



*He vowed never to love again.
Then he met her.*

THE SPIDER PRINCE

DESERT PRINCES OF JIKKAR

REBECCA GOINGS

Carnal Passions Presents

The Spider Prince
Desert Princes of Jikkar Book IV

By

Rebecca Goings



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Other Books By Rebecca Goings

The Viper Prince
The Scarab Prince
The Falcon Prince

Dedication

For Tuomas, Marco, Emppu, Julius, and Anette—the members of Nightwish—for inspiring this entire series with their song SAHARA.

One

"Ziyad Bihar, Spider Prince of the Golden Desert, you stand before me with your intended. You have chosen Amani Bantish to be your Spider Princess."

Amani watched as Ziyad raised his hand to stop the young Jackal Prince from going any further. "My *wife*, Siraj, not my princess."

Amani's heart fell and she trembled violently. The Spider had told her not long before the ceremony that he didn't love her. He was marrying her out of obligation, to provide himself and his caravan an heir to his throne. She suspected as much when he'd made her wait almost two full cycles before finally claiming her.

"I'm sorry?" The Jackal looked just about as nervous as Amani felt. He was young, a few cycles younger than she was, but he'd reigned his oasis for a while now, ever since the Viper deposed his father. He'd been the only caravan prince available to marry them in Suridesh, and this was obviously his first time officiating the ceremony.

"Amani will be my wife, not my princess," Ziyad explained once more.

The Jackal knit his brow in confusion, but nodded and continued. "Do you pledge to serve her for the rest of your days, to give her children and protect her with your very life?"

The Spider returned his gaze to her, piercing her to the core. His eyes were cold, as if he was remembering the wife he'd lost beneath the hooves of a raider's horse, the woman he'd always regard as his princess—Karis Bihar.

Amani couldn't breathe. Her own eyes filled with tears.

Holding Ziyad's eye contact was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do.

"I pledge it."

His empty words sealed her fate, like the sealing of a tomb rather than a vow of marriage. His distant demeanor had her remembering happier times, when Ziyad had actually smiled and Amani had heard the peals of his laughter.

But that man was gone, replaced now by the one standing before her, detached and uncaring. Amani had been offered to him once before, but he'd chosen her good friend Karis instead, who'd left Suridesh with him after they had wed. Long had Amani envied her friend, loving Ziyad, carrying his child...

But Karis had been killed in a senseless accident, bowled over by a group of raiders who hadn't stolen a drop of water from the Spider's caravan. Amani had mourned not only her friend's passing, but that of Karis's unborn child—of *Ziyad's* unborn child.

"By the law, you must pledge by blood." The Jackal's voice was louder now, able to carry out to the crowd that had gathered near the Spider's caravans outside the city wall.

The Spider produced a wicked-looking knife from his belt-wrap. On its hilt was a spider inlaid with black onyx, while the entire length of the blade was etched with spider webs. The weapon glinted in the sun as he gently cut the pad of his thumb, drawing a drop of blood from his skin. He held it up to her mouth.

Amani took hold of his hand and licked the bead just as her tears fell down her cheeks. As soon as she'd tasted him, Ziyad dropped his hand from her grasp.

"Amani Bantish," the Jackal said, turning to her. "Of the tent city Suridesh, you stand before me with your intended. You have chosen Ziyad Bihar to be your Spider Prince. Do you pledge to serve him for the rest of your life, to give him children and love him until your dying day?"

Ziyad's previous words to her suddenly came back in a rush. *"I wish to marry you, Amani, but not for love. For an heir. I do not want to fan your hopes or give you lofty dreams. Our marriage will be one of convenience only."*

There was still time to walk away. There was still time

to say no and let the Spider choose someone else to bear him sons. If he'd truly wanted her, he would have chosen her over Karis. But he hadn't.

Even the Scarab Prince had refused her.

After the Scarab's rejection, her father had also offered her to two traders and a goat merchant. All of them had passed over her.

No one wanted her to be their wife. Not even the Spider. There was no love for her in the dunes—she'd accepted that fate long ago. The only hope Amani had for love now was to have a child who adored her.

At least the Spider was offering her that much.

"I pledge it," she said, pleased her voice did not waver.

The Jackal nodded. "By the law, you must pledge by blood."

Ziyad handed her his dagger. She took the hilt, but her shaking hand and blurred vision made it nearly impossible to cut her thumb without doing more harm than she should.

After a few tries, Ziyad took her hands in his to steady her. "Try again," he whispered, helping her.

Amani bit her lip, but this time was able to draw a small line of blood that grew into a fat droplet. The Spider pulled her toward him and took her thumb into his mouth, suckling her gently before letting her go.

That one, hot, wet contact had her reeling back. For the first time in a long while, she admired the Spider for the handsome man he was. His thick, black hair was tucked behind his ears, but one pesky lock had decided to fall over his forehead. His face was clean-shaven, except for his chin, which was covered with a patch of black hair.

Even his eyes seemed dark against the black of his robes, the color of his caravan.

It must have been her imagination, but he seemed to be looking differently at her now, as if to tell her once and for all that she now belonged to him.

"Now the Spider must claim his..." The Jackal paused. "Wife."

Amani closed her eyes. She was humiliated enough that Ziyad didn't love her. But the fact that she would never

be his princess was now known to one and all.

Ziyad took her right hand in his and placed something on her third finger. Amani peered down and gasped. The finest ring she'd ever seen adorned her hand. It was a spider, made of black onyx, much like the hilt of Ziyad's dagger. The band was the purest platinum, which held the stones perfectly, and the legs of the arachnid fanned outward, just barely covering her other fingers.

"With the gods' blessings," the Jackal exclaimed, "you are married. Go, and rule your caravan with firm hands and gentle hearts!"

A shout rose up from the crowd, probably from Amani's father—most likely a shout of relief. She gazed down to Ziyad's silver belt-wrap, unable to look him in the eye any longer.

"I must kiss you now," he whispered in her ear. "It's tradition."

Tradition. That's all it was for him.

Amani gave him a short nod and turned her face to his.

The moment after his lips touched hers, she pulled away, not wanting to linger. If she kissed him for any length of time, she might swoon. Her heart was not safe and she knew it. Amani had fancied the Spider Prince at one time, but he'd married her friend. Now, however, he was *her* husband.

He looked down on her and she shuddered. There was no hope for her. Amani knew without a doubt she'd already begun to fall in love with him.

Two

Ziyad didn't know what to make of his new bride. She looked into his eyes one moment only to hide her gaze the next. She appeared shy, almost reluctant to look at him, and had seemed relived when her family took her aside.

Amani sat across the fire, quietly chatting with her sisters. Each of them looked deliriously happy, eating of the feast their mother made and throwing glances at him—all but Amani. She smiled and nodded, but her demeanor gave her away.

This was not the happiest day of her life.

Ziyad felt a pang of guilt for being honest with her earlier, but he knew he'd made the right decision. Telling Amani what he expected had been a good choice. He couldn't, in good conscience, marry a woman and not make her aware that he'd never regard another as the Spider Princess. That title would always belong to Karis.

Even now, almost two years after her death, Ziyad missed his first wife. She'd never had the chance to bear his son—the babe had died when she had. He'd scoured the desert looking for clues as to who the bandits were who'd attacked his caravan and killed his princess, but he'd come up empty-handed time and time again.

Ziyad wasn't getting any younger. The Spider needed an heir. The entire desert knew it. He'd accepted Amani, and now he was doing the honorable thing. Hopefully she'd bear him strong sons.

Ziyad glanced at Ahmed Bantish as he took a seat next to him. The governor of Suridesh was a balding, rotund little man, but he could be formidable when he wanted to be,

settling disputes among the princes. Currently, he held a tray of bractav in his hand and offered Ziyad some of the succulent dessert. Ziyad refused.

"They're all yours, my friend."

"Please, you are family now," Ahmed told him. But his eyes squinted into slits. "However, I'm not too pleased to learn my daughter will not be regarded as your princess."

Ziyad sighed. "It is nothing personal, I assure you."

"It is not me you must convince," Ahmed replied, taking a bite.

"Amani understands."

"Does she, now?" Ahmed gave Ziyad a critical stare. "Treat her with respect, Spider. That girl will do right by you and your caravan. That's why I gave her to you."

"I do not doubt it," Ziyad said under his breath. "She already looks stunning in black." And she did, he couldn't lie. Seeing his new wife in *his* colors rather than the white of her father filled him with a certain amount of pride. He had a woman to protect once more.

He would not make the same mistake with Amani that he once made with Karis. She would always be protected.

"She does indeed," Ahmed murmured. "But do not take Amani for granted. If you let her, she could come to mean much more to you and your people than merely being the mother of your children." The governor patted Ziyad on the back and stood. "Congratulations."

With that, Ahmed made his way to Amani's side of the fire. Ziyad watched as he gave his daughter a strong hug. She smiled at Ahmed, but even from where he sat, Ziyad could see the hint of tears in her eyes. Despite her smile, he knew they weren't tears of joy.

~*~

"Are you ready to retire, Amani Bihar?"

Every inch of Amani's skin pebbled at the deep timber in Ziyad's voice. She hadn't sat next to him for the entire feast, and she hoped the people of Suridesh wouldn't find fault with that. But she couldn't pretend to be the adoring wife to an adoring husband.

She would not shame the Spider, but neither would she pretend their marriage was a perfect one.

Glancing up his tall frame, Amani sucked in her

breath. His hand was outstretched, waiting for her to take it, and across his face was spread a handsome smile. It didn't quite reach his eyes, but it stole her breath regardless. He'd called her by her new name. By *his* name.

Everyone watched as she took his hand and allowed him to help her stand beside him. The people who'd gathered at their wedding feast clapped as Ziyad lead her away, across the sand to his caravan. The caravans were deserted as most of his people had attended their feast.

"We must consummate our marriage, to make it binding in truth," he said, still holding her hand.

Gods, but the thought of making love to him... No, it wasn't making love. It was sex, pure and simple—in order to conceive. Her heart cracked a little.

"I know."

"You are not scared?"

"Not of the act, your Highness."

Ziyad raised his hand. "Do not be so formal with me, Amani. You are allowed to say my name."

She nodded, but didn't speak it. It seemed too personal, even though he was now her husband.

"Has your mother prepared you for what will happen?"

Marad, her mother, had told her on more than one occasion that the union of a husband and wife was a glorious thing. Nothing compared to the ecstasy, the sheer rapture that overcame one's heart. If Amani was not to have the Spider's love, then perhaps she could at least find joy in what they would do together.

"Yes, I know what will happen."

Ziyad stopped walking and held out his hand to an empty caravan. It was not his royal carriage, but she entered it anyway, and gasped when he snapped his fingers. A few lamps lit, revealing a modest home, with a small black carpet on the floor and black fabric hanging from the walls. A few scattered pillows lay about while the lamps themselves were nondescript save for an embossed figure of a spider on their face.

"Believe me, I wish we didn't have to do this either, but we must. This is your caravan. I trust you find it to your liking."

Amani's eyes widened. In the same breath he told her

he didn't want to have sex with her and he didn't want her in his carav, either. Pain twisted in her chest like a knife.

"It is lovely," she murmured, just to have something to say in the quiet. Thankfully, she sounded stronger than she felt. The Spider Prince had clearly loved her friend Karis to the depths of his soul. So much so, that even from the grave, he didn't wish to defile her memory by having his new wife sleeping with him in the carav he'd once shared with the Spider Princess.

Oddly, that thought put Amani more at ease. She'd loved Karis, too, before she left Suridesh with the Spider's caravan. Amani couldn't have asked for a more loyal husband for her friend than Ziyad Bihar. For Karis, Amani would do the honor of bearing that loyal man his heir.

Turning to face him, Amani finally raised her eyes to his. He seemed uncertain. Surely even he knew putting his wife in a separate carav wasn't conventional, but she wouldn't argue with him. He'd told her what he wanted of her before they'd been wed. *She* was the one who'd followed through. If she hadn't been willing to accept this, then she could have walked away at any time.

But she hadn't.

"We can douse the lamps if that will make this easier for you, Spider." She kept her voice low as she reached for her belt-wrap. It was odd, wearing Ziyad's colors, but she loved the black of his people, and would wear it with pride.

He opened his mouth then closed it. He seemed shocked by her words. Once her belt-wrap was loose, it fell and pooled at her feet. Ziyad looked away.

Amani used her own magic to dim the lamps. She didn't douse them, but she barely left them lit. The shadows gave her the courage she needed to shed her robes. But the moment she stood naked before Ziyad, she had to question the wisdom of her mother, who had insisted she wear no undergarments on her wedding night.

Her heart raced when Ziyad's eyes returned to her, taking in her body from head to toe. He didn't reach for her, didn't beckon her to come to him. He didn't even seem to like what he saw. Amani couldn't take much more of his scrutiny.

Perhaps seeing her naked reminded him why he'd

rejected her long ago. Amani turned and gave him her back. She hugged herself and tried hard not to shake. She was about to bend down and grab her robes when Ziyad stopped her.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice practically in her ear. He must have moved directly behind her without her hearing a sound.

"I was going to cover myself."

"Why?"

"Because you...you didn't... We can do this with my robes on. If you like."

Ziyad's arms wrapped around her from behind until his warm palms slid along her belly. His touch alone made her pussy tighten. Amani resisted the urge to lay her head on his shoulder.

"Can I not merely admire my wife before I take her?"

His hot breath grazed her ear moments before he kissed her there. When his lips claimed her earlobe, she couldn't help but lay her head back.

"Can I not imagine your nipples in my mouth? Or the taste of your skin on my tongue?"

Ziyad dipped his head until his mouth latched on to her neck, giving her playful bites. Amani's mind went blank the moment his fingers found her breasts.

"Mmm," he said. "You're bigger than I thought you'd be."

"I'm sorry." Of all the things to say to the Spider, she hadn't thought she'd apologize for the size of her breasts.

Ziyad chuckled. "Don't be. You make my mouth water."

Amani's stomach leapt. Gods above, but the man was turning her inside out. She bit her lip to keep from whimpering. A sound escaped her regardless.

"Do you know how long it's been for me?" he asked, walking her to a nearby wall.

"Years," she whispered. At least two, since Karis died.

"Years," he repeated. "This might be over quickly."

She heard the chuckle in his voice, but knew he was probably being honest.

"I don't mind," she answered, gazing at him over her shoulder. Surprisingly, Ziyad didn't turn her in his arms.

"Put your hands on the wall," he commanded. She obeyed. "Spread your legs, Amani. Let me feel your pussy."

She gasped and did as he said, knowing he'd find slick skin. Once his fingers touched her clit, she jumped at the unexpected feeling of ecstasy.

"Easy," he cooed. "Gods, but you're so ready for me. I can't wait anymore."

Amani felt the probing of something hard between her legs. It had to be his cock. But he hadn't pulled away from her to disrobe. Perhaps he hadn't worn undergarments himself. That thought had her stomach leaping again.

"Spread your legs more. Yes, like that."

Ziyad took his arm and lifted her hips until her ass was in the air, offering herself to him. Without any more talk, he drove into her pussy, as deep as he could go. Amani tried hard to keep in her squeals of pain by tugging on the fabric on the wall. Tears stung her eyes at the pressure of him.

She knew this would hurt, but she hadn't been prepared for just how much.

His hand rounded her hips and caressed her clit as he thrust again. This time, however, she didn't jump with pleasure at his touch. All she could feel was his claiming as he plunged in and out.

"Are you all right?" he asked, panting. Amani couldn't find the breath to speak. All she did was nod furiously and hope it would be over soon. It was better that he couldn't see her face and the agony that was no doubt twisting her features.

She wouldn't be able to quell her cries for much longer.

With three more thrusts, it was over as Ziyad shuddered and yelled behind her. He rolled his hips a few times and spread feather-soft kisses along her shoulders.

"Gods, Amani," he whispered. "You are so tight. Did I hurt you?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't. He was still inside her. As if he could read her mind, he withdrew and she moaned with relief. He turned her to face him.

One look was all she needed to confirm that he hadn't bothered to take off his robes before claiming her. A strange disappointment overcame her heart.

Ziyad's palm cradled her cheek. "I did hurt you."

She didn't bother denying it. "I was a virgin. It is to be expected."

"I am sorry."

"My job is not to feel pleasure with you. It is to bear you sons," she told him. Amani gave him a soft smile.

"I didn't want to hurt you. I wanted you to enjoy it."

Amani placed her hand on his chest. "My mother told me my first time would be the worst. I am just thankful you didn't ask for me to put my robes back on before we..."

She glanced at his robes and looked away. Ziyad cleared his throat and seemed flustered. She hadn't meant for him to take offense that he hadn't gotten completely naked, she merely wanted him to understand her point of view.

"Yes, well," he said, stepping away. "It shouldn't hurt any longer."

"Thank you, Spider." Amani retrieved her robes and put them back on, hugging her stomach in an effort to stay in one piece.

He looked as if he wanted to say something more, but thought better of it. "We have both had a long day," he said, running his hand through his hair. "I suppose I should leave you in peace."

Ziyad walked to the door, but Amani's voice stopped him. "Wait."

She slowly padded up to him and stood on her toes to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Goodnight, husband."

He blinked in confusion before his eyes softened. "Goodnight, wife."

Opening the door, Ziyad disappeared into the night, leaving Amani to close the door behind him. She did and leaned against it, hoping to the gods she'd made the right choice to marry the Spider Prince.

Three

Ziyad spent most of the night staring at his ceiling. The memory of Amani's warm skin had him hard even now. He'd never expected to want her again so soon after consummating their marriage. But more than that, he hadn't expected her gentle acceptance.

Of all the things he thought Amani would do, he never once imagined she'd disrobe in front of him of her own free will. From her behavior earlier in the evening, she'd been aloof and distant. He'd prepared himself for soothing her, for getting her used to the idea of lying with him. But Amani had been the one doing the soothing, thinking of him by asking if she should douse the lamps, or perhaps put her robes back on.

Despite her words, she'd been scared of him and his reaction to her. But the moment he'd taken in her breasts, with her erect nipples staring him in the face, Ziyad's cock had strained for release. She thought he hadn't wanted her, but he'd merely been keeping himself in check so he didn't pounce on her.

God of Spiders, but the memory of her nipples on his palms had him groaning. Right now he was questioning his reasoning for putting her in her own carav. If she were lying beside him, he could partake of her again.

No, he thought, shaking his head. He wouldn't. She'd been in obvious pain, even though she'd tried to hide it from him. He knew he was a big man. He remembered Karis's pain and closed his eyes with a groan. Ziyad hadn't meant to claim Amani so ruthlessly, but lust had been riding him.

Now, however, his lust didn't compare to his guilt.

When she'd given him a kiss on his cheek, she'd hobbled over to him in the doorway. Her slow gait gave her away. Even in her pain, she'd called him her husband.

Gods, but he didn't deserve her. The Falcon was right. She deserved a man who could return her sentiment, who would love her and cherish her. Her acceptance would only be wasted on him, the Spider Prince, who was nothing more than a shell of a man.

But it didn't matter now. She was his wife and he'd have to make the most of it. Amani had been an excellent choice for his caravan. If he thought only of his people and not of himself, he'd be all right.

He hoped.

~ * ~

Amani awoke the next morning to sunlight streaming into her carav. The darkened fabric hanging from the walls helped to keep out the glare, but it was bright regardless. After Ziyad had left the night before, she'd curled up into the pillows and wept. Not only for the pain in her body, but for the pain in her heart.

Ever since she was a young girl, she'd dreamt of the man she'd marry. Long ago, she'd once thought that man might have been Ziyad himself.

In his youth, Ziyad had been stunning, with flowing hair and an easy smile. He'd flirted with her on more than one occasion, but all flirting had ceased when he first laid his eyes on Karis. Amani couldn't blame him. Karis had indeed been a beauty, with exotic eyes and thick black hair. Amani's was black as well, but stringy in comparison.

Where Karis had been thin, Amani had curves. For a long while after the Spider's rejection, she'd wondered if her curves repulsed men. Four others, including the Scarab Prince, had rejected her as well, until Amani was certain no man would ever take her off her father's hands.

Then one chance meeting with the Spider after Karis's passing had given her father an idea. He offered her once again to Ziyad, only to be met with another refusal. However, after a few weeks in the desert, the Falcon Prince had traveled to Suridesh with his new bride and informed the governor that the Spider had finally accepted her.

Amani still remembered the thrill that rocked through

her at the news. However Ziyad Bihar could only claim her when he was ready. And he'd mourned Karis for two full cycles.

Long enough for Amani to become the laughingstock of her sisters, and to receive pitying looks from the townsfolk.

Amani sat up and winced. The aches from last night hadn't lessened much. Cleansing herself, she hoped the light magic might help with her pain. But all it did was freshen her skin and take the wrinkles from her robes.

A few shouts could be heard outside, as well as the long, low note of the Spider's horn. Within seconds, her carav lurched. Ziyad's caravan was on its way to his oasis. Beyond that, she had no idea where they were headed.

At least she'd finally be able to pay her respects to her friend. Karis had been buried at the Spider's oasis.

Amani's stomach growled. With a sigh, she reminded herself that she was not the Spider Princess, she was merely a member of Ziyad's caravan. And as such, she needed to take care of her own breakfast.

She tossed aside her thin blanket and made her way to the door. The moment she opened it, a hot breeze caressed her face. After being on the move for only a few minutes, Suridesh was already well behind them. She'd never jumped from a moving carav before, but it couldn't be hard. She'd watched people do it all the time from the city walls.

Holding her breath, Amani jumped—and fell in the sand.

"Your Highness!" One of the men walking near her carav ran to her and helped her to her feet. She blushed at her own clumsiness. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I am fine," she said with a grin, wiping sand from her robes. "And please, I am not a princess. Call me Amani."

His eyebrows shot up. "I cannot call you by your given name!"

"Sure you can," she replied, beckoning him to fall in step next to her.

"But...but you are the Spider's bride!"

"Ah," she said, wagging her finger. "But I am not

royalty. If he does not call me his princess, then I do not expect you to honor tradition."

Her words shocked the man. He stepped away from her.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Hiram."

"It is nice to meet you, Hiram. Would you be so kind as to tell me which of these caravs is the kitchen?"

"No one has brought you breakfast?"

"Why would they?" she asked with a shrug.

"You are the Spider's—"

She stopped him with a raised hand. "Where is the kitchen, Hiram?"

He merely pointed in front of him. "F-five caravs down the line, Your Hi... your...I-I mean..."

"Amani."

Hiram continued walking as if he hadn't heard her. Shaking her head, Amani increased her pace and passed the next five caravs. One of them was the Spider's royal carav. But aside from a passing glance at the lovely embossed spider on the door inlaid with black onyx, she didn't acknowledge it.

The kitchen's door was wide open and a few servants were dabbling about inside. It was hard enough to jump from a moving carav and land on one's feet. Amani was certain she'd fall once more if she attempted to climb the steps.

"Hello?" Amani called out, and one of the servants peered out the door, her eyes widening at the sight of her. "Might I bother you for some breakfast?"

"We...we sent your breakfast already, my...my lady."

"I didn't get it. Perhaps you sent it to the wrong carav?"

"Pardon, my lady, but there is no mistaking the Spider's carav."

Gods. They thought she'd spent the night with her husband. She would set them straight.

"No, I didn't stay with him." At Amani's words, the woman's eyes bulged and her face grew red. "He gave me my own carav, about five carriages down the line."

"He did what?"

"He... May I please have some breakfast? I-I'm not

used to climbing these caravs when they're moving. When I get better at it I can come in, but—"

"Certainly!" The woman disappeared and rushed about the kitchen, apparently putting together a plate for her. While she banged on her pots, Amani continued walking. It wasn't even mid-morning and already the heat was oppressive. She'd need to return to her carav soon.

Before too long, the woman scrambled down the steps and handed her a plate full of all kinds of delicacies. Not only did she have breakfast, but probably her lunch as well.

"Here you are, Your Highness. I am sorry you were not fed. It will not happen again."

"I am not a princess," she corrected, swallowing hard. "Please call me Amani."

"Oh no, my lady, I couldn't possibly!"

With a sigh, Amani nodded. "Thank you for the food."

She kept her head bent low and rushed past the Spider's carav just as his door opened. She didn't stop to make small talk with her husband. Confronting him now would horrify her. Even his own people hadn't known she didn't share his quarters.

She hadn't given a thought as to how she would clambor back into her carav until she got there. Reaching inside to put the plate on the raised floor wasn't too hard, it was putting her foot on the step that didn't agree with her.

Just as she'd dumped herself into the sand, Amani fell on the steps with a cry.

"Your Highness!"

Amani growled at Hiram's shout behind her. "My name is..."

Strong arms grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her against a lean, muscled frame. *Ziyad*.

Her first instinct was to lay her head on his shoulder, as she had the night before. But before she could give in to the urge, he'd hefted her into her carav. She stumbled, but managed to keep her footing.

Amani watched as he fluidly jumped through the doorway.

"What are you doing?" she asked, somewhat breathless. She felt like a cornered animal, but knew she was being ridiculous.

"Saving you, it would seem," he replied, his mouth barely lifting into a grin.

"I didn't need saving."

"Is that why you were hanging off the steps?"

"I would have been fine." Why was she arguing with him? Amani had no idea, unless it had something to do with her own flustered emotions.

"You would have fallen off."

Amani shrugged. "Wouldn't have been the first time I ate a mouthful of sand this morning."

She turned away from him and grabbed her plate of food from where she'd set it earlier.

"You fell off the steps?" His tone turned serious.

Amani waved him away and popped a slice of meat into her mouth. It was so delicious, she groaned as she chewed. "It waf nofing," she said around the food. "I jumped and I didn't land on my feet."

"You could have hurt yourself!"

"I just need practice."

Ziyad turned her to face him. The food was forgotten once she looked into his stormy eyes. "You need to be careful."

"I needed breakfast!" She hadn't intended to shout at him, but she waved the plate in his face. "I was hungry."

He nodded. "I should have told the servants to send you food here instead of my carav."

"Yes, you should have," she grumbled, uncaring that she was chastising the Spider. "I had to tell them we didn't share a carav. And they need to know they can say my name."

His eyes widened. "They most certainly will *not* say your name!"

"Then what can they call me?" she shouted in exasperation. "Twice I've had to correct them. I am not royalty, Spider. They cannot call me *Your Highness!*"

Ziyad wiped his face with his hands but said nothing. She walked past him and sat in her pillows.

"Why didn't you come to me when you weren't served breakfast?" he asked.

"I do not expect to be waited on. I thought I should get my breakfast myself. I am a member of your caravan

like anyone else." She took a bite of flatbread. "Besides, your caravan is on the move. I figured you'd have more important things to attend to."

She heard him approach her but did not look up. When he crouched next to her, he grabbed her chin and gently forced her eye contact.

"What makes you think attending to the needs of my wife shouldn't be my highest priority?"

Amani finished chewing before answering him. "You have set me apart from you, Spider. I am your wife in name only. Your princess would be waited upon. Your princess would be appalled at a servant calling her by name. Since I am not your princess, the rules of tradition do not apply to me. When I awoke and found no food in my carav, I knew I'd have to go and get it from the kitchen like any one of your people do."

"You are more than merely one of my people, Amani." Ziyad's voice was low and menacing. "You will be the mother of my heir."

A shiver raced down her spine at his tone. But she'd said nothing that hadn't been the truth.

"I know that," she acknowledged. "But I do not wish to be pampered. I do not want to pretend to be something I'm not."

Ziyad took a long time to reply. He broke their eye contact, yet still held her chin in his hand. "If you have need of anything, I want you to tell me. I vowed to serve you. I mean to keep that vow."

His eyes returned to her. She squirmed, but gave him a single nod. The loyal man who'd loved Karis was now showing himself. His wedding vows meant something to him—even when he'd spoken them to her.

"I will. But..."

"But what?" he asked when she didn't finish.

"What can your people call me if not my name?"

He licked his lips. "I will think of something."

Four

After two days of travel, Ziyad had finally settled on what his people would call Amani. She was to be known as 'Your Grace' rather than 'Your Highness', to give respect to her position as his wife, but not to acknowledge her as his princess.

