

Obsession
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Part 1

I sit with drawn steel across my lap, wondering why. Do I really think I can stop him? In the end, he will come in here anyway, and I will be helpless before him. My will is weak. It cannot resist the implied danger in his eyes, his moves, his very being. I can do nothing to stop even my foolish desire, how can I expect to stop him? The door moves. It cracks open a fraction of an inch, then pauses. Quietly it opens enough to admit a silent shadow.

I draw a deep breath. I knew he would come. He had to, it was an unavoidable product of our earlier meeting. Reality shifts. . .

"Hello, Mahir," I said, in a normal tone, a conversational tone. *This is an ordinary day*, my mind giggled. *I always sit in the dark, waiting to speak with dear old friends who kill people for a living.* I shied away from the thought like a skittish horse.

"It's been a long time," came the black-velvet response. I shivered, but held firm. It was easy, in the dimness, to imagine the way he moved towards me, the slide of muscle on bone, the lithe panther stalking its prey.

"Too long," I said, hearing the edge of hysteria in my own voice. "Too long, without knowing. Why didn't you at least let me know you were alive?"

I found myself on my feet, weapon in hand. In the dim moonlight coming from the single high window, teeth glinted in a smile.

"Why, Amarun, I didn't know you cared."

Something snapped within me. The tension, the sudden shock of seeing *this man* again. . . I lunged for him, pinning him against the wall with my sharp steel blade against his throat. Infuriatingly, he just stood there—no fuss, no struggle, just that same smile. This close, I could smell him, smell traces of the exotic oil from his homeland he favored for his weapons, feel the heat coming off him in waves. "Why did you do it? Why?" I could feel the flesh under my blade ready to part. Just a bit more pressure. . . *No.* I am not like him. *Why did you leave me all alone? Why did you let me grieve, thinking you were dead?*

The blade might as well not exist, for all the effect it has on this man. "I had to go," he replied, almost gently. "There were reasons you could never guess. . ." I could feel the pressure of his gaze upon me. Even in the dim light his eyes burned me with their once-familiar fire.

"So tell me," I suggested harshly, jerking my blade away from that smooth, inviting, unresisting throat. I turned my back on him. . . on my old friend, now the prime suspect in so many killings my mind refused to accept the number. I resheathed my blade, knowing I couldn't use it. My friend. . . who even before had a sense of danger about him, in the way he moved, the way he talked, the way he acted. Now far more obvious, now that I had seen him at his work. Coolly, calmly, standing up from the pitiful body laying on its bed, turning to face me even as he placed the onyx statuette on the bedside table. Danger oozed from him in a nearly visible haze, and I had to struggle to contain my response to the infernally attractive man. "Or better yet, tell me how it is that you became a cold-blooded killer."

He laughed, a short bark. "It is my profession," he said simply. "It is what I do. Surely you knew before?"

"No," I whispered. The memory rose up unbidden, a much younger Mahir staring at me with a secret plea in his eyes. And my own response, pushing him away. *No, no, it isn't possible, go away and leave me alone.* He had done just that, leaving me with the haunting memory of that brief moment of madness. "*No!* Not until tonight. Why?" Even I was unsure what I was asking.

"She was a danger," he said. I heard clothing rustle and supposed I should be afraid, having turned my back on an admitted murderer. I felt, rather than heard, him close in behind me and tensed as his arms went around me. "She would have come to you with some very dangerous information," he murmured into my ear. Heart pounding, I leaned back into his embrace.

"What information?" I shivered as his arms tightened.

"She would have told you," that black-velvet voice was turning my veins into rivers of fire, "that all the killings were related, that they were all ordered by one man."

I broke away, feeling a chill where his body had warmed me. "Who?" I faced him, but he had his back to the window and I could see nothing.

"Ah, but if I tell you now, you will miss out on all the fun of figuring out who I work for." The light, mocking tone drove me to the edge of sanity.

"I'll take you with me to the station," I muttered, "see if you can hold out against me there, when we're on my ground and everyone sees you for the miserable lying bastard you are. . ."

He laughed again, this time a sound of genuine amusement. "No you won't," he said. "If you wanted to arrest me, you would have done so earlier, by her bed."

Then he closed in on me again, and I was in his arms, feeling the silken fire of his mouth on mine. *No, let me go*, my mind protested, even as my body melted willingly into his embrace. The kiss was all I had dreamed it could be and more, burning and tingling through my body until I lost consciousness of anything else. There was no outside world, there was only the intoxicating pleasure of the kiss.

Reality reasserted itself and I broke away. "No! I can't—" My throat clenched on the words I wanted to say. *I can't do this, you kill people, you belong in jail, I can't keep kissing you because if I do it won't stop there I can't I can't I can't*. . . And I pulled away from Mahir, from the man I had once trusted, and left the room at a stumbling run.

Out in the cold of the night, I slowed to a walk. Above me, the stars glittered with a brittle light. The cold made everything crystal clear and sharp. It matched the pain, cutting through me like a knife. Mahir was here, returned from the past to haunt me. Mahir killed people, plain and simple. I had let Mahir go; twice now, in fact. I had allowed Mahir, a confessed murderer, a paid assassin, hold me in his strong arms and burn me with his kisses, while my body yearned for *more*. . .

