

As was his way, bin Aswad took no part in the celebration, and actually enjoyed his time alone as everyone else danced, sang and ate. Indeed, he had always found great pleasure in his love of numbers – calculating expenses, inventories and ultimately, profits. Despite Omari’s warnings about making money from the needs of others, bin Aswad had found it profitable to provide specialty clothing for those who could afford it. He found that some people paid well for themselves and or their family to look good in new clothing, and he was very clever in the re-use of old clothes to make new garments, as his cloth supply dwindled. Instead of being rich in coin, he now had more than his share of food, water, tools and other valuables.

He was happily humming a tuneless melody while he sat counting a number of small gems, when his tent flap flew open. A stunning young woman moved in quickly and stood over him. Astonished, he scrambled backwards with his eyes and mouth wide open, spilling the gems onto the tent floor.

“Ho, bin Aswad. Easy,” said the woman in a husky voice, and a bright smile that revealed white, even teeth. “I wish you no harm.” She raised her palms to calm his fright and sat down. “In fact, I believe I might be of some service to you. My name is Saba Khan. Did you drop something?”

No longer terrified, bin Aswad was still too surprised and embarrassed to form any reply, except to start picking up his gems while glancing up at the stranger. At first glance, Saba

Khan possessed what might be considered an extraordinary beauty – enough to turn heads, and very pleasing to the eye. In bin Aswad’s lamplight, her complexion was a satiny smooth, golden brown that seemed to blend into the darkness. Her finely sculpted face framed dark amber, almond-shaped eyes, which made him pause. For the brief moment he held her gaze, he was so struck by their sheer intensity, intelligence and perceptiveness that he stopped picking up his gems. His attitude changed to awe and he was willing, even eager to hear what she had to say.

“How do you know my name?” he mumbled, too awestruck to ask all the questions in his mind.

“You are well-known, bin Aswad. You have many customers—people you talk to and trade with. Some of the things you receive in trade are precious gems, such as that one you missed, just there.” She pointed a slender finger at a ruby behind him.

“That gets people’s attention. Some of the things you’ve said are bound to get even more attention – such as the fact that you are unhappy with Master Omari’s leadership.” She leaned forward and opened her eyes wide. “Allow me to offer you some free advice – trade your gems away and keep your opinions to yourself.”

Bin Aswad noticed the hilt of a dagger in her waistband. As the idea of danger began to form in his mind, beads of sweat

broke out on his upper lip. “That’s some strong advice,” he said, in an effort to sound self-assured. “What do you have to do with my opinions or my gems?”

Saba Khan chuckled. “I’m not here to harm you, bin Aswad. I’m here to suggest that I might be able to help you solve your problem with Master Omari...for the cost of some of your gems.” She raised her brow and tilted her head to the side. “Are you interested in seeing someone else in charge of the caravan? Someone more sensitive to your business interests?”

He frowned and leaned forward. “And how would you...”

“You don’t need to know that,” she said. “All you need to know is if you pay my price, your satisfaction is guaranteed.”

He stared at the woman in amazement. “What do you do? Are you some kind of killer? I don’t want to kill anyone.”

“I make things happen,” she replied. “And don’t worry; you don’t have enough gems for anyone to be killed. Not even that great blue jewel you have hidden in your robe.”

Bin Aswad’s eyes widened again. “You know about the jewel?”

“That is why I’m here,” she said in a low voice. “Remember my first advice? You’re not going to be able to hang onto such a stone much longer anyway. Too many people know about it. Right now, all you have to do is say ‘yes’ to the deal. If you do, I will give you more details later. Of course, whether you agree or not, I must refer you back to the second advice – keep your

business to yourself. Now, do we have a deal?" She leaned forward and smiled as if she knew the answer.