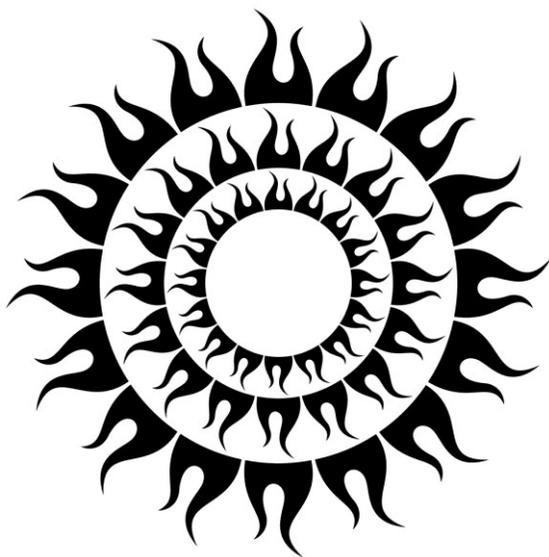


BRIDE TO THE SUN



LIA PATTERSON

Published by Lia Patterson

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ONE

It was said that at the court of Sikhand there existed only two sorts of people: those to be entertained and those who were the entertainment. And being of the former was infinitely better than being of the latter.

Knowing only too well into which category she fell, Shay straightened her spine and lifted her chin. Bracing herself, she drew the white robes of a petitioner around herself and stepped into the Ninth Circle, across lines laid down on the ground in fire. Briefly she felt the familiar embrace of her element, stifled at once by the magebond on her wrist.

Around her, the court of Sikhand in all its glory filled the Imperial Night Gardens and in the centre of it all, like the sun that lesser celestial bodies revolved around, sat Emperor Tahmareb under a golden baldachin.

In a little while it would be her turn to make her obeisance

before him. And then... But Shay did not want to think of that moment, which would spell the end of all her dreams, of all she had striven for. Twelve years of her life gone for nothing! She shook her head. Soon her summons would come and then it would all be over – but at least so would be the long days of waiting.

However, the emperor seemed in no hurry to attend to court business. A line of eunuchs knelt before him, each holding out a scroll – Shay’s supplication amongst them – but he ignored them. Instead he was talking to somebody, illustrating a point with a wide gesture of his arm. Shay caught a glimpse of white hair as his companion leant forward to reply. Too far away to make out any words, she only heard the emperor’s braying laughter ring out across the garden. He slapped the other on the back and Shay winced in sympathy for the poor old man.

“Lady Sharvenaz tal Fareed?”

Shay startled at finding herself addressed so formally. Lady Ghazal, the emperor’s favourite concubine! Clad in a robe of scarlet silk embroidered with golden chrysanthemums, the woman gave her a benign smile.

“My lady?” Shay bowed deeply. This was unexpected!

With a graceful gesture, the concubine held out a hand. “My dear Lady Sharvenaz, will you walk with me?”

“With pleasure,” Shay replied. The only possible answer.

Warily Shay followed Lady Ghazal. What did the woman want with her? As they advanced through the circles, the robes of the nobles changed from the muted tones suitable to those of the lower circles to the bright, glowing colours of the high nobility. Some of

the courtiers Shay recognised, acquaintances of her father's, but they meticulously avoided meeting her eyes. Did they fear she would contaminate them by her association? Well, her own guilt only stemmed from association. *Blood calls to blood.* She willed herself to ignore them.

Instead she concentrated on the way the concubine managed to walk so gracefully while wearing the same constricting clothes that made Shay look like a mincing peahen. Taking tiny steps, Lady Ghazal moved with an undulating, smooth gait that sent her long silken sleeves floating behind her and caught men's eyes. No wonder Emperor Tahmareb was besotted with her, quite apart from the fact that she was the only of his concubines to have born him a child. The golden bells that adorned her headdress and set off her black hair chimed softly with every step. Shay tried to imitate her. Surely as a dancer she should be able to do this!

The concubine stopped at a place in the Third Circle, where cushions lay strewn around a low table under a night blooming tree.

"Please sit down," Lady Ghazal invited Shay, beckoning to a servant to serve them tea.

Shay sank down on a cushion, hoping she would manage to get up again without making a fool of herself. Lady Ghazal's sleeves, she noticed enviously, had come to rest on the ground beside her in a perfect semicircle, whereas her own were all tangled up. How did the woman do it?

The delicate fragrance of jasmine tea rose from the little translucent cup that the servant handed her and Shay took a grateful sip. She had not noticed before how much her throat was parched

from nervousness. Lady Ghazal wore the long, golden finger sheaths that had lately become the fashion at court, and they clicked softly against the porcelain as she drank.

“You are Fire, I believe?” the concubine opened the conversation. The famous amber eyes that had first caught the emperor’s fancy regarded her from under heavy lids.

Shay had to stop herself from rubbing her wrist, where the magebond had chafed her raw. “Yes, my lady.”

“Your Head Priestess asked for a private audience with Tahmareb this morning.”

Hope flared within Shay. “She did?” Could there be a way out of her predicament?

Lady Ghazal took another sip, her perfectly formed lips hardly touching the rim of the cup. “Her Eminence pleaded most eloquently in your favour, to have you returned to your place in the temple, but unfortunately...to no avail.”

No leniency for her then. Shay forced herself to take a deep breath. And another. It was her own fault, for giving in to wishful thinking, for believing even for a moment that things could go back to normal. They never would.

“I’m sorry,” Lady Ghazal said. She lowered her voice. “You have to understand that Tahmareb is in a delicate situation at the moment. New to his throne, he cannot show any sign of weakness.”

Why did an act of kindness have to be weak? And what did Lady Ghazal want with her? “Surely such a show of piety would please the Elements,” Shay pointed out, “and also the high priests?”

“Ah, but to favour the temples might displease the army or

the civil service,” Lady Ghazal answered gently. Her finger sheaths glimmered golden as she held her cup out to be refilled. At once one of the servants hovering out of earshot scurried over.

