



Lady
In
Black

Farzana Moon

Aviar Press

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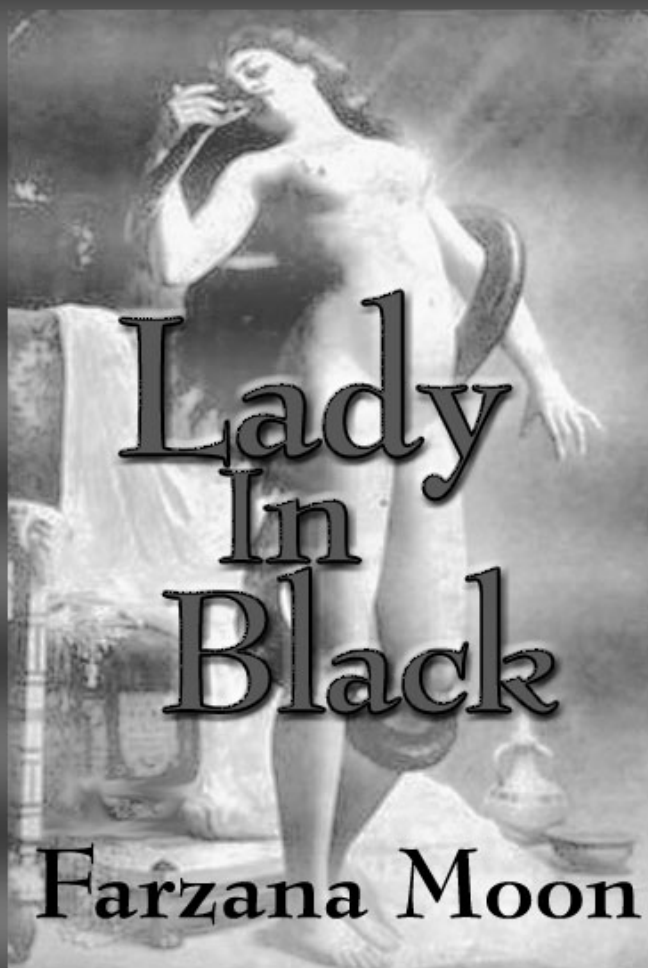
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Chapter One

The cold, blue sky with its morning gold and glory, was flooding the valley of Khanaspur. It could be seen as a sheet of ice and haze from the dining-room window where Dr. Haroon sat enjoying his breakfast. His devoted servant Ali, could be seen looming over the rosewood credenza. Alert and wistful to serve his master at the least inclination of his gesture. Haroon was wistfully aware of his devoted companion, whom he never treated as a servant, but loved and respected as a friend. Right this moment, while attacking his omelet, his thoughts were reaching out to another friend of his, Dr. Latif, who was on a two week leave, visiting his parents in Karachi. Actually, he was feeling lonesome and restless this morning, rather exultant and delirious for some nameless reason, he could neither let go, nor fathom.

Latif was Haroon's childhood friend, their hometown Karachi, and their homeland Hindustan. Both were great friends and both had studied medicine, graduating with honors and hoping for a bright future. Haroon had started working at a hospital in Karachi, while Latif had opted to work in a more congenial climate as of Khanaspur. So, the two friends were separated for almost four years, until Latif had convinced Haroon to move to Khanaspur. The hot city of Karachi, teeming with industry and commerce was forgotten by these friends, and their friendship was strengthened in this haven of a valley perfumed with nature's bounties in beauty and flowers, both wild and intoxicating. And yet, Haroon could not help feeling a subtle change in his friend, a sense of mystery and alienation. And yet again, Latif was gone only a week, and he was not only missing him, but longing to fly to the

parched, seething homeland of yonder memories. One recent epigram of Latif was swelling in his head like a bubble, his handsome features rather pale, and his dark eyes gleaming.

"Virtues are the victims of vices, and both the eternal foes of each other," Haroon gulped his tea. The boyish, mystical face of Latif with all its sincerity and agitation in his voice, etched in his mind like a throb of revelation. 'And yet, they are like the twins in one womb. Together, inseparable! One soul, with ambivalent needs, announcing the dawn of duality in this nightmare of a world,'" he was smiling. This epigram was unspooling like a sanctimonious ocean of unwoven tapestry. 'Vice and virtue! These twins, living and pulsating. Pure and innocent! Knowing the dawn of evil, and beholding the sunset of good. Forever in conformity and eternally at rift, none vanquished and neither one victorious,'" the smile was fading from his eyes, his expression somber and brooding.

"Why am I thinking about Latif? I have a whole army of patients to heal and discipline? Why is this morning so cold and mysterious?" Haroon was savoring his breakfast as well as his ruminations. "True, that the world is on the verge of ruin and devastation. Or just Hindustan? The reek of blood and plunder, I can smell it? Even the scented valleys of Khanaspur are gathering this odor, breathing dissent and corruption, of war and frenzy. Hindustan! this festering wound of diverse faiths. Is it about to split open, and flood this earth with its own abscess of gall and blood? Hindus and Muslims striking each other with the bolts of hatred, malice, bigotry? Or, is it just the British, sowing the seeds of rivalry from the very mud in their soiled hearts? Ambition and hypocrisy, two dangerous cannons in the hands of sovereigns alien and hated! In name, isn't Hindustan already divided, India and Pakistan? Pakistan, the land pure and holy, yet to be born? Would not the holiness be forgotten and desecrated, if gained at the cost of

millions foundering inside the blood-bath of tyranny and madness?" his dark thoughts were impatient and struggling for liberation. "Why should I care for such chaos and confusion in this world, when life is young and brimming with the promise of joy and hope?" his usual sense of optimism was returning as he pushed his plate away. "I love these cool, sunny mornings, Ali. They make me shiver with the pulse of life and challenge," he smiled.

"These hills up here are awesome, Sir, I must admit," Ali hastened to pour another cup of tea for him.

"All splendid and glorious, Ali! This is paradise, paradise," Haroon laughed. His thick, red lips sucking the warmth of tea deliciously. "Do you think, Ali, these hills will be splashed with blood and bullets one of these days?" he asked capriciously.

"The war, if you mean by that, Sir, is imminent, I reckon," Ali confessed sadly. "Before the British leave, they will make sure that Hindus and Muslims cut each other's throats with the poisoned arrows of hatred, if not with swords," he murmured ominously.

"You are a poet and a mystic, Ali! If I had the time, I would be serving you, than to be served," Haroon eased himself up, sipping his tea thoughtfully. "We are all cutthroats, my poet, murderers and sycophants all. In the name of religion, Ali, we would not only kill the so-called infidels, but slit the throats of our own brethren. And remember, we would do it with gloating and with a sense of exultance that we are serving God and exalting the name of Allah. With the exception of a few, like me and Latif...us, loving and harmless ones? Always, stumbling on the path of healing, not hurting. And I must stumble on to the hospital, before I have to fetch excuses for running late," he brushed the crumbs off his gray suit before trooping out of the room.

The pine-valleys slumbering under the gold-dust of morning haze were not lending any peace to Haroon's

thoughts, as he careened his jeep downhill into tortuous paths. The sense of exultance and loneliness inside him was somersaulting on some lands far and alien. His young heart was aching all of a sudden. Throbbing with an abrupt violence, as if it would break into a million fragments to explore peace inside the Heart of its own mysteries. He had not ever felt like this before, and this sensation was making him giddy. A sort of mystery and exhilaration, inside him, all around, above and beyond! The wise, wrinkled face of Ali was unveiling in his mind's sight like a continent familiar and peace-loving. He was exploring this face as he had not ever explored it before, not in this age and time, but in ages past where time could be eternally young, and utterly heedless. A kind, ascetic face with the wisest, kindest of hearts which needed no learning to perceive the maladies of the souls, and that was Ali. While he, Haroon, had to glean knowledge from medical books, only to know the anatomy of the superficial body and flesh. Ali could heal both hearts and souls with his innate wisdom alone, Haroon was thinking, while his own meager learning could bandage only the bruised frames of mankind, destined to suffer the ignominy of age and time.

Time, right this moment, was frozen in timelessness, as Haroon kept driving under some spell of inertia and oblivion. Though he was aware of the saffron fields meandering in and out of the lush vistas like the shuddering oasis. The pines and the cedars could be seen tall and motionless, edged with a profusion of wild flowers swooning under the gold warmth of the sun. He could smell the earth and the perfume of the valleys. The raw, naked fecundity of earth and cosmic holiness! All were holy, mute and awesome, inside the very fabric of his soul and psyche. Something vestal was unfolding its petals of innocence this morning, he could feel it seething in each atom of his silence and awareness. And yet his senses were greeting sadness, following some shadows profane and

ephemeral. The molten gold of the sun was burning inside him, licking the flames of destiny, kindling the fire of ache and loneliness. He was suspended in a vortex of bliss and conflagration. So absorbed was he inside the hush and absurdity of his own contemplations, that he didn't even notice one sharp turn, commanding his jeep to one screaming halt. A fleet of jeeps had materialized on this road like an army of ants.

"What is this? Where am I? Have the British decided to say farewell to this Paradise Lost?" Haroon cranked the gear to 'park', and abandoned himself to rage and impatience.

He had taken a wrong turn, the alien landscape before him was dripping with the cold threat of delay and danger. He could see the shadow of death and mourning inside the very heart of this valley. This was the valley of death, a secluded graveyard, manicured to emerald brilliance, and spruced with daisies and cosmos. The mourners were alighting from their jeeps, forlorn and graceful. Donned in black and white, they were floating toward the neat cemetery in a solemn procession. Reflected in the rearview mirror, Haroon could see a string of jeeps behind him, his despair rising as to being stalled till the funeral ceremonies were over. He wanted to jump out of his jeep and scream at the top of his lungs that he was a doctor and needed to tend his patients, not waste his time in being hemmed in by a horde of mourners. But this wild impulse of his was silenced by an astonishing, bewildering sense of peace and tranquility. Some sort of swoon and sublimity were replacing his rage and impatience. His heart was gathering rills of sadness' again, singing and fluttering to catch the mysteries of nature unseen and unexplored. He was feeling light and giddy, pressed by some inner turmoil to rush out and breathe freshness, of life and death, of the living, dying cycles of hopes and doubts. His youth itself was constricting inside the hands of some powerful destiny,

wrenching out the pain of uncertainty and loneliness. Like a reed, torn out of its muddied pool, he was hurled out of his stationary abode of conflicting thoughts and feelings. He was drifting toward the unknown, caught into a storm of fever and curiosity. What was goading him to follow the mourners, he neither knew, nor wished to know. His heart was pounding, and his former sense of exultation was his companion. The hills and the valleys were dancing in his head, and he was floating on the clouds of magic and mystery. The shadow of pain was with him too, looming and hovering above, not behind and yonder.

In a flash, all fever and madness were gone from him. Rapt and motionless, he was impaled alive on the very blades of grass upon which his feet had come to a sudden halt. Who had crucified him thus, only his heart could expound in a tremor of agony. A miracle sublime! A revelation supreme! The arrow of cupid had stung his heart to the most exquisite of agonies. The Lady in Black with white rose of a face, and sparkling eyes had chained him to the longings of the insane and the accursed.

Chapter Two

"White Truth, sweetest of miracles! An exquisite bloom, with all the purity of a white lily..." a shower of pain-loving meteors were splitting Haroon's head, as he stood there gazing, gazing.

Transported to another world of pain, bliss, illusion, Haroon didn't even know where he was. If this cemetery was filled with houris where the rivers of wine, milk and honey abound, he would have thought he was in paradise, but as it was his heart was roasting inside the fires of hell. Besides, the litany of the mullah was hammering close by, jolting him to the awareness of the damned. His very gaze was burning, devouring, stripping naked the ivory goddess in black silks. The time, for him, was shot out of the atavistic boundaries of timelessness. Churning and expanding. Gathering the pools of falling stars from the very voids in space and nothingness. He was seeing things beyond the veils of sense and sanity, forms and objects whirling inside his head in a mad, mad dance of reality and illusion. A Moorish princess, some Persian jewel in the harem of a king, or a pagan goddess exiled from the very clouds in heaven, Haroon was smitten by the assault of these phantasmagoric visions, as he kept gazing at the Lady in Black. All the fires were escaping his gaze as he drew closer, rapt, crushed, hypnotized. The litany of the mullah was rising, spluttering. A gong of reproof and recrimination, he was thinking, against the sublimity of his rapture and delirium. A Mahogany bier garlanded with roses, was being lowered into the raw, gaping earth, Haroon could see its descent and effacement, but nothing could stand in his way to reach the constellation of his

insanity. The Lady in Black, probably feeling the fire of his intensity, caught and held his gaze in the sparkling blue oceans of her own curiosity and sadness.

Haroon was earthed to the spot, as if stung by the chills and blasts of cold, whipping hurricanes from the North Pole. Had he been a pillar of salt implanted there since centuries of bondage, this gaze alone would have melted him to obscurity and freedom. But as it was, the hurricane of fire and chill inside him was meeting the most beautiful and saddest of eyes he had not ever seen before. His body was frozen solid, but his heart was melting into the rivulets of utter, absolute bliss and poignancy. Bliss! in beholding such a miracle supreme, and a stab of poignancy in knowing the depth of this beauty's sadness. So besotted was his stare and absorption, that the other mourners had begun to watch him with wild, glittering eyes. He himself was drowning and foundering inside the murky deeps of his soul and psyche with such intense abandon, that he knew not himself, only the Lady in Black. Such utter calm, chaos had taken hold of him, that he didn't even recognize the voice of his friend, though it hit him like a blow on the head. Still, he thought, he was dreaming, for Latif was in Karachi, and could not have materialized in this cemetery where he himself was not supposed to be.

"Hello, Haroon! Are you alive?" Latif waved his hand before his face, peering at him with sad, accusing eyes.

"How did you get here? Am I seeing ghosts?" Haroon snapped with a sudden dint of impatience.

"I arrived this morning, you simpleton!" it was Latif's turn to be cross and impatient. "Just in time to attend the funeral of my friend."

"A friend?" was Haroon's appalled murmur of a query.

"You wouldn't understand," Latif murmured enigmatically.

"You bet, I won't! A friend you never mentioned?" Haroon was swept asunder by an abrupt sense of giddiness.

"I knew you wouldn't," Latif murmured again, half desperately, half sarcastically. "It seems you have fallen off a cliff, landing here in some sort of relief and delirium? I was gone only one week, and it looks like...are you in love?" his gaze was suddenly bright and piercing.

"I, in love! I think...I am dying..." Haroon smothered a delirious giggle. His heart was caught in the pincers of agony, and the noose of longings tightening around his thoughts. "Yes, only a week? Were you not supposed to stay there till another? What made you abandon that medical conference, so very congenial to your sense of ideation and experiment?" his own gaze was now sharp and feverish.

"Priorities goad one to propriety, and propriety hurls one into the furnace of obligations. Quite cumbersome evils, both of them, and very unpleasant ones, I must say," Latif was his usual self, clinging to his self-made parables. "Gloom and mourning tend to call one to their bosoms with the urgency of fates, while mundane or delightful tasks must wait and suffer?" a shadow of profound sadness swept over his honeyed complexion as he ruminated aloud. "You, attending this funeral, what strange coincidence! How long have you known Tanwir, friends are the last ones to know?"

"Who is Tanwir, and whose funeral I am attending? You are talking to a stranger, not to a friend. I don't even know why I am here?" Haroon breathed unconvincingly. The anguish in his heart knowing the reason of this coincidence, and his gaze returning to the Lady in Black. "By some happy, or unfortunate chance, I missed that devious turn, and landed here, hemmed in by this funeral procession."

"I knew all along that fates were leering at my back when I espied you standing here, my friend," Latif murmured under his breath. "Come, meet the beautiful widow, bereaved and bereaving," his hazel eyes were

kindling to an enigmatic gleam, as he almost dragged Haroon toward the Lady in Black.

"Pleased to meet you, Dr. Haroon," Balzeeb murmured gently after being introduced by Latif. A shaft of sunlight was changing the glittering blue in her eyes from turquoise to sapphire.

"I cannot express my joy..." Haroon stood there sinking into the mire of his own misery and mortification. The fire of ardor in his eyes and the blotches of red on his cheeks making him look like some callow youth, wading through the tortures of hell. "Pardon...I mean...what I meant to say...I am truly...please accept my condolences. Your grief...this terrible loss..." his words were choked, his breath suspended.

"Very kind and thoughtful of you, Doctor! One needs friends in times such as these," Balzeeb intoned calmly as if she had not noticed any incongruity in Haroon's speech or manner. Her dream-boat eyes were turning to Latif, speaking volumes even before she spoke. "So sweet of you, Latif, to get here on time. I didn't think you could make it. Hope, you would visit soon. What a nightmare! Loss and grief have made a permanent abode in my house. It's not home, where silence frightens me, and where shadows of death never leave..." her voice wrapped in silken sheets of sorrow, appeared to be rustling than grieving. "Of course, you both should come, evenings perhaps, they tend to be sadder than the days," she let her sparkling gaze caress both with a farewell note.

"Of course, we would, dear Princess! You will never find us neglectful," Latif sang rather fervently. "My evenings will be devoted to you, entirely. Good-bye for now," he turned abruptly, urging Haroon with his gaze alone to follow him.

The string of jeeps was broken, leaving room for a careening exit, as Latif and Haroon returned to the narrow path of a parking space. Both were quiet, both feverish and

flushed in the faces. Haroon's heart was one ocean turbulent, swelling and expanding. Inside the very vacuum of its turbulence, it was affixing a portrait large and idolatrous. The face was that of Balzeeb, and her beauty the light of the heavens.

"What a fool I am!" lamented Haroon, hurrying to keep pace with Latif.

"An utter dolt, I must add," admitted Latif, intent on reaching his jeep and not looking back. "Somehow, I had the impression that your speech and manner were refined and eloquent. That impression is not valid anymore. You are on the verge of becoming a dull, mindless specimen of human folly under the microscopic scrutiny of others. Did you notice all those wild, gloating stares, perhaps not? As a good friend, Haroon, it's my duty to warn you, do not ever see Balzeeb again. Forget that face with beautiful eyes, forget her!" he flashed a singeing appeal at Haroon before getting into his own jeep, and fishing for keys.

"Forget her!" Haroon stood there stunned for a moment, his heart lurching and missing a few beats. "Everything looks so strange this morning. You, most of all. You have never talked like this before. Your parables I can understand as I am accustomed to them. But this dry, brittle mockery, where does this come from? I have been here in Khanaspur for quite a while now, a few months, so to speak...and you never even once mentioned the name of Balzeeb to me, or of your friendship with her and her...Oh, what am I saying? I know, my heart is stricken. I want to know all about her...all about you too...that long gap of separation between us, our friendship? What was her husband like? I can't stop thinking about her, or..."

"Just like any other cuckold bruised by the shafts of Beauty!" Latif scoffed, turning the ignition on impatiently. "A doltish heathen much like us who consider themselves invulnerable? Go, crank your jeep to action, Haroon. If we don't leave this accursed abode of the dead, our patients

would be cursing us and wishing us dead. We will talk about this over lunch, that is if you buy," he let the wheels spin before scudding away in a cloud of smoke and roar.

Haroon plodded toward his own jeep in some stupor of pain and misery. But inside his body were fire and storm. The bolts of agony and the arrows of lightning, all shooting inside him in one shower of a whirlwind. His jeep too was whirling...the valleys mad and meandering, the vistas all giddy and frolicking. A part of him was left behind in that cemetery, sobbing and smoldering in Love. Weeping and pleading with Beauty to let him even kiss the hem of her silks. The familiar, nameless ache which he had felt in his heart early this morning, was returning with all the caprice of the stray, billowing clouds. The hills and the mountains too were spangled by the plume-like islands of clouds all of a sudden. The sunshine was gone. The Face of Light concealed somewhere against the thick veil of gray, pregnant Darkness.

"Balzeeb, Balzeeb," the cries of despair were stifled inside Haroon's heart. The revelation of pain, stinging and surging. His very soul was throbbing and constricting, as if it had seen the Powers of Light and Darkness for the first time in its brief flash of oblivion and awareness. The Forces of Joy and Unhappiness! His very Being was caught into a vortex of delirium. Something inside him was unfolding, strange and unfathomable. He could hear the voice of his psyche, pulsating to embrace love, beauty, sunshine in its cold, eager embrace. One bloom of a face with glorious, blue eyes was swimming in his heart, radiant and illumined. Suddenly, the Sun was a glazed mirror, shedding away the gray mists, and smiling at the indigo clouds which could not help pilfer warmth out of its own glowing face. A sense of awe and fear were seething in Haroon's awareness. He could see the face of Balzeeb etched everywhere as far as his gaze could reach, from deep ravines to the fragrant hills spiraling aloft to kiss the

cool mists. The sparkle in sunshine, the saffron fields, the mingling of colors in his soul, all were painting one portrait, that of loveliness, Balzeeb!

Once, seated inside the camphorated chill of his office, receiving patient after patient, Haroon's thoughts were bubbling into a volcano of hot, simmering absurdities. Some sort of dull pain and mute misery were exploding inside him in fountains of tears and laughter. This pain and misery had no name, like the tender saplings they were intertwined, intoxicated by their own scent of love and renewal. They were like the newborn twins, knowing their hour of separation, and longing to explore the mystery of passions stark and unutterable. Some sort of power and exaltation were surging inside the very rivulets of his veins, something warm and swollen, like the sense of invulnerability. A whiff of pride somewhere inside him was fanning more absurdities to yawning and awakening. The smiling disdain, bright and wide-eyed, was uncurling its lips. Disdain! for the vulgar and the callow, who couldn't explore the mysteries in their souls ravished by a love supreme? He was smiling to himself, his thoughts wicked and mutinous. The breeze of wild joy was tearing his sanity into shreds, gathering the hurricanes violent and demented. The feverish, sniffling, whimpering patients were the mortals weak and pitiful before his mighty sense of love and exaltation. And yet his might knew no malice, but mercy? He could, by the sheer power of his love, could heal the ailments of the suffered and the suffering, in body or soul?

"Only if they have faith in love!" Haroon's giddy thoughts could be heard screaming through his stethoscope. "But they have faith only in swallowing pills and distasteful potions. Their bodies longing to be punctured with needles, and then they succumb to the sighs of relief and ecstasy! This inexpiable curse of ignorance...their thoughts and ambitions poisoning their bodies and corrupting their

souls! And to garnish such corruptions, no concept of wholesome food or sanitation."

With such a sense of corrupt knowledge tainting his own soul, Haroon was on his daily rounds, drifting from ward to ward in some stupor of giddy exhilaration. Examining the last patient with the prognosis of acute hepatitis, he was on his way to the cafeteria. The hospital cafeteria with curtain-less windows, reflecting the pale haze of the early afternoon, was pilfering his sense of power and invulnerability. His gaze was wandering in search of Latif, though the image of Balzeeb could be seen trembling even inside the thin fabric of air which he could clearly see in his mind's vision. The cafeteria was rather deserted, a few nurses and doctors scattered here and there on separate tables. Dr. Javed, a friend of both Latif and Haroon, was seated all by himself on a table by the window, unnoticed by Haroon. Holding a tray laden with fruit, coffee and a sandwich, Haroon's gaze was wandering again, hoping to see Latif, while dallying to select a table for himself. He was still demurring when Javed's voice lured him toward the window, where chill and haze seemed to be hovering close by.

"Have you lost something, Haroon? Or, are you looking for some inconsiderate prig who has lost all sense of time and temerity?" Javed beamed with a rush of hilarity. " I would invite you to join me, but I am done with this revolting meal, labeled as wholesome lunch for us horde of nurses and doctors. I better get out of this unhealthy dungeon before my own health suffers," he drained his coffee with a look of distaste scrawled all over his face.

"May I sit, even if you are dying to escape," Haroon contrived a smile. He set his tray on the table slowly, and lowered himself across from his friend thoughtfully.

"I can't shut the door to your face, Haroon, this is not my home!" Javed laughed genially. "How can one endure

to sit in this place and not suffer indigestion...so squalid and so shamelessly bare and unkempt? Why can't we suggest some improvements here? Sandwiches are fine, but rice and mutton, uncooked, un-garnished, deplorable!"

"If you keep your bushy eyebrows lacquered, and not lick the grease out of these delectable dishes, you will never suffer any qualms about health or indigestion," teased Haroon, eyeing his plates licked clean of food.

"This stuff is unhealthy, I tell you, Haroon. One doesn't have to be a doctor to come to this conclusion!" was Javed's heedless exclamation. "Of course, how would you know? To your genuinely besotted mind, everything is pure and noble. You have such an earnest expression...I wonder, behind that calm visage, lurk deceit, wickedness, even mendacity? Latif has the same expression too, but I know he is conceited! Here, comes the fair deceiver himself!" he declared, noticing Latif armed with a smile and a tray, both loaded with unhealthy reek of disdain and gluttony.

"Are you still counting my virtues of conceit and deception?" Latif banged his tray on the table, hurling himself beside Haroon.

"Not more conceited than Haroon! and I leave you both conceited fellows to your own wicked schemes," Javed leaped to his feet, but stood there glowering.

"Don't pay any attention to a word he says, Latif," Haroon laughed. "A moment ago he was praising us for looking earnest?"

"He is a cynic, Haroon!" Latif ignored Javed's glowering intensity, turning his attention to Haroon. "Though cynics are less dull than the skeptics."

"And conceit much interesting than deception," retorted Javed, cantering away.

"You were supposed to buy me lunch, or was I?" Latif attacked his lunch ravenously. "Other people's pain and suffering are our bread and butter, don't you agree? We

wish them ill and miserable, so that we could stay healthy and prosperous? Isn't it true in all fields of labor in living? We feed our bellies from the pains of each others, and nurture a sense of goodwill, much like the parasites, though not being aware of it?" his dark eyes were spilling mirth and sunshine.

"Leave your profundities to simmer for the time being, Latif!" Haroon murmured with a sudden impatience. "I was looking for you to buy you lunch and to..."

"To talk about Balzeeb, I am sure," Latif snatched the pause, giggling to himself. "Balzeeb! doesn't the name itself sound sweet, delicious?" he resumed his eating as if he had not even interrupted.

"You are in love with her. Are you not?" the very pang of misery smoldered in Haroon's voice.

"Yes and no," was Latif's calm and laconic response.

"How do you mean?" Haroon's eyes were burning with the tinge of jealousy and bewilderment.

"One can fall hopelessly in love and still not love enough in fear of getting hurt. Or, insanely frightened to love, though in love madly and incurably. Love and fear, like joy and pain, entwined eternally into the arms of a Mystery, and inseparable always inside the waters of the Unknown," Latif breathed mystically.

"Parables again! How I deplore them anymore? Won't you tell me about Balzeeb?" was Haroon's desperate appeal.

"Balzeeb! she too is veiled in mysteries. The tale of her life lengthy and quite intriguing. Can't be summed up in a few words, and not especially in this cafeteria," Latif's tone was sad and ominous. "Invite me to dinner and I will tell you all. Ali's cooking will unclog my brain as well as my tongue."

"You are in love, no doubt! She might be heartbroken now, but would welcome courtship soon, I assure you. Get to work right away before she marries someone else,"

Haroon intoned in some sort of painful delirium. Heedless to what Latif had said.

"And die?" Latif shot a bolt of lightning with an enigmatic smile.

"Die? Is her beauty poisonous? Did she kill her husband? How did her husband die?" Haroon's delirium alone was raising mad cries.

"He died, as all few privileged die, happily and peacefully, in sleep," Latif murmured low, springing to his feet as if stung. "Though uninvited, I would see you at dinner. Ali's good cooking would welcome me, if not you," he scurried away without meeting Haroon's gaze.

"If you were not so deplorably proud and priggish, you could dine with me every evening," was Haroon's snide retort.

