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SOME
THINGS
ARE DEADLY
WHEN
BROKEN.



OBSIDIAN
AWAKENING

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Obsidian
Awakening

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DEDICATION

For my husband and children who taught me love.

INTRODUCTION

Some things are deadly when broken.

The heart of Obsidian lies in this sentence. Obsidian breaks sharper than any other materials and must first be broken to form a deadly weapon.

This series is, therefore, a story of broken people who are forged by life into dangerous weapons. It is also a story based on many forms of love and how far we, as humans, will go for love, be it the love of freedom, of an ideal, of pride, of our homeland, of a child, a husband, a wife, a parent, or those closest to our hearts.

The brutality of this story has been written for the sole purpose of proving that violence, discrimination, racism, and slavery have no place in this world, that no one ever truly wins in wars, and no true heroes are ever made in an act of killing. The objective of this book is not to offer hope, it is to show that we all have the strength to prevail in the absence of hope, that even if the world does not improve, we have the power to change it

little by little if we choose to let go of our hatred and prejudice,
little by little.

The inspiration to write Obsidian came from my time spent among the bedouins of Jordan and Egypt, along with Mongolian nomads who showed me we need very little to survive and how pride can be found in the absence of wealth and career success. My love of the desert is, of course, unconcealed in this story which is inspired by my travel experiences in Petra, Wadi Rum, the Gobi, and the White Desert of Egypt.

VOCABULARY

THE WHITE DESERT

Kha'gan – A tribe in the White Desert.

Kha'a – The leader of a Kha'gan.

Kha'ari – The wife of a Kha'a.

Khumar – The chosen heir of the Kha'a, not necessarily the son of the current Kha'a but more often so.

Khumari – The wife of a Khumar.

izr – Son of.

iza – Daughter of. Women in the White desert take the name of their mother. Shakshi people worship the moon goddess Ravi. Women are, therefore, considered daughters of the goddess and are given a superior place of honor in their society.

Halfblood – An offspring of a Shakshi and another race. They are considered a destruction of the goddess' bloodline.

Commonblood – A Shakshi with physical characteristics furthest from those of a Bharavi or an oracle (i.e. yellow eyes, silver hair, dark skin). Commonbloods are believed to be the least likely to produce an oracle or a Bharavi as offsprings. They usually come with darker eyes and hair and lighter skin tone.

Pureblood – A Shakshi born with dark skin, and light-colored hair and eyes close to truebloods that are considered superior and more likely to produce Bharavis and oracles.

Trueblood – A Shakshi born with silver/white hair and yellow eyes with dark skin. Trueblood males are usually born with an ability to receive visions, while females are treasured for the likelihood of conceiving more oracles and Bharavis, even when married to a commonblood.

Bharavi – A trueblood Shakshi most likely to conceive trueblood offsprings (but not always). They are usually reserved as brides for Kha'as or Khumars and are given the responsibility of sustaining the purer bloodline in the White Desert.

Oracles – A Shakshi born with a gift of foresight, usually found among purebloods and truebloods.

Citara – The hidden, sacred city of the White Desert to which tributes (taken from merchants and caravans as rights of passage fee) are sent from all Khagans and from which resources i.e. food, water, clothing, and other supplies are distributed back to sustain life in the desert. Laws are written, passed, and executed from Citara, and only Zikh-clad warriors and bharavis are allowed to enter or told of its location to keep the city from

being discovered and attacked.

Zikh – The white robe given to the most elite class of warriors who have passed the test and taken an oath. The term White Warrior comes from the color of the Zikh.

Raviyani – A celebration held every full moon where each Kha'gan get together to feast, hunt, and compete in several warrior events. Winners are chosen to compete in the Dyal held annually in Citara.

Dyal – An olympic-like annual competition for White Warriors. Every year, each Kha'gan sends several representatives to compete.

THE BLACK DESERT & THE SALASAR

The Salasar – An empire currently consisting of four nations under the rule of Rasharwi, the capital city and command center of the Salasar. The territory covers almost the entire peninsula save for the White Desert, the mercenary-ruled Black Desert, and Makena.

Rasharwi – The capital city of the Salasar. Geographically a part of the Black Desert due to the black color of the rocks and mountains, whose people are seen by the Shakshi as one of the same due to their similarities in appearance and their long history of conflict with the White Desert.

The Black Desert (and the mercenaries/Rishis) – A

desert of black rocks and mountains south of Rasharwi ruled (independently) by a large tribe of mercenaries who makes a living from raiding the White Desert and other settlements, taking slaves and valuables to resell to (mostly) Rasharwi or for their own use.

Salar – The ruler of the Salasar.

Salahari – The ruling wife of the salar equivalent to the queen (not necessarily the first wife).

The Black Tower – The resident and command center of the Salar.