Shay decided to go on the offensive. After all she had little to lose. “Why are you telling me all this?” she asked.

A graceful shrug. “I feel sorry for you. I suppose you remind me of my younger self.”

Shay raised her eyebrows in disbelief. Surely the other woman could not be much older than herself. She might have a daughter, but imperial concubines married young, when they were hardly more than children themselves.

Lady Ghazal saw the gesture and smiled. “My dear, I might not have much on you in years, but I feel I have your advantage in experience.”

Shay could not deny that. After all she had spent the last twelve years quite deliberately shut away from the world.

“You are too kind,” she murmured. A safe reply.

“Not at all. And perhaps I may even be able to help you.” Lady Ghazal leant forward. “Not to return to the temple, you must understand, for that is out of the question. However, court life is not without its compensations.”

Shay did not know what to reply, for she had never wished for anything in her life but to honour the sun as a firedancer. She looked down at her hands clutching the delicate teacup, wanting to smash it against the table. With an effort of will Shay relaxed her grip on the cup. There had to be a way out! Or tomorrow all would be over.

“What an enchanting picture,” a smooth voice interrupted her brooding. “Surely even the moon above is put to shame and hides herself, faced with such double loveliness.”

She froze. Beside her, Lady Ghazal put her cup down in one smooth motion and bowed deeply. Recalled to her senses, Shay hastily followed suit.

“Prince Koshayar. You flatter us.” Ghazal’s voice held no warmth. “Would you honour us with your presence?”

“For a moment only.”

Rich robes whispered as the prince lowered himself onto the cushions opposite them. Shay stole a quick glance at the emperor’s half-brother, catching a glimpse of a nose like an eagle’s beak and dark, deep-set eyes. So this was the famous Prince Koshayar, reviled in all the temples! To her obscure disappointment he looked no different from the other courtiers, just even more richly dressed. His hands, she noticed as he clapped them for a cup of tea, were long and slender like a woman’s. But to be caught staring would be rude, so she quickly lowered her eyes again.

“Lady Sharvenaz,” he addressed her. “I have heard that unfortunately my dear brother has declined to restore you to your temple. You must be grieved.”

Grieved! To be torn from her rightful place and having to submit to... She tried to frame a polite answer, but he overrode anything she might have said anyway.

“However, Fire’s loss is our gain, giving us the chance to acquire an exquisite new ornament for our court.” A soft laugh accompanied the words.

Was he mocking her? But when she looked up at him, his face only held a polite smile. Wonderful – how had she managed to end up seated between the second most powerful man in the Empire and the most influential woman? The dislike they held each other in was legendary and Shay felt like a rice grain caught between two millstones. She groped for a safe answer. “Thank you, my Lord Prince.”

Another laugh that set her teeth on edge. “Ah, such delightful shyness! Such refreshing innocence!” He turned to Lady Ghazal. “I think our young friend here will be a great success, don’t you agree? She will have the suitors lining up for her.”

“Absolutely,” the concubine murmured.

“Didn’t you yourself come to Tahmareb’s attention this way?”

“So I did,” Lady Ghazal agreed and Shay felt hidden currents in their conversation. Currents that could easily drown the unwary, so she kept quiet.

The prince looked Shay up and down as he might have done a piece of merchandise displayed for his pleasure. “White suits you,” he purred.

Shay, who thought it made her look like a corpse, gritted her teeth and bowed again. “Thank you, my lord.” In their endeavour to make her into a properly humble petitioner, the slaves had even powdered her black hair with chalk, turning it into a ghastly grey.

A finger slipped under her chin and forced her to lift her face to Prince Koshayar. “But what is this,” he said. “You aren’t wearing your bridemark.”

Her bridemark! The reminder of what fate awaited her came like a blow to the stomach.

Prince Koshayar turned to Lady Ghazal. "We must assist our young friend."

"Of course." Lady Ghazal murmured an order and a maid came running with a casket inlaid with precious stones that she presented to her mistress.

"The traditional way?" Lady Ghazal asked.

Prince Koshayar smiled. "Certainly. I am a great believer in traditions."

Shay dared not free herself from the firm grip on her chin and now watched out of the corner of her eye as Lady Ghazal flipped open the casket and extracted two tiny pots of cosmetics from amongst a large selection.

"Carmines for joy," she murmured. "Gold for prosperity."

Then she bent forward to place a golden finger sheath in the centre of Shay's forehead, between the eyes where the soul rested. "Blood for a fruitful marriage."

Shay forced herself not to flinch at the sharp prick that followed. A single drop of blood beaded on the gold, to be transferred into a bowl held ready by the maid. As another slave cleaned her mistress's hand with a silken handkerchief, the maid mixed all the ingredients into a smooth red paste.

However, it was Prince Koshayar himself who dipped a finger in it and marked Shay's forehead. A wave of dizziness swept through her, leaving a sick taste in her mouth.

"There," Koshayar said and released her. "Red suits you,

too.”

Shay thought of the flame-coloured robes of a sunbride that the bridemark made a mockery of. Tears of rage pricked her eyes as she bowed her thanks. To these people she was nothing but a bit of amusement; they enjoyed playing with her like a cat played with a mouse.

“You do me great honour, my lord,” she pressed out.

“Oh no, not at all.” His eyes glittered with irony. “And now I must take my leave of you,” he told them and rose from his cushions, “though it pains me to part from such beauty. Besides, I think that our young friend’s audience is about to come up.”

Her audience! Inelegantly she scrambled to her feet when she spotted a eunuch hovering a few paces away, clearly unwilling to interrupt such an important personage as Prince Koshayar, but beckoning to her urgently.

Lady Ghazal nodded to her. “You go ahead, my dear, I will see you there. And remember, you have a friend.”

