

The Love Slave

Copyright © Sarah Kernochan

<http://www.sarahkernochan.com/>

Chapter One

CONNOR BLAKEY

Connor Blakey limped through the crowd of New Year's revelers in the lobby of the Pierre Hotel. It was just as well everyone was too drunk to notice the blood on her leg, she thought, heading for the elevator. She glanced at her watch: eleven-thirty. In a half hour the whole depressing year would be over, definitely something to celebrate. The next thought, that 1978 could turn out even worse than 1977, was too demoralizing to dwell on.

She felt the eyes of the hotel staff on her. She knew they were worried to see her alone. Her family had paid them not to report her exploits to the gossip columns; what would happen to that extra income if she became celibate?

She rode up in the elevator with an unaccompanied male. By the time he got off at his floor, he was also unaccosted. Connor had a rule: She never offered herself to a man over forty. The elevator doors closed. She was rich, beautiful, and easy; and now, outrageously, she was alone again.

She unlocked the door to the apartment she kept in the hotel, flinging her purse onto a chair. It fell to the floor,

spilling out her lip gloss, artificial sweetener tablets, and empty diaphragm case. *I'm just like Willy Loman*, Connor thought as she eyed the mess. *Trudging home with his sample case after another desperate outing and no sale*. Only with Connor, it was *Death Of A Slattern*.

Collapsing on her sofa, she watched her ginger cat, Simone, turn circles in the middle of the rug, her fluffy behind lifted high in the air, making low moans in her throat, in a parody of lust. According to the vet, there was some problem with her ovaries, which he could only identify by cutting the poor animal open.

The cut on Connor's leg had stopped bleeding but throbbed with an insistent beat. Connor didn't mind getting wounded on a successful mission, but failure made the pain pointless.

If she hadn't gone to that screening, then broken her rule about no actors, she wouldn't now be alone and mangled on New Year's Eve. The one night when you rightfully expected to be *in flagrante*.

Connor had been invited to the screening along with some other rich people; the producer was angling for money to back a New York opening. The movie had been forgettable, except for one scene which held her rapt.

The heroine was a widow, a recluse who hadn't left her house since her husband's death. Every day she stared out the window at her garden falling into neglect, until at last she called a landscaping service. They sent over a gardener.

Day after day she watched him work: the careful way he cupped a seedling, sliding it into a fresh hole; the muscles bunching on his shoulders out as he spaded; his sure stance, legs apart, as he held the hose, covering the opening with a thumb and producing the finest spray on the new flowers.

One day she heard her back door open: He was in the house, she realized. Clothed only in a light robe, she hurried down the hall to her bedroom, when she saw him coming toward her.

He asked for water. She pointed him toward the kitchen, then turned to the wall to let him pass. Instead he pressed her against the wall with his body, his groin against her buttocks. Her face was forced sideways, mashing against the plaster. She cried out. His hands grazed her breasts, traveling down to the hem of her robe. They slipped under the fabric, and he stroked her thighs, slowly moving higher and higher. He gazed meditatively at a speck on the wall, taking his time. His fingers found the join of her legs and coaxed them apart; all the while he rocked his groin into her, pressing her mound against the wall, until she grew silent, hypnotized, almost not breathing as she waited for the shock of his hardness inside her--

At this point the film cut back to the widow's face at the window. It was only a fantasy. Connor could have screamed.

Months later, making the rounds of New Year's parties, she ran into the film's producer and recalled the scene. "Anyone who can ram a woman against the wall with such skill and tenderness should be bottled and sold." Just as she said it she saw him over the producer's shoulder: the actor who had played the part of the gardener. He'd grown a beard, but she recognized his eyes, which were now studying her with the same intent focus he had previously devoted to a spot on the wall. Someone was telling him who she was.

Actors were constantly switching characters without warning, Connor reminded herself, and the only time they shut up was to hear themselves praised. She turned back to the producer, who was hitting her up for money the thousandth time.

Later, on her way to the bathroom, it seemed inevitable that she pass the actor in the hallway. She paused, pretending to study a framed picture, then felt his body settle into hers, pressing her to the wall, mashing her cheek against an oil portrait of the hostess's dog. Hands slid over her hips, her thighs, found the hem of her skirt and slipped under, moving slowly up her legs.

"You really turn me on," he murmured into her hair. Connor mentally deleted the bad dialogue as his hips began to rock against her.

"Let's find a more private wall to do this against," she said. "Your place?"

If only she could keep him from talking.

He gave the cab driver his address. Before he could say another word she dammed his mouth with her tongue and hooked one long leg over him. By the time they reached his apartment, he was distinctly alarmed. "What sign are you?" he asked, unlocking his door.

"Scorpio," said Connor. "Scorpio sun, Gemini moon, Sagittarius rising, retrograde Mercury in Scorpio, Venus in Scorpio, Mars in Leo, Jupiter in Sagittarius, Saturn in Leo, retrograde Uranus in Gemini, Neptune in Libra, and Pluto in Leo. I haven't a single planet in an earth sign, no earth at all, so I'm impractical and insecure and really impatient," she flung her wolverine coat over his sofa and grappled his belt buckle open, hoping the door she was pulling him towards led to the bedroom and not the closet.

Inside the bedroom, a framed handstitched sampler on the wall caught her eye. It read "Life Is A Colored Waitress." Without thinking, she asked, "Is that really your motto?"

She could have bitten her tongue off when she realized what she'd done.

It was a prop from a play, he said, which would have been his ticket to stardom if not for the *Times* review, though he had been singled out for the scene in which he caressed the co-star's knee and delivered a speech about the disappearance of the small farm in America. The reviewer said he was "eerily menacing," so after that he started being typecast as the heavy, like in that movie she'd seen him in. It was a drag to be eerily menacing in role after role, since really his best performance had been as a sensitive effeminate Greek immigrant on the brink of madness. He proudly lapsed into the lisping Greek accent he'd perfected by hanging out for weeks in luncheonettes.

Connor went to sit on the bed. Clearly the wall was out.

By the time all the characters had been exorcised from the actor's body and he was at last aware of someone other than himself, Connor was naked, stretched out on his bedspread, her caramel-colored hair waving over his pillow. No matter how many times she had done this, it was still a moment she prized: when a man first saw her pink-tipped breasts, her long creamy limbs, the soft fluffy triangle, and became awestruck.

After an all-too-brief moment of amazement, the actor primly turned off all the lights, then took off his own clothes, climbing in next to her and pulling the sheet up around his neck. With one hand he traced the curve of her breast, the gentle indentation of her waist, the swell of her hips. When he ducked his head under the covers, Connor sighed, parting her legs.

He began sucking on her knee. She sensed him thinking of a small farm in America.

"Let's be different and just start right in," Connor said after a minute, pulling him up onto her bosom. "Foreplay is such a yawn now that everybody's doing it."

Another few minutes later, Connor blurted: "Not *you, too!*"

It was the wine, he muttered, or the coke--it was the canapés. *It's me*, thought Connor.

It was happening a lot to her lately: Men were lying down on the job. Her astrologer, Larry, had warned her: She had a grand square between Saturn and both moon nodes and Pallas Athena, which made her a habitual ball-buster. "If you don't stop, in your next lifetime you'll have a pair of your own," he'd said. "Then someone will come along and cut them off, and you'll see how you like it." (Larry subsisted chiefly on beer, which made him fairly rude.)

As the actor shut himself in the bathroom with some inspirational magazines, Connor quickly dressed, sitting on his glass-topped coffee table to pull on her boots. It shattered. Hopping off the jagged shards, her leg bleeding, Connor fled.

He had seemed so beautifully adept in the movie, she thought sadly. But this was the Age of Impotence, and competence was just a special effects trick.

In thirty-one years, Connor Annette Blakey had only found thing that interested her. When people asked her what she did, she said, "I sleep around." If she'd had a needlepoint pillow with her motto, it would have read: "Life Is An Elaborate Plan To Get Laid."

She was too rich to work. Her relatives, all the other Blakey women, sneered at her lack of endeavor. They were rich, too, of course, but they worked incredibly hard. They had a kingdom to protect. Or, more specifically, a queendom.

Thisbee Blakey started the legend in 1586, at the height of England's famine, peddling her "Blakey's Marvelous Mustard" while simultaneously encouraging sly gossip about herself and the Prince of Wales. The little mustard crock, and the stories about the beautiful adventuress who created it, took the nation's mind off its hollow belly.

She was the first in the long Blakey line of mercantile matriarchs. Through the next four centuries, generations of Blakey women expanded Blakey's Mustard & Condiments to Blakey General Products to Blakey *Industrials*. They were handsome and piquant, brigands in business. They devoured the competition, snapping wolf-like at the air, hungry for more. Their greed was glorious, uncompromising, as if the memory of famine had been imprinted on their genes. Once America offered them free enterprise, they quickly transferred to the New World and built their industrial storehouse, stocking the larder with politicians, mobsters, and journalists for future use.

Though greed was the prime motivated force, the typical Blakey female pretended she wasn't hungry, and was always thin, with a brittle sheen of charm, class, and courage. Her approach to marriage was pragmatic. Though a man could marry a Blakey for her money, and encourage her tenderly from the sidelines, he was barred from working in the family firm; his clumsy male psychology made him incapable of understanding Blakey business methods. A man could strategize, but not connive. So the matrix of the mother company was off-limits to sperm-mongers.

A man *cum* sperm was important to the continuation of the Blakey line, of course, provided he signed the elaborate pre-nuptial contract, stipulating that children would only bear his family name in two places: either as a first name (thus the

preponderance of children with names like Connor) or trailing a hyphen (as in Blakey-Vandermuffing).

Once a Blakey bore a female heir, her duty was discharged (Connor's mother had stopped with one). This meant Blakey offspring were predominantly female. It was just as well, as thanks to a treacherous Y-chromosome in the women's blood, most male Blakeys suffered from eye problems. They were usually astigmatic, colorblind, cross-eyed, and ignored.

The pure family name was regained when Connor's mother, Annette Blakey-Fitzsymingdon, married her distant myopic cousin, a full Blakey, who died when Connor was eight. A Taurus, Connor's mother specialized in plants. When she wasn't outdoors serenely tending her own garden, she was touring the gardens of the various Blakey estates or designing the grounds for Blakey *Industrials* in eighteen major cities. Once in a while, when a pride of Blakeys got together for a tax write-off and donated a park, Annette created the landscaping.

When it came to the animal kingdom, however, Annette was quite vague. That she had a daughter pretty much escaped her notice.

The other Blakey women were more attentive; they could see from early on that the girl was not going to amount to anything. At Blakey family reunions, little Connor showed no instinct for where the power lay; she would come into a room and

climb into the uncles' laps. In the ten years since her graduation from Sarah Lawrence, she had borne out their predictions: She had never achieved anything, never found a project which might fulfill her.

Of course, as far as Connor was concerned, sex was her project, one she'd spent years perfecting. That she had reached a level of breathtaking skill was no small achievement, she believed, no matter what her aunts might think. It hurt that they considered her an aberration. Couldn't they see that, in her own way, she was every inch a Blakey, greedily gobbling the competition? Like them, she'd sought power--the kind she could grasp in her hand, and straddle, and subdue. Over the years she had made legions of men surrender, in buckets.

Still, the project wasn't going too well lately, something she was not about to admit to her family. In the sixties, sexual opportunity and mass nudity had been rife, but now, in the late seventies, she seemed to be facing a famine. Not only men who couldn't get it up: men who didn't even want to get it up.

It was a mutiny, Connor and all her unmarried friends agreed. Today's men were sailors sick of rowing on the pelvis of the insatiable sea. There were no more virgin shores, and everywhere they landed they were greeted by cynical bare-bosomed natives demanding insane prices for their fruit, even

though it grew everywhere. Small wonder these men now preferred to stay at home with their wives and boyfriends.

What would she do with her gift? Connor wondered. The gift of giving herself was her sole pastime and passion. She switched off the television and the tired spectacle of Times Square crowds waiting for the ball to come down. Who else might be home on New Year's?

Picking up the phone, she called one friend after another. "What are you doing home?" she asked, when she finally got her friend Wren.

"I have agoraphobia." It was always some disease with Wren, the more fashionable the better. "I also have a split of Mumm's and two Quaaludes coursing through my bloodstream."

"What's to become of us?" Connor tried to keep her tone light.

"I don't know. What did Larry say?"

"Larry died last week."

It had been a huge shock to Connor, after eight years of relying on her astrologer's counsel. On the other hand, you didn't have to be psychic to know that a person who lived on beer was bound to die.

As a child, Larry had played one of the little Siamese children in *The King And I*, supporting his family for the

eleven-odd years the show ran on Broadway. To keep him tiny, his mother had fed him nothing but Minute Rice and tomatoes, so by the time he quit show business for astrology, Larry had developed a loathing for food. One day after years of subsisting on beer, he passed out in front of a client, who called an ambulance.

In the emergency room, the intern was checking Larry's pulse, when he heard a gurgling sound, and put his hand gently on his patient's abdomen. Larry died instantly. With that slight pressure, his stomach had dissolved completely away.

"I haven't left my apartment in a week," Wren said, changing the subject. "What's out there, manwise?"

"I don't see anything I want any more," said Connor.

"I knew it. The place is fished out."

"You know what I'd like? Someone who just comes in, does exactly what I want and is grateful for the work, and then leaves." If only you could pull a tasseled rope and some noiseless, naked, and infallibly erect hireling would appear, a man of silence, decorum, and solid expertise, doing his duty in an atmosphere of worship. . . .

"I know. Preferably someone who doesn't talk. Maybe lost his tongue in an accident."

"No, we need the tongue." Connor patted a cushion to get Simone's attention, but the cat only hoisted her butt higher.

"How about gigolos? Some of them don't speak English."

"But they always want money. Who needs the extra aggravation of having to do bills?"

"I miss Bert." Wren's voice wavered. She had just been jilted by an art historian. "Connor, I tried to be what he wanted. I think I gave him too much freedom."

"Men already have too much freedom as it is." Connor could hear her friend sniffle, trying not to cry. She felt a surge of rage: Why should men have the power to inflict such tortures?

Out of nowhere, a thought struck her, an idea so dazzling she felt faint. The death of her astrologer hadn't been a random event, she realized. It was a sign that she was now free to invent her own fate, to soar through an open window into a lawless, godless, guideless universe. She could do anything. Even something wonderfully terrible.

"I'm going to find him," she announced.

"Who?"

The cat wheeled round and round. Connor's cheeks were flushed pink. "I'll only tell you this: In 1978, I'm going on a long trip." She hung up.

Outside her window, cries resounded: The New Year had arrived. In the midnight sky above Central Park, stars flickered and shifted, promising good fortune, strange encounters, and a wish fulfilled. ("Just don't overindulge," she could almost

hear Larry scold.) As the heavens' minute-hand passed midnight, Connor Blakey was on the cusp of an extraordinary adventure, one that would be set in motion not by the stars but by a simple act of will. And a gold credit card.

Chapter Two

AIR WAZZ

Clouds covered the Cairo runway. The pilot announced that the plane would have to hover until dawn, when the rising sun would burn off the veil of moisture and he could see to land.

The atmosphere in first class was convivial. The two Saudi businessmen had made friends with the two German whores and had persuaded the Air Wazz hostesses to break open the reserve champagne after the whiskey ran out. Everyone came into the aisle, traded names, and toasted the sunrise. But after three hours the clouds hadn't burned off, the champagne ran out, and the spirit of *entente* faded. The twelve passengers fled back to their seats, wishing they hadn't revealed so much.

The American salesman went back to memorizing party jokes from a paperback anthology. The hulking Russian, who claimed to be with the Bolshoi and smelled horribly of fish oil, returned to smoking black Turkish cigarettes, clearing his throat repeatedly of the same fertile puddle. The Danish woman, flying to meet her architect husband in Masmoudia where he was designing a soccer stadium, murmured false encouragement to her two small children. The two representatives of a Hong Kong wax-

fruit and party-favor company resumed testing each other's conversational Arabic with flash cards. The hookers bent their indestructible heads together and slept. Malcolm Pugh, the celebrated British adventurer-anthropologist-geologist, gripped the arms of his seat until his knuckles blanched.

It was the seventh time Pugh had made the trip between London and Masmoudia. This last trip would mark the end of his exploratory study in the Dar Loosh Mountains. The Crown Prince of Masmoudia had hired him to search the sedimentary strata of the interior for traces of valuable ore, in hopes of discovering some commercial resource for the country beside roses.

The ruling family of Masmoudia were Arab Bedouins, but the mountain people were Berbers, a different ethnic tribe altogether. During Pugh's two years' work in the mountains, the scientist had lived among the Dar Loosh Berbers and could speak their language as well as Arabic. Since he had reported his findings to the royals, however, word had gotten out that Crown Prince Rassan planned to blast mines on Berber territory. Violence would probably ensue, and Malcolm Pugh would be bidding Masmoudia farewell just when things got exciting.

Pugh craved novelty, and the world supply was low. He'd done all the really odd civilizations, the aborigines, the Masai, the Yaquis, and also the uninhabited regions of the Amazon, Sahara, Antarctica, and so forth. Now, after several dec-

ades of adventuring, his native curiosity was losing the battle against his worst phobia, boredom. Clutching his armrest, he looked around the plane in search of amusement.

Across the aisle sat that lovely tall American in the emerald-green-dyed wolverine coat whom he'd met earlier drinking with the Saudis.

"You're a scientist?" she had said. "I suppose you're an Aquarius."

"Is that good or bad?" He'd awaited her reply, bracing himself for a sickening wave of boredom.

"Good for science, but they make lousy boyfriends. It's the scientific side of them that's so vile. They like to find out a) how everything works, and then b) how it works when you remove one leg." She'd turned and gone back to her seat, without another word, leaving him heady with surprise.

At the moment she looked cool and unruffled, despite the stuffy cabin, the dawning Egyptian heat, and her lurid fur coat. She was reading a book: *Inside the Arab Mind: A Businessman's Guide to the Middle East*. He slipped into the seat beside her.

"Bloody awful airline," he said. "Can't think when we'll put down in Masmoudia if we're already five hours late to Cairo."

Connor looked up to see a tanned, raw-boned face with close-cropped white hair. The man looked older than she by at least twenty years, so she decided not to have sex with him. "It's not the airline. It's me! My family thinks I attract everything from minor annoyances to major calamities. They even blamed me for the time I was camping out with this arms smuggler on Maui near a totally extinct volcano and it erupted--"

The pilot interrupted to announce that the plane was nearly out of fuel and he would have to fly all the way to Jeddah to replenish the tanks. The Danish woman burst into tears as her children watched blankly. Bar service abruptly ceased. The two Saudis went rigid, and clapped for black coffee.

"If we all have to get off the plane in Jeddah and those two are still reeking of alcohol, they'll get eighty lashes on the backside," Pugh told Connor. "Their home country takes rather a dim view of besotted native sons. Not that you and I need suffer." Discreetly he emptied the two miniature bottles of cognac he'd pinched at the beginning of the flight into their coffee cups.

"Arabs seem to have an awful lot of bizarre rules. I've been reading about them." Connor closed her book.

"Well, a lot of it's just stuff your mum told you never to do -- drinking, gambling, whoring. Then there's the list of

things the Prophet calls 'unclean' - the left hand, the sole of the foot, pigs, blood, women. . . ."

"I just hope none of it applies to tourists."

He sputtered, "Don't tell me you're going to Masmoudia to sight-see!"

She turned to stare at him. Suddenly aware of the extraordinary fullness of her pupils, Pugh was strangely immobilized and a little afraid. It was like being observed by a total eclipse. She giggled as if embarrassed, though it rang a little false; she didn't seem the type to be embarrassed by anything. After a few moments' hesitation, she said: "I'm going there to buy a slave."

"Hmm," he said.

She seemed surprised that he wasn't horrified. "Somebody told me you could find them in Masmoudia," she went on.

"Who?" He couldn't help grinning.

"An old friend." She looked annoyed. "I'm not telling you any more."

"But you're very clever! Masmoudia's the perfect place; they've got some uncommonly good ones, very loyal and so forth. The ones from the mountains are particularly attractive, boys and girls both, some with absolutely milk-white skin, and blue eyes."

"You're not shocked?"

"Not a bit. I've spent enough time in certain Arab countries to know slavery's a thriving institution. Even if the United Nations thinks they're 'bonded servants.'"

"Well, I think it's shocking. Why isn't that on their list of unclean things? I thought in the twentieth century we'd realized it was uncivilized to buy and sell human beings."

"I'll have you know, slavery was considered one of the great civilizing advancements of Islam. At the time of the Mohammedan conquests, it was hugely humanitarian not to kill off all one's opponents, but rather spare their lives and enslave them. Unlike America where the settlers simply killed all the Indians who resisted. And Arabs give their slaves a great deal of status. They're protected by all sorts of laws in the Koran. Some of their rulers treat their slaves even better than members of their own family, since slaves are usually more trustworthy." He tapped Connor's book. "A good slave would willingly kill or be killed for his master's sake. Unlike America in the last century, Islam even makes it relatively easy for a slave to gain his freedom, if he wants it, though many don't - "

"What mountains did you say the ones with the blue eyes come from?" Connor interrupted.

But Pugh was looking out the plane window. "Hullo, here's Jeddah!"

Syrupy waves of heat rose off the Jeddah runway. After the pilot announced that no one was to leave the aircraft, the Saudis relaxed visibly. A desultory ground-crew of Palestinians in checkered headcloths began refueling and the doors were opened, blasting a torrent of scorching air on the passengers. Pakistanis entered with pails to wash the lavatories.

". . .you'll have to be terribly subtle in how you go about it," Malcolm Pugh lowered his voice. "I doubt they'll permit you to take a slave out of the country. They do, of course - I've seen the little buggers in their white shifts carrying packages for their mistresses in Harrods. Once they get to London, it seems, all sorts of things are no longer unclean: casinos, whores, booze, bacon. Of course a dog or cat is still--where are you off to?"

Connor was climbing over his knees. She pushed past the stewardess and stepped off the plane, where her boot heel caught on the loading stairs and hurtled her downwards. At the bottom, she regained her balance, heading toward a ground-crew member crouched by the fuel line.

Watching through the window, Mal Pugh saw her loom over the Palestinian as if she were about to sink her country's flag between his shoulderblades. It was thrilling to behold. She bent and lifted him firmly by the arm. Looking up at the six-

foot genie covered with green fur who had seized him, the man nearly fainted.

Connor pointed urgently at the baggage hold in the underbelly of the plane. "Meow, meow!" she shouted. "Open please! *Ouvrez la porte!*"

"Thanks for reminding me," Connor said, as the plane took off for Cairo. Inside a cage on her lap a ginger cat lay rumpled and near swooning. "God, she was in the hold for eleven hours straight. She'll be all right. She has an amazing capacity for suffering."

"What's the poor thing's name?" Mal asked politely. Allergic blotches were already blooming all over his neck.

"Simone Weil."

The bar service re-opened, though by now there was nothing left but beer and canned gin-rickey. Connor was sorry when the British scientist's cat allergy got the better of him and he had to change seats to nurse his cat allergy. She drank a beer, and allowed herself to picture her ideal slave. Age: around twenty. Height: tall. Eyes: don't care. Hair: black, straight, with a single wave at the temples. Skin? White stained faintly with maple, like a fading tan. He'd have the strong, long, tapering cheekbones of Andalusian horses, a small chiseled mouth. When he knelt to stroke her feet, svelte ropes of muscles would

gather on his thighs. The sinews in his back seemed polished and beveled, and his hands were deft. He would forever be watching her, hungrily but respectfully.

"Stop staring at me," she'd say.

"I can't," he'd murmur. (Maybe she'd let him talk after all.)

"Come here," she would command.

"Ah, mistress," he'd groan, entering her again. "Princess, lady, queen. . . ."

"Where did you find him?" her friends would cry out, when he took off his shirt at the pool and revealed his beautiful chest. (She couldn't decide if it had hair.)

"I turned the corner and there he was, in some little out-of-the-way shop I never noticed before." The fantasy faded as Connor fell asleep.

Connor woke from her nap to the sound of Simone mewling from thirst in her cage. Night had fallen; the airplane was nearing Masmoudia. There was no sign of any of the stewardesses. While Connor had been asleep, the two Saudis had disembarked in Cairo, and a pair of Masmoudian pashas had taken their seats; when they'd begun obstreperously objecting to the lack of whisky on board, the beleaguered Air Wazz hostesses had

locked themselves in the cockpit with the pilots and refused to come out.

Connor went back to economy class to find some milk for her cat. Only half this section was filled, mostly with the wives and children of the two pashas. The rear galley was empty. Connor rifled through the lockers.

"Hello how are you feeling fine!"

Startled, Connor peered into the shadows near the toilets. All she could make out were some grinning teeth.

"What you want, milk?" The overhead light caught the waxy surface of a milk carton in the speaker's outstretched hand. He stepped out of the shadows. He was a tawny little man with a sparse gray beard and a small puckered hole in one cheek. He wore a blue headcloth, a goat's-hair coat, loose blue cotton trousers, and yellow pointed slippers.

"Thanks," Connor said as he poured the milk into her plastic cup.

Behind him stood a similarly dressed tall, gaunt boy whose head was shaved, except where one long lock slithered down his back. He stood on one leg, scratching his bare ankle with his toes. All were dyed a bright blue.

Connor looked at the bearded man laughed; they too were bright turquoise. "You are see my blue legs? I am blue leg man! I am Berber man from Dar Loosh mountain where all mans have

this things! You come, say for Habib! All what you want I find for you!"

Before Connor could reply, a voice over the P.A. ordered all passengers back to their seats. Connor hurried forward; the Masmoudian wives were donning and their black georgette veils and *abayas*, dense black cloaks which concealed the fashions they'd bought in Rome. Connor tripped over the folds of someone's *abaya* and fell headlong through the curtains into the first-class section.

A stewardess appeared to mop up the milk as Connor sank into her seat and fastened her belt. The pilot announced their descent to Port-Au-Wazz, capital of Masmoudia. Connor's stomach lurched; she felt giddy. *I want a love slave, she thought, with blue legs!*

Chapter Three

SUNSET IN MASMOUDIA

A cool western wind floated dust from the cement factory over Port-Au-Wazz, capital of Masmoudia; the particles settled like drab snow on every orchard, roof, and washline. Every intersection in the city had been torn up. Derricks bent their horrendous bills over countless construction sites, like famished herons feeding off the skyline. Crown Prince Rassan was building a modern capital.

The new clock tower on King Musa Boulevard announced seven o'clock. A panel burst open, and a mechanical figure of the King emerged bestride a camel, carrying a falcon on his wrist. After sixty seconds of their painfully slow semi-circular course, King, camel, and falcon were unceremoniously whipped back into their chamber, to await the next hour.

As the lowering sun grew plump as an apricot, spreading as if overripe when it touched the bay, the inhabitants of Port-Au-Wazz began their exodus to the shore cafés. Fishermen and pearldivers hitched their dhows to the quays, gathering around braziers where pots of thick umber coffee brewed. Turbaned Pakistani and Baluch laborers descended the scaffolding around

the forty-two-story King Musa Trade Center, soon to be the tallest building in the Middle East. (Crown Prince Rasan dreamed of urinating off it, onto the head of the Sultan of Oman across the bay; God willing, a felicitous breeze might also carry his yellow stream to the pate of the Sheikh of Dubai, whose Trade Center stood at thirty-nine stories.) The white people--French, British, Russians, Poles, Swedes, Americans, Dutch, Belgians--returned from their embassies and banks downtown, negotiating the illogical detours in dusty cars.

As Venice had her canals, so Port-Au-Wazz would have flyovers and tunnels. It was the Crown Prince's dream that streets would soar up and over intersections, or dip down and under; and pedestrians with their donkeys could walk the level surface in between. (Construction was being rushed to be completed in time for an Italian movie company that wanted to film a chase scene on the rollercoaster-like thoroughfares.)

"Come to prayer!" the *muezzin* sang into his microphone. "Prayer is better than sleep!" resounded from speakers hung all over the city. Masmoudian Arabs, in ankle-length tan *dishdasha* shirts and fringed gray headcloths anchored by coiled black rope, stumbled over the mounds of rubble where the kasbah once stood to the 14th-century mosque, soon to be leveled when the new aluminum mosque was finished. Others stopped on the traffic

islands and turned northwest to Mecca, facing into the contracting sunlight as they prayed.

Mercenaries in magenta uniforms came down from the fort. A once-coveted stronghold built by the Portuguese, it overlooked the harbor where an artificial island with an elaborate amusement park was being built.

Packing up their scales, the moneychangers headed for the café terraces, to drink glasses of cardamom-flavored coffee and sugary jasmine tea, alongside mercenaries, Bedouins, laborers, porters, poets, and feline acrobats with painted eyes. Men from the Dar Loosh mountains, in long indigo shirts with curved daggers at their waists and blue-dyed ankles and calves, Arab traders from Salala, Basra, Addis Ababa: All drank coffee in the twilight, except farmers and taxidrivers, who preferred to chew wads of the green plant *gat*, drooling chartreuse streams down their chins.

All over the eastern hemisphere, the sun vanished on its way to the west.

The Beni Wazz family had ruled the island of Masmoudia for six centuries. In the beginning was Mabruk Beni Wazz, the patriarch of a small Bedouin tribe from the oasis at Dugagah, who chased the Turks off Masmoudia, corralling the other sheikhs under his rule. This he accomplished by a combination of atroc-

ity and *baraka*, or God-given magical powers (he was reputed to bring the dead back to life, for instance, by putting live coals in their armpits). Mabruk was small, stocky, with an enormous ribcage and the briefest of necks. Tiny black eyes restlessly dodged the heavy drooping eyelids, in a round, amber-skinned, cheek-dominated face. These traits were inherited not only by the Beni Wazz born of incest and intermarriage but by every descendant of the royal seed; even the children of concubines and slave-women had the look of moody rodents.

For four hundred years Port-Au-Wazz had been their capital, set where an immense gravel desert met a lackluster bay. It existed chiefly to be a pawn between nations. Any seaworthy power occupying Port-Au-Wazz gained a natural harbor and a sanctuary from the perilous Indian Ocean currents; strategic access to Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, and the Gulf sheikhdoms on the Arabian peninsula, access to Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia on the African mainland; and all shipping routes to Iran, Pakistan, India, and the Orient.

The Beni Wazz family invited foreign occupation. They had learned that the Great Powers had a way of removing each other. In the 16th century, the Portuguese had built the fort and naval base, insuring native obeisance by cutting off all the old men's ears, then set off to quell barbarous Arab traders and pirates in the Gulf of Oman. Next, the British and Dutch liber-

ated the island, fighting for the next century over the spice and silk trade in the Indian Ocean. At last the British decided they liked the view from Muscat better, and moved across the bay. In 1749, the French attacked the British in Muscat, ousting the Dutch from Masmoudia.

Subsequent treaties left the island uncolonized until the early 1800's, when the Wahhabis, an exceptionally cruel tribe from central Arabia, seized Port-Au-Wazz, the better to strike the Imam of Oman (himself aided by the British and Iranians). The ruling Beni Wazz sheikh invited Napoleon to conquer Masmoudia and expunge the Wahhabis, but after Waterloo the French were obliged to leave the island.

Before leaving, the French encouraged the Beni Wazz sheikh to proclaim himself monarch of all Masmoudia. Their hopes were for a tribal revolt so that French would have to return in the form of a Protectorate. Instead, the tribes had gone crazy for the monarchy's pomp and pageantry, vying with each other on the King's Birthday with folkdancing, staged battles, ecstatic trances, and camel races.

King Musa ruled Masmoudia much as his ancestors had done, Touring his five palaces, he sat amid his brothers and sons and secretaries in daily *majlis*, where he allowed citizens to petition him in person. He helped solve property disputes, blood feuds; he might give someone money to make the pilgrimage to

Mecca, or to buy a child glasses. He married his brothers' sons to the daughters of the lesser sheikhs, and his sons to his brothers' daughters and the sons of the greater sheikhs. Renowned for his *baraka*, he effected miraculous cures while in a trance. He taxed, tortured, and imprisoned arbitrarily. And like all the Beni Wazz rulers before him, he left the formidable mountain tribes alone to rule themselves.

In 1914, needing an additional naval base during the war in Mesopotamia, the British returned and promptly abolished slavery. For the next four years, Masmoudian slaves were bewilderingly referred to as "maid" and "valet." When the British left, foreign activity in Port-Au-Wazz dwindled to the humdrum plotting of consuls and ambassadors and spies. They kept the same hours as the natives: Between the hours of one and four, even the liveliest *agent provocateur* was napping.

Then, in 1977, King Musa suffered a stroke. His entire right side was paralyzed and he was unable to speak. All eyes turned to Crown Prince Rassan, the son of the King's first wife, who stood next in line for the golden head-robe.

As the years passed, the Masmoudian populace waited in vain for the King's recovery. They had little understanding of the bachelor Rassan (thirty-five and not even one wife!), with

his University of Southern California education and his mania for modernization. It was Rasan's bittersweet nostalgia for his college days that inspired all this reconstruction, in fact: If Mohammed couldn't come to the mountain, then L.A. would come to Masmoudia.

Rasan's conduct in *majlis* was eccentric. In the old days, if a man had come before the King claiming that his brother had shamed the family name by stealing goats, King Musa might have buried the defendant up to his neck in the sand. If the royal prostate was acting up, he might place an inverted bowl over the plaintiff's naked buttocks with a rat inside; the rat would mistake the man's anus for the only exit and gnaw its way to freedom. The King's son, faced with the same complaint, would tell the two brothers that their problems stemmed from feelings of sibling rivalry. Thanks to his years of group therapy in the U.S., his goal would be to get them to express their destructive emotions, purge their hostility, and sit down to discuss the matter like adults. The first time the Prince put these beliefs to into practice, the accusing brother got rid of his hostility by disemboweling his brother on the spot.

Under the Crown Prince, the foreign community of Port-Au-Wazz stopped being a sleepy little windowbox of intrigue. Rasan needed money for his modernization programs, and Masmoudia sat in the tender groin of a balance of power between Communism

and Western diplomacy in the Middle East. Overnight, the capital's one hotel flooded with aliens with clashing ideologies and open checkbooks. The oil-rich Saudis ultimately outbid the competition, trading vast sums of *rials* for the promise that Rassan would abominate Communism and not build casinos. Crowds of cosmopolitan hustlers arrived to spend his money -- after convincing him to build a better hotel to house them. Rassan soon acquired a reputation as an expensive but harmless whore.

Recently the Crown Prince had been overheard casually debating the purchase of nuclear warheads as if they were a pair of endtables. Privately, the Americans joked that a pair of exploding ICBM's would be the perfect gift for a man who was "crazy as a sack of assholes," and international sentiment ran along the same lines. Diplomats and salesmen alike thought Masmoudia would be better off as a crater. They were all convinced that the island was good for exactly nothing; drilling in the desert and offshore had yielded no oil, and Masmoudia's only export was rose attar, a uniquely vulgar essence, very popular in India.

Nor was the Masmoudia terrain alluring. The northern portion of the island -- one-third of its 130,000 square kilometers -- was sand desert and gravel plain. The south was marsh and loess plains bisected by two great *wadis* that joined in unholy flood during spring. Once a year, monsoon rains trans-

formed the east into lurid jungle. Stretching east to west across the center of Masmoudia were the Dar Loosh mountains, where the Berbers lived. At the foot of the Dar Loosh were kasbah settlements; on the peaks were the cliff-squatters in their ksars, and the burrowing cave-dwellers. From below, the north flank of the range seemed jolted together like ghastly dragon vertebrae.

Nomad herdsmen and sentinel armies of the Berber chiefs roamed the crags. Barely tolerating the posturing of the Beni Wazz royals, the Berbers had their own councils and leaders, their heroes and saints. (One of these, Babas Umaloo, the "Father of Shadows," was rumored to be captivating all the mountain people with his *baraka* of visions, healings, and rescues.) Agriculturally self-sufficient, the Berbers met with the Masmoudian Arabs only to trade rose leaves, silver jewelry, blankets, and slaves for coffee, sugar, and a cheap cotton cloth dyed bright turquoise-blue, which their women sewed into loose trousers the men wore under goat's hair coats or billowing striped *dishdashas*. Eventually the dye would get into their skin and tint their legs a rather fetching blue.