Amani hated it. Every time a servant now called her *Your Grace*, she cringed. She would have much preferred they merely call her by her name. But she would respect the Spider's wishes, even if she didn't agree with them.

Ziyad hadn't come to join with her since their wedding night. He'd sought her out during the day to ask how she was and whether she needed anything, but that was the last she saw of him until the next day. Now, she'd eaten her dinner and was basking on the roof of her carav, gazing at the stars as they popped into the sky.

She'd loved watching the sky in Suridesh, lying in her father's yard and watching the moons and the stars. Being trapped in her carav didn't give her that opportunity, and lying in the sand might raise more than a few eyebrows.

She'd gotten the idea after watching the carav drivers scramble up to the seats near the top of the caravs. The seats were high, in order to gaze over the backs of the hairy Sentinels, the magical creatures that pulled the caravs and were long-assumed to be given to the princes by the gods themselves. It wouldn't take much more effort to climb onto the roof from there.

Amani had been nervous to try it, but figured she'd need to become familiar with these caravs sooner rather than later. No doubt she'd soon be chasing her son all over

them.

She rubbed her belly at the thought and gazed back up to the heavens. She could be pregnant even now, but she doubted it. Would she even know?

A shout sounded beneath her as people began running back and forth among the caravs. Amani's heart quickened and she gazed over the edge. What was wrong? Had something happened to Ziyad?

No, there he was, striding up the caravan line and looking just about as worried as a man could be. "Find her—I don't care what it takes. She is still in the caravan, I can feel it."

Men bowed and ran, searching each carav one by one.

"Spider!" she cried. His eyes rounded with shock when he heard her voice.

"Amani?"

"Up here."

Ziyad craned his neck to gaze up to the top of her carav.

"What is the matter?" she called. "Is something amiss?"

"You...you are on the *roof*?"

"Who are you looking for? Did someone get left behind?"

"You, woman!" he growled. "I'm looking for you." With that, he began climbing himself. "I've found her!" he yelled behind him. A few more shouts sounded down the line, echoing his words. "By the gods, Amani, what are you *doing* up here?"

Her husband was furious. She backed away from him as he climbed on the driver's seat, but she didn't dare to stand. She didn't want to risk a fall from this height. But the Spider didn't seem to share her caution. He'd finally gained his own footing and stood above her with his hands on his hips and his eyes shooting sparks.

Lying at his feet made her heart pound in her chest. The man was gorgeous, through and through. He was powerful and influential, one of the six princes of Jikkar, a steward of his god, who brought water from his oasis to the people. And right about now, that power radiated from him like heat radiated from the sun.

"It would be wise to answer me, or else I might be inclined to punish you, wife of mine. Why are you on the roof of your carav? Are you trying to hide from me? Because you are under my magical protection—you cannot hide."

"I am not hiding from you, Spider, I swear it!" She backed away in spite of herself. "I merely wished to watch the night sky. I apologize if I caused you grief, but watching the night sky is one of my favorite things to do. And since your servants still seem to fawn over me, I thought lying in the sand wouldn't be the best way to go about it."

"And you thought risking your life on top of this carav was the better way to go?"

"I...I..."

"If you wanted to gaze at the stars, why didn't you come find me? I would have taken you beyond the caravan."

She closed her eyes to him. It was the only way to keep her sanity in check. Being alone with the Spider among the dunes... She shivered.

"I didn't think you'd want to spend time with me," she confessed.

"What makes you think that?" Ziyad walked toward her then knelt beside her.

"I only spend a few minutes in your presence every day. I know you are busy. And even though I'm your wife, I cannot merely take you from your duties."

Ziyad sighed deeply. "I have neglected you for too long. I thought by getting used to my people and my caravan you might get used to me, but I was wrong. Have I not told you to come to me if you need anything?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you?"

"You frighten me." Gods, did she just say that? Amani shut her mouth and turned away.

"I would never hurt you!" He sounded affronted.

"I know," she replied. "I don't fear *you*, Spider, I fear what you might do if I...let you in."

Ziyad scoffed. "What does that mean, woman?"

"I am not one to be uncaring or unfazed by people. My father called me...a dreamer. And I suppose that's true. I used to look at the sky and dream of the man I would one day marry. He would be kind. He would hold my hand. And

he would...love me. If I spend time with you, Spider, I'm terrified I might come to care for you. But if you don't care for me, it would break my heart."

He didn't respond. Ziyad merely gazed at the horizon, as if uncomfortable with her words.

"I want you to know something." Amani reached out and touched his hand.

He glanced down at her fingers. "What?"

"Karis once asked me if she had my permission to wed you—as if you belonged to me those years ago. I fancied you then, Spider, I won't lie. I was touched that she thought enough of me to ask."

His eyes caught hers in the soft light. "I didn't know that."

Amani nodded and pulled away from his hand. "Even then I knew your heart was hers. I had to let you go. I cannot fall back into that trap, Your Highness." After a short silence, she said, "I apologize for climbing up here. I won't do it again. But it is late, and I suppose I must retire."

She stood a second before he did. "I will help you down."

Amani let him climb over the seat and reach for her. She tried hard to ignore the fire his touch ignited on her skin or the way his breath puffed across her cheek.

God of Spiders, she silently prayed, protect me from your steward. I cannot afford to fall in love with him.

~ * ~

Amani had once fancied him. Ziyad couldn't help but hear the words she'd spoken over and over again in his head. He remembered flirting with her before he'd met Karis, but he hadn't thought much of it. He'd been young, Amani had been attractive, but Karis... She'd taken his breath away.

Knowing that Karis had asked Amani's permission to become his wife had shocked him. If Karis felt she'd needed to ask, then it only stood to reason Amani had more than merely fancied him. She must have had feelings for him. Perhaps even loved him.

How could he have not seen it?

Dawn was cresting over the dunes. Another sleepless night had come and gone. But Ziyad didn't move from his pillows. He glanced at the one that had been Karis's favorite,

the fluffy black satin with the silver trim. He remembered combing her hair with his fingers and waking her on many mornings to make love, mornings just like this one.

But it was getting harder for him to remember what Karis looked like. More and more, it was Amani's image that greeted him. Ziyad rubbed the pillow then brought it to his face. Karis's scent had long since vanished, but he inhaled deeply anyway.

He was lonely. Desperately lonely. But he had no one to blame but himself. He'd sent Amani to live in another carav while he slept alone with his ghosts. His hard cock wanted a woman beside him. His woman. His wife.

For the first time, he wished for Amani above him, riding him slow and easy, with her breasts bouncing and her hair in his face. His old fantasies had been of Karis, but now, today, they were of Amani. He tried hard not to feel guilty. He knew there was nothing wrong with wanting his wife.

Ziyad knew the difference. He wanted Amani for a release, but he loved Karis with every piece of his soul. Gods, but he was going to torture himself if he fantasized for very much longer.

He should go to her. Amani wouldn't fight him. He had every right to take her. He needed to get her pregnant after all. But something kept him right where he was. Perhaps it was her tone from the night before, telling him she couldn't get too close to him or she'd be doomed to fall into the same trap as before.

What trap was that...loving him? It had to be. Nothing else made sense.

Ziyad couldn't take it anymore. Reaching beneath his blanket, he grasped his cock and thrust into his palm. Squeezing himself, he imagined Amani's tight pussy engulfing him as he rolled his hips. His entire body buzzed as he worked himself. Over and over again, his hand sheathed his cock, until his orgasm ripped through him like a sandstorm.

After his groans abated, he lay there panting and realized tears had escaped him. He was through with making love to himself as he had countless times before.

Amani would just have to find a way to mentally detach herself from him. He would no longer avoid his wife.

Five

Amani walked beside the caravan, needing to stretch her legs. She'd gotten her breakfast not too long before and ate it in the kitchen carav with the servants. They'd had to help her up the steps, but once she was inside, they'd shared some decent conversation.

The head cook had seemed horrified that the wife of the Spider was in her kitchen, speaking to her as if she was an equal. But Amani was lonely and she was tired of staring at her own four walls. She wanted to make a few friends if she was to be the mother of the next Spider Prince.

But she knew her presence made the servants nervous, so she'd left to clear her head in the hot air.

"How is your morning, Amani?"

She jumped at the sound of Ziyad's voice. He walked right next to her with his hands behind his back. She hadn't even noticed he'd appeared beside her.

"It's...well, Spider."

"You seem lost in thought."

Amani sighed. "I tried to speak to the cooks this morning. They were nice enough. But I don't think they like me."

He chuckled and shook his head. "You tried to talk with them? About what?"

"Anything." Amani shrugged. "I miss talking with my friends."

"You can talk with me."

She didn't speak after his words. What could she say? She needed someone to confide in, someone she could tell her innermost secrets too. Someone like Karis.

"Why do you think my servants don't like you?"

"They seemed jumpy," she answered. "They smiled and nodded, but seemed relieved when I left."

"You are an important woman, my dear. They do not know what to make of you."

She chanced a glance at him only to see him squinting off into the distance. Amani admired him for a moment, trying hard not to look for too long. "It would seem I don't know what to make of myself, Highness."

"I told you not to be so formal with me."

She could see him looking at her out of the corner of her eye. "I cannot say your name."

"Why not?"

"It is too personal."

"You are my wife," he reminded her. "I am fairly certain that makes it your right to be personal with me."

"It might give me the right, but it doesn't mean I should."

"*Amani*," he began, stressing the fact that he'd just said her name. "I know you're worried about getting too close to me, but you have nothing to fear. I will not take a lover. I will treat you with the respect you deserve."

"I know," she answered. "You're a good man. The one time you returned to Suridesh after marrying Karis, she sought me out and told me as much."

"She did?" He seemed surprised.

"She did," Amani said, grinning. "She was deliriously happy with you, Spider. She loved you more than life itself."

When Ziyad walked on silently, Amani cleared her throat. "I-I'm sorry if it bothers you to speak of her."

He took a deep breath. "It used to bother me," he whispered. "But now, your friendship with her intrigues me. How close were you?"

"We were not the best of friends, but her father used to dine in my father's tent on occasion. Her brother was enamored with my older sister Ashala and asked my father for her hand."

Ziyad nodded. "That is right...your sister married Karis's brother."

"In a way, that made us family," Amani said, watching her feet cut through the sand. "I used to..."

"Tell me," he prompted when she didn't continue.

"I used to pretend Toren had fancied *me*."

After a short silence, Ziyad asked, "Why? Did you like him?"

"No, I merely wondered...what it was like."

"What *what* was like?"

Amani shook her head but remained silent. She shouldn't have confessed as much as she had to Ziyad. She should have kept her thoughts to herself.

Ziyad grabbed her shoulders and stopped her. They stood there in the sand, facing each other while the caravan continued on.

She gazed at him in confusion. "What are you..."

"Answer me, Amani."

"Your caravan is moving on. We can't stand here all day!"

"Then answer me and we will rejoin them."

"But..."

Ziyad arched a brow and silently dared her to challenge him. Chewing her lip, Amani watched the caravans as they slid by on their metal runners.

It was silly to continue defying him. His strength was greater than hers—he could keep her here for as long as he wanted.

She kept her eyes averted as she spoke. "I used to wonder what it was like, having a man pine away for me. I...I've never had anyone fancy me. I've been rejected for marriage five times. Six, if you count your second refusal. But you eventually accepted me.

"Yet I know I am only here to serve a purpose, not for love. I sometimes wonder if I...if I'm that repugnant. People say I look like my mother, but she is a great beauty. Perhaps they only say it to humor me."

"You are not repugnant, Amani. You are very beautiful, like your mother."

"Karis was beautiful, Spider. That is why you chose her. I am so sorry for your loss. I cannot imagine the pain you must feel every day."

Ziyad's hands dropped from her shoulders. She couldn't face him any longer. With long strides, she began to follow the caravan once more.

He grabbed her arm. "Wait."

Amani stopped, but didn't turn to him. Therefore he moved to stand in front of her again.

"You don't believe that I think you're beautiful."

"I'm sure that you do," she answered. "You wouldn't want ugly sons."

"That's not funny."

"I'm not laughing."

Ziyad's eyes were on fire as he gazed down at her. "Karis was indeed beautiful, but if memory serves, I flirted with *you* on occasion, before I married her. I thought you were adorable." She tried to look away, but his palms on her cheeks stopped her. "Don't hide from me."

"Please don't say things like that."

"Like what?" he challenged. "That I've always believed you to be a beauty? That I know you wish I'd married you instead of her?"

Amani's temper burned hot. She yanked away from Ziyad and gave him a scalding glare. "Yes, Spider, I do wish it. Only because it would be *me* in that grave. Then you would be with Karis right now, and you wouldn't have to be in so much pain!"

With one stride, he stepped close and wrapped his arm around her waist. The other hand buried itself in her hair. He didn't say a word, nor did he hesitate. His lips were on hers before she could form another thought. Amani whimpered and he took advantage of her shock, forcing her mouth open with his tongue.

She couldn't think much beyond his assault. Every one of her senses was filled with him. She couldn't escape, all she could do was hold onto his robes and hope she didn't crumple at his feet.

So many times she'd dreamt of kissing the Spider, but she never knew how much the reality would rock her, lost in his arms while his mouth claimed hers. It was difficult, keeping up with him. But the taste of him was unlike anything she'd ever imagined—sweet, yet succulent at the same time. The Spider's mouth scorched her, burning her from the inside out.

Ziyad pulled away just enough to whisper, "Say my name, Amani."

"No."

He kissed her again, brutally this time, bringing her down to press her into the hot sand. Amani squealed with surprise, but didn't try to stop him. She could no longer see his caravans, but that didn't mean they weren't over the next dune.

"Say it," he commanded again, this time leaving a trail of wet fire down her neck.

"I will not. I cannot!"

He bit her. Gods, but she cried out at the sensation of his teeth where her neck met her shoulder. Her clit throbbed and her pussy was wet. Ziyad's use of sensual force had her heart racing and her body willing for his cock.

"We must...we must return...to your caravan. Spider!"

"Not until you say my name. Have no fear, woman, I *will* make you say it."

"Why?" she said, fully aware she was whining.

"Because I am your husband."

"You are the Spider Prince." Her voice cracked.

"I am your husband," he repeated, gently this time. "I no longer have Karis. I have *you*. And I wish to hear you call me by my name."

His pleading eyes undid her. Amani's own eyes burned. She sniffled while she caressed his cheek. It was the first intimate touch she'd ever given him. Ziyad allowed her to touch him, up his cheek and into his hair, exploring him.

"You are the most beautiful man I have ever known," she whispered. His eyes widened. "Ziyad, my husband."

A long, low blast of a horn echoed throughout the desert. Ziyad groaned and lowered his head to Amani's shoulder. "I had hoped it would take them longer to realize we were missing."

"We should return."

"I will come to you tonight," Ziyad promised. "Be ready for me."

Amani bit her lip but nodded.

He must have seen the fear in her eyes. "It won't hurt this time. I will make sure of it."

He stood and offered his hand to help her up as well. She took it, somewhat shocked that he didn't seem inclined to let her go. He led her back to his caravan with her hand

firmly in his.

Six

Amani spent the rest of the day in her carav. When she and Ziyad had returned, his people had been in an uproar, one that he'd calmed with grace and dignity. She'd gotten a glimpse of why her husband was royalty. The man had a firm command over the hearts of his people, and it was clear to her why they loved him.

He merely explained they had lost track of time together. Most everyone who'd gathered to hear his words had chuckled and poked each other in the ribs, clearly understanding what they'd done beyond the caravs.

She shouldn't feel ashamed—she was the Spider's wife after all. But Karis had been their princess. Amani didn't want Ziyad's people to resent her. Then again, there was no hope of her ever claiming the Spider's heart, so the memory of their princess was safe.

But saying his name was something she hadn't been prepared for. He'd made her do it, by dropping her to the sand and biting her into submission. Her neck was still sore, and she had no doubt his teeth marks were evident. But one thing was for sure. Amani had no complaints about what Ziyad had done. If anything, she was more than ready to take him as her husband, into her arms.

And bear him a son.

Now that the caravs had stopped for the evening, she knew it would only be a matter of time before Ziyad would come to her. She'd been delivered dinner, the one and only time since she'd become a part of his caravan. He must have ordered it. But her insides roiled. She couldn't eat, even if she wanted to.

While she paced the carav forward and back, the food had gone cold. Amani worried her bottom lip with indecision. Should she meet Ziyad with her robes on or off? Should she douse the lamps completely or leave them lit? Should she greet him with conversation or lie provocatively on the pillows?

The door to the carav ripped open and there was Ziyad, bounding into her quarters, taking the decisions off her hands. He closed the door behind him, but never took his eyes off of her.

"You have not eaten." His words confused her, until she realized he must have seen her full tray of food still where the servant had left it on the floor.

Amani shook her head. "I cannot eat."

"You will need your strength."

Her knees went weak at the look he gave her. He wanted her, there was no doubt about it. His eyes were dark and his mouth was set in a determined line. The man was going to take her again, and this time, he'd promised she would enjoy it.

Amani's stomach was suddenly lodged in her throat. "When will we arrive at your oasis?" she asked, walking backwards.

"Tomorrow evening," he answered, advancing.

"I don't want your people to resent me."

"They do not resent you. Why would they?"

"I know they loved Karis." Her foot hit a pillow and she stumbled, but regained her footing.

Ziyad's mouth turned up into a half-grin. "They will soon love you."

"Did *you* eat?" Her back came up to the far side of the carav. She had nowhere else to go. Instead, she clutched the black fabric that draped the wall behind her.

"I have eaten," he answered. "But for some strange reason, my mouth is still watering."

"*Gods.*" Amani closed her eyes and groaned, unable to deny the fact that her fingers itched to touch him.

"Open your eyes." Ziyad's breath puffed on her lips and her pussy was instantly wet. If her heart beat any faster, it would explode.

She obeyed him, only to find he'd caught her, with

both his hands against the wall on either side of her head. The Spider filled her carav, every corner. She swallowed hard.

"Say my name."

She closed her eyes again. "Why?"

"Because I will not touch you unless you say it. Unless you beg me. Unless you want me."

"You know that I want you."

"Then there is no reason for delay."

Amani looked at him once more. He did nothing other than to cock his brow in his infuriating way. After a long, uncomfortable silence, he changed his tactics.

"Do you want me to feast on your nipples? Would you like me to lick your pussy with my tongue? Do you wish to touch my body with your hands, anywhere you like?"

"By the gods, Spider..."

"Then say...my...name."

There was no hope for her. He'd won and he knew it. Nothing could stop her from spiraling down into falling in love with her husband. Her marriage would be a sham, but she'd enjoy every damn minute spent in his arms.

"Ziyad!" she cried, as if the word had been ripped from her heart. "Ziyad, Zi—"

His mouth attacked hers, cutting off her air in a most delicious way. Instantly, his tongue was inside her, plunging in and out, playing with her own. Just as he had on the dunes, he pulled her to the carpet, yet this time, he tugged frantically on her belt-wrap.

Amani was forced to open her legs wide to allow him to lie on her. In that position, she could feel every hard inch of his cock. Instead of scaring her as she thought it might, it excited her, and a fresh wetness coated her clit.

Once Ziyad had opened her robes, he didn't bother taking off her undergarments. Instead, his hand disappeared within, opening her pussy with his fingers. The instant his skin glided against hers, she gasped and pulled away from his mouth, opening her legs wider to feel more of his delight.

Ziyad worked his mouth down her chest until he found her erect nipple. Never had Amani thought having it in his mouth would cause her such wicked pleasure, but she couldn't help but buck underneath him and hold his head

down, urging him on.

The silk of his tongue was replaced by the sharp bite of his teeth, and Amani moaned at the arc of fire that bridged from her nipple to her clit.

Something was building inside her. She strained toward it, needing it, wanting it. Ziyad's finger disappeared into her pussy, just as his cock had once before. He was right, it didn't hurt. It felt good. So very good.

With her feet on the floor, she silently asked him to do it again. And again. And again.

With one more swirl of his tongue on her nipple, Amani cried out as a rush of sensation crashed over her. Ziyad didn't stop and his fingers took her higher, demanding more of her, making her come for him.

She could barely think when Ziyad tugged her undergarments down her legs and threw them somewhere in the carav. Her eyes were hooded when he dipped between her thighs. But once his tongue lapped at her sensitized clit, Amani clutched the pillows and threw her head back.

She tried to scoot away from him, the pressure inside her was too intense. But he held her hips steady and continued, making her experience every single bolt of pleasure rippling through her.

Just when she thought she couldn't take any more, Amani came again, screaming this time and thrusting her hips into his face. Her orgasm was so powerful, she continued to come for as long as Ziyad licked her—which seemed like an eternity. He still held her hips, he still refused to let her come down from the sky until he was good and satisfied she had given him every shred of her passion.

"Mmm," he growled, kissing his way back up her body. "Gods, but I've missed the taste of a woman."

Amani had no idea how his words could flare her lust, but her clit pulsed again without his mouth touching her this time.

In her stupor, she hadn't noticed him undress, but Ziyad held his weight above her, without his robes. Amani gasped again, this time with awe. Her husband's muscles bulged beneath his skin, which was peppered with a light dusting of dark hair. She finally understood what he'd meant about his mouth watering, for hers was watering as well.

"Touch me," he demanded. "I need you to touch me."

Her hands were on him at a turn of the winds, rubbing his chest. She reveled in the shudders he gave her as her fingers explored him, lower and lower, until her hands found his cock.

"*Gods!*"

Ziyad's shout startled her, but he didn't order her to stop. Therefore she continued to stroke him until he took her hands in his.

"I must be inside you." His eyes caught hers and Amani nodded. Slowly, Ziyad slicked himself on her pussy, bringing forth cries of ecstasy from her lips.

Bending low, Ziyad kissed her furiously, and Amani could taste herself on his tongue. It only served to make her hotter, and her hand rounded his ass, urging him forward.

Ziyad needed no further encouragement. His cock sank deep within her channel, spreading her wide, opening her. It was still a strange, foreign feeling, but it did not hurt, just as he'd said.

"Are you in pain?" he asked, nuzzling her neck.

"No," she replied, breathless.

"Thank the gods," he said.

She heard the chuckle in his tone, but didn't have time to laugh with him before his mouth returned to hers. For the next few moments, Amani was shown just how tender the Spider Prince could be as he rocked within her, being careful not to jostle her in any way. His warm palms spread on her thighs and she offered herself up, finding her rhythm against him.

Amani watched as Ziyad's body trembled. He closed his eyes and growled loudly, forcing his cock inside her so deeply, she thought she might come again from the feeling. With a few more sharp plunges, he was spent, and panted his breath into her hair.

When he kissed her this time, his kisses were soft, gentle. As if he had all the time in the world to spend soothing her from their lovemaking.

"Do you ache now?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, deciding to tease him. He gave her a look of surprise. "But now, in a much different way."

"Minx," he murmured under his breath.

She giggled and kissed her way to his ear. "I think I will very much enjoy being married to you, Spider."

Ziyad grinned down on her and rubbed his nose with hers. "That makes two of us."

Amani's heart soared.

~ * ~

Ziyad smiled at the tender scene Amani presented. She'd fallen asleep against him, snuggled on his chest. Her soft breaths tickled his skin, but he didn't want to move her. Not yet.

Having a woman in his arms again felt too damn good. And having her so responsive to his touch had heated his blood to boiling. This time, Amani had found her pleasure. Many times, in fact. Ziyad couldn't have stopped his grin of satisfaction, even if he wanted to.

But the longer he lay there, the more his mind was taken back to what Amani had told him earlier. She didn't believe she was a beautiful woman. The rejections she'd received for her hand had obviously taken their toll on the dear girl. However Ziyad was more than thankful. If she'd been accepted by any one of them, she would have been the wife of a merchant or a goat herder.

Or the Scarab Princess.

She could have belonged to Qadir and not to him. Ziyad thanked the gods for Qadir's obsession with Trianna. Amani would have been well treated in the Scarab's caravan, but then *he* wouldn't have had the chance to experience her trusting soul.

Ziyad's wife confused him. With practically the same breath she told him she fancied him then acknowledged his love for Karis. Never once had she shied away from talking about his first wife, and even spoke of her with respect. What other woman would accept her position in the Spider's life than Amani? She'd never asked him to forget Karis, never asked him to move on or think only of her, now that they were married.

She respected his love for Karis, and that meant something to him. It made her even more glorious in Ziyad's eyes, with her hair spread out upon her grey satin pillow.

But her indignation earlier had taken him aback. She admitted that she wished to have been his first wife—if only

to trade places with Karis. Then he could still be with her. Amani didn't want him to be in pain. That had shocked him more than anything else. Knowing she cared for his sanity had led him to kiss her thoroughly in the sand.

With a sigh, Ziyad was reluctant to leave. But this was her carav. He'd need to retire to his own before morning. If he entertained the idea of staying the entire night, Amani might get used to it. And she deserved more from him than false hope.

With a light kiss on her forehead, Ziyad slipped from her arms and stood. He found his robes and silently dressed, watching her stomach as it rose and fell. His cock stirred and he had to turn away. It wouldn't do to succumb to his lust again. If he woke her to make love once more, he would end up staying with her all night.

But the walk to her door seemed so very long, and returning to his carav seemed so very lonely. He was slipping. He couldn't allow Amani's gentle ways to conquer him. He needed to be stronger. For Karis—the woman he loved.

Seven

Amani stared at the empty pillows next to her and tried not to fall apart. She'd woken some time ago, probably when the caravs had lurched forward on their final push to Ziyad's oasis. But she hadn't risen. What was the point?

She'd just spent the most magical night of her life with the man she adored, and he'd left her cold and alone. Her heart ached that he hadn't wanted to stay, that he'd slipped out of her carav in the middle of the night. But her head chastised her for her romantic thoughts.

Of course he'd left her. She wasn't his princess. He didn't even love her. Ziyad had enjoyed what they'd done, but he'd never spend the night with her. It was for the better that she learned it now, instead of trying to come to grips with his feelings for her after they'd been married a few years. She had to realize she wasn't the first woman in his life.

Karis was dead, but she still reigned over this caravan and Ziyad's heart. She always would.

But that didn't change the fact that Amani desperately wished her husband might love her just as fiercely as he'd once loved Karis.

"This is your life now," Amani whispered to herself. "You'll have to get used to your heart breaking every single day. The man you love doesn't love you."

Forcing herself to rise, Amani dressed and ate a few slices of food from the tray she hadn't touched the night before. She felt drained, as if she'd been crying all night. But she wasn't going to let it stop her.

If she couldn't gain Ziyad's heart, then perhaps she

could gain the hearts of his people. He'd said they would come to love her. Maybe in their eyes, she could find her purpose, something beyond merely being the mother to the Spider's heir.

Amani opened her door and leapt from her moving steps. She stumbled, but managed not to fall.

"Much better this time, Your Grace!"

She turned to find Hiram smiling at her. She had to wonder if the man was a guard, for he never seemed to leave his post near her carav.

She returned his smile. "Thank you!"

"Have you been practicing?"

"No," she answered, wiping the dirt from her robes as she walked. "Just determined."

"A fine quality for the Spider's..." He paused. "Ahem, his bride, Your Grace." His tone had turned sour. Could it be Ziyad's people didn't like her circumstance just as much as she?

"As well as acceptance," she replied, just as sourly.

Hiram snickered. "I suppose you're right."

"My husband says we'll reach his oasis this evening."

"That we should," he answered, nodding.

They walked on in silence before Amani spoke again. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course." Hiram bowed as he walked.

"What do the people think of me?"

"Well...Your Grace, I can't speak for the others."

"All right. Then what do you think of me?"

Hiram put his hands behind his back and cleared his throat. "You are a wonderful choice to bear the Spider his heirs."

Another long silence descended between them.

"Did you love Karis?" Amani watched as Hiram took a deep breath.

"I loved my princess very much," he told her. "She was a loving woman with a good heart. She was the mother of this caravan and she looked forward to giving the Spider a son. She fairly glowed. Pregnancy agreed with her, if you don't mind me saying."

Amani stared out at the faraway dunes. She'd been so caught up in Ziyad losing his wife, that she'd forgotten he

also mourned his heir. But it was clear to her that the people of his caravan had loved Karis almost as much as he did.

