

Prologue

Darkness!

Cold - with only the occasional sound of dripping water breaking the lonely silence!

How long had he been here? He didn't know; and what did it matter anyway?

What did it matter whether he was sitting or lying down, or even walking through this small room which was his prison. How often had he traced the contours of the walls with his hands, looking for an exit? A tiny gap through which air penetrated?

He had found nothing, and now it no longer mattered.

And so, he just crouched there and waited. He had long been unsure whether his immortality, which prevented him from losing his mind, was in fact a blessing or merely a curse. A curse he had brought upon himself. Like so much else.

He laughed hoarsely into the silence and listened to the sound until it faded away.

Actually, she had done him a favor. Weren't there people who actively sought solitude to escape from worldly things? He smiled. He had certainly managed to do that. Strangely, he didn't miss food or drink or clothing or even a comfortable bed. The only thing he truly missed was fresh air; the gentle caress of a cool breeze on his face. But in fact, he didn't need that either. He had freed himself from everything, from what he had once owned and from everything he had once done. He felt purified and thus uniquely unshackled, strange as it sounded. There were many things he would do differently now.

He stroked the book thoughtfully. Involuntarily he smiled. If only she had suspected that he had it with him when she locked him up in here...

He felt no anger. It had only been a matter of time before she took her revenge. And they had both had more than enough time.

The book in his hand suddenly grew warm. Astonished, he lifted it up. A faint glow emerged from between the pages. Was it possible? His hands began to tremble involuntarily and his heartbeat quickened. A throbbing dark red glow suddenly illuminated the book. He swallowed excitedly and opened it carefully, hoping this would extinguish the mysterious light. But the glow remained, animating with soft light the pages where the book fell open, until he turned to a new page. The book had acquired a new page!

Incredulous, he gently stroked the page, which quivered under his touch. As if by an invisible hand, red-hot writing appeared, silently burning itself into the paper and continuing the story he had begun so long ago:

Verdun, the seer, threw himself at the feet of his king.

"The time has come, your royal highness. The wind has carried news to us. A new scribe will soon advance into our territory."

"When?"

"In two weeks, royal highness."

"You know where?"

"With absolute certainty."

"So, it is time to leave. How do I find her?"

"Not you, royal highness." Verdun shook his head. "The ink will find the quill."

The other man regarded the old seer appraisingly.

"Prepare everything," he said curtly, and waved Verdun out.

The writing cooled. All that remained was a faint glow in which he could just read the letters. It was more than he had had in years.

With a pounding heart, he snapped the book shut again. Hope and fear pulled him into an embrace he could not resist.

Hannah

Hannah opened the door to her room and was astonished to discover her friend Marina lounging in her favorite chair, gazing dreamily out of the window.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh! I was just watching the butterfly fly into the garden." Guiltily, Marina stood up and smiled sheepishly at her. "I'm sorry, I couldn't help it when I saw the sheets of paper on your desk." Dreamily, she heaved a sigh of relief and hugged Hannah tightly. "It's a mystery to me how you always manage to write a simple story about a butterfly in such a way that it reaches into my very soul. I could literally see it right in front of me."

Hannah smiled good-naturedly. "You're nuts."

"You say that now. But someday I'll go into a bookstore and be able to proudly buy a copy of your book there. Mark my words!"

"Haha, good one," Hannah snorted; but secretly there was nothing she wanted more. A life not spent in the boring city council office where she was doing her training. She looked longingly down at the sheets of paper Marina had dropped guiltily onto the desk. Then she carefully folded the pages and took a folder from her shelf.

"You shouldn't just file them away. Why don't you send them to a publisher?"

"Someday," she replied monosyllabically.

"Why are you afraid to use your talent?" Marina sounded almost desperate as she continued, "Nothing can happen to you. It's all in your hands, isn't it?"

Hannah sighed and shook her head decisively. She was tired of it. She'd spent far too much time ruminating on this subject. She would wait and at some point, when she felt it was the right time and the right story, then she would send something to a publisher. Not before, period.

Marina shrugged her shoulders, then gave a grin that lit up her whole face, her freckles shining with her hazel eyes.

"That's not what I'm here for, though. We've got a lovely surprise lined up for you."

Hannah frowned suspiciously. "We?" she asked stretching, filing away the pages of her story into the folder as she did so.

