



*He is determined to save her—
no matter the cost.*

THE JACKAL PRINCE

DESERT PRINCES OF JIKKAR

REBECCA GOINGS

Carnal Passions Presents

The Jackal Prince
Desert Princes of Jikkar Book V

By

Rebecca Goings

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Other Books By Rebecca Goings

The Viper Prince
The Scarab Prince
The Falcon Prince
The Spider Prince

Dedication

For everyone who fell in love with young Siraj—as I did—while we watched him grow from a boy to a man throughout this series.

Like a beaming, teary-eyed mother, I'm very proud of the regal prince—and the honorable man—he has become.

One

He is here. In Neviann. Run to him. Run!

Yasmin emerged from her hiding place behind a few water barrels stacked next to a goat merchant's tent. The merchant's wife had been nice to her, giving her stale flatbread and some tepid water to ease her hunger over the past few days, but Yasmin couldn't stay with them forever. She needed a way out of the city. She needed a caravan prince.

She needed the Jackal.

Her heart pounded as she ran through the streets, avoiding carts and children. A few people shouted at her to slow down, but she couldn't stop. She had to reach the Jackal's caravan before she was caught. His acceptance meant she'd be under a god's protection, and the ghost that had been chasing her couldn't touch her.

But would he remember her? Would he know that *she'd* been the one to heal his mortal wound all those years ago? She'd been a child then, but she'd told him her name on the dunes before shifting into a falcon and flying away. Perhaps he would remember. She could only hope. If the Jackal denied her safe passage, she would surely die.

"Please," Yasmin whispered as she ran. "God of Jackals, have mercy on me. Let him remember!"

There it was, the Jackal's long line of caravs and the Sentinels that pulled them, just beyond the tents. She'd heard his horn blast announcing his arrival not too long ago, and now, his servants unloaded his water supply for the people.

"*Jackal*," she cried, stumbling in the sand. "Please, I need to speak to the Jackal Prince!"

A couple of caravan guards stopped her before she reached the royal carav with the golden jackal emblazoned on the door. Two golden flags flapped in the breeze from the top of his carriage, depicting a black jackal rearing on its hind legs.

"Who are you?" one of the guards asked.

"What business do you have here?" the other said.

“Please,” she said again, her eyes wide. With a quick glance over her shoulder, she shivered. Thankfully, nothing and no one had chased her through the streets. “I need to speak with your prince. He knows me. He will listen to me.”

“Tell us your business and we will tell the prince.”

Yasmin looked at the guard on her left, the bigger man in the golden dunla. His thoughts came to her in bits and pieces, but it was easy to read him. He thought she was a threat. He wouldn’t let her see the Jackal. She was hysterical and there was no way he’d let her have an audience with one of the most important men in the desert.

Yasmin took a few deep breaths to calm herself. “I need the Jackal’s help,” she said in a smooth, steady voice. “He owes me a favor. Please, I need him!”

“You need some shade and cool water,” the man on the right said. They both chuckled and began hauling her away by her arms. She could easily break their hold and overpower them, but she’d be punished harshly if she did so. And Yasmin already knew firsthand what it was like to be an outcast. She rarely cast her magic now because of it.

“No, I must see him. I must!”

The sound of a door opening came to her and she glanced over her shoulder. There was the Jackal, gazing at her with his hands on his hips. He was taller, older. His face had filled out, losing its boyish charm and replacing it with a gorgeous man. He’d grown facial hair since she’d last seen him, a moustache coupled with a thin patch of hair below his lower lip, which widened to a bigger patch on his chin. It wasn’t too thick, but closely clipped.

It made him look regal and commanding, like the prince he was. Despite his young age, he’d already ruled his oasis for twelve years, inheriting his father’s crown when he’d been fifteen. Everyone knew the story. He’d deposed his father with the help of the Viper, the Scarab, and the Falcon.

His strength drew her to him. And his courage.

“Jackal!” she cried, finally twisting free of the men holding her. They tried to catch her, but she was faster, dropping to her knees in the sand next to the steps of his carav. Yasmin bowed her head. She needed his acceptance, more than anything on Jikkar. “Please help me!”

“What is wrong?” he asked. His deep voice resonated on her skin. She couldn’t stop every hair on her body from standing on end. “Are you in some kind of trouble?”

Tears burned behind her eyes, but she wouldn’t let them fall. “I need your protection.”

“What have you done?”

Yasmin found it within herself to lift her head, but she didn’t look much higher than his feet. The Jackal had descended the stairs. He stood on

the bottom step, his golden robes right in front of her face.

"I have done nothing," she said, hearing the hitch in her voice. "I am being pursued, and only the protection of your god can save me."

"Pursued by whom?" he asked, finally stepping onto the sand.

"Not who, but what. Please, Jackal, I'm begging you. Save me."

"Why should I save you, woman?"

Biting her bottom lip, Yasmin finally gazed into his eyes. "Because I once saved you, Highness."

~*~

Siraj Pramtash sucked in his breath at his first glimpse into the woman's lavender eyes. It was her. *It was her!* She'd found him, after all these years of thinking about her, wondering about her. She'd found him, just like the Scarab Prince had told him she might.

Swallowing hard, he tried not to show that his heart pounded against his ribs or that his hands were suddenly sweaty. Ten years ago, she'd stunned him with her exotic looks. But she'd merely been a young girl then. Now, she was every inch a woman, and more glorious than he could have ever dreamed.

Long raven hair cascaded over her shoulders while thick, dark lashes ringed her extraordinary eyes. Her skin was the color of warm tea, but the robes she wore were ratty and thin. She looked a little thin as well.

He knelt in the dirt beside her, waving away his men. He didn't speak until he was sure they were gone.

"Yasmin?"

The corners of her mouth lifted in what looked like relief before she cupped her hands over her smile.

"You remember."

"Of course I remember," he said, raising his brows. "How could I forget the beautiful little girl who appeared out of nowhere then flew away on the wind?"

She blushed and glanced down, seemingly uncomfortable in his presence. The last thing Siraj wanted to do was scare her away. He'd wanted to find her years ago, but they had both been children. However, the god of Jackals was a patient god, and now he appeared to have handed Yasmin back into Siraj's hands.

And she needed his help.

"Who is pursuing you?" he asked. "Have you broken the law?"

She shook her head as she gazed at the sand. Siraj fought the urge to cup her cheek and make her to look at him again. He could drown in her lovely gaze.

"There is no *person* chasing me, Highness. May I... May I...?"

"What?"

Yasmin glanced over her shoulder as if looking for the guards who'd almost hauled her away.

“My men are gone,” he told her in a soft tone.

“May I speak with you privately?”

She blinked many times while looking at him. He had the distinct feeling she had a hard time holding his eye contact. What had happened to this girl in the past decade? The Yasmin he remembered had seemed confident and happy. This woman before him now was cowering and distant. Siraj’s heart broke for her. He’d feared she wouldn’t survive unscathed. He’d once watched her change her shape into a falcon, after she’d healed the sword wound the Cobra Prince had given him right through his belly.

She knew how to wield the ancient magics, the powers meant only for the gods. Insanity followed those who dabbled in their power. He could only pray it wasn’t too late for her.

“By all means, come with me,” he said, indicating she step into his carav.

Yasmin hesitated and looked up at the flags waving in the breeze. With a deep breath, she stood and followed, meekly bowing her head.

Siraj closed the door and turned to her, but she didn’t look at him. She seemed to be studying his ornate golden carpet.

With a sweep of his robes, Siraj strode past her and sat on his pedestal throne at the far end of the carav.

“I’m listening,” he said.

Yasmin was trembling. Was she afraid of him? Perhaps she was. She didn’t know him. She couldn’t know that he’d searched for her, that he’d thought of her almost every day since she’d left him in the dunes beyond Suridesh.

She lifted her head and glanced at him, giving him a strange look, as if she’d heard his thoughts.

“This will sound strange to you, Jackal,” she said. “But I hear voices. I see things, people that aren’t there. And...and I can do things.”

He gave her a knowing grin. “Yes, I know you can do things. And it doesn’t surprise me that you can do more.”

“You don’t understand,” she continued. “What I can see and hear is not a benevolent spirit. It haunts me, Highness.”

Siraj furrowed his brow. “You see ghosts?”

She took her time, nodding slowly. “I have tried to keep a low profile. I’ve run from it before. But it’s found me in Neviann and I need to move on. I know your god can protect me, and I thought I would beg you to help me.”

“Because you helped me?”

She nodded.

He didn’t know what to make of this woman. She claimed she saw spirits. Perhaps the insanity had already touched her.

“You must believe me,” she said, this time with less conviction. “If you do not...” Her voice broke off but she squared her shoulders. “If you do

not, then I will die.”

“This ghost, it’ll kill you?” he said skeptically, cocking his head.

“In some way, yes.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not exactly sure what it’ll do to me, Highness. But...I think it’s attracted to my magic. I never wanted to study the ancient magics, I was born this way. I just know what to do. I’ve never been taught, and that’s made me unwelcome everywhere I go.”

The pain behind her words hit Siraj right in the gut. He wanted to go to her, comfort her. But he barely knew this woman, aside from their chance encounter years ago, when he’d been run through by the Cobra.

“Why were you out there on the dunes that day so long ago, Yasmin?” he asked after a short silence.

She stared at the floor and swallowed. “I can become a bird, as you know. I heard the Falcon Prince’s call in my head. That was the second time it had happened. The first had been a couple of years before, when I was only ten years old.”

“You can hear the Falcon Prince call to his birds?”

She nodded. “The first time, I ignored the call. I was young, it scared me.” Siraj nodded and gestured for her to continue. “The second time, I was curious. So I shifted my body and flew into the sky. I found the Falcon easily enough, and followed the other birds to look for the Spider’s princess. But I... found you. My keen eyes saw your wound and I couldn’t let you die.”

“How did you know I was the Jackal Prince?”

Yasmin finally lifted her eyes to him and smiled. Siraj’s heart skipped a beat, but he returned her soft grin. “You were wearing gold, Highness. I knew the Jackal’s color was gold. And I also knew you were a boy. Your robes were too fine to merely be a member of your caravan, and your jackal sword gave you away.”

“You saw all of that when you healed me?”

“No,” she replied. “I saw all of that from the sky.”

His eyes widened. “I never got to thank you properly.”

“I didn’t want your friends to see me.”

“Why not?”

She played with her hair, twirling it in circles around her fingers. Siraj suddenly had the insane urge to delve his own fingers into her tresses.

Yasmin shrugged and looked away. “I was naked.”

That got Siraj’s attention. “If I remember correctly, you were surrounded by a sparkling glow of light.”

“Well, I did not wish for you to...see me. But if the others had seen me, I wasn’t sure I could hold onto my concentration. I wasn’t very powerful.”

He stood from his throne and took a few steps toward her. “I still wear the mark of the Cobra’s sword.”

She took a few steps back. "I heard what happened to the Cobra. Seems he got what he deserved."

"Did you know I look at this mark every day when I dress and think of you?"

Yasmin's sharp inhalation of breath echoed off the walls. "It has been years, Highness."

"Doesn't matter. I was in such pain, you were an angel to me out there in the sand. I have always wondered where you were, what you were doing. Who you were with. What you looked like all grown up."

"Now you know."

He nodded. "Now I know."

A long, uncomfortable silence descended upon them the moment he stepped in front of her. There was nowhere for her to go, she was up against the wall, pressing against the fine, golden silk draped across it.

"If I give you my protection," he said, his voice barely above a whisper, "then you will ride my caravan. You will leave this place and travel the desert with me. Is this what you wish?"

He hadn't meant for his words to sound intimate, but by her raised brows, he could only assume what she was now thinking. He didn't correct her thoughts. He'd been dreaming about her lovely eyes for far too long not to wonder what it would be like to be with her. And if she stayed with him for the long ride back to his oasis, he wasn't sure if he could keep his hands to himself.

"I wish it, Jackal."

Damn, but her soft acceptance sounded too much like a wedding vow.

"Then consider my hospitality my belated thanks for saving my life. You will be an honored guest in my caravan, and you may call me Siraj from now on."

She gasped again. "I couldn't possibly say your name!"

He held up his hand. "Further," he said, continuing as if she hadn't said a word. "I will give you some new robes to wear." He looked her up and down. "And some food. How long has it been since you've eaten a decent meal?"

She shied away from him. "I...I can't remember."

Siraj grasped her elbow, and he couldn't deny the zing of awareness that shot straight to his cock. "Yasmin, why didn't you find me sooner?"

She looked at him through misty eyes. "I did not wish to use you and take advantage of your hospitality, Jackal. I could always find something to eat here or there. But I could no longer...ignore what the voices were saying. What they wanted of me. I-I'm so scared. I didn't know where to turn. When I heard your horn over Neviann, something told me to run to you."

"One of your ghosts, perhaps?"

Yasmin shook her head. "No, Highness. More like a feeling. A...a

need.”

Gods. Right about now, Siraj knew all about need. But he couldn’t find it within himself to let her go. He was touching her, after all these years. She was before him. She was going to ride his caravan across the dunes.

He sent up a silent prayer of thanks to the god of Jackals. For surely it had been him who’d prompted her to come to him.

If Siraj had his way, she would never leave.

He gave her a slow grin. “My god brought you to me.”

Yasmin swallowed hard and nodded. “I think he did, Highness.”

“Siraj.”

She looked away without saying his name. He’d get her to say it. One way or another.

Two

Yasmin couldn't believe the whirlwind that suddenly surrounded her. She could finally breathe again. The Jackal had given her his protection, and with it, the protection of his god. But the servants who scurried here and there were almost laughable.

Siraj had insisted she take a seat among his pillows while he gave her a goblet of water to drink. The goblet was made of fine glass, surrounded on the stem by a howling jackal. Yasmin had tried hard not to gulp the water and moan. It was cool and clean, the best water she'd ever had.

Siraj's servants made their way in and out of his carav, either setting a tray of food before her, or a new robe. Or more desserts. Or perhaps more water? What about jewelry? Siraj himself had disappeared after calling his servants to attend her. It was evening before he returned.

Yasmin felt awkward dressing in his carav, but his servants had insisted, and soon, she had been cleansed, clothed, fed, and her hair brushed until it shone.

Sometime later, Siraj entered once more, but not before knocking to tell his servants he'd returned. They nodded at him and left one by one, without him having to command them.

Behind him, another man chuckled as he, too, stepped in to the carriage. Both of them stopped and stared at their first look at Yasmin.

She fidgeted before them, biting her lip and playing with her hair. She'd never been dressed in such finery. It embarrassed her. She shouldn't have let Siraj's servants fawn over her so. The gold of his people shimmered on her, as if the garment itself had been spun from the precious metal.

"She is beautiful," the strange man said. Glancing at him, Yasmin gasped. Aside from a few differences here and there, he looked almost like Siraj, as if he was his...

"Yasmin," Siraj said, interrupting her thoughts. "This is my brother, Yasir Pramtash. You shall be staying as a guest in his carav, along with his wife Barika."

She furrowed her brow. The Jackal must have anticipated the question she wanted to ask.

“Yasir is not born of my mother, the Jackal Princess. Therefore, he is not in line for the throne. However, as the son of my father, he has been given the honorary title of prince. He is well-respected in my caravan.”

“You have...given me too much, Highness,” she said. “My stomach is full beyond imagining—I’ve eaten enough food to fill myself for an entire week! And these robes, they are too lovely. I never asked to stay with your brother. A tent will do.”

Siraj scoffed. “Nonsense. You deserve it all. Saving the life of a mere prince is worthy of high praise. Saving the life of a *reigning* prince, well, there is nothing I could give you that could ever repay what you have done.”

Yasmin turned away. She had to. It was almost too much to bear, having two handsome men gaze at her so. She’d always known her eyes were unique, but she’d done her best to hide herself most of her life. When people found out she could wield powerful magic, she was ostracized. Being so openly admired was not only foreign, but painfully uncomfortable.

“Give me a moment?” Apparently, Siraj had been talking to his brother. The door of the carav shut quietly behind Yasir.

“Are you all right?” Siraj’s voice was closer. She shivered at its deep timbre. She remembered how he’d sounded as a boy. Now, however, the Jackal Prince was very much a man.

“I am not used to such attention, Highness,” she murmured over her shoulder.

“Surely a woman as beautiful as you has had her fair share of attention.”

“Not in the way you suggest,” she told him. “I used to rub mud on my face to hide myself. I keep my eyes downcast so no one can see me. My looks have gotten a few rocks thrown at me.”

Siraj’s hands were on her shoulders in an instant. He spun her to face him, and his features were hard. “People threw *rocks* at you?”

Yasmin nodded, gazing at his chest. “When I was younger, I would cast my magic without a care. I thought everyone could...do what I do.”

“Go on,” he said when she’d stopped.

“But I soon learned the depth of people’s hatred for things they do not understand. My eyes are so recognizable, I soon became known by them. Before I came to you, I had to hide behind the water barrels near a goat merchant’s tent. And unfortunately, changing my eye color or my looks is not something I can do. I can shift into a bird. But I cannot change the way I look, no matter how much I wish it.”

The Jackal hooked his finger under her chin and forced her to look him in the eye. Yasmin flinched and tried to look away, but he stopped her. “I do not wish you to change the way you look. You are a beautiful woman, Yasmin.”

She bit her lip. “Please don’t tell your caravan what I can do,” she

whispered. "I saved your life, can you leave it at that?"

Her entire body trembled and she couldn't help the moisture in her eyes. If Siraj's people knew what she was capable of, they might not be so welcoming of her. They might even throw a few rocks of their own.

As if mirroring her thoughts, Siraj said, "If any one of my people dare to harm you, they will feel my wrath, make no mistake."

"I just want to be normal."

Siraj's eyes softened. "As long as you ride my caravan, you shall be safe. I will treat you no differently than I do already. I am your friend, Yasmin, and I will always respect you."

Her chin wavered, but she managed not to sob in front of him. "Thank you, Jackal."

"You can thank me by calling me Siraj."

He cocked his head when she remained silent. Yasmin closed her eyes and sighed. "Thank you, Siraj."

"There now," he said, his tone teasing her. "Was that so hard?"

~ * ~

Yasmin was an enigma. Siraj glanced around his now-empty carav and sighed deeply. Her scent surrounded him. He tried to keep thoughts of her cleansing and dressing where he slept out of his mind, but he wasn't too successful.

She'd left with his brother, on her way to Yasir's carriage as a guest of the Jackal. But it was possible Yasmin would be in his caravan for much longer than either of them anticipated. Would she need her own carav? Would she decide to stay and live with his people?

The idea appealed to him. As he undressed himself for sleep, he glanced down at the scar he bore on his belly. The Cobra Prince had run him through with his sword on the dunes in a pitiful attempt to regain the favor of his god. But in so doing, the Cobra only managed to anger every god in the desert, and they had exacted their revenge. Now, the Cobra Prince's line had died out, his oasis dried up, and his caravan disbursed.

Where once there were six, now only five princes remained in the Golden Desert.

Siraj closed his eyes and remembered that day so long ago, when he'd lain in the sand and prayed to his god for deliverance. He'd heard a voice in his head to look for the falcon. Of course, he'd assumed the voice meant the Falcon Prince, but no. The voice had meant Yasmin, and the falcon she could become.

She'd found him alone and bleeding, and healed him with her gentle magic. He'd clutched onto her hand for dear life, clinging to her as if he would fall off a precipice if he let go. Even now he remembered the tears he'd shed, not just for his pain or how he'd been healed, but for the fact Yasmin had left him. She'd left him and he'd had no idea if or when he'd ever see her again.

Now she was here, in his caravan, desperate enough to join him in the desert to escape the ghosts haunting her.

Siraj leaned back on his pillows and doused his lamps with his magic. In the dark, his thoughts ran away with him. It would seem they were connected, he and Yasmin. At least, that's what he believed.

He'd once heard a voice on the dunes telling him to look for her. She'd heard a voice just today telling her to run to him. Perhaps it hadn't been coincidence that she'd heard Khalil's call to his falcons as a child. Perhaps it hadn't been coincidence Siraj had felt a strong urge to deliver water to Neviann just a few weeks ago.

No, this was definitely the work of the god of Jackals, bringing them together for a purpose. But what purpose would that be?

Siraj groaned. He knew what purpose he *wanted* her to serve. Over the years, he'd been hard-pressed to think on any other woman. His thoughts, his memories, his *dreams*, had revolved around Yasmin, and what she might be like if he found her as a woman. He'd had a few lovers here and there, some even provided by his fellow princes—to learn how to better serve his future princess, they'd said.

Siraj had to smile. His friends were only looking out for him. He knew good and well they each regarded him as a younger brother, someone to protect and mentor. But he was a grown man now, plenty capable of finding his own women.

And it was no secret among the princes that he often wondered if his god had set aside Yasmin for his princess. A theory that Qadir, the Scarab, had frequently scoffed at. Siraj had only met this girl once, randomly in the desert when he was delirious and in pain. There had been no heavenly match-making. It was a chance encounter, nothing more.

But Qadir didn't understand. None of them did. Siraj wasn't merely attracted to her because of her beauty or obsessed with her because she'd healed him. He felt a connection, a pulling, a driving force that almost demanded them together.

What else was he to conclude but that his god wanted her with him?

Siraj whispered in the dark. "*Is Yasmin the woman you have chosen for my princess?*" There was no answer. Not even the moons were out tonight to comfort him.

All Siraj could do was wonder to himself as he tossed and turned.

Three

A loud banging woke Siraj from a sound sleep. Had he been dreaming? He lay there for a moment and listened. No, there it was again, harder this time, coming from his door.

“*Jackal!*” That was Yasmin’s muffled voice. “Siraj, please, open the door!”

The banging continued as he sprang from his pillows.

“Help me!”

He didn’t bother donning his robes before striding to the door and opening it wide.

“Yasmin, what in the name of the gods—?”

Before he’d finished his sentence, she was up the steps and in his arms. “Close the door. Close it, now!”

He obeyed her and locked it for good measure. His heart pounded in his chest and his breath came in short, sharp pants. Yasmin’s own fear seemed to leak into him.

Without warning, his entire carav rocked from side to side as something shrieked outside. A harsh wind blew sand against the walls, sending shards of dust into the air, seeping through the slats on the wall. Thankfully, the golden silks draping his carav kept them from inhaling it.

“What was *that*?” Siraj yelled. He glanced all around his carav. Holding Yasmin behind him, he strode to his sword, propped in the corner, and unsheathed it. The glow of steel lit the room, even in the absence of the moons. The rearing jackal of his caravan was etched into the blade.

With one more shriek, whatever had been outside retreated, howling into the distance.

Siraj didn’t move. He didn’t dare breathe. *By the ancestors, what had been outside his door?* He held his sword aloft, still unconvinced that whatever had been chasing Yasmin had vanished. No screams lifted from his people. Perhaps they were safe. But he needed to make sure.

“Stay here,” he commanded before walking the length of his carav.

“No!” Yasmin ran ahead of him and plastered herself against his door. “Do not go out there.”

“Whatever was chasing you is a threat to my caravan. I must find it and kill it.”

“No,” she said again, this time shaking her head. Yasmin’s chest rose and fell while her hair was wild in disarray. Gods, but she was beautiful. “You cannot fight what is out there, Jackal,” she told him, her voice finally finding some semblance of calm.

“Do you know what it is?” he asked.

“That is...” She stopped when her breathing hitched. “That is what has been chasing me, Highness. It’s never been so close before.”

“I thought you were safe. Once I gave you my protection!”

“I am safe,” she countered. “In...in here. It couldn’t follow me into your carav. It couldn’t touch me.”

Siraj leveled his gaze at her and took her in from head to toe. She was in a thin robe, probably bedclothes his sister-in-law had given her. Her feet were bare and her eyes tired.

“What happened?” he asked, turning to grab his sword’s sheath from the floor.

“I had a dream.”

“You had a dream?” He faced her once again.

Yasmin nodded and looked away. “I was running and the voices in my head were chasing me. I had nowhere to go. The voices, they began shouting. They woke me. My entire body was trembling and I couldn’t stop. Even in Yasir’s carav I was terrified. That’s when I heard the shriek from my dreams over Neviann and I did the only thing I could think to do. I ran to you.”

Siraj was too shocked to do anything more than stand there, dumbfounded. Yasmin continued.

“I didn’t think it could find me in your caravan. But it has. Gods, I am so scared!”

Yasmin covered her mouth a second before she released a sob, falling back against the wall and sliding down to the floor. Siraj tossed his sword and knelt next to her.

“It’s going to kill me,” she moaned, hiding her face in her hands.

With his fingers, he tucked her unruly hair behind her left ear. She lifted her tearstained face, her breathing still ragged.

“Whatever is out there, Yasmin, I give you my word as the Jackal Prince it will have to come through *me* to get to you.”

She sobbed once more, again throwing herself into his arms.

~ * ~

Yasmin tried hard to quell her tears. It took a few minutes to compose herself, but she finally managed to control her breathing, clutching onto Siraj for dear life.

She hadn’t thought she’d be able to make it to his carav before that thing caught her. Thankfully he’d opened his door in time, and the spirit

hadn't been able to enter. She shuddered. If Siraj hadn't let her in...

She wasn't going to think about it. Right now, she concentrated on the warmth of the Jackal's arms around her. The clean scent of his skin. The way his head tilted against hers, as if to keep her close.

Yasmin's arms tightened around his neck. Her fear slowly melted away. In its place now was something new, something different. She didn't want to leave the shelter of Siraj's embrace. She shouldn't have touched him without his permission, but her terror had overridden her common sense.

Now that she held him close, she didn't want to let him go.

"Are you all right?" His voice, so low and soft, sent a shiver down her spine.

"I am now," she whispered, tucking her face into his neck. She would have pulled away the instant his arms loosened, but he seemed inclined to hold her just as she held him.

Siraj stroked her hair. It felt so good. The way his fingers made trails through it and brushed at her tangles had her own fingers threading through the hair at *his* nape.

"You are cold," he said, his hot breath scorching her ear.

"You are warm," she countered. As much as he claimed he'd thought of her over the years, she'd thought of him as well. Of what kind of leader he'd become, of where he was—and if he'd found his princess.

Thank the gods he hadn't. A swift wave of possessiveness crashed through her. Yasmin silently scoffed at herself. Just because she'd healed him so long ago did not mean she had a claim on him.

But he'd vowed to protect her and keep her safe. Yasmin had to wonder how she'd managed to live the past ten cycles without him.

"Yasmin," he said.

She finally pulled away. "I am sorry," she replied, keeping her gaze averted. "I did not mean to pounce on you."

