

Winds of Change

(*Chapters 1 & 2 Teaser)

Book Two of
The Merchant's Pearl Saga

by
Amie O'Brien

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Chapter One

Dolmabahce Palace, Istanbul

December 1875

"You know, as much as you say that you love to sleep with me"—Emre pressed his lips to the top of my head—"it seems, as of late . . . you rarely sleep when you are with me."

"I love spending my nights with you."

"But you can't actually sleep?"

"The moon is incredibly bright tonight."

"Yes, and last night you said there was a bitter chill in the room."

"Because there was." I pulled the blanket a little closer to my chin.

"Leila, I can stack an entire tree's worth of wood in that corner and I could have Kamile add another layer of winter drapes, but neither would put your mind at ease. You have to stop."

"Stop?"

"Worrying about us." He sighed. "Waiting for something to happen."

"Emre . . ." I touched his hand, drawing him to my side on the chaise. "I'm not looking out the window, hoping someone will come to snatch your father away. I'm grateful your father is still here and that he is safe—that *you* are safe."

"I know you are."

"It's just . . ."

"What?"

"Does it seem right to you, the quiet? With all of the rumors, all of the despair, and the warnings in the newspapers that Robinson has brought to you . . ." I exhaled. "How are we still here?"

"I don't know."

"I'm awake because the palace is eerily quiet, I can't control my thoughts. Not even when I'm with you."

"I know. I often feel the same way during my prayers."

"Do you think it's real? Could they be giving your father a second chance?"

"No. It seems impossible that they would. Just yesterday, Robinson likened it to the calm

before a storm. But Leila, it could be that everything is exactly as it seems. If it's Allah's will for my father to continue his reign, there is no man, no country, who can stand against him."

I tucked my hand under his arm and pressed my face snugly against his chest. It was silent for a few minutes.

"I know you dream of your freedom," he said. "You're fearful it's slipping away."

"Our freedom."

"Yes, our freedom." His fingers filtered through my hair.

"You can't lose something you never had, Emre."

"But you can lose hope."

I lifted my face from his chest. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. "I want to be with you. I would *prefer* to be outside of this palace and it feels like the strongest chance we have to stay together would be to . . ."

"Say it."

"To be anywhere but here."

He paused, but there was no anger in him. He knew it was the truth. He had spoken the words himself many times. Like when he shared with me that he had made a secret deal with his oldest cousin, the Crown Prince, Murad.

He had promised Murad that if his father, Sultan 'Aziz, should be forced to step down, he would surrender his entitlements as prince and any future claim to the throne. Emre would sign away any chance to become leader of the Ottoman Empire. Thanks to his father, a now bankrupt Ottoman Empire.

He would walk away from the palace, leaving his family, his two wives, his children, his twin brother, his concubines—everyone, except me. All so he could enter the world with me, free from any constraints of the palace or his family.

"Does it make me any less horrible that half of my inability to sleep is because I am burdened with guilt?" I asked him.

"You aren't horrible. You are everything I need."

"Still. . ." I shook my head and let out a deep breath.

"It's been eight weeks, Leila. Believe me, I have had many moments to think about it. I would make that same promise to him right now, should Murad seek confirmation from me."

"Thank you."

"I know you're scared. So am I. But I have to believe that everything that's happening to us is for a purpose. We just have to wait it out." He tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear.

"Alright."

I moved forward and kissed him. Then I stretched toward the window and closed the velvet drapes. Snuggling back into him, I pulled the blanket so that it covered us both. "I love you."

"I love you, too," he said, going in for a deeper kiss.

"Emre, while the palace is asleep, would you be willing to dream aloud with me? I mean, tell me what you think it will be like?"

"America?"

"Yes."

"You do realize that I, myself, have never been?"

"Of course. But you read books and you're an artist, paint me something in words. A masterpiece."

He smiled, his brown eyes taking me in.

"I'm serious," I whispered. "It will help me fall asleep."

"Which is precisely why we should kiss instead." His hand slipped between my thighs.

"So . . ." I ignored him, concentrating instead on stroking my fingers along his soft yet prickly jawline. "Will our home be situated on a hill or tucked away in a valley?"

He whispered smoothly in my ear, "I envision a towering sea cliff. But no palace. More of a humble abode—perhaps a fraction of my sister's villa."

"Hmm." I smiled at the thought. "We can walk the winding path down to the ocean, for once in our lives touch the sea foam as often as we wish."

"That's right. No more iron sea gates."

"And you can catch us fish that I can cook for dinner."

"You can catch the fish." He lifted my hand and seductively kissed my fingertips.

"Hardly."

"You know, on second thought, Leila, we may be tired of staring at the sea after such a long voyage. Reaching America will take months."

"Perhaps you should build us a cozy cottage in the mountains then? Some place with more anonymity, at least in the beginning."

"Oh, I'm building houses now?" He glanced down at his free hand.

"Yes, and I'll draw the water for us. I promise you, you'll have never had a finer Turkish tea."

"American-Turkish tea," he said, lacking enthusiasm.

"And I desire a fireplace, like this one, within mere steps of our bed. Perhaps even one on each side, so you'll stop stealing all of the covers at night."

"Oh you desire that, do you?"

"I do."

"But do you want to know something, Leila?"

"What?"

"For all of your desires, and there are many . . ."

"Yes?" I coaxed him, wrapping my leg around his a little more tightly.

