

Desert Stars (sample)

by Joe Vasicek

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Note to This Edition

The following sample chapters are taken from the unedited manuscript of *Desert Stars*, a forthcoming novel in the Gaia Nova series. They are provided in connection with [the *Desert Stars* kickstarter campaign](#) running through November 2011. Those who contribute to the campaign will receive the following rewards:

\$10 or more: A copy of the finished ebook in all formats, with your name listed under "special thanks" at the front.

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The goal is to raise \$600 by November 30th, 2011. This will cover editing costs and subsidize the cover art. All other costs will be covered by the author.

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Prologue

The boy felt scared, more scared than he had ever yet been in his young life. It was because of the strange noises in the bulkheads and the way the walls and floor shook, but mostly because everyone around him, even his parents, were scared, and he didn't know why.

The lights in the hallway flickered as he wandered out of his cabin, and the whine of the engine rose higher and higher. It wasn't especially loud, but didn't sound right; the boy knew that much at least. On the other side of the ship, a door hissed as it slid open. The boy turned and saw his uncle and three of his cousins come running out of the bridge, eyes wide with fear.

"She's gonna blow," shouted his uncle. "Let's move!"

The boy stood rooted to the spot, his legs frozen in terror. He watched as his cousins ran to the emergency escape chutes—the ones his parents had adamantly told him never to play in—and dove through.

A groaning noise came through the bulkheads—the terrible sound of metal on metal. He closed his eyes and covered his ears with his hands, and the floor itself dropped out from under him. For a frighteningly disorienting moment, gravity vanished, leaving him floating weightless in the corridor. The taste of vomit filled his mouth and he screamed in fright, but without gravity he could only kick his legs uselessly beneath him.

The moment passed, and he fell to the hard tile floor. Tears of terror clouded his vision, and his arms and legs shook so bad he hardly noticed that the floor was shaking. The ship lurched, sending him sprawling on his hands and knees.

Hands grabbed him underneath his arms, lifting him up and carrying him away. He glanced up and recognized the face of his mother, pulling him towards the escape chutes.

"Mommy," he cried, "I'm scared."

"I know, dear," she told him. "Mommy needs you to be extra brave right now."

The boy nodded. Though his mother tried to sooth him, he could tell that she was just as frightened as he was. That terrified him more than even the loss of gravity.

"Come on!" the boy's father shouted, further down the corridor. "Any minute now, and

—”

The lights flickered again, and an explosion sounded from deep within the bulkheads of the ship. A low hiss sounded behind them, and not from a door opening.

“Oh God,” the boy’s mother cried. “Is that—”

As if in answer, a mighty wind howled throughout the ship, filling the boy’s ears with its roar. It whipped at his hair and tugged at his clothes, sucking him away like a monster from the bottom of a giant drain. Somehow, he knew that in only a few moments, they would all be dead.

Hands grabbed him, lifting him up toward the escape chute. He screamed, but the roar of the wind was so loud he could barely hear his own voice. His mother slipped something around his neck, and suddenly he was falling through the chute, into darkness.

He came to a stop in a snug little space, closed in on all sides like a glove for his body. A holoscreen lay in front of his face, with a pair of flight sticks and a miniature control board. The boy gripped the flight sticks with his hands and stared dumbly at the screen, barely able to process anything that was happening.

A distant puffing noise sounded through the ultra-soft walls, and then he was falling again—only this time, he couldn’t move his arms or legs. He was locked into position, cushioned on all sides and only able to use his hands.

Fighting back panic, he watched as the holoscreen flickered and came to life. It showed an image of space, the stars spinning wildly as noiseless flashes of light burst into being before fading into after-image amid the blackness of space. He squeezed the dual flight sticks and moved them like he was playing a computer game, but it was no use—he couldn’t equalize.

Mommy, the boy cried inwardly. Panic swept over him, and his hands and arms began to shake. He screamed, but in the tightly enclosed space, there was no one to hear him.

The glowing orb of a planet came into view, filling the screen with its brilliant light. The boy squinted as the display adjusted, showing a brown and yellow landscape framed by a curved horizon. It danced with the spinning stars, moving so quickly that everything was a blur.

A red light started blinking in the corner of the screen, and words flashed across the display. The boy didn’t know how to read, but he knew it was something bad. He tried again with the flight sticks, but that only sent him spinning in a new direction.

Without warning, the screen switched off, and the entire capsule filled with thick, pink foam. The boy gasped and tried to shield himself with his hands, but before he could cover his

face it hardened around his body, freezing him into position.

The foam covered his mouth and face, but was just porous enough to allow him to breath—in short bursts, however, because his stomach was severely pinched. The spinning grew worse, until he wanted to throw up. As if from a great distance, he heard a muffled roar through the bulkheads. Everything around him grew increasingly warm, until he began to sweat. He tried to open his mouth to cry out, but his jaw was locked too tightly in place—he couldn't move anything, not even a finger.

Mommy! he mentally screamed. *Where are you?*

As if in answer, something popped behind him. Inertia threw him forward, but the foam held him in place, so that all he felt was a tremor through his body. Gravity returned, so that he felt as if he were dangling upside down from his feet. Blood rushed to his head, and he swooned, redness clouding his vision.

Then, like a punch to his face, the shock of impact hit him, causing his bones to shudder. He spun even faster than before, but the foam still held him. It felt as if someone had turned him inside out, though—as if his stomach had swollen and turned to mush.

As the spinning gradually came to a stop, tears streamed from the boy's eyes. The roaring had died down, leaving him encased in near-absolute silence. That frightened him almost more than the noise.

A sharp hiss filled his ears as the foam grew sticky and porous all around him. He thrashed against it, pulling his hands and arms free as it turned into a sticky, foul-smelling soup. Behind him, a hatch opened, and he struggled toward it, spitting to get the nasty taste out of his mouth.

He crawled out and rose to his feet, blinking in the harsh light of a foreign sun. The hot wind bit him as it blew in his face, stinging his face with sand. He raised a hand to his eye and looked around him at the alien landscape.

A lonely, rust-red desert extended in all directions, with nothing but sand and rock and distant craggy peaks to meet his eye. The sky shone a hazy yellow, completely unlike the clean white light of his family's ship. A new fear passed through the boy—the fear of being alone.

As he stared at the land around him, he reached down to see what his mother had slipped around his neck. It was a pendant with a little black case at the end. He felt it between his fingers and knew somehow that he would never see her again.

Tears clouded his eyes, and he screamed and wailed for someone, anyone—but in the harsh desert waste, there was none to hear him.

Book I: Dome and Desert

Part I

Chapter 1

The desert wind howled across the barren, unforgiving landscape, threatening a magnificent sandstorm. All along the horizon, great craggy peaks towered like rows of misshapen fingers, thrusting upward from the rocky, lifeless ground toward the hazy yellow sky. From his perch high atop the mountain overlook, Jalil scanned the rust-red desert with his binoculars. The hot desert wind pelted his face with sand and dust, making him pull his checkered headscarf tighter over his mouth and nose, but still he stood watch, searching for any sign of humanity—welcome or otherwise.

“Jalil!” called out his older stepsister from behind him. “What are you doing up there? Storm’s coming—let’s go!”

“What?” Jalil called back, still scanning the landscape.

“I said, let’s go—yallah!”

Jalil lowered his binoculars and glanced over his shoulder at Tiera. Her long black hair tossed wildly in the wind, tied back with a single gray bandana; she was not the kind of girl who cumbered herself with veils and headscarves when there was man’s work to be done. With a look of impatience, she squinted her eyes against the wind, one hand on her hip with the other clenched at her side.

“Just a little longer,” he said. “We’ve got time—they might still make it.”

“But we need to break camp,” she shouted against the wind. “By Allah, we’ve been here for days, and with that storm bearing down on us we’ll be lucky not to spend another.”

“Ten minutes,” he said. “Just give me ten more minutes.”

Tiera clucked irritably and shook her head, but she offered no further protest. Jalil turned and resumed his watch while she climbed back down to the camp.

With his binoculars, he scanned the valley below, ignoring the numerous dust devils as they danced across the sandy wash. The pass was just out of view on the right; anyone coming

through the mountains in this direction would first have to pass over the wide open valley before him.

Inevitably, however, his gaze drifted to the horizon. On a clear day from this ridge, it was possible to see the wreckage of the starship that had brought him to this world. Desert tribesmen had long ago scrapped every useful piece of the derelict for parts, leaving only the sun-bleached hull. Jalil could see it in his mind even now, the wreckage jutting out from the desert like the fossilized ribs of an impossibly huge creature. Sometimes a trader passing through would ask him about it, and his answer was always the same: only Allah knows.

And in some ways, perhaps that was true. He remembered precious little of his life before the desert, and what few memories he still possessed faded ever faster with each passing year. But in other ways, the wreckage proclaimed a truth that Jalil could not ignore. He sensed it in the way that men of other tribes eyed his too-fair skin and bright blond hair; the way that traders and overland merchants asked him where he was from, as if the desert were not his home. And indeed, that was the truth that the wreckage proclaimed—that he was not from this world.

Distracted by his idle thoughts, Jalil didn't notice the rising column of dust until the first rover dashed out across the sandy wash.