"You were scared." After a moment of silence, he didn't move away. "Why do you hide your eyes from me?"

Her face flushed with shame. She was thankful for the darkness. "Habit, I suppose," she answered.

Siraj brought her face level with his. "Don't. I love your eyes. I wish to look into them often."

Her small gasp had him smiling. Yasmin was mesmerized. Never had she seen a man more beautiful.

"You...you..." She swallowed hard. "You are not properly dressed, Highness."

He glanced down at his bare chest. "I suppose I'm not," he said, making no move to cover himself. "Does it bother you?"

She shook her head vigorously then looked away. Once again, he cupped her cheek, forcing her eye contact.

"Don't," he whispered.

“It is hard, looking at you.”

“Why?”

Yasmin bit her lip. “I have spent my life trying not to bring attention to myself.”

Siraj shook his head. “There is nothing you could do that would make me look the other way.”

Her heart slammed to life. His palm was still on her cheek, and she was acutely aware of it when he swiped his thumb across her lower lip.

“You barely know anything about me,” she answered.

“Then tell me.”

She stared at him for a few silent moments. “I should go back to Yasir’s carav.”

Siraj’s countenance hardened. “You’re not leaving.”

“But—”

“I will not send you out there with that...that thing.”

“Your entire caravan is at risk, Jackal. I should leave you. I shouldn’t have come to you at all.”

Siraj growled an instant before his face hovered right before hers. If she leaned forward just a bit, she’d be able to kiss him. His soft, warm breath flitted across her cheek.

“Yasmin, you are not leaving,” he said again, this time with more force. “It seems I am the only one who can protect you from whatever it is that’s chasing you. I will *not* send you on your way. You were obviously not safe in Yasir’s carav. And that...spirit couldn’t enter *my* carriage. I am the steward of the god of Jackals, and with my position comes the favor of my deity. You are safe with me. More so than you have ever been. Therefore, you will stay with me. In my carav.”

“But—”

He put his finger on her lips. “It is decided, woman,” he said, giving her a lopsided grin. “Unless you wish to argue with the Jackal Prince?”

When Siraj looked at her like that, all predatory and sensual, he took her breath away. She couldn’t do much more than shake her head. The thought of staying with him, in his private quarters, both thrilled and frightened her.

“Good.” He moved away, taking his warmth with him. “Come here.”

She meekly followed and watched as he threw a few pillows and blankets into a corner.

“You will sleep here,” he said, pointing to the cozy nest he’d just made. “I shall sleep over there.”

Yasmin swallowed hard.

“If you leave this carav while you are under my supervision, I will find you, wherever you go.”

“I-I won’t, Jackal.”

“Smart girl.”

With that, he walked to his side of the carriage and sat on the floor.
“Good night, Yasmin.”
She sat as well, trembling as she pulled up the blankets. “Good night.
Siraj.”

Four

The lurching of the carav woke Yasmin the next morning. Siraj was nowhere to be found. He had probably woken early to ready his caravan for the trip back to his oasis. She hadn't heard him make a sound.

A small tray of food was by the door. He must have left it for her. Thank the gods. The last thing she wanted was to confront his people. Regardless of her safety, staying in the private carav of the Jackal Prince was something to gossip about. No doubt the gossip had already begun. Surely Yasir and his wife knew where she'd gone.

Yasmin didn't think long on it when her stomach growled. She took the tray and returned to her pillows, eating voraciously. As she ate, she studied Siraj's quarters.

His pedestal throne was near where he'd slept, draped with golden silks and fine pillows. A few small tables were here and there, holding pens, papers, and a jug of water. The chest that held his clothing was open and messy, as if he didn't have time to straighten things once he'd found what he'd been looking for.

Lovely golden silks also draped from the walls, giving the room an ethereal glow as the sunlight poured in through the slats.

After she'd finished her breakfast, Yasmin wondered what she could do to pass the time. She'd left her robes in Yasir's carav—she couldn't very well leave the Jackal's carav in her bedclothes.

Perhaps she should tidy up, as having two sleeping areas took quite a bit of space on Siraj's lovely golden carpets.

Her decision made, Yasmin stood and folded the blankets she'd slept in, laying them in a neat pile in the corner. She placed her pillows on top then moved to where Siraj had slept. She took her time folding his blankets, relishing in the thought that his warm body had curled within them.

By the gods, she was smitten. There was no use denying it. She'd fallen for him the first moment their eyes had met on the dunes as children. But she couldn't think of anything beyond his protection. Falling in love with the Jackal Prince was walking on fragile ground. She was an outcast, someone who would only bring shame upon his house as a witch of the

ancient magics.

Yasmin laughed at herself. She wasn't in love with Siraj, she knew nothing about him. All she knew was that he'd been run through by the Cobra, and that he thought of her. Every day. For years.

Bringing his pillow to her face, she breathed deep. She remembered his arms around her. His skin, so warm and soft. She had to swallow hard and bite her lip to keep from trembling. For the first time in her life, she desired a man. Yasmin had been on the receiving end of a man's lust before, but had managed to keep them at bay with her magic. Perhaps in retribution they had turned on her and incited others to do the same.

But Siraj was different than the rest. Aside from being the prince of his people, he was kind and considerate, and he wanted to see her safe—just as much as he wanted to gaze into her eyes.

The bits and pieces she'd been able to read of his thoughts had revealed to her a gentle man. He would never back down on his word, and that only served to attract her more. Aside from the things he *said* to her outright.

Leaving his tidied blankets, Yasmin made her way to his clothing chest, gilded with golden jackals. The prince definitely didn't want for finery.

She pulled out his robes in an effort to fold and replace them. But what she saw at the bottom of the chest stopped her in her tracks. It was the Jackal armband, meant for Siraj's princess.

It was lovely, a howling jackal with its head back, as if baying at the moons. Wrought in gold, the body of the animal wrapped around in a circle while the tail would hang almost to the wearer's elbow. In the center of the coiling band was a single dried flower, its petals a lovely shade of lavender.

Like her eyes.

Yasmin pulled it out and studied it, wondering where in the desert Siraj obtained such a bloom.

At that moment, the door to the carav opened, making the entire carriage rock from side to side. The Jackal himself sprang through the entrance with a cat-like grace. His face was flushed and his breathing hard, as if he'd jogged down the line to return to his quarters.

He hadn't closed the door. The sand slid by as the Sentinels plodded on, making their way to Siraj's oasis. The smile on his face faded when he took in the scene before him. Yasmin could only surmise what she looked like to him, kneeling before his clothing chest, holding the bloom he'd obviously kept tucked away.

Instantly, she glanced down and trembled, hoping to all that was holy she hadn't just incurred his wrath.

Siraj's voice rolled over her like a hot desert wind. "You have found my clea flower."

The tone in his voice didn't tell her if he was angry or not.

"I am sorry, Highness," she said timidly, replacing the flower. "I had only meant to help you by cleaning your things."

"I have servants to clean my things." He stepped closer, his hands on his hips.

She nodded. "But I had nothing to do."

"You could have come find me. I would have shown you my caravan."

Yasmin indicated the thin robe she slept in. "Not in this," she told him. "I left my proper robes in Yasir's carav."

Siraj crossed the room and knelt beside her. He was silent for long moments before he spoke again. "It took me forever to find the right shade."

Yasmin lifted her gaze to his in a silent question.

Siraj nodded his head to the flower. "The clea blossom. They grow at my oasis, but for only two weeks in the cooler months. A few years, I'd missed their blooming. But perhaps five cycles ago, I'd finally arrived at my oasis when they were in full bloom. I scoured the plants for just the right color. That one was nearly perfect."

"The right color? For what?" she asked, confused.

Siraj picked up the flower and held it to her face. "It matches your eyes."

Yasmin gasped, unable to look away from his gentle smile. Pieces of his thoughts came to her, flitting through her brain like a butterfly. He cared for her. He wanted to protect her. And for the past ten years, Siraj Pramtash had been wishing and hoping he'd meet her again.

"I was only with you...minutes at best," she whispered, referring to their first encounter. She knew he understood what she was talking about. Of course he did. They were connected on some higher level—as if beyond mere flesh, their souls had bonded.

"It doesn't matter, and you know it," he answered, his voice just as soft.

"You have thought of me all this time?"

His slow nod made her skin pebble from head to toe. "And I'd be willing to bet," he said, scooting closer, "that you've thought of me, more than you've already admitted."

"I was a young girl, smitten with an older boy—one who just happened to be a caravan prince." It took all her concentration not to glance away. But she couldn't help closing her eyes the instant Siraj's palm cupped her cheek.

"And now?" he prodded.

"Now that boy has grown into a fine man, one I can barely bring myself to look at."

"Why?" he demanded. He was affronted. His thoughts turned angry and hurt at her words. She needed to put him at ease again.

"Because I don't ever want to look away."

Gods. Siraj closed his eyes and she read his thoughts like a scroll. The scenes of him kissing her senseless were what made her shudder, but it was the scenes of him caressing her body that made her wet. Yasmin couldn't stop her nipples from hardening any more than she could stop the moons from chasing each other across the sky.

His eyes snapped open and he pinned her with his gaze, as if he'd just had a revelation. "You can read my thoughts, can't you?"

How did he know? "O-only bits and pieces. Your Highness."

"Do you know what I'm thinking right now?"

Her concentration was shattered, but she licked her lips and tried her hardest to read him. A sudden flash of his face between her legs had her gasping. Loudly. With that thought came a wave crashing over her, pulsing through her pussy as if his tongue truly caressed her clit. Then it was gone.

"Are you all right?" Siraj asked, concern lacing his voice.

Yasmin made a conscious effort not to moan. "I know what you're thinking," she said, panting.

His grin grew wicked. "I've done more than dream of your *eyes*, Yasmin."

"Your door is open," she reminded him in a small voice.

He arched a brow. "Then close it."

Yasmin knew he was challenging her to use her magic. It would be easy enough. But then she'd be alone with him, in the privacy of his carav, knowing exactly what he thought of when his mind wandered to her. His lusty thoughts had her skin yearning for his touch.

She raised her hand to meet his challenge and flick the door shut.

"Siraj!" Yasir's voice filled the carav and Yasmin turned to see the Jackal's brother in the doorway. "Ooh, bad timing on my part. I came to give Yasmin back her robes."

Instantly she stood, knowing full well she was a coward. Siraj had been straightforward with his thoughts and feelings toward her. And she was once more pulling away.

"Do not worry yourself," she said, as if she had a right to give Yasir peace of mind for interrupting her audience with the Jackal. "Thank you for returning them."

Yasir glanced over her shoulder and grinned before handing her the robes and bounding off to where he'd come from.

Yasmin didn't turn to face Siraj. She couldn't. Their sensual game had almost become a reality, and that wasn't something she was ready to come to terms with.

She barely knew the Jackal!

"I have neglected my caravan for far too long," Siraj said, clearing his throat. But before he took his leave, he stopped next to her and grasped her hand. "Never be ashamed of what I say to you, Yasmin. Or how I make you feel. Words cannot describe the connection between us. I know you feel

it, too.”

He didn’t wait for her to say anything. Instead, he brought her hand up to his lips and kissed the back of it, lingering longer than was necessary. With a devilish grin, he was gone, slipping out the open door and striding through the dunes.

Yasmin watched him go, knowing full well that he knew she did. But the pressure of his lips on her skin had zinged through her entire body, igniting something foreign within her. She had to press her hands against her belly or risk swooning right there in the Jackal’s carav.

What had she gotten herself into?

Five

It was past midday and Siraj couldn't keep what had happened earlier between him and Yasmin from his mind. He'd returned to his carav to check on her only to find her rummaging through his clothing chest. He had been more surprised than angered at her actions, and had decided to be honest with her about his feelings. If she was indeed the one woman the god of Jackals had set aside for him, she deserved his honesty.

Now more than ever, Siraj felt the connection between them, plain as day. If Yasmin didn't feel it, then she was a liar.

She could read his thoughts. He had no idea how thoroughly she could do so, but it was obvious by her reaction she'd been able to see the erotic scenes that had flashed through his head. What he hadn't been prepared for was feeling something whoosh out of his body and into hers. She'd gasped, and he'd assumed it had been due to what he'd been thinking.

But Siraj wasn't too sure. That familiar feeling had been too much like magic leaving his body. But his talent for magic was strength. For as long as Siraj could remember, he had been much stronger than anyone he'd ever known. And his strength had been convenient on the day he'd deposed his father.

Perhaps Yasmin had cast *her* magic without knowing it. At this point, anything was possible.

He'd spent the entire morning inspecting every carav as they traveled, looking for any signs of damage from the ghostly encounter of the night before.

Amazingly, no one in his caravan had heard a sound during the night. Not even Yasir or his wife. Siraj wondered how that could be possible. That *thing* had rattled his carav so hard, Siraj was amazed it still stood, much less traversed the dunes. And the ghost's howling shrieks had surely been heard by all.

But as Siraj walked down the line, the more he became convinced that only he and Yasmin experienced the events of the previous night. How was that possible?

How was anything possible?

“So tell me, brother,” came the mischievous voice of Yasir, suddenly beside him. “How is it Yasmin has been in the caravan for barely a full day and yet she shares *your* carav instead of mine?”

Siraj gazed at Yasir walking next to him and gave him a lopsided grin. “She couldn’t live without me.”

They both chuckled before Siraj turned serious. “I need to tell you something, Yasir, and you must believe me.”

“All right.” His brows furrowed. “What is it?”

Siraj sighed before speaking. “Yasmin is being pursued. By a spirit. She heard it screaming over Neviann last night and ran to my carav for safety.”

Yasir stared at him with his mouth wide open. Siraj continued.

“The moment I opened the door and let her in, something hit my carriage hard. I even have piles of sand on my floor as proof. But...it seemed as if it couldn’t enter my carav. Yet no one in the caravan heard a thing and nothing seems to be damaged. No one is hurt, thank the gods.”

“Are you sure of this?” Yasir swallowed hard.

Siraj nodded. “Scared me more than I’d care to admit.”

“Do you know who...or what...it is?”

“No. I doubt even Yasmin does. But she’s claimed it has been chasing her for a while. That’s why she came to me, for my protection. It found her here, but seemed powerless to attack me.”

“Of course it was powerless against you. You’re the Jackal Prince, steward of the god of Jackals himself. There is no spirit in Kaldaeron that could stand up to the power of our god.”

“I am frightened for Yasmin,” Siraj confessed, walking alongside his caravs as if he didn’t have a care in the world. “She doesn’t know how to defend herself. I’m her only hope against...whatever it is.”

Yasir was quiet for a few moments, pondering his words. “Isn’t this the very same girl who once healed your mortal wound years ago? Isn’t she the one you’ve hoped to find again?”

“Yes.”

“There is one way to solve your problem if you want to give her the permanent protection of our god.”

Siraj gave him a sharp look and cocked his brow.

“Make her your princess.”

Threading his fingers through his hair, Siraj let out a bark of laughter and looked at the sky. Hadn’t he just been thinking the very same thing?

“I don’t know the woman,” he said in exasperation. “How could I possibly make her the mother of my caravan when I have no idea what kind of person she is?”

Yasir held his hand out to indicate Siraj’s carav. “Is she not staying with you indefinitely? Get to know her. Everyone in the caravan is well aware how much you’ve longed to find her again. I don’t think it would

shock a single person if you married her.”

“I feel...a connection with her,” Siraj said, his voice low. “I don’t expect you to understand. But I feel as if I *do* know her. I just need to remember.”

“Perhaps meeting her again was preordained by the gods themselves,” Yasir suggested. “Seems to me, your soul knows it even if your head does not.”

“You do not find this entire turn of events the least bit strange and uncanny?” He had to know he wasn’t the only one.

“Of course I do, Brother,” Yasir said, patting him on the shoulder. “But I’ve seen stranger things than this.”

Considering all Siraj himself had seen in his own life, he supposed Yasir’s words weren’t too far from the truth.

~ * ~

Yasmin finally dressed in the robes Yasir had brought for her and stepped out of Siraj’s carav. It had taken most of her courage just to open the door, as the approval of Siraj’s people meant the world to her. If she never had another rock thrown at her, it would be too soon.

The heat of the air hit her in the face, prompting her to fill her lungs with the acrid desert breeze. The sun was bright but welcome as it beat down upon her. For the first time in her life, she felt safe. Protected.

Various people walked here and there alongside the caravan. A few of them gazed at her, but most continued on as if they hadn’t seen her, and that suited her just fine. She scanned the line for the Jackal and spotted him further on, talking with his brother. Yasmin wasn’t about to disturb him. She was content to walk for a while and stretch her legs without fearing for her safety.

A smile swept across her face. The freedom she felt, merely walking with the Jackal’s caravan, bolstered her mood. She felt giddy, as if she could accomplish anything, even beat the ghost that haunted her.

But that thought had her reliving the terror of the previous night. Yasmin glanced once more at Siraj, only to suck in her breath at the sight.

He was gazing back at her.

A slow, easy grin spread across his face, sending shivers down her spine, despite the oppressive heat. She couldn’t hear his words, but it seemed as if he’d taken his leave from Yasir. Now, he made his way down the line toward his carav—toward her.

Her heart slammed against her chest, but she continued on, even though she desperately wanted to flee him. The feelings he brought out in her made her squirm, and she didn’t like the fact that if Yasir hadn’t interrupted them previously, more than mere banter would have been exchanged.

“It is good to see you out and about!” Siraj said jovially, bowing to her as he approached. “The gold of my caravan gleams richly against your bronzed skin.”

His compliment had her fidgeting with her robes. “Th-thank you,” she managed to say.

After a few moments of silence, Siraj cleared his throat. “I’m sorry if what I said to you earlier has made you uncomfortable.”

“Do not worry,” she said, glancing at him through her lashes. Once her eyes clashed with his, she had to look away. She didn’t wish to read any more of his erotic thoughts, they were much too scandalous. “I appreciate your honesty, Jackal. It just...caught me off guard.”

“I have something to confess,” he said after another short silence.

“Oh? And what is that?” Good. Her voice didn’t waver.

“All those years ago, after I was healed, I cried when you left me.”

Yasmin stumbled at his words before once again finding her footing. He nodded at her look of shock.

“I have been thinking more and more about that time out there in the dunes when we first met,” he continued. “Something happened to me after you pushed your magic into my body. I didn’t feel it then, but I remember it now. As if...”

“*What?*” she whispered, almost too afraid to ask.

“It is silly,” he replied, running his fingers through his hair. Yasmin tried hard not to stare at the gesture. His hair was a glorious shade of dark brown, looking as soft as it was thick. Her own fingers itched to do the same.

“Tell me.”

Siraj took a deep breath. “When you healed me, did you feel anything leave you? A rush of...something?”

“Well, yes, my magic. I had to heal your wound.”

“Beyond that,” he said, giving her a sideways glance.

Yasmin bit her lip in an effort to remember. She’d been only twelve. But her encounter with Siraj in the sand might as well have been seared onto her brain.

“I held your hand. Told you to think good thoughts.”

Siraj smiled, but continued gazing at his feet as he walked with his hands behind his back. “All I thought about was your eyes.”

She gasped. “Truly?”

“Truly.”

Once again, his gaze caught hers. This time, she was hard-pressed to breathe, much less look away. “I...do remember something, a tugging. But not on my body.”

“On your soul?” he offered.

She nodded.

“I felt it, too,” he confessed. “I think you did more than heal me. I think you gave me a piece of yourself. Or at least, of your magic.”

Yasmin stared at him for almost a full minute. “Why do you say that?” she asked, breathless.

“Because every time I’m near you, I feel connected to you. Like I

know you. Like I've always known you. And even in these past years, I did nothing but think about you. Every day. That isn't natural. I've never felt this way about any other person on Jikkar. Only you."

Yasmin crossed her arms over her chest and shuddered. She glanced around them, but they walked apart from anyone else. No one was listening to their conversation.

"Do you feel it, too?" His deep voice rolled over her like the hot desert wind. Gods, but her nipples hardened at the sound of it.

"I...think so," she said, unable to hold his eye contact. "Back in your carav, earlier, I felt something. I can read most people's thoughts, but *your* thoughts, I think I felt them."

"What do you mean?"

He was going to make her say it. With a deep sigh, she decided to be as honest with him as he was with her. "I could feel your...your *tongue*."

Siraj's eyebrows shot up. "You felt that?"

Yasmin nodded. She turned her head and tried to step away from him. But his hand snaked out and pulled her even closer.

"Something left me when I showed you my thoughts," he said, his voice in her ear. "Gods, Yasmin, have you given me a piece of your power?"

Before she could answer him, he'd stopped her in the sand.

"Close your eyes," he commanded.

"Why?" she replied.

"Do it," he said without explaining himself. Yasmin complied, trusting him and obeying his word as her prince seemed natural.

Within seconds, his hands were under her robes, caressing her breasts and bringing her nipples to painful nubs against his warm palms. She cried out at the sensation, aghast that he would fondle her so explicitly in front of his people. But upon opening her eyes in shocked indignation, she found he wasn't touching her at all.

It had merely been the power of his thoughts.

"*Gods*," she breathed.

The look on Siraj's face was predatory. He'd suddenly gone from a flirting prince to a man who knew what he wanted. And Yasmin knew without reading him that he wanted *her*. That knowledge made her tremble where she stood, amazed that her pussy could be so dripping wet.

"I *am* connected to you," he said, his low voice raising every hair on her body.

"So it would seem," she answered, her voice shaking.

"My thoughts alone will not satisfy me, Yasmin."

There was no room for doubt about what he meant. Staying in his carav, night after night, would be a dangerous game. Knowing they were connected on a deeper level somehow made the fact they'd only been together a short time seem silly.

It hadn't been mere days they'd spent together, but ten long years.

Snippets of his thoughts now slipped along her mind, and she was aware of what he meant to do seconds before he did it. But she didn't move away from him. She wanted him to kiss her just as much as he wanted to do it.

They each took a step. And with one puff of breath between them, their lips met—and the entire desert ceased to exist.

Six

Yasmin instantly opened her mouth. There was no thought, only a need to take Siraj inside herself and consume him. His arms wrapped around her, holding her in his embrace, tugging her so close her entire body molded against him. And there was no denying the long, hard length of his cock. Her fingers delved into his hair, threading through its thickness and holding on tight, wanting, needing *more*.

Her first taste of him was more flavorful than she'd imagined. His mouth was warm and tangy, as if he'd just taken a bite of a gandarang fruit. She couldn't remember how many times she'd fantasized about kissing the Jackal, then chastised herself for such whimsy. But now, she stood in the sand, clutching onto the back of his head as if she'd die if she ever let go.

His lips raged on hers and his tongue plunged deep, demanding she keep up with him. Yasmin used her own tongue to stroke his and whimpered as every inch of her skin crackled with sensual delight.

Gods above, if merely kissing him was a feast of the senses, what would making love to him be like?

After what seemed long, eternal moments, Siraj pulled away, but not by much. His eyes pierced her while his nose flared, but his arms remained around her like two palm trees trapping her within their circle. Yasmin was dimly aware that they'd kissed each other wantonly in sight of Siraj's entire caravan.

"What are we doing?" she asked.

"I don't know," he answered, his breath a mere whisper on her lips.

"We are strangers."

"We are not." He cocked a brow. "I think we know more about each other than even we know."

Yasmin scoffed.

"When I deposed my father, do you know what I prayed for that very night?" he challenged.

Yasmin gave him a strange look, yet somehow knew the answer. "You prayed for the god of Jackals to show you your future princess."

"Then after I met you in the dunes two years later, what did I think?"

She inhaled sharply and held her breath.

“What did I think, Yasmin?” he asked again, his voice soft and gentle.

“You believed that he...that he’d fulfilled your prayer.”

Siraj nodded. “*That* is why I cried when you left me.”

“Gods!”

His arms dropped, as if he somehow knew his words were too much for her. Yasmin’s eyes stung and her vision swam. Her soul felt ripped in two. Half of her wanted to flee, while the other half wanted to stay firmly in his embrace.

When she said nothing and looked away, Siraj stepped back with a sigh. “We will stop soon for the night. I will order that our dinner be prepared and sent to my carav.” She couldn’t tell by his tone, but it seemed as if he was hurt, perhaps disappointed.

At what?

“Go back to my carriage and drink some water. I will join you soon.”

With that, Siraj turned on his heel and followed the caravan. Yasmin meekly followed behind him, not wanting to be left behind. A few servants grinned at her, some even whispered amongst themselves. But all she focused on was the retreating form of the Jackal Prince.

It suddenly struck her why he’d withdrawn. Every single time he’d been honest and forthcoming, she’d turned away, as if not wishing to be burdened by his true feelings for her.

But he was a prince and she was no one of consequence. Surely this relationship between them couldn’t possibly bloom into something more.

Yet the longer she watched him walk away, the more she wanted to call him back and lose herself in his lusty kisses.

Ripping her eyes away, she returned to his carav with an aching heart.

~ * ~

Siraj retired to his carav well after sundown. He’d seen to it his caravan was well fortified for the night, posting his guards at every carav, just in case the spirit came back to wreak more havoc. He wasn’t even sure his guards could fight the thing, but it was better to have some protection than none at all.

He’d sent food to his carav long before him. Yasmin should have eaten by now. He glanced around the carriage and found her easily enough, sitting in the pile of blankets he’d given her for a bed. She raised her eyes to him and nodded. She seemed nervous and tense. He couldn’t blame her.

His instincts had gotten the best of him a few hours before, and he’d kissed her before the entire desert. It hadn’t been a decision, merely something that had to be done. But she’d been so sweet, so delicious, that he didn’t have a single regret. In fact, the memory of that kiss had his cock hardening even now.

With a groan, Siraj returned Yasmin's nod and closed the door behind him. He made his way to the food she'd left him and sat among his own pillows. He'd have to put a rein on his thoughts or else they'd manifest and become real. And the last thing Yasmin needed right now was his unwanted advances.

Siraj attacked the food even though he wasn't particularly hungry. He had to keep his mind clear of the woman whose fragrance filled the air. Gods, what was that lovely scent? Did she even wear perfume? Probably not, he reasoned.

Yasmin lie back on her pillows and let out a soft sigh. He swallowed hard, not knowing what it was he'd just eaten. He raised his eyes to give her a quick glance, and cursed himself. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't look away.

Yasmin gazed back at him, her long black hair spread out upon the large golden pillow she rested on. She brought her blanket to her chin and shivered, but didn't look away, either.

"I am sorry," Siraj breathed, just to have something to say. He hoped she realized he meant kissing her beyond an inch of her life.

She did. "Don't be. I have always been curious, Highness. Now I know."

