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The  
**Aristocrat**  
and  
**Desert Prince**

貴族と熱砂の皇子



Yaoi ヤオイ Novel

*When Takeyuki caught sight of the man's eyes, he gasped. He was being sucked in—into blue eyes that seemed scooped from the Mediterranean itself. With such willful and vibrant eyes fixed on him, Takeyuki didn't know what to say. All he could do was stare back, unable to wrest his gaze away from the man.*



**I**n his young life, Takeyuki has never really known hardship. The youngest son of a wealthy family, he has never had any difficulty getting anything he desired. Now, though, Takeyuki is enjoying his last month of freedom before he begins working at his father's import company in Tokyo, and he has decided to spend that time with his brother and his sister-in-law in Cassina, a small country in the Middle East.

**L**ittle does Takeyuki know that his prideful manner will soon land him in hot water! In Cassina, some dangers are very real and some people are not who they seem. For example, who exactly is the charming, majestic man who won't stop staring at Takeyuki during their flight to Cassina, and why do his blue eyes make Takeyuki feel like his chest will burst?

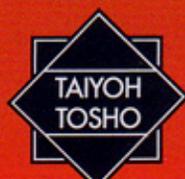
*The Aristocrat and Desert Prince* explores one boy's journey of self-discovery in the deserts of the Middle East, following him as he discovers his sensual side and finds true love while escaping his humdrum destiny.

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~~“I-I’ve never . . .”~~

~~*I’ve never kissed someone like this before.*~~

It was like tiny explosions were going off inside his head.

“You’re awful.”

Zayid sucked at Takeyuki’s tongue almost painfully and squeezed his arms tightly around Takeyuki.

## THE ARISTOCRAT AND DESERT PRINCE

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# The Aristocrat and Desert Prince

貴族と熱砂の皇子

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# Chapter One

**N**ot again.

They had run into each other again.

Takeyuki felt awkward and displeased, as well as a touch embarrassed, so in order to hide the disturbance in his heart he put on an expression that was more annoyed than necessary and looked abruptly away.

This was the third time.

The first time had been in the first class lounge while waiting for their flight to leave.

The second time had been while walking down the corridor to board the plane. The man had come striding smartly up from behind, and when he had passed beside Takeyuki, he had turned to look back at him for some reason.

At that time, Takeyuki had thought they had simply taken the same flight, but after the third time, he started to feel there was an unpleasant implication to it.

He wasn't blaming the man for going to the bathroom in the back of the cabin, but why did he stare so intently at Takeyuki's face?

*What, do I have something stuck on my face?*

After the man had gone by, Takeyuki put a hand to his mouth to check. Of course, his fingers came away clean.

If it wasn't Takeyuki, what was it? Why had the

man looked at him not twice but three times for no apparent reason? It made Takeyuki uncomfortable. He wanted to yell, "If there's something you want to say, just say it." Takeyuki was rather short-tempered. He knew he was selfish and stubborn, perhaps because he was the youngest child and he'd been spoiled growing up. He had a bad habit of getting into fights easily.

The man was seated two rows in front of Takeyuki.

To tell the truth, he couldn't really tell if the man was looking at him or not. He was definitely turned in Takeyuki's direction, but since he was wearing dark sunglasses, Takeyuki couldn't tell what his eyes were focused on.

The man was tall and broad-shouldered, his body perfectly proportioned. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, but could have been in his early thirties. He had taut, sun-glossed brown skin and an invigorating, youthful quality, but his entire body exuded a formidable, majestic aura that made it hard to dismiss the possibility that he was in his thirties.

One look was enough to recognize the rare quality and impeccable tailoring of the suit he wore. It showed that there was more to the man than met the eye.

He was enchantingly conservative in his suit, but his hairstyle was a little unconventional. His wavy black hair fell to the middle of his chest. From the neck down, it was neatly layered, so its length didn't look too overwhelming. The man had tied it back at the base of his neck.

*What does he do for a living?* Takeyuki wondered

every time he looked at the man's face. Since the man left his sunglasses on even inside the plane and he was seated in first class, it struck Takeyuki that he could be a famous actor or musician, or maybe an athlete. But Takeyuki couldn't connect his face to any of the people he'd heard of.

*I guess it doesn't really matter.*

Takeyuki was definitely testy, but he couldn't stay angry for long; not three minutes later, he'd forgotten about it. Even when Takeyuki saw the man's back as he passed once again, on his way back to his seat, Takeyuki only watched him absently, thinking, *there he goes again*, not relapsing into the annoyance he had felt only moments before. It might also have been due to the fact that the man passed by with his back to him, so Takeyuki didn't see his face. But if the man had deliberately turned to glance at Takeyuki as he passed, a new anger would have bubbled up inside him and Takeyuki might have leapt from his seat and attacked the man.

But he sat down in his seat without ever turning back to Takeyuki.

Takeyuki watched a stewardess politely hand the man a warm hand towel. Takeyuki even heard him utter a word of thanks in a low, enchanting voice. Takeyuki had dabbled in basic Arabic, just in case, so he understood what the man said.

Besides Takeyuki and the man with the sunglasses, there was one wealthy older couple and a very important-looking man with a potbelly seated in first class: five people in all.

When they reached cruising altitude and the

“fasten seatbelt” sign was turned off, the cabin was calm—a far cry from the murmur of anticipation and excitement appropriate to the beginning of a six-hour journey. What they had instead was just a run-of-the-mill reaction from people very accustomed to such travel. Aside from the occasional sound of quiet conversation between the older couple, it was utterly silent. It was no doubt a world apart from the economy-class seating behind them.

Takeyuki yawned slightly and set the in-flight magazine he was holding in the empty seat beside him. He peered out the plane’s dual-paned window. All he saw was a limitless blue sky and clouds like a carpet of cotton balls.

Once the plane had leveled out, they had felt hardly any turbulence. Their journey through the sky was comfortable and smooth.

Takeyuki was currently en route to the Middle Eastern kingdom of Cassina, which bordered the Mediterranean. He had transferred at Amsterdam and was now headed for the capital city of Ras.

He was going there to see his older brother, Atsushi, and his wife.

Takeyuki’s brother, who was much older than him, had been posted to Cassina two years ago as a diplomat. Currently, it was hard to call the situation in the Middle East as a whole stable, but, in the midst of all that, Cassina was a relatively peaceful country. The country’s king was a pacifist who had declared himself to be anti-war. Ever since, he had steadfastly maintained a neutral international position.

When Takeyuki had said that he’d like to visit Cassina for his college graduation gift, his parents had looked pained. What had finally won them over was that, in addition to the fact that the constant terrorism in neighboring countries hadn’t affected Cassina, his older brother and his brother’s wife were there.

Takeyuki didn’t particularly like traveling, so he didn’t want to go somewhere popular with Japanese tourists and had decided on Cassina instead. That might also have been due in part to a stubborn personality that hated to do what everyone else was doing. There were still numerous traces of the ancient culture of Cassina around, but Takeyuki wasn’t interested in that sort of thing. The only thing he was at all interested in was being able to see with his own eyes the desert he had only seen before in videos and photographs.

But, of course, he did want to experience a foreign culture.

He believed it would be good to experience firsthand a place with values that were completely different from those of Japan or Western countries before he started working. Takeyuki would start working at the import company his father owned in April. He knew he would have a number of opportunities to go to Europe and America after that, but he wouldn’t be able to go to the Middle East unless something major happened. So, with that in mind, he’d decided to visit now, while he was still free during his month-long vacation.

Takeyuki didn’t look it, but he had a lot of nerve. It was a common criticism that his personality didn’t match his looks, but he knew he had fine, sensitive-

looking features, so he didn't argue. He rather resembled his mother. When he was in the first few grades of elementary school, he had sometimes been mistaken for a little girl.

*I know something interesting will happen to me here.*

He hadn't started out with any particular goal, so even if nothing happened Takeyuki wouldn't be disappointed. At first he had considered staying for about ten days, but if it was too boring he could cut it short and head home whenever he wanted.

While he was thinking all this over and gazing outside, his forehead against the window, the flight attendant came by with drinks and snacks. A glance at the menu revealed a long list of various kinds of alcohol, but, unfortunately, Takeyuki drank so little that it hardly counted as drinking at all. He ordered a non-alcoholic cocktail.

He looked around the cabin and saw that the other passengers had opened bottles of their preferred brands of wine. Even the man in the sunglasses two seats ahead of him was being served from his own wine bottle by the head flight attendant.

Takeyuki knew that, among the Islamic countries, there were some fundamentalist nations that prohibited alcohol and others that didn't. The Kingdom of Cassina, where Takeyuki was going to be visiting, was one of the countries that allowed it. They produced their own special vintage of wine, and people could drink at restaurants and hotels like anywhere else in the world. But still, the devout believers of Islam didn't drink, so

bars weren't as common on the streets as they were in Western countries.

*Maybe he's Cassinian,* Takeyuki thought.

The man's beautiful skin was a deeply tanned sable with a gloss like burnished leather, and his hair was black, falling in gentle waves. He was wearing sunglasses, so Takeyuki couldn't tell what his eyes were like, but his features were sharply sculpted around his prominent nose. Takeyuki found him sexy in a masculine way, which disturbed Takeyuki, since he was, himself, a man. If a man like that wrapped his arm around a girl's waist and whispered a few words in her ear, it would put most women in the mood and they would quickly surrender.

Takeyuki remembered the strange embarrassment and agitation he felt every time he met the man's gaze. Perhaps that was similar to what those women might feel. The thought made Takeyuki go silently red.

Ridiculous.

*What am I thinking?* he scolded himself, draining his grapefruit juice cocktail in a single gulp.

Driven to such distraction by a man he had never seen before, Takeyuki grew even more resentful of the stranger. He may have had no ulterior motive toward Takeyuki and had simply run into him by chance, but even if Takeyuki accepted that intellectually, he just couldn't accept it on a gut level.

After the apéritif came a fish course and then a meat course, just like at a fancy restaurant, and each time new dishes were brought out, the passengers selected bottles of wine. But Takeyuki had told the stewardesses

that he didn't drink alcohol at the very beginning, so he was the only person who had non-alcoholic beverages and mineral water during the entire meal. Most of the time he didn't feel one way or the other about not drinking alcohol, but at times like this he felt as if he were somehow missing out. If he drank, he might have been able to enjoy the atmosphere more.

Everyone around him seemed to be enjoying their drinks, so after the meal Takeyuki ordered a little Grand Marnier to try. The flight attendant recommended it, saying it was sweet and would nicely compliment the chocolate they gave as a dessert. But after just a tiny sip Takeyuki felt his face burning, so he gave up and set the glass aside.

"Don't like alcohol?"

As he was drinking coffee to get the taste out of his mouth, Takeyuki heard a voice from in front of him, catching him off-guard.

The man in the sunglasses was standing in the aisle, leaning on the back of the seat in front of Takeyuki.

He spoke perfect English.

He was tall, and Takeyuki looked up at him, confused about what tone he should take. He'd decided to glare the next time the man looked at him so rudely, but now that the moment had come, things didn't go quite as planned and Takeyuki wound up gaping at this handsome stranger.

"You visiting Cassina by yourself?" Paying no attention to Takeyuki's lack of enthusiasm, the man asked another question in a familiar tone.

Facing him so closely, Takeyuki saw that the man's



body was surrounded by an intense aura. Overwhelmed by it, Takeyuki's body tensed to the point that he felt like he was choking. Takeyuki was wary and perplexed, and filled with a strange awe. The man's lips curved into a smile, as if he thought it was funny.

"Don't worry, I won't try anything funny." As he said this, he raised his long fingers to his face and removed the sunglasses he'd been wearing the whole time.

When Takeyuki caught sight of the man's eyes, he gasped.

He was being sucked in—into blue eyes that seemed scooped from the Mediterranean itself. With such willful and vibrant eyes fixed on him, Takeyuki didn't know what to say. All he could do was stare back, unable to wrest his gaze away from the man.

"Do you mind if we talk a little?" The man asked for permission, but he rested his hand on the empty seat next to Takeyuki without even waiting for his response. Takeyuki had left the in-flight magazine he'd been reading when they took off in the seat, but the man picked it up and put it in the pocket on the back of the seat in front of him.

Utterly overawed by the man's presence, the man was already sitting calmly beside him, his sinfully long legs crossed, by the time Takeyuki returned to his senses.

"Uh, you know, I saw you...before." Takeyuki was making sure it hadn't just been his imagination that the man had been staring at him ever since the lounge, and his voice was prickly. His expression also revealed his

displeasure and it grew severe.

But the man showed not the slightest sign of guilt. On the contrary, he was looking at Takeyuki with a taunting expression. "What do you mean?"

"You've been looking at me constantly. It's really rude and creepy."

"Oh, sorry about that." The man's forehead tightened imperceptibly, displaying an earnestness that was more than an empty apology. "I thought it was odd that a kid like you was alone in the lounge, so I ended up staring at you. If it upset you, I apologize."

"A kid like me...?" Takeyuki's temper flared again. The way the man talked, he made Takeyuki sound like a teenager. Of course, people tended to think he was younger than he was, and actually Takeyuki was secretly self-conscious about it. He was still sometimes mistaken for a high school student and it always upset him. He remembered his brother looking more adult at this age, so Takeyuki had no idea why he didn't.

"Did I just hit another nerve?" The man looked amused again, seemingly aware of Takeyuki's temperamental personality. There probably weren't many people in this man's entourage who showed their emotions so openly when dealing with him. He looked refreshed and deeply interested.

"I'm not as much of a child as you think," Takeyuki returned curtly, turning away. He was annoyed by the man's forwardness in sitting down beside him without so much as a by-your-leave, and, on top of that, his pride wouldn't stand for being mocked by that tone of voice. Takeyuki hated himself for stumbling momentarily at the

man's incredible presence, and he'd rebuked him more than was necessary. He was trying to use body language to tell the man to go back to his own seat.

"You're surprisingly easy to upset."

"You might have something to do with that."

"Do you hate men like me?"

"You don't seem like the sort of person I would like." Takeyuki had no obligation to restrain himself, so he said exactly what he thought. He turned away from the man and faced the window, which he'd closed because of the glaring sunlight during the meal. Takeyuki couldn't see what expression the man wore in response to his words.

"I see. That's too bad." His answer might have been serious or joking. His voice made it sound like he was truly sorry, but Takeyuki couldn't decide whether to take that at face value and he coldly said nothing. He'd meant to be utterly harsh, but the man continued talking as if Takeyuki's tone had had no effect on him.

"How long are you planning to stay in Cassina?"

"I haven't decided." Somehow unable to ignore him, Takeyuki answered in a hard, peevish voice. After he'd spoken, he felt strange and wondered why he was talking to this man. He could make any number of viable excuses to drive him away, like that he wanted to sleep, or that he wanted to watch a movie, but for some reason Takeyuki held back. The strength of the man's bearing had beaten Takeyuki, and an atmosphere had formed that made it difficult for him to express his will. This was extremely rare. It must have been the difference in their ages. Or, perhaps, it was because Takeyuki instinctively

felt the difference in their status as human beings.

"Are you really all by yourself?"

"My older brother lives there. I'm visiting him. Do you have a problem with that?" It annoyed Takeyuki to be asked so persistently if he was by himself and his voice grew harsh as he sharply turned back to face the man. His eyes were arrested by the blue eyes that had apparently been fixed on him the whole time.

Takeyuki's heart skipped.

He felt something clamping tightly on his chest. The man's eyes were that impressive, with an incredible power that burrowed into the depths of Takeyuki's soul.

"Of course I don't." The man shook his head slowly and smiled faintly.

"Er—" Balling his fists loosely on his lap, Takeyuki fought back his embarrassment to ask, "Are you under the impression that I'm a woman?"

"No." The man denied it immediately, his voice calm.

Takeyuki blushed with embarrassment from his earlobes to the back of his neck. He hadn't asked the question because he wanted to; he had been harassed overseas because of misunderstandings like that in the past, so he had only asked to be sure. But the man had denied it so smoothly that it made it seem as if Takeyuki had been the one with the perverted misunderstanding. He felt truly uncomfortable.

"Y-you're from Cassina, aren't you?" The awkwardness forced the words out of Takeyuki. He felt an urgent need to change the subject.

"Yes, I am." Unambiguous pride filled the man's

voice. Takeyuki could feel the boundless love he had for his country and how important it was to him. It gave Takeyuki the impression that he might not be such a bad person after all.

Just then, the cabin lights began to dim; soon it would be dark. The cabin would stay like this until they served drinks again.

“Well, I suppose I’ll head back to my seat while you don’t think any worse of me.” Compared to the intensity the man had while seated, it was almost disappointing how gracefully he stood up.

Despite how quickly Takeyuki had asked him to leave, now that the man was actually going, Takeyuki perversely wanted to stop him. It was strange. Perhaps he was just fundamentally contrary. While the man was there, the conversation never seemed like it would pick up and the mood seemed unlikely to become more enjoyable, but at least for a moment Takeyuki found it hard to let the man leave him. Takeyuki couldn’t understand that.

“Have a good trip,” the man said, polite to the last. He looked Takeyuki straight in the eyes with a raw, earnest face. Takeyuki looked back at him, as if transfixed. He wanted to respond, but for some reason his throat was tight and he couldn’t speak.

He probably wasn’t going to rudely stare at Takeyuki’s face anymore.

When the plane landed, they would forget they had ever spoken to each other and return to being perfect strangers. That was perfectly natural, but for some reason Takeyuki felt regret. He could have filed the

man away as just another strange person, except for his incredible presence.

## *Chapter Two*

When Takeyuki walked out into the arrivals lobby of the Ras airport, he saw his brother and sister-in-law among the throng of people waiting. It had been twenty-three hours since he'd departed Narita. It was the first time he'd traveled so far on his own. Finally arriving at his destination and seeing these familiar faces, Takeyuki's heart calmed down and he felt a little more human again.

"Welcome to our home, Takeyuki!"

"Hey, there. So you really came after all." Compared to the bright smile of his sister-in-law as she greeted him, Takeyuki's brother, eight years older than him, was as brusque as ever. It had been two years since they'd last seen each other, but Atsushi didn't seem particularly moved or happy. But still, deep in his eyes, hidden by a pair of glasses, floated a hint of his happiness to see Takeyuki. Atsushi had always been the type to communicate with his eyes rather than with words.

"But I see you're still our father's favorite. He paid for a first class ticket without even grumbling."

"Oh, but it's such a long flight. Takeyuki is going to be starting out in the workforce next month, so Father must think this is the last time he can take care of Takeyuki. Father wants to do as much as he can for him."

“Geez. Everyone falls all over themselves for Takeyuki.”

“Stop talking like that, dear. You know you spoil him more than any of us.”

Takeyuki's brother pursed his lips glumly at this gentle riposte from his wife. Takeyuki couldn't help but smile at the sight of the couple's familiar exchange, which made him forget that they were actually arguing about him.

“Do you only have that one bag?” His brother changed the subject to hide his embarrassment. He was looking at the suitcase Takeyuki pulled behind him. It was big enough for about one week of traveling. Takeyuki nodded. He'd packed as lightly as possible, deciding he would buy whatever he needed when he got there. A quarter of the space in the suitcase was taken up by souvenirs he'd brought from Japan.

“Mustafa.” Atsushi turned around and called to a young native man standing a little ways off. He was twenty-five or twenty-six and had frizzy black hair and a combination of smooth, firm skin and intelligent eyes that made a sharp impression.

“Takeyuki, Mustafa is one of the local staff members at the embassy. He works as a translator and office clerk. You may need his help during your stay here, so say, ‘hello.’”

“Hello. I'm Takeyuki Onozuka. It's nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you.” Mustafa shook Takeyuki's hand with a firm grip. Apparently Mustafa spoke Japanese as well as English, so he would be very useful.

“All right then, let's go. It's this way,” Atsushi said, leading the way. Mustafa brought the suitcase, and Takeyuki's burden felt much lighter with only the shoulder bag hanging across his chest. Following close behind his brother, they traversed the building.

After walking for a little bit, Takeyuki recognized a familiar figure in a suit ahead of them and made a quiet cry of recognition.

“What's wrong?” his brother asked, looking back over his shoulder at Takeyuki.

“Oh, n-nothing,” Takeyuki answered hastily. “I just saw someone who was sitting near me in the plane.”

His brother snorted, unimpressed, and turned back around.

During Takeyuki's brief conversation with his brother, the man with the sunglasses had already disappeared again. Takeyuki didn't have the first clue which way he'd gone, but, even if he had, it wouldn't have changed anything. Their only connection was a very brief, not terribly enthusiastic conversation. Just as Takeyuki had predicted, after the man wished him a good trip and left the conversation, they had nothing further to do with each other. The man had passed Takeyuki twice after that to go to the restroom, but he'd made the trips without looking at Takeyuki. It was bizarre, but despite how annoyed Takeyuki had been with the man's gaze on him, when the man left him alone, that gave rise to fresh dissatisfaction. The man had had such a deep interest in him and had talked with such a lack of restraint that it seemed bizarre that he could ignore Takeyuki as a

perfect stranger now. It made Takeyuki feel sick to his stomach. He felt strange, unable to grasp his own state of mind. That had been the first time Takeyuki had seen the man since getting off the plane and he had inadvertently cried out.

They exited the airport with the image of the man's barely-glanced back still lingering in Takeyuki's mind.

Unlike the air-conditioned interior of the airport, the sunlight outside was intense and the air was dry. It was barely seven in the morning, but the sunlight in the Middle East was merciless. When he set foot outside the shadow cast by the building, blades of light pierced Takeyuki's skin instantly.

They waited by the rotary for a few minutes before a black luxury car pulled up and stopped before them. Another local man was driving. The driver was a smaller middle-aged man with a beard, dressed in a white uniform. While Mustafa loaded the suitcase into the car's trunk, Takeyuki and the others climbed into the back seat. A moment later, Mustafa got into the front seat.

"First we'll go to the embassy and introduce you to the ambassador," Takeyuki's brother said.

Takeyuki surrendered his body to the swaying of the speeding car, fighting back a yawn as he began to feel sleepy. He had been unable to rest very well on the plane, so he felt lethargic. No matter how soft and comfortable the seats, Takeyuki was unused to traveling and hadn't felt relaxed. He had dozed a little, but real sleep had stayed far away. That was how he had landed in Ras early that morning, so he was sure he would be

practically useless all day. After his brother took him to the embassy to meet Ambassador Kusunoki, he would take Takeyuki to his home, where Takeyuki would be staying for his visit, and he could relax.

"Are Mother and Father doing all right?" Takeyuki was caught off-guard by his brother's question, forcing open his falling eyelids.

"They're fine. Father is writing something like an epic about our great-grandfather's life called *On the Late Lord Onozuka* in his spare time; he wants to tell me how amazing a person he was whenever he catches me. I understand how father feels; Grandfather did receive a Grand Cordon of the Order medal from the Emperor, after all, but I'm not really that interested in it so I thought it was a little annoying."

"Sounds like you're the one who's the same as ever," Atsushi interjected a little sarcastically. There was mockery in his slanting eyes and a smirk on his refined lips.

"Mother is still in a flurry every day with her lessons and volunteering." Takeyuki cut through his brother's mockery to continue. "And what about you? You're almost five months along now, right, Masako?"

"That's right, Takeyuki." Seated between them, Atsushi's wife leaned forward to look at Takeyuki, as if putting herself between them. She rested her hands protectively on her stomach. "You'll be an uncle soon."

"It feels so weird to hear you say that." It wasn't the fact that he would soon have a niece or nephew; it just didn't seem real that his brother, whom Takeyuki had spent his entire childhood with, was going to

become a father. He was sure his brother still had lingering doubts, too. Atsushi remained silent about the child who would be born that summer. But when Takeyuki stole a glance at him, his face was resolute, brimming with the satisfaction of the professional and family man shouldering all of his responsibilities. It made Takeyuki's heart thrill.

*Will I ever be like that?*

The same vague anxiety he always felt pressed down on Takeyuki's heart. He knew he was rushing things. He had to launch himself into a completely different world in one month's time and put an end to sixteen-odd years of carefree student life. That was his fear, and his excitement. As his brother said, Takeyuki had been shamelessly spoiled growing up. Born into a wealthy family, he had grown up showered by its blessings. Until now, that had been enough, but he wanted to stand on his own two feet. He had actually resisted working at his father's company, but he couldn't rebel against his parents' wishes when they had already parted with Atsushi. Besides, it wasn't as if there was any job he absolutely wanted to do, so he hadn't been terribly convincing. Even if his father *was* the CEO, that didn't change the fact that Takeyuki was becoming a responsible, independent adult. This elusive anxiety must have come from intimidation at how illustrious the rest of his family was. Takeyuki felt that he couldn't be like his father or his brother, and perhaps he already felt as if he had lost any direction in his future.

*I want to see the desert,* Takeyuki thought suddenly. He remembered now that when he'd proclaimed that he

was going to Cassina, he had felt exactly this muddled and had wanted to see if the parched land swept by gritty red wind would set him on his own wobbly feet. Takeyuki looked out at the scenery that flowed past the car window.

The scene was punctuated with palm trees among stone and concrete buildings that followed the paved asphalt road; it was much more cosmopolitan than Takeyuki had imagined. When they entered the market area, older cars joined them on the road. On either side of the street, Takeyuki could see roads lined with storefronts for camera shops and bookstores. There was a promenade where people of every description walked, its roof held up by arched pillars. The people of Ras apparently got an early start on their day.

"Where's the desert?"

Atsushi answered his question curtly. "Southeast of here."

"Have you ever ridden a camel?"

"No." As expected, his brother shook his head disinterestedly. His answer was completely dismissive, as if to say that he wasn't in this country to play around.

Takeyuki wanted to ask many other things, but he imagined that no matter what he asked his brother would act like that, and his enthusiasm faded.

He yawned again.

Takeyuki wanted to just spend the rest of the day at his brother and sister-in-law's house. He had done enough traveling. If he napped until evening, he would probably recover from his fatigue. He could think about where he wanted to go and what he wanted to see that night.

They made it through the congested traffic of the marketplace, and the car pulled into a tranquil area atop a hill. The entire neighborhood seemed to be an upscale development of elegant mansions with yellow and cream-colored walls. The gardens peeked out from behind the iron grillwork of large gateways, their fountains and green grass speaking to the wealth of the people who lived there.

The Japanese embassy was built on one of these corners. Two officers in military uniforms guarded the gate with machineguns at their shoulders. The car stopped momentarily outside the gate to await permission, then proceeded inside.

“There have been some small disturbances of the peace lately,” Atsushi muttered with a serious expression.

“Like terrorists?”

“No, this country has particularly progressive ideals for a Middle Eastern country, so the religious laws are more lax, and the entire country is very unified under the ideals of their current king, who often sides with Western nations. Of course there’s still one segment of society that’s anti-American and holds extreme views, but there’s almost no risk of terrorism. The skirmishes among the tribes, theft, and kidnapping are bigger problems. These incidents have always been insurmountable. There was an incident just the other day of a kidnapping that targeted a member of the upper class for ransom. A Japanese person will make a tempting target, so be careful.”