A friend? One of her father’s sayings came to her mind: a true heart at court is rarer than a fish living in a tree. Her father had maintained there existed no such thing as friendship at the court of Sikhand. Only alliances, debts and obligations. Invisible strings that tied people to each other and could quickly turn into a noose. But it puzzled Shay what the influential concubine could possibly want from her. Had she continued on her path at the temple, she might one day have held power, yet at the moment she was surely the most insignificant and helpless member of the court. Just look at her white petitioner robes!

With the eunuch whispering furious instructions on how to behave in front of the emperor, she decided to push all these considerations away. She would think of it later. Whenever that was.

At the edge of the First Circle Shay had to pause and wait for admission, because the imperial guards would only let one supplicant at a time approach. She shivered under their impersonal gaze. Their shaven heads and tattooed cheekbones marked them for Khotai slave soldiers: the wolves of the steppe, renowned for their ability for ruthless violence. One false move and they would not hesitate one instant to act. As her father had found out.

Better think of something else! The guards blocked her view of Emperor Tahmareb, but she caught a glimpse of white hair – it had to be the man he had been talking to earlier on. Seated on the low platform that held the emperor and his closest friends, he leant back and stretched his long legs, as if uncomfortable from the prolonged inaction. Shay blinked. He wasn't ancient at all – probably only a few winters older than her! A second glance revealed his hair to be a blond so pale as she had never seen before. Instead of caught up properly in a topknot like the other men's, it hung in a loose curtain down his back, except for a strand at the temple braided with beads and feathers. How bizarre! Belatedly she remembered having heard of a deputation from one of the uncivilised countries across the northern mountains.

As if he felt her gaze, the barbarian swivelled his head round to stare straight at her. Cold eyes of an unnaturally pale colour met hers. Grey? All of a sudden Shay knew how the hare felt when pinioned by the hawk's glare. In a single instant he raked his eyes

over her from top to bottom, before discarding her as no threat and turning away, bored. Probably he was used to attracting attention.

“Lady Sharvenaz!” the eunuch hissed in her ear, “you’ve been called!”

He gave her a push and she stumbled forward, only just catching herself in time. She would not shame her ancestors by falling flat on her face in front of the Emperor of Sikhand! Hastily she knelt down and touched her forehead against the ground in obeisance. And so she would have to remain, until given permission to rise.

“Fire Lady Sharvenaz tal Fareed,” the eunuch announced her, “ward of the Empire, come before the Ruler of all under Heaven to have her person bestowed at the emperor’s pleasure.”

From her position on the ground Shay could only see a small section of the carpet she was kneeling on, a pattern of stylised lotus flowers, but she heard the creak of wood as someone leant forward on the platform facing her.

“This is the firedancer that her Eminence, Mother Azar, pleaded for this morning?”

A young voice, sounding bored.

“Yes, Your Magnificence,” the eunuch answered.

Reconsider! Shay thought at the emperor. What better opportunity to acquire merit in the eyes of the Elements than to restore a bride to the sun to her temple?

“What is her crime?”

Paper rustled as the eunuch read from his scroll. “Guilt by reason of first level blood relationship, Your Magnificence. Her

father, the late Fareed tal Tishandar, was caught trespassing on the palace grounds.”

“He callously took the life of one of your guards and wounded another before being slain in his own turn,” a soft voice added – Prince Koshayar.

“I know, I know,” Emperor Tahmareb answered petulantly. “Did Captain Ugadai ever discover what the man was doing there?”

“Why not ask him? Here he is.”

It took all Shay’s long years of mastering self-control to remain still. She took a deep breath, held it and then released it slowly, forcing herself to relax the muscles that had gone rigid in her exposed back.

Footsteps approached from behind, then the scuff of leather against stone as he stopped beside her.

“My Lord Emperor?”

The harsh voice made her clench her fingers in the fabric of the carpet. Instinctively she reached for the comforting presence of Fire, but found only that hollow space within her that had once held warmth and light. The magebond on her wrist chilled in response.

“Ugadai,” the emperor said, “have you found out why that man, Lord Fareed, broke into the palace?”

The question that Shay had spent many a sleepless night pondering. Her father, so cultured and learned, to kill another human being and cut short his turn on the Wheel! In a way, that was the hardest fact to accept. She chanced a look out of the corner of her eye, but saw only high leather boots with trousers stuffed into them in the manner of the steppe people. Revulsion rose within her, but

she dared not move away. Captain Ugadai's spurs jingled as he shifted his weight.

"I am afraid not. The man bled to death before I had the chance to question him."

"Lucky him," Prince Koshayar murmured.

The emperor laughed and after a moment the rest of the court joined in. Shay forced herself to continue taking deep, regular breaths. None of these people had known her father. Although it seemed she had not either – after all she had not even known he possessed a sword, let alone that he would be willing and able to use it. And now she would never be able to ask him why.

"I do not like people trespassing on my palace," the emperor said and the laughter died down abruptly.

"Of course not, Your Magnificence," Captain Ugadai replied. "And I would have liked to get to the bottom of things. However, I was not allowed to interrogate Lady Sharvenaz properly."

Cold sweat broke out all over Shay's body. She did not even want to imagine what he meant by *properly*. After announcing her father's death and clamping the magebond on her wrist, he had subjected her to a ferocious verbal interrogation. Only her indignation at his treatment of a sunbride had enabled her to clamp down her grief and stand up to him. What would have happened if Mother Azar had not been present?

"Her Eminence, High Priestess Azar, assured us that the girl had not seen her father since she took vows two years ago," Prince Koshayar said, "so it did not seem necessary." He sounded bored.

“Shall we get on with this business now?”

“Yes, let us,” the emperor agreed. “You have permission to rise, Lady Sharvenaz.”

She was a dancer, with perfect control over body and mind, and would not be defeated by these impossibly tight clothes! In a smooth movement Shay sat back on her heels, then started to rise.

A hand grabbed her elbow. “Let me assist you.”

She found herself looking up at Ugadai. Stockily built like all the Khotai, he still loomed over her. His shaven head glistened with oil while across the slave tattoo on his left cheek ran a cut, pink and healing: her father’s work.

