

Emerald Fire

By Caris McRae

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Chapter 1

Nia Dei-Trea was desperate. Where could she hide? There wasn't a place for her to run to. Her home, the Hareem, was two miles away and being who she was she wouldn't be welcomed anywhere else. She should have listened to Serabi and not taken the shortcut through the market after sunset. A Hareema certainly wasn't afraid of sexual contact, which was why she had thought she was safe. That someone would try to mug her and then dispose of her dead body hadn't crossed her mind. Bad mistake.

She heard the cruel voice of her attacker behind her and ran faster. Only to realize that she had arrived at a dead end. *Shit.*

"Did no one ever tell you that running from a predator only makes him give chase, little whore?"

Nia just stood there, inching back at the wall behind her. She looked at the man and defiantly refused to answer. It was meant to be rhetoric anyway.

"Cat got your tongue?" he drawled in that nasty, excited voice of his. "Too bad. I think I can make you scream though," he said, his excitement over the upcoming torture apparent in his face. "They all do when my blade is slicing their throats open." He slowly licked over his dagger's serrated blade, never lifting his gaze from her.

He stepped closer. And closer. And closer until he was but an inch away. He drew up his weapon that glinted in the faint moon light.

Nia's heart raced. She had nowhere to go and she wasn't strong enough to hit him hard enough to somehow get by him, much less overpower him. The futility of the situation killed the last remnants of her hope and she felt her shoulders sag. That was not how she had imagined she died. And certainly not now that her life was finally going to change, not now that she was going to be elected Chief Mistress of the Hareem after decades of misery in two weeks' time. No more letting random men touch her without any kind of affection; no more being at the mercy of the mostly brittle control the unmated Warriors showed after a fight; no more being at the mercy of a Chief Mistress who hated her guts and tormented her

at every turn. She didn't mind her place in the world, she liked giving pleasure in every possible way – she was a born Hareema after all – but still, she had wanted to experience a meaningful relationship of sorts or at least mutual affection and caring, only once in her life.

But no. Idiot that she was, she had to take a shortcut and die in a dark back alley at the hands of a cruel outcast.

However, she wouldn't go down like a coward. If she had to die, then she would do it with her pride intact. So she steeled her spine, straightened to her full height, and looked the lowlife straight in his eyes.

“Then do it, *coward!*”

“*Coward?* You call me a coward, you filthy bitch?” the man hissed, enraged. “I show you *coward!*” he raged and lifted his hand to end her life.

Slash.

Nia blinked, confused. One moment she thought she would die and the next the monster's head fell off his body. Without a sound.

Stunned, she watched speechlessly as the headless body sagged and fell to the ground.

“You might want to avoid shady corners after sunset in the future, lady,” a dark, cool voice said from the shadows.

Nia shivered. Oh Sol. She really hoped that this one didn't want to continue where the last one had left off? She felt herself getting desperate. She broke into a cold sweat.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Manners never hurt, did they?

She heard a bitter laugh. She felt another tremor through her body. Who was that? She couldn't see the new threat in the shadows and she was felt on the verge of throwing up she was so scared. “What do you want from me?” she said with her last bit of courage.

“Nothing,” he replied icily. “You are beautiful, sure, but not worth a man's life. I'm not going to maul you, so relax!” she heard the voice again, this time scoffing. She had a feeling that he might even have rolled his eyes, too.

“Then I'm free to go?” Nia's mind was blank. She couldn't wrap her head around what was happening here. What kind of weird game did the shadow man play?

“That's what I just said, isn't it?”

Uh, no; he didn't say that, Nia thought. But it was nice of him to tell her. Cautiously she took a step forward. Then another one. When she had reached the alley exit, she took a

relieved breath. He really let her go. Meaning he had saved her life a few minutes ago. She needed to thank him for that. At least propriety demanded she did.

“Wait, who are you? Please, step into the light!”

“Whatever for?”

“How can I thank you properly for saving me if I don’t know who you are?”

“I’m no one’s savior and I don’t need your thanks. Besides, you already did that.”

Gruffly he added, “One would think, you’d be happy to leave this place. So go already, will you?”

“Please tell me your name, then. I need to know who I owe my life to!”

“You don’t owe me anything, lady. The lowlife had already reached the end of his life. Keeping him from killing you was just a nice side-effect of his demise.”

“Please,” she said and unconsciously put on her puppy dog face – the one that had been working on every male so far in her life. “You need to give me something; the Gods need to know who to bless when I thank them for sending you my way.”

“I’m not susceptible to flattery, so that look won’t get you nothing. By Nyx, are the men in your life really that gullible?” he answered sourly.

At his derisive tone, Nia got angry. There she wanted to thank him and he accused her of manipulating him. *Asshole*. Never mind that he was spot on in his assessment; this was about the principle of the matter. Deep down she wondered what the hell she was doing. Her mind screamed at her to run. But she refused to listen.

“Oh, you highhanded jerk! See, if I pray for you now!” She went on calling him every name she had ever heard, until she heard a soft laugh.

Then he said dangerously quiet, “Now that is what I call flattery. Aren’t you afraid that I’ll retaliate for some of your more creative name-calling?”

Nia stopped dead in her tirade and thought it over. “Nah. If you wanted to hurt me, you would have already done so. Are giving me your name now or not? Because I have to go!” She didn’t know where that knowledge came from, but she was sure that it was true. He had no interest in ending her life. Or any other interest in her. Which she knew she should be grateful for, but in a teeny-tiny corner of her heart, it stung.

“You have some spunk, I’ll give you that. Next time though, stay at home after dark, lady, wherever your home is. I might not be there to save you again. Good night!” With that he was gone.

“Arrogant, infuriating male! You know what, instead for thanking the Gods for your help, I’m gonna ask them to teach you some manners, you twit!” she muttered, put out.

