POETRY

I should have been satisfied. It was easy enough work—and far more suited to my nature—but I was unused to confinement and an unchanging environment. And of course one thing hadn’t changed—I was still a slave; the chains attaching the ring on my middle finger to the bracelet on my wrist attested to that.

But life was better. Really, it was. Cataloguing the endless tomes in Tarqin N’Khapha’s library was a significant improvement on being forced to aid in the transaction of unscrupulous deals in Sipha’s caravan. But it was, well … dull. If I could have lost myself in the stories of the Elvar or Elashian poets, if I could have followed the epic heroes in the sagas of the Fjordûnlanders, or ridden the waves with the daring Thalimondan explorers, I might have been more content, but my gift for languages was not to be wasted on such frivolous pursuits, and the head librarian was stern. She’d bought me along with Sipha’s books to make use of me.

The other library staff were pleasant enough, though they tended towards timidity or vacuousness. They performed their tasks, as I did, in silence, and had very little of note to converse about during our one mealtime together. There was little in their lives apart from thick stone walls and leatherbound books, the scorching Caliphani sun, and avoiding a beating. The scribes and binders were not much better, and, being mostly male, generally unapproachable as conversation partners. So it was only my own thoughts that kept me company—chiefly the memories of the other lands I’d travelled to as part of Sipha’s caravan, and the stories I’d picked up along the way.

The driest part of the year passed in a beige stone blur. Then, when rains once again filled Qintiq’s oasis, an opportunity to escape the oppressive sameness came. The head librarian needed reeds for stylus making, and her usual menial-boy had taken a tumble on the stairs. His ankle was badly twisted, and he needed crutches. There was no possibility that he could walk to the far end of the oasis and gather some.

I marshalled my courage. “Excuse me, *Danah*, but I could go. My back is strong and so are my legs. It is not only my head that may be of use to you. The scribes and binders are too important to waste on such work, and the others would not have the strength.”

The *danah* eyed me. “Very well, Samah,” she said, and told me to fetch a carrier.

I did as bid, then, exchanging my house slippers for more sturdy footwear, and pulling my veil atop my hair, stepped out into the courtyard.

The heat of the sun was still mild at this early hour, though the hint of its full strength already snickered in the sharp shadows it cast through the porticos. The library was located in Tarqin N’Khapha’s walled compound, one of four buildings surrounding the central atrium. Making my way to the East Gate, I explained my task to the guards and they waved me through.

The oasis city of Qintiq was typical of Calipha—a spread of beige boxes with deep slits for windows, trying in vain to bring order to the twisted streets. Tarqin N’Khapha’s compound dominated the high-ground of the city, fixed to the rocky hills from whence the oasis’ spring seeped. I made my way through the streets quickly—keeping to the shade whenever possible—and scooted through the marketplace as fast as I dared. I did not want to give the appearance of a runaway, but I longed to enter the wilder parts as soon as I might, and escape the crowded isolation of the city for this more natural kind.

My haste was rewarded. I soon passed the clumps of washers scrubbing away on the stone-carved steps of the bank abutting the city, and made my way at a more leisurely pace along the palm shaded path leading to the reed beds. They were a quarter-league or so away, and I intended to take my time getting there. Mica sparkled in the rocks, and the path meandered with the bank. The rains had brought life to the oasis, and tiny birds flittered in the tangled brush, fussing and worrying as they built nests and harried away intruders. I stopped to watch a pair of blue ones, their iridescent feathers catching my eye.

Other birds darted into the water to fish, emerging triumphant with flapping fingerlings in their beaks. They shook off their wings as they gulped them down. Dragonflies buzzed in great profusion, frogs called from their day-time hides, and the wildflowers that covered the sides of the hills danced with beetle wings. Green was everywhere here, shading me from the brilliant blue sky, as fronds gently arched with their burden of ripening fruit. It was a glorious change from the stifling brown verticals and horizontals of the library.