Suri, Suma, Sangi, and Sabha – The four fortresses surrounding (and protecting) Rasharwi and the Black Tower in the North, South, East, and West.

FATE

'Fate is a condescending, angry, sadistic bitch with few things to do and too much free time. But when Fate decides to strike, you can choose to die broken, or you can break like obsidian.'

— Deo di Amarra

WITH OR WITHOUT YOUR CLOTHES ON

One moonless night, under the star-stained, crushing sky of the desert, where the snow-capped peaks of the Vilarhiti drew an unconvincing line between the realms of gods and men, Fate brought together one man and one woman from opposite sides of the war, and bestowed upon them the first chance to bring peace to the peninsula. It was also on this night, in a tent of stumbling shadows and raining stars, when peace was offered, declined, and set on fire by the woman and the man, and the secret wager that began the greatest war between the Black and White Deserts was made.

She was nineteen years old when he found her, bound to a post in a military tent, half-naked, and about to be raped by one of his generals. The prince, son and heir to the Salar of Rasharwi, High Commander of the royal army that had successfully wiped out her Kha'gan and three more in the Vilarhiti, was said to be in the middle of a damage assessment report and therefore in a

mood to cause more damage when the news about a woman being missing from the prisoner camp had arrived.

The general, who had yet to learn—or had been too ignorant to notice—the supernatural ability of the crown prince's most trusted advisor and right-hand man to be so shockingly accurate on head counts during the chaos of battle, had thought he could keep a girl for entertainment for a few nights before sending her back to her holding pen. The prince, being already on edge from the heavy loss of his army despite the eventual success of his campaign, had stormed into the tent, unsheathed the two obsidian blades strapped to his back, and executed the general with his own hands—something he hadn't done often, judging from the looks on the guards' faces.

He turned to his advisor, snapped a clear and precise command to have every man who might have been aware of such treason executed and made to leave. He stopped, as though there were a calling or an invisible force of some kind that prevented him from leaving, and turned, in an agonizingly slow and calculated manner, to look over his shoulder toward her.

Time inched by like a nervous criminal hoping to escape as the three other men and one woman kept their mouths shut, and seemed to screech before being snatched back into the tent by the prince who, after some deliberation, decided to return to the exact same spot where he'd slain the general.

It took him no time, no time at all, to figure out what she was.

"Why," he said, cold anger rising in his tone, "did no one know there's a Bharavi among these Kha'gans?"

The soldiers behind him shifted their weight, suddenly finding something stuck between their teeth or in their fingernails to be a matter of great importance and proceeding to pick at them in perfect synchronization. Only the man she understood to be his trusted advisor was able to keep his personal hygiene a concern for other times, despite the visible effort to swallow a mysterious object that must have materialized in his throat.

The prince turned to look over his shoulder when the answer didn't come. "Are you all deaf, or am I?"

Those words, spoken in a mere whisper, were enough to mute everyone in the tent in addition to their apparent hearing loss. The advisor, however, managed at long last to swallow the mysterious object and replied, "I will have the men responsible found and brought to you before dawn, my lord."

The young prince, drawing a breath and exhaling loudly as if to make sure it could be heard by his deaf and mute officers, shook his head. "Have their heads on display before dawn along with General Hamir's accomplices and their crimes clearly explained to all divisions," he commanded in an effortless, practical tone, the same way one might have instructed a meal to be prepared or a table to be set. "Take this woman, wash out the red filth in her hair, and bring her to me. I will speak to this Bharavi before nightfall."

The soldiers carried out his instructions with utmost care.

They washed out the red dye she'd applied to her hair to hide her identity. The paste, made from a mixture of red wine and the root of a Biba tree, came off easily enough with water, but left a blood-like stain on her clothes. Having been too terrified to touch her after learning what had happened to their general, the small group of soldiers assigned to carry out the task had left her dress on as they emptied buckets of ice-cold water on her hair and decided to deny her a change of clothing.

It had not been a part of the command, one soldier had argued when another suggested giving her something dry to wear. She might be executed soon, he said, and it could be considered a waste of resources, which the prince didn't like. Then again, her soiled garment and state of appearance might offend him, the first man argued. The rest nodded in agreement, but none found the reasoning sufficient to draw a safe conclusion. The issue, from which more arguments ensued for a considerable amount of time, ended up being passed to a higher-ranking officer on duty to judge. The officer, conveniently finding it above his own rank to decide, thought it would be best to bring it up to the general of their division, who in turn decided it was safer to check first with the prince's advisor regarding this complicated problem before issuing a command. By then, twilight had already arrived, and the decision, she overheard from the commotion, ended up being to send her over to the prince's tent in whatever state she was in as soon as possible. The most crucial and clearest part of the command, his advisor

pointed out, was, *'before nightfall.'*

And so she was sent to him, still in her tattered, dye-stained garment, dripping wet from her hair, now returned to silver, to her toes. They had, fortunately, given her a blanket to dry herself with, for the reason that the prince would definitely find it unpleasant to have his floor wet and stained.