I walked on and on, not knowing my path, attempting to return my mind to sanity. What was wrong with me? I had scarcely been able to deal with our relationship before, but now—! Before it had been simpler, just a young man getting closer than he should. He'd been my partner, once, a constable like myself. New to the force, a bit younger, assigned to me because I knew the area and could show him the ropes. . . And he had been hiding this from me even then! A brief moment of remembered sweetness flashed before my mind's eye, and I dispassionately compared the memory with the sight of his face in the shadows as he rose from the deathbed of the young girl. I felt a twisting sensation deep in my gut. Gods, but surely I was as much monster as he, for hadn't I let him go?

My walking had brought me down to the docks now. Hundreds of ships bobbed serenely in the water, undisturbed by my actions. How could this be? How could the world not be shaken by what had passed between us? I stood for a moment watching the moonlight glint off the water, then turned and headed for my home.

Footsore and weary, I finally reached the dubious comfort and security of the inn I called home. Despite the late hour, there were still a few patrons in the common room, drinking and dicing. I ignored them, nodded to the barkeep as I always did, and went upstairs to my room. Inside, I had found a fragile stability, having decided on a course of action. Just stay away from him. It was that simple. I went through my nighttime routine and slid between the sheets of my bed. If I could not bring myself to do what was right and arrest him, I would stay entirely clear of him.

I settled into the bed, curled around the pillow, and tried to ignore the cry from my heart: *Mahir*. . .

Nothing changed. Despite the fact that I felt my guilt written in every line of my body, nothing seemed any different at all. I went to the station and interacted with the men and women smoothly, normally. Nobody pointed me out and accused me of withholding vital information. Nobody threw me in a cell for letting a killer walk free.

I went to my desk, burying myself in my notes. I could see him in front of me, as clearly as though he stood there. His eyes smiled at me, mocking me, as I picked my way through the notes for this case,

the one which only had one link between all the victims. A small onyx statuette of a cat had been found at a dozen different crime scenes. In memory, I saw him place it carefully on the nightstand. What was the significance of the cat? Was it a symbol for him, or for his employer?

My stomach churned. I pushed my notes away and went to the breakroom to see if anyone would trade duty with me. Sitting in the office today already threatened to drive me mad.

And so I walked a patrol. It was relatively boring, only a pickpocket to deal with, but the activity allowed me to keep my mind off *him*.

Upon my return, something caught me unprepared, knocking into me like a mule's kick. Seemingly harmless, a folded piece of vellum lay on my desk. Hand shaking ever-so-slightly, I reached out and picked it up. All it had on the inside was the name of a tavern, The King's Arms, in that elegant script I had once known so well. I stared at it for a long moment before consigning it to the flames in the fireplace. I would hold firm. I would not give in, would not allow my weak will to carry me into his arms. . . My stomach twisted, a feat it had been performing all day. *A killer*, whispered the voice of insanity in my mind. *He is a cold-bloded killer. He kissed you, and you let him do it. You let him get away. Twice! You melted into his arms and kissed him back. . .*

No! I will not go, will not see him in the light, will not hold him forever more. . . will not look to see if his eyes are still gentle and caring. . . will not remember the burning caress of his lips on mine. . .

I wrenched my mind back under control, breathing heavily. I tried to compose my face, then left my tiny cubicle of an office. I avoided the eyes of my fellow constables, wondering if they could see my guilt on my face. I spoke to no one until I reached my home. Early for once, I went inside and fetched my dinner from the kitchen. Stewed chicken and vegetables over biscuits tonight. I paused by the bar to purchase a bottle of brandy.

"Rough day?" Perro, the bartender, asked with raised eyebrow. He pulled out an unopened botle of expensive liquid oblivion.

"You can't imagine," I growled, collecting my purchase and making my way to my room. Once inside, I sat at the table by the window and ate methodically, gazing sightlessly at the familiar room. Then I cracked the seal on the brandy.

Not even a whole mug into the bottle, the memories took over.

"You're young, but you're responsible enough," the Chief said. "You take him."

Those words, those inelegant, fateful words. . . I agreed, of course. What else would I do? The Chief wants me to take a trainee, I take a trainee. Easy.

What did it matter that when I saw the trainee, an all but visible spark happened between us? He was my trainee. Nothing could happen. But, oh. . .

The bottomless eyes? The ravenwing hair? The dusky skin, so smooth and. . . No. I remember. The surface packaging truly attracted me, but what did me in was the way he moved. Loose-limbed, graceful enough to make my bones ache, the man danced more than moved. That was it, that was the start of the madness.

But then he opened up his mouth and spoke, and intelligence came out. Sharp wit, sharp insights, and an instantaneous grasp of any concept he encountered. That was nearly more important than the pure animal attraction. Lust could be found in many places. True compatability, though, the ability to *connect* with another human being. . . That presented the most difficult complication.

