

Chapter I

29 August 1491 AD / 23 Shawwal 896 AH

Hassan was deep in prayer.

He was not on his knees, however, nor bowing toward the gold-painted medallion in the southeast corner of his workroom that marked the direction of Mecca: instead, he sat on a cushion in the sun with his legs crossed and a string of wooden prayer beads slack in his hand, his eyes focused on something Fatima could not see. She had no way of knowing how long he had been in this attitude when she slipped into his room from the shaded path she had taken through the Court of Myrtles. Sweat glowed on Hassan's brow where the sun struck it, and when she stepped on his shadow with her bare foot, the marble tiles beneath were cold. He might have been there for hours, so lost in God that he had trouble finding his way out again. His lips were parted as if he had gone silent in midconversation. A holy name had been upon them, but which?

"*Hayy*," whispered Fatima, guessing. Yet that syllable fell on the wrong part of the palate.

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“*Hu*,” she guessed again.

There was a door in the western wall that hadn’t been there on Fatima’s last visit to Hassan’s workroom. It stood innocently ajar in its frame of white plaster, a simple rectangle of wood dotted with iron fastenings, its edges cracked and dry, as if it had been there as long as the Alhambra itself. Fatima stood on one foot and leaned sideways to peek around the door, shielding her body behind its solid bulk to protect herself from whatever might lie beyond it.

Her worry proved needless. Through the doorway was the familiar lantern-shaped interior of the Mexuar. Fatima could see the outline of its low balcony and the wood-paneled ceiling above, the small dais at the end of the chamber where the sultan sat to hear lawyers argue and listen to the complaints of his viziers. It was empty now, though it still smelled of incense, as if the men who spent their days in its rich gloom had only just left.

It was certainly the Mexuar, yet the Mexuar was on the far side of the Court of Myrtles, in the opposite direction.

“It was convenient to have a door there.”

Startled, Fatima turned and shut the door abruptly behind her. Hassan was alert now, smiling, his velvet brown eyes lucid and unperturbed, as though falling into trances and summoning passages out of solid walls were ordinary late summer occupations.

“I got tired of walking back and forth across the courtyard in this heat,” he continued, getting to his feet. “Why should the royal mapmaker burn to a crisp when all the other viziers and secretaries sit inside all day? Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I can easily make another.”



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Fatima looked over her shoulder and saw only the chalky plaster wall she had seen a hundred times before, uninterrupted by passages of any kind.

“I didn’t mean to close it,” she said. “It’s just that you startled me.”

“I said it doesn’t matter.” Hassan, yawning, shuffled to the stone balustrade that ran the sunny length of his workroom. It looked out through a series of slender wooden arches onto the green hedges that gave the Court of Myrtles its name, separating Hassan’s quarters from the courtyard in the briefest and most ceremonial way. Maps drawn on parchment and vellum and linen were piled along its length and weighted with stones, their edges curling in the heat while the ink upon them dried. Hassan teased one out from under a chunk of quartz and held it up critically. A grid of streets traversed its length, terminating in what to Fatima’s eyes looked like a river.

Fatima went to her favorite spot along the balustrade, yawning herself as Hassan’s indolence grew contagious. She pushed aside a pile of paper and sat on the sun-warmed stone, allowing herself, finally, to relax.

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The golden hour bloomed around them, yellowing the myrtle hedge, the grass, the marble paths, the long reflecting pool that pointed through the courtyard toward the administrative wing of the palace. It was in this vaporous time of day, when Lady Aisha liked to doze, that Fatima would often slip away from her mistress, leaving the harem through an unguarded door used primarily by the washerwoman and the unfortunate pox-scarred girl whose job it was to



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empty the stool chamber. It led to a windowless corridor which was entirely dark when the doors at either end were closed, and emerged, by Hassan's benevolent wizardry, in the Court of Myrtles, allowing Fatima to come and go without being seen, provided she kept her wits.

"You're fond of that spot," said Hassan. He threw the map he was holding at his worktable, where it unrolled only a little, and picking up a small lead compass, began to clean his fingernails with the sharp end. "But you'd better get down from there before someone sees you."

"Why must I?" Fatima countered.

