas said, his words quick and eyes dark.

"You didn't have to," Hadi murmured. He could only assume he had hit Judas' own carefully chosen shield, however, and he respected that, not probing any deeper.

Judas averted his eyes. "It is... difficult... to pluck someone from their families, f-f-feed from them weekly for decades, and watch them die, you the only witness to that death. I steal those of Ya'akov's line, their desires... their hopes and dreams... relegated to dusty bookshelves and stuffy rooms full of unopened boxes. There is room for little else but shame."

Hadi didn't know what to say to that, but a wave of sympathy rushed through him. Standing from his seat, he crossed to Judas, and placed his hand on the man's shoulder. It wasn't much, just a simple gesture.

Judas looked up at Hadi, his face flushed with the remnants of that shame. "I should go prepare your supper."

The smile that Hadi offered Judas was small and gentle. "All right," he conceded, letting his hand linger on Judas' shoulder. "If there is anything I can do... please let me know."

Standing, Judas placed his hand over Hadi's. "I will."

Hadi watched Judas leave, and he wondered what it would take to ease that shame in Judas. The thought was brief, strange, and he dismissed it, returning to his embroidery until supper.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The summer was finally giving way to fall, the daily heat breaking some in the evenings. This afternoon was cool, a fine mist in the air as the cloudy sky gifted the dry lands with much needed rain. It was an ideal day, Judas thought as he stood on the terrace just beyond the double doors that led from the dining room to the outside oasis.

It had taken four months for Hadi to freely laugh with him. There were still tense moments, and Judas expected that for many more months to come, but he held hope now. His prayers had been answered through his own patience. Hadi was a gifted man who made his loneliness just a little less each day, and who confounded him a little more each night. Judas didn't understand why, when he would touch Hadi lately, his heart would leap and race in his chest.

That was a lie; he knew why. He simply refused to place a name to what it was and why his eyes were often drawn to Hadi's half-clothed body. With the summer fading, Hadi wore more clothes, but on those particularly hot or humid days, Judas would escape to a distant room and meditate, pray to Yehoshua for serenity and poise. In those moments, he would swear he could hear Yehoshua's gentle laughter, his sweet voice telling him chastity was long beyond him now and no amount of serenity was going to ease the lust threatening to take root in him for his keeper.

Judas' reverie was broken by the quiet sounds of Hadi approaching, and he turned to glance at a proffered glass of wine. It was a subtle test, he assumed, Hadi wondering if he could consume it. A faint smile appeared on his lips, and he accepted the wine with a quiet nod. He inhaled the bouquet before sipping the liquid, humming with pleasure as the wine burned pleasantly down his throat. "Thank you. That was thoughtful of you."

"You can eat *and* drink, then," Hadi observed softly with a smile, leaning against the railing of the terrace.

"I can." Judas looked out at the overcast sky, the sun setting behind the gray clouds. He'd wondered just how long it would take Hadi to ask that question. "It does little for the body, but I can enjoy them."

"I know so many who would shallowly envy you for that... being able to eat anything and not gain a pound."

"The vain envy what they would curse should they bear the burden." Judas' gaze remained on the darkening sky. "I would trade such a thing to live, love, and die."

Hadi sipped his wine and watched Judas, his voice remaining quiet, rising just above the call of the common loon and the chirping insects. "You cannot die? Not at all?"

Judas pressed his lips together briefly before saying, "No. I cannot."

Hadi turned and looked out over the landscape, the lights of the distant city becoming brighter as the sky faded to darkness. "I'm sorry."

Judas finally looked at Hadi. "Why are you sorry? I am not."

"It would be difficult, seeing everyone you know and care for go while you don't age and... well, cannot join them," Hadi replied with a lingering glance. "And being who you are, most who figured out who you are probably weren't very welcoming."

Sadness filled Judas' gaze. "It was hard, in the beginning... but I've learned how to not become too attached. I have learned great control."

"Has anyone made that control waver?" Hadi asked over the rim of his wine glass.

"On occasion, I have grown angry, but..."

Hadi smiled. "I would hardly think you human if you didn't. I meant more along the lines of that attachment you mentioned. Has anyone made you falter and become attached?"

Judas took a deep drink of his wine before answering, the lie passing his lips without hesitation. "No. As you said, to watch those I care for wither and die... no. I have always kept a certain distance. Friends, companions, but never more."

"Friends like my grandfather?"

Judas smiled. "Your grandfather was an engaging individual who would visit me three times a year. I mourned his passing, just as I mourned Asif's."

"I didn't know my grandfather very well," Hadi admitted, "though the loss of him was still a blow to the entire family. My mother especially liked him, as he made her feel welcome in the family when her own parents disapproved of the match with my father. I never met Uncle Asif."

"Both Iyas and Asif were devoted men, giving their lives over into my keeping." A wistful smile curved Judas' lips. "I always tried to express my appreciation."

Hadi's head snapped up at that. "My parents frequently mentioned a family friend who gave us money when we needed it... That was you."

"It is a pitiful recompense, isn't it? Money for a life," Judas muttered with a self-derisive laugh.

Hadi was speechless for a few seconds, and then regained his voice, a half-grin tweaking his features. "It may be 'the worst poison known to man', but I wouldn't be who I am today if I hadn't been granted the opportunities of my schooling and my move to Milan, both of which you financed. Thank you, Judas."

Judas came to stand close to Hadi. He tilted his head and reached out, cupping Hadi's cheek gently. "And you are proud of who you are?"

Looking at Judas, Hadi nodded minutely. "I have my faults, but... yes."

"Then I am glad to have helped contribute to who you have become."

Hadi's lips quirked into a smile that was part amused and part embarrassed. "No one has ever said that to me before. Not like *that*."

Judas let his hand drop as he chuckled. "Like what?"

"My parents have said similar things, but they are family. No one else has—" Hadi stopped himself short. "Well, there was Dante as well, but I'm not sure he counts. No one has ever said it with such... feeling."

"Who was Dante?" Judas asked, trying to sound casual about the question. He was almost starving to know about Hadi's past, about his loves and losses.

"He was a close friend of mine. We did some schooling together, and he was my first roommate in Milan. He... said that once to me, though I think he was joking at the time. We had imbibed a few drinks." There was sadness and fond remembrance in Hadi's eyes as he spoke of his friend that pulled at Judas.

"Did the friendship end badly?"

"No," Hadi replied with a sad shake of his head. "He passed away. We... didn't know he had AIDS until it was too late to do much about it. He was a wonderful man. A few years older than me, but still so vivacious."

"A difficult thing, death. Especially of one whom you were close with." Judas did not offer empty platitudes and condolences; he knew better than most how little words eased loss. "I am glad Asif held on as long as he could." His eyes returned to the yard, now lit by stars and the moon as the clouds parted. "You should have had the opportunity to live before coming here."

"I lived before I came here, and I continue to do so. This is not going to be some sort of death sentence to me."

"A wonderful outlook, for we will be companions for... many years," Judas murmured.

"You won't put a return-to-sender stamp on me if I annoy you to your wit's end?"

Judas smirked, his eyes sliding sideways to glance at Hadi. "And how could you possibly annoy one so in control, hmm?"

"Have you ever been in a seedy electronic club with a bad DJ during Carnival?"

Judas blinked repeatedly in confusion. "No."

"Trust me... You don't want to," Hadi chuckled, a playful threat in his tone.

"You wouldn't be able to drag me into such an establishment, my dear Hadi," Judas laughed with a shake his head.

"So you do not dance?" Hadi asked.

Judas tilted his head. "I think it has been as many years since I have danced as it has been since I have kissed. In fact, I am pretty certain they both happened on the same night."

Hadi seemed to perk at that bit of personal information, and Judas thought Hadi was as interested in his loves and losses as he was in Hadi's. "Oh?" Hadi asked.

Judas smirked to himself as he recalled the evening fondly. "Too much drink, a lot of singing, the tavern's wench keeping my arms warm..." He chuckled. "Oh, the headache I awoke with the following morning, and lighter the twelve pounds I'd had when I fell asleep and minus my wench."

Hadi laughed, the sound lovely to Judas' ears. "You were scammed by a tavern wench? How long ago was this?"

"Seven hundred years?" Judas said after a moment's silence. "Give or take a decade."

Hadi nearly choked on the wine he was swallowing. "You have not even *danced* since then?"

"No." Judas smiled. "Is that so surprising? After that night, I decided women and excessive drinking were unwise for one such as me. I have yet to drink to intoxication, dance, or bed another in all that time."

A glint came to the blackness of Hadi's eyes. "I'll admit that women and drink can be problematic, but dancing does no harm! I will have to teach you."

Judas raised an eyebrow. "Dance with you?"

Hadi sipped once again from his glass, emptying it. "Would you like to?"

"I..." Judas tried to think of an appropriate reason to decline, but none came to mind. "None of my companions have asked me to dance."

"I can teach you to lead, and then we will find a place where you can have some wholesome, innocent fun with ladies. I am assuming that there is a classy club somewhere in this country, of course," Hadi teased with a smile.

"I shall be taught by my young male companion how to dance with a future young lady companion?" Judas found the suggestion quite amusing.

"I took a ballroom dance class during college to learn more about movement. It is just a matter of reversing the steps for the female part most of the time."

Another laugh left Judas' lips. "Very well, Hadi. You may teach me to dance."

"Thank you, Judas. I do think you will have fun. If you do not, I promise not to subject you to the techno-club out of spite." Flashing a bright smile, he headed back into the house and to his room.

Judas finished his wine and followed Hadi, setting the empty glass on a side table. "Such a generous soul."

"Every so often."

Judas' eyes sparkle like the night sky, and he watched Hadi for a moment. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Hadi... tomorrow night..."

Gathering some of his supplies in order to retire for the evening, Hadi straightened again, looking inquisitively at Judas. "Yes?"

Judas had never felt so... uncertain before with his keepers, and it irked him he felt it with Hadi. "I will need you again," he muttered as a flush of shame crept over his face. Four months, and that statement was still uncomfortable, sticking in his throat and making the shame acute.

"Oh," Hadi murmured, nodding minutely. "Very well."

"I am sorry," Judas said as he shook his head. He knew it was not an act Hadi was happy to do. Hadi was duty-bound to provide for him. Not that he expected Hadi to find joy in the sacrifice made, but something in him wished for something... other. Other than resigned acceptance. Other than reluctant acquiescence. Other than uncomfortable pity.

He wanted something that simply could not be. "I... will retire now. Goodnight, Hadi," he said, and then he fled the room before Hadi could offer hollow words of acceptance.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Judas pressed his lips together as he stared at Hadi's determined face. He knew it would have only been a matter of time before his keeper demanded he do as had been suggested so many nights ago. And he knew Hadi was right. It was inconvenient for Hadi, and downright cruel of Judas, for the feedings to continue as they had.

But it was frightfully intimate, and it was an intimacy he'd not shared with any of his other keepers save one. He sighed and bowed his head. "Hadi, it's... it's so personal. It requires being held as a lover would hold you." He didn't know if he was objecting for Hadi's comfort or his own, but it was the closeness of feeding from Hadi's throat that gave him pause.

"I need my hands to work perfectly so I can continue what I do. The incisions, no matter how skilful, hinder me. We need to choose another spot, and if that spot is the neck, then..." Hadi's voice faded for a moment. "You will be careful. I... I trust you," he said, and Judas recalled another night when Hadi had said those same very words.

Judas licked his lips, because that pause in the words worried him. It tore at his heart. "You do?"

Hadi swallowed and nodded. "You are kind... and have looked after me long before I knew you did. Your 'kiss' has never betrayed me. I trust you."

"Do you want the wine?" Judas whispered. He oftentimes wished it didn't hurt his companions to gift him with the blood, so he could—just once—see them with clear eyes when it was over. To see Hadi smile at him when they were through instead of the drunken stupor—even just thinking about it made his heart raw and tired, that sense of solitude returning as it always did in these moments.

Hadi nodded his assent and began pacing when Judas ducked his head and disappeared to prepare the drugged wine. When Judas returned after a few moments, a glass of wine in one hand and the small knife in the other, he let out a breath slowly. "I'm nervous," he admitted, taking his seat on the sofa.

Judas wet his lips and offered Hadi the wine. "So am I, but... I will not harm you."

Hadi reached out and grasped Judas' shoulder for a moment. "I know you won't," he said with the smallest of smiles. Pulling his hand back, he took the wine glass and drank swiftly, as he always did during the feedings. Setting the glass aside after a few breaths, he leaned back, and they waited for the alcohol and drug to hit him. There was a bit of nervousness that showed in Hadi's twitching hands, but it served as an indication of when the medication began to work. "Judas..." he breathed, feeling himself relax back into the cushions.

"Hadi." Kneeling on the sofa beside Hadi, Judas allowed his fingers to trail over Hadi's throat. It took him a few moments to find the best spot to cut, and as his fingers hovered, his attention turned to Hadi's relaxed face. Hadi put up no resistance as he was positioned, and Judas smiled faintly when another touch to his keeper's throat caused Hadi to shiver. But even that reaction was slow, sluggish, and Judas knew the drug sped through Hadi's body, dulling his mind and paralyzing his body.