This citron evening with violet clouds was some sort of a mournful revelation for Haroon as he returned home from the hospital. Ali's presence could be felt only from the clatter of pots and pans in the kitchen, and he flung himself upon the couch in some sort of stupor and fatigue. Though his heart was kindled with the flames of hope and hopelessness. Hope! in winning Balzeeb's love, and his hopelessness in not even trying to win such love since Latif himself was the rival and suitor both. To Haroon, childhood friendship was holy and precious, and he could not destroy this sacred bond by competing even for the most sacrosanct prize he would ever wish to possess. Even if his body was consumed by the fires of longings, he would not move a muscle to seek the Love of his Life, Haroon had vowed to himself this very afternoon. And yet he could think of no one else but Balzeeb, the newborn babe of Love inside his heart, weeping, shuddering, inconsolable. Sweet and tender, fragrant and bloom-like, the face of Balzeeb could not be effaced from the window of his mind. Pain and frenzy were his companions under the shutters of his eyes as he closed them, the goddess of

Love and Beauty looming above him, ethereal and impelling.

"Hope! Only if I have even one grain of hope...to possess Balzeeb, all this despair and anguish would be reduced to cinders..." Haroon opened his eyes. His gaze wandering slowly, as if he has seen this haze for the first time. Illusion was in the air and everywhere, only Balzeeb was the Reality, vestal and unwedded, not ever deflowered by any mortal passions, but by the very wills of the gods in heavens who had permitted this Miracle Sublime to walk on the face of this earth. He himself was communing with the immortal gods when the mortal voice of Ali reached his awareness.

"How tired you look, Sir? Let me fix you a cup of tea," Ali edged closer, his look warm and solicitous.

"No, Ali. Coffee is still boiling in my veins, and I must not dilute it with tea," Haroon elicited a smile. "Just feeling...I don't know what...have never felt like this before? Sort of empty, a little lonesome," the sherry gleam in his eyes was molten gold.

"You need a wife, Sir!" declared Ali, puffing on his little hookah which he carried everywhere.

"Perhaps?" Haroon ruminated staunchly. "Let me have a puff or two on your beloved hookah, Ali," he pleaded childlike.

"No, Sir, no! This will be too strong for you, the water-pipe is reeking of old tobacco. I will fetch you your cigarettes and today's mail," Ali hastened toward the escritoire in utmost haste. "No bills today, Sir, just this one letter, from your mother, if I am not mistaken," he murmured over his shoulders. Snatching the letter and the cigarettes, he returned promptly.

Haroon lit a cigarette, watching Ali with a quiet intensity. His gaze was missing his servant's dark eyes and the swarthy features; instead, contemplating his brodered vest and white, starched turban. He sat there making

smoke rings and tossing the letter aside, leaned farther back against the couch. His eyes appeared to be speaking volumes, but no sound issued forth from his lips. Ali was not puffing on his hookah anymore, his own look warm and searching.

"Aren't you going to read your mother's letter, Sir?" Ali murmured a low query without sounding intrusive.

"Nothing precious or interesting in a letter from one's own mother, and nothing urgent which can't wait perusing," Haroon smiled, the sherry gleam in his eyes kindled to mischief. "She is always goading me to marry some great beauty. Such praises and compliments heaped on some Unknown, who could be the perfect bride for me, and I the most fortunate of bridegrooms? I know all her plans and schemes, yet I humor her at times, and you know that Ali, don't you? How a man of intellect can marry some beautiful stranger, is beyond me! Though I do pity the girls who are coaxed to marry the brutes, much like my own self?" he laughed, now light-hearted gaiety escaping his pain-mirth.

"You are a young, handsome doctor, Sir, and any girl would consider herself fortunate to be your wife," Ali's comment was more of a fatherly reproof than a compliment. He piloted toward the bay window and sank into the rocker.

"How come you never married, Ali, or did you?" Haroon asked, appalled by his own sense of ignorance in not being close to his old and dear servant.

"I was married, Sir," Ali puffed fury and wisdom as was his wont when provoked by Haroon. "Poor girl, she died young. I could never forget her face, still can't. I loved her at first sight, and can't love another till my dying day. I didn't see my wife till we were married, and we both fell in love with each other on our wedding night. Such joy and love...unfortunately, death took her away from me," he stopped as if choked with emotions.

"Love is painful, isn't it Ali? Its wounds never heal, its loss cankerous and unfestering," was Haroon's sympathetic consolation. And yet his young heart could not comprehend wasting its passions over some precious loss buried under mounds of dust ages hence. "Why didn't you marry another, Ali? A man's heart is big enough to love more than one woman," stars of mischief were gathering in his eyes once again. "You could have married four, you know, and all at once too, as sanctioned by Prophet Muhammad. What an advantage, if one of your wives died, you would be left with three, and if two more died, you would have at least one, who would have taken care of you in your old age. Like a true Muslim, you would have lived happily?" he teased with a perfect knowledge of self-gloating that he had provoked him enough for the taste of a delicious sermon.

"I am not educated, Sir, but since I love reading, I know enough about lies and distortion, not only in Islam, but in other religions too," Ali spewed forth with a fervor akin to lashing. "Medical books alone are not healthy for young minds, Sir. Have you ever given a thought to this, Sir, that polygamy was practiced by pagan Arabs? Prophet Muhammad was only trying to save them from the sins of lust and adultery when he permitted them four wives. Knowing that if only one was allowed, they would grow mad and defiant and turn away from Islam. But do the Muslims heed that injunction, Sir, which says, 'A man may marry up to four wives, provided he treat them all with equal justice?'" he sat there spent, puffing on his hookah furiously.

"It would be a miracle if any man could learn to love one woman alone, truly and perfectly, that is!" a volley of delirious mirth escaped Haroon's lips. "To love four equally and justly, as you say, Ali, is beyond the power of any man. And yet, I don't understand you, Ali, polygamy is the Law of Islam, you could have married in perfect faith

just for the name of religion," he goaded with rising mirth and mischief.

"I am not as stupid as you think me to be, Sir!" protested Ali with a grand vehemence. "I didn't go to college to learn all the clever stuff, but I know how mullahs distort everything they can lay their hands on. It's just common sense, Sir, common sense! You as well as any reasonable man knows that polygamy was permitted, not recommended. Simply, Sir, as Prophet Muhammad knew how men are, you know what I mean..." he ceased to speak. Becoming aware of being goaded into fury by his master's wonted mischief.

"You are wiser than many of us fools, Ali," Haroon began genially. "The lusts, greed and passions of men, you know too well. Not to mention the depraved souls, searching for comfort in distortion, and tainting the name of religion. When was the last time you were goaded into fury by my sense of levity and absurdity? Oh, yes, when you talked about morals, morality and drinking, concerning Islam, Christianity, Judaism! Is there any law which forbids us from eating in excess, yet gluttony is harmful...the gist of what you had poured out? That reminds me, Ali, Latif has invited himself for dinner again," he stretched out his arms behind his head in a tight knot as if trying to remember more.

"Young men, especially doctors, are so forgetful, Sir," Ali Scrambled to his feet, mild reproof shining in his eyes.

"Sorry, Ali," Haroon murmured contritely. Leaping to his feet with a sudden alacrity. "I guess, I will take a walk and get back before the dinner is ready!" he bolted for the door.

"You better be back, Sir! You know how I have the habit of grumbling, if I have to reheat the dinner? Besides, it doesn't taste good that way," Ali appeared to grumble, already.

"I don't mind eating it cold, Ali, but you always insist on warming it for me," Haroon teased, vanishing behind the door in quick strides.

"Don't forget to read your mother's letter, Sir," Ali admonished with the indulgence of a father, before the door was swung closed after him.

Chapter Three

The wild, gnarled valleys with mysterious contours had claimed Haroon as their lonesome guest most cherished. He knew these valleys intimately. They spoke to him in tongues of silence, and could gather their murmurs of greetings with a joy akin to bliss. These valleys were steep and tortuous, rolling down in voluptuous abandon, not far from where he lived, but he knew each fabric of their caprice and intimacy as if this was his own sweet, mysterious world, not to be shared by anyone. Promenading under the thick clouds of cedars, the thought of Ali and dinner were forgotten. Only the scent of pine and emerald glow were seething in his awareness. Suddenly, he could feel another presence beside him, as he sought the familiar trails, serpentine and meandering. Yes, this presence was wafting the sweetest of scents, the perfume of youth and beauty. Balzeeb was with him?

‘Balzeeb, Balzeeb,’ a small voice in Haroon's psyche was repeating this name in a bliss supreme. He was not alone, his solitude was splintered. The distant murmur of a cataract was seething into his awareness. The reeds and the rushes were telling him the magic and the mystery of the unknown. The saffron blooms mired in tall grass were wafting a subtle aroma, which he dared not inhale, lest he feel drunk and giddy. He had seen saffron fields during one of his excursions, the scent so overpowering, that he had almost collapsed, as if opiate and intoxicated. But here in this valley, as the saffron were few and scattered, he was in no danger of being drugged. Another person was intruding his solitude, and that was his old servant, Ali.

‘How passionate Ali must have been...now living like a monk!’ Haroon's thoughts were vague and seething. ‘Ali,

loving only One...a sage, an ascetic, for sure? The light in his eyes, it can calm the bitter winds to a rustling surrender. His wisdom, his tenderness, the music of his perception...he didn't have to go to college for that, and yet, he seems to have the power to melt the mountains to tears and shame...' his thoughts were yawning to a sickness of the heart and soul.

Balzeeb was everywhere in these glens and valleys, within him, without him! Inhaling the scent of the pine and the fecund earth along with him, much like his own breathing, so subtle, so inexpressible. Yet, agony and anguish were simmering inside him. Fever and sweetness too! And the bitter, bitter knowledge that another man had possessed her by the very virtue of his matrimonial need and longing. One ache of a longing was awakening inside him like the uncoiling of a serpent, and he was overwhelmed by this sudden assault.

'Had Ali's heart ever thundered with such pain and frenzy?' Haroon's thoughts were groping for a refuge where they could find a link to pain in someone else's loss and grief. 'Did he ever feel the violence of such anguish which could consume any man with madness? Did he suffer the agonies of the heart and soul? Was he ever possessed by the fires of jealousy and hopelessness? Were fear and doubt ever his companions, splintering his joys...' the splintering of thoughts inside his head were gathering clouds dismal and threatening.

Haroon's very soul was smoldering in the fever of desire and hopelessness, as he swung around to trace the path of his pain and loneliness. His feet were hurrying home, and his mind following the shadow of one dream unattainable. Balzeeb was this flower of a dream, floating ahead, wild and pristine. He was chasing that Lovely Flower of a dream in the maze of glens and valleys. Even the pines were murmuring songs, and the streams singing lovelorn. The blades of grass and the ermine lilies

swooning in riot and glee. The hush was broken, and the laughter was in the air, even the lichens could be heard whispering to the polished rocks some wild secrets. His own soul was a babel of mutiny and insurrection, seething with passion and yearning. His senses were yielding to the sweet mutiny in Desire. He wanted to hold and absorb Balzeeb into the very fabric of his Being, but she was fleeing. The Flower Dream, dissolving, dissolving! His senses were welcoming the pangs of thirst and hunger, these pangs both carnal and physical, which he knew would welcome no surfeit. The pine-valleys behind him were throbbing with the gluttony to love and living, and he was leaving them to their own caprice in his haste to chase his Dream down to the warm hearth in his home. The air was heaving cold sighs, and the finches practicing a litany in lullabies. In the west, the indigo clouds and crimson streaks were painting a mournful dusk, but Haroon's thoughts strewn in amorous knots were taking a sightless journey on the path to desolation.

"Sorry," murmured Haroon to Latif's back, as soon as he straggled into the living-room. "Lost track of time. Sunsets are so very deceiving, lasting a life-time when one is not in a hurry, and fading in a minute when one is running late," he added, watching Latif turn around slowly and thoughtfully.

"Wrong of me to think that to arrive late is the sole privilege of the guests alone. Wrong again, my thinking that is, that the hosts must stay home!" was Latif's caustic comment, laced with the poison of a smile.

"I told you, sir, he would wave farewell to the sunset before he got home," Ali flounced into the room, commenting to Latif alone. His wrinkled features flowered into a bright smile, as he tuned to face Haroon. "The kitchen will be closed in a few minutes, sir, if you do not hurry," he rather commanded than informed, and fled back into the kitchen.

"Don't mind Ali, " Haroon urged Latif toward the dining-room. "His manner as well as his prudence baffle me. And your dry wit, it unnerves me? At least, Ali has integrity of spirit and character, and you...well, always foundering inside the pools of platitudes," he held the chair for his friend to be seated, donning a cheerful smile. "Well, did you enjoy your visit in Karachi? Like a good host, I must move from amenities to winsome topics of conversation. Though, how can one enjoy anything in that city reeking with greed and clamor, is beyond me?" he sank into a chair opposite Latif. The mahogany table between them a large bridge covered with white damask.

"Fairly pleasant, considering the reek and the noise!" murmured Latif, fixing his gaze to the chandelier as if counting each crystal in droplets of light.

"From your expression, I gather, that you do not wish to talk about Balzeeb!" cried Haroon in an abrupt burst of frenzy. His own gaze sweeping over the hearth, and then tearing the gold tassels on the drapes to shreds.

"How can any sensible man talk about beautiful ladies, when hunger is gnawing at his stomach?" Latif quipped evasively.

"I will not ever forget that face, Latif, not ever!" Haroon declared heedlessly. "That small, lovely face! And that pagan veil...her exquisite eyes...remind me of some mythical portrait painted by a heathen artist?" fever and longing were burning in his very eyes.

"She may be some heathen princess, who knows? She is a Gnostic, if not pagan...*revere all gods*, I have heard her say." was Latif's brief and enigmatic response.

"Oh, how I want to know everything about her..." Haroon shuddered inwardly at the fury of his own passion, and was quiet.

"Her beauty acts much like hemlock, my friend, no antidote..." Latif's unfinished response was suspended in the air like a warning.

"More lethal than her beauty is the mystery surrounding her, I presume? Though I long to taste the poison of her beauty...to let it course into my blood, to feel its corruption in my soul." Haroon gasped, as if already poisoned.

"If I were you I would abandon the leering fates to their own jests, and not tempt misfortunes to pierce me with the poisoned arrows of love or beauty," Latif breathed ominously, spying Ali with a tray laden with steaming dishes. "Pour some sense into the head of your master, Ali, he is feeding his famished guest with the morsels of curiosity," he intoned with a sudden brightness.

"His moods and vagaries, sir, I have not been able to tame all these years," Ali borrowed Haroon's own platitudes, not in the least discomfited by the accusing gaze of his master. "This mutton curry is my specialty. My pea pilaf with shami kabobs, you can't find such delicacy in the whole wide world," he emptied the tray and hurried to leave.

"You must sit down with us, Ali, and enjoy your own homemade masterpieces," Haroon shot a command, his sherry eyes brimming with fire and impatience.

"I will enjoy more, if I ate in the kitchen, sir," Ali dared not meet Haroon's gaze.

"A table set for two? Didn't I tell you that Latif was coming? You eat with me every day here in the dining-room, why make an exception when my friends are here? And Latif enjoys your food as well as your conversation, isn't that true?" Haroon concluded with one hopeless gesture.

"True, sir, but you know how I feel...besides, you have not seen each other for a whole week...and young people need time to themselves..." Ali recited as usual with his wonted sense of pride and propriety.

"No great secrets here, Ali, and no delightful gossip either, which you would like to carry to your neighbors on a silver tray! I know, don't forget to puff on your hookah

while enjoying your lonely meal," Haroon's eyes were lit up with mirth and reproof.

"I guess, this uninvited guest is the cause of all this discord...I should get accustomed to this by now! Shouldn't I, Ali?" Latif's bantering tone was grazing Ali's awareness.

"You are a fine gentleman, more like a family, sir, not a guest," protested Ali. "Known you since you were a child. Comely and mischievous, as I remember," he smiled timidly. "But, as for eating alone, I like to puff on my hookah as Haroon knows," he almost fled, vanishing behind the swinging doors.

"Quite abnormal, Haroon, this sentimental attachment of yours, and with an old servant too!" Latif whispered, heaping his plate with rice and mutton curry.

"He is my friend, not a servant," Haroon murmured under his breath. "In my parents' home, I couldn't make him sit with me, and now I have the authority to do so, because I always wanted it this way. The fruits of being independent, and earning one's own bread with the sweat of one's brains? Ali has impeccable table manners, and he is much more interesting than one pious prune of a character who may not be even aware of his own vulgarity and ignorance," he attacked his food with much appetite.

"Thank you for the compliment, if I am one of those privileged ones?" Latif elicited one rueful smile. "Though, I am aware only of my virtues, gluttony and indolence, the two very best! And piety sits not near me like a hated shadow," his hazel eyes were spilling wit and mirth.

"You are not one of them, unfortunately," Haroon seemed to be breathing fury, more so to deflect the storm within, than to avoid the hurricane without. "The reek of vainglory and self-righteousness, can't you smell that when you meet a horde of so-called civilized men? How base and doltish their minds, how corrupt and malefic their hearts? This is our fate, our destiny, to breathe this reek, to live with such men! And yet, I met my fate face-to-face,

this morning? This fate supreme, and I its will-less slave, prostrating before it in abject surrender. Will-less and sightlessly I followed my fate, knowing neither my own self, nor the designs of nature hurling me toward some stark destination. Balzeeb! the magic and miracle of my fate...such beautiful surrender, where will it lead me? Oh, who is she? What is she? Where did she come from? Why don't you tell me? I want to know all! Even some hideous truth becomes dearer than a lie unuttered," he concluded with a feverish thoughtlessness.

"Our follies rest easy on the shoulders of fate!" Latif's tone was trilling with the lilt of a presage. "How happy we would be if we could burden fate with the weight of our follies. No misfortunes averted, but fortunes gained with the ransom of Blame? How fortunate it would be if I could convince us both to believe in fate, and to let it humor us with its blind whip of absurdities or adversities. Only one warning escapes such levity, Haroon, guard yourself against ill fate. Balzeeb fetters her husbands to the shackles of doom and glory in death..." he almost bit his lip, as if he had desecrated the shrine of his own love and torment.

"How gladly would I wear those shackles, if I could but hope for one grain of love from the bounties of her beauty!" Haroon exclaimed with a gallant heedlessness. "Oh, do talk about her...about her youth, about her family, even about her husband...I am dying to know everything about her..." his thoughts were choked by the fever of passion and curiosity.

"If I did...talk about Balzeeb, that is, you would lose your appetite," Latif dug his fork inside the heart of this little remnant of a kabob, and poised it before his mouth. "I can't talk until I settle these layers of fat with a cup of tea," he chewed on that little morsel absently. "Besides, what I have to tell you is...well, let's say, let's talk about something pleasant, till hot tea warms my gall to confession."

"How unpleasant is your evasiveness, Latif, you have no idea? Much too distasteful for my gall and curiosity!" Haroon laughed a bit deliriously. "Never in my entire life I have known you to be so sly or discreet? Are you trying to intimidate me? If you are, you surely are not succeeding. We are done with this dinner, as I can see. Let's have tea in the parlor, I will tell Ali, and then you may disclose your guarded secret," he pushed his plate as well as his chair out of the way, and shot to his feet.

"Your own curiosity and impatience, really, should intimidate you, if discretion on my part has not succeeded in doing so," Latif quipped most amiably. "And as to my discretion, I am thinking only about you. Sort of sorting my thoughts in euphemistic lumps, so as not to graze your delicate senses. You are sensitive, I know, and some facts may prove fatal to your sensibility, rather distressing?" he murmured gently, rather ominously.

"Oh, distress me, please!" Haroon exclaimed histrionically. "Throw the arrows of euphemisms right into my heart, and I will not utter one groan! Cut my soul to pieces, but tell me about Balzeeb, Balzeeb," his heart was pounding like his words, though his words had moved Latif to compassion.

"A cup of tea, and I will tell you all you wish to know," Latif pushed his chair back slowly and thoughtfully.

"Ali, could we have our tea in the parlor?" Haroon's request rang out loud with a dint of impatience. "The scum of British have left us this legacy of tea addiction," his impatience was now directed toward Latif. "But they have failed to inculcate the need for alcohol, isn't that marvelous? Perhaps, religion, after all, greater impact upon our lives than alien vices...though we are corrupted to the very bones..." his dark ruminations were cut short by the breezy return of Ali.

"You will not get your tea before dessert, sir," Ali waved his arm pontifically.

"No room for dessert, Ali. Besides, your good cooking is going to keep me awake half the night," Haroon resorted to teasing, ignoring the silent protest in Latif's eyes.

"You were taught to be hospitable to your guests, sir," one shadow of a mild reproach was crossing Ali's features. "Latif will never refuse to taste my carrot pudding. That's his favorite."

"Latif is family, Ali, not a guest, as you yourself never tire of telling me," Haroon's eyes were lighting up with a gleam of mirth. "And the family members deserve to be treated shabbily, even with scorn and impatience."

"How can I not bloom under the weight of your scornful generosity, Haroon!" Latif retorted innocently. His eyes pleading for dessert from Ali.

"I will fetch the dessert," Ali announced with authority, turning to his heels.

"And if you must, Ali, then serve us on a silver tray in the parlor," Haroon voiced his own command before Ali could vanish behind the swinging doors.

"Hope, you will not neglect to invite Ali to sit with us in the parlor?" Latif opined amusedly.

"Is that a command?" Haroon leaped to his feet with the alacrity of a young boy, and scampered past the cadenza toward the parlor.

The balmy parlor with dun-colored couches and rugs as colorful as the mountain sunsets, was hosting these young doctors with a caprice of its own. The dessert was consumed amidst the missiles of raillery, but the air was charged with the currents of mystery which was creating some sort of vacuum in the parlor. Ali had declined to stay, and the two friends were left together, feeling somewhat alienated from each other, as if Balzeeb herself had drawn a thick veil between them to restrain their thoughts from exploring her domain. Haroon had finished his second cup of tea and could not contain the spool of his thoughts wound up inside the knots of his stomach.

"Now that you have layered your food with several cups of tea, my friend, how about taking a stroll down the avenue of Balzeeb's life? Curiosity is killing me!" Haroon spilled his agog with an attempt at mirth.

"The path is tortuous, and I am standing at the end!" Latif failed in his own attempt at humor. "Might as well track my steps back from where you left off Balzeeb standing in the cemetery. The shafts of irony! To meet such a beautiful lady amidst the chills of tragedies. Two of her husbands met her that way, dying one after the other as swiftly as the first one. Were you driven there by fate to attend the funeral of her third husband, I wonder?"

"Third husband!" Haroon declared in some sort of shock and disbelief.

"What a folly to fall in love with such a woman like Balzeeb? Tragic, isn't it? You are struck by the arrow of Cupid, and there is no use denying it, for I too was when I saw her the first time. Madly and inexorably in love! You should have seen me then, even the mention of her name could plunge me into ecstatic swoon. My heart breaking with each sigh and my soul bruised like a gaping wound? I was a furnace of romantic delusions, singed by the flames of my own desire and yearning!" Latif spewed out a torrent of confession as if possessed. "But be assured that is past and gone. The fires are abated, and I would never fall in love again. It's not my courage which made me the master of such a grand passion, but cowardice, mind you, and I am not ashamed to tell you. I love life too much and can't endure the face of death, clawing at me with its pincer-like teeth."

"Three husbands," Haroon repeated heedlessly, as if he had not heard one single word of his friend's confession. "How could that be possible? She looks so...so fresh, untainted...like some vestal lily by the secluded pond! So pure, her youth, her beauty? By the looks of her, she could

be passed as a young girl, in the prime of her teens, unacquainted with grief or sorrow. How old is she?"

"No one knows! Latif's staccato gesture was poised before him like an exclamation mark itself. "The daughter of ageless time, I guess. The story is quite bizarre. She was discovered by the emir of this valley, near some lonesome brook in one of his many gardens. Naked as a Nereid and clothed only in the beauty of her youth. A victim of amnesia, some wonder? No spools of magic could unravel her past, it is obvious. And what is more obvious than anything, her youth and beauty immortal? Molded by wills divine and fashioned by the very hands of gods, don't you think?" he seemed to be questioning himself. Totally entranced by the flow of his own thoughts, and plucking at their strings hastily and capriciously. "Nothing could mar her beauty, no grief, no tragedy, no misfortune small or great! She is Kali and Venus both, death and beauty are wedded to her youth. Men are attracted to her like moths, and her husbands are left dead like the flies. She is the chaste daughter of Jerusalem, as far as she is concerned, singing the songs of joy and waiting for a perfect bridegroom?" he paused as if expecting a comment, but as Haroon offered none, he continued passionately. "Since she couldn't remember her name or childhood, muttering only the word, princess, emir named her Balzeeb. Loaded with gold and jewels, she was married to emir's nephew. The wedding was a great affair, emir's mansion spruced with lights as if the angels themselves had brought stars down to welcome the heavenly bride. But this wedding splendor was turned to dust just short of two months. Emir's nephew died suddenly, and the wedding sheets were turned to the winding shrouds of a funeral. One year of mourning, and she was wedded to a doctor, the head of cardiology unit in our hospital. Once again, emir had spared no cost in bestowing fortunes in dowry to his adopted princess,

though the wedding ceremony was not as grand as before. Her second husband too became a victim of death after enjoying a whole half year of health and happiness. Not even a year of mourning, and she herself chose her third husband. This time, a lieutenant by the name of Tanwir, whose funeral you were destined to attend? Well, that's the story of Balzeeb. A tale of death and mystery concealed under the raiments of her youth and beauty," he yawned suddenly, his look bright and enigmatic.

"There is no mystery in death, but grief and tragedy, that's all," Haroon murmured laconically. "Unbelievable though, that a goddess like her could ever be wedded to mortals?" his thoughts were choked under the weight of shock and incredulity.

"More like a sorceress whose life attracts a web of calumnies spun solid by wagging tongues," Latif exclaimed mystically. "Many a canards floating around, but some of her own friends are spreading a rumor that she is actually an old serpent transformed to a woman by the tricks of a demon, who goads her to sting her husbands?"

"Fickle brains and wicked lies! Do you believe in such absurdities?" a volley of delirious mirth broke forth on Haroon's lips.

"You would be laughing in your grave if you were her husband!" Latif joined him in his mirth.

"You are a total dunce, my Sufi friend," Haroon teased. "Never thought, you could be craven or superstitious? "You are in love, I can tell, and with Balzeeb, can you deny?"

"You might be correct in your assumptions, I am not sure," Latif murmured evasively. "But I leave the joys of wedlock to you. You are destined to be her fourth husband!"

"A Sufi and a prophet both!" exclaimed Haroon. "If you dare prophesy, then tell me why?"

"You are a poet, don't you know? That rhyming idiocy!" Latif attempted a stab at levity before collecting his thoughts. "I have known Balzeeb long enough to be able to dissect her art of selection. The way she looked into your eyes, rapt and bemused! That icy sparkle in her beautiful eyes...that subtle kindling of perception and inevitability? Like the lamp of Destiny, holding open the portals of bliss and torment? I have seen that same lamp before, twice already, kindling with the light of intuition, knowledge? No, her look can't be mistaken. You are the chosen bridegroom. The spouse of Death and Beauty! If you could only hear the tinkling of bells in my ears? The music of celebration?"

"And you accuse me of poetry and madness, you idiot!" Haroon exploded forth impatiently. "How unhappy you are, in love, in love? Pain is scribbled all over your face like the curse of Babylon!"

"You can spin a whole continent of romance in your poetic head if given liberty!" declared Latif with equal impatience. "I cannot love, when fear lurks behind my back like some slithering enormity. Life, even as a vessel of pain, is my Love. And if I do feel such pain, this affliction itself nurtures my joy in being alive. What if I was to die young? Would I not lose all, everything, the joy, the pain and all the fruits of hope and despair where hate feeds the furnace of love, and envy strips naked the roots of jealousy? Oh, love and happiness, how could we be such fools? *Happiness*, is it not that some narcotic bewilderment? Ephemeral, evanescent, unattainable?"

"Epigrams! Rather platitudes, dull and prosaic," Haroon muttered intensely. "In your field of sufic madness, the sheer joy of a quest is to pursue something unattainable, isn't that so? So, why don't you make a dash after it, and let it satisfy your gluttony for pain in living, if not your fear of the inevitable! Imagined or experienced,

does it make any difference, as long as you follow your illusion to the door of Reality?"

