



“It’s subtle,” he said, “but I get the sense I’ve upset you.” His midnight eyes were bright and wild with energy from his fighting, his face flushed, his breath still quick. He was close enough to touch, and she clasped her hands in front of her. That was the extent of her self-control, and her gaze slid from his fierce expression to his bared torso. Naime had never been so close to a man who wasn’t fully clothed, outside of Ihsan while he was recovering from his burns.

She had seen men without their caftans, in the fields, at the docks. But this was wholly different. He was different. A warrior, attested to by the hash-work of scars on his golden skin. Naime wondered at them, a thin one across his chest, a thicker, short line over his ribs, and a long, curved one that disappeared into his salvar. The entire expanse of her skin felt as if it were on fire.

Naime cut her gaze away from his body and caught sight of the Viziers, huddled just outside the walkway that opened into the main courtyard. They were watching the two of them together, expressions pinched with suspicion.

“Do you have clothes?” Naime said, appalled that she’d been so preoccupied ogling him that she hadn’t considered the fact she was lurking in an archway with a half-naked man.

“I am wearing clothes,” he said. Her gaze whipped to his, and her shame deepened to see the pleased expression on his face. Of course he was aware of her attention, she had been as obvious in her staring as her handmaids had.

“More clothes.” Naime tried not to sound desperate, but the weak timbre of her voice gave her away.

“I do.” He reached up to swipe a hand across the back of his neck. A shower of sand fell to the stone floor between them and they both peered down.

“In the future, wear them. And refrain from such inappropriate displays.” Naime managed to find some composure once she wasn’t looking at him.

“What exactly do you consider an inappropriate display, Sultana?” He almost laughed, but it came out as an impatient exhale instead.

“Tamar is a place of restraint and decorum, Agassi. You are more than welcome to spar with the guardsmen as long as Commander Ayan oversees it”—she pointed to Bashir—“and I would expect that you would not humiliate yourself by doing so half-clothed again. Certainly not in front of the Viziers. It will do you no favors in the Council Hall.”

“Humiliate myself,” the Agassi said, his voice flat with disbelief.

“It is offensive.” Naime gestured at him in a lame attempt to indicate his half-clothed state, then at the lingering Viziers.

“Only in a place full of weak-bodied, self-important pacifists would sword practice count as humiliating. You find me offensive,” he said, “fine. There are few things I find more tiresome than someone who puts too much stock in pageantry and pretense. And you worship at the altar of pretense.”