Chapter Four
WOMEN'S QUARTERS

"Groovy, we are grooving and mind-blowing. Well, I wet my pants I laughing so hard."

In the women's palace, overlooking the muddled Port-Au-Wazz harbor, Rassan's sister the Princess Awisha was practicing American conversation, circa 1968 and her former roommate Connor Blakey.

In the great tradition of Arab hospitality, and in tender memory of Connor's finicky tastes, the Princess had flown in a typical college girl's buffet, or what she could remember of it, by special chartered jet: cases of coffee-flavored yogurt, cottage cheese, and TRIM diet soda. (The latter had been confiscated at the airport because the soda company was deemed to be pro-Israel.) Connor herself was about to arrive on the weekly plane from Cairo.

Awisha awaited her friend's appearance with mounting excitement. Connor represented one of two experiences that had lit up the Princess's life: the Girl Scouts, and Sarah Lawrence College. A natural athlete, Awisha was squat, compact, and versatile; at twelve, she marched in the Birth of the Prophet Parade as national girls' champion in swimming, archery, gymnas-

tics, marksmanship, and track. King Musa had watched with tears of pride as his daughter's tangerine Scout bandanna flickered in the hot eastern wind off the desert, her young lips pressed together, her faint mustache drenched in sweat, her robust legs pumping under her brown gabardine skirt. A year later, when a rich ruby drop of blood seeped through her Scout uniform to herald her womanhood, she joined the royal women huddled indoors for a life term in *purdah*.

Born to be physically brisk, Awisha had to learn a strange new ballet of stillness, waiting, reclining, to the gazelle's lesson of dip, scurry, and glide. Upholstered in petticoats and dresses, caftans, aprons, and veils, she was rarely allowed outside the walls of the women's palace. Then she sat, enveloped by fabric, behind a chauffeur, and saw the world as if through a mattress. The only physical education was to prepare her for the marriage bed -- mainly lessons in submissive rolling and lolling, and some exercise of interior muscles - and to transform her into an ethereal creature. The transformation didn't quite take: Awisha became merely meek.

At first she wasn't aware that she was miserable. Then, in 1969, her father sent her for an American education to Bronxville, New York. For nine heady months she immersed herself in basketball, tennis, wrestling, karate, acrobatics, and handball. An unfortunate incident involving her roommate resulted

in her being removed from school; she returned to Masmoudia and seclusion. For the next ten years she waited and glided and lounged and bore the fruit of her husband's occasional visits to her bed.

At twenty-nine, after the birth of her third child, her spirit finally made a leap to freedom. Early one morning her mother-in-law discovered the Princess in the men's reception salon, naked except for a cloak, chattering disconnectedly and taking potshots with a rifle out the window at the peacocks.

Prince Azadin, her husband, brought in a modern doctor, providing him with equipment, three comely slave-boys, and an office in the central palace. He was escorted to the women's quarters, where all the women were locked in their rooms except Awisha, who was walking on her hands in the garden. The doctor promptly started her on a course of tranquilizers and shock treatments.

The following week, as the Princess lay in a profound sleep disturbed only by flashes of intelligence, the Queen Mother brought in a *sehúra*, who threw herbs and vermin on a smoking brazier, slew a horned sheep and spat a piece of its liver down the Awisha's throat. Soon the Princess was back on her feet, pelvis nudged slightly forward in obedient imitation of birds and boats, traveling from cushion to cushion along the limitless horizon of carpets.

Now Awisha could feel the manic energy rising again. Connor's plane, due in at two a.m., had not arrived by dawn. The Princess paced the corridors, playing billiards, pasting recipes in her scrapbook, dancing with her scarves from Paris, taking baths and designing a few dresses for herself. Aunts, sisters, cousins, children, and slaves steered clear of her in nervous whispering waves as she broke into a trot up and down the corridors. Returning to the billiards table, Awisha played a game of three-cushion caroms by herself in the vast central reception hall.

By noon Connor's plane had still not come. Awisha addressed the object ball, bisected the angle with her cue, and crouched delicately for a running english shot, her black veil stamped with gold stars sweeping over her poised elbow. She tossed the glittering net behind her shoulder, narrowing her kohl-smudged eyes.

At three o'clock the chauffeur returned from a fourth futile trip to airport to find the women's quarters in an uproar. The Princess had been vaulting settees and chinning herself on the high window sills, bouncing around the central hall like one of her cue balls. The American doctor gave her a massive barbiturate, before returning to his boy-strewn quarters in

time for a nap; and the children and the hareem were sent east to the Spring Palace at Ajuz' .

Awisha curled, whimpering, on a divan in the empty women's reception salon, and beckoned to a young slave-girl. Shammarr slipped under the sheepskin blanket and bit her mistress's breast consolingly. Looking out the north window, over the ten-foot wall surrounding the women's palace, all the Princess could see of the city were the derricks and cranes. *Where is Connor?* she wondered, before her eyes finally closed.

Chapter Five

TWO ROOMMATES

The new moon enshrouded the women's palace in darkness. Toting her cat's cage, Connor followed the chauffeur up the marble steps to the immense brass-studded door. Inside the palace a servant woke Awisha from her barbiturate-laden sleep. As Connor stepped into the foyer, a wave of embroidered fabrics and pearls hit her. Dropping the cage, she stumbled into the arms of her old roommate, who assaulted her with kisses. Little maidens in silk shifts clapped and giggled, sprinkling the visitor with Masmoudian Rose perfume.

"Everything is yours," Awisha cried. "I am the guest and you are the real mistress of this house. Oh Connor, I'm so happy to see you I wet my pants!"

"Same old Wishy," Connor said.

"You remember what you call me? Same old 'butt-face'!" Awisha laughed wildly.

"Can you make them stop spritzing me with that horrible dime-store stuff and point me to a bath?"

The Princess clapped her hands and jabbered something in Arabic; instantly the luggage and the chauffeur disappeared. The remaining nymphs were dispatched to prepare the fire in the

bath, Simone was dispatched to the kitchen, and Awisha led Connor into the women's reception salon, which had been recently redecorated in purple, gold, and white. "Louis Quinze?" Connor eyed the antique reproductions, which struck her as closer to Louise Katz.

"My husband likes modern things. Please sit down."

"Where is the Prince, anyhow? In bed?"

"Oh no, he does not live here. This is the women's house, but you and I are all the women here now. The others are gone to the Spring Palace. My husband, he lives with the other men in the big palace across the city. If he comes to see me he comes to the other side of this house to the salon where we receive men, and there is also a bedroom for us there if he wants to 'ball.' See, I don't forget your expressions!"

"It's like dorm life in the fifties," Connor remarked. It didn't bode well, no men. Oh, well. *Send in the eunuchs*, she thought.

"Would you care for some cottage cheese from California?"

"Thanks, I'm not hungry."

They sat: Connor in green wolverine, a football jersey, gaucho pants tucked into tall chamois boots, one leg sprawled over the arm of a rococo loveseat, tapping her teeth with a thumbnail; Awisha below her on an ottoman, in a yellow satin caftan under a gossamer embroidered mantle girdled in gold, her

black hair loose and snarled down her broad back. In a palace on a desert island, surrounded by French furniture that looked like half-digested petits-fours, sheltered by an ancient ceiling of dizzying carved arabesques twined with verses from the Koran in green, gilt, and scarlet; two women too different for words, remembering in silence the first day they had met.

King Musa had learned about Sarah Lawrence College from a beautiful American journalist, who had come to Masmoudia in the '50's to research a magazine article on whether Arab sheikhs made good lovers. Even after her article rated the King's amorous performance far below the sheikhs of the Lower Gulf, Musa still pined for her and never stopped sending her presents.

In his love's memory, he decided to send his eldest daughter Awisha to Sarah Lawrence, after the girl married his nephew Azadin. Since Islamic custom provided a waiting period between the wedding and the marriage bed that could last anywhere from ten minutes to ten years, depending on the parents' decision. Thus the consummation of Awisha's marriage with her cousin was postponed until he finished his studies at the University of Oklahoma. Awisha was a virgin, albeit a married one, when she joined the Sarah Lawrence class of '69 as a junior.

A Masmoudian intelligence agent met Awisha at the New York airport and drove her to the campus in Bronxville. She had been

assigned a double room in Twill House, a charming Tudor cottage that had once been a private home and now served as a dormitory for nineteen girls. Awisha's room was on the second floor. The agent deposited her luggage there, bowed, and left. Then he hid in the bushes to watch the arriving students and make his report on the Princess's future companions.

Awisha sat on one of two unmade cots, dazed with jet-lag, kohl dust mingling with international grime under her eyes. Hives dotted her arms; she was allergic to the polyester in her modern travel outfit. Her face bubbled with acne from the several baskets of courtesy chocolates she'd eaten during two days of travel. The candy had kept her from screaming: She had never flown before. The stewardesses had fussed over her, offering her as many meals as she wanted, sewing the zipper on her skirt shut when it burst. (Later, in the galley, they snickered amongst themselves about how little like a Princess she looked.)

Two cots, an open casement window, a delicate breeze, girls shrieking recognition, Volkswagens throbbing. Awisha opened one of her steamer trunks, then slumped back heavily on her bed, gaping, as her new roommate kicked luggage across the threshold. A rich aroma of suntan lotion filled the room. The girl's legs were endless, and naked from her square-toed pumps to the hem of her micro-miniskirt. Her

hips were encircled by a mod vinyl target belt. Her caramel-colored hair swung to her waist. Her arms, covered in livid scratches, tried to restrain a monstrous spotted rabbit from lunging for his freedom.

"Ack! Quit it! He's just hyped up on all the cookies he ate in the car. Hello, I'm Connor and this is Rabbit Penn Warren."

She lowered the beast to the floor. He took two lumbering hops, sailing into Awisha's open trunk.

"Rabbits are very clean animals and you can house-train them in no time at all. People think they're stupid but really, they don't care what anybody thinks, which is so smart, right? You know, rabbits are never supposed to make any sound their whole lives except when they die, they scream. But R.P.W. makes this sound, a very faint sort of honking noise, when he's aroused--it's like when you press the tummy of one of those stuffed animals. Whoa. I hope you're not very fond of that dress in there. Is it a dress? Oh, is this one of those veils you wear over your face?"

"No," said Awisha carefully. This was her first American conversation. "He is a garment."

"Well, why don't I buy it from you, because, I speak from experience, R.P.'s wee-wee does not come out of silk

even if you dry-clean it. Looks like it soaked through this, too. What is it, a skirt? Pretty see-through."

"Yes. She is a veil."

"Oh God, he's really done his monsoon number all over everything in here. Bad rab. Bad, bad bun. Listen, I'll buy the whole trunk from you and we'll just empty it out and put cat litter in it. Even if you shut it now he'll gnaw through the lock to get back inside, because now he considers it his personal john. They always return to the first place they go. Anyway, you won't have to wear a veil around here. The townies are scared to death of us. I've got to get out of these grungy clothes." Plucking off her miniskirt -- she was not wearing any underwear -- she put on a pair of ragged dungarees with holes on each thigh and a loose cotton shirt the Princess recognized as customary attire for the lowest caste of Pakistani laborers.

"Aren't you going to change?" asked Connor.

The upheaval implied by this question left the Princess speechless.

"Well, I guess you're okay as you are," said Connor, her nostrils flaring. Rabbit Penn Warren was munching on a bureau leg. "We're supposed to be at an Orientation meeting in ten minutes, so let's go into town until it's over. I don't have to call you Your Highness or anything, do I?"

"No, please. I must rest."

"Let's go find a bar and get crazy."

Awisha followed her out. Connor was man; in Mas-moudia, only the men were so tall, slender, and deaf to protest.

They met another girl in the hall. "We're going out for a beer at Mike's, Ronda. Come with?"

The three stopped to look into the next room, where a girl in a top hat and whiteface clown makeup was juggling her naked breasts in front of the window. "What are you doing, Wren?" Ronda asked.

"There's a man out there in the bushes." Wren majored in children's theater. "I'm entertaining him."

"Come join us at Mike's when you're done."

Mike's was very dark. They were the only women there. The town males huddled around the bar and pooltable, casting resentful looks at the girls' booth.

"Wishy is a weal woyal pwincess fwom Awabia!" Connor called to Ronda over the jukebox music.

"She wooks wike a ddowned wat," Ronda replied. "Is she buying our beer?"

Unable to understand the strange collegiate dialect, Awisha examined her glass of amber liquid crowned with foam. It was clearly alcoholic, forbidden by her religion.

She drained the glass with the whole and perfect thirst of an athlete and was instantly sheathed in sweat, her skin flushing a rosy orange.

Wren arrived, radiant in a velvet renaissance gown, two cloth orchids tucked in her golden Botticelli hair. "You all look wonderful." She had taken LSD two hours earlier. "This is going to be the most beautiful year."

"One thing I know about Arabs," Connor said. "If you admire something of theirs, they have to give it to you. Watch. Why, Awisha, what a terrific polyester suit you're wearing, I just love it."

"Ignore them." Wren reached across the table and covered Awisha's hand. "You have your own music, so you just flow. Honestly, Connor, can't you stop being ruthless for one minute?"

"We're a really grabby bunch, our generation." Connor explained to her new roommate. "We were all born with Pluto in Leo."

Stoned-out Wren was staring at her hand next to Awisha's. "Oh, wow! Look at our two hands! Mine is so white and hers is like, like. . ."

"Lox," Ronda said.

The next day, the Princess joined twelve other foreign exchange students for tea with the Dean, Mrs. Duckworth.

"We have high hopes for you, Miss Wazz," Dean Duckworth drew her aside. "We realize that women in a Moslem society don't enjoy a great amount of personal freedom, but there are many ways of serving or leading a community without overstepping one's bounds, and we're hoping to give you a core of strength, an individuality, that you can always draw upon. If there was ever a plane crash or . . . or a sandstorm that removed the male heirs, you'd be Queen of your people, and we have to make you equal to the task. I selected Connor Blakey to be your roommate, because her family has always produced strong women leaders. She'll help you over the bumps and hurdles--you'll be a special project of sorts for her. Connor knows a great deal about your culture; she took a course last year in Oriental Mysticism, and I know they covered the Middle East in the second term."

Next Awisha had a meeting with her faculty advisor, who told her she'd enrolled in too many sports classes. He advised her to eliminate psychology, Ibsen, the American Civil War, and city architecture. That left Queens of the Nineteenth Century, and sports, a program that acknowl-

edged Awisha's individual strengths while preparing her for leadership in the nineteenth century in the event of a sandstorm.

Her advisor was a very nice man, clean-shaven, prematurely bald, with an air of youthful apathy. When he learned who Awisha's roommate was, he grew wistful. "I was her advisor last year. She is quite. . . something," he sighed. "An odd choice for a roommate. Dean Duckworth must be out of her tree. Oh well, I'm confident Miss Blakey will entertain you. Just be careful not to leave your crown lying around." He winked.

Later, when Awisha returned to Twill House, she found a sign on her closed door that said "DO NOT INTERRUPTUS COITUS." Awisha opened the door.

Rabbit Penn Warren popped his head up from her trunk and glared indignantly at her. Connor lay on the bed, her long legs wrapped around the bearded head of her new faculty advisor. "God, Wishey, can't you read English?"

Awisha closed the door and walked into town to Mike's, where the pool table reminded her of home and the hareem, so far away. She craved a beer to drown her heartbreak: She was in love with Connor.

When she returned to Twill House later that night, she had won \$30. (Gambling was against her religion, but it

seemed to be the only way to get the townies to play with her.) Up in a third-floor window, Wren was just beginning the evening performance for the man in the bushes, accompanied by two equally naked friends on flute and guitar.

Weeks later, a security guard discovered the Mas-moudian intelligence agent in an advanced state of starvation under the hedges outside Twill House; the wretch was deported.

Awisha soon settled into her new life. On weekdays, she studied a little and trained in every sport she wanted; on weekends, when other girls had dates or mescaline trips, she was happy playing the locals at Mike's for beer or a few bills. However, once Connor started coming along to the bar "to unnerve the competition," things took a downward turn. Lounging over a crucial pocket in the table, in scotch-tape miniskirts, her legs swinging in mod yellow tights, she downed Black Russians and then offered her opinions on pool: "I don't see the fun of it. I mean, everyone takes their little stick and tries to cram their little balls into a hole, and meanwhile everybody else is outside getting the real thing. I mean, why would anyone spend their time doing metaphor when they could be doing

IT?" After a few such episodes, Awisha became persona non grata at Mike's.

But it was, as Wren predicted, a wonderful year, filled with stirring activism and artistic endeavor. There was a big fast: upset about the famine in Africa, students went for a week without eating in the cafeteria, demanding that the money saved by the administration be sent to the victims. (Most of the school preferred "The Coachman's Grill" in town to the cafeteria's jello and "mystery meat" anyway.) To protest the war in Vietnam, Ronda composed a cantata without words for the college chorus entitled "Fifty Tongueless Peasants" that got a write-up in the *Village Voice*. After Wren Ellis acquired a turtledove, which Rabbit Penn Warren maimed, she dyed half her pubic hair platinum and posed nude for a poster, implying she would ball any guy who dodged the draft. Then, in a freak blizzard, Twill House was snowed in for days, and Connor Blakey revealed she had been keeping a young man in the attic for just such an occasion.

There was a black-magic coven for girls without dates on Saturday nights, while the Bible enjoyed a rapturous revival among the acidheads; one senior even got stigmata. Then Ronda led a protest against "elitist alumnae, decadent faculty, and spineless bookkeepers." A steamy love

triangle involving Connor and two teachers from the theater department ended in Mr. Sadler and Mr. Buck splitting up after twelve years of togetherness; and in a "Battle of the Sexes" wrestling match, Princess Awisha Beni Wazz defeated a Yalie.

In the spring, Connor's fancy turned to black musicians. One of her lovers, learning of Awisha's prowess at pool, arranged a billiards match between Awisha and a player of some fame in Harlem. To protect the Princess' anonymity, Connor covered her in her veil. "It'll psyche 'em out," Connor said, her judgment somewhat warped by the potent reefer her musician brought her. "We'll call you the Veiled One."

At first Awisha was frightened to leave behind her cozy suburban set-up in Bronxville, but when she walked into the warm smoky room in Harlem and found herself surrounded by deferential opaque black faces like the slaves' back home, she relaxed.

Though Connor started things off on the wrong note, complaining that there were no Black Russians to be had, and Awisha's dense veil impaired her vision, the Princess began to win. While Connor's lover overdosed in the toilet, Awisha won a few more games and a great deal of money. After she politely said goodnight to her opponent

and his friends, the evening more or less hurtled downhill.

The next morning, when New York policemen picked up the two girls on the steps of an abandoned tenement building in North Harlem, an unveiled Awisha was sobbing over her pool cue, which had been broken into eight pieces. Connor's ocelot coat had been stolen, though she was too stoned to feel the cold.

Shortly after the New York newspapers broke their stories about "The Poolshark Princess" and "The Hustler From The Harem," the Masmoudian ambassador arrived by order of His Majesty King Musa at Twill House. As he waited downstairs in the official limousine, Awisha packed for the jet flight home. The phone rang, : long-distance from Oklahoma. Awisha listened meekly. After hanging up, she sighed to Connor, "My husband will not divorce me, thanks to God."

"It's a raw deal, butt-face." Connor had give up trying to convince her roommate to go underground. She sat sprawled in her study chair, her thumbnail tapping her teeth, as Awisha hugged her knees tightly to her chest on her stripped bed, swallowing hard on the hopeless longings that lodged in her throat. Rabbit Penn Warren made a faint sort of honking noise and clawed frantically at the locked

steamer trunk, then gave up and launched a pond of murky yellow urine at its base.

Ten years later, the reunited roommates lounged in a shallow tiled bath, talking through roiling masses of steam. Three maids massaged the dirt off the American limbs with crepe cloths, awed by the foreigner's extreme length and slimness, as well as by the fresh plum-colored bruises on her knees. The skin covering Connor's belly was so smooth it was hard to believe there were vital organs conspiring beneath.

"It is ten years and you do not change, darling." Sadly Awisha gazed down at her own body; after the births of three children, it was like a cloth hastily wadded after vigorous use.

The maids sluiced Connor with hot water. "I feel like I'm in a car wash," she said. "All through, girls?"

The trio transferred their ministry to their mistress. Connor sat letting her pores bloom in the steam. "Awisha?"

The Princess tensed. Connor never called her by her formal name. "Yes?" Through the mist she could make out a pair of eyes searching for the perfect place to make an incision.

"I've just got to have a slave."

Relieved, Awisha gestured toward the three sylph-like maids scrubbing her back. "Which one do you like?"

"Don't be so kinky. I want a man."

"But there are no men here."

"I don't mean just for one night. I want one of my own. This is a take-home order. Money is no object, of course."

Her friend's determined tone made Awisha tense up again. "My brother the Crown Prince has forbidden slavery in this country."

"Bonded servants, whatever you call them, I know you've got them. I promise I won't tell the UN. I only want one, for God's sake."

The Princess asked cautiously, "But why?"

"I want to have sex with him." Connor hoped Wishy wasn't going to make this difficult.

"My husband will not like this. He wants international people they are thinking we are very modern here and we have no slaves."

The steam was beginning to make Connor irritable. "Now that you mention it, the rest of the world has refrained from buying and selling human beings for the past hundred years."

"But we are not the only country! Many still have slaves and say nothing."

"Well, bondage must have its good points. Far be it from me to criticize." Connor stood dizzily. "Wishy, I'm melting in here."

The floor of the women's sleeping chamber was covered by opulent carpets, layered to such softness that Connor felt as if she were treading an intricate crimson fog. The slave-girls flitted about, creating mounds of cushions like plump clouds for Awisha and Connor to lie upon. Silky spreads billowed and settled over them. Then the little maids blew out the tapers; spinning themselves inside blankets against the far wall, they curled together and slept. Simone had already puked on her very own brocade pillow.

"You really mean it?" Connor's voice cut through the darkness. "I can have one?"

"You are my friend, you are my guest." Awisha felt waves of apprehension, as if the carpets were undulating beneath her. "It is my delight to give you every enjoying."

"To sleep with whenever I want?"

"You may do anything to him. It is why they are slaves."

"I want a tall one. And he should be about my age or a little younger, strong but not husky, and built big but not jumbo. Oh!--and long black eyelashes would be great."

"If God wills it." Awisha was miserable, and groped for her pills.

"A Libra, if possible," said Connor.

Chapter Six

MAJLIS

Outside the central palace, the clocktower struck four; the figurine of the King, falcon, and camel trundled out, listing dangerously as it rounded the track; and the afternoon session of *majlis* began.

At the far end of the reception hall, Crown Prince Rassan sat surrounded by a crowd of male relatives clad in the white robes, black headcloths, and gold mantles of the ruling family, all bearing the same cheeky, droopy facial traits of the Beni Wazz. The huge portrait of King Musa stared down over them with the air of a disappointed chipmunk. Though modern couches lined the white marble walls for the international bankers and hustlers, the Masmoudians preferred to squat on the splendid carpets spanning the vast floor. Servants moved about noiselessly, pouring coffee as soldiers shivered in the arctic temperature. Supplicants were instructed to speak loudly to be heard over the roar of the outdoor generator that powered the palace air-conditioning system.

As an old man slowly set out on his long journey up the carpets to the throne, the venerable slave Suleiman

leaned over and whispered into the left ear of the King's son. This next petitioner was a poor stone-mason from Port-Au-Wazz, he said, rattling off the names of the man's ancestors, wife, fourteen children, and the number of times he had been to *majlis* before.

The stone-mason saluted the Crown Prince. "God's peace on Your Royal Highness, may your life be long, and God's peace on your family and on His Majesty the King, Commander of the Faithful, Protector of the Poor." After an exchange of salutations and some brief gossip about the old man's neighborhood, the mason mentioned that he did not have enough money to pay for his son's circumcision ceremony. Rasan wished God's favor on his son's day of manhood, promising him the money he needed, then mentioned that the old man's neighborhood, where his family had lived for two hundred years, was about to be razed to make way for a soccer stadium. The mason and his family would be moved into a modern villa with a swimming pool provided at no cost, where he could live and prosper to the end of his days, God willing.

The next petitioner was an American salesman, Mister Ralph Shunt. He complimented the Prince on his makeover of the capital. "Reminds me of Los Angeles, without the free-

ways and smog." Rasan beamed. Then Mr. Shunt brought up the subject of hot-air balloon transportation.

The third petitioner was a pesky Dutch bank manager who, after salutations and chitchat, demanded to know why the Crown hadn't met its latest payments on the loan for the King Musa Route One, the new freeway under construction.

Connor waited the better part of the day for the sedated Princess to wake up. None of the maids except the one called Shammar spoke any English, and all the girl could offer was more food or another bath to pass the time. Less than thrilled her choices of walking in the orchard, pedaling an exercycle, playing pool, or watching old movies on the video-cassette machine, Connor finally decided to go for a walk in town. Before anyone could stop her, she was out the door.

As she passed the guards and turned onto a frangipani-lined boulevard, she noticed a black fellow in a long white shift following her at a careful ten paces. Connor hailed a petit-taxi. "Kasbah," she told the driver, and they sped off, leaving the crestfallen slave enveloped in clouds of exhaust.

Through the taxi window Connor saw the sights of Port-Au-Wazz: the fort and the Ferris wheel, the steam-shovels and minarets, the skeletons of the half-completed flyovers, the chasms of the half-excavated tunnels, the towering scaffolding around the Trade Center with workers' jumbled shacks at its base, the crooked wing of the drive-in movie screen next to the camel market.

Two clacking storks careened overhead, following her taxi all the way to the souk, where the driver left her off. The kasbah had long since been bulldozed.

She proceeded on foot through the arched portal to the market. A canopy of woven palm fronds shaded the narrow avenue of shops and stalls; a crowd of peddlers, black-swathed women, porters and donkeys parted as she came through. Shopkeepers leaned out over their counters to stare at her outrageous legs. Connor paused to listen to the quaint singsong of little boys chanting Koran verses inside a mosque.

Suddenly the recitation stopped. A flurry of old men burst from the mosque and started beating her with sticks; the little boys swarmed about throwing stones at the Christian slut-sorceress. "Ow!" Connor pulled an anti-mugger spray disguised as a ballpoint pen from her purse. After a small noxious explosion, the old men stumbled

back, temporarily blinded and mildly paralyzed, and the screaming children fled.

Rubbing her mauled arms and frowning, Connor walked on. The marketplace was suddenly vacant, she noticed. She paused and looked behind her: All the shops were closed and everyone was hiding inside.

"Hello you crazy too much!" She wheeled around again. The tawny little man with the gray beard and the hole in one cheek she'd met on the plane was standing there. "Why not you for saying your friend Habib and you walking your self in souk with bad peoples?"

"Oh Habib," Connor breathed. "I'm so glad I ran into you!" His companion, the boy with the snakish lock of raven hair flowing from the back of his shaved skull, hovered behind him. He grinned, revealing four tangled gold teeth. "Hi there," Connor said.

"You see Blek! His name Blek!" Habib laughed and capered. "We going now, show you souk and all city."

"Did you see what they did to me? All I wanted was to come in here and buy something, for God's sake."

"Eat money," said Blek.

Habib giggled. "He know only two words English."

Connor linked arms with her new blue-legged friends.

"Let's go, boys."

"I see you've met my peerless guide Habib," said Malcolm Pugh.

They ran into the scientist on King Musa Boulevard in front of the central palace, where he'd just finished paying his respects to the Crown Prince in *majlis* before heading back to the mountains to complete his survey. "Ah, been to the souk, have you? Good lord, did you go in there dressed like that? Must have given them quite a turn."

Habib explained, "Her mind not with her today. Mind like knee."

"Habib has been a peach," she said. As they moved to the fountain under the clocktower's shade, Connor looked over her shoulder for Blek. He was standing on one leg across the street, facing into a bit of abrasive wind which had just sprung up. "Habib got all my dollars changed to *rials*, and we bought this camel tether I thought would make a cute belt. Look at this fabulous curved dagger I bought from a guy with one hand. Some ridiculous old men attacked me with sticks--didn't I tell you I attract this stuff? I've got a bum aura. What's wrong with how I'm dressed?"

"Nothing." The scientist's eyes twinkled. "The Arabs fancy a touch of mystique in a woman, that's all."

"It's time they came out of the Middle Ages," Connor said hotly. "We have no mystique, we're just people." The sun disappeared suddenly, turning the sky a mean ochre. A burst of violent wind lifted her gauzy tent-dress; all that kept it on her body the strings crisscrossed over her bare back. "But I see you've gone native," she noted. Like Habib and Blek, Pugh was dressed in a grown goat's-hair coat, turquoise headcloth and trousers. Sand and dust writhed like serpents around his pointed yellow slippers.

"Bad wind coming," said Habib.

"I'm afraid I'll have to hijack Habib from you, Miss Blakey. We've got to buy several months' supplies for our trip to the Dar Loosh mountains tomorrow." The scientist shook her hand.

"Bye." As Connor gave Habib her hand, he turned it over, examining the lines on her palm. "You meet man what you dream, here in Masmoudia!"

"Habib reads palms, too," said Mal Pugh.

"Why does he have a hole in his cheek?"

"Comes from a very religious tribe. They like to mutilate themselves at the height of trance. It's rather fun to watch. Habib's a bloody marvel, really. He can get you anything, take you anywhere, knows everybody, and often has been seen in two places at once." He leaned in. "Also

number one *sahab* in the black market. Might be the sort of chap you could ask to bring you a slave."

"I'll keep it mind." In case Awisha's husband didn't pan out.

Blek's rope of hair flapped wildly. "Bad wind, we go!" cried Habib. The men sprinted away to the souk. Then the sandstorm drove down, hurled high the fountain spray, and slapped wet sand all over Connor as she reached the marble steps of the central palace.

Prince Azadin Beni Wazz, Minister of Defense and Chief of Protocol and Police, left his furniture showroom, sped his Thunderbird through the streets, and made it to his office in the palace just before the storm descended.

Heedless of the sand seething on the windows and the blustery air conditioning, he tenderly unwrapped the bundles of shares which had just arrived from the printer. In green and gold, English and Arabic, worth one thousand *rials* apiece, here were the share certificates for the King Musa Water Utility Project to harness the two great *wadis* that surged from the Dar Loosh mountains. Here too were the shares for the new Wazzco shipping firm; the ones for the real estate company formed by Azadin with all the other sons of the King's third wife; and those for the new

Popular People's Bank of Masmoudia. Here were the shares for Azadin's pet enterprise, Kurry King, a projected chain of fast-food parlors for the imported foreign labor force. The Prince had already signed a contract with Blakey Big Fry International for the Masmoudian rights to their burger franchise, and they were sending him skilled management from the U.S. to oversee the openings of both the Juicy Jack and the Kurry King chains.

He phoned his German broker at the new Masmoudian stock exchange. "Buy two hundred shares of Kurry King."

"Your Highness, no such company is listed on the exchange."

"I have the shares here in my office. I will send my steward to you with them."

He counted off two hundred Kurry King certificates and dispatched his trusted steward Sidi Messoud to the stock market.

Prince Azadin never ceased getting ideas for making money -- when he was driving, praying, hunting, at *majlis* or at the baths, making love, even when he was asleep. (He dreamed often about fish, and fish meant money.) This morning at the baths, as he was having his body hair removed, he'd gotten the idea to close his furniture showroom, dismiss the employees for the day, and pocket the

payroll money. Such a beautiful, simple idea would never have entered the pathetic effete mind of an American businessman.

Azadin loathed America as violently as his cousin the Crown Prince yearned for it; his own college experience, as a business major at the University of Oklahoma, had been torturous. Despite his eagerness and initial aptitude, he was forever getting lost in the American theories of business. He'd stride forcefully into a concept, only to panic, as if he was stranded in a vast labyrinthine palace not of Arab design, lacking a central courtyard by which to orient oneself. When he failed to pass a single course, his family was forced to build a new lake for the rowing team to ensure Azadin a diploma." But Azadin knew the problem was: He thought like an Arab. Whenever he tried to think like an American, he foundered.

Azadin was the busiest man in Masmoudia. Struggling to solve the Crown's most critical financial problems (the new Popular People's Bank could not charge interest on loans because the Prophet Mohammed forbade usury), he had another golden idea. The bank could turn a profit to the Crown while helping to boost the real estate market! His cousin Rasan's current policy increased the standard of living by donating new villas to the people, who could not

possibly afford the switch to modern housing. What the bank should do was loan them the money, at no interest, to buy villas from the Crown, on the condition that they sell them the next week for a higher price. They could pay off the loan with the profit, and the higher price of housing would force up the real estate market, which would benefit the Crown Prince's real estate company managing all these purchases and sales --

Changing tracks mid-thought, Azadin drew up a list of requested missiles to present to the French delegation when it arrived next week. He started multiplying each item in France's missiles force by two when the guards brought in the beautiful American assassin.

Examining the confiscated dagger and anti-mugger spray, Azadin dismissed the guards and clapped his hands for some tea for his prisoner, who was shivering with cold and rage. Her hair was matted with wet sand and one knee was scraped and bleeding above day-old bruises on a long creamy shin; there had evidently been a struggle when she tried to enter *majlis*.

She scanned the office. "The joint is teeming with these butt-faces," she muttered, noting Azadin's resemblance to Awisha and the King, whose photograph hung above the Prince's desk.

"You have upset all my men." Azadin attempted a teasing, seductive expression, confident his robes hid his paunch and his headcloth covered his bald spot; the platform boots from his own shoe store made the London show-girls swear he was sexy. "The royal *majlis* is forbidden to women."

"My Aunt Packard Blakey always says that men want to keep women out of the room because they're afraid we'll start laughing. Listen, we know what you're doing with the money and the power. You're putting it in your mouth, you're throwing it at each other, you're smearing it on the wall. And when you get all tired and cranky we have to march in and put you to bed before you destroy the place."

"Miss Blakey, I hope you will forgive us for today's accident, though you are very beautiful when you are angry, and I hope you will stay on and perhaps learn to understand our customs--"

"There's one custom I'd like to get in on."

"When I look at such a beautiful woman," Azadin sighed, "I feel all this business and politics is nonsense. I feel God has given us these gifts -- time, a beautiful woman, a beautiful place, like our Samra desert on the night of the full moon which I must show you -- He gives us all these things and we use them badly." The

American woman seemed tired and overexcited and cranky, he thought, as happened when women had not been paid enough attention. He would do something for her later.

Meanwhile in *majlis*, the next petitioner, a young blue-legged Radif tribesman, complained passionately about explosions in the Dar Loosh mountains, poisons in the *wadis*, and foreigners in the pastures. Before the Crown Prince could explain about the wonderful dam the government was building -- and the four converter stations which would give all Masmoudians twelve million kilowatts of electricity -- the young Radif drew a pistol from his dirt-clotted cloak, crying "God is great!" and pulling the trigger. The barrel exploded in his hand, taking off the fingers that held the gun, which had been purchased that morning from a Russian arms salesman who smelled horribly of fish oil. The weapon fell to the carpet.

Interrupting the Minister of Defense's meeting with the beautiful American woman, the guards brought him the assassin. Apologizing to Connor, Azadin had his chauffeur drive her back to the women's palace. He would be tied up for a long time with the assassin. Since Crown Prince Rasan had abolished capital punishment, they would be hours at battering their prisoner. There were also the guards to

be flogged for having let the young man into *majlis* with a gun.

Later that evening, Princess Awisha sat before her husband in the salon where the women of the hareem received male visitors. Vapors of mint and wormwood filled the room as she tipped the gold spout and directed a long skein of tea at the glass. The tea struck the rim of the glass, splattering all over the tray and the charmeuse dress Azadin had brought her from Paris.

What a pig! thought the Prince, fidgeting with his robes on the spindly Louis XV chair. He hated to be alone with her. The last time he had visited her, a month ago, she would not stop tossing a round sugar cake in the air and catching it, one-handed, then back and forth between her hands, around her head down into a hand in her lap, then straight up in the air with a spin on it to catch it overhanded. The whole time she'd worn an expression of disdainful superiority on her puffy face. After her numerous breakdowns, she was barely presentable, but he didn't dare provoke her while her father the King was alive. Nor could he divorce her until his uncle the King died, and one could not take a second wife in this day and age.