"Such unholy quest doesn't suit my temperament, Haroon!" Latif declared with false blithe. "Besides, happiness doesn't even qualify as a quest. It is like a mirage, allusive and shuddering away toward some abyss unknown. Have you ever thought that life with all its senseless talk of joy and peace, doesn't ever come close to feeling such emotions? In this jungle of dream-reality, only pain and loss appear Real, and minds cling to that reality? These two emotions are the only ones which kindle one's soul to fire and whip the fever for survival coursing down one's veins? Life is the living, throbbing canker of pain! And death, vacuums upon vacuums of peace and Silence. And those vacuums are my Fear, I don't want to be sucked into them in the prime of my youth."

"The canker of life is more frightful than the vacuum in death, I should say, but I am not sure," Haroon began with a ponderous smile. "Fear, where does it come from? Isn't it the shadow of life's greed, dreams, aspirations? Making our hearts craven with despair and longing that we might lose all what we have gained or aspire to gain? Not only love and hope, but riches and friends too, and all the baubles we strive to collect for physical and material satisfaction? Our life's earnings, blanketed with fear? Our dark passions dusted with fear? If we make Fear our master, we would die in the chains of slavery, ruled by fear in all our sleeping, waking hours of toil and labor. So, why not banish the king of fear and enjoy all little pleasures which life deigns to bestow on us wretched mortals?"

"Why do you always fall into the quagmire of your own contradictions, Haroon, or do you even know that you do?" Latif got to his feet. His look wearied and distraught. "If I was in a position to advise you, I would say, don't embroil yourself in this lovely charade of love and death. But it's no use, destiny is our guide to the most delicious of follies

we would not ever commit if we were not tempted. Good-bye and do not think too much about Balzeeb. Doctors can't afford a sleepless night, especially, if they have to treat insomniac patients in the morning," he piloted out of the room, wearing an amiable smile.

"Not sure, how many countless nights you have spent in passionate wakefulness? No wonder, most of your patients die! For a lack of right prognosis, I should say," Haroon shot this comments over his shoulders, sitting there in utter immobility.

Chapter Four

The flames licking the hearth to pewter, and kissing their own smoldering tongues, were the wild companions of Latif and Haroon as they sat deep in thoughts, just short of being buried into their own cushioned seats. A frenzied chase after the Flower of Love had drained Haroon of all sense and sanity, beside making him neurotic and intemperate. Almost! as he would repeat to himself inside the anguished sanctuary of his solitude. Actually, he was not chasing Love, but being consumed by it without even getting closer to its sanctified Need. Two whole months were swallowed by the hungry lips of time, while his heart had become a churning wheel of chaos and torment. During these gaping, grueling hours of absurdity and madness, he had seen Balzeeb only twice, and only to be slain by the daggers of her Beauty. His heart bleeding and his lips uttering not even a prayer to reach closer to the shore of sanity. Latif too, caught inside the currents of love and jealousy within these past liquid months, was transformed from the immaturity of boyhood to the maturity of a man inside the arena of passions raging and inviolate. Such passions sublime or profane had created an emotional vacuum between these friends, forever drifting apart, and eternally pulled together in some ocean of rifts with waves indecisive and turbulent. This particular afternoon too, they had waded through these turbulent waters in an endless struggle to cross the barriers of emotions, and were now plunged in silence, mired in the muddied pools of their own thoughts.

Latif was gazing vacantly into the hearts of the flames, spluttering and crackling like the throbbing violence within his own heart. He thought he had killed his love for

Balzeeb most brutally with no chance of it ever being revived, but time had proven him wrong with its stealthy rod of mockery and recollection. Right now, he was transported back in time, towering over the sprig of love like a cormorant moon, and longing to devour Hope in hopelessness. Yes, love had returned with all its maddening fury of pain and fear and elation. He could inhale its scent, its beauty, its tragedy within the confines of years mad and frolicking. The first time he had seen Balzeeb was when she was married to emir's nephew, and his heart was caught into a vortex of fire so scalding that he thought he was dying. And after being drugged thus with the pain of shock and terror, he had discovered that he was in love. An agony supreme had taken hold of his heart and soul, and he had writhed in misery to be released from this torture indescribable. His love was hopeless, he knew at the very inception of its sting and assault. And as soon as he had succeeded in wrenching out this sting, it had pounced back on him with many more stings, more savage than the wounds of grief and loss. Her husband was dead, and hope had entered his head like a slithering demon. This demon was slain by Balzeeb's own choice in selecting her next husband, and he had murdered his love the second time around. The noose of accursed hope was not to leave him, it seemed, for he could feel it uncoiling at the death of her second husband. Once again, he had to free himself of this tightening noose with the full knowledge of a sage who had seen her third husband even before she herself could confirm him as her next bridegroom. And this time he thought he had finally succeeded in slaughtering both love and hope, until he met the fourth bridegroom! His rival of a friend, who was fated to walk on the same rope of destiny which seemed to be the only link between his own self and Balzeeb inside the Scythian deeps of centuries and continents.

These Scythian deeps were unfolding in Latif's heart as he sat contemplating the flames under the hearth and a blaze of conflagration within him. He was thinking about the caprice of his youth with all its moods, whims and vagaries. Some of them so violent in nature that time and time again, he was forced to condemn his thoughts in even thinking about such vile horrors not ever to be committed. And yet his mind was visited by the unplanned guests of horror, even welcoming them as the angels of virtue and honor. The first time he was tempted to run a sword through a man's heart was, (not any man but Balzeeb's second husband chosen by her) when he himself was caught in the throes of love and hope. And then he was prostrated with the fever of nausea and disgust at the corruption of his own thoughts. Guilt and penance were nowhere to be seen closer to his heart, only the agony of rage and jealousy. From then on, time had ceased to exist for him and he was lost deep into the ravines of self-annihilation which lovers find painfully exhilarating. His stormy passion sealed within the casket of his heart was like a swollen river, fierce and turbulent. And its roaring deeps would have swallowed him whole once again, if he had failed to implore the reeds of sanity to come to his rescue. Blind destiny was at his heels, for no sooner had he felt the anchor of safety, her second husband had died. How could he live through this anguish again and again, his heart had wept the tears of blood and bitterness. The canker of hope inside him was like a raw blister, and he knew he had to puncture it, for Tanwir was to be her third husband who had become closest of his friends. By then the curse of death for Balzeeb's husbands had become a living legend, and Latif was succumbed to fear and silence after murdering his passion this one last time. Or, was it, this one last time? The passion murdered had feigned death, and yet it was to live eternally, bruised and broken, and he was getting accustomed to its spurts of silence and

violence. Some sort of seasonal blasts like autumnal winds and springtime riot and restlessness. After the death of Tanwir a new season had commenced with a mingling of fear and sadness, and the spring of hopes, already buried deep under the snow of winters. Arrested within the cul-de-sacs of all seasons, he was not sure if his fear was greater than his love, or both equally hopeless and inconceivable. Even now as he sat demurring, his thoughts were vacillating in a scale of frenzy and calm-chaos.

‘I am a coward!’ Latif could hear one of his thoughts moaning with a sudden plight. ‘Fear is my foe. Have I not suffered a million deaths, embracing the pain of separation, and the fear of death forever prolonging my misery and hopelessness? Balzeeb, Balzeeb,’ his thoughts were chanting her name in a prayer-like swoon. ‘Is your beauty the canker of a rose, Balzeeb, and your lips laced with hemlock? Or, behind that veil of love and beauty, there is something ugly and hideous, lusting for men, and thirsting for their blood? Insatiate and gluttonous, you sit on your throne of beauty? Eternally young and merciless! Is my love for you a deformity, a sickness of the body and soul? A dream and dementia both? How could one escape this fatal spell? How could I heal myself of this pain and disease...’ Latif’s thoughts were reducing themselves to smoldering embers much like the flames under the hearth.

Haroon was oblivious to the warmth and comfort of this strange haven in Latif’s home. Even oblivious to the company of his friend who was to accompany him to Balzeeb’s home this evening, as some link between an altar and a guillotine. Immersed in his own bubble of solitude, he had forgotten about Latif, and about the dismal parlance truncated so abruptly as both had decided to practice a few moments of silence before airing their thoughts caught in a stalemate. Haroon’s own gaze was cutting through the French window panes out into the back garden, where the tall pines in mantles of snow stood huddled and shivering.

But he seemed not to see anything, feeling only the shuddering in his soul and psyche where Balzeeb stood like a marble goddess carved by the magic of dream and inspiration. Naked and unashamed, wearing only the glow of pearly dawns as her robe of youth and beauty. His soul was vast and boundless, lit by a memory past and forgotten. He was the child of the mountains, kneeling at the feet of this beautiful goddess. Weaving garlands of dewdrop tears around her chaste feet, and uttering nameless prayers. Grief and misery were there too, hovering above like the livid clouds bled white of their life and sustenance. And agony and betrayal were growing wild down the bottomless deeps within his soul, his childish heart daring a peek and closing its eyes, while still prostrated at the feet of the goddess. The childish heart was growing and expanding. Bloated with elation and madness, it was fluttering its wings to crush the goddess of love and beauty into one eager embrace. A loud laughter from the hideous lips of fate was lowering its echo into the silence of his soul. One smothered groan and an ominous thunder! The bubble of his solitude was punctured, and he was exiled out of his soul like a sniveling fool, wretched and defenseless. Hush and silence were the sharp, throbbing blisters, exploding forth into the arena of awareness. His heart was linked to Latif, though not an atom in his body had changed its posture.

‘Latif is a coward!’ Haroon's thoughts were following the trails of his friend's revelations, lost and abandoned. ‘Yes, afraid of death! Why? Is death not another journey where life would unfold in revelations upon revelations...perhaps, fearing the renewal of life in another birth...the wheel of life and death spinning in maddening fury to churn all fears into a froth of eternalness...’ he could see his thoughts sailing on the wings of pain and poetry. ‘I do not fear death, and if I die loving Balzeeb, then I would welcome such death like a lover embracing

his beloved. Fear is the death of a soul, and Love the birth of joy with all its pain and sorrow...' his thoughts were entering the sanctuary of his soul, mute and bewildered.

Still kneeling at the shrine of his goddess, Haroon's child-body was transformed to that of a young man. His heart passionate and expanding. Amidst the thunderous applause of his own ecstasy and bewilderment, he was yet awakening into the realms more bewildering and astonishing. Soaring inside the vacuity of his own soul into realms lofty and divine. Sucked into the void of Destiny by the sheer will of fates benign and leering. Blind and besotted, floating toward the livid, luminescent clouds. The marble goddess down there was alone and stunned. He was struggling to get back, but his weightless body was like a rocket, shooting toward the stars. Rapt and lacerated, his heart was shedding tears of blood. Suddenly, he was released from the valleys of gray, pregnant clouds obscuring the light of the heavens, and tossed back at the feet of his beloved. A will divine was mating with some will profane, and his heart was heavy with anguish and disconsolation. A torrent of tears were a billowing storm within him, and his gaze was lifted to the idol of his worship with a plea most ineffable. And before he could humble himself at the altar of his beloved, Latif's voice could be heard splintering the hush and the gloom.

"What insufferable dolts we are? A pair of demented chickens, clawing at each other's throat for male dominance!" Latif declared. Tossing his head sideways, as if shifting and balancing the corruption of his own thoughts. "If we have nothing to say to each other, why not efface ourselves from each other's faces? Isn't it apparent that Balzeeb prefers you over me? Those two brief visits could spin a tale of centuries, and you still don't get it? Why don't you propose to her? To end this charade of misery and duplicity?"

"I could, if you were not hanging around my neck like some rosary of friendship and generosity?" was Haroon's involuntary bitterness, wrenched out of the well of his own anguished silence Within. "A worthy chaperone that you are, carving hurdles at each step with your suffered, dejected look of God knows what?" the sherry gleam in his eyes was chilled to incredulity by his own utterance.

"This evening, my friend, you would dine alone with her? And this wretched chaperone would be glad to stay home, practicing his all-time hobby of killing his sadness with the dagger of solitude!" Latif shot this bullet into the very heart of rivalry and friendship.

"Please, Latif, you know, I can't go there alone!" Haroon protested with a mingling of plea and vehemence. "This inferno of heat and gloom in your home, very oppressive, if you could only feel it? Ali too keeps the fires blazing in every room...utterly depressing when I go home. What am I saying? Don't you feel, we are acting like two lunatics this evening?" he paused as if expecting some outburst, but since none issued forth, he continued with an attempt at levity and diversion. "Wish, the month of Ramadan was swallowed into its own grave of gnawing emptiness? Fasting makes people cruel during the day and ravenous in the evening. Lucky for me that I don't fast anymore, for if I did I might become like one of those doctors who cut open their patients in the name of surgical wonders, while pressed only by the weight of greed! Do you know that more patients die on the operating tables in the month of Ramadan; simply, because the pious doctors wish to prolong the hours of abstinence on the gaming tables with live victims as their pawns? But who cares, brains or bowels, either could be costive, and no sure remedy or prognosis, but trial and experimentation? Do you know who in the whole wide world gets paid for killing...not a difficult guess, both doctors and soldiers?" one snort of a laughter escaped his lips as he continued

madly and deliriously. "In the name of piety, bigots bloom and prosper. What do they say? Fasting, the panacea of all evils? To discipline the wayward minds? To restrain the floods of greed and gluttony? To nurture love and compassion in barren hearts? But one look at those bigots, and you would know that all evil breeds in their hearts, on the tree of Ignorance, not even one leaf of evil discarded, the rivulets of odium and gluttony never running dry? Reek of mendacity, Latif, can't you smell it, on the streets and in the bazaars? Even in this holy month of Ramadan. Pride, malice, cruelty, corruption, all kneaded together into the dung of virtue and honor. Is one holy month in a year not enough for the Muslims to melt the pools of hatred and vengeance in their hearts? Muslims against Hindus, and Hindus against Muslims, are they all not men of virtue and honor? Could prayer and fasting teach us to live in peace? Why do you fast, Latif? Is it for the sake of equanimity, or to bribe God to smooth your way to the heavens, or to grant you long life?" he asked whimsically.

"Your curiosity would lead you to the gates of hell, sooner than Judgment Day!" Latif declared with an attempt at cheerfulness. "Some of us have faith in propriety, if not in piety! Such parables are too complex for your poetic temperament, I can tell," his eyes were kindling the tapers of sufic tenderness as he continued. "Balzeeb admits that she doesn't believe in fasting, and yet she gives dinners in honor of the ones who fast. To me, this is decorum, but you will bruise it with the brand of hypocrisy, won't you? Well, don't attempt a defense, hear me out first, till the end. In your defiance toward faith and ritual, you don't even know that deep down you are clamped to the pillars of spirituality. Don't ask me how I know, but we both know that this is true. And as much as you deny it you can't escape this fact. Your revolt against convention is merely a facade, more so a rebellion against bigotry, than a war with God. None of my friends are even close to surrendering

before God's will as you do, and you better admit it to your own self. And as for wars, though most of them fought in the name of religion, have nothing to do with faith, but with the hunger for riches and power. Greed and pride too make men slaves of their own zeal and cruelty. The lust to kill...the territorial right of any beast called man? What? Am I falling in the trap of agreeing with you? And yet prayer and fasting are our lowly guards, posted at each forked path to point to us the right road in our long journey toward...oh, we are wasting our time," he looked at the clock on the mantel and leaped to his feet. "Better not let the Princess wait, or she would never admit us to her presence again," he grabbed his jacket and ploughed his way toward the door.

"What a relief, the fast will be over in less than an hour, and you won't be bilious for one short evening at least, hopefully!" Haroon followed him, snatching his own jacket from the back of his chair.

"You think yourself an angel, don't you?" Latif cried over his shoulders, hunting for the keys to his jeep.

"An angel of both evil and good," Haroon laughed.

"How so?" Latif inquired absently.

"I don't lie, cheat or hurt anyone, so I must be good. But others honor me with the titles of a heretic, impostor, libertine, so in their scale of judgment I am a rotten fruit festering in the mud of heresy and impiety..." Haroon stepped out into the cold haze of the evening, the sherry wine in his eyes warm and glowing.

The pale rose twilight was swallowed by the gray, pearly whiteness, as Latif and Haroon reached the mansion of Balzeeb. The yellow kisses of the sunset lay trembling upon the snow-spangled pines, and they were ushered into the large dining-room, gleaming with Aubusson rugs and dewdrop chandeliers. The chairs in gold and vermilion and the table laden with silver and crystal was a welcoming sight. Soon, the servants had brought in the steaming

dishes as soon as the departure of the Sun could announce the breaking of the fast. Besides, the sirens could be heard blaring, permitting the faithful to break their fast and enjoy the bounties of God's gifts to mankind. Latif was the only one suffering the pangs of hunger, and he had concentrated solely on eating, not even paying any attention to the drift of conversation between Haroon and Balzeeb. Suddenly, the silvery notes in Balzeeb's voice were reaching his awareness.

"None of my friends accept my invitations these days, the women friends, I mean, how very fortunate! They have marked me as a heathen," Balzeeb's eyes were lit to the sparkle of icicles. Absorbing light from the dewdrop chandeliers, and shimmering like the blue oceans. "A perfect heathen who deserves to be ignored by the pious elite so very much engrossed in their deeds of piety and kindness?"

"Pagans had perfect faith in their gods, and their hearts more pure than any of us professing to be the true devotees of our beliefs," Haroon was saying without conviction, only his look rapt and intense. "Greeks and Romans, they perfected the religion for all mankind, in my estimation. Was it Aristophanes, who said: Fear God, revere all gods, Surrender to the will of God?"

"Sumerians were wiser than the Greeks...or Romans, I guess," Balzeeb fondled the blue ruffles on her silk dress, absently and dreamily. "Their garden of Eden so perfect with the trees of wisdom and knowledge, and no fruits of sin to taint its beauty..." she paused, her small, white face wreathed in one beatific smile. "But why talk of ages past and forgotten? I live in the present, and this present doesn't allow me the comfort of peace and friendship. How gloomy and cheerless this month of Ramadan, it lingers on and on? My so-called friends, praying and fasting and concocting lies! No high teas or luncheons, and even when they come for dinner parties, they end up sitting in lethargic

heaps, then breaking their fast in silence, and devouring without any sense of taste or appreciation. No humor, no intellect! Oh, I shouldn't complain. Entirely my fault that I can't help but inviting? Don't know why, when they lie like the cicadas? And they gossip. These valleys are alive with lies and gossip. Have you heard, Dr. Haroon, what they are saying? I am a murderer, they say, and a sorceress, casting spells on young men and killing them? Such intolerable lies, imagine that," her features were glowing like the smooth, round pearls which she wore and her lips the color of red poppies.

"Ah, Princess, envy makes people malign even the reflection of beauty which they could never possess!" Haroon sighed a swooning comment, his eyes bright and worshipping.

"Such flatteries, Doctor, would hurl me into the abyss of pride and arrogance," Balzeeb smiled, curling one strand of her flaxen hair on her finger.

"And me into the pit of slavery and exaltation," Haroon murmured under his breath.

"Us sinners most innocent and heedless!" a low tinkling of mirth parted the poppies on Balzeeb's lips into a seductive smile, as she continued. "Only Latif here is the pious one this evening, reserving his intellect, and suffering our levity with the patience of a saint. A sort of saint, at least during this month of Ramadan, fasting, if not observing the ritual of daily prayers?"

"Sinners, what a delightful word, Princess? Never thought it could sound so delicious, but then from the lips of beauty..." Latif swallowed his passionate refrain with a sip of tea, almost burning his lips. "If I can ever dare reveal my saintly thoughts, Princess, the purity in your heart would melt to tears of pity and horror!" he declared with a *sufic élan*. "Haroon might be judged as a sinner if one was to look into his soul, but you, my Princess, no! Holy and chaste, you will live inside the hearts of men who are

privileged to be favored by your friendship," he bit his lip in an effort to stifle his anguished torment. "The motive behind my fasting is quite selfish, I am not ashamed to admit. During the years of my medical studies, I fasted religiously, prompted by fear that if I didn't I would flunk. Prayers led me through exams like an army of tyrants, and I became a slave to my own habits. Wonder, if piety moved me to such discipline, or selfishness? And why do I still fast, I can't tell, for reasons change and multiply with the changing of the seasons."

"A blessing, for sure, that we can't fathom the mysteries in our hearts and souls," Haroon explored the heart of his chicken kabob with a tender probing of his fork. "There is an element of sanctity to these mysteries, but there is no mystery or holiness in the outward practice of ritual. Now, what is so holy in breaking the fast with dates? Don't laugh, Princess, but may I ask why not serve pears or peaches instead, or any other seasonal fruit available? Well, Latif might splinter my curiosity with his own thorns of intellect?" he tore his gaze away from the laughing miracle of beauty and turned to his friend.

"Nothing new to add to your rags of curiosity, Haroon!" the hazel pools in Latif's eyes were gathering sadness'. "Pears and peaches could be holier than holy, if one were dying of hunger and deprivation," he murmured thoughtlessly. "But certain foods do have their auras of sanctity, I believe, much in common with our own if we could see them with our sight imperfect and perception limited?"

"All I know is that I like dates, regardless of Ramadan or ritualistic fasting," Balzeeb chirped merrily. "Blessed are they who break their fast with the holy fruit of dates! Should this be another holy blessing over the sanctimonious heap of commandments which mullahs never cease to expound or explore?" the flicker of amusement in her eyes was shifting from one to the other.

"Just because Prophet Muhammad broke his fast with dates?" Haroon declared with a quick animation. "Did not our Prophet live humbly, sharing his meager fortunes with the poor and the unfortunate? Do we ever try to emulate his style of living simply and truthfully? No, we covet riches and fortunes. Greed and malice simmering in pious hearts, do mullahs not preach what they can't practice? Prophets bring us the message of love and peace, and we mold them into the tools of war and vengeance. From Abraham to Jesus, to Muhammad, from Krishna to Buddha, to Confucius, there is only one message superseding all, Love! and only this one word, this one command or this one commandment, is the word Love, which escapes our memory? Monks, saints and celibates, are we here to imitate the lives of the Prophets or to satisfy the grueling needs of our own mind and flesh with whim and caprice? Why do I end up talking like a God-intoxicated lunatic in the month of Ramadan?" he added with a wave of despair.

"The idea of celibacy appeals to me, though! But if I practice imitating Prophet Muhammad's life, it's not possible," pain and delirium escaped Latif's lips in a volley of mirth.

"Yes, the virtue and glory of imitating Prophet Muhammad's life!" Balzeeb was caught under the shadow of her own hilarity and sarcasm. "Won't you all men love to have four wives? Wouldn't it be a miracle if you could treat them all with equal justice as commanded by the Prophet?"

"Justice, or the lack of it in that time and age, could be the only reason, which prompted Prophet Muhammad to take charge of dire reforms; permitting if necessary, and forbidding if needed, and even sanctioning if beneficial, certain customs and privileges which were rooted in the psyche of the Pagan Arabs!" Haroon could not extricate himself from these folds of theology. "Ali would have explained it better, if he was here with me? Well, Pagan

Arabs! who were mired in all sorts of vice... sloth, polygamy, drunkenness, just to name a few, could not be tamed to virtuous living with edicts harsh and absolute. So, polygamy was permitted, but with the blessing of a revelation it could not be exploited. It worked toward the benefit of the poor and the oppressed, affording home and hearth to the widows and harlots alike, who otherwise were neglected and shunned like the plague..." he paused as if astounded by his own outbreak of levity and vehemence. "Forgive me, Princess, I didn't come here to taint your beautiful home with shoddy bits of theology, but to..." he could not continue. The poetry of love in his eyes mute and bashful.

"If you feel as remorseful as you look, then you could not be guilty of any indiscretion?" Balzeeb's eyes were flashing mirth-songs.

"Guilty is the word, Princess," murmured Haroon.

"You would feel less guilty, Haroon, if you listened to the voice of your soul, not of your heart," Latif teased with a meaningful look at his friend.

"My soul has no tongue, and the voice of my heart I dare not interpret lest I be caught into the follies of more indiscretions, which I dare not commit," a mild reproof escaped Haroon's lips, his heart thundering all of a sudden.

"Would you gentlemen care for some more tea?" Balzeeb sang her tactful query.

"I would love to, Princess, but," Latif got to his feet with a capricious nod of his head. "Besides being on call, I couldn't find a substitute for my patient suffering cholera, besides stanguary. You would forgive me, Princess, I hope, for leaving right after dinner," he elicited a most winsome smile, flashing an innocent comment at Haroon. "You would stay, of course, while my duty robs me of the pleasure of staying," his eyes were betraying pain and challenge.

"I," Haroon stumbled to his feet as if stung, frightened out of his wits to be alone with the idol of his worship. "You besotted prig, didn't I ask you to remind me of my appointment with Dr. Sharif, and you didn't even mention of your own at that time?" his face was flustered as he shifted his gaze toward Balzeeb. "Forgive me, my levity and indiscretion, Princess! How I have compounded all together into one lump of absurdity in one brief evening, I can't even begin to explore or explain..." guilt and misery were making his eyes shine like the gold coins.

"No need for apologies, gentlemen," Balzeeb waved a gracious dismissal. "Next time you come, make sure, no duties command you to leave in haste."

"Good-bye, Princess," Latif snatched Balzeeb's hand into his own, implanting one suave kiss before she could withdraw it.

"Good-bye," was Haroon's one groan of a farewell, as he followed Latif under the weight of rage and misery.

"What a witless tyrant you are!" Haroon exploded as soon as he was out into the cold fury of the night. "What malice drove you to concoct such a blistering lie?"

"How ungrateful is man! Can a friend ever get sympathy in assisting his friend on the road toward love and happiness?" Latif hastened toward his jeep, his eyes dark and gloomy.

"Next time you crave to win my gratitude, let me know an eternity in advance," Haroon suppressed an obscenity under his breath.

Balzeeb stood by the window in utter immobility, a figurine carved out of alabaster with sprays of blue silks, and arrested on the canvas of time like a precious sculpture. Only her blue eyes with the sparkle of ice and fire were following the silvery terrains where the lone jeep had vanished, as if swallowed by the chasms of the night. The moonlit vistas in winding sheets of snow and silken slumbers were inviting her to their bosoms dark and

profound. But her own mind and heart were throwing open some portal wide and strange, revealing profounder depths within and without. Like a wavelet in the sea, she was sinking deeper and deeper into the oceans of her own psyche and sub-consciousness.

‘What is this curse? How could I look into the hearts and souls of the others, and not even know where my own are? Do I have a soul? Am I heartless?’ one wavelet in Balzeeb's psyche was swelling and expanding. ‘How did I enter Haroon's soul, lacerated with anguish and longing? And with pretexts...why is he afraid to be alone with me? Could I avoid visiting the corpses of love, fear, despair inside the graveyard of Latif's own soul? Where are my husbands? How did they die? Why do I crave for this love sublime and love supreme when there is no love in me? Am I incapable of loving? Did I ever love? If yes, could it always turn to hatred? Loving and then hating! Could such a kernel of hatred inside me be that drop of poison which killed my husbands. Why didn't I feel any grief at the loss of my husbands? Am I destined to love like a raging tempest, knowing not its fury, until all violence is abated and calm returns like a blessed reprieve? Is love some ethereal spirit, formless and sightless? Or just a vapor, bright and ephemeral? Perhaps, a dewdrop of poetic expression, illusive and meaningless? A lie, a farce and mockery, could that be love? More like a terrible need in quest of something ineffable which could never be found and possessed...’ Balzeeb was sinking to her knees in one rustling heap. Chasms upon chasms of memories unfolding inside the abyss of her mind like islands deserted and forsaken.

‘This ominous haze of spells and incantations? Oh, these pits of silence and darkness! Time slithering away, silence engulfing me! Where am I? Who am I? Why did my parents abandon me? How did I come to this world? What voice is this? Nothing, nothing! The Voice of

Silence. Yes, I did love...always soiling the chaste garments of love with the mud of hatred? Why do I fall in love? Why do I marry? Why love becomes the victim of hatred, wishing death for the one it has ceased to love? Why, why? Death and tragedy, and no grief or despair? Is love back again with all its deformity and ugliness? Would Haroon marry me, fated to die? Consumed with love and murdered by hate? No!' one groan of a plea was smothered inside her as she sat hugging her knees.