"There's a certain piece of furniture I'll be forbidding you to have."

"You forbid me?" I said slowly.

"Absolutely. It's uncomfortable and you constantly subject me to it, even as we speak."

The grim realization sank in. "Our chaise? Emre, you can't . . ."

"Why not? We have a perfectly good bed." He tore the blanket off of us.

"Emre!" Struck by the December cold, I hopped over him and ran to submerge myself in his bed. He grabbed my lower leg before I could reach the top of the mattress, securing me in his grip while tossing the quilt to the other side.

"It's freezing!" I playfully scolded him. "You had better give me those covers now."

"But I prefer to see you." He rolled my body his way.

"And I prefer sleeping in clothes, but that doesn't happen here, now does it?"

"True. Tell me, Leila, what *is* one blanket worth to you?"

"Oh, you are vexing me now." I tried to keep my face fierce. "You picked the wrong hour and the wrong lady to play games with, Sire."

"We shall see." He smiled. But with that, he reached for the quilt again, snapping it so that it created a warm dome over us.

We remained in bed the following morning, even dismissing Kamile from her chores, with the exception of adding a few more logs to the fire.

My stomach had caused me to wake a handful of times, but I wouldn't surrender. I knew how much Emre loved to sleep in.

When Robinson finally entered, I was surprised that he didn't step in quietly. Instead the door swung open.

"Your Highness, pardon my intrusion, but you have a guest. It's imperative that you rise and make yourself ready to receive her at once."

"Receive *her*?" Emre asked, meeting my gaze.

"Yes, *her*," a terse voice replied. One that I could never forget.

"Princess Mother." I bolted upright, holding the covers firmly to my chest while Emre reached for his robe.

"Good afternoon," she replied, walking through his room. "Perhaps with a little addition of sunlight"—she quickly thrust the drapes open—"I might know which of my grandson's beauties I have the pleasure of speaking to."

"It's Leila, Your Majesty," Emre spoke up before I had the chance. He followed her over to the second window, adjusting the drapes himself. "She'll be leaving so we can have our privacy. Thank you, Leila," he said without turning to me. I could hear the warning in his voice.

When it came to his grandmother—Sultan Aziz's mother, Pertevniyal—it was important to reroute her attention away from me. But in this case, it was difficult to do. Although she was impeccably dressed, I was still without clothes, trapped under his bed covers.

I glanced up at Robinson and given that he immediately looked down, I knew what I had to do. I had to adopt the position assigned to me—a palace concubine.

I carefully dismissed Emre's covers and walked a few steps towards the end of his bed where my silky gown still lay on his floor. I stepped into it, pulling the thin straps over my shoulders.

"It's a pity you had to part with the blonde, Aster," Princess Mother said without showing any feeling toward me. "She was far more voluptuous."

"Only unfortunate for her." Emre's frustration was audible. "I've experienced nothing but

peace since her departure. You can check the log book. Dariya and Leila get along exceptionally well.”

“Two usually do. But my how things change in the spring when a new addition arrives,” she mused.

I placed my slippers on my feet while trying not to look at Emre. I knew that’s what she wanted, to gauge my fear. Instead, with pressed lips, I saw myself to the door. After I had passed through it, Robinson made sure it was closed.

“You live a languid life, Emre,” Princess Mother’s firm voice carried through the door. “I have to say I’m a little surprised. I suspected as much from your younger brother at this hour, but you . . . you, I didn’t take for indolent.”

“It was one morning out of perhaps a hundred, Grandmother. I assure you, none of my few duties have ever been shirked.”

“Well, certainly not your privileges.”

I had to keep walking. I knew it would cost me far more sleepless nights if I continued to listen in. Besides, I wasn’t the only one in the hallway. A pair of eunuchs were not too far ahead of me, guarding the entrance to the stairway. Most likely, they were mentally sketching every inch of my attire or lack of.

Once I reached my hallway I realized that it was empty, save a few young girls wheeling the leftover food to the bigger, off-site kitchen. At that point, it would be dispatched to the various dormitories where the servants were housed.

“May I?” I walked alongside one of the girls whose cart was filled with pastries and fruit.

“Of course, Miss Leila.” She stopped and gestured that I take anything I wished.

“Just an apple.” I smiled at her.

“Are you sure? I have plates. You are more than welcome to—”

“Positive. This should tide me over just fine. Plus, it’s less mess to clean up. Thank you though.”

“You are welcome, Miss.” She curtsied and was on her way. I stood there, watching her push her cart past door after door. She was still innocent, her ash blonde hair laying free of any braids, ribbons, or pearls. She was a few years away from being introduced to the cares that hung over the shoulders of each of us, those whose beds were along the other side of the wall.

Our room was hot, and the air was thick as I entered.

"Oh, Dariya. You and that blazing hot brazier," I mumbled to myself between coughs. "At some point, you'd think you'd learn."

I located the cast iron door stop and placed it so the door was affixed, fully ajar. Then I went back into the hall, to eat my apple where I could breathe.

About five bites into it, I spotted Dariya and she spotted me.

"Leila, you are letting out all of our heat!" Dariya quickened her pace to our room.

"What else would you have me do?" I rose from the floor. "You realize the smoke only has two places it can go, pour out the door or pour into our lungs?"

"Leila, not everyone has the blessing of a chimney and fireplace. We have to make do."

"True, but making do could mean tolerating it a tad bit cooler, not shaving twenty years off of our lives," I pleaded with a smile.