A bolt of fear and excitement shot through him like an electric shock, and he dropped to his stomach, keeping his profile low across the ridge line. Another vehicle darted out from among the rocks—and another, and another after that. Together, they fanned out and began their climb toward the pass. Though the magnified field of vision danced before his view, he saw enough to identify the shapes as caravaneers—long range, micronuclear-powered dune buggies built to carry entire tribes across the desert.

Entire tribes—or roving bandit armies.

“Tiera!” Jalil called out loudly. “Someone’s down there!”

“What? Where?” In only a few seconds, she was at his side, panting slightly as she reached for the binoculars.

“Here,” he said, handing them to her and pointing at the rising dust columns. “See that? Down there.”

“How many are there?”

“I don’t know—at least four.”

Tiera grunted. “Probably more, though. You think they’re the Jabaliyn?”

“That, or bandits.”

She returned the binoculars. “Try to reach them on the shortwave. I’ll finish packing our supplies.”

“Right,” said Jalil, rising to his feet. Together, they raced down the rocky path to the narrow landing where they’d made camp.

“Storm, eh,” came the shaky voice of old Zeid as Jalil stepped inside the dusty, sun-faded camp tent. “Storm coming—feel it in my bones, I do.”

“Has anyone called over the shortwave, Uncle Zeid?” asked Jalil. Wrinkled, toothless, and half blind, there wasn’t much old Zeid could do except listen for chatter on the radio—that, and act as their chaperone, which he did with all the vigor that his ancient body could muster.

“Shortwave, eh?”

Jalil ignored him and grabbed the transmitter, crouching down on the old, tattered camp rug to adjust the receiver frequency. The wind made the fabric of the tent ripple with wild abandon, but the sound of static drowned out the wind as the green and red bars danced across the ancient equipment’s dusty interface.

“Hello?” Jalil called into the transmitter. “Hello? Who’s there?”

“—you hear me?”

“Yes,” said Jalil, fine tuning the receiver to get a clearer signal. “I am Jalil bin Sathi al-Najmi.”

“And I am Abu Mahdi Hamza al-Jabaliyn. May the peace of Earth be upon you.”

“And upon you as well,” said Jalil, reciting the traditional greeting of the desert.

“Are you on the pass?” Hamza’s voice cackled. “The storm is on our heels—we cannot make it to the Najmi camp without your guidance.”

“Forgive me, brother,” said Jalil, “but how do I know the truth of what you say?” In the deep desert, where strength was the only law and tribe the only universal bond, honesty was sometimes nothing more than a luxury between friends.

The wind howled as Tiera opened the tent door and stepped inside. Without a word, she picked up a pair of old, rusted camp chairs and hastily rolled up the stiff rug beneath them, hauling them out as she broke camp. She’d already packed the cots, mattresses, and stove—only two small chests remained, besides the shortwave and some other assorted electronics.

“What can we offer as proof?” Hamza’s voice came over the wind and static. “We have

come to wed our son Mazhar bin Amr to your sister, Lena bint Sathi.”

“Indeed,” said Jalil. “And where is the tent you have prepared for her?”

“We have not prepared any tent,” said Hamza. “Mazhar is to stay in the Najmi camp, until the question of her father’s inheritance has been resolved.”

A smile broadened across Jalil’s face at Hamza’s words. Normally, the bride moved in with the family of her husband; however, because Sheik Sathi of the Najmi camp had only daughters and nieces, special provisions had been made. Few things were normal in a camp without sons.

“Indeed,” said Jalil. “Wait for our signal on this frequency, brother. We’ll meet you on the other side of the pass.”

Tiera parted the tent door and stepped inside, letting in another gust of dusty wind. “Is it them?” she asked.

“Yes, it is,” he said, switching off the radio as he rode to his feet. “They’ll meet us on the other side of the ridge.”

“Well, let’s move then—yallah!”

She closed the camp burner and hauled it out, leaving the tent door flapping in the wind. Jalil chuckled as he collapsed the antenna and packed the shortwave in its ornately painted tin box, fingering the pendant he always kept around his neck. *Soon*, he told himself, his grin widening with anticipation. *Soon, and I’ll be on my way home.*

Home—wherever that may be.

* * * * *

The wind picked up as they rode across the desert, blasting Jalil’s face with the oppressive heat. The open-air caravaner was more frame than solid metal, with dusty blue tassels dangling from the bar above the windshield and a sun-faded arabesque red rug stretched across the dash. Tiera rode hard and fast, making the cracked leather seats bounce and the tassels dance. As the rust-red landscape sped by, Jalil squinted against the wind and held onto an overhead bar. Behind, nearly a dozen caravaners from the Jabaliyn convoy followed them,

racing the coming storm.

After nearly an hour of hard driving across the rocky plain, the camp gradually came into view. At first, it appeared as nothing more than a single bump on the horizon, surrounded by flat, empty desert. As they came nearer, though, the outline of familiar structures gradually took shape. First came the top of the camp's windmill, the ten-foot blades spinning as fast as Jalil had ever seen. Next came the colorful tents; though the fabric was faded by the harsh desert sun and caked with dust, their fanciful white and red designs still stood out against the rust-red rock and dusty ground. Last of all came the heaped stone wall that circled the camp, with the small, portable gun emplacements in the corners. Nearly a dozen people hurried about covering the weapons with heavy tarps, their dark robes billowing in the wind.

With his headscarf wrapped around his mouth and nose to protect him from the dusty air, Jalil swung out of his seat and onto the caravaner's metal frame. Squinting against the wind as the ground rushed beneath him, he pulled out a small submachine gun and fired into the air. A barrage of fireworks and plasma bursts from the camp answered his salute, echoed from behind by a chorus of gunshots and ululating voices as the Jabaliyn tribe answered in turn. Like thunderheads swollen with moisture bursting into rain, the pent up excitement erupted all at once, filling the desert landscape with its joyous noise.

The entire Najmi tribe came out to welcome the Jabaliyn convoy. Sheikh Sathi stood at the head in his richest, most impressive clothes—an ornate red ochre robe, with a maroon, gold-trimmed vest capped with a white and red checkered headscarf. His two wives, Zayne and Sheila, stood at either side, veiled in deep blue and brilliant red. Sheila's seven daughters had gathered out with the women, faces covered with the richest embroidered veils that they possessed. The Sheikh's two younger brothers, who led their own camps nearly a hundred kilometers away, were present too with their families—they must have arrived while Jalil and Tiera were gone.

As Tiera slowed the caravaner to a crawl, Jalil leaped off and pushed through the crowd toward his stepfather. Ululating cries filled the air as friends and family pressed upon him, but he ignored them all until he had made it through.

“Jalil, my son!” said the sheik, embracing him with open arms. “How are you? How is your health? How was your journey?”

“Very well, very well,” said Jalil, loosening his headscarf to kiss his stepfather on both

cheeks.

“The Lord of Earth and Heaven be praised,” Sathi exclaimed. “Now won’t you see to the unloading of our guests’ vehicles? Be quick!”

Jalil hesitated, but before he could say anything, Sheik Amr of the Jabaliyn tribe stepped forward. Sathi’s face immediately lit up, and he embraced his guest as warmly as if they were long lost brothers. With the opportunity gone, Jalil turned and headed for the garage complex. His father had given him an order, and he knew what it would mean if that order wasn’t carried out.

He found the Jabaliyn caravaneers parked inside several wide tents next to the main shop. The Najmi vehicles were parked in an adobe shelter not a hundred yards away; Sathi had specially set them apart to keep their guests from seeing how small and run-down the Najmi fleet actually was. In the high desert, such a sign of weakness was better kept concealed.

Jalil slowed to a walk and pulled his headscarf tighter. The air was hot, and the wind was picking up—they didn’t have much time before the sandstorm hit the camp full force. Inside the tents, the Jabaliyn tribesmen hurriedly unpacked their vehicles. From the looks of it, they were only taking what they absolutely needed for that night.

“Here,” called Jalil, “bring those chests out this way. Those tents are connected to your quarters—we’ll get everything sorted once it’s all inside. Let’s move—yallah!”

“Where was that girl who came with you?” one of the young Jabaliyn men asked.

Jalil cringed, but took pains not to show it. “What girl?”

“You know—the one who drove you here.”

“You must be mistaken; there was no girl with us.”

“But—”

Before the young man could continue, one of his elders tapped him on the shoulder and spoke with him in hushed tones. His face turned red, but he gave Jalil no further trouble.

Jerk, Jalil thought to himself. *Don’t they know better than to probe?* Still, he would have greatly appreciated Tier’s help right about now. Her absence was a painful reminder that he was the only young man in the Najmi camp.

The thought fell over him like a shadow. *They’ll get along all right without me*, he thought to himself, fingering the pendant under his shirt. It was true; Lena’s marriage would secure the tribe a much needed alliance, and settle the question of the inheritance. With another

man around, he would no longer be needed.

Then why did he feel so guilty about leaving?

* * * * *

In short time, they finished unloading the last of the supplies. Jalil showed the Jabaliyn men to their quarters, the guest tents distinctly separate from the main compound.

He walked around the corner toward the family entrance and froze where he stood. A towering wall of brackish dust towered over the horizon like a giant crawling mountain. The nearest edge was only half a mile away, racing toward him with uncanny speed. The wind howled in his ears with savage ferocity, as if the storm were a living thing, a beast of unparalleled strength and ferocity.