Siraj's heart skipped a beat. She'd been curious about kissing him? His entire body shook. He had to look away—problem was, he couldn't. Whatever bound them demanded he look at her. He let his gaze wander down her form, covered by his blanket. He wondered what she'd look like in nothing at all.

"Do you know anything about me?" she asked in a small voice.

His eyes snapped back to hers. They sat in silence while he concentrated on what her life had been like for the past ten years.

"You don't have a last name." Of all the things he suddenly knew about her, he had to wonder about that. "You don't remember your parents."

She smiled forlornly. "I have been alone for a very long time."

He sat up in shock as bits and pieces of her past revealed themselves to him. She'd had to rummage through trash for scraps and rely on a few kind-hearted souls for water. She'd even spent a few summers as a falcon, nesting at the Falcon Prince's oasis. She'd been curious as to how he could summon *her* along with his glorious birds. But she'd left his aeries not knowing anything more than when she'd arrived.

And she'd thought about him. Often. If what he was seeing in his mind was correct, she'd shed her own amount of tears over leaving him in the desert as well.

"I tried to impress people with what I could do," she said in a soft voice. "I turned a few flowers into glass. Made warm water cold. I even showed one of my supposed friends that I could become a falcon. That's when they began to..."

“Throw rocks at you,” Siraj finished, his eyebrows raised in shock. “How could they do that? You were just a child!”

“They were afraid.”

“Your powers are a gift of the gods, not a curse.”

Yasmin rolled away to glance at the ceiling. Siraj shivered, suddenly feeling cold without the heat of her gaze. “No, Highness, it’s a curse. My powers have captured the attention of an evil spirit. And I know what will happen to me if I cast too often. I will lose my mind.”

Siraj had to swallow to dislodge the panic that threatened to overtake him. “Perhaps the god of Jackals can prevent that from happening. You have already asked for his protection.”

“From the ghost.”

“My god is generous. He remembers it was you who healed me, Yasmin.”

“I have done nothing worthy of a god’s attention.”

Siraj scoffed and scooted closer to her. “You think *saving* me wasn’t worthy? I am my god’s steward, his representative in the Golden Desert.”

“But I didn’t save you because you were the Jackal, Highness. I saved you because I thought you were handsome.”

He had to grin at her confession. “Regardless, if you hadn’t happened upon me, I would have perished out there on the dunes.”

She looked at him once again, her beautiful eyes laced with sorrow. “Please don’t say that.”

“It is the truth.”

“I chanced upon you.”

“There is no such thing as chance.” She took a deep breath, licking her lips in the process. Gods, but he wanted to sink his cock deep into her pussy and claim her as his woman. As soon as he had that thought, he squelched it. But it was too late—she’d seen what he’d been thinking.

Yasmin’s eyes were round as she shrank away from him. He damned his own insatiable lust.

“I am sorry,” he said for the second time that evening. “But I want to tell you the truth from my own mouth, Yasmin. I have wanted you for as long as I can remember. I have prayed often I would find you again. But you found me first.”

She bit her lip as her eyes shone in the soft lamplight. “I prayed to find you as well,” she whispered. “But you are a prince, Siraj. I am nothing but a woman who will one day go mad. Either my magic will claim me or the ghost will.”

His eyes narrowed and he shook his head. “My brother thought of a solution that will protect you for the rest of your life.”

“*Gods above*,” she exclaimed, once again reading his thoughts. “I cannot become your princess!”

“Tell me why, Yasmin? And don’t you dare say you are not worthy.”

She gazed at him with shock clearly written on her face. “I...I...will go insane, Siraj. Your caravan cannot shelter me when that happens.”

He took a deep breath. “That will *not* happen. You will have the hand of our god upon you.”

She visibly shuddered at his words. He decided to push the point home.

“You are the only woman I have ever dreamed about. You are the only woman I feel connected to. How could I take another as my princess, when all I can think about is you?”

She looked away but he continued.

“I want my children to have your gorgeous eyes. Your thick hair. Your sweet smile.”

When she didn’t say a word, his heart fell. He was coming on strong, but she needed his honesty, and she needed to know exactly what he wanted.

“The question is,” he whispered. “Do you want to spend the rest of your life with me?” She closed her eyes and teardrops fell into her hair. “I will not push you any longer, Yasmin. The choice is yours. You shall have my protection for as long as you wish me to give it.”

It took all his strength to move away, but he lay back in his own pillows and doused the lamps. The darkness pressed in on him and he knew she didn’t sleep. He’d be lucky if he got any sleep himself. He’d just laid his heart on the sand. He prayed fervently she wouldn’t rip it asunder.

Seven

Yasmin tried to keep busy as the days passed. Siraj had done his best to leave her alone as he'd promised. He was gone in the mornings before she awoke and returned late in the evenings when she was ready to retire. But that didn't stop his heated stares. Whenever their eyes connected, a bolt of awareness shot straight to her clit, making her yearn for his touch between her legs. Or his mouth on her breasts.

It was becoming harder and harder to ignore the man.

Yasmin wasn't sure she wanted to any longer.

He'd poured his heart out to her, telling her exactly what he wanted—for her to become his princess. She couldn't believe he'd admitted that to her, or the fierce elation that had permeated her soul when he did. Gods, but he was scrambling her common sense.

He was getting better at masking his thoughts. She could only read him if she really tried, yet she didn't try too hard. She already knew what he thought. It wasn't good for her psyche—or her libido—to know exactly what he fantasized about.

Just knowing he wanted to make love to her had her heart racing. Even now, as she toiled with the other women in the weaving carav, her heart skipped a beat at the memory of Siraj's tongue in her mouth. While she'd been trying hard to ignore her own desires, she'd kept herself busy with the women who made both new fabric and lush carpets on their large looms.

Siraj's caravan must supply the other princes with the fabric for their fine garments. They didn't just make textiles in the colors of the Jackal, Yasmin also recognized the blue, the red, the green, and the black of the other desert princes.

She didn't quite know what she was doing, but the ladies were eager to show her, and soon, she found herself laughing with them as they talked about this or that.

Thankfully, the ghost hadn't shown itself since they'd left Neviann. Perhaps she'd been lucky. Perhaps it had lost her in the vast expanse of desert. But despite the fact it hadn't reappeared, that hadn't stopped Siraj from posting his guards up and down the caravan line.

His protection meant everything to her. If it was true she'd have the protection of his god for the rest of her life as his princess, then perhaps she *should* marry him. It was a tempting offer. She'd thought on him at least as many times as he'd thought on her. Making love to him would be a dream come true.

Bearing his heir would be an honor, knowing her son, *their* son, would be the next Jackal Prince.

She cleared her throat, weaving threads with trembling fingers.

"Are you all right, my dear?" an older woman known as Disa asked.

She nodded with a smile.

"You know," the woman said, a light of mischief in her eyes, "the Jackal has been looking so long for you, we were beginning to believe you didn't exist."

Yasmin stared at her with her mouth wide.

"Is it true you saved his life when he was just a boy? Why, you couldn't have been much older than a child yourself." Disa gave her a toothy grin.

"Y-yes, it's true," Yasmin replied, averting her eyes.

"Then your magic is healing?"

"Of a sort." Yasmin's heart pounded now for a different reason. She couldn't risk telling Siraj's people what her true powers were.

"My knee has bothered me for years. Can you have a look?"

Every eye in the carav was on Yasmin while Disa gazed at her expectantly. Panic bubbled within her. She could heal the woman without batting an eye, but casting her magic would surely alert her presence to the spirit chasing her. She couldn't risk it.

"I'm sorry, but no," she said nervously.

"Why ever not?" Disa's eyebrows shot up.

"My m-magic, it c-comes and goes. I-I have no control over it." She hated lying, but it was better than the alternative.

"Perhaps you can use it today," the woman offered. "Can you at least try?"

Yasmin stood suddenly and smoothed her robes. "No, I'm sorry. Please excuse me."

Without waiting for their replies, she made her way swiftly to the door. She couldn't escape the carav fast enough. The moment her feet hit the sand, she ran up the line to Siraj's quarters. She would be safe there. Nothing and no one could touch her behind Siraj's door.

Except, perhaps, for Siraj himself.

~ * ~

By the time Siraj entered his carriage, Yasmin had eaten and curled up in the blankets, as if she slept. The lamps burned low, and she tried hard not to make a sound. She faced the wall, not wanting to bear his scrutiny. She'd been a coward, hiding for the rest of the day. No doubt Disa would

wonder at her odd behavior, as well as the rest of the ladies in the weaving carav. She had no doubt it would soon be known she couldn't—or wouldn't—heal anyone.

She listened to the familiar sounds of Siraj sitting among his pillows, eating his food.

"I know you're not sleeping," he said, his voice gentle. "What ails you?"

Right about now, Yasmin cursed whatever power they were bonded by. But she wasn't about to tell yet another lie.

"I spent my day in the weaving carav," she told him. "Disa, who is making a most colorful carpet, asked me to heal her knee. I...lied to her."

Silence greeted her words before Siraj spoke once more. "Why did she ask you to heal her?"

"Because I'd once healed you." Yasmin flopped on her back and gave Siraj a deep sigh. "I told her my magic comes and goes. That I couldn't heal her. But I...*can* heal her, Siraj. However if I cast my magic, there's a good chance the spirit will find me again. I couldn't risk it."

"You did the right thing," he said, taking a sip of water from the goblet off the dinner tray. "Perhaps after we deal with this... whatever it is, you can use your power to heal the woman."

"I don't like lying. I can't stand hiding. It's all starting again. I thought I was safe here, that I could have a new beginning. But if your people find out what I can do..."

"If they find out," he said, his voice as hard as granite, "they will have to deal with me before they ever get to you. I promised you my protection, Yasmin. Even from my own people."

She bit her lip as tears burned her eyes. His jaw was rigid and his body tense, telling her beyond a shadow of a doubt he spoke the truth. He would fight for her, no matter the cost to himself.

"They are your subjects, Jackal," she whispered. "I am just—"

He held up his hand to stop her. "You are the woman I have prayed for. I have no doubt in my mind the god of Jackals delivered you into my hands. I will protect his gift until my dying day."

Siraj's words clutched onto her heart. The silence stretched out as she held her breath. The carav seemed to melt away until nothing was left but the Jackal Prince, blatantly claiming her with his gaze alone. In that instant, Yasmin knew exactly where she wanted to be. With Siraj. Forever.

Yet all she did was nod.

"Are you all right?" he asked, somehow sensing her change of mood.

"Yes," she answered, somewhat breathless. "Just tired."

"Then let's get some rest." Without another word, he'd doused the lamps with his magic and curled up within his blankets.

She tried hard to ignore his even breathing, or the fact that he'd taken off his robe before finally settling down to sleep. Her mind ran away with

her, and for once she was thankful the Jackal couldn't read *her own* naughty thoughts.

Eight

Yasmin stood and watched as the man before her stumbled in the sand at the feet of a beautiful woman. He was gasping and crying, and his skin was ripped to shreds. Deep red blood stained the ground and the sharp stench of iron filled the air, but that didn't stop the man from begging for his life.

Yasmin knew she was dreaming when the scene shifted, to the very same man, rutting with the woman violently. He cried out again and again, as if he'd found his pleasure more than once, but that didn't stop him from slamming into the woman. His thrusts were so forceful, Yasmin had no idea how the woman hadn't been ripped in two.

But her head was tossed back, a look of pure ecstasy on her face. She welcomed him, and the familiar tug of magic hung in the air.

Before her eyes, the man's wounds healed, and he breathed a sigh of relief before kissing the mysterious woman as if his life depended on it.

But the woman's power wasn't any mere magic. Yasmin recognized the force of it. She'd weaved the ancient magics. With a gasp, Yasmin was even more startled when the woman opened her eyes and looked at her.

The woman's mouth opened in a vile sneer before she screeched and tossed the man off her. In one swift movement, she was astride him, gazing at Yasmin as she sheathed his cock and bucked on him wildly. Her breasts bounced and her hips writhed. No matter how much Yasmin yelled at herself, she could not look away.

At the moment of the woman's orgasm, a burst of magic rippled throughout the dream.

"Yes, Khalil," the woman cooed to the man, who moaned underneath her. "As I have given you life, so, too, have you given me a life."

The man didn't seem to hear her. Or if he did, he didn't care. But the woman growled in his ear.

"I want your cock in my ass."

With his eyes glazed over, the man groaned and positioned himself behind her, spreading her cheeks wide for his cock. He pulled her hair as he slammed into her—to the hilt—thrusting so hard Yasmin winced.

The strange woman gazed at her once again. "I have created you," she whispered through her gasps. "Yasmin!"

With a cry, Yasmin sat straight up and glanced around her. The darkness pressed in, but she recognized her surroundings. She was in Siraj's carav, and judging by his deep breaths, he still slept.

Tears rolled down her cheeks and she angrily wiped them away. It had merely been a dream, nothing more. Why was it affecting her so deeply? What she'd witnessed had seemed more real, more tangible than any other dream she'd ever had. The woman had known Yasmin watched, and that made her skin crawl. She'd even held her eye contact.

And there had been no denying her use of ancient magics. But who was she? And who was the man she was with?

A breeze stirred the dunes. A few grains of sand lightly pelted the carav outside, giving the darkness an eerie sound that made the hair on her arms stand on end. She was being silly. She'd merely had a bad dream. But the images in her head seemed branded on the back of her eyelids.

A larger gust of wind sprayed more sand against the carav, making her gasp in fright. The thin blanket did nothing to warm her chilled skin, and her common sense couldn't calm her wild imagination.

Her mind made up, Yasmin padded over to where Siraj slept and lay next to him, lifting his blankets to curl in their warmth. Finally, for the first time that night, she felt safe and secure, as if nothing could touch her. Scooting toward him, she tucked her arms in and cuddled close to his back, relishing in the scent of his clean skin.

Closing her eyes, Yasmin sighed with a grin, and slept beside the man she'd only just realized she'd been in love with for most of her life.

~ * ~

Siraj awoke at the twilight of dawn. But this morning was different. Someone snuggled next to him, and hair was in his face. Before he even opened his eyes, he knew by the scent filling his nose that Yasmin had joined him sometime in the night.

Instantly, his body tightened and he couldn't keep his cock from rising even if he wanted to. Why had she crept over to his blankets? Why was she curled next to him as if she already had a right to be there?

Gods above, Siraj didn't care.

Opening his eyes, he gazed at her, facing him, with her arms tucked into her chest. Was she was cold? Wrapping his left arm around her waist, he gently pulled her closer to him, trying not to wake her. She whimpered and tossed her head, but didn't open her eyes. With a smile, Siraj tugged his blanket over her and pressed her into the curves of his body.

She felt good against him. Damn good. He couldn't resist a few gentle thrusts, rubbing his cock on her thigh. The thin robe she wore to bed did nothing to hinder him. The swell of her breasts and the outline of her

nipple made his mouth water to taste her. It was all he could do not to lower his head and suckle through the fabric.

Now that she was in his arms, where he slept, he'd be hard-pressed to ever let her go. She was his, and had been for some time. By all that was holy he wanted to claim her.

Siraj tucked her hair behind her ear, exploring the soft skin of her cheek and neck. His touch was light, but he didn't know how much longer he could take, having her against him and not taking advantage.

What would she do if he woke her with a kiss? He'd told her he wouldn't pressure her further. The choice had to be hers to come to him. But she had *already* come to him, sometime during the night.

Perhaps she'd been cold. More likely, she'd had a bad dream. Whatever it was, Siraj thanked his good fortune to be lying next to her now.

He stared at her lips. But instead of kissing her, all he did was caress her, using his left hand to lightly skim the top of her robe, over her hip, down her thigh, then back up to her waist. Surely the fact she slept next to him gave him the right to touch her.

But when his gaze rose back up to her face, Yasmin's eyes were open, regarding him with an emotion he couldn't read. Her lids were hooded and she blinked a few times, but she was definitely awake, and seemingly very aware of his hand.

But Siraj didn't remove it. His palm was firmly on her hip and he arched a brow at her. She made no move to shake him off. Instead, she lowered her eyes and took him in, glancing at his chest and even further down his belly.

His cock leapt painfully beneath his undergarment, the only article of clothing that separated him from her. She had to see the large tent it had become. But for now, that didn't seem to be where her attention was focused.

Without saying a word, Yasmin's palm skimmed his skin, beginning between his pecs to lightly trace a line through his chest hair, down to his long, thin scar—the very one she'd healed years ago. The pads of her fingers explored the ridge of it, and Siraj had to close his eyes or risk attacking her in passion.

Her innocent touch slammed through him, bringing every nerve ending in his body to life. The silence surrounding them seemed holy somehow. He loathed to break it. Instead, he let his hand do the talking as it slowly crept its way up her body to the very breast he'd been fantasizing about.

Ever so gently, his thumb swiped her nipple, which brought her eyes back to his. Such lovely depths he'd only been able to dream about these past years. Now that they held him captive, he couldn't glance away, but instead, he rested his forehead on hers.

Their breaths became one. He inhaled and kissed her nose. Yasmin bit her lip, shyly holding his gaze through her black lashes. She opened her

mouth to say something, but Siraj quieted her with his finger to her lips. She remained silent, and he spread his palm over her cheek and into her hair.

With a light brush, his lips grazed hers. He had to tilt her head up a bit, but she followed him. Siraj's heart soared. His next kiss was a bit firmer, but not by much, and he pulled away just enough to make her lips advance toward his.

By the gods, Yasmin was offering herself to him. Her thoughts opened for him, as plain as day. This was no mirage, this was a shining beacon in the desert sands. She wanted him. And gods help him, but Siraj *wanted* her to want him.

The instant her hand found his cock sheathed in his undergarment, he growled and thrust, but still did not kiss her fully. He needed her to claim this, to own it, before he took control and loved her as he'd always dreamed. By the look in her eye, she was both aroused and frightened, but Siraj's hand had found its way inside her robes. Teasing her nipple between his fingers seemed to seal her fate.

With a cry, she wrapped her leg around his thighs and brought his mouth to hers. One plunge of her tongue was all the invitation Siraj needed.

Yasmin was finally his.

Nine

There was no holding back. Yasmin kissed Siraj for all she was worth, tugging on his hair, devouring his mouth, trying like mad to get as close as she could. And he returned her kiss with just as much ardor.

His hand left her breast to round her ass, pressing her tightly against his stiff cock. She mewled in his mouth and rocked against him. More than anything, she wanted his fingers to touch her clit and play in the wetness of her pussy. As if he'd heard her thoughts, he bunched up her thin robes until her entire leg was bare beneath the covers.

Her undergarments were no barrier to him. His hand slipped inside, and the warmth of his palm had her gasping.

Yasmin pulled away from his mouth, but that didn't keep Siraj from kissing her. His lips made a trail across her cheek to her ear while his fingers followed the gentle divide that led straight to her pussy.

Her slick skin offered no resistance. His touch was divine, swirling on her clit and making her jump from the shocks of pleasure he created. But he was also gentle, seeming to sense she'd never been with another man.

Siraj, Siraj, Siraj...

She canted his name over and over inside her head, thinking the words she didn't have the courage to say. She wanted to tell him how she felt; she wanted to tell him what was in her heart. She hoped he already knew. Perhaps he could read her.

His glorious mouth returned to hers, and his tongue swirled inside, mirroring the fingers that explored her pussy. Yasmin had never before imagined such bliss could be possible. She threaded her own fingers through his hair and held on tight to the back of his head. She couldn't stop her hips from swaying back and forth. A need spiraled within her, coiling like a snake ready to strike.

More. She needed *more*.

Yasmin raised her leg higher against his thighs, urging him to continue. He groaned in response and his touch became rougher.

Yes. That was exactly what she wanted.

Without warning, Siraj's mouth left hers and he dipped his head,

latching his lips onto the point of her nipple, right through the fabric of her robes. The rasp of the fabric and the pressure of his teeth and tongue made something burst within her.

Pleasure unimaginable thundered throughout her body, consuming her limbs and bringing forth a cry of completion. It seemed to rage on and on, until finally, her passion cooled, and once again, Siraj was gentle. But he continued to swirl his fingers, prolonging the ecstasy.

Yasmin's body shuddered as tiny arcs of electricity crackled in her blood. Nothing in the desert could possibly compare to the rapture he'd just shown her. With soft kisses, he brought her back down from the sky and removed his hand from her undergarments.

Yasmin closed her eyes, reveling in the afterglow. But Siraj didn't give her much time to float down from the heavens.

He lightly pushed her leg from his thigh and rolled her to her back. With deft fingers, he untied her belt-wrap and threw open her robes. Amazingly, she wasn't ashamed that he gazed upon her tightened breasts. But he didn't touch them. He was intent on stripping her completely, and tossed her undergarments somewhere behind him.

Holding his weight on his elbows, he took his undergarments off as well.

Yasmin's first glimpse of his cock made her mouth go dry. He was long, thick, and powerful—every inch a prince of the Golden Desert.

But instead of crawling over her as she thought he would, Siraj lowered his head and once more took her nipple between his teeth. This time, with no fabric in his way, the sensation was wonderfully intense, prompting her to hold his head firmly in place.

Gods, but his mouth was hot, scorching her skin with wet fire. It was as if he wished to swallow her, suckling deep before lapping her nub back and forth.

The need she felt moments ago coiled within her again. She wanted to rub her pussy on him, but he pulled away before she made contact. Yasmin tried not to groan with disappointment.

Siraj lifted his head and grinned at her. That perfect face of his stole the air from her lungs. A shiver rippled through her from head to toe, and more cream coated her lower lips. His hands spanned her waist as he continued on in a downward path, stopping only to open her legs wide and kiss the inside of her thighs.

Yasmin sucked in her breath as she watched him, such a gorgeous man, crouched between her legs. He meant to give her more pleasure. Her heart beat erratically at that revelation and she planted her feet on the carpet, if only to offer herself to him.

Siraj entered her pussy with his finger and pressed deep. Yasmin thought it might hurt, but it only felt delicious as he slowly pulled back then pushed forward once more. She was so very wet, his entry gave her little

more than a slight pang.

But she couldn't deny that when he pressed deep, she wiggled her hips to make him press deeper. Something he touched far inside of her had her bobbing on his hand.

The first flick of his tongue on her clit shocked her. Yasmin cried out and clutched the pillows, arching her back as Siraj feasted. She hadn't known a man would want to kiss her pussy, but by the gods, Siraj did.

Everything was forgotten, nothing mattered but this very moment in time, as his tongue rolled her clit back and forth, much like he'd lapped at her nipples.

One finger became two inside her, yet she hardly noticed. She was too focused on his mouth. But soon, the combination of his tongue and his fingers demanded another wave of pleasure, and this time, she shouted his name. Over and over again the waves crashed as she bucked and writhed, holding his head down to her clit until her orgasm had passed.

"Gods!" she exclaimed, gasping as her entire body spasmed in the aftermath.

Siraj kissed and caressed his way back up her body. He stopped to love her breasts once more, but didn't stay there for long. He returned his mouth to hers and conquered her heart and soul. No man could ever compare to Siraj Pramtash—her Jackal Prince.

While his tongue speared her mouth, his cock rode the folds of her pussy, slicking in her juices. Yasmin was powerless against him, shuddering at the erotic touch. Her hands were lost in his hair and her legs spread wide to make room for his body.

She wanted him inside of her like nothing else on Jikkar.

Passion rode her prince as he panted above her, but he held her head steady to gaze into her eyes, silently asking permission. Gods above, the man wanted her blessing before he plunged. The tip of him just barely entered her, and she raised her pussy up to meet him.

He cocked his head and grinned again, stroking her cheek with the back of his fingers. Yasmin returned his smile and wrapped her legs around his waist. His large frame shook as he pulled back. She took in his breath, caressing his neck and chest, back up to his shoulders, then into his hair.

With a tug, she returned his mouth to hers, and in that instant, Siraj thrust his cock, embedding himself within her very being.

A twinge of discomfort was all Yasmin felt with his initial plunges. She'd been so wet, he'd slid into her as if he'd done it a thousand times before. But Yasmin wasn't about to lie back and do nothing.

As he made love to her, so, too, did she make love to him, thrusting her hips in time with his, stroking his skin, and cherishing him with her touch. His thrusts became urgent and the sound of his skin slapping hers filled the carav. But of all things, she wanted him to push harder. Faster.

His cock connected with that point deep within, where his fingers

had been, and if she concentrated hard enough, she could come again. Yasmin strained for it, wanting it, needing her prince to show her the heights once more. A split second before her pleasure crested, Siraj tossed his head back and cried out, thrusting before pressing deep and rolling his hips forcefully against hers. His cries fueled her own need, and Yasmin's pussy convulsed around him. Her ankles hooked around his waist as she came, growling into his mouth when he demanded another fiery kiss.

Their tongues tangled while he rested his weight against her, lying fully on top of her sweat-slicked body. Never in her life did Yasmin know lovemaking could be so wondrous. Even now, Siraj was still inside of her, and she wished he'd never leave.

He pulled away from her mouth to gaze down at her for long, languid moments. "Why did you come to me?" he finally whispered, fluffing her hair with his breath.

"I-I had a bad dream last night. And I was cold."

He arched a brow. "Those are your only reasons?"

"No." She didn't elaborate. Neither did he question her further. He merely treated her to another of his beautiful smiles before rolling off of her and holding her close.

"Then you won't mind if I cuddle with you before I start my day?" he asked, his voice light.

"Not at all," she answered, kissing his chest. "My passionate prince."

Ten

It wasn't until after Siraj had left his caravan for the day that Yasmin reflected on what they had done. Without words, she'd invited him to touch her, and touch her he did.

She couldn't deny that part of her had hoped he would make love to her once he discovered her beside him. But she had also been prepared for the possibility that he wouldn't touch her due to his own promise.

Siraj had, however, silently asked her twice if she wanted him to continue. And she'd given him her blessing. Gods above, she couldn't be mad at him for it. The pleasure he'd bestowed upon her had made her body sing with delight.

But now, with the sun shining high and the breeze hot upon her skin, Yasmin walked with the caravan and bit her lip in trepidation. She couldn't allow their intimacy to continue. Not only was there the issue of the ghost haunting her, but that of her sanity. It was well known anyone cursed with the power of the ancient magics eventually went insane from casting them.

Not to mention Siraj could get her pregnant. If he did, their offspring would merely be a bastard, not the next Jackal Prince.

But Siraj had it in his head that he was going to marry her. Even though the thought of being his wife had her stomach leaping inside her, she couldn't burden the Jackal's caravan with her troubles. She was not a woman who could lead his people and bring them prosperity and peace. She would only lead to their downfall.