"Compromise, Leila. Learn to compromise." She corrected the door so it was just wide enough for a person to slip through.

"I always compromise."

"You never compromise." She gave me a smart look.

"How was breakfast?"

"It was good, but then again, so was lunch."

"Oh, right."

"How late did the two of you stay up last night? Or were you off painting again?"

"No. Only guilty of too much sleep."

She sat on her bed and pulled off her indoor slippers, wisps of toffee-colored hair fell into her face.

"He is paying for it now though," I offered. "His grandmother is probably still reaming him as we speak. She already thoroughly mocked me."

"Valide Pertevniyal surprised him with you there?"

"Yes. Fully bare, too. Well," I smirked. "We were fully bare. Thankfully, she was clothed."

"It could have been worse. You could have been dining with him."

"I know. On any given day that's the picture she would have seen."

"Perhaps you should come back here the next few mornings, have breakfast with me instead. You never know if she might reappear."

"Where I grew up, there was nothing immoral about dining with a man."

"Maybe so, but here, it's a matter of his ranking and your weaker station. In her eyes, the two should never mix."

"Except when it's a more desirable 'mixture.'"

"Leila, you know the rules. You also know Emre doesn't feel that way and, of course, he will dine with you again. But you might want to suggest protective measures for now. At least, for a week. Princess Mother is too on edge as of late. In her mind, everyone is a potential challenge to her, even me. And let's be honest, she has never looked fondly on you."

"I'm sure Emre will make accommodations if they are needed."

"No, he won't. He'll fear hurting your feelings which is precisely why you should make it easy on him and make the concessions yourself."

I sat down on her bed. "Ridiculous customs." I chewed on my lip.

She rubbed my knee. "If it makes it any easier, I'm going to be more careful regarding my time with him, too. She'd definitely wonder why Emre's head eunuch has been included in our visitations."

"No. Knowing her, she'd find that more forgivable."

"Oh, Leila, you know what you need?"

"Fresh air? Freedom? Peace and quiet? To not have a new concubine added in the spring?"

"Chocolate. I'm a firm believer that dark chocolate can cure any spell of bitterness."

"In that case, perhaps we should send Robinson off to purchase a few dozen cases for the Valide."

"Shhh." She put her finger to my lips, smiling while looking to our door. She crept off the bed, peeked down the hall, and then made her way over to her chest of drawers. Casting a series of undergarments to the side, she pulled out a box, wrapped in muslin cloth. "Ahh, yes." She smiled.

I perked up too, a little. I sat in a fashion where, with legs tucked beneath me, we could center her treasure on the bed.

She lifted the cover. "Enough of these and you might not remember Emre's name altogether."

"Enough? Dariya, you are already down to two rows. How many have you had per day? I

just had Robinson deliver these to you last week.”

“Robinson accounts for nearly this entire row.” She giggled. “I suggested he partake in some in Emre’s room that first night. The three of us were chatting and, I swear, every ten minutes his fingers were patrolling this box. I don’t believe he even realized the damage he had done. Not until Emre relocated the box to his own lap. He probably saw the panic in my eyes.”

“Poor Robinson. I’ll have to send him an additional little purse to purchase a box for himself.”

“Leila, I imagine Robinson has a far greater stipend than the two of us combined.”

“Likely, but it appears I’m the only one in this palace who’s ever practiced the art of frugality.”

I unwrapped the velvety confection and sniffed it once before taking a small bite. “Oh, that is heavenly.”

“Aren’t they though?” She sought me another piece, her finger strumming over the row. “Take this one next. It’s by far the finest.”

“Thank you.” I placed it in the lap of my dress while I made sure she could locate another one like it for herself.

“In my defense,” she continued, “it never made any sense to hold onto my stipend. I mean, it’s not like we could ever leave the palace. Everything belonging to Sultan ‘Aziz will be transferred to his successor. Even us. A girl is lucky to stay alive, let alone keep her jewels and fine dresses. In every way, it’s a borrowed life.”

“Except for the chocolate.” I smiled while chewing.

“True.”

“Dariya, what did the three of you discuss in Emre’s room? Has Robinson come back with any new reports?”

“Political reports? I’m afraid not. At least, he didn’t disclose them in my presence.”

“It’s odd to me that the empire declared bankruptcy and yet, aside from freezing our allowances, we’ve been told to carry on as before. You would think they’d be confiscating half of our rooms, selling off all of our jewelry.”

“I know, although I must say, I’m glad to still have mine in my cupboard.” She grinned with a hint of guilt.

”I did notice you keep them tucked away now. They’re no longer piling up in your silver

tray.”

“I’ll surrender them, should that grave day ever come. But I’ll not happily bring them to their attention.”

“They’ll probably suspect me to be hiding mine. I barely have anything to return.”

“True. But there is that one,” she warned, pointing to the single pearl and delicate chain suspended from my neck—the necklace Emre had gifted me as an emblem of his faithfulness.

“Oh, this one I shall hide. No doubt.”

She shook her head at me. “In that case, perhaps I should lend you some of mine so you’re slightly believable.”

I leaned in close. “That would be a kindness worthy of more chocolate.”

“I’m not trying to win chocolate. I’m trying to keep you from losing your head.”

“So . . . getting back to the original subject,” I leaned back out, “what do you discuss in there?”

She sighed but eventually caved. “Well it’s not like your rendezvous. No one is whispering sweet nothings.”