“I will.” Takeyuki had never assumed that he was

coming to a stable, peaceful region, so he nodded testily, feeling like his brother was emphasizing something he already knew perfectly well. He didn’t need Atsushi to tell him that to understand the danger.

The embassy was in a lovely three-story white stone building. They passed through the entrance hall, which was inlaid with mosaic tiles, and walked down a corridor overlooking the inner garden toward the ambassador’s office.

His sister-in-law, Masako, would wait for them in a small lounge on one side of the hall drinking tea, so only Takeyuki and his brother would be meeting the ambassador. They passed several embassy workers along the way, and every single one of them bowed deeply when they saw Atsushi. Takeyuki felt fresh admiration for his brother, realizing how special he must be to be a councilor at such a young age.

Ambassador Kusunoki, a large man who was both generous and carefree, appeared to have just arrived at work.

“Well, well, come in. How is your father?”

“He’s doing well, thank you.”

Ambassador Kusunoki had gone to the same college as Takeyuki’s father and they had apparently met several times. He had been looking forward to Takeyuki’s arrival in Cassina and had told Atsushi that he wanted to meet Takeyuki very much.

“I’m sure this must seem like a backwater compared to Tokyo, but there are a great many things here that you just can’t see in Japan, like the ruins or the *souk*, so I don’t think you’ll get bored. I also recommend

watching the sunset in the desert at least once. We'll loan you one of the embassy's cars and a driver while you're here, so please feel free to use it whenever you like."

"Thank you very much," Takeyuki said, bowing at the ambassador's kindness.

The fan spinning on the ceiling circulated the cool air of the air-conditioning evenly through the room. Mustafa, who had briefly disappeared, returned carrying chai. The glass cups he brought narrowed in the middle and contained a dark liquid that looked like tea. Spoons rested on the saucers, each with two sugar cubes in it. Takeyuki lifted the cup and sniffed at it; it smelled like a mixture of black and oolong tea.

While Takeyuki was examining his chai in fascination, Atsushi and the ambassador talked.

"So the prince won't be returning to the palace this week, either?"

"It seems not. It's not a particularly urgent matter for us, either, so it might be petty to force an appointment."

"No, no, of course. I'm happy to meet with His Highness whenever he finds it convenient, Onozuka."

"He's rumored to be a very mercurial man."

"Well, he's still young, after all."

"Even so..."

The ambassador's office was very comfortable. Takeyuki brought his first sip of chai cautiously to his lips, then relaxed. Leaning back in the deep cushions of his seat, he listened distractedly to the men's voices as they spoke and felt the sleepiness that had been intermittently haunting him now returning.

"Takeyuki. Takeyuki!" The second time he was called, he started awake. Atsushi was looking at him in disapproving surprise.

"I-I'm sorry, I—" He quickly sat up straight and apologized. The ambassador grinned at him from his own seat.

"Oh, don't worry about it. There are no direct flights from Japan to Cassina, so you lose an entire day traveling. The tour groups arrive here early in the morning and often have to follow strict sightseeing schedules, which I've heard is hard on the older visitors. It's also very easy to get food poisoning here, so many people come to us asking for information on hospitals. Listen to your body and don't push yourself too hard."

"Yes, sir." Takeyuki dipped his head once more in a mortified bow. "Thank you again."

"Sorry to trouble you, Mister Ambassador." Atsushi also offered a polite remark.

The ambassador smiled as if nothing at all had happened. He was really very kind, modest, and placid. Following his brother's sign, Takeyuki left the ambassador's office.

## *Chapter Three*

The day after he arrived in Cassina, Takeyuki climbed into the car Mustafa drove and was taken on a tour of the famous tourist spots of Ras, of course, but they also ventured into the neighboring city. There were any number of things to see if Takeyuki had been in the mood, such as the mosques where the devotees of Islam worshipped, the sepulchers where supposed saints slumbered, Roman temples and the remains of a line of pillars, and many other interesting sights.

It was very strange to see a single ribbon of road stretching across the undulating earth covered in sand as far as he could see. Takeyuki climbed to the top of a hill with a good view and the panorama that opened before him forced a gasp of admiration from his lips. He saw a lump of green beyond a sand dune, and realized, *That must be an oasis.*

Mustafa was extremely knowledgeable, and he was able to answer almost all of Takeyuki's questions instantly. However, Takeyuki hadn't studied up on Cassina before coming, so perhaps Mustafa found his questions to be incredibly simplistic.

"The men of Cassina must serve two years in the army between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five."

"Really? So you were in the army, too, Mustafa?"

"Yes, I was involved from age twenty to twenty-

two. Prince Ashif was in the same unit as me, so it was very inspiring.”

“Prince Ashif? Is he going to be the next king?”

“That’s correct. Crown Prince Ashif bin Rashid is King Muhammad’s eldest son. He and I are the same age.”

The car rattled as it rolled over the unpaved streets of the suburbs. Takeyuki sat in the back, holding tightly to the back of the passenger-side seat as he talked to Mustafa, who held the wheel. Mustafa seemed to revere the heir to his country from the bottom of his heart, holding his head high as he spoke proudly about the crown prince. Takeyuki had learned that the current king commanded absolute trust and popularity from his people, and it was apparently the same for the crown prince.

“He’s courageous, intelligent, and believes fiercely in justice—an amazing person. The harem system has not been in my country for a long time, but there are a considerable number of women who pine for His Highness the prince.”

“There are no harems? So you mean a man has only one wife?”

“In theory, that’s correct.”

Mustafa gave a cryptic answer.

“But in fact the king is attended by concubines, and if Prince Ashif does the same none of the people will question it.”

“He must be very well liked.”

“He is the pride of our country,” Mustafa declared without hesitation. His conviction made Takeyuki want

to meet this Prince Ashif to see what he was really like. Of course, he didn’t think he had the slightest chance of actually doing it. It was nothing but a passing flash of curiosity.

“Where would you like to go next today?”

This was the third day in a row that Takeyuki had gone out with Mustafa. He tried to refuse by telling his brother he felt bad making Mustafa babysit him every day, but Atsushi would only frown and say he was uncomfortable leaving Takeyuki by himself, and he refused to listen. Masako couldn’t exert herself while she was pregnant and Atsushi had to go to work. Since Takeyuki had arrived on a Monday, they had arranged with the ambassador to entrust him to Mustafa until the weekend. It would be too late if they waited until after something had already happened. His brother repeated that refrain again and again, but Takeyuki had never felt any danger worth mentioning in all the tourist spots he had visited so far with Mustafa. Maybe Masako was right, and Takeyuki’s brother did spoil him and mother him more than Takeyuki had realized. It must have been that.

Since he hadn’t done any background research, on the third day of sightseeing Takeyuki ran out of ideas of what to do. Ras and its surroundings were famous sites for people who were interested in ancient Roman culture. Within half a day’s travel from the city were the ruins of a fort and an arena, and apparently also quite a few museums and art galleries. For every one Takeyuki thought about visiting, there were innumerable other things to see, and Mustafa could take Takeyuki wherever

he wanted to go.

“Oh, I know. I want to see a *souk*.” After gathering up and searching through his sparse knowledge, Takeyuki came to the realization that he hadn’t yet visited such a place.

A *souk* was better known as a bazaar. He could find almost everything the native people used in their day-to-day lives there. And, at the same time, there were many kinds of souvenirs available for tourists.

“I want to go to the biggest *souk* in town.” There wasn’t anything in particular that he wanted to buy, but Takeyuki sounded decisive. He was deeply fascinated by such a place, where he could feel the power of the local people.

“A *souk*, sir?”

He met Mustafa’s eyes in the rearview mirror. The smallest sign of anxiety wavered in Mustafa’s wise eyes, and Takeyuki tilted his head. “Is it dangerous?”

“No, it’s not a very dangerous place, but...”

Mustafa answered evasively, his black eyes lowering. Following his gaze, Takeyuki looked down at himself and guessed what was bothering Mustafa, but he brushed the concern off with a laugh. Takeyuki was wearing a short-sleeved, open-necked shirt with pants made of a stretchy fabric, a light sweater tied around his hips, and a hat on his head. His style defined casual dress, but every last piece of clothing he wore was a luxury item bearing a brand name. Anyone who saw him would know he was the son of a rich family. He would be an easy mark.

“Don’t worry, Mustafa.”

He wasn’t stupid enough to be criminally overcharged for inferior goods. Takeyuki was convincing himself of that at the same time that he reassured Mustafa. The most important thing was to not let the vendor take control. If he clearly refused and told them he didn’t need something when he didn’t need it, the vendor probably wouldn’t force the issue until he bought something. He fingered the large cross that hung around his neck and thought he would be fine.

If necessary, he could take a stroll through the *souk* by himself, even if Mustafa didn’t come with him. He didn’t know much Arabic, but Cassina’s official language was English. The level of education for the citizens of Cassina was far above the average Middle Eastern country, and, besides, his brother had told him that most of the people living in the metropolitan area understood basic English.

Takeyuki wanted to move around by himself. He wanted to go for a walk. These feelings gradually rose up in his mind. Everyone had always calmed him with over-protectiveness and more over-protectiveness, and Takeyuki felt inwardly rebellious against that. He had the confidence to do anything, but everyone around him tried to take care of everything because he was the youngest child or because he gave the impression of being thin and weak or for other reasons of their own.

“You could even rest at a café, Mustafa.”

Mustafa’s head jerked up at this suggestion and his eyes reflected back to Takeyuki in the mirror, seeming to say, “certainly not!” and full of reproach.

“Doing that would make me angry. No—if it were

only that, I would not argue because it would only be my personal problem. But if something were to happen to you, Mister Takeyuki, it could cause an international incident."

"Don't blow things out of proportion," Takeyuki joked, honestly finding the idea ridiculous. But Mustafa's eyes stayed serious, admitting no sign of a smile. It seemed that no matter what Takeyuki said, he wouldn't be allowed to stroll around on his own. He was certain his brother had made Mustafa do this.

A small sigh escaped Takeyuki and he turned his gaze to the scenery outside the window. The car once again entered the city. The road, three lanes wide on one side, looked as if it had been repaired recently. Palm trees were planted in the central divider, making the road a pleasure to drive down.

Takeyuki was surprised to see the modern city sitting right beside the bleak desert. He asked Mustafa to stop the car for a moment on the side of the sand-swept road and climbed up a hillock nearby, but all he saw rambling out ahead of him were grey and yellow and sometimes pink sand dunes, and he was dazed for a moment.

He had heard that the Bedouins who roamed in the desert had sand for their beds and the stars for their canopy. Takeyuki couldn't imagine what that must be like. He could only think of how impressed he was by the awe-inspiring environment. He thought it would be impossible to sleep a wink in it.

Once Takeyuki had placed himself in an environment so utterly unlike Japan, he wanted to try

doing things he never would have done ordinarily. Maybe that was because he was becoming more liberated.

"The best *souk* in Ras is *Kamal Souk* in the old marketplace."

"How big is it?"

"It's like a labyrinth." Mustafa's face was solemn yet again.

"A labyrinth..." That excited Takeyuki even more.

The narrow cobbled streets were blanketed with a sordid vitality. Both sides of the street thronging with the unbroken line of street stall roofs, all of them calling out their wares, selling wondrous things Takeyuki had never seen. He could picture it all. It was probably good to be caught up by the spirit of things sometimes and buy things he would never buy unless he were on vacation. There might be some amazing antique finds out there. And just window-shopping at the stores that sold *kilims*, the beautiful rugs of the Middle East, would be interesting.

Mustafa turned right on the boulevard. When they had gone a little ways, the look of the buildings began to change. The brand new high rise buildings largely disappeared, and in their place older buildings grew more numerous. Takeyuki even saw buildings that were falling into ruin. Suddenly, they pulled into a district crowded with tiny houses and other buildings and the road became a little rougher, too. It felt very much like a downtown alleyway. Ancient asphalt had collapsed in places and cracked apart in others, and the jolting of the car grew worse. Sometimes a donkey

loaded with packages walked at the side of the road, and they had to reduce their speed and drive more slowly. The car then entered an even narrower road with no sidewalk. Shoppers spilled into the road, milling around. Numerous cafés were open on this street and most of the colorful plastic chairs set out in front of them were filled with customers.

The car moved forward at almost the same speed as the pedestrians. When they honked the horn, the pedestrians blocking the road ahead of them moved, but Mustafa seemed to honk as little as possible. The flow of people continued for another fifty yards.

Takeyuki looked over and saw a stone gateway to the left. People were streaming in and out of it constantly.

“The *souk* is through that stone gateway.”

“Wow. It looks really busy.”

“There’s a place to park the car a little way ahead, once I get through this.” Mustafa really didn’t want to leave Takeyuki by himself. He never told Takeyuki that he could get out here and go on ahead. They passed slowly before the stone gate.

Peeking through the gate, Takeyuki saw crowds of people dressed in a variety of costumes. Shops lined both sides of the road, looking like a covered shopping arcade. Takeyuki caught only a quick glance, but yellows and reds and greens swirled together in a vibrant stream that assaulted his eyes. He wanted to walk through the thick of it as soon as he could. Takeyuki’s heart was dancing, quite uncharacteristically. He’d had enough of mosques and ancient temples; he was tired of the solemn air of ruins:

he wanted to do something to relax for a change.

“We’ll have to walk a little bit, but it wouldn’t do to break the law with an embassy car,” Mustafa stated, by way of excuse. Once past the stone gate, the streams of people abruptly thinned out. Probably because they were on the edge of the city, and ahead of them lay only sprawling desert.

Two white-haired old men were in front of a café smoking a water pipe as they bent over a table made of stacked cardboard boxes and a wooden plank playing backgammon. Just as they were pulling past them, something happened. There was a sudden bang and the car rocked. It happened so suddenly that Takeyuki wasn’t prepared for it and he slipped off of his seat.

“Augh! This is bad!” For the first time, Mustafa shouted in Arabic.

“W-what’s wrong?” Takeyuki leaned forward from the back seat to get information out of Mustafa.

“We’ve got a flat tire,” Mustafa answered confidently, instantly recovering his characteristic reserve. The two men at the café had also jumped up, startled, and were alternately peering into the car and shouting in Arabic. Mustafa lowered his window and stuck his head out to speak quickly to them, and they responded. The old men had such thick accents that Takeyuki couldn’t understand them, though he couldn’t really understand Mustafa, either.

There was a small chicken coop beside the café, and Mustafa pulled the car up in front of it to park. Mustafa got out of the car and Takeyuki followed him. He stood beside Mustafa as the young man bent to

examine the flat tire, sizing up the situation. The two old men had already gone back to their game.

“This seems like the worst stroke of luck,” Mustafa said, frowning as he looked over all the tires. “The flat is on the rear left side, but the rear right tire also seems to be losing pressure. We only have one spare. This seems like it would be better to have a mechanic repair.”

“Will one come out here?”

“I’ll go to the nearest gas station and tell them what’s happened. There was one two kilometers back, so I should be able to bring back a mechanic in twenty minutes. I’m very sorry, Mister Takeyuki, but would you mind waiting for me at the café? You can get some tea there.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“I’m very sorry for this trouble,” Mustafa apologized, looking extremely remorseful, then left Takeyuki to hurry back along the road they’d come in on.

Takeyuki watched him go, then muttered, “Sorry, but I don’t really want to sit and drink tea.”

He took a sidelong glance into the café. The inside of the building was dim and obscure, and he saw no one except two thin children, four or five years old, playing in front of the cash register. The shop owner had apparently gone into the back.

The two old men from before were staring at Takeyuki intently and talking to each other in Arabic. They seemed to be looking at the necklace that hung over his chest. It was a white gold crucifix decorated at the center with a diamond and sapphires. The crucifix

was rather large, so it stood out hanging from Takeyuki’s slender neck. He could have tried to hide it under his shirt, but it was an open-necked design that spread naturally into a V, so the crucifix would still show.

*I’m sure it’s no big deal.*

Takeyuki wasn’t very religious, but he was still a Christian. And what was the harm in a Christian wearing a crucifix?

Takeyuki assured himself there was nothing to worry about and he walked past the café without a second glance. He didn’t want to sit in there and obediently wait for Mustafa to come back. He decided to go ahead by himself to the *souk* and wander around for a little bit before Mustafa came back. He wasn’t a child who needed to be led around by the hand. That was how dismissive he felt.

Takeyuki passed through the stone gateway and saw a complex of narrow alleys stretching out interminably ahead of him. This was the largest *souk* in Cassina, after all. He was shocked by the scale of it, which was so much larger than he had imagined.

It was midday, but it was dim inside the *souk*. There was a domed ceiling that gave Takeyuki the impression of being in a cellar. The ceiling and the walls of the shops were made of old stone. Clothing and fabric hung down here and there from it. Every imaginable thing was for sale at the dozens of shops. There were large baskets filled with red, brown, and yellow spices. Just passing in front of the shop, Takeyuki inhaled a remarkable scent. There was a shop lined with silks, selling things loaded with gold and silver. There were

also several shops aimed at tourists, selling postcards, disposable cameras, and souvenirs. Takeyuki was soon swallowed up in the atmosphere of the first *souk* he had ever experienced.

He was only wandering around aimlessly looking at the storefronts, but his eyes often met those of locals who wore scraps of cloth on their heads. It made Takeyuki uncomfortable to wonder why so many people were looking at him. There were many other tourists besides him. There were people who were obviously part of a group, and the white and blonde-haired Europeans stood out, too. Takeyuki didn't think he was dressed in a particularly remarkable way, so he couldn't understand why he was being stared at so much. He wondered if perhaps the cross he wore around his neck had touched on a religious taboo, but Mustafa had told him that such fundamentalism was not in Cassina's national character, so it just didn't make sense. The strange atmosphere of the place, so remote from his daily experience, made Takeyuki forget the time.

The cobblestone streets stretched ahead of him forever, punctuated by plates of sweet-smelling candy that looked like bread. Captivated by the wares, Takeyuki walked with his eyes on the sides of the street, and so his shoulder bumped against someone walking in the opposite direction.

"Oh, I'm sorry." He turned quickly and apologized. An Arabic man with a beard and thick eyebrows frowned and said something in Arabic as he stared sharply into Takeyuki's eyes. He pointed at Takeyuki's chest with a rugged-looking finger and spoke in a critical or warning

tone, but Takeyuki didn't have any idea what he was saying. The gruff tone of the man's voice only distressed Takeyuki a little bit. Apparently the man had said what he wanted to say and he moved on, his eyes resting on Takeyuki as he left.

Takeyuki felt relieved. But, in the same moment, he felt uneasy that the official language of English was less effective than he'd thought it would be. He began to feel that he should be heading back. It really made a difference having Mustafa with him.

He looked at his watch: the twenty minutes were already up. *Uh-oh*. Mustafa might be realizing right now that Takeyuki wasn't at the café and starting to panic. Takeyuki began to retrace his path with quick steps. If he went back the way he'd come, he thought he would be able to see the stone gateway any moment. But he didn't see it. Takeyuki worried that perhaps he had taken a turn on an earlier road, so he went back and tried going down a different street. Everything in the *souk* looked the same to Takeyuki, and though he felt that he had come a certain way before, he also felt as if he was walking there for the first time; he just couldn't tell. Gradually he grew more frantic and nervous.

He thought about stopping one of the people going by and asking directions to the stone gateway, but all of the locals seemed to be staring at Takeyuki suspiciously, which gave him a bad feeling and made him hesitate. He glanced around but didn't see anyone who looked Japanese, and he was reluctant to ask directions from any of the other foreign tourists since he couldn't tell what country they came from.

Lost, he moved forward relying only on instinct until he saw a break in the shopfronts ahead. The crowds thinned out a lot: he seemed to have reached the end of the *souk*. The way ahead was blocked by a stone wall, but light shone in on the right-hand side. The stone gateway seemed to be one of several entrances. The first thing Takeyuki had to do was get out of this dim, suspicious place. It would be much nicer to walk back to where he started from outside, rather than wandering in circles inside the *souk*.

About a dozen feet to the right was the outside, with no roofs. Takeyuki felt as if he were escaping purgatory for the real world. There were three decrepit houses there, behind which was a small empty lot. A cramped alley ran between the houses to the main road.

*Great, maybe I can find my way.* Takeyuki calmed himself with that thought and took a step toward the alley. As he did so, he was terrified to feel someone grab his shoulder from behind. He spun around and saw a bearded man with a red and white checkered cloth on his head staring balefully at him. The man was in good shape and he looked strong. Takeyuki thought he was being accosted for going somewhere he shouldn't have.

"I-I'm sorry, I'm just lost," he explained, praying that his English would be understood. But two more men appeared behind the first, both looking menacing, and Takeyuki's words stuck in his throat. He could say nothing more.

The three men were closing in on him, pressing him deeper into the empty lot. He had no idea what was happening and he almost fell into panic. If he shouted,

people in the *souk* might hear him. But no, it would never work. There was no sign of anyone nearby. The crowds were further inside, and he knew his voice would never reach that far. It seemed that the men had been tailing him.

Takeyuki could tell that they had set their sights on him early on. Finally, his back hit the wall of a broken-down home. The three men surrounded him. There was no opportunity for escape. The men were all taller than him, and Takeyuki looked up at them in terror. The two men who'd come after the first wore the cloths typical of people in the Middle East on their heads. They wore a variety of costumes, their clothes resembling workman's clothing or pajama pants and a baggy sweater, or a patterned shirt and cotton pants. But each of them wore, as if by some sort of agreement, a leather sheath that held a knife with a curved blade. Their faces, burned black by the sun, their thick eyebrows and mustaches, the stubble on their chins, and, worse than all the rest, their eyes filled with cruelty and cunning, made Takeyuki shrink back to the point that he couldn't even move.

He was terrified. So terrified that he couldn't speak. If he made any noise, he had a tense notion that they would slice his throat instantly with their knives. One of the latecomers reached out for Takeyuki's cowering head.

"Agh!" Takeyuki made a noise that was torn from his throat in a burst of air, shrinking into his shoulders and shutting his eyes tight. The next instant, he felt a burning pain on the back of his neck.

He opened his eyes in surprise and saw that his

crucifix was dangling from the man's fingers. Takeyuki put a hand dumbly to his neck. He felt a faint trace of blood. The three men looked at the ornament they had torn from Takeyuki's neck and nodded to each other conspiratorially. Takeyuki tensed his body and gulped.

He wanted them to be satisfied by this and go. The necklace, with the diamond of almost one carat fixed in the center of the crucifix, was definitely worth money, but they weren't fixated on it. It would have been a small stroke of good luck if that one thing actually had been able to save him. *Oh*, Takeyuki realized belatedly, *That man in the souk who pointed at my chest and looked so frightening must have meant this*. He must have been warning Takeyuki about being so careless. But that realization couldn't help him now. The man wearing the checkered cloth put Takeyuki's necklace inside his shirt.

*Please—just go now!* Takeyuki was praying. He absolutely could not make noise. He didn't want to provoke them. These thoughts ran through Takeyuki's mind. Pressed against the wall, cold sweat ran down the center of his back. He heard a muffled exchange of Arabic over his head. The men were consulting about something.

*Atsushi! Mustafa!* If Takeyuki had known something like this would happen, he never would have considered walking alone in the *souk*. Mustafa was probably looking for him right now. Takeyuki knew Mustafa would realize he had gone into the *souk*, so if he was lucky Mustafa might be coming for him right now. But when he remembered that knotted maze of streets,



he lost all hope. The chances of Mustafa finding this spot were very, very slim.

Raising his eyes fearfully, Takeyuki's eyes fell on the man standing in the middle of the group. A shudder ran down his spine. He was terrifying. He looked like he was sizing up a woman, his eyes filled with lust and rude curiosity as they stared impudently at Takeyuki. *I'm a man*. If the men couldn't tell, Takeyuki needed to tell them that, but he still couldn't speak. Cowardice was the very word to describe this behavior. It was a shock to discover how powerless he was when it came right down to it.

With his slender body and fair skin, his silky black hair and large eyes, Takeyuki was aware of how androgynous he looked. The older boys at school had hit on him and he had even let them kiss and fondle him. But since Takeyuki only thought of himself as a man and nothing else, he never cared what other people thought about his outward appearance. The situation he found himself in now was like a nightmare.

*What can I do? What should I do?*

The more frantic he became, the more confusion and panic descended on him.

"If you want money..." He finally choked out a hoarse offer. He wanted to tell them that he would pay any amount they asked, if they would just let him go. But they didn't seem to understand his desperate English, either.

The man on his left grabbed Takeyuki's chin and turned his face toward him.

"No—don't!" He cried out reflexively in Japanese.

Takeyuki flailed his head frantically and shook the man's hand from his chin. "Let go! Let go of me!"

As soon as he began fighting back, his tense body filled with power. He resisted the three men frantically, desperately trying to escape. Flailing his arms around, Takeyuki tried to make an opening between the men so he could break through them, but in the end all his struggling was in vain. The three men never lost their cool in the face of Takeyuki's attacks, as if he were a rat shut up in a cage. His show of resistance only made them smirk.

They let Takeyuki flail for a while, perhaps thinking that he needed the exercise, then one of the men circled behind him and pinned Takeyuki's arms behind his back. By the time Takeyuki realized what was happening, the man in front of him had planted his fist in Takeyuki's solar plexus. Takeyuki didn't feel the punch, or any pain, as he sunk to his knees and fell to the ground. It was as if all the blood had drained from his body at once.

*A-Atsushi...* Takeyuki's head went limp as he fell unconscious.

## *Chapter Four*

There was a loud clattering noise.

His body was rocking unsteadily in time with it. There was a dull pain in his solar plexus that throbbed every time his body was shaken.

*Where am I?*

Takeyuki's eyes fluttered open.

The first thing he saw was black cloth. It was wrapped around his head and covered him all the way to his shoulders. He tried to reach up and touch the cloth that was keeping the sun off his face, but his arms were stuck behind his back and he couldn't move them. His wrists were tied together. The same had been done to his ankles.

Bound hand and foot, rolled up inside a black cloth like a caterpillar, Takeyuki was lying in the bed of a truck used to transport livestock. He was surrounded on all four sides by a yellow-painted iron frame. Takeyuki appeared to be the only person in the back, but all around him the truck was stuffed with dingy cloth bags, big plastic jugs of water, pots and basins, blankets, and other daily utensils.

Rolling over to crane his eyes to the horizon, Takeyuki saw rose-colored sand dunes in every direction.

His eyes widened in surprise. He wanted to sit

up and get a better look around, but his body wouldn't move the way he wanted it to and he could only lift his head a little.

In the west, the sun was beginning to set overhead.

The sun was red, too. Or rather, it was like a ruby-red grapefruit. Its light reflected off the ash-grey sand and dyed everything the color of roses. If only he weren't in such a desperate situation, the sight would have been beautiful and a slice of imagination made so real that it elicited a sigh or a cry of pleasure.