Judas cupped the back of Hadi's head, and he had the wild desire to press his lips to Hadi's throat, and not just to feed. He whispered near his companion's ear, "Hadi?" but there was no response. Judas made a careful cut in the vulnerable throat, and then sealed his lips over the wound.

He held Hadi close and swallowed each time his mouth filled with the blood. It was more than just copper. There was spice under the metallic flavor, and he drank, savoring the pounding of his heart,

the slow beat of Hadi's pulse under his lips. Feeling Hadi's body in his arms, soft and warm against him, was as intoxicating as the blood itself. It was with great reluctance that he parted from the bleeding throat, gasping and shivering in a way he'd never done. With shaking fingers, he covered the wound with the salve and herbs, and then bandaged Hadi's throat. "God help me," he whispered as his mind swam.

As expected, Hadi was completely pliant, his head cradled by the back of the couch and Judas' supportive hand. His eyes were once again hooded, and Judas watched as his chest rose and fell slowly. Hadi breathed in and out in a steady rate that reassured Judas that, though his companion's mind was muddled and no words would register, Hadi would be all right.

Judas merely stared into Hadi's unseeing eyes, and he knew Hadi would remember nothing of this moment. "Never has one so young been sent to me. Your uncle was the youngest, and he came to me when he was near on forty. I had just over twenty years with him. But you... forty? Fifty?" He touched his fingers to Hadi's parted lips. "They weren't sensual and free, beautiful with eyes like onyx that sparkle when you laugh. You walk with me. Speak with me. Sit with me. I have told you more of myself in four months than I ever did any of the others in decades of living with them." Judas lifted his eyes from Hadi's lips. "Your blood makes me shudder, makes me moan... how is that possible?" Leaning in, Judas hovered just above Hadi's lips, the temptation there to kiss him. "I am no pious man, but I am *honorable*."

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Judas rose from the sofa. "Let me put you to bed, Hadi." He lifted Hadi, carrying him slowly from the room. Once inside Hadi's room, he stripped the young man down to his underwear and tucked him safely beneath the sheets. Judas pressed a chaste kiss to Hadi brow. "May the Lord watch over your dreams." He silently slipped out of the room, like a shadow fading under the dawn's caress, and closed the door as quietly as morning dew.

CHAPTER NINE

A classic waltz meandered through the warm air of the early evening. It had been nearly a month since Hadi had promised to teach Judas how to dance, and he had been a diligent instructor, teaching his charge the basics in classic and Latin ballroom dances, ranging from tango to a slow foxtrot to the rumba. He was, by no means, a great dancer himself, but he did have a thorough knowledge of the beginning moves and an imagination that could fill in the gaps he couldn't quite remember from his days in college. Judas was not the swiftest study, since the man first needed to learn the different counts of modern music, but Hadi was quick to encourage and directed the man with patience. He corrected when he knew something was off but didn't get overly bogged down in the details. Their dancing was mostly for fun, after all, and he had to admit, it was a wonderful break from his work and a welcome way to exercise.

With the help of activities like these, he was beginning to feel more at home in Sétif, and the friendship and connection he felt toward Judas kept growing. In a way, Judas made himself vulnerable as they listened to the different styles of music and worked out the steps together. It wasn't easy to throw yourself into something new and different with a person you didn't know all that well, being open to critique and unafraid to learn from one many years your junior. Judas had instantly endeared himself to Hadi in the process, and the young man found it increasingly difficult to hide his budding interest. As far as he knew, however, Judas was not interested in the ways his own mind conjured every so often, so Hadi kept his silence.

Following Judas' lead, Hadi twisted and turned, his body lifted as he flowed with the steps and tempo. A subtle press to his shoulder blade dictated his direction. He smiled at Judas, completing his small promenade turn and returning to center, where he was spun out again just as the music ended.

"Just like in the classic Hollywood movies," Hadi complimented with a laugh, parting from Judas to take a sip of water. "Except I'm not exactly Ginger Rogers, am I? And you haven't made a move to kiss me yet. At this rate, I'll have to kiss *you*."

"Oh, no. I swore off booze, sex, and dancing, remember?"

"One down, two to go," Hadi chuckled. "And kissing isn't sex. Well, unless we're going by the 'thoughts are as bad as actions' rule that I vaguely remember hearing at Sunday Mass."

"'Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.' Matthew 5:28," Judas quoted with a smirk. "I think you'll find such condemnations gained quite a lot more fire after repeated translation."

Hadi raised an eyebrow, smirking back at his companion. "Then it seems that you are running out of excuses."

"I am not gay?" Judas tried, the excuse weakly offered.

"Nice try," Hadi credited with a grin, "but you don't have to be 'gay'. There's an entire spectrum of sexuality. Most people fall somewhere in the middle. Wanting to kiss me doesn't necessarily make you gay. It just doesn't make you straight either, and that is all right." He was of the opinion that it was much more about conduct than preference.

"You don't want to kiss me, Hadi," Judas murmured, his gaze suddenly uncertain. "It will... complicate everything... won't it?"

Hadi backed off just a bit, acknowledging Judas' point with a gentle smile. "Probably, but isn't that what makes life beautiful in the end?"

"I don't know. Life... hasn't been much to me for a very, very long time." His eyes held a vulnerability that made Hadi's heart ache.

An internal debate took place within Hadi's mind as he wrestled with that budding desire and his conscience. His tone had been light before while they teased, but it was clear that there was no more joke being played out between them. In the end, his desire won out, and he reached out, cupping Judas' face in his hand. "Make something of it. If you make nothing of it... then it is worth so little." He swallowed before asking, "Do you want to kiss me?"

"I almost did," Judas breathed. "Almost, Hadi, but I didn't. I couldn't. Not when you were under the drug's influence like that."

His heart sped a little in his chest. He felt flattered, both by Judas' temptation and his honorable forbearance, and it showed in his soft smile. "I am awake and aware now, and I want to know. Do you still want to kiss me?"

Judas swallowed thickly and nodded once, the word coming out in a near-silent breath. "Yes."

"Then kiss me," he suggested, his lips twitching once. Hadi rubbed his thumb along Judas' cheekbone. "And don't apologize for it."

Judas' hands trembled minutely as they came up to cup Hadi's face. Slowly, he brought their lips together, his slightly parted. The kiss was simple, almost chaste, but he lingered there, his eyes closed.

Sighing quietly, Hadi turned his head just enough to press close without their noses colliding. He could feel the softness of Judas' lips and was pleased by the contrast between the lightly parted lips and the slight prickle of facial hair against his skin. When the first lingering kiss finally ended, their lips disconnecting, he allowed himself a breath or two before bringing their lips back together again, not even opening his eyes in between the intimate caresses. He hadn't known he wanted such contact with Judas so badly, and having it now, he found it hard to relinquish.

He heard Judas gasp as he pulled him into the second kiss. But after the initial shock, Judas parted his lips further, the tip of his tongue darting out to briefly taste Hadi's lips. Hadi hummed his pleasure, his own tongue sneaking past his lips to briefly meet Judas', sliding along the inner seam of the other man's lips for only a moment before retreating. A single, nearly innocent kiss had never affected him so much, causing his pulse to speed dramatically, and he pulled back with a smile. "You see?" he whispered against damp lips. "It is not so bad."

Judas panted softly. "I never said it was bad, Hadi. I just didn't think I'd be able to stop once we started." He took Hadi's mouth again, moving with a little less finesse, but with immense care and tenderness. He slipped his tongue between Hadi's lips, moaning loudly. Hadi's answering moan was softer than Judas', but no less heartfelt as he shivered. It was an incredibly personal exchange between them, the intimacy of it making his cheeks flush as he opened to Judas' exploration. But Judas kept the kiss light, fleeting, and after a small taste, he pulled back. "Hadi..."

Hadi felt his lips reach for Judas again, and he panted in small huffs, his eyes fluttering open at the sound of his name. "Yes, Judas?"

Judas' thumbs rubbed at Hadi's facial hair. "Lord, what am I doing?" Hadi's work-worn hand tenderly caressed Judas' face, and he looked back and forth between the deep brown of his companion's eyes. The question was not his to answer, and so he kept his silence. "This... is not why you were called," Judas said finally, his lips brushing over Hadi's.

Another thrill ran down Hadi's spine and along the backs of his arms. "Called?"

Judas' lips again and again bestowed feather-light touches as he murmured, "I... did not send for you... to be used."

Hadi smiled, relishing the soft contact. "You are not using me," he assured Judas. Judas had the opportunity to use him each week when he was drugged and gave blood, but the man had done nothing while he was unaware, holding himself in check instead. The honor in that did not escape his notice.

"Hadi," Judas said falteringly. He then took Hadi's mouth in a searing, deeply intimate kiss, his tongue sweeping through with brazen intent. Hadi's mouth was utterly possessed before he could think twice. Heat washed through him in a rush, and once the shock passed, he engaged Judas' tongue with his own. He battled for dominance in a deeply passionate way he had not expected of himself. Judas' submission was slowly given, surprising Hadi.

Granted his opportunity, Hadi explored Judas' mouth with tender care that was perfectly blended with his quiet, fiery passion. His tongue swept across palate, teeth, cheeks, and tongue, experiencing all he could through the single caress. His own moans were quiet, though they rumbled deeply through him, and he cradled Judas' face in his hands, only pulling back when he required breath. Even then, his pants were broken up by smaller, superficial kisses, drawing soft, needy sounds from Judas. He wasn't sure which he liked better, submitting to Judas or obtaining the man's submission, but he knew that he had released something erotic and beautiful in the withdrawn spirit that now held him close.

"Bewitched," Judas whispered roughly. "Bewitched by my keeper." His hands tightened on Hadi. His touches were always gentle, softness found under the fingers of a scribe.

Hadi drew his fingers over the features of Judas' face, through hair and short beard, along brow and cheekbones. "I never thought... you would kiss me so fiercely." He couldn't deny his arousal, so unlooked-for and passionate, but he was filled with quiet strength, sure that he could resist the temptation of going further with Judas. Judas probably wasn't ready for such things, and he found himself content with what they shared, not disappointed that he wouldn't receive anything more. It was a wonderfully serene feeling to have amidst his desire.

"I never thought... your kiss would be so gentle." Judas' hands moved up and down Hadi's back, inching their figures closer together with every stroke.

Hadi simply tried to breathe, moaning when, after several moments, their bodies came into close contact, pressing softly against one another. "Gentle... to feel you."

"We should... cease this... course... of action..." Judas whispered between brief kisses.

Swallowing against his dry throat, Hadi nodded. It took more willpower than he wanted to admit to in order to stop, to look ahead to the future and ignore the throbbing between his legs. Slowly, almost relapsing several times, he drew their kissing to a sweet close and, with a final caress of his hands, stepped back. He was still panting, though his lips were curved up into an unconsciously sensual smile.

Hadi looked at Judas in a new light, from the eyes of a lover. He could smell the musk of their mutual arousal, and he could see its evidence clearly from the deeper hue of Judas' tanned cheeks to the state of the older man's trousers. He shuddered at the slightly sweet, metallic taste when he licked his own lips, and his smile grew softer. "You... are beautiful, Judas."

Judas laughed softly, and then took a deep breath. "I am all tied up in knots, and I, for once, don't know what I am to do."

Hadi's ears rejoiced to hear another laugh from Judas, and he returned the breathless sound. "Have you never... used your own hand?"

"That was against the law when I was a young man. It is a habit long learned."

"Some lessons can be relearned. You are more than grown now." Hadi's eyes glittered with amusement. "Just... touch and stroke, and do what feels good until you reach that blessed release. Surely you remember that sacred bliss."

Judas swallowed, crimson suffusing his face. "Vividly."

"Seek it. Find it. Reach for that light and take hold of it, Judas." Hadi stepped just close enough to brush the back of his hand along one of Judas' flushed cheeks. "Shall I... leave you to it?"

"If you require time alone, I will not keep you from your own needs," Judas replied.

It was a gentle dismissal, one that Hadi could not help but accept, for both their sakes. He smiled at Judas, surprising himself with his final words before he quickly disappeared in the direction of his room. "You're a good kisser."

CHAPTER TEN

Hadi cursed as he rummaged through the drawers of his closet, his fingers pausing in their movements when the obscenity passed his lips. Gritting his teeth, he let out a slow breath and continued his search, second guessing himself several times. He wasn't even sure why he had kept them, as it wasn't often he used these particular beads, but it was a matter of finding them first. Replacing the items of one drawer in a neat, detailed fashion, he moved on to one of the boxes he had never unpacked after his move from Milan.

Judas had been distant the last couple days since their kiss, and Hadi's jubilation at the step had tapered off with every unreturned glance the few times they encountered one another. He had told himself many times that Judas likely just needed to think—after all, Judas had never been with a man before, so the kiss must have been a shock—but the obvious distance and discomfort of his charge had slowly put him on edge. It made him think about what he was doing, and who he was doing it with, and thoughts like those brought him back to the fact that Judas was *Judas*, one of the Apostles who studied under the tutelage of Christ Himself.