"You know very well why. You're not allowed to be here unchaperoned, let alone sprawled languidly across the railing of my terrace. The poor dear sultan looks weak enough as it is without you thwarting his authority as well. The Castilians and the Aragonese surround us on all sides, the Egyptians have abandoned us, and the Turks have swallowed all of Anatolia in one gulp. Our Abu Abdullah is master of an empire that no longer exists. His own mother overrules him when it suits her. Who is left to take him seriously if not his concubine? I pity the fellow."

Fatima sighed in irritation. She swung her legs over the edge of the balustrade and sat up, shaking the hem of her loose linen trousers to free the belled bracelets that lay in the hollows below her ankles.

Hassan chewed at a tuft of beard beneath his lower lip. His hair, another of his perversities, was reddish, the legacy of a Breton grandmother taken hostage in some war or other. Fatima was not sure he was handsome—his nose was too sharp, his eyes were too



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small, his complexion was too hectic, apt to turn red and blotchy on the frequent occasions when he was flustered. No, he was not handsome, yet he was the only man she had ever come across who did not desire her, and for that, she forgave him many things.

“Have you brought me anything?” he asked now, his voice boyish and pleading.

Fatima pointed to his worktable: in a handkerchief was a small, sticky pile of orange-scented sweets.

“Bless you,” said Hassan fervently. He picked up the handkerchief and began to shovel its contents into his mouth.

“Slow down,” said Fatima, laughing at the droplets of honey that clung to his beard. Hassan made a face at her.

“I forget you aren’t starving,” he said. “You live in the harem eating honey and playing the lute and mincing around in silk slippers all day, while the rest of us are chewing old shoe leather. You might at least have the grace to pretend to suffer. We’re under siege, after all. The sultan will be forced to accept terms from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella at any moment.”

“Would you trade, then?” asked Fatima, her lip only a little curled. “I’ll happily do your job and starve if you’d like to do mine and eat well. You can listen to Lady Aisha insult people all morning, mend dresses all afternoon, and then—” Here her voice caught in her throat. Hassan studied her with one ruddy eyebrow raised.

“And then lie with the sultan all night? I’d trade you in a flash, Fa, in an absolute instant. My God! Those melancholy lips. What? Don’t you think he’s handsome?”

Fatima thought nothing. Her body felt suddenly heavy and sluggish, like some unfamiliar borrowed thing growing damp in the



heat. She hung above it in the air, tethered to it only loosely, and wondered whether she would find the sultan as handsome as Hassan did if she had a choice in the matter.

“Fa? I’m sorry, my love. Don’t look like that. I didn’t mean to upset you. Fa—” Hassan pressed an anxious kiss into her palm.

Fatima took a breath.

“Choose a bird,” she said, changing the subject. It was the way all their conversations went now: the palace, rambling as it was, had grown cramped under siege, the air perpetually stale with the shut-up breath of a hundred half-starved mouths. Every conversation became an argument. It was safer to retreat into the games of their childhood, as they did more and more; into the stories of creatures that could fly away. Fatima returned to her patch of sun on the balustrade.

“A bird,” she repeated.

Hassan chewed for a moment before answering.

“Red-crested pochard,” he said triumphantly. Fatima laughed at him.

“That’s not a real bird,” she said. “You’re just being an idiot.”

“It is so a real bird! It’s a sort of duck, a waterbird. We used to have them on my mother’s land, near the lake. Hunters would come to trap them in the fall.” In the course of their game, they had long ago run through all the ordinary birds, and had since moved on to more exotic ones.

“Very well,” said Fatima. “The pochard, the pochard—since he has a bright crest, perhaps he was vain, and when the other birds sought him out to accompany them on their journey across the Dark Sea to the mountain of Qaf, he refused. Why should he leave



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his home, where everyone flattered him and he could spend all day preening? The people of Qaf might not appreciate his plumage as they ought to do. But the hoopoe—”

“Ah yes, the hoopoe is my favorite.”

“The hoopoe, who also had a lovely red crest, scolded the pochard for his shallowness.”

“And then?”

“I don’t know.” Fatima yawned. The effort of thinking too hard in bright sunlight had begun to tire her. “But surely something silly enough to be called a pochard wouldn’t survive such a long journey. Make me a new map. I want a view.”

“A view,” muttered Hassan. “You’ve got lovely views already. Look at this view! Look at the fork-tailed swallows flying low across the reflecting pool! At night, you can see a second field of stars in the water. Enjoy it now, Fa, for soon it’ll all belong to Castile.”