I spied a flat rock amid a grove of palms and decided to rest, for the sun was gaining strength and I needed to take a little water. As I stoppered the skin again, I was startled to find a pair of eyes looking at me—just eyes. I knew that is what they were, for they blinked. I froze, for a moment certain they belonged to a djinn, but presently the body they fitted in appeared too—that of a sleek fey hunting-cat. Its peaked ears sported long white tufts of hair, and its tawny-blonde fur slicked down its back to a sinuous dark tail, which flicked slightly as it stared at me.

Such a cat could be dangerous, and I knew not what to do. This one had a collar however, so I remained where I was. Perhaps it would leave.

It blinked once more, then rose, padding a few steps down the path, then stopped and looked over its shoulder at me. It seemed to expect me to get up, so I did, and followed it down the path. Every so often it checked to see if I was still following, and when it was satisfied that I was, kept going a little further, till, up ahead, I could hear a man cursing.

I stopped, again unsure, but the hunting-cat stared at me with such an expression of ‘are you coming?’ that I soon found myself following it towards the sounds. It was not long before we came upon the source of the noise, a young tarqin thrashing about near a spineback he’d killed, trying to get a quill out from between his own shoulder blades. Nearby stood his horse, a fine caliphani mare, shy of the spineback, but unwilling to abandon her master. A brace of waterfowl hung behind the saddle—the apparent target of the spineback.

A tarqin could hunt alone if he liked, of course, but it was unusual. There were many in the city of various rank, and a visiting shah could bring quite an entourage, too. Perhaps, like me, this one had wanted a diversion.

I watched him soundlessly a moment, then stepped forward. “May I be of service, Tarqin?” I asked.

He appeared not to have heard me, for his cursing just went on, so I repeated, louder, “May I be of service, Tarqin?”

At this, he turned around. His eyes ranged my slight form—its veil, tunic and flowing trousers—then rested upon my slave-bracelet. “*This* was all the help you could find, Shimash?” he addressed the hunting-cat, and went back to his energetic struggles.

“If I will not do, Tarqin, I can fetch someone from the city,” I offered.

He again hit me with a dismissive glance. “No, I shall manage. By the time you got there it would be done,” he said.

He was perhaps right, but the position of the quill was awkward, and his hands were already streaked with blood from trying to catch it against the barbs. The blood spattered his silks, too, giving him a rather grisly appearance, despite his obvious wealth. As he raged and twisted, his eyebrows gathered low across his brow, and his dark eyes flashed with frustration.

“Be on your way,” he growled. “You surely have an errand to attend to, and I do not wish to be gawked at.”

For a moment I almost did go on, used as I was to obeying orders, but his hunting-cat, Shimash, lowered its chin in such a way as to forbid me, so I said, “I cannot think of leaving you, Tarqin, until I see you are fit to leave yourself.”

He stopped his thrashing and looked at me then—really looked. “What *are* you doing here anyway?” he asked. “It is a strange place for a female slave to be coming alone.”

“I am here to collect reeds for stylus making, Tarqin,” I replied. “The menial-boy took a fall and is on crutches, and the head librarian needed them urgently.”

“You are employed at a library?”

“Yes, Tarqin.”

“Who is its patron?”

“Tarqin N’Khapha.”

“Of the compound on the hill?”

“The very one, Tarqin.”

“Have you ever seen him? Or his son?”

“No, Tarquin,” I answered. “He was absent for the dry. Though I do not know how often he or Tarqin Hashaq normally visit.”

“Not often enough, for the wealth that is contained there. What is your role then?” he pursued.

“I was employed to catalogue the foreign volumes, as I am fluent in many languages.”

“Ah, so she finally found someone then,” he muttered. He looked me over again. “How did you come by such knowledge of languages?”

“I was raised on a caravan, Tarqin,” I replied, not wishing to go into the matter any deeper.

But he pressed. “Trade negotiations?”

I cast down my eyes. “Yes, Tarqin.”

“Of the nefarious variety, I presume.”

I didn’t answer him directly. “If a slave slips and falls, there is no blood.” My voice had more pique in it than I intended, but surprisingly, the tarqin laughed. It was a harsh laugh, bitter almost.

“Do you always speak your mind?” he asked.

I hesitated, but something about the tarqin disarmed me, and I decided to speak the truth. “Not as often as I would like, Tarqin.”

He laughed again. “And doubtless less often than those about you need,” he said. His manner changed. “Are you well-treated?”