'God, my Friend and Comforter, help me, I love Haroon, I do love him. Yes, God, I do, and yet there is no need to say it, You Know Everything! I get a glimpse of love and compassion in Your Soul too, God? Why is that? Why can't I look into mine? You have given me youth, beauty, wisdom, even Knowledge? Where does it come from? And yet, You keep my past concealed from me, why, God, why? Is it Your Will that I suffer this ignorance, and yet suffer no loss? Would the white horror of love and longing ever leave me? Could I ever love, truly and absolutely love, You and You and You...' she was being sucked into the arms of a hurricane, its Eye a blaze of fire, licking and consuming.

In utter, absolute swoon of the senses gone mad, Balzeeb was hurled into the abysmal void of eons, rolling past the carpets of centuries into heavens and continents. Her three husbands clothed in shrouds of white peace were greeting her. Singing paeans of peace to death. Mocking the misery in living. Laughing at the pain and grief in life. Tearing open the heart of Illusion and gazing into the soul of Ignorance where Love slept like an innocent babe, dreaming of Purity in Awakening!

Chapter Five

This particular evening with its Spring riot and glee, was flooding Haroon's heart with pain and longing. He was perched on his wooden swing on the verandah, and beholding the frolicsome dance of molten colors in verdure and sunset. Actually, waiting for the time to race past, so that he himself could unfold his wings to carry Latif to the welcoming hearth in Balzeeb's home which had become his hell and haven both for the past six, grueling months of indecision and vacillation. Not that he wanted the company of Latif, but this mystic friend had become his moral burden which he could neither endure, nor discard. Right now, he was not even thinking about Latif, his youthful features against the veil of surface-calm, handsome and glowing. Pines and cedars were calm and stately. And crocuses peering out of their unkempt beds in awe and wonder. Haroon's mute and admiring gaze was settling on the Himalayan tulips in large pots by the dilapidated terrace. There was something terrible and awesome in the silken beauty of those blooms, poised in midair like bright goblets, brimming with blood, and stealing more from the wounded heart of dusk. Haroon could not tear his gaze away from them, the shadows of war and carnage which had been threatening this valley with the assault of their dark embraces, now jolting his peace to the awareness of doom and death. He puffed on his cigarette fiercely, lighting another one before discarding the stub away, his thoughts kindling into sparks of rage and hopelessness.

'Chaos and confusion! What is this greed for territorial rights? Power-mad Hindus and Muslims fighting for strips of lands as their separate, little kingdoms! The land which belongs to no one, but God. And the gold-hungry

Englishmen filling their coffers with jewels before fleeing, but not before tossing the crumbs of riches into the bloodbath of millions. Wars spreading like wildfire, sweeping sea and land into clouds of flames from the borders of Indus to the valleys in Kashmir? The birth of two nations, India and Pakistan, from the oceans of tears and tragedies. Pride and Ignorance! Rage and hatred! Are the virtues of love and brotherhood exiled? How malice and vengeance has cut through the hearts, already soiled with the dust of oppression...the glory of Mother India usurped by British Raj...brothers killing brothers, mobs slaughtering foes and friends? Mercilessly! Indiscriminately! Pakistan, the land pure and sanctified, perched high on the blisters of ruin and devastation, cradling the graves of the Martyr and Madman in its tender bosom with sighs and lamentation?' Haroon's thoughts were watching the horror of the past few months with the eyes of doom and despair.

The splitting of two nations, India and Pakistan, amidst the fountains of blood and carnage! This vision was returning to Haroon's mind with all its shock and trauma. How could he forget it? He himself had amputated the infected limbs and had bandaged the mutilated bodies, as if he himself was the demon of fate, letting the suffered suffer in the suffering of their own agonies and misfortunes. Without being a part of the maddening mobs, he could imagine tides upon tides of raging horde, crossing the borders in a melee of plunder and slaughter. He had wished to heal the deformed minds, not the mutilated bodies, trying to find some cure for the souls disfigured with hatred, not for the broken limbs pressed by the need to kill more. And of course, some tender balm for the broken hearts who would never live to see the hope of love and liberty. But all his wishes were buried alive along with the graves of the slain and the suffered, where the word Independence meant nothing, but a black hole of anguish

and suffering. And yet, the warring absurdity in his own heart and soul was more savage than the demented addiction of the mobs to loot and plunder in the very face of doom and death. And yet again, he had filled the black holes in his soul and inside the soul of the universe with the eyes of Hope, and with the Promise of Healing. Even now, Hope was rising in his mind like a flower by the name of Balzeeb, perfumed like spring, and joys blossoming on its lips eternally. Before he could reach out and touch this Flower, Ali had emerged forth on the verandah like a phantom of the ages past and unforgotten.

"This war and Independence have robbed us all of our senses and sanity, sir! And must you smoke like a chimney?" Ali padded closer, adjusting his turban, already installed impeccably over his aged head. "Pakistan will grow and prosper, I hope. And so will its young and heedless. You have been working tirelessly, sir, and for what? No sleep, hardly any time to eat! The war is over now, and you need rest. Your health, sir, is going down the drain, and no one has to be a doctor to tell you that," he settled himself on the rough-hewn steps, planting his hookah beside him.

"My health is perfect, and one has to be a doctor to know that," Haroon breathed a lie, garnished with mischief. "I am hungry for a morsel of peace. How famished one could be if someone were hungering for something vague, fleeting, unattainable? Much like Truth, Happiness..." the sherry cups of wine in his eyes were gathering poetic stars. "The war is not over, Ali, this is only a prelude on the theater of tragedy and suffering. The fountains of blood will not run dry until they have avenged the deaths of the departed in generations to come. The pools of grief will continue to ripple as long as there are hearts who have suffered the blight of love and hope. The wounds might fester, but the canker of pride and prejudice will never let them heal into the scars of forgiveness.

The lust to oppress and dominate will go on throbbing with the passion of greed, even upon the heaps of misery and poverty..." he paused, noticing fear and alarm in Ali's eyes. "If you are hiding any Hindu friend in your cellar, better hand him over to me. I will carry him myself to the borders of India with utmost secrecy and discretion. You know what will happen if your Muslim brothers find out...if you are really offering shelter to an unfortunate Hindu friend, they will tear your heart out before they tear you from limb to limb," he laughed, mischief dancing in his eyes.

"I never fear death, sir, and I never would, even if all the beasts are let loose on me!" Ali's dark eyes were a furnace of fire and hell. "You should be thanking God, sir, that your family and your parents are well and alive," One flicker of a smiling reproof flashed through his eyes.

"Yes, Ali. Also, should I prostrate myself with gratitude before God unjust and merciless for afflicting millions with His wrath just and gracious?" Haroon's mirth and mischief were swelling to a crescendo.

"Bite your tongue, sir, what blasphemy?" the smoldering coals in Ali's eyes were kindled to shock. "God's ways are not to be judged or understood. His is the Justice and the Kindness. All these sufferings, sir, our own wicked thoughts...who is to blame?" his look was flustered and accusing.

"Just think, Ali, what terrible passions goad us to the altars of faith and subservience?" Haroon began with a poetic vehemence. "Isn't it better to think and reason than to submit blindly and ignorantly? Even God would not accept such false surrender, when one's heart is churning with doubt and bitterness?" he paused as if stumbling under the weight of sadness'. "The One and Only God, most Merciful and Gracious, Who saved my parents from doom and death, robbed my uncle of his life and possessions? One flower of a bride widowed and two young children exposed to the mercy of the merciless

world? What about the innocent millions, afflicted with grief and hopelessness? In this jungle of trauma and tragedy...hearts bleeding and inconsolable! When fortunes smile and our hearts have the strength to kneel with gratitude, then under the searing heat of misfortunes, why should we lack the courage to cry against cruelty and injustice visited upon us by the same God, most Magnificent and Benevolent?" his look was distraught and wearied.

"Life and all these worldly possessions, sir, are God's to give and God's to take. Not a grain of sand moves without His Will, and who are we to argue?" Ali smiled indulgently, all his rage and shock dissolved. "You need rest, sir, as I said before. Maybe, a change of air? Your mother, sir, she even wrote to me, urging me to convince you to take some time off. Why don't you go, sir, get away from all this? So many doctors to take care of the patients, they will be taken care of, believe you me, when you are gone, sir," he sucked his thoughts into a long puff from his hookah. "Latif will take good care of your patients."

"Latif, like several other physicians, is overworked, Ali, you should know by now! The maimed and the crippled follow us in our thoughts even when we are not there," Haroon got to his feet, pacing the length of the small verandah in slow strides. "If you didn't know me, Ali, would you say I am timid and cowardly?" he asked abruptly.

"No one could accuse you of that, sir, even if they didn't know you from Adam..." Ali couldn't air his befuddled thoughts to completion.

"You would suit perfectly as a politician, Ali," a dry ripple of mirth escaped Haroon's lips. "Don't wait up for me, I might be late," he cantered down the steps with the alacrity of a young boy. "And if you are still awake when I get back, I will raise hell till all the neighbors are huddled

to their windows," he shot a warning over his shoulders, padding over the lawn toward his jeep.

The chariot of Sun in its heliotrope glory was lost in the gloomy twilight as Haroon pulled his jeep by the curb, leading straight to the dull facade of Latif's house. Without turning the engine off, he sat there still and brooding.

'What keeps me from proposing to Balzeeb? Do I fear? What? No less a coward than Latif, is that me? I would cut my tongue to pieces if it didn't speak for my heart this evening!' rage and madness were constricting Haroon's heart to a blithering lump.

Throwing open the door of his jeep, Haroon was about to jump down when he espied Latif standing under the myrtle like the demon of darkness. This slick, handsome demon stirred; probably, feeling the warmth of his friend's dark gaze, and strolled toward the jeep nonchalantly.

"How prompt you are?" Latif opened the passenger door unceremoniously, and leaned back on his seat comfortably.

"What N in the world you were doing in that black hole of a shade?" Haroon flung his inquiry without looking at him. "Giving devil the opportunity of seizing you by the throat and wringing you dry of sanity at this hour of the evening, as Ali would say," he added, swerving around the oval driveway to get back on the road.

"You are getting in the habit of quoting Ali, it's not healthy, you know," Latif commented with disapproval. "Look at that splinter of a moon, make a wish."

"I am working on my wishes with actions, you dolt! You need your Wish granted more than I do? Why don't you make a wish?" was Haroon's enigmatic missile of a response.

"You are so very mysterious, are you not? What do you mean?" Latif watched the scintillating array of cypress' alongside the road with utmost absorption.

"And you have mastered the art of ignorance, my Sufi friend," Haroon teased, concentrating on the winding road ahead. "You are in love with Balzeeb, deny as much as you will. Your happiness would make me wretched, but I would befriend it just for the sake of our true friendship, if you wish to..."

"You wretched fool!" interrupted Latif with abrupt vehemence. "Don't you beg me to come with you every time she invites us? I go along with you, not that I am dying for a glimpse of her beauty, but because you are such a coward. Yes, I have been in love since...am still, and will always be, but can't marry...and in love, not the way you think, so have no fear on my account..." his vehemence was dying, replaced with confusion. "Why don't you propose to her, and I would be relieved to be dismissed from the duties of chaperoning? Concerning the death-toll of her former husbands, you are afraid of dying, are you?" he contemplated aloud.

"Dying, more likely, with chill and fever, when I sit opposite her stricken with mad longings," Haroon began dreamily. "I am a coward, I must admit. Can't explain the terror which seizes me when I think of proposing? Some sort of ominous awe, cutting my heart to bleeding lumps and searing my thoughts with a brand of despair so deep that I succumb to the violence of mute agony and worship. No! Something inside me is weeping and grieving always, as if mourning some loss, which is not mine, yet entirely mine. Strange and astonishing visions come to me during odd hours of the day and night. Dreams whirling! Chasms shattering! And I am a part of those dreams and chasms, emptiness gnawing within me, and black hole of nothingness engulfing me. Crests of waves and glittering mists, stark and formless...no, I can't explain it, this beautiful mirage of illusions...reality slipping from under my feet...and yet Balzeeb, sweet agony!"

"*We are such stuff, as dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with sleep,*" Latif quoted under the spell of a mystic sadness he could not banish. "All this lunacy of war and Independence is making us the victims of dreams and dementia! Wonder, how many people are jolted to awakening in the middle of the night, fearing the hand of a cutthroat over their jugular vein? Love warring inside our hearts could be the only remedy to stop the wars of hatred and vengeance," he closed his eyes, as if to shut out the ravages of misery and bloodshed. "Could anyone ever truly love? I thought I did, the first time I saw Balzeeb...but then years and eons, and I still think I do?"

"*O, they love least, who let men know of their love,*" Haroon's thoughts spilled a spontaneous quote, as he took a sharp turn leading toward the beloved mansion.

"An alien drama addict and intruder! Didn't know this bard of London could visit us in these glens and valleys?" Latif sloughed off his sadness, his look eager and searching.

"Shakespeare is not an alien, but a friend of the world!" Haroon's heart was singing with elation at the mere sight of the mansion at the end of the long driveway lined on both sides with elms and cedars. "He might as well be our uncle if not our cousin? The charlatans of academia around here are claiming that Shakespeare was born in Arabian peninsula, and that his name was Sheik Pir, not Shakespeare!"

A volley of laughter from the lips of these friends was a mingling of hysteria and delirium. Both sat rolling in their seats like two school boys, struck by the bolts of hilarity and amusement. And when they bolted down the passage, their laughter seemed to kiss the livid lips of the evening, already flushed with fatigue and outrage. The crimson streaks on the horizon like the painted sails of a lost ship had absorbed their roller-coaster mirth before they were led into the palatial drawing-room of their lady love. Both

were turned into the pillars of attention and propriety as they sat conversing with Balzeeb. Latif was feeling at ease with himself as far as his thoughts were concerned, and encouraged by the passionate flow of his compliments which were making Balzeeb happy, he could not fail to notice. Haroon, on the contrary, was sinking deeper and deeper into the pool of his anguished silence he dared not break, lest he make a fool of himself. He sat gazing at Balzeeb like a devotee who would lay bare his soul at the feet of his patron saint, if permitted. This portrait of loveliness was shuddering inside his heart like a vestal lily. The corals and sapphires at her throat, and the fire of rubies on her lips were carving his longings to kisses mute and bruised. He himself was carved like a statue of ice, numb and unmelting. Only aware of the shafts of beauty, and words bouncing off him in bubbles of glass, ethereal and soundless. One such bubble was penetrating his awareness, and lending him sight to notice the velvets and damasks on the furniture and the gilded paintings on the walls. His gaze was lured back to the portrait of his heart, her silken raiments the color of sunshine, were luring him to their warmth. Her ruby lips were pouring pearls of poetry which his poetic senses could not help but gather.

"You two are the dearest of my friends, and I need none other," Balzeeb's very eyes were whispering the songs of a lonesome brook. "Even the tragedy of war and atrocities overshadowing the joy of Independence have not robbed my friends of their talent in spreading gossip. Such base and malicious accusations! Well, no more talk of this. How pleasant it is to have you both to brighten my evenings! As long as you two visit me now and then, I fear no friends who have turned foes."

"A slave to your wishes, Princess! Whenever you command, I will be here," Latif murmured with a gallant bow of his head.

"And this slave to your beauty has no other wish, but to obey," a lone plea was torn out of Haroon's anguished silence, and he himself was shaken by its abrupt assault.

"Oh, such delicious flatteries, they make me swoon with joy," Balzeeb's very eyes were sparkling with mirth. "Sweet and adorable friends, you should visit me often! Though accustomed to solitude, I crave for warmth and sweetness."

"Dare I voice my own longings, Princess, which thirst for the sweetness of your voice!" Latif was flustered by his own audacity and confession. "But I must starve my longings this evening, for I am destined to cut open the heart of one of my patients in order to mend his clogged arteries," he murmured a lie and seemed chilled and confused by his own words.

"Sweet friend, such longings may prove to be a canker inside the throb of a true friendship?" Balzeeb smiled. "And yet I know, the longings of a pure heart between friends never corrupt the sacred river of true friendship," the blue oceans in her eyes were profound and shimmering.

"Be assured, Princess, such is the purity of my longings," Latif rose to his feet in conformity with his will-less thoughts and expressions. His gaze was turning to Haroon under the spell of daze and stupor. "Sorry, Haroon, forgot to mention before...this patient of mine. Are you driving, or may I borrow your jeep?"

"My chauffeur..." Balzeeb eased herself up slowly and reluctantly.

"You are welcome," Haroon breathed quickly, his heart thundering and somersaulting. "As long as you don't forget to give me a ride after the heart is cleared of all obstruction and the patient is comfortably sedated," he managed one wisp of humor, bandaging his own heart to some sort of discipline. "Would be delighted to stay if the Princess would permit..." his gaze was returning to the sweet

Scaffold of Beauty where his heart lay suspended in one plea of agony.

"I would be delighted, doubly so, if Latif could stay too, but duty always serves as a tyrant over friendship," Balzeeb's laughing eyes swept both friends in one sparkling embrace, as she sank back on her velvety couch.

"Good-bye, Princess, I would not neglect to taste the sweetness of your generosity late this evening," Latif marched past Haroon without meeting his searching gaze. *"Injury most sweet, you will not ever serve as a tyrant to my longings pure,"* one delirious epigram tumbled over his shoulders as he vanished behind the double doors wainscoted with gauze.

"This precious moment...to be alone with you, I have seen in my dreams, how often..." Haroon murmured in some sort of daze after Latif was gone. "Strange, how dreams are the only reality worth living...this moment has been with me, always! You have been with me always, centuries and centuries rolling past, and we are together...does this make any sense to you, Princess..." he rose to his feet and drifted toward the marble hearth as if sleep-walking. "I count myself fortunate in meeting my Dream face-to-face, in life, in this lifetime, in reality, or is it? Thank you, Princess, thank you for letting me stay," his heart was caught inside the Bubble of Psyche where agony supreme was on the verge of collapsing.

"Fortunes all mine, Dr. Haroon, these cold, silent rooms whisper to me the mysteries of those centuries you have dreamt, revealing strange secrets obscured from our sight," Balzeeb's confession was barely audible, her eyes suddenly feverish and glittering. "I am glad you stayed. You are welcome to stay in this cold, cold desert of a mansion called home."

"And in your heart, my dear Princess?" one rose-petal of an endearment was plucked from Haroon's wounded heart.

"The doors of my heart stay open, welcoming all! Foes and friends, and even saints and sinners," Balzeeb's voice as well as her thoughts seemed not to belong to her. Even her heart was not her own, chilled by some sorrow so deep which she could neither dispel, nor fathom.

"I love you, Balzeeb, utterly and absolutely!" the thunder and violence in Haroon's heart were uttering these words, not his lips. "What kind of love is this? More like a disease, a madness...I am getting addicted to agony and suffering, it seems? My heart ravished with desire and longing...no, love could not be so painful...and yet I have tasted its sweetness too? Where was it, centuries ago. In the very same glens and valleys, you have always been with me, loving you always...why this pain now, this heartrending weight of grief and sorrow...a torment supreme, my desire and your Beauty..." his heart was weeping in shame, burying its face under the veil of tears and dementia.

"Didn't know, my beauty, so cruel!" Balzeeb's eyes were sparkling with fever and mischief. "Had I known, I would have left it behind a veil, in eternal mourning," her heart was rejoicing, not mourning.

"How could a madman express the poetry of his love to a beautiful Princess like you!" exclaimed Haroon, his hands entwined behind his back in one fierce knot. "You are dearer to me than my life, Balzeeb," his lips murmured this prayer as if consecrating some holy truth.

"Even a madman is no stranger to the art of flattery!" splinters of mischief were escaping the cold slab of Balzeeb's heart. "I have yet to accustom myself to the poetry of courtship with passions inconstant," a tremor of joy without the sweetness of pain was trembling upon her lips.

"Inconstant indeed!" Haroon's lips were tasting the blaze of despair curling up from his volcanic heart. "If you could only see the tempests raging inside my heart? The

fireworks of hope and agony! The tearing, bleeding storms in longings? Deformity and madness! Misery and affliction," he swung around and stood facing her.

"If that is the only crumb of a proposal from the blight in your heart, then I must accept, and accept quickly before devastation consumes you completely," Balzeeb murmured in awe, almost stunned by the smoldering of agony in his burning eyes. "I guess, my consent is as artless as your proposal...if I am not mistaken," she added, as Haroon stood there mute and astounded. Rather dazzled by some miracle divine which was blinding his sight.

"Bal...zeeb..." one rapturous moan escaped his lips, and he drifted toward her like one moth toward a bright flame. "Balzeeb," another low moan escaped his trembling lips, as he folded her into his arms, kissing with a wild abandon his Joy Supreme.

Chapter Six

Drugged with joy and fatigue, Haroon slumped into his chair as if hugging the comfort of his bed. He had just completed his morning rounds in this dimly-lit graveyard of a hospital. The dust of war was still caked on the bodies of the maimed and the injured, and settled into his eyes like the stormy nights which had nothing to do with the present, but past and future. The scanty furniture in his office and the voluminous books on the crowded shelf appeared to spin in slow motion as he closed his eyes. For the past two days and nights he had been operating on a fresh surge of patients with gangrenes and wounds swollen to balloon-size enormities. Mental and physical exhaustion was seething into his very veins like a fever, but the fever of joy inside him was lending him inner strength to keep on ministering the ailing and the afflicted.

This Fever of Joy he had contracted but recently, after his engagement with Balzeeb was solemnized in a private ceremony, attended only by his family members. Even Latif was not invited, and the engagement was to be a secret affair not to be discussed. But Haroon could feel that all the medical staff in his hospital knew, including Latif with whom he had had no real conversation since months. How this knot of happiness had unfolded like wildfire, Haroon had no idea, but he was content as long as no one approached him with the missiles of intrusion and curiosity. He had had his portion of intrusion, his parents had come from Karachi to attend the engagement, and his dear mother was still with him to besiege him with questions dour and probing. One small sprig of reprieve was handed to him this morning, as his scheduled army of patients were transferred to another physician who had just returned after

two weeks of leave-of-absence. So, Haroon with his eyes closed and his stethoscope dangling over his waist, had abandoned himself to rest and reverie.

‘Balzeeb, Balzeeb,’ Haroon's thoughts were repeating her name as if chanting a prayer and falling into trance. His thoughts, never tiring of returning to the path of love, were familiar with each moment of time spent with Balzeeb. Months of courtship rolled inside the perfumed sheets of memory, were wafting the scent of joys precious and unutterable. He was filled with the light of love, though painful and blinding, it was revealing to him the mysteries of the world. A few glimpses here and there, but he was lured toward the Lamp of Perfection burning high on the top of the heavens. From its moonbeam reflections whatever he could snatch, Perfection could be seen glowing on the face of this earth like an exquisite tapestry. If one were to efface the colors of pain and sorrow, the bright hues of joy and passion would be dimmed. And if the black silk of death was torn apart, the gold thread of life would unspool into one formless heap. The rude patterns of greed and malice, of hatred and malevolence, of zeal and cruelty, and of all passions wild and violent, would disfigure the beauty of love, virtue, compassion so intricately woven, if ripped apart. The portrait of Unity would collapse. The Order of Universe crumbling! Nothing to accentuate the gentle rose of living, loving, aspiring minds and hearts where vice is the friend of virtue, goading goodness to fight evil, and to discover how Truth cradles lies and how angels bless demons inside the generous womb of cosmos and entirety.

Haroon's body was relaxed, his arms limp, his head sagging. He had seen this glimpse of a Perfection, not once, but many times, and now it was bathing him again in its tender light. He had watched it particularly, when gazing into the Beautiful eyes of his Beloved. And his beloved was no other, but Balzeeb. She was with him even

now, pouring pain and elation into his opiate senses, along with some bliss ineffable which he could feel only when drenched with the mists of dreams illusive and allusive. But right now something inside him was stirring, an ache nameless, some yearning inviolate. His eyes were opening, light fleeing, sadness descending. The image of Latif was alighting in his mind like an old portrait yellowed with age...he had not talked to his friend in months and his heart was filled with pity and remorse. Actually, he had seen him this morning, in the hallway, during one of his rounds, a pale, lean ghost of a figure leaning over the counter in stupor and fatigue. Something inside Haroon's heart was snapping, some crackling absurdity of a longing to see his friend. Before he could haul himself to his feet, Latif materialized like a phantom, flying through the half opened door, and sinking into a chair opposite him. The mahogany desk with laminated top divided the two friends like a murky stream of glass cluttered with vials and books.

"I knew you would come! It's a mystery, don't ask?" Haroon smiled.

"Yes, my sage friend! Can you divine the mystery of this stranger intruding upon you?"

"You are no stranger, Great Sufi, you know that," Haroon slouched lower just short of falling off his chair. "And how could a friend ever intrude upon a friend. And as to mysteries, I am no diviner. Tell me, why are you intruding? Can't you see a horde of patients waiting?" he teased with a sparkle of mischief.

"To offer my heartfelt congratulations on your engagement," Latif dropped this missile, failing in his attempt to smile.

"A delightful surprise! Who told you?" Haroon beamed with a mingling of regret and sadness.

"A diagnostic routine! Physicians are the first ones to come face-to-face with the fever of excitement," Latif retorted caustically.

"Curiosity is killing me with blows violent, Latif! Now, truly, how did you find out?" Haroon demanded.

"To lessen the impact of those blows...maybe, one of the maids, or Balzeeb's own lady-in-waiting?" Latif grunted enigmatically.

"Now, why didn't I think of that?" Haroon smiled wistfully.

"You don't think, Haroon! You just feel? And feeling without thinking is like swimming inside the puzzle of time where all pieces are lost into the river of timelessness," the enigmatic gleam in Latif's eyes was kindled to one polished surge. "But let's not get into the mire of these dull profundities since our minds are dead under the weight of fatigue. Curiosity is the only topic worth cultivating! How is your mother?" he asked abruptly.

"Indulgent as ever...and bilious," Haroon offered cheerfully. "She thinks I am horrid as ever, and have added a new word to her endearments, infidel? Balzeeb is a heathen name, she has told me a million times. She has even turned Ali against me, telling him that I am bewitched and shouldn't be marrying an old widow?"

"She doesn't approve then?" Latif was trying to be cheerful, but failing miserably.

"Not now...now that she has seen the *old hag*, as she called Balzeeb," pity and remorse were gnawing at Haroon's heart like the talons of a vulture, as he became aware of his friend's misery. "Mother is very dear to my heart and I wanted her blessings more than my father's. So I asked her if she could give her consent to our marriage, warmly and sincerely. And she said, it couldn't be otherwise. Strange, the way she said it?"

"And your father?" Latif's voice was dull and sinking.

"He is a liberal, that means a devout follower of my mother's interests. He does what she says," Haroon's own thoughts were growing dull, and probing the ashes of misery in his friend's heart. "Don't pretend, Latif, that you

are not interested in knowing the details? How did I propose? When am I getting married?"

"Not really, you poet and diviner! I have no intention of exploring the matter which doesn't concern me any more," Latif was quick to don his stoic mask, eliciting one pale smile. "The pain of desire and yearning which I had felt years ago, is silenced now. Peace and silence...yes, my soul is calm and unwanting."

"No, my friend, you would never stop loving Balzeeb," Haroon murmured sadly. "Why don't you scream and claw my eyes out? Let yourself be consumed into the fires of rage and jealousy and come out absolved of all grief and misery? Can't endure to see you chilled under this glacier of despair? If you could see yourself in the mirror now, sitting there just like...well, that expression, can't find the right word...yes, condemned?"

"You have found the right word, I have no doubt!" one wisp of a dry, brittle laughter escaped Latif's lips. "Condemned in the name of love where love is no more. Some sort of joyless, loveless inertia. No pain, no sweetness. Even fear sits in there somewhere like a petrified rock. Let's not ever talk about this love in the name of friendship. The bond of friendship endures, while love might bloom and wither in a season. And that petrified rock inside me might yet explode, fearing for your life more..."

"Don't suffer fear on my account, Latif! You have suffered enough...in love," Haroon interrupted with an impatient wave of his arm. "I am beginning to think you are demented. A demented Sufi! Yet what's the difference, don't Sufi and dementia belong to the same order of mystic madness? And yet, fear has been your mystic master, not love and dementia. You have let your fear rise to the height of absurdity. Do you think that this love and marriage is going to be the end of me? You might be correct in assuming such a misfortune? But is it...a

misfortune? Is death a tragedy? At least I would have the bliss of loving, and in death knowing not the torments of joy and pain! You have buried your joy in living death, and don't even know what you fear you might have embraced without fear?"