"I'm not here to replace her, Hiram," she said in a small voice. "I want you to know that. Karis was a lucky woman, to be so loved."

"She is with the god of Spiders now, Your Grace," he answered. "Perhaps she looks down on us."

Amani glanced at the sky. "Perhaps she does."

~ * ~

Amani wanted to exhaust herself. If she kept walking, if she concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, she could keep her mind off the fact that she'd never be able to compete with Karis. She had no idea it would affect her so deeply. It hadn't been too long ago she thought perhaps the love of a child or the love of Ziyad's people could fill the void in her heart.

Now she wasn't so sure.

But she was determined not to pity herself. She'd chosen to marry the Spider Prince. She could have walked away. She would have shamed him, her father, and herself, but she could have said no.

But the longer she walked alongside the Spider's caravan, the more she came to realize the reasons she thought were legitimate for marrying Ziyad were just excuses. Secretly, in her heart of hearts, she'd thought he would come to love her. Amani had hoped he would look at her differently and realize he couldn't live without her.

What a fool she'd been. These past two years waiting for him to marry her should have given her a clue to her future. She would forever be an outsider in the Spider's caravan, allowed to wear his colors, but never his love.

She was so thirsty. It had to be late afternoon. But she wasn't going to stop until they camped for the night. Maybe if she collapsed in her caravan tonight, she wouldn't dream of her husband.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, he appeared beside her. "How long have you been walking, Amani?"

"I don't know," she answered, wiping her brow.

"Hiram tells me you have been walking for hours. And without a dunla for your head. Look at you, your cheeks are flushed! Do you have water?"

"Back in my carav, probably."

"Are you mad, woman?"

She chuckled at his tone. "I think I might be."

He gave her a strange look. "Come." Ziyad grabbed her arm and dragged her along behind him. The heat had drained her, just as she wanted, but that meant she had no strength to fight him.

Amani's eyes widened when she realized where he was taking her. His royal carav. Before she could protest, he scooped her into his arms, opened his door with his magic, and bounded up the steps with a grace she'd never possess. Once inside, he kicked his door shut and set her down.

Amani had to blink a few times to get her eyes to adjust to the dark, but she sighed at the cool air. All she wanted to do was sink to the floor and sleep. Ziyad led her across the carav and sat her on a pedestal. It was surrounded with soft pillows and black silks.

It was his throne.

"Spider, no," she protested, trying to stand. He pushed her back down.

Ziyad loomed over her as he reached for something near the throne, but he didn't speak. When he straightened, she noticed he held a silver pitcher embossed with a spider and filled with water. He poured some into a matching goblet and handed it to her.

"You should know better than to walk in the desert with no water." Despite his harsh words, his voice was as smooth as the silks she sat on.

Amani drank, being careful to take small sips. The cool liquid felt heavenly sliding down her throat and pooling in her belly.

"Your skin is hot to the touch." Without another word, Ziyad dipped his hands into the pitcher. Once they were wet, he brought his palms to her cheeks. The sensation made her gasp with delight.

Ziyad got his hands wet again, then wet her eyes, her forehead, her chin. Amani turned her head up, gazing into his eyes as he stood before her. She was unable to look away. His caress was so gentle and the water so cool, that Amani shivered at his ministrations.

With another dunk of his hands, his fingers delved into

her hair, leaving trails of water behind him.

"Never do that again," he whispered. "The desert is an unforgiving place." He dipped his fingers and trailed them through her hair once more. "Feel good?"

Amani had no breath with which to speak. All she could do was nod and look up at him, wishing she could hug him, dreaming that he loved her.

Then again, he was her husband, and he'd once told her she had the right to be personal with him. What could it hurt?

Standing from the throne, Amani placed her hands on his chest. She bit her lip, unsure of her actions, but continued regardless. Ziyad's hands had slipped from her hair to her hips, allowing her touch.

Circling his neck with her hands, she stood on her toes and pulled him close. She didn't speak—she didn't want to ruin the moment. It seemed so fragile, holding him tight, hiding her face in the crook of his neck.

Once she slid her hand into his hair at the base of his neck, Ziyad responded to her gesture and hugged her back. Amani breathed deep, taking in the unique scent of him. He smelled like the rahala bloom, which she'd heard from her mother grew everywhere at the Spider's oasis. Many women and men alike vied for his flowers, as their scent was very rare indeed.

The longer she held him, the harder it was to contain her emotions. She knew she was trembling, but there was no hope for it now. He had to have felt her ragged breathing and known by her sniffles she desperately wanted to break down and sob.

She needed to pull away. For her own sanity, she had to. But Amani stayed put, not willing to leave the shelter of his arms. It was sweet torture.

She managed to lift her head, but her cheek rubbed his as she pulled away, and his face hovered near hers. She couldn't help but gaze into his dark eyes, silently pleading for him to let go—to throw caution to the wind and give her his heart. She'd protect it. She'd cherish it. She'd never throw it away.

Ziyad closed his eyes, as if he could no longer bear to look at her. Yet he didn't release her. He hadn't spoken a

word, but she felt his rejection clear to her toes. She had to get away.

A long, low note hit the air outside his carav. Ziyad's eyes snapped open just as the caravan came to a halt. They'd reached his oasis.

The instant his arms loosened, Amani pushed her way out of them. Before he could stop her, she dashed across the room and ripped open the door. With tears in her eyes, she shot across the sand, uncaring for where she was going. She vaguely heard her husband calling her name behind her, but she didn't stop, not even when she came to the water's edge.

Eight

Crashing through various grasses, bushes and trees, Amani finally stopped on the other side of Ziyad's oasis. Her tears fell in torrents, and she collapsed in a heap, unable to keep her soul from flying apart.

Her mother had been right. Huge white rahala blooms grew everywhere. Their scent filled the sky, surrounding her, filling her head with images of Ziyad's face. He'd asked if she was going mad. She was beginning to think she was. How much more could she take, being rejected by her husband again and again?

She had to harden her heart. That was the only way she could survive. She had to.

Amani vaguely heard an uproar near the caravs. She knew she'd caused it. Everyone had seen her running this way. Ziyad himself probably wasn't too far behind. She'd be punished, she knew. Making him worry about her wasn't tolerated.

But she couldn't go back. Not yet.

Wiping her eyes, Amani stood and walked further along the water's edge. It was gorgeous here, with birds cawing in the trees and the lap of the cool water against the sand. The Spider's oasis was bigger than she thought it would be, an oval situated in the desert. The water was as smooth as glass and the air was cooler. Fresher.

After a few more minutes of walking, she came across a mound of dirt with a golden spider laid across the middle. Rocks ringed the mound, and many dead and withered rahala blooms lay about its base. There was only one thing this mound could possibly be.

Karis's grave.

On the spider's abdomen were etched four words. 'Karis Bihar, Spider Princess.'

Amani covered her mouth and stood there for what seemed an eternity.

"Karis," she whispered. "Gods, I wish you were alive. Ziyad needs you. He hurts so much. He tries not to show it, but I can see his pain. He doesn't want me. I thought he might, but he doesn't. Now, I get to bear him the son you never could. But I'm not sure I'll survive this.

"You were so perfect, Karis. You were everything I can never be."

The sound of rustling came from behind her. Amani turned to see Ziyad emerging from the trees. His eyes were wide and his breath came in deep pants. He seemed wary, as if she might flee him again.

Amani took a deep breath. "The spider you placed on her grave is exquisite."

He glanced down to Karis's grave, then back to her. "What are you doing here?"

She turned toward the mound. "Paying my respects." Good. Her voice didn't waver.

After a short silence, Ziyad said, "The sun hits this glade the first thing in the morning. She loved mornings."

Amani nodded. "She'd have liked that."

"She hated spiders," he said, a little closer this time.

Amani smiled. "I know. I used to tease her about it when you accepted her. I made it known that *I* had no problem with spiders."

He chuckled, but his mirth soon faded away. "Why did you run from me, Amani?"

She hesitated before answering him. "Because I finally understood the terms of our marriage. I needed to clear my head."

"You didn't understand them before?"

With a sigh, Amani plucked a nearby rahala bloom and placed it on Karis's grave. "I was in denial, I believe. Caught up in my first bout of passion, I was bound to be infatuated with you, Spider. But you belong with her."

Ziyad gazed at the ground with his hands balled into fists.

Amani walked up to him and placed her palm on his shoulder. "I loved Karis, too," she whispered before wandering back into the trees.

~ * ~

Ziyad stood rooted to the spot, unable to move. He'd heard every word Amani had spoken before she knew he was there. She'd wished Karis could ease his pain. Amani believed she'd never be as good as his first wife.

Gods, is that what he'd done to the caring young girl he'd taken from Suridesh? Had he squashed her self-confidence? Taken away her self-worth?

The Falcon had warned something like this might happen. Khalil had said that Ziyad's despair was so dark and desperate, he'd do nothing more than pull Amani down with him and extinguish what made her unique—her caring spirit.

But what Amani didn't know was that every time he was around her, Ziyad felt more alive than he had these past two years. She brought sunshine into his dark corners and chased away his demons. He wanted to cling to her, but the memory of Karis weighed him down. How could he want to fly with Amani when he'd been so in love with Karis?

"Tell me what to do," he said aloud. If Karis was with the god of Spiders, then perhaps she could hear him. The sun had finally set beyond the dunes, painting the sky a lovely shade of golden orange. Amani had left him, claiming he belonged here. But there was nothing in this glade but cold, dark silence. He wanted warmth. He wanted light.

Gods above, he wanted Amani.

"I do not wish to defile your memory," he said brokenly. But he remembered Amani's gentle acceptance. She'd never expected him to put his love for Karis aside. All she wanted...was to be wanted.

Ziyad didn't know if his intuition was from his god, from Karis, or just from his gut. But he knew he had to tell Amani what was on his heart or he'd risk her spiraling into her own despair.

After laying another rahala bloom on the mound, Ziyad turned back for his caravan. Karis was his past, but Amani was his future. Tonight, she would stay in his carav. They were married—it was about time they started acting like it.

Nine

Ziyad's people were happy as they set up camp near his oasis. Children chased each other, falling over themselves to run and play, contradicting the sorrow in Amani's heart. She tried not to show her anguish, and smiled whenever someone looked at her. But even in the midst of the Spider's caravan, she felt so alone.

The sky grew dark and a few stars winked at her. She sat on a small stone by the water's edge and gazed up at them. There was the Spider's constellation, almost directly over Ziyad's oasis. Amani wondered what her sisters were up to, and what life was like back in Suridesh. Probably the same boring monotony.

Right about now, she'd welcome that monotony.

"The stars are bright tonight."

Ziyad's voice didn't startle her this time. Nor did she look at him. She continued to gaze up toward the heavens.

"Do you think heaven is among the stars?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said.

"I hope so," she replied. "I would love to look down upon Jikkar and shine my light when I am gone."

By the rustling of his robes, she knew Ziyad looked up as well.

"The moons won't rise for awhile yet," she told him. "There is your constellation."

"Yes," he said. "I see it."

"I used to stare at the spider in the sky and wonder what you were doing. In the two years after you accepted me for your wife, I wanted to know what kept you from marrying me."

He stepped closer. She could see him out of the corner of her eye. But she kept her eyes on the stars.

"I cried myself to sleep by Karis's grave more than a few times," he confessed. "I combed the desert looking for her killers. I was ready to send those bastards into the flames of Kaldaeron. But I never found them, never learned who they were. They're still out there somewhere and I can't abide by that."

"What will you do if you find them?" Amani already knew the answer.

"I will give them justice."

She shivered at the cruelty in his words.

"Are you cold?" he asked, his voice gentle this time.

Amani shivered again. "I suppose I am."

Ziyad held his hand out to her. She lowered her gaze and looked at him. He cocked his head, silently telling her to take his hand. Once she did, he pulled her up to stand beside him.

"I have been cold for a very long time," he told her. "The only warmth I've found has been in your arms."

Her heart quickened and she swallowed hard. He must have seen the surprise on her face, for he smiled gently.

"I want to be warm tonight," he whispered, stroking her cheek. "Will you stay with me, Amani?"

She hadn't been expecting him to open up to her, even a little bit. Hearing him confess he was warm in her embrace made her entire being ache for him. It astonished her and she swayed on her feet. Ziyad steadied her.

"I can deny you nothing," she whispered. "If you can forget your pain, even for a little while, then I will gladly keep you warm, Spider."

His wide, handsome grin tugged on her heart. It was impossible trying to harden herself around her husband, especially when he could melt her with just a look alone.

"Then I will order our dinner to be sent to my carav."

Amani nodded slowly and followed when he drew her behind him. She couldn't decide if she'd been delivered to heaven or made to endure hell.

~ * ~

Ziyad led her up the steps to his carav and snapped his fingers. Four ornate silver lamps lit, hanging from the

ceiling, giving her a clear view of his quarters. She'd been in here earlier, but her eyes hadn't quite adjusted to the dark from the bright sun. Now that she could clearly see, she gasped at his decadent surroundings.

Just like in her carriage, black fabric hung on his walls, but his fabric was made from fine, soft silks. Colorful pillows of all sizes littered the floor where he slept, and the carpet beneath her feet depicted a scene of black and silver spiders in their webs.

The pedestal throne he'd set her on earlier was also covered in fine fabrics, and the strong, heady scent of rahala blossoms greeted her nose.

"Your carav is glorious," she said in awe, looking all around her at the black chests, gilded with silver, which held his clothing. A few papers lay in disarray on a polished table, and the pitcher and goblet she remembered still sat next to his throne on the floor.

"I suppose I no longer see the splendor my position affords me," he said, glancing around with her. "I have taken my throne for granted."

"I do not believe you have," Amani told him. "You've had...other things on your mind. Do you settle disputes of your people here?"

"I have in the past," he replied. "But not lately. There have been no disputes to settle. Our caravan is a friendly lot."

Amani coughed behind her hand and looked away, suddenly uncomfortable. Ziyad had said 'our caravan', as if she was his princess. Perhaps he meant it in a broader sense, encompassing his people as well. That had to be it.

A soft knock interrupted them and the Spider made his way to the door. The head cook, Patik, glanced into the carav and her eyes lit on Amani. A wide grin stretched across her face before she handed her prince his food.

"Have a spirited evening, Your Highness." She winked before Ziyad closed the door.

"That woman has a loose tongue," he growled, setting down the tray. Amani joined him when he sat in the pillows.

"She merely wishes to see you happy, Spider."

"And you know this how?" he said, taking a bite of the fragrant flatbread.

Amani took her own piece of bread and dipped it into a creamy sauce. "Your people love you," she answered. "They grieve for their princess just as much as you do. But they wish nothing but the best for you and hope I bear you healthy heirs."

Ziyad arched a brow and lifted his mouth in a half-grin. "It would seem you have found a way to speak to them after all."

"Yes, well," she said, reaching for the water goblet. "Patik might be uncomfortable around me, but at least she doesn't wave me away like your lead carav driver."

Ziyad chuckled while she took a drink. "You tried to chat with Brand? That old man doesn't talk much. To anyone."

Amani nodded and finished chewing her cheese before answering. "So I've noticed. But Hiram is a wonderful man. He speaks to me more than Patik ever does."

The look on Ziyad's face darkened. "Does he now?"

"Every morning when I step out of my carav, he is there, walking beside it."

He chewed his spiced meat while his eyes glowed, pinning her to the floor. He looked angry, but for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why.

"Is he a guard?" she asked, taking a sip of water from the goblet.

"He is not." Every line of Ziyad's body was tense and rigid.

"Oh? I thought he would be, since he never seems to leave his post."

"Hiram is my cousin, Amani," Ziyad said. "If I'm ever killed before I have a son, my Spider crown would go to him. He has yet to take a wife. Seems he is sniffing around mine."

She gasped at the news. "I-I didn't know! He never told me. Why then would he walk next to my carav every day?"

"I can think of many reasons. Has he ever touched you?"

"Well, when we first left Suridesh, I fell in the sand after jumping from my moving steps. He helped me up."

"What do you think of him?"

"He is a nice man."

"Do you find him handsome?"

Now it was Amani's turn to arch a brow at her husband. By the gods, was he jealous? Her heart hitched in her chest as she studied him. His movements reaching for the food were short and sharp while his mouth was set in a thin, taut line. Amani had the sudden, undeniable urge to tease him.

"Well, Spider, he might be your cousin, but the family resemblance is almost non-existent. While your brow is strong and proud, his slopes just a bit. Your nose is straight. His has a knob. Your lips are soft, while his seem permanently chapped. And your hair... It is thick and full. He hides his underneath his dunla. Could he be balding?"

Ziyad's bark of laughter warmed her skin. She hadn't heard it in a very long time. The sound of it had her nipples puckering from where she sat. Gods, but her husband was a beautiful man. The way his eyes crinkled at the corners or how his entire face seemed to light up turned her mouth dry.

"No, Highness, I do not find him attractive," she said. "Not after I've held the most wondrous man in the caravan against me."

The look in Ziyad's eyes turned from mirth to passion at a turn of the winds. He seemed as if he was about to crawl across their tray and pounce.

Amani stood suddenly, startling him. "In fact, I should go find Brand right now. I know he's getting on in years, but you don't think he's asleep, do you?"

Ziyad stood and lunged at her. She squealed the moment his strong arms engulfed her. When he began tickling her, Amani laughed and doubled over, but could not escape his grasp.

"Are you telling me you're dallying with my weathered old carav driver, wife of mine?"

His tickling became even more ruthless, until Amani's giggles produced tears. "Ziyad, stop—I'm teasing you! Please!"

"Not until you tell me who this man is you speak of."

His chuckles filled her heart. He was enjoying himself, torturing her.

"You!" she yelped without hesitation. "Gods, Ziyad, you're the most handsome man I've ever laid my eyes

upon."

He stopped his tickling and turned her in his arms. "Truly?"

Amani cupped his cheek and smiled at him. She said nothing, she merely nodded. Something changed in his eyes. His smile faded, but he didn't let her go. His fingers plunged into her hair until he lightly fisted it in his hand.

Ziyad rested his forehead on hers and closed his eyes. "I...I..."

"Shh," she whispered, placing her hand over his mouth. "Don't say anything."

He was trembling. The mighty Spider Prince of the Golden Desert shook in her arms like a leaf on the wind. Amani framed his face with her palms and stood on her toes, kissing him fully on the mouth.

She kept her kisses chaste, pulling away just enough for him to lean forward, wanting more.

"Gods, Amani," he groaned against her lips. "What are you doing to me?"

She smiled and leaned back just enough to plant kisses on his cheeks, his forehead, his nose, his chin and down his neck. "Making love to you."

His arms curled tighter just as his breath shuddered from his lungs.

"Sit on your throne, Spider."

Amani never thought her voice could sound like that, so full of passion and wanting. But her pussy throbbed for his cock, and inspiration struck.

He gave her a wicked grin. "My throne, minx?"

She nodded, unraveling his belt-wrap. "I want to know what it feels like to make love to a prince on his seat of power."

Ziyad closed his eyes and hissed his breath through his teeth. Once his belt-wrap pooled at his feet, she tugged his robes off his shoulders.

"I want you to remember me, to remember this, every time you take your throne."

Amani had no idea he'd been working on her belt-wrap until it fell away. Her breasts leapt from her robes. Instantly he fondled them as he walked backward, bringing her with him. Once he reached his throne, he yanked off his

undergarments and kicked at his sandals. Amani did the same.

Ziyad sat before her, gazing up into her eyes, but stopped her when she would have sat on his lap. His eyes held her captive while his tongue snaked out, flicking her nipple, teasing it, tasting it. Amani's clit demanded she rub against him, but he wouldn't let her sit on him. Yet.

With deep, hot sucks, Ziyad took her breast into his mouth again and again, making Amani believe she could come without him touching her pussy. He released her nipple only to suckle the other, leaving the one he'd just loved wet and cold. While his mouth teased her, Amani brought his hand up to her other breast, asking him to stroke her, needing his touch on her skin.

"Are you cold now?" she asked, bending her head to whisper in his ear.

Ziyad pulled her down onto his lap none-too-gently. "No, damn you, I'm on fire. I want to sink into you. I want to lose myself."

She was drawn to his mouth as if by some magical force. Amani couldn't stop kissing him any more than she could stop breathing. Forcing her tongue into his mouth, she stood on her knees and straddled his thighs. Ziyad's head was angled upward, accepting her domination as she brutally threaded her hands through his hair.

"I ache for you," she confessed, teasing the tip of him on her engorged clit.

Ziyad groaned. "Then take me inside you."

Amani bit her lip, so tempted to do just that. But since he'd opened up to her earlier, could he give her more? "I will," she promised. "But first I must ask something of you."

"Now of all times?" He lowered his head to nuzzle her neck, and the patch of hair on his chin was coarse against her. Amani's skin pebbled from head to toe.

"Yes, mighty Spider," she said, grinning.

"Ask what you will," he responded with a groan. "I am not likely to deny you right now."

Amani leaned in close, touching her nose to his. She was a little scared to ask him, for she only just thought of it. "When...when I get pregnant, will you still come to me?"

He gazed at her in shocked silence.

When he didn't speak, she continued. "I am terrified you might not wish to...continue making love to me."

"Why wouldn't I?" he asked. His voice was even, but his eyes betrayed his surprise.

"Because you married me to give you a son, not to give you pleasure."

"But you do give me pleasure, Amani Bihar," he said. "And you are my wife. Husbands and wives make love. I want a brood of children, not merely one. So yes, I will still come to you." Her heart leapt when he said her full name. She still wasn't used to it. "Does that answer your question?"

Amani nodded, relieved more than she thought she'd be. "Thank the gods," she murmured, kissing his throat.

He chuckled then grasped her hips. "When it comes to making love, my lovely wife, I am not your prince but your servant. Any time of the day or night, I will be yours."

His words were spoken in mirth, but what he'd said contradicted their arrangement. He would never be hers. He belonged to Karis. Amani could never hope to compete with the memory of his beloved dead princess.

She threw her head back to hide her shimmering eyes. "If you are my servant, Ziyad, then touch my clit," she commanded. "Make me come and watch my pleasure."

Without another word, Ziyad's fingers opened her lower lips and swirled against her, slicking his hand on her pussy.

"Gods!" she cried, unable to keep herself from thrusting on him. He plunged into her, bringing out more of her wetness, coating her with her own juices.

"Does this please you, minx?" he asked gently, keeping his voice low and submissive, as if she was the princess he'd denied her to be.

"Yes. Don't stop." Amani's hips rolled back and forth as her pleasure built within. Ziyad continued stroking her as she thrust against him on her knees.

"Kiss me," she demanded. He complied. "God of Spiders, Ziyad," she whined against his lips. "I want your cock."

Before he could obey, she came, thundering against his hand, crying out into his mouth. His carav seemed to shake from the force of her pleasure. It was so pure, so

precious, that her heart hitched into her throat as her ecstasy crested.

"Come into me!" she exclaimed. "Now. Right now!"

Ziyad was frantic. He took a hold of her hips and slapped her onto his thighs, sinking himself deep and crying out with her. Amani helped him by rising up and lowering herself, amazed at how different he felt in this position. The fullness of his cock spurred on her orgasm as she rode him. The pleasure never seemed to fade away until she hit another peak and came furiously once more.

Ziyad's body tensed an instant before he growled his release, holding Amani down and bucking with her. He shuddered and crushed her to him until the storm of his pleasure had passed.

She couldn't think straight enough to put two words together. Instead, she rested her head on his shoulder and ruffled his hair with her breath. Ziyad was still inside her and she wished to keep it that way.

"I will never look at this throne the same again," he told her, seemingly in no rush to push her off.

Amani smiled. "That was the point, my powerful husband."

"Now, my subjects will wonder what I'm grinning about."

She chuckled at him. "They will all be jealous that you have a minx for a wife."

"Along with my fellow princes."

Amani's smile faded. The wives of the other princes were royalty. She, however, was not. She doubted very much that they would be jealous of her.

"Are you all right?" Ziyad asked, apparently noticing her change of mood.

"Yes," she lied, trying to keep her voice light. "I'm just tired."

Ziyad raised his brow. He let her stand and find her robes while he sat there, as if he intended to reign his caravan stark naked. She wasn't ashamed to look her fill.

"I was hoping we'd stay like this for the remainder of the evening," he said, indicating the fact that he wore no robes.

Amani dropped her garment. "A fine idea."

Ziyad stood and approached her. She had to glance up to look into his eyes, but once she did, they held her captive.

"Come rest with me," he said.

"You will keep me warm?" she asked, reaching for him.

"What do you think?"

Ten

Amani stared at Ziyad's face, relaxed in sleep. He seemed so at peace, as if his problems couldn't touch him. His hair, so dark and full, was tousled from her fingers. She wanted to stroke his skin, just to feel its softness once more. She doubted if he knew just how much she cared for him.

It was late. She had no idea just how late, but the caravan was quiet and the night was dark. Amani needed to leave. The sun would rise soon, and Ziyad had never asked her to stay all night.

Besides, she didn't belong in his carav. His quarters were meant for him to share with his princess. But Amani didn't want to leave.

Ziyad's arm was around her waist. She slowly moved it in order to sit up.

"*Karis?*" he murmured dreamily.

Amani's heart stopped.

"Where are you going?" he asked, still caught in slumber.

"Easy, my love," she said, her voice cracking. "Go back to sleep."

"I miss you..." Ziyad's voice trailed off once more.

Amani had to cover her mouth to keep from making noise. She stood and hastily dressed, not bothering to tie her belt-wrap before quietly opening his carav door. Once she shut it behind her, she walked barefoot to her own quarters, gazing up at the lovers in the sky. The moons Thiadra and Pamos were almost touching. Another couple of weeks and he'd catch her. They seemed to mock her in their silence, bathing Jikkar with their ethereal light.

There would be no blessing from the lovers for her and Ziyad. He loved Karis and he always would. What he'd said a few moments before was proof of that, regardless if he'd been dreaming.

Amani opened her own carav door and entered the darkened room with a heavy heart. She was numb. She was in love.

She was falling apart.

~ * ~

Ziyad awoke to the sound of a horn blast outside his carav. That wasn't his call to arms. Even in his own befuddled state, he knew whose horn that was.

The Falcon Prince.

The sun was already high in the sky by his estimation. He never slept so late. Must have been his minx of a wife that kept him right where he was. But when Ziyad rolled over, all he beheld were empty pillows.

He blinked a few times then glanced around the carriage. Amani wasn't there. Her robes were gone as well. She hadn't stayed with him.

Disappointment shot through every corner of his body. More than anything in the desert, he'd wanted to wake in her arms and kiss her to passion once more. But she was gone, leaving him in the middle of the night, just as he'd once left her.

He tried to tell himself she was only doing her duty. She wasn't his princess—she knew she couldn't stay in his carav all night long. But by the gods, he'd wanted her to stay. He'd hoped she would when he'd suggested they rest. If she'd fallen asleep, she might have woken with him this morning.

But the fact that she was gone jabbed him in the stomach. He knew he shouldn't take it personally. Amani hadn't rejected him. She was merely honoring his wishes as his wife, not his princess.

However, Ziyad had to wonder about the wisdom of his choice in putting Karis on a pedestal. She was the woman he'd loved, but she was gone. He couldn't hold her any more than he could hold the wind or the waters of his oasis.

She'd never speak his name or make love to him again.

Amazingly, the sting of that loneliness was lessened the more he thought on Amani. She'd opened up to him more than he thought she might. He wanted to spend every waking moment with his pretty wife.

Khalil's horn sounded once again. What was the Falcon doing at his oasis? With a sigh, Ziyad had a good idea. The Falcon was probably here to check up on him and make sure he hadn't totally destroyed the starry-eyed girl he'd shackled to him in marriage.

Wandering to one of his various chests, Ziyad pulled out a fresh black robe and donned it, along with clean undergarments and a silver belt-wrap. Out of habit, he tucked his dagger into the fabric, the one his uncle had given him upon his marriage to Karis.

Taking a deep breath, Ziyad vaguely remembered a dream he'd had the night before. He'd been holding Karis in his arms. He'd called to her, but she left their shelter. She'd told him to go back to sleep.