He was being stripped down by two handmaidens when they brought her in. The armor had been taken off and laid neatly on a bench to their right, leaving only a thin layer of tunic underneath. The black silk, trimmed subtly with gold threads in a simple yet elegant design, clung to his blood-soaked body as if he'd been riding all day in the rain.

It wasn't that far off from the truth, she thought bitterly. The Vilarhiti could be said to have rained blood all week for how many had died defending the valley, and had the fabric been any color but black, it would have shown.

She wondered, watching the girls remove the last piece of clothing from him with exaggerated care, whether this man had been aware at all how much trouble he'd caused. It was becoming clear to her that the first rule around here was to be competent or be executed, even over something as trivial as the matter of her dress. She could see why the Rashai soldiers, usually intimidated by her people's White Warriors during battle, had fought the way they did. They would have been more terrified of this man—this monster—who was leaving no room whatsoever for mistakes.

It might have been why they'd lost the battle, despite so

many Kha'gans having united for the first time against a common enemy. She had heard many stories of the exiled prince, sent to the dungeon of Sabha in his youth as a punishment for his mother's crime of infidelity. The boy, who had later been pardoned and reinstated in status after three years of being imprisoned, had made it back to the Black Tower and eventually became the new heir to the throne. There had also been, she recalled, stories of several untimely deaths in the Salar's royal household in the past ten years.

The truth to those stories was being made clear to her now, proven by the numerous scars that crisscrossed the prince's body. He stood with his back to her, stripped down to the skin in the middle of the tent lit by four hurricane lamps. On the back of his left shoulder, the mark of slavery remained visible even from a distance. It would have had to be left there deliberately, in light of the many procedures available to him to remove or alter such a scar. She might have been able to guess why, but she was too afraid of being right to fully shape that thought.

The girls began wiping him down with a cloth, dipped and washed in scented water that smelled like a mixture of sage and mint. The bucket required change with almost every limb they cleaned.

The blood of her people, she thought, washed away so quickly, so effortlessly, as if the massacre and the pile of dead bodies outside could be so easily forgotten. She had seen him in battle. Everyone had. A dark figure atop a black horse, snapping

precise, efficient commands in the midst of chaos at the front where the White Warriors had congregated. He shouldn't have survived, and yet he was standing here, alive, with no more than a few flesh wounds.

'We will not win this fight,' her father had said on the first day of battle, watching the two armies clash from a cliff overlooking the plain. *'Not unless we have that man on our side or we find a way to kill him. Pray,'* he'd told her, resting his large hand on her shoulder and squeezing it firmly, *'that he never makes it to the throne.'*

The battle had lasted six days. The Vilarhiti had fallen, lost to the Salasar for the first time in the long history of the White Desert. Four large Kha'gans had been disassembled, their survivors taken prisoner down to the last child. Their horses—the very best in the peninsula—had been rounded up to be used by the Rashai army. All the White Warriors had died one way or another, knowing they must not be taken alive for the secret they had sworn to protect. Her father and brothers had been among those deaths. They had died with honor, with pride on the plain of the Vilarhiti.

All because of this man.

The man who was standing naked before her.

Naked and therefore unarmed.

"What is your name, Shakshi?"

The question pulled her from the dangerous thought that had begun to form in her mind. It had been a while since she had

been tossed into the tent, and until this moment, the prince had not acknowledged her presence besides an initial nod to his burly personal guard who'd brought her in. The guard who was still quietly standing behind her with a massive axe strapped to his back.

She drew a breath and straightened. "I see no reason why you need to know."

The two handmaidens, in nearly synchronized motion, made small, startled sounds as though someone had just cursed a god in his own temple. Showing no signs resembling that of his attendees, the prince stilled for a time at her words, and then with the slow, confident step of someone used to dominating every room he occupied, turned, in all his nakedness, to face her.

Acutely aware of the fact that there was a man standing with every inch of him fully exposed before her eyes, she fought the initial instinct to turn away and kept her gaze precisely where it had been. He regarded her for a time, and, as if in answer to her defiance, took a step out of the shadows made by the two handmaidens and into her unobstructed line of sight.

He stood in the middle of the tent, head held arrogantly high, legs firmly apart, and shoulders pulled back to catch the flickering light of the lanterns, inviting—*challenging*—her to look, to see if she had the stomach for it.

It just so happened that apart from being a Bharavi, she had also been an experienced healer, making her no stranger at all to the male or female bodies. She sneered a little at the

attempt to intimidate her and proceeded to scrutinize—as she had been invited to do—the figure being displayed before her.