It made him uneasy to think of it that way, uncertain of how to proceed.

What he needed was someone to talk to about the whole thing, but even in the five months he had been in Algeria, he hadn't made any friendships that he considered close other than with Judas. There was no one he could trust with the issue that pervaded his mind. He was at the bottom of his proverbial barrel, one option left to him, an option he wasn't sure he liked.

He released a breath triumphantly when he found the small box he was looking for and, removing the lid, pulled out his beaded rosary. The weight of it was familiar, and yet oddly foreign, and he instantly thought of putting it away and simply working out his thoughts on his own. Hesitating for long moments, he finally sighed and exited his closet. Donning his informal, lightweight clothing and packing a small sack with the essentials, he left Judas a vague note and stepped out of the estate. It was a bit of a walk to the Catholic church in Sétif, but he figured if he made it there without turning back, it was an option worth taking in the end.

Hadi sat in the confessional booth. It was awkward, being in church again after so long. He wasn't very religious, despite his spirituality and faith. Even the shocking news that he was somewhat related to Jesus Christ hadn't changed that. It had altered his views about his spiritual interaction, making it seem redundant to seek counsel with a priest when he could just pray to God and his... uncle... on his own.

He needed someone to talk to in person, however, and who else was under oath to keep what he said absolutely confidential?

The slider behind the meshed screen was pulled back, the shift of wood against wood almost deafening to Hadi's ears, given the eerie silence of the confessional at midday in the middle of the week. Kneeling in the booth, he made the Sign of the Cross. He swallowed before speaking, his fingers tightening on his rosary. "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been..." Hadi paused. "Three and a half years since my last confession. These are my sins."

Hadi was forced to pause again, as he looked back over the last three years, trying to sort out which of his 'sins' would be considered 'mortal sins' worth confessing to the priest. It was a difficult

process, especially considering the note that Judas had made about sins only truly being those actions that violated the love that Jesus had preached. From that perspective, the list did not seem as daunting as before, and he began.

"I have willfully dishonored my parents twice since my last confession. I have committed over one hundred and fifty acts of fornication with four different individuals, lied at least twenty times, and have had more impure thoughts than I can number. Thirteen in the last week." He had touched himself many times over the years, but he didn't consider those acts sins, since he didn't believe he was debasing himself by enjoying his own touch. It was the fantasy behind them that put him on edge, and he hesitated, debating once again whether or not he wanted to share more detail. "Those more recent thoughts were about a man of the cloth, whom I kissed three days ago before committing an act of impurity with myself."

Dear God, it sounded horrible to sum up the last three years of his life by the sins he had committed. He cringed, his eyes shut as he waited out the small silence that followed.

There was silence from the other side of the booth, but after a moment, the priest began to speak. "*Dominus noster Jesus Christus te absolvat; et ego auctoritate ipsius te absolvo ab omni vinculo excommunicationis et interdicti in quantum possum et tu indiges.*" There he paused, made the sign of the cross, and Hadi did the same. "*Deinde, ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.*"

The priest bowed his head and continued the prayer. "*Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi, merita Beatae Mariae Virginis et omnium sanctorum, quidquid boni feceris vel mali sustinueris sint tibi in remissionem peccatorum, augmentum gratiae et praemium vitae aeternae.*" After yet another pause, he spoke directly to Hadi. "My child, you must ask God for forgiveness for your sins, and pray for this man of God whom you are leading down a path of damnation. Ask Him to bless you, to forgive you, and seek not to repeat these sinful deeds. Choose another path, one of purity and righteousness, not one of unnatural lusts."

Hadi's face contorted, and he looked up fully at the partially obscured priest for the first time. "Is it a mortal sin to desire one such as him, Father?"

"It is a mortal sin to desire one of your own, and that this man is one of God's servants compounds that sin."

Clenching his jaw, Hadi lowered his gaze again. What had he expected, after all? Pity? Understanding, perhaps? Taking a few deep breaths, he finally spoke again. "What is my penance, Father?"

"Your penance, my child, is to pray the rosary ten times, speak seven Hail Marys and five Our Fathers. Now, speak an Act of Contrition and reflect on these misdeeds, pray for God to grant you the spiritual fortitude you need to keep from such sins in the future," the priest said, the conviction clear in his tone.

Hadi sighed, leaning his head against the wooden wall of the confessional. The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. "To say such a prayer would break one of the amendments, Father." He couldn't say the Act of Contrition when he was not fully sorry. That in itself was another mortal sin.

The priest's surprise was easily heard. "You do not seek forgiveness for your sins?"

"I do," Hadi affirmed, closing his eyes.

"But you fear you will repeat the same actions again."

Hadi swallowed. "Even now, I feel the stirrings of arousal at such thoughts. What I fear are the consequences of those actions. The temptation is great, and I am uncertain I should even bother to resist it."

"My son, such thoughts are devilish in nature. Resistance is imperative," the priest insisted. "Put such thoughts from your mind, and when they prey upon you, turn your thoughts to Our Lord. Pray, my son. Ask the Lord for forgiveness for your weakness, to impart strength to resist. Such desires are unnatural, unclean."

Hadi felt the rise of guilt in him like a sickening wave of nausea, and with it came anger that stung behind his eyes. He was silent for a few moments, gripping harshly at the rosary he had dug out of the recesses of his belongings. "What if you are wrong? What if all Jesus wanted was love for all? Is that not what he preached in the Gospel of Mark, which the others so readily quoted? That we should love God and love others, that no other commandment was greater than those, which were of equal importance?"

"What Christ spoke of was *platonic* love, the love of one creature to another. Physical love should always be within the bonds of marriage, between man and woman, for is that not how God began? One man, one woman. Woman was given unto Adam, and Adam took her to wife. What you speak of, my son, is abomination, the laying of one man with another, and that your desires are towards a man of God..." The priest shook his head. "You sully this man of God with your impure thoughts."

How many times had Hadi heard that argument? The various languages spoken by the priests he had seen over the years did nothing to change the ideal of marriage and family that had been passed down through the church. The words Judas had spoken to him blazed in his mind, coupled with verses from the Gospel of John of the prayers Jesus spoke before the 'betrayal'. "'May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that You sent me and that You love them as much as You love me'. That is all Yehoshua hoped to see come to be," he whispered, and a short silence followed the words. "You speak so knowledgeably, Father. One would almost believe you were there with him." He felt instantly guilty for the pang of sarcasm that colored the otherwise complimentary words. "Forgive me my arrogance and pride, Father. What must I do to earn my forgiveness?" he asked contritely, his head bowed in defeat and his eyes drawn to the beads of his rosary.

The priest took a breath and released it slowly. "When you are able to speak the Act of Contrition, my child, then return and confess once again. Remember, should your thoughts turn to the impure and unnatural... Our Lord is there. Trust in Him. Go in peace." After a brief silence, the small wooden separator slid firmly shut.

The slide and thud of the wood almost seemed like a wall being closed between him and absolution. Hadi heard the door from the other side of the confessional open and close, and he found himself too heart-sore and embarrassed to leave immediately, lest the priest see his face. His salvation did not rest within the words of the Latin prayers he had long ago memorized; it lay in 'perfect contrition'. Yet the sorrow he felt, no matter its sincerity, would never qualify as anything more than imperfect to the standards of the church. There was no use in receiving the Eucharist. Why add another mortal sin on top of the others? Leaning over his knees, the rosary a leaden weight in his hands, he wept silently. He had almost forgotten why he had ceased being religious.

"Uncle Yehoshua," he whispered to the semi-darkness, finding a comforting connection to the name that he hadn't possessed before he had discovered their relation. "Uncle Yehoshua... forgive me. I remember now."

Judas had seen Hadi return home. The young man's head had been bowed, but Judas caught sight of the flushed cheeks and swollen eyes. Hadi, wherever he had been, had spent a large amount of time crying. But Hadi didn't come to him, and so Judas had allowed him his silence and solitude.

When afternoon wore into evening and Hadi still had not appeared, Judas decided it was time to seek out his companion. On silent feet he walked through the house, and was only slightly shocked to find Hadi's door open. He pushed the door open completely and stood just inside the cool, dark room. Hadi sat on the bed, his elbows resting on his knees, and his face cradled in his hands. To Judas, Hadi looked to have the weight of the world's sins upon his shoulders, and it worried him. His eyes

darted to the bedside table and immediately honed in on the rosary tossed to the wooden surface. He crossed the room to that table and lifted the ornate, beautiful piece of jewelry. He fingered the beads, and then the cross, before he finally spoke. "Did you find what you were seeking, Hadi?" he murmured sadly, replacing the rosary on the table.

Hadi spoke softly, and Judas heard the tears in his voice. "I had almost forgotten the guilt of confessing to someone who doesn't understand."

"The idea of finding absolution through a man has never made sense to me. If you want forgiveness for something, kneel where you are and ask God to forgive you." Judas' eyes focused on Hadi. "He hears. He listens. And He forgives, Hadi, without conditions, for He loves you as you are."

Hadi smiled sadly, his eyes downcast. "I suppose I just wanted a second opinion... someone to speak the words and reassure me that what we did was not wrong. I should have looked elsewhere." He chuckled mirthlessly. "A gay bar, maybe."

"You mean... the kiss?"

"I enjoyed it," Hadi confessed, looking up with a nod.

Judas ran his finger over the beading of the rosary again, his eyes steady on the cross. "A kiss is hardly a reason for damnation." He had tried very hard not to think on that kiss and all it stirred in him. It frightened him in a way. It made his mind and body whisper of want and need and, possibly, love. All things he'd not indulged in, or held hope for, in such a long time.

"Even when that kiss inspires impure thoughts about one of the original twelve disciples?"

Judas shivered at that confession, and he slowly met Hadi's gaze. "I... am just a man."

Hadi looked at Judas for long moments before flushing lightly and averting his gaze again. "I know. Forgive me if I took advantage by kissing you."

"You took nothing I did not willingly give." Judas crouched in front of Hadi and brushed his fingers over Hadi's flushed cheek. "There is nothing to forgive. You don't need my forgiveness, and you do not need God's. You've done nothing wrong."

"Thank you."

"Never let men tell you what God intended," Judas whispered.

"Should I discount all you have told me, then?" It was an honest question, but Judas could hear the teasing in Hadi's voice, and he chuckled in response.

"I may not know what God intends, but I know what Yehoshua said. I think I am a more trustworthy source of information," he said as he cupped Hadi's face.

"And what would he say, were he here now?" Hadi asked, leaning into his touch.

"That you are a son of God, and just like a parent, He loves you unconditionally. He only desires your happiness, only asks for your faith." Judas rubbed his thumb against Hadi's flesh. "And He would tell me I over think everything, as I ever have, and that I need to laugh more." He smiled. "He always said I didn't laugh enough... didn't live enough."

"You don't," Hadi agreed with a chuckle.

Judas laughed, the sound quiet and rich. "I was a pious man back then."

"And now?"

"Now..." Judas' eyes darted to Hadi's lips, and his fingers migrated there, ghosting over Hadi's lower lip. "I... don't know what I am any longer."

Slightly reddened eyes glimmered up at Judas. "You are in my keeping... as I am in yours."

Judas' eyes were unfocused as he breathed, "Companions."

Hadi lifted his hand to intercept Judas' as it began to pull away. "Companions," he agreed, and with his eyes still upturned, he drew the tip of the man's index finger between his lips, his tongue wetting the skin as he suckled lightly. Judas gasped, a shudder racing down his spine. His body once more came to painful hardness between his thighs. How many times, as he laid in bed, had his mind returned to that kiss, the sweetness of Hadi's lips? How many times had he moaned, burying his face in his pillow, praying to have the ache eased. Never did it ease. Cold showers at 2 A.M. had done nothing to relieve his desire for his young companion. His chest rose and fell swiftly, pleasure coursing through him from that single, wet touch.

The sound of Hadi's moan vibrated up along Judas' finger. He drew more of the finger into his mouth, moving wantonly upon it with his tongue, nipping at the tip with his teeth. A choked groan filled the air as Judas shuddered almost violently as he stared down at Hadi's mouth around his finger. Judas knew this was what those lips would feel like wrapped around the insistent desire between his legs. He knew what that delightful tongue would feel like stroking him. He watched with dazed eyes, his face slowly tinting scarlet while his breathing increased rapidly. God, to know the pleasures Hadi promised with just a look... to feel those moments of ecstasy with him... He moaned again, louder, the sound fuller this time, and he felt himself swell against his trousers. "Hadi—" he warned as he tried desperately to control himself. It had simply been too long since anyone had touched him, *looked* at him, as Hadi did.