“Not even Robinson?” I raised a brow her way.

She gave me a stern look.

“Our conversation pieces are trivial,” she offered. “They’re mostly little stories and conversation bits Robinson has overheard in the grand bazaar.”

“Or in the half dozen coffee houses Emre makes him visit?”

“Yes, there too. I told him his stomach is probably lined with thick, Turkish sludge by now.”

“So let’s hear some trivia.” I prodded.

“Oh, ‘So and so is suing his neighbor. An ox cart was stolen in broad daylight from the local harbor.’”

“Go on. Those are some feisty headlines,” I teased.

“Oh, this is a good one. A Tatar tragically fell to his death while sleeping on his horse.” She dramatically fell off her bed, shielding her topaz-colored eyes for further effect.

“You’re a terrible actress.” I leaned forward and offered her my hand. “Terrible!”

“I’m a concubine, not an actress. Role play hardly means the same thing in our world.”

“Just don’t try that maneuver again, especially in front of Emre or Robinson. They’d send

for Dr. Capoleone at once, fearful you were convulsing.”

“I assure you, you are the only one privy to my nonsense. I remain ladylike at all times . . . unlike some people.”

I made a face at her.

“I’m sure Robinson divulges the real, gritty details with Emre when they are alone,” she said. “That’s likely when they discuss ‘Aziz.’”

I nodded in agreement.

“Still, it’s nice to be included in male conversations,” she said, “no matter how inconsequential.”

“I hope you asked them why on earth a man would sleep on his horse. Did he mean the horse was moving?”

“Yes, I did ask. He said that’s what the Tatars do. They would lose too much time delivering the post should they stop traveling, sleep, and remount. Robinson says the horses are quite intelligent. They know the route by heart.”

“That is absurd. Dying for mere letters. What a pity.”

“According to your Emre, it’s an honorable job. He felt it to be an interesting way to see the empire.”

“True, he would. Men live for adventure. It’s in their blood.” I crumpled up our empty wrappers. “A few more decades living like this, even the horse will have led a more alluring life.”

“Circumstances often seem better on the other side. That doesn’t mean that they are.”

“Perhaps. Then again, perhaps not.”

“I’ve always believed it comes down to perspective. Even freedom has a price. I’m sure if either of us knew what that price would entail, at the very least, we would see our boredom as the lesser evil.”

I sucked in my lip, not offering a peep.

“I remember what my life was like before I came here—”

“Before you were enslaved here,” I corrected her.

“Right . . . enslaved here.” She allowed the words to linger.

This change—her conceding to me—it somehow convicted me. I rose to approach the window. We both knew she had been here years longer than I. I was in no position to chide her.

The garden, though groomed for winter, looked brittle and brown. And colorful coy fish no longer darted about the palace pond as they had a few months before.

"I just meant. . ." Dariya mumbled, "that it's a miserable position to be in, not knowing where you will find your next meal, who will be kind to you, or who will take advantage of you."

"I'm sorry," I admitted. "I remember your poverty. I know you still grieve everyone you lost."

"It was everyone. But then again, I'll not pretend it wasn't the same for you."

I stayed quiet, my eyes focused on the fountain. I hated talking about that part of my past. I loved my parents dearly and, in my mind, I visited their memory as often as I could. But I wouldn't keep revisiting that scene. In fact, I kept it tucked deep inside.

"Dariya," I finally turned her way. "When I say these things, you must know that I'd only want them if I knew that all of us would be safe."

"It's a different picture up here." I drew in a breath and lightly touched my head. "Can a girl not yearn for a future, one with unlocked doors and carriages and boats that actually take her somewhere?"

She thoughtfully watched me.

"Can I not have my dreams?" I left the window and approached her bed. "Even if both of us know they're likely to never ever come true?"

"Of course, you can," she said, without smiling back. She then turned away, re-wrapping the box of chocolates.

"Here, allow me. I'm already up," I offered.

She handed me the box.

Placing it back inside her bureau, I reached for a few of the garments she had formerly used to entice Emre and arranged them on top of the box. Staring at them, I slowly closed the drawer.

That's it. That's why she's quiet. At least for me, I have someone to love.

"Anything else I can get you?" I softly asked before turning around.

"Nothing comes to mind."

I sat on the floor, allowing myself to be closer to the brazier. She adjusted her pillow, laying on her back rather than facing the fire or me.

I had been sworn to secrecy by Emre to never utter a single word of his plans. And rarely

was I tempted, except in moments like this with her. Still, no one could know that he had already sought protection from his cousin. I couldn't tell her that those same provisions of freedom had been arranged for her too. Well, almost the same. She wouldn't be leaving with us. But Murad would allow her to remain at the palace if she chose or he would arrange for her to marry outside of the palace. That is, if she approved. If she felt safe.

"Dariya . . ."

"Yes."

"I don't want you to live a loveless life. Not forever. Especially, not because of me."

"Then that makes two of us."

I tightened my arms around my legs, my forehead sinking to my knees. It was certain. We had been thinking the same thing.

"You're not the one making my life loveless," she amended. "It's this palace."

"But I've certainly added more constraints."

"Not really. If you think about it, I'm safer now. My emotions are steadier. Plus, now I always know what the day will bring—companionship. With him. With you. With Refia and Robinson."

"So you are more at peace?"

"I'm trying to be."

I nodded. "Good."

"With everything that has surfaced as of late, everything with 'Aziz and . . ."