Gods. That hadn't been Karis. That had been Amani.

He closed his eyes with regret. She'd called him her love, no doubt to calm him so he wouldn't waken fully. He could only imagine what had crossed her mind at being mistaken for his princess. He knew her position as merely his wife was taking its toll on her. But Amani hadn't complained, at least not with her words. Her body betrayed her on more than one occasion. Especially after he'd mentioned his fellow princes would be jealous of her.

The moment he'd said that, he'd mentally kicked himself. Her bright, genuine smile had faded, and he could only blame himself for bringing that dark cloud across her pretty face.

Ziyad stepped from his carav and instinctively looked down the line at Amani's carav. There was his cousin Hiram, lounging in the grasses by the water, as if soaking up the sun. The Spider growled low in his throat.

"Ziyad!" Khalil's voice boomed from his own caravan. "I've come to take advantage of those favors you still owe me!"

Ziyad turned and smiled at the sight. Khalil and Zara walked toward him, each of them waving. Their son, Akim, held firmly to his father's hand. Ziyad couldn't be happier for

the Falcon and his princess, who'd conceived his heir shortly after they'd killed the vile witch known as Mother.

Ziyad closed the gap between them and hugged each of them in turn. "It has been too long!"

"Yes," Khalil said, returning his hug. "It has." He looked over Ziyad's head. "Where's your wife?"

"Resting, I assume."

"But it's nearing midday! I say we wake her and catch up on old times." Khalil gestured to Zara. She smiled at him and took his hand. Ziyad fell into step next to the Falcon, who was marching toward his royal carav.

"She's not in there," he said, glancing at his friend.

Khalil stopped walking. "Well, where is she, then?"

"Her own carav."

His old friend's look darkened, making the three-clawed scars on his face seem all the deeper. "You have put her in her own carav?"

Ziyad fidgeted. Damn Khalil, but *he* was the prince of this caravan, not the Falcon! How dare he arrive and make him feel like a steaming pile of hatshef for giving his wife her own place to stay.

"She is not my princess," the Spider said, lifting his chin and giving his words a confidence that he didn't feel.

"Right," Khalil said sourly. "She is merely your wife. How obtuse of me to think your wife and your princess are one in the same."

"You know my princess is Karis."

"I know Karis is dead!"

Zara gasped. "Khalil, perhaps we should..." He put up his hand to stop her. She closed her mouth and took their son in her arms.

Ziyad's temper suddenly flared at Khalil's stance of self-righteousness. He'd never had to live through losing the woman he loved.

"Who are you to tell me what I do with my people?" he spat.

"I am your peer, *Spider Prince*," Khalil said, his voice low. "I am the only one present with any authority to knock some sense into you. And you know damn well your god doesn't care what you call Amani. She is your princess!"

Ziyad began to feel like he'd been backed into a

corner. His fists balled and his body tensed for a fight. He knew he'd have to confront the Falcon sooner or later. He'd been hoping for later.

"Karis wears my armband," Ziyad said, trying like mad to keep his voice even.

"The armband is a symbol, nothing more." Khalil raked his hand through his hair. "You are yelling at me when your argument is unfounded. You cannot claim Amani is merely your wife. You are royalty. You have married a woman. That makes her royalty as well. Ziyad, you are squabbling over semantics!"

"Karis was—"

"*Karis*," the Falcon interrupted, "gods rest her soul, will never return to you. Let her rest in peace. Look at your wife."

Khalil pointed at something over Ziyad's shoulder. Once he turned, Ziyad recognized Amani bending over a wailing child by a large palm tree. It looked as if he'd skinned his knee. He couldn't hear her voice, but he saw her pull the boy close and tuck his hair behind his ear. The child nodded a few times then ran to his mother, who was approaching from a nearby carav.

The boy's mother embraced Amani and smiled, and then both women stood and chatted.

"Amani might not be *your* princess, Ziyad," Khalil said behind him. "But she is theirs. Do not deny your people the mother of their caravan."

Seeing Amani's lovely face lit from the sun sparkling off the water made Ziyad's heart swell near to bursting. His emotions raged within him. Karis was his princess. But Karis was dead. Amani stood before him, more regal and caring than anyone he'd ever known.

Turning back to the Falcon, he saw his old friend walking away with his family, apparently giving him time to think on his words. But Ziyad felt ripped in two. A part of him would always belong to Karis, and yet, Amani had managed to wiggle beneath the wall he'd erected around his heart. He didn't know what to do.

Therefore he just stood there, gazing back at his wife like a lovesick fool, praying to his god for guidance.

Eleven

Amani fidgeted under her husband's powerful gaze. She'd brought a servant before him, the one who'd asked what she'd like prepared at the feast tonight. Apparently, the arrival of the Falcon at the Spider's oasis was cause to celebrate.

She hadn't known what to say to the man about the feast preparations. Therefore she'd sought out Ziyad, who looked as if the sun had risen on the wrong side of his carav.

They stood in the sand, not too far from the water and Ziyad crossed his arms.

"What do you need?" he asked. His voice was even, but his eyes shot sparks. Was he angry with her?

"Your servant has asked what I'd like prepared for the feast to come, so I brought him to you."

Ziyad shrugged. "I do not care what you choose."

Amani bit her lip. "I don't know what you like. I don't know what the Falcon likes. I...I don't have the authority to make commands. I thought you might be better suited to tell your cooks what you'd like prepared."

"Amani, I am overseeing my water supply today. We must fill the barrels on ten of my caravs by tomorrow morning. Then we leave for Parradh. I cannot be bothered with this banquet."

"But I—"

"Are you not my wife?" he said harshly.

Amani flinched. She'd never been confronted by his fury before. "Y-yes."

"Then deal with it."

With a twirl of his robes, Ziyad left her staring after

him. He began barking orders, making his servants jump, just as she had. Her eyes stung and her own temper flared.

"Your...Your Grace?" the man beside her whispered. "I do not need to know what you wish right now. When the time is convenient we shall talk."

Amani watched the man scurry away, probably uncomfortable at what had just transpired. Every time she had a problem, Ziyad had told her to come to him. But the one time she did, he'd yelled at her for it.

She had no idea if the arrival of the Falcon had soured his mood. If she was Ziyad's princess, she would have marched right after him and demanded they have it out. As it was, she was too afraid to go near him. She wasn't his princess. She didn't have the right to speak to him as an equal.

Amani turned away to find the servant who'd fled from her. If Ziyad wanted her to act like his princess without giving her the title, what else was she to do but his bidding?

~ * ~

Amani had met the Falcon Princess only one time, two cycles ago when she and her husband had informed Amani's father, the governor of Suridesh, that Ziyad had accepted her as his bride. The Falcon Princess was a beautiful woman, who obviously loved her husband and young son more than life itself.

But as Amani tasted samples of foods from the kitchen carav, the Falcon Princess herself walked right up to her with a large grin.

"Hello, Amani," she said, her tone friendly.

Amani had been fascinated with the Falcon armband she wore, and had once wondered what the Spider armband looked like. But she'd never know. It was whispered among the servants that Ziyad had buried it with Karis. All Amani had to prove she was his wife was her Spider ring.

Amani cleared her throat. "H-hello, Falcon Princess."

The woman held up her hand. "My name is Zara."

"No, no, I can't call you that."

Another servant brought a plate from the kitchen, allowing her to sample a few of the delights for dessert. Amani's eyes grew at all the possibilities. Bractav, desint, and even some minty komerant greeted her. Not to mention

cream-covered rahala seeds.

Zara pointed to the seeds. "Those are Ziyad's favorite." She pointed again to the bractav. "And that is Khalil's."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Amani said, feeling some measure of relief.

"Zara," the woman corrected again.

"No, I cannot. I do not have the right."

"You do, Amani. You are the Spider's wife."

"I am not his princess."

Zara smiled. "Ziyad may not call you his princess, but you are. The god of Spiders does not worry himself with such a petty thing as pride."

"I cannot cross my husband on this."

"Perhaps not," Zara said, popping a few of the creamy seeds into her mouth. "But Khalil is working on him. The Falcon and the Spider are good friends. Ziyad listens to him. He will come around."

Amani shook her head. "Ziyad loves Karis. He always will."

"I have no doubt of that. She was his first love. But there is no law written that states he cannot love another."

With a forlorn grin, Amani shook her head. "Ziyad does not love me. We have our...fun. He has told me he wishes for a big family. But that is all he wants from me."

"Amani," Zara said, walking her beyond the kitchen a few paces. "I was once blind long ago. But I could see beyond what people say to what they actually mean. I know you love that husband of yours. And if you could stand back and see the way he looks at you, then you would know much *he* cares, perhaps almost as much as you do."

"He has set me apart from him, yet he expects me to act like his princess."

"The man is confused," Zara explained. "He loves Karis, it's true. But he's coming to care for you as well and he doesn't know how to deal with his feelings. Perhaps all he needs is time."

Amani gazed down at her ring and twisted it on her finger. Zara followed her gaze. "I made that ring for you."

She glanced at the princess in shock. "You did?"

Zara nodded. "He didn't have anything to give you. I

assume you know what he did with his armband?"

"Yes, I know." Amani couldn't keep the hurt from her voice.

"This ring has magic. Every piece I make has some form of magic within it."

Amani's eyes widened. "What does it do?"

"It enhances your husband's magic. He has placed you under his protection, I'm assuming?"

"Yes."

"His magic doesn't extend any farther than his caravan. If either of you were to leave it, his magic would fade away. But your ring ensures that Ziyad's magic can protect you wherever you go." Zara paused. "I wanted to give the Spider something special, since he blames himself for Karis's death. She hadn't been under his protection when she died. They were traveling the dunes, so how could she come under harm? But he hadn't foreseen an attack by raiders, and thus, Karis lost her life. But while you wear your ring, Ziyad's protection will always cover you, no matter how far apart you are."

Amani stared at the onyx spider in awe. "A piece of him will always be with me."

Zara smiled. "Yes."

"Thank you, Your Highness. May I touch you?"

"Of course!" Zara said, as if shocked she would even ask.

Amani stepped forward and gave her a hug. She'd never known the properties of her ring. Now, she would cherish it all the more.

"I must continue choosing food for the feast," she said. "Can you help me? I have no idea what I'm doing."

Zara's smile widened. "I would be delighted."

~ * ~

Ziyad spent the rest of the day making sure his barrels were full of water, and helped the Falcon with his water supply as well. Since Khalil had once allowed him to fill up at his oasis, it was only fair to repay the favor.

Thankfully, the work got his mind off his wife for a time. He knew his anger at Khalil's words had lashed out at Amani. He felt like an ass. She'd been taken aback and hadn't deserved his wrath, but Ziyad was holding on to

sanity by a thread. He didn't know what to do with her.

Now that the sun was setting, it was time to take his seat of honor next to Amani. As he walked to where the feast was being set up, he couldn't help but be struck by his wife's gentle ways.

She glanced at him, tucked her hair behind her ear, then looked away. Pain entered his heart. In the brief moment their eyes connected, he saw the hurt buried there.

Ziyad damned himself to Kaldaeron.

"She is lovely," Zara said behind him, patting him on the shoulder. "She cares for you, Spider. Do right by her."

He swallowed hard and wished his friends would mind their own business. His relationship with Amani was no one's concern but his own.

"Your seat is ready, Highness." Patik held out her hand and ushered Ziyad to a smooth stone. Amani still bustled about like a servant. He knew he'd told her to deal with the feast, but he wanted her to sit. It irritated him that she flitted about, taking care of things his people had been doing for years.

"Tell my wife to come here."

Patik bowed with a grin. She trotted over to Amani and whispered in her ear. Amani looked up and sighed with annoyance. She marched up to him with her arms crossed.

"What?"

Ziyad's brows shot up. She'd never spoken to him like that before.

"I wish for you to sit with me." He patted the rock next to him.

Amani shook her head. "No, that seat is reserved for the Falcon."

"Then...sit here." He pulled another rock closer on his other side.

"That is for Hiram."

"Hiram does not sit next to me."

"He is your cousin, Highness."

"You are my wife."

Amani licked her lips. "I have last minute preparations to do."

She would have turned and walked away, but Ziyad stood and grabbed her elbow. "Let the servants do it. Sit

with me."

"No," she said, twisting out of his grasp. "My seat is over there, next to Patik and Brand."

"That is where the servants sit!" He was aghast. Surely she was jesting. But the look on her face wasn't playful in the least.

"I cannot sit with the royalty, Spider!"

Fingers of ice clawed at his heart. By the gods, she was right. "You are my wife, Amani. I want you to sit with me."

"What you wanted," she said, stepping away from him, "was for me to deal with this feast, and that is what I have done. I am not your princess, Spider, so stop treating me like I am!"

Her voice echoed across the oasis. Surely every eye in the caravan was on them now. But Ziyad hadn't been prepared for just how deeply her words would sting him.

"The Falcon and his princess want me to say their names. But I cannot! I do not have the right. I only say your name because you are my husband." Tears shimmered in her eyes, but he knew her anger fueled her now, not her sorrow. "And I only say it because you *insisted*."

He was at a loss for words while she publically railed at him. But his own resentment rose to the fore.

"Why did you marry me, Spider?" she asked, shrugging her shoulders. "Why me? Why did you pick *me*?"

"I didn't *want* to marry you!" he finally spat. "But I needed an heir, and you were convenient. I don't want anyone!"

Amani gasped then held her breath. Her tears brimmed over just as the Falcon yelled behind him.

"Ziyad Bihar, by all that is holy, you have just *divorced* her!"

The Spider glanced around the clearing, feeling dread swallow him whole. By the law, if a prince publically denounced his wife, she was no longer his. And his entire caravan had witnessed his mistake.

He watched in panic as Amani turned and ran. He tried to go after her but the Falcon stopped him.

"Don't you dare. I will pummel you into the sand if you take off after that girl."

"Unhand me, Falcon," Ziyad growled, feeling his own eyes burn. "She is my wife!"

"She is no longer. But you and I both know, *Spider*, that she never was."

Ziyad was in shock. All he could do was look into the faces of his people, who were now gazing at him with various looks of distrust and loathing.

"God of Spiders, what have I done?"

He ripped free of Khalil's grip and charged into the foliage near the edge of his oasis, feeling the need to scream at the top of his lungs.

Twelve

Ziyad didn't stop until he reached Karis's grave on the far side of his oasis. Dropping to the dirt, he yanked on his hair, trying desperately to calm his thundering heart. His eyes were on fire. Every inch of his skin seemed charged, like the desert air during a thunderstorm.

Gods above, he'd just divorced Amani.

What had he been thinking? Her words incited his wrath. He'd wanted to lash out, if only to release his pent-up emotions. The Falcon's appearance had flustered him and made him feel guilty for giving his wife less than she deserved. But his fury had been directed at the wrong person, and now Amani was paying the price.

They both were.

The only way to make things right was to swallow his pride and ask the Falcon to perform the marriage ceremony once more. But his old friend would never agree to that. Not after what Ziyad had done. Khalil cared for Amani. He'd always thought of her well-being, more than Ziyad ever had.

Amani had given him everything. She admitted caring for him. She wanted to be a good wife, and a better mother. But now, she was most likely back in her carav, crying to the depths of her soul.

He'd yelled to Amani that he didn't want anyone, but he hadn't meant it. He knew damn well Karis was lost to him. But the solitude of loneliness had gotten the better of him. He *did* want someone to share his life with, but he also didn't want to defile the memory of Karis. His pain and uncertainty had turned into anger and he'd spoken to Amani without thinking.

Ziyad was going to be sick. He hated himself. Glancing at Karis's grave, his countenance hardened. "You are dead, Karis," he growled. "Why can't you leave me alone?"

Staring at the moons, he saw that it wouldn't be too much longer before Pamos caught Thiadra. He glared at them. How dare they hang there, shining their serene light down upon Jikkar while his very soul shuddered within him?

What was so glorious about love, anyway? In the end, there was nothing but heart-wrenching pain.

Ziyad didn't know how long he sat there, but he knew one thing for sure. He needed to make things right with Amani. He needed to beg for her forgiveness. He needed to grovel and ask her to marry him once more. Perhaps *she* could convince the Falcon to perform the ceremony.

But gods, he'd need to claim her as his princess if Khalil was to go through with it. Was he ready? Could he do it?

He cast his gaze once more to his first wife's grave. He'd buried Karis with the Spider armband. But Khalil was right, it was a symbol, nothing more. Perhaps he could convince Zara to make him another, that is, if she didn't hate him as much as he hated himself.

Ziyad had loved Karis more than he ever thought possible. He hadn't known his heart could care for another. But he did care. He cared for Amani, he was just too proud—or too scared—to admit it.

But was it love?

Ziyad stood and wiped the sand and grass from his robes. He rubbed his eyes and ran his fingers through his hair. *To Kaldaeron with love.* He had to stop being a coward and claim Amani once and for all.

As he walked back to his caravan, he noticed the feast had fizzled. No one milled about, and the silence was deafening. But that wasn't what troubled him the most.

The Falcon's caravan was gone.

The princes didn't travel at night, not because they couldn't, but because they stopped in order to give rest to the families and servants who traveled with them. But the fact that Khalil had left Ziyad's oasis with the moons high in the sky struck him like a blow to the head.

His old friend had severed their friendship.

Ziyad ran down the caravan line until he came to Amani's carav. The door was shut and nothing but darkness greeted him. He flew up the steps and ripped open the door.

"*Amani!*" he cried, his heart in his throat.

Snapping his fingers, he lit her lamps, but her carav was empty. Nothing, not even her robes, had been disturbed.

The Spider Prince just stood there slack-jawed as understanding dawned on him. The Falcon had left his oasis—and Amani had left with him.

~ * ~

Over the next few days, Amani stayed in the carav the Falcon had given her. On such short notice, he didn't have anything to offer her other than a storage carav to sleep in. Crates and chests were strewn about, carpets were rolled in the corners and even a child's cradle was among the clutter.

But it was vastly better than sharing a carav with the Falcon's head cook, or anyone else who'd offered. Amani needed to be alone and face her raging emotions.

She hadn't run back to the Spider's caravan after he'd divorced her. She'd sprinted to the Falcon's, hoping and praying to the god of Spiders the Falcon would be willing to take her back to Suridesh, back to her father.

Amani hadn't known the Falcon had planned on leaving Ziyad's oasis that very night, but it suited her just fine. The sooner she left the Spider in the dunes, the sooner she could leave her humiliation behind.

The Falcon's princess had been the one to accept her into their caravan, allowing her to put on the green of their people rather than having to bear the shame of wearing Ziyad's black.

He'd divorced her. Of all the things she thought she'd have to bear with the Spider, she'd never once foreseen that he would completely cast her aside. It proved to her that he'd never cared for her. All the talk of being cold and needing her had been nothing more than a ruse to get her to sleep with him.

To bear him an heir.

Amani's heart burned. She hated him. No, she didn't hate him. She loved him. It hurt so very much every time his face swam before her eyes. Each night she'd dreamt of him,

and each night it had been the same nightmare. He'd denounced her in front of his people, and in front of his peer, the Falcon Prince.

There was no doubt in her mind the Spider had been waiting for a chance to be rid of her. His heart was buried with Karis. He was so deep into his first wife's grave that he was never going to emerge.

It was far better to love a man who loved her in return. Perhaps this was a blessing in disguise. She was now free to marry for love. That is, if any man on Jikkar could see past her disgrace. She'd been tossed aside by one of the most powerful men in the Golden Desert.

She'd be hard-pressed to find another husband.

And this would no doubt bring shame onto her father's house, as the governor of Suridesh.

Amani hadn't wanted the Falcon's servants to bring her food and water, but she didn't have the courage to leave her carav. Despite the fact that the Falcon's people were more than hospitable, she couldn't face the idea that they were probably whispering among themselves about her.

She pulled a golden chain from around her neck that had been hiding under her robes. On it was her Spider ring. She hadn't given it back to Ziyad before leaving him in the dust. Amani couldn't bring herself to wear it any longer, but she couldn't be parted from it, either. Zara had told her it was a piece of Ziyad, with her always.

Despite the fact that he'd made it painfully clear he didn't want her, nothing would ever stop her from wanting him and dreaming of the way it could have been—if he'd chosen to marry her instead of Karis those years ago.

True, *she'd* be the one in the grave at the Spider's oasis.

But she would have died knowing the depths of a man's love.

Thirteen

"I must call the Princes' Council."

Zara glanced at her husband after he'd spoken. Their carav was dark aside from one lit lamp. Khalil sat on his throne, deep in thought.

She'd been sitting amongst the pillows, playing with their son who was delighted to chase after a ball fashioned of leather. Zara had never seen the Falcon so pensive.

"You do not believe the Spider will let it lie." She knew her husband well. And he, in turn, knew Ziyad.

Khalil shook his head. "No, he won't. What he did to Amani was done in the heat of the moment. He wasn't thinking straight. He will follow us to Suridesh and demand Amani return to his caravan. I need the other princes to make him see reason."

"You mean to keep Amani from him?" Zara asked, her eyes wide. "What if she wishes to return?"

Khalil took a deep breath. "Ziyad cannot merely whisk her away. She is no longer his wife. But if he wants to keep her, the council can force him to accept her as his princess. If the Spider accepts those terms, then it will indeed be up to Amani to stay or go."

"You would be forcing him to turn away from Karis."

Khalil's eyes narrowed, but Zara knew his frustration wasn't aimed at her. "Karis is dead. Ziyad is too damned loyal for his own good."

Zara stood and wandered over to him, threading her fingers through Khalil's thick hair. Instantly, green bloomed with grey and brown in her mind. It was her magical ability, to see colors and intentions whenever she touched another.

And Khalil was both worried and angry.

"The Spider Prince has been through Kaldaeron, my love," she said gently. "He's been raked over the coals time and again. His wife and unborn heir were struck down. He has been unable to find their killers. And he needed another wife to bear him a son. Could *you* be so willing to take another woman to your bed if I had died with Akim in my belly?"

Zara watched as Khalil glanced at their young son toddling near the pillows. The boy turned and gave his father a toothy grin.

"Gods, Zara, don't make me think of it."

"I must," she whispered. "If only to allow you to give Ziyad your mercy. He cares for Amani. But his loyalty to Karis has been weighing him down. Perhaps this is what will wake him up and bring him out of his despair. Perhaps this is what will make him realize he needs Amani."

Khalil nodded. "That is exactly my intention. Amani loves Ziyad, but what he did broke her heart. I'm not so sure she will take him back. And then where will the Spider be?"

Zara licked her lips and thought of the options. "He will become a hardened, jaded man. He won't care about anything or anyone."

"Yes," Khalil agreed. "He is afraid of that possibility just as much as we are. He will come for Amani. In his mind, she still belongs to him. But he cannot continue to treat her like a servant. I am willing to take the gamble that Ziyad is smart enough to make Amani the mother of his caravan rather than turn her away for good. He's in too deep now. Perhaps he could have turned her away after their marriage, but now..." Khalil shook his head.

"I touched him, right before he divorced Amani. I saw his colors. I believe he loves her. He just hasn't realized it yet."

"Then we must make him realize it."

Zara and Khalil stared at each other for a few long seconds. "How will you call the others?" she asked.

Khalil grinned and pulled her down to his lap. "I will summon my falcons to take them messages. It won't be long before every prince in the desert descends upon Suridesh."

~ * ~

Ziyad left his water caravs behind in order to travel faster. He'd considered merely saddling a horse and taking a few men and supplies to intercept the Falcon. But lighting out across the desert without the necessary supplies he'd need would be a suicide mission. He knew where Khalil was going. He'd merely arrive a little behind him.

Ziyad hadn't been in his right mind the night Amani left. He'd holed himself within his carav and let his own sorrow and self-loathing overcome him. But in the light of dawn, determination had taken their place.

Amani was his, and he wasn't about to give up without fighting for her. She had to know he'd been venting his anger. He didn't truly wish for her to leave him. It also didn't help matters that every time he gazed at his throne, he thought only of his wife's sweet pussy and her soft, hot sighs in his ear.

There was no way he was going to live the rest of his life without experiencing her touch again. Unlike Karis, Amani was alive. And as long as she was alive, she was his wife.

Ziyad wanted to push his caravan. He wanted to travel at night, like the Falcon did. But they were also traveling by day. While the Sentinels could handle it, Ziyad knew his people could not. But he didn't allow them long to rest. They set out long before the sun rose, and camped long after the sun set.

By the gods, he was going to make it to Suridesh before the week was out.

~ * ~

There it was, the tent city, gleaming in the sand like a mirage. Amani squinted and shielded her eyes from the hot sun, but that didn't stop her wide grin. It hadn't been long since she'd left her father's tent, but it seemed like ages. She couldn't wait to see her sisters again, and her mother, who would no doubt demand the Spider's head on her bractav platter.

At Zara's urgings, Amani had finally emerged from her carav and walked with the caravan. She'd even eaten with Zara in the kitchen. Amani remembered trying to do the same with Ziyad's people, but feeling uncomfortable in their presence. However it was obvious the Falcon's people loved

their princess and jumped over themselves to do her bidding.

Now, she and Zara walked together in the sand, only a few leagues away from their destination.

"Ziyad will come for you," Zara said, giving her a sideways glance. "Make no mistake."

Amani shivered in spite of the sweat rolling down her back. "He does not want me."

"Oh yes he does. That man has been trying to rebuild himself after his world was destroyed. I don't know him well, but what I do know is that he will fight for what he considers his, and from what I saw at his oasis, he still considers you his wife."

Amani scowled. "Then he should have thought about that before speaking the words that released me from our bond."

"Unfortunately, Ziyad is not one for thinking before acting. He is impulsive, but fiercely loyal. I do not believe he meant to divorce you. Khalil and I were trying to convince him to see you as his princess. I am sure his anger was directed toward us, not you."

Amani turned to look at the princess. "Whatever his reasoning, it does not matter. We would need to be remarried."

"Not necessarily."

"What do you mean?"

Zara wiped her brow. "Khalil has sent his falcons to summon the princes of the Golden Desert. He wants to call a council."

Being the daughter of the governor, Amani knew what that meant. If two princes couldn't settle a dispute, they called a council to settle it, relying on the decisions of their peers to judge fairly. And the governor of Suridesh presided.

"A council for what?" she asked.

"If Ziyad is willing to claim you as his princess, then your wedding vows will stand, assuming you choose to stay with him. If he is not willing, or if you do not wish to be with him any longer, then you will be divorced."

"However, it is not as easy as it sounds. The princes must vote on what they deem is right. They will hear what Ziyad did to you and choose if he deserves to be your

husband. If they vote no, then he cannot be your husband, even if he is willing to claim you as his princess, and even if you wish to go with him."

Amani knitted her brows. "So the princes must vote on whether our vows are still intact, then Ziyad must be willing to claim me *and* I make my choice?"

Zara nodded. "Correct."

"I don't know if I can go through with it."

The Falcon Princess gave her a sharp glance. "Why not?"

"If Ziyad is forced to make me his princess, then can we truly be happy? His resentment will fester until he lashes out once more."

Zara walked in silence before speaking again. "Did you notice a change in him? Before he spoke so harshly to you?"

Amani looked down at the sand and bit her lip, remembering. "He...opened up to me more than I thought he would. He told me he was only warm—in my arms. And...he wanted me to sit with him at the feast, even though I wasn't royalty. That's what started everything."

Zara rubbed Amani's shoulder when she heard the tears in her voice. "Ziyad is an intensely private person. The fact that he told you something from the heart is proof enough he cares for you. He was conflicted about where you should sit at the feast because you are his wife, but he'd previously declared you weren't his princess. His feelings were warring within him." She squeezed Amani's shoulder. "I have no doubt the Spider wants you to be his princess, but felt his duty was otherwise. Khalil believes, as do I, that the Princes' Council will open Ziyad's eyes and make him see what his heart has known all along."

"And what if you're wrong? What if Ziyad took his water supply on to Parradh and washed his hands of me?"

Zara looked Amani in the eye. "Peer into your heart of hearts, Amani. Do you *truly* believe he did? With all you know of Ziyad Bihar, do you believe a man such as that would back down from a fight? Would he give up so easily? Would he lie down and accept this defeat?"