Then Nia remembered where she was. She quickly left the alley and ran in the direction of her home. Secretly though, she was a bit sorry that her savior had refused to give her his name. Without him she would have died in a decidedly unpleasant and most likely painful way; she was more than relieved that he had spared her that. Well, she would still thank the Gods for sending him her way. She figured they would know who he was anyway – they were said to be omniscient, after all.

Shortly before the side gate of the Hareem, she suddenly felt a breeze of warm air and a dark presence next to her. She stiffened, tense.

“My name is Onyx. May the Goddess keep your spirit willful, little filly!”

And he was gone again.

Nia blinked confused. *Filly?* That, that...

However, she entered her home with a pleased little smile on her face.

Chapter 2

Two months later

“Congratulations, Nia! I knew you would make it,” Serabi, the Hareem’s Healer, said and applauded her.

“Yeah, but it was close. Why weren’t you at the ceremony, by the way?” Nia asked. She had missed her friend of many years.

“Well, I was delayed in Iquis. Carbin, the old grump, made me do some extra work for what I needed and then an emergency occurred, so I couldn’t get away in time.” The older woman sighed, then muttered, “Stupid Hashisins. Always getting hurt on the job. You’d think they teach them how to stay unharmed!”

“Well, I think they are more focusing on how to survive while getting the job done than staying uninjured.”

“So? Why does that mean I have to stitch them up?” Serabi went on, exasperated.

“Oh, stop it, woman. I know you would never refuse your help if someone really needed it; and I’m pretty sure that you told whoever it was who needed mending what you think of his, hm, ‘clumsiness.’ In detail.”

Serabi smirked. “You’d be right about that.” The Healer sat down in a chair in Nia’s spacious chamber and said, “So, what have you been up to?”

“I moved in *here*” Nia said and waved at the room, “and then I improved security, implemented some new rules, you know, like no roughing up the girls without consequences, and then I contracted a builder to for a new infirmary – for which I still need a resident Healer.” She looked expectantly at Serabi.

“You want a resident Healer? Good to know that at least one of you lot has enough brains to see the merit in that. Whom did you have in mind?”

Nia just shot her a pointed look.

"I see. But I would need separate chambers, a generous budget for ingredients, and a monthly allowance. As well as an assistant. Hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but you can't afford my services; at least that's what your *wonderful* predecessor told me. More than once." Serabi almost choked on her rage at the thought of the former Chief Mistress.

"Well," Nia replied slowly, "it turned out that we have plenty of money left for your services – you see, Troia demanded a hefty price for our services and put the bulk of it aside for 'bad times.'"

"I'm sure she did. And how exactly did you find that out?" Serabi drawled. She was pretty sure that there was an entertaining story behind that – Troia had not been known for her generosity and giving spirit.

"Oh, she told me that the day she was leaving," Nia said calmly.

"Did she, now," Serabi said, amused. "So what? She tried to take a chest of gold coins with her and your sentry alleviated her of it?"

Nia grinned. "Something like that. Anyway, there is plenty of money and we decided unanimously that we want to use that money for a Healer. We have taken great pains to fulfill your demands, my friend. The only things missing now are the herbs, since we figured our future Healer would know best what she needed, and well...*you*."

"What about the assistant?"

"You can choose whomever you want. Our only condition is that he or she is respectful towards our profession."

"Of course; that goes without saying. So show me the infirmary; let's see if it's good enough to make we want to stay."

Nia smiled happily. They had gone all out in their efforts to get Serabi to agree to a permanent position as the Harem's Chief of Healers. She was aware that no Healer would ever take on such a commitment lightly and so they had tried their best based to make it worthwhile for her, based on Serabi's numerous complaints over the years.

The two women walked in the newly built west wing where they had set up the infirmary and some additional private quarters for the Hareemas.

After Nia had shown the Healer around, she said, "So? What do you think?"

Serabi didn't answer for a few minutes, then the Healer said, "By Sol, girl, you did an amazing job – this is what I call an infirmary! Every Healer would be proud to work in here."

"Will *you* be proud to work in here?"

“Well, dearest Mistress of the House, I certainly will. With you in charge, my friend, I’ll be happy to be of service. When can I move in?”

Nia’s eyes sparkled at her victory. The others would sure be as happy as she was their hard work had paid off.

“Um, I already took the liberty to let your things be brought in. So, how does *now* sound?”

Serabi grinned. “You’ve been so sure of your success?”

“I figured that with a working place according to your wishes, you would have enough incentive to stay. I know you like it here. So...”

“Oh Nia, it wasn’t the shitty infirmary that has held me back. I can work everywhere. The greatest deterrent had been the previous leadership. And now that the Queen of Greed and Furtiveness is gone and left *you* in charge, I am most pleased to take care of you lot.”

Nia cleared her throat at that – she couldn’t very well openly agree with the Healer because bad-mouthing your predecessor was considered bad style– and then gave in to her joy and drew the older woman in a mighty bear hug.

Chapter 3

Time went by fast as Serabi settled in and got the infirmary stocked and running. After a month, the only thing missing now was an assistant now, but that turned out harder than she had anticipated. It seemed not too many Healers wanted to work in a Hareem. Yes, the Hareemas had a certain reputation, but come on, their services were as necessary as were air and water. She had been quite appalled by the derisive attitude most Healer apprentices had towards the women here. For some, being Esendri held more merit than choosing the life of a Hareema. Serabi didn't get it.

Most women here were born Hareemas, which was a special kind of Muse. However, there were those who didn't have enough power to survive out there but too much for being Esendri. And since most of them weren't averse to pleasure of any kind, they had chosen the life of a Hareema. And they did well. It wasn't all about sex here, but pleasure in every form and shape. Some men just wanted to spend a good time with an attentive companion, some wanted massages of all kinds, and yes, some desired sexual relief. But those had to follow a very strict set of rules that ensured the safety of the women.