Shaking with revulsion, she shook off his touch. “I can manage.” Murderer!

He let go of her, but his eyes rested on her like a heavy weight as she turned away from him to face the emperor: the Ruler of all under Heaven, Chosen of the Elements, Defender of his People, Emperor Tahmareb the Magnificent – may he reign ten thousand years.

So young! Intellectually she had known as much of course, but she had only ever seen him from afar before. He sat on a low throne with his back straight and his legs set wide apart, in the traditional ruler’s posture, yet to Shay it seemed that it did not come naturally to him. His resplendent clothes hung on him as if made for a larger man and on his upper lip a thin moustache struggled for purchase, which he stroked softly. Willing it to grow?

Quickly she lowered her gaze, lest he should read her thoughts on her face. This youth had set his seal on the magebond

that chained her and now he held her fate in his hands.

“Do you have anything to add, Lady Sharvenaz?” the emperor asked, fidgeting on his throne as if disappointed with the entertainment she was providing. Had he expected her to break down in tears pleading her case? Well, she wouldn’t do him that favour. He had already decided her fate; nothing she could say would move him.

“No,” she said flatly. Let him do what he wanted, he would get nothing from her!

There was a short, nonplussed silence, then the emperor waved at the eunuch. “Well, continue.”

Standing there in the white robes that proclaimed her insignificance, she shivered as a night breeze stroked across her shoulders. Her last moment of freedom. The bridemark on her forehead seemed to throb at the thought.

“Who will offer for this woman?” the eunuch intoned.

“Excuse me,” a new voice interrupted. The barbarian? Shay had forgotten all about him, she had been so focused on her predicament.

Now he leant forward. “Do I understand correctly that you are selling this girl into slavery for the crimes her *father* committed?” He sounded incredulous. Or perhaps it was just the foreign lilt in his speech that made it seem so.

“Not slavery,” Prince Koshayar corrected, “after all we are civilised people here. Let me explain,” he added in the tone of voice used to instruct a child. At the back somebody sniggered. “Through her father’s offence all members of the family within three degrees

of relationship have lost their standing and are considered criminals.” He indicated Shay’s magebond. “This means that Lady Sharvenaz’s person falls into the care of the Empire. But since she is of noble birth and could still bear mageborn children, the emperor has decided to bestow her as a concubine. Against a suitable bride price, of course.” Prince Koshayar gave the barbarian a kind smile. “Do you understand now?”

The man remained unmoving until the sniggers had died down. Then he gave a curt nod of his head. “I do.”

For somebody who was unarmed and on his own, he managed to exude a surprising sense of menace in those two words. Shay got the impression it came naturally to him.

Throughout this exchange, the emperor had looked from one to the other uncertainly. Now he cleared his throat and waved at the eunuch to continue.

“Who will offer for this woman?” the servant repeated the ritual call.

Shay closed her eyes. Now might be a good moment to send a plea to the Elements, but she found no words. Besides, they had shown precious little interest in her fate so far.

“I will,” Ugadai said from beside her.

Shay’s eyes flew open. Not him! Fires below, anybody but him! She started to form a protest, but Lady Ghazal was quicker.

She leant forward from where she sat in the shadow of Emperor Tahmareb’s throne. “What extraordinary devotion to duty, Captain,” she said and extracted a fan from one of her sleeves. “I am impressed to see how determined you are to question the girl.” Lady

Ghazal flicked the sandalwood fan open with a delicate motion of her wrist. “Or is it something else you have in mind?”

Laughter greeted this sally. The barbarian, Shay noticed, had crossed his arms in front of his chest with a grimace of disgust.

Beside her, Ugadai stiffened. “I am only doing my duty.”

“Of course,” Lady Ghazal agreed with him. “However onerous that duty might be.”

Her words called forth more laughter from the other courtiers and the emperor was grinning openly at his captain’s discomfiture. Shay stole a quick sideways look at Ugadai. The veins on his thick neck stood out as he struggled with his temper. This wasn’t helping her any! On the contrary, if he got his wish, Ugadai would no doubt take out his frustration on her. She wondered if she might find it in herself to kill him. But an untrained girl against the captain of the emperor’s guard? The man was built like a bull!

Perhaps when he was asleep, after... Bile rose in her throat at the thought of being taken to his bed and having him touch her wherever he wanted, of owing a wife’s obedience to the murderer of her father. Never! Much better to be dead. She looked up to find Lady Ghazal gazing at her, while fanning herself gently. Her eyes seemed to hold a message: only ask and I will help you.

And Shay knew at that moment that she would do anything – anything at all – to escape the fate that threatened her. As if sealing an agreement, Lady Ghazal dipped eyelids painted with powdered gold and then leant forward to whisper something in the emperor’s ear. The gold sheaths on her fingers tightened on his arm like the claws of a raptor. Emperor Tahmareb gave a bark of laughter at

whatever his concubine had said to him, then held up a hand. At once the court quietened.

“Captain Ugadai, it would not be fitting for a slave to own a mageborn concubine, so the match is out of the question.”

Shay released her breath in relief. Beside her, Ugadai stilled, before bowing his head in obedience. “As my lord wills it.” His heels clacked together as he took a step back.

But the emperor wasn’t finished yet. “As a token of the friendship between our countries, I have instead decided to confer Lady Sharvenaz’s hand on Lord Medyr of Aneirion.”

What? Who was this Lord Medyr?

The barbarian shot bold upright. “What did you just say?”

The guards had drawn their scimitars the moment he moved, but the emperor waved them back. “Sit down, Medyr,” he said. “Haven’t you declared repeatedly that you want to improve your knowledge of our language and customs?” He grinned like a little boy who had just pulled off a trick. “There is no more pleasant way to learn than in the arms of a woman. The crown will waive the bride price – consider it a present between friends.”

She must have made a strangled sound, for the two men turned her way. Still reeling with shock, she met the eyes of her future husband. Wide with surprise at first, they narrowed in speculation after a moment.