Amani sighed deeply. She shook her head.

Zara continued. "Then you must prepare yourself for seeing him again, and ask yourself if you're willing to return

to his caravan. Loving a man is easy. It's staying with him that's the hard part."

Fourteen

Now that the Falcon's caravan had pulled up to the gates of Suridesh, Amani had second thoughts about visiting with her parents. She didn't wish for her shame to become theirs. A few people ran out to greet them, presumably friends and families of those who rode with the Falcon through the dunes.

"My husband has already sent word to your father with one of his falcons," Zara told her. "You will not need to tell him yourself."

Amani glanced at the Falcon Princess in awe. How had she known what she'd been thinking? She supposed the colors in Zara's head told her a lot about a person's thoughts. Her hand was on her shoulder, after all.

"I am a failure," Amani whispered, her chin trembling.

"You are not a failure!" Disbelief resounded in Zara's voice.

"I am," she insisted. "I've been passed over for marriage five times and here I return to Suridesh divorced, by the very man who denied me twice."

"No, the god of Spiders was directing your path."

Amani wiped her eyes and glanced at her friend. "You think so?"

"I do. Khalil and I are very close to the god of Falcons. He has guided us through our lives, and we have felt his touch on our hearts. I have no doubt the god of Spiders is at work here as well."

"How could being rejected be the work of the Spider god?"

"Our gods can see all of creation laid out before them."

The god of Spiders knew that one day Karis would pass. He knew you would be the one to heal his steward's heart. He didn't wish for you to marry the Scarab or any other man your father offered you to." Zara touched Amani's arm. "You were meant to be with the Spider Prince, Amani. The god of Spiders gave him Karis that so he could better love *you*."

"How could he possibly love me as much as he loved Karis?"

"Ziyad has come to care for you. Probably a lot more than you think. He can love you *and* he can love Karis. One love does not cancel out the other."

"Perhaps." Amani glanced up at the city gates. "There is my mother!"

Zara smiled and raised her hand. "Go and be with her."

Amani briskly walked the short distance and embraced Marad with tears in her eyes. Her sisters weren't too far behind.

"Where is Father?" Amani asked, wishing she could hide from prying eyes.

"He didn't want to come and shame you further with even more gossip," Marad said, keeping her voice quiet.

Amani took a deep shuddering breath. "I'm sorry, Mother!"

Marad pulled her to her chest and let her weep on her shoulder. "It is not your fault your husband divorced you. The Spider Prince is the one who should be sorry for giving up the most beautiful woman in the desert. And it will be my pleasure to tell him that when he arrives for the Council."

Amani was helpless to do anything more than follow her family back through the gates. She kept her eyes firmly on her feet, avoiding the curious gaze of onlookers, until she reached her father's white tent. Once inside, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Finally, she was home.

~ * ~

Ziyad left his caravan the moment they came to rest outside the walls of Suridesh. The Falcon's caravs weren't too far away. That meant Amani was here.

The sun was low on the horizon. By the looks of things, Ziyad had made good time. He'd been only a few

hours behind Khalil. Those long days of being on the move had paid off.

He ignored the people of his old friend. Those in green robes watched him curiously as he strode around their caravs and into the city. Many people stopped what they were doing to watch the Spider stalk by. A few whispered to each other.

His face was set—he was determined to win back the heart of his wife.

This wasn't going to be easy.

But was anything truly easy?

Ziyad rounded a bend and sighed with relief the moment he laid eyes on Ahmed's tent. He licked his lips and swallowed hard. But before he could announce himself outside the tent flap, Ahmed himself came out to greet him, with a stern look on his otherwise welcoming features. Ziyad looked down at him.

When the governor didn't say a word, Ziyad spoke. "I am here to see my wife."

"You have no wife."

After the long, harrowing push to get to Suridesh, Ziyad was in no mood to play games. "I am here for Amani."

"My daughter is not here."

Ziyad growled. "Do not lie to me, Ahmed. I know she rode the Falcon's caravan."

The rotund little man nodded and his jowls shook. "That's right. And she is a guest in the Falcon's royal tent. I suggest you look there. Although I do not believe you are welcome."

Ziyad took a deep breath and sighed hard. "Then I will go there."

He turned to leave, but Ahmed stopped him. "You will not be allowed to see her, Spider. She does not wish to see you."

"She is my wife. She will see me."

"You divorced her. Therefore, you cannot stand in her presence until you face the Princes' Council."

Ziyad slowly turned to face Ahmed. "The Princes' Council?"

"Yes," the governor said, clearing his throat nervously. "The Falcon has called the princes to Suridesh to make you

stand trial, to decide if your wedding vows to Amani are still intact. But by the pain and suffering you have caused my daughter, I pray they vote no."

Ziyad was taken aback by the venom in the man's words. But he bowed his head anyway, in a sign of respect. "Then I will take my leave of you, Ahmed. Until the Council."

With that, Ziyad turned on his heel and retreated down the road. If Amani was staying at the Falcon's tent, there was no way Khalil would let him see her. Perhaps he could find a way to sneak in. Surely she wouldn't turn him away.

He hoped.

~ * ~

Ziyad waited until night had fallen. Khalil's royal tent was dark. He knew where the prince and his wife slept. He also knew where the prince allowed his guests to stay. They had their own space in the rear of the tent, partitioned off from the main living area.

And that was where Amani had to be.

Looking left and right, Ziyad prepared to lift the outer wall of the tent to go under it. But a booming voice in the darkness stopped him cold.

"Ziyad Bihar, what do you think you are doing?"

He groaned loudly. That was Khalil, and by the sound of his voice, he was gloating.

"I am here to see my wife, Falcon," Ziyad growled. "Care to stop me?"

Khalil glanced around the empty street as if looking for someone. "Hmm, I didn't know you had a wife, Spider."

"Don't play this game with me," Ziyad said, moving away from the tent and crossing his arms on his chest. "I have come a long way to make amends, and you will not get in my way."

"I am not playing a game." The Falcon's voice had become deceptively calm. If Ziyad didn't know him better, he wouldn't think he was furious at all. "Amani doesn't wish to see you. And by the law of the princes, you cannot see her until the Council has convened."

"And how long will that take?" Ziyad asked in frustration.

"As long as it takes for Tariq, Qadir, Siraj and Jaden to

arrive."

"You have no right to keep Amani from me, Khalil." Ziyad tried hard to ignore the nagging in his gut that told him Khalil *did* have that right. He'd witnessed Ziyad's mistake, and so had both of their caravans.

"You cannot pretend nothing happened at your oasis, Spider. You divorced Amani, and no amount of wishing it was otherwise can undo what you have done. At first, I thought this was the best thing you'd ever done for her. But now I'm not so sure. For the entire trip to Suridesh, your *wife* never emerged from her carav. At least not until we were almost here. She has removed your ring from her finger and adopted the green of my people. Amani is more than welcome to ride my caravan if the princes decide she is better off without you and your black heart."

Ziyad sucked in his breath. "She removed my colors?"

Khalil nodded slowly. "You have broken her. The woman she once was is gone. She no longer smiles. She no longer laughs. And with this disgrace, she will never find a man who loves her."

"She cannot be with another, she is *my* wife!" Ziyad couldn't keep his voice down no matter how much he wanted to. He ran his fingers through his hair in an effort to keep a grip on his raging terror.

"She is not!" Khalil fired right back. "Amani is free of you, Ziyad. If she wanted, she could marry anyone—Hyrām perhaps—and be happy."

Ziyad's eyes narrowed as fury blinded him. "Hyrām was here?"

Khalil gave him a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. "While you strode to Ahmed's tent, your cousin came here. He had a nice chat with Amani before returning to your caravan."

"*Gods*," Ziyad whispered, feeling bile rising up in the back of his throat.

"If she wishes to marry the man, I will gladly oversee her ceremony. Then she *would* return to your caravan. Except this time, she'd have the right to sit near you at their wedding feast, instead of with the servants."

Ziyad's breathing quickened as panic began to overwhelm him. "She wouldn't marry Hyram. She has told

me she doesn't find him handsome."

"Are you sure of that?" Khalil asked, his voice gentler. "He has shown her more compassion and friendship than you ever did. Amani needs a man who will love her, Ziyad. If that man is not you, then let that man be your cousin. Find another to bear your heirs. You said yourself one woman is like any other."

"I made a mistake, Falcon. I need to right it."

"If fixing your mistake is your only concern, then she will not return to you. The princes will not agree to allow your wedding vows to stand unless you claim her as your princess."

Ziyad watched helplessly as Khalil pulled something from the folds of his robes. The Falcon held up a new Spider armband, made of platinum and onyx. It shone in the light of the moons and Ziyad gasped at its beauty.

"I know you buried your armband with Karis," Khalil said. "And I also know you consider her your princess, but she is dead, my friend. Amani is warm and alive. She can love you for the rest of your life. Karis never can." He lifted the armband. "Zara made this for you. If you want to keep Amani, if she is the only woman for you, if your heart burns with jealousy at the mere mention of Hiram's name, then you must give her this. *You must claim her*. Or else merely *divorcing* her will *not* be the biggest mistake of your life. If you don't claim her, it will haunt you forever."

With trembling hands, Ziyad reached for the band. Khalil gave it to him and stepped back.

"Wait for the Council, my friend. Then make your choice."

Ziyad watched as Khalil disappeared around the side of his tent. He clutched his new armband to his chest while his stomach fluttered wildly. Either Amani was to be the next Spider Princess or he'd have to let her go.

And letting her go was not an option.

Fifteen

Jaden Rahasha, Cobra Prince of the Golden Desert, gazed out of his carav and shuddered when Suridesh came into view. He'd considered ignoring Khalil's call for the Princes' Council, but then the others would only convene to ask why he'd abandoned his duty.

And he couldn't bring attention to himself. Not if he was to stand before the Spider.

"Calm down," his princess, Sahirah, said behind him. She ran her hand over his shoulder. Once, he'd never been able to get enough of her. But his resentment toward his wife had only been growing these past few months. "They cannot possibly know our secret."

Jaden turned from the door and slammed it behind him, pushing her further into their royal carav. "The witch is dead, woman. And with her died her magic. The Spider himself killed her, along with the Falcon. There is nothing now that can prevent Ziyad from knowing it was *you* who killed his princess!"

"Don't be absurd," Sahirah said, adjusting her dark brown robes. "The Spider does not know."

"How can you be so sure?" Jaden yelled. His heart thumped wildly in his chest. "It is possible we are wandering into a trap! What if Ziyad has already learned of our mistake? What if this Council is nothing more than a ruse to bring us to him before he slaughters us?"

Sahirah gazed at him with thinly veiled animosity. "The Spider would not choose such devious methods to kill us, husband," she spat. "If he wanted us dead, I have no doubt he'd bring war to our caravan."

"I do not share your certainty." Jaden began pacing on the fine brown and gold carpet. The embroidered cobras in the fibers seemed to be mocking him. "We should attack first."

"Are you mad?" Sahirah screeched. "Every prince in the desert is in Suridesh. There is no way we can attack anyone."

"Not obviously," Jaden mused, scratching his chin. "But the Spider will find out what we have tried to hide, one way or another. We can no longer keep the secret that our oasis has been shrinking these past two years. The god of Cobras has forsaken us! People will begin asking questions. Rumors will spread. Never has a god looked away from his steward."

"You do not know for sure if the god of Cobras has turned his face from us." Sahirah tossed her hair over her shoulder.

Jaden gave her a piercing glare. "Do I not? The water in my barrels is mixed with mud, Sahirah. It is only a matter of time before my oasis is a wasteland, and everyone will know it. And it's all because of you!"

Sahirah gasped. "How *dare* you?"

Jaden strode right up to her and grabbed her by the throat. "You killed a sitting princess," he snarled. "The god of Spiders would have demanded restitution from the god of Cobras, and this is our punishment for your folly!"

"It was an accident!" she cried, her eyes wide with fear. "She was in the way. I couldn't stop my horse in time. *You* were the one who sent me and the others to attack the Spider."

Suddenly, Jaden's cock sprang to the fore. Seeing Sahirah so unhinged, so scared of him had ignited something deep and primal within him. "I wanted you to only scare the Spider's caravan. It is not my fault you took Karis's life in your own incompetence." He squeezed a little harder. Sahirah could no longer breathe. An idea came to him.

"Perhaps if I kill you, the god of Cobras will find favor with me again. A princess for a princess."

Sahirah's eyes bulged and her face reddened. She twisted and turned, but her strength was no match for him. Her fingernails scratched his hands and arms, but he would

not be moved. He was through with this woman. She'd been nothing more than a thorn in his side since she'd lain with his father on their wedding day.

The Cobra Princess dropped to her knees, trying desperately to get away, but he held her fast.

"Finally, princess, after these two long years, I am hard for you." Jaden reached into his robes and yanked down his undergarments, revealing his stiff, aching cock.

While he crushed the life from Sahirah, his other hand stroked himself, until her gasps for breath merged with his own gasps of pleasure. Ecstasy built within him until the pressure was almost too much to bear. The moment he came, he growled loudly, pumping his hand while his seed overflowed onto Sahirah's face and hair.

He stood gazing down at his wife and triumph lit within him. She was lifeless. He was finally free of her. Perhaps now, his god would see fit to bring back his oasis.

And with Sahirah's death, perhaps he could avoid the Spider's wrath.

~ * ~

Days felt like years to Amani. She'd been staying in her father's tent, despite what her father and the Falcon had told Ziyad. Khalil had known good and well Ziyad would try to sneak in and see her, and he'd been right. It warmed Amani's heart that he'd tried, but she was glad she hadn't seen him before the Council. His powers of persuasion were unparalleled, and she had no doubt he would have whisked her back to his caravan without having to face his peers.

But thankfully, the princes had been close to Suridesh and hadn't taken that long to arrive. The Cobra had arrived shortly after the Viper, and yesterday, both the Scarab and the Jackal had made their appearance.

Today was the day the stewards of the gods decided her fate.

Amani's heart fluttered wildly and she tried hard to swallow her stomach. She still wore the Falcon's green rather than donning the white of her father. Ahmed had tried to persuade her to rejoin his household, but she'd refused. She could no longer be a burden to him. If she was to stay divorced from Ziyad, then she'd ride the dunes with the Falcon, and hope his caravan led the way to her happiness.

The Council was to be held in a large tent that had been specially erected for this purpose outside the city walls. The princes were convening there now.

Amani had been woken by her mother before dawn, to give her time to prepare for what was to come. Marad had brushed Amani's hair until it shone, threading braids throughout and clipping them away from her face. Her green robes were brand new, having been sewn just for today, and she'd eaten a large breakfast, taking advantage of her mother's cooking prowess.

"The Spider Prince may be an ass," her mother whispered to her when she'd been braiding her hair. "But he's a good man. If you choose to return to him, you will not be shaming our house, Amani."

Amani smiled and met her mother's eyes. "I know. But out of all the men in the desert, I chose to love the most complicated one."

Marad scoffed. "All men are complicated. If you weren't with the Spider, you'd be with someone else who'd make you tear out your hair."

Despite her nerves, Amani chuckled while her mother grinned.

Now, however, she was being led to the Council tent by her father, as curious people lined the streets. The residents of Suridesh were not allowed in the Council, but speculation would run rampant, and Amani had no doubt the underbelly of the tent city would be placing bets and wagering whether or not she'd return to the Spider's caravan. Even now, walking through the streets, she had to endure the scrutiny of the people. It was almost more than she could bear, having so many eyes upon her.

Gods above, but she was going to revisit her breakfast.

Concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other, she made her way through the streets and somehow arrived at the Council tent in one piece.

~ * ~

Ziyad stood in the tent and paced back and forth. He was nervous. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so edgy. He swallowed hard. He coughed. He paced once again.

The princes who'd arrived for the Council were being seated one by one. Their pillows were arranged in a large circle surrounding the center of the tent, where Ziyad would stand with Amani. Each pillow on the ground was the color of the prince who'd sit there, and it wasn't long before Ziyad was made to endure the knowing stares of his brethren.

The only princes who weren't smirking were the Falcon, the Cobra, and himself. Ziyad glanced at each prince in turn, noticing with surprise that Jaden turned away suddenly, a bit too suddenly, almost on the verge of being rude.

But perhaps Ziyad was reading into things. *He* was the focus of this Council after all. Perhaps the Cobra was upset at having to drop his plans and travel to Suridesh to solve the Spider's problem.

Ziyad didn't blame him.

Soon after the princes were seated, Ahmed entered the tent and Amani followed meekly behind him. Just seeing her again sent a shudder straight through him.

She was gorgeous. She was wearing the Falcon's green. She wasn't looking up from her feet.

Every instinct he had told Ziyad to march over to her, throw her over his shoulder, and walk back out into the sunshine. But his peers would stop him and he'd further shame the governor of the tent city.

Ziyad's eyes were on fire. His breaths came in short, sharp gasps. He wasn't going to survive this intact.

The instant Amani's eyes lifted to his, he saw her visibly shaking. Gods in heaven, but he wanted to wrap himself around her. Ziyad's chin trembled but he managed to keep from crying out and making a fool of himself.

Amani walked past him and turned, standing opposite him in the center of the tent. Once she was before him, hands clasped and head bowed, Ziyad's world tilted. For just one kiss, one caress, he'd give his caravan, his oasis.

His very life.

"Princes of the Golden Desert," Ahmed said, his voice booming. "We are gathered here to decide the fate of Ziyad Bihar's marriage to my daughter, Amani Bantish."

Ziyad bit his tongue to keep from correcting the governor.

"It has been whispered the Spider Prince divorced her in front of not only his own caravan, but that of the Falcon as well. Khalil, I give you the floor."

Khalil stood and relayed to the others what he'd witnessed, but Ziyad had stopped listening. The only thing that mattered was keeping Amani by his side. His heart overflowed with regret at the look on her face. He needed to make it right. He had to make Amani understand that he would never hurt her again.

Regardless of his better judgment, he'd gone and fallen in love with his beautiful wife.

Sixteen

Amani couldn't stand staring Ziyad in the eye, but she couldn't look away, either. He was too handsome for his own good. The black robes he wore seemed new, just as hers were. His hair was clean and combed back, while the patch of hair on his chin had been neatly trimmed. He'd freshly shaved, and the faint scent of rahala blossoms filled the air.

The reality of the Spider Prince was much more breathtaking than her dreams had ever been. Since her arrival in Suridesh, her own anticipation at seeing him again had fueled her dreams, and more than once she'd woken with tears in her eyes.

The sound of Khalil's booming voice pulled her out of her reverie. "My fellow princes and the governor of Suridesh, we must vote. Shall the Spider Prince be allowed to stay married to Amani Bantish? All who approve, show your hand."

Glancing around the tent, Amani watched as the Scarab, the Viper, the Cobra, and the Jackal all raised their hands. Only the Falcon and her own father kept theirs down. She looked back at Ziyad to see him scowling at Khalil.

"It would seem," Ahmed exclaimed, "that the vote is four to two in favor of the Spider. Ziyad, do you wish to claim my daughter as your princess?"

Ziyad's dark, intense eyes once again rested on her. Every inch of her skin pebbled with awareness. She bit her lip and his face softened.

"Yes," he said with a nod. "I do."

His words shocked her. They weren't filled with fury or animosity at being forced to accept her. He seemed...willing.

"Then plead your case to Amani before she makes her choice."

Silence descended upon the tent after her father had finished speaking. Ziyad fidgeted, then took a deep breath. Within two steps, he stood before her. It was a miracle she didn't fly into his arms.

"Do not touch her before she has chosen!" The Falcon's voice made Amani jump. Already, she felt tears well in her eyes.

"*Amani*," Ziyad whispered, his voice filled with longing. "I have missed you. I am sorry for ever hurting you. I know I have done it on more than one occasion. I did not mean to divorce you at my oasis. The words I said were said out of fear. I could feel my heart slipping and I couldn't let that happen.

"My heart was slipping because...because..." He stopped to sigh and run his fingers through his hair. When he looked back at her, his eyes were red-rimmed. "I was terrified of falling in love with you."

Amani inhaled sharply. Her heart screamed at her to take another breath, but she could do nothing more than stand there with her eyes wide.

"After you had gone," he continued, his voice wavering, "I knew I had let you slip away. I'd lost Karis to a horrible fate, but I'd lost you due to my own stupidity. And I also realized..." Ziyad cleared his throat. "That it was too late for me. I'd already fallen in love with you. I couldn't let you go. I couldn't let you think the worst of me."

Tears fell down Amani's cheeks. He loved her. He *loved* her. She stared at him in disbelief.

Without warning, Ziyad dropped to his knees before her and bowed his head. "I'm so sorry, Amani. Please forgive me." His voice broke and his shoulders shook. By the gods, he was crying. The powerful Spider Prince was supplicating himself before her.

"I cannot lose you," he continued. "I...I'm suffocating. I'm drowning. I can no longer face my life alone. *I need you!*"

Amani released her own sob and covered her mouth. She glanced at the Falcon, who gave her a smile and a single nod. She had no idea if touching Ziyad was against their law,

but right now, she didn't much care.

Reaching out her hand, she touched the top of his head. Ziyad's entire body quaked when she threaded her fingers through his hair.

"By the law, the Spider Prince has made his case before you, Amani," her father said, his voice gentler than before. "Do you choose to stay in his caravan?"

"I must know one thing first before I make my choice," she said, finding her courage before the princes of the desert.

"By all means," Ahmed replied, raising his hand.

She swallowed hard. "Ziyad, look at me."

He took a moment, but he raised his head dutifully. Amani was shocked at the sight of him. His eyes were red and wet, and his chin trembled in an effort to hold back his sobs. It was all he could do to control his emotions. Once their gazes locked, a few tears escaped him.

"I do not wish to be your princess if you were forced to this decision," she said, still threading her hand in his hair. "I don't want you to ever forget Karis. She is your princess."

Ziyad shook his head. "*You* are my princess. You have brought my heart back to life. You have rescued me from myself. My people, our people, adore you. *I...adore you.*" He paused. "I was not forced, Amani. I could have walked away. I could have let you go. But I am here, and I am at your mercy."

Silence once again pressed down on her. Everyone in the tent was awaiting her decision, but the only person she cared about was Ziyad. He told her she was his princess. She would honor his choice for the rest of her life.

"My name is Amani Bihar, not Amani Bantish. I choose to stay in the Spider's caravan."

Ziyad closed his eyes and smiled in relief as more tears escaped him. In one swift movement, he stood and grabbed her, then spun in circles. Gods, but the strength of his arms had her gasping in his ear. Holding him close once again made her realize just how much she'd missed him.

"By the law," Khalil called out once again. "Ziyad must bind himself to you again by blood. It was he who broke his wedding vow, and it is he who must right it."

Ziyad put her down and pulled out his dagger. He

gave himself a small cut on his thumb and a bead of blood appeared. Without his prompting, Amani took his thumb and suckled, swirling her tongue on his skin.

"*God of Spiders!*" he exclaimed loudly.

The others chuckled and the sound of their laughter echoed across the tent.

Khalil cleared his throat. "Now, the Spider must claim his princess." The Falcon walked over to them and handed Ziyad a perfect new Spider armband.

Amani gasped. "Where did you get this?" she asked, breathless.

Ziyad grinned at her. "I am a prince," he said. "I have my ways."

She glanced at Khalil. "Zara."

The Falcon's eyes twinkled and he bowed then stepped away.

Ziyad took her right arm and placed the band on her bicep. The jewelry hummed before squeezing her, fitting her perfectly as the legs of the spider wrapped around her arm.

She gazed at Ziyad in wonder. The look in his eyes was nothing short of adoration.

"With the gods' blessings," the Falcon said, "you are married. Again. Go and rule your caravan with firm hands and gentle hearts."

Everyone present began to applaud.

"I must kiss you now," Ziyad whispered, his eyes mischievous. "It's tradition."

Amani arched a brow, but didn't say a word. Instead, she pulled his head down and kissed him for all she was worth. Instantly his tongue tangled with hers as he held the back of her head, ensuring her no escape. Ziyad's flavor filled her mouth. She could do nothing but moan when he deliberately pressed his cock into her belly, letting her know exactly what he wanted.

Amani forced herself to pull her mouth from his. "It is also tradition," she whispered in his ear, "to consummate our marriage, my prince."

"Gods, minx," he growled. "I've been without you for weeks. I'm about ready to take you here in the Council tent."

"No," she replied, tonguing his earlobe. "Take me in our royal carav. Right now."

Amani shrieked when Ziyad tossed her over his shoulder.

"Excuse us," he said to the others. "But my wife needs to change her clothes into something more suitable for the Spider Princess to wear."

"Like the Spider Prince?"

Amani had no idea who said that remark, but once again the princes were laughing. Ziyad ignored them and strode from the tent.

~ * ~

The Cobra stood from his pillow in the Council tent and nervously rubbed his sweaty palms together. Being in Ziyad's presence had been the most uncomfortable thing he'd ever had to endure. The Spider had made eye contact before Amani had entered the tent, but Jaden had to look away.

He was sure Ziyad would be able to see the secrets he kept hidden behind his eyes. Bile rose in his throat. Sahirah had said this Council wasn't a trap. But looking around him, Jaden noticed the others giving him strange glances.

He tried to run his fingers through his hair and adjust his robes as if nothing was amiss, but it was nearly impossible to stop his hands from shaking.

Ziyad had mentioned Karis's accident to Amani. That had been no mere coincidence. Gods, did the Spider already know? Had he killed Sahirah in vain?

No. Sahirah's death had been necessary to rebuild his oasis and regain his favor in the eyes of the god of Cobras. Now that she was dead, he could blame Karis's death on her and claim ignorance of the deed.

But that look... When the Spider had held his eyes, he'd arched his brow. The hairs on Jaden's neck stood on end. He knew. The Spider Prince knew who'd killed Karis! *Gods above.* And if he knew that, then he had to know that Jaden had tried to hide it from him through Mother's magic. The witch had claimed that the Spider would never know. But the Spider had killed Mother at the Falcon's oasis.

Perhaps the witch had betrayed him and told Ziyad Jaden's deepest fear. That had to be what his look meant. He'd been claiming Amani while vowing vengeance for Karis.

"Jaden!" The smack on his back made him cry out and jump before he realized the Scarab stood behind him with a

wide grin. "Haven't seen you in awhile. How've you been? Are you all right? You look pale."

Jaden's eyes widened as he gazed into Qadir's face. "I...I am...not feeling well."

Qadir's brows knit together. "I'm sorry to hear that. Where is your lovely wife? Trianna has been asking about her. We should dine together this evening."

Jaden's sweat ran cold. "She...isn't feeling too well either, I'm afraid. We won't be able to dine with you."

"That's too bad. Trianna will be disappointed. What happened to your hands?"

Jaden looked down, noticing for the first time the scabs and bruises that marred them. "I...uh...Sahirah is *rough*, if you understand."

Qadir gave him a half-grin. "Looks like you have a hellcat. Well done, my boy."

Jaden's eyes narrowed. The Scarab was mocking him. His heart burned, but he didn't dare let on that he knew. The princes of the desert were conspiring against him. He had to do something. He wasn't about to lose his throne.

"I must take my leave," he growled, turning away from Qadir with a flourish. He squinted once he stepped out into the sunlight and strode across the sand to his caravan. The Spider was no doubt going to kill him as soon as he had the chance.

The Cobra just had to make sure he struck first.

Seventeen

Amani had blushed at Ziyad's haste to make it to his caravan. She was slung over his shoulder and his caravan was a little ways off. All she could do was hang on and hope he'd come to his senses.

A few rowdy onlookers from the gates whistled and cheered as they walked by. Amani knew it wouldn't take long before word had spread that she'd become the new Spider Princess. But she didn't relish the thought of having to endure their knowing stares after being carried back to Ziyad's caravan like a sack of the Scarab's gandarang fruit.

"Ziyad!" she cried, laughing. "Put me down. Everyone can see!"

"Good!" he answered, his tone jovial. "Then they'll know beyond the shadow of a doubt you belong to me." He didn't even sound winded and the caravan was still many paces away. "Especially my cousin."