As the little run-down truck chewed its way through the desert, it seemed as if it might gasp its last breath at any moment. It wouldn't have surprised Takeyuki if the engine stopped right then. The hard planks that formed the truck bed had been covered with a muddy *kilim* only where Takeyuki was lying. It looked like they were treating him with care.

He craned his head to its limit to look ahead and saw three camels walking. Each one carried a man on its back. Were there people behind them, too? Takeyuki turned his eyes down to his feet. There was—another man followed on a camel. His head was covered in a white cloth.

Takeyuki could see the heads of two men inside the truck, one driving and the other in the passenger seat.

Six in all. They all seemed to be men.

Takeyuki's entire body was gripped by despair and worry.

Where on earth were they taking him?

Who were these men?

That reminded Takeyuki of what his brother had told him, that there had been a series of kidnappings in the suburbs near the desert recently. There were some among the Bedouin tribes who made their living as bandits and the king had been working hard to crack down on them and return the peace. Atsushi had said that the embassy had already called attention to it so that Japanese tourists wouldn't be put in danger.

Takeyuki hadn't wanted to believe it, but he couldn't deny with any confidence that the people who had kidnapped him were part of that group of bandits.

Atsushi had told him about cases where people had been robbed of everything they had and then been left in the desert, and of young women who had truly terrible experiences.

The more Takeyuki thought about it, the more his heart trembled.

He had to get away. Just thinking about what evil things might happen to him made his hair stand on end.

Takeyuki didn't think that the man behind the truck had realized yet that Takeyuki had regained consciousness, so he tried to surreptitiously move his wrists. But the rope was tied snugly over his sleeves. No matter how he moved, it never loosened.

Takeyuki began to get impatient.

Considering the fact that they seemed to have done everything in their power not to injure him, the men probably considered Takeyuki a commodity and were hoping to sell him somewhere. Takeyuki couldn't imagine who would want him or for what, but it was

certain at least that if he were sold, he would never be able to return to Japan again.

*I don't want that.* Takeyuki bit down hard on his lip, thinking how absolutely it repulsed him to do something so completely against his wishes.

No matter what, he had to get away from here. He wanted to get back to his brother.

But Takeyuki didn't know how he could escape this crisis. His arms and legs were bound. Even if he fell from the truck bed, the man at the back of the caravan would catch him immediately and just bring him back. Most important of all, they were in the middle of the desert. It didn't seem likely that Takeyuki could walk back to the city without so much as a bottle of water.

*What do I do?* was chorusing in his mind without stop when Takeyuki heard an exchange of Arabic ahead of him and the car stopped.

Takeyuki cowered away from this fresh terror and shut his eyes tightly. His ears alone were tensed and listening.

He heard a gabble of voices.

It looked like the caravan had decided to rest here. The sun would probably set soon. Before it went down, they would eat dinner and secure a place to sleep.

He felt the two men in the truck get out. The car rocked and Takeyuki heard the sound of two doors slamming in succession.

Someone came to the back of the truck. There was the sound of a metal latch opening at Takeyuki's feet and the sound of a metal bar beside him being lowered. He heard a heated exchange in Arabic overhead. The bags

and tools packed in beside Takeyuki were taken down one after another.

Confronting his own death, Takeyuki stiffened in the shadow of the black cloth.

*Please just ignore me,* he prayed, but suddenly someone grabbed his shoulder and shook him.

"Agh!"

A scream of shock and terror shot from his mouth.

The cloth covering his face was pulled away.

"Hey."

A man whose face bristled with hair was staring down at Takeyuki. His dark, sun-baked face was riven by numerous wrinkles, which made him look rather old. This man seemed to understand and speak English. From the great importance in his bearing, he came off as the leader of the group.

He was leaning his face in over the metal sides of the truck. The side was about two feet high, and if he had wanted to reach over it he easily could have. It was less a barrier than a framework to keep the top on.

"We're camping here tonight. I'll warn you just in case, but you're better off not getting any strange ideas. We're in the middle of the desert. It's two days to the nearest oasis. Even if you get away, you'll only be buried alive in the sand. Remember that."

"Wh-what are you going to do with me?" Takeyuki tried hard to not let the man realize how frightened he was. He fixed his eyes firmly on him, tightening the muscles in his stomach and staring resolutely at him.

Apparently the man found this show of

undampened spirit odd. He narrowed his eyes and quirked a corner of his mouth in amusement.

“You’re a lively one. You look so pretty, but inside you’re all man, huh? That makes you an even better gift for the chief of the Azzawar.”

At the word *gift*, Takeyuki felt all the blood drain from his face. He was going to be a human sacrifice after all, just as he’d thought. The Azzawar were a Bedouin tribe who lived in the desert. They were a wild and war-like group that was feared by the city-dwellers for often starting skirmishes with other tribes. Takeyuki had heard that they gave the government a lot of trouble. If he was being turned over to the chief of a group like that, there was no guarantee whatsoever on his life.

“Don’t look so worried!” The man lifted Takeyuki’s chin with thick, gnarled fingers and trailed his fingers down Takeyuki’s neck. Takeyuki saw out of the corner of his eye that the fourth finger of the man’s right hand was missing after the first knuckle. It seemed to prove that he had done violent things before and Takeyuki’s spirit quailed even more. He wanted to resist, but when the moment came, his courage failed him. *Coward*, he cursed himself, trying to rouse his spirit, but it didn’t work the way he planned. It was as if a person who had been in a peaceful, secure environment their whole life had suddenly been thrust into an action movie. Takeyuki had no special knowledge or skills. It was a miracle that he was even staying calm. It was all he could do not to be distraught.

The man chuckled with unpleasant delight.

“You’re definitely going to please the chief. An

Asian man with such beautiful skin and hair is sure to captivate him. The chief of the Azzawar loves unusual things. And if we can please him, their attacks on the Ulfa, our tribe, will decrease. And we won’t have to fear that the goods we trade will be stolen so often.”

“If I go missing, the Japanese government will get involved. This will spark an international incident.”

“That’s none of our concern. The king is the one they’re going to be putting pressure on. Of course, the king is probably going to be looking pretty hard for you, but there’s not a speck of proof that we took you. Those three made sure no one would see when they brought you to me. Once you enter the desert, it owns you. The people of the desert obey our leaders, not the king. And our leaders hate outsiders and will stand by us to the Gates of Hell.”

Takeyuki wanted to answer that he didn’t believe any of it, that it was all a trick, but he was painfully aware that his life experiences would not help him process this place. He couldn’t argue. Things worked differently here than in Japan. Takeyuki only dimly understood the concept of religious and tribal warfare. And he was almost completely ignorant of the desert.

“We’re going to be as gentle as possible with you. The chief of the Azzawar is far to the south of here. It will take us three more days of travel.”

Help would surely come in those three days. That was what Takeyuki thought, with no real hope. He had become a prisoner being escorted to his jail cell. Takeyuki was sure the others felt the same way he did.

“Metahat.” A very thin man came over, calling the

man with the whiskers. The rest of their conversation was in Arabic and Takeyuki didn't understand a word of it, but apparently this man, their leader, was named Metahat. The skinny man with the mud-brown face was one of the three who had attacked Takeyuki. He was younger than his companions. Takeyuki glared at him, his indomitable personality laid bare. Glaring was all Takeyuki could do now. But no matter how viciously he glowered, the man's face remained blank, showing no sign of irritation. It was almost unbearable.

Metahat walked away from the truck with the skinny man. Left alone in the bed of the truck, Takeyuki's nerves relaxed slightly. It looked like they were going to stay here for the night. Whether or not he would be saved would be seen tomorrow or the day after. Using his shoulders, hips, and knees, Takeyuki somehow lifted himself up and leaned back against the metal bars.

The scenery here was very different from what he had seen only horizontally while lying down. Two huge boulders abruptly punctuated the bleak desert, their sharp corners rounded off by erosion. The stones were white, probably limestone. They were the same color as the desert sand, as big as hills. Takeyuki and his captors were going to camp in the shade of these rocks for the night.

The men were all performing their individual duties. One man dug a pit in the sand and surrounded it with rocks, building a campfire with dried camel dung as fuel. Another cooked, throwing finely chopped ingredients into a pot and stirring them with a wooden ladle. The sounds of their work and their babbling voices

were the only sounds in the world.

Whatever direction he looked, Takeyuki saw only sand dunes stretching out forever as silence descended on the area. He had once heard someone use the expression "frighteningly quiet," and it was exactly that. Takeyuki felt himself drifting off and he shook his head. It was all right for now, but he could hardly imagine the silence that would envelop the area once night fell. The thought of being left behind in a place this devoid of sound made him worry that he would go insane.

The sun steadily sank.

The skinny man brought Takeyuki an aluminum plate. His hands were freed only to eat. On the plate were corned beef and onions cooked in a tomato sauce. The food had a unique, spicy flavor. It wasn't bad, but Takeyuki would have been hard-pressed to say he much liked it. But Takeyuki ate it all in silence in order to keep up his strength. No matter how hopeless he became, he hadn't lost his will to make a break for it if he got the chance. He didn't want to give up.

By the time they had finished eating, the sun had set completely. Takeyuki's eyes could not adjust to the darkness, which was much deeper than he had expected. He even felt a dull pain between his eyes. The men sat around the campfire eating and drinking cheerfully. Their jovial voices echoed in the dark. Their drink had the same flavor and body as beer, without the alcohol. Takeyuki knew this because he had tried some in the city. The local wine and real beer were expensive, so they probably couldn't drink it all the time.

Takeyuki's arms had been tied once more behind

him and they began to ache. He slowly lowered his body to lie down in the truck bed. As soon as he was beyond the reach of the sunlight, his skin felt clammy. He never moved from the truck bed and soon someone sprang lightly up into it. He couldn't tell who it was due to the darkness, but it was probably the skinny man. Metahat seemed to have made him Takeyuki's guard.

The man threaded through the piles of cargo without missing a step to pick up a blanket stuffed in a corner and lay it over Takeyuki. They seemed concerned that he stay healthy until they handed him over to the chief of the Azzawar. Takeyuki found it impossible to be grateful as that thought echoed in his mind. He let out a deep sigh, burying his head in the blanket and closing his eyes.

So much had happened that he fretted about what would come next. It was impossible to sleep. A violent loneliness engulfed Takeyuki's entire body and made him want to sob out loud. His pride was the only thing that helped him fight back the urge and keep it sealed in his heart.

*I'll never give up!* He thought. His brother and the ambassador were surely looking for him. They would save him. All he could do now was believe that and wait. Takeyuki held onto these feelings and swore to never give up.

## Chapter Five

The next morning, the caravan began moving with the rise of the morning sun, which seared the sky with an unbelievable intensity. The blanket which had protected Takeyuki's body from the cold that night he still kept over his head, to protect himself from the daylight sun. For the morning meal they gave Takeyuki hard oven-baked bread and camel's milk. They taught him to dip the bread in the milk to soak it up before eating it, so Takeyuki tried doing that. When he did, the bread that had been as hard as a stone became softer. It wasn't bad.

The man who was looking after him didn't seem especially cruel, and since Takeyuki was behaving, he let him keep his hands free after the meal. At any rate, it was obvious he couldn't run away during the day. For his part, Takeyuki was planning on running in the night. Using his hands, it was much easier to support his body. Even in the jolting bed of the truck, Takeyuki could ride it out by holding onto the metal sides and avoided hurting himself too much.

No matter how far they went, there was nothing but cream-colored desert. There were a good number of rolling hills in the desert, but it looked totally flat from a distance, like a sea of sand. Above the horizon, the harsh, clear expanse of blue sky spread over them.

From time to time, faint clouds appeared like stabs of a paintbrush. The wind picked up the fine particles of sand and blew them everywhere. Takeyuki's carelessness brought many stinging tears to his eyes as the wind drove sand into them. His body was covered in sand, and his hair became dirty and brittle. Takeyuki had taken it for granted in his life that he would be able to bathe every day, and he wanted to take a shower more than anything.

As noon approached, the sunlight intensified. There was no shelter from the wind and the sun that beat down mercilessly on the caravan. Takeyuki wrapped the black cloth tightly over his skin and fought back his thirst. Water was precious, and if he drank too much too fast it would hurt him.

A giant boulder appeared on their path that resembled a huge man kneeling down. They rested the camels in the shade of this rock and made their preparations for the afternoon. The truck Takeyuki rode in was also parked out of the sunlight. Now his body cooled down quickly. He was constantly surprised by these extreme changes in temperature. If a person wasn't careful, it could wear down their body.

After lunch, the men began taking naps in shifts. There was always someone beside Takeyuki. His hands were still free, but it would have been difficult to untie the ropes around his ankles without the watchful eyes seeing him. He checked the knots, which were tight and complicated, and it only depressed him. His fingers weren't likely to make much headway with them. He probably wasn't going to get his hands on a cooking

knife, though, so planning his escape without it seemed more realistic.

Apparently Takeyuki had also dozed off, because when he started awake the truck was already moving. A cover had been put over the truck's bed. It provided some shade and made things much more comfortable. The piles of cargo rattled noisily, and it seemed they had been traveling like this for ages. Takeyuki was assaulted by the sense that he was on a journey with no destination, probably because his sense of time and space had become blurred. There was nothing in the world but desert and blue sky, and the city bristling with iron and glass skyscrapers that sprouted far to the east seemed like a dream.

Takeyuki felt the hot sand and the empty space sucking at his senses and draining the life force out of him. It was over. Takeyuki closed his eyes and the faces of his brother, his sister-in-law, and his mother and father in Japan floated through his mind. He had promised them that he would return home, but after all this time without seizing one opportunity, he was beginning to resign himself to his fate. He felt pathetic. How could he keep up his determination? He felt like his naïvete had been shoved in his face.

He wanted someone to snap him into shape. He wanted someone to yell at him to keep his spirits up. Trying somehow to cheer himself up and be a little more positive, Takeyuki raised his head and gazed out the back of the truck at the receding scenery. If there was even the slightest landmark, he had to remember it. He gazed out intently with this in mind. Anything would have been

fine at a time like this, but if he didn't charge himself with some task, he knew he would become apathetic. That was his biggest fear.

As he listened to the dull noise of the engine, Takeyuki gazed into the distance. He had heard that desert peoples had excellent eyesight, and now he understood why. With just a glance, he could see far into the distance. There was nothing to obstruct a person's vision. Absolutely nothing. Of course there were no buildings, but there weren't even natural structures like mountains.

While Takeyuki was staring intently at the distant landscape, suddenly he thought he saw a dark speck. Takeyuki squinted. He had average eyesight, but he didn't trust himself. He thought he was imagining it. The chances were high that he had simply imagined he'd seen something where there had been nothing for so long. He strained his eyes until they ached, staring at the place he thought he'd seen the shape.

*What could it be?* It wasn't an illusion. He definitely saw a black spot. And it was getting bigger. It had only been the size of an ant before, but by the time Takeyuki had realized it wasn't his imagination and was coming closer, the men had noticed it, too. At the front, Metahat turned his camel around and circled behind the truck. The man following behind the truck came up beside him. The truck continued on, but Metahat and the brawny man stayed behind, trying to ascertain who was coming toward them.

Takeyuki could hear their voices even fifty yards away. That was how well sound carried in the desert.

Dimly, he was surprised. The tense sound of their discussion made Takeyuki's body stiffen. During all this, the black shape continued to get bigger. The two men who had stopped to determine the identity of the shape suddenly turned their camels back around and chased after the caravan that had gone on ahead. Camels that were being seriously driven by their riders could run quite fast. Soon they had overtaken the truck and shouted loudly. Takeyuki detected some fear in their voices.

Metahat had apparently ordered the caravan to speed up, because the truck suddenly accelerated. Because of that, the rickety truck that had already been sputtering began to make ever more distressed engine noises. The vibrations got worse, too, and Takeyuki quickly clung to the side. It seemed that the men were being plagued by bad luck. It wasn't clear if that was good or bad for Takeyuki, but he could no longer remain detached. He might end up in an even worse situation.

The shape was distinct by now. It was a horse. The strength of its legs was plain to see as it ran toward them at an unbelievable speed. A man rode it, a white *kuffiyah* on his head and his face covered below the eyes. He had broad, masculine shoulders and even from a distance his nobility stood out. The man riding the horse was not the only beauty: the horse was amazing, as well. The way its legs leapt as it ran, the way it shook its head, the silkiness of its mane: Takeyuki couldn't turn his eyes away from its beauty.

The long white train of the *kuffiyah* billowed in the wind like a priceless painting. The man bent forward, looking like a desert mirage of a phantom hero.

Takeyuki blinked rapidly. Maybe it was real. Yesterday this sudden misfortune had seemed like a movie plot, but this scene was completely unbelievable.

In the time that Takeyuki stared dumbfounded at the man and his horse, the two had practically closed the distance. They were only a few yards away now, and still they came closer. The closer the man came, the more regal he looked. He was wearing a costume different from the clothes of the people who had captured Takeyuki. It crossed his chest like a kimono and was held shut by a sash as well as a leather belt. A large knife hung at his hip. Takeyuki shuddered. The man was a robber.

Takeyuki raised his eyes to get a better look and his gaze met the man's. The moment their eyes locked, a strange shiver ran through Takeyuki's body. Blue eyes were fixed piercingly on him. His entire body stiffened, as if held under a spell. First, awe filled him, then a strange sense of familiarity. Takeyuki didn't know why. Finally, heat seared him to the core like a flame and his body shook so much he had to catch his breath.

Takeyuki held the man's gaze for only a brief moment. When he came to his senses, the man had run up alongside the truck. He seemed to be chasing Metahat, who had apparently fled to the front.

"Metahat! Stop!" the man shouted with domineering authority and, surprisingly, the truck jerked and slowed down. Probably because the group of camels in front of it had stopped, as the man had ordered. The truck soon pulled to a stop. Takeyuki peered out through a gap in the cover to see what was going on.

The man gracefully dismounted. He was tall, with



a marvelously proportioned build. He had a body that even other men couldn't help being jealous of. Metahat got off his camel as well and approached. His walk revealed a fear he was trying to hide, but his subservience and cunning were palpable—he wanted to get through this peacefully, with flattery if he could do it.

“Hello, ‘Desert Hawk’—Zayid. It's been a while.”

“Indeed. It seems you've been getting your hands dirty again in some foul business since last we met.” The two spoke in English. Apparently the man's name was Zayid. The fact that he could so calmly make these pointed jabs at Metahat, the leader of a group of bandits, showed how fearless he was. It would be one thing if the man had an equal number of allies, but he seemed confident that he could best six men. Zayid didn't quail at all; on the contrary, he acted aloof. Metahat was the one who wanted to end this quickly. His alias, “Desert Hawk,” seemed truly fitting.

“I'm not involved in anything dishonest,” Metahat mumbled, obviously lying. He seemed afraid that he couldn't hide anything from Zayid. Who was this man? Did he always ride through the desert alone, or did he usually have more men with him? Either way, judging from Metahat's awkwardness, he had obviously had some pretty bad experiences with Zayid in the past.

“Oh?” Zayid's blue eyes narrowed suspiciously. His face was covered with a white cloth, obscuring all expression except for his eyes. Naturally, Takeyuki stared at them. His voice was also muffled by the cloth, so it was difficult to guess at his mood. What Zayid said

next made Takeyuki's heart skip a beat.

“Then what is that in the back of your truck?” Takeyuki's heart leapt into a frantic beat. In that moment, their conversation had ceased being impersonal. Depending on Metahat's answer, there was now no telling what Zayid would do, or what would happen to Takeyuki.

“Oh, that's a guest of our chief,” Metahat explained brazenly. “He's an Asian man who came to learn about our nomadic culture. Adam from the Ismail Travel Company introduced him to me, and I'm serving as his guide.”

*No, he's lying.* Takeyuki was on the verge of shouting through the gap in the cover when it happened. The truck rocked suddenly. Before Takeyuki had even realized that the skinny man had climbed in, he'd pulled out his blade and held it to Takeyuki's throat. The skin of Takeyuki's neck went ice cold.

The man stared at him with terrifying eyes. *If you talk, I'll kill you.* His eyes spoke loud and clear. In any case, Takeyuki wasn't sure if Zayid was an enemy or an ally. Even if he sought his help, he might only get into worse trouble, so he was stuck either way. His gut told him that it was better to go with Zayid than to be held by a gang of bandits, but he might have simply been hypnotized by the man's magnificent appearance and the way he'd ridden his horse, which was not the same thing as an opinion based on thorough observation of Zayid's real character. It was dangerous to judge a person by appearances. Zayid might have been heartlessly cruel, for all Takeyuki knew. He could imagine that Metahat

might be acting so noncommittally for that reason. Just the suggestion of that possibility meant Takeyuki needed more courage to decide between the two of them.

"I see," Zayid answered slowly, appearing totally oblivious to the threat Takeyuki was under inside the truck. Takeyuki's eyes slid from the knife held against his skin to stare back at the gap in the cover. "I thought for a moment it might have been a woman, but you say it's a man. In that case, I can't imagine you've abducted him to offer as a gift to the leader of some rival tribe. I'm sure it's just as you say, Metahat."

"Of course it is, Zayid. Have I ever misled you before? I even told you that the Zard gang was selling criminally overcharged goods to tourists. Didn't you tell me I would be handsomely rewarded for that?"

"Hmph." Zayid snorted haughtily. "All right. I stopped you because I thought you were carrying something interesting and it caught my eye, but if that's all it is, it looks like I was out of line." With that, Zayid turned on his heel.

He walked up to his horse, which had been patiently waiting to one side, and it appeared that he would get back on his horse and go. But he opened a hemp bag attached to his saddle and took out two bottles of wine. He threw one to Metahat casually. The kidnapper read the label and whistled.

"This is a good one. Where did you get your hands on wine like this? Is this smuggled?"

"That's right." Zayid admitted it easily. His eyes weren't smiling at all, but his voice sounded upbeat. "This is a token of my esteem, to be shared only at very

special times. I'm sorry for stopping your band on unfair suspicions. I hope that makes up for it."

"Oh, it's fine. Everyone makes mistakes, after all. I've already forgotten about it. But I'll accept this as a sign of our friendship."

"I appreciate it. At times we find ourselves on opposite sides, but most of the time we work together. Isn't that right, my friend?"

"Right." Metahat puffed his chest up importantly. He held the bottle of wine securely in his fist. He looked truly happy—he must have been dying for some alcohol.

"I'll be going, then. Have a safe trip." This time Zayid did put his foot in the stirrup and he jumped nimbly onto his horse's back. The horse whickered. Even after the magnificent gallop it had already performed, it looked as if it could run for a long time yet without the slightest complaint. Zayid turned the horse back in the direction he'd come.

When they were sure he'd gone, everyone in the gang let out the breath they'd been holding. Their relief was palpable. Arabic buzzed in the air as they spoke to each other in whispers. The man holding the knife to Takeyuki relaxed also and slipped his knife back into its sheath. Then, with a final warning glance at Takeyuki, he jumped out of the truck.

The engine started and the truck pulled away. The caravan set out once more. Everyone was in a good mood, probably because they'd won such an unexpected souvenir. There was also the relief of getting away without incident. The truck ran slower than before, and

it rocked Takeyuki back and forth as he thought about Zayid, the man's elegant mannerisms, and how he'd carried himself like a much younger man than Metahat but had possessed an incomparable force of personality and authority.

Who had that man been? What did he look like beneath the cloth that hid his face? His blue eyes burned in Takeyuki's mind. Eyes like beautiful, clear pools. Takeyuki felt like he'd seen eyes like that somewhere before, but he couldn't remember where. It was on the tip of his tongue, but he just couldn't summon up the memory.

In any case, Zayid was gone. No one would come now who could save Takeyuki. His brother was surely desperate in his search for Takeyuki. Was there no way to tell Atsushi where he was? Takeyuki felt frustrated and tousled his dirty hair, caked with sand. When he thought about spending another night camped out in the desert, he felt sad and pained and scared, and he wanted to cry. He missed soft beds. He didn't care if people called him weak, that was how he felt and he couldn't help it. In the end, Takeyuki was the coddled son of an old family and he was accustomed to luxury. If anyone had said that to him before he would have snapped at them, but given the current situation, he couldn't deny it despite his embarrassment.

After Zayid's sudden appearance, the day wound to a close uneventfully. Like the day before, when the sun began to set the caravan decided on a place they could camp and stopped their advance. At that night's campsite, there were no rocks; only gentle waves of

sand. The men spread a large domed tent over the sand. They would likely sleep inside it that night. They spread three *kilim* together on top of the sand and covered them with the tent. They built a rustic oven in front of the tent and began the dinner preparations alongside it. Everyone was understandably used to this and they worked efficiently.

Takeyuki was left loaded in the back of the truck as usual. He needed to get up and stretch his arms and legs eventually; it was unbearable. If he stayed like this, he felt like his legs wouldn't support him anymore. Metahat paid no attention to Takeyuki's requests. It may have been caution in case Takeyuki tried to escape. He was going to turn Takeyuki over to the chieftain the next day, so he only laughed maliciously and told Takeyuki to take his demands to Chief Azzawar.

When the preparations for dinner were complete, the festivities began. The men had the smuggled wine they'd gotten from Zayid tonight, so they sang and danced around the fire gleefully, singing loudly. Takeyuki shivered in the cold and huddled in his blanket. The man who looked after Takeyuki had brought him food and a cup of the wine, but Takeyuki accepted only the plate and refused the wine. If he had been a drinker, this was a time for drinking until he got drunk, but since his body practically refused to accept alcohol into itself, Takeyuki would regret it later if he did drink. Even if he drank only a sip, he wouldn't escape the hangover the next day. He still had memories of throwing up and suffering, so he just didn't feel like drinking.

The men's rowdiness continued. Everyone was

chatting and seemed truly happy. It had been so long since these men had had alcohol and it gave them a sense of freedom, and allowed them to relax. Their cheerful chatter and songs went on for more than an hour, but the next thing Takeyuki knew, everything was silent.

After eating, Takeyuki had been half asleep, but something had brought him back awake with a start. That was the eerie quiet all around them. He had thought the banquet had been going on only a moment before; it seemed unnatural. He raised himself on both arms and crawled to the back of the truck to look outside. He felt so uneasy he even worried about such unlikely possibilities as having been left behind. He yearned to run away, but he didn't want to be suddenly abandoned. Outside it was pitch dark. There was no moon that night. Without the moon, even the twinkling stars were dim. Perhaps there were clouds covering them.

The campfire had gone out. This was strange. Takeyuki was sure the men kept watch at the fire in shifts. They never let the fire go out, day or night, even when they were moving. Something unusual had happened.

His ankles still bound, Takeyuki stood on his hands and knees and shuddered. What should he do? Now seemed like a good time to run, but what about his feet? There must be a knife to cut the rope around his ankles somewhere. He couldn't do anything in this darkness. Just then, he heard a rustle of cloth nearby.