And she'd be damned before she brought down the house of the Jackal Prince.

Thankfully no one spoke to her as she walked. They seemed to keep to a safe distance. Perhaps her refusal to heal Disa from the day before had made its rounds among the people. It was for the best. She couldn't afford to show anyone her magical ability.

But the memory of Siraj's gentle kisses after they'd made love had her swooning even now. He'd held her as if she was the most precious thing on Jikkar. Yasmin had dozed in his arms before he finally had to leave her to ready the caravan. He'd leapt from the blankets, unrepentant in his

nakedness, and she'd looked her fill.

There wasn't a man in the desert who could compare to his male beauty. Siraj was stunning, both hard and soft in all the right places. The hair on his chest wasn't too thick, and aside from the old scar that marred his belly, his hair ran in a line all the way to his cock. And what a cock it was. Yasmin hadn't seen any other, but she could only surmise that his was perfection.

Just before he'd left her sprawled on his pillows, he'd stooped and lifted the blankets to gaze once more at her naked form. With a heart-stopping smile and an appreciative shake of his head, he'd kissed her hard then exited the carav.

By the time he'd closed the door behind him, Yasmin had finally been able to draw breath. Siraj spun her life out of control. On one hand, she wanted to belong to him with everything inside of her. On the other, she couldn't possibly become his princess, as her presence would only bring destruction upon his people.

He wouldn't be likely to listen to reason. The bond they shared had made his common sense fly right through the carav slats. He'd made up his mind the god of Jackals had given her to him, and nothing short of an act of his god would convince him to think otherwise.

And she had to admit, it was an attractive fantasy. Loving Siraj every day of her life, riding the dunes with him, raising a family. Her eyes burned. She couldn't possibly marry the Jackal, but she couldn't leave him, either. She needed his protection.

But perhaps she was being selfish. In being granted the protection of the god of Jackals, she'd already brought the ghost to his caravan. If it found her in Neviann, surely it could find her among the dunes as well. Regardless that no one had seemed to hear or see their previous encounter with the spirit, that didn't change the fact that Siraj's caravan was already in danger.

It didn't matter if she became his princess. The fact remained that she was putting his people in danger by her very presence. The ghost could strike at any time. Perhaps her fate was to succumb to the thing—alone. If that were the case, she'd need to travel far beyond any city or settlement. She'd need to leave the Jackal's caravan and head out on her own.

If the spirit found her, she wouldn't be able to hurt anyone if she was nowhere to be found. It would probably kill her, but Yasmin knew *that* was to be her fate, not staying with Siraj and pretending like all was right in the desert. It was about time she quit running and face it.

Just as she had that thought, one low, haunting note echoed across the dunes. Everyone around her erupted in gasps. A few people ran down the caravan line, while others furiously spoke of what it could be. Yasmin barely threw her thoughts into concentrating on their words when one particular word leapt into her head.

Viper.

The Viper Prince was upon them.

Yasmin knew from learning about the Jackal that the Viper's oasis was the closest one to his. In fact, Siraj's father had tried to force Trianna, Siraj's cousin, to marry the Viper in an effort to steal his oasis out from under him. That had been what led to Siraj overthrowing his father and seating himself on the Jackal throne.

But Nestor Pramtash hadn't succeeded in his nefarious plan. Trianna had married the Scarab Prince instead, and the Viper, he'd married a blond-haired beauty from another world.

For some wild reason, panic entered Yasmin's heart. She couldn't fathom why, she only knew she needed to run. Swallowing her fear, she turned and raced down the line, away from the Viper and his entourage. She didn't know where she was going until she'd climbed the steps to the weaving carav. Thankfully, it was empty, as she knew it would be. The ladies had jumped up and left the moment they'd heard the Viper's horn, probably to join the crowd in greeting the visiting prince.

Their looms and projects lay in various states of disarray, but it was quiet compared to the cacophony outside.

Yasmin wandered to the far corner and slid down the slats. She was able to calm her racing heart and ease her breathing somewhat by closing her eyes and swallowing hard. With her head clear, she realized the exact reason why she ran.

With the arrival of the Viper, there was no other obstacle for Siraj to marry her. Only a prince could marry another prince, and the Jackal would see the Viper's visit as a sign from the gods.

He'd want to marry her.

Probably tonight.

Bile rose in Yasmin's throat. *What am I going to do?*

~ * ~

Siraj strode across the open dunes to the Viper's caravan and met his old friend halfway. Tariq grabbed him in a strong hug and slapped him on the back.

"Siraj, old boy, how long has it been?"

The Jackal returned his friend's hug and pulled away, gazing at the Viper at arms' length. With a wide grin, he said, "Too long. Over a year. How are your boys?"

"Well!" Tariq said, smiling broadly. "They are most excited to see you."

Siraj looked over Tariq's shoulder only to see two young lads with sandy-colored hair running toward them. Sabine, the Viper Princess, wasn't too far behind, raising her hand in greeting. She was the only woman in the desert with golden hair, and she'd passed it on to her sons.

Stooping low, Siraj grabbed Hassan, the Viper's heir, and twirled him around, reveling in the sound of the boy's giggles. Not to be ignored,

Kadif, the Viper's youngest, tugged on Siraj's golden robes.

"Jaka! Jaka! Next!"

Siraj laughed at the boy's way of saying his title; he couldn't quite pronounce 'Jackal' properly. Setting Hassan down, he snatched Kadif into his arms and tickled him soundly.

By the time Sabine caught up to her sons, Siraj swept her into his arms as well. "You look more radiant than ever, Highness!" he said, grinning.

"And you, Siraj, have found Yasmin."

He set her back down in the sand, glancing between Sabine and Tariq. "You know?"

Tariq's expression became grave. "We have not merely happened upon you, Jackal. Sabine has had a vision, and we must speak with you about it." The Viper swallowed hard. "It's about Yasmin."

A rock settled within the pit of Siraj's stomach. Every one of Sabine's visions of the future had come true. And judging by the look on her face, her vision of Yasmin hadn't been a good one.

"We must talk," Sabine said, her voice low. She bent and picked up Kadif, who put his head on her shoulder and regarded Siraj with his thumb in his mouth.

"By all means," Siraj murmured, gesturing them to follow. "Hassan and Kadif can rest in my brother's carav."

"Thank you," Sabine replied.

Siraj's mind raced as they walked, and the more he worried, the faster his heart raged inside of him. Obviously Sabine's vision had been traumatic enough for the Viper to find him in the desert. Siraj wasn't too far from his oasis, but whatever the Viper Princess had to tell him obviously couldn't wait another couple of days.

Swallowing hard, he allowed his people to greet the Viper and his family. It took longer than he'd liked to reach his royal carav, but thankfully his brother had been more than willing to look after Tariq's children.

With a frown, Siraj realized Yasmin wasn't in his carav. Where was she? She hadn't appeared when the Viper had announced his arrival, either. Now Siraj's worry was compounded by the fact that Yasmin seemed to have disappeared.

By the time the door closed behind Sabine, Siraj had to breathe deep to hold on to his sanity. Running his fingers through his hair, he winced.

"What have you seen?" he asked, not mincing his words. He needed to know if Yasmin was in danger.

"Maybe we should sit—"

"What have you seen, Sabine?" he asked again, interrupting her. "Please, I don't mean to be rude, but I must know."

Sabine took a deep breath. "Yasmin is being pursued by a...a ghost?"

“Yes,” he answered. “I’ve seen it attack her myself. Or try to, at least.”

“What do you mean try to?” Tariq asked.

“It seems I protect her from it.”

“You won’t be able to for long,” Sabine whispered, her voice barely audible. “Siraj, it’s going to...overtake her.”

His eyes lit on the Viper Princess. An uncomfortable silence descended upon the carav. “You have seen this?”

Sabine nodded. “Yasmin will succumb. It will madden her.”

Siraj’s countenance hardened. Every hair on his body prickled and a consuming rage overcame him. “That will not happen.”

“Siraj,” Sabine said, placing her hand on his shoulder. “It will. I am sorry.”

“No!” He didn’t mean to shout, but he couldn’t help it now. “Forgive me, Viper. But this cannot happen. I won’t allow it.”

“There is nothing you can do.” The Viper’s soft words filled him with panic.

“Please,” he said, his eyes burning. “If I marry her, the blessing of the god of Jackals will be upon her. Is it possible we can avoid this if she becomes my princess?”

Tariq and Sabine glanced at each other.

“I have never known my wife’s visions to be wrong,” the Viper replied. “She has accurately predicted the birth of our sons, when the Scarab would be in Suridesh, and even the weather patterns. This is her magic, Siraj.”

“I know.” Siraj rubbed his eyes and gazed at Tariq. “Please help me,” he implored. “I have to do something. Gods, Viper. I’ve been looking for her for a decade. I cannot lose her. Not now.”

Tariq sighed. “I will marry her to you if that is what you wish, Jackal.”

Siraj could no longer speak. His emotions choked him and all he could do was nod.

“Even the blessing of your god might not be enough to stop this spirit if it is strong enough,” Sabine said. “You might lose Yasmin. You must think this through.”

“I have thought about it!” Siraj spat, uncaring that a few tears escaped his eyes. “By all that is holy I love that woman. I love her. Oh, sweet god of Jackals, I *love her!*”

He was unraveling, but it couldn’t be stopped. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t catch his breath. The Viper placed his hand on Siraj’s shoulder, calming him somewhat as Tariq’s magic flowed through him. It was nothing more than the cleansing magic, but it was enough to pull him back from the brink.

“I must find her,” Siraj breathed. “I don’t know where she is.”

Tariq nodded. “We won’t be far. When you find her, we will perform the ceremony.”

Siraj didn’t wait any longer. Ripping open his door, he hit the sand running.

Eleven

Yasmin yelped when the door to the weaving carav ripped open, rocking the carriage from side to side. Siraj leapt in, his chest heaving from his harsh breaths. His eyes seemed drawn to hers, snaring her with his hardened gaze.

The man was stunning, standing there with the light of the sun draping across his shoulders, clothing him like his fine golden robes. His royal power exuded from him, reaching her from clear across the carav. Yasmin shivered and stood, still keeping her back against he slats.

Without a word, Siraj slammed the door and made a gesture. The short pulse of magic in the air told her he'd sealed the door.

They would not be disturbed.

She swallowed hard when he slowly advanced, and for the first time in her life, Siraj brought unease into her heart. His thoughts were guarded, but she could read the anger, the fear, the desperation, rising off him in waves.

For the life of her, she didn't want him to catch her.

Yasmin began inching away, stepping around the looms, yet keeping him in her sights.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice deceptively calm.

"The Viper is here."

Siraj arched a brow, but continued after her, as if she was a horse he didn't wish to spook. "That he is."

"I cannot marry you, Jackal."

Siraj seemed to mull over her words. "So you chose to hide from me rather than find out why the Viper's caravan is here?"

That stopped her. Biting the inside of her cheek, she fidgeted with her hands. "I..."

Siraj's eyes narrowed. "You thought I would see the Viper's visit as a sign from the gods."

Yasmin gasped and contemplated lying to him. His ability to read her thoughts was getting better, damn him. She doubted she'd be able to deceive him. She doubted she ever could.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, continuing to advance. "But Tariq came to warn us. His princess has seen a vision."

"You shouldn't say his name to me," Yasmin replied, her voice wavering. She tripped over a basket of thread, but was able to regain her footing. Siraj smiled.

"*Sabine* has told me some disturbing news."

"Siraj, don't!"

"What she has told me," he continued, as if he hadn't just revealed the names of two royals, "has made me come to a conclusion."

Yasmin backed into a corner. Damn! She groaned and banged her head against the slats. Had she backed herself into it? Or had Siraj herded her there? She was willing to bet he'd been more than aware of what he'd done.

With one lunge, he trapped her, placing his hands on the walls by her head. He eased in close, to make sure she couldn't duck under his arms.

"Please don't," Yasmin whispered, turning her head to avoid his eyes.

"You must marry me."

"I cannot."

"You must." His gentle fingers grasped her chin and turned her gaze to his. "*Yasmin*." The soft timbre of his voice had her pussy instantly wet for him. Her eyes stung and her vision swam. She wasn't going to be able to resist the Jackal for long. "*Sabine* has told me the ghost will overcome you. I will not let that happen. Marriage to me is the only answer."

Yasmin sucked her breath in sharp pants. She desperately willed herself not to cry. Terror at his words sluiced down her spine.

"Siraj," she cried, sniffing as a tear fell down her cheek. "I must leave you. I can't stay here! Gods above, if that vision comes true, I'll..."

"Stop. Right there." His eyes shot sparks. "Don't you *dare* talk to me about leaving my caravan."

"But—"

"*No!*" The force of his voice shook the carav. "I have spent the better part of my reign thinking of you. Looking for you. Dreaming of you. You are mine, Yasmin. And I mean to claim you."

Siraj's mouth cut off any more words she wanted to say. His attack forced her lips apart before he stabbed his tongue deep, swallowing her cries. But it didn't take long before her hands were on his shoulders, wandering up his neck and threading through his hair.

She tugged, just hard enough to cause a little pain. Siraj pulled back with a grunt, but his eyes refused to let her go.

"The ghost is too dangerous," she whispered. "I cannot risk the safety of your people."

"The safety of my people is for me to decide," he replied. "And I know that my god will protect you."

"But...the Viper Princess had a vision!"

Siraj framed her face with his hands. "When I was seventeen, *I* saw a vision too, of a lovely young girl with amazing eyes. She saved me from the brink of death. I asked my god if he would see fit to give her to me. And he did. The god of Jackals did not fail me. The god of Jackals *will not* fail me. He will not fail *us*." Siraj gave her a gentle peck on the lips. "Trust me, Yasmin. I want to give you a home." He gave her another peck. "And a last name."

If there were any doubts she was in love with the Jackal Prince, Siraj had just laid them to rest. Twin tears fell from her eyes as she stared at him, trying hard to calm her raging emotions.

"I don't want to leave you," she confessed.

"Then stay."

"I'm so scared."

"I will protect you with my very life."

She released a single sob. "I want to be your princess. I want to stay with you. I want to ride the dunes and be...normal."

He swept her tears away with the pads of his thumbs and gave her a slow grin. "Then marry me. Warm my bed. Bear my children. Fulfill my life."

"Promise me, Siraj, please? I need you to promise you'll keep me safe."

"My dear girl," he whispered, his breath hot upon her lips. "That is what wedding vows are for."

Yasmin's will crumbled. Siraj's faith was infectious. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps his god *would* protect her as the Jackal Princess. She needed to trust that stability, and finally stop spinning out of control.

Yasmin caressed Siraj's face with her palm and took a deep, shuddering breath. "Then make me your wife," she said, taking that leap. "I want peace, Siraj. I want a place to belong."

He closed his eyes and grinned broadly. His relief was palpable. "You belong with me."

Suddenly his arms surrounded her, sheltering her from her own emotions. Resting her forehead on his shoulder, she breathed deeply, inhaling his clean scent and turning her face toward the skin of his neck. She hugged him back, unwilling to ever let him go.

Twelve

Yasmin shivered as the sun sank low. Siraj and the Viper had made preparations for the wedding, but she willed the ceremony to begin. The sooner she was under the full protection of the god of Jackals, the better. Siraj wanted her to wear a special robe, one his own mother wore years ago, and handed it to her once they'd returned to his royal carav to ready themselves for the ceremony.

He could barely remember his own mother, but what he could remember were happy times. At some point during Siraj's childhood, his father had quietly cast the woman aside. All Nestor had wanted was for her to bear him an heir, and she'd fulfilled her purpose. Siraj had known ever since he was a child that she had been killed.

He'd never forgiven his father for it. His mother's death was one of the main reasons why Siraj had never loved or followed his father. His plan to overthrow his father, then the sitting Jackal, had been hatched when he was ten years old.

His plan finally came to fruition when he was fifteen with the help of the Viper, the Scarab, and the Falcon. Now, the Viper had readied himself to marry them, waiting beyond the caravs, where both of their peoples had gathered.

"Will you wear this as well?" Siraj asked, turning with the purple clea blossom in his hand, the one he'd searched his oasis for to match the color of her eyes.

"Of course I will," Yasmin replied, reaching out her hand to accept his gift.

Siraj shook his head. "Allow me," he whispered. With his strong fingers, he tucked the flower behind her ear and leaned back to admire his handiwork. "Lovely."

Yasmin blushed and bit her lip.

"Are you ready to become the Jackal Princess?" His gentle smile made her breath catch in the back of her throat.

"More than you know," she answered.

"You have been my princess since the day we met, Yasmin. We may

not have been bound by vows, but we were bound by magic.” He held up the Jackal armband and her eyes widened. “I will finally claim you tonight. With this.”

“Do not make me wait any longer.” Her soft voice snapped something inside him. Without another word, Siraj took hold of her hand and led her out of the carav. They walked together up the caravan line, and didn’t stop until they stood before the Viper Prince, who gazed at them with understanding in his eyes.

After the people had settled around them, Tariq began the ceremony with a prayer to the gods to bless their union. Yasmin didn’t hear a word. Her entire world focused on the man before her, the one who gazed back at her with a slight grin, making her breath leave her lungs in a rush.

Siraj was such a beautiful man, and becoming his wife was a dream come true. She couldn’t remember how many times she’d dreamed of this very moment, thinking herself pretentious for even wondering what it would be like to be with the one man who made her heart race within her chest.

And now, she’d made love to him. She was to be his princess. A few tears burned in her eyes.

“Siraj Pramdash, Jackal Prince of the Golden Desert,” the Viper said, his voice booming. “You stand before me with your intended. You have chosen Yasmin of Neviann to be your Jackal Princess. Do you pledge to serve her for the rest of your days, to give her children and protect her with your very life?”

Siraj took a deep breath and squeezed her hand. She’d forgotten he still held it. His own eyes shimmered, and a myriad of his emotions filled her. Elation, exhilaration, but above all, relief. It wasn’t until that very moment Yasmin understood the depth of Siraj’s feelings for her. He would indeed fight every last demon of Kaldaeron to keep her by his side.

“I pledge it,” he said, his voice wavering.

“By the law,” Tariq said, handing Siraj a small dagger, “you must pledge by blood.”

Siraj accepted the knife and made a small incision on the pad of his thumb. He held it up to Yasmin’s mouth and took a deep breath. His emotions bubbled within her, and a lone tear escaped her countenance.

Opening her mouth, Yasmin suckled his thumb until no trace of his blood remained. Siraj closed his eyes and bit his lip. Now another emotion raged within her. *Lust*.

The Viper grinned and Yasmin caught a snippet of his thoughts. He knew exactly what it was like to shudder with need for the woman he loved. Gods, did Siraj love her?

Yasmin tried to probe his thoughts, but the Viper was speaking again, shattering her concentration.

“Yasmin, of the tent city Neviann, you stand before me with your intended. You have chosen Siraj Pramdash to be your Jackal Prince. Do you

pledge to serve him for the rest of your life, to give him children and love him until your dying day?"

She nodded vigorously. A few chuckles rose from the people. Her breath rattled in her lungs. "I pledge it," she managed to say. Even Siraj grinned widely at her response. Yasmin blushed.

"By the law, you must pledge by blood," the Viper said, gesturing for Siraj to give her the dagger.

With trembling hands, Yasmin cut her thumb until a bead of blood appeared. She held it up to Siraj's lips. He opened his mouth and the warm wetness of his tongue surrounded her thumb. She swayed on her feet and groaned as her nipples pebbled. Siraj arched a brow and pulled her thumb from his mouth with a loud pop.

More chuckles erupted from the crowd. Even the Viper tried unsuccessfully to hide his mirth. "Now, the Jackal must claim his princess."

Siraj didn't waste any time in grasping Yasmin's right arm and taking the Jackal armband to place it around her bicep. The gold seemed to hum before squeezing her arm, fitting perfectly. Yasmin gazed at the trinket in wonder. It was magical. She'd had no idea!

With wide eyes, she glanced back at Siraj, only to see him grinning at her like a fool.

Once again, the Viper's voice boomed. "With the gods' blessings, Siraj and Yasmin, you are married. Go, and rule your caravan with firm hands and gentle hearts!"

Yasmin's new husband curled his arms around her and kissed her soundly, demanding she open her mouth to accommodate his tongue. Her tears flowed freely now as she clutched onto him, overwhelmed by becoming royalty—the Jackal Princess.

"Gods woman," Siraj whispered into her ear. "I love you, Yasmin Pramtash."

She shuddered at the sound of her new name and clutched him tighter. Finally, she had a home. Finally she belonged.

Finally, she was loved.

"Don't let me go, Siraj," she pleaded.

"I will never let you get away from me."

Just as the sun set behind the dunes, a deep chill hit the air. Every hair on Yasmin's skin stood as something seemed to clutch onto her heart with icy fingers. She leaned back to gaze into Siraj eyes with a mixture of shock and fright. Something had changed. Something wasn't right.

Her husband looked over her shoulder just as the people around them cried out in surprise. Thick black clouds rolled in at an ungodly speed, threatening the desert with their ominous appearance. A sudden wind picked up, stinging them with a spray of sand while thunder rolled across the desert.

"*Gods*," Siraj whispered. His arms tightened around her, hurting her with his strength. But Yasmin didn't care. The fear within her grew until it

overflowed.

“It’s found me. Siraj!”

He set his jaw and opened his mouth to reply, but before he could, an ear-piercing screech echoed across the dunes, and one by one, the caravs in the Jackal’s caravan went flying into the air.

The Sentinels shrieked as they flew up with the caravs, only to crash back down to the sand with tremendous force. Yasmin couldn’t watch. She couldn’t bear to witness the destruction of Siraj’s caravan, knowing she was responsible.

She was the one the demon wanted.

But Siraj didn’t let her bury her face in his chest for long. Before she could gain her bearings, he was towing her behind him, running across the sand like a man possessed.

“Do not stop, Yasmin!” he yelled against the wind. She wanted to tell him it was futile—they couldn’t outrun the entity behind them—but her terror stole her breath and her heart threatened to explode within her chest.

All she could do was hold on tight and pray that her marriage to the Jackal Prince was enough to protect her from the one who wanted her soul.

Thirteen

Siraj had no idea where he was going. He'd just witnessed...something...destroy more than a few of his caravs. He couldn't risk bringing that thing to the Viper's caravan as well, not when Tariq's sons were somewhere amongst them.

He prayed fervently to the god of Jackals that his own people were unharmed as he led Yasmin into the open desert. His heart ached and his lungs burned, but he couldn't afford to stop. The screeching behind them had grown louder, and the rushing howl of the winds pushed on his body from every side.

"Siraj!" his new wife yelled. "Stop. Stop!"

He couldn't. Something within him wouldn't allow him to slow down. Not when Yasmin's life was at stake.

But he hadn't put much thought into the fact that she wouldn't be able to keep up with his long strides. Yasmin fell, releasing his hand with a cry. Siraj turned back and rushed to help her stand, but the scene behind him froze his blood.

A giant whirlwind, from sand to sky, churned in the dunes. It sped toward them with a speed unparalleled, easily eating up the ground he'd gained by fleeing on foot.

"Get up, Yas, get up!"

"I can't!" she screamed.

Siraj glanced at her face and saw for himself the horror in her heart. His decision made, he merely scooped her into his arms and took off running once more. But with the sweet burden in his arms, he had no hope of outrunning the thundering wind behind him.

"Gods help me!" he cried a moment before he dropped in the dirt. With his large body, he covered Yasmin from head to toe, intent on taking the brunt of the demon's wrath himself.

Within seconds, the winds were upon him. They tossed him with the ease of a young girl casting aside her ragdoll. He had no idea how far the winds had thrown him. All he knew was that Yasmin was now at the wind's mercy as it howled all around them.

“No!” he shouted, attempting to stand. Something pushed him back hard.

“*Siraj!*”

“Yasmin!” He would not be conquered. With a grunt and the taste of blood in his mouth, he stood once more, railing against the fury. “You cannot have her!” he screamed. “*She is the Jackal Princess!*”

Something answered him with a primal yell. The sound of it shook the foundations of his soul. This was no demon of Kaldaeron. This was no ghost. This was something else entirely, and for the first time in his life, Siraj’s faith in his god was shaken.

Battling the wind, he could just make out the form of his wife a few paces in front of him, standing with her arms outstretched, as if trying to cast in the middle of the storm.

A flash of light blinded him for a split second and he cowered back, only to shiver at the cold shards of ice in his blood. Yasmin was screaming.

He tried to run, he tried to reach her, but something held him back, something stopped him. No. He would *not* be stopped. Reaching inside his thoughts, he grasped for anything that could help Yasmin, and clutched on to the one thing he knew he could do.

His thoughts could manifest.

He thought about walking freely within the whirlwind. No longer did it hold him. But no matter how hard he looked, he couldn’t see Yasmin through the stinging sand.

No, there she was, not too far away.

Calling her name, he heard her shriek, and with his heart in his throat, watched helplessly as she was pulled up into the sky.

“*Yasmin!*”

Her arms and legs flailed as she, too, was batted around like a ragdoll, before being pulled higher into the sky.

Siraj tried to think her back, he tried to use his thoughts to save her, but his concentration was crushed at the sound of Yasmin crying his name in terror.

As soon as it began, the winds suddenly died, and the dark clouds broke in the sky. One last, fading shriek was the only testament to the rage of the elements as the stars winked delicately in the sky.

Yasmin was nowhere to be found.

Falling to his knees, Siraj tugged on his hair and screamed at the top of his lungs in tearful denial. His wife had been taken. And he’d been powerless to stop it.

~ * ~

Tariq sprinted across the sand until he reached Siraj, still crying out to the sky. What the Viper had witnessed chilled him to the bone. Not since the witch Mother roamed the dunes had he seen such powerful magics. They’d appeared out of a clear sky and taken the newest princess of the

desert. And now, Tariq had to find a way to comfort the broken heart of the Jackal.

Falling to his knees, the Viper didn't hesitate. He took the man he'd always thought of as a younger brother into his arms and held on tight. Siraj had been the one to help him save Sabine from the clutches of his evil father. Siraj had been the young prince brave enough to stand up to Nestor and depose him in front of three of his peers.

There was nothing Tariq wouldn't do for this boy.

"Are you all right?" Tariq asked, pulling back and holding the Jackal at arms' length.

"She's gone," Siraj exclaimed before furiously wiping his eyes. "She's gone and the god of Jackals did nothing to save her!"

Without warning, the younger prince stood and began marching back to his caravan. Tariq stood as well and trotted after him. He stopped him with his hand on his elbow.

"What do you have a mind to do?"