"The uncertainty of it all? If Murad will allow any of us to leave—or shall I say, to live?"

"Yes. It's all Refia ever talks about." She turned my way, rubbing the back of her neck.

"I want to be safe, Leila. I'd rather deal with the monotony of what I already know than fill my mind with fears or childish dreams. He has to stay sultan. I *need* 'Aziz to stay Sultan."

"I know."

I placed my chin back on my knees.

"Can I tell you something, Leila? Without hurting your feelings?"

"Of course." I looked up at her again.

"Your faith . . . I don't know, maybe it's something else . . . something about your upbringing . . ."

It seemed she was being extra careful in choosing her words.

"Well, it makes you special. To Emre, for sure. But, also to everyone who crosses your path. You see things differently. That's probably why Princess Mother despises you so."

"Somehow, I don't imagine that was the bit that's supposed to hurt?"

"No." She grinned. "It's just, it makes you this epic dreamer. And, it leaves you constantly unsatisfied. As if life owes you more, even when it's just given you so much."

I nodded in agreement, absorbing it all.

"I don't . . . think life bends to our will like that. I just don't. Not for anyone."

"You're probably right."

"I know it sounds gloomy and passive, but, I think we're supposed to accept our circumstances and live as best as we can. For me, more times than not, that means purposefully seeking out the good in the situation, even if, on the surface, everything looks bad."

"That doesn't sound like weakness at all—"

"But don't you see? I can't do that." Her gaze was steady. "Not with you around."

"Because I'm a dreamer? And . . . because I speak those dreams aloud?"

"Yes. When I think on them, it leaves *me* unsatisfied. It reminds me that that I am unloved." She bit her lip.

"Then I'll stop. Dariya, I promise. From now on, I'll keep them locked inside."

"Thank you. I'm sorry, Leila."

"No." I got up and soothed her. "Thank you for telling me how you feel. Who knows . . . perhaps my discontent is wearing on others as well."

"You speak of Emre?"

"Like you said before," I weakly smiled, "he wouldn't want to hurt my feelings."

Chapter Two

Emre

"I'd like you to be supportive, Emre." My grandmother said to me, her finger slowly brushing over a scene of Venice painted on her unused plate.

"Be supportive of him?" I asked her. The thought of doing anything different would be absurd.

"Yes. As your grandmother, I am telling you—warning you—your father is under immense pressure. He needs to know he has the supreme backing of every member of this family." She set the small dish aside on the coffee table. "You have no idea what that man wrestles with each day. He can't trust the pashas that give him counsel. Half could be described as no more than a nest of vipers."

"I don't disagree. I know they've had a hand in much of what has transpired."

"No, they are to blame for *everything*. Especially that Midhat," she said bitterly. "He'd sign away half of this empire in a heartbeat if 'Aziz would allow him."

"But what would you have me do?" I refilled her half-empty teacup. It shook slightly as she held it out to me. She placed the porcelain cup next to the ewer and basin, then rested her arm on the sofa's pillow. Her hands, though slender, were far from nimble. Was there a new development setting her nerves afire?

"As it is, Father barely calls upon me," I continued. "What kind of serenity or counsel might I offer him? He must know he has my devotion. Have I not kept careful watch of all that goes on in this building? I mean . . . that is why I remain confined here, correct?"

"You and your brother remain here because it is your *home*. You are *princes*. This is the palace afforded you!"

"But I am also here to keep an eye on my cousins." I touched her knee in an effort to calm her. "That was made clear to me many years ago. And I have done so, sharing in both life and captivity."

"You are twenty years old, Emre!" She shooed my hand away. "Do not try to sell your

woes to an old woman. I am not one of your sympathetic concubines.”

“Grandmother—” I started, but the way her eyes were slanted, I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“I’ve been confined to three palaces,” she further grumbled. “For far more years than you and your father combined.” She tucked a lock of her raven black hair into her tight bun. “I’m beginning to think I should have brought your mother along. What would she say to your ungratefulness?”

“Alright, alright. You know I’d never wish to stir a fight with you.”

“It would be your last fight.”

“I am sure of it.” I cleared my throat, briefly glancing to Robinson. He was still standing at attention to the left of the doorway.

“And let it be known, Emre, that I have many sets of eyes on this palace. Hundreds of informants are at my bidding. Dozens on this floor.” She pointed. “If anyone should sneeze or if a bird lands on your window sill, I assure you, I hear about it. No one’s whereabouts go undetected, no matter whose room or which hour of the night.”

She seemed to be adding extra emphasis on the last bit. Was she insinuating Leila? Could she know about the times Robinson had her waiting in the wings at the exact moment Dariya was dismissed?

I nodded, trying to maintain steady eye contact.

“The truth remains, Princess Mother,” I paused to take a sip of tea, allowing the unnecessary formality to linger. “Neither Murad, Hamid, or Reshad have ever given me a reason to be suspicious of them. And . . . I can promise you, upon my life, if they ever should, I know where my loyalties lie. You can report back to Father that you have seen me, and I remain ever diligent in my post.”

“Very good.” She permitted the slightest smile. “Because . . . I did not come here only to speak with you. I am here to gather you and your brother, Ali. Your father has several important announcements to make. In fact, your brother, Yusuf, is in his chamber now. He’s receiving his first assignment as we speak.”

It's odd that I was a prince and yet, I was keenly aware that my life was of little or no importance. I often wondered when that realization would finally sink in for Ali.