"W-who's there?" Takeyuki shouted. Someone shushed him warningly. "Atsushi?" There was no way it could be his brother, but Takeyuki couldn't imagine who

else it might be. The person said nothing.

Takeyuki grew frightened and recoiled from the shape in the darkness. As he did so, an arm reached out and grabbed him around the torso.

"N-no!" Takeyuki thought someone was going to carry him away again and he panicked. His hands now free, he thrashed around in the darkness. Takeyuki could see nothing but the faint outline of the person, but it seemed that they could see Takeyuki just fine. Whatever he did, they could avoid it. Takeyuki didn't even brush the person and, before he knew it, he had been carried out of the truck.

"No! Let me go!"

"Be quiet!" Frightened by the deep, menacing voice, Takeyuki's heart withered immediately. The person hadn't yelled in a loud voice, and he hadn't acted out in violence, but he had a terrifying authority. Takeyuki suddenly remembered the man from that afternoon, Zayid.

"Z-Zayid?" he asked weakly, but the man ignored him. But since he didn't deny it, either, Takeyuki was sure it was none other than Zayid carrying him. But why? What would happen to him now? His thoughts were in chaos.

Takeyuki pleaded with him, feeling close to tears. He no longer had the liberty of feeling pride or shame. Getting home safely was his priority. He could worry about everything else later.

"Please—let me go back where I came from. I don't want to be passed around anymore."

"I told you to shut up," the man spat out, ignoring

Takeyuki's tearful words. The voice was unclear through the cloth, but it was definitely the voice of Zayid from that afternoon. But with no one to turn to, Takeyuki was forced to close his mouth, despite his misgivings. What did this man hope to achieve?

So he had seen Takeyuki that afternoon after all. He had acted friendly with Metahat, but he had secretly intended to kidnap Takeyuki once night fell and everyone was asleep. Takeyuki was astonished at the man's willpower and cunning. His captor might be only one man this time, but Takeyuki felt it would be even harder to escape from Zayid than from Metahat and all his men, and he grew depressed. The situation was getting more and more impossible. A fear that he might never see Japan again in his lifetime flitted through Takeyuki's mind.

Zayid held Takeyuki firmly in his strong arm and walked several hundred feet without a single misstep through the darkness. His black horse was waiting there. Once Zayid had set Takeyuki down on the cool sand, he stripped off the cloth covering his face. Takeyuki's eyes had adjusted to the darkness and as soon as he saw Zayid's naked face, he almost cried out. He had a sharp nose and long, gently waving hair. And his build. Takeyuki couldn't see the details, but this shape...

"You're—! The man from the plane?" There was no mistaking it. Takeyuki could barely believe it and he stared at Zayid agape, his eyes boring into the man's face. Takeyuki's memory of the blue eyes had been of him, too. Takeyuki thought it was strange that he had been unable to recall the source right away. The man had

left such a deep impression in his mind; Takeyuki could only imagine that he had been distracted by the bandits.

"Do you know how to ride?" Zayid asked, ignoring Takeyuki once again. Of course. This voice. There was no doubt in his mind that Zayid was the man on the plane who had abruptly sat next to him and asked him all those questions.

Why didn't he answer? The fact that he didn't deny anything must have meant that he didn't want to hide anything. The man's unbending nature annoyed Takeyuki. But Zayid's tone was sharp and filled with an authority that would not allow resistance, so Takeyuki resolved to wait on all the things he wanted to say and ask, and nodded in answer to the question, though he did it peevishly.

"If I need to, I can ride the regular way."

The moment Zayid heard his answer, he drew his knife from its sheath. Shocked, Takeyuki cowered away from him. Without a word of explanation, Zayid cut through the thick ropes that bound Takeyuki's feet with one swipe of the blade.

"Now listen." As he sheathed the knife again at his hip, Zayid spoke, his voice more threatening than ever. "Don't think for even a moment of running away. From now on, you're coming with me. Otherwise, I won't guarantee your safety."

His voice was terrifying, but his eyes made Takeyuki flinch as they glinted in the darkness and he shook his head as jerkily as a puppet. If Takeyuki defied him, Zayid might really kill him. He could feel the restless awareness of that on his skin. Takeyuki's body

had stiffened in fright. Zayid must have thought he had been a little too harsh and he smirked.

“Come on.” He stretched his hand out to Takeyuki.

Takeyuki fearfully took hold of it. He had been tied up for so long that his legs wouldn't move the way he wanted. Right now, he couldn't be sure he would be able to stand on his own, so rather than invite embarrassment with a show of bravado by knocking Zayid's hand away, Takeyuki thought it was better to gracefully trust himself to the man at once. Zayid pulled Takeyuki powerfully to his feet and helped him put his foot in the stirrup while supporting him around the waist.

“Got it?”

Takeyuki nodded and the next moment, with impeccable timing, he felt a hand on the back of his right leg giving him a boost onto the horse's back. Takeyuki straddled the black-haired Arabian without difficulty. Zayid climbed up behind Takeyuki next.

Their bodies hugged each other closely. Takeyuki felt Zayid's chest against his back. His back picked up the heat of the man's body and his tense muscles, which he had felt since Zayid had first taken Takeyuki in his arms. Takeyuki's cheeks flushed brilliantly. It was very unlike him. He couldn't quite explain what was so embarrassing about doing this with another man. But for some reason he felt an unsettling ticklishness and embarrassment that made it impossible to be calm.

Zayid took up the reins and shouted “Go!” He kicked the horse's sides and it began a leisurely run.

The sound of it pounding through the sand

reverberated in the silent darkness. They rode the horse through the midnight desert. The ground was invisible, so Takeyuki had the sensation of flying. It was the same feeling as riding a roller coaster at an amusement park.

“Hold tight. You don't want to fall off.” Zayid passed the reins to his left hand and circled his right arm around Takeyuki's stomach, holding him tightly against his own body.

“Uh, Zayid...” Takeyuki was flustered by how closely they were pressed together. Zayid's groin was pressing against his tailbone. Takeyuki had never had his body this close to someone else's before. His voice was high-pitched with embarrassment.

“What is it?”

But Takeyuki was the only one who felt that way; Zayid seemed to think nothing of it. This feeling was completely normal when riding together on horseback. There was absolutely no deeper meaning and he seemed to find it baffling that Takeyuki was disturbed by this.

“Where are we going? What are you going to do with me?” Takeyuki covered for himself hopelessly with these questions.

Zayid only snorted and didn't reply. Perhaps he hadn't decided what he would do and had only stolen the prize of a band of thieves out from under their noses for fun. If that were the case, Takeyuki was flabbergasted by Zayid's grace under pressure and his shameless arrogance.

“Have you been watching me ever since the plane ride?” Takeyuki disliked silence and pursued a conversation with him again. He hoped to understand

Zayid's purpose a little bit better and felt awkward. Metahat had spoken English well enough, but he had never felt like talking. Takeyuki wanted to get Zayid's opinion on a variety of topics. The fact that Zayid had struck up conversation with him on the plane bolstered that impulse.

Takeyuki remembered how Zayid had looked, perfectly dressed in an obviously expensive tailored suit in first class on an international flight. He hadn't had a clue that the man was mixed up with bandits in the desert. Certainly, he hadn't thought Zayid was a regular businessman, either, but Takeyuki's imagination had never gone further than supposing he was an actor or an artist or something like that. But here was a thief who went by the name "Desert Hawk," a man who made even the boss of a powerful-looking group of bandits cautious. Takeyuki's guess had been completely off the mark. His head was spinning.

"You didn't drink any of that wine, did you?" Zayid began his own line of conversation, not answering Takeyuki's question. "You didn't have any in the plane, either, so I suspected you wouldn't drink it even if they offered it to you. If you had drunk any, abducting you like this would have been much harder. I added a sedative to the wine."

So he had planned the whole thing after all. Takeyuki didn't know when Zayid had come up with the idea, but the foresight and determination necessary to prepare smuggled wine with sedatives in it for just such an occasion was simply shocking.

Not pausing to gloat about his own cleverness,

Zayid went on coolly. "People are as heavy as a stone when they're unconscious. And it would have taken time to get you onto Aslan's back. It's a good thing you're such a child."

"A child?" Zayid's words made Takeyuki forget the situation and pricked his temper. He objected loudly and started to spin around to face the man. But as he did so, his body tilted wildly to one side.

"You idiot!" If Zayid's hand hadn't been there to catch him, Takeyuki would have lost his balance and fallen off the galloping horse. Zayid rebuked Takeyuki in menacing surprise. "Who tries to turn around that suddenly? You're a handful, boy. Was I wrong to call someone as foolhardy and utterly thoughtless as you a child? Try and be reasonable."

"I-I...I swear, no one has ever spoken to me like that before!" Takeyuki was so angry he couldn't get his words out. He tried to object incoherently, but Zayid completely ignored him.

Zayid's mount Aslan never stuttered in his gallop. Takeyuki was lighter than most, but the horse was still cutting through the desert with unbelievable speed considering that it was carrying two men on its back.

"Soon we'll be at my hideout." They had been riding for what seemed like forever when Zayid suddenly said this.

Takeyuki squinted at the landscape ahead. While he was focused, he saw, faintly but surely, the outline of an object. This area was not an unending swath of swelling sand dunes; it was littered with rocks of all sizes, a desert of stones. Takeyuki's eyes merely

widened mutely at the clump of rocks that appeared so suddenly in the desert that was otherwise featureless in all directions. There was a round rock that looked like an upside-down bowl, a rock that had eroded into a strange shape like a mushroom, a rock like a table...

Zayid seemed to be heading toward a large oblong rock that stood on end. As they drew nearer, Takeyuki saw that there was a sideways crack in the rock that led to a hollow within. Nature appeared to have carved this feature, as well.

Zayid stopped his horse in front of his hideout and leapt from its back.

"Come on." He stretched both arms out to Takeyuki.

Takeyuki had no time to hesitate and held Zayid's arms as he helped him climb down from the horse. He was well aware that he could never get off the horse's back by himself, so stubbornness would do no good.

"That's a good boy." Completely disregarding Takeyuki's inner monologue, Zayid smirked and treated Takeyuki like a child. Or maybe he was only pretending to treat him like a child to tease him. Takeyuki was beginning, little by little, to understand Zayid's personality.

Zayid jerked his chin for Takeyuki to follow him, and Takeyuki trailed after him reluctantly. He had no choice but to do what the man told him. Takeyuki couldn't begin to guess where he was right now. Wherever he looked, the land was nothing but rocks and sand, and he was not reckless enough to try and run away in a place where he couldn't even tell what

direction he was running.

The gap in the rock was bigger than he'd thought. Zayid passed through it easily, even with his broad shoulders. There was a small space just next to the entrance, but Zayid continued walking further inside. The path curved to the right. When they reached that point, a different kind of darkness from the one outside filled the place and Takeyuki's steps were hesitant. Zayid had taken a candle from the bag on his horse's saddle, as if anticipating Takeyuki's reaction, which he lit to illuminate their surroundings.

It was chilly inside, but the cave was like a stone hut. The air was dry and it seemed to have ample ventilation. But when Takeyuki focused more, he noticed a faint oriental fragrance in the passage, as if from burning perfume. They walked for a little while and again the way ahead opened up.

The space they stood in now was many times larger than the opening just inside the entrance. Takeyuki shouted in surprise at the size of it. They were surrounded by white limestone walls. Dry sand had been spread out on the floor like a carpet. The particles of sand were so fine and smooth that they seemed different from the rest of the sand in the area. Zayid must have brought it here on purpose from somewhere else.

*Who is this man?* The same doubt resurfaced in his mind. He was obviously not to be trifled with. If he could do something like this, he obviously had some power. While Takeyuki stood in silence, his thoughts tumbling around, Zayid efficiently built a fire at the furthest part of the room. It seemed that the space for the fire was

always the same: the stones around it were black with soot. There was also apparently a crack for the smoke to escape. Thanks to the fire, the cave grew brighter.

“Sit down and wait over there.” “There” was a beautiful *kilim* with a hand-woven pattern that Zayid pointed to.

“Where are you going?” Takeyuki shouted as Zayid turned back down the passage. He was suddenly worried about being left alone here. And, to be honest, he was a little lonely.

“I’m going to tie Aslan up behind some rocks and give him food and water, then I’ll come back. Don’t worry, I won’t leave you here and disappear.”

“O-oh. I see. I wasn’t really worried, though. I was just wondering.”

“Ah.” The man smirked in amusement.

He seemed to be secretly laughing at Takeyuki’s childishness again and Takeyuki flushed angrily. He was embarrassed. No matter what he did, Zayid annoyed Takeyuki. Zayid kept brushing him off and laughing at him with a knowing expression. He seemed like he was mocking Takeyuki.

*I’m a full-grown adult!* Takeyuki glared at the man’s back as he left and sat down on the indicated *kilim* with an irritated expression. It took a long time for his resentment and annoyance to fade. He couldn’t calm down, but while he waited alone in the silent room for the man who had promised he would return, he grew lonely and he forgot his anger. Instead, the faces of everyone he missed floated through his mind one after another.

His older brother, Atsushi. His sister-in-law, Masako. Ambassador Kusunoki. Mustafa. He wanted to go home so badly that tears soon sprang to his eyes. Takeyuki didn’t want to cry, but his eyes misted up on their own. He wiped his eyes hard with the back of his hand.

“Ow...” His hand was covered in sand, and specks of it had gotten into his eyes. His tears came even faster now.

“Hey—” A hand grabbed his shoulder from behind.

What awful timing.

Takeyuki squirmed out of Zayid’s grasp and shouted “It’s nothing!” He couldn’t help that his voice sounded so tearful, but he hated it all the same. “There was just something in my eye.”

It was completely true, but it sounded like an excuse. And since Takeyuki felt that way himself, Zayid must have been sure it was an excuse.

“Let me see.”

“Hey!”

Zayid grabbed hold of Takeyuki’s chin and lifted his face. Takeyuki glared spitefully at Zayid with his tear-filled eyes. A candle stood on the flat rock beside them, its light fluttering. Zayid’s eyes seemed to shimmer, and it reminded Takeyuki of staring into the depths of the sea. His earnest gaze silenced Takeyuki and his feelings plunged into the depths of his heart.

Zayid was clearly not teasing him out of malice. He wasn’t tormenting him. For no reason at all, Takeyuki could believe that.

Perhaps that was the magic of his blue eyes.

Zayid's lips approached Takeyuki's face. Takeyuki stared at Zayid's handsome face, forgetting even to close his eyes. He had felt this in the plane as well: how attractive Zayid was in a gallant, masculine way. To have this man drawing nearer to him, even Takeyuki felt his masculine heart pounding.

Zayid cupped both of Takeyuki's cheeks in his hands. Takeyuki had been such a prisoner to the man's eyes that he hadn't noticed it at first. It was hard to believe what happened next.

Zayid gently kissed one of Takeyuki's open eyes. For a brief moment, Takeyuki didn't know what had happened. Before Takeyuki had shaken off the shock, the man kissed the other one, too. Strangely, his eyes stopped hurting. It was like a magic spell.

"W-what did you do?" The act had been so completely unexpected that the bravado disappeared from Takeyuki's voice. It was all he could do to murmur.

"You said your eyes hurt."

"Yes, but..."

"And they don't hurt anymore, do they?"

"... I suppose not."

"What's your name?"

Takeyuki blinked in confusion. He'd thought they were talking about his eyes, but Zayid had asked him for his name so suddenly that he couldn't process the question.

"Takeyuki Onozuka."

He gave his name obediently anyway, because he



had lost all will to resist the man. At least for that night.

“Takeyuki, hm?” Zayid spoke his name savoringly. It touched Takeyuki.

Metahat hadn't cared in the slightest what Takeyuki's name was. That was because he hadn't seen Takeyuki as another human being. But Zayid had asked him his name. And then he had pronounced it correctly.

He wasn't such a bad person.

Takeyuki may have been rushing to conclusions after such a small thing, but he wanted to trust his instincts. Perhaps he was already under the spell of this mysterious, handsome “Desert Hawk.”

“Takeyuki.” Maybe he was imagining it, but the tone in which Zayid said his name sounded full of deep emotion. Of course, Takeyuki may have thought so simply because he was in a sensitive frame of mind. Zayid had no reason to cherish any special feelings for Takeyuki. They had only just been reunited. And not even a reunion; the first time they'd met had been riding the same plane. They had almost no relationship to one another.

Zayid stroked Takeyuki's cheek with the back of his index finger. Zayid's fingers were long and soft. It felt good to be touched by him. Takeyuki started to feel like Zayid treasured him, that he was truly dear to this mysterious man. *Is that weird?* Takeyuki wondered. Perhaps he was intoxicated by some aspect of the man whom he wasn't even sure he could trust. Takeyuki surprised himself. Wasn't this exactly what Zayid wanted? Perhaps he had a talent for capturing people's hearts.

Zayid paused long enough that it seemed to Takeyuki that he wanted to say something more, but in the end all he said was, “It's time you were asleep.”

He broke away from Takeyuki's side and brought back a blanket from a pile of folded clothes in a niche that had been hollowed out of the cave's wall. Takeyuki accepted the blanket, which was thicker and made of a very different material from the ones stuffed in the rusty truck; it was big and seemed warm. When he held the blanket, he was suddenly struck by how sleepy he was.

Takeyuki lay down on the *kilim*, covered himself with the blanket, and closed his eyes. That night, his legs were finally free. That alone made him happy. Zayid came closer and Takeyuki heard him sit down directly on the sand.

“Good night,” he whispered in a low voice. Takeyuki let out a deep, relaxed breath and was soon fast asleep.

## *Chapter Six*

Takeyuki had managed to escape the grasp of the bandits, but now he was in the hands of a man whose true identity was unknown and who had brought Takeyuki to a cave he called his "hideout." The bandits' objective had been crystal clear, but Takeyuki had no idea what Zayid wanted with him. Takeyuki could not yet look at the situation optimistically and couldn't abandon his caution toward the man.

Until he knew what was going to happen to him, he just couldn't relax. Even when he slept, he was so uneasy that it gave him bad dreams. That morning, Takeyuki had jolted awake, drenched in a cold sweat, and looked around the empty cave, feeling as if he were still dreaming.

Takeyuki was still in a daze when Zayid came back. His head was covered, but his face mask was untied. Takeyuki didn't quite understand it himself, but when Zayid reappeared after the shock of his absence, Takeyuki was deeply relieved. Zayid was the one who had abducted Takeyuki, but the thought of Zayid abandoning him here made Takeyuki miserable. That was natural.

Zayid carried a plate and mug in his hands; apparently, he had been preparing their breakfast outside. There was coffee in the mug. It wasn't Turkish coffee,

but the drip coffee that Takeyuki liked best. Takeyuki ate the soup of boiled beans and chewy bread, and drank his coffee. It seemed like the most delicious thing he'd ever eaten, but that might have been because he was starting to snap mentally.

"What are you going to do to me?" Takeyuki repeated the question he had asked the night before

"What do you want me to do to you?" Zayid shot Takeyuki a sidelong glance as he turned the question back on him.

Takeyuki got angry. Zayid had been completely ignoring his questions since the night before and didn't show even a hint of anything he was thinking. Takeyuki was very nearly at the limits of his patience. It was just like being provoked in the plane, but when he was taunted here, it angered him much more deeply. He wasn't in the mood to banter back and forth jokingly. Takeyuki was utterly powerless now. Only a few steps ahead lay a shadowy future that Zayid was carrying him into. It depended entirely upon Zayid's whim whether Takeyuki lived or died. Zayid knew that and still needled Takeyuki for fun. There was nothing crueler than that. He looked regal enough, but that seemed to conceal a rotten interior. When Takeyuki realized that Zayid might be the very same sort of person as the band of thieves, he felt self-loathing rising up at his superficiality and naïveté in believing in the man. He was hurt by Zayid's heartlessness.

"I want you to take me back to the Japanese embassy in Ras of course!" When Zayid heard the anger in Takeyuki's voice, he chortled coldly.

"You want to forget you ever came to Cassina already? The little boy wants to run back to his sheltered little country as fast as his legs will carry him."

"Why do you...why do you always have to say such mean things? I'm not a little boy. And I'm not trying to run away."

"Oh? Then would you enjoy staying here in the desert as my bride?"

"Your *what*?" Takeyuki was struck speechless.

He was sure Zayid was telling a tasteless joke this time, but his eyes weren't laughing. Takeyuki couldn't tell if he was joking or if he meant it. He cleared his throat and gulped, then stared at Zayid's face angrily.

"That can't be the reason you kidnapped me from those men."

"And what if I told you that it was?" Zayid smiled boldly. The corners of his full lips twisted into an expression that clearly found the situation amusing. His eyes also changed, their aspect becoming much softer than before.

"Ridiculous." Takeyuki blushed and looked away. "At least wait till you're asleep to talk nonsense."

"Which means you really do want to go back to Japan," Zayid concluded sarcastically, and Takeyuki grew even redder.

*What's wrong with that?* he shouted back in his heart. He was just a naïve weakling, anyway. He didn't like to acknowledge it, but from Zayid's point of view that was probably self-evident; Takeyuki had nothing with which to disprove the assumption, so all he could do was stay silent.

“You looked adorable when you were sleeping last night.”

Takeyuki’s blood boiled again. It was as if Zayid were telling him he was anything but adorable when he was awake. Talking to Zayid was one infuriating experience after another. They just couldn’t get along with each other. Takeyuki grew indignant. He turned back to glare at Zayid, and Zayid snorted at him. He seemed to be gloating again. What a horrible personality!

Takeyuki pressed his lips together tightly to show his revulsion.

“Well sorry, but I’m not interested in doing anything with a man.”

“I wonder. I get the feeling that you would degrade yourself surprisingly quickly if someone would only touch you. Because you *are* oddly sexy. That’s why Metahat treated you like a physical commodity and probably wanted to hand you over to the chief of a nowhere tribe to beg him to be more lenient in the future.”

Somehow Zayid had perceived that Metahat had lied to him. Not only that, he had even guessed his true intentions. He seemed to thoroughly comprehend the rivalries and struggles for sovereignty of the nomadic tribes. He was a shrewd, resourceful man. It could become quite troublesome if he fell in love with Takeyuki.

“I thought homosexuality was taboo for Muslims. Or is it like alcohol, and ideas about sex aren’t regulated by religion in Cassina?”

“It’s private business.” Zayid cut down his

argument offhandedly. “Orthodox Muslims strictly uphold the tenets of the religion. They live their lives every day faithful to the Five Pillars of Islam and even if the consumption of alcohol is allowed by law, they don’t drink it.”

“Are you like that?”

“I’m exactly what I seem. The teachings of religion are important to me, but I set aside the parts that seem meaningless to me as much as seems prudent and live faithful to my own feelings. In the past I probably would have been tried as a heretic and denounced. I’m glad the current king is open-minded and progressive.”

Zayid’s religious views didn’t have much effect on Takeyuki, but he could identify with these flexible ideas. The man possessed a truly mysterious appeal. Takeyuki tried to hate him, but he could already feel himself being seduced.

He looked at Zayid’s face, drawn to it, and Zayid, who had looked away, turned his gaze back onto Takeyuki’s face. His blue eyes gazed at Takeyuki, seeming to swallow him up. Takeyuki’s heart beat unsteadily.

He held his breath unconsciously and clutched the front of his shirt. Because he’d been dragged through the desert for two full days, there was no sign of his brand new white shirt under all the dirt. His entire body was covered in coarse sand, and he was dirtier than he would have ever believed possible in Japan. The fact that Zayid had found Takeyuki sexy in such a state was incomprehensible to him. Was he just a sexual person, or perverted, or what?

There was no excuse to untangle their locked gazes, so Takeyuki stared back at Zayid, as if trapped. He felt the air thickening and his leaping heart tightened.

“Takeyuki.” Suddenly, Zayid reached out to touch Takeyuki’s cheek.

Takeyuki cried out in surprise and shrank back, closing his eyes. He didn’t know what Zayid was going to do, so he was afraid. Zayid seemed to have no intention of violence. He brushed the hair from Takeyuki’s cheek with actual tenderness. Takeyuki relaxed his shoulders and opened his eyes, confused.

“Are you that afraid of me?” Zayid seemed slightly hurt.

“Of course not.” Takeyuki hated to admit that he’d been scared. He shook his head, bluffing.

His finger-combed hair was sticky, impossibly far from its usual smooth texture. He was embarrassed that anyone would touch his hair when it was like this. But they were in the desert. No matter how he wished for a bath or a shower, he would never get one. Takeyuki wanted to get back to his older brother as soon as he could and return to his normal life.

With a wry smile, Zayid declared that Takeyuki’s stubbornness was impressive and he pulled back. As Takeyuki watched, Zayid returned to packing the two woven and one leather bags. They weren’t going to stay here long.

Takeyuki was assailed by a fresh anxiety. Where was Zayid going to take him now? Was he really never going to see his family again? Did Zayid intend to keep Takeyuki with him forever and treat him like his wife?

“Zayid.” Takeyuki called out to Zayid’s back with the last of his hope.

There was no answer, but Takeyuki saw the muscles of the man’s back tighten as he pulled a sleeveless blue wrap over his long-sleeved white shirt. Zayid was listening to him.

“Please, take me back to the city.” Takeyuki gulped. His throat was dry from nerves. “Just to the edge of town is fine, but please take me. I don’t want to stay in the desert any more.” His voice was slightly wheedling as he worked on Zayid desperately.

Until now, the things Takeyuki had asked for or demanded had hardly ever been things he couldn’t have. In the end, everyone had always smiled grimly and given in. Thinking about those precedents, Takeyuki hoped that Zayid might be moved to do as Takeyuki wished, whatever his reasons for abducting him in the first place. But Zayid’s response was utterly blunt, and he didn’t even turn around.

“Unfortunately, I need you to stay with me in the desert a little longer.” He didn’t answer definitively, but Takeyuki felt that his answer was a clear “no.” A sense of doom closed around him.

“Let’s go.” Apparently done with the preparations, Zayid lifted the bags onto his shoulders and stood, his strong posture forcing Takeyuki to move and brooking no disobedience. There was a dark red cloth in his arms.

“Come with me. We’re going to move before the sun gets too high.”

“I don’t want to.” Takeyuki sat where he was,

stubbornly shaking his head. "I'll stay here. I'll wait for someone to come find me here. I'm not going with you."

He turned crisply away.

"Oh are you now?" Zayid spoke coldly. "So you want to starve to death, then? How do you plan to survive in a place like this until help comes? You don't know the first thing about this place. There's nowhere near enough food and water here. If you're very lucky, somebody might find you within three days, but otherwise you'll waste away and die slowly."

"I...I don't care what you say." Zayid's threats instantly turned Takeyuki into a coward. It was probably completely true. No matter how big a show of bravery he put on, when confronted with the realistic problems of food and water, Takeyuki didn't have any idea what to do.

"If you don't hurry up, we'll fall behind schedule. Come on! Or do you want me to carry you on my back like a baby?"

