

Amie O'Brien

*The Merchant's Pearl*

His face hadn't hardened at all these last few years. It still looked soft. His eyes seemed a deeper hazel than before, a soft chocolate brown rather than the medium color they had been when we were children. I studied them along with his long, thick, black lashes.

He didn't have the lengthy beard either, the kind captured in oil paintings in certain rooms of the palace—the kind that made me cringe. Instead, his was a refined shadow that any man could grow in two or three days' time. And then there was that olive skin, not as rich as his father's, but a perfect match to his half-brother, Yusuf. Reflecting on the conduct of both, I had to smile. Suri was right. He seemed so much more thoughtful and less showy than Yusuf.

He must have felt me watching him or maybe it was the smile. He turned to look at me.

"I'm afraid I have built too good of a fire. Would you like to see the view from the window as the flames settle down a bit?"

"Yes, Sire."

He didn't offer me a hand up, just stood in a gentleman like manner as I rose to go before him to the twin towering windows.

"Allow me," he said, reaching over me. He gently pulled back the velvet drapes using a long cord. "Everything about these windows is such a nuisance. I guess we don't always feel very secure as a family. We like our unwanted ones to arrive and retreat announced, so the windows have very little play and are filled with squeaks."

"Seems about right," I mumbled.

He quickly glanced up at me.

"I mean, I think I would wish it that way too, if I were the Sultan."

He said nothing, just looked back to the window, but I noticed a smug smile.

He gestured to the Bosphorus. In awe, I placed a hand on the cool pane of glass. The water looked as if it were practically below our feet. There was only a small strip of land between the palace, white iron gate, and the low, concrete sea wall. If anyone were in a boat coming from the opposite direction, I would swear it would have to look like a floating castle to their naked eye.

"It's unbelievable." I let out a little sigh.

"Have you not ever seen it before?"

“No. How could I? We came in by carriage.”

“Yes. I guess you wouldn’t have seen it so close like this. The land side, that’s where the Forbidden Gates are and where everyone like you enters.” He cleared his throat. “Sorry, what I meant to say was...that’s where your dormitory lies. Everyone else would enter by the Shore Gate, or perhaps, the Treasury Gate—not the Harem Gate.”

“How do you sleep at night with such a vision right outside your window?” I asked, peering out at the vast, still waters that gently licked up against the smooth wall. “The reflection of the torch lamps, it’s like the water itself is on fire.”

“I manage. I suppose after enough years even this becomes commonplace.”

“Well, that is a great misfortune, Sire. It is truly the loveliest sight my eyes have ever beheld. And I’m afraid I don’t give credit to much.”

“In that case, you will even be in more rapture when you hear it,” he said, smiling.

The next thing I knew he was standing barefoot on the chaise and reaching for the center locks on the second window. With great might, he could only manage to lift the window by a few inches. A medley of evening sounds waft in—the waves, the gulls, some distant ships’ sails rippling in the breeze.

“Just keep your head on this side of the window,” he warned. “The loaded springs in these things are like twenty years old. If one gave out, I’m afraid you’d lose your head faster than you could say ‘Henry the VIII.’”

“Point taken,” I said with a grin. “Though I do not believe it would likely fit.”

“Your fingers then.”

I was astonished that he knew so much of the Western world, in particular, mine. I continued staring out at the sea and the meticulous grounds just below us, as he sat on the chaise beside me, one arm supporting the base of the window as a precaution.

“You’ll have a view of your own now,” he said. “Well, you and my other two consorts shall share one. But it won’t be in your bedroom unfortunately. That will still be of the garden.”

“You mean a parlor then?”

“Yes. It should look out to the sea. Not like this, but...partially. My wives have a view of the sea. It requires only minor squinting,” he teased.

“Thank you, Sire.” I smiled and nodded without looking over.

It was strange to think about how in just an hour or so I had climbed that invisible ladder,

several rungs, at least—the one that separated the extraordinary girls from the ordinary. I never wanted to make the ascent, especially, not this way. I felt the only safe way up it at all would have been by accompanying his younger sister to wherever she should have me.

It remained quiet until I broke the silence.

“Thank you.”

“For what?” he replied, glancing back at me.

“For this, for small talk and privacy—for making it easier than it needed to be. It’s unexpected,” I said, looking out at the channel that led to miles of ocean before me. “You stopped the trembling. That’s all.”

Our eyes met briefly and his lips parted, like he might say something, but then he hesitated.

“What?” I said, pulling myself away from the window.

“Nothing. I just...wish I could have stopped it the first time.”