"Do you remember Amira telling us about her uncle's hotel in Tunisia? You must do, she's mentioned it often enough. Anyway, he's just had it renovated and has invited Amira and us there for a week. We only have to pay for the flights. Room and board for free." Marina almost jumped across Hannah's small room and grabbed her by the hands as if she wanted to dance with her. "What do you think? Isn't it fantastic!?"

Tunisia! Instantly, sand-colored buildings appeared before Hannah's eyes, barely distinguishable from the similarly colored ground in the shimmering heat. Suddenly, she was seized by an overwhelming desire to see the turquoise water and the desert with her own eyes. This was a great idea of Amira's uncle. Finally, she could get a taste of adventure.

"When are we leaving?" was all she could ask before Marina threw her arms around her neck letting out a yelp of excitement.



Two weeks later, the four of them entered the spacious reception hall of the hotel 'Riadh Hammamet'. Brightly polished reddish-brown marble columns lined the walls, which had high arches, lending the entire building an air of One Thousand and One Nights. Uncertainly, Hannah glanced down at her dusty flip-flops and the somewhat rickety wheels of her suitcase, which had seen better days. Then her gaze drifted to the equally shiny marble floor and the small dirty trail she and her friends had already left behind on their short walk from the entrance. Amira strode confidently ahead of them, as if the hotel belonged not to her uncle but to her personally. Neither Marina

nor Emma appeared particularly impressed by the hotel's appearance, but for Hannah it was like entering another world. Her imagination was already going into overdrive, and her eyes were trying to take in and memorize every tiny detail. It was a treasure trove of new ideas.

"Are you coming?" Marina had stopped and smiled at her.

Hannah nodded and grabbed the suitcase tightly by its handle having decided to carry it the rest of the way to the reception desk, where Amira and Emma were already waiting for her.

"My uncle will meet us tonight," Amira said, gesturing to the concierge who was on the phone. "He's probably out all day and will want to take us out to dinner. Give me your IDs, we still have to fill out the registration form."

Hannah already had her ID to hand and was passing it to Amira when Emma and Marina bumped into each other, holding their breaths almost simultaneously.

"Wow," Emma hissed, running an embarrassed hand through her short-cropped brown hair.

Marina giggled. "This is going to be a great vacation."

Slowly, Hannah turned her head and immediately knew what, or rather who, the two were referring to. Two young men were striding towards the reception, attracting the attention of everyone in the room. Even a mother carrying a child sat the little one on the floor as she gazed awestruck at the two men.

"Yin and Yang," she heard Emma whisper, then she and Marina started giggling again.

"Behave yourselves," said Amira, glaring at them both with her dark, reproaching eyes. "I don't want to embarrass my uncle with our behavior. Those two men there are his guests, too."

Hannah grinned when she saw the look with which Amira eyed up the men and then looked to the side in deliberate disinterest. Both men were tall and without doubt attractive. While one had light blond hair and rather gentle features, the other possessed jet-black hair that fell a little into his eyes and added something wild to his strikingly chiseled features. Jet black eyes swept over her as he stepped up beside her at the counter and nodded briefly before searching for the concierge with his gaze.

"Hello," he said in a pleasantly dusky voice as his blond companion joined him, giving her only a brief glance.

Hannah swallowed and took a step to the side. Instantly Marina and Emma filled the gap.

"Could I have the key for room 175, please," asked the blond man, adding charm to his words with a bright smile.

Marina made no attempt to conceal her sigh. Hannah poked her rudely in the back. Could this get any more embarrassing? Her friend looked at her with wide eyes, as if entranced. Her lips formed a "What?" without saying it out loud, and she winked cheekily at her.

"If I could just interrupt you two lovestruck teenagers for a moment," Amira hissed, a little annoyed. "Here are our room keys. We're sharing an apartment. I guess Hannah and I will go ahead. I'll meet you there." With an overly loud clatter, she put the keys down in front of the others and headed off.

"We'll catch up with you soon," Marina promised absently.

This was going to be fun, Hannah thought, and hurriedly grabbed her keys and followed Amira.



After enjoying a lavish dinner with Amira's uncle, the friends decided to go to the hotel disco together. Hannah had little desire to listen to music that was far too loud, but Marina had begged and begged until she had no choice but to agree. Now they sat together at the table and drank cocktails, while Marina's gaze incessantly scanned the crowded room.