"I didn't plan the death of my joy. On its own accord, it has fallen into some dark pit of silence, and I dare not retrieve it," was Latif's wearied comment.

"Inertia, apathy, banality! You are becoming a victim of these three most hated of vices, and they are going to attack your vital organs if you do not think of cultivating the virtue in living," Haroon began with a sudden vehemence as if his own joy was splintering into smithereens by the contagion of his friend's mute misery. "You think you have guarded your youth in a cage of ice where no joys and sorrows could penetrate. But is it worth living in that cold, brutal world of life where death itself could not breed life into the cycles of living and dying?"

"You think you can dissect my life on the operating table of stoicism where hideous vices like inertia, apathy and banality could be seen growing like the putrid wounds under the microscopic inspection of a mad physician?" Latif exclaimed suddenly, as if stung by the icicle of his own ice cubicle. "No, my friend, you would find nothing there but a benign tumor of inertia, and that too swaddled into the bandages of stoic bliss, which few of us are privileged to find and possess. And as to the cycles of living and dying, that's a poet's dream! I only know this life...and what happens after death I don't want to know...my fear of death itself forbids me to think."

"More likely a mystic's dream I should say. So after all, you are neither a Sufi, nor a mystic. What a pity? Only a dull physician, witnessing the inevitability of birth and death everyday, and using not his imagination as to the mystery of renewal and surcease?" Haroon contemplated aloud. *'You were dead and He brought you back to life,*

and He will return you to the dead and then restore you to life. Whereupon you shall go back to Him.' Ponder upon this, Latif, and you might learn to love the pain in living, not hate the fear of death. For most of us, the courage to live is much more frightening than the fear of death itself."

"An infidel, quoting verses from the Quran! You are surely going mad, with joy or pain, I am not sure?" Latif's eyes were bright with the fever of pain and amusement. His stoic facade crumbling. *"The animals have their caves, and the birds of sky their nests, but the son of man has no place to rest his head."*

"What does that mean?" was Haroon's baffled query.

"Jesus said that, don't you know?" Latif murmured laconically.

"Of course, I know that, you dolt, but what does that have to do with our conversation? What do you really mean?" Haroon's thoughts were foundering inside the pools of weariness and incredulity.

"It means, I guess, that we really have no home, in life or death," was Latif's noncommittal response.

"Home is where one's heart is, have you not heard about this silly adage?" Haroon's thoughts were bound on the road to levity.

"I have given my heart away, so I will never have a home!" Latif too was feeling light and giddy.

"Better get your heart back and put it back inside your breast, before you wander into exile in all the cycles of your life or death," one blithering comment was Haroon's only response.

"Two demented doctors! There is some truth in rumors, I am beginning to believe," Latif began to laugh. "Are you going to invite me to see your mother, or should I impose uninvited?"

"You better come tonight, she is leaving tomorrow," Haroon shot him a piercing look.

"Can't do that tonight. Dr. Ishfaq is lying low of melancholia after losing his wits, that is, his prize of a wisdom tooth! That is how young doctors are if you didn't know? Since he can't attend the cripple and the dying, the glutton me offered," Latif's own wits were shattering under the weight of pain and fatigue. "Can you coax your mother into staying? I would really love to see her."

"If you can coax her? She hates traveling...might even stay a lifetime, and I would be doomed," Haroon feigned a lament.

"Shame on you! Your own mother and you want to get rid of her?" pain and amusement in Latif's eyes were gathering stars of hilarity.

"You would too, if you had to listen to the same stories ten times in one evening," Haroon admitted shamelessly.

"What stories? I love stories. Tell me one?" was Latif's capricious request.

"How do I know? I can't remember a word of what I hear," Haroon resigned to smiling.

"Then I must coax her to stay?" Latif challenged with his accustomed blithe.

"To think of it, I do remember one," Haroon began with an impatient wave of self-surrender. "A war story, if you are not already sick and tired of looking at the living ruins of war and devastation?"

"Who is not, but might as well heal ourselves by drinking All down to the very dregs. Sweet hemlock, a sure antidote for poison, as our wise mentors would agree," Latif blistered forth thoughtlessly. "I want to hear it, just to while away the hours with my groaning companions of the night, if not for anything else."

"As real as a nightmare, this is no bedtime story. It could be though," Haroon vacillated, his look poignant. "A bus-load of Muslims who were fleeing India to find home in Pakistan, had nothing to share but tragic stories. One of them is about a lady who was forced to leave all her

belongings behind in order to save her life and the lives of her children. Numb with grief and shock, she had uttered not even one word during the entire journey, until the bus was half way toward the border of Pakistan. It was a quiet night, and she had jumped to her feet, crying, 'fire, fire'. Panic and commotion were the result, but the driver was wise not to stop; probably familiar with the bouts of insanity on such journeys stark and dangerous. Had he stopped, the passengers on the bus would have been slaughtered by the bands of Hindus, much like the Hindus exposed to similar acts of violence by the Muslims around the villages of the Punjab."

"Wonder, how Mr. Jinnah, the father of our nation, is keeping his sanity intact amidst this flood of the homeless and the impoverished?" Latif's interest in the stories was dwindling.

"That lean and avaricious man! He would drink the blood of the orphans, if he was sure that that would double his riches." Haroon's thoughts were leaning toward the staff of rage.

"Let's our warring thoughts rest, and talk of something pleasant. When is the wedding? At least I should know in case I am not invited?" Latif murmured capriciously.

"You would be invited, you should know," the bubbles of tenderness were swallowing Haroon's rage. "As soon as Balzeeb fixes a propitious date..." he paused, his expression at once boyish and mischievous. "Strange as it may seem, but I was afraid of you. I thought if I told you about our engagement, you would rave like a madman? Or, not say a word...which could have been worse than raving? And here you are, all calm and indifferent. Are you not consumed with jealousy, at least? What a disappointment! I must admit, I avoided you...didn't have the guts to tell you."

"I avoided you too, but for different reasons! Don't ask, and we are even," Latif elicited one snort of a laughter.

"But be assured, my friend, that my heartfelt wishes for your long life and happiness are always with you."

"Long life with just happiness and with no ripples of pain to break its monotony would be insufferably boring, but I might learn to live with such painless banality," Haroon shot a witless epigram, his sherry eyes sparkling with the wine of joy."

"With Ali as your foe and friend, how could you ever have a dull moment in your life?" Latif's thoughts were gathering the clouds of envy, if not of jealousy. And the latter had nothing to do with Ali.

"Ali, a friend for sure. He can be foe to none! A sage and a mentor, yes, he is a blessing," Haroon murmured reverently.

"Could never guess that he would approve of...well, your engagement? Did he offer any counsel, or construed a string of arguments?" Latif seemed to be brooding, not asking.

"His heart is a battleground of omens and divinations, and he has waged all wars. Now resigned to the idea, I guess. Only saying that he is happy because I am happy."

"Your mother, she is the one, very difficult to convince? Is she happy and satisfied? Latif's ruminations were surfacing involuntarily.

"Mother! Difficult and persistent as ever. After subjecting Balzeeb under a lengthy inquisition, she was impressed if not convinced. She admired Balzeeb for her wit, though some of the questions she asked her, blew my wits away, plunging me deep into misery and mortification," the reminiscent look in Haroon's eyes was changing from regret to fondness. "She asked Balzeeb about her past and parents. And Balzeeb's response, 'I am blessed in forgetting my past entirely,' threw mother into a fit of tears and laughter. I never thought that she would touch the topic of age, but she did, and I would have died instantly, had not Balzeeb sang most charmingly, 'Centuries

old! An eternity lies between my forgotten past and forgettable present."

"Haven't seen your father since ages. He is gone back, I hear. He is sure to return for the wedding, I am sure. I would see him then," Latif stirred as if ready to get up, but couldn't move.

"He wouldn't miss his son's wedding. Especially, when he says it's the mating of the fates," Haroon was becoming aware of his own wearied thoughts, and of his friend's weariness which had clamped him to his chair. "Why are we discussing inanities when we should be sleeping so comfortably as we are?" Haroon's eyes were drooping shut.

"I agree," an overpowering sense of fatigue was Latif's nearest refuge. *'O God, Thou knowest that Paradise weighs not with me so much as the wing of a gnat. If Thou befriendest me by Thy recollection, and sustaineth me with Thy love, and makest it easy for me to obey thee, then give Thou Thy Paradise to whomsoever Thou wilt.'*

"What are you babbling about?" was Haroon's opiate query. "Paradise...where the hell..."

"Abraham's prayer. I was chanting Abraham's prayer..." Latif was murmuring to himself.

*"Now is the pitch gloom for us made dazzling
Since thou thy splendor givest me for my guidance
And when thou from mine eye in outward seeming
Art gone, I cast it inward, there to find thee,"*

Haroon's psyche itself was reciting this refrain, conversing with his friend in half slumber.

"Love means that the attributes of the lover are changed into those of the Beloved. Now he lives in accordance with the saying of God: When I love him, I will be His eye by which He sees and His hearing by which He hears and His hand by which He reaches out..." Why this gloom...love...is beautiful..." Latif was carrying on with his own thoughts. Astonishingly enough, Haroon too was

participating in this conversation of the sleepy and the forgetful.

*"Listen to the tale of the reed flute
 Complaining of the pain of separation
 Since they tore me from the reed-bed
 My laments move man and woman to tears
 O, for a bosom torn like mine with the wound of
 severance
 That I may tell it to the pain of longing
 He who is far from his place of origin
 Longs for the Day of the Return
 In every company I tell my wailing song
 I have consorted with the unhappy and the joyous
 Each one becomes my friend for his own sake
 None asks the secrets of my heart
 My secret is not far from my plaint
 But eye and ear lack light to discern it
 Body from Soul and Soul from body are not veiled
 Yet to none is it given to see the Soul
 A fire in this noise of the reed-flute
 May whoso has no fire be naught
 The fire of Love has caught the reed
 The ferment of Love has changed the wine
 The reed is comrade to him who has lost his Friend
 Its strains rend the veil from our hearts
 It tells the mystic path of blood
 It recounts the love of Majnun for Layla
 In our woe life's days are grown untimely
 My days move hand in hand with anguish
 Though they pass away thus, let them go..."*

Latif was oblivious to the reed-voice in his suffered heart.

"Rumi, Rumi," both the friends were confirming this truth in sleep, lost in the bliss of oblivion and surrender.

Chapter Seven

The grand mansion of Balzeeb which had also become Haroon's home after his wedding, was lit to starry effulgence on this eve of their first wedding anniversary. Haroon and Balzeeb were in their bedroom, intent on getting dressed, and saying very little to each other. Somehow, this large bedroom with mahogany furniture and canopied bed seemed to waft the scent of hush and quiet, as if forbidding its occupants the art of speech. Paradoxically, inside the hearts of both, were fury and thunder, which they were trying to tame, lest it puncture the facade of their happiness together. Like two boats caught on the waves of a stormy sea, they were forever drifting apart, and fighting the tempests to get closer. But no shore was in view, and the oars which had braved the churning waves were losing their strength and tenacity. The fates dark and spurious which had brought them together, were now rowing the boats of their lives in any direction they chose, while they could only gape and wonder. Both were in love, both holding on to the surface-calm of the raging oceans, both wading toward happiness, both foundering inside the churning waters of the imponderables.

‘What did he expect? Fireworks from the very heavens, and angels lowering rills of bliss and rapture on his wedding night?’ Haroon's thoughts were mocking in solemn glee the broken heart which he carried well-bandaged inside the casket of his body. In fact, he was donning his starched shirt with utmost care, as if not to bruise his aching heart, lest it explode at the feet of his beautiful goddess.

This beautiful goddess was seated at her polished chiffonier, oblivious to the pain and yearning in Haroon's

heart, and plunged deep into the simmering depths of her own chaos and confusion. Balzeeb's heart, painless and unsuffering, was stirring the serenity in her thoughts to curiosity and bewilderment. Inside the corridors of her mind were chambers cold and polished. Love was there without a breath of pain and sweetness. Grief was frozen solid in centuries of time. No tears could be seen into the glassy eyes of misfortunes. Death and tragedy were mists white and glittering. One marble shrine was installed in the middle. A deserted monument of prayer to some unknown deity, sealed by splinters of ice, and only chinks of silence its bright windows.

‘Am I heartless? Why is Haroon so unhappy? Do I love?’ Balzeeb's thoughts were wandering in broken files of joyless ruminations. ‘Why do I always feel cold and empty? Untouched by loss or tragedy? Loving only life! What life? Centuries of longings to love and to be loved? Where are they? Could this cold, cold heart ever be torn with grief or despair? Who am I? A lost soul in the wilderness of nothingness? No mother, no father, no sister, no brother...not a soul to grieve and mourn for? Yet, I had husbands, why couldn't I mourn? What is this need for mourning and grieving? Why, why? Just because Haroon is unhappy? Do I love him? Would grief visit me if...’ her thoughts were entering the valleys of death where her three husbands lay buried in shining armor of peace. ‘What is this curse, falling in love again and again, without the pain and sweetness of loving and cherishing? Haroon is unhappy...drinking too much...where's the pain, my pain?’ she seemed to be hypnotized by the icy blue reflection in her eyes, so stark, so bright.

Haroon was oblivious to the painless thoughts of his enchanting bride, his own rippling with pain and anguish. Tides upon tides of months rolled between the winding sheets of bliss and union which had evaded him so far, were unfolding inside his heart like waves terrible and

raging. Night after night, the fire and hunger of his passion had explored in vain to find bliss in loving the Love of his Life. But the violence of his desire was not even close to attaining what his heart longed for, as if the swollen rivers of his ecstatic desires fell on some idol cold and idolatrous. Are most men doomed to such violence and unsurfeit while searching the souls of their marble goddess' for warmth, for some rapturous accolade, Haroon's own soul had sunk low into despair and disconsolation. Something strange and astonishing was taking hold of him, as if the lamp of his love was lit with misery and hopelessness, and he could not feed it with the oil of Hope. Pain of love with all its raging fury he had experienced before, but this nameless grief and anguish of the eternally accursed was new to him. The hunger and thirst of the oceans for loving warmth of sunshine had settled inside him, and he didn't even know that his soul was constricting in frenzied silence on the verge of death and release.

"Haroon, what have I done? I have failed you in some way? Don't know how?" Balzeeb cried all of a sudden, her gaze fixed to the knotted hands behind his back. "You have grown so sad, so quiet, it breaks my heart. I love you...so much...can't endure it. Am I going to lose you too..." she couldn't breathe, her hands struggling to clasp the emerald lavalier around her throat.

"My love, Forever Sweetness!" Haroon swung around as if stung. "You are my joy and treasure, sadness could never enter there. Silence is the tongue of the lovers, don't you know that?" he was at her side in a flash, helping her with the lavalier around her ivory throat.

"Our first wedding anniversary and it seems like you are crushed under the weight of a glacier?" Balzeeb's eyes were locked into the glitter of sadness from her husband's eyes inside this tomb of a mirror.

"Look into my heart, love, the fire of love crackling and spluttering! Where do you see sadness?" Haroon smiled. Awed by the glorious blue in her eyes, his heart sinking.

"One whole year of unutterable bliss, and my friends thought I would be cold in my grave by now?" he laughed, imprinting a burning kiss on the cold marble of her cheek.

"If guests were not coming this evening, Haroon, you would be grounded in your seat of trial! But it would resume tomorrow, I promise," Balzeeb eased herself up, laughter rippling in her eyes and on her lips. "Would you escort me like a shining knight without the armor of fire and sadness?" she linked her arm into his, her look soft and radiant.

"At your command, my princess," Haroon led her gallantly toward the vast staircase.

The Great Room brimming with Victorian furniture and colorful tapestries was housing more than fifty guests. The tables laden with steaming dishes in buffet-style were ravished and devoured amidst cheers of applause for the host and the hostess. The flagons of wine drained of their amber sweetness were being replenished by the ever-vigilant servants, eager to serve and please every guest. Haroon was foremost in taking advantage of the eagerness of his own servants, sipping and swallowing his wine, as if enacting some religious rite of devotion and offering. Balzeeb was fluttering amongst her guests like a butterfly with the color of meadows on her silken wings. Waves upon waves of gaiety and laughter were flooding the Great Room with the currents of warmth and excitement. The strings of compliments from the quivers of the inebriated guests were shot at random, mingling with the notes of music in some sort of envious strain.

"Isn't Balzeeb beautiful? A rare bloom in these valleys of Khanaspur," Dr. Ishfaq was whispering to the besotted surgeon opposite him.

"What priceless rugs...I love Persian and Aubusson..." one young wife was rapt with admiration. "This Chinese chandelier, my favorite," her husband was mute and brooding.

"How light and color are woven in these tapestries, a delight and wonder, though I am swooning..." a couple of ladies were smitten with envy.

"I didn't expect this husband of hers would last this long..." one secret admirer was pouring venom into the ears of his friend.

"Look at Latif! Ogling and devouring the beautiful hostess without shame..." one medical colleague was taking the other one into confidence.

"I would sell my soul to have such wealth..." an officer was commenting to his boss.

"These odious rumors, they make me nauseous..." a group of young wives were sated with food and gossip.

"You are drowning yourself in wine, Haroon. Take care, the host is not permitted to get drunk," Latif admonished with a friendly smile.

"Had Balzeeb set you on this to be my chaperone?" was Haroon's blithering comment.

"Does she guide me in my concern when I catch you red-handed while on duty?" Latif breathed a surreptitious warning.

"On this happy occasion, my ascetic friend, how could I not help but drink?"

"Let's step outside for a breath of fresh air...to cool the fever of your drinking, if I may suggest?" Latif held him by the arm and guided him through the French doors into the garden in the back.

"Are you happy?" Latif asked softly, as soon as they stepped out. "The wine in your glass is not happiness, Haroon. It just makes you drunk," he commented, making him stroll beside him on the unpaved path.

"This glass is filled with love, not wine," was Haroon's quick response, half delirious, half inebriated. "And I am not drunk, but intoxicated with joy."

"Bloated with joy, you don't even know that pain and misery are gnawing at your heart," Latif breathed the night air deeply, as if to drown his own anguished thoughts. "We are past pretending, you know, and you have already confessed more than you should, during your bouts of drinking, if you recall."

"I hate birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, anything festive or solemn...they remind me of...well, of something I want to forget..." Haroon quaffed his wine, and flung his glass to the ground.

"And you call this, happiness?" Latif smiled, watching the glass hit the trunk of an elm, crashing into beautiful splinters. "A joyful, passionate life crackling into splinters of pain and loneliness?"

"If men only knew about the drought of all throbbing passions, they would hunger for the fruit of death," was Haroon's giddy comment.

"They know it too well, Haroon, and still crave for the cankerous fruits which only life deigns to offer," Latif began profoundly. "But nothing satisfies their hungers, and they go on searching for more, singed with greed and afflicted with ambition to conquer each and every strip of land inside the heart of each man, if not of the world. A paradox, you better not explore while you are drunk. As for your happiness, you are doling it out into the hands of oblivion. You have the love of your life...a beautiful wife..." he couldn't say more, his own heart cringing with sorrow.

"Yes, Balzeeb! Lovelier than a Dream," giddiness and delirium were loosening Haroon's tongue. "Though I must be a fool to think that happiness is attainable. I don't know how I feel, or why the purity of joy and love eludes me? What I feel I can't describe, but it does feel much like a

sore on my knee when I was a child. This sore didn't heal all summer, exposed to all sorts of injuries...even a small touch against something, it bled and ached for hours. That's how my heart feels, and it is swollen with the pain of love, and this love is like a hunger? I feel famished, longing for warmth, hungering for something...we love each other, madly and absolutely. And yet, it feels like, I am fire, and she is ice...and this mad, dull poem keeps spinning in my head.

I am death, and she is the Life

A Light in darkness revealed

How fates cultivate such strife

Fire and ice in one flame are sealed'

"Why? Who wrote this? How it came into my head, I have no idea," he stood by the fountain, fascinated by the cascading dewdrops filled with light from the lamps below.

"Maybe, Balzeeb dropped this quatrain into the river of your heart, swollen with love?" Latif's own pain was welcoming rags of humor. "If you stay sober and not recite such quatrains in front of the hospital buffoons, you might catch a few whiffs of rumors floating around. Your own devoted colleagues, if I may infer, are rewriting a bulletin of absurdities. *Balzeeb is a witch, they say, who cannot help but murder her husbands, and Haroon is her next victim?*"

"You are the first one to believe, I am sure!" one volley of inebriated mirth escaped Haroon's lips. "What more juicy tales they cook, besides cooking their patients in pots of pain and death?"

"I am the suspected villain in all these supposedly gruesome murders. Haven't you noticed how everyone bestows upon me the honor of 'suspicion' with daggers in their eyes? Watch out, Dr. Haroon, I am your most hated foe, the very face of death!" waves upon waves of pain-mirth escaped Latif's own lips.

More lapping of waves in giddy mirth were mingling with the hilarity of these two friends, as some guests were leaving. Latif was the first one to notice, dragging Haroon along, so that the drunken host could bid farewell to his guests. Haroon was happy, shaking hands and blathering, and just short of staggering or collapsing. Balzeeb was calm and radiant, standing by her husband like some angel sculpted in marble and ivory. Latif was the last one to leave, but not before he had caught a splinter of sarcasm from the lips of a guest, who appeared to be rolling toward his car sated with drink and stupor.

"A feast for a king, and this is only the first anniversary..." this remark from the guest was swallowed by the night silence.

And silence in Latif's own heart was murmuring. "How can I ever stop loving Balzeeb. I have loved her always... always..."

Inside the mansion, the phantoms of the night had stolen into the bedroom, lulling both Haroon and Balzeeb into the comfort of sleep. But keeping watch over them like the brutal guards who were to splinter their rest with dark-hooded dreams and incantations. Haroon was blissfully drunk, staggering to his bed with the assistance of Balzeeb, and not even knowing that the houri of his dreams slept beside him.

"Lift the veil of Illusion, Beloved, and drop the bridal gown of Ignorance at your blessed feet...let me see...You...naked and unashamed..." Haroon was murmuring in his sleep, his own soul naked and cowering. Like a child of the wilderness, he was wandering alone. Lost inside the alleys dark and terrible, and shuddering with fright. The phantom of fear had enveloped his soul like a blanket of ice. Beneath its depths was a mirror-reflection, a pair of blue eyes. His soul was weeping and moaning, mirrored in those liquid pools of sparkling eyes. The eyes of his own soul were glazed and startled, searching for

something he had just lost. What was this loss and grief, splitting his soul into two glittering halves, he was whirled into the chasms of torture and bedlam.

Balzeeb, sleeping by the naked soul of her husband, was entering some torture-chamber in her own nightmarish journey. The phantoms of the night were holding her prisoner inside the cobwebs of truth and delusion. She was struggling for release, followed by the pale, slithering shadows of the dawns and sunsets. Somewhere out there were the mists bright and blinding. Thunder was rolling down from nowhere, and the wind was whistling some tunes sharp and diabolical. She was hurled into a labyrinth of dungeons slimy and grotesque. Rain and sleet were oozing forth from the very walls of prison-darkness. The volcanic womb of earth itself was swallowing her, she was panting and hissing. Her former husbands were materializing in clouds gray and tearful. Their eyes were lowering the bolts of pain and betrayal, and in between the strings of lightning were strewn her own tears of love and hatred. One stark, savage revelation was tearing her flesh, and her lips were bleeding with the downpour of a confession. Yes, yes, her love was fated to turn into the arrows of hatred, and those poisoned arrows were the ones, marking the end of her husbands. Another poisoned arrow was poised over the heart of Haroon, but she was pulling it away, screaming desperately.

‘No, no, I love him...’ Balzeeb’s very soul was slithering away into the darkest pits of agony. The phantoms of the night following her with wands of torture.

‘Beloved, Balzeeb...’ one low moan in Haroon’s psyche was yawning and shivering. The sad, beautiful pallor of dawn was driving the phantoms of the night to exile. Haroon was tossing and turning, his arms reaching out for a warm embrace. Suddenly, he was jolted to awakening as if struck by a thunderbolt.

This thunderbolt had glided into his heart, as his dreamy eyes searched for Balzeeb beside him. At first, he whispered her name, then called aloud, and when no answer came, he heard himself screaming like a madman. Like the one possessed, he was flying from one room to the other, his lungs exploding in agonized cries of, *Balzeeb, Balzeeb*. Bent low under the weight of pain and madness, when he stumbled back into the bedroom, he saw Balzeeb slumped over the bed, her eyes glittering and her arms hugging her knees.

"Where were you? Why didn't you answer?" Haroon could barely breathe, sinking beside her like a man drugged with despair and dementia. "Say something, love, anything...you are shivering...what's wrong? Where did you go..." he held her close, panting and gasping.

"The curse..." one tremor of a sob escaped Balzeeb's lips, her head drooping over his chest.

"What curse, love, you are not well?" Haroon pressed her closer, as if coddling a sick child.

"The curse of life," Balzeeb murmured, her voice distant and toneless.

"You are tired, Balzeeb...one of your nightmares...I myself had one? You never talked like this before? So early...such a wild night...last night? What do you mean by the curse of life?" Haroon's thoughts were opiate, comforting his mad soul.

"The sin," one abstruse, trembling comment was Balzeeb's drowsy response.

"Sin, Life, Curse? You are coming down with some sort of fever, I fear," Haroon's soul was speaking, not his thoughts.

"Sin. Life is sin! Birth is sin! Love is sin! Marriage is sin!" Balzeeb's voice was not her own. Some sort of melancholy song was choked inside her throat, as if a lonesome brook was pouring its own magic into words. "Were Eve and Adam not tempted by the fruit of sin, and

fallen into this exile of mortality? Living and dying by the law and virtue of sin and retribution. Branded with sin, they couldn't purge their souls with penance and negation. Instead, multiplying sin by the sinful desire of mating and breeding. Spinning the wheel of birth and death with toil and greed, and prolonging the sin of loving life. The sins of one generation passed on to the next in a continual cycle of death and renewal. That is the curse, the curse of sin, the sin in life! Sins never absolved, never forgiven? Christ dying on the cross for the sins of mankind, and their shoulders still carrying the weight of old sins. Prophet Muhammad washing the sins of the nations with the Creed of Love and Brotherhood, and sins still nurtured by the mud of greed and hatred? Sins conceived in innocence and perceived as..." the gold thread of her alien voice was snipped short suddenly.

"You are still not with me, Balzeeb? Who is speaking through your lips? What are you saying?" Haroon's own voice was infested with trance-like assiduity. "No sins in the monasteries? Doing penance for some sins not ever committed. The pleasures of the world spurned and rejected. Immolating one's life and soul for something inconceivable? A world, dull and intolerable, if there were no children? Gloom, tears and stark silence of the nunneries? What a world, without color, without laughter, without happiness?"

"Happiness! A meaningless word, a worldly paradise of the insane and the deluded?" Balzeeb's razor-thin contemplations were an echo both magical and metaphysical. "The magic and mystery of this word...only a word, polished with the gold of romance and nobility? No one can claim this nugget of gold! It's like a mirage, glittering far, far away, alluring us and always fleeting. No one has ever possessed it, no one will ever possess it...only its yellow kisses, empty and sunlit, skipping ahead of us, tempting us always, toward some mythical ruins untrodden

by time. But suppose, by some miracle divine, I am the first one to possess it? In swoon and rapture, I would conceal it in my soul. It's mine, mine, I would weep with ecstasy. No one can ever touch it. No one can ever steal it. People would flock around me, smitten with jealousy, coveting this nugget of gold called *happiness*? But simply, because it's in my possession. And once, it's known that happiness can be possessed, half its charm and mystery are gone, engendering even contempt and loathing...and yet who can ever taste this nectar of a Thought..." her razor-thin soul was constricting and stabbing her thoughts with one violent blow.

"Balzeeb!" Haroon was not listening, his slumbering soul itself uttering this low moan. "Where did you go? I went from room to room...you were nowhere...I was going insane? Thought, I lost you? Why don't you tell me, where were you?"

"A secret not to be revealed, Haroon," Balzeeb claimed Haroon's hand, pressing it to her cold cheek.

"A secret!" Haroon's eyes were shot open, his heart thundering. "Is there something so terrible that you can't even tell me, your husband?"