Moderately tall and built to the exact proportions from which a sculptor might choose to render his masterpiece, the prince's hard, compact muscles revealed years of training in both combat and endurance. His skin, burnt by the recent exposure to the sun and made substantially darker than the average Rashai, was covered in enough scars to rival any experienced White Warrior she knew. He wasn't a big man, not remotely close to his giant bodyguard behind her, but she knew without having to see it put to the test that he would be a match for some of their best wrestlers with those broad shoulders and saddle-hardened thighs. The fact that this man who was about to be handed the Salasar and all its power was so well-endowed in every way was hard, depressing evidence of how unfair the gods could be.

In another place, at another time, and given different circumstances, she thought she might have been able to admire such qualities in a man as capable as this. But here and now he was her enemy, the murderer responsible for the death of her family, and the monster she wanted to see dead. She detested him for what he was, for the detached respect and admiration her father had harbored for his enemy, and for the warmth on her cheeks that was not from the heat of the fire.

“So you do speak Rashai,” he said at length, looking at her with keen interest.

She resisted the urge to bite her lip. No point in denying

it. He had asked for her name in Rashai and she had responded without thinking. "I speak four languages," she replied in Samarran.

He nodded, thought for a moment, and picked up the conversation in fluent Khandoor. "You are schooled, then, in linguistics?"

"No more than in history, geography, and mathematics," she responded, this time, in formal Shakshi. "We are not savages or uneducated camel herders, despite what your incompetent informers might have told you. Do you," she asked, switching back to Rashai, "need me to translate?" She had, after all, thrown in some difficult words on purpose for a chance to see that arrogance subdued a little.

It didn't touch him. Not even a little.

"What does *jamanya* mean?" he asked with casual curiosity, in the way one might inquire from a cook the ingredients he used.

"*Djemanya*," she corrected in Rashai, out of spite. "Incompetent."

"*Djemanya*," he repeated, this time in perfect pronunciation. She could see him taking a note of the word in his mind, and was sure he would remember it for next time. She was also sure her master linguist would have wanted to adopt him had he been one of their own.

"Leave us." He turned to the girls and dismissed them. They promptly obeyed.

The prince, still clad only in his own skin, took three steps forward to stand before her. He paused for a time, watching her quietly as if waiting for a chance to catch something she might let slip. She forced herself to remain still, holding his gaze, despite the awareness that the distance between his entirely naked body and hers was no more than a hand-width away—her hand, to be precise. The thought of backing away had crossed her mind several times, but only over her dead body would she allow him to intimidate her to that point, with or without his clothes on.

There would be nothing, no one at all to stop him from whatever he wanted to do to her. That reality, too, had always been there in her consciousness, pressing down on her every time she turned a corner. He would do what it took to get what he wanted, to force her to reveal the secret that would bring down the White Desert—the same secret she had vowed to protect, no matter how vile or unbearable the torture he put her through.

The prince leaned toward her and reached out to rest his hand on something behind her ear. She closed her eyes at the sudden disappearance of space between them and braced herself for the nightmares to come.

"Don't worry," he said, tugging on the robe hanging behind her and proceeding to cover himself with it. "I'm not as incompetent as my men, whatever you may think of me."

It came out of her without thinking, thrown together by the shame of having allowed herself to be played by her enemy—the response she would have considered unwise had she

been more calm and composed, only now she found she couldn't stop. "You are just as foul and as despicable as your men. That is what I think of you."

The axe touched her neck the instant she finished the sentence. The guard—who was as large as a bear and looked like one—had been quick to respond despite his gigantic size.

"You will bow and apologize before I take off your head, Shakshi!" The tone was raw, etched with genuine anger in every word, as if he'd been personally insulted—or his mother had been.

She kept her eyes leveled on the prince, ignoring the blade at her throat. She had not been raised to fear death or men, and she wasn't going to start now just because her Kha'gan had fallen. Death, in any case, was a gift to be desired at this point in her life.

"I am a Bharavi," she said, "daughter to the Kha'a of the largest Kha'gan in the Vilarhiti. I bow to no one but my Kha'a. You do not outrank me here, or anywhere on our side of the peninsula. If you want submission, seek it on your own land."

The blow that followed sent her crashing against the wall to crumple at the prince's feet. She wiped the blood off her lips with the back of her hand before turning to glare at the giant who'd just slapped her with his massive palm, daring him to finish the job with that axe. It would have been a quick, painless death, and just what she needed had the beast been less sensitive to his master's need to keep her alive. He was, unfortunately,

fully aware of such a need, judging from how hard he was struggling not to hack her to pieces.

"That's enough, Ghaul," said the prince with no more than casual amusement in his eyes. "Leave us. I will speak to this Bharavi alone."

"My lord...."