Jalil ran up to the door flap marking the family entrance and reached in to pull it aside, but the fabric repelled his hand; the door was sealed. He fumbled unsuccessfully and shouted for help, while behind him, the storm towered ever higher.

The door shook, and a pair of small hands parted the narrow opening. "Let me in!" he shouted, knocking someone over as he pushed his way inside.

"Hello?" came a little girl's voice. Before answering, Jalil turned and sealed the tent door shut. As soon as he fastened the last clasp behind the zip line, the entire wall shook as howling winds pelted the camp with sand.

With a sigh of relief, he turned back around, eyes slowly adjusting to the dim light of the glowlamps. The girl who had let him in was Rina, Sheila's youngest daughter. Barely seven primary lunar years old, she looked up at him with round, innocent eyes.

"Thanks for letting me in," he said. "Is anyone else still outside?"

She shrugged, then ran off giggling.

I'll take that as a no, he decided. Still, he hung around for a moment, just in case.

As he stood by the sealed door, the loud wind shaking the tent walls as if to tear them down, he heard another girl's voice as she approached from the inner corridor.

"What is it, Rina? Who did you—"

She rounded the corner and almost walked into him. Jalil recognized her at once—Mira, the Najmi daughter closest to his own age, and by far the most beautiful. Her long brown hair spilled out over her small, feminine shoulders, head uncovered. They both froze for a second, waiting for the other to speak.

Her eyes grew wide, and her cheeks blushed deep red, bringing out the hue of her gorgeous hazel eyes. “Oh!” she said, hastily wrapping her dark red headscarf. Jalil laughed, breaking the tension of the moment; Mira’s smile was so genuine, even a veil couldn’t hide it.

“Sorry to disturb you,” he said, nodding to her, “but it seems the storm has cut me off.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Mira. She glanced down shyly.

“This is the women’s quarters, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Ah. Well, better warn the others that I’m coming.”

Mira nodded and hurried back the way she’d come while Jalil waited. Since he was one of the family, it wasn’t technically forbidden for him to be in the women’s quarters—but then again, there was a reason why old Zeid acted as chaperone whenever he and Tiera were out alone.

After a few moments, he stepped into the narrow annex and through an old brick doorway into the inner chamber. The noise of the wind outside grew fainter as he passed into a narrow vaulted tunnel, glowlamps casting a dim yellow light along the rough-hewn stone and adobe. Still, with the arabesque rugs spread over the dusty, uneven ground and the ornately embroidered wall hangings, the place felt far from barren.

Although the stone and adobe structures sheltered them so well from the storm, Jalil knew that the camp wasn’t designed to be permanent. At the center of the compound, the windmill operated a pump that pulled up groundwater into a large cistern; when the water was depleted, the family would have to move to another site several dozen miles away. They’d already lived at this place for five primary lunar years, and the cistern was getting low. After another year, they would be forced to move on, letting the wind-operated pump gradually replenish the cistern over the course of the next few decades.

Jalil ducked to step through another doorway and stepped into the small vaulted courtyard at the center of the women’s quarters. Sheila’s older daughters sat clustered around one of the ragged mattress pads that ringed the room, chatting excitedly under the light of several

dozen glowlamps. They glanced up at him as he came in, but soon resumed their conversations.

“Hello,” he said, nodding as he walked over to them. “Have any of you seen Tiera?”

Lena sat on a cushion in the center of the group, dressed in a richly embroidered black silk gown with gold coins dangling from the hem of her headscarf. Surayya, the largest of Sheila’s daughters in spite of the fact that she was only the second oldest, rose to her feet as Jalil approached. She and Mira both had their heads covered, while Amina, the smallest and craftiest of the four, didn’t seem to care one way or the other.

“Tiera?” said Surayya. “I don’t know. Did any of you see her?”

“She’s here,” said Amina. “I saw her come in a few minutes ago.”

“Good,” said Jalil, glad to hear that she was safely in from the storm. “Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“Jalil!” A short, graying woman with an old, wizened face ran over from the far side of the room, arms outstretched. Jalil recognized her at once—it was Zayne, his mother by adoption and Tiera’s mother by birth.

“Hello, mother,” he said. They embraced and kissed each other warmly on both cheeks.

“Jalil, my son from the stars, welcome home! But my, how you stink! You smell even worse than Tiera.”

A flutter of giggles rose from the girls. Jalil’s cheeks burned with embarrassment.

“Mother!” he protested.

“Don’t ‘mother’ me—be a good boy now and wash up. Your father will be expecting you shortly.”

“All right, all right. I’m not a boy anymore, you know.”

Zayne smiled up at him, her wrinkled face beaming. “No, no, my son. To me, you will always be my little boy.”

Jalil inwardly cringed as he thought of his plans to leave the camp once the wedding was over. How would Zayne feel when he was gone? When Tiera was the only child of her own she had left? Even that wouldn’t last forever—as soon as Sathi found a suitable husband for her, Tiera would be gone.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” asked Zayne, one hand on her hip. “Off to the washing room with you!”

The girls laughed again as she chased him from the courtyard, down the narrow hallway

that separated the men's quarters from the women's. Jalil pulled aside the rug door and ducked into the narrow chamber that served as the camp's washing room. A large, metal tank stood propped at an angle in the far corner; the rust-red dirt beneath it was stained dark from runoff. Two spigots in the wall opened to a sink jutting out of the wall, and in the corner next to the sink sat a flat water basin. A shower head jutted out over the basin at eye level, and a white plastic curtain hung from the ceiling, tied off against the wall.

"There," said Zayne from the doorway. "I'll lay your clothes out on the floor while you wash off."

Jalil knew that there was no objecting, so he submitted without further protest and quickly undressed himself once she was gone. When he was down to his sand-worn trousers, he paused to carefully remove the thin chain that hung from his neck. At the end of this chain dangled his pendant—a black plasteel locket, rectangular in shape and no larger than his thumb. He handled it with great care, gently hanging it from a nail in the brick wall.

To anyone else, the little black locket might be just another electronic device, but to Jalil, it could not have been more valuable if it were made of pure, unblemished sapphire. His birth mother had given it to him shortly before he had crashed into the desert. At all times, he kept it on his person, wearing it underneath his clothing, close to his heart. The long years had worn the exterior casing smooth, but it was intact, and that was all that mattered.

Not long now, Jalil told himself as he stroked the black plasteel casing. *Not long before I uncover the secrets you hold.*

Though his body was exhausted from the long ride, he resisted the temptation to savor the shower. Not that he could if he wanted to—the trickle from the spigot was barely sufficient to wash himself. He scrubbed himself down with a chunk of spongerock, splashed the suds off of his body, then pulled down the vacuum to suck up the scarce moisture back into the fluid recycler.

Once he was fully dressed, he slipped the locket back underneath his shirt and returned to the courtyard of the women's quarters. He no sooner stepped inside, however, than he felt as if he had entered a battlefield.

"How could you say such a thing?" Shiela screamed at Tiera, her daughters standing timidly behind her. For her part, Tiera stood alone, arms folded defiantly across her chest, even as she faced the full brunt of Shiela's wrath.

Oh no, Jalil thought to himself. What is it this time?

“Majd asked why we don’t serve some of the strawberries to our guests now,” Tiera said in a cold voice. “I only said it was a good idea.”

“Don’t play games with me, you little brat. You meant a lot more than what you said, and I won’t stand for it—not on the eve of my daughter’s wedding!”

Sheila’s face was a picture of fury. Creases of anger cut across her prematurely aged face, and her eyes blazed with murderous hatred. Mira, Surayya, and Amina stood behind her, while Majd, her second youngest, clung to Sheila’s knees with tears streaking her innocent face. Lena stood by her mother’s side, aloof and yet in the very center of the fray.

“Wait, wait,” said Jalil, stepping between them all. “Please, let’s not start a fight over a misunderstanding.”

“It’s not a misunderstanding,” said Lena, her voice deadly cold.

“Yes!” Sheila screeched, shaking her finger at Tiera. “That bitch openly insulted my daughter!”

“I did nothing of the sort,” said Tiera. Her voice, though calm, carried a sting as focused as a sniper’s sight.

“By Allah! What devil gave you such a liar’s tongue?”

Down by Sheila’s knees, Majd began to wail.

“Please!” shouted Jalil, raising his hands. The room quieted somewhat, and in the brief lull, he turned to face Tiera.

“I don’t know what you did, but whatever it was, Lena feels insulted by it. Please, Tiera, apologize.”

She glared at him, then said in a hushed voice, “why should I deny what we all know to be true?”

“You whore!” screamed Sheila, lunging forward. Before she could strike, Jalil caught her and held her back.

At that moment, Zayne stepped into the room.

“What is—Aie! My daughter!” Zayne rushed to Tiera and hugged her close, as if to protect her from a dangerous beast.

“Your daughter is a puss-ridden whore,” said Shiela. “Do you know what lies she said about my Lena? The gall!”

“Please, Sheila,” said Jalil. “Get a hold of yourself; the guests will hear you.”

His words quieted her somewhat, but did nothing to lessen the evil in her eyes. Beside her, Lena’s lips curled upward in a snarl, as if preparing herself to strike.

Jalil turned to Tiera and gave her a furious look. Zayne was crying on her shoulder, and her previously stony expression had started to crack.