"You *are* jealous!" she exclaimed. "I knew it."

Amani cried out at the sharp smack he gave her ass.

"I am not jealous, minx," he said, finally breathing harder. "I am merely concerned about who my princess spends her time with."

Ziyad began to rub her, right where he'd smacked her. That touch alone had her wishing he'd lower his hand between her legs.

"Do you want to know how much time I spent with Hiram?" she asked, just as they reached his caravan. The people of the Spider Prince cheered and shouted, some even danced and sang. No doubt tonight would be a great feast in their honor.

Ziyad growled as he strode down the line.

"I wasn't staying with the Falcon," she went on. "I was with my father. And Hiram visited me every day. He told me about you, about your journey here. Even gave me a Jandris blossom."

"Enough."

Amani continued, needling her husband and enjoying herself. "He ate dinner with us one night and my father was quite taken with him."

"If you wish for my cousin to be beheaded, by all means, continue, my love."

Ziyad had reached his carav and leapt up the steps like a cat. The door was no match for him as he opened it with magic then closed it behind him in the same way. Only then did he lift her off his shoulder, but he did not let her feet touch the floor.

Amani grinned at him, loving the disheveled picture he presented while his breaths puffed on her cheeks. She grabbed hold of his neck and hooked her legs around his waist.

"I am teasing you, Spider," she whispered. "Hiram never visited me. And if he had, I would have sent him away. There is only one man in the desert I love to distraction, but unfortunately, Brand never visited me either."

"Gods above, woman," Ziyad said through his chuckles. "Do you want me to behead *everyone* in my caravan?"

"What I want," she replied, tugging on his hair. "Is your cock between my legs. Think you can manage?"

Amani had no idea where her inhibitions had gone. But she grinned wickedly at Ziyad's look of shock. Leaning forward, all she did was lick his lips before he crushed his mouth to hers.

She held on tight as Ziyad attacked her like a starving man, devouring her whole. She could barely keep up with his mouth as he delved. She rubbed against him, wanting to be naked but not willing to let him go to disrobe.

With a growl, he knelt on the floor and laid her down, pushing her away to tug on her belt-wrap.

"No, don't go yet," she protested, yanking him back with her fists full of his robes. Her mouth took his in another

powerful kiss, this time with Ziyad sprawled on top of her. Amani's hands dove inside his robes, only touching a small portion of his chest. Ripping her mouth away, she kissed and bit him down his neck, letting her tongue explore the line of his collarbone.

"Amani," he whispered, easing back. "Unless you want me to rip this fine green robe, you must let me take it off of you properly."

She nodded and watched as he unwound the wrap and opened her robe, peeling it down her arms. His fingers brushed the Spider ring she wore on a chain around her neck and he swallowed hard. She smiled at his discovery. He hadn't realized she still had it with her. That alone made her heart swell.

He tugged on her undergarments as well as her sandals until she lay naked beneath him. With a trusting grin, she placed one hand on his cheek and stroked his face with her thumb.

Ziyad's eyes returned to hers. "You will never again wear another prince's colors."

"Only yours," she replied.

He nodded. "Only mine."

Ziyad lowered his head and kissed her belly, slowly licking her in an upward path. "Gods, Amani, I never thought I'd love another woman. I was content in my solitude. But you made me care for you."

His mouth had found the peak of her breast. Amani gasped as he opened wide, taking her in only to slowly release her. His teeth lightly bit her stiff nipple and he grinned.

"How dare you make me want you, minx?"

Ziyad retreated only to advance up her other breast, capturing her second nipple in much the same way. Amani's clit demanded she rub against him. As if he'd heard her thought, he brought his knee between her legs.

"How dare you make me need you?"

His mouth now explored her neck, nibbling and licking, making her skin pebble. Amani's hips worked against his knee and he pressed even harder into her pussy. She clutched onto his arms, lost in the sweep of his silk robe against her.

"How dare you make me love you?"

Ziyad had found her ear and tasted her there. His hot breath shuddered through her entire body. In that instant, she came and cried out against his shoulder. He replaced his knee with his fingers, bringing her higher.

When she opened her eyes, she was surprised at the tears falling into her hair. He saw them and kissed them away.

"*Ziyad*," she breathed as she floated down from the heavens.

"What?" he answered, still nuzzling her.

She pulled on his belt-wrap, rejoicing when his robes finally gave way. In a flash, he was as naked as she.

"I love you, too."

~ * ~

Ziyad closed his eyes and grinned. Leaning his forehead on hers, he inhaled deeply, taking her breath into his lungs. "You have no idea how happy it makes me to hear you say that," he whispered.

"You deserve to be happy."

He shook his head. "I don't know about that. I've been an ass."

"*Ziyad*," she said, cupping his face. "You've lived through a nightmare I cannot even imagine. You were angry. You were grieving and terrified. I do not fault you for trying to deal with everything in the only way you knew how."

"My anger and grief pushed you away," he replied, giving her a chaste kiss. "I never would have forgiven myself if you'd chosen not to return to me."

Her gentle smile melted away the last remnants of his fear. "Do you know what Zara told me when we were on our way to Suridesh?"

"What?"

"She said the god of Spiders was looking down on us."

Ziyad scoffed. "The god of Spiders is the one who ripped my life to shreds."

Amani's eyes softened. "No, Ziyad. He made it so I wasn't accepted by any man. Not even you, until you were ready. He knew Karis would be killed. He knew you would need someone to heal your heart. We were meant to be together, my love."

"If that's true," he said, knitting his brows. "Then why didn't I just choose you over Karis?"

"Because then *I* would be in that grave by your oasis."

"*Gods.*" Ziyad shivered at her words. Just the thought of Amani dying like his first wife sent a chill straight to his bones.

Amani caressed his arms and shoulders. "As much as you loved Karis, the god of Spiders gave her to you so that you could recognize love when you found it again. When you found me."

"She was pregnant, Amani," he said, unable to hold back the sorrow within him.

"I know," she whispered, giving him a few kisses across his face. "But do you not believe that your child and your first wife are in heaven watching over us? Karis knew I had fancied you for years. Perhaps she asked the god of Spiders to give me to you. She knew you'd come to love me as well."

Ziyad released the breath he'd been holding and hugged Amani close. "I won't survive if you leave me too."

"I will never leave you. I do not believe that's our god's will. I will give you a brood of sons. I will love you for the rest of my life and into eternity."

After her confession, Ziyad could no longer hold back. He lowered his head and kissed her, but unlike his brutal kisses, this time he was tender, drawing Amani's tongue into his mouth, stroking it serenely with his own.

With a moan, she wrapped one of her lovely legs around his hips, inviting him in. He didn't give a single thought to resistance. He pulled back gently only to push forward, sinking his cock into her, and cherishing her heated gasps.

Lifting his palm, Ziyad teased her nipple and watched as his wife threw her head back, giving him free reign over her neck. As he plunged within her depths, he nibbled on her skin until she returned her mouth to his.

Gods, but he wouldn't last much longer. Her fingers in his hair ensured he couldn't pull away, but he didn't want to. He wanted to lose himself inside of her and never emerge.

Her body's rhythm against him urged him to thrust harder. He obeyed her silent command. Amani's eyes caught

his and wouldn't let go. He knew the exact moment she came. Her pussy gripped him and pulsed her pleasure as she cried out, making half-moons on his shoulders with her fingernails.

That was all it took.

Ziyad's own pleasure shot from him, into her, over and over. He growled and took her mouth, demanding every ounce of her heart. He pushed forward until he was completely sheathed, and gasped as her heat burned him from the inside out.

Amani didn't say a word, but her hands did the talking. She loved every part of him she could reach, from his arms to his ass. The trusting smile on her face sealed his fate.

He belonged to her. For the rest of his days.

Eighteen

"Amani?"

"Mmm?" She rubbed her thigh on Ziyad's, content to snuggle with him under his blankets. His arm was around her shoulders, and she rested her head on his chest, while drawing circles on his skin.

"Do you have magic?"

She was silent for a moment before answering. "I didn't think I did for a long time. But I found out after you'd married Karis that my ability is with plants." Amani lifted her head and rested her cheek on her palm. She gazed down at him and smiled.

"My wife is a gardener?" Ziyad flashed his handsome grin at her, making her suck in her breath. She'd never get tired of seeing him so content and relaxed. She doubted he'd ever know just how gorgeous she thought him to be.

"I suppose I am," she replied. "I was alone a lot and spending time outdoors was one of my favorite things to do. Along with gazing at the stars, I used to cultivate my mother's garden. But one day, a plant was dying. I spoke to it. I wished it wouldn't die, because I needed someone to talk to."

"You had sisters," Ziyad said.

Amani nodded. "Yes, older sisters who were married, younger sisters who chased after dragonflies, and other sisters who were too enraptured with attracting men for their own good. I'd learned a long time ago there was no hope for me."

"Don't talk that way," he told her, tucking her hair behind her ear. "You are mine now. And I will not allow the

Spider Princess to think less of herself."

She held his hand in hers and brought his palm to her lips. "I don't believe this now, but I did then. The plants were my only friends after Karis left with you."

He gave her a short nod. "Continue."

"My sisters learned I talked to the plants and they laughed at me. I was teased for it, as well as for not being able to find a husband."

Ziyad sat up so fast, Amani yelped when he flipped her over. "They *laughed* at you?"

His tone was angry, if not on the verge of furious.

"Childish banter, nothing more," she assured him.

His eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. Amani's heart thudded within her. The Spider was ready to do battle. With her sisters.

She grinned. "I am sure that *now*, they are crying in their tea, Your Highness," she said, kissing his nose. "For *I* am the Spider Princess and *they* are the mere wives of goat herders."

Ziyad grinned devilishly. "Perhaps the god of Spiders bestows his justice after all."

Amani giggled and he chuckled right along with her.

"What happened with the dead plant?" he asked.

"Well, after I...told it not to die, it didn't. It began to grow before my very eyes. The leaves turned green, the stems became strong and its petals bloomed more than I had ever hoped. It comforted me on many nights. My mother still makes her perfume from it."

Ziyad leaned back and cocked his head. "Your mother wears the perfume of the rahala blossom."

"Yes, she does."

"But...those grow only at my oasis."

"That is why I knew it bloomed from my own ability. That rahala blossom was the gift you gave my mother when you came to Suridesh to choose your wife between Karis and myself."

"I...I gave a blossom to Karis's mother as well."

"Her blossom didn't last but one day after you'd left the tent city with your bride. My mother's flower still blooms."

"It has been years, Amani!"

She nodded. "After the Falcon told my father you'd finally accepted me, I used to pray to the god of Spiders where that rahala blossom is planted. It reminded me of you, of your strength and resilience. And your gentleness and honor. It is a delicate flower, but it survived the odds against it."

Ziyad just stared at her with his mouth open.

"I suppose I've been in love with you for a very long time, my handsome Spider."

"Then how could you accept me?" he asked. "After what I'd told you before we wed, that I would never love you. How could you accept that if you cared for me so?"

"I knew you were hurting and I knew you were brusque, but I also knew a side of you many didn't. You'd once flirted with me. You were a good man. And I knew I wasn't about to find another husband. I figured...you'd give me a child who would love me."

"Amani, by the gods, that is no way to live a life!"

She shrugged but kept her voice even. "I would have accepted you regardless of your terms, Ziyad."

"I must have broken your heart a hundred different ways."

"Do not think on it, husband," she whispered. "What's done is done. All we can do now is move forward from here. We love each other. That is what we should think on."

Ziyad lowered himself until he stretched out beside her. "The Falcon was right."

"About?"

"I don't deserve you. I almost dragged you down into my despair."

"Ah, but you didn't drag me down, Spider," she replied, caressing his belly. "I lifted you out."

He closed his eyes and sighed brokenly.

"And you *do* deserve me," Amani continued, tugging him close. "You are the Spider Prince of the Golden Desert and your god has seen fit to bless his steward with a second bride. You deserve me, Ziyad. And it's about time you believe it."

He groaned and crushed her to his body, then hid his face in the crook of her neck. "Everything I am belongs to you, Amani Bihar."

Amani took a shuddering breath. "Just when I thought I couldn't love you any more than I already do..."

Her husband chuckled and silenced her with a sweet, amorous kiss.

~ * ~

When evening came, Amani marveled that all the princes save for one came to their caravan in celebration. Apparently, the Cobra and his princess weren't feeling well and had declined to come. But the feast Ziyad ordered was what they should have had the first time they married. Not for the food, but for the revelry.

Amani sat on Ziyad's lap, due to his own insistence. He'd given her a lovely black robe to wear, heavily embroidered with silver spiders along the cuffs and hem. The sleeves were short, to show off her new Spider armband, and the silver belt-wrap she wore glittered in the firelight.

The Scarab and the Falcon regaled them with their prowess for playing their lialas, stringed instruments that filled the air with lyrical music. Both men sang the same song, yet their booming voices complemented each other, harmonizing as they played. The Scarab's liala was a gorgeous blue, matching the color of his caravan, while the Falcon's instrument was the green of his people.

"Would you care to dance, my princess?" Ziyad breathed in Amani's ear.

Her back straightened and she cleared her throat. "I've never danced before. I might step on your toes."

"Never?" Ziyad sounded surprised.

"Never." She looked him in the eye, silently reminding him that men had never looked twice at her.

His soft grin stole her breath. "Then I will teach you. Come."

He stood and pulled her behind him until they were before the fire. Many hoots and whistles filled the air, making Amani smile and gaze at Ziyad's chest in embarrassment. But his finger hooked her chin and made her gaze into his eyes.

Soon, she swayed in Ziyad's arms and placed her hands on his shoulders. As if taking a cue from their prince, many other couples began to dance as well. The Scarab and the Falcon sang all the louder, seemingly overjoyed to have

such an adoring audience, and Amani could see both Trianna and Zara giggling with each other out of the corner of her eye.

"I have regained the respect of my people," Ziyad said before he corrected himself. "*Our* people."

"What do you mean?" Amani asked, barely threading her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck.

"After you left me, my servants and family members would have mutinied if I hadn't turned back to Suridesh to chase you."

Amani cracked a grin. "What, did they serve you cold flatbread?"

Ziyad chuckled. "Worse. I had to endure more than my fair share of hostile looks and murmured whispers. They love you, Amani. I knew they would. And it was Khalil who told me my people had already considered you the mother of my caravan, whether or not I recognized you as my princess. Truer words have never been spoken."

"And now?"

"And now, they gaze at us with the moons in their eyes."

Amani glanced around. Ziyad was right. His people were grinning at them, sighing and laying their heads on each other's shoulders.

"I think they wanted to believe you would find love again, Ziyad. They wanted you to be happy, and they could see what you could not. That I was perfect for you." She rubbed her body against his. "In every way."

Ziyad arched a brow. "Is that so, little minx?"

Amani nodded, allowing her hand to wander down his back. "If your people—"

"Our people," he said, interrupting her.

"*Our* people," she amended. "If they were angry with you for letting me slip away, surely they've forgiven you now that I've returned. But just in case there is any lingering doubt in their minds, I'd like to do something to lay their fears to rest."

"And what is that?"

Amani grinned. "This."

Grabbing two handfuls of his robes, she yanked him forward and kissed him without reserve. She knew the

people were happy for them, but they would always wonder if the Spider truly loved her. Perhaps kissing him wantonly in front of them would solidify in their minds that she was his princess just as much as she was theirs.

Ziyad gasped at first, but offered no resistance when she stood on her toes to wrap her arms around him. He'd stopped swaying with her, only to sweep her off her feet. Amani squealed when the world tilted, but she pulled him back to her lips, content to be held in his arms like a delicate babe.

With one more swipe of his tongue, Ziyad leaned back, but just enough to gaze into her eyes. "They are cheering for us."

Amani bit her lip when the sound of the people's approval finally reached her ears. "I hadn't noticed," she confessed.

Ziyad grinned. "The song is over now."

"Is it?"

"Didn't notice that either?" he asked.

She stroked his cheek and shook her head.

The sound of a faint tolling bell broke through the night. It came from Suridesh, along with a few cries and shouts from the city gates. Amani's blood turned to ice.

"Ziyad, that is my father's alarm," she breathed, her eyes wide. "The last time he tried to ring it, that sandstorm leveled the tent city before he could."

"Something is wrong," the Falcon exclaimed. "Suridesh is erupting in chaos."

As they all turned toward the gates, Amani could see for herself the residents running through the streets.

Ziyad put her down. "Stay here. I will see what is going on."

"But—"

"Stay. Here." Ziyad was commanding her. When he looked at her like that, she knew he was no longer her teasing husband, but the regal Spider Prince.

"My family..." She shivered.

"I will make sure they are safe. I promise you."

"Be careful."

He flashed a grin at her. "You have my word." With a swift kiss, he turned and barked orders to his men. A few of

them stayed to protect the caravan while a few more drew swords at his command. The Scarab, the Falcon, and the Viper followed the Spider into the night, leaving their wives behind. The women huddled together, each praying to her god to keep her husband safe.

The Jackal, however, sprinted to his own caravan to rouse his men to surround the princesses, offering further protection.

The bell continued to toll, and with each hollow clang, Amani felt a cold dread settle upon her. All was not right in Suridesh.

"Keep him safe," she whispered under her breath. She hoped that now she was Ziyad's princess, she held some sway with the god of Spiders. Amani took Zara's hand and felt the Falcon Princess squeeze her.

"He will be all right," Zara said, somehow finding a confidence Amani did not feel. "His magic will protect him. You wait and see."

She couldn't answer her new friend. All she could do was nod.

Nineteen

The princes jogged through the city gates with their swords drawn. Ziyad held his dagger, the only weapon he carried. He stopped a young man who'd run out in front of them.

"What is going on here?" he demanded. Women wailed in the street and men watched them nervously, whispering amongst themselves.

"You have not heard, Your Highness?" the man yelled, his eyes wide. "The Cobra Princess is dead!"

"*What?*" the Scarab exclaimed. "How do you know this?"

"Everyone is screaming it!" the man said.

"What happened?"

"I don't know, I don't know! I swear I had nothing to do with it, please believe me."

Ziyad let him go and began marching up the road. "Ahmed will know," he said to the others. "He has eyes and ears all over Suridesh."

The princes followed him, dodging frightened and wailing people. Many cried out to them, but they didn't stop until they came to the huge white tent in the middle of the city.

"Ahmed!" Ziyad didn't wait for an invitation before he strode through the tent flaps. Neither did the others.

The governor stood from his pillow, seemingly conversing with a dirty, haggard man. The man's eyes were wide. He was obviously scared, and now more so that four desert princes stood before him.

"What has happened?" the Falcon asked, sheathing his

sword.

Ahmed's own eyes were wide with disbelief. "The Cobra Princess has been found beyond the city gates by a few of my guards," he said, his voice shaking. "She's been murdered."

"By the *ancestors*!" the Viper cried.

"Her body was locked in a trunk. It looks as if she's been strangled." The governor wiped his eyes as a few tears escaped him.

"What of Jaden?" the Scarab asked, his eyes wide. "This news will destroy him!"

"*Gods*!" Ziyad exclaimed, feeling punched in the gut. He knew first hand what it was like to lose a wife. He'd never been close to the Cobra, but his heart went out to him. This news only made him double over and gasp for breath. Memories of losing Karis bombarded him.

"Do you know who did this?" Falcon asked.

Ahmed shook his head. "No. But according to my man," he said, indicating the guard next to him, "it would seem Sahirah has been dead a few hours at least."

"But the Cobra wasn't feeling well," the Scarab said, wrinkling his brow. "He told us his princess wasn't well either. That's why he couldn't come to Spider's feast."

"Where is Jaden?" Ziyad asked, finally straightening. "We must tell him."

"I've sent my men to his caravan," Ahmed told them. "They haven't returned."

"Come," Ziyad said, his face set. "We must tell him ourselves. News like this should not come from the city guard."

The Viper placed a hand on Ziyad's shoulder. "No, it shouldn't."

With a nod, Ziyad strode from the tent and raced once more to the city gates. Who in the desert would ever wish to kill a caravan princess? Could it be the same people who'd killed Karis? Ziyad's heart burned at the very thought. He would get to the bottom of this. He would find out who killed Jaden's wife.

And he would make them pay.

~ * ~

The steady drumming of hoof beats echoed in the

night. Amani stood when a horse and rider approached the Spider's caravan. Long, dark robes flew out behind him as he ran his horse as fast as he could. A few people pointed, many of them gasping in shock. The Jackal stood as well.

"That's the Cobra," he whispered and waved.

The people moved aside to allow the Cobra's horse through the throng. The Cobra looked at the Jackal and all the women with wide, frightened eyes.

"Siraj!" he exclaimed. "Thank the gods I've found you."

Amani swallowed hard.

"What is going on?" Zara asked.

"There is a revolt in Suridesh," the Cobra said, glancing over his shoulder. "The others have asked me to find you and take their wives to safety."

"What?" Trianna yelled, glancing at the Viper Princess. Sabine's eyes were wide as well.

"We must be off, and quickly! There is a mob marching on the governor's tent."

"My family!" Amani almost ran past the Cobra's horse, but Zara stopped her.

"The Spider has promised to keep them under his protection, Amani, you must believe in him. His magic is strong."

The Cobra nodded at Zara's words. "Ziyad will have my head if I don't do as he says and save his new bride."

Amani's stomach flopped inside her. She couldn't stop shaking if she wanted to.

"What do we do?" the Jackal asked, gazing out upon the open desert. "Where do we go?"

The Cobra's horse sidestepped and chuffed, jangling the tassels on his bridle. "We cannot take the caravs," he said. "If that mob breaches the city gates, we won't be fast enough to outrun them. Horses are faster."

"But we have no time to get that many horses ready!" Siraj yelled.

"Then we will take the women and order our men to follow!"

The Jackal nodded and dashed around the Cobra's horse to command his men. Jaden glanced down at Amani.

"Ride with me, Highness," he said, holding his hand

out. "We cannot afford to wait for many horses to be saddled, we must ride two-by-two!"

She bit her lip with indecision.

"Amani!" he cried. "You are the Spider Princess now. Ziyad has asked me to protect you in his stead. You must ride with me!"

She nodded, knowing her husband trusted every prince in the desert. He wouldn't have sent the Cobra to their caravan unless chaos indeed reigned in Suridesh.

She grabbed his hand and he easily hauled her up to sit sideways before him. Without warning, Jaden kicked his horse and took off into the night, leaving the others behind him.

"Wait. *Wait!*" she yelled against the wind. "We can't leave yet. We need to bring the others!"

The Cobra didn't answer her. Instead, he hissed at his horse to run even faster. Terror entered Amani's heart and she held on for dear life. She didn't know if what he'd told her was the truth, but right about now, the look on Jaden's face scared her to the bone.

She squeezed her eyes shut, forcing tears down her cheeks.

"Do not fret, my dear Spider Princess," Jaden said in her ear. "If your husband agrees to my terms, I will spare your life."

Bile rose in the back of her throat. *Gods above.* The Cobra Prince had just abducted her.

Twenty

"Dead. They're all dead!" The Falcon raced out of the Cobra's royal carav, his face as white as the governor's tent. "Those guards Ahmed sent, they're stacked in the carav with their throats slit. Looks like quite a fight. The floor is covered in blood!"

"What in the name of Kaldaeron is going on?" the Viper yelled, drawing his sword.

Ziyad's heart pounded from the run across the sand. He struggled to draw breath, but as he stood there, a familiar feeling crawled up the back of his neck.

Amani was leaving the circle of his magical protection.

His frightened gaze rested on the Falcon.

"What is it, my friend?" Khalil asked.

"My wife!" he breathed a split-second before he raced across the sand once more. Shouts and screams were coming from the people surrounding his fire. As soon as the princesses saw the men running toward them, they dashed out to meet them.

"Ziyad!" Zara yelled, pointing behind her. "The Cobra took Amani! He said you'd ordered it, that you wanted him to take all of us to safety. But once he pulled her onto his horse, he...he ran. The Jackal is in pursuit!"

Ziyad didn't waste any time. With his lungs on fire, he ran down the caravan line and found the animal carav. He threw open the sliding side door and leapt in, uncaring when his friends leapt in behind him.

"We will help you, Spider," the Scarab said, grabbing the first horse he saw. "The Cobra will not get away with this."

"The Cobra killed his wife, Qadir," Ziyad exclaimed. "After seeing the bodies of Ahmed's guards, I have no doubt of that. There is no reason for him to have killed Sahirah unless she had a secret he didn't want told. He wouldn't have taken *Amani* if that secret didn't involve *me*."

"You think he killed *Karis*?" came the Falcon's shocked reply.

Ziyad's eyes narrowed as he tossed his saddle onto his sleek, black gelding. Fury burned hot within his heart, consuming his fear. "Yes."

"But that's impossible!" the Scarab cried. "He was too busy helping that witch sacrifice his father for the Cobra crown when *Karis* died those years ago."

"There are rumors," the Falcon said, saddling another horse, "that the barrels of water from his caravan are filled with mud. I heard it just today, but didn't believe it."

Ziyad had never prepared his horse so fast. He boosted himself up just as the other princes did as well. "If his oasis has stopped flowing, that means Jaden Rahasha has lost favor with his god," Ziyad growled. "And there's only one reason why a god would turn away from his steward."

The Falcon sucked in his breath. "He murdered someone in a royal family."

Ziyad nodded ominously. "He killed *Karis*. He will *not* kill *Amani*!"

"Here, take these!" The Viper jumped into the carav and handed each of them a full water skin. "You'll need them. I will stay with the women and fortify our caravans. Ziyad, my prayers are with you. Go find your wife."

With a nod, the Spider kicked his horse out of the carav. The animal sailed through the air and hit the dirt in a plume, but didn't stop. The Falcon and the Scarab followed.

Ziyad's entire being cried out for vengeance. The god of Cobras had turned his back and Jaden had no heirs or family to take his place.

The Spider Prince wouldn't stop until the Cobra was dead at his feet. Jikkar was about to lose an entire royal house.

~ * ~

By all that was holy, Ziyad pushed his horse to the limits. He didn't even know where they were going. All he

could do was trust Zara's directions and point his horse toward the horizon. The moons were high above them, shining their light upon the dunes, just barely touching. He silently thanked his god for their light, and hoped Thiadra and Pamos would help him find his own lover.

His wife. His princess.

"Put on the ring, baby," he whispered to the wind. *"Put it on. Please."*

Ziyad prayed that the god of Spiders would remind her of it, still hanging from her neck on a chain. He'd be able to tell the moment she donned it, but he hoped she remembered before it was too late.

He'd meant to ask her to wear it again, but they'd been distracted by the feast—and by each other. And by the fact that he'd assumed they were safe near the gates of Suridesh. He refused to lose Amani. Not after all they'd come through together.

"Put it on," he said again, trying hard to fight the tears that so desperately wanted to fall.

Twenty One

The ring.

Amani's eyes snapped open as the memory flitted through her brain. The spider was still there, beneath her fine black robe. She could feel it against her skin. In the commotion, she'd forgotten to put it on. No matter what the Cobra's plans were for her, he could not harm her as long as she was wearing it.

That ring was an extension of Ziyad's powers of protection, and as soon as Jaden wasn't looking, she'd slip it on. But they'd been riding for a while now. She had no idea where he was headed or how much longer they'd ride. It wouldn't be much longer before dawn lit the sky, and riding the dunes with no shade, no dunlas, and no water was going to be like riding through the pits of Kaldaeron.

"You know about everything, don't you, little bitch?" The venom in the Cobra's tone made Amani's hair stand on end.

"Kn-know what?" she stuttered.

"Don't patronize me, *Spider Princess*," he spat. "I know good and well every prince in the desert is plotting against me. And their princesses, too. But I will gain back my respect. I will gain back my oasis!"

Amani gasped. "What happened to your oasis?"

Before she saw him move, he backhanded her. She went flying through the air and landed in the sand, face down. Amani coughed, inhaling the fine dust and trying to spit it from her mouth. She tasted blood, but she wasn't concerned about that now.

In this position, she could slip on the ring without the

Cobra noticing.