Fatima had never seen the Court of Myrtles at night, when being caught anywhere outside the harem or the sultan’s own rooms might have real consequences, but was in no mood for another argument.

“Will you make me a map or not?” she demanded.

“Yes, of course I will. A map. A view.” Hassan wiped his hands on his coat and sat down at his worktable, a low, scuffed oak plank balanced on two stacks of books. Fatima knelt beside him. She liked to look at his face while he worked, to see it transformed by the fervent, vacant light that possessed him as his maps took shape. His lips would part in an eager smile, like a child’s; there was a bliss about him when he worked and when he prayed that made Fatima wonder whether he knew what it felt like to have one’s faith in the goodness of things removed. Fatima herself had never knelt



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upon a prayer mat except grudgingly. Obedience was demanded of her all day and on many nights; when she was asked to pray, she had no more left in her. Hassan was different. His obedience was always rewarded; whatever force he called upon in his silent moments always answered him, and though the maidservants might giggle and the undersecretaries scowl when he passed, he did not appear to notice.

Hassan was the only person she allowed herself to watch so openly. To look too long at anything male, the palace guards or the cook or the dozens of secretaries and lawyers who populated the Mexuar, was to commit impertinence; to look too often at the freewomen she served was to risk rebuke. Hassan was different. It gave her a stealthy joy to sit beside him and try to translate the lively conversation between his brows, and know he neither minded nor misread her. He saw her looking now and smiled absently, reaching out to stroke her jaw with one finger. He took out a charcoal pencil and whittled it with a small knife, removing a fragment of paper from one of the untidy stacks on his desk. His fingers—the length and suppleness of which almost redeemed his awkward features—moved quickly across the page, defining the right angles of a short hallway, the nautilus-shell progression of a flight of stairs.

“This is the way you came,” said Hassan. His pencil rasped and shed black ash. “This is a door. It leads off the small antechamber in the harem where the washerwoman keeps her baskets and soap. That is the door you want.”

Fatima teased the map from beneath his fingers and slipped it into the embroidered V at the front of her tunic, against her skin. Hassan watched her and sighed.

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“You’re wasted on me,” he said. “God’s names, look at you.” He took her hands in his and turned her to face the sun. “Look.”

Fatima smiled. She was not above admiring herself. Her eyes were so black and unflawed that they swallowed the afternoon light without reflecting anything, like a night without stars. They floated in a face whose pallor might make another girl look sickly. There was no high color in her lips or cheeks of the kind the poets praised: her beauty was something too remote for poetry, a tilting symmetry of jaw and cheekbone and dark brow. Only her hair seemed to be made of anything earthly: it billowed over her shoulders in a mass of dense sable curls that snapped the teeth of every comb Lady Aisha had ever taken to them.

The effect of it all was singular. Whenever Fatima encountered newcomers walking the halls with her mistress, they would invariably stop in their tracks, put one hand on Lady Aisha’s arm, and ask, *Where did you get her?* And Lady Aisha would say, *She is Circassian.* And whoever it was would raise one eyebrow and say, *Ab.* It was always the same: *Ab.* Much was contained in that single syllable. *Ab!* All are equal before God, but some are meant to be bought and sold.

Yet Fatima was the only Circassian slave left in the Alhambra, the others all freed or sold off to pay debts, dispersing across the Strait to safety as the armies of Castile and Aragon pressed down from the north. There was no one left to praise her in the language of her mother, whose face she could barely remember and whose homeland she had never seen. She was the last reminder of a time of prosperity, when pretty girls could be had from Italian slave merchants for unearthly sums; there had been no money and no victories since. The Nasrid sultans, heirs to the empire of

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Al Andalus, to the foothold of Islam in Europe, seemed to have few talents beyond losing the territories won by their forefathers. They preferred beauty to war: they had built the Alhambra, every brightly tiled inch of which represented the lifework of some master craftsman. That was all Al Andalus was now: an empire indoors. A palace, and inside it a garden, and inside that, a beautiful girl.

“Men would risk their fortunes for an hour in bed with you,” said Hassan, letting her arms drop. “Other men.”

“You risk your fortune for my company,” said Fatima. “I love you better than I would love those other men.”

Hassan leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes with charcoal-blackened fingers.

“You’re a good friend to me, Fa. Friends are rare these days. But you’ve got to be more careful. Laughter carries in the Court of Myrtles, and a woman’s laughter most of all. It may carry all the way to the sultan’s quarters—and then what?”