These days polygamy was considered bad form, like slavery and gelding.

He slipped his tea. It was too hot; she had not even tested it. He dashed it onto the rug. She seemed not to notice. She did not offer him the plate of sugar cakes but instead leaned back in the couch, folding her arms over her stomach with its damp tea stains, absently gnawing on her lips.

He asked after the health of their three children, who were at the Spring Palace in Ajuz' with the hareem.

"All are well, thank God," she answered mechanically."

He had to look away from her knees drifting apart, her ankles caving outwards so that her Italian high heels pointed at each other. She was mad, insane.

She didn't react as he talked about the assassination attempt in *majlis*, the Berber problem, the troubling reports about the Berbers' new saint Babas Umaloo. Nor did the state of the stock market or the debut of the new television station the next evening seem to interest her. "And how is your guest, the American?" he asked at last. "She tried to come to *majlis* today. You must explain our customs to her or there will be more embarrassing inci-

dents. We must make certain that any foreign guest leaves Masmoudia with happy impressions."

The new hypnotic drug that Azadin's American doctor had given her that afternoon made it difficult to think; Awisha would have preferred to fall back to sleep than to sit having tea with her husband. She struggled to gather her wits, then remembered her promise to Connor. "I would like to make a gift to her. She wants to have a manservant. I thought your steward might go to Tittawen and pick out a suitable man. She wants one who is light-skinned and tall, not too young, with dark eyelashes--"

If she were not the King's daughter he would have slapped her. "A love slave? Do you realize how it would look to the international community if it were known?" Masmoudian Intelligence had told him that his wife's friend was related to Blakey International, with whom he had many important contracts. All he needed was for the woman to report to her company's magazines and newspapers about the slave she bought in a Masmoudian souk. "And do not mention to her the assassination attempt of today. Port-Au-Wazz is not stable now. Take her to Ajuz'." In the hareem the crazy woman would forget her idea -- American women didn't know what they wanted. "She doesn't want a slave. She wants a man." One night with a real man, and

American women learned what it was they didn't know they wanted.

He pictured it: one night in the desert, in the Samra sands, near Ajuz', under a full moon like an unthreaded pearl. He would give the American a gift she would not forget.

"Go with her to Ajuz' tomorrow," he told his wife.

Chapter Seven

TO THE SPRING PALACE AT AJUZ'

"What?"

". . . ."

"I can't hear you through that ridiculous veil."

The Princess peeled back the two layers of georgette to reveal puffy, unfocussed eyes. "My husband says no."

"So what? We don't need his permission."

"But Connor, I can't go against my husband."

"What's he going to do, throw you in the dungeon? As far as I can tell, you're already in the dungeon. Anyway, weren't you our school wrestling champ? You can get him down on the mat and yank his face off any time it suits you."

"But darling, I have sworn by our God I will not help you to have a slave."

"Then I'll go over his head. How about the King, is he more enlightened?"

"My father, God make his life long, he is very sick. He can't even speak." Awisha began to gnaw at her raw lips.

The royal sedan, followed by a military escort jeep, traveled west on the fifteen completed kilometers of King Musa Route One, then continued on the sand, following the beach coastline.

Connor noticed the cat shedding profusely all over the seat of the limousine. "I don't think this climate is going over big with Simone." She turned to her friend. "You don't look at all happy with your life, Wishy. Why don't you divorce the guy, or take a lover? You could always buy a brace of slaves -- I'll split it with you."

If her marriage was unhappy, it was God's will, Awisha said. Besides, the only grounds for a woman divorcing a man were sexual impotence, and even then he would keep the children. If she were caught in adultery, she would be stoned to death. "Our punishments are hard because God wants us to be good. We are not so different from America: We have laws so that people will try not to be bad, and we have punishments if they do not try, yes? This is right?" She rummaged in her little jeweled box for a pill to elevate her mood.

"So long as it doesn't apply to tourists. Is there a doctor where we're going?"

"No. Why, my friend?"

"Good." Connor snatched the little box of pills, lowered the window, and hurled it out. Tablets and capsules twirled away and danced briefly on the windshield of the jeep behind. Connor imagined some lucky Bedouin finding the Dexedrines and making it to Mecca in half the usual time. "You should see the expression on your face. Portrait of a junkie. I'm sure it's taking all your royal restraint not to strangle me with your veil. Listen, those pills are bad news. Think of them as unclean."

"But the doctor says I must have these --"

"Wish, you're suffering from post-partum depression. It's fairly common to flip out after you have a baby. But if it's ten months later and you're still living for your next upper or downer, it's the pills that are the problem. Go ahead and take drugs if you want to get high, but don't take them because some doctor says you're crazy."

Awisha was already feeling better when they reached the northwestern tip of the Masmoudian island. Transferring to Landrovers and jeeps and turning inland, they crossed the upper corner of the Tannur, a cracked and pebbled plain of slag. From there the caravan moved on to the Samra, the eastern desert, flat sandscape that rippled and turned from gray to yellow, tufted by camelthorn. From

time to time they saw a walled town off in the distance, a cluster of nomads around a well.

The first few scrawny trees appeared, then meager groves in the wandering sand. At last the dunes leveled into a broad plain. Here, a sudden chaos of jostling date palms and orchards of olive, orange, almond, and clove trees crowded like an intoxicated mob around to Ajuz's wall, a thick rampart the same honey color as the soil. Soldiers on horseback galloped out to meet them. Passing through a great arched door guarded by Yemeni mercenaries in magenta uniforms, and through a small shuttered kasbah, the motorcade entered the castellated walls of the Spring Palace. Tame zebras, antelope, apes, and flamingoes roamed freely on the grounds. The jeep escort remained at the gate of a third wall, as the royal Landrover continued on alone, under an arcade of jacaranda and oleander trees, to the steps of the women's palace. A band of miniature horses and dogs trotted up to stare curiously at the new arrivals.

Connor woke, sweating, in a windowless room. The intricate stucco carvings on the ceiling spun and reversed like the insides of a watch. Where was she? Throwing off the sheepskin coverlet, she sat up, searching for her

shoes in the darkness. Her suitcases were lined up at the foot of the divan.

When she opened the door into the corridor, she found herself in a second-floor gallery that overlooked a court paved with elaborate tiles, echoing with the splash of water in mosaic'd basins. Through narrow casement windows, Connor could see past the maze of walls that enclosed the palace, out over the town. A halo of dust clung to the desert horizon, where the sun had recently set. *Muezzins* called the evening prayer, their voices faint in the violet air, whirring upwards like gnats eager for dark.

Connor continued down the gallery. Through open doors left ajar she could see more dim, close apartments like her own, each furnished with carpets and divans and muslin pillows, plus the occasional domed hairdryer or exercycle. As she went down a staircase, through catacombs, kitchens and laundries, steambaths, slaughter-rooms and bakeries, servants flattened against the walls, averting their eyes when she passed. A tall ebony-skinned man in a white shift appeared, smiling, at her side, and wordlessly led her through a columned arcade lined with canals from the fountains. The sound of water gushed and trilled, accompanying the clack of Connor's high-heeled mules and the slap of the black man's slippers. Another sound, distant and

treble, grew louder as they approached the heart of the palace.

Suddenly Connor was standing in the entrance of an immense atrium. Alabaster columns rose to a ceiling laden with chandeliers, clumps of brilliant crystal sagging like huge twinkling grapes. Along the rosy marble walls, hundreds of women sat on plump gold-brocaded divans, a clamorous soprano din rising through the fog of musk. Some wore sumptuous caftans of maroon, lime, saffron, coral, indigo, and flame, their hems dragging from the heavy gold stamped into the cloth, silk ropes and seed-pearls looped in their hair. Others were clad in ruffled chiffon fantasies by Milanese couturiers. Hundreds of little children tottered across the carpets while laughing maids kept them from colliding with the tea services.

The women fell silent and fixed their kohl-lined eyes on Connor. Princess Awisha called her name, patting the cushion beside her. Feeling about as elegant as a carhop, Connor sat and accepted a glass of tea.

These women were all soft textures and hidden pins. Removed from the outside world and raised in captivity, the wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, and concubines of the royal family had been cruelly overbred for femininity, diminished to glints and points. Connor glimpsed the sub-

terfuge in their obedience, greed in their surrender, hysteria in their poise, madness in their sensitivity. Held within walls, far from the desiccating elements, yet they appeared as pliant as willows, their mouths mimicking the spicy nonsense of birds in their branches.

"Mutluq wants to kiss you!" Awisha laughed, restraining a baby whose jowls were prickly with sugar crumbs.

"And Rashida, she is dancing for you!"

The little princess had stretched her mother's veil above her head and began to revolve her pelvis; a concubine started to pluck an *oud* while the exultant hareem clapped and beat their gold spoons on saucers.

Then Queen Johara arrived.

The children vanished; cushions were laid; low tables were placed end to end down the center of the hall, and a gold cloth was spread over the tables' acre-long surface. The maids circulated with towels, silver basins and pitchers for the women to wash their hands for dinner. Queen Johara sat at the head of the table, completely enveloped in fabric save for her toothless mouth.

"Can she get me a slave?" Connor whispered. Surely the Queen had some clout.

Awisha petted her friend's hand nervously.

The royal hareem had always been a velvet battleground, and Johara, most languid and subtle of generals, preferring betrayal or poison to bludgeoning, held the top of the silken heap not by beauty but by her sheer ferocity. She would have mounted the throne herself when Musa was incapacitated by his stroke were she not so advanced in years that her own faculties had also frayed.

The Queen had never been far from the center of power. Before wedding King Musa, she'd been married to his brother. To him she'd borne Azadin, who as an infant became engaged to Musa's eldest daughter Awisha, placing him next in line to the throne after Rasan. During the first seven years Johara's sons lived in the hareem, she had so terrified them that even now they felt unable to act without her leave. It was not unusual for the princes to visit the women's palace solely for an advisory sitting with Johara, never once asking to see their wives and children. Her judgment was the shrewdest in all Masmoudia; her mastery of the Koran and the poets stupefying. She was truly influenced only by one man, however: a palm-reading magician from the Dar Loosh.

The meal began with bowls of soup, daintily eaten with spoons. Then utensils were abandoned as platters of halved sheep's heads in sizzling leaves arrived, then the

remaining bodies roasted whole on platters of rice. Dove-like hands plunged to the wrists into steaming dunes of rice, tearing the sheep to shreds. Grease dropped like glass baubles from chins; mouths chewed energetically while maintaining deafening conversation. Connor contented herself with defoliating an artichoke.

Two girls further down the table watched her, then fell back on their cushions, laughing and pinching each other's bosoms until the Queen called them whores and daughters of sluts.

"You must at least taste a little bit of everything," Awisha said. "It shames us if you refuse."

Connor sighed. Half-heartedly she nibbled some roast mutton, goat's-liver brochettes, chicken with pickled lemons and onions in oil, sweet pigeon pie, eggplant paste, buttered semolina studded with dates and hard-boiled eggs, sour goat-cheese in pools of buttermilk, grated carrots in sugared orangeflower water, pastel sherbets in flavors of mint, almond milk, tangerine, and rosewater, tiny pears, walnuts, and jasmine tea with sticks of absinthe poking out of the teaspouts.

At last the service was cleared. As everyone drifted back to the divans along the wall, maids appeared with incense burners in the shape of crouching lions. The women

flapped their garments in the sandalwood smoke, opened caskets of perfume and daubed each other with little gold wands dipped in fragrance. The room grew hushed as a servant removed the embroidered drape from a large television set. "We watch the first Masmoudian news program," whispered Awisha, "produced by my husband's brothers Hamad and Fuad."

"Good evening in the name of God," said an attractive unveiled anchorwoman on the screen.

"Whore! Filth from a dog's uterus," said the Queen, maintaining a stream of curses through the entire fifteen-minute news report.

The lead item was an action by Berber saboteurs in the Dar Loosh mountains: A bomb had exploded at the King Musa Water Utility Project and destroyed a cement mixer and a Pakistani. The next item was a false report (written by the Minister of Defense) stating that the great saint Babas Umaloo had passed away. ". . .and the Masmoudian stock market closed today up 75.3 points," the news concluded.

Queen Johara ordered the tall black steward to put a film in the video cassette machine. Some women excused themselves to pray; the rest stayed to watch a scary American movie about zombies.

On her way to bed, the Princess stopped by Connor's room.

"Did you ask her?" Connor sat up in bed. "Did she say I could have one?"

Awisha looked glum. "The Queen, my mother-in-law, my aunt, she is not well. She says you are a whore and other things."

"Okay, but is it yes or no?"

"This means no, darling."

"How about all these guys running around in white shirts, then? They're kind of old, but--"

Mortified, Awisha explained about the eunuchs. "Why don't you just stay to have enjoyment with my family and forget this idea?"

Connor frowned. "How long do I have to stay in this House of a Thousand Yentas?"

"Until my husband sends for us to return. Days or weeks or months, only God is knowing."

How much more barbaric treatment could she and Simone take? Connor punched her silk pillow as Awisha left.

In her room, Awisha found a case of German beer hidden under the rows of beaded slippers in her closet. The little old blue-legged palmist-smuggler from the Dar Loosh

had made his usual delivery to her maid Shammar. She popped open a can. If only Connor would leave matters to God, the Princess thought as foam spurted onto her sleeve. He always took care of everything.

Chapter Eight

THE THIRTY-SIXTH NIGHT

It was well after midnight when the eunuch woke Connor up, delivering a hand-written note from His Royal Highness Prince Azadin. Dressing quickly, Connor slipped out of the palace.

Standing on the marble steps, she peered around the moon-blanching esplanade. A man's white robes and headcloth glowed beside a parked Landrover. He bent to caress one of the miniature saluki dogs.

"You've come to take me away!" Connor nearly danced down the stairs to the Prince, who straightened to his full height below her chin.

"My brothers are falconing south of here, but I left our camp tonight to find you. I have promised to show you the full moon over the Samra desert. When I give my word I am slave to it." He grinned at her, his teeth a white scimitar under his shaggy mustache.

"You angel!"

They drove through the empty kasbah. Soldiers silently swung back the great door of Ajuz', and the two left the city, chugging through the dark tousled oasis,

out onto the open desert. Azadin stopped to open a bottle of champagne, which Connor held between her blue-jeaned thighs as the vehicle jolted onward. "I don't know how I stood the past two weeks," she shouted over the engine. "No phones, the worst TV programs, or it's video ping-pong or old horror movies. My T-shirts were ruined in the laundry. . ." The final straw had been when Simone Weil's ovaries started acting up. "It makes her go 'round in circles and scream, so the maid thought Simone was possessed by a devil and started beating her! I mean, that place is like a snake pit! Those women are getting really twisted in there."

"The enemy of women is solitude," quoted the Prince.

"Don't forget men. And women. And carbohydrates!"

They stopped at last in a valley, where the moon shone like an unthreaded pearl. Azadin unpacked camping gear: carpets, embroidered pillows, several jars of caviar, tinned fruit salad, crackers and cheese, tea bags, styrofoam cups, plastic forks, a jar of sugar, a bottle of mineral water, a quart of whiskey, and a handgun carefully wrapped in a paper towel. The air was piercingly cold. Spreading the carpets on top of each other, he set about creating a fire from a packet of charcoal and a cigarette lighter, breathing heavily from his exertions. This was

the last time he'd try to entertain a woman in the desert without his steward.

Connor swung the champagne bottle, twirling in place. The seamless landscape whooshed around her, the dunes' backs arched like whales and coated by the ivory moonlight. "Forget the fire," Connor said, "and come under the carpets with me, Prince."

He tittered, brushing soot from his hands. "I am sorry. They didn't teach me to makes fires at the University of Oklahoma."

"You've never done this before?" She lifted the corner of the top carpet and slid under.

"I am not a Bedouin. I am a city Arab."

"Then I'm your first desert date, ha ha."

He glanced around the desert uneasily, burying the gun in the sand at the corner of the carpets before he slipped between them beside her. Connor handed him a cup of whiskey. "Here. Now we can relax and get loaded."

The liquor kindled their cold faces. On her back, Connor stretched, then went limp, as though crushed by the warm heavy weight of the carpets and the granite light of the moon.

The whisky caromed through Prince Azadin's veins. As he gazed at Connor's beautiful profile, his chest swelled

unbearably. He considered the terrible grace and mystery of all life. The desert, the stars, the woman, the forbidden liquor, and all God's fathomless designs: To know these things only increased one's ignorance, for to arrive at the heart of anything was to be completely lost; truly God was everywhere and nowhere!

He moved closer to Connor and drank some more. Abruptly he burst out in a flood of Arabic, spontaneously composing a love poem.

"Wish those stars would keep still," said Connor, when she was pretty sure he was done. "I must be smashed."

"I am telling you," the Prince pressed on, "in Arabic which is such a beautiful tongue, that I am in love with you, and you are like a bird, so fly away with my heart to your nest and let's make love."

"I wouldn't waste this scenery for anything, what a perfect place to get laid! But first you have to promise me something."

He winced at her lack of poetry. These American women trampled all over the grace and mystery of life like driverless mules. "What, darling?"

"Promise you'll give it to me, first. Swear by your God."

"I swear by God, His name be praised, darling." His conquest assured, Azadin's mind began to wander.

"Swear by your mother," Connor said craftily.

"Anything you want, my sultanness," he said, startled out of a daydream about charging more money for larger shoe sizes in his store, "I swear to give to you, by my mother, God keep her, and by God, his name be praised."

"I want a slave."

"I will be your slave."

A hyena chuckled in the distance, raising Azadin's anxiety. He wished he were anywhere else but this Godless place.

"A real one," Connor said firmly, pouring more whisky into their cups.

In the spring palace, the achingly gibbous moon kept the princesses awake. "What does he see in her? That skin like a rag faded by the sun."

"She is a pond whose surface shines and whose bottom is filth."

"She has made some sorcery on the Crown Prince. He is going to take her as his only wife."

"She wants to be Queen. She has done some Christian magic to make the King die. This morning they opened a

goat in the slaughter-room and its liver was shriveled up into a human head resembling the King."

"God protect us!"

"Right now the faithless slut has sneaked out to meet Awisha's husband," hissed Khadija, one of King Musa's ancient concubines. Secretly she rejoiced in the outcome of her latest spell to separate Azadin and his wife. Khadija, a towering Sudanese, had borne the King three sons, but Queen Johara had had them all burned at birth. Thus Khadija became the enemy of all Johara's sons, especially the eldest, Prince Azadin. She had burned incense with fur from a black cat and fur from a dog and the outer layers of an onion and a garlic, then she had written a verse on a strip of paper that she paid a eunuch to bury outside Azadin's villa:

The sun is upside down

The moon is upside down

God, as you have turned

All these things upside down

Do so also this couple, Awisha and Azadin

Make her see his face as a monkey's

Make him see her face as a donkey's

When he leaves, she comes

When she comes, he goes

In Connor's absence the concubines stole into her room, laying a dried lamb's tail by her pillow, sewing incantations and long black hairs into her pillowcase, and slipping a scorched pan under her mattress. When Simone, the devil cat, mewed weakly from her cushion, they clutched each other, whispering, "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!"

Later that night Awisha was visited by her young cousin Princess Najiba, who told Awisha that her husband and her friend had run off for a night in the Samra. Her pretty complexion lurid with triumph, she lit an Egyptian cigarette and waited for Awisha's response.

Awisha offered her a beer. Perhaps Connor would pull one her pranks on the Prince, she thought, like the time she'd tied up a concert pianist in their room at Twill House. Preparing him for sex, she'd gagged her enthusiastic partner with his cummerbund, fastening his feet and hands with his dress hose, then gone down the hall to borrow a joint. Getting stoned in Wren's room, she'd forgotten all about the musical prodigy, who completely missed his recital in the college auditorium.

Awisha shook with laughter at the memory. Najiba fell back on the carpet with her, the two hooting like idiots, until Najiba nestled her tobacco-flavored tongue inside Awisha's lagery mouth.

The slave-girls slumbered through the night, rolled up in their soft muslin spreads along the walls of the communal quarters, like cocoons along a branch. The one from Marrakesh moaned and rocked her hips in her sleep: She was making love with her handsome *jinn*, the spirit who came to her nightly, starved for love, from a world of restless spirits all said to be composed of pure flame.

The palmist squinted over the Queen's outstretched hand, kneading his gray beard and scratching the hole in his cheek. "The man who rules Masmoudia does not rule the mountains. Let him scratch in their shadow but not climb into their eye. . . ."

That meant her stepson, the Crown Prince. His projects in the Dar Loosh were insane, he had as much sense as a lamp at midday, whereas her son Azadin --

"One night your eldest son will fly without wings, and he will be lost."

She sucked in her breath. Azadin in danger? She would make him swear on her life never to take an airplane at night.

"Do not eat so much and so quickly," he giggled.

She overturned her palm and slapped his wrist lightly. Habib's predictions were uncanny, but sometimes the little blue-legged man went too far.

Far to the southwest of Ajuz', horses' hooves scrabbled over the high ridges of the Dar Loosh. Berber warrior chiefs swarmed down the mountainsides to Tittawen, the town in the foothills where the two great *wadis* joined. The chiefs would convene there at dawn to witness the supernatural baraka of Babas Umaloo, the saint calling the Dar Loosh tribes to evict the Crown Prince's soldiers and foreigners from the mountains.

To the north, in Port-Au-Wazz, the Polish embassy's party was still in full gear. An era was ending. At the royal press conference the day before, the Crown Prince had announced the discovery of rich and unparalleled deposits of bomb-grade uranium in the Dar Loosh mountain range. As Indian servants twirled about the guests with trays bearing glasses of the new gin, secretly distilled

from turnips in the embassy's kitchen, an American salesman named Ralph Shunt regaled everyone with Baluch jokes.

There had been trouble that day with the harbor amusement park's new Ferris wheel. During a maintenance check, four Pakistani laborers had been flung to their deaths from the cars of the wildly spinning machine.

"I hear the wheel's back in action," said Ralph Shunt. "Just needed oiling, so they threw in a Baluch."

"Drink!" called the Polish ambassador, at once giddy and morose. "We may never be friends again!"

In His Majesty's chambers in the central palace, King Musa was propped up on a divan before a vaulted window, his old slave Suleiman at his side feeding him mashed dates and almond paste. Since his stroke, Musa had learned to chew again.

Rassan sat at his father's right hand, recounting the day's events in a monotone. Musa preferred the beautiful newscaster on the new nightly television program, but her version of the news was censored and mostly fanciful.

Calls, telegrams, and invitations had been flooding in from all over the world since the press conference, Rassan explained. The capital wasn't ready for a thick descent of foreign envoys. The flyovers and tunnels were far

from completed, and the amusement park's machinery was suffering the ravages of sandstorms. Berber terrorists had captured some Japanese contractors overseeing construction in the Dar Loosh, and were trading them as domestic slaves. The stock market was up 108 points.

With all the international visitors expected, plans for the King's birthday would have to be expanded to include a *son et lumière*, tours, and cook-outs in the deserts, said Rassin. A New York press agent was being hired.

" . . .which reminds me of the time I was stuck in a rented bungalow in Baja with a team of father-and-son rapists," Connor said. After she'd told the Prince she was having her period, he'd refused to have sex with her because she was "unclean." She'd thought that was rather finicky of him. Still, she cheerfully entertained him until dawn, spinning tales and plying him with drink.

By the time the morning star rose and the moon had gone gauzy in daybreak, the Prince had passed out. Connor tossed the empty whiskey bottle at a dune, exhilarated by her success. He'd promised her a slave.

Chapter Nine

A *POUF* IN TITTAWEN

The Berbers of Masmoudia had survived one of the grimmest transplantations in the history of religious war.

In the eighth century AD, the Moslem Arabs who'd conquered North Africa had been unable to extinguish or convert the pagan Berbers inhabiting the plains and mountains of what would become Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. By the time the invaders took up residence in neighboring lands and the compromise of co-existence was achieved, the recalcitrant Berbers had been re-conquered and re-converted some twelve times.

One of the Arabs' fleeting victories involved a group of Berber tribes called the Masmouda. Unlike the relatively sickly, swarthy Arabs, the Masmouda were gleaming with health, clear complexions, and the incidence of light hair and blue eyes was mysteriously high. From among their prisoners the Arab generals selected five thousand of the most beguiling youths and maidens, blonds, redheads and ravenhairs whose skin ranged from apricot to milk, and drove them out of the high pastures of the Atlas Mountains

to be sold as slaves in Medina. The Arab command was puzzled by one thing: All of the blue-eyed captives were all hard of hearing. (Unbeknownst to their captors, they had imbedded chalcedony gems, then considered priceless stones, into their ears.)

For seven months the caravan straggled across the Mediterranean coast. Two thousand young Masmouda perished of heat and starvation in the Libyan and Egyptian deserts; then fever swept through the Arab command, who began to reel with delirium and vomiting. The prisoners, who had not shared the soldiers' food, bribed several guards with chalcedony, gained their swords, then massacred the entire escort, fleeing on camels through Abyssinia to the mouth of the Red Sea. With their remaining gems, they bought an old *dhow* and sailed into the Indian Ocean.

After the boat ran aground in shallows off an island shore, the fugitive slaves waded to the beach onto a dismal flat landscape of sand and loess. Just as they were giving in to despair, they saw a distant shadowy diadem: mountains.

The great mountain range so resembled the Masmouda's homeland in the Atlas mountains many thousand of miles away that all the survivors fell in their tracks to praise Allah, whom they had accepted during their captivity. They

marched toward the sight. Fortunately, the hostile Bedouin nomads who roamed the desert had no innate skill for farming mountain slopes and no inherent resistance to the moist cold and snow of the Dar Loosh winters, so the Berbers found an unclaimed sanctuary. Free at last to serve the one God along with the trees, streams, and stones they had always worshipped, they ascended their new mountain home.

The island Arabs maintained an uneasy *détente* with the mountain tribes. Both benefited from trade: In exchange for such things as the blue cloth for their trousers, the Berbers traded grain, rose oil, occult aphrodisiac powders, and the eerily beautiful adolescent boys and girls sold in Tittawen.

These offspring were an important source of income for very poor families, families with too many children, or those in which a second husband was not eager to have his predecessor's litter in his household. An unusually pretty child would be raised among the women under quarantine, grown like a rare seedling in dark rooms, fed sweetened cream to plump its buttocks, its skin never contacting any fabric harsher than muslin. Later the child would be schooled in the art of entertainment -- singing, poetry recitation, dance -- and watched for signs of puberty.

Then instruction in the arts of pleasure would begin -- semen retention, use of potions, feigning the emotion of love - and a fee was fixed. The young floret was then displayed at the agent's house.

Legally the boy or girl was an indentured servant whose parents had consented to wages of usually two *rials* a year. These wages were withheld until the youth had earned back his purchase price. At that point he was free to quit the household, but since it would have taken three lifetimes to earn back a price that was never less than two hundred *rials*, the servant was forever a slave.

It was the fashion to grant love slaves their freedom after five to eight years: According to the Koran, the true believer who freed his slaves would be summarily rewarded in the afterlife. They were past their prime of desirability, anyway, and ready to move on to other functions. After the emancipated slaves returned to their families, the money from their original sale often went toward a good marriage.

Some chose to remain even after they were freed. Sometimes a master loved and valued his slave above his own children (a slave was more loyal), and placed him in a position of considerable power. A slave could become a

minister, steward, counselor, captain -- even rich and powerful enough to keep slaves.

The *muezzin's* call to prayer woke Sidi Messoud, confidential steward to Prince Azadin. It was dawn in the Tittawen kasbah. As a special guest, Messoud was given his own chambers in the governor-pasha's villa. Washing his face, hands, and feet, he bowed in prayer northwest to Mecca. A slave-girl brought him the morning meal. When he finished eating, the girl returned and removed the tray, hesitating in the doorway with lowered eyes; he made no sign of wanting her, so she slipped away.

The kasbah stood at the base of the Dar Loosh foothills; undulating orchards of peaches, figs, walnuts, pomegranates, and olives rose to meet steep slopes climbed by steps of glistening green terraced fields where Berber farmers tilled wheat, maize, barley, and alfalfa. Herdsmen lived on the rocky pasturelands; cliff settlements and caves dotted the hoary peaks of the mountains. Spring would soon erupt with blood-black flowers, and the streets of Tittawen would be filled with the scent of Masmoudian roses, signaling the advent of the flood season.

A slave-boy came, carrying a stringed *oud*. As he knelt and tuned the instrument, Messoud was struck once

more by the beauty of the Berber race, their brilliant blue eyes and elegant features. The Prince had chosen Tit-tawen wisely; the best slaves were to be found here. This boy had tawny blond curls and coral-pink skin, as if he had been reeled in from the ocean floor. Yet Messoud knew his delicacy was artificial; the boy had been reared indoors, knowing neither sun nor work, to produce just this pink-and-gold effect, but Messoud could see the tough resilience of his race shining in the boy's metallic blue eyes.

Messoud nodded tenderly as the lad's head bent over his plucking fingers. As he sang to the older man, himself a former slave, the boy glanced up, his eyes supplicating. Messoud motioned him, and the boy rose and approached, turning instinctively when he reached Messoud's knees. Truly the real loveliness of the human body was not revealed when it approached, thought Messoud, but when it turned to leave: two incandescent globes, buoyant fastened bubbles, sailing sun and sun, moon and moon. It was a good practice to have sex before viewing prospective slaves, Messoud felt, so that personal emotion wouldn't cloud his judgment. Lifting the slave's white shift, he gathered the young marvel into his arms.

After the boy had left, the steward washed thoroughly, shaved, put on fresh robes, and left for the slave-agent's house.

The houses of Tittawen were the same pale coffee color as the soil, with ruggedly carved lattices and doors. Their corners were melted and crumbling from the annual floods; occasionally a gouged scar showed where torrents had wrenched off a balcony. Messoud enjoyed the early spring sun and mountain-cooled breeze as he walked, watching the long canoes skim across the *wadis'* glancing sapphire ripples. A black-skinned slave in the traditional white shift preceded him as he strolled into town.

A group of unveiled Berber women, tattooed on their chins, stared at him with derisive blue eyes, then disappeared into a white-washed chapel, where the local folk sought the advice of a living saint. Children carrying pans of raw breadloaves scampered through the alleyways to the communal ovens. The smell of roses trailed from the rose-attar factories, overpowering even the rancid fumes of the tanneries.

The slave-agent, an energetic little gray-bearded man with blue legs and a hole in one cheek, received Messoud in a modest salon. After the customary glass of cardamom-flavored coffee, they passed a few hours smoking a water

pipe and idly talking. Messoud asked where all the men in town had gone; the agent explained that they had left to pay respects to a new saint in the mountains, a man named Babas Umaloo, who was said to be as huge and as bald as a Dar Loosh peak and yet was capable of flying like a swallow. Conversation drifted to the stock exchange, television programs, and problems with domestics, at which point Messoud mentioned that his lord Prince Azadin needed a male servant.

A strong worker? The agent had a Somali as black as a goat's liver and with muscles hard as anthracite. Or a handservant? He had a rare pair of Japanese, if one did not mind shortness.

No, Messoud explained, the Prince needed a tall light-skinned young man for private service and festivity.

The agent nodded at his assistant, a lanky boy whose head was shaved except for one long thick lock flowing down his back. (The Berbers believed that their boys needed this dangling rope so that they could be yanked out of danger -- or towed up to Paradise, if they died in battle -- by their ever-vigilant *jinns*.) The boy left the room.

After the noon prayer and a lunch of grilled kid with rice and wild duck stewed with olives, they washed again

and sipped several glasses of sweet lemon-balm tea. At last Messoud was ushered into a windowless carpeted chamber. A dozen naked youths huddled on a round brioche-like cushion with a raised knob. Their flesh gleamed; they had been prepared by baths, unguents, and depilatories. Their hands covered their genitals and their heads tilted back, so that all parts save the face were in shadow.

Messoud circled the *pouf*. An experienced buyer first assured himself that a slave's face was a whole and harmonious planet whose features did not compete for attention. He clucked his tongue at an Egyptian whose nose and lips were separately splendid, but together too grotesquely dramatic, ruined further by eyebrows that nearly flew off his face. He paused before one copper-haired boy who smiled, revealing rows of marvelous white teeth like rice-grains swollen in milk. Seeing Messoud's interest, the agent told the boy to stand. As he did, his hands left his groin, and Messoud noted with favor the 'cucumber skin' on his penis and its healthy wine undertone. The boy was also tall, with a waist as slender as cane; his skin was firm and fresh but had a peculiar dusty hue that did not complement his golden-flame hair. The steward moved on.

All the youths were standing now; at a word from the agent, they turned and knelt on the *pouf* and bent their

heads down on the central cushion, forming a flower, each of whose petals ended in the double lobes of their raised buttocks. Messoud grazed his palm over their texture, now and then dipping between the thighs to cup their testicles.

Once more he stood before the copper-haired one, who lowered his lashes until his aquamarine eyes conveyed a languorous plea. He opened the boy's mouth, and started at the sourish smell that greeted him, betraying a treacherous tongue. "His father was a Hindu slave," the agent said. "The mother was a fair Radif Berber, and he has a wonderful gift for--"

Messoud stopped him. "These are too young. The Prince needs a man, not a boy."

The boys subsided on the *pouf* in pouty bewilderment. The agent looked perplexed. In a love slave, one always preferred extreme youth. To buy an older slave meant to inherit the indelible gouges and scuff-marks of previous masters, as well as absence of virginity.

"A manly young man," Messoud added. "Such as a woman might favor."

"Ah!" The agent sighed: One gained nothing by attempting to decipher the tastes of women. He did have a very comely servant whose testicles had been removed,

suitable for the women's quarters, but he was no more than fourteen now; perhaps the Prince would be satisfied to buy this one and wait a few years for the desired effect of manliness. Buy seeds, the Palestinian proverb cautioned, but do not eat them. Wait, and you will have grapes.

"The Prince needs a servant now. It is for his new villa in Zhubba," Messoud said. Privately, he shared the agent's view: Purchasing a grown man for pleasure greatly reduced the opportunity for control. After twenty summers a slave's character was irreversible, a man had become such as he always would be. But the American woman wanted grapes out of season, and did not care if they were ripe or even fermented: She was a Christian, after all.

Sadly Messoud retired to the salon, where the assistant served them more tea and honeycakes. "Now it comes to me," the agent said at length, "there is one who might do very well. An unusual, pitiable case I saw recently when he stopped at my house."

The agent went on to tell of a Berber of the Wilad Jebel tribe between twenty-two and twenty-five years of age. "He is as handsome as the rising moon on its night of complete fullness, and he is the youngest and most beautiful of eight sons. The father died early in his life. His name is Selim, he was raised here in my house until his

manhood grew upon him, and he was sold to a merchant in Tittawen. Both the merchant and his wife were very fond of Selim, but after six years, Death which ends all enjoyments claimed the old man. His wife, reluctant though she was, freed Selim, because she had promised his manumission to her husband as he lay dying."

Selim had returned to his home in the mountains to find all his brothers dead from a blood-feud with a family of the Al Gouni tribe. The sheikh of the Wilad Jebel and Selim's aged mother made the boy promise not to seek vengeance. The feud was over and the other family had paid the blood money. Selim, the last living son, would surely have been killed if he had attempted revenge. He had no experience with weapons. He had been schooled in one craft only: that of giving pleasure and delighting the eye. Unskilled at farming, he sat at home, while his mother and sisters worked in the fields, until floods washed away their seed and their wheat crop was lost. The family moved farther up the Dar Loosh, into the caves, his sisters weaving blankets to support them.

"By now the mother is very old and sick," said the agent. "and Selim feels useless. Last month he made a trip down the mountain to see me. He believed he might become a slave again, in the hopes of changing his circumstances

and finding as generous a master as his first. He wants to become the source of money to his family he was before, and to take up once again the art in which rested his pride. He is a very proud young man, and he does not want to learn a new trade. I am afraid he will take to the streets, if he has not done so already, with the many young men wandering about, waiting for Fortune to reverse their luck, or a *jinn* to swoop down, pluck them up and toss them into the garden of a beautiful princess with skin as white as cream—you know these dreamers.

"I know of no one so marvelously handsome or adept as Selim. When he was in my house, he was the best of them all. I made a fine profit when I sold him, but it is my heart, not my purse, that wishes for him a second happiness in as illustrious a household as the Prince's. If God wills it, you might see Selim tomorrow, if my assistant finds him still in Tittawen."