Thank Sol Nia was now Chief Mistress. She had improved the situation a lot for her girls. Troia had run a system that allowed for anything for the right price and as a result had to deal with broken and battered girls left and right. Which hadn't bothered the cold bitch one bit. And to top it off, she had thrown out the damaged girl when they didn't recover in time. That was not how you treated others; especially not when you had taken a vow to protect them.

With Nia in charge now, the girls were much happier and due to the new rules and sentry, Serabi didn't have a lot to do. That left her enough time for experimenting with new potions and improving those she already had, something she didn't have enough time for before. So the non-existence of an assistant didn't pose that much of a problem, at the moment. Anyway, she firmly believed that she would find the right one somewhere somewhen.

Serabi walked into her laboratory and at the sight of all the potions, lotions, and herbs, she smiled, utterly content. She took her recipe book and started on a new mixture. Life was good.

Nia was sitting in her little office over her books, almost asleep since it was late at night, when she heard some commotion at the side gate which was near her room.

She went to the guards in the hall and asked for a report.

“Chief Mistress,” the bulky man said, “there is lowlife out there who wants to speak to the Healer. But since he refuses to give us a name and is wearing weapons he doesn’t want to part with, we refused entry. Which made him angry. A lot.”

By Sol, Nia thought, they were a Hareem not a charity. “I’ll take care of that, so stand back.”

“Mistress, I don’t recommend going out there alone. He doesn’t seem safe.”

“I’m not a wilting flower and I have you, don’t I? You will take care of physical side of things for me, won’t you?” she asked him, all the while batting her lashes. Which had the intended effect.

The guard stood taller and replied proudly, “Of course, Mistress. You can count on me to keep you safe!”

When Nia patted his chest, he turned red. *Men.*

She opened the door, the guard on her heels, and steeled her spine. Whoever was making trouble out there, she was sure that they could find a solution. Maybe he would be more comfortable dealing with her. In her experience most men found it easier to talk to a ‘harmless’ woman than to a soldier with a sword at the ready.

“May I help you?” she asked the second she appeared on the doorstep, not wanting to give the man a chance to rant at her some more. From what she had heard through the door so far, he seemed to be very creative in his choice of words.

“What the...?” the man cursed but stopped when he saw her. He took a breath and said a bit more civilized, which wasn’t civilized at all, “Yeah, you can help me. Get Serabi down here and tell your guards to leave us be!”

“Why do you need her? What do you think the Healer of a Hareem can do for you?”

He sighed, exasperated, and balled his hands.

Upset much?

“She wasn’t always your Healer. And she can do plenty.” He took a step back and roared, “Serabi! Move your butt down here! Or...!”

“Or what?” the Healer suddenly shouted from her window at the first floor. “For Sol’s sake, stop with the noise! People want to sleep here! And if you can’t behave like a sane person, I let you rot out there – Healer’s oath or not!”

Immediately the man quieted down. Pissing off a Healer was never a good idea. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll behave,” he muttered. “So come down now, would you? I don’t have all day, old hag!”

Nia just stood there rooted to the spot, the same as her guard. She wouldn’t have thought that her friend consorted with outlaws; and rude ones at that. Plus, where was Serabi’s acid retort to his insult? The Healer wasn’t usually one to letting such a thing slide. Nia had to talk to her about that.

Then she gathered her wits and addressed the dark male figure in front of her. “You better mind your manners, outlaw! You only so much as raise your voice in my Healer’s presence and I order your death! My guards are deadly and Serabi is way more valuable to us than a lowlife like you could ever be!”

However, instead of getting the man to rethink his attitude, her threat seemed to amuse him judging by the small smile and his suddenly relaxed stance.

“Oh, please, let them try,” he drawled and looked straight into the eyes of the guard behind her. Who in turn raised his sword and tried to shove Nia behind his massive body.

The man’s smile grew wider.

“Get in, Mistress. We’ll deal with him,” the guard told her anxiously.

Suddenly Serabi appeared and shoved the guard aside.

“You!” she yelled as she pointed her finger at the outlaw. “Stop threatening him! That doesn’t benefit you!”

“I didn’t do anything; I just looked at him. It’s not my fault that he is afraid of his own shadow,” he said and bared his teeth.

Serabi rolled her eyes at him and asked, sighing, "Let's cut the crap. What's so important that you felt the need to disturb my well-earned rest?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I didn't think experimenting was hard work, but what do I know?" He shrugged and raised his hand to stop her as she opened her mouth to tell him where he could stick his attitude. "I didn't come here to bicker with you – as nice as that is." He shuddered. "I've got a message for you."

"And that couldn't wait until tomorrow morning?" Serabi asked.

"No. So?"

That elicited another eye roll from Serabi. She knew from experience the man wouldn't say anything else until they were alone. *Stupid Hashisin.*

"What are you waiting for, then? Come on in," she ordered, disgruntled. And here she had thought living in a female-only environment would keep her safe from the demands of testosterone-driven males of the martial persuasion.

"I'd like to, but..." he said and waved his hand at Nia and the guards who blocked the door.

"I don't think it's wise to let an unknown male into the Harem at night. Especially not a lowlife of uncertain origin. You wouldn't stand a chance if he decided to attack you, Healer," the guard piped up then. Even Nia nodded her agreement with his opinion, although her eyes betrayed a certain curiosity.

"Now I'm hurt. Why would I want to attack her? She's a Healer, for Nyx's sake!" the man said, outraged at the mere thought of hurting a female, and a Healer no less.

"Calm down, he's just doing his job," Serabi told her nightly visitor. Turning to the guard, she informed him, "And he is neither a lowlife nor of uncertain origin. And like he said, he would never attack me; not to mention I would ban him over something like that, which would be his death. He might be bad-tempered but he is certainly not stupid or suicidal. So clear the way, soldier. He is no match for you, anyway."

"Serabi," Nia spoke up then, "no. He is not to set a foot in here. There are too many vulnerables under this roof to let an unknown armed man in, regardless what you say. I can't and won't allow it."