"I'm going to find her, Viper," the boy spat. "Whatever it takes. I will search every cave, every cliff, every damn rock until the whole of Jikkar is turned upside down."

"You can do nothing now," Tariq reasoned.

"The hell I can't!"

"Listen to me, Siraj!" Tariq took hold of his shoulders and shook him roughly. "I know you are hurting. But your people need you. Night has fallen. We cannot hunt for Yasmin in the dark, no matter how much we may wish it. The moons will not rise until close to daybreak. There is no light to speak of."

"I cannot do nothing." Siraj's rage seethed within him, Tariq saw it in his eyes. He knew that pain well. He'd been made to endure it when Siraj's father had abducted Sabine from Tariq's own carav.

"You will not be doing nothing." Tariq tried hard to keep his voice calm and even. Siraj needed to see reason. He could not merely ride off into the night and hope for the best. "Some of your caravs have been destroyed. Your people are injured. They need the guidance and leadership of their prince right now."

"She is out there, Viper," Siraj said, growling through his tears. "She is alone and terrified and I can do nothing to protect her. I am her husband, I promised to protect her!"

Tariq nodded and squeezed Siraj's shoulders. He had an idea. "We need help. I didn't know what was so very obvious until after I'd married Sabine, but I am a dream walker. I can send my dreams to others."

Siraj blinked, clearly not understanding.

"I can contact the Falcon. If I get through to him tonight, he can call the birds from his aeries to help us search the dunes for your princess."

The Jackal's eyes widened in shock. "Yasmin told me she can hear

the Falcon's calls!"

Tariq grinned. "Then we might find her yet."

"But, Viper, what if...what if...the ghost..."

"Don't even think it," Tariq replied. "You said it yourself. Yasmin is the Jackal Princess. Your god will keep his eye on her."

Siraj glanced up at the constellation of the Jackal in the night sky and shook his head bitterly. "That didn't save my mother."

Tariq watched in shock as his old friend made his way back to his ruined caravan. The unshakable faith of the Jackal Prince had been shaken to its very foundation. Tariq prayed to every god of the desert that they'd find Siraj's princess.

Alive.

Fourteen

The Jackal's heart burned. His eyes swelled with tears but he refused to shed them. Every step he took brought him closer to his caravan and the wails and shouts of his people. Their cries ripped through him, some for their broken caravs, others for their injuries.

Some cried for their abducted princess.

Yasmin hadn't ridden his caravan long, but Siraj had known his people would accept her. It had been no secret she was the woman he'd been searching for all these long years—the woman with the lavender eyes.

The Viper wasn't too far behind him, and thankfully he ordered his men to help Siraj's men clean up the wreckage. Tariq must have known Siraj didn't have the capability to deal with this tragedy—therefore he'd taken it upon himself to bark orders left and right. For that, Siraj would be forever grateful.

He did, however, tell his physician to heal anyone who needed it. Thankfully most of the people had been away from the caravs attending the Jackal's wedding, and there were few injuries to be had.

The Sentinels, the hairy, magical beasts that pulled the caravs through the dunes, were unharmed, as Siraj knew they would be. In all his years, he'd only seen dead Sentinels once, and that was when the god of Cobras had taken out his wrath upon Jaden Rahasha for his sins against the desert princes. The house of the Cobra Prince was now nothing more than a mere memory.

Amidst the chaos, a certain order was restored, and soon, everyone worked together to gather the debris strewn across the sand. The caravs that had been tossed into the sky could not be saved. There was nothing more to be done other than stack the unmarred wooden slats on top of the other carriages and lash them down. They did the same with the metal runners that guided the caravs through the sand, in the hopes they could make new caravs in Suridesh.

What couldn't be saved was burned.

While the flames licked the night sky, Siraj went in search of Yasir. It was easy enough to find him, he was busy picking through the ruined

caravs, choosing what wood to keep and what wood to dispose of. Despite the cool evening, Yasir had peeled his robe off his arms and tied it around his waist.

“Yasir!”

Siraj’s brother glanced up at the sound of his voice and made his way over to him, wiping the sweat from his brow. “Yes, Jackal?”

“Your wife, I assume she is safe?”

Yasir nodded. “She is with the Viper Princess in her caravan.”

Siraj breathed a quick sigh of relief, thankful nothing had happened to any of his surviving family. “I must ask something of you.”

“Anything,” Yasir said with a slight bow.

“I am leaving in the morning, the moment the sun rises. I must find my princess.”

“Of course.”

“I do not know how long I will be gone. I am leaving my caravan in your capable hands.”

Yasir gazed at him, seemingly speechless.

“You are to take the people to my oasis, fill my water caravs and travel on to Suridesh, is that understood?”

Yasir’s mouth worked up and down but no sound escaped him. Siraj knew his brother had been blindsided by his request. He was the son of Siraj’s father, but being illegitimate, Yasir had no claim to the throne. What Siraj was asking him to do was to take on the mantle of the Jackal Prince when he had no right—a request that was unheard of in the desert.

“Is that understood, Yasir?” Siraj’s patience was wearing thin. Sunrise couldn’t come soon enough.

“I...I...” His brother nodded.

“Good. Wait for me in Suridesh. Do you know the way?”

Again, Yasir nodded. He’d ridden with the caravan drivers when he was a child—he probably knew his way around Jikkar as easily as Siraj did. “See to it this wood can be remade into new caravs. Those who have lost their homes are to be made comfortable with others until their homes can be replaced.”

“It will be as you say.”

Siraj took a deep breath and glanced at the sky. Right now, they should be feasting. Right now, he should be holding Yasmin in his arms and celebrating their good fortune. Gods above. Something had taken her. Something with such raw power, it had flung her into the sky before disappearing before his very eyes.

Yasir placed his hand on Siraj’s shoulder. “Find your princess, Siraj. We will be fine.”

“I am asking too much of you.” When his eyes met his brother’s, they stung with moisture. “I cannot expect you to traverse the dunes with an entire caravan to care for. You have a wife of your own, responsibilities—”

“You are my prince and you are my brother,” Yasir replied. “That makes Yasmin both my princess and my sister. I will do whatever I can to preserve our people while you look for your wife. Bring her home to us.”

Without another word, Siraj grabbed Yasir into a tight hug. “Pray for Yasmin,” he whispered. “Gods, I am terrified!”

“I am praying already, brother. For you as well.”

Siraj pulled back and managed a watery grin. “Thank you. For everything. I will not forget this.”

“Just find our princess, Jackal.”

Siraj steeled his features and gave his brother one single nod.

Fifteen

There he was.

Finally.

It had taken Tariq a few tries to locate Khalil in the dream world. Perhaps the Falcon hadn't gone to sleep until late in the evening. But Tariq had managed to find him, dreaming of driving his caravan across the dunes.

It hadn't surprised Tariq, finding out he'd been a dream walker after marrying Sabine. He'd once thought her Viper armband held the power of their shared dreams. His mother had enchanted it to find the one woman he could love, after all. But the armband hadn't been responsible for their dreams—it had merely helped him focus his own power.

For years, the Viper had believed he didn't have any ability other than the common magics, lighting lamps and cleansing his body. But after he'd had a son with Sabine, Hassan began talking about what he had dreamed—the very same images Tariq had dreamed.

Trying many times, every one of his attempts had been successful in reaching the dreams of others. He had found his ability.

Tariq's favorite part was the fact he could do anything in the dream world. Instead of calling to Khalil from the sand, he appeared to the Falcon on the driver's seat of the lead carav.

"Hello, Tariq!" Khalil said jovially. "Care to drive my caravan for a spell? I'm going to hop down and make flatbread with the servants. It's Amani's birthday, you know. She would like some flatbread."

"Falcon," Tariq replied. "You are dreaming. And I am not a figment of your dream. I've come to talk to you about something important."

"Yes, the Spider Princess's birthday, let's go make gifts!"

"Khalil!" This was the part Tariq hated, having to convince the person that what you said was true and not a dream. "It is not Amani's birthday. You are dreaming."

"I am...dreaming?"

Tariq nodded. "Have you ever made flatbread in your life?"

"No."

"Then why would you start now?"

Khalil gazed at him with a blank expression. "I...I don't know."

"Listen to me. I am a dream walker. I'm contacting you through my magic." When the Falcon didn't respond, Tariq continued. "Siraj needs your help. He's married Yasmin, the young woman who healed him in the desert ten years ago. She is his princess now. But she has been taken from him by a...a whirlwind."

Khalil arched a brow. "You are sure this is not still a part of my dream?"

"I know it sounds odd, but it is the truth. We need your magic to call your falcons. We need to find Yasmin. The Jackal and I believe she was abducted by a ghost—a very powerful one at that. It's been stalking her. Waiting until the time was right. Siraj thought his god would protect her, but she was taken right after their wedding ceremony."

"Siraj is married? Young Siraj?"

"He's not young any longer, Falcon. He has seen twenty-seven cycles."

"That is still young." Khalil smiled. "The Jackal has himself a princess."

Tariq nodded. "Yes."

"I suppose I shouldn't be too shocked he married the one girl he's never been able to forget."

"And now she has been taken from him. His heart is broken, Khalil. We must help him."

"Yes, we should. I will call my falcons at first light. They will be able to cover more ground than Siraj or his men."

"Thank you, Khalil," Tariq said, slapping his old friend on the shoulder. "I will contact you again tomorrow evening, to see if you've found her."

"No need," Khalil replied, holding up his hand. "If I find her, I will send a falcon to you."

"How will it know where to find me?"

"You question my magic?" Khalil sounded affronted, but Tariq knew he was not. Tariq gave him a grin.

"Not at all, Falcon. It shall be as you say."

"When my falcons find the Jackal Princess, I will make sure she is safe and send word. If I can, I will bring her back to my oasis. My caravan is resting there as we speak."

"Excellent. I will look forward to seeing your birds in the sky. And so, too, will the Jackal."

"He'll owe me one."

"At this point, I think that boy is willing to do just about anything to get his wife back."

The dream broke and Tariq opened his eyes. The twilight of dawn peeked over the horizon, lighting his carav. Sabine cuddled next to him under

the blanket and he squeezed her closer, kissing her forehead with a sigh.

If he knew Siraj at all, that boy probably hadn't gotten a wink of sleep. Even now, Tariq was willing to bet the young prince was assembling his men in the search for Yasmin. Tariq didn't blame him. He himself had been crazy with urgency when Siraj's father had taken Sabine from him.

The only saving grace they had now was the power of the Falcon Prince, who was no doubt awake himself after their shared dream broke.

"Please help Siraj," Tariq whispered to any god who was listening.

~ * ~

Siraj cinched the girth strap on his horse's saddle and checked his supplies. A few of his camels had been loaded with water and food for his men, who were also checking their horses. He didn't have many men to spare, only ten would accompany him to find Yasmin. Most of his men needed to stay with the caravan, to help with the water delivery to Suridesh, and help rebuild the four caravans that had been destroyed.

The Jackal had already wound his dunla on his head and squinted at the sun. It was an hour past dawn and the desert was heating up.

This was not going to be a pleasant trip.

"Did you sleep?" Tariq's voice startled him, but he didn't turn around.

"No."

"You must rest, Siraj. You're no use to Yasmin if you're exhausted."

"I will rest when I find her."

Despite the Viper's words, Siraj wasn't tired in the least. He had a suspicion whatever magic Yasmin had given him long ago was sustaining him now.

Siraj turned to face his friend. The Viper was dressed in his traveling robes with his own red dunla on his head. Behind him were thirty of his finest men, dressed the same, ready to light out across the dunes. Siraj gasped at the sight.

"Then let's find your princess." Tariq smiled.

"But..." Siraj was at a loss for words. "You have your own people to worry about. You need to go to Suridesh!"

The Viper nodded. "Sabine is more than capable of driving my caravan into the tent city. But *my* place is with you."

Siraj swallowed hard while his eyes burned. He struggled for every breath, determined not to lose control.

"You once helped me save Sabine," Tariq said. "I will not let you find Yasmin alone."

Siraj embraced his old friend. Tariq gave him a squeeze, then released him. "I was able to contact Khalil last night. He will lend us his falcons in the search."

For the first time in what seemed an eternity, Siraj smiled, and relief swept through him like a desert wind. "Thank you, Viper," he whispered.

“We are all family,” Tariq told him. “We take care of our own.”

“I...I don’t know exactly where Yasmin is, but I can feel her toward the west.” Siraj turned his gaze to the far dunes. Her magic tugged him toward her. It was how he knew she’d been hiding in the weaving carav after Tariq’s arrival yesterday.

“Then that is where we shall go. Let’s mount up. We have a woman to find.”

Without any further encouragement, Siraj mounted his horse and ordered his men to do the same. With one last glance at his caravan, he spied his brother Yasir next to the lead carav.

Siraj raised his hand and Yasir did the same. With a sharp whistle, Siraj kicked his horse, riding side by side with the Viper Prince. The thunder of their horses’ hooves echoed across the sand.

Sixteen

A loud, piercing cry woke Yasmin, making her realize she was face-down on a large dune. Something was pulling on her soul, beckoning her to the north. She'd felt that pull before, yet she couldn't place it. But just as swiftly as it had begun, it was gone, leaving Yasmin disoriented and confused.

Sand filled her mouth. The sun beat down upon her back like a ray of fire. Lifting her head, it was all Yasmin could do to open her eyes. She coughed, and sand flew away from her face. But inhaling only served to make her cough more.

Her muscles screamed at her when she attempted to sit up. It felt as if she'd been dropped from the sky.

The sand was hot, but she sat on it anyway, glancing all around her. Yasmin's eyes were full of sand, just like her mouth and her hair. She rubbed her eyes and looked again through cloudy vision.

Nothing greeted her but wave upon wave of rolling dunes. The air shimmered in the distance, resembling a lush, green oasis. But when Yasmin stood on shaky legs, she groaned. It was nothing more than a mirage.

Her stomach twisted and she doubled over. If she didn't find water—and soon—she was in a lot of trouble. Where was Siraj? What had happened?

Her memory returned in snippets, of marrying the man of her dreams only to be taken from him in a spectacular whirlwind. Gazing at her arm, she saw the Jackal armband that wound up her right bicep. She was the Jackal Princess, no mistaking it.

Gods, the ghost had found her and stolen her from her very own wedding! Yasmin turned in feverish circles, as if she could see the spirit who'd deposited her in the dunes.

"Hello?" she yelled. "Is anyone out there?"

Nothing responded.

"Siraj!" Could he hear her? She had no idea. They were connected somehow, but she had no idea how strong their bond was. "Siraj!"

Yasmin called his name until she was hoarse. Tears sprang into her

eyes. The spirit was just toying with her now. Instead of killing her or possessing her body like she thought it might, it merely took her somewhere in the middle of the Golden Desert with no hope of survival.

If only she had Siraj with her, if only she could cling to the very man she'd given her life and her heart to, she wouldn't be quite so frightened.

"Siraj," she called again, this time with less fervor. She could cast her magic and shift into a bird. Perhaps she could find his caravan that way. But she was reluctant to cast her magic. If she did, the ghost might return to finish her off.

"What am I supposed to do?" she cried to the sky. "Please tell me, because I have no idea!"

The familiar release of magic left her body and shot off across the sand. Yasmin gasped in shock. Her eyes widened as she watched more clouds roll in along the horizon.

"God of Jackals," she whispered. The ghost had returned!

The cry of a bird distracted her from the gathering storm. Glancing up, Yasmin recognized it. That bird was a falcon, and after a few moments, it was joined by more and more birds until an entire flock circled above her head.

That's when she remembered the tugging on her soul. The call of the Falcon Prince. She'd felt it a few times as a child. She had felt it again. That was what woke her in the first place.

Then what was that magic that had left her body?

By the gods, could the ghost have been inside of me?

The clouds on the horizon were black, churning now, just as they had done before. But they didn't seem to be coming after her. She watched the storm warily as the falcons alighted in the sand by her feet. A few of them pecked at her garments while others merely regarded her by cocking their heads.

With a snuffle, Yasmin realized why they were there. Somehow, her husband had been able to get in touch with the Falcon and ask him to send his birds to find her. She chuckled with relief as her tears spilled over.

"Please," she said, not knowing if the birds understood her. "Go and tell the Falcon where I am. I am all right. Lead him to me!"

A few of the birds stayed with her while the rest took wing, as if following her orders. Perhaps they were. She was the wife of a god's steward. From now on, Yasmin wasn't going to take anything for granted.

The clouds were getting closer. Gods! Without thinking, Yasmin turned and ran in the direction the falcons flew. She couldn't get caught by that thing again. There was no telling where it would take her this time.

That is, if it didn't kill her first.

~ * ~

"Look. Siraj!"

Siraj glanced in the direction Tariq pointed and sucked in his breath.

Dark, black clouds were rolling in, just as they had the night before.

The Jackal and the Viper had stopped after a few hours of riding in order to water their horses when the clouds began to darken the sun. Now, the wind whipped their hair and spooked the animals.

“The ghost is back!” Siraj stood in shock, watching as the clouds gathered directly above them. What would it want with him? Perhaps now that he was Yasmin’s husband, the spirit had decided to return and finish him.

Leaving the horses behind, Siraj marched through the sand and pulled his sword from the sheath around his waist. He had no idea if Tariq followed him or not, nor did he care. Fury blinded him to everything else until the only thing before him was the unexplained storm in the sky.

“Where is my wife?” he screamed, raising his sword high. “Bring her back to me, or I swear to my god I will find a way to kill you!”

The winds responded by howling across the desert. Sand whipped all around him, so close that Siraj could no longer see Tariq, his men, or their horses behind him. The whirlwind had once again touched down to the ground, and he was caught in the middle.

Siraj attempted to swipe at the wind with his sword. He was desperate to do something, *anything* against the entity that had abducted Yasmin. But his sword was ripped from his hands, making him cry out in pain.

“You coward!” he exclaimed, uncaring if he incurred its wrath. “Fight me!”

Without warning, the whirlwind tightened until the very walls of wind had him in their clutches. Siraj’s feet left the sand and he cried out as he flew up into the air. Nothing supported him as he was lifted up and his heart exploded in his chest.

“God of Jackals!” he cried. “Help me!”

Siraj couldn’t even hear his own voice—the winds deafened him. The clouds raced before him while the dunes disappeared beneath him. He tumbled over and over again with tears in his eyes. Was this what Yasmin had endured? Had she been killed by being dropped from the sky?

Just as he had that thought, he began descending, faster and faster until the wind deposited him back on shifting sands. Siraj hit the ground with a dull thud and cried out as his head spun.

The shadowy clouds broke and retreated, and the howl of the winds seemed to fade away until the sands no longer pelted his face.

He was alive, thank the gods, but no matter how hard he tried, Siraj couldn’t find the strength to lift himself into a sitting position. His arms wouldn’t obey him.

He willed his body to obey his thoughts. And it did. With a mighty heave, he pushed off the dune and stood, his legs wobbling beneath him. Nothing remained in the sky but the hot, burning disc of the sun.

“Siraj!”

That was Yasmin’s voice, he’d bet his caravan on it! He whipped around so fast, he almost lost his balance. There she was, soiled and gorgeous, running toward him with a few falcons dancing in the air above her head.

His heart in his throat, Siraj stumbled toward her.

Seventeen

Yasmin leapt into her husband's arms and hooked her legs around his waist. Siraj fell over on the dune, but his arms never let her go. She could barely breathe, but that didn't stop her from planting kisses all over his face.

The world spun and before she knew it, Yasmin was on her back with Siraj now above her, fisting his hand in her hair. His lips raged on hers, giving her a glimpse of the terror he'd felt in his heart after she'd been taken. His tongue scorched her, forcing her to arch into him. More than anything, she needed full contact.

She wanted to ask him how he'd gotten there, she wanted to know how he'd found her, but Siraj didn't seem inclined to release her mouth. When he surged forward, she swallowed his groan the moment his cock thrust against her pussy. Gods above, but she wanted to make love to him, right here, right now.

"*Yasmin*," he cried, finally ripping his lips from hers. "Are you all right?"

"I am now," she confessed, her eyes stinging with tears. "How did you find me?"

"The storm, the same one that took you—it came for me."

"That makes no sense. Why would the spirit seek you out?" She trailed her fingers through his hair and he sighed, as if savoring the feeling.

"I don't know, I don't care!" he exclaimed. "It brought me to you."

After another soul-stirring kiss, Yasmin hugged him tight. "I awoke here, on the sand. I called out your name. I wanted you, needed you. And here you are. What is happening, Siraj?"

He shook his head and shrugged. "All I know is one minute I was desperate to find you and the next, I'm holding heaven in my arms."

Yasmin tried to control her breathing while she stroked his face. "I thought you wouldn't find me!" she said, her chin trembling. "I saw the storm brewing in the distance and I started to run. I didn't want it to catch me again."

"Nothing in Kaldaeron or Jikkar can keep me from my princess, Yasmin. *Nothing*. And as for the storm, I don't know what that ghost's game

is. But I will find a way to defeat it. I promise you that.”

She swallowed hard and nodded. But she read his thoughts, and saw what he didn’t say. He was no longer leaning on his faith in the god of Jackals. Shock flooded her heart.

“Siraj...”

He held up his hand, probably seeing her own thoughts written all over her face. “*I will find a way.*”

She didn’t question him. Right now, Siraj’s faith was fragile. His love for his god was still there, under the surface, but it had been shaken to the core. He’d thought their god would have saved her from the ghost, but he hadn’t. She prayed the Jackal god would not let his steward down again.

“There has to be a reason for all of this,” she told him. “I do not believe the god of Jackals has forsaken us.”

Siraj hid his face against her neck. “I don’t know what to believe anymore.” His voice sounded tortured. But before she could dwell on the pain in his heart, Siraj sat up and brought her with him. She snuggled against him and clutched his robes.

“Perhaps he brought you to me.” She knew he’d understand what she meant.

“You are safe now, Yasmin,” Siraj said. “That is all that matters. By the gods, last night was the worst night of my life.”

She sniffled and clutched him harder. “But I became your wife last night, Jackal. Surely it couldn’t have been the worst night of your life.”

Siraj gave her a sad grin. “That you did. But we have yet to consummate our marriage. Perhaps that is why the god of Jackals didn’t see fit to save you from your spirit. Perhaps he doesn’t yet see you as the Jackal Princess.”

Yasmin gasped. “But we were married. The Viper performed the ceremony!”

“Yes,” he said, giving her a nod. “But after that ceremony, I would have taken you back to my carav and claimed you before my god. It is said two people who make love become one.”

“We have already made love,” she replied, knitting her brow in confusion.

“After the vows are said, after the binding by blood, and after I put my Jackal armband around your arm, then making love to each other becomes much more than a carnal delight. Before we were wed, I wanted you and you wanted me. We followed our instincts. Afterwards, however, it becomes a bond between us, and unites our hearts.”

Yasmin closed her eyes and held on to the back of Siraj’s head. “Then when will the god of Jackals truly see me as your princess?”

“The first chance we get, Yasmin, make no mistake. It appears as if the Falcon’s birds have found us. It won’t be long before the Falcon himself discovers where we are. He’ll take us back to his oasis. And then *I will take*

you.”

With a deep sigh, Yasmin turned to face the dunes just as riders in green robes crested them. One man rode ahead of the pack, his robes finer than the men behind him.

Siraj stood and brought her up with him. With a grin and a wave, he took Yasmin's hand and walked across the sand toward the Falcon Prince. She followed him, hoping and praying the spirit that haunted her wouldn't separate them again before Siraj finally sealed their marriage.

She clutched his hand a little harder.

~ * ~

“Jackal!” Falcon cried just as he brought his horse to a stop. Siraj watched as his old friend arched a brow in confusion. “How are *you* here? Viper said you were with him.”

“It's a long story, my friend,” Siraj said, running his hand through his hair, thick with grains of sand. He needed a good cleansing. “I see you haven't lost your touch with your falcons.”

Khalil grinned. “My oasis is beyond those dunes. They didn't have to travel far. But I will send them on to the Viper and tell him you are safe with me. Perhaps he can meet us when my caravan leaves for Suridesh.” His eyes slid to Yasmin, who'd taken hold of Siraj's entire right arm, hugging him close to her. She stood partly behind him, as if shielding herself from the Falcon's eyes. “I'm assuming this is the woman we've all been looking for?”

Siraj grinned and gazed down at his wife. She looked back at him with trusting eyes. He was still struck by their lovely shade of lavender. He hoped he'd be struck by them for the rest of his days. “This is my princess, Yasmin Pramtash. Yasmin, this is—”

“Khalil!” Yasmin looked back and forth between him and the Falcon.

Khalil dismounted and stood before them. “How do you know my name?”

Yasmin took another step behind Siraj and he felt her shudder and squeeze his hand almost painfully. Holding his other hand up to his friend, Siraj turned to face her.

“Yas? What's wrong?”

“I...I'm sorry for saying his name!” Her hand covered her mouth and she looked down at the sand, hiding her eyes like she had done many times before.

Siraj gently tilted her face back up to his. “You are royalty now,” he reminded her. “You have the right to say it. Did you learn his name from your summers at his oasis?”

Khalil made a gasping noise behind him. Siraj held up his finger. He'd explain everything. In a moment.

Yasmin shook her head. “No. I...I dreamed of him. That dream I had the other night. When I came to you.”

Siraj nodded, silently urging her to continue.

"He was in my dream. With a woman. And she...she healed his wounds."

"By the gods!" Khalil stepped around Siraj. Yasmin once again cowered away and Siraj stopped him with a hand to his chest.

"You are scaring her."

"I would not hurt your princess, Siraj, you know that."

"I saw you," Yasmin said, her voice barely above a whisper. She moved in closer to Siraj's chest. He lifted his other arm and wrapped it around her shoulders. "You were with a woman. She was demanding that you...that you—"

"I know what she demanded," Khalil growled, narrowing his eyes.

"She saw me. In my dream. She looked right at me and smiled while you both were... It doesn't matter. But she said as she'd given you life, so too did you give her a life."

"What does that mean?" The Falcon sighed deeply and scowled, making the three scars on the side of his face seem all the deeper.

"I don't know. I am sorry. She told me she created me," Yasmin replied. "And she called my name." Yasmin tucked her arms into Siraj's chest, as if she were cold.

Khalil's countenance softened. "No, princess, I am sorry, for frightening you. The woman you saw in your dream was called Mother. She was the witch who killed my brother and scarred me. She tricked me into saving my own life so that she could...be with me. But the hag is dead now, you do not need to be frightened any longer."

A rock seemed to settle in the pit of Siraj's stomach. Yasmin had never told him exactly what she'd dreamt, but now that he knew, he glanced back up at the Falcon in disbelief.