"Do as I say. Or do you find me incapable of defending myself against a girl?" The tone was mild and considerate, one she hadn't heard him use with the others. They must go back a long way, these two. The giant Samarran—she figured from the red hair and the face tattoo—seemed to have held a special status among the prince's subjects and was apparently tolerated much more.

"No, my lord, of course not," Ghaul replied. To her disappointment, he offered a quick bow and headed reluctantly toward the exit.

"And Ghaul." The prince called him as he was halfway through the door. "Have that wound on your arm looked after. We have a long ride tomorrow. You fought well today."

She looked at his arm, saw the blood seeping through the dark fabric, and wondered if the prince had possessed a prior knowledge of that injury or if he was simply that observant. The latter being true could complicate many things for her.

Ghaul, beaming now like a fifth hurricane lamp at the compliment, sketched an elaborate bow and left the tent.

Power, intelligence, a highly disciplined army, and men

loyal beyond his post who seemed to consider him a god to be worshipped. She was beginning to understand her father's words at that moment, why he'd considered this man such a threat. If he was difficult to deal with now, what would they do when he had full control of the Salasar?

"Can you stand?" He held out his hand.

She ignored it and rose to her feet.

The prince smiled. "Take a seat." He gestured at a chair by a table where food and drink had been laid. On it were a few flat breads, some cheese, a small serving of local fruits, and a pitcher each of wine and water, both made of plain, unadorned silver.

She swept her eyes around the tent and noticed the practicality of the furnishing. It offered comfort and elegance, but never to the point of being vain. He wore no jewelry besides a signet ring. His hands were those of a man used to wielding weapons on a daily basis. There was nothing soft about this prince who should have been no more than a sheltered, spoiled, over-privileged imbecile had he been raised in the Tower like all the others. Instead, they'd thrown him into prison, given him a reason to fight, and the hell of Sabha had spat out this exceedingly capable creature who had destroyed her home.

"Let us talk then," he said formally, "like two civilized people on equal ground. Or should I say, man to man?"

She regarded him for a time, searching for a sign of mockery in his expression, and didn't find it.

Adjusting her robe to cover the torn dress underneath, she drew herself up straight and seated herself on the opposite chair from the one he'd suggested. He smiled at that, then picked up the pitcher to pour himself a drink.

"Do you take wine?" he asked, but filled another goblet anyway. "It's the finest Samarran we have on reserve. The texture is superb, if a little too intense from being in the heat." He handed her the drink. "It washes down blood rather well. Perfect for the occasion, don't you agree?"

She took the offered cup. "Perhaps," she said. "Is it poisoned?"

He took a seat on the opposite side of the table and leaned back on the cushion, turning the goblet in his hand. "It could be," he said. "But then you're not afraid of dying, are you? That is the Shakshi way of life, is it not? *All lives come to be by the will of Ravi, and through death rejoin her in the land of eternal life and ever-flowing springs.*"

Dark, intelligent eyes stared at her in a challenge as he quoted, in near perfect Shakshi, a phrase from the *Passage of Life*.

"Ah, the prince reads." She raised the cup, sipped it twice, made sure he could see it. "Or is heresy a thing in the Black Tower these days?"

"I'm afraid I'm not pious enough to be considered a heretic for any religion, but my position does require that I show faith in Rashar. As for reading, what was it they say... *One must*

first gain a place in the enemy's mind before he seeks to gain more?"

"*And stray not from the path of righteousness,*" she said, taking another sip of the drink. The prince, as it turned out, didn't simply read, but read excessively. *The Secret Journal of Eli the Conqueror* was not a tome that was easy to come by, or one that could be found lying about for a prince to pick up out of boredom. The text itself had also been written in old Khandoor and was considered one of the most difficult to decipher. She wasn't sure what disturbed her more, the fact that he seemed to be everything she would look for in a man, or that he had everything she'd long feared her enemy would possess.

He made a small sound in his throat when she finished quoting the rest of the passage, took his time to reach for a single grape from the plate between them, and rolled it back and forth between his fingers. "I'm impressed," he said.

She smiled and tried not to wince when he bit into the fruit. She could almost feel the cold of his teeth, perhaps also the heat of his tongue. "You should have poisoned the wine," she said. "It's a waste of time and effort to think you can get the location of Citara from me."

He wiped his hand on a napkin nearby and gave her the smile of an adult to a child. "I'll tell you what's wasteful," he said. "The lives of our soldiers who died today. The cost of sustaining a campaign in the desert when it could have been used to build roads and dams and feed a city during a famine. The

damage of battles that must be rebuilt. How long have we been at war, do you think? Two hundred years? Perhaps more? How many lives have been lost, how many more will be if this continues?" He paused, took a sip of the drink and placed it back down on the table, leaning slightly forward as he did. "We can end it now, you and I, on this table, over wine. Give me Citara, and I will give your people the freedom to continue living in the desert. It will be as before. No one has to die. Nothing has to change. I give you my word."