"You won't allow it?" Serabi replied with acid dripping from her voice. "As you wish, Mistress!" She turned to her visitor and said, "Give me five minutes to dress and wait for me outside the gates. We'll talk there!" The Healer turned on her heel and stomped back in the

direction of her quarters. “I won’t allow it,’ my ass. Who does she think she is? The Queen of Ter, or what?” she muttered as she walked away.

One second passed. Two. Three.

“Oh for Sol’s sake!” Nia exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air. “Wait you stubborn witch! I’ll let him in if you take another person with you!”

Serabi stopped and suppressed a smile. That had been way too easy. She regarded Nia pensively and appeared to contemplate the offer. At last she said, “It’s certainly warmer up there. I agree to your terms.” She turned again and went up the stairs.

“Guard, accompany the Healer,” Nia ordered. To the rude man, whose face she had yet to see, the Hareema said, “Mind you, you only so much as raise your voice and my soldier is going to kill you. Got that?”

“Like I said, Mistress, he’s welcome to try!” The man entered the house and followed Serabi, but somehow managed to keep his face hidden from her although the hall was well lit. *Strange*. At least he seemed clean and didn’t smell foul Small mercies. Nia trusted Serabi and since the woman seemed to know the man quite well she was willing to take a chance on him. The Healer would never bring danger to them; that much she was sure of.

When the guard tried to follow, Serabi said from the stairs, “Get a move on girl, would you? I don’t have all night!”

“Sorry?”

“You said one additional person. And since I don’t know the guard well enough yet to know whether he can keep sensitive information to himself, you are the lucky one to accompany me. So *move!*”

“But, but...” Nia sputtered. Since when was the Healer one to exploit loopholes? “Don’t think I’ll forget that stunt, Healer,” she muttered as she made her way up the stairs, after she ordered the guard back to his post. So much for being the one in charge here.

“I would expect no less. But that’s what you get for forcing your will on me, Mistress. Let that be a lesson to you!”

The stranger snickered at the exchange, which got him a murderous glare and a slap upside his head from Serabi. Nia grinned in satisfaction.

“Yeah, I love you too, old hag,” was the man’s only, surprisingly good-natured reply.

At the door to her quarters, Serabi said, “Here we are. This better be worth it, my friend. Or else.”

“Given the sender, it most certainly is,” came his solemn answer.

Chapter 4

“So? What is it?” Serabi asked the man impatiently.

Onyx aka Rayza An-Pyr, the late Fire King’s youngest brother and the best spy in the Hashisins’ Guild, regarded her thoughtfully and then eyed the Mistress of the House. She was gorgeous, but that he had already seen when he had saved her life a few months back. He was slightly amused that she had no idea whom she had let in her house. And if it weren’t so important to talk to Serabi, he would have stayed far away from the beautiful Hareema.

Ever since his brother’s death six months ago, he had been in a deep, dark place and nothing and no one had managed to get him out of there. No one but her. The lowlife who had threatened her had been his target, yes, but the moment he had seen the red-blond beauty with the stunning green eyes, something in him had stirred – interest as he had realized later. It had reminded him that there were other things in this world than blood and death.

Thanks to her, he had slowly found his way back into the world again. He had finally been able to overcome his grief and had put all his efforts into finding the bastard who had murdered his beloved big brother. Oh, and his not-so-much-loved sister-in-law. If she weren’t already dead, he would have found a way to throw her out of the fortress that had been his home. A bloodied and sullied home now. Onyx was sure that Diarsa had been one of the reasons Benali had gone after Maris. By Nyx, he hated that woman. The only downside of her demise was that the children were motherless now.

Anyway, he drew his attention back to the beauty standing to the side, watching the scene before her with a mixture of curiosity and puzzlement. Nia, *Sunbeam*, Serabi had called her. The name fit her, he thought. Gentle, yet powerful. Still, he was wary of the sway she seemed to hold over him.

“Is she trustworthy?” he asked the Healer in her very own, very rare dialect only a few people of a certain region at Ter’s border to Tortaris spoke nowadays.

“Duh, of course she is. But it’s nice to hear my grandmother’s tongue – even if it’s meant as a security measure. Whom did you sweet-talk to teach you? Or rather, who was stupid enough to fall for that act?”

“Trade secret,” he smirked. “Suffice it to say that your cousin sends her best.”

She regarded him, disbelieving, and blinked. “My cousin? How did you?...No, don’t answer; I don’t want to know. Anyway, you said you had a message for me?”

“Here, read that,” he said after producing a sealed letter out from under his robe. Playing messenger wasn’t his usual type of work – what with his being the master spy of Quiliaris’ elite Warrior Guild, but in this case he had made an exception; partly because one of his best friends had asked him to and partly because the careful and ever suspicious Healer was one of his favorite people outside the Guild. And the content of said letter was too important to let a less trained and experienced member of the Hashisins’ Guild carry it.

Serabi broke the seal and read the letter. When she reached the end, she blinked and read it again. And again.

“Do you know what it says?” she asked the Hashisin.

“No, not exactly. Why?”

“You better read this then. This is as much for you as it is for me. Here.”

He did as he was ordered.

“Shit!”

He closed his eyes and a muscle in his cheek started to tick.

After a few moments of silence, he asked, “Are you done with it?”

Serabi just stared at him.

“Very well.”

He took a deep breath, reached deep within his soul where his elemental Fire power dwelled and focused his thoughts on the letter in his hand. He gave the command to burn and a second later the paper went up in flames. His Fire didn’t even leave ashes behind, so furious was the man behind the power.

He turned away from the two women and tried to get himself under control. No wonder his friend had kept that information a secret. He balled his hands hard. Although it hurt, it had been a wise decision to keep him in the dark; he wasn’t sure what he would have done otherwise. He had picked up the letter at the Temple of Balance in the east of Ter where his friend and Captain of the Hashisin Guard, Lightning, had met with the High

Priestess of Wisdom to discuss the uproars in Imbra; it would have been a disaster of epic proportions to go off the deep end in her presence and maybe destroy some of the Gods' property on his way out. He shuddered at the mere thought of such a sacrilege. And where the Hashisins took care of the combat side of things, the Temple of Balance was responsible for conferring with the Gods, reading the signs of the present to see what the future might bring, and advising the four Royal Houses and the Guild; thus it was no surprise that they would have information on certain important matters that was unknown to others. But this? This was yet another proof of the corrupt soul of his brother's murderer.