Takeyuki reluctantly stood up. It was unbearably painful, but he didn't want to die here. Dying would accomplish nothing. Pride was important, but most important of all was the pride of living. When they left the cave, they were exposed to the brutal sunlight. The sun was still in the east, but it was already glaring brilliantly.

Zayid went to the shade of a rock where his black steed was resting and secured the bags he carried behind the saddle, stroking the horse's neck as if thanking him for his cooperation. The thought had already occurred

to Takeyuki the day before, but Zayid's mount was a beautiful horse with a fine coat. Its strong legs had been proven in the run the night before, but the muscles rippling below the glistening black coat were large enough to elicit a cry of wonder.

"Here, wrap yourself in this." Zayid held out the dark red cloth that lay on the saddle between the tied up bags, and Takeyuki unfolded it and draped it over his head. It was a square cloth, six full feet in length. Lines were drawn in gold thread around the edge. He covered himself with it and crossed it in front of his neck like Zayid told him to, then let it fall over his shoulders.

Covered like that, he climbed up in front of Zayid, like the night before. The horse began to walk with an even gait. Zayid's arms supported Takeyuki's swaying body.

"Hey—" Takeyuki turned his head to speak to Zayid who sat directly behind, pressed up against him. "You weren't serious, were you?"

"About what?"

"What you said last night." Takeyuki was embarrassed to repeat the words himself and he was reluctant to say any more.

"You mean when I said I would make you my bride?" Zayid answered in a deliberately provocative tone. Takeyuki's cheeks flushed within seconds. Zayid really did have a terrible personality. It was obvious that he enjoyed making Takeyuki uncomfortable. "Well, I don't know. I went to all the trouble of stealing this rare prize from Metahat. I'm still trying to think of how best to enjoy it."

"I don't think you'll enjoy it very much if you sleep with me."

"Well then, I might as well do what Metahat was planning to do and sell you to the chief of some tribe or other and get a reward."

"So you aren't any better than Metahat after all!"

"What were you expecting from me?" Zayid laughed out loud at Takeyuki's disappointment. "Did you think I was your savior? Some prince chasing through the desert to rescue his kidnapped princess?"

"Why would I think that?!" Takeyuki's mind blurred with humiliation. It wasn't that this man had a terrible personality. He was evil. However magnificent he looked, inside he was just like Metahat after all. No—he was even more dishonest, villainous, and cowardly. Takeyuki was angry at himself for ever thinking a man like Zayid was even the slightest bit good. Apparently he was a terrible judge of character.

In his anger, he wanted to claw at the arms that held his waist, but he knew that if he did that he would probably fall from the horse and get badly hurt. He couldn't do anything stupid. It would be bad if he broke any bones or got trampled by the horse's hooves. The only thing Takeyuki could do was harrumph and be silent, keeping his face turned straight ahead.

Zayid was a skilled horseman, riding with only one hand through the desert, weaving between the rocks. The only desert Takeyuki had known before yesterday was of sandy dunes, but even a brief journey changed the character of the desert he saw. He felt awed by the mystery of nature. Takeyuki didn't have the faintest idea

where they were on a map. But Zayid seemed to clearly know where they were going.

Zayid's heart beat rhythmically. It told Takeyuki that he was perfectly calm, not troubled by anything. As long as he was with Zayid, he probably didn't have to worry about starving to death. That impression of the man as reliable, at least, was still the same. The problem was his personality. He seemed dismissive of Takeyuki and treated him like a woman or a child. As they ran through the desert, the sun climbed overhead.

Zayid seemed particularly concerned with the well-being of his horse, since it was carrying both of them. He never forced it past its limits, occasionally resting it in the shade and giving it water and shredded carrots, or stroking its neck and praising it to soothe it. It was strange to say it, but Takeyuki felt jealous of Aslan.

Half the time Zayid spent with Aslan, he didn't care about Takeyuki. Takeyuki couldn't quite understand how Zayid could treat a horse better than a human being. Of course, logically Takeyuki understood it. The horse was the one doing all the work running through the desert. Takeyuki was just riding it, so he was in no position to complain. He understood that, but when he witnessed Zayid's affection for his horse in the way he spoke to it and looked at it, Takeyuki felt sulky. He felt a little inferior, as if he was less important than the horse.

Despite how kind Zayid was to his horse, he was nothing but cruel to Takeyuki and it made Takeyuki's expression even more sour. Whether he noticed Takeyuki's feelings or not, Zayid made the horse run faster after the break, and silence stretched out between

them. About three hours after they'd left the hideout, Takeyuki spotted greenery and yellow buildings ahead of them.

"That's an oasis." Finally, Zayid spoke up behind him.

"That?" Takeyuki responded despite himself, catching sight of the landscape up close for the first time. He answered as if his earlier sullenness had never happened. Eventually Takeyuki, too, found it uncomfortable to remain silent. The silence broke naturally, which was a relief.

"What are those yellow buildings? There's a line of them by the water."

"They're hostels. There are niches in the walls that make narrow beds for one person to lie down in after a long day. There are thin urethane mats in them, though it's hard to call them sanitary."

"Are we staying there?"

"No, we're just going to rest at the oasis. When the sun starts to set we'll head out. I'm going to warn you again not to try anything funny. The people around here only speak Arabic, so it's useless to go to them for help. Promise me you won't try to escape and will stay near me." Zayid's voice grew suddenly more frightening in the middle of his explanation.

Still Takeyuki naïvely defied him.

"And if I don't promise?" He was getting annoyed at being ordered around all the time. If Zayid thought he was going to meekly fall into line, he was mistaken. Takeyuki wanted to show him that.

"I'll just tie a rope around your waist so you can't

run away."

"You wouldn't! You can't treat people like pet monkeys!" Takeyuki protested, his face pink with anger. But Zayid snorted, apparently completely unaffected.

"If you don't want me to do that, then be a nice boy and promise you won't run away." Zayid was unbelievably arrogant and high-handed.

Takeyuki ground his teeth. This was unbearable. If only they weren't in the desert, he would already have run. He would deal with this for now, but when he got a chance, he would definitely run away and show Zayid. He renewed his decision.

While the two of them exchanged these ugly words, the oasis drew right up below their noses. It was a large spring. A big pool rising suddenly out of the desert. Lush greenery grew all around. This land was not barren. Takeyuki finally felt refreshed.

Zayid did not proceed to the line of yellow-walled buildings, but got off the horse a little ways away. Then, like the night before, he reached both arms up to Takeyuki. As Takeyuki held Zayid's arms and got down from the horse, he thought how strange it all was. At times like this, Zayid was like a knight in shining armor, and it was odd. It was impossible to believe it was the same man whose lips twisted sarcastically as he abused Takeyuki. He was polite and resolute, and even seemed refined.

"People don't often come here. The majority of the travelers in the desert stay by the buildings to rest and eat."

"Is the reason you don't go over there because

you're a good-for-nothing villain?" Even though Takeyuki deliberately said things to upset him, Zayid only scoffed, completely unaffected by it. He gave Takeyuki an amused look.

"Could be. You're quite perceptive for a child."

"I told you, I'm not a kid!" Takeyuki pouted, cursing Zayid. Whenever he opened his mouth, it was always the same thing. He wanted to strike Zayid's handsome face and tell him not to mock him again.

Zayid tied Aslan's reins efficiently around a tree standing beside the spring and took one of the bags onto his shoulder, then grabbed Takeyuki's arm and yanked him closer to the water's edge.

"What are you doing? Stop it, Zayid! Let me go!"

"You never shut up, do you? Don't you want to get in the water and clean up a little bit?" Zayid's words reminded Takeyuki of the horrible state he was in. He felt shame quickly coloring his cheeks. He had completely forgotten. It had been three full days since he'd bathed.

"There." Zayid let go of Takeyuki's arm and threw a towel at him.

"Nobody will see you, so go get into the water."

"Fine," Takeyuki answered, beginning to bend more often to the unkind behavior.

"Watch your step."

"All right already!" This time he answered curtly. When he glanced sharply over his shoulder, the corners of Zayid's lips were pulled up in a mocking expression.

A thicket of grass grew at the edge of the water up to his waist. Takeyuki stood in there to undress then

waded into the water, taking only the towel with him. The water temperature was lower than he'd expected, but it wasn't actually cold. Since he couldn't be sure that no one was peeping at him somewhere, he shrunk down into the water up to his shoulders and moved to a deeper spot.

The water felt better than he'd ever imagined after so long. Takeyuki soon forgot about his shyness and began to enjoy his bath. Just as Zayid had said, he didn't see anyone else around. After wiping his body off with the towel, he swam around for a little while. He would occasionally look over at the bank to check on what Zayid was doing.

The first time he looked, Zayid was holding Aslan's reins to lead him over the uneven ground to the water's edge to let him drink. While Aslan dropped his head to the water and dipped his nose below the surface, Zayid stroked his steed's neck and gently combed his mane. It showed how important Aslan was to him and how fond he was of the horse, and Takeyuki's heart ached again. *He won't even look at me*, he thought gloomily. He even considered swimming all the way to the opposite bank, but he remembered that he was naked and stopped.

After swimming for a little while, he turned to look again, and this time Aslan was tied to a tree eating grass while Zayid sat under the tree reading a book. What could he be reading? Takeyuki was curious and swam over to the bank, then got out of the water. His towel was hanging on the branch of a tree near the bank.

Before he could go over to it and wrap the towel around himself, the sound of the splashing water reached

Zayid and he looked up. Their gazes locked, because Takeyuki had been looking at Zayid as he walked. Zayid's eyes widened slightly.

Takeyuki was taken aback as well, and he hid himself with his hands. Zayid was only another man, but for some reason Takeyuki was embarrassed to be seen by him. He was flustered, and made for his towel in a hurry, so he wasn't paying attention to his footing and his foot slipped, making him lose his balance.

"Oh!" He wheeled forward, on the verge of falling.

"What are you doing?" Zayid walked over to Takeyuki in broad strides. Takeyuki was flustered and righted himself, then pulled the towel off the branch and wrapped it around his waist.

"I'm not doing anything, you jerk!" His embarrassment made Takeyuki insult him. Zayid looked surprised.

"You're really rude," Zayid told him. "Your face makes you look like an aristocrat, but your personality doesn't match it at all."

"Well thank you for your opinion!" Pushing back his hair, heavy with water, Takeyuki looked down at the ground as he spoke. He wanted Zayid to just go away. He couldn't help feeling awkward like this. But Zayid wasn't about to leave; instead, he drew closer to Takeyuki.

"You seemed to be having fun in the water."

Takeyuki's eyes shot up to Zayid's face in surprise. He'd been watching. He'd seemed to be tending to his horse and reading and not paying the slightest attention



to Takeyuki, but he must have been watching him out of the corner of his eye. That was surprising.

“Did it feel good?” Zayid fixed his blue eyes on Takeyuki.

Takeyuki was weirdly flustered. His heart raced and his throat tightened. Why did he get like this when he faced Zayid? He couldn’t understand it at all.

Zayid reached out to Takeyuki with one gentle hand and brushed the hair that clung to his forehead aside.

“Your hair looks a bit better with all the dirt washed out of it.”

His fingers stroked Takeyuki’s hair as he said that, then trailed as if by accident over his cheek and pulled away.

“Zayid—”

“Wait here.”

Takeyuki wanted to ask why he’d touched him like that, but he was interrupted imperiously. Zayid went back to the tree he’d been sitting under a moment ago. The leather bag rested at the base of the tree, apparently serving as a cushion, from which Zayid took a dry towel and clothing the color of café au lait. He tossed each one to Takeyuki. Takeyuki hung the towel over his shoulders and unfolded the clothes to look at them. It was a safari shirt. It looked new. He checked the size and found that it was the same as what he typically bought for himself, and he wondered why Zayid had something like this with him. Had he stolen it? In any case, when he had the choice of obediently putting on these clean clothes or wearing his own, caked with sweat, sand, and dirt, it was

obvious which of the two Takeyuki would choose after cleaning himself off.

While Takeyuki was dressing, Zayid sat back down under the tree and leaned against the trunk, reading his book.

“Zayid—” Takeyuki’s voice was almost hoarse with timidity as he approached the man.

“Have a seat and rest, too. It’s much smarter not to move too much at noon.” Zayid spoke curtly, never looking up from his book.

Takeyuki sat down beside Zayid at the base of the tree in resignation. The ground was cool in the shade and each gust of wind felt refreshing.

“What are you reading?”

“Sartre.”

Takeyuki was surprised that he was reading such a challenging book. Zayid treated Takeyuki like he wasn’t even there, enthusiastically lost in his book. Takeyuki stole surreptitious glances at Zayid, resting his hands and chin on his raised knees as the breeze blew lazily around them. His hair was almost dry. It rustled smoothly over his cheek and felt nice.

Zayid’s profile was handsome. His strong, willful mouth; his tall, sharp nose; and his blue eyes that took their observer prisoner. Takeyuki’s heart thudded loudly again. He closed his eyes. He felt Zayid’s warmth against his arm.

After a while, he felt drowsy. With sunlight pouring down on him and then going swimming, Takeyuki had tired himself out. His body began to sway as he drifted in and out of sleep.

“Takeyuki.” He thought he heard Zayid call his name, but his drowsiness was more powerful and he couldn’t answer.

Takeyuki felt his shoulders being lifted and his neck being supported by something, and he felt more comfortable and better able to sleep. The sun’s intensity had passed its peak and was growing weaker, so it was time to set out into the desert again. When Takeyuki was awoken, he realized he had been asleep and found himself leaning on Zayid’s shoulders. He flustered considerably.

“I’m sorry. I must have been heavy. You should have pushed me off.”

Zayid chuckled.

“Your face when you’re awake really is nothing compared to how cute you are when you’re asleep.”

“Zayid!” Zayid was teasing him again! Takeyuki pouted and turned his back on Zayid. “I was trying to apologize.”

“You don’t need to apologize. Help me get our food ready instead. Once we fill our bellies, we’ll set off again.”

“What do you mean, help you?” Takeyuki had no idea what to do. *And why should I have to help?* That question sounded in his voice, as well.

“You brat. How many days have you been wandering through the desert?”

“I’m not here because I want to be.”

“That attitude is the reason you caught the bandits’ eyes and were stupid enough to get abducted.”

“Excuse me?!” Takeyuki couldn’t remain calm

after Zayid called him stupid to his face. He glared flintily at Zayid and rolled his sleeves up. “I’ll do whatever needs to be done, so just tell me what to do.”

Zayid cocked a corner of his mouth slyly. His blue eyes were laughing. Takeyuki realized instantly that he’d taken Zayid’s bait and frustration bubbled up inside him, but his pride wouldn’t allow him to take back words once they’d been said, so he helped Zayid gather rocks and fuel for a fire, just as Zayid had told him to.

## *Chapter Seven*

When they left the oasis and had re-entered the desert, the sun's rays had become much gentler. They had had a good rest and eaten well, so the horse and men had regained their strength. Takeyuki swayed with Zayid on Aslan's back, and as he gazed at the flat landscape of sand and rocks, which never changed no matter how far they went, he grew dispirited.

"Why do the Bedouins move around when traveling is so hard?"

"Who knows. The heat and wind of the desert stirs the blood of those who are born here and makes it impossible for them to sit still, perhaps." Zayid answered the question with a rare seriousness.

"Like you?" Takeyuki pursued, but this time there was a slight pause before Zayid answered.

"From time to time the blood of my ancestors is stirred up and I feel it pushing me out into the desert."

"Hmm, is that so?" Takeyuki stopped the dark red cloth covering his head from flapping in the wind and gave a brusque response. It was hard for Takeyuki to understand the feelings Zayid held for the desert, and at the same time it was difficult for him to make Zayid understand how much he wanted to return to the city. He felt an overwhelming sense of resignation.

"How far are we going?"

“Until I feel like stopping.” Zayid’s answers to that question were always like that. Takeyuki let out a deep sigh and simply gazed ahead in silence after that. The silence continued for a long while before Zayid broke it.

“Does it scare you to not know where I’m taking you?” The answer to that question seemed obvious, so Takeyuki sealed his lips tightly in annoyance and ignored him.

Pressed close against his back, Takeyuki could feel Zayid’s hard, rippling muscles and the heat of his body, and even smell the musky scent of his body. For a brief instant, Takeyuki felt more than the usual familiarity between them, but in the end his relationship with Zayid was a strained thing. Zayid didn’t tie Takeyuki up like a piece of cargo. He did threaten Takeyuki to keep him from running away, but Zayid didn’t tie him up. Even so, when it came right down to it, Zayid would treat Takeyuki however he wanted. Such an ambiguous, undefined relationship annoyed Takeyuki. He would have preferred that Zayid acted like Metahat and took away his physical freedom and dragged him around without answering any questions. Then at least he wouldn’t feel these amorphous feelings.

Zayid seemed utterly unperturbed by the fact that Takeyuki didn’t answer. If Takeyuki wanted to be quiet, let him be quiet, and if he wanted to sulk, let him sulk. That was how thoroughly dispassionate Zayid was.

Since Zayid’s emotions were sealed away, Takeyuki looked at his surroundings and none of it stayed in his mind. Before he realized it, the sun was

setting. The sun was bright red and dyed the world a burning orange. There probably weren’t many places on earth where a person could encounter a landscape where the skyline was below the horizon.

Takeyuki felt solemn and watched fondly as the bright red sun kissed the horizon. Gradually, little by little, the sun sank into it. The horse continued running as if it might catch up to the sun, carrying the two men on its back.

The reddish-orange light of the setting sun changed the world into a palette of melted paints, mixing the color of persimmons with purple and navy blue and many others besides. Even the change was beautiful and it arrested Takeyuki’s gaze. It was like watching some grand performance.

The sun disappeared. Takeyuki instantly felt a chill and he shivered. As the shiver passed through him, Zayid pressed his body even closer to Takeyuki’s, as if covering him with his own.

“Um, Zayid, what are you doing?”

“This will warm you up a little.”

“That’s true, but...” Takeyuki trailed off.

Takeyuki couldn’t conceive of being this close to a total stranger. But Zayid didn’t seem particularly uncomfortable. He was utterly relaxed, acting perfectly natural. It seemed Takeyuki was the only one whose heart was racing.

*Maybe I’m overthinking this,* Takeyuki wondered, confused. Maybe he was too aware of Zayid. That could also be because Zayid had said such strange things to him, like asking Takeyuki to be his bride. Was that just

the type of mean-spirited joke that Zayid specialized in? If so, Takeyuki was embarrassed at his own naïveté to be so conscious of his body and so flustered.

“Tonight we’re camping out.” Takeyuki heard Zayid’s voice close against his ear. It was deep and fascinating, sending a shiver down Takeyuki’s spine. Every word struck the back of Takeyuki’s neck with a warm breath. That made Takeyuki’s chin tremble. Not from revulsion, but from a strange tension.

If he stayed with Zayid, sooner or later he would cease to be himself. Takeyuki sensed that danger without any firm reason.

“If you can put up with it tonight, in exchange I’ll let you sleep in a soft bed tomorrow night.”

“What?” Zayid’s words had surprised Takeyuki, who cried out. “Does that mean we’re near a town?”

Even Takeyuki heard the desperation in his voice. He couldn’t tell if that had affected Zayid, but for the first time that sort of question received a nod from him. He told Takeyuki that they were headed in the direction of a town. It didn’t matter what town it was, either; as long as they were getting out of the desert, Takeyuki could deal with whatever came after that. There would be transportation and he would be able to make phone calls. If he contacted his brother, Atsushi would come for him at once.

His hopes bubbled up stronger with each passing second.

“Are we really going to a town, Zayid? You swear?” Takeyuki’s voice was excited and he asked several times to be sure.

Zayid’s attitude was aloof and cold as always in response. Takeyuki couldn’t guess what he was thinking.

“We’re going to a town, but I still decide what happens to you.”

“What do you mean?” Takeyuki’s heart, so recently swelled with hope, withered as his face clouded with an evil premonition.

“Exactly what I said. I still haven’t said one word about letting you go.”

“But Zayid—!” Takeyuki desperately tried to convince Zayid somehow. “You can’t possibly run with me forever. For now, I still owe you a debt of gratitude for saving me. The king will probably thank you and my parents in Japan will send you a sizeable reward. That’s much more intelligent than doing anything rash. Don’t you agree?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not after the king’s gratitude or a large reward.” Zayid slapped down the offer in a frightening voice. It was almost as if he was angry for being lumped together with small-time bandits.

Takeyuki was frightened by Zayid’s intensity and he regretted speaking so hastily.

“S-so what is it you do want?” Takeyuki asked meekly. Zayid put his fingers to Takeyuki’s chin and lifted his face.

“No! What are you doing?!” He saw Zayid’s face directly above him. Takeyuki rested the back of his head against the man’s rugged, muscular shoulder and stared up at Zayid with anger in his eyes.

“You impetuous airhead.” Zayid stroked

Takeyuki's lips with his long index finger. Takeyuki parted his lips, trying to bite Zayid's finger, but somehow he only knocked his teeth together. "I suppose I did save you from the bandits' grasp. If you had remained Metahat's prize, you would already have been handed over to Chief Azzawar by now, and he enjoys snuggling much more. Azzawar is a hot-blooded rake in his forties. If you weren't lucky, he would have treated you like just another cripple within a month."

"I've had enough of your threats, Zayid." Takeyuki responded forcefully, but he couldn't stop his voice from shaking. His face was probably pale, too.

"You talk big, but your voice is shaking." Predictably, Zayid mocked him.

"Shut up!" Takeyuki became even more stubborn. He shook his head fiercely and knocked Zayid's hand from his chin. "Fine! I won't expect anything from you! That's better, right?" he yelled in despair.

Zayid answered coldly, "That's right." He acted as if it was perfectly obvious. "Don't get any strange ideas. I'm absolutely not going to do anything bad to you. If you're a good, obedient boy, my feelings for you will deepen. Depending on how you behave, I might be moved and send you back where you came from."

"You mean a year from now? Or maybe two?" Fighting back his fury, Takeyuki questioned Zayid in a low voice.

"We'll see." Zayid didn't give him a clear answer. Perhaps because he hadn't made up his mind yet himself. Takeyuki was struck by a powerful despair.

He had to do something. He would flee on his own.

Otherwise there was no guessing what might happen to him. For the moment, Zayid's caprice was satisfied and he was interested in Takeyuki, but if Zayid's mood ever changed he might sell Takeyuki to someone else. The way things were now, Takeyuki worried he might never get back to Japan again. His heart was in turmoil.

The earlier exchange of abuse had silenced Takeyuki and sent him into his thoughts. Only the sound of Aslan's confident gait across the sand echoed through the silent desert night. The sky was full of stars that night.

Literally full of stars. The sky looked like a domed ceiling. Returning from his thoughts, Takeyuki looked up at the sky and gasped without thinking. He thought he had seen a sky sparkling with stars before, but he felt as if this was the first time he had ever had the time to take in the entire celestial expanse.

He tried to look up at the stars directly overhead and craned his neck back. He accidentally brushed the top of his head against Zayid's chest. The awareness that things were awkward after their fight made Takeyuki flinch suddenly away from him. In that instant, his body reeled wildly.

"Agh!"

"Idiot!"

He tensed his entire body, expecting to fall, but Zayid caught him smoothly and he was fine. Takeyuki was covered in a cold sweat. It was difficult for him to keep his balance normally on the horse's back. And this was the second time he'd almost fallen off. Zayid must have been getting annoyed.

Takeyuki trusted himself meekly to Zayid's embrace, focusing on getting his breathing back under control for a bit.

"I wish you would stop making Aslan's burden even heavier. If you lose your balance, it makes it harder for Aslan to run and tires him out. Horses aren't suited for running great distances through the desert. Please sit still, Takeyuki."

The sound of his name, *Takeyuki*, at the end of the sentence seemed bursting with kindness and affection. That small thing was enough to relax Takeyuki's thorny emotions, if only a little bit. But it didn't manage to reverse his decision to run.

"All right." Pretending to be obedient and won over by Zayid's pleading, Takeyuki continued turning things over in his mind.

Using a horse to travel through the desert certainly didn't seem common. Takeyuki remembered Mustafa telling him that normally people used four-wheel drive cars or camels. Actually, that was what Metahat's group had done. Their small, beat-up truck was an old model and the sound of the engine never inspired confidence, but it was sturdy and was much more useful than it looked.

But, despite that, the reason Zayid had ridden his beloved horse Aslan was due to the plans he had drawn up in his mind of a journey that went perfectly. That was the only thing Takeyuki could imagine. Zayid already had places to rest the horse in mind. It was obvious that he was being careful not to push Aslan too hard. The place they were staying that night must have been close

to a town.

Takeyuki was convinced of it. The next morning, Zayid would choose a time when the sun was comparatively gentle to set out, just like today. If all went well, Takeyuki was sure they would reach a town, even if they had to go by foot. No—he would reach it. Takeyuki settled his plans. He didn't think Zayid was truly a cruel man, but Takeyuki was tired of being forced to do things against his will.

In addition, Takeyuki didn't much feel like being ordered around constantly. No one had acted that way toward Takeyuki before. Why did he have to accept such arrogance from Zayid if he took it from no one else? It was only natural that Takeyuki was angry and upset.

Tonight, Takeyuki would have to be as docile as he could be in order to not arouse Zayid's suspicions. He would run one hour before dawn. If he could move then, he was sure Zayid would still be asleep. By the time the morning light began to shine, Takeyuki would have been able to get far away. If he could get close to the town, he knew he could find someone to ask for help.

Considering what resources he had available, Takeyuki's plans grew more detailed and began to seem completely achievable. He was sure it would go well. Takeyuki took a deep breath to reassure himself, and felt encouraged.

Tomorrow night, he would be able to sleep in a soft bed. Zayid had told him as much; but the essential difference was that the bed Takeyuki was imagining was in his brother's house, not some hotel bed. And, of course, Zayid would not be with him.

If he could just get back home, he would forget all about Zayid. Takeyuki allowed his plans to run that far ahead. Zayid had caused him pain, but it was also true that he had treated him well. He didn't want to pursue justice against Zayid for kidnapping him. Takeyuki even wished he could give Zayid some respectable work, if only he would give up this life. Zayid could do anything if he tried. Takeyuki wanted him to abandon his lifestyle as a lone wolf bandit and disown the name "Desert Hawk." If Zayid did that, then...

Then what? Takeyuki returned to reality with a jolt and shook his head hastily to clear the bizarre ideas that had been going through his mind. How ridiculous. How could he think even for a moment that he and Zayid might become friends?

"Takeyuki?" Zayid's voice interrupted his thoughts suddenly and Takeyuki felt as if he might slip out of the saddle once again. Zayid's timing gave him the unsettling suspicion that he had read Takeyuki's thoughts, and he was terrified.

"Y-yes?" His voice cracked. Takeyuki started to pray *Please don't let Zayid find out about my plans.*

"I hope you're not getting any stupid ideas," Zayid said again.

"Geez, I know. I'm not," Takeyuki answered dutifully, but a bitter sensation spread slowly through his heart, the slightly unpleasant aftertaste of lying to Zayid.