"What is it?" Khalil asked, placing his hand on Siraj's shoulder.

"God of Jackals, it all makes sense. How could we not have seen it before?"

"Siraj?" Yasmin's voice got his attention and he kissed her forehead.

"Yas, I think I know what your dream means. I might even know what the spirit is that haunts you!" He took a deep breath to collect his thoughts. "That witch didn't just trick Khalil into saving his own life." Siraj glanced at the Falcon. "She tricked you into *fathering* one as well."

Siraj's gaze once again caught Yasmin's. "It's the witch who's been haunting you, Yas. She's the reason why you have such strong magics. *She* is the reason you never knew your parents. *She is your mother.*"

Khalil's eyes widened as dead silence descended upon the dunes. For long, uncomfortable seconds, no one dared move.

"Mount up," the Falcon suddenly exclaimed, his voice gruff and his eyes glassy. "Let's go back to my oasis and straighten this out. Perhaps Zara can make sense of this madness. *Gods above* if that witch wasn't already

dead, I'd kill her again!"

Siraj helped his wife astride the one horse Khalil had brought to rescue Yasmin. Without hesitation, Siraj leapt up to sit behind her. She leaned into him, trembling from head to toe. All he could do to comfort her was kiss her temple and whisper that everything would be all right.

Perhaps it was an empty promise. But it was the only one he could give her.

Eighteen

Yasmin recognized the tall cliffs that surrounded the Falcon's oasis from the summers she'd spent in his aeries as a falcon herself. His waters shone, reflecting the sun's light with tiny points of gold. Trees and grasses grew near the water's edge and his birds flew here and there, lending their beauty to the scene before her.

Khalil's caravan sat in a line near the water, and his people enjoyed the day in their lovely green robes. A few of them turned to watch their approach.

Despite the beauty of the water, Yasmin's stomach roiled. Siraj's conclusions about her conception seemed sound. Was the Falcon Prince was her father?

Yasmin stole a glance at him. Despite the three claw-like scars that marred his face, the Falcon was a handsome man, with wavy brown hair tucked behind his ears. His eyes were deep and dark, but now, his countenance was stony, as if he didn't want to believe the truth of her birth.

Yasmin released a shuddering breath and rejoiced when Siraj's arms tightened around her waist. His strength never ceased to amaze her. She knew she wouldn't be able to survive this ordeal on her own. She drew her strength from her husband.

It was still hard for her to believe. She was married to Siraj—the Jackal Princess of the Golden Desert. Yasmin's fingers traced the golden Jackal armband she wore and sank deeper into Siraj's embrace.

"No matter what happens, nothing will change my feelings for you," Siraj said, his mouth right next to her ear. "I will never regret my decision to make you my wife."

Yasmin half-turned to face him on the horse and bit her lip. "Even if I am the daughter of a witch?"

Siraj nodded slowly gazing deeply into her eyes. His honesty reached within her and squeezed her heart. "Yas, she is not you, I want you to remember that. She might have given you her power, but that is where the resemblance ends."

"Gods!" she exclaimed, her eyes misting. "I don't know what to

believe anymore. I feel like...I'm already losing my grip on reality."

"Believe in me," Siraj whispered, kissing her cheek. "Believe that I love you. Hold on to me if you feel yourself slipping. I will never let you go."

He squeezed her, as if to make his point.

"I need you to claim me before our god." Yasmin cradled Siraj's face with her palm.

He nodded again. "Soon, I promise," he replied. "We must endure the hospitality of the Falcon's caravan first."

They came so a stop near the caravan line and dismounted. Khalil's men took the horses away while a woman bearing the Falcon armband approached them. She was dressed in a fine silk robe in the deepest green that shimmered in the light as she walked. Her dark hair ruffled in the breeze, and her smile lit up her lovely face.

"Siraj!" she called out, raising her hand. "What are you doing here?" The moment she reached them, she embraced Siraj with a grin. "Is this your princess?"

The woman extended her hand in greeting, but the Falcon gently pushed his wife's hand away before Yasmin could take it.

"I do not want you to touch her, Zara," Khalil said, his face grave. Siraj's eyes narrowed until the Falcon turned and amended himself. "I don't want her to touch Yasmin *here*. Zara has a keen sense of perception when she touches someone. I wish to be in my carav before any truths are revealed."

Zara looked back and forth between her husband and Yasmin. "Your colors are swirling brown. What is going on, Khalil?"

"Come," he said, beckoning them to follow.

Siraj took Yasmin's hand and walked with her to the Falcon's carav.

"Where is Akim?" Khalil asked.

"Playing by the oasis with Aziz," Zara answered.

"Good. He doesn't need to witness this."

Yasmin glanced at Siraj. "Akim is their son," he told her. "He's about twelve years old now. A good kid. He will make an excellent Falcon Prince when his time comes."

Her eyes widened. Did she have a brother? Yasmin stumbled her way up the steps into Khalil's carriage.

"You'd best tell me what this is all about, Khalil," Zara demanded, putting her hands on her hips just as the Falcon closed the door. "I'd hate to think you were deliberately rude to the Jackal Princess!"

Khalil made a sour face. "Of course I'm not trying to be deliberately rude!" he exclaimed. "I need you to touch her now, Zara, and tell me what you see."

The Falcon Princess arched a brow but didn't move other than to cross her arms on her chest.

Khalil growled low in his throat. "Trust me," he said, his voice

calmer. "I couldn't risk your reaction in front of our people."

Zara took a deep breath and sighed. Without a word, she crossed the carav and stood in front of Yasmin. "It's all right. My name is Zara. It is nice to finally meet the woman Siraj has been searching for most of his adult life."

Yasmin blushed and glanced at her husband. He gave her a heart-stopping grin. That grin had the power to fill her with a confidence she didn't feel a moment ago.

"This won't hurt at all, Yasmin," Zara said. "Give me your hand."

It shook in the air, but Yasmin extended her hand regardless. Zara took it gently and gasped. She closed her eyes and her grip became firm.

"Gods above..." Zara's voice trailed off. Her eyes snapped open and she gazed at Yasmin with a look of shock.

"What do you see?" Khalil asked, stepping closer.

"It can't be possible." Zara's eyes caught Siraj's. "It can't be."

Siraj pulled Yasmin back into his embrace. She didn't fight him.

"What did you see?" Khalil asked again, frustrated.

"Her colors are an exact match to yours," Zara told him in awe. "I've only seen that once before—with Akim."

Yasmin felt as if she was going to be sick. Her stomach twisted within her.

Khalil ran his fingers through his hair and tugged hard. "Siraj was right. By the ancestors, he was right!"

"Yasmin is your daughter, Khalil." Zara's face went white. "And that means her mother was... Oh, sweet god of Falcons!"

Yasmin turned into Siraj's chest and hid her face. She couldn't bear the scrutiny any longer. Silent emotions poured out of her as she clutched onto him—fear, uncertainty and pain. She knew Siraj could feel her emotions through their magical bond, but his strong arms held her firmly against him.

"Mother's ghost is haunting my wife," Siraj said. His deep voice reverberated throughout her body, calming her somewhat. "That ghost has already destroyed four of my caravs. We must find a way to kill it."

Zara licked her lips and cleared her throat. "Siraj," she began. "I don't believe there *is* a ghost."

His confusion and disbelief filled Yasmin's heart. "You're wrong. I've seen it myself. It stole her from our wedding on a spectacular whirlwind. And it...somehow brought me across the dunes in the same manner. I've experienced it myself!"

Yasmin watched out of the corner of her eye as Zara shook her head and trembled like a leaf. "No, Siraj. That wasn't a ghost you experienced."

"Then enlighten me!" he cried, his anger snapping.

Zara took a deep breath, as if she didn't wish to reveal the words she was about to say. "Yasmin's magics, they are twisting her. They are manifesting like a spirit, but these events are not spiritual in nature. I am sorry Jackal, but... Yasmin is going insane."

Nineteen

“No!”

Yasmin collapsed completely against Siraj, forcing him to hold her up. But the strength in his arms assured he would not drop her. He stared at Zara in disbelief, feeling the denial of what she’d just spoken well up within him.

It couldn’t be true. He would not believe it. Yasmin’s mind was sound. He knew it for a fact. She was lucid and conscious and had no knowledge of casting such powerful magic. How could she be losing herself so completely? It didn’t make sense.

No one spoke. The only sound came from Yasmin, who shuddered against him from head to toe.

“You are wrong,” he finally said, his voice soft, yet booming in the silence.

“Zara is never wrong, Siraj,” Khalil replied. “As sure as Yasmin is my daughter, she is losing her mind.”

Siraj’s eyes stung as he clutched onto his wife, practically crushing her in an effort to keep her close, to protect her somehow from the cruel truth.

“If that is true,” Siraj said, his world reeling, “then she is a natural born princess of the Golden Desert. It doesn’t matter if she is legitimate or not. My own brother is illegitimate and my caravan regards him as a prince, even though he can never inherit my crown. Therefore as your daughter, she has the protection of the god of Falcons. As my wife, she is protected by the god of Jackals. There must be a way to stop this!”

“Other than prayer, I do not know what that might be,” Khalil answered, placing his hand on Siraj’s shoulder.

The Jackal swallowed hard. “I need...to be alone with Yasmin. This is too much for her to take in. I cannot be a part of any feast you might have planned, regardless of tradition. We haven’t...I haven’t...she was taken from me before we...could...”

“On the far side of the oasis,” Zara offered, sparing him from further

embarrassment, “there is a small clearing surrounded on one side by trees and on the other by the cliffs. We will make certain no one finds you. If you wish, you may rest there tonight and meet us again in the morning.”

Siraj glanced to Khalil, who walked to the door. “Come. I will escort you there. I’m sure you have much to discuss with your princess. But we have much to discuss as well, Jackal.”

The Falcon’s intense gaze burned into him. Siraj nodded. “We will return in the morning to make sense of this madness.”

Satisfied, Khalil spun on his heel and bounded out of his carav. Siraj walked with his arm around Yasmin’s shoulder. She followed dutifully, her face turned toward the sand.

~ * ~

Walking around the Falcon’s oasis took the better part of fifteen minutes, but Yasmin didn’t notice. She was numb, planting one foot in front of the other. Siraj was leading her, somehow knowing she needed him to do so. Despite the lush foliage and the wildlife that lived in the trees, Yasmin saw none of it.

She knew she’d one day go insane. But she had no idea that day had already come. What did she do now? What hope did they possibly have to save her from her fate?

Siraj and Khalil said their goodbyes once they reached the clearing, but Yasmin wasn’t listening to their words. She glanced up at the cliffs and took a deep breath, remembering the two summers she spent perched among them. She hadn’t had the courage to confront the Falcon as a child. She’d hoped she could find out why she heard him when he called to his birds.

Now she knew. She was his daughter. It all made sense.

Warm arms surrounded her from behind, urging her back into their warmth. Siraj was such a handsome, loving man, and he’d foolishly shackled himself to her in marriage. She should have been more adamant against it. She should have refused. But when he began kissing her neck, she forgot about refusing him and melted in his embrace.

Suddenly, Siraj’s cleansing magic pulsed through her, erasing the grit of the desert from her skin. He’d cleansed himself as well, and the clean scent of his clea blossom filled the air.

“It makes sense,” she whispered, turning her head to allow his kisses. “When you married me, I was thinking about how I needed to get away from your caravan. I had thought the...the ghost would destroy it. My magic must have lashed out and taken me away from you.”

Siraj’s arms tightened and he sighed, leaning his forehead on her shoulder. “I will not allow you to go mad. I will not lose you again.”

“And when I was alone on the dunes,” she said, continuing as if he hadn’t spoken. “I was frightened. I called your name. I needed to be with you. So my magic brought you to me.”

“Yas,” Siraj replied. “I will not let you succumb.”

“You can’t stop it.”

“Watch me.”

“I must leave you.”

Siraj spun her in his arms so fast, she gasped in surprise. “You will not!” His eyes shot sparks and her breath caught in the back of her throat. He must have seen the fear in her eyes, for his countenance softened.

“You will not,” he repeated, softer. “Yas, I’ve been looking for you for years. I’ve known you could do the ancient magics since we were children. I’ve always known what that might mean. But I’m not afraid to face it. You were given to me. I intend on keeping you.”

She looked down, unable to hold his eye contact. The man never ceased to amaze her with the things he said. Her heart burst with love for him. But he could be putting himself and his people in harms way.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said, lifting her chin with his finger. Once she gazed into his eyes, Siraj held her face gingerly between his palms. She saw the truth written on his face. The magic that drew them together had probably told him everything in her heart.

“What are we going to do?” she asked, biting her lip.

“We are going to take things one day at a time. We are going to pray for guidance.” He gave her a sexy, mischievous grin. “And we are going to make love.”

Yasmin’s heart skipped a beat and her entire body flared to life. She needed to rub against him, needed to feel his cock deep within her. She needed his mouth on her breasts and his skin sliding on hers.

With shaking hands, she touched his chest, only to inch higher and embrace his neck. “Siraj?” she asked. Her fingers toyed with the hair on the nape of his neck. He shivered and her pussy responded with a rush of wetness.

“What?” His breath tickled her skin.

“I love you.”

He took a deep breath and kissed her lightly on the lips. “I know.” With those words came his passion. His mouth returned to hers, crushing her lips and demanding entrance for his tongue. Yasmin stood on her toes and allowed him in.

Siraj’s hands wandered to her ass where he squeezed her closer against him. Yasmin moaned with pleasure and held the back of his head, determined never to let him go.

“I am going to burst if I don’t get inside you,” he said, gasping against her lips.

Yasmin found her courage in his desperation. Without a word, she slipped her hand into his undergarments and took hold of his cock. He leapt away from her in surprise, but couldn’t get too far. She smiled at him and stroked his length, reveling in the feeling of having him in the palm of her hand.

“What are you—?”

“Shh,” she interrupted.

“Yas...” Siraj’s voice trailed off as he stood there, letting her touch him. His eyes were shut and he gently thrust his hips a few times.

“Be quiet, Siraj,” she replied. “Let me love you like you loved me.”

Before he could protest, she knelt in the grass and loosened his belt wrap. With a few sharp tugs, his undergarments fell to his ankles and he sucked in his breath. She grasped him and looked up, only to see he was now staring at her.

Holding his gaze, Yasmin opened her mouth and took him inside, swirling her tongue on his sensitive skin. Gods, but he tasted divine, salty and warm and distinctly Siraj. His fingers dug into her hair at the very moment he groaned loudly. Yasmin’s nipples hardened, but she didn’t stop.

Again and again, she took him in her mouth, pressing deeper with each thrust. Siraj’s sighs of encouragement spurred her on and she cupped his balls. Taking his cock in her hand, she continued to stroke him while she licked his sack, gently running her tongue along his male skin.

“Stop!” he cried, startling her. She looked back up into his face. His passion now raged out of control. Excitement shot through her like a burst of electricity.

He bent low, grabbing her under her arms. She only had a moment to marvel at his magical strength before he walked her back against the sheer cliff face behind them. Without repentance, he held her against the wall with his body and dove his hand into her undergarments.

The moment his fingers slid between her pussy lips and rubbed her clit, Yasmin cried out in ecstasy. He silenced her with his mouth. He kissed her for so long, she had no idea when she’d last taken a breath.

“You will come first,” he growled, pulling away. “I command it.”

More cream coated her pussy at his words, and his fingers plunged into her. Siraj lifted her foot against a nearby rock and continued plunging his fingers into her, making her ride his hand, back and forth.

“You are so wet, so hot,” he whispered into her hair, thrusting with her. “So beautiful. Gods, Yasmin, come for me. My sweet wife.”

She brought his lips back to hers and did just that. With his tongue conquering her mouth and his hand claiming her pussy, she released, shuddering against him with tears wetting her eyes.

I love you. I love you, Siraj, she thought over and over again. Her husband peeled her from the cliff face and laid her gently in the grass near the trees. With the hum of insects in the bushes and the call of the birds above them, she sighed and ran her fingers through the Jackal’s hair. Suddenly, she heard a phantom voice in her head.

I love you, too, Yas.

Startled, she gazed into Siraj’s face only to see him smiling at her and cocking a brow. She smiled back. Their bond had grown stronger.

Now he was gentle, opening her robes with an unparalleled patience, pulling down her undergarments and revealing her breasts one at a time. When his mouth took a nipple deep inside, Yasmin bit her lip at the sensations. His tongue rolled it before taking it in his teeth and gently tugging. He made love to her with his mouth alone, plunging her breast into his mouth over and over.

His legs straddled her thigh and Siraj pressed forward, digging his cock into her skin. Yasmin held him to her, trying hard not to pierce his skin with her fingernails. But it was nearly impossible to do so when his mouth took her other breast and his hand cupped her pussy once more.

Her body convulsed at the shock of his finger on her clit after having already come so powerfully. But he was gentle. Lifting his face, he traced kisses along her collarbone and up her neck, crawling over her body to finally rest between her legs.

Neither one of them had fully shed their robes, but Yasmin didn't care. All she wanted was the man she loved rocking inside her body, demanding her pleasure.

"Take me, Jackal," she whispered, lifting her hips just enough to feel the tip of his cock against her pussy. "I want to be your wife in every way."

He didn't say a word. Holding her eyes, he slid inside her, advancing slowly, until he was finally, gloriously rooted within her. She pushed against him until he pulled out and plunged again. And again.

More so than when they'd made love before, this time was a deeper connection—of their souls, not just their bodies. The intense connection touched her, just as Siraj was touching her. Caressing his arms, she undulated with him.

Her hands wanted to caress every inch of his marvelous body. She let her hands roam under his robe to his belly and his waist, where she rounded his ass and cupped him, urging his deep, wondrous plunges.

Siraj lowered his head and kissed her, but unlike the hurried passionate kisses from before, this kiss was one of love, one of surrender. Yasmin followed his tongue with her own while her hands returned to his hair. Siraj never let her lips go, but his kiss grew more forceful, more demanding. She met him kiss for kiss, increasing her rhythm to keep up with his plunging hips.

Suddenly, powerfully, Siraj came, and his cock surged in her pussy, pressing as deep as he could go. He held her hips steady to take him, and Yasmin couldn't help but continue to undulate, to experience the fullness of him deep inside her. Another orgasm crashed over her and she cried her pleasure into his mouth as their tongues tangled. Gods, he could make her come just by touching her where no other man ever had.

After his groans and her cries of completion had passed, Siraj lifted his head and kissed her face everywhere, but stayed within her warmth. "Now you are completely mine, Yasmin Pramtash," he whispered.

She hugged him, unable to speak without fear of sobbing. Not only did she wrap her arms around his neck, but she also wrapped her legs around his waist. She wanted, needed, to be as close as she possibly could. Her husband stayed right where he was and rested his head on her shoulder with his breath hot on her skin.

Siraj had finally claimed her before his god. Now, truly, no one could dispute that she was the Jackal Princess of the Golden Desert.

Twenty

“I have a daughter.”

Khalil paced the length of his carav for the hundredth time, scrubbing his face with his hands. Of all the things he’d prepared himself for after he’d slept with the witch to heal his wounds over twenty years ago, he’d never considered a pregnancy from their union.

He’d been blinded by agony, willing to do anything Mother commanded in order to be healed, and he hadn’t even remembered what he’d done with her for a decade afterward. The magic she’d wielded to heal him had also made him forget. That likely seemed a part of her plan now, as she wouldn’t have wanted him to discover her secret.

He would have returned to claim his daughter, a natural born princess. The baby wouldn’t have been legitimate, but he wouldn’t have cared. Khalil would never leave his child in the hands of a monster.

Even now, he had no idea what Mother did with Yasmin after she was born. Just the thought sent icy tendrils of fear down his spine.

Zara watched him pace from her seat among the pillows. She’d been silent for the most part, but she had to be just as shocked as he was to find he’d fathered a baby with that vile woman.

“I have a daughter,” he repeated, this time tugging his fingers through his unruly hair.

“Khalil, you couldn’t have known.”

Zara’s voice cut through his panic. He stopped pacing to gaze at her. His stomach churned and his eyes stung. The scenes Mother had revealed to Zara those years ago had horrified his wife. Even now, she woke to dreams that set her heart racing. She never spoke of it, but through the power of the falcon ring she’d made for him, he could see the colors of her fear and disgust flowing through his mind.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, hanging his head in shame. “I’m so sorry.”

Instantly she was on her feet and standing before him. She took his hands in hers and brought them to her mouth. “I have never blamed you for lying with Mother,” she said. “This is difficult to accept, but it does nothing

to change the love I have for you, Khalil Dehriq.”

He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. “How can you be so accepting?” he asked.

“Because my love is unconditional,” she answered. “You have asked me the same question regarding your scars, and also when I found out how you’d survived them. Why would I be swayed now? If you have a daughter, she is a part of you. And I will embrace that. She is not Mother’s daughter. The witch is dead. Therefore, she is my daughter as well as yours. We will get through this.”

Khalil pulled her into his embrace and held on tight. He had no idea how he’d managed to live before he’d met this woman. As far as he was concerned, the sun rose and set in his princess.

“We have a daughter, Khalil,” she whispered in his ear.

He shuddered and squeezed harder. “Gods, and she’s married to Siraj.”

“Can you think of a better husband for her to have? The Jackal is loyal and caring and his heart bursts with love for her.”

“But she’s going insane, Zara,” he reasoned, pulling back to look into her eyes. “She will grow old before her time. There is only one thing that can save her—the very same thing that saved Mother every ten years.”

Zara gasped, probably seeing his colors of concern in her head. “You think she would kill Siraj? You think he’s in danger?”

“I think we’re all in danger,” he said, his voice low. “To restore her mind, Yasmin will have to make a blood sacrifice from a royal house.”

“We can’t let that happen. We must do something!”

“I am not sure anything can be done. Don’t you think Mother would have found a way if it was possible?” His wife stiffened in his arms.

“We cannot give up on her. I refuse to.”

Khalil finally let Zara go to resume his pacing. “Then what do you propose? What can we possibly do?”

After a few moments of silence, Zara spoke once more. “I still have a piece of wood from the glade Amani magically created years ago. It was infused with her magic, but also with Ziyad’s, since she’d been wearing the spider ring I’d made for her. And the Spider’s magic is—”

“Protection,” he said, interrupting her.

“Yes. If I can make her something from that wood, a pendent perhaps, it might be enough to keep her insanity at bay.”

“Ziyad’s magic is not as strong in that wood as it is in Amani’s spider ring,” Khalil reminded her.

“It is all that we have.” Zara bit her lip. “I don’t know what else to do.”

He sighed. “Do it. The sooner the better. Her magic could lash out at any time.”

Zara nodded and scurried to the small chest she kept in the corner of

the carav. She'd have her trinket carved in a few hours at best. She worked her magic to make her jewelry, and that allowed her to carve her pieces in a fraction of the time it would take a normal jeweler.

The question was, would it be soon enough? Khalil tugged his hair once more and silently prayed to the god of Falcons *and* the god of Jackals. Surely Yasmin deserved their combined protection. Perhaps even the protection of the god of Spiders for having a trinket infused with Ziyad's power.

Khalil knew he was grasping at cattails. But there was no other option to save the life of his daughter.

~ * ~

"Something is wrong, Siraj."

Yasmin lay halfway on her husband's chest for the past hour, and found comfort in his regular heartbeat. Their lovemaking had allowed her to let go of her fears for a little while and lose herself in Siraj's arms. But now, it felt as if a weight had settled on her chest, slowly crushing the breath from her lungs.

Siraj's fingers stopped combing through her hair. "What do you mean?" he asked. His deep voice always seemed to resonate through her body. Now, however, it seemed so far away, as if he was calling to her from across the dunes.

Yasmin sat up and gazed down on him. It was hard to focus. Siraj's sharp intake of breath quickened her heart and it was all she could do not to panic at the look in his eyes.

"Yas," he exclaimed. "By the gods... You have aged! How is that possible?"

Lifting trembling hands, Yasmin felt for herself the wrinkles on her face. Siraj sat up as well, holding a lock of her hair. Before their eyes, it turned gray, as if Yasmin was a much older woman.

"What is happening to me?" she said as tears welled in her eyes. "I don't feel well." The glade spun all around her. She groaned and closed her eyes.

"You are burning up. We must get you back to the Falcon's caravan."

A sudden, unexplainable lust overcame her and her mouth practically watered at the thought of sex.

You must fuck him.

Yasmin gasped at the sound of a phantom voice in her head. Where had it come from? She didn't care. Gods, she needed Siraj plunging inside her. Right now.

The need in her body was more like an instinct, and she straddled Siraj's legs with ease.

"Yasmin, what are you doing?" he asked, confused.

"I need you," she replied, her voice raspy. "I need your cock."

“You are not well. We must get you...back to...*gods*.” Yasmin thrust her wet pussy against him, arousing him once more. “Yasmin, you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Yes I do,” she said, holding Siraj’s hands to the ground above his head.

Fuck him, the voice whispered again. A sudden breeze picked up within the glade, ruffling her hair. Yasmin’s pussy ached. She needed to ride his dick. His emotions flooded her mind. He was confused and frightened, but more than that, his lust had flared, and Yasmin’s need grew along with his cock.

Yasmin didn’t want to go back to the Falcon’s caravan. Not now. Not yet. They could go later.

“You are not in your right mind. You are not feeling well,” Siraj said, easily breaking free of her hands.

Siraj’s resistance sparked her anger. He wanted her, she knew he did. Then why didn’t he impale her pussy?

With a pulse of her magic, Yasmin pushed him back into the grass, this time holding his hands with her power. “Fill me, Jackal,” she commanded. “Now. Right now.”

Yasmin watched with satisfaction as Siraj’s eyes glazed over. He couldn’t touch her with his hands bound above him, but she knew the moment of his acquiescence. The cool breeze stiffened his nipples and she leaned down to lick them, one by one.

Siraj surged against her, searching for her warmth. Yasmin sat back and took his cock to the hilt without pausing to savor the moment. Up and down she thrust, riding him, demanding he keep time with her. He did.

Yasmin threw her head back and cried out, unable to stop herself from grinding her hips into his. Her pleasure built inside of her with each plunge until it finally released and thundered down her arms and legs, exploding outward. The palm trees around them swayed back and forth, but Yasmin didn’t care. She needed more. *More*.

“Fuck me, Siraj,” she demanded, never stopping her thrusts. “Make me come again!”

The sound of skin slapping skin filled the glade, and Yasmin turned wild. With the pleasure of her first orgasm still buzzing through her, she strained for another, growling deeply every time Siraj’s cock sank deep into her pussy.