The Traitor, as Benali, the King's former Consul, was called now, had not only killed his brother and sister-in-law but had traumatized their eight-year-old twins, too. Both children lived now in heavily guarded camp deep in the middle of the desert, where Kara, his second brother, rules as the Regent until the Heir was of age. Nice of Benali to put a bounty on Kara's head. Real nice. If there was one thing that never failed to rile his usually calm, rational brother, then it was a threat to his life. Which had always resulted in Maris and him wiping the floor with the idiot in question. Well, he better took care of the situation, because he wouldn't lose what remained of his family to the Traitor, too. And now he knew exactly where to look for the bastard: Iquis. Ah, arrogance had always been Benali's Achilles heel.

"Why do you of all people need this information if you don't mind the question? Other than the obvious?" he asked the Healer when he had calmed down enough to talk again.

"And the obvious would be?" she calmly asked him back with a raised eyebrow.

"To prevent me from rushing into action without a thought?"

"Not everything is about you, my friend," the Healer replied sharply. "Though this might have played into his decision to send you here. However, this is Lightning's way of killing to birds with one stone as this information is vital for me too since I planned to go to Iquis next week. And getting killed is definitely not part of my to-do list." How the Captain of the Hashisins' Guard had known that, she had no idea.

Silence.

Then Onyx asked, "Care to explain why anyone would be stupid enough to kill a Healer? One from Ter no less, with no connection to the matter?"

Serabi paled. A second later, the air around the woman bristled with power. He seemed to have hit a nerve inadvertently.

At this point Nia decided to join their discussion.

“What have you said to her? If you have hurt her feelings, I’ll kill you myself,” she spit at him.

Protective much? The woman could be a Warrior, he thought, amused.

A second later the woman was in his face and he felt her energy whirling around her. Impressive. She had enormous offensive power for a Muse. But then, even the most defensive power could be used offensively if you knew how. Which she obviously did. Or at least her survival instinct did.

He rolled his eyes, then pushed against her power with his own. “I didn’t do anything.”

He knew his non-answer told her less than nothing, but he wasn’t a man of many words. So what?

“Serabi? What is it? Should I call the guards?” Nia asked the Healer anxiously.

“No, Nia. There’s no need for that. He just triggered a memory, is all.” Serabi sighed. To Onyx, she said, “You need to take care of this situation immediately. He can never lay his hands on him or *them*. Ever.”

Serabi was right, taking Kara out would make the twins vulnerable. Rage rose in him. No way. The children had to be protected. Unable to deal with his aggression at the thought of them hurt, Onyx focused on the woman in front of him. He watched the Healer carefully; what memory was bad enough to faze the unfazeable Serabi? He had seen the woman heal injuries of both body and soul that were beyond imagination in terms of cruelty without even so much as a blink, so what was this all about?

“I know that but I’ve got a feeling that your reasons for that are different from mine?”

She sighed again. “That’s a long story and one that doesn’t concern you.” She waved her hands and went on, “Anyway, when are you heading out?”

“Hm, I was hoping to stay the night. I’ve been riding without pause for days to get this message to you.”

All of a sudden, Serabi had an evil grin on her face. “That’s not my decision to make. You need to seek permission of the Chief Mistress,” she drawled.

Onyx closed his eyes in defeat. Now this was so not going to go over well. *Great*. But he had to try. He was beat. He turned to Nia and assumed a less intimidating stance by deliberately slouching. He pointedly ignored Serabi's smirk.

"Dear Mistress of the House. As the Healer informs me, I need your permission to stay the night here with her?"

Nia was startled at the sudden address and blinked. Now he talked to her? She bristled. She had never met a more infuriating man and never a more impolite one. She was used to being wooed or at least being the center of attention and not a nuisance or a threat due to some yahoo's paranoia. When calm and collected Serabi had lost her control for a minute there, Nia had been scared; but as the Chief Mistress the safety of the Healer was her responsibility. So she had gathered her courage and put herself between him and Serabi. And had been stunned. Damn, the man was *handsome* – for a mugger that was. He had an angular, very male face that went great with his muscular build and his height, but the most stunning thing about him (if a man like him could be called that) were his eyes. They appeared pitch black in the dimmed light of Serabi's chambers, but that couldn't be, could it? Anyway, now wasn't the time for mooning over his appearance; now was the time to get back him for his rudeness.

"Yes, you do." She examined her nails in fake disinterest.

"So?"

"So what?" She looked up at him innocently. With satisfaction she saw the muscle in his otherwise expressionless face tick.

"So do I have your permission?"

She took a second to think it over and said sweetly, "No."

The only reaction to her answer was a slight shift of his stance. That was unexpected. Why exactly would her refusal make him more relaxed? And why was Serabi looking at her so confused? Of course she wouldn't let him stay– he was a stranger; she hadn't even seen his face yet, for Sol's sake.

"What?" she mouthed in her friend's direction. Which only earned her a raised eyebrow.

Nia rolled her eyes and said defensively, “Why in the world would I let a rude, bulky, and *armed* lowlife stay here, with our precious Healer no less?”

Serabi howled with laughter. And said lowlife had an amused smirk on his lips. *What the hell?*

“Oh, that’s rich! A rude, bulky lowlife!” Serabi laughed and wiped the tears of laughter from her face. “By Sol, Nia, he wouldn’t be of much use if that were true!”

“If he is not, then who and what is he? It’s not like he introduced himself like any normal, sane, and polite person would do!”