The emperor clapped his hands three times. “So be it.”

TWO

Medyr sighed inwardly. While the other men riding with them threw him looks of amusement mixed with envy, the captain of his war band stared straight ahead, a frown on his face. Quite obviously Garym disapproved of his lord's latest acquisition. But really, what else was he supposed to have done? There was no way he could have refused this dubious gift without insulting the emperor.

Frowning, he smoothed the feather ornament at his temple. Why couldn't the lad have given him something innocuous? A sword, a hawk or a piece of jewellery – although the latter probably would not have pleased Garym either, not with the way everything in this land was riddled with magic.

Up ahead the entrance of White Lotus Ward appeared out of the darkness, flanked by lanterns. One of the men urged his horse forward and pounded on the wooden doors, but as usual the gate guards took their time responding. And also as usual they inspected Medyr's night passes with meticulous care. Guests of their emperor

they might be, but the city guard held a very low opinion of barbarians. Medyr tried not to let them see how much this irked him and eventually the guards condescended to wave them through.

Inside the ward, the city's dusk to dawn curfew did not hold, and the narrow lanes thronged with people. Every evening a night market sprang up along the main roads, the stalls selling everything from ear cleaning tools to grilled crickets. Medyr sniffed appreciatively at the smell of exotic spices floating on the air and involuntarily let his eyes roam along the upper galleries of the houses, where the ladies of the flower world plied their trade. Wrapped in the thinnest of silks that did nothing to hide their charms, they leant over the low railings, giggling behind painted fans and trailing long sleeves in invitation. To Medyr they looked nothing so much as a flock of colourful birds.

Garym scanned the galleries too, but for a different reason, for he saw assassins everywhere and the slow going made him jumpy. Medyr cast a look back at the palanquin that held the girl. The bearers struggled to keep up and he signalled two of his men to help carve a way. He had wanted to take the girl up on his horse, but she had looked so horrified at the idea that he had given in and organised a litter for her. What had she thought anyway? That he would have his wicked barbarian ways with her while riding home in the dark?

They turned into the alley that led to the compound he had rented for the duration of their stay in Arrashar and the crowd diminished rapidly. Outside their house hung a banner bestowed as an honour by the emperor and these doorkeepers jumped to attention

at once and swung the gates open for them. But as they rode into the courtyard, he got a surprise. All the house slaves were waiting for them, lined up in strict order of precedence down to the lowest kitchen scullion. Whatever for?

Darab, the overseer, stepped forward and bowed to him. “Lord Medyr, please accept the household’s congratulations on your nuptials.”

How had he known? But news travelled in twisted and unfathomable ways in this country. “Thank you,” he answered and swung down from his war mare. Morwyn snapped yellow teeth in the overseer’s face, making the man jump back, and Medyr had to check his irascible horse. “Peace!”

His men were leading their horses to the stable and usually he would have followed them and pitched in, since he rather enjoyed the sensation this caused amongst the staff of the house. However, this time he handed the reins to his squire and went to help the girl alight from her litter.

The curtains twitched as a slim hand emerged. Next silk encased legs swung out. The servants of course did nothing so vulgar as to stare, but he caught a definite sense of anticipation in the air. Her eyes demurely cast down, the girl rose from the velvet cushions. The moment she had alighted, she took a step away from him, fussing over arranging her robe.

Darab bowed again. “Lady Sharvenaz, welcome to the House of the Emerald Dragon. The household is yours to command.”

The overseer even knew her name! Yet whenever Medyr

asked a question of his servants, more often than not he just met blank looks. At least the girl seemed equally startled to have herself addressed by name. She murmured soft thanks.

“You must wish to freshen up,” Darab added. “This way, please.”

With his usual efficiency, he whisked the girl away and handed her over to the gaggle of maids that had come with the house. Medyr tried to ignore the obvious relief with which she escaped from his presence. What was he supposed to do with her?

“My lord, are you done with *my* services for tonight?” Garym interrupted his thoughts, saluting him with exaggerated correctness.

Medyr wrestled down the impulse to deck him. They had grown up together, his friend had no business to *my lord* him! Perhaps he should let Garym deal with this Sharvenaz – that would serve him right!

“What would you have me do, *Captain*,” he snapped. “Throw back the emperor’s present in his face?”

“That is not for me to say,” Garym answered primly. “I would just like to point out that the woman might be easy on the eye, but very likely she is a spy. Or worse, an assassin...”

“I know that!” Medyr pushed his fingers through his hair. Did his friend think him a simpleton? Although if she was an assassin, she was a better actress than any he had ever encountered, giving a pretty good impression of a startled deer. “I can take care of myself,” he said.

Garym looked unconvinced. “She’s probably got daggers up

those voluminous sleeves of hers,” he muttered, “or wears poisoned hairpins!”

Medyr rolled his eyes at these dire pronouncements. “You’re getting paranoid.” He had a hard time imagining a little slip of a girl like her as a fearsome assassin. “I could break her in half without even trying.”

“A spy then,” Garym said.

“Far more likely,” Medyr conceded. In fact the same thought had occurred to him once he had got over his initial surprise. The whole situation was just too pat. He shrugged. “But then the household is probably riddled with spies already, so what’s one more?”

That called forth an unwilling laugh from his friend. Garym shook his head. “Three weeks in Arrashar and already you’re in trouble over a woman,” he grumbled.

Medyr took a deep breath. Not that old story again! The whole journey south his friend had been moaning about missing the summer’s fighting with the Khotai. “Garym, that was six years ago!” he pointed out. “I can’t help it if Prince Blayth cherishes a grudge the way other men cherish their family heirlooms.” And all over a small, long ago indiscretion with the royal favourite of the moment!

His friend snorted. “Easy to say, but just look at us now, stuck amongst savages.”