## Chapter Eight

Zayid spread his folding tent out on the sand and began to set it up, explaining to Takeyuki that it would be their bedroom for the night. The nylon tent was only ten inches by twenty-five square when it was folded up, but once set up it was big enough for three adults to lie down comfortably and seemed high-tech enough to withstand even the harshest weather.

Like always, once they had finished their dinner Takeyuki went into the tent and lay down, drawing his blanket over his head. Takeyuki waited in that position in perfect stillness, his nerves peaked by wild tension. Naturally, he didn't sleep a wink. He was worried that if he slept, he might not wake up till morning, so he was wide awake.

If Takeyuki messed up tonight, he would get no more chances. That sense of urgency pricked at him. If he had considered things more calmly, he would have seen ways to escape once Zayid took him into the city. But not even a twinkling of that thought occurred to Takeyuki. He was lost in thoughts about escaping from Zayid before the sun rose.

Since he had always gone to bed earlier than Zayid before, Takeyuki didn't know what time he went to sleep. He pretended to sleep and listened to his surroundings. He fought back the urge to open his eyes slightly to look

around and simply begged for the dawn to come faster.

He more or less knew when the sun would rise. Takeyuki's watch still worked, so there would be no mistake about what time he left the tent. The only problem was getting outside without Zayid somehow noticing. The tent opened in two places. He had made sure of where the food and water was kept. He felt guilty about it, but he had taken out a knapsack and packed it with one two-liter bottle of water and a box of biscuits. The high-tech tent was one example of the variety of provisions Zayid had, as if he were prepared for every situation. Mustafa had talked about the compulsory military service for all the adult men in Cassina, but Zayid may have enlisted in the military voluntarily after that. The image of a soldier deserting because he disagreed with his superior officer rose in his mind for no good reason. The thought of Zayid's manly build didn't do anything to dissuade him of the idea.

Zayid didn't come into the tent until a good hour after Takeyuki had gone to bed. When he did, he lay down beside Takeyuki, who pretended to be asleep, and seemed to read for the next half an hour. In the dim light of the lantern, Takeyuki heard the flutter of pages in a book. As Zayid read, he seemed to occasionally gaze at Takeyuki. Lying on his side, Takeyuki felt the man's piercing gaze on his back and grew afraid many times. At those times, he turned the pages less frequently, so Takeyuki knew he wasn't imagining things.

Perhaps Zayid was more on edge tonight, too. He probably couldn't trust Takeyuki at all right now. Takeyuki lay perfectly still, not moving a muscle. He

would get away from here. He wanted to show Zayid that he had at least that much of a backbone. Then Zayid would have to look at him with new respect. Takeyuki wanted to see the surprise on Zayid's face. A picture of Zayid floated into his mind, his sloping eyes crinkled and his lips curved in a faint smile. Takeyuki would rub his own triumph in that face. If Zayid didn't like it, then he could come after him. And the next time he was captured, Takeyuki was sure Zayid would treat him like an equal instead of a child.

The light of the lantern went out. Zayid lay down beside Takeyuki. Takeyuki's heart swelled. No. This was bad. If his heart was beating this wildly, Zayid would notice. Takeyuki struggled to slow his pounding heart.

The time passed with terrifying slowness until the hour arrived that Takeyuki had decided on to leave the tent. Several times he thought enough time had passed to be able to just go. The thing that tamped those urges down instantly was the knowledge that Takeyuki could not afford to underestimate the desert. The desert was a burning hell at midday, but it was fiercely cold at night.

Setting out on foot about an hour before the sun would rise seemed like the wisest course in that situation. It may have only been Takeyuki's amateur opinion, but he found it convincing and applauded himself.

He could hear Zayid's peaceful breathing. Cautiously, Takeyuki listened to that quiet sound. This was the first time he'd seen Zayid asleep. Before now, Zayid had always gone to bed later and woken up earlier than Takeyuki. And twice when the man had seen Takeyuki's slumbering face, he had laughed meanly.

Unfortunately, it seemed like Takeyuki would not have the opportunity to see Zayid's face while he slept. But he could at least listen to his breathing. Takeyuki almost wished that Zayid snored more loudly, but even asleep Zayid showed no weakness.

After tonight, he would never see Zayid again. For some reason that thought filled Takeyuki with regret. Of course he wanted to get away from here and return to his normal life. But he couldn't deny the fact that he also wished he could be with Zayid a little longer and get to know him better, and that made Takeyuki long that things could be different.

*Am I insane?* he wondered. In any case, he was leaving. He had bided his time and finally the moment had arrived to put his plan into action.

Slowly, slowly, he pushed the blanket off and got up. He was careful not to make a sound. The shape of Zayid lying on the ground floated up out of the darkness, far enough away that there was no worry about accidentally brushing him. Everything was fine. Zayid was deeply asleep.

Takeyuki wrapped himself up in the thin blanket he'd used while lying down and got down on his hands and knees to crawl to the tent's flap. He lifted it quietly. Before he plunged through it and into the darkness, he looked back to be sure one more time. The long, shadowy shape rose and fell minutely with every breath, but showed no signs of stirring.

Now, Takeyuki thought with an explosion of courage. He went outside. It was pitch black. The cold air sliced at his skin.

Takeyuki wrapped the blanket he'd brought around himself like a jacket and dug up the knapsack he'd buried behind the tent under the pretense of helping Zayid prepare dinner. The dark red cloth covered his head like always. It was knotted tightly below his chin. His preparations were complete.

Takeyuki moved slowly away, careful that his footsteps made no sound. The desert was enveloped in an almost painful silence; he felt that he would hear a pin drop. If a light went on in the tent just then, everything would be for naught. Zayid would probably be crazed with anger that Takeyuki had betrayed him. He would catch him and tie him up this time, taking away his freedom. And he might change his mind and stop going toward the city, and instead turn back into the desert. Takeyuki was sure he would.

He grew frantic. His heart beat so fast it threatened to rip itself in two. His steps fumbled again and again as shallow breaths caught in his throat.

He pressed forward, intent on the need to get away quickly. He didn't think he would go in the wrong direction. If he simply began walking in the direction Zayid had been headed, sooner or later he would see a cluster of buildings and greenery rise over the horizon. Then he would just have to aim for that. Takeyuki estimated that it would be less than a day away. If it were three or four hours on horseback, he should arrive by evening, even if he walked slowly. That was the impression he'd gotten from Zayid. He had planned to be in the city before the sun had mounted into the east.

After he had gone several hundred yards, Takeyuki

turned to look back at the tent.

Nothing had changed. Everything was dark around the tent. Zayid's fatigue from the day before must have caught up to him and made him sleep more heavily than usual.

Takeyuki relaxed at once. His clumsy steps became smoother, also, and he walked briskly to keep away the cold. He was far enough away that even if he did make noise, he doubted that Zayid would hear it.

It was coldest just before the dawn. Takeyuki wrapped the blanket tightly around his body as his teeth chattered, and he walked in the direction he'd decided on. He never wavered.

At length, the sky in the east showed the first rays of dawn. It was so brilliant he couldn't look directly at it. Takeyuki bent his head, watching as the dark sand gradually paled beneath his feet.

How many times had he seen the sun rise and set by now? It was certainly beautiful and moving, but he wanted to go back to his life in the city so badly. He actually missed the hazy light of the rising sun hidden by smog in the city, rather than this brutal dawn. The time had been so oppressive since being abducted into the desert that Takeyuki couldn't believe only four days had passed. His nerves were reaching the limit of their endurance.

When the sun rose, the temperature began to rise as well. Takeyuki was still shocked by the extreme swings in temperature. The cold sand grew as hot as the surface of a frying pan. The white surface reflected the sunlight mercilessly and burned so hot it almost seemed

to sizzle in his ears.

It was hot. The blanket, which had been defense against the cold at night, served to deflect the sun during the day. There was a great variety in the desert, but the places Takeyuki walked sometimes seemed familiar in their standing boulders and toppled rocks, and aside from these there was nothing but the sloping grit of the sand. There wasn't as much as a hint of green in any direction. He happened across a place that seemed to be an old riverbed, but no water flowed there.

Takeyuki told himself to go step by step, to not push himself. He found shade by a rock and took a break, and drank the water he'd brought. He was careful not to drink too much water, and he fought back his desire to guzzle it down.

Every time he rested, he ate a biscuit dipped in water, trying to keep his strength up, but it was only much later that he realized it only made his throat drier.

The sun climbed ever higher. It was hot. Takeyuki's body felt like it was on fire. The air at his feet wavered. At any other time, this was the hour of the day they would spend resting in the shade of a tree or rock. Even Metahat and his group hadn't traveled at noon, napping and waiting for the sun to set.

He had to rest, he thought, but too late. He found nowhere he could take shelter. Takeyuki wiped his brow constantly, but sweat fell into his eyes.

His legs had been feeling heavy for some time now and he forced himself onward, practically dragging his feet. He hadn't thought walking through the desert would be such hard work. No, that wasn't true: he'd

been somewhat prepared for this, but it wasn't as easy as he'd thought it would be.

*Don't underestimate the desert.* Well, Takeyuki had definitely not intended to underestimate it.

But the reality of it far outstripped his expectations. The desert he knew from films and photographs was unrecognizable next to the real thing. The harsh heat and the cruelty of the wind that occasionally gusted up laden with sand were impossible to understand until he experienced them. His body, which spent the entire year in temperature-controlled rooms, could never have anticipated it.

Zayid had certainly never let Takeyuki down from Aslan's back to walk. He had himself walked beside the horse, as if concerned for the animal, but it had looked easy. That was why Takeyuki had assumed he could walk when the thought of escape occurred to him.

His rough breathing became harsher still. He wanted to rest in the shade of a tree. His throat was so dry he couldn't think. There was only a small amount of water left, but if he didn't drink it now, he would probably die of thirst anyway.

When the thought of death flitted through his mind, Takeyuki deeply regretted what he'd done. He should have stayed with Zayid obediently after all. If he were with Zayid, this never would have happened to him.

But it was too late now. His eyes had been fixed straight ahead the whole time, but there had never been any sign of buildings. He had not run into anyone else. The number of rocks had decreased as well, and the

only thing that spread out around him were the dunes carved by the wind. It didn't seem that there was an oasis anywhere nearby, either, and with each step Takeyuki sank into deeper despair.

His unsteady steps kicked up clouds of sand as he stumbled onwards.

He had already lost his sense of direction. He had only taken two or three steps with his eyes closed, but already he could no longer tell what direction he had come from. A trembling terror crawled up from his legs. It was the fear of death.

It was shortly after that that Takeyuki's cloudy eyes caught sight of a white, mushroom-shaped rock. Takeyuki was practically crawling towards it, and when he finally reached it he collapsed in its shade. The midday sun was unholy. Shady places were the only escape.

He dropped the knapsack, which had begun to feel so heavy that it bit into his shoulders. His fingers trembling unsteadily, he took out the plastic bottle, but there was only one gulp of water left. The shock hit Takeyuki like a hammer-blow to the head: he had pushed himself this far by believing that he still had more water. His entire body quivered with shock, as if he were gripped by a malarial fever.

"Zayid...Zayid!" *Help me*—the words caught in his throat. In their place, a sob escaped him. Takeyuki's thoughts were filled not with his mother and father, not with his older brother, but with Zayid. He sobbed tearlessly.

A terrible thirst clawed at his throat. He didn't

even have any moisture left in his mouth. It became torturous to even rest propped up against the rock, so Takeyuki curled up in his blanket and lay down. He touched the cool sand with his fingertips.

Takeyuki was struck by an intense desire to scoop the sand up into his mouth and suck on it, and in a few moments more he would have done it. But before he could, his consciousness wavered and he could no longer summon the strength.

“Zayid—” A single tear fell from his eye and rolled over his cheek to strike the sand.

Takeyuki imagined Zayid calling his name tensely, but he was sure it was simply a hallucination. With a frail smile on his lips, he released his hold on consciousness.

## *Chapter Nine*

Water warmed by the heat of a body dripped slowly down Takeyuki's throat. It was as if rain was soaking into the earth.

More. He wanted more.

His lips trembled wordlessly and something wet again closed over his lips, a tongue practically pushing the water into his mouth. He gulped deliriously, drinking it down.

“Takeyuki.” He thought he heard someone nearby call to him.

He felt a light touch on his cheek and forehead.

“Nngh...”

Takeyuki let out a slight groan and opened his eyes a crack. They felt as if they had been glued shut. It took several moments for him to recognize the face of the person in front of him.

He had long, loosely waving black hair, clear blue eyes the color of the Mediterranean, and he was dressed in a white cloth that covered him from head to waist.

“Zayid...?”

“Yes. It's me.”

Takeyuki watched his full, attractive lips form those words, and heard the sound of his voice ring in his ears. But it couldn't be. Takeyuki gave a faint, dreamy smile.

“Is this a dream? Or am I hallucinating? I mean, Zayid would never come rescue me.”

“What a lovely thing to say.” Zayid wrinkled his face at Takeyuki.

*But if he's in my dream, he should be nicer to me.* Takeyuki frowned.

“I see you're still rude to me, even though this is my dream.”

“That's enough; be quiet now. You'll tire yourself out if you talk. You still need more water. If you wanted to go for a walk in the desert, I would have preferred you did it after learning a little bit more about how to do it.”

At that point, Takeyuki finally got a firm grasp on consciousness again.

“Are you...real, Zayid?”

“Takeyuki!” Zayid glared at him in utter frustration. But even as he glared, there was a hint of joy deep in his blue eyes.

*He was worried about me. He came looking for me.* Takeyuki could hardly believe it, but when he looked up at Zayid's face, that certainty began to flow up viscerally inside him. Takeyuki's heart cheered more than it ever had before.

“I'm not dead?”

“If you ran away from me in order to die, I'm sorry to disappoint you.” Zayid's voice was thick with sarcasm, and considering his words, he wasn't being gentle at all. But he was lifting Takeyuki's upper body in his arms, holding onto his body with more than his usual strength. Takeyuki became freshly aware of the soft, warm sensation that still echoed in his moist lips and the

water Zayid had breathed into him.

“I...I'd like some more water.” Takeyuki closed his eyes in invitation. He didn't want Zayid to pull away and tell him to drink from a cup now that he'd regained consciousness. He couldn't help wanting to be coddled a little more. He also wanted to know what it felt like to receive the water from Zayid's mouth while he was fully awake.

Zayid sighed with a hint of relief and without any abuse or malice. He took a drink of his water and pressed his lips over Takeyuki's mouth.

*Oh.* Takeyuki's head ached with a sharp numbness. He almost cried out, but their lips were sealed so tightly that his breath was taken away. Zayid's cold tongue pried open a gap between their lips. The water flowed in with it. Takeyuki gulped deliriously, devouring this small amount of water. The water disappeared almost at once, but Zayid's lips remained.

Takeyuki didn't want him to pull away, either, and he touched his tongue to Zayid's.

“I-I've never...” *I've never kissed someone like this before.* It was like tiny explosions were going off inside his head.

“You're awful.” Zayid sucked at Takeyuki's tongue almost painfully and squeezed his arms tightly around him. Then he pulled his lips away.

Takeyuki looked up at Zayid, in a soft stupor. His arms were wrapped up in the blanket, unfortunately, and he couldn't get them out, but if he could have Takeyuki would have clung to Zayid.

“All right. That was a nice diversion, but it ends

there. We have to move further north now.”

“Why?” The sky was already darkening.

Takeyuki thought it would be better to stay the night here, but Zayid shook his head firmly.

“There’s a low pressure system coming this way.”

“What?”

Certainly, a lot of low pressure systems developed during the spring, but Takeyuki couldn’t understand why Zayid looked at him with such a serious expression.

Zayid lifted Takeyuki in his arms as if he weighed nothing at all and stood up. The echoes of their kiss had not yet faded from Takeyuki’s hazy mind. When Zayid carried him in his strong arms, it sent a sharp, sweet ache through him. Takeyuki wanted to stay like this forever. That was how he felt. Takeyuki blushed silently, flustered.

There was a camel on the other side of the rock’s shadow. Zayid strode purposefully over the sand toward it.

“Where’s Aslan?”

“I wasn’t going to kill Aslan just to save you. I took him out here with the intention of returning to a city today. I adjusted his work to match that plan. He didn’t have enough strength left to go chase after some fool wandering in the desert without the slightest idea of where he’s going then drag him back to the city again with two people on his back. If I made Aslan do that, make no mistake: he would have died on the way.”

The seriousness of Zayid’s expression pierced Takeyuki’s heart. He wasn’t lying or joking: that was the cruelty of the desert. Takeyuki regretted his own



incredible naïveté, his ignorant fearlessness, so much that he trembled.

"I'm sorry...I'm so sorry, Zayid." Tears flowed out of Takeyuki, unstoppable.

"Crying like that won't do any good now. You should have been good and listened to me from the very beginning. Aslan is probably in the city now, with the trader I got this camel from. We should have been in a comfortable bed by now, too. If you've learned your lesson, you'll never even think about running away from me again. All right?"

Takeyuki nodded without a word, accepting Zayid's sharp gaze with glistening eyes. Zayid let out a deep sigh.

"A camel is harder to ride than a horse. Hold tight to me so you don't fall off." Zayid set Takeyuki on the ground.

The camel bent all four of its legs and lay down on the sand. It had long eyelashes and an amiable-looking face, and pretty fur. It was already outfitted with a saddle and bags; all preparations for the journey were complete.

"I'll get on first in the front. Do what I do, then when you get on hold tight around my waist. When the camel stands up, it's going to start with its hind legs. Even if you feel like you're going to fall forward, just hold onto me and you won't have to worry about falling off. Got that?"

"Yes." Takeyuki nodded meekly.

He straddled the camel's hump behind Zayid. Suddenly, the camel straightened its hind legs and

stood up. If he hadn't been prepared for this, Takeyuki probably would have shouted in surprise.

Once the camel was back on its feet, they were higher up than Takeyuki had expected. He was terrified of falling, so he wrapped both arms around Zayid's firm hips and held on tightly. The camel began to walk.

Takeyuki rested his cheek on Zayid's back and apologized again, earnestly.

"I'm sorry, Zayid. Thank you...for coming for me. I'm glad you did."

Zayid gave no answer, but he covered Takeyuki's hands and squeezed them firmly, once. *I'm glad you're safe*, it seemed to say. Something warm rose up in Takeyuki's chest and his eyes filled with tears again. He had never known he was such a crybaby before. It was embarrassing. But his tears just wouldn't stop.

Riding the camel was so uncomfortable that it set Takeyuki's teeth on edge, but he knew full well that he had absolutely no right to complain, so he bore with it silently. They progressed unerringly as Zayid gazed up at the stars in the night sky.

Zayid told Takeyuki that the reason they were so pressed was that a *khamzin* was coming. Apparently Zayid had decided to stop leaving Takeyuki completely in the dark about everything. He probably just thought that the situation had gotten more complicated.

"What's a *khamzin*?"

"It means sandstorm in Arabic."

"Sandstorm?" Takeyuki's eyes widened.

How badly would they suffer if they were caught in a sandstorm in the desert? Just thinking about it

terrified Takeyuki. His body trembled with fear only now, after everything. If he had been wandering in the desert, Takeyuki would probably have died and been so buried by the sand that even his corpse would have been lost forever.

“We’re sheltering in the hideout I took you to the first night. There are signs that the sandstorm will reach that far. You feel how strong the wind is?”

It really was. Takeyuki bit into his lip and held even tighter to Zayid, pressing against his back. He was afraid. Zayid seemed like the one thing he could depend on, and he had to cling to him.

“You don’t need to be that afraid.” Finally Zayid said something light-hearted.

Takeyuki looked up and saw the familiar shape of a group of rocks ahead of them, rising against the night sky.

“I can’t believe I’m back here again.” Takeyuki was in shock. He had been walking in completely the wrong direction.

“You must have looked very hard for me.” An innocent question rose to his lips next. “How did you do it?”

Zayid didn’t give a clear answer to that, deflecting the question. “Well, you know. I heard your voice crying out to me in tears. Or maybe there’s already an unbreakable bond between us and God led me to you.”

“You jerk.” For some reason, Takeyuki felt embarrassed. He insulted Zayid in a quiet voice and lowered his eyes.

He could feel the warmth of Zayid’s body against

his cheek. He was glad to be alive. Takeyuki gave fervent thanks for it.

They reached Zayid’s hideout. Zayid made Takeyuki carry the bags he untied from the camel’s saddle and ordered him to go inside. He said he would shelter the camel in a nearby cave and then come back.

The wind clearly held the promise of a storm as it howled around them. If they had been only a little later in arriving here, the two of them and the camel would probably have been marooned in the middle of the desert. Tension ran down Takeyuki’s spine.

“Be careful. Come back as soon as you can.”

“I know. Don’t worry,” Zayid answered gratefully. He grabbed Takeyuki’s shoulders suddenly and grazed a kiss over his lips, then pushed him gently inside.

As Takeyuki stood in blank surprise, the sand was picked up by the swirling wind. The camel brayed. It was afraid of the change in the weather, too.

Troubled by his fluttering heart, Takeyuki entered the hideout and lit a bright fire in the pile of dried wood in the firepit with some tinder and a match, just as Zayid had done before. Zayid had taught him how to do it, so even Takeyuki could do that much.

He waited, soothing himself with prayers, and twenty minutes later Zayid finally returned. His dark blue clothes were caked in sand. The powerful wind had disheveled the white cloth covering his head, and when he shook it out fine grains of sand cascaded to the ground. Zayid himself was perfectly calm.

“Do you want some coffee?”

“Okay.”

Really, Takeyuki wanted to find out more about the sandstorm, but Zayid was so perfectly composed and unruffled that Takeyuki tried not to think about it. Zayid knew the desert well. The least Takeyuki could do was to not add to Zayid's fatigue.

"I tied the camel up in a cave. It was nervous, so I had to stay with it for a little while. You didn't get lonely and cry while I was gone, did you?"

"I wasn't crying!" Takeyuki scowled angrily and Zayid laughed in satisfaction, nodding.

"That's a good boy. You even made a fire for us." He patted Takeyuki on the head.

Takeyuki was enveloped by a sprawling feeling of happiness. A thought suddenly occurred to him. It might actually not be so bad to roam the desert with Zayid, hassling each other like this.

They sat around the fire and Zayid put ground coffee and sugar into a special Turkish coffee pot called a *cezve*, added water, and set it on the coals of the fire.

"This will let it heat slowly and make the coffee taste better."

Takeyuki nodded with interest, watching what Zayid did in fascination. While waiting for the water to boil, Zayid would stir the contents of the *cezve* occasionally until at last the coffee began to bubble up inside the pot and he removed it from the fire. He poured it into two small cups.

"Be careful, it's hot. You drink it by letting the coffee grounds sink to the bottom, then sipping the top. Understand?"

"Yeah. Mustafa explained it to me when I had

this in a coffee shop in town." Mustafa's name came to Takeyuki's lips completely naturally. He gasped and looked down awkwardly. He didn't think Zayid wanted to hear about Takeyuki's life before they had met.

But apparently his fear was unwarranted; blowing on his coffee to cool it, Zayid asked him placidly, "Who's Mustafa?"

"He's a Cassinian man who works at the Japanese embassy. He's very smart, and nice, and level-headed, but I didn't listen to him and went into a *souk* by myself, and that's where the bandits caught me."

"I see." Zayid glanced at Takeyuki mockingly.

The wood on the fire gave off a dry pop. The sparks sailed close to Takeyuki. He pulled back quickly, surprised. That put him closer to Zayid, but Takeyuki didn't pull away.

"How old is Mustafa?"

"Um." Takeyuki tilted his head, wondering how to answer. He was pretty sure he had asked once, but he'd forgotten the answer. "Oh—he said he was the same age as Prince Ashif," Takeyuki answered, then took a sip off the top of his Turkish coffee.

The thick taste spread through his mouth. The hot liquid seeped into the walls of his stomach and perked him up, giving him the feeling of being alive again. He was extremely lucky not to have died out in that savage land. Takeyuki knew now that he was not so indifferent as to just surrender his life. It would be terrible to die without ever experiencing love.

"I think Prince Ashif is twenty-six this year," Zayid said disinterestedly.

“How old are you?” Takeyuki wasn’t interested in Prince Ashif or in Mustafa, but in Zayid.

“How old do I look?”

But when they touched on something actually important, Zayid was evasive, just like always. He would almost never answer questions about himself. It frustrated Takeyuki and made him angry.

“For all I know you have four wives and ten kids, and you live in the lap of luxury in the biggest mansion in town off of a treasure trove of all the money you’ve cheated out of people!”

“You’ve got quite an imagination. A treasure trove? What century do you think this is? You still haven’t outgrown the *Arabian Nights*, have you?”

“Wh—there you go again...” Takeyuki felt himself turning as red as a boiled lobster. His cheeks burned. And not just because he was sitting beside the fire.

“Unfortunately,” Zayid glanced at Takeyuki over the rim of his coffee cup. “I’m not that responsible.”

His voice was placid and purposefully calm, but his words concealed more than a little emotion.

“Hey...” Takeyuki tried something new. He kept his face turned to the fire out of embarrassment. But he still felt his earlobes burning. It would take a fair amount of courage and determination to say this. “You know, if you wanted, I could...stay here with you.”

Zayid froze.

“What does that mean?” In contrast to a moment before, his voice sounded both surprised and cautious. His tone seemed to chide Takeyuki for talking so flippantly.

“I just thought living like this might actually turn out to be kind of fun.”

“Fun? You still haven’t learned to fear the desert, have you?”

“I have, too!” Takeyuki answered earnestly, turning to face Zayid, who had begun to sound almost angry. “I have learned, Zayid. I’m ashamed of myself for underestimating the desert so badly. What I meant to say wasn’t that I want to stay in the desert forever, but—um...that I want to stay with you.”

“And that’s just as shallow.” Zayid’s eyes were colored by his disbelief.

Takeyuki gulped audibly, and set his emptied coffee cup down on the sand, then turned his entire body to face Zayid.

“I don’t see why.” His voice was tense with embarrassment.

Takeyuki blinked rapidly. It was extraordinarily awkward being exposed to Zayid’s gaze. This was the first time he had ever talked to another man with feelings like this. Takeyuki was acting so strangely, he didn’t know what to do with himself.

“Takeyuki.” After a short silence, Zayid stood up calmly and started walking toward the entrance of the cave.

“Where are you going, Zayid?!” Takeyuki leapt to his feet as well.

But Zayid ordered him to stay where he was, his voice brooking no argument, and Takeyuki sat back down without arguing, though even he didn’t know why. The power, the dignity, the overwhelming authority he

had glimpsed in Zayid at odd moments was not easy to resist.

“Turn toward the fire. You exhausted yourself with your little escapade today. Stay right where you are.”

Wanting to argue but completely incapable of it, Takeyuki obeyed Zayid’s command and gazed at the dancing sparks in the fire. But he listened carefully.