Fatima shrugged. “The sultan knows what you are.”

“Still, I’m not allowed to speak to you alone. It doesn’t look proper. And there is a vizier coming in half an hour who wants a map of the Castilian military encampment at Rejana. So.” He pressed a kiss into the palm of her hand. “Go look at your view.”

Fatima touched the map beneath her shirt: it crackled under her fingers.

“What kind of view is it?” she asked. “Is it very pretty? Is it possible to see the sea from there?”

Hassan was bent over his work again.

“The sea is miles and miles to the south, across the mountains,” he muttered. “Not even I can give you a view like that.”



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* * *

Fatima left the way she had come. There were no guards posted in the Court of Myrtles, situated as it was near the heart of the palace, away from the bustle and heat of the Mexuar, where the sultan heard petitions with his viziers and lawyers and secretaries. Yet it was summer, and the black-green bushes for which the courtyard was named were in full bloom, attracting a throng of beardless students set loose from their daily lessons. Fatima could see their skullcaps bobbing above the flowery hedge. She pressed herself against a pillar in the arched colonnade that framed the veranda and held her breath. There was a volley of laughter from among the myrtles. One of the students began to recite his lesson, half singing a few rhymed verses of the *aqeeda* in an unsteady tenor. Other voices joined his, growing softer as the students drifted away toward the shade of the interior rooms.

Fatima pressed her cheek against the tepid stone and forced herself to relax. The door by which she had entered the courtyard stood nearby: it was not quite closed, so that she would make no noise when she returned. She passed through it on light feet and shut it behind her. The hall was plunged into darkness. She felt her way by memory, breathing the austere reek of dust and disuse, until she came to a meager strip of light on the ground that signaled the door to the harem's antechamber. Here she paused. No noise came from beyond it, no footfall interrupted the light beneath it. Fatima found the latch with her hands and pushed the door open.

The antechamber was just as Hassan had described it, though Fatima had trouble imagining why he had ever set foot there himself:



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buckets and rags were piled in one whitewashed corner along with stoppered jugs of vinegar and a tub of congealed soap. An arched passage tiled in blue and gold led to the common room of the harem itself. All these things were familiar. The small door set in the right-hand wall was not.

The door was half of Fatima's height and whitewashed, like the walls; a crossbeam cut across it diagonally, giving the impression of a cupboard or closet. She opened it, expecting stacks of bed linen. Instead she saw a flight of narrow stone stairs. Grinning to herself, Fatima ducked through the door, ascending the steps two at a time, pleased by the soft scuffing noise her feet made on the flecked stone. The edge of each step was worn to a fine polish, as if the staircase had been traversed by hundreds of pairs of feet, yet there was no sound save from her own movements, no hint that anyone else was near. There was strong light coming from somewhere; squinting upward, Fatima thought she saw a window or perhaps an empty arch. She put one hand on the wall—wide blocks of red-brown stone, in all respects a proper old wall like all the proper walls of the old palace—and crept along, stepping gingerly on each unknown surface until she reached the top. Her last step was only a half step: there were an odd number of stairs, which pleased her. They ended in a sort of parapet, a small, square tower room with a narrow window in each wall. Fatima picked one and stuck her head out.

She was greeted by a blast of wind. It smelled of dry hay and cold water: the summer heat would not last much longer. Fatima took several deep breaths, enjoying her own dizziness, blinking in the sharp-shadowed afternoon as the objects below her resolved



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themselves. She was in a southeast corner of the palace. Her window overlooked the low roof of the Mexuar and the wide lawn beyond, burned yellow now as it always was by summer's end. The hill spilled away beneath it, cloaked in dark elms, tapering off at the smoke-clad medina in the valley below. There were the red-tiled roofs of villas; the cramped knot of houses that formed the Juderia. She could see tiny green squares of garden in innumerable courtyards; below these, in the lap of the valley, the shallow river that supplied them.

In the distance, where the ground flattened out, there was the wide plain of the Vega de Granada, smudged here and there with plumes of smoke and dotted with the skeletal remains of siege engines. Beyond these human outworks were the shoulders of the mountains that receded south in a humid haze, as ambivalent toward their Catholic rulers as they had been toward their Muslim ones, their pelt of pines and grasses unfurling toward a pale and factionless sky. They ended in nothing, for Fatima's knowledge of the world did not extend as far as the sea. Yet standing there, she thought she detected the faint, damp scent of salt carried on the wind from the south. Hassan had tried his best.