Sidi Messoud was encouraged. He would take his time inspecting the slave, he knew, dining and drinking tea with the agent for several days more if the young man seemed promising. Sometimes faults not apparent in the first encounter showed on later visits. Virtues emerged that had first seemed to be faults. Time and beauty were the gifts of God to be exchanged between men. Now it was

time for the afternoon prayer. Rising to leave, the royal steward promised to come back the next day.

Chapter Ten

THE LOVE SLAVE

Connor turned down the straps of her maillot, lay back onto the beach, and positioned her limbs for a fine suntan. Wisps of caramel hair wavered in a breeze she tried to pretend came from the Côte d'Azur and not the Bay of Two Dogs.

She deserved this holiday. Life in the hareem had been intolerable after she returned from her little overnight camping trip with Prince Azadin. No one seemed to appreciate that she had nearly died out there. The Prince was so hungover he could barely see to drive, so they got lost in the heart of the Samra desert, where the dunes rose like cliffs that a clever eastern wind remolded into craters one minute and then whipped up into cliffs the next. If they hadn't chanced upon a Bedouin scout, they would never have found their way back to Ajuz'.

When Connor finally staggered into her bedroom, she found a desiccated piece of some creature's anatomy under her pillow, a charred frypan under her mattress, and Simone unfed and bawling in the closet. In the morning, she stepped into her favorite espadrilles and found the

insides coated with an odiferous mung. The only person who would speak to her was Awisha, who sat nobly by her friend and flexed her biceps menacingly, provoking Princess Najiba to fits of jealousy. Awisha had not yet learned about the promise Connor had extracted from her husband.

Two days later, one of the maids entered Connor's bedroom, ostensibly to clean it, and suddenly began to scream, as if in fright, and to beat Connor on the head with a broom handle. For every whack she gave to Connor's head she dealt another blow to herself on the arms or legs, so that when the other women rushed in, the maid was seen to be covered with welts and crying, whereas Connor, who had been too astonished even to yelp, had no visible signs of injury, her long hair covering her own bruises. The husband-stealing devil-sponsored American had tried to kill a poor servant!

Could Queen Johara be behind this? Connor wondered. At meals, the old woman would look up from her grilled sheep's groin and drench the tablecloth with a volley of Arabic that Awisha was too embarrassed to translate. Connor endured a week of such harassment, waiting for the Prince to make good on his promise. But at the end of the week, Azadin left for Paris to stump for guided missiles, without sending her a word. Crown Prince Rasan summoned

Awisha to Port-Au-Wazz to entertain the wives of the daily arriving international delegates. Fearing Connor would become bored and misbehave at these official functions, Awisha sent her friend to their now-vacant villa in Zhubba.

The Mediterranean-style villa was brand-new, gleaming white, and completely isolated on its vast strand of beach. It had a walled garden, a tiled inner courtyard, and a balcony-terrace overlooking the water. Azadin had left a skeleton household staff: a military guard, a cook, two housemaids, and a middle-aged black slave named Sayed who served as gardener, chauffeur, and maintenance man, as well as serving meals and fetching supplies from Port-Au-Wazz. Awisha also loaned Connor her young slave-girl, Shammar, who spoke a little English, as her personal maid. Slightly hurt that Connor seemed so eager to be alone, Awisha said she'd visit soon; Zhubba was only fifty kilometers down the coast from the capital.

As the royal limousine drove off into the dusk, Connor went upstairs to the master bedroom. She slept heavily until the following morning.

For the next eight days, she woke in the capacious bed, Simone lifting her head from the woven coverlet and purring idly, her eyes in slivers. All around the bed on its raised platform, ivory silk-embroidered hangings bil-

lowed and swirled, and across the delicately veined pearl-gray surface of the marble floor, sheepskin rugs puffed like scudding clouds. Finding a trove of Parisian oils, soaps, and cosmetics in the adjoining bathroom, Connor paddled through drifts of perfumed bubbles in the oval bath, squirmed happily on the bidet. She painted her nails, donned the airy caftan Shammar had laid out for her, and stepped out onto the terrace, where Sayed was waiting to serve her breakfast in a corner pavilion.

"Good morning, Marvin." Connor never remembered his name. Sayed bowed, ducking his long baboon nose, and poured her tea, unveiling a bucket of iced fruit, honey-soaked sponge-cakes, smoked fishes, and coffee-flavored yogurt all the way from New York. He hovered until she snapped her napkin at him, then disappeared in a murmur of white shift and bare feet.

Each afternoon she strode out onto the beach, turning down the straps of her maillot and lying back on the coarse sand. Watching the shark fins slice the waves like a regatta of black sails, she strolled up and down the shore. Sometimes she noticed Sayed walking a vigilant fifty paces behind her, until she flapped her towel at him -- "Go home, Marvin!" - and he retreated. After an hour or so in the sun, she went to her room for an afternoon nap;

then Sayed served her supper in the downstairs salon. Connor took one bite of everything, then motioned him to take away the rest. Sayed bowed his head, his bosom brimming with hopeless love.

Later Shammar read her fortune from Arab playing cards. "Man coming, man coming now," said the laughing black-eyed girl.

The third afternoon Connor was sunbathing on the beach when a shadow covered face.

"American crazy taking off clothes in hot sun is funny too much!"

"Habib!" She sat up. "How did you get here?!"

Giggling, the little gray-bearded man flapped his goat's-hair cloak, his pointed yellow slippers slapping on the sand. "Fly!" Off on a distant dune his lanky sidekick perched on one leg, his shaved head glowing.

"I thought you and Blek were in the Dar Loosh with Malcolm Pugh, discovering uranium and all that."

"I am in the Dar Loosh. I have eating the food and right now sleeping under tree. I am dreaming I bring you something." Out from under his cloak he brought an ice-cold can of TRIM diet cola.

"Habib! If you only knew how I missed this!" She popped the can open and gulped down the delicious carcinogens.

"You happy, you not believing your self!" The hole in his cheek deepened as he grinned.

"I haven't had any chemicals in so long! Can you get more? I'll pay anything."

"All you wanting, but very expensive. Twelve *rials* for one like this."

"That's three dollars a can! Oh well, you bring me lots, I pay you small fortune, you wonderful man. Hello, Blek."

The youth was motioning to Habib that they should go.

"Come back soon," Connor waved as the two Berbers walked back across the dunes.

Blek turned his head; his four gold teeth gleamed.

"Eat money."

Connor gulped the rest of the TRIM. When the men had diminished to two dark specks on the horizon, she lay back and closed her eyes. Just like a hustler, to walk a couple hundred miles just to sell a can of soda.

That evening Shammar tapped her cards importantly.

"Man coming!"

"He came," said Connor, "today. Past tense."

"No, no, coming," Shammar insisted. "Man coming." She hugged her shoulders and made kissing sounds.

Five days later, as Connor turned down the straps of her maillot and lay back, Shammar appeared to tell her that the man from the Prince was waiting for her in the salon.

Sidi Messoud was not surprised at the sight of Miss Blakey, who was Prince Azadin's preferred type in a Western woman: beautiful, big, leggy, graceless. The royal steward hoped she would be less trouble than the English nightclub dancer who had wept and screamed and entreated not to be sent home.

Western women never wanted to leave, once they discovered Azadin's talents as a lover. Messoud's own mother, God give her peace, had prepared the Prince in the art of lovemaking when she was a slave in the Queen's household. It was ironic; both the Prince's and Messoud's wives disdained these talents, shunning sex with their husbands, while Western women begged never to stop. It wouldn't take Azadin long to grow bored with this latest giantess, as he had with the others. Since the Prince was going to extraordinary lengths to please this American, he obviously hadn't had her yet.

She sat on a sofa in the salon, crossing her legs under her filmy caftan. Messoud remained standing. "His Highness the Prince has instructed me you have need of a servant. He has allowed me to find you a proper boy."

"Not too young," said Connor. "And he should be taller than me. Please check his birth certificate to make sure he was born between September 24th and October 23rd."

"But it is done. I have brought you a young man and he is here."

Connor's head snapped up. "Here?! Where?"

She was in a panic. The whole idea of a slave had really been just that, an idea, a passing mania. She'd been in the mood to get out of New York anyway, a very naughty mood that her astrologer would have picked up on and snapped her out of. But Larry was dead and here Connor was, faced with the prospect of actually having to go through with it. What should she say now? "Very nice, stick him over there, would you?" She'd have to stall for time, think of how to stop this situation before it got any more absurd. "I just have to run out for a minute. To America."

Messoud led her to the door of the salon.

A young man in a white shift squatted on his heels by the fountain in the courtyard. Near his bare feet lay a small cloth bag containing a few tools and condiments of his trade; his face was tilted up at the late afternoon sky as if he knew he was being watched. Indeed Sayed, face contracted in hatred, was watching him from kitchen window.

Connor stood close to Messoud. He smelled her suntan lotion's damp smutty odor, her fear, and something else.

"God, he's gorgeous," she breathed. "What's his name?"

"Selim." The steward was glad she was satisfied; to his own taste, the new slave fell wide of the mark. The agent had lied: Selim had plainly been working in the fields since his liberation. The skin which had once been white was now lightly tanned, as if stained with nut oil; the slender lines of his body swelled here and there with knotty sinews that scarcely befitted a domestic consort; and although he had evidently managed to soften his hands with rose oil, the plow had forever destroyed their yielding grace. The look in his blue eyes showed none of the diffidence of the years of slavery, but rather the autonomous steel of his people. Everything spoke of a free man: the toughened hands dangling over his knees, the curved

shoulders of an archer, not a minion, the glossy black hair swept straight back from a moon-proud forehead.

However, there was no denying he was breathtakingly handsome; Messoud himself had been impressed the first time he saw him. And his penis was the ideal length, two hands and two fingers. It was a pity the American spoke no Arabic, because Selim could recite and improvise excellent love poetry. He seemed genuinely eager to serve again, his expression charmingly compliant, long feathery raven lashes gentling those metallic eyes.

"When's his birthday?"

Messoud chuckled politely. "Here, a man is lucky if he knows if he was born in the summer or winter, because his mother tells him it was a very hot day or a very cold day - "

"You mean you don't know when you were born?"

"What does it matter for a servant? If this one does not please you --"

"It's not that." Connor peered again into the courtyard. The young man had looked directly at her. She quickly stepped back into the salon, unnerved. "No, he's, he's really cute."

"If you decide you do not want him, send your servant Sayed to me in Port-Au-Wazz and I will do everything pos-

sible to bring you someone of more satisfaction. Or perhaps you can telephone me." He beamed proudly. "Very soon we will have telephones all over Masmoudia, not only in the city. I have bought stocks in the company that is making them."

"I was thinking of going home in a few days."

Messoud tensed. If Prince Azadin returned from Paris to find her gone, the blame would fall on him. "But there are no airplanes for a week or more."

"You can't be serious."

"They are all full. We have many delegates from foreign countries coming and going every day."

"Now that you've got heaps of uranium. Soon you guys won't need electricity, you'll all be glowing in the dark." She wanted him to leave. Her heart was pounding so hard she needed to lie down.

"I am always available for any problem you may experience." He bowed. "God keep you, and peace be with you."

"Ciao."

Messoud left instructions for the new slave to be given a room in the servants' quarters, where he should remain until Connor summoned him. The steward wondered if

she ever would; she appeared rather afraid. What a waste, what an atrocity it would have been, to deliver a perfect pristine young virgin to a Christian mistress whose frivolity was exceeded only by her ignorance. Love slaves were artists, raised in the expectation of a master or mistress who knew the art of sovereignty as well as a slave should know the art of submission. It was a mutually dignifying relationship.

Yes, thought Sidi Messoud, Miss Blakey deserved Selim, flawed as he was, past season, used. She would probably think him wonderful, having never known anything better.

Connor lay down on her bed. When at last her heart slowed to a normal rhythm, she fell asleep.

When she awoke, she saw the arched window framing a lilac sky; dusk had spread its fawn-soft stain in the room. As the shadows gathered, only the white things in the room were visible, gleaming as if lit from within: the coverlet, the sheepskin rugs, the towel on the floor, the wall opposite the bed, the white shift crouched against the wall opposite the bed, the white corners of the eyes in the young man's darkening face.

Connor gasped. "What are you doing here?"

The hint of a smile tempered the severe elegance of his face. Under the long black lashes, the look was deferential, if uncomprehending.

"Do you speak English?" Connor sat up against her pillows. "*Parlez-vous français?*"

He stared warmly at her.

"Well! At least you'll never say the wrong thing!" Connor let out a nervous laugh.

He echoed her laugh. His white teeth glowed. Then the sky sank through blue to black and all the incandescent white things faded into darkness.

They moved at the same time, she swinging over the side of the bed to get the light switch, and he kneeling and catching her foot before it touched the floor.

He had an oil on his fingers, orangeflower and musk. He traced the stem of the tendon in back of her ankle, moving gently upwards, then joined the tips of his thumb and index and touched the fragrance to the center of her forehead, the back of her neck under her hair, each of her nipples through the caftan, swiftly, with the ghostly pattering of a moth. The fingers came down to cup her heel again and she felt his lips softly nestle on her foot while he stroked oil into her heel, as if he were soothing the ruffles of a bird.

She heard a low lyric man's voice, speaking in an alien tongue. "Courage, little dove," he said in Arabic. Behind the breasts his fingers had grazed, Connor's heart shivered like the delicate jangling of wind chimes.

Connor could see nothing; could only feel the caftan passing over her head, like a slippery wave, lifting her arms with it; could not understand the language in which the voice beseeched her to command him perilous missions, for the right to caress each part of her. Soon his hands were a drove of nocturnal beings which flittered, smoothed, scratched, glided; her skin shuddered and blushed. When he stooped and raised up her breasts and his thumbs discovered her nipples, he lamented the broken stems of these two enchanted pears, swollen so with syrup and cream they had dropped from the tree. Did he have the right to taste them? he asked her, but she didn't understand. If he touched them to his mouth, he said softly, he would be forever under the spell of the angel who grew them. But he was a fool, and rolled them over his tongue, mad with the fruits' liquor and flesh; and it was his folly, also to, to drink from the glistening pool in this place. His love was a star; when he saw her mirrored fire in the water, he imagined he could imprison her between

his cupped hands and bring her to his lips. So he tipped Connor's head back and drank, while she sagged back on the pillow and opened her mouth wide to his flowing tongue.

At length he lifted his head, and continued his story in a soft voice and a language that she would never comprehend. While he was drinking, he said, a gazelle had crept up to the pool and sucked from the precious swirl, and now she too raised her beautiful brown velvet head and met his eyes. If he inched toward her, with tender words, she might trust him. His tongue waded slowly down Connor's belly, pausing now and again to murmur reassurance, and the gazelle allowed him to come so close he could stroke her muzzle, still pearly with the delicious water from the pool -- they had both drunk from it, they were both bewitched, they mingled their liquid exultant remorse when he kissed open her matted lips. She trusted him now; she would let him ride her away.

The words were strange, they became music without words in Connor's ear, music which held and entered her. Then she was riding away; she was past understanding, past the bed, the ground, the bay; was climbing the air, beating the wind, and clouds rioted past her striving head like hectic surf. He guided her legs to reach and reach, he prodded and dug at her ribs and buttocks; her flanks

foamed, but he was urging from her a rarer lather from a deeper pore, and when they breached the firmament he said, "Look, we are here, my star, my gazelle, this is your place in the sky," and she gave out the last of her spirit, a blaze of light, diminishing to a point of radiance in the dark.

The cook kept Connor's supper warm on the stove, laying out dishes on the mat for the servants. When she sent Shammar to fetch the new slave, the girl returned alone to say he wasn't in his room or in the garden.

"Isn't she coming down for the meal tonight?" the cook asked.

Shammar shrugged. Squatting on the mat, Sayed rolled some rice into a ball with his hand. "He is with her," he said darkly.

The cook looked bewildered. "She didn't ask for him."

Sayed dipped his head, frowning; his thick black brows merged. Shammar giggled.

"She didn't summon him," the cook repeated. "He had no right to go to her."

Did she weigh nothing, that he could roll her in mid-air, turning her hips with a potter's hands? The blind

potter and his treadle, in the black night; inside her he was hollowing a new vessel, she could feel the form change, the wheeling course of perfection and its pain -- something harder than his softly sheathed hardness was stirring her. He lifted her in midair and spun her to the overrunning brim.

After, he eased off the collar of silver with embossed silver beads from his still-hard column. Putting it back in his cloth bag, he brought out a long strip of silk.

Lying on his side, he slowly knotted the middle of the scarf, watching her with a faint smile, long lashes hung halfway as if to shield her from the mica sheen of his blue eyes.

She could see everything now. The oyster shimmer of dawn lit the straight lean lines of his body, which had been plucked clean of hair. His skin was luminous, like a tree peeled by lightning.

He lay back, pulling her onto him so that her back rested on his chest, as if she lounged on a long branch. Her legs parted, the wet root of him sliding into her. He made low dove-purr sounds in her hair as he rocked in and out of her, stretching the silk strip between his hands

and sawing it lightly on her mound, the soft knot burrowing deeper each time it glided by.

His arms circled her tight when she started to tremble. The tree shook her madly until the quake passed.

When the blue of midmorning shone through the window, Connor was dazed with hunger: He plucked a rose from the garden, dipped it in a saucer of honey, sprinkled something crumbled like cloves on it, and fed it to her.

She drank from a bowl of water. He put little pastries in her mouth, pecking seeds off her cheeks with his lips, brushing the snarls and burrs from her hair. Then he fed her a glass of cold milk thickened with almonds and sugar, tipping the last of it onto her bosom. The drop paused like a heavy pendant, then meandered lazily down her stomach, until it caught in her tamped curls, and his tongue vanquished it. Her ribs ached from panting. He lifted her up and brought her into the bath, where he ran steamy water, and caressed the sweat and labor from her body with a white stone from his bag. He had a poem and a twist for each toe, long songs for her legs and back, silence before the fragility of her breasts, and low-bowed string hums for the rubbing of her head, while he worked. Then, after sweeping over her a froth of soap, a dancing

dash of water, and oil smelling of amber and the nibbled rose, he took her back to bed.

The cook was indignant. "He just walked in and ordered me around, had me making cakes and almond milk. How do I know it's what she wants? We haven't seen her since yesterday afternoon." She told Shammar, "When he thought my back was turned he sprinkled something from a bag onto the pastry--in God's name, he's putting a *sehúr* on the poor woman! All those people from the Dar Loosh are mixed up with sorcery."

Shammar shrugged at the cook. "I talked with him this morning in the garden when he was picking the new roses. He's so handsome."

Sayed slammed out of the kitchen.

In the lavender shadow of that afternoon, Selim plunged once more into her and dislodged love from his mistress. She wrapped her legs around him and delivered it. The sweet welter scented the bed. Yet he had surrendered nothing, not a drop of his seed. He smelled only of spice, saddles, and smoke.

Chapter Eleven

A WASTE OF STAMPS

BLAKEY PUBLIC RELATIONS, INC.

One Lincoln Court

Suite 1405

New York, N.Y. 10019

Tel. (212) 637-7000

Cable BLAPCO

Albright Blakey-Vandermuffing, Pres.

March 5, 1978

Dear Connor:

What a coincidence to find out my little niece (I still think of you as little) is in Masmoudia of all places! You may wonder how I know that you're a guest of the royal

family, but just remind yourself that *Blakey Industrials* is a worldwide corporation and not some lemonade stand! At any rate, I felt sure that if I sent this letter c/o His Royal Highness the Crown Prince, it would find you in due course.

It's so exciting to think of you gadding about the shimmering sands and minarets, and I'm sure they're giving you the royal treatment. You must be quite tanned by now -- I understand the beaches there are out of this world in the spring, or at least that's the kind of word-of-mouth I'm helping to cook up on the first leg of my "See Masmoudia" campaign! I'm terribly high on it. You can imagine what an honor it was to be approached by an emissary of His Royal Highness the Crown Prince and to be told that I'm the one they want to take charge of improving His country's image abroad and promoting tourism.

I'm sure you can appreciate what a plum account this is for me. I intend to make Masmoudia the place for out-of-the-way fun, finance, glamour, whatever. And Masmoudia sounds so much more laid-back than Abu Dhabi, which I hear is quite prissy about foreigners, liquor, dancing close, gambling, etc. His Royal Highness the Crown Prince sounds

much more hip, and He has already instituted many projects to lure tourist capital--have you seen the amusement park and those "flyover" streets? We're not starting from scratch, though as you can imagine this job requires Maximum Finesse.

You'll probably be bowled over to learn that I am coming to Masmoudia very soon. (With Blakeys trotting all over the globe, it's not only become a small world it's positively microscopic!) I'm arriving mid-April with a group of travel agents to kick off the Masmoudia campaign. I'm bringing them to the King's Birthday Expo and *Son et lumière*.

I'm sure you're also wondering what all this spiel has to do with you! You've probably guessed correctly that I want a favor from you.

You know, Connor, our little office is just a baby finger of the giant mother company, so it is highly unusual for me to get a personal call from the Chairman of the Board of Blakey Industrials! When your Aunt Packard called me in person, I knew it had to be important. To make a long

story short, we had a long talk about Masmoudia and, you might as well know, you.

Masmoudia is one of B.I.'s most promising new Third World markets. The Big Fry division, for example, has already signed a deal with His Royal Highness Prince Azadin Beni Wazz for the Juicy Jack franchises, and since the discovery of uranium Masmoudia has also naturally become very attractive to our pharmaceuticals, equipment, aerospace etc. divisions.

Net-net, Connor, we don't know what you're up to over there, but Packard and I want you to get out of Masmoudia the instant you receive this letter. We can't afford to have a Blakey with your particular history of indiscretions loose on the scene. We understand about you and Her Royal Highness Princess Awisha Beni Wazz having a little *auld lang syne* over your Alma Mater -- although we're not quite clear why the Princess should want to reminded of that horrendous Harlem debacle and those horrible headlines. Since you've been over there a month and a half now, we don't believe we're being unjust in asking you to cut short your visit.

I don't mean to come down on you, Connor. You and I have never personally locked horns before, and to be perfectly fair at least some of the catastrophes you seem to attract appear not to be completely your fault, as far as we know (i.e. the volcano episode in Maui, which was clearly out of your hands). Packard of course has her own irons in the fire and she wants you out immediately, but if you want to take a week to round up your things and do some last-minute shopping and make your farewells, it's all right with me. With all we have at stake, I'm sure you can grasp that we're not taking any chances or accepting any excuses.

Your mother wants to know if you're coming to the Quogue compound for the big Blakey oyster contest in May. Sounds like fun!

Love,

Aunt Muffie

Chapter Twelve

PORT-AU-WAZZ

On the advice of her palmist, Queen Johara collected her retinue of princesses and servants and left the Spring Palace at Ajuz' for Port-Au-Wazz. It was time for her to bring a halt to her stepson's policies, his absurd infatuation with foreigners and modernization.

A few concubines, slaves, and unwanted wives were all that remained in the women's palace at Ajuz'.

Crazy Khadija, the old Sudanese who had sworn to destroy Johara's sons as the Queen had incinerated hers, embarked upon the deadliest *sehúr* her African magical arts could manage. First she burned pepper, musk, and frankincense, and placed a saltless dish of stew near her door, to please the household spirits. Then she consulted a chart to see which *jinn* was available during this particular hour of the day in this week in March, and what direction she must face in order to conjure the demon.

She took three paces to the northeast, recited a surah from the Koran, and called upon all the *jinns*: "In the name of

God, calm our hearts which are afraid and guard us from enemies without, and enclose us by a wall without lock or key."

Since it was a *sehúr* for evil, the *jinn* appeared behind her. In the little round "devil-mirror" she held up she could see his beautiful steaming black fur and his yellow globe eyes.

On the afternoon of the day of the tragedy, another plane full of VIPs landed in Port-Au-Wazz. The line of black limousines, stretched like an eel in front of the airport for hours, quickly broke apart, each sedan heading for a different destination.

"Let me give you one of our few Masmoudian thrills." The American consul told his chauffeur to drive over one of the completed flyovers.

"Whee," his old friend the German ambassador said. "How much was that?"

"A million bucks apiece. Likewise the tunnels. My kids are already skateboarding on them. When everything's finished, you'll be able to drive up and down flyovers clear across the city going east-west, or if you drive north-south you'll be doing the tunnels, down and up. If everything gets finished. The architect who talked the Crown Prince into the flyovers and that artificial island you saw in the harbor just skipped

the country, and we hear he's in the Seychelles having himself a frozen daiquiri and a good laugh. I'm sorry to say our banks loaned Rasan the money for the flyovers, and they're really sweating the next payment. All these con artists have to do to gain access to the Crown Prince is show up at *majlis* and wait their turn. By the way, are you planning on going to *majlis* today after lunch?"

"If Allah wills it. They say that quite a bit here, don't they?"

"I'd sooner Allah was in charge than Rasan. We call him the Crown Prince Rat's-ass. You'll see the resemblance. Hey, did you bring the knockwurst? We're climbing the walls for some pork. Betty's pregnant again."

Looking out over the harbor, the vice-president of a German brokerage house sat as his limo took the route along the port to the Grande Wazz Hotel. The harbor was glutted with boats: deliveries of a hundred police cruisers and a fleet of new freighters for the Wazzco Shipping Company. Because the artificial island with its vacant amusement park occupied most of the boat basin, the ships that came daily couldn't reach the quais to unload their cargoes of furniture, appliances, automobiles, and food. "I was expecting something more like Kuwait," the VP said to the junior stockbroker who had met him

at the airport. "I don't believe I've ever seen a country quite like this one."

"Oh, Masmoudia's not a country," said his subordinate, who had been here a month. "It's a piece of strategically located land, not a nation. Except for the royal family, and some Bedouins who pass through on occasion, there aren't any people. Oh, there's one." In front of a desolate housing project, a nomad let his camel drink from the swimming pool. "Otherwise there's no one living here but foreigners. The National Guard are Yemenis, the engineers are Jordanians, the contractors are Koreans, the hotel staff are Indians, and the crooks are American."

The two men chuckled. Thanks to the success of the new stock market, all the European brokers in Masmoudia were in high spirits. After rapidly buying and selling the same land and utility commissions, they'd driven share values to artificial heights. It was a wondrous illusion of volume and activity, like selling tickets to a mirage.

In the limousine behind them, the British consul chatted with an eminent geologist he had picked up at the airport. Their driver claimed he couldn't tell which flyovers had been completed, in all the rubble of construction, so he was taking the long way about to the consulate, along the chaotic docks. The scientist stared at the tons of cement, sugar, rice, and

flour in bags, dumped in bloated pyramids so high that the bottom bags had split, rats teeming around them. The food and merchandise was arriving so fast that dockworkers could no longer scale the piles to get near any ship that managed to berth; instead, the workers, Pakistanis and Baluchis, slept or brewed tea in the doorways of shacks improvised from corrugated tin and crates.

"There's not much room to live in this city anyhow, for the lower classes," the British consul was saying, "and there's no middle class any more, since they demolished the kasbah. The big population here is the royal family--thousands of them! And they're always tootling off to Europe themselves. There are some people in the mountains. Unfortunately they're right bang on top of the uranium. And now, with Pugh missing -- "

The week before, blasting for the first uranium mine had begun in the Dar Loosh. The engineers were driven away by Berbers on horseback, and the Crown's key scientist, Malcolm Pugh, had disappeared in the fracas. ". . . We can't create a stink over Pugh's disappearance until we're sure it's foul play, because our relations with that damned Rasan are rather good and we'd like a whack at mining concession."

"I don't mind risking my neck." The geologist had known plenty of exotic peril in his career. "I only hope there's enough uranium to be worth all the trouble."

"It's rather a lot. Rassan is holding out for an exchange, just a few knickknacks like atomic submarines and air-to-air missiles, before he grants mining rights. No one even knows if he's got control over the uranium--he can't keep the bloody Berbers away from the site for two minutes. And no one fancies giving a load of nuclear weapons to a man who can't even put up a proper Lunapark. The Soviets sent him some jets and tanks but the carriers can't get into the harbor, so even the Russians are rather off Rassan at the moment. Wish the old King would get better. He was rather all right--"

The clocktower clanged deafeningly.

"Two more hours 'til *majlis*," said the consul. "I'll trot you in to see the Crown Prince and we'll get you up into the Dar Loosh as soon as possible to have a look-round. And *find Pugh*, if you can."

Another limousine contained three Beni Wazz princes in Italian suits and dark glasses, who'd been drinking heavily on the plane. Their mother had dragged them from their business abroad--Azadin from Paris, Hamad and Fuad from Rome, where they'd been scouting locations for a spy thriller "Rendezvous In Masmoudia." Annoyed that they'd have to wait until much

later when they were inside the lofty walls of their private villas to have more whiskey, they glowered at their native land through the smoked windows.

As their car drew up in front of the women's palace, they were startled to hear the hearty *thock* of a tennis ball. "Good shot!" said a foreign female voice in the garden.

During the weeks in Ajuz', where she ended her dependence on pills, Awisha had recovered her natural vigor; she was now attacking her duties as official hostess with exuberance. At her first tea for the wives of the consuls, visiting dignitaries, and businessmen, she learned that most of the women played tennis, or loved flowers, and all enjoyed martinis. Awisha borrowed a construction crew from the King Musa Trade Center site. After a long night of hammering and bulldozing, she looked out her window to see a splendid shimmering new pink-and-white clay court.

The Queen's personal palmist brought her cases of vodka, gin, and vermouth -- along with her usual consignment of beer.

The Princess was playing a round-robin doubles tournament alongside a Brazilian steel magnate's wife when the three princes arrived from the airport. Other women strolled in the garden, admiring the roses. A trio of slave-girls played Bedouin music as several Beni Wazz princesses showed a group of attentive Japanese ladies how to dance with scarves.

In a private room adjoining the men's reception, Queen Johara met her sons by King Musa and his deceased brother. The eight men sat submissively while she poured out her disgust for her stepson Rasan. As coffee was served, Azadin excused himself to send his steward to his villa and tell the American that he would arrive that evening for dinner alone with her.

Sidi Messoud reached Zhubba at five that afternoon. He told the cook to prepare a superb champagne supper for Connor and Azadin, with grilled shark's meat for Highness to eat immediately on arrival, to insure his virility. Then he sent Sayed to bring the girl downstairs.

As he waited, he could hear some monotonous American music being played up on the terrace: "I've traveled each and every highway. . . I did it my way. . . ." He was anxious to get back to the capital; something momentous was taking place at the Queen's conference.

After an hour, she finally appeared. Messoud was now furious. "Oh, hi," she said, as she was just wandering through.

"Good afternoon, Miss Blakey." He stood, and waited for her to sit down. She did not. Drinking from a can of American soda, she shuffled absently around the room, periodically bumping into a table. She was bony, and very pale. There were lavender smears of fatigue under her eyes; her caftan hung strangely in the back, wrinkled and stiff with patches like

dried milk stains. "I am happy to inform you His Highness Prince Azadin has returned from Paris and will dine with you this evening."

"Tell'm I'm unclean, will you."

Messoud smiled indulgently at the lie. "You are *haram*? What does this mean to you? An American does not believe in *haram*. Or perhaps you are saying you need to wash?"

"Believe me, even by American standards I'm unclean. Look, I just can't see him, that's all." She winced as she walked to the sofa. "He can't just snap his fingers. . .open your legs and close your eyes. . .I just can't. . .any more." She sat stiffly, as if her back bothered her. "Did I get any mail?"

"You cannot refuse to see the Prince in his own villa, Miss Blakey."

For the first time she looked at him directly. His expression held barely restrained brutality. She curled up on her side, taking refuge under a pillow. "If he comes, he comes," she said, falling fast asleep.

"*It turned out so right,*" the American singer sang as Sidi Messoud left, "*for strangers in the night.*"

Selim strolled in, wearing nothing but a pair of wet jeans that Connor had bought for \$200 from Habib, who'd magically turned up the week before. (Selim liked to wear the

jeans wet so they would turn his legs blue.) She'd also paid an outrageous price for a tape recorder and a couple of Frank Sinatra tapes to help Selim learn English.

Selim bent down and woke his mistress by stroking the backs of her calves. "Lady," he whispered. (He had learned that one word so far, from "That's Why The Lady Is A Tramp.") She uncurled, opening, with an awful groan. He gathered her up, making soft clucking noises of encouragement against her neck as he carried her back upstairs.

When Messoud got back to the women's palace in Port-Au-Wazz, Queen Johara was still in conference with her eight sons, who were urging a bloodless coup. She listened petulantly: A coup without blood was soup without salt.

Oblivious to the meeting of his kindred, the Crown Prince welcomed envoys, press representatives, and the usual native petitioners. Scanning the broad spectrum of foreign nations, he wondered which one among them was supplying the Berber rebels with arms and explosives.

There was an hour remaining to *majlis* before the evening prayer, as he listened to a poor tanner complain about the bread shortage in Port-Au-Wazz. There was no flour (though

Rassan knew it was spilling from thousands of sacks on the docks) and inflation had risen forty percent in a month.

"It is because our stock market is doing so wonderfully well," Rassan explained. "Everything is going up." To help Masmoudian residents weather this temporary effect of prosperity, he offered coupons entitling them to food discounts from any Beni-Wazz-owned King-Save Supermarket.

At the entrance to the hall, guards searched a petitioner for weapons. Rassan noticed the man towering over them, holding up his hands and biting his thumbs in the ancient pose of surrender. He met the Crown Prince's eye with a coarse familiarity.

"Who is that Berber giant?" Rassan whispered to the old slave at his left.

Suleiman pursed his lips anxiously. "I have never seen Babas Umaloo," he said. "I have only heard him described."

The entire room grew hushed. The guards glanced anxiously at Rassan, waiting for a signal to arrest the rebel leader. The man's bald head emerged from an immense goat's-hair coat like a buzzard perched on a tent; the foreigners present noted his blue ankles with curiosity.

"I come to you unarmed and in peace," the barefoot giant said in loud English, as he passed by envoys who had been waiting for hours to see Rassan. "Prince, I am in your power,

but I too have power. I am the mountains, you are the wind. Between us we can make great disasters. But we are different. I, the mountains, go nowhere. I belong in my place. I am the pegs that God hammered into the earth to fix the tent of his universe. But, the wind, go everywhere and belong nowhere."

The big man reached the throne. Speaking in Arabic, Rassan pointed out that the whole world looked to Masmoudia for this wonderful resource in the Dar Loosh mountains, and that the uranium mines would mean one hundred percent employment for the Berber tribespeople. The ogre continued his harangue in English as if he was deaf to the royal remonstrance. Rassan could only sit and suffer alarming bolts of pain in his sinuses (he had caught a cold from the air-conditioning) as the man shouted on and on, in the unmistakable hoarse adolescent pitch of a eunuch. If Rassan ordered the Berber arrested there and then, the Western reporters present would charge the Crown with repression of human rights and the free speech supposedly guaranteed by *majlis*. "We are a cultural, ethnic, and religious entity which seeks its own preservation," the speech, clearly memorized, finally wound down, "and you are abusing our rights as an autonomous people. If you withdraw and make no further penetration, there will be no trouble between us. But if you persist in this evil which you perpetrate against all universal standards for human freedom, blood will rush

down the sides of the Dar Loosh, for every Masmoudian Berber will die to protect his independence and every Masmoudian Arab will die trying to take it from him."

The giant wheeled and left the hall. A flurry of foreign languages sprang up in the hall after the man exited.

Suleiman turned to look at his master. The Prince's expression was magnificent. He looked like his father the King; his Western education had fallen away and his Bedouin ancestry was calling him, filling him with bloodlust, the exquisite horror of vengeance. The Crown Prince turned to his venerable slave. "Bring me the head of Babas Umaloo," he commanded.

The British consul and the eminent geologist, who had not succeeded in speaking with the Crown Prince before *majlis* ended, walked down the Palace's front steps. The consul apologized. "Rather a good speech that big bloke gave, I thought, for a yokel. Still, if the rebels were holding Pugh hostage, don't you think he would've said something? Perhaps brought up a ransom?"

"Come to prayer!" called the *muezzin*, his amplifier sputtering. "Prayer is better than sleep!"