Hadi's eyes were still open, though half-lidded, and he redoubled his efforts. Judas actually heard himself whimper as Hadi thrust his mouth down upon the finger as deeply as he could and sucked with such purpose. Then, with a suddenness that surprised him, he cried out sharply, his knees buckling, and he hit the dirt floor as his first climax in centuries raged through him. His head was thrown back, and a strangled moan left his throat as he trembled, his seed coating the inside of his trousers. He rested there, on his knees before Hadi, as he tried to regain his breath and some semblance of rational thought.

Hadi panted wildly, his mouth open while Judas' damp finger rested against his lower lip. He shuddered, his face flushed and eyes bright. Maneuvering onto his knees from his seated position, he cupped Judas' face and kissed him with gentle passion. "Tell me I am not evil," he pleaded in a whisper, another shudder running through him as he breathed against moist lips. "Tell me I am not wicked... Please, Judas. I will believe you."

Yet another moan left Judas as they kissed, and he weakly embraced Hadi. His voice was rough, thick with his lingering pleasure. "You... are not wicked."

Tears came to Hadi's eyes again, and he pressed a final, grateful kiss to Judas' lips before hugging him close. Judas held him tightly, and though his words had eased Hadi's guilt, he worried how this moment, this incredibly important moment, would change their relationship. Still, ignoring his own misgivings, Judas bestowed a kiss to Hadi's throat. "No more weeping, Hadi... not... not over this." He could feel the man's throat shift as Hadi sniffed, inhaling deeply while nodding. The young man's exhale was shaky, but slow. Trying to ease some of Hadi's sorrow, Judas laughed and shook his head. "You've made a mess of me."

Hadi looked down at Judas' trousers for the first time and did a poor job of stifling his own laugh. "So I have." He smiled. "It has... been a long while for you."

Judas' blush renewed itself. "A long while. And you have a skillful mouth." He laughed again, his finger tracing Hadi's lips. "It tempts me in so many ways... and obviously, I was unable to resist that temptation."

Hadi humbly accepted the compliment with a nod of his head. "To remember something so pleasant is worth the price of the temptation, I hope."

"How am I to stop thinking of you in such carnal ways now?" Judas murmured.

"I could... teach you how to knit? Help you remember that I'm your friend?" Hadi suggested weakly, a smile beginning to curve his lips. "If all else fails, I could buy you an electro-shock collar."

Judas laughed. "I will never forget you are my friend."

"Good," Hadi said as he sat back. "I'm hungry. I have barely eaten all day. Would you care to join me for an early supper?"

"Allow me to change first?"

"Oh, but it is the latest fashion in Milan," Hadi claimed dramatically. "Such a fashion-forward style suits you!"

Judas slowly stood, chuckling as he moved stiff, lethargic muscles. "You just wish to enjoy the fruits of your labor."

A wicked gleam entered Hadi's eyes as he rose, rearranging his own pants. "It would be amusing to see others' faces, but I would not make you endure such public humiliation."

"You're too kind." Judas leaned in and left a quick kiss upon Hadi's cheek. "I will meet you in the kitchen." After one last look at Hadi, Judas slipped out of the room, intent on a quick shower and new clothes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Judas sat in his chair just outside the house with a cup of strong tea and watched the sun rise. He loved sunrises. They always reminded him of the potential God had granted the world and all life within it. Sunrises reaffirmed his faith, and made him feel closer to his Creator than any Sunday morning mass.

He'd spent the night tossing in his bed, uncomfortable and his mind racing with thoughts. Thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, but most importantly, thoughts of *now*.

How many years ago had it been? At least nine centuries now. Nine centuries since he'd experienced one of the greatest losses in his life. How vibrant Keilah had been, laughing and dancing in their modest home. She'd been the only female keeper Judas had ever possessed, and he'd rightly chosen never to have another after her.

Poor Keilah, who had wanted to marry a nice boy in the village and bear his children.

Poor Keilah, who had been his only option in a world consumed by disease.

Poor Keilah, who had decided that, if she could not marry her beau, then being her charge's lover would suit her.

And foolish Judas for thinking it a wise course of action.

Wound up in her life, her laughter and joy, he'd lost sight of everything.

He gazed at the sky that lightened from purple into searing orange and sighed. Poor Keilah, who had never truly been happy with him, and whom he'd loved in spite of her growing restless sorrow. Judas sipped his tea and closed his eyes.

It had taken no more than a year for consumption to leave her drowning in her own body, but it had been a year of hell for him. He'd watched her waste away before his eyes, him untouched by a sickness that had ravaged their small village. Her eyes accusing him as she'd coughed up ungodly amounts of blood, and he'd been able to do *nothing* to ease her pain.

And when she had died, he'd been unable to ease his own.

Judas opened his eyes, an unsteady breath leaving his lips as he stared out at his garden through a haze of tears.

He'd decided then that no female of Ya'akov's line would again be called as his keeper. They posed too much of a temptation to his lonely heart, and while he would not blame God for a disease of mankind, he did know when to take the hint. Judas knew he shouldn't have taken Keilah as his, playing husband and wife as if he could give her children and a long, comfortable life.

Men, he'd decided, would pose no such threat.

Yet here was Hadi, and again he felt the stirring of his heart and his loins. And in Hadi's eyes he saw that same look he'd seen in Keilah's at the beginning. Affection and desire swirling around a kernel of fearful love.

And he'd *kissed* Hadi, encouraged the young man with looks and touches. By God, that incident in Hadi's room, soiling himself like that with almost no provocation! It had been unseemly, driven so easily into release by a simple touch. He wanted that again... that and so much more.

Hadi was dangerous, and *he* was dangerous for Hadi. The temptation for them both was simply too great, and Judas was unwilling to risk his heart a second time. Not like that. Not to watch another he cared for, could perhaps even love, slowly die and leave him behind alone yet again.

Something had to be done before things raged out of control. This childish infatuation of his keeper's had to stop before it became something neither of them *could* stop. Judas refused to look too deeply into his own heart, to see where his own fears came from, and he nodded to himself as he finished his tea. The best course of action was a separation, and while he could not give up his keeper entirely, he knew a compromise he could make.

Rising from his chair, he entered the house to make a call to a real estate agent in the city.

Hadi paced, his current projects set aside in his room to allow for a clear path as he walked the length of his room over and over. It had been six months since he first came to Algeria, and he couldn't help but notice once again that the typical roller coaster of relationships, the ups and downs inherent in them, were paced just as slowly as the rest of life there. In Milan, breaks and reconciliations seemed to have happened so quickly in comparison. Even in his long-term relationships, the cycle of misunderstanding and making up was swift.

Not in Sétif.

With Judas, it was like small actions gained momentum before tipping the scales, and the switch between pleasing conversations and tense silences was so slow that Hadi nearly didn't catch the change until it had fully happened. This time, though, he had noticed the slow change, and it had started to agitate him.

Judas was more distant than usual, and the man had been disappearing for entire afternoons. It was a strange occurrence that had grabbed his attention. It seemed Judas was going into town for one reason or another, and curiosity raged within him those times when his charge would leave without a word, his absence most clear at the midday meal, which they usually shared. Something was amiss, and he found himself swaying between his desire to satisfy his curiosity and his knowledge that Judas' business was none of his.

Thoughts of their most recent feedings also filled Hadi's mind. As always, he took the drugged wine that Judas prepared for him, and it muddled his memories of the act, but that, too, was beginning to bother him. He wanted to remember. Judas had said it was intimate to take blood from a place like the neck, and Hadi wanted to share that somehow. The experience would be more painful, he was sure, but would it make that much of a difference to lower his dosage of the diazepam enough so his senses would dull but his memory would remain?

That was a question he had debated asking Judas for nearly a week, and as he heard the front door of the estate open and close, signaling Judas' return from town, he left his room. It was time for him to ask, whether or not he received any answer. At least his interest would be voiced instead of bubbling inside him. Rounding a corner, he offered Judas a small smile in greeting. "May I speak with you for a few minutes?" he asked hopefully.

Judas dropped his keys onto the side table and removed his sandals. "I was about to ask you for the same thing." He motioned for Hadi to follow him to the sofa, and he waited to speak until they had settled into the soft cushions. "What did you want to talk about?"

Hadi was not one to skirt endlessly around an issue, so he spoke bluntly. "I have been thinking a lot about it, and I would like to begin decreasing the dose of diazepam that I take with the wine before you drink from me."

"Why?" Judas shook his head. "That is not a wise course of action. Cutting into flesh and having the wound sucked upon is not comfortable."

"I know that. You said that the act is very intimate for you when it's performed at the neck, and I want to experience it and remember it in the morning," Hadi explained. "It's not that I want to cut out the drug entirely, since I know I don't have the best pain tolerance in the world, but I'd like to work it out somehow so I still don't feel too much pain but can remember what happens."

Judas clenched his teeth. "No."

Hadi was taken aback at the abrupt refusal and stared at Judas for a few seconds. "Why not?"

"Because it is an intimacy I would rather not share with my keepers."

Judas' tone made the reason nearly sound like an insult, and Hadi frowned. "But Judas—"

Judas stood up. "No." He reached into his pocket and held out a set of keys in his palm. "These are for you. I've purchased a flat for you in the city. It's already furnished, and it's spacious. There is plenty of room for your work and your personal items."

Shock was evident in Hadi's wide-eyed expression, and he stared at the keys, his heart suddenly pounding in his throat. "What do you mean, you've purchased me a flat?" he choked out, his lips curling into a deep frown as he looked up at Judas' face. "You're sending me away?"

"You will be living in the flat from now on. I will visit once a week, on Fridays, for the..." Judas' eye twitched. "Every Friday evening."

"You're sending me away," Hadi growled, his shock giving way to anger born of rejection. His voice grew in volume. "Weeks of growing silence and distance, and now you're sending me off to live elsewhere right when I've finally settled? What is the meaning of this? Tell me!"

Judas forced the keys into Hadi's hand. "Our... relationship... is inappropriate, and it will end. It is best if you live on your own. You *will* go."

Hadi stood, his fingers making a fist around the keys. He was usually more astute in his relationships, knowing easily when things had progressed badly enough that separation was being considered. But that was back in Milan. Everything here was different, and he felt himself scrambling to regain his bearings. He wanted to shout at Judas that the man couldn't make him leave, had no power to force him away, but he knew that wasn't true, and it just incensed him further. "I don't want to go!" he shouted. "You didn't even ask my permission! I'm not a child. I uprooted myself once for you of my own free will, and now you're *forcing* me to do it again? You'd better have a reason more sound than 'for your own good'!"

"Because I *tell* you to," Judas snapped. "I do not need your permission, Hadi. I choose what is right for the both of us with regards to our arrangement. *This* is right." He crossed his arms. "You should begin packing your things. I have two men coming to the house tomorrow evening to take your boxes and suitcases to the flat."

"This is not acceptable, Judas," Hadi ground out through clenched teeth. He was fighting a losing battle, and he knew it.

Judas gazed at Hadi with a level, blank expression. "This is not up for discussion. The decision has been made. You will live in the flat."

Hadi resented that he had no say in the matter, and he seethed, fire blazing in his eyes. He squeezed his hands tighter, feeling the ridges of the keys dig into his palm. Though he couldn't help the angry exhale that escaped audibly from his nose, he refused to make a fool of himself by flying into an endless rage or a tearful tantrum over something he couldn't change. With a last scathing look at Judas, he stormed into his room to begin packing, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Bowing his head, Judas gritted his teeth, his heart pounding a hurt, longing rhythm. How he wanted Hadi to remain, to be his, to live with him and love him... But Hadi was mortal. Eventually, either disease or age would take Hadi from him, and then he would be alone again.

Until a new keeper arrived to remind him of everything he'd lost, everything he couldn't have, and everything he had to endure before the curse placed upon him would end.

Judas took a deep breath, steadied himself, and headed for his own room, closing the door quietly, relegating the house to grief-filled silence.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It had almost been surreal, moving away from the estate, but Hadi had been given no choice, in the end. He had packed in a silent rage, but his anger slowly gave way to hopelessness and barely-contained grief when he realized there was no chance of Judas reconsidering. During the ride to his new flat, he had prayed for something to stop them, for anything that would sway Judas, but the answers he received from God, if they were truly answers at all, were not as he had wished. The move went smoothly with absolutely no hitches. Not a single box was misplaced, nor was anything damaged as the movers transferred everything into his furnished flat.

In any other relationship, he would have been allowed the respite of a clean break. With Judas, such a break was impossible. The first week had left him desperately awaiting Judas' visit. He had tried to convert his flat into a place of his own in those first few days, but it simply wasn't the same, living alone after months in Judas' company. The anger and hurt of the separation had renewed when he had received an impersonal message from Judas telling him, quite plainly, that their first visit was canceled.

Melancholy had eventually set in, and Hadi found his own ways of dealing with the emotions that would not dissipate easily. Though Sétif was not the most lively place as far as clubs were concerned, Hadi had found cafés he began to frequent and places to simply mingle with others. It hadn't taken him long to set up a small, weekly gathering where others could learn to knit or embroider from him. It wasn't the same, but it filled the empty space of his flat, if only for a short time.