“There must be peace in this house,” he said. “Tiera, apologize!”

Tiera’s lower jaw began to quiver—not a lot, but just enough to be noticeable. Her hands began to tremble as well.

“I’m sorry, Lena,” she said coldly. “I’m sorry to insult you on the eve of your wedding.”

“With a tongue like that,” said Sheila to no one and everyone at once, “it’s no wonder that she isn’t married yet.”

Tiera pushed her mother away and screamed at the top of her lungs. Before anyone could stop her, she stormed red-faced out of the room.

Sheila and her daughters were in an uproar.

“What did she do that for?”

“The guests—do you think they heard?”

And Sheila: “By the Lord of Earth and Heaven, next time I see that girl, I’ll wring her little neck!”

Zayne hurried after her daughter, while Majd’s wailing grew even louder.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry—I didn’t mean it! I’m so sorry!”

“Hush, now, sister,” said Mira, crouching down to console her while the others continued to fuss. “You didn’t know.”

“What did she say?” asked Jalil.

Mira looked up at him, still hugging her younger sister. “She asked if we could serve the Jabaliyn tribe some of the strawberries Sheila has been growing for the last few months.”

“Ah,” Jalil nodded. He crouched down and tousled Majd’s hair, ignoring the chatter of the infuriated women.

“It’s good that you want to share the best we have with our guests,” he told her. “Those strawberries are very special, and I know why you wanted to share them.”

Majd stopped crying and turned to him. “But why don’t we?”

“You’ll understand someday. They’re very important.” He smiled and glanced over at

Mira.

“That’s right,” said Mira. “The strawberries aren’t just for eating, Majd—they show that Lena is a pure and honorable woman. Someday, when a handsome young man comes to the camp to marry you off to his tribe, mother will grow strawberries for your wedding...”

Jalil left them and walked towards the tent doors leading to the main chamber. The guests were certainly seated by now, and as Sathi’s only son, he would soon be expected to make an appearance. Besides, someone needed to explain Tiera’s scream—even with the storm buffeting the camp, the guests surely must have heard it. A scorpion in the women’s quarters, perhaps? Yes, that would work.

This is one thing I’m not going to miss when I’m gone, he reflected as he absently fingered the pendant underneath his shirt.

* * * * *

The sandstorm was fierce, but like so many summer storms, it blew over in little more than a day. The main brunt passed far to the south, sparing the camp from any damage. Still, it left the landscape noticeably changed, burying small craters and outcroppings while uncovering others. The wall, however, protected the camp from the worst of the drifts, and only the windmill took any damage—damage which Jalil repaired before the morning was finished.

Lena al-Sauliha bint Sheila al-Najoumi Saharat al-Gharab al-Gaiani al-Jadida was wedded to Mazhar al-Kariym bin Amr al-Jabaliyn Saharat Mutli’ih Aliet al-Gaiani al-Jadida just after sundown. The festivities continued late into the night, long after the bride and groom had retired to their wedding suite. Jabaliyn and Najmi tribesmen danced around the roaring bonfire to the music of the drums and pipes, celebrating all night beneath the stars and satellites.

Jalil was the first to rise the next morning. Even so, he walked some distance from the camp to say his morning prayers, seeking the solitude that only the desert could give.

“In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate,” he began, kneeling on the stiff prayer rug in the midst of the rust-red sand. The compass laid before him pointed east by southeast, and as he pressed his forehead to ground, he visualized a pearly white spire

surrounded by a sea of glass, reaching upward toward the starry sky. The image hung on the wall in the magnificently decorated front room of the camp, and depicted the Temple of a Thousand Suns, the Noble Shrine of Earth and the holiest place in all the settled worlds.

“Almighty Lord of Earth,” Jalil whispered, his face low to the ground, “Thou who led our fathers safely through the starry void and blessed them with the richness of Thy bounty, if it be not against Thy will, lead me to Thy holy temple, that I might discover the truth of who I am.”

The wind whispered across the rocky plain, stirring the dust and tickling his cheek with sand. Jalil closed his eyes and savored the silence, finding in it a peace that refreshed and edified his soul.

When he returned to the camp, the guests had already begun to gather in the lavish front room to drink the morning tea. Several of the Jabaliyn tribesmen eyed him as he entered, staring at his unusually blond hair and fair skin. He pretended to ignore them and joined the Najmi girls near the front, reclining on the cushioned floor between Tiera and Mira.

“Where were you?” Tiera whispered.

“Praying.”

“Ah.” She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “Why did you leave the camp to pray?”

“I’ll tell you later,” he whispered back, pouring himself a cup of tea. More than a dozen gold kettles littered the center of the room, ample evidence of the Najmi tribe’s hospitality.

Mazhar and Lena were the last to arrive. Lena entered wearing a black dress and veil lined with red embroidery, and Mazhar entered wearing his finest flowing robes, dyed in the green and blue colors of the Jabaliyn tribe. As they stepped into the chamber, everyone present rose to their feet to clap and cheer. Mazhar raised his rifle in the air and let out a great whoop, and the women let loose with their loud ululating cries.

After several moments, the chamber quieted down once again. The spirit of anticipation, however, did not leave them—breakfast had not yet been served. Jalil stretched out on his side, enjoying the moment.

“When are you going to marry?” Jalil asked Mira light-heartedly. “You’re the prime age for a bride!”

Mira blushed deeply, struggling to come up with an answer. Jalil smiled and winked, and she turned away quickly, hiding her face behind her headscarf.

She's changed a lot since we've grown up, Jalil thought to himself. It was true; her eyes alone were gorgeous enough to disarm any man, and even in her loose black robes, her figure was very noticeably feminine. He wouldn't be surprised if she were married off before the end of the year—with luck, she'd already caught the attention of one of the Jabaliyn boys.

Sheikh Sathi rose to his feet, and Sheila led her three youngest daughters into the room: Rina, Majd, and Alia. The young girls carried a giant platter between them, piled high with hundreds of plump, juicy strawberries. A loud cheer erupted as the men raised their rifles in the air and the women filled the room with their ululating cries.

After some time, the cheering gradually died down, and Sheikh Sathi motioned for everyone to have a seat. As they did, he cleared his throat with a magnanimous wave of his hand.

“Fellow tribesmen, both in law and in blood,” he began. “Here sits the flower of my daughter, Lena bint Sheila Al-Najoumi, who we have given in marriage to your son Mazhar bin Amr Al-Jabaliyn. For many years, we have labored hard to cultivate and nurture her into an honorable woman, that she may become a noble wife. Indeed,” he said, taking a single strawberry from the platter and raising it in the air, “we have cultivated her as we cultivated this noble red fruit that you see before you now. Even as the strawberry requires shelter from the hot sun and nourishment with water and nutrients that the desert alone cannot provide, so too have we struggled these many years to raise our daughter pure and unsullied in this world of sin and corruption. But behold, our labors have not been in vain, for here before us stands a woman worthy to be called a daughter of the most holy Earth.”

Mazhar's mother stepped forward and accepted a plate of the strawberries from Rina, the youngest daughter. She presented the plate to Sheila, who smiled warmly as she offered it to Lena.

“And now,” Sathi bellowed, “may this union of our people be blessed with much fruit!”

The cheering and singing began anew as Lena hand-fed a juicy strawberry to her new husband. As the guests clapped and made music, Sathi took his seat next to Sheikh Amr, and Rina served them both with generous servings that Sheila had spooned up. As the girls served the guests, lavishly dressed dancers from the Jabaliyn tribe moved to the center of the room to provide the entertainment.

“I wish I could dance like that,” said Mira. “Those women are beautiful.”

“You’re as beautiful as any of those girls,” said Jalil. “Besides, you’re a Najmi, and that makes you better than any two of them.”

“Truly?”

“Of course. It won’t be long before Sathi’s making some long-winded speech on your wedding morning, of that I’m sure.”

Mira smiled and blushed, quickly looking. *Strange*, Jalil thought to himself—but then again, she always was the shy one.

Chapter 2

“So which of the Jabaliyn boys caught your eye?” asked Amina, eyes sparkling as she looked up from scrubbing one of the giant cooking pots. “My eyes are for Ozal—that man’s a beast.”

Ozal? Mira wondered quietly as she rinsed the last of the plates. *Which one is he?*

“Good Lord!” cried Surayya. “You’re much too young—Ozal is almost as old as Uncle Samir.”

“Eh, you’ll probably marry a blind old man,” Amina retorted, passing the pot on to Mira for rinsing. “Besides, I’m not too young to take a husband if I want to.”

“Oh, yes you are,” said Surayya, carefully drying one of the plates with a vacuum sponge. “Besides, father isn’t going to marry you off until he finds a husband for Mira and me.”

Mira kept to herself as her sisters argued around her. She always felt awkward talking about boys, especially with sisters as gossipy as Amina and Surayya. That didn’t mean she didn’t think about the subject, though—not at all.

“Come on, Mira,” said Surayya, hands on her hips in a gesture of impatience. “Can’t you do your job? You’re holding us all up.”

Mira jolted upright and nearly dropped the pot she was rinsing. “Oh,” she said, slowly regaining her composure. “Sorry.”

“Looks like Mira has someone on her mind,” said Amina, smiling mischievously.