Fatima pulled her head back inside with a feeling of regret. Lady Aisha had undoubtedly awoken by now and gone to bathe; her bondswoman's absence would be noted. She turned away from the window and hurried down the echoless stairs, her footfall landing strangely in her ears, emphatic, like a kind of speech. At the bottom, she lifted the latch on the little unassuming door and passed through, shutting it behind her as softly as she could.





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She stood on tiptoe in the antechamber with Hassan's map in her hands. If she misplaced it, she would forget: the location of the door would grow indistinct in her memory, and she would confuse it with other doors that led to other rooms. She had, on occasion, attempted to find her way back to the places Hassan marked for her without a map, and inevitably got herself turned around or found familiar rooms rendered suddenly alien. It was unpleasant to be lost in your own house. She did not intend to repeat the experience.

Fatima folded the map and tore it along the crease, then folded it and tore it again, until she was left with a pile of tiny fragments. These she let flutter to the ground. Straightening, she smoothed her tunic and trousers, setting off down the tiled hallway that led into the harem itself. She did not look back: she knew well enough what she would see. The wall would fold up without a sound, as if it was made of ether, and the door would vanish, leaving no trace of itself but motes of dust suspended in the light.

* * *

The hall leading off the antechamber ended in a modest courtyard. It was ragged now with the remains of summer roses, their hips gone bulbous and discolored for want of pruning. When Fatima passed, Lady Nessma, the sultan's half sister, was sitting on a pile of cushions in a shaded annex, strumming a lute that was slightly out of tune. Her hair was loose, spooling on the cushions like a crumpled skein of black silk. It was her great vanity. She was surrounded by a gaggle of cousins from the countryside whose families had deposited them at the palace, siege notwithstanding, to procure





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husbands. They had been talking when Fatima approached, but hushed when they saw her, averting their eyes and stifling giggles.

“Girl! Where have you been?” demanded Nessma. She rose, her plump, pretty form snug against the green silk robe that confined it, and handed her lute to the air. It was snatched with dogged promptness by an overdressed girl sitting at her feet. “My stepmother went to the baths alone, cursing you the entire way.”

“I was in the antechamber,” said Fatima truthfully. “There was a stain on my tunic, and I went looking for some soap.”

Nessma pursed her lips. Fatima knew she was weighing the satisfaction of demanding to see the treated stain against the risk that Fatima would complain to the sultan in bed.

“You shouldn’t be so careless about your things,” said Nessma finally, having decided upon a line of attack. “You think that because you’ve ensnared my brother, you can walk around with your nose in the air like a lady and dirty the clothes we give you, but if you ruin your tunic, I will see to it that you don’t get another. We’re at war, in case you haven’t noticed. We can’t afford to keep idle slaves in silk.”

Fatima wondered whom Nessma was trying to impress. She lifted her chin. She had discovered that by walking softly and deliberately and keeping her eyes fixed on the person to whom she was speaking, she could inspire an odd kind of terror in whomever she chose. It came, she supposed, from her own ambiguity: she was something the sultan owned, not dissimilar from the weary-looking pair of trained cheetahs that had come home with him from Genoa, along with Fatima’s mother, when Fatima was still a secret tucked inside



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her mother's womb. Yet Fatima too might be carrying a secret, as far as anyone knew. If that secret were viable and male, it would catapult her over all the other women of the palace and place her on a par with her own mistress, the sultan's mother. She could be despised, but not dismissed.

"Do you have anything else to say?" she asked Nessma. Nessma flushed a little brighter. Her lower lip, pink and slick with whatever she had been eating, quivered slightly. Fatima reached out and wiped it clean with her thumb. She almost wished they would come to blows, giving her an excuse to rake her nails across the exposed column of the smaller girl's neck. It seemed more honest. But Nessma only gritted her pearly teeth and trembled. Satisfied, Fatima turned on her heel and walked across the courtyard, through the weedy roses.

"Her heart is as black as her eyes," came Nessma's voice in her wake, much too loudly. "She will never learn obedience, poor thing—she hasn't got enough wits to know what's good for her."