Her husband shouted his own release and once more, Yasmin shuddered with ecstasy, screaming and tearing at his chest with her fingernails. She couldn’t stop herself. Her hips bucked despite her lucidity returning, despite knowing what she was doing was wrong.

Her magic had bound Siraj, and he only obeyed her because she commanded it. Gods, what was she doing?

Kill him.

That whisper in her head made her cry in shock. Instantly, her eyes burned and horror overtook her. With one look at Siraj, Yasmin knew her magical bonds no longer held his hands.

"No!" she shouted, leaping off him. She scrambled to the cliff face and pressed her body against it.

"Yas," he exclaimed as he stumbled to his feet.

"No, stay away. What have I done?"

"Yasmin, stop, please." He shook his head a few times, as if to clear it. "You're not well."

She backed away from him, along the wall. "I can't, Siraj. I will hurt you!"

"Come with me, baby. The Falcon and I can help you. We'll find a way—"

"No!" she yelled, holding up her hand. Siraj stopped advancing. "I just made you make love to me. How could I do that? *How could I do that?*"

"You are not thinking clearly. I need you to come with me back to the caravan."

Yasmin released a desperate sob. What was happening to her? She brutally ran her fingers through her hair, making herself wince with pain. "You must stay away from me," she said with a moan. "The voice in my head...it told me to kill you!"

He seemed taken aback, but he didn't flee her. After his shock had passed, he softened his countenance. "You are my princess, Yasmin. I am not leaving you."

"But you must." Her voice cracked just as her knees buckled. Instantly, Siraj was there, taking her into his arms. She tried to push him away, but it was futile. Her magic was gone and he was too strong. Instead, she collapsed against him. "Forgive me," she sobbed, finally succumbing to his embrace. "Forgive me, please. Gods, Siraj, I'm losing my mind!"

"Never apologize for making love to me," he cooed in her ear. "I enjoyed it."

"But I made you do it..."

"Shh, now. I've got you, Yas."

The ground was gone as he stood with her in his arms. He brought her to their robes and helped her push her arms through her sleeves while dressing himself as well. She was so exhausted. She wanted nothing more than to curl into a ball and wither into the grass.

Again she found herself in Siraj's arms. He walked back to the Falcon's caravan just as she laid her head on his shoulder.

"Don't let me hurt you," she whispered, holding on to his neck.

Siraj kissed her forehead and nodded. He didn't say a word, but she could see his worry and concern as plain as day. He had no idea how to save her. And the fact she'd been able to bow him to her will scared her to the bone.

The voice in her head told her to kill him. Her own shock had been what pulled her out of her trance. But how much longer would it be before she could no longer resist?

The thought made her clutch onto Siraj all the tighter. How could she continue to exist if she murdered the man she loved?

God of Jackals, she silently prayed. *Please kill me before I kill him!*

Twenty One

The sun had just set over the dunes when Siraj pounded his fist against the door of the Falcon's royal carav. Khalil himself ripped it open, gazing down at him with a look of shock.

"Please, we need your help." Siraj was beyond caring how desperate he sounded or how fast his heart raced with fear for the woman he loved. Yasmin had begun shaking and moaning, and it was all Siraj could do to keep his tears at bay. He didn't know what to do—he could only pray Khalil knew of some solution.

"What happened?" the Falcon asked, ushering them inside. Khalil couldn't have missed the curious looks from his people, but he closed the door without paying them any heed.

"She...she lost herself—lost hold of reality down in the glade. I don't know what to do. It's as if she's aging, Khalil."

The older prince brought him to a mound of colorful pillows. "Lay her down."

Siraj knelt, but Yasmin wouldn't let go of his robes. "It's all right, Yas," he said, keeping his voice low and even. He smiled for good measure. "We are with the Falcon. I am not leaving you. I want you to be warm. See?" He held up a few green blankets and she relaxed, giving him a nod.

Looking into her face made Siraj bite his lip to keep from sniffing. She seemed older now than she had at the glade, and her hair was heavily streaked with gray.

"I am freezing," she said. Even her voice sounded old. "And tired. So very tired."

Before he could stand once more, Yasmin grasped his hand and kissed the back of it. She didn't say anything, but her thoughts were suddenly revealed to him. She was fatigued. She loved him. And she was frightened to the depths of her soul.

"I will save you, Yas," he whispered, allowing one tear to flow down his cheek. "I promise you that, as the Jackal Prince."

Her eyes fluttered closed and he stood to face Khalil. He wiped his cheek and glanced around the room. "Where is Zara?"

“She is in another carav, where she makes her jewelry,” the Falcon answered. “She believes she can make Yasmin a pendant from the wood Amani created those years ago. It has remnants of Ziyad’s power. Perhaps it can protect Yasmin from her own magics.”

“Do you believe it will work?” Siraj asked, daring to hope.

Khalil let out a sigh and glanced at Yasmin resting near Siraj’s feet. “I don’t know. Ziyad’s magic isn’t as powerful in that wood. It will not protect her like Amani’s spider ring. But it is better than nothing.”

“What else can we do? There’s got to be something.”

Khalil took hold of Siraj’s shoulder and led him away from Yasmin, keeping his voice low. “I know this isn’t what you want to hear,” he began, clearing his throat. “But Yasmin is the daughter of that witch. And her insanity is manifesting just like Mother’s once did.”

“You mean the fact that she’s growing older.”

“I mean everything.” Khalil shook his head. “Siraj, Mother grew old every ten years. She needed to *kill* to regain not only her youth, but her lucidity.”

Siraj’s eyes widened as the Falcon’s words sank in. “Yas told me at the glade... She...heard a voice in her head. It told her to kill me. She was terrified she’d hurt me!”

Khalil nodded. “Yes. She cannot just kill anyone. She must make a blood sacrifice from a royal house. I know first hand what this magic does to a person, Jackal. I bear the scars to prove it.”

“No, I will not accept that.” Siraj’s fear was now turning into rage, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. “She would never kill me!”

“Think, man!” Khalil exclaimed, taking hold of Siraj’s shoulders and shaking him. “Your wife is going insane. You’ll be lucky if she recognizes you when she awakens. There is no guarantee that she will spare your life if she hears that voice again. Mother never could resist her own insanity.”

“She is my princess,” Siraj replied. “Surely that holds weight with the gods. Surely my god won’t let her go mad.”

“That, my friend, is the only true hope you have. It is the only thing I’ve found that can counter such powerful magic. Whenever Mother bound me with her power, my prayers to the god of Falcons were what broke those bonds. Pray with her. Pray *for* her. And pray for yourself, Jackal. The fate of your caravan is at stake.”

Siraj shivered from head to toe and glanced over his shoulder. Yasmin finally slept, but the woman before him no longer resembled the woman he’d married.

The weight of his dilemma finally crashed down on his shoulders. With a cry, Siraj doubled over and tried in vain to catch his breath. “Gods give me strength!”

~ * ~

Yasmin cracked her eyes to a dark and quiet carav. She was warm

under the Falcon's blankets, and couldn't help but notice the sleek body next to hers. Siraj's breathing wasn't even enough for sleep. Concentrating on him, his thoughts of worry and fear permeated her heart. He didn't know what to do. There in the dark, he was praying. She reached out to touch him.

"Siraj." Gods. Even to her own ears her voice was ragged and rough. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," he whispered, taking her hand. She didn't believe him. His emotions raging through her head gave him away.

"Do you honestly believe prayer will save me?" She tried to rein in her own despair and bit her lip to hold back her tears.

Siraj took a deep breath and sighed, then rolled to face her. Even in the dark she could see him. His eyes betrayed his exhaustion. Their fingers tangled beneath the blankets and Yasmin attempted to pull away. He wouldn't let her.

"I am the steward of my god and you are my wife. If there is any man in the desert the god of Jackals listens to, it is me. Of course I believe prayer will help you."

Kill him.

That voice! It was hard to breathe as her terror churned inside her. "Gods!"

"What is it?"

Yasmin's hot tears fell into her hair. "The voice, I heard it again. By all that is holy, Siraj, you must leave me."

"I will not." His countenance was as hard as stone.

"You must! It was a mistake to marry me, Jackal. I am a threat to you, and to your entire house. Your god will not save me. He will smite me to save your life."

"Yas—"

"You must denounce me," she whispered, interrupting him. "In front of Falcon's caravan. You must tell one and all I am no longer your wife. I cannot keep you shackled to me when I'm so tempted to hurt you. I must leave you. I need to—"

"No!" Siraj's one word seemed to hang in the air. "Don't you *dare* say that to me again. You might be my wife, but I am your prince, Yasmin, and I *order* you never to speak such words. You are the one I have chosen. I will not cast you aside. I cannot believe you would suggest such a thing, considering how long I have searched for you."

A sob escaped her and she touched his cheek. Her withered fingers soon trailed up into his hair. "I could never live knowing I had hurt you. I love you too much!"

"Then have faith in me," he pleaded. "Have faith that I can save you, that all is not lost. I love *you* too much to lose you now."

"This madness, I can feel it," she confessed. "It's pressing on my belly like a rock, and it's going to drag me to Kaldaeron."

Siraj shook his head. “No, it won’t. Zara has made you a pendant for you to wear. I put it on you while you were sleeping.”

Yasmin looked down to where his fingers toyed with something on her chest. There lay a gorgeous jackal, carved and polished from a single piece of wood. It resembled her armband, with its head back as if baying at the moons.

“This wood is infused with the magic of the Spider and his princess. Amani’s magic is cultivating plants, but Ziyad’s magic is protection. It is our hope that it will be enough to protect you.”

She clutched his hand in her own. “What if it won’t? What if it’s not enough?”

“It will be. We must believe in the god of Jackals.”

“The god of Jackals did nothing to save your father,” she reminded him.

“My father was a tyrant,” he answered. “I’ve often wondered why the god of Jackals didn’t turn away from my father the way the Cobra turned from Jaden? I believe my god revealed to me that he is a patient god. Where the god of Cobras strikes with fury, the Jackal is patient, waiting to see what will happen. I believe he knew I would overthrow Nestor and seat myself upon the Jackal throne. Because of this, I do not believe he would turn away from the woman I love.”

Siraj caressed her face with the back of his hand. “Remember, I prayed to him every single day for years that I would find you. He would not take the mother of my heirs from my arms.”

“B-but isn’t that what happened to the S-Spider Prince?” she asked, unable to keep from trembling.

Siraj took a deep breath. “The Spider had a different path to walk than I do, Yas. His god knew of the accident that would befall his princess and provided him with another. And Ziyad loves Amani more than I’ve ever seen a man love a woman.”

Without warning, a harsh wind blew outside, whistling along the cliffs of the Falcon’s oasis. Sand pelted the carav and fear prickled down Yasmin’s spine. With a whimper, she closed her eyes and tried to stop the magic spiraling from her soul. She could feel it now, exiting her body, practically stealing her breath.

Siraj pulled her closer to him until his warm arms enfolded her. “I will not leave you,” he whispered in her ear. His love melted the ice in her veins, and the wind died down outside.

“We cannot stay here,” she said, moaning into his chest. “I will not sacrifice the Falcon’s caravan.”

Her husband smoothed her gray hair and kissed her forehead. “We’ll leave in the morning. You have my word. Can you hold on until then?”

Yasmin honestly didn’t know. With every moment that passed, her insanity churned within her. It seemed as if her skin was the only thing

keeping her body from flying into pieces.

She took a ragged breath. “That’s up to the god of Jackals.”

Twenty Two

Siraj awoke to the deafening crack of thunder booming across the sky. A fierce wind rocked the carav while rain pelted the slats, and shouts outside reached his ears. He sat up, glancing around the room in confusion. Zara and Khalil had slept in the far corner with their son, and apparently were awoken by the cacophony.

Cold dread clawed at Siraj's belly. Yasmin was gone.

"Where is your wife?" Khalil exclaimed, jumping from his own blankets.

With wide eyes, Siraj couldn't find words to speak. He touched the blankets. They were cold. Yasmin had been gone for some time. But her robes were there, as well as her Jackal armband. It was as if she'd simply disappeared into thin air.

"It never rains in the desert!" Zara cried, stating the obvious. "Unless..."

Khalil gave her a worried look before striding to the door of the carav. Yanking it open, he soon became wet as fat drops of rain drenched the front of his robes. Another flash of lightning lit the darkened sky, soon followed by a clap of thunder so loud, Siraj had to cover his ears.

"Gods!" Khalil slammed the door shut. He swallowed hard and turned to face Siraj. "There is only one explanation for this."

Siraj's heart beat wildly in his chest when he found Yasmin's pendant mixed within her robes. Wherever she'd gone, she hadn't taken her protection with her. "Khalil," he whispered. He held the necklace up for the Falcon to see.

Without waiting for his old friend to say a word, Siraj was on his feet, adjusting his own robes. "Yasmin's out there somewhere," he said, his face set. "She needs me."

Khalil stopped him before he reached the door, blocking his path. "You don't know what you'll be dealing with when you find her. She disappeared sometime in the night. For all we know, she has succumbed to her insanity. This storm is proof of that!"

As if to accentuate his words, another flash lit the carav, soon

followed by the roar of thunder.

"She needs me!" Siraj yelled again, about ready to push his friend out of his way.

"Jackal, wait!" Zara's voice pierced his anger and he turned to her. She made her way to him and took the pendant clutched in his fist. She wound the leather strap around his neck and took a step back. "If Yasmin isn't wearing it, then you should if you intend to go out there."

"You made this for her," he said.

"It's too late for that now," Khalil said, opening the door once again. "But if you insist on saving your princess, you will need to be protected from her power. I will come with you."

Siraj took a deep, shuddering breath, but nodded.

Glancing at Zara, Khalil said, "Stay here with Akim. Keep him safe."

Zara opened her mouth to say something, but a palm tree by the oasis's edge exploded with fire as a bolt of lightning struck its base. Siraj covered his eyes, momentarily blinded by the flash. The rumble of thunder rattled every bone in his body, and the smell of burning wood wafted on the wind.

"God of Falcons!" Khalil screamed, pointing. "She is on the cliffs!"

Siraj looked out through the pouring rain and saw a figure gazing down upon the water, with arms held high to the heavens. At that moment, lightning seemed to arch from her fingertips to the clouds above. The figure writhed with what looked like pain.

"Yasmin!"

Without another thought, Siraj leapt down the steps and raced across the sand. Khalil was one step behind him, yelling for him to stick to the waterline. It didn't take long before the Falcon had caught up to him and gestured for Siraj to follow him up a steep path that wound along the cliff face.

A woman's scream reached Siraj's ears and panic nearly overtook him. He needed to reach her before her magic killed her. He ignored the flames in his legs and the fire in his lungs as he chased Khalil up the cliff.

But they'd barely made it halfway up when another bolt of lightning struck the path, blocking their ascent. Bushes that had grown along the trail caught fire, keeping the men from climbing any higher. Birds screeched here and there as the fire assaulted their aeries, and Khalil's falcons took wing, flying high on the air currents.

"We must go back!" Khalil yelled against the wind.

Siraj stood his ground. "No, I will not leave her!"

"There is another way up the cliff, we must go that way. Trust me!"

The Jackal gave one more glance to the top. He couldn't see his wife, but he could feel her, and he knew without a doubt she could no longer control the magic that was releasing itself.

"Hurry, Falcon. We must hurry!"

Khalil nodded and led Siraj back down the cliff. Siraj couldn't afford to let the fear within him overcome his heart. Yasmin needed him. She needed his strength. He'd been gifted with great strength from the god of Jackals since birth. Perhaps there was more to his magical ability than merely lifting heavy objects.

"Please!" he cried to his god. "Please don't take her from me. Let me save her. *Help* me save her!"

Once they reached the bottom, Khalil rounded the cliffs and followed a different path up the backside of the rock face. Siraj refused to give in to his exhaustion. The life of his princess was at stake.

~ * ~

Ecstasy coursed through her as Yasmin released her magic. Electricity pulsed through her entire body, stiffening her nipples and buzzing her clit. Gods above, it was heavenly, standing in the pouring rain, her skin whipped by sand as she came mightily against the magic flowing through her.

Every inch of her skin crackled and she tossed her head back, staring up to the heavens and letting her power flow into the sky. Somewhere in her befuddled brain, she knew if she let her magic go where it would, the Falcon's entire caravan would be destroyed. She couldn't allow that to happen.

But the more energy she released, the more her body succumbed to the intense rapture. Never in her life did she imagine her orgasms could be quite so vigorous or long-lasting. Even now, she gasped against her pleasure that plundered on and on, heightened every time another wave of magic escaped from her fingertips.

Thunder crashed all around her, but that was nothing compared to her own screams of passion. It was too much, she couldn't take it. Her pleasure continued to crest, bringing her to the point of pain. But she couldn't stop it, couldn't keep herself from coming over and over again.

Her body writhed as she tried to get away, but there was nowhere to go. This is what the god of Jackals had told her to do, but now that she had begun, she couldn't stop.

Had the god of Jackals really spoken to her in the night? Or had she merely been delirious? The urge to kill Siraj had once again risen to the fore and she'd had to work hard to hold on to her sanity. She'd even raised her hand to his chest to stop his heart. But a masculine voice had spoken in her head before she'd surrendered to her urge. It was different than the voice of her insanity, booming through her much like the thunderclaps that now roared across the sky.

It had told her to flash to the cliff top. It had told her to cast into the sky. It had told her to fling all her magic away from herself.

Another wave of pleasure rippled through her and Yasmin gasped, standing on her toes and thrusting her hips to experience it fully. But it was

hard to keep her footing, and soon, she fell to the ground, arching her back and crying out to the heavens.

Her hand wandered to her clit, but the moment her fingers touched herself, she cried out in agony at the burning fire.

Cast to the sky! the voice shouted once more. *Look for my light. You are almost ready.*

With a shriek and a few hot tears in her eyes, Yasmin once again focused her power on the sky and sobbed as more pleasure-pain coursed through her, zinging down her arms and legs, forcing her to come once more.

“God of Jackals!” she yelled against the wind. “Help me!”

Without warning, a beam of blinding white light shot down from the clouds, surrounding Yasmin on the ground. In that instant, peace flowed into her, silence surrounded her, and her body found blessed relief.

She was finally, wonderfully with her god.

Twenty Three

Siraj's breathing stopped and his heart railed painfully against his ribs at the sight before him. He'd reached the top of the cliffs with the Falcon only to watch helplessly as Yasmin's body was lifted into the air in a beam of light.

They were too late.

"No!" Instantly, Siraj's eyes burned. Without thinking, he dashed forward, but was tackled from behind.

"You cannot save her!" Khalil yelled into his ear. "She is gone!"

"No, get off of me. Yas. Yasmin!" Siraj struggled against the Falcon.

"If you go into that light, you will be killed yourself. The desert needs you, Jackal!"

Siraj twisted out of Khalil's grasp and sat on his knees, watching in terror as Yasmin's body jerked this way and that. She was dying. The magic in that light was tearing her apart. He was not going to sit idly by and let her go.

He took hold of the jackal pendant around his neck and sprang forward before the Falcon could stop him. Ziyad's magic would protect him, or else the god of Jackals would have to choose another prince for his steward.

Siraj had promised he would never leave Yasmin.

He meant to keep that promise—even if it killed him.

Once he entered the light, the sounds of the storm faded away. Rain no longer soaked him through, but something tugged on his robes and pushed him again and again. He could feel claws raking his skin, but they didn't draw blood, and it was all he could do to fight them off.

"Yasmin!" he exclaimed. She was too far above him, he couldn't reach her. But that didn't stop him from trying. Her body convulsed and he saw for himself the wounds she sustained from the magical claws. He seethed with fury.

"Release my princess, by the authority of the god of Jackals!" he screamed. Siraj had once witnessed the power of his god years ago when every deity of the desert had demanded retribution from the Cobra Prince. He

could only hope his influence as the Jackal's steward was enough to calm Yasmin's raging magics.

Instantly the light went out and Siraj had only a moment to be shocked before Yasmin fell to the ground. His body cushioned her fall and they both went down, crashing to the dirt in a heap. The clouds broke and the wind died down, revealing the shining golden orb of the morning sun.

But all Siraj cared about was the woman in his arms, who was bleeding all over his fine golden robe.

"No, no, no," he canted, smoothing her hair and willing her eyes to open.

"Jackal!" Khalil cried, falling to his knees next to Siraj. "I am so sorry."

Tears of frustration, pain, and horror escaped Siraj, falling onto Yasmin's lovely face. Her wounds were deep, and she even had two claw swipes on her face, which crossed over her nose, almost taking one of her amazing lavender eyes.

Unbelievably, her lids fluttered and she gasped for breath, shocking Siraj to the core.

"She lives!" the Falcon yelled. "My daughter!"

Siraj didn't spare him a glance, but from the tone of his voice, Khalil was overcome with emotion as well.

"Yas, can you look at me?" Siraj bit his lip and prayed he hadn't just seen what he wanted to see. She moaned and tossed her head, but beyond that, remained slack in his lap.

"Yasmin," he said again, his voice firmer. "Open your eyes. I order you as your prince."

Despite her wounds and her bruises, Yasmin's eyes cracked open and her gaze sought his.

"So beautiful..." she whispered through thickened lips.

"Shh, don't talk now," Siraj cooed before releasing a sob. He held her close and tucked her face into his neck. "Stay with me, baby, please. I cannot live without you."

"He said...it would be beautiful," she moaned with a sigh.

"Who?" Khalil asked.

"The Jackal."

Siraj glanced at the Falcon with an arched brow.

"Siraj." Yasmin's shaky arm reached up to cup his cheek.

"What is it, my princess?" he replied, turning his head to kiss her palm.

"I cannot hear the voices."

For the first time, Siraj realized she'd regained her youth—her body was no longer old and wrinkled, and her hair was no longer streaked with gray. But her blood pouring out upon the cliff chilled him to the bone. If they didn't stop her bleeding, she was going to die.

“Khalil, get your physician,” he ordered. The Falcon nodded and left his side. Siraj didn’t watch him go.

“Save your strength,” he told her. He let her go to take pendant from his neck. “This is yours,” he said, praying it would give her enough strength to last until Khalil returned.

But the moment the howling wooden jackal nestled between her breasts, Yasmin took a gasping breath. Her body tensed and she shuddered, making Siraj’s fear bubble up all the more.

“Be still, Yas,” he said, once again feeling panic overwhelm him. “The Falcon is bringing his physician. Hold on for me.”

She didn’t respond. Before his eyes, every one of her wounds miraculously healed themselves, leaving behind whitened scars that marred her perfect skin. Siraj’s mouth dropped open as he held her, amazed to find her blood had been cleansed from his robes as well.

One short, sharp yip grabbed Siraj’s attention and he glanced up only to see a handsome jackal seated on a rock not too far away. The animal bowed its head to him, then yipped again, as if acknowledging him.

“Siraj!” Yasmin’s voice drew his attention once more, and joy permeated his entire being. She was smiling at him, obviously no longer in pain. The only things that marred her were the scars she now had to bear.

His eyes were once again drawn to the rock, but the jackal had disappeared. One single caw, however, had Siraj looking skyward and he grinned at the large falcon circling high above them.

“The gods are smiling down on us today, Yas!” he exclaimed, bringing his gaze back to hers. Awe and wonder filled him.

“You were right,” Yasmin replied, sitting up in his lap. “You were right, Siraj. The god of Jackals did not fail us. The voices are gone!”

He couldn’t say another word. His wife’s sweet mouth was on his, kissing him so deeply, he had no idea where he stopped and she began. But he didn’t care. His relief was too great not to take advantage of her plunging tongue.

Holding her head, Siraj pressed her into his body and kissed her right back, forcing his way into her mouth and making sure she couldn’t come up for air. He wanted to become one with her and brand himself on her heart like she had been branded onto his.

But if the exuberant way she kissed him was any indication, he’d already been branded on her heart for a very long time.

“I told you I would never leave you,” he breathed through his kisses.

Yasmin pulled back and threaded her fingers through his hair before firmly embracing him. “And I promise, Siraj, that *I* will never leave *you*. I love you, my loyal prince.”

Twenty Four

“Yas, what happened up there?”

With her head tucked against her husband’s shoulder, Yasmin clutched onto his neck a little harder. Siraj had insisted on carrying her down the cliff once the Falcon had returned with his physician as well as her robes. Now that the terror in the caravan had died down, she sat with Siraj on a rock in their private glade.

Siraj had insisted on privacy, and the Falcon was inclined to give it, allowing them to disappear along the water’s edge. His caravan was to leave for Suridesh within the hour, and Yasmin had sighed with contentment. Soon, they’d leave the Falcon’s oasis and meet up with their own people in the tent city.

Yasmin took a deep breath. What *had* happened? She still wasn’t sure herself, but she *was* sure her insanity had left her. No longer did she feel it pressing down against her.

“Last night, after you’d fallen asleep, I couldn’t hold back. The voices told me to...kill you. I almost did.”

Siraj gasped and tilted her head back to look into her eyes. She could see the unspoken question on his face. She answered him before he asked it.

“I was...gods, Siraj, I was going to stop your heart.”

Tears burned her eyes but she blinked them back. Just talking about what had almost happened tore her own heart to shreds. Siraj looked as if he was about to say something, but she stopped him with a finger to his lips.

“Before I could do it, I heard another voice in my head. It was...different than the insanity.”

After a short silence, Siraj gave her a squeeze. “Go on.”

“I somehow knew it was the god of Jackals.” She searched his eyes for some sign of disbelief, but all she saw was trust and understanding. His response to her confession gave her the courage to say the rest.

“He told me I needed to flash to the cliffs. I didn’t know what that meant, but before I realized it, I was suddenly there—without my robes on. He told me to cast my insanity toward the sky, to fling it from myself. That was the only way to save my life.”

“Casting at the sky?” Siraj’s brows knit in confusion.

“It was more than that,” Yasmin explained. “I wasn’t just conjuring a storm. I...ordered my magic to release. The god of Jackals revealed that...the witch who gave birth to me used to cheat her magic by killing royalty. That’s why it returned to her every decade. But the only way to release the insanity for good is to give it an outlet and cast it out of yourself.”

Siraj was silent for a moment. “You’re saying Mother would place her insanity on her victims, and they died instead of her, but all she needed to do was to cast to the sky?”

“No, she needed to sacrifice her magic. From what I’ve heard of the witch, I don’t think she was willing to do so. She reveled in her power. I...no longer have my magic. When I was casting to the sky, I was letting my power go.”

“You no longer have magic?” Her words had shocked him. She stroked his face and gave him a smile.