His back to Takeyuki, Zayid spoke in a low, even voice.

“I’m sorry. It seems my jokes have gone too far. I didn’t think you would seriously believe I would take you as a bride. I only said that to tease you. There wasn’t any deeper meaning in it.”

Takeyuki had no idea what to say to that, so he stayed silent, softly biting down on the edge of his lower lip.

“You’re a rich man’s son in Japan, aren’t you? You had an escort from the embassy with you, so I suppose you’re closely related to the emperor?”

“Not at all, actually,” Takeyuki answered vaguely. There had been a slight relationship five generations back, but Zayid didn’t need to know that.

“Well, you’re still a naïve, spoiled rich boy, in any case. I shouldn’t have teased you.”

It was all a joke. Zayid didn’t have the slightest interest in Takeyuki. He had basically said as much. Their passionate kiss had just been an impulse, nothing more than an extension of Zayid’s efforts to save Takeyuki’s life from the very beginning. That’s what he was saying. Even the kiss they’d shared when leaving the hideout the first time was meaningless. He was denying everything

they’d shared.

Takeyuki’s shoulders slumped.

“I see.” His voice was hollow.

“I’m sorry I confused you.” Zayid accepted his apology in a sullen tone, too. “It sounds like the wind has died down a little. I’ll go check on the camel.”

“Zayid!” Takeyuki spun around just as Zayid disappeared down the narrow passageway to the exit.

Takeyuki was conflicted, wondering how he should greet Zayid when he returned. He had been sure Zayid would accept his offer, but at the very last moment Takeyuki had apparently become a burden to him. Perhaps Zayid had lost his nerve when he found out that Takeyuki came from a family of old money. But that was so unlikely. As if the man who had kept Takeyuki at his mercy with his bold and arrogant attitude would worry about something like that so late. Takeyuki simply could not accept it easily. He didn’t understand it.

He lay down on the *kilim* spread over the sand and closed his eyes. Zayid’s manly face sprang up immediately in his mind. Takeyuki’s chest contracted sharply and filled with a bittersweet sensation.

“You idiot. I wasn’t joking! Jerk!”

Takeyuki scooped up a handful of sand and threw it at the stone walls. He did it again and again before he began to cry from bitterness and fury. Something was seriously wrong with his tearducts tonight. He had never cried so many times in one day before.

Takeyuki cried and threw sand at the walls. Soon his arm got tired and he began to feel sleepy. His raised arm slumped back to his side. Sand sprinkled over his

hair. Just as he was starting to surrender his body to his seething fatigue, Takeyuki heard someone coming and started awake.

Zayid had come back. "What were you doing in here? Honestly," he breathed in exasperation close against Takeyuki's ear. Takeyuki closed his eyes. He was too embarrassed to face Zayid right now.

Zayid apparently believed that Takeyuki was actually asleep. He brushed the sand from Takeyuki's hair with gentle fingers, and Takeyuki felt Zayid staring at his sleeping face for a while.

Takeyuki felt unbearably jittery and almost opened his eyes a crack to show Zayid that he was awake, but before he could, he felt something draw suddenly near his face and, before he knew it, he felt a kiss on his lips. The kiss was over in a moment and Zayid sat back up immediately, but Takeyuki's heart was obliterated, as if a bomb had been dropped on it.

What was this? What did it mean? Takeyuki didn't know. He didn't understand the first thing about how Zayid felt. As he turned these things over in his mind, he grew truly sleepy, and unable to focus on his thoughts.

Maybe things would be different in the morning.

No—probably nothing would change. That was the last thing he thought.

## *Chapter Ten*

Considering that he had completely wasted an entire day, Zayid didn't blame Takeyuki at all. When they looked outside the cave in the morning, the sandstorm had stopped and the same clear sky stretched overhead. It seemed like today would be hot, too.

As soon as they'd finished breakfast, they climbed onto the camel and set out. Zayid said that this time they would not go to the oasis. Ever since waking up and facing each other, Zayid had been even quieter than usual, and those straightforward words were the only ones he finally pronounced. Zayid was fuming silently, but he wasn't really angry. Something seemed to be tearing at his heart and he had his hands full thinking about that, so he couldn't be bothered to worry about anything else. That was the impression Takeyuki got.

Clinging to Zayid's waist with both arms, rocked uncomfortably by the camel, they moved through the burning desert. This time it was clear even to Takeyuki that Zayid was heading toward the city. When they reached it, perhaps he would take Takeyuki to the Japanese embassy. Takeyuki felt more secure in that hope.

Normally, he shouldn't have needed to hope for something like that. Takeyuki's depression, impatience, and desolation only increased.

The night before, Takeyuki had worked up his courage and confessed his timid feelings to Zayid, but Zayid's answer had been "no." Every time Takeyuki recalled Zayid's odd discomfort, he was pierced by a feeling of shame. Zayid had captured Takeyuki first. Had he not intended from the very beginning to take Takeyuki as his own? The moment that Takeyuki had said he wanted to be with him, Zayid had been flustered, as if he were frightened of the things he'd done, and he'd spoken as if he wanted to forget everything that had happened until then. Takeyuki had been disappointed. He wanted to curse Zayid for being a coward.

Maybe Zayid thought Takeyuki's words the night before were the result of temporary insanity. Certainly, it had happened immediately after Takeyuki had survived a brush with death, so it would be hard to claim that Takeyuki had been in a balanced frame of mind. He had just learned to truly fear death, and in that moment Zayid was the only thing in the world he could trust. The crescendo of those feelings had pushed Takeyuki to make the outrageous declaration that he wanted to be with Zayid. Takeyuki couldn't entirely deny that.

But he really had meant it.

Takeyuki's heart ached desolately. He could feel every step the camel took bringing him closer and closer to his separation from Zayid. His brother and sister-in-law would be waiting for him when he got back to town. They must have been very tense, strained by worry. And Mustafa was probably being attacked from all sides for his failure.

When he let himself picture how things must

really be, Takeyuki became painfully aware of how impossible it was to remain with Zayid as a matter of practicality. It was even possible that his parents had heard about the incident and flown from Japan to Cassina. If things went badly, he could even imagine that the kidnapping of a Japanese person would become an international incident. Takeyuki's fleeting caprice would impose a heavy burden on all sorts of people. Zayid was important to him, but before he could worry about that, his first priority was to take care of everyone else.

They spent the peak of the noontime sun in the shade of some rocks then, when it cooled down slightly, they went on.

As they continued on, the conversation between the two men dwindled to spurts of the bare minimum necessary. They were each caught up in their own thoughts, and despite the silence neither of them seemed to have the time to worry about it. A different sort of silence from the oppressive quiet of the beginning fell over them.

The sun sank and night returned to the desert. Zayid stopped the camel earlier than usual.

"We'll sleep here tonight."

It had been hours since he'd last spoken, and Takeyuki's heart skipped a beat. Just the sound of Zayid's harsh, imperious voice sent his heart fluttering. He knew it was strange, but there was nothing he could do about it. They were both men, but he was inappropriately conscious of Zayid. He had never before in his life had feelings like this.

"What's wrong?" Frowning, Zayid stared at

Takeyuki, who had been staring into space all that time.

“Oh—it’s nothing. I’m sorry.”

While his certainty that the time of their separation was drawing nearer grew stronger with each moment, Takeyuki felt annoyed at himself for his ineptness and embarrassment. He knew he should have talked with Zayid about much more while they still had the opportunity, but when he actually came face-to-face with Zayid, his mind went completely blank and nothing occurred to him.

He had never guessed that he would be like this. The fear, anger, and uncertainty he’d felt toward Zayid the night he was taken seemed like a dream now. But if he truly thought about it, deep in his heart of hearts Takeyuki had been intrigued by Zayid ever since the first time he’d spoken to him on the plane. He was forced to admit that he was attracted to Zayid.

“There should be some dried branches and sticks over in the shade of those rocks. Go and get some for us,” Zayid ordered, handing Takeyuki a pocket flashlight.

Takeyuki walked in the direction he’d told him. The shade of the round limestone rock was fifty yards away. Takeyuki wished they’d set the tent up closer to the rock. He would never be so childish as to say that he was afraid to walk alone in the dark, but he felt uncomfortable for some reason.

Shining his pocket flashlight on the sand, Takeyuki gathered the dried wood that Zayid had asked him to get. He knew that tonight was the last time they would build a fire.

Takeyuki collected as much as he could carry,

filling his arms, wanting to let the fire burn as long as he could because of that. Focusing on his work, Takeyuki didn’t immediately notice that someone was standing behind him.

He bent at the waist and reached out for a piece of fallen wood when he saw a dark black boot through his legs. He stood up in surprise and spun around.

“Wh—who’s there?” He knew it wasn’t Zayid, but before Takeyuki could make a move the person had pinned his arms behind him.

“What are you doing?! Let me go! Let go!” He fought back desperately, twisting around, letting everything he’d been carrying fall to the ground. “Quit it! Let me go!”

This was the third time this had happened. Why did it keep happening to him? Takeyuki wanted to shout at the person and curse them for life. *This is insane*, he thought. *How long am I supposed to deal with people ignoring what I want?* An intense rebellion bloomed in his heart. He tried to struggle harder than he had any time before, but the person was amazingly strong and Takeyuki couldn’t manage to shake him off. The man wasn’t that large, but he parried Takeyuki’s struggles expertly and restrained him.

“Zayid! Zayi-i-id!” Takeyuki shouted for help as loud as he could as he was dragged away. He knew Zayid would save him. He must have been able to hear him. He shouted again, believing in that. “Help! I’m being kidnapped! Za—nngh!”

Suddenly his mouth was covered by a hand in a leather glove.

“Mmf!” He couldn’t speak.

Takeyuki flailed his head wildly back and forth, struggling desperately. No—this was horrible! *Zayid!*

But Zayid never came and, tightly muffled, Takeyuki was dragged away. There was a jeep parked in the shadow of the rock. He could see what must have been the man’s accomplice in the driver’s seat.

He was pushed into the back seat, his resistance utterly useless, and his kidnapper got in beside him.

“Move it.” The man slammed the door shut and gave a muffled order to the man in the driver’s seat.

The jeep’s engine roared immediately and the car peeled forward, the tires biting noisily into the sand. Takeyuki’s body was pressed into the back of the seat with the force of it.

Refusing to give up, Takeyuki stuck his head out the jeep’s window and started to shout for help. The man grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back in.

“Takeyuki!” The voice was familiar now.

He turned in surprise and stared into the face of Mustafa, the native man on the embassy’s staff. His eyes widened in astonishment.

“Mustafa? H-how did you—?”

“Takeyuki!” Mustafa wrapped his arms around Takeyuki once more.

“I’m so glad you’re safe. So, so glad.”

“Mustafa...”

Mustafa’s voice was shaking. Takeyuki’s chest tightened and he found it impossible to speak without faltering. He never imagined Mustafa would come rescue him. His thoughts were chaotic as the surprise, the

joy and relief, the shame at the trouble he’d put people to, and the regret that he’d been forced to leave Zayid without even saying goodbye welled up inside him.

“I’m sorry I worried you. I was very stupid, and I’m sorry,” Takeyuki apologized tearfully, but Mustafa shook his head firmly again and again, his white teeth peeking out of his tearfully joyous smile.

“Are you all right? You’re not hurt?” Mustafa asked to see his face, then took his gloves off and cradled Takeyuki’s face in both hands, stroking it. Takeyuki’s embarrassment multiplied, and he lowered his eyes until it was over.

“The counselor and his wife and the ambassador have all been very worried. You must prepare yourself for some scolding.”

“Yeah...It was my fault. Did anyone come from Japan?”

“No. Your brother judged it best to keep things quiet for the time being. Since we were able to bring you back tonight, we’re lucky enough to not need to cause your parents undue worry.”

Mustafa’s answer reassured Takeyuki. His brother was so sensible. He had to be grateful for that.

“Still, how did you know to find me there?”

“Well,” Mustafa smiled meaningfully. “It takes a thief to catch a thief.”

Takeyuki didn’t quite understand that, but he doubted Mustafa would explain if he asked, so Takeyuki also sealed his lips about it.

“Were you treated badly?” Mustafa asked again. Takeyuki got the feeling that Mustafa had detected

how hard it was for Takeyuki to leave the man who'd kidnapped him, and he felt strangely embarrassed.

"No....In fact, he saved me when I ran off into the desert without thinking."

"Oh, really?"

"That man isn't the one who kidnapped me that day."

"I know. We tracked down the bandits who took you from the information we gathered in the *souk*. When we interrogated them, they pretended not to know anything. But once they acknowledged that they'd taken you, they told us that someone had stolen you from them."

"He was going to take me to the embassy tomorrow, so please—"

"Don't worry, sir," Mustafa said confidently, as if brushing away Takeyuki's concerns. "No one will question his innocence."

"That's good." Takeyuki sighed with relief, and Mustafa's intelligent eyes narrowed. "It looks as if the Desert Hawk caught more than he bargained for this time."

Takeyuki looked up in surprise. He could see the lights of the city over the camouflaged shoulder of the soldier in the driver's seat. It had been so long since he'd seen such a collection of artificial light.

Takeyuki finally felt the reality of the fact that he was going home and burning tears came to his eyes. The town was the most reassuring place for him after all. Raised in cities, the urban landscape was the most familiar to him. Takeyuki might not actually be capable

of adapting to life outside of a city. Even if he could enjoy the novelty of it for a little bit, he knew it would be nothing but suffering if he had to do it forever. Zayid must have understood that. Only now did Takeyuki realize that.

Zayid was, after all, a man living in a different world from Takeyuki. He tried to wall Zayid off with that thought, but Takeyuki still found it hard to accept. Doubts and regret swirled together in his heart. These feelings, which warmed his heart to the point of burning, would not be forgotten so easily.

*I wish we could have slept together*—when he realized what he'd thought, this bold desire made Takeyuki flush. He was being foolish. They were both men! And more importantly, if Zayid had actually been interested there had been any number of opportunities for him to act. The fact that he hadn't could only be taken to mean that he was all talk, just teasing Takeyuki.

The more Takeyuki thought about it, the more disappointed he grew.

Trying to change his mood, Takeyuki turned his eyes to the scenery that flowed past the car windows. Their jeep was already on the main highway through the outskirts of the town. They were on a newly built bypass road. If they went straight down this road, they would end up in the heart of Ras, the capital city.

Watching the pale yellow light of the street lamps flash past one after another, Takeyuki imagined Zayid's firm, manly face. He doubted he would ever meet a man who left such an intense impression on him again.

But no matter how Takeyuki pursued him, he

would never be able to have him.

He had to give Zayid up and forget about him as soon as possible, despite the pain it caused him.

“Takeyuki?” Mustafa called to him timidly and Takeyuki turned to look at him.

“Tonight we would like for you to stay in the guest room at the embassy. Everyone is there, waiting for the news that you’ve been rescued.”

Of course Takeyuki had no objection. He felt so sorry for what he’d done to everyone. His head sank in a deep nod of assent.

“Then, tomorrow, do you think it would be possible to meet with the king and tell him that you’re all right?”

Takeyuki reacted to this with a shocked outburst. “W-what? I wouldn’t know what to say—I mean...”

“It will be fine. King Muhammad is a very friendly person.”

“But how did the king hear about what happened to me?”

“It was purely by chance, but the day you were kidnapped the ambassador and your brother were at an audience they had arranged many days in advance with Prince Ashif, who had finally returned, so they were at the palace. When they heard the first reports, the king and the prince found out about the incident as well and ever since they have been deeply concerned.”

Takeyuki could scarcely believe it.

Not only would he be scolded by his brother and have to apologize to the ambassador, but he had to have an audience with the ruler of this nation to assure

him that he was all right. The very thought of it filled Takeyuki with dread and made his knees tremble. He felt nothing but shame at ever considering that he could wander the desert with Zayid forever. If he’d done that, there would have been a real commotion.

Thirty minutes later, the jeep was on a road even Takeyuki recognized, heading toward the embassy.

They passed through the gate to the embassy, guarded by soldiers, and entered the grounds. The magnificent three-story chalk building was dotted here and there with lights. Takeyuki looked down at his watch. It was just before ten o’clock at night.

The jeep stopped in the driveway at the front entrance. Mustafa got out of the car first, and then held out a hand to Takeyuki.

“Takeyuki!”

“Oh, Takeyuki!”

Atsushi and Masako, his brother’s wife, flew out of the front doors and ran toward Takeyuki as he climbed out of the jeep.

“Oh, thank god you’re safe! Thank god!” Masako threw her arms around Takeyuki’s neck and hugged him tight. With the weight of her five-months’ pregnant body hanging from him, spindly Takeyuki felt like he would topple over.

“Takeyuki.”

“Atsushi.”

When Masako let go of him, he turned to face his brother and apologized, his face meek. His brother’s emotions had been laid bare when he ran over to Takeyuki and his face was slightly flushed, but he had

regained his control now. His face seemed a little paler than usual. It made him look even more detached and emotionless than ever.

Takeyuki had bowed his head when he apologized, and he now raised it again to look his brother in the eye. As he did so, he felt a sudden sharp pain in his left cheek.

“Atsushi!” Masako shrieked in surprise. “There’s no reason to hit him!”

“You stay out of it.”

“But—”

Masako stood between Takeyuki, who was dazed by the shock of being slapped for the first time in his life, and her husband, who was normally so calm and had never before raised his hand. The ambassador finally came over to them and led her away.

“There now, Masako—let’s give the these two some time and go have a cup of tea.”

The driver took the jeep to the garage and even Mustafa excused himself, disappearing into the embassy. When they were alone, Takeyuki touched his slowly swelling cheek with his fingertips, then slumped and apologized again.

“I’m sorry—I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for making you worry.”

“I can’t believe you!” This time, his brother suddenly embraced him. His voice was hoarse and shaking. Takeyuki had never heard him like this before.

“Atsushi—” Takeyuki clung to his brother, as well. Atsushi’s arms tightened around him.

“Can you imagine how worried I was? What was

I supposed to tell mother and father if the worst had happened? Don’t you ever, ever make me worry like that again.”

“I’m sorry.” Takeyuki could only repeat those words like a broken record. He could find nothing else to say.

“You’re so pampered and naïve. I share the blame with everyone who’s coddled you so much. You’re the youngest, the second child mother and father wanted so badly in their old age, and they never let you learn the meaning of the word hardship. Even if you are starting a job next month, you’re still getting special treatment from the boss. I was worried about that, so it made me happy to see you come to Cassina. I thought it would broaden your experience a little. But I never imagined something so outrageous would happen to you.”

His brother swallowed, then, as if choking back a sob. His large hand stroked the back of Takeyuki’s head.

“When the prince swore that he would bring you back safely and asked us to wait just five days, to be honest I wasn’t entirely sure I could believe him. But I’m glad I trusted him. Because now you’re safely back with us. I may be a Christian, but tonight I feel like giving thanks to Allah.”

“I won’t do anything that stupid again. I promise.”

“Please don’t. We all love you.” Takeyuki nodded and finally raised his face from his brother’s chest. He looked into his brother’s eyes and saw they were bloodshot. Takeyuki was sure his own eyes looked the same.

When their eyes met, they smiled at the same time and chuckled.

“You’re a little sunburned. The tip of your nose is bright red.”

“But I’m not that burned considering I was in the desert, right?”

“You’re right. I’m amazed. Even the desert sun pampered you.”

In reality, he had almost died of dehydration in the desert, but Takeyuki decided to keep that to himself. There was no need to cause his brother any further worry. Takeyuki was safe. Thanks to Zayid.

Remembering Zayid, Takeyuki felt a pang of yearning. Only a few hours before they had been together, but now they were separated. And they probably would never see each other again in this world.

*I don’t want to go back to Japan like this,* Takeyuki thought fiercely. But God only knew if he would see Zayid again in the time that was left. Whatever else Takeyuki could say about him, Zayid lived a respectable life, but he seemed to have no human connections.

“Anyway, you go take a bath and wash off all this dirt and exhaustion. Then go to sleep. Tomorrow we’ll go to the palace and thank the king and apologize for causing all this commotion. All right?”

“All right. But what about the prince?”

“With any luck, you’ll see him. He’s not the sort of person who stays in one place very long.”

As they talked, they went through the entrance hall of the embassy and down the hall to the western wing where the guest rooms were.

On the way, they passed through a room in one corner of which was a sofa set, where they found the ambassador and Masako. When the two of them saw Atsushi and Takeyuki approach, they set the tea they’d been drinking on the table and stood up. Takeyuki bowed yet again and apologized. Masako fussed over the swelling in his cheek, but Takeyuki gave her a smile and said, “I deserved it,” which finally seemed to reassure her. The ambassador smiled and answered, “We’re relieved, anyway.”

Takeyuki calmed down when they left him alone in the guest room. He filled the bathtub immediately with hot water, and then climbed in for his first bath in five days. He cleaned away the sweat and dirt covering his entire body with a soapy washcloth.

He remembered being in the cool water of the oasis and only wiping at his body with a cloth. Takeyuki set aside the washcloth and looked down at his soapy body. What had Zayid felt when he saw Takeyuki’s naked body? Perhaps he’d been disappointed by how scrawny Takeyuki was. Takeyuki didn’t know Zayid’s preferences, but he knew that a bony body like his didn’t feel as good or offer as much fun during sex as a soft, luscious body would. That was why despite all the suggestive things Zayid said to him, he’d never laid a finger on Takeyuki.

*But he did kiss me. And he did that several times.* As the hot water of the shower poured over his head, Takeyuki closed his hand around the shuddering object between his legs.

He massaged the entire shaft gently.

“Ah—!” A pleasure that outstripped his expectations coursed through his body and he cried out inadvertently.

It was because he was thinking about Zayid. That was why he'd gotten so excited and his body was reacting so much. Takeyuki imagined that his hand was Zayid's and he surrendered his body to a time that seemed to carry him into passion. He knew he should be embarrassed at what he was doing, but once the fire was lit inside his body it was impossible to dampen it until it was released.

“Oh! Oh, Zayid!” A milky spray splattered the tiled wall before him and Takeyuki panted heavily.

After their separation, he'd realized that he truly loved Zayid. It was no simple desire to be together, but a yearning to become physically one, not caring that they were both men. He had never before wanted someone so desperately.

It hurt so badly he felt as if his heart would shatter. From now on, whenever Takeyuki did this sort of thing, he would think of Zayid's long, beautiful fingers as he pathetically soiled his own.

He dried his hair and changed from a bathrobe into silk pajamas, then fell into the soft bed. He didn't need anything.

He didn't need anything else, but he wanted to see Zayid just one more time.

This wish that had no hope of being realized tumbled through Takeyuki's head. Burying his face in the bed, Takeyuki bit back his sobs and cried. As he cried, he thought about leaving the country and going

anywhere else—he didn't care where—on the last flight of the day after they visited the palace tomorrow. It would be impossible to stop thinking about Zayid as long as he was in Cassina. Takeyuki sensed that. He didn't care if people called him a weakling. This was the first time Takeyuki had ever seriously loved someone. He had lived twenty-two years and for the first time he felt more tenderly about another person than about himself, or anything else.

He fell asleep crying, so the next morning when he woke up and looked in the mirror, his eyelids were puffy. The mark on his cheek where his brother had hit him the night before had disappeared, but his face looked even worse now. He was nervous about meeting the ruler of the country looking like that.

His brother and sister-in-law and the ambassador joined him at breakfast, all of them eager to cheer him from his gloom. Takeyuki felt bad and tried hard to act upbeat.

His brother had told Masako to get a change of clothes ready for Takeyuki, so Takeyuki was dressed formally in a suit with tails he'd brought with him from Japan. It was a private meeting, but it was with the king, so all the formalities had to be strictly observed.

At ten o'clock that morning on the dot, a car came for them. It was a long black limousine. The ambassador and Atsushi got in along with Takeyuki, and Mustafa got into the front passenger's seat. As the car sped along, Takeyuki took extraordinarily deep breaths, trying to somehow calm his body as it shook terribly with nerves.

## *Chapter Eleven*

King Muhammad III of Cassina was a placid ruler with a ruddy round face graced by a beautiful beard and mustache. His eyes were a pale brown and, when the sunlight hit them, they turned the color of tea. He told them to dispense with ceremony and selected a smaller reception room where they could chat for their audience.

“I’m relieved that no serious harm was done, at least.” The king embraced Takeyuki like a long-lost son and pressed a light kiss to his cheek. “It pains me to say that law and order does not yet reign in my country, but I hope to consult with the courts in the future and work toward promising my people and our guests a bit more safety. I deeply apologize for this incident. I’m very sorry you were put in such a terrifying situation, Takeyuki. I know that it cannot but taint your every memory of the country.”

“Certainly not, sire,” Takeyuki dissembled politely. Beside him, his brother bowed deeply and picked up the conversation.

“Honestly, your majesty, my brother brought this entire incident on himself out of ignorance and a lack of caution. We don’t have the words to thank you for your generosity in rescuing him.”

“Thank you for aiding us in our efforts,” the

ambassador put in next. "No need to be so formal, now." The king gestured for the three men to take a seat on some sofas, then rang a bell to have chai and some teacakes brought out. The teacakes were a sort of sugar candy called *sanyora* that melted in the mouth. The burst of flavor was like a sweet potato.

"Incidentally, Your Majesty, how is Prince Ashif today? If he's available, we would very much like to offer our thanks," the ambassador went on, but the king shook his head, troubled.

"He returned last night, but even after I told him that you would be coming to the palace today, he said he would be embarrassed to receive your thanks since he did so little to help, and he refused to come. I apologize."

"Oh, not at all. It would be rude of us to force our appreciation on him."

"I'll tell him you send your regards."

"That's very kind, thank you."

The audience was concluded in twenty minutes. The ambassador had done most of the talking, so once Takeyuki and Atsushi had expressed their thanks, they had only needed to listen in silence the rest of the time. They all bowed respectfully and left the room.

The ambassador and Atsushi were going back to work at the embassy. The same limousine that had brought them would now take them back.

"We will ready a separate car for you, Mister Takeyuki. Would you care to wait in the garden?"

"All right. Thank you for going to so much trouble," Atsushi answered for him.

Takeyuki saw the other two and Mustafa off at

the driveway then followed a man in Arabic garb who worked at the palace to a gallery that enclosed the garden.

The floor of the hallway was inlaid with white and green marble in a checkerboard pattern and every few yards stood a marble pillar, which supported the second floor corridor. The tops and bottoms of each pillar were beautifully carved. The floor was intensively polished and reflected the light like a mirror. Takeyuki was afraid of slipping if he didn't pay attention.

The garden was large and overflowing with greenery. There were many exotic flowers blooming, as well. Takeyuki turned his head to gaze out at it as he walked. Suddenly, his guard came to a halt, then withdrew to one side of the hall and bent sharply at the waist in a reverent bow.

Takeyuki had been staring at the garden as he walked and he was slow to notice what had happened. It was only when he had come to the spot where his guide had withdrawn that he noticed the figure standing there.