Fatima forced herself not to pause or give any sign that she had heard. She walked on stiff legs through the common room on the far side of the courtyard, where the flyblown remnants of lunch were waiting for the last of the harem's serving women to clear them away. Here she steadied her breathing. A glossy, neglected dish of olive oil caught her eye: it was startlingly green, the first pressing of the season, and so heady with the scents of fruit and sap that it perfumed the room. A fly had succumbed to its temptations and was slowly drowning, wheeling in frantic half circles with its swamped wings. Fatima picked up the dish. It



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was glazed in contrasting shades of blue, which merged with the green of the oil and lent it a subterranean aspect, like a mountain spring she could hold in her hand. She plucked out the drowning fly by one wing.

“Sorry, little fellow,” she said, flicking it away. “You’ve got to fight or flee like the rest of us.”

The fly landed on the tiles at her feet and hobbled onward. Fatima stepped over it and made for the baths.

* * *

Lady Aisha was soaking in a hip-deep stone tub when Fatima arrived. Her white hair, still thick, was gathered into a knot at the top of her head; her eyes were closed, as though she had fallen asleep. Fatima’s eyes lingered on the knobs of bone that protruded from her mistress’s shoulder and spine, demarcating the flesh that hung upon them, giving her body a weightless, fragile appearance. It would be easy enough to lean on that shoulder, or to wrap her hand in the ample white hair and watch the bathwater close over it. A scant minute would suffice, for how long could an old woman hold her breath? A far more cynical kind of violence had been waged to procure Fatima’s mother, whose parents had sold her, screaming and wailing, to a Genoese man when starvation loomed, yet the thought of such a brisk, tidy end to Lady Aisha’s life filled Fatima with sudden exhaustion. She could not act in the way she had been acted upon, and wondered, as the steam escaped from a star-shaped skylight overhead, whether this made her nobler than her keepers, or simply less decisive.



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“Sit,” came Lady Aisha’s voice, still clear and deep. She patted the edge of the tub without opening her eyes. Fatima sat, avoiding the wet spot left by her mistress’s hand.

“Lady Nessma says you came in here cursing me,” she said. Lady Aisha clucked her tongue.

“Nessma exaggerates as usual. I may have cursed you once, but not continually.”

Fatima rolled up her trousers and put her feet in the steaming water. It was strewn with lavender buds and dried linden, which clung in sticky clumps to the flesh of her calves. The task of cleaning the tub was, thankfully, not hers.

“You went to see our cartographer friend,” observed Lady Aisha. Fatima no longer wondered how she knew these things. Lady Aisha had eyes everywhere, though how this was achieved remained a mystery.

“I like Hassan,” said Fatima. “He isn’t afraid of me.”

“He ought to be.” Lady Aisha opened one veiny brown eye to scrutinize her bondswoman. “If you like him, you shouldn’t compromise his reputation—or your own, for that matter—by lurking about his rooms. A man of his peculiar gifts and inclinations can’t afford scandal.”

Fatima sighed and beat her head lightly against the flank of the stone arch behind her.

“I don’t see why it should be a scandal,” she muttered. “Everyone knows he doesn’t like girls.”

“You miss the point. For the sake of his dignity, we all assume he does like girls. That way, no one need make a fuss when men come and go from his quarters. But there must be a fuss if my



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son's own concubine visits him alone. It ruins the symmetry of the arrangement.”

Fatima thought of arguing, then remembered where she was. The bathing room was built entirely of white stone and shaped so that a whisper carried all the way across it; secrets were exchanged elsewhere. She slumped, letting her legs slide farther into the water. For several minutes, neither spoke.

“How old am I?” Fatima asked, breaking the silence.

“Seventeen, my love. No—eighteen. No, I was right the first time. Your mother gave birth when the full moon of Ramadan fell on the first of May. That I remember distinctly.”

“How old was she when she had me?”

Lady Aisha shifted in the bath, considering the question. A lock of white hair had come loose from the knot atop her head and trailed damply across her breasts, flattened by age and a succession of children.

“She must have been a bit older than you are now. Poor thing, what a muddle that was—solemn as the rain from the moment she arrived, and didn't tell anyone she was pregnant until it was obvious. Never spoke a word about your father. I imagine he was the Italian merchant who bought her in the first place. Though who knows? Perhaps she secretly took some handsome soldier for a lover on the journey between Sochi and Genoa. You must get your height and your temper from somewhere. Whoever he was, he was long gone by the time she arrived at the Alhambra.” Lady Aisha frowned up at Fatima. “Why all these questions now, sweeting? Are you pregnant? Is that what this is about?”