"The curse, remember? The old sin! And this life?" Balzeeb muttered deliriously.

"Balzeeb, you are not well...you are raving..." Haroon felt her pulse. "Let me get you something...maybe, half a pill of ..."

"No, Haroon, I don't need any medicine!" Balzeeb interrupted fiercely. "You don't know what you are saying? Only if you knew? But you can't, if...If I told this secret to anyone, I would die? And I am afraid of death..." she cupped her face into her hands, her eyes flashing.

"Yes, love, your death would be the death of me, though I am not afraid of death either. Yet, I cannot live without you, I know that..." Haroon held her into his arms. "I had a bad dream, or is this still a dream? You were

dreaming too, it seems, we both were..." he made her lie beside him, stroking her hair and kissing her.

"What was your dream, Haroon?" Balzeeb was drifting back to sleep.

"Something formless...can't remember? Thought, I lost you," an overpowering sense of fatigue was lulling Haroon's thoughts to rest. "We need rest...slept so late...in the morning we will forget about all this," he couldn't keep his eyes open, his body relaxing.

Balzeeb was whirled back into the cobwebs of her former dream. White clouds and saffron mists were dancing around her, a dance of death and resurrection. Minarets of memories were rising and falling like the sand dunes. The cobwebs were washed away by tear-streaked jungle of time, and she was buried deep under the mountains of ice and glaciers. Haroon was crouched beside her, his look glazed and pleading.

'My dearest, my forever dearest,' Haroon's lips were blowing circles of fire and frost, as if enveloping dreams within dreams. 'I prefer lies to truth. For truth is cold and terrible, hurting and lacerating. More savage than the storms and hurricanes, which at least bring peace after violence, while truth carves wounds eternal and unhealing. Lies are warm and beautiful, smooth and peace-loving, always eager to cure the afflicted and the grieving. One gentle lie in the face of truth can heal a million heartaches. And one grain of brutal truth has the power to destroy love, peace, harmony. So, let lies blossom, dearest! Lie to me, lie to the world. Not ever let the flower of truth live or whisper. Guard the sting of your beauty, not ever let any trespass its sanctity. Let your hatred churn and simmer. Conceal your secret inside the folds of my heart. Tell me, you love me, lie to me, lie to the world...I have been stung, many times, not with lies, but with the pincers of truth...' a flood of light was engulfing her and Haroon. Both were locked in an embrace of lies, the casket of holy Secret

above them wide and gaping. She could look into the eyes of this Secret, yet could not comprehend its import, only its threat and violence. It was some flaming sword of retribution, poised over her heart, forbidding her to reveal even one word of her dreams, until she was prepared to die. Centuries upon centuries were hers to explore, and she was slithering in and out of seasons under the weight of wisdom and knowledge which she dared not claim even in her thoughts. Right now, she was hovering over the sleeping form of Haroon, disguised as a serpent, her tongue sticking out for a quick sting. Horror stinging her own eyes, she had recoiled back, falling in one coiled heap at the feet of her husband.

‘No, I cannot, I cannot...I love him, love... the coiled serpent in Balzeeb's dream was hissing and laughing. She herself was transported into the garden of Eden, chaste as a houri and beautiful as a fresh dawn. And yet her heart was throbbing with the canker of grief and despair she had not ever known in her entire life. She could hear herself pray for death...to die for love, to save Haroon's life...to immolate her own? Longing for peace. Fearing not death. Atoning for her sins.

‘What sins?’ the very Eden of Balzeeb's desire in dreams was dying. Her desire to die, stark and fearless. ‘Did she kill her husbands? How did they die? Was she the Cause, the Curse, the Sin, the Life eternal and everlasting?’ the sword of Secret over her heart was poised and glittering.

Chapter Eight

The scintillating evening with its lengthening shadows of gold and violet was cradling both Latif and Haroon in its warmth of peace and friendship. They were seated in a Village Restaurant perched high as a tree-house with windows looking down the lush valley in awe and swoon. For the past three months, they had shared the secrets in their hearts like twin-brothers lost in the magic and mystery of this bewildering world. But this particular evening, they were drifting apart as if torn asunder from the single womb of knowledge and searching the link to sanity which could solve the mysteries in living and suffering. Away from the reek of disease and sickness, Haroon had suggested this retreat before he could face the torment of love and anguish in the eyes of his beloved Balzeeb. They had been drinking tea by the gallons and stuffing their bellies with mutton kabobs, if not with the morsels of unsolved mysteries. Haroon was puffing on his pipe with the force of the bellows to keep it kindled, and looking quite flustered. He had adopted this habit a few weeks ago, and was immensely gratified of its affect in calming his thoughts as well as his longings. Latif was yet not accustomed to this new habit of his friend, and his eyes were darkening with disapproval and annoyance.

"Must you explode your lungs, besides polluting them with tar and poison?" Latif drowned his annoyance with a sip of tea, and leaned on his elbows over the table.

"Have you ever tasted the hemlock of love? Yes, you have," Haroon stirred his pipe without meeting his friend's gaze. "This place is as oppressive as our hospital! The only difference is that it reeks of spice and grease, instead of disinfectant and chloroform."

"You are becoming so predictable, Haroon, it frightens me," Latif shot this comment nonchalantly.

"Yes, it frightens me too. Didn't I say while we were studying medicine together, that to fall in love with one's own wife is the most horrid of banalities ever lived?" Haroon's eyes were burning with the ardor of memories. "And now I am in love with my own wife? My soul hungry and lonesome..." he left his thoughts unuttered, taking a deep puff from his ebony pipe.

"Why must you hunger when you have it all?" Latif murmured, though deep down understanding what Haroon meant.

"My hunger is deeper than the oceans, I suppose," Haroon began with that deep, lingering tone, which was also new in the vocabulary of his ever-changing personality. "And there is no hunger more savage than the hunger of the soul, yearning for love divine or temporal and getting lost inside the flood of mysteries. What mystery is in dreams, I wonder. My dreams and Balzeeb's, we are living Dreams. Hers concealed, and mine brimming with horror. We are becoming the victims of our own dreams. My heart burning with the fire of agony, and hers cold and barren like the blasts in winter. We are in love, hopelessly in love, don't be mistaken about that. But that mystery, that curse of disappearing, is getting so frequent. It's like sleeping with a ghost, dreading the veil of darkness, not knowing when she will be gone, or when might she return...and the intervals are growing longer and longer too. What curse, what secret, will I ever know?"

"Fates, which have joined her with you...and me, might unravel this spool of mystery, or curse or secret?" sufic light in Latif's eyes was revealing a mystery of its own. "Did I tell you I met a sage, or was driven to his hermitage by chance?"

"The only sage I have ever met is me, and the only fool sitting opposite me this very moment is you?" Haroon's anguish was flaring.

"So, the fool in you doesn't want to meet this sage, is that it?" Latif retorted with a stab at sarcasm.

"If he is some witch-doctor, selling foul potions to frighten the ugly dreams by killing his victims, then I am not interested," Haroon laughed. "But if he is saintly, doling out wisdom without expecting any reward, I might fill his pockets with gold, besides courting his friendship. Well, are you going to tell me, or not?"

"You won't be interested, he is a diviner of dreams?" Latif goaded laconically.

"Now you prick my curiosity with the red hot pincers of evasion and gloating!" Haroon declared with a sudden animation. "You must have told him about my dreams? What did he say?"

"I don't know your dreams...only in bits and pieces? All vague and wordless," the candles of sufic mysteries in Latif's eyes were melting.

"Knowing you, you must have gone there carrying the puzzle of mysteries...one of them concerning the disappearing..." Haroon's thoughts were knotted in chaos, his eyes probing.

"Well, yes...but his deductions, totally off the ramp! You won't be interested?" Latif was feeling his way to wiggle out of this dilemma.

"I would be! Immensely! If you deign to share with me?" Haroon grinded his request as a command.

"What do you want to know?" Latif muttered, knowing that he was cornered.

"Nothing! Just the prudent deductions?" Haroon challenged.

"Well, he unearthed an old musty, scroll! Think, he didn't even listen to what I said," Latif began reluctantly. "Reading as if to himself he ended up telling a strange

story, and then fell into a profound trance. And when he emerged from that, he wouldn't answer me, so I have no way of knowing what this ancient tale or belief has to do with me, or you, or Balzeeb. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"Certain," Haroon murmured with a glint of curiosity.

"Here it goes then," Latif smiled ruefully. "The script was about serpents and serpent gods called Nagas, and what not? If the serpent ever lives to be a century old, it has the power to transform itself into a human form. And this power bestows upon it the gift of youth, beauty and wisdom. This human-serpent then embarks on a journey to explore the mysteries inside the hearts and souls of other human beings, longing for the fountain of joy, but never attaining what it longs for. Unconscious of its own power, identity and longing, its quest for joy is marred by its former instinct to sting, thirsting for a drop of blood to march on to the road toward immortality. That's when it becomes prisoner to its own body, and by the command of its own subconscious seeks that nectar of blood, which would feed its altered state to life eternal. The venom in its own body and spirit works like a time-clock, holding in abeyance the cycle of life and death till the death of its own victim becomes a Need to nourish its own fountain of youth and beauty..." he paused, alarmed by the rush of pallor on Haroon's cheeks. "And that is the gist of what the sage read out of an ancient script. Why? Don't ask me...can't make head or tail of this incongruity?"

"One of my aunts who is a psychic and a healer, told me a story similar to this one when I was young," Haroon murmured under some spell of shock and recollection. "I must talk to her?"

"Why, did she divine some misfortune for you, you have forgotten?" Latif teased, though his own heart was thundering with a sudden fury.

"I don't know what she predicted, but I still remember her comment...some sort of joke with an undertone of warning?" sparks of fear were swimming in the sherry cups of Haroon's eyes. *'Make sure, you don't marry a serpent, she might sting!'* She was laughing of course, I can still hear her? She said that because I had a pet serpent...very precious to me...dearer to my childish heart than anything I had..." the sparks of fear in his eyes were replaced by the flames of incredulity. "That serpent died, and I was inconsolable."

"With grief sitting on your brow, it seems you are still mourning that loss?" Commented Latif, noticing the beads of perspiration on his wide brow. "It's stifling in here, don't you think?"

"I want to meet that sage of yours," was Haroon's abrupt comment, as if he had not even heard Latif.

"You must be mad! You shun sages and saints as if they were infected with plague? What makes you change your mind?" Latif asked incredulously.

"To check the validity of your story...if you are not making it up?" Haroon donned a mask of cheerfulness, sealing his fear inside his dithering heart.

"Or to make sport of me all the whaling hours of day and night, even when you are not with me?" Latif chuckled amusedly, holding on to this reed of diversion. "No, you cannot meet him."

"Why, are you afraid that he would expose your secrets to me, which you guard with an armor of steel? While I...I lay bare my soul at your stinking feet?" Haroon joined him in his mirth.

"What makes you think my heart is a den of secrets? No secrets between us friends, you know that...mine doled out freely even before you wrest yours out?" was Latif's blithering response.

"Any imbecile of a friend, if he happens to come upon our friendly trio, can tell that you are still in love with

Balzeeb. And still you have never satisfied my curiosity? How can you love someone...see that beloved married to your friend, and not feel the pangs of jealousy? No bullets of agony tearing your heart out, while you claim to love and not feel the pain of separation?" Haroon's heart was tangled between the knots of childhood and youth.

"No secret then, is it?" Latif murmured profoundly. "And as for loving and suffering, you know my pain as well as my peace. Since the inception of fear which stood over me like a tyrant, I had to tame my passions with the rod of will and volition. Despair and anguish itself have tutored me to heed the voice of my soul. And the voice of my soul says that every life is conditioned to be nurtured like a privileged child, accepting everything as his due, without a thought of ever offering anything in return. Always demanding, always pouting and sniveling for more and more. In order to discipline this child in the virtue of sharing, one has to cut short his privileges. In denial and suffering one discovers the kernels of love and kindness, where greed is like a weed to be killed, and ingratitude a thorn on the rose of life to be plucked out. Such a child I have reared inside me, who doesn't take everything for granted, sharing joy with joy, pain with pain, and befriending even the bridge of separation where joys and pains are but the lapping waves, frolicsome and dissolving."

"You couldn't have learnt all this from the Sufis, or from the sufic school in your heart? Otherwise, you would be the one going stark mad," Haroon's eyes were gathering poetic stars. "The child within you is unwise, resigned to the rigors of early schooling. He needs to grow into a sapling of youth, wild and passionate. Isn't this the law of nature, holy and immutable. Just like breathing, one doesn't think how one inhales or exhales, and yet one feels the flow of emotions and the release of passions, without which body turns into a dry, brittle limb on the tree of life,

to be lopped off in order to maintain a healthy balance. A fodder for your sufic wanderings, Latif! Ponder upon this to find a balance between your mind and heart. Though I would be regretting my advice if you acted upon it?"

"I have already done so without your instigation, and no regrets whatsoever on my part," Latif bristled with irony. "My mind and heart are like two little soldiers on the field of combat. My mind demands the offering of blood from my heart, and my heart refuses to wound its integrity to appease the unjust demands of my mind. Then, my heart flutters like a wounded bird, pleading mercy from mind's whipping rage, and mind staggers not in its resolve to grant a boon to heart's desire. Both, with naked swords in their hands, are waiting for the hour of armistice, denying themselves the pleasure of peace and harmony, and yet there is peace, believe you me. A dull peace, splintered with doubts and fears."

"This smell of grease is coating our minds with the soot of banality! I better be heading home...Balzeeb is not in too good spirits these days..." Haroon's thoughts were doubling under the weight of some alien sorrow he could neither feel, nor fathom.

"You didn't tell me that? What's wrong?" Latif's hazel eyes were attaining the glow of smoldering coals.

"Did I hear a groan, or is this my imagination?" Haroon smiled.

"Since you know my heart, should I not be concerned? Yes, you should be going home. She is alone, and probably worried..." Latif murmured evasively.

"Oh, you haven't been to our house for one whole week, I forget! Ali is back. Since Balzeeb is having all those nightmares and is frightened, I thought Ali would be an anchor of strength for her. They have struck a chord of great friendship."

"A dangerous alliance, I should say," Latif resorted to humor, noticing that Haroon was reluctant to leave.

"Strange, how events slip past me like quicksilver?" Haroon reminisced aloud. "A couple of weeks ago, or is it a month? Balzeeb espied a serpent by the rose bushes. She is so frightened, she dares not walk in the garden. Ali hobbles outside with a stick in his hand, imploring her to take a stroll, but she shuts herself inside. He is succeeding though, for he told me the other night that she did venture out?" he got to his feet. A thin film of sweat clouding his brow once again.

"Well, see you at that staff meeting, bright and early next morning," Latif fished out his wallet, piling a few bills on the table.

"Leave a tip for me too, I would use it to pay for our next extravagance," Haroon hurried down the rickety steps in some daze of urgency.

"Oh greed, thou art cruel!" Latif flashed an epigram, drowning his fears into a flood of mirth.

The evening Sun dipping behind the trees like a globe of fire, was reflected in the rearview mirror of Haroon's jeep as he drove home. The dusk was gathering haze and silence with only a thin sheet of amethystine glow in the west. But Haroon, though driving carefully, was lost into the alleys of childhood where time stood frozen and words chilled inside the mirror of memories sweet and frightening. How could he forget? His aunt was holding his little palm into her soft hands, laughing and exclaiming with a mingling of swoon and disbelief.

'Never marry, you little changeling! How is it possible? Wedded to a princess...how could she be a serpent? The hemlock of intrigue? Venom in her heart and poison on her tongue, could be any woman, but a serpent in the guise of youth and beauty? No...yes, never trust a woman, my love...' these words writ upon tablets of ice were crashing into Haroon's head in a crackle of warnings.

'Where is my aunt? She died...when? Years, years ago before I...' Haroon's thoughts were trying to fend off the

blow of shock and revelation. ‘She was joking, always joking. Testing my little heart if I were strong and not lily-livered? Telling me strange stories of horror and murder, and was I ever frightened, no! Yes, she is right. Right about what? No, no...as she said, how could a woman be a serpent? Why I am thinking in these terms about Balzeeb, desecrating the altar of her chaste soul? Why, why? Why these revelations, these coincidences...what do they have to do with us? The curse, the secret, the phantoms of imaginations? Am I going insane? Is Balzeeb neurotic? Do I have to be treated of dementia? Does Balzeeb need the help of a skilled psychiatrist to wring out the fever of paranoia from her mind and body? Why do I see fates jesting and leering...’ his thoughts were running down the glens and valleys in some mad spree to touch the fabric of sanity.

‘Breathing in, breathing out! This invisible thread of divinity, where does it lead us? From end to the beginning, or from beginning to the end? A continual spool of life dissolved in ether? Even when this life ceases to breathe, the soul keeps on pouring breath into the bits and pieces of each life, scrambling the pieces of a puzzle, and mending the thread of life with its own fountain of life-giving sap which might be the healing nectar for one universal Soul?’ Haroon's gaze was following the narrow, meandering road against the stark vistas in his thoughts. He could see the radiant face of Balzeeb as some ice-goddess etched alive in some book of fate and fatality, and his heart missed a couple of beats before throbbing violently. Some sort of awe and sickness were entering the cage of his heart through the windows of his eyes where the majestic cedars appeared to hum a litany of prayers, rocked by the gentle arms of breeze.

‘God!’ Haroon's lips were sealed by a cry most awesome and desolate. This was a cry from the very depths of his soul, to the God within him, whom he had

forgotten. He had even forgotten how to pray as he used to do, occasionally, with Silence as his altar and wordless gratitude his prayer-mat. Now that his heart was ravished by anguish and hopelessness, he could not reach the calm shores of Silence inside the fabric of his soul and psyche. And yet, the eyes of his heart, glazed and bewildered, could look into the clear pool of his soul. Silence was there like a thin veil, silken and gossamer. But against that veil could be seen nothing, only voids of ether and emptiness. The stark, colorless vacuums in nothingness. And yet again, this Nothingness itself was throbbing and pulsating with an aura of Power he had not ever felt before inside this strange Temple of vacuity and loneliness. Vacuum and Nothingness were wafting the scent of Reality, as if they contained everything of Time and Eternity in their Invisible folds of Eternalness. In one flash of astonishing Silence and Surrender, he had seen the Face of God as the Light of Unity, vast and boundless, the Mirror of Perfection as one Beautiful Whole. This vision was gone when he parked his jeep. The Mirror of Perfection was shattered. God had left. Beloved was a stranger in his heart in the guise of Balzeeb, whose youth was her own secret and whose beauty her own curse, which he could neither explore, nor possess, Haroon's thoughts were one heavy, lonesome murmur.

Gold and scarlet clouds arrested on the screen of twilight were keeping Haroon and Balzeeb company, as they sat on the verandah, gathering the bliss of silence and nearness. The small garden flanked by elms and cedars seemed to be sitting still like a painted dream against the sprawling lawns, which could be seen crawling under the tall gates in voluptuous contours. On the cobbled pathways, Ali was promenading, hugging his hookah in one arm and pounding the earth with his walking stick as if searching for something. Haroon was holding Balzeeb's hand. The same, astonishing sense of peace and silence which he had felt while driving was with him at this

moment, his heart light and empty. Balzeeb, on the contrary, was filled with a sense of loss and grief which she had not ever felt during her entire life.

‘Why can't I cry and tear my heart out, to melt this feeling of...what is it? What is happening to me? What loss? Am I grieving...’ Balzeeb's thoughts were melting into a pool of absurdities. This alien impulse to cry and to tear her heart out was simmering inside her like some terrible need which could not ever be gratified. For she knew, her eyes could never shed tears. How this knowledge was imparted to her, she had no idea, but a psychic sense which never lied to her, and by which her moods and whims were guided even when she was not aware. Her mind was like a land tilled and furrowed, where ages slept like the brides sated with consummation. She could look into her mind and feel her heart, which was opening like some primeval cave with doors wide as the oceans and windows as large as the continents. Right this moment, she was entering that door, gliding toward one window where her dreams slumbered. One dream was yawning and awakening like a seductive enchantress, spiraling aloft and expanding. Tides upon tides of vistas were unfolding. Amidst them one ocean wave-less and shimmering, so calm and slippery that she was gliding on its surface without drowning. She was bathed in awe and light, lifted to the very bosom of a remote horizon, pure and sparkling.

The ripple and sparkle in Balzeeb's own heart were carrying her gently into a garden with white tuberose the size of dewdrops. Gods and goddess' were seated at a mirror-table strewn with wreaths and garlands. Zeus, Hebe, Venus, Noibe, Apollo, Hermes, Athena, Vulcan, Phoebus, Astarte, Poseidon, Aphrodite, and a host of many more with Osiris presiding and Dionysus playing his lute. Beside them the wheel of Fate was churning and obeying the commands of the deities perched high on one lotus of a

Sun. Shiva, Brahma, Vishnu were contemplating aloud, and she could catch a whiff of their wisdom. The nectar of wisdom was entering the navel of Buddha, and she could touch this pure stream of thoughts reflected in ether. Above his head were hovering islands of clouds, pale and blanched. They were bloated with the waters of lust, greed, hatred, avarice, cradling many more vices into the rivers of their Being. Balzeeb was terrified, and her terror alone was whirling and tossing her with the speed of a hurricane, and before she knew she was hurled into the very garden of Paradise. Eve and Adam were standing there naked and unashamed. Thunder and lightning were a succession of choir and music she had not ever heard before. The veil of music was lifting, revealing a succession of Prophets at the head of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. The tree of knowledge was towering above her, visited by ghosts, goblins, fairies and cherubim. Up on the top was perched Lucifer, lowering a serpent into the very silence of her soul. With one heartrending cry, she was plunged down into the pit of utter darkness. Evil and perdition were coiled around her body, and she was slithering deeper and deeper into some chasms profound and inconceivable.

*'No new fashion of hardship, none unexpected
Rises to confront me, all have I anticipated
All have I traversed in my mind...'*

Balzeeb could hear the voice of Virgil following behind her.

Haroon, for some strange reason, was thinking about this young patient of his, who was heavy with child and diabetic. While examining her this afternoon, one vague, splintering thought had attacked his own paranoia, and he had recoiled inwardly, shuddering with rage and impotence. Now the same thought was visiting him in the guise of a recollection, as he sat holding Balzeeb's hand in some sort of bliss and oblivion.

‘No womb has ever conceived Balzeeb, and she in turn has no womb to nurture life...’ this sting of a recollection was jolting Haroon to the reality of a Dream sitting beside him. Though he was coaxed into the mirage of his own dreams, which had become his living nightmares, along with Balzeeb's own mystery in appearing and disappearing. His dreams were the manifestations of his fears, where he could feel himself throttled by invisible hands. In his mind's vision, those hands belonged to her deceased husbands whom he had never seen. But more savage than his fear, was the agony of his soul hungry and insatiable. Balzeeb was his figurine of ice whose passionate surrender could not even kindle one spark of warmth inside him, as if the foaming violence inside her heart could breathe nothing but chills and hungers.

‘What a perfect dolt I have become? What fires consume my own soul and sanity? The demon of lust inside me...what does it want? What sinister, grueling hunger...what does my soul want...alienated from God I hunger for...’ Haroon's thoughts were muttering inanities. ‘What is this demon of desire inside me? Are saints closer to God...why did I want to meet that sage, anyway? What odious doubts are breeding in my head? Am I jealous...of Latif? Why? Balzeeb is mine, forever mine? And yet, I cannot possess her...what is this misery and loneliness? Balzeeb. What is her secret...that gaping, searing Mystery? Those hours of loss and despair...fates leering...gods, God, Silent and Judging? What, where? My soul hungers for...don't know what...why is this Scythian chill entering my own soul? Hunger and loneliness...’ an imperceptible shudder passed through his spine, and he squeezed Balzeeb's hand absently.

"Balzeeb, is the evening getting cold, or is it my heart shuddering?" Haroon appealed suddenly. The dreamy look in his eyes absorbing the glorious blue from hers.

"And mine eternally cold, as you know, Haroon?" Balzeeb contemplated aloud. "And even the fire of your love has failed to warm it? Why does my heart feel cold as ice, while my love for you is hot as a furnace? Such bliss and warmth when you are near me. And yet you can't feel it, Haroon, I know that. You are unhappy...why can't we be happy? What is this curse? I should know, instead of asking you. Why can't I be like any other woman? Why does my own beauty sit inside me like a curse? Isn't it a violation of some holy law in Nature that one is deprived of this priceless gift in making one happy whom one loves with all one's heart and soul? This flame of longing inside me, is that cold and..."

"Hush, my love, hush," Haroon kissed her on the lips, as if infusing the warmth of his longings into the purity of her cold regrets. "We need to find a way to banish our dreams and nightmares, and then our hearts would be filled with warmth and sunshine of joys unutterable," the poetry of dreams in his eyes was one tender caress. "How many times you have made me weep with joy and anguish when you talk like that...don't tell me!"

"See, Haroon, I can't even cry! I have made you cry, but my own eyes never shed a tear as if blasted by years and years of drought. I don't even remember when I cried last. Maybe, never? Never felt any need...even when my husbands..." Balzeeb could not continue, noticing the shadows of pain in Haroon's eyes.

"How could I ever endure your tears, my love, when your mere regrets cut my heart to bleeding lumps!" Haroon leaped to his feet, holding out his hands to her, and gazing into her eyes. "A light stroll before dinner, does that tempt you to the promise of warmth and happiness!" Haroon laughed, making her walk beside him.

"You know how frightened I am, Haroon, and you still insist...for my health, you say?" a tinkling of mirth escaped Balzeeb's lips. "My health is fine! If you were not a

doctor, you wouldn't even notice? My very stomach feeding on fear, and craving not for any food, isn't that normal? Or, you would recommend a psychiatrist, as you can't stop goading me?" she sang cheerfully.

"This whole nation needs the aid of a healer or a psychiatrist, if not of God, since infant Pakistan can't stop protesting and sniveling!" Haroon's anguished mirth was trembling on the verge of sorrow and surcease. "Do you believe in God, Balzeeb?" he asked abruptly. His mind unfolding a tapestry of Eden with Satan and serpent beguiling the first pair of lovers, Eve and Adam themselves.

"In gods and goddess' all, I guess," Balzeeb sang ruminatively. "Their spirits hovering above and beyond, and inside me. "I feel a Presence, if that could be God. And yet, at times, I see a dance and frolic of lights, not these earthly lights, but some sort of moonbeams shuddering and dissolving. Shades and shadows too! A procession of gods, saints, prophets and goddess' too, all marching in one solid rank of discipline, guided by the Hand of One Creator, and not ever stepping out of their files, lest they disturb the Order of the Heavens. Unity and Perfection could be seen in the eyes of that Creator, where angels kneel and pray, and yet I see myself tossed back to earth, enveloped in darkness. You are fortunate, Haroon, you see only the Light of one God, while I wade and founder inside a beacon of many, many lights, searching, always searching...for what, I don't know?" the blue pools in her eyes were darkening with fright.

"I was born into such faith, not initiated as a disciple," Haroon's own gaze was gathering dusk and presage. "Wonder, what faith your parents belonged to...not that it matters? Such heavenly dreams interspersed with foul nightmares...what mockery of fates? If you could only dream heavenly dreams, imploring your gods and goddess' an absolute reprieve from those nightmares? Or, maybe, I

should implore? Why didn't I think of that before? My one God is most Merciful and Benevolent, listening to the plight of suffered and the suffering heart, most generously, I presume?"

"Could we go inside now, Haroon, and placate the gods after dinner under the light of the candles? This dusk is filling my heart with fear and omens," Balzeeb chanted sweetly.

"Come, love! Look, how Ali is sweeping our path clean of all omens, or dangers?" Haroon guided her down the path, guarded by elms and cedars. "Look, how the sky is painted saffron and crimson...the dusk around here lasts a lifetime! A sunset such as this can make one drunk with the nectar of spirituality?"