Medyr gave another inward sigh. When the need to send an embassy south to offer Emperor Tahmareb congratulations on ascending his throne had come up, nobody had been keen to go. Then Blayth, seeing an opportunity to get his own back for that long

ago quarrel, had suggested Medyr as a likely candidate and at a heavy hint from King Gwartegyth Medyr's father had to bundle his son and twenty men of his war band off to the court of Sikhhand. A pleasure Medyr could have done without. His mood darkened as he considered that backstabbing, sniping lot of courtiers.

The Sikhhandi had never forgiven the barbarians of the north for their effrontery in resisting conquest and refusing the blessings of civilisation, and it had taken two weeks of cooling his heels in the receiving halls of various officials before he had even been allowed to present his credentials to the emperor. Nobody had been more surprised than him when the young monarch had taken a liking to him. Medyr suspected that the lad secretly dreamed of being a great warrior and he had never before met anybody with real battle experience. If only he hadn't felt the need to show his appreciation with such a dubious present.

He shook his dark thoughts away. "Anyway," he said, "we'll just have to keep an eye on the girl, and if she gives us any trouble I'll get rid of her somehow. After all she's nothing but a concubine."

Garym frowned. "But how are you going to do that without offending the emperor?"

Medyr shrugged. "I will think of something. Don't worry."

Slightly mollified, his friend grinned at him. "I always worry. That's my job." Apparently coming to the conclusion that his friend could cope with the situation, he turned to leave. "Enjoy being spied on!"

Medyr grimaced in distaste at the idea. But first he had to run the usual gauntlet of servants anyway. The Emerald Dragon

consisted of several rooms arranged around two courtyards lying one behind the other, and surrounded by a high wall. Raised on pillars to keep them dry during the winter rains, the houses were surmounted by wide tiled roofs. When he ascended the steps to the first hall, servants ran to take his cloak and offer him a basin of water to wash the dust off his hands. Two more knelt in front of him to take off his boots and slip on a pair of house sandals, but he waved them away. These people thought that he could do nothing without assistance!

Then he entered the inner courtyard and the bustle fell behind. A couple of his men stood guard at the foot of the stairs leading up to his private rooms and they grinned openly as he nodded to them in passing. Word of his *gift* had spread fast.

Sikhandi houses did not have proper walls, but rather thin, latticed screens that could be slipped open and closed at will. The inside was divided into rooms in a similar fashion with adjustable bamboo blinds, so Medyr was unsurprised to find his quarters looking completely different to how he had left them a few hours ago. The bedroom still took up the centre, but the servants had set up a new dressing room.

While he washed the sweat and dust off his face and then changed into a shirt and loose trousers, he pondered what to make of this Sharvenaz. A spy, as Garym thought? Yet she had seemed equally surprised at the turn of events and possibly even more dismayed than Medyr. Only with the Sikhandi you could never tell for sure what they really thought. Inwardly they might despise the barbarians from the north, but the outside remained smooth and shiny like the lacquerware boxes they prized so much.

When he entered the bedroom, he found her already waiting. The screens along the back had been slid open, and she stood gazing at the garden that stretched behind the house all the way to the encircling wall. She had changed into a flowing robe of pale pink, but her hair was still that strange ashen colour – he would never understand Sikhhandi notions of fashion!

At his entrance the girl turned round and sank into a deep obeisance, touching her forehead to the bamboo mats that covered the floor. Medyr studied her, wondering if he had acquired hidden enemies – more than just the Khotai swine, who were his foes wherever he encountered them. Spy, assassin or just an ordinary girl? He would need to tread softly to find out.

“Please get up, Sharvenaz,” he said.

Stumbling slightly, she rose. “Thank you, gracious lord.” Her voice had the soft, refined accent of the Sikhhandi nobles.

An awkward silence descended. She just stood there, not meeting his eyes, knuckles white where she clutched her arms as if bracing herself. What did she think he would do? Rip her clothes off and ravish her this instant in whatever barbarian ways he could invent? Probably.

He tamped down his irritation at her assumptions. “You like the garden?” he asked, trying to gentle his voice and set her at ease.

She looked out across the pond surrounded by a lawn and bordered by large rocks and clumps of reeds. A carefully raked gravel path led to a huge willow tree trailing its long leaves in the water, and at the back a bamboo grove had been planted so cleverly that it gave the impression of extending into much larger woods.

Every evening, servants hung up lanterns from the branches of the tree, making their light reflect in the water.

The girl remained silent so long that he began to wonder if she had understood him. “Yes,” she said at last, “it is very well balanced.”

Balanced? How could a garden be balanced? Medyr did not really want to know. “The former owner was a poet,” he offered information gleaned from his overseer.

For the first time, something resembling animation showed on her face. “Really?” she asked and looked up at him. She had lovely eyes, liquid black and huge in her face. Involuntarily, she thought that if only he could get her to relax, the evening might not be a complete loss shot through his mind.

“Perhaps my father knew him,” she said. “What was his name?”

But Medyr did not know. “I’m sorry, I have no idea,” he admitted, “Apparently he fell into disfavour and had to sell the house.” Medyr had in fact been surprised that a mere poet could own such a place. But maybe he had come from an important family; the nobles in this country pursued the strangest interests.

She bit her lip “Oh!”

Belatedly Medyr realised that the last remark had cut too close to the bone. “Shall we sit down?” he asked, trying to dispel the awkwardness.

Her eyes widened, then she quickly lowered her head. “As my husband wishes.”

He was getting heartily tired of being cast in the role of the

lion stalking a hapless fawn. "I do," he said, then cursed himself as she jumped at his harsh tone. "Please," he added more softly.

She shot him an uncertain look, before edging past him to kneel at a low table. Medyr chose a cushion opposite her and sat down cross-legged. They considered themselves the only true civilisation, yet did not even have proper chairs!

Sharvenaz gestured at a flask placed in a pan of hot water.

"Wine, my lord?" she asked.