On the brink of sixteen, he still walked with confidence and exuberance, as if the whole world awaited his arrival, even our father. As if the tall windows, crystal chandeliers, and plush red carpet that ran the length of every hallway had been laid just for him. As if it were a special path predicting his future greatness—the Shadow of Allah on earth.

I, on the other hand, had been silenced in 'The Cage' or princes' quarters, for four more years than he had. As the second son, I took my rightful position ahead of Ali, following some steps behind our grandmother. She occasionally turned back to look at us while leading the way to the main palace. I made sure my pace remained satisfactory to her, both indoors and out. Never once did I fall behind or encroach upon her satin dress when we stopped at the various steel-clad doors or heavily guarded gates. I marched forward, knowing nothing of my fate, which forced a severe heaviness in my heart.

"Not long now," my grandmother said, as if she were relishing in our suspense.

My father was the type of man that rarely sustained the same temperament for a two-day stretch. He could be charming us with his calligraphy or flute in one moment and yelling out senseless commands the next. His paranoia meant that even mere happenstances were seen as evidence of sinister plots against him. Needless to say, since the financial fallout and resuming attacks by Christian insurgents, his reactions had risen to new extremes.

Upon hearing of Aster's brutal attack on Leila, he demanded the immediate removal of all floor candelabras, plus every upholstered chair or sofa that graced a public room. In fact, it was a decorative iron bench that awaited us outside of his chamber door now. Aster had been sent away and was no longer a threat to anyone. Did he suspect his own servants would set more comfortable furnishings aflame?

"This is good news," Ali whispered into my ear after we sat down. "I can feel it. Even Grandmother has a certain ray of confidence about her. Do you see it too?"

"I admit there is something there." I watched her smile at the chain of eunuchs guarding my father's door.

"I heard talk of Father bringing all of Murad's brothers to the same confined location. I think we're being assigned new rooms, perhaps even here. Or maybe separate villas."

"Who's your informant? A eunuch?"

"I'll hold off sharing that for now."

"Yusuf then?" I raised a brow.

He playfully sealed his lips.

"Doesn't matter." I picked off a small hair from my court jacket. "There's no longer money for villas, Ali."

"There are plenty of villas left standing. What's it to the British if we should abide in them rather than some decrepit pasha?"

I smirked. "I suppose you have a point. Still, as much as I'd love for you to be right, Father knows they'd push back all the same."

"Let them. The sultan is not a dog, heeled at the feet of infidels. We'll repay them their millions. Then we'll never ask for—nor return—another favor again."

"They've cut our interest in half. The French, too," I whispered. "Yet we still struggle to pay them."

"We'll get the money we need."

"Oh, did your informant tell you of a plan for that, too?"

"Hmpf." He laughed under his breath, straightening his red fez hat.

If only Ali's words were true, and we were being moved to private villas. But he was probably more correct in his first conjecture. I'd often feared that one day my father would require us to return to the main palace, just as he had with Yusuf. It had been all I had wanted in years past as I was so far removed from my daily activities and my mother. But not now . . . not with the closeness I finally had with Leila. Everything would be different and rigid here. My grandmother would make certain of it.

No, a villa would require relinquishing too much power and oversight. If there were anyone more paranoid than our father, it was the woman who created his fear. She was sitting only a handful of feet away from us, watching us as her fingers methodically stroked an amulet.

"Yusuf!" Ali's voice and elbow pulled me from my reverie. We both stood up, anxiously awaiting our brother's arrival through the opening door.

But it wasn't Yusuf. It was two men in military uniform. One was highly decorated,

older, with slick, silver hair and a flawless gray mustache. The other looked to be close to my age with dark, russet hair and a harshness to his face as if he had spent much of his life in the sun.

“Good afternoon, Your Highness,” they each greeted us in turn.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” I finally found my words.

“Emre!” Yusuf stepped into the hallway, beaming as never before. “I see you have met my newest champions and confidants. This is Huseyin Avni Pasha, Minister of the Ottoman Imperial Army.” He gestured to the taller, distinguished man, almost as if he were pointing out a famous statue cloaked in gold and blue. “And this is the impressive Hassan Bey, Army Captain and now aide-de-camp to yours truly.”

The younger man grinned to his superior, obviously enjoying the whole display.

“I’m sorry, ‘Yours truly?’” I looked at Yusuf with confusion.

“Yes, Emre. You are looking at the empire’s newest Army commander.”

Ali rushed to hug him, literally rocking him off his feet. But I just stood there, processing words that couldn’t possibly be true.

“But no worries, brother . . .” Yusuf came over a moment later, cupping his hands firmly over my tasseled shoulders. “I’m sure you’ll be pleased with your destiny considering the massive naval fleet I left to you. Surely we are true rivals now.” Then he pulled me into an embrace as if we were standing on top of the world, not utterly falling into it.

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“I know you’re in shock,” my father said as I sat down for my private meeting with him. I sunk into a brown leather chair. He had his own, but, for the moment, he was standing along the window.

Be supportive, my grandmother’s earlier words kept ringing in my ear. Regardless, it felt like I should be the one permitted to pace the room, not him.

“I suppose that explains the formal escort down,” I managed, removing my fez and

placing it in my lap.

"Your grandmother's doing." He waved his husky hand, almost in apology.

Through the enormous mahogany window behind him shown the sunlight dancing on the still blue waters. It was nearly blinding, making his features indistinguishable.