"Even a heathen like me? Can I ever drink such sweetness?" Balzeeb declared happily. "Strange, that these sunsets make me feel old and tired. It seems, as if layers upon layers of centuries are pressed inside the fabric of my very soul? The inner Voice of this Soul, is rising forever, as if invoking the gods and goddess' of the Greeks, the Romans, the Egyptians? Pleading for some sort of intercession...don't know what? This soul has kneeled and prayed before these deities...at times, have rebelled, and then have fallen into absolute surrender. The gods soaring into the loftiest heights, and then perishing into some chasms steep and profound. Gods in rags, in purple robes, appared in Light? I have lived with Krishna, and have followed Buddha to the Bodhi tree. Have been in the wilderness with Mosses, and was blessed by Jesus? Muhammad was my patron saint, and I had gone to heavens with him...then I was lost...blindness and darkness? Darkness all!"

"You have talked about this before, my love, but not with such passion?" Haroon murmured under some spell of awe and fascination. "Your thoughts are on fire! Let me see if it has reached your heart?" he slipped his arm around

her waist. His gaze separating a rigol of roses in profusion of colors.

"My heart is cold. More so, whenever I hear a muezzin call the faithful to prayer," Balzeeb strained her ears. Her gaze too turning toward the roses, but seeing only the dark form of Ali, not a bouquet of colors. "There is so much chill and hatred in that call...corrupting these valleys? Is that what Islam is all about?"

"Are you not exaggerating, Balzeeb?" Haroon demurred softly. "This call is warm and melting...delicious to the heart. And yet, Islam has corrupted its own name with the filth of zeal and intolerance. So very difficult to forget and forgive the horrors of jihad, or crusades, or holocaust! All hanging low over our heads, and it matters not if we are Jews, Christians or Muslims? We all stand condemned. But I am not talking about the holocaust which turned human flesh and soul of the Jews to ashes, but of the holocaust of the east and west and north and south which has slaughtered millions in the most savage manner possible, and for what, to give birth to India and Pakistan? The land most pure soaked in blood and the land most holy festering with the wounds of the slain and the tortured..." his feet came to a sudden halt beside Balzeeb, not noticing that she was frozen on the spot. "Look, my love, look at this garden, calm and beautiful, and the valleys deep..." his thoughts were snipped short by a loud cry from the lips of Balzeeb.

"No!" Balzeeb's cry of agony was stabbing the bent back of Ali. "No. Stop. It's murder," she was pale and swooning.

Ali was showering blows on the head of a snake, repeatedly and mercilessly. Not even aware that Balzeeb was terrified, or appealing to save the life of this dangerous reptile. Haroon could not speak, pressing his wife to him in some sort of shock and disbelief. Balzeeb was limp and swooning. Haroon was literally carrying her into his arms

inside the house. He had seen the mottled, battered head of this snake, and disgust and revulsion were splintering his shock. Now Ali was the one frozen to the spot, standing there like a stick, more like a rock petrified by a bolt of lightning.

"Oh, this tearing, searing pain in my head...in my soul...this sense of loss and grief...how could I not feel..." Balzeeb's voice was barely audible, Haroon forcing brandy down her throat. "My dear, dear brother...his head broken..." she was raving. An unhealthy flush creeping down her cheeks and throat, after she had swallowed a few spoons of brandy. "Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, can you see them...tell me you can? And Pascal and Montaigne! How Nietzsche and Descartes argue and blaspheme...Novalis standing there like a referee. Don't you recognize Spinoza, wise and godlike...and that savage horde, how they rant and scream? Atheist, pantheist, God-intoxicated...where am I..." Balzeeb's voice sounded distant, her heartbeat loud and erratic.

Ali had joined Haroon, dazed and speechless. Haroon was filling his syringe with diose mixed with a small dose of opium. When he returned with this sedative held between his trembling fingers, he could hear the feeble voice of Balzeeb, uttering one familiar quote.

"Men are only without excuse before God, because they are in God's power. As clay is in the hands of the potter, who from the same lump makes vessels. Some to honor...some to dishonor. If you will reflect a little on..." Balzeeb's voice was silenced, even before she could feel the prick of the needle.

Chapter Nine

Haroon sat in his office, poring over the x-rays and lab results in some sort of somnambulant awareness. The brown, transparent sheets with the anatomy of lungs, brain, kidneys and stomach lay scattered over his desk under a bright light. And he could not detect a speck of fault in these plastic organs, so perfectly healthy and beautiful. These perfect specimens of inner beauty belonged to Balzeeb, and his heart was aching with a terrible longing to allay her fears and doubts, cowering under the mantle of threats from the very folds of her psyche. Three whole months were swallowed into the puzzle of time since Balzeeb had fainted that fateful evening. And still she had not discovered what made her crumble with love and grief, if not with fright and loathing. Since then, she had been visited by a succession of dreams, plunging her deeper into the pit of misery and disconsolation. Her dreams were stumbling on the path to Mystery, and discovering more mysteries, where her soul and psyche were the warring soldiers, denying her the comfort of peace and contemplation. Blood was drained from her cheeks, as well as from her heart, and she thought she was dying. But a host of tests had proved otherwise, all the organs in her body were fit as a fiddle, and the piano of mysteries in her brain was in tune with the orchestra of her body.

‘All my friends waiting to hear the news of my death, while my own beloved is dying? Negative, all results negative? What does it mean? Some sort of negation in everything bizarre and incomprehensible...mockery of fates...or is science, concealing the odious truth against a veil of perfection?’ Haroon's thoughts were somersaulting in some jumble, saturated with the odor of magic and

mystery. 'Magic and mystery! What secrets lay buried in the heart of Ignorance, and what clusters of...' his thoughts were fleeing at the mere glimpse of Latif who was sailing into his office nonchalantly.

"Have you converted your office into a stinking lab?" Latif declared, sinking into the leather seat opposite him.

"This lab is not stinking at least? Wafting the scent of health and salubrity," Haroon elicited one pale smile, the parched lips of his aching heart constricting. "Balzeeb is a paragon of health as these results show, but she is suffering a million afflictions, I know. She has lost weight and is losing her appetite, I have noticed but recently. Pallor and dreams are her companions wherever she goes...appearing or disappearing like some phantoms of the night, if not of the fairytales?"

"Are you not exaggerating, Haroon?" Latif began as if cosseting a child. His look reminiscent and apprehensive. "This disappearing, though mysterious, seems harmless. Her late husbands...heard no such complaints when they were alive. I think, unrest and ravages of war are making us all...neurotic, should I say...even doctors can't escape this curse. I was hoping that the presence of Ali would lessen the burden of your fears and anxiety...but, it's not working, is it?"

"Balzeeb sings the praises of Ali, and I am consumed by the fires of jealousy!" Haroon resorted to humor, his laughter dry and brittle. "They both coddle me as if I am a child, and I fear they have formed an alliance against me, to drive me crazy? Though, my own dreams are the ones driving me crazy...do I have the right to complain about Balzeeb's? Only that horror of disappearing," he flicked the lamp off, and sat rubbing his eyes.

"Dreams are becoming the bane of your fear and unhappiness, Haroon, don't you think?" Latif intoned thoughtfully. "You are letting your dreams rule over you like the invisible tyrants. What happened to those joyful,

carefree days of caprice and madness? Madness is still there, I have no doubt, but of the most terrible and savage kind, which kills the victims without mercy who think they are sane. And yet you are sane, drunk with unhappiness. Dreams signify nothing, my friend, only mirage and illusion, don't you know? So why not walk clean out of this bewildering map of delusions, and cherish each moment with the promise of joy and hope?"

"The Sufi in you is dead!" Haroon exclaimed with false enthusiasm. "Dreams, much like life, though ephemeral, have reality of their own. "Isn't each life one great web of dreams? Each little, gossamer thread woven so intricately, throbbing with dream-hopes and dream-failures, gathering dream-joys and dissolving dream-sorrows? And yet, this life-dream of my existence is unspooling the pulse of time strewn with grains of realities, which conceal no lies and tell no truths? A paradox! The most astonishing and mind-boggling aspect of these dreams is that Balzeeb and I fall into their traps concurrently, if not simultaneously. And when I awaken she is gone. And when I am lying there prostate with despair, she comes back...dazed and trembling like a leaf. My dreams are just a repetition of one dream...fear and shock dripping through my pores that I have lost her? Her dreams...can't even begin to describe? I have begun to hear voices these days...soft, sibilant sounds, tingling with warnings...what sort, I can't tell, only that some tragedy is lurking in my wake? My heart has become a pot of divinations, spewing out demons of thoughts that I am going to lose Balzeeb? Can't even endure such thought, save alone the thought of living without her?"

"And here I worry myself to death that you will be the one dead!" Latif donned the mask of mischief to dispel the fears of his friend. "It seems to me, both of you have fallen under the spell of some Spanish Moor, whose sole delight is to torment the young lovers with frightful dreams?" his

own heart was bleeding in mute torment, yet his eyes were flashing mirth. "Balzeeb is a Spanish princess, don't you know? The victim of some court magician who was in love with her? We should read that book again, Alhambra, wasn't it the one we read in college? Who was the author, I forget?"

"Irving, you dolt," Haroon murmured with a whiff of nostalgia. "I still remember which paragraphs we liked the most, and wore them thin with arguments. 'When the Moors held Granada, they were a gayer people than they are nowadays. They thought only of love, of music and of poetry. They made stanzas upon every occasion and set them all to music. He who could make the best verses, and she who had the most tuneful voice, might be sure of favor and preferment. In those days if anyone asked for bread, the reply was, make a couplet. And the poorest beggar, if he begged in rhyme, would often be rewarded with a piece of gold.'"

"We should start reading and sharing books again...then you would forget about your fears and dreams? Not those medical journals and dull articles on medicine and medical wonders," Latif's eyes were shining with a glint of hope. "And why don't you indulge in your favorite past time of writing poetry...put those demons of voices to work on pieces of paper? Better yet, take some time off. Go to Spain, you might meet some Spanish magicians, who could exorcise all your dreams, and Balzeeb's too?"

"I would be lost inside the pools of Arabic inscription carved on the walls of Alhambra," Haroon ruminated wistfully. "Isn't there a stone hand and a key at the main facade? What made you bubble with curiosity after you read the book was this, I guess? 'Those who pretend to some knowledge of Mohemetan symbols, affirm that the hand is emblem of doctrine, and the key, of faith. The latter, they add, was emblazoned on the standards of the Muslims when they subdued Andalusia, in opposition to

the Christian emblem of the Cross.' A good idea, going to Spain! You should come with us, to explore the ruins of the infidels, as Muslims were labeled in those times?"

"I am looking for some paradise lost, these days, to rest and contemplate," an anguished sob was stifled against the weight of Latif's heavy laughter, his eyes shining with a mystical light. "The palace and garden of Irem, whereof mention is made in that chapter of the Quran entitled, The Dawn of Day, and that eternal..." Latif rose to his feet as the voice on the intercom boomed. 'Dr. Latif, cardiac ward, number four, please.'

"There is your garden of Irem buried under the assaults of duties," Haroon followed suit. "One grueling round, and I am off the hook!" he followed Latif with heavy, reluctant steps.

The immaculate corridors smelling of wax and bleach, seemed to feel the weight of sorrow in Haroon's heart as he plodded on to complete his rounds. For, they were reflecting not only their own languor, but the languor of the ages dissolved into pangs of death and sickness. The yellow charts clipped neatly to the doors were greeting Haroon with pale smiles, but he could not detect even a trace of smile on the faces of his patients as he wandered from room to room, aware more of the groans in their pulsating hearts than of the low moans on their lips. The lips in his own thoughts were trembling to form words, but heaving only sighs and mute lamentations.

'The luxury of idleness if one can afford it,' Haroon's thoughts had begun to pace in formless, wordless circles. Laboring for freedom from work, and yet not quite reaching the shores of Spain 'Without pain, would love not be the purest and the sweetest? And yet, pain, is that the nectar of its life? If there was no pain, would one cease to love? A rose without thorns, perfumed with the sheer joy of living, could it ever taste the wine of love and longing?' pain, not Spain, and poetry in love were accosting his

aimless thoughts with a promise of inspiration. 'Living and loving, are these not the hurricanes most unpredictable... untamed and raging, always aiming to erase the name of love and life from the pages of this earth? What would be life without ruin and devastation...peaceful as death? But who knows if death is peaceful? It might surprise us with its cauldron of chaos, which is lidded before our mortal sight as the emblem of peace? Balzeeb, Balzeeb,' his heart was sinking for some nameless reason, as if it needed to squeeze some tonic of strength from the bloom of her youth and beauty.

The sun was dipping its fingers of gold into the pure nectar of emerald valleys, as Haroon drove home. The flower of Balzeeb's face was still in his thoughts and in each contour of these glens and valleys, so fresh and so very enchanting. So achingly beautiful! Haroon's poetic thoughts were swooning.

'Youth! if we cherished it like some rare bloom, and nurtured it inside the fountain of love, could it stay fresh and healthy? Not ever fading, not ever withering, and drunk with the perfume of its own charm and beauty?' Haroon's thoughts were longing for the poetry of love and bliss. 'And yet, is youth not the seed, the fruit, the essence of life and fecundity? Much like a strong tree, its roots digging deep into the mysteries of the earth, and imbibing gallons of strength to ward off all blights against nature and mankind?' his thoughts were rippling and shuddering like waves on the verge of extinction. 'Stupidity, Ignorance, Inexperience, are these the only hurdles on the path to wisdom and understanding? Who has exiled us to this lone journey in life with fear and uncertainty as our guides? What are we seeking? Where are we going? If joy is a distant mirage, and peace the sanctuary unknown, then where could we find them in this chase of fleeting shadows and delusions? Is pain not the womb of joy? Is it not kneaded sweet with tears and longings? If it is not, could

the sweetness be missing? Could love ever be pure and unselfish? Without anguish, without bitterness, without the sense of fear, guilt or betrayal? Does God know answers to these all? If He does, He must know He is as lonesome as any man, for no man is capable of loving anyone but himself? But God does not need our love, He bestows only? What does He need? Surrender? What could one surrender when God's Will and His Creation, all belong to Him? Why am I thinking about God? Why not? What did Latif say...when love is born in our hearts we rejoice, and when it dies, we mourn, and yet we can't be the author of its surcease or conception...' he could feel his love for Balzeeb as some disease which could kill him, but would never escape the curse of its own sickness and immortality. He didn't even know which sickness was the most savage, of the mind or of the body? Right now, he didn't even know where he was, on the road, or on the road to self-discovery or self-annihilation. His jeep was his guide, taking advantage of his wandering thoughts, and straggling down the valleys strange and tortuous. Harnessing this error with a sudden awareness, his thoughts were obeying his instinct to turn back and trace his way home. A subtle premonition was knocking at the doors of his psyche, telling him something, but he was not heeding. He could feel the presence of Balzeeb with him, not knowing that she was lost in her own premonitions and heeding them.

Balzeeb, cuddled against satiny pillows with one colorful afghan thrown carelessly over her legs, was resting on the davenport in her parlor. She could feel Ali hovering in the background and ever-vigilant to the slightest of her whims, but she had abandoned herself to silence and introspection. For the past few months, she had been suffering? Suffering terribly, of not just her fears and doubts, but of inner trauma perched solid at the gates of horror and revelations. Just this morning, she had lifted one monumental decision out of her past tragic experiences

to immolate her life for the sake of love and posterity. She herself didn't know how she was going to end her life, but some Power most kind and benevolent was guiding her toward a peaceful staircase leading down the waters of surcease and forgiveness. She was calm and terrified both, as if floating on the agitated surface of consciousness, and then sinking down into the placid deeps of sub-consciousness, emerging and foundering and seeking the Altar of Destiny.

Destiny was not some cruel rod, whipping Balzeeb to confessions, but a gentle hand under the confessional booth, urging her to embrace salvation. This particular morning, she was awakened with an overwhelming sense of doom, as if Judgment Day was nigh and brimming with the edicts of retribution. Later in the day, the veil of doom was lifted, yet her stomach was gripped with the fever of retching on the verge of physical nausea which never surfaced. All these feelings were dissolved slowly and gradually, as if her body was ether, and her soul the fabric of dreams. Right now, she was dreaming away time while waiting for Haroon. Actually, she was not waiting, as if suspended in time. Rather, following the trail of her dreams, where the pillars of reality were newly erected as signposts for her sole guidance and perception.

'And if you must be damned! At least, be damned for pleasant sins,' Balzeeb's thoughts were whirled into the Age of Reason with Voltaire as her mentor. He was looking into her eyes, and tracing the path of her past sins on the palm of her little hand. She was the bride of Lucifer. The Serpent of Eden. Beguiled and beguiling. Leading Eve and Adam into exile, and exiled from the Paradise of Knowledge. Crawling under the tree of Wisdom, and never tasting the ripeness of its fruits and blessings. The Wise, All-knowing serpent, wedded to evil, and living under the curse of the Almighty God Himself. In her dreams and reality both, she had killed her husbands. She was the

embodiment of Life, the servant of Lie, the Curse of Fate. Destiny was her Father, Reality her Mother, and Dream her own unbegotten child of youth and beauty. She was the Life, stealing the nectar of love from loving souls and feeding on Death for the everlasting renewal of her own youth and beauty. Centuries old, banished from the heavens, tossed into the very fountain of love and hate, she was the prisoner of this world, where truth lay concealed inside the tablets of hearts branded with deceit and corruption.

Her own heart, once pure and guileless and mating with Truth, was now corrupted with disgust and hatred. Eons had slipped past since the Sin was born on the shoulders of Eve, and Guile on the tail of the Serpent, and Woman had become the Head of evil under the Rock of lies and distortion by Man. This was her Psyche speaking in her Dream. And then the Horror! Her first husband, bronzed and handsome, she had fallen in love! His passion and her unsurfeit. His lust and her desire, both sated and insatiable. The gluttony in passion and passionate paradise. And then the tempests chilling and frightening. His intensity and her emptiness. The bowl of her emptiness was gathering hate, disgust, even loathing. Loathing for the man she had loved once. A deep kindling of odium in her soul licking the crumbs of her love to cinders. These cinders pounded and fermented to the wine of hatred. She was drugged by it, consuming it by the flagons, and being consumed. Consumed by a burning Need to free herself from the chains of this wedlock. Not knowing the violence inside her brewing and churning. And that was when she was powerless against the Curse designed by Fate. Her Secret was coiled in the heart of the serpent, she was the serpent! A serpent incarnate! Sibilant and will-less! Overwhelmed by the Force of her dark Desire, she could not help but sting the man whom she loved to hate. Her own husband, her first love!

From the death-bed of hate, plucking the rose of love in renewal, she had seen herself uncoil from the body of the Dead most seductively. Descending down the caves of Hades to commune with Persephone, and then begin her Ascent into the world, carrying lamps of love in her shining eyes. She had chosen her second husband, even before the first one was buried. No grief had visited her. She didn't even know that the shroud of death which sealed her husband inside the grave had really ever lived? Her soul was vast and boundless, filled with haze and elation. The memory of her first marriage was wiped out, the death of her first husband a dream which she had not really lived. Love was fresh and perfumed, not as a sprig of renewal, but a chaste bloom from the valleys of paradise, eternal and blessed. Once again, she was swept by desires sweet and insane, to fall in love, this second time! The Curse had returned within a few months, stark and inviolate. Hatred, followed by emptiness, was a simmering, boiling cauldron of revulsion and bitterness. The sea of anguish inside her was gathering storms and tempests. Her soul was torn by the raging, maddening fury of some hurricanes swift and devastating. This time she could feel her agony and desire when she was transformed into the messenger of death. One more love was replaced by the light of betrayal, not by choice, but by the Power of Fate and Curse. She had witnessed the shadow of agony in her husband's eyes even before the poison of her sting had floated down his throat. The death of one more love, and the birth of Another? The third husband fated to die, was struck by the arrow of cupid while the second one was still wading into the marshlands of love and hate. This memory too was effaced from the book of her youth and beauty. Deaths and marriages were falling into the abyss of reveries and delusions, and she could feel no pain or loss, only swoon and exultation.

Love was sweet and beautiful! Young and immortal. Bliss and raptures were theirs to explore and possess. She

was in seventh heaven this third time around, madly and utterly in love. But alas, she was destined to be the victim of this ritual in loving and hating, again and forever. The violence of hatred inside her and the Need for Freedom were so savage this time that she was not granted one moment of awareness at her transformation. Lucifer, her husband of the heavens, dark and handsome, had cast a veil of darkness over her, and the evil deed was done. One lethal sting from her hissing tongue, and the Object of her love and hate was plunged into the comfort of Peace Everlasting. The abysmal rivers of love and hate were drained, and replenished with the nectar of love inside the shining halls of her ever-loving soul. She thought Latif was to be her next husband, when Haroon had materialized like the god of Love and Mercy. One silver thread of a revelation had snapped inside her head that this was love sublime and love supreme!

A mystery sublime and knowledge supreme! Yes, she was in love. Utterly and absolutely in love. This power of love so overwhelming that she thought she would die if Haroon was to dissolve into the ether of nothingness as her previous husbands. She, who had known no fear, no pain, no grief before, was bewildered by this sudden weight of Love and Fear. She thought she was loving as she had not ever loved before, but her heart was cold, the limbs of her memories chilled, the hands of her psyche frozen. The crackling, splintering mirrors in her mind were talking to her, and spewing out rags of visions she had not ever seen before. She thought she was dreaming, but her dreams were the archetype of reality woven into the tapestry of past and present, where future could be seen aghast and crystallized into the tiny pyramids of time and timelessness. Her fear and coldness were some mighty defense against the venom of her soul, spirit and psyche. Through dreams, past was coming alive, and through contemplation present held in abeyance to tame evil instincts till body and mind

were purged clean of passions dark and lethal. Love had taken hold of her so completely that there was no room left for hatred. Each moment spent with Haroon had become a wedding feast for her, and lovemaking a ceremonial which she never wished to end, not knowing that the warmth of her passion was all sealed inside, and what she was offering to her husband was a lifeless, soulless idol of defense to ward off evil. Powerless as before, though the ark of holiness in love her sword and scepter, she could not fight the mighty foes as Curse and Destiny. She had sold her soul to Lucifer in the garden of Eden. And he had wedded her with this promise as a dowry that she would drink from the eternal fountain of youth and beauty forever and forever, and remaining forever and forever obedient to his Will.

This Will of Lucifer, she was trying to break free from. The Secret of her Identity was wrested out of his heart by the power of her own wisdom and knowledge, though she was still chained to his commands. The only husband she wished to kill now, not in a state of haze and oblivion, but with the naked sword of awareness and most willingly, would be Lucifer, but she knew she could not harm him until she herself died a natural death. And each flashing moment of ageless ritual inculcated in her head by Lucifer himself, when she was goaded by him to sting Haroon, she had managed so far to slither away and hide herself till she could transform herself to the beautiful princess again. She was not afraid of her own death, but of Haroon's. Once her Secret revealed, she would be strangled by the hands of Lucifer, and unable to avenge the countless deaths which had made her the instrument of evil and surcease. With this burden of a Secret sitting heavy inside her heart like a glacier of ice, she was contriving means to will a natural death, though Lucifer willed her to live. She was coveting death like a lonely bride separated from her bridegroom inside the rivers of births and deaths. Her psyche was

thawing, and the answers were coming to her like a liquid stream of ages, trickling down their secrets and mysteries into the fertile womb of Mother Earth.

Balzeeb had found her biological mother, and inside in her womb she was entombed even now, playing with the secrets so tenderly guarded and concealed. Inside the Great Womb of her Mother Earth, she was Pure and Whole, and infinitely happy. She could taste the fruit of Love from Her loving hands, and it was a ceremony of bliss and tenderness, the most delicious of fruits she had not ever tasted in real life. Her Mother was smiling, raising her prayer-like hands over her head as if warding off the shadow of oblivion, and pouring the light of awareness in her body possessed by the Devil. She could feel a breath of fresh air caressing her cheeks, and the presence of Ali. The smell of tobacco from his hookah was sweet to her, and she inhaled it deeply, her mind's eye even watching him perched high on a stool by the French doors. The molten gold in the sun was dissolving the clouds of smoke, and her own thoughts were returning to her Mother. Mother Earth was holding open the veil of Balzeeb's own life, and it was trembling against the breeze of secrets awful and awesome. She was the Eve and the Serpent coiled in one loving embrace. The Bride and the Virgin Mother, one suckling the Son of Man, and the other kissing away the Wounds of God, a circlet of golden halo cradling them all as the Sun of the earth and heavens. She was the goddess One and All, the Power and the Wisdom, the World and the Knowledge, the deceiver and the deceived, the suffered and the suffering! The Mother Earth of this earth goddess was guiding her gently through the brambles of lies and distortions. The words of Ignorance with the brand of 'I' were shuddering and dissolving. The Eye of Illusion with 'I' as its lamp posted at every fork of the dividing path, was now blinded by falsehood, and weeping in shame and mortification. The dewdrop tears of blood were painting

the earth red with wounds carved out of the bruised Scriptures so preciously concealed from mortal sight. The Immortal gods had plucked out eyes from their shining brows, and flung them down to earth as the burning arrows. The lips of time were bleeding! cherished lies an echo loud, and sanctified wisdom one clap of thunder. Balzeeb's own lips were pouring bolts of lightning, though the mockery of divine inspiration was smothered in the man-made expression of disbelief and sorrow.

‘And the Lord God said unto the serpent. Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field. Upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shall thou eat all the days of thy life,’ Balzeeb's lips were uttering these alien words. Her eyes lifted up to the bright Face of God where no judgment sat carrying the shafts of doom and punishment.

‘And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed. It shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise her head,’ the murmuring plea on Balzeeb's lips and in her eyes was facing God, but there was no fire of wrath, only the beacon of Love Profound and Boundless.

‘Unto the woman He said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception. In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children. And thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee,’ her eyes were gazing into the Light in God's eyes, and it was Pure and Enveloping where no harsh winds of such edicts could ever enter or leave.

‘And unto Adam He said. Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, thou shalt not eat of it. Cursed is the ground for thy sake. In sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life,’ her words were crumbling like the vessels of clay into the Glorious lap of God. And there was this shining Pool of Bliss dissolving all earth and sky

in one Gracious Embrace, where Love alone was the Mirror of Commands, reflecting no discord, but Perfection.

'Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee, and thou shalt eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground. For out of it wast thou taken. For dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return,' Balzeeb's very soul was leaning against the Throne of God, and it was bathed with Light upon Light. She had returned to the Eden of her Light, where there were no dust or thorns and no sweat pouring down the trees of life and knowledge, but Light, Love, Sweetness. Perfection All.

"Princess, Princess...Dr. Haroon is back. I hear his jeep grinding to a halt...can't mistake this sound for another one..." Ali's urgent tones were reaching Balzeeb like an echo released from the tomb of memories dear and forgotten.

"I love him not, but worship! To love someone like him would be a desecration..." the voice in Balzeeb's psyche was trembling upon her lips. Her eyes unfolding the sparkle of blue lagoons.

"Are you talking about me or some pagan god?" Haroon bounded close to her like a whirling dervish. "Your god-intoxicated voice was reaching me through the lips of the drunken valleys! I was lost...can't you tell..." he kissed her cheeks before flinging himself beside her.

"How could you? I was visiting the monasteries old and abandoned...somewhere in Tibet, or right under the snow-peaked mountains of the Himalayas?" was Balzeeb's cheerful retort, though her heart was sinking.

"I thought our Princess had gone to the heavens and talking with God," Ali murmured enigmatically.

"Why...why would you think such a..." Haroon asked with a sudden burst of energy and apprehension.

"Don't know, sir? Princess was dreaming...words holy. I was not paying attention though, just listening to her voice..." Ali stood there bashful and brooding.

"The best you know is whipping up a delicious dinner! So, how about it? I am starving," Haroon teased. His anguished heart erecting a facade of cheers.

"Yes sir. But it will not be holy, mind you," Ali smiled before he fled in confusion against the abrupt assault of his own silly comment.

"To think of it, I was in paradise! No nightmares, but dreams most edifying," Balzeeb murmured after Ali was gone.

"My paradise! Only when I am with you, and the rest is all hell," Haroon laughed. "The flames of disease and sickness, licking the life out of human flesh, and leaving the soul naked to the degradation of slavery and imprisonment...to life, to life," mirth and delirium were erecting another facade to chill his fears and doubts.

"Life is all perfection, Haroon, but you don't see it," Balzeeb's senses were murmuring disbelief, while her psyche was the mistress of speech.