Medyr nodded. He did not really fancy the colourless liquid the Sikhandi brewed from fermented rice and called wine, but it would hardly have been polite to say so. To make matters worse, they served it hot. He watched her closely while she chose two cups from a lacquer tray. In a face framed by grey hair, her lips and the scarlet mark on her forehead provided the only splash of colour. The dull pink didn't suit her; she needed something rich and vivid to set off that ivory skin. Not such a stunning beauty as Lady Ghazal, but quite enticing in her own way. Back home in Aneirion, her exotic looks would have turned heads.

Careful, he admonished himself. After all she could easily have a dagger hidden in those wide sleeves. Quite possibly the whole story of being an innocent girl fresh from the temple was an elaborate act.

With a jerky motion she poured the rice wine and handed him his cup. The porcelain clinked softly and when their fingers touched she trembled. Yet still she would not look at him, keeping her eyes fixed on the table. How could she have such iron control over herself?

“How old are you?” he asked.

She clutched her cup between both hands. “Eighteen winters, my lord.”

Only two years older than his little sister. Involuntarily he wondered how Aranwen, wild and slightly spoilt, would bear up in this kind of situation. He pushed the thought away. Back home, a lord might keep a leman, but would never acknowledge her in public. By contrast Sikhandi men took as many concubines as they could afford, in addition to their proper wife, and the women were considered perfectly respectable.

Medyr lifted his cup. “Let us drink to our...” He hesitated. Though she might call him her husband, the whole affair seemed too much a business transaction to be called marriage. Certainly not like offering his feathers to an Aneiry lady. He cleared his throat. “...union.”

She took a tiny sip. “To our... union.”

Nettled by her lack of enthusiasm despite his own mixed feelings, Medyr emptied his whole cup in one go. The wine burned its way down his throat – what wouldn’t he give for a mug of ale. He set his cup down on the table with a clank.

The girl regarded him with alarm. “The wine is not to your liking, my lord?”

“No, no. It’s fine,” Medyr waved her concern away.

“You can send for something else,” she offered. “Ladan tea perhaps?”

Not that tasteless stuff! “Don’t bother,” he told her, “it’s all the same to me anyway. What I would really like is a mug of ale.”

Her mouth dropped open. “You drink ale in your country?”

She did not add that no noble of Sikhand would touch a drink only considered fit for common labourers and slaves, but Medyr knew.

“Yes we do,” he said. For some reason it provided him a perverse pleasure to establish his coarse tastes. “Lots of it. However, for the moment wine will do.”

He held his cup out for a refill and after a startled moment she complied. The magebond on her arm glittered in the dim light. Medyr leaned forward to finger the thin bracelet. “This is no ordinary iron?”

She went still under his touch. “The emperor has set his seal on it. His line has long held the secret of using sky metal to block magic.”

Medyr brushed back her sleeve to have a closer look. Sinuous inscriptions like running water flowed along the metal.

“How does it work?” he asked, casually slipping his fingers down to her wrist, where her pulse beat a frantic tattoo. As he had thought. She might play the ice maiden, but her body told a different story.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “If I did...” She left the rest unspoken.

“... you would burn me to cinders?” he finished for her, amused at the thought of her posing any kind of threat to him.

“Of course not.”

Medyr took another sip of wine. Perhaps the stuff wasn’t quite so bad after all. Feeling hot, he loosened the laces of his shirt.

“I suppose Tahmareb’s magic is just stronger than yours,” he mused.

She remained silent, but pressed her lips together in disagreement.

“Well?” he asked.

“Obviously it goes against the Circles of Dominion,” she replied reluctantly.

Not obvious to Medyr. He frowned. “What is that?”

The question earned him an incredulous look. “The Circles of Dominion!” she repeated, as if to a child. “You know, Earth smothers Fire, Fire burns Wood, Wood absorbs Water...”

He had never heard of it, but then he had never been particularly interested in Sikhandi magic. Give him a sharp sword over a spell any day! But she did not need to treat him as if he were a simpleton. Medyr was getting rather tired of having these people sneer behind his back!

“Bear with my ignorance for a moment, girl,” he told her, letting some of his irritation leach into his voice. “What has this to do with the magebond?”

“The Inner Circle of Dominion states it clearly,” she answered in a colourless voice. “Fire melts Metal.”

“So it does.” He shrugged. “Perhaps you got your circles wrong then.”

Saying nothing, she sat there immovable as a rock that will let the water flow around it, but she might as well have shouted her disagreement. The iron had chafed her smooth skin red.

“Does it hurt?” he asked, turning over her arm and noticing the firm line of muscle. From her dancing?

“No, my lord.”

She offered nothing more and reluctantly he let go. No hidden daggers, anyway. Which proved nothing, of course. He seemed to remember seeing her in conversation with Prince Koshayar and wondered anew if she had been planted to spy on him.

“So,” he said, raising his cup to his lips, “the emperor called you a firedancer.”

“Yes.”

“Did you serve in the Temple of the Sun here in Arrashar?”

“Yes.”

Medyr took a large gulp of wine to mask his irritation at these monosyllabic answers. “And what did you do there?” he asked.

“Dance.”

Was she making fun of him? In that case she would soon find out she had chosen the wrong man to mock! Very well, perhaps putting on a bit of pressure would make her reveal her motives. He gestured at the veranda with his cup. “In that case, dance for me.”

She froze. “No!”

“Why not?”

The girl stared at him as if searching for an answer. “I can’t,” she stuttered. “My magic is bound.”

Did she think him too stupid to figure out she did not want to? Somehow she managed to sit there and defy him while at the same time preserving the outward appearance of dutiful obedience.

“I did not ask you to use your magic,” he pointed out, “I told you to dance.”

She folded her hands in her lap. “The firedance is nothing to

look at without its magic.”

“Then dance something else.”

“I know nothing else.”

“You must do!”

“No.”

A hint of steel rang in her voice. Medyr’s blood pounded in his ears. The girl seemed to have forgotten that she was not in a good position to display the usual Sikhandi arrogance.

“Sharvenaz,” he said softly, “if you will not dance for me, you will please me in other ways.” What would she say to that?