“Well, I have to concede this point, but since he had never been one of those three things, you might want to cut him some slack.” Serabi laughed again, but then went on to introduce the two of them. “Nia, meet Onyx, Hashisin *extraordinaire* and senior member of the Guild. Onyx, meet Nia, Chief Mistress of the Hareem.” Nia’s shocked face made Serabi chuckle. “I’ll make sure your opinion of him reaches the right people, Nia. They’ll get a laugh out of that one for years to come!”

“Don’t you dare, Healer,” Onyx threatened her – but without heat.

Nia just stood there, dazzled. Again. Seemed to be the favorite state today. *Whatever.* Onyx? Where had she heard that name before, she wondered. Suddenly it hit her: the memory of swishing steel, a falling head, and the low, dark whisper of a shadow rose in her mind. “*You!*” she yelled, outraged

A Warrior, a Hashisin. One of the protectors of Quiliaris. A protector of the innocent and an avenger of the wronged. Nia felt her cheeks heat in shame and surprisingly anger. And she had called him a jerk and a lowlife. But it was his own fault really; if he had told her, she’d never have done that. She hoped. Serabi was right, some slack on his manners was due. And some damage control.

“Oh you, you... Why didn’t you tell me? I’d never have called you a...”

Serabi watched Nia curiously and interrupted her. “You know each other?”

“No,” Onyx said.

“Yes,” Nia replied.

“Huh?” Serabi asked.

“Yes, we do,” Nia stated, while shooting daggers at the Hashisin. “He saved my life a couple of months ago. And refused to tell me his name or anything else, so I couldn’t even properly thank him!”

“That’s not true. I did tell you my name,” the Hashisin pointed out calmly.

“That could have been anyone, you jerk!”

“If what you’re saying is true, then how do you know it was me? And who is the rude one now, lady?”

Infuriating man.

“Well, I would apologize, but...you are a jerk. Saving my life doesn’t change that,” she informed him arrogantly.

The Warrior turned to Serabi and said, “Now I know why she was made Chief Mistress. With a temper like that, she couldn’t have been good for the bottom line!”

Serabi chuckled. “Something like that.”

“Excuse me? I was one of the most sought after Hareemas here!”

“Really,” he drawled. “And here I thought gagging the women wasn’t allowed.”

“You *bastard*,” Nia yelled the second the meaning of his taunt hit her. “Leave my House! Now! And don’t you dare ever coming back!” Her power flared in the room as she called out, “Guards!”

He laughed and said, “I have a feeling I’m no longer welcome here. Farewell, Serabi. May the Gods look favorably on you!”

And then he vanished into thin air.

Nia stared at the spot where the Warrior had stood not a second ago and blinked. *Poof. Vanished. Gone.* The man was simply *gone*.

“What the fuck?” was the only appropriate thing left to say. Even for someone with her excellent breeding.

Serabi looked at her with a mixture of disappointment and curiosity.

“Care to explain what all that was about, Nia? Because you just damaged my reputation.”

“I did no such thing! How could I even?”

“They won’t feel safe to contact me if they think I’m working for a mad shrew with a penchant for blood.”

“Oh come on, I’m neither mad nor fond of blood. And no one is going to think that. It sure didn’t impress the bulky jerk. No need for worry here, Serabi.” Nia stopped and a thoughtful look appeared on her face. “But back to a more important matter: where the hell did he disappear to? He can’t simply be gone, can he?”

Finally, the guards ran into the room. "What is it, Mistress? Do you need help? Is anybody hurt?"

Nia just looked at them with a blank face and shrugged helplessly.

Seeing her friend's lack of...everything, Serabi graciously decided to help her out. "It was nothing. The Mistress and our guest had a slight misunderstanding after which he has left us."

"He did? The gates are closely guarded and no one went in or out the last few minutes!"

"Trust me, he is gone. And no Hashisin is ever seen except when he wants to be."

"*Hashisin*? The lowlife was a Hashisin? That's what you saying?" one of the guards asked in utter disbelief. Mixed in was awe. And fear.

"Well, yes. You can go back to your watch now. Everything's all right."

On their way out, one of the stunned soldiers murmured, "Oh, that's not good. He's so going to kill us in our sleep for how we've treated him..."

"He will do no such thing," Nia called out then, "so stop acting like babies! You are grown men and experienced soldiers, for Sol's sake!"

"Yeah, but he's a *Hashisin*. They are the best for a reason," another one muttered in reply. "Fuck."

After some minutes of leaden silence, Nia asked Serabi again, "So? Where did he go? And how come you are familiar with the Guild? And why do you get messages in the deep of the night by scary Warriors looking like muggers?"

Chapter 5

“First, it was only one Warrior and he might look like a mugger, but he certainly isn’t one. Don’t let yourself be fooled by appearances, girl; thanks to his profession he is a master of disguise. And yes, he is rude, secretive, and stand-offish, but because he needs to be. As for the Guild, that connection goes way back. My brother is a Hashisin as well and as a Healer he can trust, he used and still uses my services quite frequently. Word got around and so others eventually came too. And last, he didn’t vanish or disappear. He just knows how work the shadows to his favor. As he should considering what and who he is.”

Silence.

“So, let me see if I got that right,” Nia said then, “you, who would ream out anyone who so much as raises his voice in your company, excuse the poor behavior of someone who called you an ‘old hag’ to your face. You have a long and rather intimate connection to the Guild that I didn’t know of – you didn’t think this was crucial information since it could bring danger to my door? – and a brother I didn’t know of as well. And here I thought we are friends.” Nia snorted. “And that piece about ‘working the shadows’? No one can use a shadow to disappear in a lightened room.” She stopped. “Oh, wait, I know! He is an Illusionist, right?”

Serabi sighed. “By the Gods, use your brains, girl! He is a Warrior, Nia, remember? And we *are* friends; the only reason I didn’t tell you is because I wanted to keep you safe. He wouldn’t have come here if it hadn’t been necessary. Anyway, I asked a question of my own: what was with the name-calling? And how exactly did he save your life?”