“What first time?” I said, immediately staring back at the bay, pretending to be unaware of meeting him before.

“When you came to me that time at my piano.”

I swallowed a sizeable knot in my throat. I didn’t offer a word though. Everything was silent but for the sea.

After a moment, an unwanted tear began to slip down my cheek and subsequently drip onto my hand. I didn’t bother to wipe it away. I just brought my chin to rest on the window frame and pretended it wasn’t there—that he wasn’t there either. I was usually good at pretending people away.

He cleared his throat. “I hadn’t ever been touched like that before, you know? You were the first. If they didn’t tell you.”

I listened intently, but my anxiety was back and rising quickly. Without blinking, I prayerfully wished he would drop the wretched subject and move on.

“And...I want you to know that I didn’t expect anything like that when you came in the room that day. I’m not expecting it tonight either. Please, you must know that. I just...I just remember thinking you looked so beautiful—like tonight. It had been a long time since I had seen you.”

“You saw me before that day?” I asked with a tone of surprise, once again acting as if I wasn’t aware of him from my youth.

“You know that I did. Do you pretend to forget everyone you serve, or is it just me?” He tried

to cover up being a little agitated by accompanying the question with a laugh.

“I carried coffee and poured it, Sire. I wasn’t spending time around anyone for very long.”

“So you do remember.” He gave me a crooked smile. “And to own up, I made sure I was around you as often as possible. You sort of made an impression on me, early on.”

“You were twelve. The African maids probably made an impression on you.”

He laughed. “Maybe so, but not nearly as strong.” He allowed his words to linger for a moment. “In all seriousness though, when you disappeared, it grieved me. I wondered if I would ever see you again.”

I stroked away the few strands of hair that had glued themselves to my cheek. He tilted his head softly and tried to touch my hand, beckoning me to acknowledge him, but I wouldn’t.

“You know, I asked my mother what happened to you. She said, ‘The palace is very big. There are many jobs for a girl like Leila to do.’ When I asked her to inquire of my grandmother, she said perhaps you were selected for the palace school and, I should just stop asking so many questions.”

“In your mother’s defense, I was at school.”

“Yes, but apparently they weren’t teaching you the same selections we were taught.”

With that last comment a deep shudder passed through me. “No, we probably got more practical hands-on experiences than any of you.”

“Leila, when you came in that day and asked me if you could sit beside me on the piano stool, it was like a gift—to me, at least. My father had given me what I most wanted. Unknowingly, no doubt, but still, what I wanted.”

He waited for me to respond. I suppose he expected me to throw myself at him, but I didn’t.

“When we were children,” he continued. “I always wanted to talk to you, but I was too afraid that I wasn’t supposed to. And, that day, I honestly thought you were going to play something, or maybe you were there to sit and listen. I didn’t think they’d make you...”

“Please stop,” I begged him. “I remember. I do. You don’t have to rehearse such details.”

“But I do. You were trembling, worse than tonight. And, I remember *exactly* what you said. ‘Your playing brings me such great enjoyment, perhaps you have a few minutes to sit back that I might perform something pleasing for you?’” He paused. “At that moment I slid over to give you all the keys of the piano. I was eager to be near you, Leila. Very,” he said. “But you closed the lid and got on your knees before me...and you...” He paused again. “I could see tears running

down your face. They leaked out when you closed your eyes. It was clear you didn't want to be there. You didn't even want to look at me. I knew then, you had to hate me. You looked very sick as you left my room."

"I hated myself, Sire. I hated my governess. I hated the Valide...the eunuch. There's no one that I didn't hate. You probably shouldn't take it so personal." I shrugged. "You just happened to be the one that they picked me for."

"I should have stopped you. I should have told you—no, I should have told them that they couldn't do that to you. It wasn't right, forcing you—forcing me to degrade you like that."

"Were you forced?" I asked, probing for an answer I already knew.

"I cannot say that I didn't want it." He swallowed hard, then looked down and shifted his ring from side to side. "You'd know that to be false. But...I didn't want it under those circumstances." He looked back up.

"It probably wouldn't have made any difference."

"It would've. My father was giving you to me. Had I been able to control things—to at least slow down what I was feeling—perhaps you wouldn't have been so disgusted by me. Maybe you could have stayed on permanently."

"You were only responding as any man would. And your father, he didn't select me. He never even once laid eyes on me before that day. He's only been in the same room with me on a handful of occasions, and even then, he paid me no mind. Not until tonight—when he contemplated me for himself," I said, looking sideways. "It was the Head Eunuch. Your father made the gesture and he picked me for you that day."