"You're not seriously waiting for those two guys?" asked Amira, rolling her eyes. "You really are beyond help, Marina. Let's just spend the few days we're here without your usual flirting."

"Oh, get over yourself!" Marina dismissed her with a grin. "A little flirting once in a while would do you the world of good, too! You can take the black-haired one, I'm more interested in..." Abruptly Marina fell silent and grabbed Emma by the arm, who was sitting next to her on the other side. "Yin and Yang! There they are," she whispered excitedly, sliding around in her chair before finally crossing her long legs and leaning back.

"Oh, please." Amira shook her head. "I'm going to the bathroom now. Does anyone else need to powder their nose?"

Hannah shook her head, but Emma joined Amira. Together they disappeared as Marina's 'prey' walked past them and sat down two tables away.

"Okay! What do you say, Hannah?" Marina stood up and stretched, tossing her long blonde locks back with a loose sweep so that they shone enticingly in the twilight of the disco.

Hannah declined. "No way, you know me."

"What a shame. You don't know what you're missing." With a wink, she gave Hannah a cheeky grin and then strolled toward her two victims in rhythm with the music that boomed loudly from the speakers and shook the room with its vibrations. In front of the table, she stopped for a moment and danced in a decidedly provocative manner until the two young men looked up at her. The blond one carefully appraised her figure. He said something to Marina, pointing invitingly at the chair that stood between him and his friend. So, once again, the irresistible smile that Marina had painted her face had not failed to have the desired effect. Her friend sat down and instantly started a casual conversation with both of them. But the dark-haired man donned a disinterested expression and looked around the room as if he were looking for someone. Then he leaned back in his chair and looked at his friend, who gave Marina an adorable smile, grabbed her hand and simply pulled her to him on his lap.

Hannah's cheeks turned red with embarrassment as her friend wrapped her arms around him and kissed him with abandon. She wanted to look away, but a small part of her envied Marina's straightforwardness. The larger part, however, felt little desire for such mostly very short-term encounters.

The dark-haired man seemed to feel the same way. He looked at his two table companions with a furrowed brow and rose abruptly. Without a word, he left the table. Hannah froze as he came in her direction, as a glance from his incredibly dark eyes settled briefly on her. Involuntarily, she held her breath. Fortunately, he walked past her without even noticing her and strode toward the exit. When the door closed behind his tall figure, she heaved a sigh. Lost in thought, Hannah played around with the straw in her cocktail. Marina, beautiful and confident, attracted the attention of such men, but not her. Hannah sighed once again and rolled her eyes as the truth of this dawned on her. Maybe she should get all dolled up like her friends did before they went out. With her jeans and T-shirt, she was simply lost in the crowd. He probably hadn't even noticed that she was with Marina. Until now, however, it had never bothered her. And suddenly she was sitting in this stupid disco, worrying about it. Annoyed, she snorted and twisted her straw around.

"What's happened?"

"You're blushing!"

Hannah looked up in surprise and met the worried looks of Amira and Emma. She hadn't noticed that they had come back to the table.

"Oh, come on! I think our good Hannah is just horrified that Marina is pulling back there." Grinning broadly, Emma pointed to the table where Marina was currently engaged in a passionate embrace.

Suddenly, the room had become unbearably stuffy to Hannah. Decisively she shook her head and pushed back her chair.

"I'm fine, thank you. I think I've had enough for today. I'll see you tomorrow at breakfast, okay?"

Her friends looked at her in wonder and then nodded simultaneously, as though connected by an invisible string.

"Good night, Hannah!" they said, as if from one mouth.

Hannah hurried from the room. Relieved, she took a deep breath of the clear night air as the door closed behind her. After a few hurried steps, she leaned on the terrace railing. A cool breeze brushed her hot face, and she closed her eyes. Muffled music poured out from behind her and rose into the stillness of the evening, only to be instantly lost in the air against the soft murmur coming up from the sea across the beach. Hannah took another deep, intense breath and lightly licked her lips, enjoying the sound of the waves and the taste of salt on her lips.

"Are you alright?"

A voice of dark velvet caressed her ear. Curious, she opened her eyes, only to blink in surprise at the face that looked at her with concern. Yin stood beside her, smiling cautiously at her.