“I can still feel you,” she whispered. “Our connection is intact. The god of Jackals spared us that.”

“Can you still read my thoughts?”

Yasmin concentrated and saw the image of Siraj doing nothing more than hugging her, until he began kissing her neck, making his way up her throat until he reached her mouth.

“You are hugging me, you want to kiss my neck.”

“Mmm,” he responded, giving in to his wish. Yasmin’s entire body shivered at the hot, wet slide of his mouth. “I can’t say I’m disappointed, Yas,” he said against her skin. “I don’t care if you can no longer cast. As long as you are with me, as long as you are alive, I could care less.”

Yasmin stopped his roving mouth and brought his eyes up to hers. “I am scarred now.”

“I know,” he whispered. “I don’t care about that, either.”

“But...my face—”

“Is breathtaking,” he interrupted. Now, instead of her neck, he was kissing her face, making his way along the two claw marks that began at her left eye and bridged her nose to her right cheek.

“But my body—”

“I will take your scars over your insanity,” he interrupted again. “There is only one woman for me, Yasmin, and that woman is in my arms.”

Yasmin pulled him close and held him. She didn’t know she could possibly love him more than she already did, but Siraj never ceased to make her love for him overflow.

“Can you read *my* thoughts?” she asked into his ear.

“Gods!” he exclaimed after a moment. “You want to do *that*?”

“Yes,” she answered, giving his neck a few kisses of her own.

The sound of Falcon’s horn interrupted their interlude. They needed to return to the caravan.

“As soon as we are underway,” Siraj growled, lifting her easily in his strong arms, “I will let you do what you will—to your heart’s content.”

Yasmin giggled at his tone. “Hurry, my prince. My mouth waters.”

He groaned and sprinted his way around the edge of the oasis.

~ * ~

Siraj lay naked beneath his wife, gazing at the ceiling and gasping loudly every time she took his cock into her mouth. She’d pounced on him mere moments before, practically ripping his robe in an effort to get it off.

Once they were settled in the carriage Zara crafted her jewelry in, the Falcon’s caravan departed, using what daylight that was left to travel to Suridesh. But Siraj wasn’t thinking about meeting up with his brother or his people. His entire world was focused on Yasmin’s hot mouth.

It was hard not to thrust, but he eventually stopped trying and found his rhythm against her tongue. Yasmin’s thoughts had been explicit in the glade. She’d wanted to take him into her mouth and love him like she had once before.

And gods, he decided then and there to let her have her way with him any time she wanted.

She suckled him and sheathed his cock until he felt the back of her throat. Siraj groaned loudly and thrust upward, forcing himself further into her. He wanted to hold her head, he wanted to guide her, but this was her loving. He didn’t want to take control.

“Mmm, Siraj, I’m so wet for you,” she said, catching his eye. His cock leapt. She’d shed her own robes when she’d shed his, and now, her legs straddled his thigh. Her naked pussy thrust on his skin.

Once again she took him into her mouth, all the way. Yasmin bucked her pussy, prompting Siraj to suck in his breath.

“Come here,” he growled, grabbing her shoulders. Yasmin began to protest until she understood what he wanted. He didn’t want her to stop suckling his cock—he wanted to taste her as well. He helped her to swing her leg over his head until she was on all fours above him, with his head between her thighs.

“Continue, my love,” he ordered. The moment her warmth enfolded him, he thrust his cock down her throat and entered her with his finger. With her pussy directly above his mouth, he tongued her clit, and reveled in her shudders and whimpers of pleasure.

His own pleasure built while she rode his face, thrusting her hips in time with the lashes of his tongue. And he, too, kept time with her, plunging again and again past her lips, over her tongue, until he could go no further.

His grunts seemed to fuel her lust, and every ounce of her ecstasy poured into him. He didn’t stop pounding her with his fingers, didn’t stop swirling his mouth on her clit until he surged against her, releasing his cum down her throat, and wishing to the gods he could hold her head still while he pulsed his pleasure. But Yasmin squealed and came against him as well,

coating his lips with cream, yet never once taking her mouth from his cock.

When she finally pulled back, she suckled him the entire way up his length, leaving nothing behind.

“Siraj,” she said, breathing heavily. “I never knew you’d be so delicious.”

With her scent covering him, he buried his face within her pussy once more and attacked her clit, reveling in the shocked cries she gave him.

“I want to be inside you, Yas,” he told her with a growl. “I want to sink my cock into you and never emerge.”

She crawled off of him and turned around, giving him a marvelous view of her breasts swaying heavily above him. A playful grin lit her face when she straddled his hips. “We’ll have a hard time explaining that to our people, Your Highness.”

Siraj grabbed her waist and thrust upward, finding her wet sheath easily. Yasmin tossed her head back and began moving in time with his plunges.

“That’s fine by me,” he said, grinning himself. “I’d be more than happy to rule our caravan with you riding me across the dunes.”

Yasmin rested her palms on his chest and pushed against him, increasing her tempo. “That can be arranged, Jackal.” She arched a brow.

He chuckled at her humor until she sat back on him, clearly enjoying herself, pinching her own nipples as he guided her hips up and down.

That was his last straw.

He grabbed her waist and lowered her to the floor, smiling at her look of surprise. “I want you like this,” he told her, wild with need.

Yasmin nodded once and took him in her arms, accepting him, heart and soul.

Opening her legs, Siraj thrust home, again and again. His sac slapped her pussy, making him grunt with rapture every time they connected with her sweet skin. Yasmin’s own breathing quickened, until she bit her lip and whimpered each time he pressed deep within her.

He couldn’t hold back, he had to kiss her. Their tongues tangled as well as their bodies, and it didn’t take long at all for Siraj’s second orgasm to crest. With a few cries and a sharp thrust, he shuddered, and watched with fascination as Yasmin’s own orgasm gripped her—and gripped his cock.

He tried to hold his weight above her, but she wouldn’t have it. Instead, she yanked him down and embraced him with her entire body. Her love for him flowed out of her, and he was caught up in it, unable to do anything but kiss her slowly, completely.

He had no idea how long he stayed rooted inside of her.

Twenty Five

The ride to Suridesh was long, but Yasmin didn't care. She basked in the silence and prayed every day. No longer did the voices plague her. No longer did she have the urge to take Siraj's life. And there was no doubt in her mind the god of Jackals had helped her to that end.

Now, her faith seemed to outshine Siraj's. Yasmin never thought that could be possible. She smiled often. She stayed close to her husband. And she got to know her extended family.

It was odd, thinking of the Falcon's son as her brother. Akim was a lovely young man who was very polite, but even at his age of twelve cycles, he took the mantle of being the Falcon's heir very seriously. He had the deep-set eyes of his father, but the soft, beautiful features of his mother. One day, Akim Dehriq would be a very handsome man.

The Falcon, however, wasn't quite as easy-going around her as his son had been. He seemed flustered more often than not, but Yasmin never took offense. She probably reminded him of a life he wished to forget, and because of that, she never called him Father. Nor did she call him Khalil. He was the Falcon, and despite being a princess herself, Yasmin knew she'd never be able to call him by his given name.

Zara wasn't her true mother, but that didn't stop Yasmin from wishing she were. The Falcon Princess was friendly and genuine, and seemingly determined to make their new relationship as painless as possible.

They often ate their meals in the Falcon's royal carav, talking about this or that, but never about the circumstances of her birth. Now that Yasmin knew where she came from, she wasn't too inclined to turn over any other forgotten stones. She didn't necessarily want to find out what was crawling underneath them.

One warm morning while Siraj and Yasmin walked next to the Falcon's caravan, the Falcon himself strode over to them and nodded with a smile on his face.

"And how are you two on this fine day?"

Siraj grinned and twined his fingers through Yasmin's. "We are wonderful. Better than wonderful, actually. Energetic. Adventurous."

Yasmin's cheeks heated. By the Falcon's cocked brow, he understood what Siraj was telling him—that they'd been having mind-blowing sex. But the Falcon chuckled at Siraj's candor.

He smacked the Jackal on the back and winked for good measure. "Good for you, boy!" he exclaimed. Clearing his throat, he tossed a glance at Yasmin. "Mind if I have a word with my daughter?"

She held her breath. It was the first time she'd heard him call her that and her heart raced within her chest.

Siraj gave her a grin and squeezed her hand. "By all means, Khalil." With a kiss on her cheek, Siraj bowed to them both and made his way back to their borrowed carav.

Now that she was alone with the Falcon, Yasmin bit her lip, not knowing what to say to him.

"Are you happy with the Jackal?"

The Falcon's unexpected question caught her off guard. "Yes," she answered truthfully.

"He seems to love you to distraction."

She grinned. "I have noticed. I love him more than I ever thought possible."

"I am glad," Khalil said, rubbing the back of his neck. When his eyes roamed her face, she knew he was gazing at her scars, so like his. She wondered if he was thinking the same thing.

If she still had her magic, she'd be able to read his thoughts. But right now, the Falcon was as closed to her as the cliffs at his oasis.

"I couldn't wish any better for you than marriage to Siraj. He is a good prince and a better man. Your life will be happy with him."

Yasmin smiled and kicked the sand as she walked. "I know."

"I...I want you to know that I'm sorry, Yasmin."

She glanced up at him and gasped. "For what?"

Khalil took a deep breath. "For not taking you from the witch, for not being there for you."

"You didn't know I existed, Falcon," she told him. "I do not hold that against you."

He gave her a mirthless chuckle. "I should have accounted for the possibility. Every time a man takes a woman there is the chance for a baby to be conceived."

"You were under Mother's magic, Highness. Even if you had thought it, she would have banished that thought from your mind. From what little I know of the dream I had of her, she didn't want you to know that you'd...conceived me."

"That doesn't keep me from adding it to my long list of regrets." Khalil sighed as he gazed out at the dunes. "It has been a very long time since a princess was born in the desert. Trianna Hadmas, the Scarab's princess, was thought to be the only natural born princess in the past hundred

cycles. She was born to Siraj's aunt. Trianna's mother was an older woman when she had her. And Siraj's aunt was the last natural princess before her daughter. If I had known you existed, I would have come for you. I would have waged war on that witch. And I would have raised you as my own."

Khalil gave her a sidelong glance, making her stomach flutter. Knowing he wished he could do things differently had sorrow pierce her heart. She wished her fate could have been the one he would have offered her.

"There are many princesses of the desert," he continued. "But only two are naturally born rather than inheriting the title from their husbands. Trianna and you. Every royal child since your birth has been a prince. That makes you unique and special, Yasmin."

She swallowed hard to dislodge the lump in her throat. "I...I don't know what to say."

The Falcon held up his hand. "You don't need to say anything. I have found you now. If you let me, I would like to...be the father you never had."

She stumbled in the sand at his words. Khalil steadied her and she held onto his robes in an effort to calm her breathing.

"You are my daughter, Yasmin. I want the desert to know the Jackal Princess is a natural born princess. And as such, you will have the protection of the god of Falcons as well as the god of Jackals."

She smiled at him. "I know. Siraj saw a falcon circling us after the Jackal healed me."

"You have no reservations about this secret coming to light?"

She shook her head. "No. I don't have to read your mind to know you truly wish things could have been different. So do I. And we have the chance to make it so. But there is one thing I might not be able to do right away."

Khalil swallowed hard. "And what is that?" he asked, seemingly uncomfortable.

"Call you Father."

His trepidation melted. "Perhaps that will come with time."

"Perhaps." Yasmin stopped the Falcon to face him. "Thank you. For accepting me."

His countenance softened and he gave her one single nod. Without a word, she embraced him and rejoiced when his arms circled her as well.

Finally, after years of being alone and fending for herself, Yasmin belonged to a family.

Twenty Six

Siraj sat straight up and gasped. Covered in sweat, his heart pounded, and it was all he could do to calm his raging emotions. A tear slipped down his cheek as he remembered his dream, and he ran his fingers through his hair with shaky hands.

“Siraj?”

Yasmin’s voice seemed to caress him and he sighed, gazing down at the woman next to him. She lay on their pillows, staring at him with concern in her sleepy eyes. “Are you all right?”

Siraj didn’t know what time it was. It felt like nighttime, but the sun was shining. Yet it was too far in the sky to be morning. Disoriented, he pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned, finally remembering they’d taken a nap that afternoon.

“Siraj?” Yasmin asked again, this time sitting up to rub his bare shoulder.

“I am fine, Yas,” he said, his voice gritty. “I had a dream.”

She nodded but didn’t prod him further. He felt her concern.

“It wasn’t a bad dream,” he told her. “It was...intense. I was visited by the gods.”

Yasmin’s eyes widened. “*What?*”

He opened his mouth to tell her what he’d dreamt, but at that moment, Khalil’s horn blew, announcing their arrival at Suridesh. The sound was a welcome break from the monotony, after many days in the dunes. Soon after, another horn sounded, one very familiar.

His own.

Siraj leapt from the blankets and tied on his robes, giving his wife a grin from ear to ear. Once he’d finished with his belt-wrap, he hauled her up to stand beside him and kissed her soundly. She squealed at the unexpected assault, but surrendered easily enough.

“I cannot wait to see my brother!” he exclaimed after releasing her lips. His giddiness seemed to flow into her. Yasmin smiled and tied on her own robes.

“You have something to speak to him about?” she asked, probably

reading his mood.

Siraj nodded. "The Jackal told me the god of Cobras has returned to Jikkar. He's chosen another steward!"

Yasmin's sudden intake of breath seemed loud in their carav. The carriage finally ceased rocking back and forth as Khalil brought his caravan to rest outside the walls of the tent city.

"You don't think..." Yasmin gazed at him in wonder.

"I do," Siraj answered, ripping open their door. Not too far away was his own caravan, sitting right where Yasir had promised it would be. "Come, let's go greet our people."

She didn't waste any time placing her hand in his. With a confident stride, Siraj left the Falcon's caravan and crossed the sand to his own, grinning at the sound of his people shouting and singing at the site of their princess.

And there stood Yasir among them, raising his hand high, with his other arm firmly around his wife. His teeth flashed when Siraj returned his gesture. But it took a long while before he reached his brother. His people insisted on praising Yasmin's safe return.

Siraj watched with pride as she welcomed them, proving herself to be a loving and gentle princess. His heart swelled, and right there, before their people, he swept her into his arms and kissed her for all to see.

"My princess has returned, and we have defeated her demons!" he bellowed, and cheers followed. Soon, they were surrounded by more well-wishers, and in no time, throngs exited the gates of Suridesh. They wore blue, red, and black, among other colors, telling Siraj that every prince in the desert was resting in the tent city.

"I never doubted you, Jackal!" Yasir yelled, finally making his way through the people. "I knew you'd find Yasmin if you had to search every single dune!"

Siraj grabbed him into a tight hug then held him at arm's length. "We must talk, brother."

Yasir grinned. "That we do. I have something of great importance to tell you."

"You had the dream!" Somehow, Siraj knew by the gleam in his eye that Yasir had the same revelation that he did not too long ago.

"Yes, can you believe it?"

"Gods above, Yasir, you are to be the next Cobra Prince!"

As if the gods were waiting for Siraj's proclamation, the crowd surrounding them began shouting and pointing out at the desert sand. Both Siraj and Yasir looked at the same time, but it was Yasmin who gasped as she squinted at the black shapes approaching on the horizon.

"Are those...Sentinels?" she whispered.

Siraj's eyes bulged. Never in his life had he seen the beasts outside of pulling the caravans. Everyone knew they didn't roam wild on Jikkar—

they were magical creatures, given to the desert princes by the gods themselves. And the fact that they made their way to Suridesh from the direction of the Cobra's old oasis sealed in Siraj's mind that the vision he and Yasir had seen hadn't been merely a dream.

The god of Cobras had chosen the Jackal's brother for his steward. Yasir must have pleased him greatly. But Siraj wasn't questioning it. His brother was a good man. He'd always known Yasir would be a wonderful leader, but the law of the princes prevented him from ever inheriting the Jackal throne.

By merely choosing him, the god of Cobras had found another way to make Yasir a caravan prince. And that meant Siraj's people would now be busy making colorful robes for the newest prince in the desert.

"I don't believe it." Khalil's awed voice was right behind him. Siraj hadn't noticed him among the others. The Falcon gazed out at the unfettered Sentinels with awe on his scarred face. "Your brother is..." He didn't finish his question—he merely gave Siraj an arched brow. Siraj nodded while his eyes burned.

"We have much to celebrate!" With that, Khalil began barking orders left and right. People rushed to obey him.

Siraj drew Yasmin to his side and hugged her close. Indeed, they had plenty of cause for celebration.

Twenty Seven

Yasmin sat on Siraj's lap and took it all in. They'd been invited to the tent of Ahmed Bantish, the governor of Suridesh, along with the other princes of Jikkar. She'd never met the Spider or the Scarab, but they had been most gracious to her, even managing to make her blush when the Spider mentioned he was shocked she actually existed.

She saw firsthand the ribbing Siraj had received from his peers for searching for a magical young girl with lavender eyes and the ability to shift into a falcon. They continued to poke him until she'd put a stop to it, defending him to one and all.

"I can take care of myself, Yas," he whispered after he'd pulled her into his lap. Siraj gave her a squeeze. "I've had to put up with these cretins for years."

She giggled and kissed his cheek. "Maybe you can," she replied. "But as your princess, it is my job to make sure the name of the Jackal is not slandered to the winds, even by the other caravan princes."

Siraj raised his brows and fingered her Jackal armband she wore. "Taking your position seriously, are you?"

Yasmin nodded and cupped his face. "You made me your wife. Because of you, I am royalty. Because of *you*, I have a say what happens in this desert. And I will not stand for anyone having fun at your expense."

The Scarab Prince chose that moment to smack Siraj's shoulder and sit next to him on the pillows. "Your wife has a good head on her shoulders," he bellowed. "And unlike the Spider," Qadir gave Ziyad a friendly glare across the tent, "I didn't doubt the existence of your lovely bride for a second."

Siraj scoffed. "Is that so, Scarab?" he challenged. "I seem to recall, on more than one occasion, mind,—"

"To the Jackal Princess!" Qadir yelled, not letting Siraj finish his thought. Yasmin grinned while her husband chuckled and raised his wine glass along with everyone else in the governor's tent. She did the same, and closed her eyes at the glorious burst of fruity flavor in her mouth.

"You like the wine?" Siraj asked, his lips close to hers.

“It’s exquisite.”

“It is made from berries that grow at our oasis.”

She gasped and gave him a wide-eyed grin. “Truly?”

Siraj’s smile made her stomach leap inside of her. She hoped he’d always have that effect on her.

“The clea plant is good for more than it’s lavender blossoms. I cannot wait to show you their beauty.”

“Siraj. Yasmin! I am so happy to see you both healthy and breathing.”

Yasmin looked up, right into the face of the Viper.

“Tariq! Good to see you as well.”

The Viper smiled. “If it hadn’t been for the Falcon’s birds sending me a message that you were safe in his caravan, I’d still be searching for you in that sea of sand.”

“I’m sorry for that,” Yasmin said, swallowing hard. “I didn’t know my magic...was so strong.”

Tariq raised his hand. “Think nothing of it, Highness. The important thing is that our Siraj is alive and with the woman he loves.”

Yasmin glanced across the tent where the Falcon and the Spider were talking with Yasir. Siraj followed her gaze and nodded toward them.

“Can you believe the god of Cobras chose my brother for his new steward?”

The Viper looked at Yasir and nodded. “Your brother deserves his own caravan. He had a few hardships to handle while your caravan was on route to Suridesh. One of the caravs wasn’t quite travel-worthy. It lost a runner and almost overturned. But it’s said Yasir didn’t panic, he ordered your men to take care of it and only lost a few hours of the day.”

“Truly?” The awe in Siraj’s voice was unmistakable.

“Yes,” Tariq answered, taking another sip of his wine. “I’ve also heard the driver on the last carav fell from his bench and broke his arm. It just so happened Yasir saw him fall and halted the entire caravan. Otherwise, they might have left him behind in the dunes.”

“No wonder he gained the attention of the god of Cobras!” Yasmin said in amazement.

“Yes,” Siraj agreed. “But the gods can see our hearts as well as our deeds. The Cobra god knows Yasir is nothing like Malikk or Jaden Rahasha.”

“Thank the ancestors,” Tariq said under his breath.

“He’s already chosen his colors.”

Yasmin glanced at her husband. “He’s not adopting the brown of the Cobra?”

Siraj shook his head. “He wants a fresh start. He wants to make his own traditions.”

“Like a true prince.” Yasmin had almost forgotten about the Scarab,

still sitting next to them. "What colors has he chosen?" Qadir asked.

Siraj rested his chin on Yasmin's shoulder. "He has chosen a rich, royal amethyst for his robes, to honor the color of the Jackal Princess's eyes."

Yasmin glanced at him in surprise, but Siraj wasn't finished.

"He has also chosen gold for the color of his belt-wraps and also for the embroidery of cobras around his sleeves and hem, in honor of my colors. I have no doubt he's asking Zara right now to make him a Cobra armband for his wife Barika."

Yasmin watched as her father, the Falcon, grinned at Yasir while Zara nodded vigorously. A warmth entered her heart and she rested her head against Siraj's cheek. She'd never been happier in her life.

"We'll have to hold a council for the Cobra to claim his princess," Qadir said. "They're already married, so I doubt it'll be much more than a formality."

Siraj grinned. "We'll have to make sure the people who ride his caravan see to it he's tossed into the waters of his oasis."

The Viper and the Scarab both nodded and laughed.

"Why?" Yasmin asked.

"Tradition," Siraj answered with mirth in his eyes. "Whenever a new prince is crowned, he is tossed into his oasis by his people."

"It will be amazing to see the Cobra's oasis flowing once again," Tariq said.

"Yes, it will," Qadir answered, waving at a lovely woman dressed in the Scarab's blue. "Siraj, has your wife met your cousin?"

"No, I don't believe she has. But I am sure she will love your princess."

Qadir stood once the beauty in his colors had finally approached them. Her belly was round with child. According to Siraj, it was the first time they'd been able to conceive these past years, and they were both deliriously happy.

Siraj stood as well, bringing Yasmin with him. "Yas, I'd like you to meet my cousin, Trianna Hadmas, the Scarab Princess. Trianna, this is my wife, Yasmin Pramtash."

Trianna shook Yasmin's hand with a wide grin on her face. "I presume Siraj calls you his princess?"

Siraj shook his head with thinly veiled irritation. "Of course I do!" he barked.

Trianna's laughter was infectious, making everyone around her laugh as well. "Never can tell after what the Spider tried to pull."

"Yes, well the *Spider*," Siraj said dryly, "saw the error of his ways and rectified the situation."

"Indeed he did," Trianna replied.

As if he'd heard their conversation, the Spider Prince glanced their

way and raised his wine glass, cradling his toddler son in his lap. He was leaning into the arms of his lovely wife Amani, the governor's daughter. Everyone saluted him back with their wine, except for Trianna, who had a glass of tea rather than spirits.

"Well, Jackal," Trianna said. "I suppose we should let you get back to enjoying your own princess for a while."

"Yes, you should."

Yasmin had to cover her mouth to keep from giggling at Siraj's response.

The Viper and the Scarab took their leave, mingling with the governor and his family.

Once they were alone, Siraj whispered in Yasmin's ear. "Come with me to my private tent."

"You mean *our* private tent, Jackal?" she amended, holding his hands around her belly.

He gave her one feather-soft kiss where her neck met her shoulder, and just like that, her pussy was wet. He leisurely licked her there as well, seemingly unperturbed by the people all around them.

"Yes, I mean our private tent." He pressed her back against him and the hard line of his cock poked against her ass.

"We'll miss the bractav," she teased.

"That's all right," he whispered, now tonguing her earlobe. "I have a much sweeter dessert I plan on eating."

She groaned with desire. "How far away is your tent?"

"You mean *our* tent?" His eyes sparkled when he caught her gaze. Her mouth went dry and she merely nodded. "Not far."

"Then take me, Siraj."

If the look on his face was any indication, he'd caught on to her double meaning. Siraj stood so fast, Yasmin stumbled, but she did not fall. The other princes chuckled at their hasty retreat, making her blush, but she didn't care about their knowing glances. All she cared about was being with the man she adored more than any other.

The cool evening air was welcome against her heated cheeks. She had to trot to keep up with Siraj's long strides. He'd been correct, the tent wasn't far, and he'd just barely led her through the flaps before he attacked her, pulling her to the ground and ripping away her undergarments.

"What are you...?"

"Shh," he interrupted with a wicked grin. "Having you wiggling in my lap has set me on fire. Will you deny me?"

Yasmin threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled his lips to hers. Siraj growled and fumbled with his own undergarments before he forced her legs open, settling between them.

"Gods above, my beautiful princess, I love you."

Without another word, he thrust forth, his cock easily finding her

channel. Yasmin bucked, crying out at the exquisite feeling of having him plunging deep into her pussy.

"I love you, too," she managed to say through her gasps. "Siraj, my Jackal."

"Come for me," he whispered hotly, thrusting so hard their skin slapped loudly. Yasmin lifted her legs against him and followed his rhythm with her hips, rubbing herself on the hair surrounding his cock.

Within seconds, she came, her orgasm thundering through her, seeming to crest on and on. Siraj rode the waves of her ecstasy, continuing to pound her, until his own pleasure released in a primal roar that echoed out into the night.

With a few harsh pants and a gentle kiss, Siraj brought them both down from the sky then tucked his face in her neck and breathed deep. Yasmin's entire body shivered before she embraced him and smiled, silently thanking the god of Jackals for giving her to the most wondrous man she'd ever known.

~ * ~

"Would you look at that?" The Scarab pointed up at the sky as he and the Viper made their way back to their caravans with their wives. Tariq followed his gaze. There hung Thiadra and Pamos, together once again, shining a deep, regal gold.

Tariq couldn't help but smile up at the heavens. "It would seem the Jackal and his princess will be richly blessed."

"We have all been richly blessed," Sabine said, poking Tariq in the ribs. He grinned at her.

"Indeed, my flower."

"Look!" Trianna exclaimed, gasping as she continued to gaze at the moons. "I don't believe it!"

The Scarab laughed so loud, it seemed to echo across the tent city. The Viper arched a brow and chuckled himself. "It would seem the new Cobra and his wife are blessed as well!"

There, before their eyes, the lovers in the night sky changed their colors from gold to a deep purple.

"The new Cobra Prince didn't waste any time!" Qadir said, continuing to grin. "A man after my own heart."

Trianna slapped his shoulder but laughed right along with him.

Tariq's heart was light as he gazed at his friends and pulled his wife close.

Tonight, the gods were smiling.

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.

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