"Is it true that you wish for me to join the navy now?" I asked.

"Join? No. I am placing you at the head of it. No son of mine will be relegated to the barracks."

"But Father, I have *no* training," I said with contained disbelief. "None of us have so much as stepped into an academy."

"There was no need. We brought the royal academy to you. You are a master in archery, fencing, falconry, and horsemanship. Do you not recall all those hours you spent with your brothers and the students I had brought here? I spared nothing. Every teacher, every expert, every firearm was the finest in the land."

"But that was more than seven years ago! Aside from wrestling, those practices have disappeared from our routines. Am I to arm myself with paintbrushes and drawing pencils? At the moment, that's about all you'll find in my room."

"I knew you'd be difficult to convince." He stroked his short-trimmed beard. "I am prepared for your arguments. I had to remind myself that you have the sensitivities of your mother, the insecurities of a middle child, and, most of all, you've allowed Murad to subdue your focus."

"How?"

"For years you've been so privy to both sides of this family that you're no longer capable of seeing the dividing line. You are a great peacemaker, Emre. So is your cousin, Hamid. But Murad has launched a secret war against me."

"Father, these are mere conspiracies—"

"Don't argue with me, I know it to be true!" He suddenly lost his temper.

"As you say." I bowed my head to him. It took him several seconds to loosen his hold on his desk. Even after, I knew it best to allow him to speak first.

"I am no longer sitting back, awaiting a strike from my nephew," he continued. "You have always served me well, Emre, but what I need most from you now is your *protection*. The only way I can ensure my security is to set you and your brothers in places of power, where no

one can place a charge on my life.” He gestured to the landscape outside his window. “Don’t you think if I had men I trusted, I would use them?”

“Yes. I know you would,” I soothed him. “I’ll be that man.”

“You have more wisdom and strength inside of you, son, than you give yourself credit for. You are an Osman,” he said with vigor. “There is no greater lineage of men on this earth. You have my blood and the blood of my father and his father before him. This . . . this commission will pull it out.”

I nodded. “I know.”

“Good. Very good!” His smile erupted. “Surely you must know I poured much thought into this decision.”

I stared at him, wondering how much thought he counted to be a lot. A day? A fortnight? Enough time for my grandmother to scurry in one of her persuasive sheiks.

”Now, do you have any more questions before I call in our second round of guests? Among the others, I have brought in Ahmed Kaiserli, Minister of Naval Affairs. Ahmed will assist you in your transition and you will use him, and only him, as a direct line to me.”

“He’ll be taking me away today?”

“Not today, but definitely within the week.”

The deadline felt like the final nail in my coffin.

“I have built for you the third largest navy in the world.” He approached me, his left hand resting on my head as if I were a little boy. “Every time you gaze upon it, remember that I, your father and sovereign Padishah, am entrusting my life to you.”

“I will.”

It was then that he held out his other hand to me. It was no more than a breath away from my nose. I was to seal my promise to him with the customary kiss to his signet ring.

“Your Majesty,” I uttered, kissing it. Satisfied, he pulled it away.

“You have more questions, I presume,” he offered, walking back toward his desk.

I looked at the door. “What is to happen with our households while we take leave?”

“Your harems?”

“Yes.”

“They should remain as they were before—no more, no less. Of course, you’re permitted a handful of servants to journey with you. *Eunuchs*, that is,” he clarified. “I’m sure you can curb

your lust for the cause.”

“Definitely. I only wanted to know that their conditions or placement with me wouldn’t be changing, should my absence be long.”

“I gifted them to you, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” I breathed with relief.

“Then there’s nothing to worry about. We may do a little shuffling here and there of rooms. Your grandmother has it in her head that Murad’s mother could use some additional surveillance. Still, no one should get lost along the way.”

“You’re bringing her in from the old palace, after all these years?”

“I haven’t settled on a decision yet. As you can imagine, it’s complicated.”

His sudden change in posture revealed he was closed to the topic.

“One more, Father, if I may?”

“Proceed.”

“What are your intentions for Ali?”

“Ahh,” he rubbed his beard again, somewhat nervously. He finally took a seat at his desk.

“Ali is to command a specialized unit we’ve been training for our modern artillery.”

I swallowed a large lump in my throat. “He’s very young, Father. Still fifteen.”

“It is the smaller branch of the three.”

“Can you not delay?”

“I need the position covered.”

I kept looking at him, hoping he would break.

He sighed in hesitation.

“Just six months,” I offered. “Entrust him to me. Allow me to . . . smooth out some of his youthful ways. Then, when he is fit, place him there.”

He stared at me intently, a war of wills battling behind those large hazel eyes. “I’ll give you three.”

Leila. How will I ever break this news to Leila?

I lay perfectly still, my back flat against the marble ledge that formed a continuous bench along the hammam walls. Beads of sweat inched their way across, then down, my olive skin. My rag, still drenched in soapy water lay to my right, just beyond my waist.

I was alone finally, apart from the questions firing in my head.

How can I lead anyone? I've never led a soul in my life?

And the voice was true. Even under lesser circumstances, the notion would have been laughable. If not to me, to everyone else.

This is Allah's punishment, I conceded. For what I've said to Murad, I must be a traitor.

Will Murad recant his promise now? How could he continue to trust me? He'd have to perceive this move as a change of heart, or worse, a direct threat.