"Ahem, yes of course. Thank you, I'm fine," she stammered, venturing a faltering smile. "It was just... the air in there." Hannah fell helplessly silent, cursing inwardly.

"I suppose you were a little thrown off balance by the pace your girlfriend and my brother were setting." He was still smiling, but concern had given way to understanding.

Hannah swallowed and nodded hesitantly. So, he had noticed her at the table after all. Hannah blushed. What must he think of her? But then something else caught her eye.

"Brother?" she asked in surprise, looking him properly in the eyes for the first time. Never before had she seen such dark eyes. They were almost pitch black. To make matters worse, the stars were now reflected in them. Yin looked at her just as fixedly, then shook his head slightly, as if he had just woken up from a dream, and cleared his throat.

"My brother, yes - in fact, my twin brother."

"Are you sure you weren't switched at birth?" she asked in amazement, immediately wanting to kick herself when she noticed his distant gaze. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be so personal," she mumbled sheepishly.

"You mean because we're as different as night and day? Or more like yin and yang?"

Had he actually heard her, then? Hannah's cheeks instantly glowed. Her guilty conscience raised its index finger and pointed at her silently and accusingly. She herself had given him that name, after all: Yin, which had the meaning of dark and denoted a shady place. Yang, on the other hand, a sun-drenched hillside. How fitting for his brother.

"But then no one can have looked you in the eyes," she responded impulsively, blushing even more intensely.

"The eyes are the gateway to the soul, they say and mine are black, as black as night." He looked at her so challengingly that she couldn't help but wonder if, in a way, he enjoyed exuding an air of darkness and mystery about him.

"I love the night," she said. The words escaping from her mouth before she could stop them.

I love the night? What nonsense! He must think she's a complete imbecile or desperate.

"My name is Targon, by the way," he said with amusement, raising an eyebrow in an inimitable way that gave his smile something suggestive. No doubt he was assuming that she was no different to Marina. Hannah's heart was beating so loudly he must be able to hear it, she thought. Seemingly unperturbed, he held out his hand to her, which she took hesitantly.

"Hannah," she breathed tonelessly, enjoying the intensity of his firm grip.

"Hannah," he repeated with a smile. "I suspect you and I won't see our roommates again until morning." Now he grinned broadly at her, brushing a stray strand of hair out of her eyes. "By the way, you don't have to feel embarrassed by what you just said; I think you're right. I'm sure a lot of people think like you do. But where I come from, there's no chance of confusion."

"Hmm, sure." Hannah avoided his gaze and fixed her eyes on the sky. Countless stars twinkled down at her, and with a quiet flutter in the pit of her stomach, she thought of his eyes. How could a human possess such eyes? "And where are you from, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I don't live in Germany."

"Okay," Hannah said at length, now grinning mischievously at Targon. "Well, if I use a process of elimination, then in a few hours' time I'll at least discover the country you live in; or else I'll just accept the fact that you don't want to tell me."

Targon smiled appreciatively. There was something in that that made Hannah feel satisfied and mysteriously increased the fluttering in her stomach. He had his reasons for not answering her, and it pleased him that she did continue with her questions.

Hannah forced herself to become serious again. But the corners of her mouth kept moving upward all by themselves. To distract herself, she cast her gaze upon the garden. Only a few windows still had lights on, and the pool lay still and untouched in front of them. The surface of the water was as smooth as a mirror, so that it looked as if the palm trees, which were planted around the pool, had stretched out for a night's rest. Hannah liked the image before her, and reached for her shoulder bag, from which she took out a small notebook, and opened it.

"What are you doing? Are you going to give me your number?" asked Targon in a jesting tone that made her cheeks flush again.

"Oh no, absolutely not, even though you might like it." Annoyed, she glared at him. What was this guy thinking? Did he really think she was that pushy? However, she had to admit that she had indeed talked a lot of nonsense. Still. "No, I like to write stories, and whenever I see something I like, or think of a nice phrase, I write it down before I forget it."

Irritated, Hannah noticed how his expression stiffened at her words. A dismissive barely perceptible twitch flickered at the corners of his mouth, and the sparkle in his eyes disappeared. Even the reflection of the stars had receded from them. Hannah was startled and closed the notebook, without having written anything in it and without knowing what could have caused this change of mood.