“I do not,” said Mira, a little too quickly. She passed the cooking pot on to Surayya and fumbled about in the rinse water for the next plate.

“Sure,” said Amina, “and I’m secretly a man. Come on, Mira, what’s his name?”

Mira tried to think of something to say, but nothing came to her mind. Her knees began to feel weak, and she took a deep breath.

“Oh my,” said Surayya, her face lighting up. “You’re right, Amina; she’s got that dreamy-eyed look about her.”

Hot blood rushed to Mira’s cheeks, and she glanced quickly down in an attempt to hide

her face.

“I knew it,” said Amina. “You’ve been up to something, haven’t you, girl?”

“Good lord!” said Surayya, eyes widening as she covered her mouth with her hand. “You didn’t actually go into their tents last night, did you?”

“What?” said Mira. “No! Why would I—”

“I think we all know the answer to that,” said Amina, winking.

Mira’s hands clammed up, and she started shaking. She bit her lip, but her cheeks still burned with embarrassment.

“Don’t be shy, now,” said Surayya. “You *have* to tell us.”

“Is it Ozal?”

“No,” Mira whispered.

“Ezrom?”

“No.”

“Zeyd, then. It’s gotta be Zeyd.”

“No! It isn’t anybody.”

“Suuure,” said Surayya, drawing out the word for emphasis. “Come on, Mira. You *have* to tell us.”

“Don’t worry,” said Amina. “We won’t tell anyone.”

Mira shuffled uneasily on her feet. “Well...he’s not one of the Jabaliyn boys—”

“What?”

“Ah!” said Amina, giving Mira a meaningful look. “So it’s our own Jalil you’ve got eyes for, eh?”

Mira froze where she stood. A wave of dizziness passed over her, and her heart started racing. For a terrible moment, all she wanted was to sink through the ground and disappear.

Surayya shrieked with delight. “Jalil? Lord of Earth!”

“Don’t tell,” Mira cried, grabbing her arm. “P-please, don’t tell anyone!”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” said Amina, stepping between them. “You could do a lot worse than Jalil. Besides, father wants to marry him off to one of us—why shouldn’t it be you?”

Mira said nothing, but inwardly, her heart skipped a beat.

“But I thought Jalil was supposed to marry Tiera,” said Surayya. “She’s Mother Zayn’s oldest daughter—shouldn’t the inheritance fall to her?”

Mira's stomach fell. She bit her lip.

"Not necessarily," said Amina. "Tiera may be the oldest, but Jalil is Sathi's only son, even if he is adopted. The inheritance falls to him, so long as he marries in the family."

"Oh," said Surayya, "but what about Lena? I thought—"

"Lena and Mazhar are only staying for insurance. If Jalil leaves—and I hear he has a mind to—father's agreed to pass the inheritance on to them. That's why he wants to marry one of us off to Jalil as soon as possible."

Mira's heart leaped in her chest.

"You know," said Amina, turning to face her, "I think you two would go well together. You should marry him."

Mira's cheeks flushed again, but she couldn't suppress a smile. "You truly think so?" she asked.

"Truly."

"But—but what about Tiera? Jalil spends all his time with her. Do you think—"

"Tiera hates all of us," said Surayya, her lips turned up in contempt. "All she wants is to leave this place."

"She does?"

"Sure. Can't you see it in the way she acts?"

"Anyhow," said Amina, "you don't need to worry; Jalil doesn't have eyes for her."

Mira bit her lip while Amina stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't be embarrassed. Jalil is quite a catch—you should talk with mother and make it happen."

Mira silently nodded, her heart still pounding in her chest. Ever since she was a little girl, the thought of leaving her home to marry a stranger absolutely terrified her. To marry someone she loved, while staying in her father's tent—it almost seemed like too much to hope for.

At that moment, the door to the cooking tent parted. The three girls turned just as Sheila stepped inside.

"Girls, girls girls!" their mother shouted as she waddled over to the washing table. "When are you ever going to be done with these dishes? Aie! The more of you I put on a job, the slower you work."

"Sorry, mother," said Surayya, a bit sheepishly. "We were—"

"Stop yapping and get back to your chores! Our guests will be eating again in less than

two hours, and I don't want them choking on the remains of the last meal."

She turned to Mira, hands at her hips. "Mira, dry off your hands and come with me."

Mira looked uneasily at Amina and Surayya, but they had already returned to their chores. Her hands shook nervously, and she carefully wiped them down with the vacuum sponge, doing her best to reclaim as much water as she could.

"Why are you moving so slow, girl?" Sheila nagged. "I don't have all day."

"Yes, mother."

"Where are you taking her?" Surayya asked, glancing up from her work.

"Mira and I are going to have a little chat," said their mother. "It doesn't concern you."

"Is it about Jalil?" Amina asked. At her sister's question, Mira nearly died.

"I said it doesn't concern you," Sheila bellowed. "Now see to your work—and be quick about it!"

It's about Jalil, Mira thought woefully to herself. She was eavesdropping the whole time—she probably heard everything.

"Well," said her mother, "are you ready or not?"

Mira carefully set the vacuum sponge back in its sheath and took a deep breath.

"Yes," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper.

* * * * *

"You mind telling me what this is all about?" Tiera asked as she followed Jalil to the dirt embankment at the edge of the compound.

Jalil glanced over his shoulder and motioned for her to be quiet. "Shh! The others can't know we're here."

Tiera rolled her eyes and followed him over the embankment to the other side, far enough away that no one could eavesdrop on their conversation. Together, they sat down in the shade, backs against the dusty slope so that they were hidden from view.

The sky overhead was cloudless and perfectly blue from horizon to horizon. A warm breeze blew across Jalil's face, tickling his skin with a few stray grains of sand. The rust-red

landscape had changed since the storm, but he still recognized the familiar line of the mountains on the horizon, as well as the wind-carved boulders and outcroppings that surrounded the camp. Pillars of black and red stone, standing watch like ageless sentinels over a place that felt, almost, as if it could be his home.

Almost, but not quite.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before,” he began, “but I couldn’t risk letting anyone discover my plans until now.”

“What, that you want to leave the camp once the wedding is over?”

Jalil’s jaw dropped. “How—how did you—”

“It’s not too hard to figure out,” she said. “And honestly, you have been a bit more aloof than usual these last few days.”

He glanced over his shoulder again, just to make sure no one had overheard. “Well, promise not to tell anyone, okay?”

“Sure. Where do you plan on going, anyways?”

Jalil reached underneath his shirt and pulled out the pendant he wore around his neck. “Do you know what this is?” he asked, holding it out to Tiera.

She took it and examined it closely for a few moments. “Yeah,” she said. “Isn’t this the necklace you had on you when father found you out in the desert?”

“More than a necklace,” he said, taking it back. “It’s a memory chip full of data that I’ve never been able to access. Data from my home, Tiera—perhaps from my birth parents.”

“Great. How does that figure into you leaving?”

“Can’t you see?” he said, stuffing the pendant back under his shirt. “I *have* to know what’s on this memory chip, Tiera—I absolutely *must*. But every trader that’s passed through the camp hasn’t been able to read it. If I stay in this camp, I’ll never uncover the truth of it.”

Tiera nodded. “So where do you plan to go?”

Jalil turned away from her and glanced out over the reddish brown horizon. His body stiffened, the way one stiffens in a dream just before coming back to the waking world. He hesitated for a moment, unsure whether to give voice to his true intentions—as if afraid that by naming them, they would somehow lose their power.

“Where?” Tiera asked again. “You can trust me—I won’t tell.”

“To the temple,” he whispered.

Tiera frowned. “The temple?”

“Yes—the Temple of a Thousand Suns.”

She stared at him for a few moments, uncomprehending. When realization finally struck, her eyes grew wide and her jaw dropped open in shock.

“The Temple of a Thousand Suns? Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“But—but that’s the holiest shrine in the known universe! It’s the Noble Sanctuary, the Center of All Creation, the—”

“I know.”

“But why?” she asked. “Some people spend their whole lives trying to make pilgrimage—even Father hasn’t been there yet.”

He took a deep breath. “I don’t know if I’m worthy enough to make the pilgrimage, but I do know one thing: the Holy Archives are at the temple, and they contain all the knowledge and wisdom of Old Earth. If anyone can read the data stored in my pendant, it’s those who keep the Holy Archives.”

“But how do you know they’d help you? How do you know they’d even care?”

“The temple is dedicated to the memory of Earth,” he said, “but it’s also dedicated to the last great hope of the patriarchs, that we their children would one day inhabit a thousand worlds and spread across the universe. I’m from one of those worlds, Tiera—I don’t know which one, but I know I’m from one of them. If the temple is still dedicated to that hope, then I know I’ll find someone to help me.”

Tiera stared at him for a moment, shock gradually giving way to admiration. “You would travel to the other side of the world just to find your home?”

“More than that,” Jalil said softly. “I would leave this world and travel beyond the edge of settled space.”

Tiera said nothing for several moments. The breeze idly tossed a strand of hair dangling from her hastily-tied bandana. Jalil shifted uneasily—he saw, in her eyes, a light that he hadn’t seen before, a light that he’d rarely seen in anyone.

“Take me with you,” she said. Her voice, though soft, was as fierce as Jalil had ever heard it.