With quick hands, Amani broke the thin chain and scrambled to put on the ring. But before her trembling fingers could slip it over her finger, the Cobra jumped off his horse and grabbed her by the hair.

The ring fell to the ground.

"My god has forsaken me," Jaden yelled, his eyes wild. "But you knew that already, didn't you. *Didn't you?*"

She cringed. "I-I didn't, I promise!" All she could do was hold her hands up while Jaden smacked her again. Amani spun on her knees and fell to the sand, searching the grains frantically for the ring.

Just as the edges of the spider's legs grazed the skin of her palm, the Cobra stood over her again. This time, Amani shoved the ring on her finger, and smiled up at Jaden.

The confusion on his face gave her just enough time to fist her hands together and bring them up between his legs.

The Cobra fell over with a howl.

Amani stood and turned, then grabbed hold of the horse's reins. The stirrup was high and it took two tries to get her foot in it. But the moment she attempted to swing her other leg over the top, Jaden pulled her off and they both crashed to the dune.

She struggled against him, but his strength was too great. His eyes blazed while he dragged her back to the horse and pulled out a cord from a saddlebag. He began binding her hands. Amani tried to yank away from him, but he raised his palm again. However his hand never met her face.

Though he tried again and again to hit her, he couldn't. Ziyad's magic protected her. Amani grinned widely.

"You cannot harm me, Cobra," she taunted. "My husband's magic surrounds me. And when he finds me, he will kill *you*."

"Oh, I think not, Highness," Jaden said, chuckling. "Perhaps we should test the limits of the Spider's magic, shall we?"

With a wave of his hand, a dark brown chest with gilded gold cobras on the lid appeared out of thin air. Jaden kicked it open and shoved her down inside. The air rushed out of Amani's lungs before she could think to stand. And

that's when Jaden closed and locked the lid.

"Forgive me, Amani," his muffled voice said, somehow managing to sound genuinely repentant. "But you must understand. The god of Spiders *will* force the god of Cobras to accept me once again, or he will lose yet another princess. And so will Ziyad. Your *husband* will help me find favor with my god—or he will sacrifice you. It is his choice to make."

Amani's heart raged. She pounded against the sides and the lid of the box, but Jaden either didn't hear her or didn't care. She listened to the sound of his horse prancing and chuffing then taking off across the desert, its hoof beats drumming against the sand.

"No, Cobra, please! Don't leave me here," she screamed. "Ziyad!"

In about an hour, the sun would rise. And the heat inside this chest would kill her before Ziyad ever found her. Was his magic strong enough to keep her alive through such sweltering heat? She didn't know and it horrified her to dwell on it. Jaden wasn't sane, that much was obvious. His god had left him, and so too had his sanity. Amani had no doubt he didn't intend on ever letting her out of the chest.

"God of Spiders," she prayed, swallowing hard. "Help me. Help Ziyad find me!"

The darkness closed in around her and she screamed once more. But there was no one on the dunes to hear her cries.

~ * ~

Ziyad breathed a deep sigh of relief. Amani had put on the ring. He had no idea how he knew, but he suspected it was because it had been fortified with his own magic. No matter what Jaden did to Amani, he couldn't kill her, and that knowledge alone bolstered Ziyad's mood as the night wore on.

Dawn lightened the horizon, but the sun wouldn't rise for a while yet. The princes had been scouring the desert, as much as they could in the dark.

"When morning comes," Khalil said as he pulled up next to the Spider. "I will summon my falcons. They can see for miles. They can help us."

"Thank you, my friend," Ziyad said, overjoyed the Falcon hadn't completely severed their friendship.

"I love Amani, too," Khalil whispered. "You made the right choice, making her your princess."

"Did I?" Ziyad said sourly. "Seems I was forced to the choice."

Khalil scoffed. "You were not forced and you know it. It's obvious to all of us that you love her."

Ziyad nodded. "I love her," he conceded. "With everything inside of me."

"We will find her."

The Spider scowled while his eyes scanned as far as they could see. "I know." He turned those eyes on the Falcon. His old friend squirmed under his scrutiny. "The Cobra's death is *mine*."

~ * ~

There he was!

Finally after a night of riding blindly, Siraj Pramtash had found the Cobra Prince. He was tearing across the dunes, the only rider on his horse. Where was Amani? For the sake of the Spider, Siraj prayed she wasn't dead.

With a cry, the Jackal yanked his sword from his scabbard and held it high. He was young, having only seen seventeen cycles—he knew he wasn't a match for the older, stronger Cobra. But he had to do something to stop the man.

The morning sun chose that moment to peek over the dunes, blinding Siraj as the Cobra charged him. But he couldn't stop now. Siraj kicked his horse faster, squinting at the figure fast approaching him.

The Jackal's sword gleamed in the light. But the sunlight was too much to bear. He swung as the Cobra charged close—and swiped nothing but air.

Something sharp stung his belly. Siraj couldn't draw breath. Hot liquid saturated his robe and dripped down his legs. Gods above, he could no longer stay astride.

Before the horse had come to a full stop, Siraj fell off, hitting the sand with a dull thud. He gazed up at the pink sky, gasping in disbelief. Protruding from his belly was a fine sword with cobras coiling around the hilt. The Cobra himself hadn't stopped. Jaden and his horse disappeared beyond the next dune, seemingly uncaring whether or not he'd killed Siraj.

It hurt. *So much*. Each breath was torture, each

movement an explosion of pain. Tears squeezed from Siraj's eyes, and he prayed to the god of Jackals to forgive him. He'd failed his god as the prince of his people. He was just a boy, playing prince after his peers helped him unseat his tyrant of a father. And now, he'd die in the desert, a disgrace to the Jackal throne.

You have not failed me.

Shudders rippled through his body and Siraj sobbed at the sound of the phantom voice, and tasted blood in his mouth. Now he was hearing things. Whether or not he was hallucinating, perhaps he could die believing his god found no fault with him.

"I'm so sorry! I am not worthy of the Jackal throne."

You are worthy. You are my steward, Siraj. You will not die.

"Help me. Please!" Siraj tried to sit up, but the sharp slice of agony in his gut made him cry out to the heavens.

Be still. Look for the Falcon.

Siraj's breaths came in sharp puffs. The Falcon?

The pain was clouding his vision. He wanted to die. He wanted to close his eyes and have the blessed relief of death.

Look for the Falcon.

Breathing through his teeth, Siraj glanced once more at the wide expanse of sky above him.

There, circling high, was a regal, majestic bird. Its piercing cry echoed all around him. Khalil must have summoned his falcons. Hope entered Siraj's heart as another sob escaped him.

He would not die today.

The bird spiraled down on the air currents, alighting softly on the ground next to him. Siraj watched as it cocked its head, regarding him with interest.

Before his very eyes, the air itself seemed to shimmer. The body of the bird glowed an intense bright white and he had to look away. More agony shot through his body and Siraj cried out, unable to move.

"Do not tax yourself."

Siraj's eyes snapped back open. In the bird's place was a young girl of perhaps twelve years, whose body shone like a jewel.

"Who...who...are you?"

"Shh," she whispered, stroking his hair. Her touch buzzed through him, calming his raging heart. "I am a friend, Jackal. I will not hurt you."

"Did...the Falcon send you?"

"I was summoned," she said, glancing at his wound. "But he did not send me."

Her delicate features twisted into a frown. The girl bent low, her eyes catching his. Siraj sucked in his breath. Never in his life had he seen such eyes, the color of fine lavender. They were ringed with black lashes, giving her an exotic beauty. One day, this girl would be exquisite.

She was already.

Siraj knew he shouldn't stare. But the concern on her face intrigued him. Where had she come from?

"I must hurt you before I make you better, Jackal. Do you understand?"

He didn't, but he nodded anyway. He was delirious. First the voice of his god had come to him, and now, a lovely little girl.

"Hold my hand," she told him. He couldn't lift his so she took his hand in hers. Once again, her face hovered above his. "Think of your oasis, Highness. Think of your favorite food. Your friends. Think good thoughts."

His mind was cloudy. He concentrated on her words, but all he could think of—were her amazing eyes.

With one tug, the girl pulled the Cobra's sword from Siraj's belly. His cry shook the desert and his hand squeezed hers. He was amazed she didn't squeal.

"I am sorry, Highness," she said, her voice breaking. "I promise there will be no more pain."

A soft hum came to his ears, but he was too exhausted to wonder what it was. Warmth enveloped him and the sharp, stabbing pain in his belly subsided. His skin burned, then itched—then healed.

"What did you do?" he asked in amazement, examining his belly. The girl smiled at him, revealing her white teeth. Her body still shone in the sun, but he could see her face, and it was radiant.

"I healed you," she said simply.

"Why?" he asked, sitting up on his elbows.

"Because you were hurt." The girl shrugged, then looked at him with a devilish gleam in her eye. "And because you are handsome."

"What is your name?"

"I must leave. Your friends are coming."

"Tell me, please!"

The girl stood and looked all around the dunes, her dark hair flying in the breeze. She was young, but she was stunning nonetheless.

"You cannot heal the Jackal Prince and refuse to allow him to thank you properly!"

That got her attention. She gazed back down on him and bowed slightly. "Forgive me, Your Highness," she said. "My name is Yasmin."

Before he could ask her where she lived, the air shimmered once again and her body was consumed by the light surrounding her. Just like before, a beautiful falcon stood in her place.

She cawed at him once more before taking wing.

"Wait. Yasmin, *wait!*"

But she was gone, merely a speck in the sky.

Siraj stood and stared above him with tears in his eyes.

Twenty Two

There in the sand was the Jackal, waving his arms and holding the reins of his horse. It didn't take long for Ziyad and the others to reach him, and Ziyad couldn't help but notice he was wiping his face.

Was Siraj crying?

"What happened?" the Scarab asked, just as they pulled up alongside the young prince.

Ziyad's brow furrowed. "Are you all right?"

With a sniffle, Siraj looked at each of them. "Did you see her?"

"Who?" The Falcon glanced all around them, his eyes squinting in the light of the sun. "There is no one here."

"She is in the sky!"

Qadir cocked a brow, but looked up. "Seems this boy has been touched by the sun."

"No!" Siraj cried out. "I saw a girl, she...was a falcon. She was in the sky. She somehow became a girl and healed me."

"I have sent my falcons to help find Amani," Khalil said with a nod. "I do not doubt you saw one of my birds."

"But this one became human." The Jackal looked back and forth between Ziyad and the Falcon. "She healed my wound, you must believe me!" Siraj opened the front of his robes and revealed an angry red welt, as if a sword had run him through. "I saw the Cobra, I found him. He was charging, but I was blinded by the sun and I—"

"You saw the *Cobra*?" Ziyad interrupted, his fury once again pushing to the fore. "Where? Where is Amani?"

Siraj held up the Cobra's sword. "I don't know where

your wife is," the boy said. "But Jaden skewered me and left me for dead. He was alone on his horse, but I witnessed him leave your caravan with Amani. She was not with him when I caught up with him."

"Which way did he go?" Qadir demanded, his face set with anger.

"Which way did he *come from*?" Ziyad corrected. "I will deal with that bastard once I know my princess is safe."

Siraj pointed behind him. "He was riding this way from the east."

"Are you all right to ride?" Ziyad asked.

Siraj nodded. "I'm sore but I am fine."

"You and Qadir go find the Cobra," Ziyad said, nodding in the direction of the tent city. "Once you find him, detain him in your Bantiem and stay in Suridesh. The Falcon and I will search for Amani. If I don't manage to kill him beforehand, we will make Jaden Rahasha stand trial before the Princes' Council."

Everyone nodded at Ziyad's words. Once they said their goodbyes, Ziyad and Khalil turned their horses toward the eastern horizon. A few falcons circled them and cawed, dipping low on the air currents.

"What are they doing?" Ziyad asked.

The Falcon turned to him with a grin. "They've found something."

Hope lit in Ziyad's heart like a flame to dry kindling. He didn't wait for his friend before he kicked his horse and tore off across the desert, chasing the birds in the sky.

~ * ~

Amani was suffocating. She had to wonder how many times she would have died if it hadn't been for the magic of Ziyad's ring sustaining her. She could barely breathe. Points of light speckled in front of her eyes, yet no light spilled into the chest.

The darkness pressed in like a shroud, squeezing every last drop of moisture from her body. The heat was oppressive. She'd never felt the like, as if she was inside a fiery furnace.

A sob escaped her, but no tears came. And trying to suck in breath was impossible. Her heart pounded so hard inside her, it was painful, each beat more forceful than the

last.

If she removed Ziyad's ring, she would die. She could escape the hell of being locked inside this chest. Amani fingered the legs of the spider and considered it. But her muscles didn't have the strength to pull it off her hand.

And she would never make Ziyad live through another nightmare of losing his wife.

Amani had no idea how long she'd been trapped inside the chest. It felt like years. Long, eternal years. But she had to have faith that Ziyad would find her. He would save her. He had to.

But how?

The Golden Desert was a big place. How could Ziyad find one tiny chest in the empty rolling dunes?

Use your magic.

The tiny voice inside her mind whispered to her, reminding her of her ability.

"I just...make plants...grow," she managed to croak.

And what better way to allow the Spider Prince to find his princess than foliage where there shouldn't be any?

Amani licked her lips, but her tongue was dry. She yearned for a long draught of water. Her arms and legs screamed at being cramped for so long, but she knew the voice in her head had a point.

Perhaps she could give Ziyad a sign—a landmark to find her.

It took her a few tries to concentrate, but she thought of nothing but his lovely rahala blossoms. They only grew at his oasis. If he found a patch of them in the acrid desert, he wouldn't be able to ignore them. She bit her lip. Finding the magic deep within her was harder than she thought it would be. The heat made her tired. So very tired...

But before she drifted off, Amani felt her magic leave her in a rush. She smiled. For surely the chest was now surrounded by the Spider's rare flowers. Her last thought was a prayer to her god that somehow, someday, Ziyad would come and save her.

Twenty Three

"What is that?"

Khalil pointed beyond Ziyad's shoulder just as a falcon cried overhead. Ziyad turned to look down the dune and gasped. Bushes and trees were sprouting in the middle of nowhere. It made no sense. The only vegetation in the desert grew at the princes' oases.

But the longer Ziyad looked, the more he took in, and his keen eyes could just barely make out the lovely white petals of the rahala blossom, even from this distance.

In that moment, he remembered Amani's magical ability. She cultivated plants. This was a sign for him. She was down there.

"Amani!"

Ziyad's horse was exhausted, but he'd run the black gelding to the ground if it meant saving his princess. Sweat and foam covered the mount. If he found Amani, he'd water the horse and rest for a while in the shade of the tall palms just up ahead.

"Amani!" he cried out again, not knowing if she could hear him.

"Ziyad, look!" Khalil said, reining his horse to a stop. "Gods above, it's one of Jaden's clothing chests."

"Ahmed said his wife had been found dead in a chest," Ziyad exclaimed, jumping from the back of his horse. "Amani is inside. I am sure of it!"

He pulled his dagger from his belt-wrap and dropped to the soft grasses surrounding the box. The fragrance of rahala blossoms filled the air and his eyes burned. It was nearing midday, and the sun's heat sweltered above them. If

Amani hadn't been wearing his ring, she would have died, he had no doubt of it.

Ziyad wasted no time and smashed the lock with the hilt of his dagger. It wouldn't be moved.

Again and again he pounded, until his rage took over. Ziyad screamed at the top of his lungs, uncaring that his hand was bloody, uncaring that the hilt of his dagger had cracked.

But with a few more swings, the lock finally gave way. With tears rolling down his cheeks, he scrambled to open the chest.

"Gods!" he cried. There lay Amani, seemingly peaceful in repose. Her cheeks were bright red and her hair was plastered to her head. Her robes clung to her as he lifted her out, and her head lolled back.

Ziyad couldn't hold back. Right there in the grass, he fell apart, holding the woman he loved and crying uncontrollably into her neck.

"Don't leave me. Don't leave me. Don't leave me," he canted over and over again, rocking with her. "Open your eyes, minx. Look at me."

Ziyad smoothed her damp hair from her face and shuddered when she didn't obey.

"Amani, please."

"Spider!" The Falcon tossed his water skin at his knees.

Ziyad didn't waste time thanking his friend for his thoughtfulness. He was vaguely aware that Khalil had taken to rubbing down their horses when he grabbed the skin.

Uncorking it, he poured out some of his precious water into his hand. He brought that hand to Amani's red cheek. Wetting his fingers again, he combed them through her hair then wet her neck and arms. Once he was finished, he splashed some water into her mouth.

"Wake up, my princess," he whispered. "I love you too much for you to slip away."

Amani's head tossed from side to side. Ziyad's heart stopped.

"Ziyad?" she moaned.

"I am here," he answered against her ear.

"Am I...dreaming?"

"No." He gave her a light kiss on the lips. "Can you look at me?"

He knew she was trying with all her might. When she finally did crack her eyes, she found the strength to smile.

"I knew you would find me," she whispered.

Relief washed over him in a rush. She was alive and talking. The magic of her ring had kept her breathing. Ziyad would forever be indebted to Zara.

"Your rahala plants brought me to you, my love."

"The god of Spiders said they would."

Ziyad sat speechless for a moment. Before he could say anything, Amani spoke again. "He told me who killed Karis."

Suddenly Khalil knelt next to them in the grass. "You spoke to the god of Spiders?"

Amani nodded. "And I spoke with the other gods of the desert."

"She is delirious," Khalil exclaimed.

"It's worse than I thought," Ziyad replied as shock enveloped him. Amani laid her hand on his arm.

"Believe me, husband. I spoke with them. I don't know how, but I did. It was Sahirah who trampled Karis with her horse. And Jaden ordered the raiders to hit your caravan."

Ziyad couldn't help a fresh wave of moisture in his eyes. "Why?" he asked, his chin trembling.

"To distract the Scarab."

"What?" Ziyad's surprise couldn't be any greater.

"Jaden's father, the Cobra Prince before him, wanted Trianna for his own. He ordered his son to distract the Scarab long enough to take Trianna from under Qadir's nose." Amani closed her eyes and licked her lips. "The raid on your caravan was that very distraction. With the Scarab gone from Suridesh, Mother laid waste to the tent city with her sandstorm and took his intended."

She opened her eyes once more. "Karis's death was nothing more than an unfortunate casualty."

Ziyad vaguely felt the Falcon's hand on his shoulder. His entire world tilted on its axis. He knew. He finally *knew* what happened to his first wife.

"That's not all the gods told me," Amani whispered.

Ziyad's eyes darted back to hers.

"Jaden Rahasha has angered every god in the desert. The Cobra turned his back because of his part in Karis's death, and also because he killed Sahirah. The Spider wants blood because Jaden's princess killed Karis—and he took me. The Jackal is demanding retribution for cutting down Siraj, his steward. The Scarab is angry that he dared to make Sahirah take on Trianna's appearance with magic every time they made love. And the Viper god, he's upset that Jaden has taken Tariq's head cook directly from her own carav." "

"Jalil?" Ziyad said. "Why would he want her?"

"He will contact you using Jalil's magic, to make his demands."

The Falcon Prince took a deep breath. "What of the god of Falcons? You said Jaden angered every god."

Amani looked at him and her eyes softened. "He killed two of your majestic birds on his ride back to Suridesh."

"Then he's in the tent city," Ziyad growled.

"Or nearby at least," Khalil said.

Ziyad gave Amani a few more sips of water and pulled her close. "Gods, woman, I thought I would never find you."

"I never doubted that you would," she whispered, kissing him just beneath his ear. Every inch of his skin pebbled at the sensation. "I *did* talk with the gods, Ziyad."

He pulled back just enough to gaze into her eyes. She was telling the truth, or at least, the truth as she believed.

"They want restitution for all Jaden has done. I know you are going to call another Council." His eyes widened. Amani nodded with a small smile. "The *gods* will have his death. Not you."

It took Ziyad a long time to answer. The revenge that had fueled him for so long seemed to extinguish itself at her words. Perhaps the gods would see fit to send Jaden to Kaldaeron. His heart was light for the first time in years. No longer did he bear the burden of vengeance upon his soul.

"So be it," he whispered, returning her smile.

Twenty Four

Amani was finally feeling better. A cool breeze rustled through the palms and she smiled as it kissed her face. She had no doubt the cool wind had been sent by the god of Spiders. Somehow in her stupor, she'd conversed with them on a very personal level.

And she knew her god accepted her just as readily as he'd once accepted Karis. She was indeed his princess.

Ziyad hadn't allowed her off his lap as he sat in the grass with his back to a tree. His hand had a large cut from opening the lock, but the bleeding had stopped and Khalil wrapped it in the fabric of a dunla he'd found in his saddlebags.

Amani had been able to keep down more water, and soon, they'd leave their tiny paradise behind and return to Suridesh. She almost regretted leaving these plants here to die. They had no water to sustain them. Within days, they'd wilt, and within a month, the desert would once again claim this spot with waves of sand.

"We should cut down these palms," Ziyad said after taking a sip of water.

"Whatever for?" the Falcon asked, gazing up through their branches.

"They won't last here," he explained, as if mirroring Amani's thoughts. "They will die."

"So you propose we cut them down instead? Why?"

"Amani made them. With her magic." Khalil regarded her with curious eyes. Ziyad nodded. "Imagine flutes or furniture made with magical wood. Or maybe a new liala for you? Perhaps this wood is a finer quality than palms found at

our oases."

"I hadn't thought of that," Khalil said, scratching his chin. Even Amani stared at her plants in awe. Could it be true? Could plants made by her ability be worth more than normal plants? And would they have any magical qualities she didn't know about?

The thought excited her.

Suddenly, Ziyad sat straight up, nearly dumping Amani on the grass. His eyes were wide and he cocked his head.

"What is it?" Amani asked, stroking his cheek.

"Jalil. She's contacting me." He sat in silence for a few more moments. "Yes, I hear you," he said. "Listen to me. Do not let the Cobra know you've contacted me. Pretend to have some difficulty. I want you to contact Tariq and let him know what is going on."

Amani sat up as well, glancing at the Falcon. Khalil shrugged.

"All right, then just contact him," Ziyad said. "Tariq should know something is wrong, even if you don't say a word."

Ziyad looked at Amani. "*She can't send her thoughts without speaking out loud,*" he whispered.

After a moment, he spoke to Jalil once more. "You tell that bastard there is no deal. Tell that *snake* I have found my princess and she is very much alive. Tell him every god in the desert wants his head!"

Ziyad sat in silence before he cried out in shock. "*Gods above!*"

"Spider, what is it?" Khalil demanded.

Ziyad looked at him in disbelief. "The Cobra just killed Jalil. By all that is holy, *he slit her throat!*"

Khalil leapt to his feet. "Then there is no time to waste. We must make sure that man no longer breathes."

The Falcon pulled Amani to her feet until Ziyad could stand and steady her himself. "I hope Jalil was able to get the Viper's attention before..." Ziyad said unable to finish his thought. He swung into his saddle and leaned down to pull Amani before him.

"I have no doubt that she did," the Falcon said, mounting his own horse. "Our only hope now is that the

Scarab and the Jackal made it back in time to help the Viper catch Jaden."

They turned their horses and pointed them toward the tent city.

"Are you all right to travel?" Ziyad whispered in Amani's ear.

She snuggled against his body and nodded. "As long as I am in your arms, my prince."

"Good," he answered. "Because you'll be in these arms for the rest of your life."

"Good," she answered right back. "Because there's nowhere else I'd rather be."

~ * ~

It was late evening by the time they made it back to Suridesh. Even from afar, it was obvious things had changed since they'd left. But the one thing that stood out was the Cobra's dead Sentinels.

Each colossal, hairy beast that pulled his caravs across the desert was dead. Ziyad had never seen one of those magical creatures grow old, much less die. Seeing them lifeless in the sand had him swallowing hard.

The wrath of the gods had already begun.

Even Khalil and Amani were speechless as they passed them. A few of the beasts had taken the caravs with them when they'd fallen over dead, and the entire line of the Cobra's caravan was either on its side or torn apart. What was left appeared to have been looted. And the Cobra's people were nowhere to be seen.

"Go find Tariq," Ziyad told Khalil. "I will see to my wife and meet you at the Viper's carav."

Khalil nodded and trotted away into the evening.

"Come," Ziyad said into Amani's ear. "I must make sure you are taken care of."

"I am fine," she told him.

Ziyad shook his head. "You were locked inside a scorching chest with no water or air. The only reason your heart beats is because of Zara and the ring she made you, bless the woman. I am taking you to my physician. No arguing."

"What of you?" Amani asked through a yawn.

"What of me?" he replied.

"Your hand?"

Ziyad sighed. "I'll be fine. I've had worse."

"I do not wish you to confront the Cobra with a gash in your palm."

"I will be—"

"No, husband," she said, her tone leaving no room for argument. She'd shocked him, and he couldn't find words to reply. "I am your princess now, so I will speak to you as your equal. I want you healed before you confront the Cobra, and that's an order from the Spider Princess."

"Well then," Ziyad replied, scratching his head. "Perhaps I should visit my physician too."

"I'm glad you see it my way," Amani had the audacity to say.

Ziyad tickled her, eliciting a squeal from her. "Just because I agree with you does not mean you are allowed to command me, wife of mine."

"Does it not?" she said flippantly. "I seem to remember a certain prince who once told me that he was my servant. Day or night."

Ziyad growled as his cock stiffened at the memory of his words. "Only when we make love," he corrected, clutching her tight.

"Mmm," she responded. "That's right." Amani guided his hand to her breast.

Ziyad gasped but played along, squeezing her nipple shamelessly. "I will only make love to you when you are well, minx."

"Pity," she said. "I've had a few fantasies of being ravished by a prince, but I guess a caravan driver will have to do."

"You will be the death of that old fool," Ziyad said, amused by her words.

"We shall see," she told him. "There is something to be said about having life experience."

"Amani?"

"Hmm?" she replied, stretching against him.

"Do not think for a second I will forget that you are deliberately trying to incite me."

"I am hoping you do not, Spider."

Ziyad groaned and closed his eyes, certain his minx of

a wife was going to be the death of *him*.

Twenty Five

Once Ziyad's hand was healed and he made sure Amani was comfortable in his physician's carav, he stabled his horse then dashed across the sand to the Viper's caravan. The door to Tariq's carav was open wide, and the Falcon was already inside.

"Ziyad," Khalil said, beckoning to him. "Come in."

He leapt up the steps, his chest heaving from his run. "Did you catch Jaden?" he asked, his eyes darting from the Falcon to the Viper. The Jackal and the Scarab were here too, apparently arriving well before he had with Amani.

"We haven't found him yet," Tariq said ominously, his face set. "But we found Jalil."

Ziyad bowed his head. "I am sorry for your loss, Viper, truly."

Tariq inclined his head. "Jalil was a valuable member of my caravan. Her death will not be forgotten."

"Where are the women?" Ziyad asked.

Khalil cleared his throat. "They are in my carav with Zara," he said. "And the Scarab has magically sealed the door. Jaden cannot get to them."

Ziyad's skin tingled and fear once again crept into his heart. "I left Amani alone with my physician."

"It is safe to say that wherever the Cobra is, he knows we have returned," Siraj told him. "We should move your wife."

Without another word, Ziyad turned and left the Viper's carav, hitting the sand at a sprint.

~ * ~

Amani sat before him, looking at him with trusting

eyes. Jaden's mouth watered at the sight. She was on the cot of the Spider's physician, the man he'd killed not two hours before. He knew the Spider would bring Amani here, especially after what she'd suffered in the desert.

After killing the man, it was easy to take his face and pretend to care about Amani's wellbeing to the Spider. The only way to get Ziyad to leave had been to heal him, but thankfully, the magic Mother had bestowed on him was still intact, despite the fact that his body was rapidly aging.

No doubt a punishment from the gods.

Jaden could change into anyone he'd come in contact with. And he could persuade anyone *e/*se to believe his façade.

"Close your eyes and do as I say," he told her. She obeyed, obviously believing he was Ziyad's physician. "Remove your robes. I must see if you have any burns on your skin, either from the sun or from leaning against the heated sides of the chest."

He helped pull her robes from her arms, and his cock hardened painfully at his first glimpse of her ripe breasts. Jaden's thoughts buzzed inside his head. His Sentinels had been struck down. His oasis had dried up. His god had turned his back.