"I'm really sorry, but wasn't going to write down anything about you, in case that's what you were thinking."

Targon shook his head. His expression relaxed again, but something inexplicable had suddenly come between them and destroyed the beautiful moment.

"I think I'd better go and see if I can get into my room. Good night, Hannah. It was nice meeting you." Targon smiled fleetingly and without emotion. He didn't even wait for her quiet reply before he was already descending the steps of the terrace and disappearing between the bungalows.

It was nice! Hannah swallowed disappointedly. He could hardly have said anything worse. Empty words that left an empty feeling, and the butterfly in her stomach that had just learned to fly, simply crashed to the earth and disappeared.

Behind her, the door to the disco was opened and immediately closed again. Briefly, the music screeched through the crack, as if trying to escape from the stuffy room, and abruptly fell silent again. Hannah turned around. Emma and Amira were walking toward her, arm in arm, giggling boisterously.

"What are you still doing here? Weren't you going to bed?" Amira stepped up next to Hannah and hooked her arm around hers.

"I was still talking to Yin." Hannah had no idea why she didn't tell her friends Targon's real name, but for whatever reason she just wanted to keep it for herself.

"Oh!" Meaningfully, Amira poked Hannah in the side and looked at her with renewed awe. "With Yin? Wow! How did you manage to do that? He didn't look like he was interested in any of the girls here."

"Go on, don't be shy. We want all the embarrassing details." Emma giggled tensely and swayed slightly. Hannah reached out and supported her friend. A gush of alcohol-soaked breath wafted over her face. Disgusted, Hannah pinched her nostrils together. The two of them had probably had a few more cocktails.

"Yin approached me when I came out of the disco. That was it. He seems quite nice."

"Nice?" Amira rolled her eyes.

"I hear what you're saying, but I don't believe you," said Emma in a slightly rehearsed tone, waving her hand away. "I guess nice means he's either stupid or gay. My mother always says all nice men are gay."

Hannah shook her head with a laugh, "No. Nice in this case just means nice and not interested." The confession wasn't that hard for her. Her friends had come along at just the right moment to save her from slipping into the doldrums. Promptly, she reached for Emma's arm and hooked her arm around hers as well. "I'm still one cocktail behind you. Let's see if the bar is still open."



Hours later, Targon stood in the apartment's small kitchenette and drank cold water straight from the tap, ignoring all the warnings against doing so. He just couldn't get used to the bottled fizzy water that Romun had stuffed up the small refrigerator with.

Tired, he stretched and wiped his wet lips with his hand. He hadn't been able to relax as his thoughts had spun around Hannah in an endless spiral. Her sky-blue eyes haunted him as if he had looked too deeply into them. Never before had he seen eyes so radiant. She had attracted him as a moth is attracted to light. And she, of all people, was supposed to be the Quill? Only with difficulty had he regained his self-control. It had been so long since anyone had managed to shake it. He frowned worriedly when a creak from the next room awoke him from his reverie. One of the other two had probably woken up. A few moments later, his brother entered the small living room and looked at him wide awake.

"You look terrible. What have you been up to tonight?" Suspiciously, his eyes narrowed. "Did you find out something about our Quill?"

"More than that," Targon answered reluctantly. "It's your evening acquaintance's friend."

"That's wonderful!" Romun laughed with satisfaction. He walked past Targon, opened the refrigerator, and pulled out one of the bottles of sparkling water. Then he glanced back at his room before continuing, "This makes things so much easier. It'll be a piece of cake to take the little one with us."

Targon watched his brother open the bottle and drain it in a few hearty swigs.

"What's so easy about it now?"

»"I'm going to fool around with sweet little Marina some more, and then in two days we'll join a trip to the desert. I'll suggest Marina take her friend with her so you won't be so alone." Romun winked at him, confident of victory. "It will be a trip that neither of them will not forget. You can let Kerim know to prepare everything. It all has to look like it's an excursion that the hotel is offering. Come up with a way to keep the other hotel guests away from it."

"We're taking the other girl, too? What's the point in that? You have enough women at home already."