Judas had kept his word each week after the first, arriving every Friday evening to drink from him, tend the wound, and see him safely to bed. The visits were awkward, and often ill-timed. Just when Hadi felt himself beginning to let go just a little, the week would come to an end with the inevitable knock at his door.

His blood seemed to be the only thing Judas wished of him, and he gave it freely, no longer arguing when Judas handed him the drugged wine. His blood was shed for the survival of his charge.

His own personal Eucharist, a sacrament set out weekly for a congregation of one.

One man, who was slipping through his outstretched fingers like smoke from a prayer candle that finally burned out.

Two months.

Two long, quiet, *lonely* months since Judas had sent Hadi from his side. He had spent six months in the young man's constant company, but in the last eight weeks, he'd seen Hadi only six times. There had been two weeks where he simply could not muster the incentive to stand from his bed, and he'd sent Hadi bland messages conveying that he would not be attending their standing appointments.

He'd not received responses.

The depression was overwhelming. Silence had never before been as frightening or grief-inducing as it was for him now. There was no quiet Italian music filtering in from the room Hadi had occupied, no sound of beads being sorted through or of a sewing machine whirring. There was nothing.

Judas had repeatedly found himself drawn to the room, and he would stand in the doorway staring at the neat, empty space. His heart would twist, his gut would roil, and he'd feel the tell-tale stinging at

the backs of his eyes warning him he'd made a terrible, irredeemable mistake. He'd sent Hadi away, and he could no longer even say *why*.

He sat now at the large, desolate dining table with three empty bottles of wine before him, and a fourth half-consumed. Judas gazed at the blurry image of his wine glass, his mind swimming with the amount of alcohol he'd imbibed. Even drunk, the silence of his home was all-consuming, threatening to devour his very sanity. There was nothing he could do, no way to take it all back, no way to undo what he'd done.

Again, his eyes stung, and he didn't realize he was weeping until the hot droplets slid down his cheeks. He closed his eyes and rested his brow against the cool wood of his table. He was silent in his sorrow, as silent as the house, and only one word was uttered into that frightening stillness.

"Hadi."

Judas stepped into Hadi's flat, the bustle of Saturday morning Sétif quickly shut behind the thick front door. It was his routine. He would feed from Hadi Friday night and return to check on him the following morning, and thus, he walked through the simply furnished rooms and into Hadi's bedroom. He was surprised to not see his keeper abed, the room empty, but he could hear the gentle hum of the exhaust fan in the bathroom. Judas debated waiting, but it was obvious Hadi had been well enough to leave his bed and bathe before his arrival, and he knew he'd rather not endure more of their uneasy conversation. He turned on his heel and made for the door of the bedroom, intent on being out of the flat before Hadi left the bathroom.

Yes, he was a coward, and he knew Yehoshua would be ashamed of him, but Judas could do nothing to turn aside his choices. He ran from the love and happiness he'd spent two thousand years craving, and he knew he did it out of a pathetic attempt to turn aside something that had already been set in motion. Separated or together, he loved Hadi, and the loss of his newest keeper would be devastating no matter how they spent their lives. Even if his mind knew that, knew he accomplished nothing through this forced estrangement, his heart pushed him to put as much distance as possible between himself and Hadi.

To save what little was left of himself so that when Hadi's life came to an end, as it would, there might be something remaining with him that could continue on.

The rattle of a doorknob was followed by a creak, and Hadi stepped from the bathroom slowly, clearly fatigued. When his eyes finally left the floor, locking instantly onto Judas, he stopped dead, relying on his outstretched arm, which steadied him against the wall in his weakened state. "Judas," he whispered.

Judas paused and closed his eyes, taking a deep breath before turning to face his keeper. "Hadi."

There was a lingering moment of silence between them. Hadi didn't ask why Judas was there or what he wanted. Instead, he posed a rather simple question. "Will you be staying for tea?"

"I—" Judas sighed. "If you would like me to."

The smallest glimmer of a smile came to Hadi's lips, and he slowly maneuvered his way into the kitchen. Lifting a full kettle of water was beyond him in his state, so Judas watched him simply fill two mugs with water and pop them in the microwave. He dropped a small tea pouch into each of the steaming cups when they came out piping hot. He made his way to the sofa in the living room, taking each step slowly to ensure he wouldn't spill the tea. Hadi offered one of the mugs to Judas before plopping down heavily on the sofa.

Judas chose the chair opposite the sofa and sat with his own tea cradled in his hands, looking everywhere but at Hadi. "You are well?"

"Weak, but well enough," came the quiet reply as Hadi sipped from his mug.

"That's good." Judas blew lightly on the surface of his tea, that distinct sense of discomfort settling in the pit of his stomach. "I merely wanted to be certain you were recovering."

Another bout of silence was broken by the sound of Hadi's cup as he set it onto the table beside the sofa. He leaned back, his eyes staring up at the ceiling as he rested. "Why do you do this?"

"Do what?"

"Come here each week, care for a couple of hours, and then leave again while I'm still too exhausted to stop you," Hadi clarified.

Judas' eyes narrowed. "Are you implying I do not care any other time?"

"Do you?"

"You know I do."

Hadi closed his eyes, his silence acknowledging the truth of the statement.

Judas stared into his mug of quickly cooling tea. "If you would prefer I stop looking in on you Saturday mornings, I can."

"No," Hadi said simply.

"All right." Judas set his mug on the table and folded his hands in his lap. Once again, the uncomfortable silence fell between them, just as it always did, and Judas tried to wait it out.

The effort was mutual, but Hadi eventually gave up trying to wait and righted his head. His eyes finally turned to Judas, and there was tension in his voice. "*Why*, Judas?"

Judas chose the route of ignorance. "Why what?"

Hadi's face reddened in anger, and he yelled, "Why are you *doing* this?"

"Because I have to," Judas snapped.

"No, you don't!"

"I am trying to *protect* you," Judas insisted as he stood up, though he knew it was only a half-truth.

"Bullshit," Hadi muttered, cradling his head in his hands for a few seconds. "You're trying to protect yourself."

Judas clenched his jaw. "What do I have to protect myself from?"

"You tell me."

"Nothing," Judas responded. "I've nothing to fear."

"Then why are you frightened?" Hadi asked, his eyes narrowed.

"I'm not!" Judas stepped back from the sitting area.

Taking advantage of Judas' retreat, Hadi stood and stepped forward. "You are."

"What would I be afraid of?" Judas asked, taking another step back.

"Us." Hadi refused to back down this time, following Judas step for step.

Judas tried to retreat further, but he wound up with his back against the wall of Hadi's small flat. "Us?"

With another step forward, Hadi brought his arms up, bracing them on the wall in such a way that he fenced Judas in while supporting himself. "You and I... together. Us."

Judas swallowed, his eyes wide as he gazed at Hadi. "We are together. You are my keeper."

Hadi's dark eyes narrowed further. "You don't treat me like a keeper." He allowed the double meaning to hang in the air for a moment. "You treat me as an inconvenience."

"I do not! Do I not schedule my visits around your commitments?" Judas protested, completely missing whatever alternate meaning could be gleaned in Hadi's words.

"*Visits*," Hadi growled. "You schedule visits with me as if I am a weekly barber appointment."

Judas licked his lips. "I—" He found he had no words to offer against such an accusation.

Hadi pushed off the wall irately and slowly crossed the room back to the sofa. He picked up his mug of tea again and sat down, silent in his resentment of the situation and Judas' behavior.

Sagging against the wall, Judas spoke softly. "Will next Friday evening be all right for a visit?"

Hadi took a large swallow of tea, staring straight ahead. "I'll be here."

Judas walked towards the door, but paused, wanting to say something. Unable to conjure anything when his moment of opportunity came, he silently stepped out of the flat and down to the street. He was barely outside before he heard the sound of shattering ceramic from above him. He looked back, saw Hadi pacing angrily in front of the open balcony door, and concluded that the tea set was now short one cup.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hadi shuffled into his flat, giving a sigh of relief at being back again. He'd left for Milan the morning following the fight, hoping to find some distraction. But three days later, he simply felt weary and decided to return home. He wasn't the jet-setting type, so the flights in relatively quick succession had left him even more tired, as had the bus ride from Algiers to Sétif and the short trip in the cab that had finally brought him back to the flat. All he wanted to do was collapse into bed. He tossed his keys onto the counter and flicked on the main light. A yelp of surprise jumped from his throat when Judas was suddenly illuminated in front of him, sitting on the sofa as though someone had stitched him there. "Judas!" His heart pounded in his throat. "Wha-What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," Judas replied, his voice low and dangerous.

Something in that voice made Hadi's adrenaline rush, as if he were about to face a major adversary in single combat. "How long?"

"Almost four days now."

Hadi's eyes widened. "Since I left? But... why?"

Judas slowly set aside his wine and stood, every movement careful and calculated. "You left. How am I to protect you if you leave. The. Country?"

Anger flared within Hadi. "I only went to Milan. It isn't like I took a trip to Gaza to get myself killed."

"I need you!" Judas shouted. "How dare you leave without a word! I had to hear it from—" He pressed his lips together. "You are my *keeper*. You can hardly keep me if you are in Milan!"

Hadi glared. "You have been visiting once a week for the last three months. I could have left any of those weeks and you would have been none the wiser, if it were not for your... *operatives*! I'm here when I promised I would be." Fuming, Hadi gestured wildly with his hands. "I haven't been your keeper for months now. You have put more distance between us in the last twelve weeks than I have in the last few days," he accused in a low voice. "You don't need me. You need my blood. You have made that abundantly clear since you sent me away to live in this flat."

Judas stalked towards Hadi. "Such distance is necessary. You... make me... *want*... things."

Hadi crossed his arms over his chest, refusing to back down. "How does that necessitate distance?"

"How does it not?" Judas spat back.

A growl erupted from Hadi's throat. "You're pushing away your problems because you are too much of a coward to face them. Forgive me if I don't reward that behavior."

"I am no coward!" Judas shouted, his eyes flashing with dangerous fire.

Hadi tried to hide his flinch, quipping, "Your actions prove otherwise, Judas."

Judas snarled as he shoved Hadi against the nearest wall and pressed their bodies together. Hadi's breath was knocked from him by the impact with the wall, and the gasp that followed only served to allow Judas to possess his mouth more fully when he took Hadi's mouth in a viciously fierce kiss, his hands brutal as they squeezed Hadi's backside. The rough treatment shocked Hadi, and he was momentarily caught up in the feverish moment. His body tingled all over from the sudden contact. His

senses filled with Judas' presence as they had not in far too long. It was only after a few moments of submitting that he understood what was happening and shoved Judas back. "What... gives you... the right?" he rasped out, hurt melding seamlessly with his anger.

"Isn't that what you wanted?" Judas panted.

Hadi glared at Judas with wounded eyes. "No."

"I should go. You've had... a hectic trip, I am certain. You need a shower." Judas turned away from Hadi, taking deep breaths.

Hadi's voice and manner shifted as he tried to regain his breath, sorrow permeating his tone. "What happened to our friendship?"

"Nothing... we are still... friends," Judas said simply.

Hadi shook his head, sliding down the wall to the floor. "You don't trust me."

Judas spun around and stared at Hadi. "Of course I trust you."

"No, you don't," Hadi breathed with another shake of his head. "You didn't trust me to handle the feedings with less of the drugs. You don't trust me to be close... and you don't trust me to be away either."

Closing his eyes, Judas exhaled slowly. "Would you prefer... to taper off the diazepam?"

"You know I would. You have known that for months."

Judas opened his eyes once more. "Then we shall."

Hadi looked up at Judas, uncertain that he had heard correctly, but when he met the man's gaze, he knew there was sincerity in the words. He nodded at Judas, picking himself up from the floor. Fetching a clean glass, he poured himself a bit of wine, drinking in order to calm himself further. He ran a hand through his unkempt hair. "Did you worry? Or were you just jealous?" he asked, holding out the half-drained cup Judas had been drinking prior to his arrival. Despite their mutual anger, he didn't want to be alone. He had craved Judas' company for so long that he couldn't bring himself to waste the moment.

Judas snatched his glass back. "Both."

Hadi wasn't sure whether he should be insulted or appreciative. "Why jealous?" Judas merely clenched his jaw before looking away, and Hadi took another large swallow of wine as he watched his charge. "I wasn't intimate with anyone." It wasn't really Judas' business, but he had a suspicion that the man's mind made assumptions just as his would have in a similar situation. "If all I had wanted was a quick fling, I would have accepted an offer. That's not what I want. Not from you... not from anyone." He sighed as he sat on the sofa. "I didn't think leaving would affect you at all, so long as I returned by the time you would arrive tomorrow." He hadn't expected Judas to find out, and he certainly hadn't known that man would wait for him in his flat.

Hadi thought he saw a flicker of disappointment in Judas' eyes, but Judas hid his expression adeptly by drinking the rest of his wine. "I told you. I need you. Your whereabouts and safety are paramount to me."