“Well, that wasn’t name-calling; that was the truth. As for the life-saving: I made the mistake of taking a shortcut through the market one night after I visited a vendor and got cornered. The Warrior had been so kind as to take care of the mugger in a very finite way. And before you ask, I never saw him. He just took care of the problem and left.”

“But how did you recognize him then? What is it that you aren’t telling me?”

“Yeah well, I got a bit upset when he refused to tell me his name. But short before home, a whispered ‘Onyx’ reached my ears. That’s all. Like I said, he is infuriating; a true Fire Elementar, that one!” She had figured his Element by his reference to Nyx. No one but a Fire wielder would ever call out to the Goddess of Night and Fire, the mother of all darkness.

“Fire Elementar or not, you are just miffed that he isn’t as easy to manipulate as the smitten idiots you are used to. And that he doesn’t seem as impressed by your beauty,” Serabi waved away her insults.

“What? No! That’s not true. I don’t manipulate people...” Nia sputtered. As for the rest, she wouldn’t even want the Hashisin to be impressed. He might try and pursue her - the horror. At least that was what she told herself.

“If you say so,” the Healer replied, amused. “But that talk can wait for tomorrow, now can’t it? I’m tired and I need my sleep. This incident, amusing as it was, has taken up entirely too much time by now. Thank you for your support, though.”

“You throw me out? Now? But what about all my questions that you seem to refuse to answer?”

“Tomorrow,” Serabi sighed. “Tomorrow I answer what I can. Now I want to sleep.” A pause. “Please.”

“Please?” Nia repeated, disbelieving. “I didn’t think you knew the word. But all right, I’ll wait till tomorrow. And you better have answer for me then!” With a huff, she stalked out of the room, the door closing with a loud bang thanks to her anger.

Serabi waited for a few minutes to make sure Nia wouldn’t come back and then turned around to the man standing quietly at the wall behind her.

“Sorry for that.”

He gave a short nod.

“Where are you hurt then, Onyx?”

At his questioning look she said, “You wouldn’t have come here otherwise.”

He sighed. “It’s not much. Just a little scratch. But it doesn’t stop bleeding.”

“It doesn’t stop bleeding? Since when? And let me be the judge of whether this is scratch!”

Onyx bared his chest and pointed at his injury. Serabi snorted. The Warrior's definition of a 'scratch' varied considerably from her own –surprise, surprise.

“Since when qualifies a stab to your heart as a scratch?”

“Since I'm not dead yet?”

It was as if admitting to being hurt was inversely proportional to their manhood. Serabi shook her head. “Stubborn idiot. Why didn't you say you needed help before?”

She gripped his black tunic to put it out of the way, but immediately drew her hand back in disgust. She looked at her scarlet fingers. “*What the hell, Onyx?*” She went on to examine his wound and her anger grew with every second. “I should refuse to help you and let you bleed to death, you moron! Why should I save your life again and again when you clearly have no regard for it?” she exclaimed, enraged.

“Lower your voice, will you? No need to alarm the guards. I've had worse injuries over the years; it's part of the job.” He shrugged. “And I do value my life, Healer. Which is why the one who tried to kill me is now standing before the Gods awaiting his judgment.” Satisfaction brightened his eyes.

“You do know that every life you end takes its toll? You need to watch your balance carefully, my friend,” she reminded him gently. Like every Hashisin he had to fight the evil in him to keep it from overtaking his soul and eradicate all goodness. And Onyx was rapidly approaching the point of no return. Ever since his brother's death, the darkness had grown, unchallenged.

“Yeah, I know. Everything's fine. He was an assignment.” He winced as the healer began to clean the bleeding wound with one of her awful potions that she seemed to carry with her everywhere she went. “May I ask you a question or two while you are stitching me up, Serabi?”

“Ask all you want. But don't expect an answer,” came the gruff reply.

“Gracious as always.” He winced again as she probed his wound, digging her finger into it. To distract him from the pain, he focused on his questions. “Why did you let me stay? If she finds out, you might lose all you have worked for so hard.”

“I love that woman, I really do. But some things are simply more important than friendship. My loyalty has always been to those in need first – no matter what.”

“Good to know. Still, you realize I wouldn't have come if it hadn't been important? I know you like to keep your day-to-day life separate from matters of the Guild.”

“Which is the reason I disregarded her orders and am stitching you up. Was that all you wanted to know?”

“No, I’ve got one last question for you, Healer: what did the message remind you of that you almost lost it?”

Serabi felt her power rise again. Not many knew that her healing ability could as easily be used for taking a life as for saving one. She wasn’t a violent person, but if she ever were to kill someone then it would be Benali the Traitor. Not for the regicide though; she was an Earth Elementar and the Fire royals were of no importance to her. However, that man was a monster who preyed on the weaker ones and left them battered and broken and *dead*. She had seen the results of his works up close and they still gave her nightmares. Her baby sister had been one of his victims; Serabi had only been able to identify the heap of flesh as her sister because of a distinctive birthmark that had miraculously remained intact. She hadn’t known his name then, but she had found out by following the trail of bodies all over the country until finally ending up in Pyras. There she had discovered who he was – and had had to resign herself to the fact that she had no chance to bring him down. No one would have believed the King’s most trusted advisor, the Consul, capable of such cruelties. But the worst was that he had developed a taste for younger flesh in the end. The only good thing that had come from his enforced hiding after the regicide was that he didn’t have time to pursue this little ‘pastime’ of his.

“Please, tell me. Whatever it is, I promise I will stay calm.”

Knowing that he was Idris – a night born Child of Nyx, the Goddess of Fire and Night, which was why he was able to become one with the shadows rather than merely hiding in them – she knew what it took for him to offer such a vow. None of the Shadow children ever took one lightly and they always kept their promises. Always.