Romun raised an eyebrow disapprovingly and regarded his brother coldly, "Think, Targon. You know as well as I do, they will be expecting us and will either want to kill or kidnap the Quill. But if we have two girls and we split up, no one will know which of the girls is the right one. They will have to split up and that will increase your chances of getting the Quill home safely."

Targon nodded reluctantly. His brother was right, even if he didn't like it.

"I admit that you are right. But take care of for the girl, Romun. Getting her to safety won't be a walk in the park."

"Does that mean you have a conscience, dear brother? How unusual for you." Romun laughed mockingly.

"No thanks to you."

His brother dismissed the remark with a shrug and smiled, "If you bring your companion to the castle in one piece, I will do my utmost to take care of her friend as well."

The smile displeased Targon, but he disliked even more the fact that he was not indifferent to the danger they were putting the two girls in.

"The girl will arrive at your castle unharmed. At whatever cost to me." His words were truly heartfelt. A promise he made not only to his brother, but most importantly to Hannah. He would do anything to bring her safely to their world. Still, he felt an unfamiliar sensation in the pit of his stomach, a sense of foreboding that what he was doing was not right. He knew what was in store for Hannah, and he was sure she would be only too happy to accompany her friend on the trip as soon as she heard he was going along too.

So, this time it was the light that would get burned by the moth.



Hannah stretched lazily in bed. For a hotel bed, it was really wonderfully comfortable. There were definite advantages to having an uncle with his own hotel.

Tired, she rubbed her face and got up. The bed next to her was empty, as expected. Marina had obviously not been able to tear herself away from Targon's brother. Quietly, she crept past the second bedroom, shared by Emma and Amira. In the small living room, she first brewed coffee, then opened the large sliding door and stepped out onto the large terrace. She was greeted by a warm breeze and the gentle sound of the waves. The air was still pleasantly cool and gave no indication that it would become very hot in the course of the morning. Emma and Amira would be going on an excursion today, which she and Marina had successfully avoided. Since Marina would no doubt be spending the day with Yang, she had the next few hours all to herself. Hannah was already looking forward to sitting here in the shade with a book and looking out at the turquoise sea that gleamed at her from between the artificially planted palm fringe. Perhaps she could also write a little. A fairy tale had already crept into her imagination yesterday in the hotel lobby, before being fed by a pair of unbelievably dark eyes, which had helped it to grow considerably.

A quiet rattling from the living room reminded her of her coffee. Contentedly, she filled a large mug, grabbed her stationery and cell phone, and stepped back outside. After placing everything within easy reach, she made herself comfortable on a sun lounger. Happily, she looked out to sea and took a long sip of her coffee. What could be more pleasant than enjoying the silence of a morning and being able to contemplate one's thoughts all alone? It had been very kind of Amira's uncle to invite the four of them here.

"Morning, Hannah!" Marina weaved through the greenery next to her patio and beamed at her with an overjoyed face.

"Marina!"

"Oh God!" Marina dropped down on the lounge next to Hannah and hugged her tightly. "I'm so totally in love. Romun is just a dream."

Hannah slid a little to the side to make room for Marina. Involuntarily, she smiled at their luck, although she remained rather skeptical about the whole thing. It was hard for her to imagine falling head over heels in love with someone, but Marina had always been a bit excitable. Without comment, she let her take the coffee mug from her hand.

"Romun and his brother are going on a trip the day after tomorrow. He asked me if I wanted to come too," Marina babbled between sips, then handed the cup back. "A ride into the desert with an overnight stay in a Bedouin tent. Doesn't that sound romantic?" Sighing, she put her head against Hannah's shoulder, who clearly had reservations. But before she could open her mouth, Marina straightened up again. "And you have to come with me, Hannah. You can't let me go with them by myself."

"You're not serious, are you? You're actually going to ride off into the desert with two complete strangers? And you want me to come along, too?"

"It's just a normal excursion offered by the hotel. There's even some Dutch couple coming along." Pouting, Marina pushed her lower lip out, then grabbed Hannah's hands and looked at her with wide eyes. "Please, Hannah. What's could possibly go wrong?"

Hannah hesitated. She didn't feel entirely sure, but there was probably nothing to worry about with a normal excursion.

"I don't know, Marina. You don't even know the man. Don't you want to take this a little slower? I don't think his brother will want me to come along, and then have to babysit me."