The words sounded dead to Hadi's ears, perhaps even rehearsed. He stared at the floor, silent for a long time. After a couple of minutes, he whispered, his voice barely audible, "I just want to be close."

"I just offered you closeness."

"No," Hadi protested softly. "You offered the sating of a physical desire. Our past encounters have always been more than that." He remembered back to their heartfelt kisses, to the intimacy that they

had shared when he brought Judas to climax simply by kissing and sucking on the man's finger. That had been more than physical for both of them.

Judas set his glass aside. "I... cannot cope with you closer. It's... dangerous for me. My grief was great when my past keepers died..." He lifted his eyes and looked imploringly at Hadi. "What would I do when my lover dies?"

Hadi met Judas' gaze, seeing the same insecurity that *he* had felt following Dante's death. He remembered well the anguish he had felt to have such a close friend die. He hadn't wanted to let anyone close for a while after that, and he saw that same hesitancy in Judas' eyes. Lowering his gaze to the floor again, he whispered, "It would be torturous." He paused, compelled to admit his faults. "I have been selfish. Forgive me." His life was devoted to Judas now, and no matter his homesickness or the feelings he harbored, he had to remember that Judas would outlive him.

Something shattered in Judas' eyes at that moment. "Why do you ask my forgiveness?" Judas threw his glass into the sink, the crystal shattering loudly. "Tell me it will be worth it! Tell me you love me, that you want my love in return, and no less will be acceptable! Tell me it's already too late to think about those things, for you haunt every thought I have, and that even a handful of years as your lover would be worth an eternity of mourning!" He stalked over to Hadi, bracing his hands on the back of the sofa, caging Hadi as he whispered, "Tell me you want to come home, and that there is no other option for either of us now."

After jumping at the shattering glass, Hadi's eyes widened as the outpouring from Judas rang in his ears. The words tore through him, leaving his already sore heart bleeding. There was panic in his face alongside the longing, the hurt and desperation, the anger at being cast aside when it was so clear they both wanted to be together. "I want to come home with you. I never wanted to leave!" His voice was rough with emotion, and it slowly gained volume until he was shouting up into Judas' face. "Why did you send me away? Why have you cast me aside? I need to be near you because I love you! Is that what you want to hear? That your actions have torn me up inside because I love you and miss you and want you with me?" His voice faltered, and he panted wildly. "I can't guarantee the world, can't promise you happiness, but dammit! Why won't you take that risk?"

Judas' eyes slipped shut as the fire seemed to bleed out of him. He fell to his knees before Hadi, resting his brow against Hadi's knee, murmuring, "I've never... been in love before... not like this. I want you... I want to talk with you, laugh with you, love you... and I want to for the rest of my life... but how can I do that when you won't *be* here for the rest of my life?"

Hadi tried to breathe as he righted his posture and rounded his back, leaning over to run his fingers through Judas' short hair. "I don't know," he whispered. "I don't know, Judas." He laid his head atop his companion's. There was no solution to his mortality.

"Please come home," Judas breathed. "I want you... home."

How long had Hadi wanted to hear those words? How many times had he played that moment through his mind? The repetitions were too numerous to count. A small rush of happiness surged through him, and he tilted Judas' face up until their eyes met. "Yes," he whispered with a hint of a smile. "I want to go back with you."

Judas stared up at Hadi. "Tonight."

Though Hadi reeked and had just arrived from a day of travel, his answer was instantaneous. "Tonight."

Judas smiled. "We will take what you have packed, and I will send someone back for the rest tomorrow."

Hadi managed to chuckle, though it was a bit weak. "One of your minions?"

"Yes," Judas said, joining Hadi's half-hearted chuckling. "One of my minions."

"It hurts to know that you spied." Though the hurt was not too terribly deep, and the offense was not unforgivable. "I know it was because you care, but... I don't even know them." Hadi made an odd face. "Unless you had them join my needlework circle."

Judas ducked his head. "I... had to always know where you were." He stood up, walking to Hadi's suitcases. "You are my keeper. I... needed you safe."

Hadi was on his feet in an instant and caught Judas' wrist in his hand after a couple steps. When Judas looked at him, he hesitated a moment. "I... cannot blame you for being concerned." He looked down a moment. "I shouldn't have left without telling you. I just needed to get away for a short while." Swallowing, he established eye contact again. "But, even in Milan, I thought of you constantly. I wanted to come back. I found myself actually looking forward to your next visit, even if it was filled with the usual uncomfortable silence."

"I couldn't stop thinking about you... what you were doing... and who you were doing it with."

Hadi spoke sincerely, his embarrassed tone giving further credence to his words. "It was not all that exciting, honestly. Most of my friends were too busy to visit with me on such short notice. I was able to meet with a couple designers I work for, but I spent most of my time in my favorite gardens and piazzas. I met up with a couple friends and we went dancing, which instantly made me think of you. The conversation centered on what I was doing in Algeria... who I was sent here to care for... why there wasn't someone better suited for the job. I realized that night how badly I wanted to return when one of my friends offered physical comfort for my general melancholy." He swallowed, looking at Judas. "I turned him down."

"Why?"

"I..." Hadi felt blood rush to his face. "I told him I was taken."

Judas' brow furrowed. "But, you aren't."

A half-smile quirked Hadi's face. "Yes, I am."

Judas swallowed and nodded. "Let's go home. You need a shower and..." His cheeks tinted pink. "I would like to help you with one."

Hadi blinked a couple times in surprise before smiling at the offer, his core warming pleasantly. "I look forward to it." Cupping Judas' cheek, he pressed a tender kiss to his lips, a stark contrast to the roughness they had shared just minutes prior.

Smiling faintly, Judas picked up Hadi's two suitcases. "The car is waiting for us."

Hadi grabbed his over-the-shoulder bag and keys, opening the door for Judas, and then locking it behind them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The drive from town back to Judas' estate on the outskirts was quiet, but it was a silence that felt completely different from those that Hadi had slowly grown accustomed to enduring. He was tired from all his travel, but a certain sense of excitement filled him when they neared the moonlit house. It was home. He simply hadn't known it until he had been forced away. A smile bloomed on his face when Judas took his hand and led him inside, bypassing his old room. He was pleasantly shocked when they rounded a corner and stepped into Judas' room.

He had never been permitted to see Judas' personal rooms. It had been an unspoken rule that he not disturb Judas while the man was within this room. It was tastefully decorated, nothing truly extravagant. The color palette was relaxing, and the far side of the room was almost completely open with windows that let out onto a small balcony.

"If we are to be more than keeper and charge, then this is where you will sleep. Our bedroom," Judas murmured, his eyes always on Hadi.

Hadi felt his heart race, and he finally allowed his eyes to settle on the bed. It was not huge, as one might have expected, but it was big enough for the both of them to sleep comfortably, and a quick touch revealed that the sheets were soft and inviting. "Our bedroom," he repeated quietly, his smile broadening. "I've thought so many times about what it would be like, kissing you goodnight, sleeping at your side, and then waking with you so close."

Judas took Hadi's hand and, boldly, leaned over to press a whisper of a kiss to his cheek. "Such thoughts plagued my mind, too."

Gooseflesh pricked at Hadi's neck, and he shivered. "My thoughts went much further than that," he admitted.

Judas closed his eyes, his face still so near Hadi's. "As did mine," he breathed against Hadi's ear.

Another shiver caused Hadi's hand to unconsciously tighten around Judas'. "Are you sure this is where you want me? Here, in your personal space and your personal life? I will not want to leave," he warned. "Ever."

Judas swallowed, and then whispered, "I want you here."

Hadi couldn't help himself. The impulse to kiss Judas was simply too great, and he raised his hand, cupping the back of Judas' neck and pulling their lips together. It was not a kiss of passion, but one of joy and homecoming. The soft contact of Judas' lips against his own was intoxicating, and he slowly deepened the kiss, moaning softly when Judas opened to him.

Judas' arms slid around Hadi's waist and pulled their bodies together. He easily gave his submission, though his arms refused to relinquish their hold. After a moment which seemed to last an eternity, Judas slowly broke the kiss and panted against Hadi's lips. "By the Lord, Hadi..."

"Dear God," Hadi hummed, placing another short kiss to Judas' lips. "You don't know how much I have missed that. I have missed you, despite your visits, missed being this close." He had lost count of the times he had remembered their dancing lessons, recalling every detail of Judas' embrace, even if it was in such a innocent context. Having their bodies pressed together so intimately made his pulse quicken and his desire stir. "You mentioned... helping me with my shower."

Judas nodded, brushing his lips a last time over Hadi's before leading him into the bathroom. "I missed you as well. Terribly." He reached into the oversized shower stall and turned on the taps, and the room quickly filled with steam. "I often thought I would go mad if I didn't have you again, but then I would be standing outside the door of your flat, terrified of what made my heart pound, of what it meant for us both, and I would find my resolve for another day."

"I would have welcomed you," Hadi whispered as he unbuttoned the dress-shirt that he wore, pulling the tucked portion from his trousers. "Angry and hurt as I have been, you know I would have welcomed you."

"You would have given to me even if I left the following morning." A shadow of sadness passed over Judas' face. "I know, which makes you a much better man than I."

Hadi looked from the multiple shower heads to Judas, reaching out to place one of his hands on the man's shoulder. "Now is what counts, Judas. I came back. *You* came back... and now you know I love you."

A visible tremor ran through Judas' body at those words, and he bowed his head. "I—" Judas hesitated, but after a moment, the words passed his lips. "I love you, too."

Hadi smiled, his eyes closing for a moment as he felt heat permeate his body and spirit like a warm spring breeze after a harsh winter. Without an excuse not to, he pulled Judas to him again, kissing him with a sense of peace and confidence that slowly morphed into something more heated. He pulled away only when they were both breathless, panting, "Would you... like to undress me?"

"Yes," Judas murmured. "I've dreamed of it for months now." Judas closed the bathroom door, and then stood in front of Hadi. His fingers were steady as he reached out to slide the unbuttoned shirt from Hadi's shoulders. It fell to the floor, and his eyes remained trained on Hadi's torso. "I want to touch you, to taste you, to learn what it is to make love with you much as I learned what it was to be your friend," Judas whispered.

Hadi tried his best to keep his breathing regular and even, but there was something about Judas that made the removal of even that first layer of his clothing erotic. "I will guide you," he promised. "I will teach you this dance as I did the others."

Judas' heated gaze rose to Hadi's as his hands moved up the fabric of the shirt. He drew out the moment that would reveal the flesh of his torso. His hands slid back down towards the hem, and then grabbed hold, slowly pulling it up. He held Hadi's gaze as he exposed the beautiful olive skin and the hair that spanned the younger man's chest and trailed down to disappear into the worn jeans. He tossed the fabric to the floor. There was a pause, though his gaze did not waver, before he laid his hands flat against the warm flesh, moaning as his eyes finally lifted to take in the sight bared to him. "Hadi."

While their eyes were locked, Hadi felt his heart speed up at the fire and intensity in the deep brown of Judas' gaze. His lips seemed dry, despite the moisture in the air, and he licked them, making an effort to calm his shallow breathing. The contact of Judas' hands against his torso and the slow drag of fingers across his bare skin were the most intimate touches he had received in over a year, and he felt his loins pulse and push against the confines of his jeans and underwear.

Licking his lips, Judas skated his palms down flesh, over the hair, and back up. Judas' hands felt cool compared to the heat of Hadi's skin, and his muscles jumped at the intimate caress. Judas brushed his thumbs over the tan nipples hidden among dark hair and sharply inhaled when the flesh tightened under his fingertips. His eyes darted back up to Hadi's, and he smiled faintly. "So beautiful."

"I please you, then?" Hadi managed to ask, his eyes dark as a smile twitched at the corners of his lips.

"Yes. You're... perfect." Judas trailed his hand down Hadi's center to the fastenings of his jeans. "Absolutely perfect."

Hadi's bearing and confidence grew exponentially with the simple compliment. "Thank you," he breathed, a deeper tint settling along his cheeks and neck. His physical appearance might have seemed mediocre to most in the fashion world, but all that mattered was Judas' approval.

Judas crouched before Hadi, and he eased Hadi's sandals from his feet. Reaching up, he unfastened the fabric of Hadi's jeans. Now his fingers trembled, and he stopped for a moment as he took a steadying breath. Hadi watched, his breath held. He'd wanted this for so long now. He was impatient to feel their flesh touch, but he was just as desperate to reclaim the intimacy Judas' fear had denied them. Then, Judas began moving his fingers once more, sliding the zipper down slowly, Hadi's erection pressed against his fingers.

His eyes fluttering shut for a second, Hadi relished the touches as they were bestowed, and when his eyes opened again, they returned to Judas. His hands moved of their own accord, brushing through Judas' hair and along the lines of his face. He could feel the minute trembling of Judas' hands, and he smiled, letting the expression convey all he wished without words.

Judas grasped the edges of Hadi's trousers and underwear, and he slowly pulled them down. He gazed up with reverent eyes at Hadi, not shifting his gaze until after Hadi had stepped from the fabric. Only then did his eyes shift lower, taking in the sight of the younger man's sex.