“Well enough, Tarqin,” I replied, confused. Why did he care?

“Hmm,” he grunted. “Well, as I said, it’s no use for you to go back to Qintiq, so I shall allow you to be of service here. Have you something to grasp the quill with? You do not mind the blood?”

I slung the thick carrier off my shoulder. “Your blood does not bother me half so much as your fey hunting-cat, Tarqin,” I said, “and I’m sure this will do.”

Wrapping the carrier around the quill, I gave a sharp tug and the quill came free. The tarqin let out an involuntary hiss, but otherwise bore the pain well. Rolling onto his knees, he then finally rose to his full, impressive height and leant against a nearby palm, leaving a bloody handprint behind.

“Have you anything for bandages, Tarqin?” I asked. “I could at least wrap your hands.”

“In my saddlebag,” he said. “The near one. You can manage?”

“I am well used to horses, Tarqin,” I replied, and set about unbuckling the bag.

“Of course you are,” he replied. “Yes, that. Unwrap it.”

The linen he bid me fetch wrapped a small book of poems. While startled, I said nothing, and proceeded to tear the cloth into strips and bind them around his palms.

“You have a gentle touch,” he remarked. “My thanks.”

The frown returned to his brows. “Now, fetch those reeds for your *danah* and hurry back to Qintiq. I shall be able to go on well enough from here.” He called his mare and mounted her with a grimace, a smart of pain flashing across his face as his bandaged hands grasped the reins. Then, with a slight pressure of his blood-spattered legs, the horse headed down the path, Shimash padding by his side.

I watched him go, then, for my part, picked up the carrier and walked on towards the reed-bed and the true purpose of this excursion. The event with the young tarqin had been nothing really, just a trifling incident, an interruption, and yet … it had been something … different. Something *other* than cataloguing through silent days. I had not spoken so much in three moons—and certainly not spoken my mind. No one had been interested in it!

The face that had fired the questions at me was not like the others at the library either. It was strong and chiselled, and it stayed with me as I waded amongst the reeds cutting the stalks—everchanging, like a chameleon, with its heavy black brows that wore so many expressions. It was with me as I dried my legs, put on my shoes, and took up the carrier. And I saw it as I again passed the dead spineback.

When I came a second time to the rock I’d rested on, I sat, dumping my load on the path and taking some water. I lingered longer than necessary, I admit, half hoping that another pair of fey eyes would blink at me, but they didn’t.

All at once I registered the sun, and realised I must be off. The head librarian knew how long this task should take, and I didn’t want to feel her switch for the first time. But as I approached Qintiq I slowed, reluctant to enter its box-lined streets, its perfect verticals and horizontals. I longed for the flash of iridescent feathers, the graceful arch of palm fronds, and the rapid questions of one who showed interest. I quite simply dreaded re-entering those silent halls with their vapid occupants, who would not listen to the events of my day any more than they would my travels with Sipha’s caravan, or the stories I’d collected along the way. All would disappear like smoke when I entered that great monolith.

But I must go in. The guards opened the gate for me and I slipped through, the chains connecting the ring to my slave-bracelet tinkling slightly in mocking imitation of birdcalls. I walked alongside the atrium to the alcove entrance of the library and set down my load.

A pair of fey eyes blinked at me from the shadows.

“Shimash?” I breathed, as the rest of its body appeared and rubbed itself against my legs.

The head librarian appeared soon after, carrying a book. “Take your load to the scribe’s room, Samah, then take this to the main residence. The tarqin wishes a foreign volume read while he rests.”

“Tarqin N’Khapha returned today?”

“Not Tarqin N’Khapha, Tarqin Hashaq. The surgeon has finished with him now.”

“He was injured?”

“Yes, by a spineback. Came in with blood all over him. Now, stop your questioning or you’ll feel my switch.”

I dipped my head and picked up the carrier with a panicked, fluttering heart. When a slave slips and falls, there is no blood. Would the tarqin try to use me as Sipha had? To wrest unfair advantage from diplomats and emissaries? I glanced at the book in the head librarian’s hand.

Tarqin Hashaq wanted a volume of poetry read.