A tall man stood in profile, leaning back against the very next pillar, his pure white pin-tucked shirt tucked in and covered with a long-sleeved black Arabic garment luxuriously embroidered in gold thread. He, too, was gazing out at the garden. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest, his posture infused with such nobility that it was difficult to approach him. His head was covered by a lustrous white cloth, edged in a decorative gold braid.

It could only be Prince Ashif.

Takeyuki sensed it, and he hesitated, overawed. In

such a situation, Takeyuki probably ought to have stood to one side of the hallway as well. Flustered, he stood where he was until at last the prince slowly turned and looked Takeyuki full in the face.

*Huh?* The moment Takeyuki saw the prince's face, his eyes widened and his mouth fell open, speechless. *Zayid?*

There was no doubt about it. His eyes popped and he stared intently at the face, which belonged to the man he had traveled with through the desert until only yesterday. To Zayid. Takeyuki was so shocked he wondered if he was simply dreaming.

Zayid—no, Ashif looked away from Takeyuki, who stood perfectly stiff and frozen in shock, and spoke to the man who stood bent at the waist at the edge of the corridor, not moving so much as a muscle.

"Thank you, Hassan."

"Certainly. Excuse me, Prince Ashif." It seemed that the man had brought Takeyuki here on Ashif's orders. His work done, he left them quickly.

While this transpired, Takeyuki stared at Ashif's handsome face in utter disbelief. But when all sign of other people disappeared from the area and they were left alone, he suddenly felt uncomfortable.

"Now then, Takeyuki," Ashif said with a faint smile, approaching Takeyuki with large strides. His blue eyes were narrowed with pleasure and he scrutinized Takeyuki's entire body, clad in the unusual costume of his tailed suit, apparently enjoying what he saw.

Takeyuki was flustered and looked around for some sort of salvation or a way to escape, but



unfortunately there didn't seem to be anywhere to hide in the spacious corridor.

"Are you planning to run away again?" Ashif asked sarcastically, standing almost nose to nose with Takeyuki and blocking his escape.

"Th-that wasn't fair." Takeyuki fumbled for an answer. "It was cowardly of you to trick me."

Takeyuki had thought he would never see Zayid again, had cried so pitifully over it last night, and had even done that indecent thing while thinking of him. But now it was revealed that Zayid's true identity was the handsome and charming prince of Cassina. Takeyuki could not keep his face from burning at the many shameless things he'd done under that man's gaze.

"I'm sorry for being a coward," Ashif murmured in his comforting baritone, catching Takeyuki up in an embrace only a moment later.

"Z-Zayid!"

His surprise made him call Ashif by the more familiar name.

"Shh!" Ashif hissed sharply at Takeyuki's thoughtless exclamation, drawing his face so close to Takeyuki's that their eyelashes seemed to touch. "That name is forbidden here."

His voice was so sensual it made Takeyuki's head spin; his emotions were easily mastered. Takeyuki felt as if his legs might give way beneath him at any moment. Ashif held him securely around the waist, so he was practically being held upright by the man.

"You cried last night, didn't you?"

"What makes you think I would do that?"

Shaken by the fact that Ashif had guessed the truth, Takeyuki denied it fervently. But Ashif wore a smirking expression, as if to say that he had seen through everything.

"Then why are your eyes so swollen? I can see all the tiniest changes in your face."

"I-I did cry, but not about you! I just cried because I was so happy to see my family again."

"Takeyuki, I never suggested that you cried over me. But since you said that, you've just confessed to it."

"I have not! I hate you!"

"So you said you wanted to stay with me forever even though you hate me?"

Takeyuki was trapped so quickly his thoughts descended into chaos. He didn't know what was going on anymore. The only thing he knew was that being able to see this man again, being held so tightly by him that he could barely breathe, lifted his spirits and excited him more than he could say. Ashif was right: Takeyuki had confessed the truth. Ashif probably knew that perfectly well. There was no way he hadn't noticed the frantic heaving of Takeyuki's breast.

"You're so mean. You ignored me completely. Every other word you said to me was to mock me, to say I was a child, and you never treated me like an equal!"

Takeyuki pouted over everything: he was in no way worthy of Ashif and had simply been teased and led around like a pet. He understood intellectually that that was why Ashif had treated him like a child, but his emotions ran away with him, to his chagrin.

"Let go of me, please. How do you plan to explain this if someone sees us?"

"No one will come this way for a while. I've made sure of that."

Takeyuki struggled to push away Ashif's arms, but the man thwarted his efforts easily and he calmed down again.

"You're not very good at bluffing, Takeyuki."

Takeyuki flushed with humiliation to be told that so coolly.

"So what!" He turned his face away angrily. But Ashif touched his chin and pulled Takeyuki back to face him. At the same time he pressed firmly against Takeyuki's hips. He pushed one of his legs between Takeyuki's.

"Oh—" The rigidity of Ashif's groin as it pressed against him made their desire for each other obvious.

Takeyuki blushed all the way to the tips of his ears in embarrassment.

"Promise me you won't tell anyone that I'm the Desert Hawk. And, in exchange, I'll do whatever you want me to do." His hot breath caressed Takeyuki's ear. The temptation Zayid offered him made Takeyuki dizzy.

"But...but—" Takeyuki could not speak the words that rose in his throat; he felt like he would cry from his frustration. Ashif had arranged all of this, but Takeyuki couldn't even say the simple words "take me." It was because Ashif's feelings were so obscure. Takeyuki didn't want Zayid to fill his body, but his spirit—but if he said that, Ashif, who hated to be troubled by anything,

might push him away. Takeyuki had no confidence in himself.

"Takeyuki. You're hard down here—because you want me, right?"

Ashif didn't need to ask—the proof of Takeyuki's lust was impossible to hide. But Takeyuki opened his mouth to deny it fiercely. Sensing that, Ashif sealed his mouth with his own full lips.

"Ah—"

"You're so stubborn!"

He pulled away from the man's forceful lips, and Ashif cursed Takeyuki in annoyance. He jerked Takeyuki's chin upwards once more and pressed a fierce kiss onto his lips.

Even while locked in this intense kiss, the strain in Takeyuki's groin grew as Ashif fired his sensuality. And it wasn't only Takeyuki; Ashif's magnificent, robust member grew ever more defined.

*Could Ashif feel the same?* A hope was born in Takeyuki's heart, and it pounded with excitement.

"You'll be good now, right?"

Pulling his moist lips away, Ashif stroked the hair over Takeyuki's ear. He brushed away a tear that started to the corner of Takeyuki's eye with a fingertip.

"I love you. I've loved you since the first moment I saw you, in the airport lounge."

"Liar. I can't believe I'm that lucky."

"But it's the truth," Ashif declared, staring into Takeyuki's eyes firmly.

Now that things had reached this point, Takeyuki had no reason to think that Ashif was lying anymore. But

the reason he still resisted the idea was that the memory of being refused once already, in the desert, lingered in his mind.

Ashif only looked at Takeyuki's silent expression for a few moments before he seemed to guess what was bothering him.

"Ah, that." He let out a deep, troubled sigh and smiled ruefully. "I was a coward then. It was unfair of me. I knew you were being honest with me, but I was confused and couldn't take it in. I could hardly just nod and accept you as Zayid. It would be different if you wanted to be with me knowing who I really am, but I didn't know how to answer when you were deceived and only knew me by a false name."

Ashif gazed at Takeyuki intently.

"Will you come with me, Takeyuki?"

"Do you mean, for life?"

"If you can." Ashif's answer concealed a rare hesitation and Takeyuki felt his heart swelling. He'd confirmed Ashif's true feelings.

Takeyuki circled his arms around Ashif's neck once more and held him tight.

"Takeyuki." Ashif squeezed him tightly back.

"Take me, Ashif. Take me."

The sun threw down brilliant rays of light, but now it made no difference whether it was night or day.

## *Chapter Twelve*

The palace was divided into public spaces for administrative purposes and private spaces where the king and his family lived. Takeyuki was led to a place buried deep within even the private area, where the heir's bedroom was located. Only the king's chamber and the corridor that led to the ancient remains of the harem were built further back than that. Now that harems were outlawed, those buildings were called the imperial villa and Ashif said they were open to the public. Muhammad III's policy was that it was "the royal chamber shared with the people," and Prince Ashif agreed with that thinking.

Ashif's bed was a thing of luxury, several mattresses thick and enclosed by a canopy. It was so eye-poppingly huge that five adults could easily lie on it side by side. Ashif lay Takeyuki down atop the bed, completely naked, and swore, "I will love only you for the rest of my life."

Takeyuki was so pleased and embarrassed that he didn't know how to act. He could only flutter his eyelashes shyly.

"Luckily, I have six brothers and sisters. Unfortunately, women aren't recognized for inheritance rights, but my two younger brothers share my father's blood and are excellent candidates for inheritance. Even

if I don't have any children, there's no fear that the royal bloodline will die out. Don't worry about anything silly like that."

"All right, Ashif."

Ashif had thought far ahead before deciding to build a relationship with Takeyuki, and the utter lack of deceit in his feelings communicated itself through Takeyuki's skin. He stroked Takeyuki's entire face tenderly and Takeyuki let out a contented sigh.

"Takeyuki—" Ashif's lips fell on him, gently touching Takeyuki's closed mouth.

Takeyuki accepted the soft sensation and felt a sweet ache run through his body. A delicate gasp escaped him. He liked kissing Ashif. It felt unbelievably good. Takeyuki was rapturously drunk on his kisses.

Their lips connected again and again, making vivid noises. Their cute, stolen kisses alone made Takeyuki's cheeks flush.

"Mm—ah!" His body began to grow hotter, deep inside.

He boldly tangled his bare feet with Ashif's and rubbed his member, almost painfully stiff, against Ashif's belly. The tip of Takeyuki's member overflowed slightly and wet the taut muscles that covered Ashif's abdomen.

"You're so bad." Ashif pulled his lips away and teased Takeyuki sweetly.

Takeyuki buried his face in Ashif's shoulder, overcoming his humiliation. Ashif's fingers trailed down the back of Takeyuki's neck to flow over his shoulder and across his collarbone, down to his right nipple.

Takeyuki's nipples were already hard. Ashif pinched the right one, then rubbed and stimulated it with the flats of his fingers. The left one he pinched between his teeth and sucked on.

"Nngh—no! Ah!" Takeyuki threw his head back under the strong sensation, his fingers clutching at Ashif's arms, bulging with muscles. When Ashif fondled his chest, his entire body ached, as if an electric current were coursing through him, and Takeyuki couldn't stay still. His hips leapt up and his toes flexed, and he cried out in a voice even he found unbelievably coquettish.

"Ah! Mm—no...no! Ah!"

This wasn't the first time his skin had touched another person's, but he had never slept with another man or had his nipples fondled. He'd had no idea his chest was so sensitive. Compared to Takeyuki, who had so little experience, Ashif was far more gifted in the arts of love, and he easily brought Takeyuki to his knees.

"N-not too much....It's driving me...crazy!"

"Then go crazy." Ashif brushed aside Takeyuki's desperate plea with coolness borne of affection. "I want to see you lose control."

He sucked hard on Takeyuki.

"Anngh!" Takeyuki let loose a shameless scream, arching his head back and thrusting his chin into the air.

His nipples flushed red with blood as they were tormented by mouth and hand, and they swelled to nearly double their size. Ashif's tongue tugged at them, poked them, and licked them even more, and Takeyuki sobbed.

Whatever Ashif did to him, the feeling that

pervaded him could only be called good. Takeyuki worried that insanity was invading him. He had never felt so tenderly towards someone or sought them with his entire body before.

“Ahh! Ashif—Ashif!”

He begged Ashif to kiss him, and the man assaulted Takeyuki's mouth as if he would devour him. He pried open Takeyuki's lips and slipped his tongue between them.

“Unngh—mmph—”

Ashif's wild tongue worked its will inside Takeyuki's small mouth, forcing groans out of him. Their tongues entwined as they sucked at each other.

A lewd pleasure coursed down Takeyuki's spine. Ecstasy rose up in him from deep in his hips, making his head spin. The tip of his erect shaft glistened wetly, dripping with an indecent fluid. Ashif's magnificent organ was also pulsing with heat.

Dazed by the heavy kisses, Takeyuki felt Ashif guide his hands to his crotch.

“Ah—”

Takeyuki gasped unconsciously as he gripped Ashif.

He was big. And he was rock hard, almost like a weapon.

“This is going to go inside of you,” Ashif whispered in a voice that thrilled with sensuality.

Takeyuki's jaw trembled with fear and trepidation. He started to tell Ashif that it was impossible, but Ashif sealed his moist lips with his own once more and Takeyuki couldn't speak.

“Don't be afraid,” Ashif continued, holding Takeyuki's body tightly. “I love you. I'm so happy to make love to you like this that I feel like I could die. I'll let you get used to me a little bit at a time, and in the end I know it will be so good it will make you cry. You belong to me, Takeyuki.”

His proclamation was so full of confidence it was almost arrogant, and it made Takeyuki's heart flutter. If anyone else had said that to him he would have been indignant, but he could forgive Ashif for it. No—he wasn't forgiving it, it just seemed more natural this way. The charm Ashif bore was just that vivid and unshakeable. You might even say it was the bearing and dignity of royalty.

As Ashif continuously rained kisses down everywhere on Takeyuki's body, he gradually shifted his body, moving his head down to Takeyuki's groin.

“Open your legs more.”

Takeyuki had held his thighs together in embarrassment, but now they were split wide.

“A-Ashif—” Takeyuki called out hesitantly, but Ashif paid him no attention. Every last downy hair on Takeyuki's body belonged to him, so there was no need to feel embarrassed. That was how it felt.

Ashif lay on his side between Takeyuki's open legs and began to caress the panting erection at the center of his body with his hands and mouth. He swallowed it to the very base, and swirled his tongue around it. He paid special attention to the head and the tiny hole at the tip, tickling them with his tongue. Takeyuki was inexperienced in such things and he panted desperately,

wriggling his hips lewdly and writhing on the sheets.

“Anng! Ah! S-stop!” Waves of pleasure broke over him.

Takeyuki flopped his head from side to side, dazed, and wriggled his hips indecently.

“Nngh—no!”

A luscious ecstasy pressed down on him, then receded; pressed, and then pulled back like a wave, and Takeyuki tasted heaven and hell in the same moment.

“I-I can’t take it—please....A-ahh!”

Seized by a pleasure of fresh intensity, Takeyuki dug his nails into the sheets and tensed his entire body.

“Anng!”

Light exploded in his vision and the entire scene was blown away. Unable to contain himself, Takeyuki let out a shrill scream as he spurted his dirty fluids into Ashif’s throat. Ashif gulped it down without hesitation, and then rolled his tongue over every inch of Takeyuki’s organ once again, licking even the small hole clean of the remnants inside it.

“S-stop it....Please, Ashif,” Takeyuki sobbed, humiliated. He hadn’t expected to be pushed into exposing such disgusting behavior. But Ashif never faltered, stretching his body out to hold Takeyuki, his fingers licking at his hair as he kissed Takeyuki’s shoulder.

“You crybaby.”

“Jerk!” Takeyuki pounded his fists against Ashif’s chest brazenly.

Ashif took his blows without flinching. His thick, muscular chest was covered in seductively beautiful

definition that didn’t even flinch from Takeyuki’s weak hysterics. Ashif soon took hold of Takeyuki’s wrists and easily pried his fingers out of their fists to kiss each nail one by one. His every movement was slick and practiced. All Takeyuki could do was obediently calm himself.

“You have beautiful fingers,” Ashif declared passionately, gazing at Takeyuki’s hands. There was a hint of emotion in his voice. “Any jewel would look wonderful on them.”

“I don’t need jewels.”

“Then what *do* you need?” Ashif turned the question back on him, and fire flared in Takeyuki’s face.

He looked down and softly laid his cheek against Ashif’s chest.

“Takeyuki—” Ashif spoke Takeyuki’s name as if he could hardly hold back his emotion.

He wrapped his arms around Takeyuki’s shoulders and stroked the back of his head with his palm.

“I’m serious.”

“Me, too,” Takeyuki answered without faltering.

“But you’re going to go back to Japan eventually, aren’t you?”

“But I’ll come right back.”

Ashif stopped stroking Takeyuki’s head. Takeyuki’s answer seemed to have caught Ashif off-guard.

Takeyuki looked up and stared firmly into Ashif’s blue eyes.

“If my parents agree, I swear I’ll come back. So please, Ashif—”

*Wait for me, don't forget me until I come back.* Takeyuki couldn't speak the words, but he appealed to Ashif's spirit with his earnest gaze.

"Takeyuki—" Ashif's voice was high with emotion.

"If you would let me, I'd like to meet your parents and ask them for your hand. Would you be against that?"

"I'm not *against* it, but..." Takeyuki was conflicted.

It was an offer he hadn't even considered, but how could he ask the prince of an entire country to do something like that? His parents would be so surprised they might panic. They would never imagine that a prince would come personally from a foreign country to ask for their son. But he could definitely expect better results than if Takeyuki tried to convince them by himself.

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes. Of course I do."

Now it was Takeyuki's turn to gulp and toughen his resolve.

"Then come with me."

The truth was that Takeyuki no longer wanted to be away from Ashif for even a moment. More than his parents' permission or anything else, having Ashif with him forever would make Takeyuki happiest.

Takeyuki pressed his body against Ashif's, and he felt Ashif's member throb powerfully against his groin. An intense desire for that welled up within him.

"Ashif—"

Takeyuki abandoned his hesitation and took hold

of the long, thick, manfully erect object. The organ that coursed full with spirit was raw, pulsing proof of Ashif's feelings. The knowledge that he held a part of Ashif filled Takeyuki with such adoration it overwhelmed him. Now Takeyuki vividly understood how Ashif had felt when he had passionately caressed Takeyuki and even accepted his fluids. Takeyuki wanted to let Ashif experience the same sort of pleasure.

While Takeyuki fumbled with Ashif's erection, Ashif slid his fingers, slick with lubricant, to the back of Takeyuki's hips and carefully loosened his tightly puckered folds.

He applied lubricant to each of the taut folds, and, little by little, so as not to frighten the innermost part of Takeyuki that had never experienced a man's touch before, he began to slip his finger inside. First he pushed his index finger in up to the first knuckle. Careful not to force it, in no rush, Ashif let Takeyuki get used to the sensation of holding a foreign object inside him and letting it pull out.

Ashif was remarkably patient. The affection in his treatment came through.

Fighting back his humiliation and pain, Takeyuki focused on loosening up to what Ashif was doing and surrendered his body to him.

Finally, his index finger plunged into Takeyuki to its base.

"Ahh! Nngh!"

Takeyuki moaned at the feeling of the finger inside his body.

Soon, the finger began to move.

“A-ah! No—not yet, I—ah!”

“It’s all right. Don’t tense up.”

Ashif’s voice was tinged with excitement. It was as if he were desperate to quiet the passion that yearned to push his member into Takeyuki rather than his finger and thrust deeply into him. Takeyuki’s body shuddered. When he pictured such a large object inside the still-tight tube that had accepted a single finger, Takeyuki couldn’t help but feel scared. But it was more than just fear that he felt: there was also surprise that the human body could bring two people together like that; and anticipation; and he couldn’t deny that he felt a sweet ache in the core of his body.

Each time Ashif’s finger pulled out of him, Takeyuki heard a wet noise. He bit down on his lip at the lewdness of it and flushed to his ears. His knees were raised and his thighs shook. The sensation of his delicate internal membranes being stroked and the unmistakable pleasure that arose from it blurred together. Takeyuki held it back, panting and moaning. Ashif’s fingers were deeply attentive; they wouldn’t let Takeyuki feel nervous. So Takeyuki focused on actively, obediently taking in this first experience.

The finger thrust into Takeyuki’s hole was slipped out. It was a fleeting moment to feel relief and catch his ragged breath.

“Try lying on your stomach,” Ashif suggested, and Takeyuki obeyed.

There were several cushions of different shapes thrown on the bed. Ashif reached out and selected one from among them: a cylindrical pillow.

“Lift your hips up.”

Takeyuki raised his hips, not really understanding what would happen to him, and Ashif pushed the pillow under him. Takeyuki ended up in the humiliating position of having only his hips raised. He was so embarrassed that he tried to get up, but Ashif pushed on his shoulder and forced him back down.

Ashif pressed his lips onto the skin of Takeyuki’s back, as if to soothe him. He kissed him everywhere. Ashif’s kisses made Takeyuki feel pleasant and dazed.

“Good boy.”

He kissed the swell of one buttock.

“I love you.”

He kissed the other.

Takeyuki let out a deep, satisfied sigh and closed his eyes. He wished he could feel only Ashif’s lips and fingers. He decided not to think about anything else. If Ashif was the one doing it, he would accept any indignity. *I love him—I love you*, he repeated again and again in his heart. He had had such a bad impression of the man when they’d first met. How could his feelings have changed so completely? Even Takeyuki found it mysterious. Five days in the desert had evidently had a powerful effect on him.

In this shameless position, lying on his face with his hips up in the air, Takeyuki’s thighs opened further.

The air touched his private parts that had only been toyed with by Ashif’s fingers until now. He was sure the enticing folds, twitching and wet with lubricant, made for a lewd sight. Takeyuki was conscious of his own indecency and he buried his face in the sheets.

*Please, don't look at me when I'm so disgusting,* he almost pleaded.

"Don't be embarrassed. Every single part of you is beautiful, Takeyuki," Ashif whispered earnestly, answering Takeyuki's unvoiced prayers.

"Liar..."

"I'm not lying. It's light pink, and it's panting greedily. It wants to suck me in."

"Stop it! Don't say that!"

Takeyuki covered his ears and shook his head.

Ashif was taunting him, deliberately trying to embarrass Takeyuki by saying these humiliating things. Takeyuki knew that, but he still reacted exactly as Ashif wanted. How could Takeyuki, naïve as he was, be an equal for Ashif, who seemed to have so much experience?

Ashif's fingers pushed Takeyuki's exposed folds apart and entered his tight hole.

"A-angh—ah!"

"Relax."

Takeyuki would have done that without being told if he could have. He sucked in a deep breath and let it out.

When he exhaled, his body relaxed.

Seeing that, Ashif pushed his middle finger in beside his index finger. His fingers were dripping with lubricant, loosening the tightness of his hole even more, pushing all the way inside. Takeyuki's shoulders jerked up in pain and he raised his face to let out a scream.

"Stop it! No—it's too tight!"

"You'll get used to it soon," Ashif answered

coolly, then, as if to wipe away the coldness of his words, he stroked Takeyuki's sweaty back and shoulders and hair with a tender touch.

"I'm going to be different. If you make noise for just two fingers, I'll never be able to become one with you. Try to be strong."

Takeyuki shared the desire to embrace and become one.

He wanted all of Ashif.

Takeyuki relaxed his muscles desperately and concentrated on taking him in. The man's two fingers widened his opening, moving gently.

"Ah—nngh! Yes—there!"

Deep within him was a place that gave a sense of pleasure that seemed to slice through his brain. Each time Ashif's fingers touched it, Takeyuki's breath became ragged and he moaned.

"Nn—anngh!"

"That feels good, doesn't it?"

"No—when you do that, I...ah!"

When Ashif's fingers pressed against him or battered him, Takeyuki couldn't hold back his indecent screams. His head ached with a dizzying pleasure.

"Takeyuki—" He slipped his fingers out of Takeyuki's body.

Ashif bent over Takeyuki. In place of his fingers, the hard, thick tip of his organ pressed against him. "Don't hold your breath," Ashif warned and, a moment later, Ashif himself pulled Takeyuki's folds apart and pushed into him at long last.

"Anngh!!"

It was completely unlike his fingers.

The thick, hard shaft was hot and solid as it mercilessly pushed further and further into him, forcing screams and moans out of Takeyuki.

His walls were being rubbed so viciously that they thrilled.

But Takeyuki knew the reason he felt more than just pain was due to Ashif wisely lubricating him inside and loosening him up.

“Oh—Ashif! Ashif!” Takeyuki cried out, sobbing, and Ashif rained so many kisses on Takeyuki’s cheek that he could never have counted them.

“I’m all the way in.” Ashif’s voice was slightly hoarse and erotic.

“Ah—angh! I feel it, Ashif!”

Takeyuki plainly felt Ashif inside himself. His heart thudded with emotion. He loved Ashif. He would stay with him forever.

*I can never leave you and live.* Takeyuki had never imagined that he would fall into such a dramatic romance.

It had been a little more than a week since he’d come to Cassina. He’d planned the trip as a whim, but it had spun Takeyuki’s life one hundred and eighty degrees. He’d met Ashif and though at first they had resisted each other, they had been drawn together as tightly as opposite poles of a magnet and could never be separated.

“Can I move a little bit? I—I can’t hold back, either. I want to come inside you.” Ashif’s voice was at its limit now, too.



Takeyuki nodded and surrendered his body.

The man's stunning rod moved inside Takeyuki's hole.

"Ah—angh!" Takeyuki could no longer think because of the fierce pleasure.

"Takeyuki...Takeyuki—" Ashif's streaming sweat fell onto Takeyuki's back and shoulders.

The part of him Ashif penetrated was incandescent, as if burning in the heart of a fire. A low moan escaped Ashif. *Ah—the raw proof of Ashif's love is flowing into me*, Takeyuki imagined, as an indescribable ecstasy flooded through him and he closed his eyes, Ashif's arms around him.

## *Postscript*

I'm relieved to send off this sixth installment in the "Aristocrat" series without any problems. Thank you so much to everyone who picked up a copy. Did you enjoy yourselves?

This time around I tried adding the desert theme to the usual aristocratic theme. It's my first time writing a desert story. There have been stories before (from other companies) where the main characters are only related to the Middle East because of the setting, but this story plays out on the stage of the Middle East. There's less of the florid atmosphere packed full of palaces and harems here, but the characters were very active and I had a lot of fun writing this.

It was super refreshing to pair the royal snob dom I haven't written in so long with a rebellious sub, which I've almost never written at all. I might get hooked on that pairing.

This is the first time I've teamed up with Ms. Ai Hasukawa doing the drawings for SHY Novels. I'm so grateful for the drawings she did in the middle of her busy schedule. I'm sorry for giving her nothing but trouble.

Now I have an announcement for you.

In fact, this August the lovely Inter-Communications is going to release a drama CD of *The*

*Aristocrat and the Desert Prince*. That's two months from now, but I hope you'll be satisfied with the drama of Takeyuki and Zayid in the world of sound. I'm very excited to hear it, too. Let me know what you think!

I'm aiming for autumn for my next story with SHY Novels. It will be the seventh installment of the "Aristocrat" series. To be honest, this desert story sort of inevitably turned into a shallow story compared to the other "Aristocrat" books, but I'm planning on pushing the "Aristocrat" part to the forefront again next time. I hope you'll pick it up!

We've reached the end of the book, so I want to thank everyone involved in the making of this book.

Thank you so much for joining me here in the postscript.

Love,  
Haruhi Tono