I closed my eyes tight, trying to envision reaching out to my dear cousin. There had to be some means to get word to him and quick. Yet, my grandmother's warning seemed to pierce my ears. I caught myself sitting upright, scanning the room for someone who may have entered while I was unaware.

Had I spoken any of my thoughts aloud?

There was nothing, only the trickling of overflowing basins. Hot, steamy water poured from the mouths of three golden lions.

My grandfather, Sultan Mahmud, had been a fierce combatant and a most respected leader. He was only three years older than Yusuf and me when he escaped The Cage, literally running for his life. His own brother, Mustafa, tried to have him murdered and successfully slain his beloved uncle—the former sultan Selim—that same day. But Mahmud hid and survived. He came down from the palace roof, shaking, only to be told his brother had been captured. He, Mahmud, would enter the throne instead.

Mustafa was killed for his treachery, which left my grandfather the only living soul suitable to occupy the throne. You would think that knowing this would have caused him to hide within the secure walls of the palace. Instead, my young grandfather mounted his sure-footed Arab, and led the entire cavalry to crush revolt after revolt after revolt. He even wiped out the entire Janissary corps that challenged him, creating a new army instead—something his kindhearted uncle, Selim, could never bring himself to do.

It's not that I never envisioned myself in a battle. My father was right, he had taken great pains in teaching us every art of war we should know. He, himself, had never donned a soldier's jacket or lifted a sword, except for a palace ceremony. No, he was satisfied with lifting pens, lifting his fork.

Before I knew the warmth of a woman, I used to lay in bed, picturing myself on a massive sailing vessel. We would brave white squalls, the men grasping any rope or rail they could find so the waves didn't wash them clean away.

My mind fashioned shorelines of territories I had only heard of. I'd lay there, squinting my eyes as if they were slowly becoming an outline. As if a layer of fog were being lifted from my face, from my very bed.

But . . . I never once pictured myself killing. I never held a dulled kindjal to my brother's throat in play, pretending to slit it, though Yusuf had no trouble doing so to me.

I wasn't my grandfather. I wasn't any particular sultan at all.

"Your Highness." Robinson lifted the golden latch to the hammam gate.

"Sorry. Have I disappeared for too long?" I reached for a fresh towel, laying it across my lap.

"Not at all." He held the gate open with one hand, using his other to peel off his dampened, kid leather shoes. "Bathe as long as you wish. I only thought I'd see if there was anything I could do? Shall we arrange to call on your mother tomorrow? Have her visit here or request entrance for you there?"

"Here," I answered. "Always here."

He gently smiled, and I handed him two of the folded towels, in case he'd prefer to take a seat on the bench.

"Have you put in any thought as to who you'll be taking with you?" He remained standing, holding the linens.

"No. That would make it too real."

"Hmm."

I bit my lip. "I haven't quite figured out the opening line to my speech just yet. 'Accompany me. My father has an outlandish plan to get us all killed.'"

"Hopefully that isn't the case, Sire."

"Hopefully."

"Prince Ali has apparently stayed behind with the others? Were there some celebratory events you chose not to attend?"

"I believe it's because he's still angry with me. But yes, I imagine, knowing father, there's always the added temptation of dancing girls."

"Ah," said Robinson.

I skimmed the room. Minus its obvious magnificence, it looked as much like a prison as a bathhouse.

"May I presume you'll be taking me, Sire?"

His question caught me off guard. I didn't really know. I had certainly brooded over it, even before I had returned from the imperial quarters to my apartment. But I couldn't determine in which position I needed him more—alongside me, or here, protecting those that I loved most.

"Where would you put you?" I asked.

"I would . . ." He smacked his lips. "I would take me along."

I rubbed my head. "Robinson, you know there is no one I trust more than you."

"Yes. Probably no one who knows you more, either, if I am to build my defense."

"And who would protect the women, my children?"

"Every eunuch you have."

"And who would I entrust to make sure that happened?"

"Are you asking me for guidance, Sire, or for a clear answer?"

"What would you say to Giyas?" I cleared my throat.

"He is quite young and not a particularly imposing presence. He's not been on the job even a full year."

"But would you agree that he's loyal?"

"Loyal? I'd say he's the most loyal—aside from me."

"Is he capable of having a clear understanding of every dynamic in this building? Is he brave enough to report anything out of the ordinary? Would he act with urgency as if his life—and everyone else's—depended on it?"

"I believe he would."

"Then what do you say of Giyas?"

"Perfect choice, Sire. One that most men would have overlooked."

I leaned back against the wall. "You know, this is how everything will be from now on. A

giant game of speculation. Only, not a game at all.”

“You’ve been intuitive your whole life, Sire. Beyond that, your mind remains open. Not everyone in your position believes that others might hold wisdom. Even fewer would lower themselves enough to ask. It seems, to me, that you possess vast leadership potential. The true challenge will be learning how to balance both.”

I reached for the soaked rag and wrung it out, grateful but unconvinced. “And Leila?”

“I’m sure the news will come as a heavy blow.”

“I’m supposed to protect her, Robinson. But how can I if I won’t even be here? She’s already experienced incredible loss.”

“I know.”

“If they overthrow my father, if armed men come in and clear everyone out . . . If they do precisely as they have every single time in the past . . .”

Silence weighted the room. These were the questions that crippled me.

“Perhaps. . .” Robinson shook his head again. “Perhaps then, Sire, this is your only chance.”