Hadi was semi-erect, the organ filling as he stared, and it was obvious Judas was fascinated by the fact that Hadi's foreskin was still intact. Hadi was proportionate, average in all ways, and though he'd never received any complaints, he felt just the smallest hint of trepidation as he waited for Judas' verdict of his fully naked body. With wide eyes, he watched Judas swallow thickly and lean in, leaving a kiss at the base of his shaft.

Hadi had been unsure whether or not the sight of him naked would adversely affect Judas, but the kiss to a place so intimate immediately set those small fears to rest. "Judas," he groaned, his entire length twitching against the heat of the man's lips and cheek.

Judas wet his lips and slowly rose. "I have never... looked at a man with desire."

"Is it different from looking at a woman with desire? Worse?"

"Different," Judas assured him as he drew his finger up Hadi's erection and fingered the loose flesh around the tip. "I do not know if it is because I have never lain with a man or... if it is love that alters my vision."

A wave of pleasure rushed through Hadi, and he inhaled sharply, his hands quivering for a moment at Judas' shoulders. "Men are... angles and lines, where women are softness and curves." His eyes burned as they regarded his partner. "May I return the favor?"

Judas shuddered under his gaze. "Yes," he breathed.

Hadi smiled, his hands reaching out to take in the contour of Judas through the simple trousers and tunic covering the man's skin. He drew his hands over every portion of Judas' body, including the bulge between the man's legs and along his backside and thighs. It was freeing and invigorating to touch Judas so openly, and he did not rush himself. "I have wanted to do this for some time."

Judas shuddered, his breath short. "So have I. I... wanted to know how your hands felt running over my flesh."

Hadi leaned forward as he unbuttoned Judas' tunic, whispering, "I had more to confess to that Priest than just our kiss all those months ago." He kissed Judas' neck when the fabric parted, unable to resist the pull of the uncovered skin.

Judas' eyes slipped closed, and his hands came to rest lightly on Hadi's hips as he asked in a strangled voice, "Oh?"

Smirking as he finished with the last button, Hadi slipped the fabric from Judas' shoulders and arms. "He didn't need details... but I told him I had impure thoughts about a man of the cloth on over a dozen occasions. And that was only that week." His hands roamed, and he moaned softly, glancing down at the bare torso. Dark hair, slightly thicker than his own, covered the beautifully flushed skin, and he explored the planes and indentations, his mind cataloging every detail while he nipped at Judas' collar bone. "I also told the priest that thoughts of repeating our kiss or other such actions made me stir right there in the confessional."

Judas moaned at those words, and Hadi felt Judas' sex twitch against him through the thin cloth of his trousers. "I... doubt the priest was... pleased to... hear that." Judas tilted his head back. "I... I tried to ignore the thoughts... the constant need... and I finally gave in... touching myself... but it brought no true relief... just as I knew it wouldn't."

"You touched yourself?" The thought alone made Hadi ache, and his mouth went on the move, pressing kisses down Judas' center, lingering at each of the dusky nipples within the man's chest hair. Gradually, he moved lower, his hands touching chest and reaching behind to caress back and waist.

His eyes darted up as he released the drawstring of Judas' trousers, watching his face as he slowly drew the cloth down hips, over groin and buttocks, and off legs. He could feel the heat of Judas' length pressed against his jaw and throat as he placed a kiss to the man's hip, and he moaned at the sight when he finally sat back and savored his first look at the fully nude figure. Judas' frame was a bit thicker than his own, appealingly so, and he was unashamed of the way his gaze was drawn down to the man's sex. The head of Judas' cock was slick with fluids, the shaft smooth in the absence of a foreskin, and his mouth watered.

"I did," Judas admitted, his cheeks tinted red. "I thought it would ease the ache. It only made it worse." He ran his fingers through Hadi's hair, his eyes vulnerable as he looked down at Hadi. "Do... I please you?"

"Breathtaking," Hadi whispered, the word nearly lost in the sound of the shower spray. "Yes, Judas. You please me." He ran his hands from Judas' abdomen to the man's knees. "Dear God, how pleasing you are to me." He could not resist the temptation. He didn't wish to abstain anymore. Bending forward, he drew his tongue up the underside of Judas' sex and, steadying the length with a light grip, sucked the head between his lips with a shuddering groan.

Judas cried out, the sound echoing in the bathroom. He steadied himself against Hadi's shoulders. "Hadi!"

The cry resonated within Hadi's ears, and he felt intoxicated, tasting Judas as he had so often dreamed. He swirled his tongue, dipping a bit further along the shaft with a moan that vibrated into his partner. He reveled in the flavor and texture of Judas, the sheer pleasure of being on his knees with the man's sex between his lips. In the back of his mind, he knew he could not linger for fear of leading them both to swift, unfulfilling ends. It took a great amount of willpower to pull back, but he managed to do so with a parting kiss to the leaking tip. He rose to his feet, his breath short and his heart hammering while he steadied himself at Judas' hips.

Judas cupped the back of Hadi's head with his hand and covered his lover's mouth with his own, kissing him deeply and passionately. He wanted to push Hadi to the wall and move against his lover, see what Hadi's expression was at that beautiful moment of release. His hands stroked down Hadi's back and buttocks, gripping and pulling them even closer together as he devoured Hadi's mouth, shocked by the lust that burned inside him for this man.

Hadi moaned into the kiss. The cadence of their kiss was hypnotically slow, and it was almost eerie the way they were able to give and take with one another, the line between dominance and submis-

sion blurring to a beautiful shade of gray. Hadi gasped and shuddered, and Judas held tightly to him, as if unwilling to release Hadi now that he had him once more.

Abandoning Hadi's lips, Judas brushed his own down his lover's throat and nipped softly with his teeth. "By God, I missed you," he confessed near Hadi's ear as he thrust lightly against his groin.

Hadi's muscles quivered under Judas' hands and lips, and between his own soft sounds of need, he purred, "I missed you, too."

Judas pulled back from Hadi and stepped over the lip of the large shower stall, pulling Hadi in with him. "You smell," he said with a smirk. "I wish to remedy that."

Hadi laughed as he was thrust into the stream of hot water. He let his head fall back into the spray, wetting his hair with a couple passes of his fingers along his scalp.

Judas watched Hadi and ran his hands over the slick flesh of his lover's chest. "You are... certain... this is what you desire?" he asked, his own doubts creeping into the quiet question.

Brushing water from his face, Hadi looked at Judas with a smile that glimmered in the black depths of his eyes. "To be with you as long as possible, as close as possible?" He brought their bodies together again with a hum of satisfaction. "Yes... I am certain."

"I know almost nothing about being with a man," Judas whispered against Hadi's lips.

Hadi ran the fingers of one hand through Judas' hair. "It is like being with a woman, really. You may touch with hands or mouths, and if the mood strikes, you can enter as you would with a female."

Judas chuckled, the sound slightly nervous as he reached for the soap. "That sounds distinctly... uncomfortable."

"It is an acquired taste, I think. Not everyone likes it, but the more you do it, the easier it becomes." He purred when Judas began washing him. "I do not expect us to share something like that immediately, Judas... I actually prefer hands and mouths," he confided. "It is more intimate to me."

Tilting his head as he scrubbed Hadi's body, Judas asked, "How can hands and mouths be more intimate than the penetrating of the body?"

"Let me see if I can explain it," Hadi said with a smile. "I prefer to savor a passionate build, or to let my partner draw the experience out. When I feel like a quick tryst, penetration is wonderful, but most of the time, I find the slower route much more arousing and gratifying." He grabbed the shampoo from the tiled ledge in the shower stall and lathered and rinsed his hair as Judas quickly washed his own body, evidently lost in thought.

Hadi let the hot water beat down on his shoulders and neck for a couple of minutes. When he noticed Judas done with his washing, Hadi slipped his arms around Judas and whispered, "Tell me what you're thinking."

Judas wiped the water from his eyes and glanced over his shoulder. "That I will give you anything you desire."

Hadi kissed Judas' cheek and shoulder. "That's nice, but what are your desires?" There was genuine interest in his voice, and his hands drew idle patterns on his lover's stomach.

Judas hummed in pleasure and closed his eyes before answering. "To kiss you. Touch you. Hold you close, and be held close by you, as pleasure steals sense from me."

Despite the heat of the water, steam, and Judas' body pressed to his, Hadi shivered. "That sounds... heavenly. I suggest we dry off and continue our affections in your bed."

"Our bed," Judas corrected as he shut off the taps.

Hadi ran a hand through his hair, a bit embarrassed. "I... didn't want to presume." A hopeful smile broke out on his face. "Our bed?"

Judas smiled, leaning in to press a brief kiss to Hadi's lips. "Our bed." He reached up and snagged the towels off the rack beside the shower. Hadi took one of them from Judas' outstretched hand and dried himself, moaning softly when he brushed efficiently across his stiff sex. He looked up in time to enjoy the sight of Judas' organ twitching in response. They finished drying quickly, tossing the wet towels into a basket when they were done. Judas paused near the door, and Hadi wondered if he might be having second thoughts. But then Judas held out one hand to Hadi and pushed the door open with the other. "Let's go to bed."

Hadi came up beside Judas and slid his hand firmly into Judas'. "Yes."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Judas turned off the lights as they crossed the room until only the two lamps by the bedside remained. He paused by the bed, turning to face Hadi, and his eyes darted over the nude body before him. He hesitated only a moment, a nervous flutter in his stomach, and then he reached for Hadi. His fingers traveled down Hadi's chest, deviating to tease at nipples before moving lower. Hadi moaned softly as Judas teased with massaging circles, light pinches, and gentle scrapes. The muscles of his torso twitched and quivered, and Judas thought them fascinating as he touched and stroked, listening as Hadi's breathing became shallower the lower his hands trailed.

Judas leaned in, drawing his lips and tongue over Hadi's collarbones, suckling gently at the hollow of his lover's throat as his hand finally reached its destination. His fingers danced along the stiffness between Hadi's thighs, feeling the length before he wrapped his fingers around the shaft. He stroked slowly, the movements languid and long, his other hand reaching around to embrace Hadi and pull him closer.

Hadi finally wrapped his arms around Judas, one hand delving into dark hair while the other explored shoulder blades and spine. "Judas," he moaned, his hips pushing forward into the hand.

Judas brought their lips together, sliding his tongue into the heat of Hadi's mouth. The pace of his hand never sped, it never slowed, and remained perfectly controlled. He moaned, twining his tongue with Hadi's. His own arousal blazed within him, and he found it distantly interesting how much louder their voices seemed, how the rising musk of desire mingled with the scent of soap and water, and how hot and hard Hadi felt against his palm.

The passion in Hadi's kiss could not be mistaken, and his hand moved from Judas' shoulder to his collar, and then lower. His nails ran through the dark hair of Judas' chest before reaching one nipple and teasing it to hardness. He pinched and rolled the nub, and Judas felt fire sizzled through him, making his groin just one knot of unspent need.

Judas pulled back, panting, his eyes dark and dazed as he gazed at Hadi. "I never knew... what it was to want someone... so much."

Hadi grinned, his huffing breaths melding with Judas' as they escaped his lips. "Are you... frightened?"

Licking at Hadi's lips, Judas answered truthfully. "Terrified."

"How can I... put you at ease?" Hadi asked, leaving a trail of sweet kisses along Judas' cheek and jaw.

"I think... I would like to lay with you between the sheets." Judas gave a final touch to Hadi's sex, and then his hand fell away.

"As you wish," Hadi whispered with a smile. He backed them up the few steps to the bed, pulled back the covers and climbed atop the mattress. On his knees, his thighs splayed, he began stroking himself, his eyes locked with Judas'.

Judas gasped at the display, his cheeks coloring deeply once the dark eyes moved downward. Hadi wasn't overly dramatic in his movements, but the moan that lilted up when he twisted his wrist, his hips thrusting his dark sex through elegant fingers, Judas thought he would come then and there. It was unbelievably erotic to watch, even if it made him blush brightly. He barely heard Hadi speak over the sound of his own heart pounding in his ears.

"I love the way you flush. It's so beautiful."

Judas swallowed and wet his lips. He could feel the flush all the way to the tips of his ears. "I only flush because you do things I am... unaccustomed to seeing." He slowly joined Hadi on the bed, his eyes holding Hadi's. "I see how you touch yourself..." Reaching out, he grasped Hadi with his hand once more and mimicked Hadi's movements. "I see how you like to be touched." His lips barely touched Hadi's, and he whispered into his lover's mouth. "I want to hear you moan my name, Hadi."

Hadi's breath caught in his throat, and he moaned loudly at those words. The twist of Judas' wrist was perfect, and he soon had Hadi panting and squirming for him. Judas was unrelenting, intent upon achieving his goal, and his hand upon Hadi's cock soon forced yet another moan from Hadi's throat. "Judas!"