Her nostrils flared. “As my husband wishes.”

Medyr saw a spark of distaste in her face before she lowered her head again. Why couldn’t she look him straight in the eye! But none of them challenged him openly. Instead they used words, like a thousand needle pricks, to make him look a fool. Especially Prince Koshayar! The man was rumoured to have a wide network of spies, he would not be surprised at all if she were in his employ.

“More wine,” he snapped.

Wordlessly she obeyed.

“You all think me a barbarian, don’t you,” he said, draining the cup in one gulp.

The girl did not reply, she just looked down at the table as if she wanted to memorise every detail. Her breast rose and fell with shallow breaths. Very well. She considered him a barbarian, he would behave like one!

Medyr leant back in his cushions. “Undo your hair.”

For a moment he thought that she would refuse, but then she

reached up to pull out the hairpins one by one. They clicked softly as she laid them on the table, freeing the luxurious mass of hair to tumble down her back. And still she would not look at him. What did it take to get an honest reaction from this porcelain doll? Hate, fear, anger...anything at all!

“Your robe.”

Her hands hesitated on the sash. In the garden, a fish jumped in the pond, the sound carrying loudly through the still air. Then she undid the knot and shrugged the robe from her shoulders almost defiantly. It slid down to lie like a heap of freshly scattered cherry blossoms around her. Underneath she wore nothing but a tight fitting silken shift.

Medyr let the silence grow, until it lay between them alive and menacing. Still no reaction. Slowly he sat up and reached across to bunch the sheer white silk in his fingers. She tensed and a tremor ran through her. Perhaps not all that controlled after all.

“This is next, you know,” he whispered.

Sharvenaz lifted her head and looked him straight in the face. “As my husband wishes.”

Her eyes had gone hard as obsidian. He had seen that look before, on the faces of men about to fight a battle and not expecting to survive: sheer raw courage. And he knew that whatever he did to her, whatever he demanded, she would obey. She would not even cry out. Because by the laws of this land he owned her.

It was a disgusting thought.

Medyr snatched his hand back and surged to his feet, sending the table flying. His head swam. After the first instinctive

flinch the girl had not moved, she just regarded him steadily. And in those eyes he saw an image of himself reflected that he did not recognise. Lord of Light! Was that his true self? A brute who forced himself on women?

He staggered away from her, towards the door to the garden. Leaning against a pillar, he closed his eyes, not caring that he turned his back on her. Let her stab him with one of those hairpins if she wanted to. What had he turned into? She lifted a mirror to him and what he saw in there was wholly unpalatable.

“Put your robe back on,” he rasped out.

Silk rustled as she complied. “My lord?”

“I do not force myself on women.”

What had got into him! But something about her contrived submissiveness brought out the very worst in him. He had wanted to smash that smooth, disdainful facade, but instead had very nearly shattered his own honour. The horrible suspicion filled him that she might be exactly what she seemed: a complete innocent, fresh from the temple.

Straightening up, he turned round to face Sharvenaz. She sat at the overturned table, still as a marble statue. Such a small thing to make him stumble so. Spy or not – he would no longer play this game.

“The men of Aneirion only take what is given freely,” he said through clenched teeth. “Tomorrow morning I will seek an audience with the emperor and ask him to undo this travesty.”

The blood drained from her face and for the first time he saw an unguarded expression: fear.

“Forgive me, my lord,” she whispered and bowed her head to the ground. Her hair surrounded her like a thick curtain. “I am sorry if I offended you. Please do not punish me.”

“What are you talking about!” Medyr snapped. “I said I would not touch you. But neither will I continue with this charade.”

“The emperor will lose face to have his gift returned...”

Medyr’s head was starting to hurt in earnest. Perhaps he had overdone it a little bit with the wine. Curse these people for making everything so complicated!

“What will he do?” he asked. But in truth he knew already – Emperor Tahmareb had a reputation for a temper.

“He will be displeased,” she answered, “but likely will offer you something else in compensation.”

“And you?”

Her voice went flat. “Returned gifts are worthless.”

Medyr remembered the way Captain Ugadai had looked at her, a man only too eager to relieve his master of an unwanted burden. Which meant that Medyr was stuck with her, for there was no way he would hand over a woman – any woman – to those Khotai brutes. His headache worsened.

He smashed his fist against the wooden pillar. “Then what am I supposed to do with you?”

Sharvenaz folded her hands in her lap, giving him nothing. “Whatever you please, my lord.”

Lady of Darkness! She would let him bed her, but not dance for him. He would never understand these people. A moment ago she had looked at him as if he were a monster out of the deep, now

she seemed resigned to her fate. Clearly she regarded him as the lesser evil. Well, he'd be damned if he would take her on those terms!

In the garden, a nightingale lifted its voice in song. If only he had so few cares. She might not be a spy or assassin, but the whole situation stank to high heaven. Attending the court of Sikhand was a lot like sailing unchartered waters and waiting for your boat to hit the shoals. He didn't need a green girl to warm his bed, he needed a guide!

A guide...

"The garden," he asked abruptly, "why is it balanced?"

If his sudden change of subject surprised her, she did not show it. Or perhaps she welcomed anything that would put off the moment of going to bed with him.

"Within its small space it has all the Elements in pleasing proportion to each other," she explained. "While a garden is primarily a place of Wood, the pond gives a strong counterpoint of Water." Her face took on animation as she warmed to her subject. "See how the rocks and gravel path provide the steadying influence of Earth, while the lamps invigorate the air with Fire and Metal. And then of course there is the willow..."

"What about it?"

"Can't you feel it?" she asked back. "The living centre. It is right."

True, the spot under the big tree felt peaceful in some strange way and the noise of the compound seemed to fade away when he sat at the water's edge. "Is it done by magic?" he asked.

She spread her hands. “Only insofar as all life partakes of magic.”

A guide...

Medyr crossed the room to sit down opposite her again. “I’ve got a proposition for you,” he said.

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