The men strolled through the narrow streets of the fruit and vegetable souks, the voices of Arab women rising as they haggled behind black veils, and men praising the beasts loom-

ing over them in the camel market. The sun's rays faded on the empty drive-in movie screen as a family of seven squatted in the dust, eating kebabs beside a parking post. The father unhooked the speaker-box and banged it with his palm to make the movie begin sooner.

The scientist and the consul walked on through the neighborhoods of modern villas in the process of being built. It seemed to them that the high walls surrounding Arab dwellings strove to create some mystique in this landscape that offered the senses and the imagination so little. Walls and veils and opaque language and maze-like designs provoked travelers to dream that a beautiful woman, or enchanted garden, or perhaps salvation, was hidden inside. Outside the walls, tethered goats efficiently consumed rubbish.

The two men reached the shore and turned to watch the bay suck on the last morsel of orange sun. The scientist's eyes roamed over the skyline, from the elegant silhouette of the King Musa Trade Center to the brute crouch of the old fort and huddled ships. In the middle of the harbor, the Ferris wheel glowed in the twilight. Newly installed streetlamps lit up simultaneously along the docks.

"It could work, you know," said the geologist. "Just wants a spot of organization."

"It needs *us*."

At the women's palace, the meeting between Johara and her sons adjourned. At last they'd decided Prince Azadin was to march the police into *majlis*, and force Rasan to renounce his succession to the King. He would be exiled to the royal compound at Ajuz' for life, and Azadin would gain the golden headrope, Masmoudia's new Crown Prince.

After the meeting broke up, Azadin's mother kept him behind and made him swear on her life never to fly at night. He agreed, kissing her. On a guilty impulse, he went to men's reception and asked to see his wife.

Awisha bounced into the salon, flushed in a glittering purple caftan. Plunking down on the sofa, she poured the tea, landing a verbena-scented stream neatly into each slender glass from three feet away. Azadin wondered if she was on the verge of another manic fit, and if now was the moment to bring up the American doctor's recommendation that she have a hysterectomy.

Listening with a yielding delicacy, she responded animatedly and cleverly, though her gestures were a bit athletic. Azadin found himself eagerly telling her about problems of state, his plans for the King's birthday exposition, his health, the planned coup, his dream for a healthy, progressive, neutral Masmoudia, and his ultimate ambition to become

the mediator of peace between the Arabs and Israelis, Africans and Afrikaners, Soviets and Americans, Protestants, Catholics, Muslims and Communists.

With whom but one's own cousin could one feel so close, so safe? he thought, for the first time realizing the wisdom of his marriage. He and Awisha had both been raised for unusual duty, both traumatized by their American education; both shared the same tenderness for their Arab heritage—even the same physical features. In a surge of affection Azadin desired his wife, warming to her as to his own self. He sat down beside her on the brittle French baroque sofa: The American girl in Zhubba could wait another night. "Have the slaves prepare our private quarters," he said, "and have some musicians there."

She rose, flustered. "I cannot, my husband."

"You are *haram*?"

She was incapable of deception. "I don't want it." There was a trace of anger in her voice.

He stepped forward to grasp her wrist and conquer her restraint with a kiss. She shook him off. What was happening? He couldn't hit her--she was the King's daughter--though he would so soon succeed the King. . . ' *If you strike your wife and know not why, don't worry. She always knows!*' the proverb said. He slapped the Princess's broad cheek.

Conditioned by tennis, her arm drew back instinctively and delivered a fist into his solar plexus. He doubled up with a grunt and fell to his knees on the soft carpet's labyrinthine scrawl. Terrified, Awisha ran from the salon, vanishing deep into the women's quarters where he was forbidden to follow.

Prince Azadin collapsed into his Thunderbird, switched on the headlights, and leaned heavily on the steering wheel to ease his bruised organs. Then he gunned the engine to life, squealing away from the women's palace. He was in a hurry. If he reached Zhubba too late at night, the American woman might feign fatigue. He envisioned Connor's long thighs like alabaster columns mounting to the arched entrance to the baths; like the moonlit streets skimming under his hands as he guided the wheel. Giddily he honked the horn, which played "La Cucaracha" in roistering staccato.

Instantly, as if in remonstrance, all the electricity in Port-Au-Wazz flickered and went out. The new streetlamps and the full capacity crowds at the Grande Wazz Hotel and the embassies had overburdened the system. Azadin's headlights illuminated the approaching intersection; he turned east for the beach and Zhubba.

As the Thunderbird sped up the ramp, Azadin felt as if he were soaring aloft over the darkened city, as if he had been plucked up by a great black winged *jinn*. Then the car began its fatal descent.

When she heard the news that her son had driven off one of the unfinished flyovers to his death, Queen Johara choked on a knob of lamb gristle. She died at the table, in front of a horrified hareem.

By Islamic law, Azadin's widow and daughter received nothing at his demise; all the property, houses, and wealth went to his two baby sons. Only one man stood able to assume the Prince's roles as Minister of Defense, Chief of Protocol, Chief of Police, owner of Kurry King, local operator of Juicy Jack, co-owner of Wazzco Shipping, King-Save Supermarkets, Musa-Vista Real Estate, Beni Wazz Furniture, Wazz-ease Shoes, Worldwide Wazz Travel, member of the board of the King Musa Water Utility, Popular People's Bank, and Wazz-Loosh Mining Authority. Crown Prince appointed Azadin's steward to fulfill his deceased master's duties.

Sidi Messoud gave Awisha the Swiss bank passbooks the Prince had stored in his office safe. She thanked him graciously and he decided to wait a year before proposing marriage to her.

Sidi Messoud accepted his good fortune with the proper humility. It was true, he marveled, in God's world anything was possible. A slave could become king.

Chapter Thirteen

MAROONED

She clawed at the lizards climbing her legs. They were grinning; it was absurd that they could smile. She realized she must be dreaming, and tried to wake herself by shouting for help. But her outer body slept on, encasing her scream like a sarcophagus. *Wake up!* She strained against the heavy lid of the dream until it gave way, and she tumbled out.

She opened her eyes. She lay on vast sheets, embroidered hangings all around. An arched window framed a pond-green sky, warped as through a bottle-bottom. Where was she? Something was still undone. Selim entered from the terrace. She wailed his name, wanting him to cradle her. Instead he climbed on top of her and lunged inside, with the cool probe of a professional ransacking a tomb. His implacable blue eyes stared down at her and he pushed her breasts in circles; then his overwhelming shape blocked out all light. He drove at her in darkness until she came. Then he disappeared, leaving her stranded.

She was still dreaming. She struggled to surface a second time, waking onto the same sheets as before. The silk hangings curled in a salt breeze from the arched window. Empty

diet-soda cans littered the bed or had fallen onto the marble floor. Simone let out a cry, working her claws into the sheepskin rug. Connor could hear her maid Shammar giggling out on the terrace. Frank Sinatra was singing, "*The record shows, I took the blows,*" as Selim's voice joined in, "*Undid it my way. . . .*"

He had kept her awake a long time, Connor remembered, days and nights of plunging and thrusting and coaxing. Now all she did was sleep and he didn't come to her at all. Whenever she disengaged her tongue from the parched roof of her mouth to call, Shammar would wander in with a cold can of TRIM. Connor would drink, and sleep again, then wake with another ghostly orgasm, the same pestering phantom of need.

Her backbone was scraped raw from receiving him. She had given him so much fluid she was gnarled from dehydration, yet still there was more, her juices swamping her thighs, caking the sheets and caftan, the blowzy bruised petals of her cunt sobbing. Could you die from lust? she wondered, fighting to emerge from this dream, and falling back under in defeat.

She slept through the servants' orgiastic wailing. Sayed had returned from his errands in Port-Au-Wazz with news of the deaths of Queen Johara and Prince Azadin. Sayed would be freed. Usually slaves were given manumission at the master's

death to help guarantee a choice seat for the deceased man in Paradise: where, by the eternally flowing springs, he would be served unending refreshments by the dark-eyed *houris* and slave-boys.

Selim crept into his quarters, sat on the mat he had yet to sleep on, and stuffed the tape recorder and some of Connor's money into his cloth bag.

"Why doesn't he come?" Connor's voice came from leagues under. "I called and called. Is there any mail? Don't, don't turn the tape over, there's . . .bruises on the other side, oh, sore everywhere."

"My poor darling!" Awisha stood gaping at her girlfriend's ghoulis appearance, the rifled closets, the cans everywhere, and the moaning cat rotating in the middle of the floor with its hindquarters raised. She had not been able to visit Connor until the funeral rites for her aunt the Queen and her cousin the Prince were over, arriving at the beach villa to discover Connor in bed, wasted and delirious.

The Princess questioned Shammar, who said Connor had been on one of her strange diets, refusing all food but the American soda. "She wouldn't see anyone except for her new slave—"

"Her *slave*?!" Awisha cried.

Shammar stopped, frightened. Tearing her hair and clothes, she began to scream, "God spare her! He put a *sehúr* on her!"

Awisha wasted no time in making a decision. Sayed was sent to Port-Au-Wazz with orders to drive back a certain *sehúra* to cure Connor.

That evening, the venerable witch sat beside Connor's bed. Reaching into her King-Save shopping bag, she took out some string, measuring each of Connor's limp fingers. When the total length of all five failed to reach from the inside of the patient's elbow to the last joint of her middle finger, the *sehúra* sucked in her tattooed cheeks. "*Sehúr*," she declared.

"How?" Awisha asked.

"In something she has eaten or drunk."

"God's name," Awisha and Shammar breathed in unison.

The *sehúra* descended to the kitchen, where she three handfuls of herbs into a pot of boiling milk. "In God's name," she began the incantation, stirring the pot. "It is the hand of Our Mother Fatima which stirs. . . ."

Forcing Connor to drink the infusion, she held her head and stuck white rooster feathers down her throat until Connor had vomited everything up. Shammar washed Connor in another infusion the witch prepared in the bath. Afterwards the old

woman pitched herbs and incense onto the coals in a brazier and had Connor stand naked over the fumes. When she was done, she hung a silver lavalier around Connor's neck, filled with a preparation she had made of seeds, herbs, bark, animal hair and brains.

Connor went back to sleep.

The *sehúra* packed up her shopping bag. "God forbid that it happens again!"

"God reward you."

After the old woman had left, the Princess had a long talk with Sayed about this other slave, the young man from the mountains. He told her all he knew, then begged not to be freed, but Awisha did not have the power to grant his wish.

"Well, I feel absolutely marvelous." Connor plumped a pillow and slid it behind her back. "Strangest flu I ever had. You little sneak, sitting there so quiet and watching me sleep. How long have you been there?"

"A little time," Awisha said. Sitting on a banquette near the bed, she picked up an empty can of TRIM, studying the label. "Darling, where did you get this drink? You know, it is forbidden in our country because the company send money to Israel." Perhaps the Israelis had put something in the soda to make Arabs crazy, she thought.

"I buy it from a friend, this little old man with blue legs and a hole in one cheek. And I've seen you sock away too much beer for you to give me that 'forbidden' stuff."

"A hole in the cheek? The same man who brings me beer? He reads hands to see the future, too?"

"He said I'd meet the man of my dreams here. Ha!"

"Connor, perhaps he put something in the drink to make you sick." Awisha grew excited. "There is big trouble between us and the Berber peoples, and they know a lot of magic for having control of someone. This old man Habib and this bad-news slave are both from the Dar Loosh!"

"You think it was magic? Like some kind of poison or aphrodisiac?"

"It is wacky. But perhaps it is possible." The Princess turned the can, studying it. "It's saying here this drink 'causes cancer'!"

"I know *that*, I've been drinking it for ten years. More to the point, was it making me *horny*?" Seeing Awisha's bewildered expression, Connor laughed until pink flared on her cheeks. "I know how we can find out. We'll make *him* drink some." She smiled coyly. "I guess you know about Selim by now."

"Yes."

"Isn't he beautiful? Come on, let's get him in here. If he put something in the soda then he won't want to drink it, and if he does drink it and it has the same effect it did on me, he'll start coming buckets--"

"He is gone away," Awisha interrupted tersely.

"Gone!" Connor leapt out of bed, running to scan the terrace, the beach. "Where, where?"

"I don't know. Perhaps he go back to the mountains. They tell me he takes all his things, and the gifts you give him." She didn't conceal her disapproval.

"Since when does he have the right to just pick up and leave? This is just my luck. I only have him a couple of weeks and he runs away."

"Thanks to God he is gone! Look what he does to you."

Connor limped back to bed. "He was just doing his job. I guess it wasn't any fun for him, if he's gone. Tell me, maybe this is nit-picking, because he really was otherwise perfect, but don't you think it's weird if the guy never comes?"

The Princess's face went stony. "He is taught this, to hold himself. A slave must not come."

"Maybe I'm romantic," Connor sighed, "but why shouldn't he?"

"Because it is not right. For you the pleasure, not for him. His pleasure is to serve you. That is the way." Awisha's

voice rose until she was shouting. "Oh Connor, I am very mad at you! You come to this country and you want to do everything your way! And then you say everybody is the same and why does a slave not have sexual pleasure from you! Well, if you want to be a queen and have slaves, you must understand there is a difference between you and they!"

"Keep your shirt on--"

"You don't understand us! I know in America and Communist countries they say everybody is equal, but here we say, yes, equal, but they can't be the same. It is impossible. A man is not a woman, the donkeyman is not a king, a daughter cannot be her father's mother, the sand is not grain for bread. Yes, if God wills it, it is possible one day the donkeyman can be king. But they can't *both* be king, or who will drive the donkeys? So, between a person and his slave is this space. It is not shame. You can even love each other, but he still serves and you command. You are not better than he, he is not better than you, but you can't be the same. I know you were having your slave in your room all the time and sleeping in the same bed until you are crazy. You give him things and let him tell you what to do, and this is bad. He must stay in his room, and when you want him, you call, and when you don't want, you send him back to his room, and if he steals or makes you trouble, you have him beaten. Sometimes he is like a little child, to

test you. He want you to show him: Here is pleasure, here is pain, this is the way the world is. But I tell you, Connor, if a slave takes from you his pleasure instead of he gives it to you, then he is not a slave any more and this world it breaks in pieces. I am happy he did not come and I am happy he goes away. It means to me he is perhaps a good slave and he knows what is wrong. We have a proverb: *When you beat your slave and you don't know why, he always knows!*"

Exhausted, the Princess sank back onto the banquette. Connor's face was crumpled with contrition; tears hung in her lashes. It was her fault that it had all gone wrong; she'd let him go too far.

She remembered letting him put on one of the Prince's three-piece suits from the closet, and kneeling before him, unzipping the trousers, when his open palm swatted her head to one side and she toppled to the floor. Then he was on her, heavily, muttering defiantly in his own language, the sounds sticky and tangled with insult, no longer the lilting croon of poetry he'd spoken their first nights. She felt the scrubbing of cool buttons and linen and bared zipper-teeth on her skin, and a treacherous rapture climbing her thighs. The deeper he pushed the more she pulled him into her, until they had inched to the wall; yet again it was she who surrendered, groaning, her head bashing against the wall as he continued to lunge.

She woke some time later on the floor, the arched window framing the yellow afternoon. He was naked, eating bread and grilled meat, on the bed. His greasy fingers, flecked with charcoal and pepper, brushed crumbs from his chest. After a while he grew irritated by her staring at the wolfish rolling of his jaws and put the food down on the tray. She watched him will himself to hardness, the cudgel shape lifting off his lap in perfect obedience to its master. Then he picked her up and planted her on it, walking her out onto the terrace and moving her up and down under the steely sun.

She scrambled all over him, to shake off the terrifying pleasure and fall away free but he held fast until she came; then he removed her and propped her on a chaise long.

She would have slept a little were it not for the tape player squalling Sinatra: "*Through it all, when there was doubt, I ate it up, and spit it out!*" In her delirium, Connor imagined the voice was coming from her cunt, the empurpled ridges swelling with the orchestra, "*I tasted all, and I stood tall, and did it my way!*"

Later he crammed a half-eaten orange there as if silencing the nether voice: scooped the orange wedge up from the rattling tray on the mattress as he covered her like a dog from behind, reached under her and smudged the fruit's pulp into the cleft. His other hand scratched, thumped and slapped

her buttocks as he thrust, not letting her collapse no matter how many spasms she gave out.

Later she woke to see him kneeling in the far corner by the light of a candle, with her paper money in his hands, a thousand *rials* or more, and the contents of her purse scattered onto the satin lining of her fur coat on the floor. He looked back at her expressionlessly. Downstairs in the kitchen a pot clashed with a pan. "Take it," she said, trembling in the cool night. He seemed to understand, blowing out the candle with a gust of contempt.

He'd stolen her coat, too. Was Awisha right? Had that been all he wanted, Connor wondered, for her to say "stop," "no," "go to your room," or smack him with a rolled-up magazine? He was an exotic mechanism she had wound too tightly, she supposed, and failed guide as he ran through all his tricks at dangerous speed. She hadn't thought to ask for an instruction manual.

Of course, this was a different part of the world, and she was an innocent tourist. Maybe he was disappointed that she hadn't acted her role as mistress properly, but it served him right for doping her up. Once she got him to America, she could make him relax. She'd show him how roles didn't have to be *quite* so defined, and he would be free to come at last.

"Do you think he'll come back?" she asked Wishy.

"If he does return, I will have him punished." Awisha didn't think he would; a slave who wanted to serve always stayed. "If he wants to run away, then we must sell him or free him, because he is not good to us any more. We are fair with our slaves in Islam. It is best to free these ones who wish to be free."

"Free him!" Connor cried. "But then he'd be . . . free like everybody else! Why would I want to drag him back to the States then?" Guiltily she added, "I would free him after I showed him to the girls. I really don't believe in slavery, but I just wanted to make a point."

"I cannot let you to take this man out of my country if you do not free him. If you show him to everybody in America and you say, 'This is my slave from Masmoudia,' what will happen to the international opinion? No, if you want to take him with you, he must be free, he can be your boyfriend. If you want him as your slave, you must stay here." She added dubiously, "If God wills he comes back."

There was no use arguing with Awisha, Connor could see. "Hey, have you seen your husband lately?" she asked, wondering why the Prince hadn't stopped by.

Shammar packed Connor's bags for the journey back to Port-Au-Wazz while Sayed prepared the royal limousine. The two

former roommates walked along the beach, sharing a bottle of champagne from the departed Prince's collection. Who would she get to help her find Selim? Connor wondered, annoyed by Azadin's death. And how could she get around these pointless statutes about slavery? *If he comes he's not a slave and if we go he's not a slave but then he's free*, a sort of song rattled around in her brain, *and if he's free he'll come but also go. Can't he both come and not be free, or would he rather run than come?*

Connor's silence worried Awisha. "Darling, I'm sorry I did not keep my shirt on with you."

Connor handed over the bottle. "Pals, okay?" The Princess nodded eagerly. "Don't forget, you saved my life just now. I could have died of erogenous arrest. I'm sorry about Azadin, though. What will you do now?"

The Princess swigged on the bottle, wrinkling her nose at the bubbles. "I think I will get drunk."

"You're not going to stay in this ridiculous junkyard. Why don't you come back to the States?"

"It is God's will I stay. One of my sons may be King one day. Even if I am not happy to stay I must try to be good," she handed the bottle back to Connor guiltily, "and if I fail it must also be God's will."

"Oh Wishy, you are good." Connor gave her a kiss. "Never mind what God thinks, I say so. You're just not much fun, that's all."

"Masmoudia is not for fun. And still, I love my country."

"And I'm madly in love with Selim. None of it makes any sense."

Awisha started to giggle. "If you want a slave who loves you, you take Sayed! He adores you!"

"Marvin, that old guy back at the house? He just serves my meals and stuff. I totally ignore him."

"You see? That is why he loves you." Awisha stumbled in the sand, laughing. "That is the secret!"

Connor shook her head. Her late catastrophe had not erased her mania. Possession was nine-tenths of love, and proof of ownership was the glorious cascade of sperm. Even though Selim was her chattel, she had not yet truly owned him. He kept denying her the precious element, the molten pool glowing under its layer of protective rock. It was maddening: She wanted it all, for him to pump out every drop until he had no more.

Flinging the empty bottle into the sea, they turned back. Perhaps she should ask Habib for help; as a Berber from the mountains, he would know where to look for Selim, just as he always knew where to find Connor whenever he had something to

sell. It was just a matter of time before Habib traced her to the women's palace in Port-Au-Wazz; she'd ordered some more black market tapes a week ago. She fingered the silver lavalier of herbs around her neck. "Everything will work out, you'll see."

"If God wills it," Awisha said with an indulgent smile.

"Don't worry. We Scorpions are master strategists."

"Don't you believe in God?" the Princess asked wistfully.

"Do you only believe in the stars?"

Chapter Fourteen

DAR LOOSH

It was not a propitious time for the Crown Prince to visit the Dar Loosh mountains, even if he only intended to stand ceremoniously at their base. One omen after another warned against this journey.

First His Highness's helicopter was shot at by a band of Bedouin horsemen as it passed over the Najiz desert. Rasan couldn't tell who they were, and realized too late how little he knew about his own people.

His father the King would have known the tribe of his attackers simply from the style of their turbans. He would have called a council of sheikhs (those wed to his daughters and nieces, and to whose daughters and nieces he'd married his sons and nephews). At dawn, amid the armada of black tents and the surging dunes, he would have delivered a ferocious speech, swearing all to punitive action against those who had dared fire on the royal helicopter. The temporary army of tribes loyal to the Crown would have raided the rebel clan's camps, caravans, and settlements, slaughtering even women and livestock, until the recalcitrant sheikh crawled before the King,

begging to have his life traded for sparing what remained of his family.

Rassan would have to find a different approach, he knew. His own popularity would come, provided he was patient, as a result of hospitals, trade schools, and high employment, rather than atrocity.

When his helicopter landed, a Landrover and police escort brought him to the tiny Berber kasbah at the foot of the Dar Loosh. The north side of the mountain range was rocky and infertile; yet here it was that the British scientist Malcolm Pugh had discovered sumptuous deposits of copper, silver, manganese, and uranium.

None of the villagers had turned out in celebration of his arrival, Rassan noticed; nor was there any sign of mourning for the deaths of his stepmother the Queen and his cousin Azadin. The villagers would have to be fined. By the time the motorcade passed through the dreary kasbah, Rassan's fury was building toward the governor-pasha, an Arab he had appointed only last year, for whom he had built a modern villa outside the town walls.

As they reached the entrance to the villa, the Crown Prince saw that it was bedecked with palm fronds, red and white bulbs, cardboard portraits of King Musa, and black rib-

bons for mourning. Apologizing profusely, the governor-pasha invited the Crown Prince inside.

After the construction crews had arrived in their town, the Berber population of the kasbah had migrated to the upper slopes of the Dar Loosh, he told Rasan, not mentioning that the villagers had gone to the mountains to join the dissidents who'd been sabotaging the government's efforts to claim the site of the future uranium mines.

It had been scarcely a month and a half since Rasan had announced the priceless element's discovery. The Crown Prince was on an urgent mission to open and militarize the mines. Yet the initial excitement was fast diminishing. Unconvinced that the royal family actually ruled Masmoudia when the mountains remained unbreached, delegates and envoys had begun leaving the country in droves to confer with their governments.

With the King's birthday exposition a mere three weeks away, this exodus was affecting the Crown's credit rating, just when Rasan needed non-Saudi money for all his development projects—money from the same fickle nations he'd been paying homage to with his designs for modernization! The saying was true: *The one you ask to help you out of trouble is often the one who helped you into it.*

The Crown Prince's frustration was mollified after tea, when his party proceeded from the villa to the construction

site. Steamshovels, caterpillars, bulldozers, derricks, and trucks crawled about, starting construction on a luxury chalet and an aerial tramway to transport tourists up seven thousand feet to a spa situated on the peak, near the bubbling source of a *wadi*. This project would not be completed for two more years.

The titanic nylon breast of a hot-air balloon swayed above the site. Here was Rassan's answer to the problem of gaining immediate access to the uranium site. It would silently and gracefully bypass the treacherous paths and the Berbers; it would simply float over them, and land safely where a helicopter could not. As American sales rep Ralph Shunt had relentlessly demonstrated, a balloon of the right dimension could convey not only the new British geologist, six Korean surveyors and all their equipment, but also a small military escort, straight up to the site reported by the still-missing Malcolm Pugh.

"Good morning, Your Highness, how are you?" called an ebullient Shunt, striding out of the chaos of crews and tractors around the balloon.

Rassan shook his hand. "Very well, thanks to God."

"Hope you had a good trip. How're things back in ol' Port-Au-Wazz?"

"Fine, thanks to God, the stock market is going through the ceiling." Even the deaths of Queen Johara and Prince Azadin had not hindered the upward soar of activity on the Masmoudian stock exchange; if anything, the index leaped higher still the morning after the tragedy. The brokers seemed to buy and sell more feverishly every day, as though (as the Americans put it) there was no tomorrow.

"Ain't she some babe?" Shunt and the Crown Prince stood admiring the balloon tugging naughtily on its cable. The crew had begun loading and in a half hour she would be launched. Five of the Koreans posed and giggled in the bobbing gondola while the sixth stood outside and took photos.

The new British geologist was climbing aboard to check a kit when an errant D-8 caterpillar rode over the restraining cable and snapped it.

The balloon, with its light cargo of five stunned Asians and one eminent white man rose up the Dar Loosh and wandered south before an officious east wind batted it all the way to India.

In a Berber cave settlement high in the Dar Loosh, a young girl on her way back from the springs spotted the fantastical pink sphere with its tiny antennae (the Koreans' arms

waving) and ran home with her two clay jugs sloshing patches of water in her tracks.

Ducking the hanging clusters of dried peppers and garlic at the cave's entrance, she scuttled through flurrying chickens to where her mother squatted before a smoking brazier.

"I have seen Babas Umaloo in the sky! He's taken the shape of a giant flying snail!"

"He must be traveling to the men's council, where they're all taking the Oath of War," said the old woman. "Karima, look. You've spilled the water. Your brother was planning to wash when he wakes up. There's hardly enough for his tea."

Sending the girl back to the spring, she called softly for her daughter Jalila to bring incense to soothe the *jinns* of the cave, which had been agitated. She could hear their consternation in the cracks along the ochre walls carved with protective symbols. Sometimes she could see them, in human or animal form or a combination of the two. Sometimes they walked at the side of magicians just like ordinary folk.

The night her son Selim had appeared, his eyes haunted, wearing an astonishing coat of green fur, she'd almost mistaken him for a devil. The day before, the slave-agent's assistant had come looking for her son, who he said had run away from the Prince's household.

This puzzled the old woman; Selim had never been troubled by his slavery, accepting it as his destiny--his craft. After he was freed by his first master, he had returned of his own will to the slavemarket. Why should he now run away? He loved all things loved by God -- submission, ritual, covenant, law -- submitting to servitude as a leaf curled around a stem in an ancient design. In the days after he was freed, he'd even made up a sad song of exile, praising the master as his mirror, in whose silvery countenance he was defined, without whose reflection he was invisible. Selim was a Berber: He believed a slave was free so long as he remembered honor. A heart which ceased to care for its honor, to remember wrongs and to wish for revenge, to remember favors and wish for their recompense, did not belong in the breast of a free man. So what had he run from, if not bondage?

When Selim arrived from his long journey, shuddering with cold, his four sisters were asleep against the far wall of the cave. "You ran from a royal prince's house?!" his mother whispered incredulously. "Where God, His name be praised, led you in his great kindness?"

"The Prince, God's mercy on him, is dead," Selim told her in a voice without emotion. "But the Prince was not my master." He crouched on the matting, poising his hands over the bright coals of the brazier, his beautiful mouth slanting

downward. "My mistress is a Christian. . .an unbeliever." He looked to her for sympathy.

"Is she very ugly, my son?"

"No, she is very handsome. . .but she is a whore. From a bitch's litter spawned with the flies in the compost heap -- " He stopped, seeing his mother's cold expression. The *jinns* in the wall scraped frantic messages over the shrilling wind.

"The boy from the agent's house comes tomorrow again, to bring you back," she said. "He knew you would come here."

Selim hastily shook out his bag, his still-stiff fingers searching awkwardly for the bundle of paper money. "I will buy my freedom." He offered her the wadded *rials*. "See, there is enough."

"How did you get this money?" She made no move to take them.

"I took it. She let me. Look, she gave me all these things." He spread out the contents of his pouch: the music machine, the tight blue trousers, a bracelet, bottles of perfume; then suddenly, as if ashamed, he stuffed everything back in his bag. "She lets me take anything, do anything with her, the whore." He flung his head into his mother's lap, gazing up at her in fear. "Mother, I think she is an *ogress*."

"An *ogress*?! What do you mean?" He didn't reply, curling up in shame.

There was a centuries' old tale Berber women told their children about the Ogress Tzeriel, who hungered for human flesh and always managed to eat a few adults before the children in the stories outwitted her. Did her son believe his mistress was Tzeriel? There were also ogresses who took the forms of beautiful women to entice the lone traveler, in the desert, in the marshes, in mountain gorges--but an ogress living in a prince's house in the big city? Surely someone would have noticed her goat's hooves!

She questioned him gently, as she would a small child terrified by a nightmare. "Like Tzeriel, my son?"

Clutching her, he would say nothing more about what had frightened him.

His previous master had struck him the very first day, and he had been frightened then, too. But ever after that, the older man and his wife treated Selim with such kindness that he felt gratitude--and more. It was a strange alchemy: Gratitude, because it was tinged by awe and the memory of the blow, became love.

But his Christian mistress frightened him more, and in a different way. She always seemed to want something more from him, and he could not guess what it was. He tried everything: increasing the aphrodisiacs, inner massages, different oils,

making up longer more fanciful poems to her beauty. Sometimes he went for days without sleep, but she still wasn't satisfied, no matter how vigorously or often she climaxed. Sometimes he crouched at the foot of her bed, watching her sleep and wondering: What did she want?

One night she put her mouth on him. Feeling the ridges of her teeth on his skin, he was stunned, quickly withdrawing himself before her jaws closed. She wanted to eat him! The thought filled him with such terror he thrust it away. Other times he imagined that one day she would reach inside his chest and squeeze his heart until his being passed into her hand. Then it would be hers, not God's.

At dawn Selim's mother wound a yellow string with cowrie shells, old coins, and odd shirt buttons into her hair; yellow was the favorite color of Lalla Mirra, the powerful *jinnia* who had often plagued her in the past. She wrapped a blanket around her waist, another around her shoulders, threw a third over her head, and left the cave. Because of her aging limbs, she rarely went out, but this was an errand she could not entrust to her four daughters.

Since all the men and young boys had gone to take the Oath of War with Babas Umaloo, the settlement was deserted, save for old people, women and children guarding the communal

grain stored in the caves. She clutched at the sheer rock of the mountainside as she descended the hewn steps of the path to the cemetery cave. Inside, she sat praying for a while, near the stones of her seven dead sons. Visiting the cave where a saint was buried, she bought colored candles from a beggar outside and gave them to the guardian, who recited a chapter from the Koran as she kissed the four corners of the green cloth covering the tomb and prayed. On her way back up the path, she stopped by the cave of the *fqih*, a learned man, to ask him what to do.

The *fqih* was insulted at the idea of an ogress, even a Christian one. A *jinnia* was one thing; ogresses were nothing but ignorant superstition.

When she returned, her one remaining son was asleep, dreaming badly, his lashes pattering like blackbirds' feathers on the gentle ledge of his cheekbone, a pulse trembling in his pale temple. His black hair was swept back from his brow, its wine-purple luster and perfect straightness proof of a pure-bred Berber strain that had never mingled with Arab or Negro slave's blood.

If only his mistress had been old and repulsive, or starved him, gave him no clothes or bed, made him convert to Christianity, beat him daily -- then Selim's mother could hide

him here, enduring the *h'shuma* his cowardice brought on her family. But what would his life be, hiding in poverty, he who had been raised in the luxury of the agent's house in Tit-tawen? He would end up joining the rebel army of Babas Umaloo and die young not in a holy war but in a blood feud against fellow Moslems, like all her other sons. Hadn't God delivered him to this mistress instead of to war?

"Whatever he does, he has not escaped danger," the *fquih* had said. "He cannot seek to live longer any more than he can seek to die sooner, for no one dies before the hour inscribed by God."

When Selim woke, his mother called to her eldest daughter Zayna to serve him his breakfast of bread, dried figs, and tea. He averted his eyes, eating slowly. Zayna burst into tears as she cleared the tray, and ran outside.

His mother said, "She thinks now that you've come back, we'll have to give the slave-agent back his money, and then she can't be married. Karima and Jalila are upset, too. They aren't young any more. Without dowries, who will wed them?"

"Don't they know I wouldn't do such a shameful thing to them?"

"Haven't you just run away from a beautiful woman in a royal palace? Anything is possible!"

He bowed his head. "Don't be angry with me, my mother. Tell me what to do."

"You must return to your mistress and ask her to free you. And if she will not free you, you must stay with her. Now give me your word on it by God, and bring no more shame on your family."

She hoped never again to see him so unhappy as when he swore it; she expected never again to see him after he had.

The rest of the day he lingered like some apparition, the blue in his eyes congealing to ice as his mother tried to smooth over the breach. He turned on the music machine to amuse his youngest sister, but when Frank Sinatra blared suddenly in the cave, she cowered; Selim stabbed a button and the cassette leapt in the air. Stuffing all his possessions into his bag, he went to sit in the cave entrance.

*The mirror is an upright well
She holds me drowning
But will not let me sink
Death is the real refuge
She will not let me grasp his hand. . .*

As Selim sang, the slave-agent's assistant bounded lightly up the path to the cave, his long single lock of hair floating in the wind. The Dar Loosh peaks tangled in the melted gold of the sunset as Selim kissed his mother good-bye. She fastened a silver chain with a charm containing herbs,

seeds, bark, and hair around his neck to protect him from infidel *jinn*s and ogresses in case they did exist.

" . . . We will fight the way we have always fought—we will strike, and vanish!" Babas Umaloo's shrill amplified voice echoed off the walls of the canyon. "They will ask themselves, 'Do the Radif have wings, that suddenly our horses have fled, and our soldiers lie in heaps like cracked nutshells? Are the Beni Berih eagles? Suddenly our breasts are torn open and our blood sprays forth like the Sultan's fountains! Are the Wilad Jebel invisible? Suddenly our sons fall, they are dying around our ankles like the groundseed in a flood!'"

Bonfires and thousands of torches lit the surrounding rock face. A group of musicians played the phrase favored by Babas Umaloo's patron *jinn* on their oboes and drums and cymbals. Babas Umaloo began to bob, bow, and stamp convulsively until he was in a deep trance. He lashed at his bald scalp with sharp stones until it was scarlet with flowing blood. The chiefs came forward and smeared their hands in the saint's blood; they touched red to their hearts and heels, and pledged their nascent crops, their fruit-trees' seed, their unborn lambs and infant sons to him.

"God is great!" they shouted.

"Hear, hear," said Malcolm Pugh, who was holding the microphone cord so it wouldn't crackle during Babas Umaloo's speech.

Chapter Fifteen

RETURN OF THE LOVE SLAVE

Simone's ovaries were acting up again. Connor took her to the American doctor and asked him to tranquilize her "a teeny little bit."

"I'm not a veterinarian, you know," the doctor said, a white lab coat thrown over his wrinkled caftan, as he prepared a syringe.

The ginger cat mewed invitingly, hunching down on her forepaws and raised her torrid hindquarters. Connor noticed the doctor's attention drifting over to another rump, as his assistant padded barefoot through the examining room. a young Arab boy with languorous eyes, the assistant wore an American t-shirt with the words "I Can't Believe I Ate The Whole Thing"; tight white duck pants restrained the rolling rebellion of buttocks set so high on his trunk as almost to prohibit his walking erect. The doctor followed the boy with his eyes, his hands trembling.

Coonor recognized the signs. He's got the love-slave habit, she thought: He's got it bad, and it's eating him up a little more every day.

She gathered up Simone, in cat bliss after her shot, returning to the women's palace. There she discovered her faithful maid Shammar running down the corridor, chased by an older slave-woman who struck her shoulders with a carpet-beater, shouting, "H'shuma! H'shuma!" Quickly depositing Simone on her bed, Connor hurried to find Awisha.