Judas' eyes slipped shut, and he shuddered. "Yes." He drew Hadi down to the pillows, tangling their legs and bringing their bodies close, never releasing his lover's sex while embracing Hadi with the other arm. "Your sounds of pleasure are as sacred as the holiest of hymns," he murmured as he nuzzled Hadi's cheek.

Hadi hummed his appreciation, kissing the skin closest to his lips while his hand trailed down to the nipple he had neglected while they were standing. His fingers teased while his hips shifted into the movements of Judas' hand, and he panted, "You make me want so much. More than just body, more than your presence alone... I want *all* of you."

Judas moaned, his sex jerking each time Hadi pinched his nipple. He opened hazy eyes, his hand continuing those same movements, in that same languid rhythm. He panted raggedly as desire built with steady strength inside him. "All... of me?" His mind was fogged with need and arousal he'd never before felt, his heart beating in a powerful cadence, and his hand gripped tightly at Hadi's back. "What... does that... mean?" He arched into Hadi's fingers when his nipple was pinched perfectly, the pressure ideal, and he shuddered against his lover.

A stream of panted moans rose from Hadi's throat, and he suckled Judas' lower lip as he pinched again and again, ensuring that Judas squirmed non-stop against him. Judas thought he would go mad with all the sensation he felt, more than any whore had inspired. More than even his beloved Keilah had made him feel. It was more than the sex they now shared, it was the look in Hadi's eyes as the younger man looked up at him, the tenderness in every touch, from a pinch at his nipple to the sweeping touch along his back.

And then, Hadi's other hand settled at Judas' cock. He matched Judas' established rhythm, though his grip was light, drawing the moment out. "I want to be your sacrifice... your keeper... your lover and friend. I want to... experience all of you—the blood, the words, the silence, the passion—for the rest of my life."

"Blood... and passion?" Judas began to writhe, and as Hadi's palm moved slickly over the head of his sex, he cried out, eyes wide as he gulped in air. "Hadi..." His vision became blurry as tears gathered in his eyes, and his hand stilled for a moment in its endeavors. "The... rest of your life?"

Abandoning Judas' nipple, Hadi cupped his face, black eyes meeting pitch. "The rest of my life," he confirmed in a passionate whisper, his hand twisting and pulling, sliding with purpose over Judas' shaft.

"Hadi," Judas gasped as his hand trembled between Hadi's legs and his eyes fluttered, threatening to close.

Hadi breathlessly watched Judas, and his pace gradually gained strength and speed. Hadi pressed kisses to Judas' lips, and he whispered, "I love you, Judas... Let go. Taste that blissful light with me."

Judas couldn't be still against Hadi, his eyes unfocused and heavy-lidded. His hand grasped firmly at Hadi's hip. His mind became mired in the passion, in the beautiful words whispered to him by a lov-

er, words that he'd never before heard uttered to him with such conviction and belief. He moaned and gasped, teetering there on the edge of completion.

Hadi's hand moved swiftly, his hand tight on Judas' cock, and Judas was helpless to resist what that hand demanded of him. "Come for me, Judas."

Judas trembled violently, his scream uttered through clenched teeth as his hands gripped at Hadi, pleasure erupting along every nerve as his seed was coaxed from his body with expert touches. Sight and sound were stolen from him, and his chest burned with the love he felt for Hadi in that moment.

Hadi stroked Judas until he was completely spent, and then gathered the last of Judas' seed on his fingers. He brought them up to his mouth and drew his tongue along the creamy fluids. Hadi emitted a shuddering moan, his eyes hooded as Judas watched him lick every drop from his own fingers. Once the hand was clean, Hadi drew Judas against him, held him tightly.

Taking in great, gulping breaths of air, Judas shivered in the aftermath of his pleasure, pleasure he'd not expected to ever give to anyone again. The simplicity and intimacy of the act caused tears to slip down his cheeks, and he buried his face against Hadi's throat, whispering roughly, "Hadi."

"Shh," Hadi soothed. His hands brushed through Judas' damp hair and along the small of his back, tracing idle patterns while holding him close. "I'm here."

Judas felt utterly foolish, weeping as he was in Hadi's arms, and he forced himself to calm down, to collect himself and take deep, steady breaths. "Forgive me."

Hadi smiled, peppering kisses along Judas' forehead, cheeks, and lips. "There's nothing to forgive."

Judas closed his eyes. "You would think I have never enjoyed the pleasures of release."

"You have never enjoyed them like this, never with me like this," Hadi purred, pausing to brush away some of the moisture left behind by Judas' tears and kiss him again. "I am... happy that it is so profound for you."

Judas opened his eyes to gaze at Hadi, shivering in the other man's arms. "I love you... and that makes everything between us profound."

Hadi's smile quivered slightly before he leaned a fraction closer and brought their lips together, taking possession of Judas' mouth with gentle passion. Judas instantly surrendered to Hadi, allowing him to lead, to take and give and love him. He trusted Hadi as he had trusted only one other, and his thumb rubbed softly at the hollow of Hadi's hip.

Hadi moaned softly into Judas' mouth, his body arching under Judas' as they kissed. Pulling back slightly, his muscles coiled and released, the small burst of energy rolling them over so he rested partially atop his lover. "Take me in your hand again," he instructed, his voice rough with desire. "You touch me so well..."

Judas' moan joined Hadi's. "I have been... too long without these joys." He fought his body's reaction to the words, the proximity of his lover, and he reached between them and took Hadi in hand, a shudder racing down his spine as he began to stroke.

Groaning his pleasure, Hadi thrust into each movement of Judas' hand. The pace remained slow, as it was before. There was no hurry here, now, between them. "Yes," he panted, each thrust of his hips grinding his sex against Judas' hand and the soft skin of Judas' hip and abdomen. "Yes, like that."

Judas panted, staring up at Hadi with unblinking eyes, his hand following every command Hadi gave, every cue offered. He pushed his own renewing arousal away, focusing entirely on Hadi. "I want to see you in every conceivable position for loving." He licked his lips, his own body beginning to move in time with Hadi's. "I... I think I want to feel you within me. On a hot night, just the quietness of our voices as you..." He swallowed and twisted his wrist, gripping the head of Hadi's sex briefly before sliding his hand back down.

A soft cry left Hadi. His black eyes were filled with shock and arousal as he gazed down at Judas. "You... you want...?" He groaned as he thrust forward again. "Yes. Within you... like this." Shifting slightly, he settled between Judas' legs, steadying himself by wrapping one arm around the underside of Judas' shoulder, the other hand caressing down Judas' flank as he thrust.

Judas cried out with the change of position, his thighs tensing alongside Hadi's. He had never felt so exposed, so vulnerable, or so cherished. "Hadi—" He groaned, his breathing increasing as desire kindled in him.

Hadi's eyes, which had been heavily lidded, opened fully, and he looked down at Judas with a broad grin. "I assume too much," he murmured. "Are you... able to go again?" The question was coupled with a light scratch from Judas' mid-thigh to ribs.

Judas arched, his cock hardening between them, and he whimpered, "I... I think..." He tried to clear his mind. "By God, I am depraved."

"Not depraved," Hadi breathed, shaking his head. "Blessed. Not all can so quickly." He suckled Judas' lower lip a moment, his hand sliding between them to grasp alongside Judas' hand. He slowed the pace even more, groaning as he stroked Judas in time with his own thrusts.

Judas squirmed under Hadi. "I... never knew it could... feel so... ah!" He matched Hadi's rhythm, his hand squeezing and releasing as he whispered, "Kiss me."

His hand gripping at Judas' shoulder blade, Hadi moaned as they moved. His eyes fluttered, and he sealed their lips in a passionate exchange, thrusting his tongue deeply into Judas' mouth.

Chasing Hadi's tongue back into his lover's mouth, Judas slid his tongue over the supple muscle and teased teeth and palate. It surprised him how quickly he recovered, how hard he became in Hadi's hand, and how soon he began to writhe once more against Hadi. He moaned and whimpered as his body arched and bucked, his panting and groans gaining volume. His heart raced in his breast, and he pushed upwards, moving his hand over Hadi's shaft with swifter motions, doing to his lover as he wished done to him.

Hadi's rhythm faltered as Judas made that wordless demand, and he cried out as he sped their ascent, thrusting with more force. Their bodies rocked as everything grew more intense, the new pace bringing with it his most desperate, wanton moans, the acute, musky scent of sex, and the pounding of his heart against his ribcage. Faster and faster, their tongues and bodies collided, and he was forced again and again from Judas' mouth to release sounds that rose in volume and increased that intangible sense of urgency. "Judas!"

Judas was swept away by the tide of Hadi's pleasure. His name used in the heat of passion! He spread his legs wider, thrust up into Hadi's fist faster. Judas lost all sense of himself, of control and calm. He kissed and touched, stroked and thrust. His second climax was ripped from him with intensity enough to steal his voice. In silence, he trembled under Hadi, his breath shuddering into their kiss as he squeezed his eyes shut and pulled upon Hadi with an uneven rhythm. His own seed spilled over Hadi's hand and smeared between their surging bodies.

Hadi's choked cry was fed into Judas' mouth until a wave of harsh contractions forced him to pull away, arching against Judas as his seed fell to join Judas' upon their sweat-slicked bodies. His cry was short-lived, caught in his throat for that moment of silent, breathless delight. When his body finally relaxed, Hadi collapsed weakly atop Judas, his frame trembling as he heaved for breath.

Limp and panting beneath Hadi, Judas closed his eyes as he weakly slipped his hand from between them and properly embraced Hadi. Satisfaction was a vibrant, warm feeling radiating from his chest and outwards. "Hadi... love... will always love... you," he breathed.

Never had Hadi heard such words whispered with the profound feeling, the devotion and sincerity, he heard in every whisper from Judas. Always. From Judas, that word meant so much more. The stinging sensation returned to Hadi's eyes, and he paid it no heed, letting it build within his sinuses until tears formed and fell from his dark lashes. He was quiet in his joy, his shivering breaths lingering as he pressed weak kisses to Judas' collarbone and neck. He felt safe, warm, and sated in the older man's arms. While he had felt similar feelings in the past with those he cared about, none of his life experiences compared. The emotions were all-consuming, the love of his spirit like a beacon, burning brightly as a sign of hope and refuge. "I love you," he whispered through his tears. "Always, Judas..."

Judas pressed a kiss to the crown of Hadi's head. "Thank you for coming home... for coming back."

Hadi sniffed in vain, breathing through his mouth, his lips smiling against the sweaty, fragrant skin at the base of Judas' neck. "Thank you for demanding it. I... could not stand the distance."

"There is no distance now," Judas murmured, his voice deep and rough. "Such a temptation you have been."

"Oh?" Hadi asked honestly, a smile curving his lips as he laughed softly. "Most of the time, I am not *trying* to tempt."

"Perhaps that was what made it difficult to resist the pull I felt."

"Perhaps," Hadi chuckled, kissing Judas. "I love you."

Judas sighed contentedly. "I love you."

Hadi basked in the moment, uncaring of the way their bodies stuck together or the way his hair was rumpled, having dried in strange positions. Shifting in a lethargic movement, he rolled them onto their sides. "I want to sleep in your arms every night... starting now."

Chuckling, Judas pulled the sheets up over their entwined bodies. "Who am I to argue with my keeper?"

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

S.L. Armstrong was born in West Virginia and raised in Tampa, Florida with her younger brother and a family dog.

She has been a voracious reader since early childhood, a hobby encouraged by her mother. In middle school, S.L. began to write as a hobby, scribbling poetry and snippets of prose during her classes. By the end of her high school career, she'd filled three binders full of her writings. It was the beginning of a life-long obsession with words and worlds, characters and plots.

Shortly after high school, S.L. married her husband, who has always encouraged her in her chosen field.

S.L. writes primarily male/male romance or homoerotic fiction, and she tends to lean toward the fantasy, paranormal, and horror genres.

She and her husband currently live together in Bradenton, Florida with seven cats and two dogs.

Kris Piet was born in California and raised in Flagstaff, Arizona, with her older sister and two cats. After studying in three different states and graduating magna cum laude from the University of Nevada – Las Vegas in Kinesiological Sciences, Kris moved back to Flagstaff to pursue a career in therapeutic bodywork and massage. Her private massage business places an emphasis on sports massage for circus performers, dancers, and athletes training at high altitude.

Throughout high school and college, writing fiction was little more than a pleasant diversion from required essays and applied science courses. After working with author S. L. Armstrong on a number of small writing projects and coming to see the act of writing as a learned skill, Kris found a new zeal for the challenge and now writes as a sideline career. She is particularly fond of writing in the High Fantasy and Paranormal genres, adding her own homoerotic, and often kinky, flair to her fiction.

Kris also enjoys drawing, circus arts such as flying trapeze and aerial silks, musical theater, and hoopedancing, all of which she feels balance her scientific, kinesiological side with her passion for the artistic and dramatic. Her love of the human body and its endless possibilities bleeds into nearly every facet of her life, from massage, to writing, to staring at the attractive men at the local Renaissance Faire...

Just kidding on that last part. Really.