She smiled thinly at that. It sounded like a handsome offer, as handsome as the man who'd offered it on the surface, and just as poisonous underneath. "Nothing has to change," she repeated, "except that we bend our knees, allow your people to pass through the desert without fees and settle on our lands without tributes. Let me guess." She paused to sip the wine. "You will take control of our oasis and tax us for our water and all our trades. Our children will be sold as slaves if we refuse, our men killed for breaking the slightest of your laws. Tell me, is this the freedom you intend to give us? To continue living on *our* land?"

"In exchange for peace and protection, yes," he added, matter-of-factly.

"We are adequately at peace and well protected, and would continue to be if you were content with your side of the desert. What you offer is rotten from the inside. I'm not naive enough to fall for your empty promises. You are wasting both

your words and your wine."

"Am I?" he asked, not smiling now. The playful, amused expression was gone, replaced by something colder and much more disturbing than what she had seen already that evening. "You speak of peace when your Kha'gans continue to fight among themselves every time an opportunity arises. The Shakshis have been killing each other for centuries with or without interference from the Salasar. This land you are trying so hard to protect has tasted more blood by your own doing than what we have shed in the past two hundred years. We do not wage war on our own people, you do. Who's being naive now?"

It was true, and no one alive in the White Desert or the Black would deny the long existence of conflicts between the Kha'gans. Territory disputes happened on a daily basis, and the Kha'as did nothing but plan to attack each other for power. They were a violent people. She wouldn't deny it, no one would, but it was who they were as much as it had been their way of life for centuries. Right or wrong, it wasn't for anyone to judge, and definitely not for a Rashai who understood nothing of life in the desert.

"It is the price of freedom you will never understand," she said sharply, allowing the anger she'd been holding to slip through, "as long as your people cower behind walls and abandon all their pride for the comfort of the city and the meaningless wealth it gives. You can cage an animal until it feels content and call it an offering of peace and protection, but that is

not who we will ever allow ourselves to be. We will fight each other because we are free to fight, and we'll take our chances in these mountains even if it means a lifetime of struggles and conflicts for a life without boundaries. You speak of freedom when you have no clue what it truly means. That is why you have never been able to conquer the White Desert, why you never will. I will have more, if you don't mind." She placed the cup down on the table and pushed it forward. "It does go well with blood."

He stilled for a time, watching her intently from across the table. She returned the gesture, waiting and making herself ready for the next blow.

It never came.

He reached for the pitcher to refill her cup, then his, before leaning back on the chair. "I take it you won't give up Citara even if I vow to kill every living soul among the prisoners here today?"

It was spoken in the most unanimated, practical tone possible, as if they'd been discussing a transaction concerning a sack of grain. She swallowed the lump in her throat at the image of more women and children being executed on that plain, shut her eyes to quiet the different voices in her head, and replied firmly, resolutely, "No."

It would mean more deaths, tremendously more, if the Rashai ever found Citara. The sacred city, the beating heart of the White Desert, was where all the collected tributes were sent,

where the wealth of every Kha'gan was kept and guarded. The city traded directly with Makena—the last independent nation in the peninsula, protected from the Salar's army by a treacherous mountain range and the White Desert itself. Makena's riches supplied the Kha'gans. Destroy Citara and one destroyed the White Desert as a whole and for good.

The Salasar had always known this, of course, but for centuries, Citara's location had been her people's most well-guarded secret. Apart from Bharavis and oracles, only the White Warriors who delivered the tributes and brought back traded goods to the Kha'gans were allowed to enter the city. All took an oath of secrecy upon entering the gates. The punishment for breaking such an oath was an execution of three entire generations of one's bloodline.

Everyone chose their own death over that punishment. It was the price and weight of becoming a White Warrior, of wearing the white robe called the zikh, and why her father and brothers, along with all zikh-clad warriors, had not been captured alive. They fought to their deaths or killed themselves before being put to torture to protect its secret location.

She would have to find a way to join them soon before she, too, was put to torture. He would never have it, not from her.

There was a small knife on the table for the purpose. She had been trying, despite her need to reach for it, to not let her gaze linger too long on the blade.

The prince reached over to pick another grape, toying

with it as he had done a few minutes ago before putting it in his mouth. "And if I throw you out there as a reward for my men?"

"It would be predictable," she said, "and disappointing." He might kill her for that, if she was lucky.

The prince responded with a chuckle. He rose from the chair and walked over to her side, seating himself on the edge of the table. "You are aware," he said, "that it's never a good idea to leave a man with so few options."

"Or a woman." She raised her chin to meet his eyes. "Understand me. No Rashai will ever set foot in Citara. You will not have the White Desert, in this life or the next. That is my answer. The wine," she said, emptying her cup and placing it down on the table, intentionally near the plate and the knife, "was brilliant."