“Take you?” he asked. “Away from the camp?”

“Yes. Wherever you go, I want to go too.”

“But—but Tiera, they need you here.”

“Like hell they do,” she hissed. “I do twice the work of any of Sheila’s daughters and have yet to get any thanks for it. I want nothing more than to get as far away from all of them as possible.”

“You mustn’t say that,” said Jalil. “Mother Sheila and your half-sisters are good people.”

“I wish I could still believe that,” Tiera muttered as she glanced away.

“Besides,” Jalil continued, “we couldn’t do the pilgrimage by ourselves. What would the others think? When a boy and a girl are alone—”

“—yeah, yeah, Satan is the third one with them. I don’t believe that for one second. We’re responsible enough to make our own decisions—we aren’t fated to break the rules if no one else is around to keep us in line.”

“I know, but what about our honor? If word got out—”

“Look at me,” said Tiera. “What is honor anyway? Where does it come from?”

“I, uh,” Jalil stuttered. “It comes from, uh—”

“Right here,” she said, jabbing him in the chest. “It’s right here, and nowhere else. So what if the others gossip about us? Let them! We’ll both know the truth, and that’s honor enough for me.”

For a moment, neither of them said anything. Jalil swallowed and took a deep breath.

“I want to take you with me, Tiera—I really do. But—”

“But what?”

Jalil sighed. “What about Zayne? You’re her last surviving child; if we both were to leave her, she would be devastated.”

Tiera opened her mouth as if to speak, but closed it again without saying anything.

“I need to leave the camp in good hands,” Jalil continued. “What will the others do when the windmill needs repairing, or the caravaners need servicing? I can’t think of any better hands than yours.”

“Mazhar’s taking over soon,” Tiera muttered. “He’ll see to all that.”

“But Tiera—mother needs *you*.”

She bit her lip and looked up at him with pleading eyes. To his surprise, she seemed as if she would almost cry.

“There’s nothing left here for me,” she said. “Nothing.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, putting a hand on her arm. “You won’t be here forever. I’m sure Sathi will find you a—”

“A husband? Not if Sheila has anything to do with it. She probably wants me to die an old maid. And even if he did, what makes you think I want to marry?”

Jalil didn’t know what to say. Tiera rubbed her eyes and looked out over the rocky desert plain, the wind toying with the hair that spilled out of her loosely tied headscarf.

“I’m sorry, Tiera. I—”

“No,” she said, rising to her feet. “You do what you have to do. Once way or another, I’ll find a way out of this place.”

“But not just yet,” Jalil said, rising hastily. “Please—not until things have settled down a bit. Promise?”

She turned toward him and narrowed her eyes, hands placed squarely on her hips. For a moment, Jalil worried she was upset with him, but a grin spread across her face, setting him at ease.

“Fair enough,” she said, “but just because I’m giving you a head start, don’t think you’ll be rid of me so easily. Wherever you go, I’m sure our paths will cross again someday.”

“God-willing,” said Jalil, clapping his hand on her shoulder. “God-willing.”

* * * * *

Mira’s mother led her through the darkened corridors of the camp, moving so quickly that she nearly had to run to keep up. The smell of roasting meat and vegetables mingled with the thick, stuffy humidity of the kitchen huts, making her clothes feel sticky.

“W-where are we going?” she asked.

“Somewhere private,” Sheila answered, tightening the grip on her hand.

Please don’t let me be in trouble, Mira prayed. Please don’t let her be angry with me.

“Here,” said Sheila, finally stopping in the back of an old brick storage cellar. “Now, my dear, let’s have a little chat.”

Mira swallowed. “What did I do?” she asked timidly.

Sheila bellowed with laughter. “Oh honey,” she said, “you look as frightened as a mouse! There there, don’t be so upset—you’re not in trouble, dear.”

“I-I’m not?”

“No,” Sheila chuckled. “Far from it.”

It’s about Jalil, Mira told herself, her heart pounding twice as hard as before. *It’s got to be.*

“What do you think of Jalil?” her mother asked, as if on cue.

“He’s nice,” Mira answered, blushing in the dark. “I—I like him a lot.” *Oh Lord, I sound like an idiot.*

“Good, good. Do you have any feelings for him?”

Yes!

“I, uh, I guess—”

“You guess, girl? Do you or don’t you?”

Mira wished she could sink through the ground and disappear. Even if she could, though, her mother would just lift her back up again and scold her the more for it.

“Yes,” she whispered, staring down at her feet.

“Good! That’s *very* good.”

“Why?” Mira asked. The earnestness in her voice surprised her.

“Because your father and I want to marry one of you off to him as soon as we can.”

Mira’s stomach leaped into her mouth as a wave of adrenaline surged through her trembling body. For a moment, she couldn’t speak.

“Unfortunately,” her mother continued, “there seems to be something of a complication.”

“Complication?”

“Yes, dear. A complication. You see, rumor has it that Jalil wants to leave the camp, most likely on pilgrimage—and after that, well, who knows if he’ll ever come back.”

Mira’s stomach fell through the floor, and her legs turned to water. “Leave?”

“That’s right, dear. If that’s his plan, he’ll probably ask your father for his blessing sometime in the next two days and leave with the Jabaliyn convoy before the end of the week.”

“That—that’s terrible.”

“I know, dear. I know.” Sheila glanced to either side and leaned intently forward. “That’s

why we need to talk.”

Oh no, Mira thought to herself. From her mother’s tone of voice, something devious was doubtless on her mind.

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t want him to leave, do you?”

“Well, no—”

“And he’s been making eyes at you, hasn’t he?”

“I—I don’t know—”

“Oh, don’t be so modest. You’re just his age, too—and of all my daughters, you’re certainly the most beautiful.”

Where is this going? Mira wanted to ask. Instead, she kept silent.

“We need to keep Jalil from leaving,” her mother continued. “If he does, your father’s inheritance will pass to the Jabaliyn, and we’ll be completely at their mercy once he dies. You wouldn’t want to see your mother poor and destitute no, would you?”

“No,” said Mira, shaking her head dutifully.

“That’s why we *must* keep Jalil from leaving us, no matter the cost.” Her eyes gleamed as she leaned in closer, her voice so low that Mira had to strain to hear.

“What is it, mother?”

“Sathi and I want you to go with him.”

Mira frowned. “Go with him? On the pilgrimage?”

“Yes.”

“Alone?”

“Of course,” her mother said, grinning mischevously in the dim light of the glowlamps. “We want you to get to know each other so well that he can’t help but fall in love with you, if you know what I mean.”

Mira closed her eyes for a moment and swallowed. Her heart raced as she considered the implications of what her mother was telling her. Jalil, fall in love with her—but how? He only ever saw her in passing around the camp, and never for very long. If he ever did notice her, it was only as his sister—never anything more.

“I don’t know,” she said uneasily.

“You’re not a little girl now anymore, dear,” said her mother. “Trust me, he’ll notice you

—and when he does, you *must* convince him, one way or another, to come back and stay.”

“But how?”

Without warning, Sheila reached up and pinched her breast—hard. Mira squealed and nearly doubled over from the pain.

“Why do you think Allah gave you these?” Sheila said, a tone of contempt in her voice. “Jalil is a man of honor—find your way into his bed, and for honor’s sake, he’ll come back and marry you.”

The shock of her mother’s words hit Mira with all the grace of a rockslide. She leaned against the wall behind her for support.

“But—but that’s—”

“You want to marry him, don’t you, child? It’s not wrong if you marry each other afterward—and don’t worry about the strawberries at your wedding, I’ll take care of that.”

But I won’t deserve them.

“And one more thing,” Sheila continued, leaning in to tower over her. “Your father and I have a lot riding on this. If you should fail...” She made a cutting motion across her throat. “Understand?”

Mira trembled where she stood against the wall, hugging her chest as she cowered under Sheila’s fierce, imposing eyes.

“Y-yes, mother.”

“Don’t think too much about it,” Sheila said, turning to go as if the matter was already settled. “The temple is on the other side of the world; you’ll have plenty of time. When you’re both alone together, you’ll know what to do.”

Mira bit her lip and nodded, rubbing her chest where her mother had pinched her. The pain still throbbed, and an awful sinking feeling in her gut made her want to throw up.

This is wrong.

It wasn’t just the part about getting into Jalil’s bed—though Allah knew that was frightening enough. It was how manipulative and deceitful it seemed, to shame him into marrying her.

Maybe he’ll fall in love and change his mind on his own, she thought hopefully to herself. *Maybe I won’t have to sleep with him just to get him to come back.*

If he didn’t, though, she didn’t know what she’d do.

Chapter 3

Jalil stopped outside the doorway that lead to Sheikh Sathi's private quarters. He hesitated for a moment, running through the monologue he'd practiced in his head nearly a hundred times. *Hello, father. With your blessing, I wish to leave with the Jabaliyn convoy. Yes, I've already spoken with Sheikh Amr about it. No, I don't know when I'll be back. No, I can't promise I'll return, but—*

Before he could bring his hand to knock, the door creaked open. "Jalil, my son!" boomed his father, making him jump. "Come in, come in. I've been expecting you."