The Princess and her daughter Rashida were passing through the gallery on their way to a tennis lesson, preceded by a slave carrying rackets and balls.

"Why is Shammar being beaten?" Connor asked.

"I have told them not to beat her very hard," Awisha said evenly, not stopping or looking at her friend. "I don't want to hurt the baby in her stomach."

"Shammar's pregnant?! She couldn't be more than fourteen."

"The American doctor says he will take it out. But you know she is like my child to me, and now she brings me this shame! It is because I love her I am beating her." Awisha turned tearful eyes to Connor. "It is your fault because you don't take care of her! You are blind you don't see!"

"Goodness, we are unclean. How, pray, am I responsible?"

"Because when I give her to you she must now be like your child, too!" Connor stepped back nervously. "I'm so stupid to let you have her, you who have no children, you don't know

nothing about slaves. It's your slave Selim, God burn him, who is the father of the baby! He was balling Shammar all the time in the villa. Now I'm understanding why he runs away! I hope they don't find him, because if I see him I will kill him, and I will never, never, never let him to go with you to America." Awisha stalked off, yanking Rashida with her.

Connor bolted to her room, crawling into bed and hugging her cat's stoned body. She remembered Selim and Shammar laughing on the terrace, in the hall, down in the garden. All day and night he'd screwed Connor and then what had he done with his time off? He screwed the maid--and came! In the maid but not in Connor.

She pictured him between Shammar's tender adolescent thighs, arching his beautiful back like a peeled birch-wand. She saw the cool elegant face soften in defeat, his sleek lashes sinking to close over the blurring blue eyes, his buttocks clenched; she heard him give way with wounded groans. "Oh, Simone, I can't stand it," she cried into the orange fur.

For weeks she'd waited in the women's palace for his return, shunned by all the women (who knew it was Connor that Prince Azadin was rushing to meet the night he sailed off the flyover). Retreating to her room, she had daydreamed for hours about Selim, imagining his slender straight body standing over her bed, his dear competent hands reaching to lift her, his

eyes skimming over her to find the place where he'd left off. She had the love-slave habit and she had it bad. "I want him so much, and now I'll never see him again," she told her cat.

There was a tap on the door. Sita, a pretty slave-girl, entered, indicating with gestures that two women wished to see her. "I can't get out of bed," Connor said. "My heart is being chewed to pieces." She motioned for Sita to bring the ladies to her room.

After a minute the women swept in, concealed entirely by their black *abayas* and double veils. One of them closed the door and stationed herself at the window. The other sat on her bed.

Connor shifted uneasily. "Well?"

"Please your not shouting!" came a deep whisper beneath the veil of the woman seated beside her.

"Darling!"

Habib threw back his veil with a grin.

"I've been waiting for you for the longest time!"

"I'm knowing this." His turquoise eyes sparkled as he scratched the hole in his cheek.

"I knew you'd find me eventually but--oh, Habib, you've got to find my slave! I'll pay anything, anything! Bring him--not here, if Awisha sees him--there're so many problems I don't know where to begin."

He rocked with laughter. "With you no problems! Is finish! I have bringing to you Selim now today!"

"Where is he?" Her eyes shot to the veiled figure at the window.

"No, not him. Good friend from Cuba."

"Ai, ai," moaned a voice behind the black shroud, "mi corazon. . . ." He looked down into the orchard through the carved lattices.

"He is never seeing women so much with all together! He not believing himself!"

Connor tugged Habib's cloak impatiently. "Where is Selim?"

The little Berber leaned close. "You go now to the Grande Wazz Hotel and stay in room. Wait and Selim he coming to your room this night."

Connor leapt off the bed, going to her purse. "You've never failed me, you're brilliant, and I love you." She pressed a huge wad of bills upon him, thinking that actually she should be angry at him for selling her diet soda spiked with aphrodisiacs that made her act like Simone--but never mind. "I'd better pack an overnight bag--wait. How am I going to stay out all night? They run a tight ship here. Bed check and all that."

"You take this *abaya* and put it all on you and go now like you are me." Habib handed her his veil and proceeded to remove the black cloak. His friend left the window and sat heavily on the bed, with a mysterious clanking sound. Ripping off his own veil, he revealed a young swarthy countenance bathed in sweat. Adjusting his robes, he bent to rescue the revolver which had fallen onto the carpet. "And me I sleep here this night," Habib went on, "and with me Ramon, we make big fatty mountain thing everyone thinking is woman sleeping."

"I'll tell the Princess I'm not feeling well, and for nobody to bother me--where'd my deodorant go? And listen, if my cat wakes up and starts crying, just open the door a peek and let her out. This is so exciting! I don't think I need my bathing suit, do I? Where did you find Selim, by the way?"

"His mother very sick, he visiting her up Dar Loosh mountain."

"Oh, I can forgive him then. Quick, look at my palm. Tell me how the love-line's holding up."

Habib glanced down at her outstretched palm. After a long pause he said only, "You are get every thing you want."

Swathed in the heavy *abaya* and head veil, Connor skimmed past the gossiping groups of women on their way to the grand salon for the early evening tea. She felt like a floating cam-

era the actors have been directed to pretend isn't there, and barely smothered her laughter as she passed Princess Awisha unnoticed.

Excitement gushed up in her, as her high-heeled sandals tapped quickly across the floors. She was racing to see the man she loved! Still, she probably should try to beat him this time, show him discipline, take responsibility--no more American egalitarian treatment until he shaped up. She'd raped men in her lifetime, but never assaulted one. On the other hand, she should think of him as a child, a naughty child.

Her thighs rustled, flashing in their black thundercloud of fabric. He was no child, but a man, a perfect man! A rosy fire of anticipation streaked up her body, carrying her down the palace steps, past the Yemeni guards, to King Musa Boulevard, where she hailed a petit-taxi.

Hurtling through shortcuts, the car honked through the crowds in the souk, speeding along the harbor until they'd reached the porte-cochère of the Grande Wazz Hotel. Connor got up and flew up the steps, her veil billowing, rushing to meet her lover, racing to beat her slave. Before the Nubian attendants had a chance to open it for her, she had run smack into the plate glass door at the hotel's entrance.

She was too stunned to feel pain immediately. The doormen ran to help her, but Connor waved them off, staggering to the

reception desk. "Have you got a double room?" When she flung back the veil, a plummy red contusion bloomed in the center of her brow.

"Indeed we have." Anxiously the Indian concierge handed her a registration card. "But you are hurt badly? We are able to locate an American doctor--"

"That drug-crazed pervert?" Connor laughed wildly, plucking the pen from his lapel. A lone drop of blood welled and stuck like an amulet in the middle of the bruise. "If I had a headache, he'd give me a hysterectomy!"

The concierge peered at her form as Connor scribbled on it. "You are Miss Blakey?" I believe we have a reservation for you." Habib thought of everything, Connor marveled. "The Sinbad Suite, here it is, for Miss Blakey-Vandermuffing, our most excellent best. We were not expecting you until tomorrow, but no matter. Here is the key and we welcome you most pleasurably as His Royal Highness's special guest."

Connor scooped up the key, fleetingly wondering why he'd made the reservation in her Aunt Muffie's name by mistake. "Sin, bad! Perfect!" she laughed wildly, tossing her overnight bag at the porter and lurching toward the elevator.

A little later, the pain in Connor's head came on so strong she could hardly see. Wincing, she patted foundation

makeup over the big livid bruise, which made her forehead stand out like a planked salmon. Taking her nail scissors she snipped short wisps from her forelock to cover her wound.

The silver lavalier didn't go with her outfit, Connor thought, removing the protective pendant of herbs from around her neck and slipping off the *abaya* to reveal the nightdress she'd bought in Paris for the occasion of her first night with a slave. She hadn't had a chance to put it on that first time, when Selim woke her at dusk in the villa, his caresses shaping his new goddess out of the darkness to worship. Tonight they were going to begin again -- but this time she would command her servant and he would come.

The long gown was violet-blue watered silk with slender gold straps; her breasts were cradled by two crescents of handwoven gilt lace. "The goddess of white supremacy," she joked, "a little banged up as usual."

She would get him drunk, she decided, picking up the phone and ordering one of the exorbitantly expensive French wines the hotel offered despite the Moslem ban on alcohol. Her head hurt horribly. The sight of the fruit in the hotel's courtesy basket made her nauseous, oranges and bananas bulging behind green cellophane like embalmed deformities.

She went out on the balcony, shivering in the damp breeze off the Bay of Two Dogs. In a minute she came back inside,

paced around the suite, then turned on the television set in the bedroom to watch the eight o'clock newscast.

". . .And the Masmoudian stock exchange closed today down 108 points." She snapped off the TV and approached the mirror. Her fevered cheeks gave her a look of desperate beauty, but she couldn't see it: The pain in her head addled her. Suddenly her image seemed as superficial as the quicksilver coating the glass. She felt not beautiful, not worth loving, empty. She saw straight through to her own dear soul--that hollowness which only men, entering her, could fill. Why? Why was she doing any of this? The reason escaped her--or she had hidden it too well.

Asking herself deep questions seemed to increase her headache; re-focusing on the mirror, she told herself she was a *goddess*, damn it, and this was her world. In her empire she was capable of anything, and anything was possible for reasons unknown to her. If there was a God, He was probably exactly like her. He also made some mistakes in the beginning with his slaves, and in those times they seemed to enslave Him: because he was bound to them, by need.

They couldn't both be God, though, in the end. Who then would drive the donkeys?

And where was that ass, Selim?

The room phone rang. "Good evening, Miss Blakey-Vandermuffing. A young man is here to see you."

"Send him up."

"Perhaps you are expecting a friend? This boy is only someone's servant, perhaps you want to come down and--"

"He is *my* servant. *Send him up.*"

She unlocked the door, leaving it ajar. Standing in flattering lamplight beside a velvet settee, she tried to work up a fury, but her legs were melting beneath her, her heart slamming around her body. She pictured Selim buried in Shammar and felt a brief outrage, but it evaporated when she heard the muffled roar of the elevator discharging its passenger and the feline whisper of bare feet on the hall carpet. "Come in," she called, her joy mounting.

He put down his pouch and tape recorder, closing the door behind him, and stood, tall and straight in his long white shift, staring at her without expression.

"Ol' Blue Eyes is back," she said.

He didn't move.

Her bruise radiated fever; her heightened senses seemed to leap out of the fiery corona and rush to Selim. *He's waiting to be punished*, she knew, as if he had murmured the instruction to her, as if her ear were pressed against his lips, *he wants me to strike him*. His face remained a resolute blank.

To hit him she needed to be angry; she cast about quickly for a cause. "What have you done with my fur coat?!" He hadn't brought it back--he'd stolen it and it cost two thousand dollars. She came closer, drawing back her arm. He flinched, lowering his feathery lashes almost ecstatically.

She stopped a foot away from him. She was so happy to see him, to be standing close, so astonished by his beauty all over again, her heart released all memory of hurt. Her hand kept traveling, heedless; Selim's knees bent slightly. To kneel? Or to crouch for a spring? She hesitated, suddenly frightened at the thought of his strength, of how he might retaliate. Against all reason, she couldn't stop thinking of him as a man and not a slave: a man for whom she would crawl across deserts, swim oceans, and lacerate herself with her chains. She dropped her hand, impotent. She would not beat him. In that instant, she lost her empire.

Selim's eyes snapped up to her face. Grabbing her wavering wrist, he whirled her to face the wall, his weight pushing her head sideways and mashing her cheek into the barred weave of the wallpaper. Her concussion thundered as something nut-hard pressed into the base of her skull--a round silver ball of protective herbs on a chain around his neck. His hands wrestled the indigo silk of her gown, slipped underneath, moved inexorably up her thighs. She slackened, as if she was

ebbing into the soft chasms between the pads of a lion's paw, waiting serenely for the fang-rimmed hood to descend over her head.

His hands broke apart her buttocks; she felt a horrendous blaze of pain between them, and her pubic bone crunched against the wall from the force of his penetration. The searching, gouging strokes seemed to incinerate her inside.

"You bastard, I'll get you!" she hissed through jostled teeth, and then fainted.

When she came to, she was lying on her back, on the bed. Selim, down on his knees, was cupping her foot, imploring words tumbling from his mouth.

"I forgive you," Connor murmured, not understanding that he was begging her in Arabic to free him.

They had done this before, she realized, in her half-conscious state. The image in her memory bloomed like a fatal stain, horrifying her. They were in some temple. She was the one who knelt. She was a young male initiate and Selim, reclining on a divan, was the priestess offering a foot for massage. Then the priestess began removing her robes and seducing her disciple, although they both knew if the boy broke his vow of chastity he would be destroyed by the god they both worshipped. They shivered with fascination and dread.

They had been bound together in many lives, Connor saw, and always given the chance to let each other go. And now they were beginning again.

The memory faded and she began to weep. She grasped his head in her hands, pulling him to her. "Oh, Selim, if only you'd let yourself go," she cried, "if only you loved me, if only you'd come."

Though he didn't understand her words, his face went rigidly impassive. Dutifully he slid her gown above her hips and climbed on top of her, to begin his work again.

Crown Prince Rasan had never seen a murdered man. Before him was the severed head of his enemy Babas Umaloo, twice the size of an ordinary man's head. The bald dome gleamed, and the coarse peasant face had set in an utterly impassive expression. The old slave Suleiman delicately held it in a blanket as if it were a newborn infant, then turned toward King Musa. Propped up in bed, the monarch masticated violently to show his pleasure and approval.

Suleiman looked back at the Crown Prince and caught Rasan's look of horror. The old slave regarded him curiously, as if to say, "Isn't it what you wanted? One of you had to fall. God wrote it was his time."

Chapter Sixteen

SON ET LUMIÈRE

The Port-Au-Wazz airport was packed with men when Miss Albright Blakey-Vandermuffing ("Muffie"), arrived the next morning. It was an elegantly groomed crowd, blatantly heterosexual, with not a woman among them. Muffie could see Masmoudia was going to *captivate* the singles market.

In fact, one day had passed since the collapse of the Masmoudian stock market, and the men were stockbrokers, waiting to take the plane back to Cairo, then to their loved ones in Geneva, London, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, Tokyo, New York, Johannesburg, and Paris.

Their Middle Eastern adventure had enriched them all; they had pushed the price index up as far as it would go, encouraged one last surge of demand by withholding all shares from trade, then dumped everything when the price hit the ceiling, and pocketed fabulous profits, closing their local offices as the price crashed through the floor. It was only a matter of time before all the businesses, utilities and banks owned by the royal family would be bankrupt.

"Now those are what I call real men!" Muffie sucked in her abdomen for the brokers. Even after three weeks on a liq-

uid protein diet she still felt her vanished fat, the way an amputee senses his lost limb.

Today the April sun shone superbly on the minarets and derricks of the capital city. His Royal Highness Crown Prince Rasan had sent a personal chauffeur. Muffie settled back and let Masmoudia's spell wash over her as the limousine drove her to the Grande Wazz Hotel.

Thanks to a recent mid-life crisis, Muffie was now a champagne blonde. Her makeup gave her a festive pink complexion, roasted cheeks and frosted lips. Despite her bright hopeful hues, Muffie had an abandoned aspect, like a vivid canapé no one wants to try. She blamed her weight problem for the fact that she hadn't been given a prime management position in Blakey *Industrials*, where all the action was. But the Blakey command had chosen her for the small public-relations subsidiary because of her vast optimism. "Mysterious Masmoudia," she said into her micro-cassette pocket secretary, "its colorful bustling docks piled high with spices and silks from the four corners of the world. The city's backdrop of something desert, uh, serene desert, um, the flyovers will be the eighth wonder of the eighties. Ancient meets modern. At night Masmoudia shows its fun-loving side when the amusement park bursts into action." As they passed the clock, whose mechanism had finally been paralyzed by sand and cement dust, she noted the King,

camel, and falcon that had tipped off their trolley and fallen on their side. "The Unknown Soldier? The Unknown Nomad? Note: check on war memorial, also history, any colorful battles, etcetera."

At the hotel, the concièrege informed her that her suite was taken; Miss Blakey had already checked in.

"It's a mistake," Muffie said pleasantly.

The man hunted for the occupant's registration form, as she continued muttering into her recorder, "Choice of exotic local delicacies in the bustling market or a Juicy Jack at the drive-in. Port-Au-Wazz, a favorite of artists and tourists alike, a city in transition to the twentieth century, where anything goes -- oh my God, *no!*"

The concièrege showed her Connor's signature on the form. Muffie's optimism blew out.

Angrily she handed him her letter from the Crown Prince's office. "I am so devastatingly sorry, Miss Blakey-Vandermuffing," the concièrege stuttered, "I thought the woman was you!"

As music blasted away inside, Muffie hammered on the door of the Sinbad Suite. At last a tall, stunning barechested young man smelling of wine opened the door, his blue-jeaned hips swaying as he sang along with Frank Sinatra: "*Oh no not*

me, I did it my way. . . ." He fell against the wall as she pushed past.

Connor was not in the bedroom. Snow rasped on the TV screen; sheets and cushions were strewn about the room. "*For what is man, what has he got,*" the tall man continued his duet with the tape as Muffie strode out onto the terrace.

Her niece was huddled in a bedspread on a deck chair, under a sun umbrella, a large purple bruise on her forehead, glistening cerise scrapes dotting her pale arms. She looked up dully at her visitor, like a dazed chastened little girl who had fallen off her bike. "Aunt Muffie?"

". . .if not himself, then he has not. . . ."

"Connor Blakey! I sent you a letter telling you to get out of this country and now I find not only are you still here but you're in my room!"

". . .to say the things he surely feels. . . ."

"What letter?"

"And drunk at eleven in the morning!"

"--and not the words--"

"I haven't had a drop of anything."

"--of one who kneels--"

"No diet soda," Connor continued disjointedly, "no aphrodisiacs--"

"--the record shows--"

"--never had a drink in his life, he's a Moslem--I thought it'd loosen him up--"

"--hours and hours--no sleep--and he still won't--"

"--and did it *MY WAY!*"

"--worse than before."

"Connor, tell your joyboy to go down to the coffee shop and sober up. I want to have a private talk with you."

Her niece laughed. "I just flogged my slave and can't do a thing with him."

"Young man!" Muffie called, without much force. Inside the suite, Selim stood with his back to her, his arms weaving with the next song's lush string introduction. "What's his name?"

"He doesn't speak English. He speaks Sinatra, though." Connor said bitterly, "He knows all the words to *Tell Her You Love Her Each Day* but hasn't got the least idea what they mean."

"*You see in me a man alone. . .*"

"I'm sure he has other talents." Muffie closed the patio doors against the din, returning to Connor. "Now, listen."

"What are you doing here, Aunt Muff? Sit down and tell me."

"I love it, she offers me a seat on *my* terrace."

"You're looking well."

"Well, you're looking dreadful."

"I know. The water's pretty clean here, but don't eat the men, whatever you do."

"I hope your sense of humor is lost on your friends in the royal family. Connor, I'm far from thrilled to see you." Something always happened when her niece was around. "The Crown Prince himself hired me to come over for the King's birthday expo, and I've got a group of the top travel agents from all over the U.S. arriving tomorrow. I am completely responsible for the success or failure of the entire campaign to bring tourists to Masmoudia, so--"

"Who'd want to come here?"

Hopeless. It was just the sort of thing Connor was bound to say in front of the tour group, the Crown Prince, the King--everybody--at the royal banquet. Clearly it was time to place a long-distance call to New York; Connor constituted a Blakey Industrial crisis.

Going back inside, Muffie headed for the room phone. Connor's gigolo leaned against the doorway to the bedroom, watching her with such a look of careless seduction she felt giddy. Out of nowhere she pictured Connor on a plane back home, the young man left behind. . . .The telephone rang before she could lift it: Her Royal Highness the Princess Awisha had arrived and was on her way up to see Miss Blakey.

"Ack!" Connor leapt from her deckchair and tore into the suite, pushing her lover into the bedroom and locking the door. Quickly she straightened the room, clawing her ratty hair over her forehead. Noticing that her straps had broken and her nightgown had fallen to her waist, she threw on a long white cotton shift that had been kicked under the settee.

The first thing Awisha did on entering was throw herself into Connor's arms. "Darling, forgive me all the things I have said to you yesterday!" The Princess had been beside herself on finding Connor's bed empty that morning; she would've had to take a "bad-news" pill if Masmoudian Intelligence hadn't quickly located her missing friend at the hotel. "Please come back to the palace now, and don't be mad with your poor stupid pal."

Muffie looked on, aghast at the apparent bond between her catastrophic niece and her client's sister.

"Wishy, I want you to meet my Aunt Muff." If possible, Connor seemed more nervous than her aunt. "Your brother hired her to promote tourism." Loud music suddenly blared from the bedroom. Connor blurted, "Let's put on some music. We'll all relax and have a drink. Wishy, take off your gook and get cozy."

"Oh, you have Pouilly Fuissé." Awisha's face lit up mischievously. "If your aunt will tell no one, I will have just a

little even though it is morning." She removed her cloak and veil to reveal her jogging suit. "Why is your aunt looking at me so?"

"Culture shock," Connor explained. "Muff thinks you're dressed funny for a princess."

"What about you, darling?" Awisha tugged Connor's white shift, the traditional male slave's attire.

"Cute, isn't it? I picked it up in the souk. For a song."

"I can't wait to see your souks!" Muffie said. "You know how tourists love a bargain--things like that long shirt are going to be such a hit, Princess. There's so much to be done here. I can't wait to dig in--it's a new frontier!" She started in on her presentation, but the Princess was nudging Connor's thigh with her wine glass.

"So you will come back to the palace?"

"I've had enough of the House of Corrections. God, locked up with women day and night, can't step out unless accompanied by a sla--" Awisha's look of warning stopped her.

"What you wish," the Princess said, pouting. "You know best. At least I am happy the hotel gives you the best room for my best friend."

"Actually," Muffie interjected, "Connor is going home. A family emergency."

"But you can't! Connor, you can't go before my father's birthday, I will believe you must be very angry at me! We have a big celebration, with a new '*son et lumière*' spectacle in the old fort, and music and dancers and a big feast. Only until Friday you must stay." Awisha frowned quizzically as an off-key voice started to shout along with the singer's in the bedroom.

"That's called overdubbing," said Connor. "Frank Sinatra plays the tape back in his studio and sings along with himself, and they record it."

"Do you know Mister Sinatra? You must tell him not to do this, it's not good. But you must stay, my pal, a little more days for the festival."

"Can I bring a date?" Awisha had never seen Selim, Connor realized; if she dressed him up in a suit and shoes, he could pass for an international playboy. "I met someone in the hotel, a gorgeous man. Cuban."

"Cuban! Darling, I hope it's not true, you know we break relations with Cuba right now. We believe they are helping the Berber reb--" Now Awisha stopped, eyeing Muffie.

"I'm glad to hear you're not going to associate with *that* scruffy country," Muffie said brightly. "You know, Your Highness, the whole world is on tenterhooks to know which way Mas-moudia will go. The U.S. is the top of the list, right? I

mean, you and the Crown Prince are both American college graduates--"

"Did I say Cuba?" Connor interrupted. This dude's from Peru. I always get the two mixed up. He's a knockout."

"Bring him, darling, I am happy you meet someone you like. Connor must get married, don't you think this, Aunt Muff?"

Hopeless, Muffie was thinking, the girl will not leave. Now what will happen? What disaster is Connor going to bring down on all our heads this time? "Yes, by all means. To a nice psychopath."

"Yes!" agreed Awisha. "To a nice doctor."

By the day of the King's birthday, Selim was fairly presentable; Connor had taught him to eat with a knife and fork, work the television, and his new vocabulary included "hello," "no," "dat's life," and "room service." The latter he used with glee: that others should wait on him!

Unable to read the menu, Selim told the chef to send up meals fit for a sultan. The little Sudanese waiters wheeled in the tables covered with food, glancing at Selim scornfully as they uncorked the wine. It wasn't until he slapped one of them that they treated him with any respect.

He also appeared to love his new suit: cream linen, with a turquoise shirt to match his eyes, all made by the tailor Habib had sent to Connor from the souk. By material things she hoped to bind Selim to her, and indeed he stroked his suit so much that Connor thought jealously of the way he used to stroke her, their first night together.

Now he hated her; he did all he could to drive her to throw him out: getting drunk, once even throwing food at her, until she struck out at him wildly. He'd trapped her wrists, but when she bit his shoulder, he hurled her across the room. Raising herself, she saw him pitch the half-empty wine bottle out on the terrace where it smashed. Then he lurched against the wall and stared at her, muttering strings of words to himself like chants. After that, she steered clear of him.

At night she locked her bedroom door; she hid the forks and knives and ordered no more wine.

He was presentable now, but he hated her. If only he could have one decent, normal sexual experience with her, allow himself to climax, she knew he would love her -- but she was too worn out to keep battling against his iron will.

When the news reached her that Simone Weill had disappeared from the women's palace the night she'd had left, Connor realized that the time had come for a decision. If she stayed a minute longer, she'd vanish like her cat. Had she

come halfway around the world just to be swallowed up by this merciless culture? She'd had enough; after the King's birthday, she would go home with or without her unruly slave.

How did you free a slave? How did you free yourself from a slave?

Two storks coasted on the rusty lateral rays of the sunset. The torches had already been lit along the robust old battlements of the fort above the bay. Inside its immense open court, the audience for the "*Son et lumière*" waited for twilight and the pageant to begin.

Against the far wall, opposite the great gates sat the two thousand males of the royal family and their affiliated Bedouin sheikhs. The seventy-eight natural sons of Musa Beni Wazz spread across the center row of cushions in a stain pavilion decorated with portraits of the King. Against the adjacent wall, another pavilion held the women of their various hareems: a blotch of black veils and *abayas* speckled white at the edges by the shifts of the slave-attendants.

Opposite the women, bleachers for the people of Port-Au-Wazz and a cordoned section for foreign guests were nearly vacant. Over the past two weeks, the exodus of envoys, businessmen, and consuls from foreign lands created an ominous quality like the ebbing of the sea before a tidal wave. Now

only the old guard remained, clustered together in the pavilion with wives and children, trading stories about the old King, Commander of the Faithful, whom they remembered astride his enormous ivory stallion, leading the devout each Friday to the mosque. The monarch was promised to make a brief appearance at his own birthday feast after the "*Son et lumière*." Remembering him chewing on whole flaming logs, or the time he served a stunned cobra to a Soviet agent and pretended it was the national dish, they wondered what kind of man had been left by the strokes which had incarcerated his powers more than two years ago.

The sky glowed purple; Venus glinted over a ribbon of cloud. Aunt Muffie and eleven American travel agents arrived, giving their invitations to the guards. In the spirit of tourism, a few peddlers were selling live chickens and food coupons at the gate. ". . . And the Portuguese built this fort in the fifteenth century," Muffie's voice circled her group as they trudged through the dust to the guest section, "so you can guess what a lot of history these old walls have witnessed since then."

They were proving a difficult bunch to excite. Ten of their number had been assailed intestinally by "Masmoudian Revenge," and the American doctor had administered shots guaranteeing them unconsciousness and phantasmagoric dreams for the

next few days. They would miss tonight's festivities plus Days Three and Four of Muffie's printed itinerary: the Girl Scouts' Gymnastic Exhibition ("special appearance by Her Royal Highness Princess Awisha Beni Wazz "), then off to the splendiferous Najiz desert on camelback for a catered picnic, then an evening fancy-dress party in the King Musa Amusement Park ("Fez optional!"). . . .

As the dark fell, the soldiers rounded up townspeople to fill the barren bleachers; there was another delay as the generator for the stage lights resisted attempts to start it. The only illumination came from the roving sun-gun of the second-unit film crew of Italians shooting crowd scenes for *Rendezvous In Masmoudia*. The violet-white spot scanned the bleachers, revealing morose moneychangers and grocers yanked from their shops and now cleaning their teeth with sticks, their black-shrouded wives cowering from the cameras.

The generator throbbed to life, steadily maintaining its racketing din through the proceedings. Abruptly tiers of mounted stage lights came ablaze as soldiers in magenta uniforms trimmed with gold braid, ornamented cutlasses in their sashes, rode in on horseback to present arms before the princes' pavilion. One united burst of rifle fire filled the air before the procession retired to either side of the gates.

Here comes trouble, Muffie sighed, spotting her niece climbing the aisle clad in a Nile-green panne-velvet conspiracy of tatters and slits, and copper lamé boots, her handsome Peruvian boyfriend following behind her. In his cream linen suit, he walked awkwardly in new loafers, his eyes on his feet. The couple sat a few rows behind Muffie; the young man slid his tape recorder under the seat, pressing his hands between his knees and staring warily at the white-shifted attendants spreading carpets over the center of the court for the performers.

After a sharp lance of feedback from the sound system, the lights dimmed to a demonic red. The voice of a hired British actor began a crooning narration of Masmoudia's history over a tape called "Drums of Kenya": "Who can know the heart of this strange land, this unattainable pearl, its shores caressed by a sapphire sea, its deserts traversed by the eternal caravans of the Bedouins, the 'sons of the wind'? Six hundred years ago, these proud sheikhs and warriors bowed to a man named Mabruk Beni Wazz, the Father of Masmoudia."

The narrator paused, waiting for a spotlight to pick up the actor playing Mabruk in desert robes on a turret. The light raked over the battlement in vain. Misunderstanding their cue, scores of Berber dancers erupted onto the carpeted court, cheerfully launching into a wedding dance. Musicians

pounded curved sticks on their pottery drums, their oboes squealing exuberantly. Youths with shaved heads and long backlocks snapping like horsetails leapt and spun as a line of unveiled women, beaming, faces elaborately tattooed, arms interlaced, and silver jewelry clanking to the jog of their henna'd feet, advanced on the drummers.

"The kettle's overturned," the men sang in their Berber tongue.

"And my foot kicked it over!" answered the women, bobbing merrily away again.

"The kettle's overturned."

"The old man's got a new wife!"

Although the dancers had not been scheduled until the second half of the program, the historical portion had begun so badly that Crown Prince Rassan was relieved to see his foreign guests smiling delightedly. It was ironic to think that these simple, rustic, vivacious performers were from the same Dar Loosh tribes that had caused him so much embarrassment in the past. All that fine rebelliousness had waned quickly after the death of their leader Babas Umaloo, and now the Berbers were entirely docile. Their presence on the program was further proof for the consuls: The era of hostility in the mountains was over. The mines could open and the nuclear age begin.

"This is the real stuff!" Muffie shouted over the drums' tumult.

"*The first wife was sweeter!*" The men and women came together, stamped teasingly, and bounced apart again, out of reach.

Those must be Selim's people, Connor thought, watching the men's blue legs kick out from under their striped *dishdashas*. She turned.

There were tears in her slave's eyes.

Her own eyes filled with tears. She should really let him go back to his mountains, but she couldn't give him up, any more than she could control him.

Looking back at the dancers, she realized how little she knew of his world. There was something in the ritual, some step in the dance of mistress and slave, that she was leaving out, probably such a minor thing, if only she could get at it. Oh God, she prayed, please help me fix it with Selim, and please get us to America safely, and --

"Whoopie!" cried Muffie. The sound of the drums gave way to that of pounding hooves: A phalanx of Radif horsemen exploded through the gates. The dancers had rolled up the carpets, scurrying off to the side to watch the glorious Dar Loosh tribe. The riders' faces were completely swathed in blue cloth, except for their eyes; their bare blue heels flailed at

their horses' ribs as they galloped headlong to the royal pavilion.

Just when it seemed the horses would leap into the grandstand, they wheeled sharply, parting into two groups, steep banks of dust unfurling in their wake. Antique rifles fired into the air, and pale drifts of smoke floated over the spectators' heads.

The travel agents grinned. Savage Masmoudia made heaps more sense than civilized Masmoudia.

"God the Protector!" the horsemen shouted, and the two groups raced at each other, careening into cryptic patterns so swiftly, the dust rising in slithering arabesques made them invisible, save for the darting spikes of their raised rifles. Outside the gates, their women ululated, singing a high shrill note while fluttering their tongues. The dust lifted to reveal riders halted in a single line again. Their horses stamped in place and nodded and the audience burst into applause.

"God is great!" the horsemen shouted. Again they galloped up to the royal pavilion, raising their antique guns, which disguised high-speed rifles. A resounding crack: Then the horsemen parted, wheeled, and thundered out the gates.

As the dust sifted away, the spotlight from the Italian film crew raked over the middle row of pavilion, shining on the slain princes, their royal robes spattered with blood.

Several riders had leapt off their horses and were hacking at the remaining male line of the Beni Wazz family with *khanjars*. Crown Prince Rassan appeared depressed in death.

Uncertain whether the pageant had ended or was actually just getting under way, the foreign guests noted the bullets ricocheting off the bleachers; this seemed a clear lack of diplomatic tact, if not a disdain for tourism. Placing their metal chairs on their heads, the travel agents curled up in fetal positions on the platform.

Before ducking down among them, Muffie turned and sent her niece a look of furious blame.

Transfixed by the pandemonium in the court, Connor couldn't move. Watching the mercenary soldiers struggling with the assassins in the pavilion, the guards evacuating the wailing hareem, the townspeople in panicked flight, she had no fear for her own safety, because her palm had a long and unbroken life-line. Suddenly she remembered Selim. She turned: He was gone from her side.

Before she could cry out, a tall figure jumped to her side, his shaved head bobbing. A long lock of hair swung behind like a pull on a windowshade.

"Blek!"

He flashed his four gold teeth in a ramshackle grin. "Eat money," he said. As his goat's-hair cloak flapped like a spa-

cious wing over her, darkness billowed. A brisk blow on the back of her neck toppled her.

Chapter Seventeen

CAPTIVITY IN DUGAGAH

Connor rose to consciousness and opened her throbbing eyes, gazing into darkness. A black canopy stretched overhead; the air was smoke-filled and torrid; she lay on something lumpy and hard.

She raised herself on one green velvet elbow, feeling the tickle of sand in her boots. She was lying on some sacks of rice, inside a black goat's-hair tent. Near the entrance, a triangle of daylight shone on an old Bedouin woman prodding coals in a shallow pit dug in the sand.

Beyond her, on some sheepskins piled in a dark corner, someone stirred. Connor made out a limp outflung arm, a head of champagne-blond snarls: Two makeup-charred eyes opened, focusing dimly on Connor.

"Oh my God," Aunt Muffie moaned faintly.

The old woman came over to Muffie, wordlessly offering her a bowl of camel's milk, still warm and frothy from the udder. While the woman's back was turned, Connor stood unsteadily and crept over to the tent's opening, peering out.

The sun blinded her momentarily. Her ears filled with the chatter of women churning butter, the chanting of men at morn-

ing prayer, the grumbling of camels, and the gurgle of streams. Her eyes adjusted to see towering date-palms and, just outside the tent flap, a blue-legged Berber bowing to Mecca, a rifle slung over his back.

"Excuse me," said Connor.

The Berber hastily stopped his prayer to motion her back inside the tent with his rifle. He then took his position in front of the flap.

The morning prayer ended. All along the edges of the Dugagah oasis, rebels with rifles got up from their knees and resumed sentry duty, tightening their eyes against the glare of the surrounding Najiz desert. Reprisals for the King's birthday massacre would not come soon, they knew, since they had eliminated every adult male heir to the throne.

In the heart of the oasis, Berber and Bedouin warriors went back to work rigging bombs to pipelines. Tomorrow they would blow up Port-Au-Wazz's water supply, which came from this oasis. Afterwards they would mount a full-scale attack on the capital.

The Bedouins had always held themselves apart from the mountain tribes, but now they had joined the insurgent Berbers, deserting the monarchy and bringing the rebellion to a major turning point. The two groups had a common enemy in

Crown Prince Rasan. His father, King Musa, had made the Bedouins gifts they could carry with them: falcons, carpets, horses, and women, things they understood. His son gave them schools, hospitals, and rent-free apartments, gifts the fiercely proud desert nomads had no use for. Not only that, he'd spoiled their one pleasure in life. Having survived for hundreds of years on almost nothing -- drinking their own urine if water was scarce -- they'd returned to Port-Au-Wazz to purchase the few basic supplies they needed and discovered to their outrage that coffee and sugar prices had gone up a full 50 percent since they'd last come to the souk. Coffee with sugar was the one thing they passionately required in their abstemious lives; and now they couldn't afford it. It had been inflation that had doomed the Crown Prince.