He smiled, and in the small window of time when he turned back to the pitcher, she leaped off her chair and reached for the blade, making her decision in that split second. The silver tip of the knife gleamed as she plunged it forward, aiming at the spot she knew would kill him in an instant.

Losing none of his composure, the prince slipped out of the way with the ease of a cat and positioned himself behind her. His large, strong hand closed around her neck and slammed her back down against the table as if she weighed no more than a child.

In the same instant, Ghaul burst into the tent, axe raised and ready to draw blood. Still holding her down with an iron

grip, the crown prince of Rasharwi raised his free arm and held up a finger. Ghaul lowered his weapon, gave a quick bow, and left the tent without another word.

He turned back to her, eyes flashing with something frighteningly hard. "I could take you." The prince closed his grip around her throat, the searing heat from his hand seeping through her skin and into her bones. "Right here, right now, were I in a slightly different mood this evening."

She struggled to break free, to breathe, her hands clawing desperately at the arm that was pinning her down. It made no difference. He was a rock on top of her and his fingers tightened the more she tried.

"I *have* thought of it, from the moment I heard you recite Eli," he continued, his chest heaving visibly from what appeared to be a mixture of rage and excitement, perhaps also desire. "But I wanted to give you a chance, to talk and discuss in a more civilized manner, to see if we could end this war without being barbaric to each other. Apparently, you disagree."

He took a sharp breath and exhaled, as if to still a need that was threatening to overcome his reason. It subsided, though not completely. His body still stiffened, the muscles on his arm unnecessarily tight despite the small effort needed to hold her down.

"And perhaps you're right," he said. "Perhaps I don't understand your people well enough to conquer the White Desert. Perhaps there is also something I can do about my own

ignorance."

In a single, forceful motion, he dragged her down to the edge of the table where he'd been standing, pinning her back to the wood, and holding her in place with his thighs pressing against her hips. The hand around her throat flexed as he lowered his face to her, lips hovering just above her ear.

"I'm not going to kill you, or send you out there to be defiled by my soldiers." The words, spoken in a mere whisper, burned like fire against her skin. "You will live, with me, in the Black Tower, as *my* prisoner, *my* Bharavi, *my* wife. You will bear me a son, and he'll grow, as a Rashai, a prince of Rasharwi, who will return to raid your land in the name of the Salasar. We will see, you and I, if you and your people truly cannot be conquered. I will do this thing, or you can give up Citara, here and now, and no one has to die. This is your last chance. What will it be, Bharavi?"

She gathered her breath, despite the way her stomach turned at the thought of what he intended to do to her, and delivered the words she knew would lead to exactly that outcome. "I would sooner kill my own child than let you have such satisfaction, you unimaginable monster!"

She knew something about what would follow, had expected it when she decided to aim the knife at him and not her own heart in the case she failed. What she hadn't anticipated was how far he would go, how inventive he would be in making her pay for such a mistake.

He smiled in a way that made her skin crawl and her hair stand on end. "Allow me to show you the kind of monster I can become. *Jarem!*"

In the time it took a man to take three steps forward, the same advisor who'd been with him in the general's tent emerged promptly at the entrance. "My lord." The salute was executed in a precise, spotless manner, as if it had been the Salar himself he was addressing.

"How many prisoners do we hold?" He'd released her by the time Jarem entered, and was now pouring himself a new drink as he spoke.

She pushed herself off the table, adjusting her clothes absentmindedly, and realized that her hands were trembling. The prince, now standing a few steps away, watched her from the corner of his eye as he waited for the answer—one she wished she hadn't been there to hear.

"Eight thousand two hundred and fifty-three, my lord."

Eight thousand prisoners. She wrapped her fingers instinctively around the back of a chair for balance. She was going to be sick.

"How many women and children?"

The figures, given to the prince as if he had been reading off a scroll, had also been offered to the last digit.

The prince nodded, sipped his wine and delivered a command as precise as the numbers he'd been given. "Pick one of the women and give her to the soldiers. When they're done

with her, have her killed and her head put on a spike. Tell the other prisoners one of them will be killed in a similar manner every time their precious Bharavi disobeys or so much as raises her voice at me. If she takes her own life, or mine, everyone will die, all eight thousand of them. I will have it known it is one of their own who will be responsible for their deaths. I want this done tonight, close by, where she can hear it."

Jarem paused a little, obviously finding the command a cause for concern. "My lord, the Salar may wish to sell a number of these prisoners."

"He can wish," said the prince, smiling sardonically at his advisor now, "or he can buy them from me. The Vilarhiti is mine if I can take it, and so are these prisoners. That was the agreement. They are to be given quarters among the deserters when we return to Rasharwi. I want them untouched and kept healthy for my new Bharavi wife to slaughter. Go. And have someone bring her a change of clothing before she freezes to death."