A little shaken, Jalil stepped into the private study. The room was well decorated, with purple silk hangings draped across the walls and a faded mosaic on the floor depicting a garden full of fruits and animals. A pair of highly ornamented ceremonial gold swords hung on the wall immediately opposite the door, crossed above the red and white banner of the Najmi tribe. An old, dusty computer sat in the corner, the hologram projector switched off to conserve energy. Illumination came from an enormous stain glass lamp that hung from the center of the vaulted brick ceiling.

Jalil swallowed and sat cross legged on a small cushion near the center of the room, while his father stretched out on the couch.

"Some tea?" Sathi asked, motioning to a large golden kettle on the ornate wooden table between them.

"Yes, please."

With his free hand, the sheik took the kettle and poured the tea. Jalil leaned forward and accepted the second cup, taking a short sip before setting it down.

"So," Sathi asked, pouring himself a cup, "have you been enjoying yourself these past few days?"

"Yes, I have," Jalil answered. *Small talk first, then the big stuff.*

"Excellent. It's not every year we have a wedding, you know."

"I know," said Jalil, taking another sip of his tea. "But maybe this year, we'll be blessed

to have two.”

Sathi threw back his head and laughed. “Yes indeed! God-willing, perhaps we will.”

What did I say that was so funny?

“I’ve heard a lot of good things from the Jabaliyn tribe,” Jalil continued. “They won’t forget our hospitality.”

“Good, good—as well they shouldn’t.”

“Mazhar is with the camp to stay, then, is he?”

His father let out a tired sigh. “Perhaps. But it isn’t right to expect of a young man to stay in his father-in-law’s tent. I don’t know whether they’ll choose to stay—only Allah knows.”

They’ll stay, Jalil thought to himself. As Sathi’s oldest daughter, the inheritance would pass to her, making her husband the next sheik of the camp. No tribesman in his right mind would pass up on that kind of wealth.

“Mazhar seems like a good man,” Jalil said. “God-willing, he’ll do well here.”

“God-willing,” muttered Sathi. He took a long sip of his tea.

Jali set down his drink and coughed. “There is something I wanted to speak with you about, father.”

“I know, son, I know.”

Jalil frowned. “You do?”

“Yes. You want to make the pilgrimage to the Temple of a Thousand Suns, don’t you?”

At his father’s words, Jalil’s stomach fell through the dusty mosaic floor. *How does he know?* he wondered. It was too late to stop now, though—there was nothing to do but press on.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“And why do you wish to do this?”

Jalil took a deep breath. “Because it is the duty of all believers to make the pilgrimage at least once in their lives. I’m young, I have no wife or family obligations, and—”

“Yes, yes, I know all that. But why go alone—why not wait until I make the pilgrimage, and go with me?”

Sathi looked at him expectantly, waiting for his answer. Jalil shifted where he sat.

“There are reasons,” he said, “but they are...personal.”

Sathi narrowed his eyes. “When can we expect you to return?”

Jalil squirmed, unsure how to answer. For a moment, he considered evading the question,

but that would never do; it was now or never.

“I’m sorry, father,” he said, casting his eyes down, “but I cannot promise I will return.”

For several moments, neither of them said anything. His father shifted uneasily.

“Why?”

“Because I must to find out about my birth family,” Jalil answered.

“Ah,” said Sathi, leaning back. “So that’s what this is about, isn’t it?”

Jalil said nothing.

“Oh my son, my beloved from the stars, why do you feel that you must leave us? Are we not family enough for you? We who raised you from boyhood into a man?”

“Yes,” Jalil said quickly. “Yes, you are. You will always be my father, and Zayne will always be—”

“Then why must you chase after these shadows from the past—shadows that you may never grasp?”

Why does he have to make this so difficult?

“Because I need to know,” Jalil said as he nervously fingered the locket beneath his shirt. “I need to find out where I came from.”

“You are my son. Is that not enough?”

No, Jalil nearly said. *It’s not*. Instead, he looked away.

“Don’t leave us, son,” Sathi continued. “We need you here. I need you—your sisters need you. What will we do, when all of them are married off? Who will lead the camp?”

“I’m sorry, Father,” said Jalil, bowing his head. “But this is something I must do.”

Sathi shook his head. “If you leave, this camp will turn to the Jabaliyn tribe before I die. I had to significantly lower Lena’s dowry for Sheikh Amr to agree for his son move into our camp. Unless he divorces Lena and returns to his father’s tent, my debts will be impossible to repay. No, son, I’m afraid I cannot give you permission to go. I need you here.”

Jalil fidgeted nervously. He had hoped that it wouldn’t come to this, but now that it had, he saw no choice.

“I’m sorry, father—truly sorry—but I didn’t come here to ask for your permission. I came to ask for your blessing.”

“What?” Sathi asked, his eyes narrowing.

“I’ve already made the arrangements with Sheik Amr. I’m leaving with the convoy

tomorrow.”

Silence. Jalil held his breath.

“I see you’ve gone behind my back on this,” Sathi muttered. “And I suppose there’s nothing I can do to stop you?”

Jalil bit his lip and fidgeted nervously with his fingers. His father closed his eyes and let out a long, deep sigh.

“I should have seen this. Of course.”

To Jalil’s surprise, his father sat up and brought out a thermos of coffee from the side of the couch. From a side drawer, he produced two tiny ceramic cups and set them on the table.

“So it’s my blessing you want, is it?” he asked, filling both cups with the thick, black liquid. He pushed one of them across the table.

“Yes,” said Jalil, accepting the glass with shaky hands. The coffee would seal their meeting, but until the Sheikh drank from his cup, there was no agreement, no understanding. No deal.

“As much as it pains me to see you leave,” Sathi continued, “your decision comes at an auspicious moment.”

“What do you mean?”

Sathi lifted the cup of coffee to eye level and stared casually at it. “My daughter, Mira, approached me not a month ago, expressing her desire to make the pilgrimage. She has experienced something of a religious awakening recently, and wishes to go now, before she marries. Of course, I told her that it would be better to wait—that it’s customary for a woman to wait to make the pilgrimage with her husband—but when I told her this, she broke down into tears.”

Jalil frowned. “Why?”

“Because she’s afraid she’ll never marry.”

At those words, Jalil sat upright.

“What? How is that possible? Mira is a wonderful, beautiful girl—anyone would be lucky to marry her.”

“I know,” said Sathi, “but who would want to marry their sons into a tribe as weak as ours? They would certainly gain no advantage by it. And since all her cousins are either married or gone to the domes, her chances of finding a husband in the desert are very slim indeed.”

Jalil was dumbstruck. He'd never thought Mira would have a problem finding a husband—but now that his father mentioned it, he had to admit that the outlook was worse than he'd thought.

“What are you getting at?” he asked.

“Can't you see, my son? If my beloved daughter is to make the pilgrimage, now may be her only opportunity. Few convoys come out this far, and without a husband to escort her, I would never think of sending her alone.” He swirled the coffee in his cup, eyeing it meaningfully.

“Wait,” said Jalil, realization slowly dawning on him. “You want to send her with me?”

Sathi smiled wide. “That's right.”

Jalil swallowed. “But who would be our chaperone? The temple is on the other side of the world—it might take us months to get there.”

Sathi laughed. “Chaperone! My dear boy, what makes you think I could spare a chaperone?”

“But—just the two of us? Alone?”

“Don't worry; I know I can trust her with you. You're a man of honor, after all.”

“But what will the other tribes think?”

“As far as they know, you're brother and sister. They won't think it unusual for you to travel together.”

Jalil paused to work through all the implications of his father's request. “But if I'm leaving the camp for good, how will she get back?”

“I have a wealthy aunt who lives in one of the domes next to the temple,” said his father. “She can afford to fly her to the spaceport in the east desert, and your mother and I will make arrangements with the Jabaliyn to bring her the rest of the way. Speaking of which, how much have you saved up for the journey?”

“Uh, about eight hundred credits.”

Sathi clucked his tongue and shook his head. “Not nearly enough. Agree to escort Mira, and I'll give you triple that.”

“Twenty four hundred?” Jalil asked, blinking in surprise. “You would give us that?”

“For my own flesh and blood? Of course.”

He glanced down at the cup of coffee in his hand and nervously fingered his locket. Twenty four hundred Gaian credits was a lot of money; it would be foolish to refuse his father's

support. Still, something felt wrong.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s just—”

“Please, son—think of Mira. The greatest desire of her heart is to make the pilgrimage. You asked for my blessing, knowing full well I would never give you my permission, but how can I give you my blessing if you refuse to take my daughter?”

“I don’t know,” said Jalil, stumbling over his words. “Are you saying that if I agree to escort her, you’ll give me your blessing?”

“Precisely.”

“And the money?”

“Only if you take her with you.”

Jalil shifted uneasily. Mira might be his sister by adoption, but that didn’t make her unmarriageable. After all, in the desert, first cousins often married—even first cousins who’d grown up in the same camp. For him and Mira to travel alone together, without a chaperone—

But wasn’t this what Tiera had asked of him? He had no doubt that her intentions had been honorable. If he could trust Tiera, who only wanted to set out on her own, why should he trust Mira any less? Especially if her greatest desire was to make the pilgrimage, as Sathi had said.

Besides, Jalil needed the money—badly. The temple lay on the other side world, and though eight hundred credits would take him far, he doubted it would take him all of the way.

“All right,” he said. “I agree.”