But he was alive. He could still pass on his line. If he got Amani pregnant, before anyone knew what he'd done, his very own son would become the next Spider Prince, and Ziyad would be none the wiser.

Jaden groaned and wiped his mouth.

"Lay back, Highness," he cooed.

Amani seemed unsure at first, but he passed his hand before her face and she did as he said. It was hard, changing his appearance into that of Ziyad's, but he didn't think much on why his magic seemed almost out of reach. Lust was riding him, and he wanted to thrust deep within this warm, soft woman.

Jaden lowered his head and took Amani's nipple in his mouth. She gasped and pushed at his shoulders.

"It's all right," he whispered, lifting his head.

"Ziyad?" She seemed confused.

"Yes," he said. "It is me. Close your eyes. Let me love you."

"But..."

"Do it," he growled, pushing his magic into her. Amani arched her back and closed her eyes, offering her nipple to his mouth.

Jaden feasted. She was sweet, she was hot, and he couldn't get enough.

"Are you wet?" he asked, his voice gritty to his own ears.

"Yes!" Amani gasped. Jaden plunged his hand into her undergarments and rubbed his fingers on her clit.

"Gods, I want to fuck you."

Her eyes snapped open and she glanced at him. "What?"

"Do you want to be rammed by my cock, Amani?"

A look of fear and disbelief overcame her. "Jaden! What are you doing?" Amani squealed and tried to get away, but he pinned her with his weight.

His magic must have broken. He could no longer sway her with his thoughts. No matter. He didn't need her cooperation to plant his seed within her.

"Get off me!" she yelled, flailing about.

He caught her hands in one of his and yanked her undergarments down with the other.

"Be still, bitch, or this will hurt! I am so hard for you. Mmm, I bet your ass is nice and tight."

"Ziyad!" she screamed as tears rolled down her face. "Jaden, don't do this. Please! *Ziyad!*"

"Damn, I'm going to come if you continue to fight me. Open your legs."

He forced them open and settled between them, already having tugged his own undergarments down.

"No," Amani spat. She bucked.

Jaden's cock leapt in near pain. He needed a release.

"God of Spiders!" she yelled. "Avenge Karis—right now. I beg of you as your princess. Don't let him defile me!"

In that instant, something shoved Jaden off the cot with such force, he slammed into the far wall of the carav. He glared at Amani in shock seconds before the entire roof of the carriage was torn off, as if by an unseen hand.

Jaden looked toward the heavens—and screamed.

~ * ~

Amani screeched just as the roof of the carav ripped away. She scrambled back into her robes that were underneath her and held them shut with her hands. She huddled on the cot, her eyes wide in disbelief as the Cobra Prince rose in the air. He was shrouded by a colossal beam of bright brown light, one that seemed to emanate from the Cobra constellation itself.

It wasn't the god of Spiders who was now demanding retribution. It was the god of Cobras. And before Amani's very eyes, Jaden was plucked from the carav and lifted into the sky.

"Amani!"

That was Ziyad's voice.

"Here, I'm here!"

The door slammed open just as Ziyad jumped through. She ran to him and leapt into his arms. He didn't waste time with hugging her back. He grabbed hold of her and bounded out the door, running before they'd hit the sand. Amani closed her eyes and held them shut while hiding her face in Ziyad's shoulder. She couldn't watch.

Not with Jaden's screams echoing across the desert.

~ * ~

Ziyad's heart banged against his ribs and each breath was a labored gasp, but he ran until he couldn't run any longer. Falling to the sand, he pulled Amani close and glanced over his shoulder.

He thanked his god over and over that he'd been able to reach Amani in time. He took her in, noticing her absent belt-wrap and wrinkled robes. What he'd seen of Jaden in the air, he'd been naked and about to force himself on the Spider Princess.

Apparently, that had eaten away at the last shreds of his god's mercy.

And Ziyad couldn't have been more overjoyed.

He glanced behind him once more only to see Jaden still screaming in the air. From this distance, Ziyad couldn't see much of what was happening to the man, but he had a good guess. The god of Cobras was letting the other gods torture him within an inch of his life.

Jaden's legs now bent at odd angles. His arms fell away, as if ripped from their sockets. His body rolled this

way and that, batted about like a pesky insect. With each new torment, Jaden's cries became more bloodcurdling.

Amani clutched Ziyad's robes and buried her face in his chest. He didn't want her to see Jaden's fate. He held her to him, stroking her hair and praying the man's fate would be over soon.

After what seemed an entire age had passed, Ziyad watched in horror as Jaden's body burst into flames, burning every color of the princes of the desert. Within seconds, Jaden's screams were no more and the light extinguished, leaving nothing but silence on the dunes surrounding Suridesh.

Twenty Six

Amani trembled as she held on to her husband. His arms held her close and he breathed deep, seemingly relieved to have found her in one piece.

"Is it over?" she asked, her voice cracking.

"Yes," Ziyad whispered, stroking her hair. "Jaden is dead."

"He was about to... He almost—"

"I know," he said, interrupting her. "I never should have left you!"

"You couldn't have known." Amani leaned back, amazed to find tears on her face. She stroked his cheeks. "You thought I was with your physician. So did I. He even healed your hand! Neither of us could have known."

"That is the third time I have almost lost you, Amani," Ziyad said. He sniffled, and his eyes betrayed his fear.

"The Cobra is no more," she told him. Amani let her fingers wander into Ziyad's hair. He shuddered in her arms. "He can no longer harm us. And I will never leave you again. There is nothing left to be afraid of."

He gave her a half-grin. "And here I thought I would be the one to soothe you."

She hugged him and chuckled. "The gods destroyed one of our caravs."

"A small price to pay for your safety," he replied.

"Can we... can we..."

"What?"

"Can we stay in the city tonight, Ziyad? I do not believe I can be out here on the dunes any longer."

Ziyad cupped her cheeks. "We can stay in my royal

tent. It is not too far from Qadir's."

Amani nodded. "I would like that."

"Spider!" Khalil's deep voice resonated throughout the night as he ran toward them with the other princes in tow. "Are you all right? Is Amani safe? Did you see that?"

"Yes," Ziyad answered. He stood and hauled Amani up next to him. He pulled her close with his arm around her shoulders. Amani was grateful she could press against him to hide the fact that she had no belt-wrap to hold her robes closed.

"But that carav!" The Viper glanced over his shoulder. "It's in pieces."

"The Sentinels live," Ziyad answered. "We can rebuild."

Amani watched as all five princes nodded and looked toward the Spider's caravan in silence. "The gods have eliminated the house of the Cobra," she said. "There are now only five princes who roam this desert."

Every man present looked at her. She blushed under their scrutiny, but thankfully the darkness hid it from them.

"Amani is right," the Scarab said. "It is just us now."

"What do we do with the Cobra's people?" Khalil asked. "I'm sure they fled to Suridesh when the Sentinels began to die."

Ziyad stroked his chin. "They are not guilty of the treachery of their prince," he said thoughtfully. "They should be given the choice to ride with any one of us or live in the tent city."

"Jaden had a physician, Spider," Tariq suggested. "You could ask him to ride with you."

Ziyad nodded. "True. He also had a head cook."

The Viper nodded as well. "Jalil will be sorely missed. She and Sabine had grown close these past years. My wife is nearly inconsolable."

Amani decided to speak on behalf of the other princesses. "I know your schedules keep you busy, delivering water to the people, but might I suggest something?"

"By all means, Spider Princess," the Falcon said with a grin.

"All of you are so close. And yet you barely see each other, except on rare occasions. Tariq and Qadir, you are

best friends, and yet how often do you visit? And Khalil and Ziyad, I have seen for myself a bond between you two that has only grown stronger."

"Don't fool yourself, Highness," Khalil said with a wink. "I only tolerate the Spider because of his lovely wife."

Amani chuckled. "I don't doubt it. But I've grown very close with Zara. And the Jackal married us. Well, the first time."

Everyone laughed as Ziyad smacked the boy on his shoulder.

"I propose we make it a point to meet in Suridesh a few times a year. Let our children play together. Catch up on old times. We need each other."

The Viper took a deep breath and sighed. "She's right. Sabine loves getting together with Trianna and Zara. I'm sure she would love being with you as well, Amani. It sounds like a fine idea."

As the princes talked amongst themselves, making plans for the future, Ziyad hugged Amani close and whispered in her ear. "This is why I love you, minx. You think of others more than you think of yourself."

"I know you have a responsibility to your gods and to the people of Jikkar, but the princes work too hard, Ziyad. If each of you takes two of Jaden's water caravs, then you could provide even more water on your trips. Perhaps even enough to rest a few days in Suridesh when you are all together."

Ziyad opened his mouth, then closed it. When he opened it again, he said, "I was a fool to ever think you weren't royalty. You have been the Spider Princess since the day we first said our vows."

Amani bit her lip in an effort to keep herself from tearing up. "Do you know what one of my greatest wishes is?"

"Tell me, let me grant it."

"I want to wake up to you in the morning." She kissed the side of his neck. "I want to sleep the night knowing you're next to me." She kissed his cheek. "I want to lie in your arms and know that I am safe."

The smile he gave her sucked the breath right out of her lungs. Amani's heart pounded when he lowered his head,

but all he gave her was a quick, chaste kiss.

"Gentlemen," he said, bowing to his peers. "I will agree to whatever terms you deem worthy, but for now, I must take my leave of you."

Khalil grinned. "Of course, Ziyad. Take care of your wife."

"I intend to."

With that, Ziyad took her hand and marched straight for the city gates.

~ * ~

Ziyad snapped his fingers and the lamps instantly lit around his royal tent. He was surprised to find the place had been cleaned recently. He'd expected to find dust everywhere. He hadn't stayed in his royal tent once he'd reached Suridesh. Perhaps Ahmed had it cleaned after the Princes' Council. It made sense the Spider and his princess would want a place to stay while resting in the city.

He'd forgotten the lush blacks and silvers that lined the floor, from dramatic carpets, to pillows of all shapes and sizes. Two silver columns rose like palm trees from the floor to hold up the ceiling of the tent, while a few tables held various water pitchers, pens, and hair brushes.

"Ziyad, look!"

Amani strode past him to a potted plant sitting on a prominent table in the middle of the tent. "It's my mother's rahala blossom, the one I told you about!"

He walked behind her and hugged her around her waist. "Perhaps she thought you'd want it."

"It smells divine."

On an impulse, Ziyad sent his magic into her to cleanse her. Then he took a deep breath. "*You* smell divine," he amended.

Amani didn't say a word. She turned in his arms and hugged him, standing on her toes to get closer. Ziyad obliged, closing his arms firmly around her and squeezing. When her own gentle magic flowed through him, it made him smile. She'd cleansed him in return.

"Your Highness?" A quiet, feminine voice called to him from beyond his tent flaps. Who could possibly be disturbing his time with his wife, and at this late hour?

Ziyad released Amani and strode to the flap, intent on

giving the person outside a taste of his wrath. But when he swept the flap aside, no one stood there. Instead, a tray of delectable meats, breads, and desserts greeted him. No doubt his peers knew both he and Amani needed food.

"Who is it, Ziyad?" Amani asked, glancing over his shoulder. When she noticed the food, he heard her stomach growl like a baying jackal.

"Hungry?" he asked, giving her a playful grin. Amani nodded so fast, he laughed out loud.

Scooping up the tray, Ziyad spared one quick glance up at the Spider constellation in the night sky. He grinned widely and bowed to his god.

Twenty Seven

Amani woke to a large hand caressing her belly. She stretched and arched her back, coming in contact with a warm, naked body.

Ziyad.

They'd eaten and fallen asleep the night before, too tired to do much more. Amani hadn't complained. Falling asleep in the Spider's arms was one luxury she thought she'd never have. But he'd kept her warm all night long, wrapping around her like a blanket.

Now, he was behind her, and his hand was slowly making its way up to her breasts.

"Good morning, minx," he whispered. Ziyad lowered his head and kissed her neck with an open mouth. His tongue tasted her skin, sending pulses of desire straight to her clit.

"Good morning," she answered, twisting to give him free reign with her nipples.

Ziyad didn't wait to take advantage. His fingers rolled and pinched her while he thrust his stiff cock against her ass. "Do you know how often I've dreamt of taking you in the morning?"

Amani grinned and tucked her head on his bent elbow. "About as often as I have, my prince?"

"Mmm." He growled, puffing his hot breath across her cheek. "Amani, tell me," Ziyad whispered. *"Where did he touch you?"*

She sucked in her breath and bit her lip. "I do not wish to speak of it."

"Tell me," he said again.

"Ziyad..."

"I wish to erase it from your mind, Amani." His voice was as smooth as silk, raising bumps on her arms and legs. "I am the only one I want you to think of when I touch you."

His heartfelt words melted her. Amani's body began to tremble, but she turned to face him, trusting him with her shame. "He...he put his m-mouth on my breast."

"Which one?"

Amani looked down at her right breast. Ziyad pulled away and leaned over her, latching himself onto her nipple and suckling. His tongue was magic, gently licking her, bringing her nipple to a hardened nub within his mouth. His teeth worked gently, tugging her, eliciting gasps from deep within her.

She held his head to her and tossed her leg across his thighs. She wanted him on top of her, claiming her. Gods, but she loved this man, the Spider Prince—Ziyad, her beautiful husband.

"Where else?" he breathed.

Amani cleared her throat. "H-his fingers touched my...my clit. I thought he was you. I never would have...never..."

Ziyad's face hovered above hers. "Shh," he responded. "I know."

For the next few minutes, Amani could think of nothing more than his mouth as he kissed her, deeply exploring every nook and cranny. She caressed his tongue in kind, and tugged on his hair to keep him above her when he would have risen off her.

"I need you inside me," she whispered in his ear.

"I need to erase Jaden's touch first."

"Ziyad..."

"Did he touch you anywhere else?"

His dark eyes held her captive. Their depths told her much more than his words. He wanted her to be his, completely. He wanted her to think only of him when they made love, and it scared him that she might think of the Cobra when they did.

"Nowhere else, my love," she replied.

"Then close your eyes, minx," he said, giving her a wicked grin. "Because I'm about to take you to the moons."

She obeyed him and shivered at the sudden loss of his body heat. Ziyad lifted off her, and within mere seconds, his mouth was feasting on her pussy. Amani cried out and arched toward him, clutching onto the pillows and gasping for breath.

In and out his tongue plunged while his nose rubbed her clit. She was already wet for him, but now, her cream must have coated his face. Amani wasn't shy about following his rhythm, up and down, thrusting against him and feeling the hair on his chin add to the pleasure.

Ziyad entered her with one finger, then two, then three, pumping in time with her hips and lapping at her clit like a thirsty man.

Up, up, up she flew until total and complete rapture exploded within her, shooting down her arms and legs as she pressed closer to his face, demanding more of his mouth.

Amani hadn't realized she'd screamed until she opened her eyes and saw Ziyad crawling over her, grinning from ear to ear.

"You are so lovely, Amani," he said, stopping only to kiss and lick his way up her skin. She tried her hardest to rub her sensitive clit against his belly. "I love watching you come against me. I love when your pussy squeezes my fingers."

"I love your tongue," she told him. "I love everything about you."

Ziyad chuckled, but seemed more than pleased by her confession.

"Do you love my cock?" He slicked himself between her lower lips, making her jump at the sensation.

"Yes!" she cried, rubbing every inch of his skin she could reach. "No more teasing, Ziyad. Please sink into me."

He leaned his forehead on hers and gazed deep into her eyes. When he hesitated, she somehow knew what he wanted to hear.

"*I love you,*" she whispered. "All of my thoughts are of you. All of my dreams, my fantasies... I have always loved you, my Spider, my lover, my husband. You are the most magnificent man I have ever known, and I am so very blessed to be your princess."

He shuddered and took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, moisture shown in them.

"And you, minx," he said, his voice breaking. "*You* are the most magnificent woman I have ever known. *I* am blessed to be your husband."

Amani knew Ziyad would always have a place in his heart for Karis. But right here, right now, he was telling her that under no uncertain terms he belonged to *her*, with everything inside of him.

She didn't say another word. Opening her legs wider, she allowed him to rest there while leaning up to kiss his lips. Amani took it slow, asking for entrance with her tongue, and mewling in triumph when he opened to her.

She delved. She tasted. She plundered him, making love to him with her mouth alone. Ziyad didn't break their kiss, but his cock slowly advanced, burying itself between her thighs, making his body one with hers.

Amani arched into him, silently asking him for more.

With slow, unhurried thrusts, Ziyad made love to her, telling her again and again just how much he cherished her—without saying a word.

Amani followed his dance, caressing his thighs and ass before clawing her fingers up his back, making small valleys on his skin. Ziyad pulled back just enough to tease her lips with his, taking her breath into his lungs.

She leaned up to kiss him, but he shook his head.

"I want to watch you come," he whispered.

His words alone brought her to the brink. She grinned at him, suddenly remembering that now, while they made love, he was her servant.

"Then stroke me, Spider," she commanded boldly. "And we will come together."

His hand disappeared between them a moment before his thumb rubbed her clit. Within seconds, she came, tossing her head back and crying out his name.

Ziyad pushed forward forcefully, grinding against her hips until his own pleasure burst forth, spilling into her pussy.

"Gods!" he exclaimed before resting his head on her shoulder.

Amani smiled dreamily while stroking his damp skin. "Do not move," she said when he would have rolled away.

"Yes, my princess," he replied submissively, staying

exactly where he was.

He was happy. She knew so before she even saw the smile on his face. Amani's heart soared, and she wondered if the Spider armband Zara had made for her gave her certain insights into Ziyad's moods. She suspected it did, since every piece Zara made had some touch of her magic.

"We must begin every morning like this," she said, trailing her fingers through his hair.

Ziyad lifted up on his elbows and grinned, giving her a small thrust for good measure. She gasped when he pressed deep, sending a bolt of pleasure throughout her body.

"What else can I do but obey?" he said playfully before dipping his head and kissing her senseless.

~ * ~

The Jackal Prince stood on the dunes and looked up and down his caravan line. Just like the others, he was taking two of Jaden's old water caravs with him, to provide more water to the people in the Cobra Prince's absence.

Miraculously, once the princes had agreed to take the extra carriages, the dead Sentinels came back to life. Siraj had never seen the hand of the gods so at work in his life. He'd never doubt the power of the god of Jackals, or any other god of the desert for that matter.

His thoughts drifted back to the girl who'd helped him in the desert and he closed his eyes. Breathing deep, Siraj couldn't help but think of her pretty face and her amazing eyes, the color of which he hadn't seen before, and most likely wouldn't see again. He had to find her, if only to know who she was.

He'd never known anyone who could change their shape into an animal. Despite her age, the girl knew very powerful magics, perhaps the ancient magics, the kind the gods wielded. The witch known as Mother was a testament of what those magics could do to a person if someone dabbled in their might. Such magic was not meant to be wielded by mere mortals.

But this young girl... If she dabbled in the ancient magics, she surely had a teacher. No little child could study the magic on their own.

Siraj shivered at the thought, regardless of the sweat rolling down his back.

Yasmin, as she'd called herself, had seemed such a sweet girl. Siraj didn't want her fate to be the same as that horrid witch. She was still young. There was time to save her.

And it had nothing to do with how mesmerized he'd been by her amazing eyes.

"Fall asleep on us, Siraj?"

The Scarab smacked him so hard on the shoulder, Siraj almost fell face-down in the sand. His cheeks reddened as he glared at the older prince.

"No," he said, adjusting his golden robes.

"Ah, daydreaming then?" Qadir winked. "About a woman?"

"Of sorts."

"You're thinking of that girl again, aren't you?" Qadir's brow rose.

"I wasn't seeing things out there," Siraj told him. "She was real. You saw the Cobra's bloody sword for yourself. You saw my scar. She healed me."

"And somehow she turned herself into a bird and conveniently flew away?"

The Jackal scowled. Qadir laughed and squeezed his shoulder this time. "Listen, I've lived long enough to know never to take anything for granted. Some of the things I've seen I don't believe myself. But if you believe this Yasmin is out there somewhere, your god will guide you to her."

Siraj sighed. "I just don't want her to become like...like..."

"Mother?" the Scarab finished for him.

Siraj nodded. "Only the ancient magics could be so powerful to allow her to change her body and heal me."

Qadir rubbed his short-cropped goatee. "Perhaps she is a messenger of the gods. Perhaps the god of Jackals sent her to heal you. If that is the case, you will never find her."

Shielding his eyes, Siraj looked to the sky. "I don't believe so," he said. "She told me she was summoned, but that Khalil hadn't sent her. I think Khalil's call to his falcons got her attention. But even Khalil doesn't know who she is."

"It is possible," Qadir answered. "But she is young. So are you. Give yourself a few years before you truly search for her, if you so choose. If this girl is as exotic as you say she

is, perhaps you will meet again as adults."

"It might be too late by then," Siraj said. "She could already be twisted by her power, or..." He shrugged.

"Married?" Qadir said, giving his peer a lopsided grin. "You are far too young to be thinking of such things. You have years yet to meet your princess."

Siraj kicked the dirt at his feet, annoyed his friend could read him so well.

"Besides," Qadir continued. "Finding her now will do neither of you any good. She is still a child! By the gods, so are you."

The Scarab was right. Siraj was the youngest prince to reign in over two hundred cycles.

"If you want my advice," Qadir said, "then here it is. You don't know who this girl is, other than her name. But from your story, it is obvious she knows who you are—she called you the Jackal. Therefore, I say if your god wishes you to find her again, then let *her* find *you*. She should know when you are scheduled to arrive in Suridesh if she cares enough to meet you again. Until that day arrives, all you can do is pray."

Siraj sighed. He didn't like being so helpless. And he definitely didn't like being infatuated with a child. Straightening his shoulders, he said, "You're right, Scarab. Nothing can be done about her now. Don't we have work to do?"

Qadir laughed and smacked him again. "That we do, boy!"

Twenty Eight

Amani watched Ziyad from the shadows and admired the way he was with his people. With *their* people. It was odd, thinking of herself as the Spider Princess. But she was, well and truly, royalty.

They'd left Suridesh that morning, taking two of Jaden's water caravs with them, intent on returning to their oasis to retrieve the caravs Ziyad had left behind. With a fresh supply of water, they'd be off to Parradh, to replenish the tent city to the north.

They'd taken on a few of the Cobra's servants and distant family, people who'd wished to ride the Spider's caravan now that theirs had been destroyed. Ziyad had taken Jaden's physician, as well as his caravan driver, if only to give old Brand a rest every now and again. And each and every one of the Spider's newest members had been given black robes to wear, instead of the old, drab brown of the Cobra.

Right now, Ziyad spoke with those servants about Jaden's water barrels, and how they were indeed filled with mud. There wasn't much to be done with them, other than to empty them, cleanse them, and restack them until they reached his oasis.

The sun had disappeared beyond the horizon when Ziyad had finished giving orders. He stood there, gazing out upon the empty dunes with his hands on his hips. Amani strode quietly behind him and embraced him.

He ran his palms over the back of her hands and threaded their fingers without saying a word.

"I need your help, Spider," she said, giving him a

squeeze.

"Oh?" he asked, turning in her embrace.

Amani gazed up at him and nodded. "I need to watch the stars this evening. And I need to do it with you."

He arched a brow. "Do you?"

"I was thinking on top of your—*our* carav?"

Ziyad grinned and cupped her cheeks. "I have a better idea."

"What's that?"

"Let me take you beyond the caravan where we can gaze at the sky—alone."

A thrill shot through her. She couldn't help but remember that he'd once suggested the very same thing—the night he'd found her on top of her carav. Now, he was giving her that choice again.

"I would love to. Can you manage to break away from your daunting duties, my prince? Or will I have to rely on Brand, or perhaps Hiram to take me stargazing?"

Ziyad growled and shook his head. "One of these days, minx, I will bend you over my knee and you will feel my wrath."

She grinned wickedly and stood on her toes to whisper in his ear. "Maybe I'll bend you over mine."

Amani walked away, glancing coyly over her shoulder. Ziyad followed her like a devoted dog. Within seconds, he caught her, taking her hand and marching away from the caravan.

"Don't we need to tell someone where we're going?" she asked, trotting along behind him just to keep up with his long strides.

"I believe one and all saw you hugging me just now and whispering in my ear," he said, his voice light. "They are a smart lot. They will figure it out."

Amani giggled, but no longer questioned her husband as he took her beyond a very large dune. The caravan was far behind them, and she took in the beautiful desolation of the desert.

"The moons have risen," Ziyad said, pointing to the horizon. He was right. Pamos had caught Thiadra. They were making love, as they had countless times before.

Amani stared at her husband and watched in awe as a

light breeze ruffled his hair. He was so intense and amazing that he took her breath away. When he turned back to her, she could barely see more than his silhouette, but that was enough to make her heart thunder against her ribs.

"I need your help with something else," she whispered, barely able to get her words out past the lump in her throat.

Ziyad took a step closer and the concern in his voice was obvious. "Are you all right?"

Amani nodded, but trembled nonetheless. Perhaps it was the deafening silence or the dark of the night. But she knew otherwise. She trembled at being one of the most powerful women in the Golden Desert, the one who had wormed her way into the heart of the untouchable Spider Prince. He loved her—she knew it beyond the shadow of a doubt. And the realization of his love finally struck her.

Just now.

"I n-need your help, Highness, in bathing the desert in our colors. I believe there's a legend about the lovers in the sky, and I can recall certain occasions where I've seen them turn red and blue and green. But never black."

Ziyad stroked her face and grinned, she saw the flash of his white teeth against the shadows. "I must take you under their light for the moons to glow black, my love. Are you ready for such an undertaking?"

"More than you know."

With lightning speed, Ziyad grabbed her by the waist and sat back in the sand, bringing her down with him. She squealed, then giggled when his chuckles hit the air.

"Straddle me, Amani," he commanded, his voice slowly losing his mirth. She obeyed him, wanting him to command her as much as she had commanded him.

"Open my robes and pull down my undergarments."

Amani did as she was told and couldn't stop her mouth from watering at her glimpse of his rigid cock, already long and hard for her.

"Take off your undergarments."

Within seconds, they were gone.

"Now open your own robes and take me inside you."

Amani sat on her knees and did as he said, impaling herself with a cry of satisfaction. No more verbal commands

were spoken, but plenty were given as Ziyad demanded with his hands she ride him like he rode his horse. Up and down she grinded, loving the feel of him deep in her pussy, rubbing her clit against the coarse hair that surrounded his cock.

Ziyad ripped open her belt-wrap and tongued her tits, lapping at each nipple before suckling one deep in his mouth. Amani rode him harder, faster, until the cries of her orgasm echoed on the breeze. Once her sheath pulsed around his cock, Ziyad came as well, hissing through his teeth and holding her hips down, demanding she take his deep, rolling thrusts.

And just like that, the light over the desert went dark. Amani glanced at the sky in wonder just as Ziyad did. They both gasped at the sight.

Thiadra and Pamos were still visible, but their light had turned black, dousing the dunes with the colors of the Spider.

"You have blessed me, my princess," Ziyad said, his voice full of wonder.

Amani caressed his cheeks. "No, Highness," she said, giving him a soft kiss. "*You* have blessed me."

Ziyad's hand slid down her back and spread across her thigh. Amani nuzzled his neck in return and breathed deep. Finally she knew what it was like to be cherished. *Finally*, Amani knew what it was like to be loved.

"The god of Spiders has blessed us both," Ziyad whispered.

"Yes," she replied, gazing deep into her husband's adoring eyes. "He has."

"I love you, Amani Bihar."

Her eyes filled with tears at his gentle tone. "And I love you, Ziyad Bihar, my magnificent Spider Prince."

About Rebecca

Rebecca resides in Portland, Oregon with her husband and five children, who are the light of her life. A native Californian by birth but a native Oregonian at heart, Rebecca loves the Pacific Northwest and never plans on leaving. You can find out more about Rebecca at www.rebeccagoings.com, [www.twitter.com/rebeccagoings](https://twitter.com/rebeccagoings), and www.facebook.com/rebecca.goings.

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