Jarem smiled, evidently proud of his prince. He offered another perfect bow and left the tent.

Still gripping the chair, she watched him go to execute the command with a nauseated feeling that drained all her strength. Those words, a promise of a life-long torture, of being stripped bare of the freedom she so loved, had taken from her the last valuable thing she'd intended to keep to her grave. All because she had made one simple mistake with the knife that was

now lying at her feet. She should have been dead, and now even that much freedom had been taken from her.

They were alone again. Two figures, in a simple tent lit by four lanterns, holding the fate of the peninsula in their palms. He turned, picked up the knife, and walked over to sit on the edge of the table, exactly where he'd been before.

"I'm curious," he said, turning the blade back and forth in his hand, "as to how life is measured in the White Desert. What gives you the right to decide that the lives of eight thousand people—or one—was a worthy sacrifice for Citara, for *your* idea of freedom?"

He flipped the knife over and offered it to her by the handle. "Here's a chance to prove your point. Take the knife, bury it into your own heart or in mine. Decide again, as deliberately as before, how willing you are to spend the lives of those people based purely on what you believe in. Do you think they still want to live, now that they are my prisoners? Isn't that why I will never be able to take the White Desert? Because all of them would rather die than live without your so-called freedom?" He pushed the knife closer to her hand, daring her to take it. "Show me, Bharavi, how strongly you believe that to be true."

How, she thought, looking down at the knife that was gleaming temptingly in his hand, did one measure a life—or eight thousand of them—against an ideal? None of them would ever return to their homeland now, not after being branded as prisoners of the Salasar. Their lives in the White Desert would be

forfeited for them and their children, and for generations to come. In ten or twenty years they would be considered residents of Rasharwi, their knowledge of culture and tradition lost behind the enemy's walls. Their spirit, honor, and love of freedom would be gone like the ashes of their homes that were still scattering in the wind.

In the eyes of Citara and its Devis, they would be considered lost and better off dead. No one would blame her if she killed herself now, for her pride, her honor, for the love of her people and what she believed they represented. It would send a strong message: that they could not be conquered, that Citara would never fall. What were eight thousand lives, against twenty times more, against a thousand years of tradition and generations that would be lost if she failed to uphold their way of life today?

But what if she was wrong? What if all they wanted was peace and prosperity, or a chance to live free from the fear of being raided, of not enough food and water, for their children to grow up safe and sound behind walls? Who was she to decide that they were no longer her people to protect if they became Rashais, that eight thousand lives were worthless the moment they stopped representing her ideals? They were her people now, and they would still be her people tomorrow and the day after. She, too, would never return to the White Desert, not after this. Would that make her less than what she had been the day before? She had no right to decide such things. Not without becoming the same monster she wanted to see dead.

There was no choice left for her, or none that she could see. There would never be again, for the rest of her life. Not after this.

Letting out the breath she had been holding, she closed her eyes and forced herself to look straight at him: to remember the moment, the hour, and the face of the man who had done this to her. She swore, inwardly, that she would live for as long as it took, even if she had to crawl and beg for her life, to see him die.

"I thought so." The prince took the knife away and placed it on the table. "You think I'm a monster, but are we so different, you and I? I'll kill for what I believe in, and so will you."

He rose to his feet, his shadow looming over her bruised and beaten frame. "You think you're better than me, and your people better than mine," he continued, his thick, penetrating voice burning deep into her memory. "I'll show you just how corruptible they can be, how easy it will be for me to crush them just like all the others. I *have* conquered the White Desert, even if only a small part of it, here, today, and I will have more. The Vilarhiti is mine; so are its eight thousand survivors who are now citizens of Rashawi, and so are you. You *have* been defeated, and from this day onward you will live and die by my command. On your knees, Bharavi!"

And that night, on the plain below the majestic snow-capped peaks of the Vilarhiti that had stood strong and unconquered for centuries, she could see it all come tumbling down as she—the last free soul of the valley, the first Bharavi to

have ever been captured alive and forced to bend the knee—
knelt, in all her shattered pride and honor, to the man who would
become the supreme ruler of the Salasar.

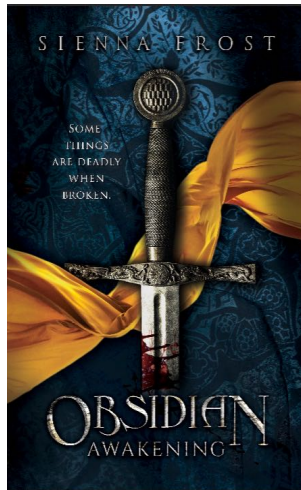
"Good," said the prince. "I hope you are now sufficiently
motivated to give me your name."

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