Marina waved a hand wearily and gave a big yawn. "That's funny. He said almost the same thing, and that he might have offended you, last night." Curious, she blinked over at Hannah. "What have you done now?"

Hannah shook her head reluctantly. She didn't have the slightest desire to go over last night's events with Marina.

"Please, Hannah," her friend whispered now. "Romun is incredibly nice and my absolute dream man."

The dream man again. Hannah sighed. Under Marina's beguiling gaze, she felt like a hypnotized rabbit. And to be fair, she did actually want to see the desert. A horseback ride and an overnight stay there might be nice after all. Reluctantly, she nodded and sat there thoughtfully for a long time, while Marina fell asleep on the lounge.

The Sandstorm

Two Days later, Targon sat on the edge of a dried-up river and looked down at the riverbed, ten meters below. His legs dangled over the edge like those of an excited child. He actually felt a similar sense of exhilaration at the events taking place below him.

Hannah was standing with her friend by the horses. They both laughed with abandon with Hannah dancing lithely over the rocky ground, while singing at the top of her voice. The Dutch couple had fun teaching the two of them a clog dance, which they took to with gusto. With every turn, Hannah's hair swung around her like a shiny reddish-brown wave.

Marina clapped her hands and followed her example. But even though she had sidled up to Romun so expertly at the hotel disco, she lacked the natural suppleness that Hannah possessed. Her movements seemed stiff and rehearsed, while Hannah impulsively followed the sound and rhythm of the song the Dutch were laughing along to. She possessed a sheer joie de vivre that was as contagious as a disease and that surreptitiously infected him too while he watched her. Targon couldn't help himself. His encounters with Hannah were strangely intense. Every blink of her eye and every word, every movement attracted his gaze and awakened in him a longing that he had never known before. A smile from her warmed his very soul, where there had been only a practiced coldness for so long. But its effect was not good for him.

He almost let out a sigh, which only served to frighten him even more. That was because he had been forced to ride beside her and talk to her all day. She had been shy at first, but then had eventually opened up and told him about her hobby, removing any doubt that she wasn't supposed to be the one he was looking for. She had been writing stories with a passion since early childhood, dreaming of a great writing career. It was strange how easy she had been to find.

Loud laughter drifted up to him. The two girls danced more and more exuberantly, twirling around in circles, not suspecting for one minute that they were being watched, or what lay ahead for them.

"What are you doing here?"

Romun's gruff voice sent shivers of ice through Targon's head. How had he been able to sneak up on him unnoticed? And that he had sneaked up, Targon had not the slightest doubt, which only made the ever-growing gulf between them all the more apparent.

"I'll keep an eye on our catch," he replied coolly, hoping that his brother hadn't been watching him for too long. Was he so blinded by Hannah that he had become completely unaware of his surroundings?

"You seem to be growing dangerously soft on me, Targon. What's the matter with you? Perhaps it would be better if I took Hannah to Kylnavern. What do you think, brother?"

"If you think it's better to change your plans on short notice..." Targon fell silent and rose calmly. Eye to eye he stood opposite his brother, who regarded him coldly with raised eyebrows and pursed lips. If Marina had seen him like this now, the whole spell would have been shattered. His ruthless nature was written so clearly on Romun's face that he might as well have been holding up a banner declaring it. "You know that most of the pursuers will be hot on your heels. You're taking a chance of losing her on the way after all."

Romun searched his face, then smiled cautiously and punched Targon on the right shoulder.

"You are right. I'm relying on your loyalty, brother."

"To the death, my king," Targon replied automatically, quickly bowing his head to hide his eyes. The eyes reveal the truth, Maruk had taught him. A skilled reader could also spot any lie in them, and Romun was such a reader.

"Kerim has given me the signal that he can now summon the storm. We should make our way downstairs." Romun held out his hand to Targon, who took it. "May we meet again safely in Kylnavern."