“No!” Fatima clutched the edge of the tub reflexively. “No.”



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“That’s a shame,” sighed Lady Aisha, closing her eyes again. “I hope you’ll conceive before that silly cow Hurriya does. She’s desperate for a boy. Imagine her horror if her future glory was displaced by the son of a slave girl. Second wives, my dear! Second wives need keeping down.”

Fatima kicked one foot restlessly. She wanted to reply that she desired no children, that the line between her own childhood and the role she occupied now was still unclear to her, but she knew better than to adopt this line of reasoning with her mistress. Still less could she admit to the little packet of herbs she had stolen from the apothecary and swallowed, in the dead of night, after she had failed to bleed during one particular moon, or to the upheaval that had come afterward, and the drying-up that had come after that. Instead, she kicked again.

“Don’t, please, you’re splashing me. Be a sweet thing and scrub my back.”

Leaning across the tub, Fatima retrieved a sponge from a copper dish and squeezed it in the milky water.

“I hear rumors from the North,” murmured Lady Aisha, pil-
lowing her head on Fatima’s knee.

“What rumors, Lady?”

“King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella have begun to expel the Jews of Seville and Córdoba and their other reconquered territories. They say there are priests riding about the countryside, lurking at the windows of those Jews and Muslims who converted to Catholicism in order to save their lands and fortunes.”

Fatima rubbed Lady Aisha’s shoulders with the sponge, careful not to chafe her delicate skin. Her mistress had aged rapidly in



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recent years. She was still slim and straight, her waist enviable, but a yellow pallor had settled on her face, and much of the anger had gone out of her.

“Why lurking?” Fatima asked, doing her duty to the conversation.

“To catch them in a lie, of course,” said Lady Aisha. She gestured damply with one hand. “The priests wait for the poor fools to refuse a dish of pork or a glass of wine or to keep the wrong sort of sabbath. And then they burn them as heretics, leaving their lands and fortunes most conveniently unattended. They’re calling it an inquisition, though I’m told the new pope looks very unfavorably upon the whole enterprise. It does no good to fake a conversion of faith. Remember that, my love. The people who want to burn you alive will find a reason to do it, whether you pretend to agree with them or not.”

Though it was warm and stifling in the bathing room, Fatima felt a stealthy chill. The sponge in her hand was still on Lady Aisha’s shoulder, dripping perfumed water into the pool below drop by drop.

“What’s troubling you?” Lady Aisha asked in a voice that was almost kindly. “You came in here like a thundercloud and you’ve been frowning ever since. You’ll get lines between your brows at this rate, and then where will you be?”

Fatima hesitated. Lady Aisha often invited confidences, but it was not always wise to indulge her. She thought of relaying Nessma’s insults, but to Lady Aisha, who had never known how it felt to occupy a body that could be priced and sold like that of a goat or a tame leopard, it might look like whining. She thought of telling her mistress the truth, of attempting to describe the feeling that sent her



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to Hassan and his maps every day. Yet she didn't trust her own vocabulary. Whenever she tried to be poetic or philosophical, she ended up saying exactly what she meant in the plainest possible language.

"Hmm?" Lady Aisha was waiting for an answer, her eyebrows raised half-mockingly.

"I don't want to be a slave anymore," said Fatima. The plainest possible language. She cursed herself silently.

Lady Aisha gave an undignified snort.

"How modern that sounds," she chortled. "This is what happens when you let a concubine read Ibn Arabi and Plato and sneak about with cartographers. What on earth would you do with your freedom, if it were granted? A small house, a bad-tempered husband, a child every year—what happiness could that bring you? Here you are clad and shod in silk, taught to recite poetry and to do sums and figures. You listen to music and wait upon great ladies. What does the world offer you that you don't have here?"

Fatima looked around helplessly. The serving woman came in to light a clot of incense in a brazier. Its scent wafted up and mingled with the steam to form a dense, sickly smell, like flowers left too long in a bowl of water and gone to rot.

"Air, my lady," said Fatima.

Lady Aisha did not pretend to misunderstand her. She peered up at her bondswoman and pursed her thinning lips.

"Interesting," she said.