"You must have gone to paradise, no doubt about it, the way you look transfigured with light? More beautiful than ever," Haroon murmured with a mingling of awe and sorrow. His heart was weeping. He could not fathom its nameless grief and smiled brightly.

"A paradise without the concept of Sin, Fall or Redemption, I guess," Balzeeb's voice was brimming with sorrow and sweetness. "Actually, I was wandering into the clouds of ether, my own body a cloud, empty and weightless," her thoughts drunk with the light of holiness were uttering innocent lies.

"And mine heavy with fatigue, love. It could surely use some rest and peace in one of those monasteries you wandered before," was Haroon's involuntary comment, his heart silent and constricting.

"I could take you there, if you want," Balzeeb sang with a burst of animation.

"Sure, my sweet sibil! I bet?" Haroon smiled.

"Don't bet too quick, Haroon, or you would be forfeiting your whole fortunes, if not your profession?" Balzeeb challenged. The transparency of her pallor kindling with a subtle glow.

"You are my fortune, love, and I can't afford to lose you. Besides, all fortunes are yours...this mansion...and the wealth of your youth and beauty...and the jewels of your wisdom..." the poetic gleam in Haroon's eyes was reflecting the silence of his heart.

"No tongue can speak the wisdom of ages concealed from our sight," Balzeeb began heedlessly. "The monasteries which I visited, though abandoned and forgotten, cherish the memory of art and poetry engraved in their hearts. One such monastery lies buried under the grove of myrtles. When I entered, it was dark and silent like a grave. But then I got accustomed to its darkness, and light appeared, and its very walls began to talk and sing. Guided by its voice, I entered an alcove, and do you know what I saw?"

"A frightful monster with eyes bulging out of his head?" Haroon crushed his delirium with one witless remark.

"No, dear doctor," Balzeeb matched his dry wit with an endearment he didn't like. "I read a most profound quatrain engraved in sandstone. Do you want to hear it? If your poetic sensibility can digest such profundity?"

"I might get dyspepsia, but I know how to cure it!" Haroon's wit was improving under the pressure of anguished silence inside him. "Yes, love, I am dying to hear it."

"Now, let's see if I can remember it," Balzeeb teased before reciting it under the spell of awe and disbelief,

which she had not felt under the influence of her ethereal visions.

*This body is the Bodhi tree
The mind, a mirror bright
Take care to wipe them clean
Lest dust on them alight,"*

Her eyes were kindled to a glorious blue in the sky.

"A sufic retreat! One needs to retire from this grueling world of material temptations in order to wipe clean one's body and mind," poetic gleam in Haroon's eyes was one flicker of profundity. "This is much too profound to be scribbled on a sandstone wall? You must have read it in some book, probably gathering dust in our library?"

"You won't find it, Haroon, it's written with the pen of ageless time, and on the tablet of stone too?" Balzeeb challenged with flashing eyes.

"I will too! And then you will owe me a vacation in the fragrant valleys of Kashmir?" Haroon murmured whimsically.

"I would carry you to the highest peaks of the Himalayas too, if you could find this next one?" Balzeeb's mind was already drinking the nectar of poetry from the next quatrain with the greed of a tourist.

"The next one! Where did you go next? So, that's what you do when I am earning my bread with the sweat of my brow?" Haroon's thoughts were becoming giddy by merely watching the cups of wine in her beautiful eyes.

"Just wandered into another monastic cell in the same monastery, that's all," Balzeeb's eyes were reminiscent blue, as if the memories shuddering in there were the dark blue oceans on moonlit nights. "You don't want to hear the next one, do you, Haroon?"

"My poetic soul is longing for it, love, though I would be the one carrying you on the top of the Himalayas," Haroon teased.

"Only, if you can find it in a book?" Balzeeb murmured doubtfully.

"Then you must be the author? I can't read your mind like an open book, can I?" Haroon ruminated aloud.

"The author of this next one is a young monk who didn't sign his name. One little whisper in the wind told me that when I was dreaming," Balzeeb's voice sounded distant and toneless. "The one you heard was written by an older monk. Actually, I didn't wander away, now it's clear to me. This next one was inscribed right below it. The same voice whispering to me that when one young monk read that quatrain of the older monk, he scribbled his own in one flash of inspiration. And all monks were awed by the genius of this young monk."

"Now that my mouth is watering for that morsel of poetry, are you not going to tell me?" Haroon's delirium was replaced by curiosity.

"If only you plead and grovel," Balzeeb's attempt at mirth was futile. Her heart was one gaping wound of fear and torment.

"On my hands and knees, my love, if you but command," Haroon insisted.

"Before I swoon at such gallantry, I must clean my own mind of all visions silly or profound," Balzeeb demurred, her thoughts shooting toward the Eden forgotten.

There never was a Bodhi tree

Nor any mirror bright

Since nothing at the root exists

On what should what dust alight."

Her pallor was accentuated by the shimmering blue in her eyes.

"Dinner is ready," Ali announced, who had been listening behind the doors, and now made himself visible.

"For some reason, I am not hungry," Balzeeb murmured feebly. Her face blanched suddenly and her eyes drooping shut.

"You are ill..." Haroon was feeling her pulse, his hands trembling.

"Princess didn't have a bite to eat all day, sir," Ali murmured apprehensively.

"Bring me the stethoscope from my briefcase, Ali," Haroon's voice was barely audible.

"Death by starvation comes gently. Gluttony makes one explode," this quote from Seneca was an imperceptible tremor on Balzeeb's lips as she fell into a swoon.

Chapter Ten

The bright, citron shadows scintillating through the elms and cedars were following Ali and Haroon, as they promenaded in their garden against the burden of misery and languor. Roses and cosmos were a profusion of color and abundance, absorbing more colors from the dusk in shades of violet and carmine. But these two men immersed in their deep contemplations couldn't see any color but the color of doom and death. Haroon's pace was slow and steady, his look opiate and forlorn, as if his world had crumbled around him and he had no wish to glue its pieces together. Ali beside him, looked old and haggard, but the dark gleam in his eyes carried all the vigor of youth and invulnerability. Both were quiet and distraught, both conversing in spurts, and both lapsing into silence as if no word was ever exchanged between them amidst this sepulchral hush of the evening. Haroon's thoughts were suspended, as if kneeling beside the sick bed of his beloved Balzeeb, and praying, and waiting. No such comfort or abeyance were Ali's companions, his mind and body chasing miracles in the form of herbal remedies to pour strength into the frail body of the ailing Princess.

Three whole weeks were dissolved in the slow, lingering march of time since Balzeeb had fainted, and since then her health had been declining. Fraught with fears and doubts, Haroon had consulted the best physicians available, including the psychiatrists and psychopaths, but not a dint of malfunction was to be found in any part of her mind or body. Schizophrenia was the verdict of one old psychiatrist, but his prescription loaded with hashish had proven fatal, afflicting her with high fever, vomiting, followed by fainting fits more prolonged than before.

Burning with the fever of rage and despair himself, Haroon had canceled out the prospect of any medication, but no cure was to be found for her spurious malady. Without the medication, her condition had improved a little, but she had lost her appetite completely, and was wasting away.

Swathed in satiny comforts, Balzeeb seemed to be resting peacefully in her four-poster bed. She was attended by a young nurse who had relieved the other one this afternoon, for Haroon had employed a staff of nurses to be with Balzeeb around the clock in case she needed any advise or assistance. Since Haroon had spent the entire day with Balzeeb, goading her to eat, and talking with her when she seemed inclined, Ali had suggested a stroll for the sake of Haroon's own health. Haroon had acceded only after Balzeeb had fallen asleep. But before venturing out, he had called Latif to come over, for his heart was a grave of omens, foretelling something more tragic than death itself. What could it be, his bewildered senses didn't have the strength to explore. What he didn't know and had no cause to guess was, that she was starving herself to death in order to save his own life. Nor could he imagine in his wildest dreams that his own dreams mingling with hers were more than just dreams?

"I can smell the odor of death...it's in the air. Don't you Ali?" one prophecy of a comment was wrested out of Haroon's silent anguish, as he kept walking.

"As long as one lives, sir, one can only smell the scent of life. Besides, death is odorless, isn't that true, sir?" Ali's own bitter thoughts were lending him the rod of prudence.

"No, Ali, death definitely has an odor, foul and putrid, much like life's subtle odors to which we get accustomed, and which we flush down the toilet every stinking day of our life," the fester of hopelessness in Haroon's mind was speaking, not his bleeding heart. "What has been Balzeeb telling you for these past few weeks, Ali? It seems like you

are a part of her Secret..." he bit his tongue as if he had violated one sacred oath.

"No secrets, sir. Princess just talks about gods and serpents. Since the day I killed that snake...it seems...I am thinking...is Princess possessed? Maybe, we can find a healer..." Ali's innocent murmurings were cut short by Haroon's loud interruption.

"What gods and serpents?" Haroon's thoughts were cutting open the blisters of memories.

"Princess said she went to see King Vasuki...he is a serpent-god, she said..." Ali offered reluctantly.

"Where else did she go? Tell me all, Ali...a healing balm..." the Secret untold, forgotten by Haroon, was looming in the distance.

"Some Naga shrines, I don't know what they are? But Princess told me...Nagas are serpent-gods, half human and half serpent. Something like being immortal? They have the power to change from one form to the other. It didn't make much sense to me...spells, amulets, incantations...I don't pay much attention, I just like listening to the Princess' voice," Ali confessed ruefully.

"She loves to tell stories, but these days all her stories tend to move toward the serpents like the magnets, why?" Haroon demurred, his mind resurrecting childhood memories. "Those horrid tales, I heard them all my life, it seems. My own aunt told me that one man who killed a female snake, was stung by a male snake at the same instant. That man didn't die though, he got addicted to the sting and the poison. Every year, at the precise hour when he had killed that female snake, he would be filled with a longing to be stung. And astonishingly enough, that same male snake would reappear and sting him, no matter where he was at that moment?"

"Your aunt, sir, I remember her. Didn't she read palms? Fortune-telling, her favorite hobby?" Ali could not help

but whirl his thoughts back in time, his heart shuddering for some reason.

"Yes," Haroon murmured, his own thoughts sliding past centuries in Chaucer's time.

*This world is a thoroughfare full of woe
And we are pilgrims, passing to and fro."*

"We need to pray, sir...I have, but you need to..." Ali's half-hearted appeals were swallowed by the noise of the jeep, careening into the driveway.

Latif jumped from his jeep as if catapulted into space, and bolted toward those two phantoms in the garden with the speed of a hurricane. His stormy approach was already whirling Ali away, and he was vanishing into obscurity behind the bower of roses. Haroon's feet were coming to a standstill under the elm sprinkled with lace patterns from sunshine.

"You sounded so low and dejected, I thought you were dying?" Latif breathed concern as soon as he approached closer, stricken with fear by Haroon's pallor and mute intensity. "You pulled me out of the research lab, all those white rats too, dying of sloth and gluttony," was his blithering attempt to jolt his friend out of this daze and stupor.

"I am not the one dying, Balzeeb is..." Haroon murmured opiatly. For some absurd, astonishing reason, the block of silence inside him carving a link between his pain and white rats.

"She can't, Haroon, don't say such things. You are just distraught, rather overwrought," Latif braved an attempt at cheerfulness, but failed.

"Why can't she? Is death not inevitable? Give me one good reason, and I will be your devoted slave for the rest of my life," white rats in Haroon's head were slicing his brain into smithereens.

"Just by the law and virtue of her youth and beauty she cannot die! And God can't be so cruel...to us..." sufic madness in Latif's eyes was flashing fire.

"What mad tests are they conducting out there, Latif?" white rats were speaking through Haroon's lips, not his own madness. "I had a feeling they would stoop to such vile means, goaded by rumor and superstition. Balzeeb's blood samples, which I had supplied for all sorts of tests...I overheard but didn't believe, were to be used for this experiments with the rats. What are they trying to prove?"

Latif stood there stunned, as if buried alive under the burden of shock. His own thoughts were racing inside the cages of the rats, suffering a slow, lingering death. Haroon was watching him intensely, his own heart a volcano of rage and grief. The maddening fury in his thoughts was churning storms, and molten lava was escaping his lips.

"All those besotted physicians and researchers, weighed low by the stinking gossip that Balzeeb is a serpent? Charlatan's and numskulls! Years of training in science and medicine, and what have they learnt? Their brains as costive as their stomachs," Haroon's head as well as his thoughts were a simmering pot of madness and delirium.

"Didn't know..." Latif murmured weakly and incredulously. "Why did I mention..." he couldn't speak.

"Why does one suffer to live?" Haroon trooped away as if fleeing his friend and his own thoughts.

"For love, I guess," Latif followed him, but Haroon had begun to pace to and fro.

"Life is a farce, a paradox! One cruel jest, mocking and laughing! One holy jest designed by God to indulge in the pleasure of drowning us in grief and suffering?" Haroon's raving, ranting voice was keeping rhythm with his pacing.

"Grief is driving you mad...when there is no grief...only doubt and despair. Balzeeb is just ill and she is going to get well..." Latif abandoned himself on the lonely bench in view of Haroon's whirlwind of pacing.

"Is she? Are you a seer, or some demented Sufi on the path toward self-annihilation?" was Haroon's blistering comment.

"You can use the wisdom of a seer, I am beginning to think, to cement your crumbling sanity," Latif's voice was both a plea and a groan. "I will find you one."

"The same one who tells you stories about the serpents?" a snort of mirth escaped Haroon's lips, brimming with pain and delirium.

"Maybe, if you had faith in a healer, you would forget about the serpents! Accusing others of rumor and superstition, and you yourself have swallowed them whole, inviting ulcers and indigestion. And I am talking about the ulcers of the mind, and indigestion of the heart?" Latif's own mute anguish was flaring and flickering.

"What do you propose? Let some seer torch her body with incantations, so that we could watch the miracle of a serpent uncoiling itself right out of her navel?" Haroon spewed out the venom of his own delirium.

"You need to pray, Haroon...pray for your soul and sanity..." Latif murmured hopelessly.

"That's what Ali says..." Haroon murmured to himself. "How could one pray when one's heart is smoldering with anger and bitterness against all, including God!"

"That is the time one needs to pray. To absolve oneself of anger and bitterness, and to fill one's heart with the light of understanding," Latif's sufic thoughts were clearing the rubble of torment inside him.

"Darkness is much more comforting, didn't you say once? Why don't we kill ourselves and escape this mirage of blinding light, which bounces away so miraculously?" Haroon was lost deep into the pool of his own dark contemplations.

"The weight of sin and perdition keeps us away from the doors of death! The horrible rewards of a homicide

stealing our resolve to die?" Latif was overwhelmed by a sudden weight of fatigue and loneliness.

"What afflicts her? This Secret, this Mystery? Is she dying? Why? She said she would die if she revealed the secret, and the secret is still intact in her bosom? I have even forgotten about that. Is this a nightmare? I would waken one day, and find myself in the paradise of her health and beauty?" Haroon was pacing and contemplating.

"More like a bad dream? Just like the Tide of Independence...the death of an empire, and the birth of two nations, orphanous and bleeding! The soot of gloom and devastation is settling, and the wounds and lacerations are gathering the balm of Hope and Freedom," Latif's thoughts were sloughing off their own pain on the graves of the Past where Pakistan could be seen recovering from the trauma of death and devastation.

"Dreams, dreams! Is life itself not one waking hell of a dream that we should be visited by more, while sleeping?" Haroon's feet came to an abrupt halt before the bench, and he stood gazing into his friend's eyes with a mad intensity. "What are you thinking, Latif?"

"Nothing. I hear music. The nightingales are singing, can't you hear?" the sufic light in Latif's eyes was a beacon of painful elation.

"Why do I hear only the howling of the wolves?" chanted Haroon, as if awakening from a narcotic slumber.

"Shouldn't we be going in? Balzeeb, is she alone..." Latif got to his feet wearily.

"Loneliness! So very dear and enchanting. It's like a shining abyss between her heart and mine..." the veil of oblivion was ripped open in Haroon's mind, and he stumbled, before aiming his steps back toward the mansion.

"At least, it's shining. Not dark as the Scythian deeps," Latif lumbered after his friend, forlorn and brooding.

The nightingales were singing somewhere in the distance, though no howling wolves were there to corrupt their sweet melodies. Hovering above the facade of the mansion was the livid, lonely moon, watching the two friends climb the flagstone steps. The evening shadows were fading behind them, and the parlor was lit to a cool effulgence as they stepped right into the very heart of blazing colors on the Persian carpet. Haroon almost collided with Ali who stood against the doors with armloads of wilting roses.

"Look at you, always bringing in the dying blooms, and hoping they would live?" Haroon strode past him, his look wild and unseeing.

"They would, sir, after I soak them into water...they always do! And a dash of sugar perks them up..." Ali's eyes were appealing Latif though, since he was the one enamored by the flowers. Standing there smitten as if hypnotized by the rush of colors.

"A coin or any piece of metal will do the same trick, Ali. Try it..." Latif murmured absently. He didn't even know what he was saying, an orchestra was booming in his head, rippling and fading. His heart too was filled with music, something similar to a sonata from Beethoven, but the notes were not earthly, rather divine and awful. Nothing! that he had ever heard during his entire life.

"I have not invited you in to stand there and swoon at the wilted flowers, but to keep Balzeeb company," Haroon whirled back on his feet as if drugged with pain.

"I was listening to the music in my heart...can't you hear it?" Latif was jolted out of his reverie.

"Laments! I hear only laments in my heart. What madness? Nightingales, and now music..." Haroon turned to Ali. "Is the Princess awake?"

"Yes, sir. The nurse came down for a glass of water, and she said..."

"Come, Latif," Haroon was whipped by the demon of his own urgency, not even aware what Ali was saying.

The large bedroom with Bokhara rugs and damask drapes, with its decor as the color of twilight, looked dark and serene. Rather quiet and melancholy at this time of the evening, as if dusk and death could be heard sighing and conspiring against the mantle of silence. Balzeeb, donned in a night robe of Chinese silk was reclining against the headboard, heaps of pillows piled behind her in a soft mound. One camel skin lamp depicting sunset was the only light on the bedside table, casting a beautiful glow inside the entire room. Though pale and emaciated, Balzeeb's features still had that radiance of youth and beauty which could never be marred by age or sickness. She was more beautiful than ever before if that could be possible. Gloom and sadness had polished her skin with that subtle luster and transparency which could only be seen in marble sculpted by the warmth and passion of some artist divine. The icy blue in her eyes was replaced by a fiery sparkle, as if her whole inner being was on fire. Latif and Haroon had claimed their seats at her bedside in low, tapestried chairs, trying to strike a chord at parlance which seemed to be slipping and vanishing. The nurse had already vanished by Haroon's wave of dismissal, and now this strange trio was merging into silence. Balzeeb was watching the hand-painted cloisonné on the mantel, its wide neck hosting a bouquet of fresh roses from the garden. Suddenly, her gaze returned to the statues of gloom by her bedside, and a smile rippled inside the feverish sparkle of her eyes.

"You two are sitting there like some old trees bewitched by the demons of the night!" one low song of a declaration escaped Balzeeb's lips.

"If you would but take even one morsel of solid food, we would dance with joy! No more exposed to the spells of any dark demons," the Sufi in Latif sang mournfully.

"I think you are in love with me, Latif, and my poor husband doesn't even know," the twinkling stars in Balzeeb's eyes were turning to Haroon.

"He knows, my love, he has known it always," Haroon elicited one pale smile.

"Well, if my secret is exposed, Princess, I must assure you that I am wedded to denial and suffering. I am the one who is goading your husband to get away from work and to take you on a world tour...a panacea to all dreams and ailments," Latif murmured under some spell of pain and tenderness.

"I would die of jealousy, if not with worry over your illness, love," Haroon's voice and thoughts were choking and stumbling.

"The dawn of truths and lovely secrets," Balzeeb smiled at Latif before returning her attention to Haroon. "I am not ill, Haroon, believe me, just weak and besotted for a little while. Are we going on a world tour?"

"How could we, Balzeeb, when you don't eat anything, and are losing all strength?" Haroon lamented, a glint of hope shining in his sad eyes.

"I will be healthy as a hawk, Haroon, you will see," daze and delirium were fading the sparkle in Balzeeb's eyes. "Where would you take me?"

"Beyond the Seven Seas, if you wish, love," hope was dying in Haroon's eyes. "Rome, Venice, Florence. We would cross the Tiber, languish at the eternal spring at Ravels. And the bright lights of Trieste would warm our hearts."

"Like going back in time," Balzeeb's voice was some wail of a rivulet, soft and remote. "The peace and purity of snow in the Dolomites. St. Peter's square in Rome, and the Roman theater in Verona, and the lakes and the gardens. Florence, the shimmering miracle! Montecito castle at Verona, how could I forget that! The golden bowl at Palermo, oh, how magnificent," her eyes were closing.

"Sounds like, you have already been there, Princess?" murmured Latif in awe. For, this was the first time he had heard her dream-like intonations.

"Yes, I have been everywhere, even beyond the mists and the voids, and into the very heart of the bottomless deeps," words were pouring forth from Balzeeb's lips like the murmur of a cataract. "This ache of century old is returning. The hand of enchantment is holding me in its moist fist. Oh, my Mother Earth, her heart is bleeding...pierced with bullets and with the cries of the suffered and the suffering," her eyes were lidded shut, her lips trembling.

"Come back, Balzeeb, from dreams and nightmares," Haroon pleaded, while Latif sat there mute and stricken. "The war is over, no more blood and no more bullets. Peace is here, on the wings of hope and prosperity," his eyes were shining with the poetry of pain and melancholia. "Look at your own garden, such abundance of roses."

"The beds of flowers which my Mother Earth planted, are now fields of blood. Can't you see..." Balzeeb was murmuring in opiate trance.

"Leave those dreams, Balzeeb, if you love me," was Haroon's desperate murmur of a plea.

"Love! Where is it? Misery has replaced it. Mother Earth is tired of this slaughter and bloodshed. She is weaving a tapestry of dreams, for me...just for me," Balzeeb's lips were half parted like a silken wound.

"Look at me, Balzeeb, don't drift away into dreams. I love you, don't you know that?" Haroon was trying to infuse the last dreg of his willpower to reach her.

"Yes, for this love alone, my love, I must leave," Balzeeb's eyes were shot open. Sweeping from one to the other, and then settling on Haroon with the love of a mother who was to be torn away from her child forever and forever. "The goddess of the Phoenicians is calling me. Don't you recognize her? She says she is Ishtar. Didn't we

pray to her as Aphrodite when we were in Greece, don't you remember? And when we met in Rome, we used to go to the temple of Venus. All those centuries, continents are ours, ours! But where did you go then? How lonesome was I? Exiled, imprisoned in Body, Soul, Thought. Can you smell ether, love, the white ether of life, folded in black sheets of death. Layer upon layer. My hands are old and weak, how can I unfold?"

"Nothing to unfold, my lovely goddess, but to fold...to fold life into the embrace of reality," poetic madness was one ripple of agony in Haroon's eyes.

"Where are those goddess' of love and beauty, Princess? Could you pray to them to send you back to your husband?" Latif's own sufic abandon was lowering a mantle of oblivion. Letting him gaze into this scenic dream where he himself was the Lover many spans forgotten, and Balzeeb his Beloved of Time Everlasting.

"Those goddess' are weeping tears of pearls, and erecting pyramids, which are crumbling for the lack of devotion and worship," Balzeeb's eyes were smoldering in flashes of Memory. "They are laughing now, melting, melting. Chaste white clouds. Snowcapped mountains of the east! Look over the mountains...a procession...how often I have seen it? Like a gold thread woven solid by the fingers of sunsets. The same as ever, the same as before, the same as everlasting. A procession of camels, their golden humps holding a canopy of stars, can you see? And the divine riders on each mount...Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, Brahma...how many, can you count? Marching in Peace, guided by the Light of Love, followed by gods and goddess', angels and seraphim, saints and martyrs, floating, floating. Where are they going? Where do they come from? Light upon Light, Eternal and Everlasting...the silver thread of Unity! The golden spool of Love! What beauty and perfection! Ether humming the songs of Youth! The Breeze of contemplation carrying the

Throne of Wisdom. Look, can't you see? Tell me, you can?" the dazzling blue in her eyes was alive and throbbing.

"Yes, the throne most radiant, and a coronet of stars on the head of Ishtar," Latif's anguish was licked white by the sufic light of ecstasy, as if he had seen the Face of a Beloved.

"And all I see are void and darkness, and heavens crumbling," Haroon was cradling his head into his hands, his thoughts sipping the soma of oblivion and delirium.

"Yes, the valley of darkness is calling me, the voids have left me. The Light is gone," Balzeeb's eyes were closing. "What a terrible Fall? Where am I? This dark, slimy pit of Knowledge. Crawling and slithering. Inside the belly of Mother Earth. Torn away from her dark womb, slandered and maligned. The knot of Truth inside my heart. Sin and distortion my foes. Who are these men? My husbands, how many? Why are the centuries tossing and whirling me around. The heavens are spinning, the world is shattering. Chaos and confusion. So many slain, who is the slayer. Murderer! Have I murdered? Whom? Who are these men? Why are they mocking and laughing? Am I naked? This mottled garment of ochre and crimson, my only defense? The serpent of Eden, no!" her eyes were opening, glazed and glorious blue. "I have killed my husbands, yes, I have!" her eyes were feverish and all-knowing.

"No, my love, no. You need rest..." Haroon was lumbering to his feet, his thoughts already mixing laudanum with water to soothe her nerves.

"I did, Haroon, I killed...my husbands," Balzeeb's gaze was holding Haroon prisoner. "I am not insane, Haroon, and this is no dream or delirium, believe me," one shaft of lightning was streaming down her gaze as the naked blade of steel.

"You don't have to assume the role of a murderer to prove your sanity, my love," Haroon murmured soothingly.

"No, Haroon, I don't even have to act this role, I have played it so well," Balzeeb closed her eyes.

"You never told me, Haroon, to what lengths these dreams have...how the Princess is suffering," Latif was jolted out of his sufic abode, watching Haroon's back where he stood making a concoction of water and laudanum "We need assistance."

"What sort of assistance?" Haroon's voice was barely audible, as if he was speaking to himself.

"Pardon me. I hope, you and Princess don't mind my saying this...but some evil spirit...as much as I don't believe in them...yet there is no alternative? A healer," Latif's words themselves were dripping with pain and confusion.

"Any reed of hope in the sea of hopelessness!" Haroon was clutching the glass in his trembling hands, and floating toward the bed.

"Get away! Don't come near me...I will sting," one cry of agony, sharp and demented, was torn from Balzeeb's very soul.

The glass slipped from Haroon's hand, his body swaying and shuddering. Balzeeb's eyes glazed by the veil of death, and polished like the marbles were stabbing him with the knives of reality. His own grief was ripped open from his heart, and escaping like thunder from the throat of a wounded animal. His head crashing on her breast, and his body racked with sobs and convulsions.

"What fear have I of any sting, my love, when your beauty has stung me over and again...poisoning my soul with longings...corrupting my heart with desire..." agony and despair were mingling with his tears, as he lay there sniveling like an orphaned child.

Latif stood there chilled and stunned. The only witness to the horror of Death and Mystery, which had escaped

Haroon inside the waters of his blind grief and disconsolation. His own look was glazed and unblinking. The hands, arms and face of Balzeeb were turned ochre with blotches of crimson, the skin all glossy and parched, as if the painter of death had left the casket of Secret open, with the colors of Truth spilled into a collage. Latif was collapsing, disbelief and darkness enveloping him in the mantle of silence. Leaning by the door, Ali too was spared the horror of this awful death, for he had heard only grief, and had viewed not the casket of Truth. With his eyes closed and tears streaming down his wrinkled face, he was reciting Al-Fatihah from the Quran.

*In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful
 All praise belongs to Allah, Lord of all the worlds
 The Gracious, the Merciful
 Master of the Day of Judgment
 Thee alone do we worship and thee alone we implore
 for help
 Guide us in the right path
 The path of those:
 Upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy blessings, those
 who have not incurred Thy displeasure, and those
 who have not gone astray.*

About the Author



Farzana Moon is a poet, historian and playwright. She composes Sufi poetry; historical, biographical Moghul sagas and plays based on the stories from religion and folklore. Born and educated in Pakistan, she now resides in America as a US citizen.