“Excellent!” boomed Sathi. With a flourish of his hand, he downed the shot of coffee with one gulp. Jalil grinned and drank his own, relief flooding through his exhausted body. After they’d both finished, they rose to their feet and embraced.

“Good luck, my boy,” said Jalil’s father as he pulled him close. “May Allah go with you both.”

* * * * *

“Mira? Are you leaving?”

Mira looked up from her packing to see Rina standing in the doorway to the older girls' tent. Amina and Surayya were probably out doing chores—or seeing off the Jabaliyn men, which was more likely. Either way, the two of them were alone.

“Yes,” said Mira, packing her last set of clothes. “I’m going away for a while.” Sunlight filtered in through the coarse weave of the dark tent fabric, the only indication in the dimly lit room that it was day outside.

“But where?”

Mira gave her a reassuring smile. They’d always been the quiet ones in the family, and with a mother and sisters as vocal as theirs, that had given them a bond that the others couldn’t understand. *I’m going to miss her*, Mira realized as she contemplated the long journey ahead of her.

“Do you know the picture in the front hall? The one with the pretty white tower surrounded by a landscape of glass?”

Rina’s eyes widened. “There?”

Mira nodded. As she closed the canvas duffel bag and rose from the stiff mattress pad that had served as her bed for most of her life, her little sister ran up and hugged her knees, as if to never let go.

“Oh, Rina!” she laughed. “Don’t be sad. I’m not going to be gone forever.”

Rina sniffed and looked up with her wide, innocent eyes. “When will you be back?”

The question made Mira think back to the conversation with Sheila the day before in the darkened cellar. *If you fail...*

“God-willing, not long.”

Rina’s shoulders shook as she quietly began to sob. Mira dropped her bag and knelt down, touching a hand to her face.

“Rina? What’s wrong?”

“When mother says ‘God-willing,’ it always means no.”

Mira wrapped her arms around her little sister and held her in a warm embrace. “I’ll come back,” she whispered. “I promise.”

She held Rina tight until sobbing stopped. Outside, the shouts of the Jabaliyn men and the starting of engines sounded through the fabric of the tent.

“I have to go now,” she said, letting Rina go as she rose to her feet. “Be good now.”

Rina nodded and rubbed her nose with the back of her hand, her eyes still filled with the sadness of goodbye.

Mira slipped on her headscarf with one hand and lifted her duffel bag with the other. Strange to think it contained nearly all of her worldly belongings: a few changes of clothes, some headscarves, a set of prayer beads, and a pretty stone that Rina had found in the desert and given to her. The rest—mostly some old pieces of jewelry, including some copper-gold bracelets and a pair of garnet earrings—she wore on her person.

Smiling one last time at her little sister, she walked down the outer corridor toward the side entrance. Rina watched her go, but didn't follow.

The glaring light of the sun made Mira squint and lift a hand to cover her eyes. It was already late afternoon, and the heat of the day had reached its peak only an hour before. Several of the young men loading the caravaneers had foreheads streaked with sweat, while perspiration pooled in their robes under their arms.

Practically the entire camp had come out to see the Jabaliyn convoy off. Sheila stood by Mira's father, arms folded across her finest embroidered clothes red and black robes. Little Majd and Alia stood by her knees, looking on with wide, wonderstruck eyes. Zayne embraced Jalil at the door of one of the caravaneers, Tiera standing aloof a few paces behind her.

Mira stopped and turned around to look back at her home one last time. The tents from the wedding were still up, their once bright colors faded from exposure to sun and sand. Beside them stood the reddish-brown adobe huts of the camp, the ancient windmill outlined sharply against the deep blue sky. Her eyes lingered on the faded brown tent that had served as the bedroom for her and her older sisters since childhood. She imagined Rina watching through the peephole and gave a weak smile. Beyond, the dusty plain stretched in all directions toward the seemingly infinite horizon. Surrounded on all sides by harsh, unforgiving desert, the camp seemed like the only safe place in the world—and she was leaving it.

"Mira!" came Sheila's voice from behind her. "What are you waiting for, girl? The convoy's leaving!"

With a heavy heart, Mira swung her bag around and hauled it toward the waiting convoy. The warm exhaust from the rumbling engines licked at her face and caused the air to ripple.

Jalil ran to meet her. "Here," he said, "let me take that for you." Before she could object, he snatched the bag from her hand and threw it onto the caravaner.

Sathi and Sheila stepped forward. As Zayne stepped back to join them, Sheila took her husband's arm and held onto him possessively, the way she always did when Zayne was around.

"Jalil, my son," said Sathi. "I have something for you."

"Eh?" said Jalil. "What's that?" He jumped down from the caravaneer and walked over.

Sathi reached into his light tan robes and pulled out the gift. At the sight of it, Mira gasped—it was her father's gold and bronze plated sniper rifle, a priceless family heirloom.

"What?" said Jalil, eyes widening. "Father, I can't—"

"Please take it, I beg of you. Take it to remember us by."

"But—but that's your grandfather's rifle. I can't possibly accept it."

Sheila clucked in disapproval, making Mira cringe.

"You would refuse my parting gift?" Sathi asked, a wounded expression on his face. "Please, my son—take it. I would be honored."

Jalil hesitated for a moment, torn with indecision. Mira knew, of course, what her father was trying to do. The pre-emptive guilt written across Jalil's face showed that the ploy was working.

"Very well," he finally said, taking it carefully with both hands. "Thank you, father."

A broad grin spread across Sathi's face, and they embraced and kissed on both cheeks. As they did, Sheila turned and gave Mira a sharp glance.

"Make sure he returns," she hissed under her breath. "Don't come back without him."

Mira shuddered. Her mother's face was veiled, but the look in her eyes was enough to tell Mira that she was deadly serious.

"Goodbye, Sheila," said Jalil, coming between them. "I'll miss you."

"As will I," said Sheila. The fierceness had evaporated instantly from her face, and she sniffled for effect. Mira stiffened as she embraced Jalil, then turned back to embrace her.

"I mean it," she whispered menacingly in Mira's ear. "Don't fail me."

The other goodbyes passed as if in a daze. By the time it was over, Mira wanted nothing more than to curl up by herself into a little ball.

"Alright," said Jalil as the others returned to the camp. "You ready to go?"

Mira hesitated for a moment, staring off at the camp. Her knees grew weak, while behind her, the engine revved, and the first of the caravaneers rode off across the dusty plain.

"Mira," said Jalil.

“I’m coming,” she whispered. Before she could say no, she climbed into the back of the waiting caravaneer.

* * * * *

Jalil watched from the back seat as the twilight desert raced by. His checkered headscarf fluttered in the wind, and he squinted against the dust kicked up from the caravaneers ahead of them, but Hamza, their driver, kept far enough out on the convoy’s flank that it didn’t obstruct his view. The mountains, once almost on the horizon, now loomed close enough to make out the crooked lines of strata along the ridge line. While shadows filled the canyons and darkened the rocky foothills, the craggy peaks still shone from the light of the setting sun. The sky overhead turned orange and red; soon, it would fade to purple and black as the stars and satellites came out overhead.

A strange, unfamiliar longing stirred in Jalil’s heart as he watched the land he knew so well pass by. Not far from here was the site of the first camp, the one he’d come to as a boy shortly after Sathi had found him lost in the desert. He felt much the same way as he had when they’d moved away from that site, out into the middle of the plains. Though he’d come back periodically with Tiera to check on the cistern and make sure no one was squatting, it never felt quite the same. All those abandoned stone and adobe structures, devoid of life except for the ants and an occasional lizard—it felt too empty to have ever been his home.

Is that how I’ll feel about the Najmi camp someday? he wondered as the caravaneer began the climb to the pass. The thought filled him with fear, until he remembered the sun-bleached ruins of the derelict spaceship—the one that had brought him to this world. If he’d made it through that, surely he could live through this.

As the incessant hum of the engines reverberated in his ears, he turned and glanced over at Mira, fast asleep in the seat next to him. Her dusty black robes and headscarf covered all but her slender hands, fingers curled near her face. Of all the strange requests Sathi could have made—but it made sense that Mira would want to make the pilgrimage with him, even if coming alone with him was questionable. When a boy and a girl are alone together...

That won't happen, Jalil told himself. His father trusted him to be a man of honor, and he wasn't about to betray that trust. Besides, Mira was nothing more than a sister to him; a stunningly beautiful sister, but a sister nonetheless.

His fingers reached for the pendant under his robes, and he stroked it gently, his thoughts drifting back to the voyage ahead. The twilight sky faded into black, and the stars and satellites began their nightly dance as the faint, cloudy mass of the Good Hope Nebula rose with the crescent moon before them. The arc of the galaxy shone down softly, tracing a path through the heavens like a bridge to far away worlds. Down below, the craggy peaks stood like sentinels, watching over the lonely desert land that Jalil knew so well. But he knew it wasn't the land that held his destiny—it was the stars above.

Thank you for reading the sample chapters of *Desert Stars*. To help make the publication of the full-length novel, please visit [the project's kickstarter page](#) and make a pledge. Those who contribute to the project will receive the following rewards:

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\$50 or more: The above, plus a character named after you in a future work and a complimentary copy of that work.

\$100 or more: The above, plus a short story up to 1,500 words that is exclusively yours to share as you see fit.

Thank you!