As the two American captives being led to the chief's tent, the tribesmen looked up from their work, enjoying in particular the sight of the short, plump blonde in her orange pantsuit. Like most warriors, the Bedouins liked to get something in the way of spoils whenever they staged a raid. The night of the expo, one of the sheikhs had caught sight of Muffie in the grandstand and taken a fancy to her. The other woman perplexed them, however: skinny, slouching, immodestly flashing her raw-boned legs. Who could possibly want her?

"Thank God they didn't take anyone from my tour group," Aunt Muffie told Connor, glancing warily at the guard as they followed behind him, to make sure he didn't understand English.

"So much for the 'See Masmoudia' campaign," said Connor.

"Don't you dare wisecrack, young lady. In fact, I want you to let me do all the talking. This requires tact and diplomacy, and you haven't a shred of either. You may not want to stay alive, but I do."

The guard pushed them into a huge black tent. Inside it was so dark that the Bedouin sheikhs and Berber chiefs, seated on layered carpets around their coffee service, recalled a moonlit cemetery, white and blue headcloths glowing like phantom tombstones, the men's eyes flickering like votive candles in cupped hands. Muffie felt a little dazed in the presence of so much raw testosterone.

"Good morning, Miss Blakey." A high-pitched voice came from the center of the group. "And you also, Madame. Please be welcome to this tent. You are the mistresses of everything, while we are only the guests."

The voice seemed somehow familiar to Connor.

"Let me do the talking," whispered Muffie.

But Connor had already stepped forward. "Habib?" She hadn't recognized him at first because he looked so different

-- so *formal*. His tawny face was impassive, his eyes narrow and unblinking; beneath the folds of his striped *dishdasha*, his slight body was as coiled as a cobra's. The hole in his cheek seemed to tunnel endlessly inward.

"It is very good to see you again," he said without warmth.

"What is this shit?" She wondered fleetingly when his English had become so good. "What the hell are we doing here - hey!"

She stared at his hand resting on a familiar ginger-furred head. Simone's tail arched as Habib caressed her.

"Typical," Muffie hissed to Connor. "The only friends you managed to make in this whole country *would* be gigolos and terrorists."

"You've got my cat!" Connor moved forward to retrieve her pet.

Muffie grabbed her arm. "Sir," boldly she summoned all her powers of finesse, "I'm sure this whole unfortunate business can be resolved quickly and to all our satisfactions."

She paused, uncertain where she was heading as the men eyed the orange *crêpe-de-chine* fabric clinging to patches of her sweaty flesh. Beaming, a sheikh with a thick beard said something in Arabic to Habib.

Muffie noted the eager look on the man's face with some discomfort, forging onward: "Sir, there's really much more to be lost than gained by holding us hostage. My family is highly connected in politics, and I have a wide influence with the press. I'm sure you want a good image for whatever it is you're fighting for. If you give us safe conduct home, I will throw my full support behind your cause. Release us immediately, and my government never needs to know we were held hostage."

Habib's features softened. "But Madame, who tells you you are a hostage? Your safety is our most serious worry. Should you return to Port-Au-Wazz now, you would surely be harmed; the city is full of savages and there is now civil war. This gentleman," he indicated his thick-bearded neighbor, "is Sheikh Juma of the great Beni Hensh tribe, and he wishes you to be the guest of his family as he travels by caravan through the Najiz desert, across the Bay of Two Dogs to Muscat in Oman. There if God wills it you will find an American embassy. No need to be involved in our tiresome politics. You are clearly a lively and interesting woman. I think you will enjoy the experience of a real desert caravan. Not many tourists have this opportunity. You can tell the press about it when you get home."

Muffie asked about Connor's travel arrangements.

"My feelings would be deeply wounded if my old friend Miss Blakey did not stay this night for the big party, to celebrate our victory over the Beni Wazz. Regrettably, Sheikh Juma's caravan is leaving at once, so I cannot invite you too, though a well-traveled woman such as yourself would no doubt find our little magic show a bore."

"I'd rather go to Oman," Connor said. A stern look from Habib silenced her. Before she knew it, Sheikh Juma and his guards were escorting Aunt Muffie out of the tent. Connor turned back to Habib. "Will she really be safe with him?"

"Even if he grows tired of her and divorces her, he will always defend her with his life."

Connor took a combative stance, hands on her hips. "This is unbelievable! You're letting that guy take my aunt, you stole my cat -- after I let you sleep in the hareem and hide your guns there! After I gave you money!"

He considered her with hooded eyes. "So. Here is Miss Blakey. The woman who wanders far from her own country looking for a slave. Many other countries have the same idea."

"While we're on the subject, I don't suppose you know where Selim is?"

He ignored her. "We cannot be enslaved - we are already slaves to God. How could you hope to be our masters? Could we love you? Men can only love and serve what is unknown. What is

too familiar, they abuse. When we love God, we submit completely to what we don't know in the most beautiful surrender. When a perfect slave has such a perfect master, they become one. One is the sun and the other the rays."

Connor sighed in exasperation. "Are you asking me to convert? Fine. Honestly, Habib, I don't even know you any more."

He smiled. "I am not Habib. I am Babas Umaloo."

Fear prickled her flesh. What was it about that name?

Connor struggled with a sudden sense of altered reality as he talked on: Was it the concussion to her neck that made his head appear to grow larger, the features fading into a blank mass which swayed on the end of his neck? His voice seemed to be coming from outside of him, turning eerily feminine. "Perhaps now you understand. We will not serve two masters. We wish our freedom from men to serve God. I want you to be a heroine for us. You will announce that you have joined our struggle for independence. Your nation has no agreement with the Beni Wazz. America will be wanting not so much to defend them if we have you." He smiled; the transcendental mask vanished.

"Why me?" she protested. "My aunt is actually worth something back home, but my family couldn't care less if I was kidnapped permanently." At Babas Umaloo's signal, A copper-

haired boy in a white shift advanced, handing Connor a sheaf of papers. She glanced down at the handwritten text. "Greetings and love to my family and to my homeland," Connor read. "I am not being held prisoner here. I am speaking of my own free will, no harm has been done to me, and my life has not been threatened. I remain here because I have been profoundly moved by the cause of the Masmoudian Berbers from the Dar Loosh mountains who seek to preserve their free identity against -- " She looked up. "What'd I supposed to do with this?"

"Mister Pugh wrote this for us. He will tape-record you saying these words this morning, to send to your country."

"Listen, I appreciate what you're fighting for, but you've got the wrong girl for the job. I'm apolitical, amoral, immaterial, and irrelevant."

"But you are so pretty, and you have so much money you can send for." He showed his teeth. "And I can twist the head off your cat. You not believing your self, you wait you see!" he said in Habib's old chirping voice, his hand closing over Simone's head.

"Okay, I'll do it!"

Babas Umaloo released the cat, who padded over and rubbed against Connor's trembling boot. "Eat money," said a voice

overhead. Glancing up, she saw Blek suspended in mid-air near the top of the canopy, his gold teeth twinkling at her.

Malcolm Pugh made his way toward Connor's tent unescorted, hoping she was over the worst of the shock. Since he'd been captured, he had managed to win the rebels' trust by doing them various favors such as repairing radios, teaching English, making crude field telephones and inventing ciphers. He understood that they'd had to capture him, believing he knew too much after months of working in the mountains among them. Still, it had given him quite a start himself when his faithful guide Habib had turned out to be the ringleader. He could still remember the moment the little man had pointed a rifle up his nose and said, "I am Babas Umaloo."

"What a crashing disappointment. I was told Babas Umaloo was as big as a mountain and you're rather short and squatty."

Habib had grinned at that, but his rifle didn't budge. "Either you will join our revolution or your body will be a palace for worms."

"Don't mind if I do join, then." Malcolm Pugh wasn't a coward; he just had never particularly liked the Crown Prince, and the British government had only the thinnest of alliances with Masmoudia. Besides, he'd become fascinated with the phenomenon of Babas Umaloo.

Like everyone else, the scientist had been fooled into thinking that the legendary saint of the Berbers was a seven-foot giant. Soon after Pugh had been taken prisoner, he'd discovered that Babas Umaloo, a.k.a. Habib, had a slave who stood in for him most of the time: a eunuch, about seven feet and twenty stone, who like most good slaves was ready to die for his master. One of Mal's first assignments had been to write a good rousing revolutionary speech in English to be delivered in *majlis* to the Crown Prince, who had no idea what Babas Umaloo really looked like. Pugh had had quite a job teaching the speech to the great hulking slave, who was frightfully stupid. Fortunately, the brute performed it well enough in *majlis*, so that the international press played up the story, and the Crown Prince had his soldiers ambush the rebels' hideout in Tittawen. They had chopped off the poor bloke's head while the real Babas Umaloo was off playing Habib somewhere.

It alarmed Pugh that Babas Umaloo assumed that he and his people were certain to die, because they wanted to leave the uranium where it was. They couldn't make necklaces out of it; it didn't traditionally placate any of the *jinns*. Even if the rest of the world clamored for it, the tribes didn't want their lives changed. While they didn't mind such modern things as tellies and tape players, it was quite another matter when the Crown Prince started diverting the *wadis* with his hydro-

electric projects, sending in construction crews of Taiwanese and Pakistanis -- Christians and Hindus -- blasting huge holes and causing the local cows to bear three-legged calves, and then bragging about building a reducing spa for French film stars.

According to the Koran, one of the signs foretelling the Hour of Judgment would be when "barefoot herdsmen compete in the construction of lofty buildings." Thus when the royal family, formerly a gang of barefoot nomads, had begun building a forty-two story Trade Center in Port-Au-Wazz, the Berber faithful couldn't fail to notice. The hour of total holocaust was ticking near, with God consenting.

Babas Umaloo's great concern was that all the Berbers die honorably in defense of their liberty and thus reach Paradise, since death was inevitable. He was fighting more than the Beni Wazz, and he knew it. The *world* would not allow a tiny population of farmers and herdsman to sit on such a valuable resource as uranium; the other nations wouldn't rest until they got it, even if they had to destroy Masmoudia and pick the uranium out of the rubble.

Mal Pugh had found working for the resistance rather a lot of fun, but soon things would become too dangerous even for his tastes. He didn't share the Moslems' views on dying. They were eager to reach eternal Paradise, since, unlike the

easy, comfortable lives of Americans and Western Europeans, their lives on earth were damned difficult. Pugh would have to find some way to get out before the whole procession of lemmings went off the cliff.

Connor looked down at the tray the old woman had set before her. Shuddering at the blob of dates, bitter coffee and camel's milk, she yearned for a can of TRIM; it might cause cancer, but it was at least attractively packaged. How could her supplier have gone political, of all things? She'd probably been financing the revolution for months with her diet cola habit, she realized. And now she was to be the poster-girl for these tent-heads! Unless Malcolm Pugh could think of a plan. . .

He was setting up a tape recorder in the sand beside her. His white hair had grown long, the ends escaping from under his turquoise turban; the beard growing thickly around his bronzed bony face added to his air of mischievous masquerade. "Even if we got past the guards," he was saying, "there's the Najiz desert to cross. We wouldn't last long without guides. Sending this tape might give us some hope of armed rescue."

"No one will come for *me* (heep)." The strain of her meeting with the rebel saint had given Connor severe hiccups. "I'm a pariah, that's always been my *job*. What happened to Habib?"

All of a sudden he speaks English like a champ and all he talks about is God. God, God, God. (Heep.) Is that all they ever think about in this part of the world? He's going to brainwash me, I just know it."

"I miss Habib, too," Pugh said ruefully. "Awfully clever chap. Sold anything from tinned pudding to slaves, told fortunes, knew every particle of the mountain terrain, and played the fool just well enough to gain access to everyone from the old Queen on down, without anyone being the wiser. He even managed to be away when he got assassinated."

"He spent the night in the safest place in Masmoudia," Connor said. "The hareem, in the women's palace. In my bed!"

"So that's where he was." Mal was taken aback.

"Not with me, he was with some Cuban dude. They were both in drag and dripping guns all over the place."

He seemed relieved. "Yes, all along he's been accepting arms, military advisors, and money from anyone who wants to donate them, including the Cubans." He finished plugging in the microphone. "I always thought it rather strange, how Habib could turn up anywhere, know everything. Evidently Habib was only a diversionary creature, like a sprite, sort of darting back and forth to steal your attention away from the larger thing, which is Babas Umaloo."

"Sounds like a disk jockey," she snorted. "Who is Babas (heep) Umaloo, anyway?"

"He's a visionary, a magician, a holy man." Mal handed her his water flask and watched as she drank. "One of the great fakirs, I'd say. As a scientist, I know his magical powers, his *baraka*, can't be real; the teleportation, miracles and so on, must be hypnosis or illusion. But real or not, they're awesome, and he gives his people hope, when hope under the circumstances is insane."

Connor looked at Simone lapping a bowl of camel's milk by the fire. "He made my cat disappear, and then poof, he brought her back. I don't call that awesome. He's just a thief."

"I saw him thrust a red-hot skewer through that hole in his cheek, one night around the bonfire, during one of those ecstatic dances they do. He was in a trance, so he wasn't burned. I've seen that sort of thing before in India. But the amazing bit was, the damned skewer was three feet long, and it didn't come out the other side!"

Connor was thinking: He brought me back Selim. And then poof, he was gone again. How could she get Babas Boogaloo to reverse the trick? She moaned, pressing her knuckles into her temples. How could she be thinking of sex at a time like this?

Mal glanced up. "Headache?"

She nodded. "That son of a bitch, Blek, hit me on the back of the neck."

"Who?" He came forward on his knees, taking her head in his hands and feeling under her hair for bruises.

"Blek, the guy who's always with Habib, or Babas whatever -- ow." Mal looked puzzled. "The tall skinny boy with the gold teeth who says 'eat money.'"

"They say Babas Umaloo gets his powers from his *jinn*, a spirit who walks by his side, in the form of a tall Berber boy, with the shaved head and ponytail so many of them have." Pugh studied her with renewed appreciation. "You know, I quite believe you've seen his *jinn*!"

Connor's mouth fell open. "I saw a ghost?"

"Well, a group hallucination -- except you're an outsider. It's quite extraordinary." He brushed the clipped stands of hair off her brow, finding the brown imprint of her old bruise. "What's this?" He tipped her chin up to see it better. "You've been coshed quite a bit, haven't you?"

"That's old. It's my life, always banging into things." He was so close, his breath on her face, his eyes so full of concern that Connor couldn't help resting her head on his shoulder. It felt wonderful to let go, put the full weight of her troubled life into someone's arms, even if only for a moment.

Mal held her patiently. "I've got some lovely opium powder in the medical kit I brought. But first we'd better make this tape. Hiccups gone?" She lifted her head and nodded; he stared into her eyes as if trying to read them. "You're enormously brave, you know." Before she knew it, he was softly kissing her mouth.

At the moment, the old woman entered the tent, carrying a goat-skin of water. Mal and Connor broke apart abruptly, averting their eyes from each other. Mal handed her the microphone.

She waited until he had started the tape. "*Greetings and love to my family and to my homeland (heep) . . .*"

Malcolm walked back through the oasis, following the water downstream, passing the women washing their men's blue trousers. Why on earth had he kissed her? Tourists weren't his style; coal-black tarts from the bush were what he fancied in the past, but after one too many cases of venereal disease, *nothing* became his style. He considered himself saved, like a bloody born-again. So why had he kissed her?

He thought of her back in the dark tent, in her bedraggled rock-star outfit, begrimed and battered, her luster somehow undimmed. She had a certain heedlessness which he couldn't help but admire; even her ignorance held a sort of allure. But

he took her claim seriously that she attracted trouble. Just being in her vicinity was dangerous enough; better to quash his libido and concentrate on their escape. Besides, he thought as he scratched the hives on his neck, he was allergic to her cat.

Reaching the shade of some date-palms, he dismissed the boy he'd paid to guard his short-wave radio and set about searching for some voice out in the desolation out there to help rescue them. His first attempts met with no luck.

Sighing in frustration, he looked up to see a tall young man in a white shift standing over him, his handsome face humbly beseeching. His fair legs were painfully burned by the sun, his eyes metallic blue beneath soft black lashes. The blue cloth protecting his head from the brutal desert sun identified him as a Berber, though his legs were not tinted turquoise. He must be some recently freed domestic slave who had come to join his people's uprising.

Crouching next to Mal, he began to speak in a Dar Loosh dialect. A silver charm on a chain glinted on his neck.

Chapter Eighteen

SANDS OF THE NAJIZ

Connor blamed herself. She had broken her long-time rule of staying away from men old enough to be her father, and now she'd let Malcolm Pugh kiss her. If Selim were only here, she wouldn't have been so tempted.

Curling up on the pile of sheepskins as opium crept through her blood, she remembered why she'd had to make the rule so many years ago.

She could almost see her thirteen-year-old self, standing before the mirror in her dorm room, wearing her boarding school uniform, a blue polished-cotton shirtdress with a Peter Pan collar. Since it was a weekend, she wore black pumps instead of saddle shoes, because someone's father was sure to be coming to visit.

Connor never liked to go away on weekends. Staying at the half-empty school was far preferable to being enlisted into some boring family enterprise at some Blakey compound and estate. Connor was happier commanding her own corps of enlisted girls here at Laurel Academy, the fragile ones who'd been unable to get weekend passes or who'd had no place to go, spending their off-hours pining for boys, studying too hard, weep-

ing and gazing romantically at the severable blood-vessels in their wrists.

Connor always made certain to be hanging around the Common Room when the girls' fathers arrived. She would stand admiring their beautiful gray wool or gabardine suits, slender silk ties, luminous lawn shirts, chatting with them as they waited for their daughters to come downstairs. The fathers who came to visit Connor's girls were usually divorced or separated, which left them in a state of shock, helplessness and guilt: They looked like dogs who'd spent their whole lives cozily sleeping in the parlor, only to be abruptly pulled awake and asked to rescue a drowning child.

"You'd look fabulous with a mustache," Connor would start casually, turning her head away shyly while continuing to stare at him in profile. The father wouldn't quite know what was happening to him; suddenly he felt like the statue of a god, adored and incapable of movement.

Too wrapped up in her own neuroses to notice what Connor was doing, his daughter would inevitably invite her to join them for luncheon in town, since all the girls knew of poor Connor's fatherlessness.

Connor liked to count how many times a father would touch her in the restaurant, and the various ways he tried to disguise the contact as fatherly. She'd make sure to sit between

father and daughter on the ride back home to school, letting her head idly come to rest against the fathers' shoulders. The moment when he looked down at the crooked part in her hair, she could practically hear his heart give way, behind layers of wool and sinew.

Back at the Common Room, as the father awkwardly kissed his daughter goodbye, Connor stood back timidly; then, as if she couldn't help herself, she'd walk up and put her arms around his waist (as his daughter was too inhibited to do) and sigh, "Oh, Louise, I just love your father. Can I borrow him?" She'd feel each father quivering under her hands.

This made for a quite satisfying, harmless little game until after a time she realized that she wanted more than simply making the fathers quiver. She wanted them to detonate.

Over the summer she stole a copy of *Sexus* (banned in the U.S.A.) from a bookstore in Paris and brought it with her to school, burying it inside a metal Band-aid box in the orchard behind the amphitheater. Every weekend she dug up the book and re-read it. By the time winter came and the ground was too frozen to yield her prize, Connor had achieved an astonishing fluency in her subject.

March of her fourteenth year, Connor knelt on the moist matted yellow grass behind the amphitheater, the ground over *Sexus* muddy from spring's thaw, the jacket of the latest fa-

ther above her was elegant gray wool, his matching vest unrumpled. His skin had gone transparent as a lampshade, the blue and crimson veins underneath surprised in the act of violent skirmish. He stared down at the crooked part in Connor's hair and at his open fly as if it were a mortar wound from which some vital entrail was escaping. When he came, the sound was exactly the same one Connor's father had made when he was dying of pneumonia.

She had been eight. Insisting on being allowed into his hospital room to say goodbye, she'd come as close to her father's bed as she dared. Sticking her head through the metal bars, she watched him arch his pelvis and twist his head, letting out long disbelieving groans as his body evacuated all his fluids. His eyes opened, staring into Connor's.

It was their first and only intimate moment together.

"Oh. . ." he let out a last, moaning breath before his body went slack with relief, yielding up to her his soul, it seemed. She stared back until his eyes, fixed on her, lost their sheen.

She would hear that same "Oh" of amazement from other fathers, but the one who'd been with her behind the amphitheater in March never came to visit his daughter again. At first the poor girl stopped eating, immersing herself in studies until her emaciated flesh was covered with ink and ballpoint gouges.

After she gave herself a concussion by bashing her head repeatedly against a pew while praying alone in the chapel, Connor knew that she had gone too far.

She would never go near older men again.

As time wore on, she waited for them to lose their attraction, but they never did; besides them, men her own age seemed perpetually foolish. Still, she was determined to stay true to her vow. Turning her face away from older men who might have made her happy, she remained single and hungry.

But she had never loved anybody until Selim.

At dusk the guard woke her, waited while she stumbled groggily to her feet, and led her out of the tent. Outside, they joined a tide of Bedouins and Berbers heading toward the center of the oasis.

"Where are we going?" she asked Malcolm Pugh, when he fell into step beside her.

"The victory feast. Then no doubt Babas Umaloo will put on a show, to pump up the troops."

"Do we get presents and party hats?" She was careful not to look at him or encourage him in any way.

"No, and the men will sit apart from the women, so this is my last chance to speak with you." He moved in closer to her, his shoulders touching hers.

"About what happened earlier -- "

He broke in: "I've just had the most agreeable chat with your slave."

"*Selim?*"

"Clever girl, you *did* get a slave after all. He's quite the Adonis, I must say."

"He's here?" Her heart leapt; she scanned the crowds of tribespeople frantically.

"The dear boy sold his suit, his watch and his shoes to buy a camel and follow you all the way here across the Najiz. I had to put some salve on his legs, they were so frightfully sunburned."

"Selim did that?" Every ache and pain in Connor's body went away. "The sweetheart! He does care about me!"

"Actually, he promised his mother he'd never leave your side unless you freed him."

She sighed. "Well, whatever it takes."

Mal put his arm around Connor's shoulder, bringing his face closer to her to speak more discreetly. "They let him into the camp this morning with no questions because he's one of Babas Umaloo's boys -- Habib's, that is. It turns out he was raised in Habib's house in Tittawen -- slavery being one of Habib's many sidelines -- and Habib sold him to your prince. They don't suspect he's still bound to you." Connor

walked faster, stepping away from Mal's encircling arm.

"There's a good chance he can get us out of here. He's come up with a fairly good plan, and he doesn't mind dying if he gets caught: one of the dividends of having a slave."

"I want to see him." He was right here, in camp, because he couldn't live without her -- or because he belonged to her, which was the same thing! She wanted him now, in the sand, under a date-palm, at gunpoint, anywhere.

"You'll see him later. If we're going to make a break for it, it'll have to be tonight, during the feast."

As they came to a vast clearing, Connor saw carpets spread for the feast as veiled Bedouin women, alongside bare-faced tattooed Berber women, placed domed clay dishes of food them. Before she could ask Mal anything else, the guard inserted himself between him and Connor, motioning her off to the women's side.

"What do we do? What's the plan?" she asked Mal hurriedly.

"Don't eat the food," was all he said.

She didn't see Pugh watching her as she was led away, taking great satisfaction in his self-control. Touching her had been a test: His emotions had happily remained unmoved.

The stars sank from their gaudy midheaven into dark sheaves of gently clicking palm fronds. The drums rumbled through the night like ancient wagons, while the shrill strands of the oboes tangled above. Babas Umaloo had been dancing for four hours, stamping and jerking from the waist, breaking to drink boiling water or dismember a live sheep with his bare hands, or revive a dying man from his supine position to dance convulsively among the throng of stamping, jerking, bobbing men all slathered by the tongues of firelight.

Connor sat in front of a tent at some distance from the celebration, guarded by the old woman and a pair of Berber soldiers, who clapped and swayed to the music. The flickering fires made her drowsy, as did the opium's lingering residue in her blood. She clutched Simone tightly, trying to stay awake, her eyes searching the crowd once more for Selim. The light was too dim, the dancers too far away; languor stole over her.

She jolted awake to see Babas Umaloo sitting beside her. He was bareheaded; his tawny face was solemn and faintly lament, as if lit from within. Her eyes moved to the dancers in the distance: Babas Umaloo was there too, among them, spinning in a frenzied whirl of tatters, having torn his *dishdasha* in his trance. Connor stared at him sitting at her side, every detail of his shape preternaturally clear. Was it the opium? Was it magic?

"I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I," a deep voice echoed in her head. "We are two spirits dwelling in one body. If you see me, you see Him, and if you see Him you see us both. God is great."

The music stopped. The dancing Babas Umaloo rose, flinging his arms up until his long sleeves became an upward surge of fabric. Connor glanced back at her side and gasped: The polished cabochon head of a snake was nudging out of the hole in his cheek, the glossy black tube of its body growing steadily larger as it streamed out of the hole. Soon his head was wrapped in a caul of shimmering obsidian scales; his body twisted into a column of coils, vanishing. . . .Above the heads of the dancers in the distance, a white form hung and tipped, half-man, half-bird. The stork flapped away; the Father of Shadows was gone.

With dawn a few hours away, the women began to serve food.

Connor was at a distinct disadvantage in this strange place, she realized. She wanted very badly to go home.

Remembering Mal's warning, she feigned loss of appetite when the roast sheep was offered. Soon the old woman and the two Berber guards were unconscious from the opium powder lacing the food. Since in a rare display of hunger, Simone had

eaten a piece of the liver, Connor was the only one awake in the tent just before dawn, when a Bedouin appeared. He held open an empty rice sack and gestured to Connor to climb inside. Slipping the sack with Connor and her cat in the sack over his shoulder, he carried them through the labyrinthine back paths of the oasis to the edge of the desert.

When Connor emerged from the sack, she saw Malcolm Pugh and Selim waiting with a kneeling camel. Her slave's face was impassive and deferential as always, but his eyes were alive with excitement, matching the blue hour of the dawn. She ran to him; his strong hands lifted her into the saddle; Mal climbed on behind her. The Bedouin accepted Selim's beloved tape recorder and several American tapes as payment for his services.

They set out, Selim walking alongside the beast. They could hear the Bedouin in the distance, slapping and pummeling the tape recorder until at last Frank Sinatra's voice wobbled feebly up into the fading starlight: "*You see in me a man alone. . . .*" Selim echoed the tune softly as they passed out of sight over the blanched ribs of sand.

Later at midmorning, Selim's feet grew too cracked and scorched to walk in the sand, and he traded places with Mal, embracing Connor from behind, singing Sinatra tunes into her

ear. He asked the scientist about the meaning of the song lyrics, nodding with dreamy satisfaction as Mal translated each line of "My Way" and "That's Life." Soon they were gossiping away in Berber.

In the magic encirclement of Selim's arms, Connor was utterly happy. Holding Simone's drugged body, she didn't even complain about the camel's bone-wrenching motion and slow progress, the slimy discomfort of her velvet gown under the insensate white sun, her unbelievable thirst and throbbing skull.

Two storks sailed over their heads. Alighting on a distant dune's crest, they became two men, one short and the other very tall with a long slithering lock of hair. Selim touched the silver charm around his neck, whispering something in a language that was neither Berber nor Arabic, and the mirage disappeared.

At midday, they stopped at a small thicket of saltbushes to let their camel graze, drinking cautiously from their one goatskin of water, eating a packet of dates. During the torrid afternoon hours, they napped, all three naked and huddled together a canopy of their clothes, Mal on one side of Connor, Selim on the other, curled on his side away from her. *Too bad survival is the only item on the itinerary*, she thought,

stretching out a hand to trace his beautiful long spine. Connor was on fire for him.

At her touch she felt his flesh contract, his body going slightly rigid, as if in dread. A stab of doubt entered her heart: Did he still hate her after all? Maybe he was embarrassed by Mal's presence, she told herself. Would she ever understand this man?

Mal couldn't sleep. He was angry at himself for wasting this precious rest time gazing at the woman's back, its plains and ridges, the cloven swell of her buttocks. She'd shown no modesty in stripping off her clothes, acting as if he wasn't there. Her focus was completely on her slave, her eyes never leaving him, admiring, worrying, wondering. The more she clung to the chap, the more she repulsed him. A bit of obvious psychology; didn't she see it? He almost felt sorry for her. She was sure to get hurt in the end, he thought, willing himself not to care.

When they resumed their journey, Mal steered them north, hoping to skirt rebel camps and cross into the territory of the Al Agrab, a Bedouin tribe still loyal to the Beni Wazz who with any luck might escort them back to the capital.

As they stopped in the evening to rest near another lone copse in this sterile sand plain, Connor seemed strangely silent, as if deep in thought. Selim chased and caught a hare, which they cooked over kindling gathered in the copse. Mal sat some distance away while Connor fed her revived cat; his face a battleground of allergic blotches and sun blisters.

Afterwards, they resumed their tortuous march over the bleak landscape, Mal walking beside the camel. By dawn he faced a fate far worse than fatigue: boredom. "Talk to me," he implored Connor. "What are you thinking about?"

The whole story poured out of her, as if she'd been ready to burst at that very moment. She told him every graphic detail of her encounters with the young man, asking his advice.

"You were probably too permissive," he said, only too happy to give it. Talking kept insanity at bay. "Spare the rod, you know. Imagine, he came to your room that first night when you hadn't called him. That's practically daring you to punish him. Once you failed the first test of wills, it was all downhill."

"I could still do it." Unconsciously Connor tightened her fists. "I'll just make myself whip him or whatever."

"It's rather late in the game for that."

"Sometimes he looks at me as if I'm *fungus*."

"It's rather shaming for him to serve a Christian, don't you see? And you fell in love with him! That's rich. Don't look daggers at me, dear girl, you asked my opinion. These love slaves become rather haughty when they imagine they've seduced you. Really, it's best to buy two of them and have them compete for your affections."

"This is hardly helpful." Selim rocked obliviously behind Connor, his arms around her waist. The dunes took on a pale orange as the sun rose higher in the sky. From time to time a shoulder broke away from the mother dune and slid down, exposing a gash of cream-colored sand.

"If you'd learned a bit of the language, it might've helped you to communicate with him."

"I didn't buy a slave to *talk* to."

"But that's one of the ways you went astray. Take your first night, when he sprinkled something on a rose and had you eat it. Probably hashish -- it's commonly used as an aphrodisiac -- "

"He *did* drug me, I knew it! Everything he fed me had that stuff in it. I nearly died!"

"But he did it right in front of you, which means most likely he was trying all his tricks to see if there was anything you *didn't* want. And since you never said "no" or "stop" -- two very simple words you really should learn -- he kept

right on, waiting for you to state your limits. Did you ever see *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*? Mickey Mouse doesn't know the magic word to stop all those brooms and pails of water?"

"All right, how do you say 'no'?"

"*Lla.*"

"That's it? *Lla.*" Selim instantly took his hands away from her waist. "Now how do you say 'yes'?" she asked, putting them back on her.

"*Naam.*"

"Okay, what else should I have done?"

"Restrained your appetite a bit. You shouldn't have let him be in your room all the time. Despite the fact that they tend to force food and other hospitalities on one here, they do expect one to graciously decline after a while. Each person is supposed to understand his role. Though I suppose it's awkward for a foreigner." He mused for a moment. "I know an English chap who had a sort of valet in Yemen, who got quite upset if his master handed him his clothes to wash. Felt he should let them fall on the floor, step imperiously away, and leave them to be picked up. The act of the master touching dirty clothes and possibly even the boy's hand in the transaction was too shaming for words. They like a lord to be a lord -- to be quite definite in his behavior about the balance of the relationship. The entire culture is designed to preserve

symmetry, you see. It's all meant to be a bittersweet ballet, before the release of death and the endless holiday in Paradise. How can he respect you when you neither follow the classical steps nor teach him the new moves to this modern dance? All he asks is that the result be graceful, definite, and suitably balanced."

"He's probably a Libra," Connor said.

As they descended a slope into a flat, minutely rippled expanse of gray sand, Selim tore off one sleeve from his shift to wrap Connor's head. The sun was sharpening. Mal continued to press north through this dismal new zone, urging Connor to keep him talking so that his mind would remain focused. Delicately she brought up another difficulty she'd had with Selim, before he ran away.

Throwing back his head, Pugh burst into laughter, cracking his parched lips.

"What's so funny?"

"You must have given him the shock of his young life. Oral sex is not a practice here -- they think it's *haram* -- bloody unclean!"

"I want him to come."

"Surely the Princess explained how he was trained like all love slaves to retain his seed. I suspect that particular

tradition came from both and abstract reasoning: the unseemliness of becoming pregnant by a slave, and the idea that a slave shouldn't enjoy possession of his mistress. The splitting of a hair makes all the difference in the phenomenon of balance. To have him never taste triumph returns him to the inferior role, the appropriate place for a slave. Otherwise he would be assuming too many actions associated with the aggressor, and much confusion about power would result. Anal sex is ever so much more satisfactory. There the distinction between master and slave is physically quite clear."

He stopped, squinting. An image of red cliffs had been hanging persistently on the horizon for the last hour. Confering with Selim in Berber, they decided the cliffs were real and pointed the camel toward them. Soon, all three were walking with the camel, stepping carefully around the perimeter of wide white patches of soft gypsum.

Under the sun's revolving blades, Mal began to babble. "Tempting him with wine didn't work, you say? Dear me, he is a good boy. Being a Moslem, he must be quite ashamed of that episode. I really can't understand why you should bother yourself whether or not he climaxes."

"Because it sort of. . .seals the deal, you know. It means he's mine, he cares about me."

"Why should that matter? Aren't you basically getting everything you want already?"

Connor stared at her boots, mechanically planting one in front of the other as they trudged across the flat plain. She couldn't bring herself to utter the words, *I want love*. "It's just not romantic," she said at last. "I could have bought a vibrator if all I wanted was a cheap orgasm. Why won't he just let go?"

"I suppose it has to do with his honor," Mal said. "Everything comes down to honor or shame with these people. This young man here is decidedly the type to want to do things correctly, or he wouldn't take his oath to his mother so seriously. So what you want him to do is just not right, not fitting for a slave, not honorable. So long as they can keep their honor shame-free, slave or not, they can consider themselves free men."

Selim started to sing.

"Teach me how to say it like a command, then, so he has to obey," said Connor.

"You'd have to deprive him of his will. I believe the trouble with your boy is, he's afraid of you. Probably why he ran away. Afraid that if he stays with you, you'll eventually win the contest of wills." He noticed Connor's frown had deepened. "Sooner or later you'll dishonor him."

Selim broke into yet another refrain of "*I did it my way.*"

"Stop singing that stupid song," Connor snarled.

Misinterpreting her request, the slave switched songs: "*And then I go and spoil it all by saying' something' stupid like 'I love you'. . . .*"

"I'm going to kill him," said Connor.

"You might try drugs," said Mal.

Connor stared. "I wasn't serious."

"Of course you weren't. I was merely thinking of a voodoo cult in Haiti, which puts a sort of vegetable-based drug in food which renders their victims obedient and essentially without will. They call it *concombre zombie*. Apparently this particular vegetable only grows on some of the Caribbean islands, which accounts for why the zombie legend only exists there. I can't tell you much more, because I left; Haiti was getting too bloody touristy for me. Nowadays I hear almost anyone can get into a voodoo ceremony -- they're practically running courtesy buses from the hotels." Mal hardly knew what he was saying any more, dazed by the sun; in another minute he would be proposing mad, passionate sex on a dune. He blinked, shook his head brusquely, trying to dispel demons.

When he next looked at Connor, she was brooding heavily over something. Something he'd said? What was it he'd said? He

couldn't remember. Her silence slowed his steps; before Mal knew it he was hallucinating.

They stopped to rest again, lying naked in the shade of their clothes, and didn't awake until twilight. Connor still didn't speak, when they rose to dress and resume their trek. A pale green scorpion fell out of the folds of her dress, but she did not even utter a cry.

"Don't budge," Mal said.

Connor only stared impassively at her astrological emblem, her shriveled double. The tiny pale creature with a single treacherous twist where its tail crooked inward was both deadly both to others and to itself.

Mal flicked it away with his boot.