“All right.” She exhaled deeply and tried to detach herself from the story as much as possible. It was the only way for her not hurt all humans within two miles with her fury. Her power was considerable; some even said that she was one of the strongest Healers of her generation. Which was what got her the trust of the Guild; besides her family ties with one of their own, that was.

“About twenty-five years ago, I was just of age, I came home one day after training and found my whole family in an uproar. My baby sister, she had been about nineteen then, hadn’t come home from her lessons and no one had seen her since she had left the Erudite’s

house. My brother and father searched for her for days, but to no avail. After a week they eventually gave up, all hope lost. Three days later, my mentor and I got called to the outskirts of our town; someone had found a body. They couldn't really say whether it was an animal or a human, or even if it was still alive. When we arrived..." Serabi swallowed hard and closed her eyes in an attempt to blind out the picture of her sister's broken, crumpled body lying in the high grass of a meadow. When she heard Onyx's suppressed groan of pain, she looked up and realized that she had dug her fingers in his wound. Deep. Her cheeks heated, but then it was his own fault. Asking her something like that while she was working on a wound hadn't been his smartest move.

"Sorry," she muttered. "Anyway, eventually I recognized my little sister. She had a special birthmark that somehow survived the ministrations of whoever had beaten her into nothing but a heap of meat. The picture of my vibrant little sister, who had always been so full of life, reduced to, to...*this*, never left me. And neither did the image leave my brother, who had insisted on sitting in on the examination of her corpse. From the wounds that we found once the black and blue was gone, we realized that she had been whipped half to death; moreover, she had burn marks all over. Of the elemental kind. You know, this was one of the reasons my brother went to the tryouts in the first place. And why he trained like a madmen. All in order to keep those he loved safe." By Sol, she felt with her brother. If it had been hard on her since couldn't save her sister's life, it must have been brutal for her Warrior brother, whose main instinct was to keep those he loved safe.

"We waited until we both had finished our respective apprenticeships and then we began to search. Everywhere we went, we asked and looked for similar murders as we have come to the conclusion that our sister couldn't have been the first and certainly not the last victim. And we've been right. For quite some time, we followed the 'Trail of Broken Spirits' as we called it; when my brother was summoned back to Aliaenar and do his duty for Quiliaris, I went on alone. I couldn't just let it go, I couldn't. A couple of years ago, I eventually ended up in Pyras."

"In Pyras? No, that can't be," Onyx interrupted her, aghast. "I would have known if there had been women being abducted and left to die on a regular basis."

"Really? Even if they were Esendri or servants? I don't think so."

Onyx blinked. "I don't care about status or rank; you know that. But I have to admit that the vulnerables weren't the focus of my work then. Anyway, I think I'd have heard at least rumors about something like this."

"Not necessarily, no. Why would anyone bother *you* with some dead Esendri? Especially in Pyr." The Fire people's reverence of strength and power left the Esendri, the Vulnerables, in a state of perpetual neglect; a reason of many why Serabi's opinion of the Fire Elementars was so very low.

"You have a point there. But I don't think that's the end of your story, is it?"

"No, it's not. After weeks of covertly asking around, I finally got a name. 'The Tamer' he was called on the streets. Apparently he had a whip made of Fire. Rather apt, don't you think?"

Onyx paled. He *had* heard rumors about 'The Tamer' – but he had never made the connection. What was even worse was that he had known about this certain Talent of Benali, had actually seen it in action on several occasions. But he had written it off as one of the man's brilliant *illusions*. The man was said to be the best Illusionist in all of Quiliaris, which was why no one had seen his true face until it had been too late and the world had changed. But still, Onyx had a hard time believing Serabi's story. Benali couldn't be that depraved, could he?

"Goddess, no! When and how did you find out who he was?"

"Somehow I ended up healing a soldier with whip marks. He had been punished for not following an order to the dot." She shuddered at the memory. "He told me when I sedated him." At Onyx's questioning stare, she shrugged. "It loosens the tongue of some people. Anyway..."

"Why didn't you tell someone?"

"Oh, I tried. But nobody believed me. Punishing a soldier is something entirely different from torturing someone beyond recognition. Hardly surprising though under the circumstances, was it?"

"No, not really," Onyx said quietly.

"And I had nothing to prove my accusation. The whip marks weren't conclusive enough. Not in Pyras. As I was told, any mediocre illusionist Elementar can create such a whip."

"Which is true. What convinced you of his guilt then?"

“Simple. A whip is easy enough to create; the precision with which that one was wielded isn’t. It takes a certain strength of power and will, both not found in anyone at mid-level. And the malice and arrogance that is needed to commit such horrors narrowed the field further. Most of you Fire people leave the Esendri alone. They are no threat to anyone and they are protected by the code; mostly, that is. Only someone with a corrupt heart would ever do something like that – and someone who doesn’t want to bring any attention to his depravity.”

“Your reasoning is sound, Healer,” Onyx said brusquely. Serabi was flattered. From Onyx this was as close to a compliment as she would ever get. Except for the Chairman of the Council, she had never encountered a less encouraging man. Still, he was a good man at heart and his word was golden.

“But you didn’t find any hard proof or someone to confirm your story? A witness of sorts?”

“No. Not a one. No one had ever seen his face. And those who he had come into contact with, however brief, were scared to death of him. They feared his retaliation. And rightly so.”

“But you seem so sure. What *did* you find then?” he asked her, suspicious. Then his eyes widened. “Maybe a survivor?”

So like him to explore all possible options, Serabi thought in defeat. So like him to ask the one question she really, really didn’t want to answer. This memory was even worse than the one of her sister, who could rest in peace now at least. Maybe Onyx would take her silence as a ‘no’? Something in her face must have clued in the ever observant Hashisin, though. But then, there was a reason he was the current spymaster of the Guild.

“You did? You really did find a survivor? *Who*? And why didn’t that person tell her story? It could have prevented the... Where is she now?”

“Stop it!” she yelled. “Just *stop*.” She held up her hand and wiped her face with the other hand to hide her misery.