"Here's to seeing you again," Targon replied curtly. Romun nodded to him and then walked ahead of him, looking for a favorable spot for the descent. A well-trodden path wound down between two large boulders. Small piles of black feces revealed that this path was used by goatherds with their flocks, who would forage for every tiny plant in this barren area. Romun walked deftly down, Targon following close behind, feeling the first tentative

gust of wind in his face. Small stones came loose and rolled down the path in front of them like messengers announcing their arrival. Hannah and Marina had stopped dancing and looked toward them curiously. Marina's cheeks took on a soft pink hue as her eyes fixed on Romun. He slipped smoothly and easily like an eel back into the role of the charming vacationer who had found his great love. With a smile that put deep dimples in his cheeks, he spread his arms and enclosed the happy girl in an embrace that seemed to Targon just a little too possessive. Hannah also frowned briefly, but said nothing, instead slowly retreating to her horse. Gratefully, the little mare rubbed her forehead against her hand. Suddenly, a short hot gust of wind swept across the ground, whipping up sand as it did so. The horse jerked its head up in fright and neighed. As if in response, the whinnying of the other animals echoed around them as they began to prance restlessly on the spot.

"Where has the wind come from all of a sudden?" Marina snuggled deeper into Romun's arms, who looked up at the blue sky with narrowed eyes, as if searching for an explanation there.

"A storm, perhaps?" Targon stepped up to Hannah, who had rested her head against her mount's neck and was whispering soothing words to him.

"Good Lord," she breathed, lifting her head. Wide-eyed, she first stared at him and then looked down the riverbed, searching. "Now what?"

"No, it can't be," cried the Dutchwoman, reaching out in fright for her husband's hand.

Targon pretended he had to look around. Kerim came out from behind the bend taking long strides, behind which he had disappeared before Targon had climbed to his lofty observation post. He waved his arms excitedly and shouted, "Quick, quick, you with the horses. We can't stay here. A sandstorm is coming."

As if to confirm his words, a new gust of wind raged in, already carrying sand with it. Hannah held her hands protectively in front of her face. Marina cried out briefly, but immediately fell silent and clenched her lips tightly after experiencing the first gush of sand. Targon felt the hot air on his face and exchanged a quick glance with Romun. As they mounted the horses, which pressed forward restlessly, they were careful to make sure that Kerim rode between them. Romun took the lead together with the slightly panicked Marina, who had left the reins to him and fearfully clutched the tip of her horse's mane. Behind them followed the other couple and Kerim, and only then came Targon and Hannah, who appeared tense but not particularly frightened, doggedly driving her horse.

"About five hundred meters from here there is a cave in the right cliff face, we must ..."

The howling of the storm snatched the words from Kerim's mouth, who pointed frantically forward as if his intention really was to reach that cave. The wind was now coming in increasingly violent gusts that made their clothes flutter open. Hannah's hair kept blowing in front of her eyes. In vain she wiped it aside, only to have it instantly blow back again. Without further ado, she let go of the reins, took hold of her hair and in one quick step tied it up in a braid. A few strands now danced around her head, as if driven back and forth in a game by the wind. Targon found himself captivated by this simple gesture, completely oblivious to their predicament. While Marina squatted in her saddle like a trembling bundle, Hannah held her reins tightly in her hand, bent low over her mare Kimon's neck, and concentrated her gaze forward. She glanced briefly in his direction, as if sensing his attention, then shouted something that faded unheard in the howling of the storm. The wind carried more and more sand with it, like a swarm of angry bees, stinging her skin with countless tiny needle-tipped stings. Targon, for his part, was now pushing Rajam harder to close in on Hannah. He bent slightly over to her and took hold of the loosely dangling lead rope.

"So that we don't lose each other!" he called against the storm, knowing that she could not hear a word he said. Still, Hannah nodded in agreement, but didn't bother to reply. She was happy for him to take the rope tightly in his hand. And just in time.

At a brisk gallop, they all chased ahead of the storm, just as a deep roar rose up from behind them, sending a shiver down even his spine. Hannah looked around and this time she too screamed. Her eyes, wide with terror, reflected the darkness that pursued and threatened to engulf her. Targon refrained from turning around, knowing full well exactly what was happening at his back. This was not the first time he'd been through the storm. Once you had seen heaven and earth swallowed up by a wall of sand, and day and night merged into nothing under the storm's darkness, you never forgot the likes of it again. Targon hated sand from the bottom of his heart and would have chosen any other kind of storm, but Romun had made his decision, and he had no business doubting that decision. Determined, he gripped the rope tighter. Sand and wind lashed at them with supernatural force like a roaring monster, grabbing them and lashing out with its thorny claws, doing its best to pull them into its maw and devour them.