As the morning dawned, they reached valley between brick-red cliffs of sand. Suddenly Selim cried out, pointing. Mal cupped his hands over his eyes, framing a distant figure of a man on the cliffs above.

Connor broke from her reverie to see the point of a bayonet swinging out as the man shouldered his rifle, disappearing down the far side of the cliff. "That was real, right?"

Mal brought his hands away from his face, looking encouraged. "Brown turban wrapped sideways. Think it's an Al Agrab. Good show if it is. We'll have a guide, then."

The Al Agrab sentry led them into an encampment of women and children. All the men and youths of the tribe had departed for Port-Au-Wazz to rally around King Musa. It seemed the King had recovered all his former powers and was now summoning all loyal subjects for a violent reprisal against the rebels.

The Bedouin women offered the fugitives bread, milk, and the merciful shade. The next day, a young boy lent them some horses, agreeing to guide them back to Port-Au-Wazz, in exchange for Malcolm Pugh's compass and Selim's last cherished possession, his mother's protective silver charm.

Chapter Nineteen

KING MUSA SPEAKS

As the dawn mist unrolled from the shore, Port-Au-Wazz's landmarks came into blurred view on the horizon: the Ferris wheel and half-finished trade center, a minaret, a giant crane. Outside the city, in the dunes between the beach and the gravel desert, thousands of Bedouins from the eastern Samra desert to the western loess plains of Masmoudia finished the morning prayer and settled back onto their rugs to hear their monarch speak.

It had been two years since King Musa had last spoken, and eight years since his people had been gathered in such numbers. The last occasion had been one of vengeance, after a young Beni Wazz prince and his hunting party had gotten lost in the northern Najiz desert and were inadvertently slaughtered by some Beni Fasidim scouts. The Crown's loyal tribes had joined forces to exterminate all the males of the Beni Fasidim.

Now the King's desert brethren gathered again, listening rapturously to his voice, as he sat amid them on a camel litter of beaten gold, emeralds, and magenta tassels, his

headrope gleaming like a gilded serpent on his brow. The ancestral Beni Wazz features shone nobly in the frame of his gold-embroidered black headcloth, though age had lowered his great cheeks to join among his chins, and his eyelids drooped so low that it seemed unlikely he could see. His face had gone waxen in the two years since his stroke, but now assumed the orange glow of the campfire before him. With his right hand still paralyzed, his left brandished a cattle prod as he exhorted revenge, glory, and genocide to the gathered tribes, fueling them with his righteous fury.

Later, his followers hoped, he might even drink boiling water and eat bottles the way he used to, thus inciting them to mystical vigor in the battle to come.

Due to the feebleness of His Majesty's voice, only those seated immediately around the fire could hear his actual words; yet all sat bathed in contentment that their King had returned to command the faithful. They understood his rage without needing to hear words: All his sons had been murdered on his birthday, in plain view of his army, his women, foreign guests, and a film crew. The royal hareem, along with his grandsons, wasted no time evacuating to Dubai.

The rest of the capital's inhabitants left as quickly as they could; foreign residents, diplomats, town merchants, moneychangers, porters, poets and acrobats, taxi drivers and

fishermen, masons and peddlers all made a mass exodus across the Bay of Two Dogs into Oman. Soon the cafés and souks of the capital were deserted. The water supply had been destroyed by terrorists, and the jets and tanks systematically stripped of the engine components that made them battle-ready.

Only the mercenary soldiers remained. Those laborers unable to obtain passage across the bay had been seized and conscripted into the army, and now stood glumly behind the King, beside their nervous horses and baffling modern jeeps.

It was an impressive gathering of troops, even if hastily assembled: twenty thousand Bedouins, mercenaries, and foreign workers, recruited by Sidi Messoud, the black slave who had risen to become Minister of Defense. Messoud's position in life depended upon the survival of his King. Should the Berber resistance be destroyed, Messoud would sit as Regent in *majlis* until one of Musa's grandsons was old enough to rule. Messoud would marry several of the King's daughters (including the recently widowed Awisha) and the Beni Wazz clan would swell again, its line nurtured by slaves' blood, as were most Arab monarchies.

If King Musa was the only man to match the charisma, cunning, and *baraka* of Babas Umaloo, however, his escape from his invalid's existence was temporary. Those watching would have been horrified to learn that he owed his rebirth to an ancient

trick, used to great effect by his great-grandfather Jawel Beni Wazz. With Musa's crown imperiled, the old slave Suleiman had told the story to Sidi Messoud:

In the previous century, when Jawel Beni Wazz was called upon to display his *baraka* before the tribes to renew their awe for another year, he'd dismembered bull camels with his bare hands, eaten scorpions, and commanded the *jinns* under the ground. For the latter performance, a slave had been secretly buried three feet down in the sand, along with a hollow bamboo pipe connecting him to the oxygen above ground. When Jawel had stamped his foot on the ground and conjured some spirit of the sands to make its presence known, the slave had shouted an answer as loud as he could through the bamboo tube. Thus it had seemed as if the sands themselves spoke: In a dim screeching voice, the spirit would praise Jawel as master and magician, feared by all the desert *jinns*.

Now, at the height of his great-grandson's crisis, the trick was revived. Though King Musa had never actually regained his speech, he could chew; timing his words to match the monarch's moving jaws, old Suleiman was buried next to his master's camel litter and now shouted about revenge, glory, and genocide through a concealed bamboo tube. Whenever the underground Suleiman had to stop and gasp for oxygen, Sidi Messoud leapt to fill the gap and further rouse the troops and

allies, reliving the night the Berber terrorists had slain Masmoudia's princes and carried away their severed limbs to eat, kidnapping two American women to be raped and roasted in oil.

Suddenly, in the midst of this frenzied spectacle, came an Al Agrab boy on horseback, galloping in with some rescued hostages -- a British scientist, and one of the American women! The crowd roared with enthusiasm. Connor Blakey and Malcolm Pugh were lifted onto the shoulders of the exultant soldiers, carried to the King. Through the din of cheering, Sidi Messoud cried that the rebels' fortunes had turned: "God is great! Soon every murdered prince will receive a hundred Berber corpses as a mantle on his grave, and honor and all power will be restored to our beloved King Musa and his brethren, the sons of the wind!"

As Malcolm Pugh was called to speak a few words to the troops, Connor stood numbly to one side of the King's litter, clutching her cat to her breast. Recent events had rendered her almost skeletal. Her skin had erupted in blisters, her eyes were pink and swollen, and her hair, still wrapped in Selim's torn sleeve, was clotted with sweat and grime. The multitude of men's dun-colored faces before her were no realer than a pack of film extras. She wanted to go home.

If only she could float above the crowd as she did so easily in her dreams, burst through the confining stratosphere and fly over mountains and forests and oceans. She pictured herself flying over the roof of her hotel in Manhattan, finding her window with its lamp still lit. For a moment, she forgot Masmoudia and Selim: She was back in her bed at the Pierre, drinking chablis with her friends and complaining about men who couldn't get it up. Had all those palmists and psychics who'd said she'd live to be eighty, with too much money and too many bad romantic choices, lied to her? Had she been actually destined to perish at the age of thirty-one on a dune halfway around the world, surrounded by raving maniacs?

Gulping back tears, she stood bravely, her boot heel planted flat upon a bit of bamboo pipe poking out of the ground near the King's litter. Three feet under, cut off from oxygen, the old slave Suleiman breathed his last.

Her Aunt Muffie would not have been surprised at Connor's latest catastrophic blunder of course. At that moment, Muffie Blakey-Vandermuffing was crossing into Oman with Sheikh Juma's caravan, having a marvelous time soaking up Arab customs. These included having her hands and feet painted with henna, a ritual she did not realize was part of a long beautification ceremony to prepare her for her nuptials with Sheikh Juma.

As Sidi Messoud shouted to the soldiers that the appearance of the hostages was a sign from God, that Babas Umaloo had lost his *baraka* and the rebels' courage was failing, Malcolm Pugh returned to Connor's side. A thunderous ovation bore down upon them. Mal anxiously looked up at the sky. "I do wish the sky wasn't so damned empty," he whispered to Connor. "Where's the United Nations, where are those lovely Marines of yours? We must quit this place of doom, my dear, as soon as we can manage."

Selim, behind them, suddenly pointed toward the Port-Au-Wazz skyline.

"What's that?" gasped Connor.

Between the Ferris wheel and the fort there swelled a fantastical pink sphere, like a jolly puff of bubble gum.

When the U.S. rescue plane came to evacuate all the Americans in Port-Au-Wazz, Ralph Shunt had stayed behind, unable to bear abandoning his hot-air balloon. He would use to escape, he decided, before realizing that inflating it would require help. After he'd hired some Baluchis he'd found hiding in a shipment of rusting transport vans along the quai, they stole his water and ran off, leaving him to fend for himself in a city that had been dry since the Berbers had blown up the

falajes, the underground conduits that supplied Port-Au-Wazz with water from the Dugagah oasis. (The few remaining Moslems in the city, accustomed to the month-long Ramadan fast, had handled the deprivation ably, but the Hindu staff at the Grande Wazz Hotel were not so well-prepared. After they'd broken into the liquor closet, Ralph Shunt found their stuporous bodies draped about the ballroom.)

Further search turned up another countryman, the American doctor, who'd stayed behind when the rescue plane's pilot refused to take along his three slave-boys as refugees. Though Ralph Shunt didn't like the doctor, he recognized the value of a man who possessed a case of Vichy water and three healthy young boys capable of erecting a balloon. In return for their help, Ralph agreed to transport the doctor and one of the boys to his destination, across the Bay of Two Dogs and north to Muscat in Oman, where there was an American embassy. (There was certainly room enough for at least six more people in the balloon's gondola, but Ralph didn't feel right about being outnumbered by fruits.)

In no time Shunt put the boys to work, spreading the ground cloth on the dock, pattering delicately around on soft bare feet, while the American doctor sat in the shade of an abandoned steam shovel nearby, blubbering incoherently and administering shots of Demerol to himself. Then his slaves laid

out the vast pink silk and held up the ring while Shunt's burner had blasted hot air through it, until the great mass of silk filled. Bobbling dizzily in a stray wind off the bay, it could be seen for miles.

As Sidi Messoud worked up the bloodlust in the crowd, no one noticed that the rescued hostages had slipped away. Trading the last precious goat-skin of water for the use of a draftee's jeep, Mal took the wheel, Connor beside him. Selim crouched in the rear as they headed full speed toward the pink silk bosom on the horizon.

The jeep ran of water at the head of the Port-Au-Wazz quai, breaking down near a small party of royal guardsmen searching for a shipment of ammunition that had been lost under the deliveries of food and merchandise piled up along the docks. The king's men glanced up curiously as the three scorched-looking fugitives ran the length of the quai to the balloon.

"We met on the plane coming in, didn't we?" Ralph Shunt said to Connor and Mal. He kept an eye on his balloon's position as two of the slave-boys held her steady, dragging on the ropes. "You guys are in the nick of time. How'd you like a one-way non-stop up-up-and-away to Oman?"

"Can you fit us all in?" Connor asked, panting.

"No problem-o. I'll give you a leg up, honey. Jeez, you guys look like you've been scraped off a barbecue grill. Those sand-niggers didn't torture you, did they? Professor, your face looks awful."

"Damn bloody cat," said Mal, climbing into the basket alongside Connor.

"Well, y'all are in luck," Shunt said. "There's a doctor on this flight. He's over there with the stewardess." He winked and indicated the American doctor lurching toward them on the arm a boy sporting a new "Voulez-Vous Couchez Avec Moi Ce Soir" T-shirt for the journey.

As the doctor and his slave clamored into the gondola, Connor waved Selim on. "Get in!"

Though Selim understood the gesture, he did not move. His tattered shift, one sleeve missing, flapped against his emaciated body. His once unmarked birch-white skin had been dried to brown wrinkles in the desert air; black hairs prickled his once lathe-smooth face and body. His parched lips parted painfully as he said something in Berber.

Connor turned to Mal. "What's he saying?"

"He says he has delivered you to safety from Dugagah, and he hopes that in your gratitude, in your generosity, you will give him his heart's wish."

"Anything! Tell him to come on!" The gondola rocked; Ralph Shunt was cutting the last stays before climbing in.

"Free me," said Selim.

"What?!" Connor reached out and grasped Selim's collar. "For Christ's sake, get inside! Mal, he's delirious, he's running on with some Sinatra song. Make him understand."

"Free. . .me." His eyes entreated her.

Connor spun on Mal. "You taught him that!"

The scientist shrugged. "He wanted to ask you properly."

"He only rescued me because - because - he wanted to make a deal?" Stricken, incredulous, she released Selim's collar. The slave stood breathlessly watching her lips, waiting for a word to release him.

She was hurt, just as Mal had feared she'd be. It never paid to lose one's heart: He would tell her that, when she had calmed down, when they were off and away. He squeezed her shoulder to comfort her, but she shook him off, her eyes filling with such fury that Mal stood back, alarmed.

"It was all a trick! And you knew!"

"Let him go," Mal said gently. "They're not worth much when they want to be free." She glared at him. "Come on, old girl, it's a fair trade. He saved your life, he gets his freedom. All you have to say is yes. Quick! Any language will do. Yes, *oui, da, si, naam--*"

"No!" She grabbed Selim's collar again and pulled him towards the rim of the basket.

Mal caught her arm, struggling to pry her away. Words tore out of him before he could stop them: "Come with me instead."

She wouldn't look at him. Her eyes were locked on Selim.

"There are plenty of other countries where you can get slaves," Mal found himself begging, "I'll take you there! Leave him here, he doesn't want to go with you. Whatever went wrong between you, it's past fixing."

"No!" Connor howled. "No!" She turned to Selim and screamed in his face, "Lla! Lla! Lla! Lla! Lla! Lla!"

Each of her cries struck Selim like a blow, his head twisting away to ward off the words, but Connor held fast to the flimsy white shift until the fabric began to shred in her hands.

Ralph Shunt walked over, frowning. "What's going on?"

"It's my boyfriend -- he's in shock."

"Only one thing for that." Making a fist, he delivered a swift punch to Selim's jaw, then flipped the slave's unconscious body into the craft beside Connor, jumping in after him. "Okay, boys, cut those mothers!" he called, making a slitting gesture at his throat. The two jubilant slave-boys hacked at the restraining ropes and, with a magnificent surge,

the balloon lifted free. Catching the dancing ends of the severed ropes, the two boys shinnied up to topple, giggling, into the gondola as it ascended.

The American doctor grinned at Ralph Shunt's indignation. "You didn't really think I'd leave without them?"

Suddenly a huge explosion at the opposite end of the dock brought a powerful gust of air to buffet the balloon. The royal guardsmen had at last located a decayed shipment of dynamite and plastique ordered back in the days when the Crown Prince was alive and yearning to blast the enchanted uranium from the mountains of Masmoudia.

Outside the city, the war party in the dunes heard the deep thump of the blast and saw the muddy plumes of smoke rise from the port. An eerie pink bubble soared up, lirting away on the wind like a giant messianic embryo born from the explosion. Confusion reigned.

Some terrible magic was at work. First the rescued American girl and the British adventurer had run off. Then, after Sidi Messoud delivered a lengthy tirade and the cheering died down, the sentries had announced that the Berber armies were approaching from the south. Seeing the long curl of dust across the horizon like a serpent rolling sideways, the troops

had waited for King Musa to utter the final valedictory before they set off for battle.

Yet though the old monarch's jaw kept working, no voice came forth. Some sorcery had reduced their King, Commander of the Faithful, Protector of the Poor, Lord of the True Believers, Exalted of God, the warriors' last hope, to a drooling marionette! No sooner did they realize the disaster that had befallen them than the explosion came, and then the vision of a pink airship in the sky.

The Bedouin tribes stayed to confront the enemy. Mercenaries and foreign laborers scattered in panic: A stampede of Yemenis, Iranians, Baluchis, Palestinians, Jordanians, Sudanese, Pakistanis, Ethiopians, and Indians raced back to the city to loot the villas and shops and palaces before making their escape across the Bay of Two Dogs. They entered the city by the road along the docks, where fire from the explosion lashed away at the towering heaps of cargo. Crates filled with washing machines and stereos, motor oil and milk formula, air-conditioners and x-ray equipment, sacks of wheat, flour, and rice, lumber, and new automobiles. . . .The harbor, the fort, and the funhouse all burned as the silk balloon skimmed safely away, northeast to Muscat.

The American hot-air balloon salesman Ralph Shunt beat his chest boisterously. "Whee-ha! Man oh man, Oman, here we come!

"My sweet refugees." The American doctor hugged his male hareem. "After I sponsor your visas to America, we will all live happily ever after in a place called Little Rock, which is my home."

Connor crouched beside Selim's sprawled form, staring down at his insensible face. Loose strands of hair seethed over her famished face.

"Why the devil didn't you free him?" Mal asked her numbly.

"And leave him to get killed in that ridiculous revolution?"

The anthropologist wasn't fooled. "It's his revolution. His choice to be killed."

"Not his choice. Mine." Connor turned wild eyes to his. "He's mine."

She turned her face to the wind, as it bore her over an ocean in flames, her slave beside her.

Chapter Twenty

MASMOUDIAN FAREWELL

After the mutiny of the King's guard, those Bedouins still loyal to King Musa fought over his body in the sands outside Port-Au-Wazz. Yet despite a ferocious battle, the Berbers defeated them, moving into the capital to skirmish with the mercenaries and looters in the narrow streets. Then Babas Umaloo was killed.

It was said he hid in a dead camel's stomach for three days in the souk, shooting three hundred men before anyone figured out where the automatic rifle fire was coming from. It was also believed that he resurrected in the form of a great stork with a snake in its beak.

One day in the Bay of Two Dogs, a pilotless dhow appeared, its motor still running and sails erect. Colliding with the artificial island in the Port-Au-Wazz harbor, it overturned: A party of hungry rats scurried ashore and entered the amusement park funhouse, promptly attacking the food provisions Sidi Messoud had been hoarding. The Defense Minister had been hiding in the funhouse with his servants until the

foreign powers intervened to end the civil war raging outside, but the Great Powers had been silent.

Messoud was grateful for the boat; after having his servants right it and start its motor, he chose three of them to accompany him to South Yemen, where he would appeal to the Communists for help. But halfway across the Bay of Two Dogs, he and his companions experienced violent headaches, and suddenly went blind. Flailing and shouting feebly for help, they soon collapsed, too weak to move. By sunset, as the boat drifted into the Indian Ocean, all aboard were dead from some mysterious affliction.

Back on land, the two servants left behind surrendered to the Berbers, who decided to take them back to the Dar Loosh as slaves. The rebels were withdrawing from Port-Au-Wazz; they had never wanted to rule Masmoudia but simply to protect their mountains and their honor. Demoralized by Babas Umaloo's death, the warriors were homesick.

They were halfway across the gravel plains, with the Dar Loosh looming before them, when the entire party was struck with sudden migraines. Their sight then fled, with paralysis following soon after. Man after man lay down in his tracks, entering a state of catatonia until by sundown their corpses littered the plain. Not one was left alive at the foot of the mountains. A peculiar calm covered their features, their eyes

open and clear, as if they had expired from nothing more serious than apathy.

Just as a snake, dealt a mortal blow, often kept writhing reflexively until sundown, "sundown sickness" victims appeared to die quickly, entering a vegetative state, but did not stop living altogether until their metabolism slowed gradually to a halt, many hours later, usually after the sun went down. Transmitted by animals, insects, people, water, and air, the virus ran through entire populations before natural barriers like mountain ranges or jungles finally prevented its further spread.

The rare disease had never been reported anywhere except in central Africa, but the strain that wiped out Masmoudia was a synthetic version, reproduced in the laboratories of a technologically advanced nation. The infected rats were deliberately placed in the dhow, with the knowledge that the dependable currents in the Bay of Two Dogs would carry the boat to Masmoudian shores. Within three months, "sundown sickness" would infiltrate even the outermost Bedouin caravansaries and Berber kasbahs, and Masmoudia would be stripped of most of its humanity. By the end of the year, the virus itself would die out, for lack of a host.

By happy accident, or by God's design, the cavedwellers would be spared the disease: the five hundred old men, women,

and children who guarded the granaries and herds of the upper slopes. Living above a perilous stone ledge that could only be reached by a single narrow path, buffeted by winds which opposed the currents of the lower slopes, the cavedweller community was naturally fortified against the disease. Blue-eyed, milk-skinned, straight-haired, some even blond, they were a hardy people. Just as their ancestors had endured abduction from the Atlas mountains of North Africa, escaping their Arab captors to be shipwrecked on Masmoudia and resume their culture here in the Dar Loosh, they were bred to endure.

Since their visionary saint Babas Umaloo had sworn them to allow no human being up the path until a Mohammedan year had passed, they'd stored their last reserves of grain and produce, drinking clean water from the *wadis'* source, and avoided the disease completely. Babas Umaloo had also told them to welcome the first men to ascend the path after the year was up. These would be the new lords of the Dar Loosh.

One year later, when the promised rulers did indeed appear, they were not Bedouins or Berbers, neither the cavedwellers' own people nor the royal family's breed. The new lords would be foreigners from other nations, seeking what lay in the exquisite heart of the mountains: enough uranium to detonate the entire solar system.

At the same time, Sheikh Juma's caravan would end its wanderings in the deserts of Oman and Saudi Arabia, preparing a return to Masmoudia. The morning of the journey home, the hundred people in his following would wake at five o'clock to pray outside their tents. In the women's tent, the Sheikh's American wife would sleep through the chanting as usual; all she did was sleep, except when it was time to eat, or the times when her husband came to her. Every night the Sheikh's other wives burned something in a brazier at the entrance to her tent which made her drowsy; and the food, which she consumed avidly, contained something else which made her feel pleasantly stupid.

She had long since stopped thinking of escape. She remembered her life in Manhattan, yet it was as if she had always lived as she did now, her needs taken care of, her life devoid of work or obligations. It was a kind of bliss, to surrender to her fate.

Her life would not be without purpose. During her remaining childbearing years, Aunt Muffie would play her part in God's design to repopulate Masmoudia.

Chapter Twenty-one

THE HUNDRED AND FORTY-SIXTH NIGHT

Ming-Li Wu winced as the banquet hall speakers blasted out the song:

*Ming-Li, Ming-Li, general's daughter,
Where have four years of art history got her?
In lizard boots, she makes the rounds
Of faithless cowboys and rodeo clowns*

People started looking at her lizard boots. "Why did we come to this party? Are we crazy?" she wailed, hiding behind her friend Wren Ellis.

"No true Sarah Lawrence girl can pass up the chance to be notorious," said her former classmate.

Crimson lights and rotating mirror balls sprayed red polka-dots on the people crowding the sushi restaurant. Ronda's record company was throwing her a gold record party; thanks in part to the rumors about Ronda and the bachelor Senator, both the title single and the album of "It's Always Some Dude" had sold a million units in one month.

"I can't listen to the radio any more," said Ming-Li. "They're even playing that song on the *country* stations!" She particularly resented having it known that she was addicted to country-western singers.

Though Ronda's hit single dissected every one of her friends from college, she had invited the same friends to her party to hear the song playing repeatedly in the background. The press was clamoring to meet the real-life women of the lyrics.

Lavender-white fluorescence bathed the immaculately pale Japanese chefs standing vigil, like nurses in a maternity ward, over rows of gleaming raw-fish fillets asleep on pillows of white rice. Ming-Li's current shitkicker boyfriend had opted to leave the party rather than "hang around watchin' folks eat bait."

*It's always some dude
For that we had to be smart?
What good is our head
If some dude's gonna get hold of our heart?*

"I think we should stay just long enough to get even," Wren said balefully, abandoning her friend to get a drink. As Ming-Li shrank into a corner behind the buffet, hoping she passed for one of the help, she was joined by Fiona Feldman, another college friend.

"Ronda must be gloating," she said. "Look at this crowd." Ronda's song hadn't made Fiona very happy either: The lyrics implied that her marriage had broken up because her husband was gay. Her ex had called her up, ranting that he was going

to sue. (Fortunately, his boyfriend talked him out of a libel action.)

Fiona and Ming-Li eyed the throng: permanently-frizzed columnists mingling with blow-dried executives, managers and agents with ethyl-soaked handkerchiefs and poppers in their dittybags, groupies and butchettes -- and the political contingent, drawn by the Senator's presence. This party was a new pinnacle in Ronda's steady rise to rock-and-roll fame: She'd landed both a Senator and a recently exiled Princess.

"Poor Connor." Wren floated up to the two women with a plate of sushi and a thimble-cup of warm saki. "She must have felt so upstaged. I mean, five months away on a desert island without a word, escaping a revolution and everything, she finally waltzes in like Phileas Fogg or Professor Higgins, with a marvelous tan and a *slave*, and no one pays any attention."

"She left so early," Fiona said. "What was it, jet lag?"

"I noticed she got uptight when she saw the Princess was here."

Ming-Li disagreed; Connor hadn't seemed that upset. "All she said was, 'Uh-oh, there's butt-face.'"

They could see the Princess dancing with the Senator as flashbulbs popped. After a bit he excused himself and Awisha, spotting her college friends, rushed over.

"Hi, Wishy. Having a good time?"

"Yes!" Awisha beamed through a black veil stamped with glittering gold studs that was the envy of all the models in the room. She was in mourning for her family and country; with the hareem forever disbanded, she took solace in the company of her old classmates. "Yes, the Senator is a very nice dude! He says to me if he is elected President he will send me back to my country."

"I wouldn't bet on his getting the nomination," said Wren.

"Can you see Ronda in the White House? She'd be ordering drummers up to her room every night," Ming-Li said, after Her Highness went off to get another beer.

A reporter approached, drawn to Wren's ethereal looks. "You're a friend of Ronda's, aren't you? Do you think she and the Senator will get married before the primaries?"

Wren leaned close. He was slightly wall-eyed; his pupils drifted haphazardly as he inhaled the fragrance of her hair. "We're all in stitches about it," she murmured. "Of course he wants her around to give himself a masculine image and convince people he has an emotional and sexual side to his personality even though all you have to do is take one look at him to know he doesn't."

Fiona and Ming-Li tensed. Ever since Wren had moved in with a doctor who'd diagnosed her as having a multiple-

personality disorder, her behavior had become impossible to predict.

". . .Nobody who really knows Ronda believes she and the Senator are actually *doing it*! As far as I'm concerned, I won't be convinced until I see a photo of her holding his -- "

"Wrennie!"

" -- in her hand."

"Wren."

"And it has to be *hard*."

Ming-Li covered her moon-shaped face with her hands. "Oh God, Wren, not to the press."

"Your name's Wren?" The reporter lit up. "Are you the girl in Ronda's song: '*Wren, Wren, who tried to be weirder/ Majored in mushrooms and children's theater*'? Did you really take a lot of drugs in college?"

Wren stroked his lapel. "Darling, I never heard of anyone named Wren. I have twenty separate identities. Right at this moment I'm Trixie." Her hand headed south toward his pants. "I come out at bad parties and do wild, disgusting things to anyone stupid enough to stand close." She hooked her finger in his belt, then dumped her plate of sushi down his pants before he could pull away. He fled.

"My saki's cold," Wren said, leaving to get another thimbleful.

"Hey, Ming-A-Ling. Hey, Fifi." Ronda strode up. "How come Connor left in such a hurry? She didn't even say goodbye."

"I think she was insulted you didn't put her into your hit song."

"I couldn't come up with a verse for her." Ronda looked guilty. "How do you describe Connor and keep it clean enough for the Top 40?"

"Mingie's just teasing you. I think Connor and Spike left because they were tired, that's all."

"Did you see her watching him like a vulture? Did she think we were going to steal him?"

"Really, though, buying a slave?!" Ronda shook her head in disapproval. "I think Connor has reached a new extreme in tackiness."

"He was cute. I never thought a person could look so good in an 'I Love New York' T-shirt."

"I can't believe she gave him that name."

"He never said a word, did he?"

"I heard him say something. It must have been Arabic."

"He didn't seem very bright. That face -- no expression whatsoever! I had the feeling that if I shot a gun off in his face he wouldn't blink."

"Fantastic dark eyelashes, though."

"And built. And hung. Did you check?"

"His posture was weird. He was leaning over Connor like a hired goon."

"And he kind of *shuffled*."

"That beautiful white skin, though, like marble. How can you be in Haiti for a month and look like you've never been near the sun? Connor was absolutely negroid."

"She must have kept him chained to the bed in the hotel room while she went down to the pool."

"Who?" Wren returned with hot saki.

"Spike, Connor's slave."

"He was gorgeous. Like a god," Ronda declared.

"But that's so easy these days." Wren yawned. "Everyone's forgotten what the gods look like."

"Hey, Wish!" Ronda greeted Awisha's return. "We're talking about Connor's slave. You must have all the dope on him."

"Slave?" Awisha frowned. "This man with her tonight? You talk about Connor's boyfriend? He is from Peru. She met him in a hotel in my country."

The women stared.

The Princess insisted, "He is not a slave. Connor came to Masmoudia for a slave but she did not find a good one, and then she met this other knockout man in the hotel. I heard him speak a little tonight, and it was not my language. I don't know what he is saying, it must be the Peru tongue. And why

does Connor leave so soon? I'm so happy to see her I wet my pants, and now I'm hurting my feelings."

"Well! I don't know which is tackier," Ronda said, "Connor buying a slave, or Connor making up a whole story about buying a slave."

Before she could get worked up on the subject, her manager caught her eye and beckoned Ronda to the end of the buffet, where he was standing with a disgruntled wall-eyed journalist.

Shortly after, Ronda ordered Wren to leave the party. Wren promptly switched identities and created a scene that would make the next day's papers.

The fractiousness of the world saddened Awisha. Her old hareem had been disbanded forever; if her new hareem was already breaking up, what would become of her? The answer would arrive in the next minute, when the Princess would meet the love of her life, an eighteen-year-old six-foot thrills-starved impoverished minxed-eyed double-Libra junkie named Carole.

The new moon shed no light in Connor's bedroom.

Connor sat riding Selim, her hair brushing his bare chest, her fingers interlaced with his. His back arched and his hips rocked, gathering rhythm, as his mistress shuddered

with pleasure. She pumped harder, their flesh slapping, and his hardness seemed like the only upright thing in the world when her body and all else were melting, melting all around it. She reached back to squeeze his balls, whispering, "Now."

He bucked, thrusting into her with a final, searching force as the spasm overtook him. The simmering fluid rushed up his column and he surrendered, groaning. Connor felt herself burst open, the flash spreading to her extremities, leaving her shocked and trembling. As the charge ebbed away, she sank down onto his breast, laughing breathlessly. "That was perfect."

She rolled off to lie at his side. He was perfect, his slim body glowing in the faint light shed by the streetlamps lining Central Park outside. His eyes stared up at the ceiling; she touched his lids gently, closing them. His breathing slowed, his abdomen barely stirring as she caressed it, feeling his sweet pulse through the smooth skin. In a surge of tenderness she hugged him to her fiercely, and spoke his name.

The swarm of dark lashes lifted from his turquoise eyes. Their sheen had dulled, like stones brought up from the sea to dry in the sun.

"Selim," she said again. "Should we do it again?"

His penis stirred, awaiting her command.

"Never mind," she said after a moment. "We're both too tired. It was really a strain, getting through that party."

He had been absolutely the most beautiful thing in the room; Connor had reveled in the waves of envy she'd felt coming her way. Of course, this was New York. It wasn't enough to be gorgeous; everyone expected him to have a personality, too.

They all missed the point, she thought defensively. He was perfect the way he was.

Sadly, she could not say the same for herself. For the first time, whenever she looked in a mirror, she saw a woman in her thirties. She cursed the desiccating desert air of Mas-moudia for the wrinkles sketched under her eyes. Haiti had repaired the worst of the damages after her escape from the oasis; the American consul in Muscat had arranged for everything she asked, and the Sultan's son let her have one of his jets for the flight straight through to the Caribbean. Now her skin was tanned the same rosy-gold-brown shade as her hair, and her concussions and contusions had disappeared. Even the faint dimples of cellulite inside her thighs were gone, thanks to the salt-free diet she and Selim were on.

But those tiny white clouds rising slowly from her cuticles to the rims of her nails told the story of her trauma. That's what the palmist at the Grande Hotel Oloffson pool had

said, the month she'd spent in Haiti, while Selim was up in the hills under the care of a *bocor*, a voodoo doctor to whom one of the native taxi-drivers had driven her on the second day.

The *bocor's* whole cure had been flagrantly expensive. Connor wired her New York bank for the money, but her mother intervened, refusing to authorize any funds until her daughter explained the meaning of that embarrassing tape which she (and all the papers) had received from that Masmoudian man Mister Umaloo. Annette Blakey had had to spend a considerable sum of money to suppress the tape, as well as hours in deep conference with the State Department, only to discover that Connor was not kidnapped at all, but lying around the pool in Port-Au-Prince, wiring her bank for thousands of dollars!

After Connor had calmed her mother down, giving the usual explanation (none of it was Connor's fault; these things just *happened* to her), the funds arrived in Haiti. She delivered the money and Selim to the *bocor* in his compound, high up in the mountains.

The operation was dangerous, the *bocor* explained. He kept Selim sequestered for three weeks before Connor was allowed to see him. She entered the little hut made of coconut matting and bamboo, and saw him lying on a straw mat. The *bocor* had

healed all Selim's burns and gashes and blisters, as well as depilating all his body hair, at Connor's request. He looked just as she had first seen him in the pearly Zhubba dawn: beautiful and pale, luminous like a peeled tree, though his skin now had a slight grayish tinge.

"He died," the *bocor* said proudly. "He was like a dead man for one night and then I slowly bring back his life and now he is awake. He can even talk a little now. Anything you tell him to do he will obey."

She felt nervous. "Sit up, Selim."

Selim stared fixedly at the thatched ceiling.

"Oh, I forgot," she stammered. "He doesn't understand English."

"You can teach him anything now!" the *bocor* laughed. "He will do anything you say."

"He has no will?"

"No will. But everything else is the same man." He gave her a supply of the dried *concombre zombie* plant to make tea, should Selim need his docility renewed; the tea and a salt-free diet would keep his metabolism depressed. "That is most important. Give him no salt. *Zombie gouter sel, li pas mander rayti*," the witch doctor said in Creole. "If a zombie tastes salt he don't want to stay. He runs away."

Outside the Pierre Hotel, down on Fifth Avenue, a wind was howling. Connor closed the window, shutting out the sound, and returned to bed.

"Tomorrow let's go to André Oliver and buy you some new shirts," she said. "Maybe we'll go dancing at 54, let everybody slurp you up with their eyes."

She didn't wait for a response; the rare times Selim spoke, it sounded like gibberish. Something in his head must have gotten scrambled from the *bocor's* procedure.

She missed him saying things while they made love, the strange liquid consonants and swallowed vowels of his language, all the more beguiling because she didn't understand them.

I have the things that count, she told herself. You couldn't have everything. It would be greedy to want more.

Of course, she had to tell him to do everything these days; he no longer showed any initiative in their lovemaking. She missed the way he'd always come up with strange, surprising tricks to bring her new sensations, to disarm and entice her. But initiative was part of independence, of will, wasn't it? And she'd made her choice to deprive him of that.

It got to be a bit much sometimes, though, having to tell him where to go and what to do. "Sit," "lie down," "brush your teeth, remember how I showed you?" "get in the taxi." Some-

times when he didn't understand her English, she had to resort to elaborate mime. Still, he was getting a little more presentable every day. She'd never have risked dragging him to Ronda's awful party otherwise.

"You go to sleep now," she said, kissing his temple. "I love you."

"*Myway myway*," he said. "*Didit myway*."

She closed his eyelids again. He would lie there for days, never moving, unless she told him otherwise. Locating the remote in the tangled bedclothes, she turned on the TV in time for the "Late Show" monologue. Laughing at the first joke, she settled back beside Selim's inert form.

One day, though she could scarcely imagine it, she might not love Selim any more. One day she might want someone she could talk with, someone who would get her jokes, forgive her faults, even give her shit when she deserved it. A rogue pang of loneliness entered her heart; she quickly banished it. If that day ever came when Selim no longer satisfied her, then Connor would start putting salt in his food.

Copyright © Sarah Kernochan

<http://www.sarahkernochan.com/>