Because he was my trainee. A person junior to me, who looked to me for leadership and guidance, and that meant no. . . *no*. Just plain *no*.

No touching. No fraternizing while off duty, although that rule crumbled nearly instantly. It wasn't too hard to bend the rules for a chat over a drink after work, or for aimless conversations on the docks watching merchanters unload, or meeting up for dinner. . .But I remember it took every bit of willpower to keep from reaching for *more*. Inappropriate. Not acceptable. Just don't do it.

But oh, how I wanted. . .

An accidental brush against him was enough to send me off into fantasyland for hours. Pathetic, in

many ways, but I wanted him so bad. . .

And then what did the bastard do? When I was so mad for him that I was nearly ready to cast all propriety out the window and finally touch that silken skin on purpose?

Betrayal.

The wounds still cut deep, even after what, five years? Ten?

Eight years and seven months, give or take some days.

Such a span of years. . . Nowhere near long enough to ease the pain fully. He'd betrayed me.

Turned out he was just gathering information. He was a spy for hire, in effect. The man got enough into the confidences of myself and the Chief both to get vital information about a particular investigation.

Then he trotted off to his employer, or was it the highest bidder? Whatever, young Mahir blew our investigation sky high, and managed to create a miserable situation for the entire constabulary, involving nearly all of Trade City before the dust settled. Gossip, scandal, bribes, and misery. . .

Misery, because Mahir vanished without a trace.

Part 2

"You can't walk away," he whispered into my ear. I shivered. His fingers traced down my cheek, the side of my neck, my shoulder. "You are mine now. I have claimed you." And I felt his mouth on mine again. My body disappeared into a mass of flames and my spirit cried out for him. . . Mahir. . .

Pounding head. Queasy, burning stomach. Light stabbing through eyeballs like a stiletto. I groaned. Why did I have to be so stupid sometimes?

Stupid or not, I still had a job to do. I wrestled my way out of bed, paid a visit to the jakes, splashed water on my face and began to wake up. The brandy hadn't helped at all. Sure, it put me to sleep, but I could still feel an awareness of *him* all through my body, the knowledge that he was alive and here and wanted me. *And you want him*, whispered the obsession. *You want his hands all over you, you want—*

Shut up! I told the voice in my head. Reaching for my uniform, I dressed, wondering if I still had any right to call myself a constable.

Suddenly I could hardly bear the thought of facing my colleagues. Surely it must be obvious. It must be written clearly on my face that I had been in touch—lightning sizzled my nerves—with the killer we were seeking, and done nothing about it. Except kiss him, and hold him, and. . .

With a violent lurch, my stomach sent me to the chamber pot. My guts turned inside out, the combined result of the brandy and what I had done, what I wanted to do. Mahir. *Assassin.*

Afterwards, shaking, I rinsed my mouth out with clean water from the pitcher on the washstand. This stops *now*. I will go back to my job and do it right.

My new resolve began to crumble early in the day, which shaped up much worse than yesterday. All day I mourned the lost chance to see him and hated myself for doing so. The brief meeting between us replayed itself over and over again in my head. Again I felt his fiery kiss, but this time I did not pull away. . . Old desire, reawakened now and stronger than ever, trembled and quivered through every nerve, dripping and seething through my body in a combination of wanton lust and self-loathing.

By the end of the shift, I felt sick, feverish. I had accomplished little, beyond including in my notes the observation that all the murders could have been ordered by the same mind, as well as carried out by the same hand. Information was information, right? What did it matter where it came from? The madness burning in my very bones kept me warm as I walked home through the dimness of the early winter dusk.

I must have been more distracted than I thought I was. I didn't notice anything unusual until a hand clamped over my mouth and I was yanked into the darkness of a side alley.

"Don't move," said a voice, that oh-so-familiar voice. I froze involuntarily. He shifted his grip on me so I could turn to face him. The shadows of the alley made it difficult to see him, but my body knew who it was and tried to press closer.

"Where were you last night, old friend?"

He's doing it again, using that voice to light me up like a fire. "Home," I managed, struggling for control. My eyes hungrily sought details in the almost-light. His hair looked longer, his face a bit thinner. . . I could not see his eyes, mere pools of shadow.

"I missed you, *kasana*." I twitched. He had called me that before. It meant something in the language of his homeland. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what.

"I—I can't do this—" I choked out, past a burning knot of desire. I could feel myself shaking as his grip on me eased and his arms slid around me. I backed up one step, two, then hit the wall. Trapped! I heard his low-voiced chuckle as he pinned me there, tracing his fingers across my face.

"It doesn't have to be this way, you know," he said softly, brushing his lips across mine. "There is no need for you to hide from me. Give in to this fire growing between us." And now he was really kissing me, and my resistance crumbled. For a long moment, all I knew was him: the feel of his lips and tongue, the strength of his body in my arms, the feeling of *rightness* as we melted into each other. "You could be mine," he murmured against my throat. "Be with me always, never have to hide in the shadows again. . ."

For a moment, I glimpsed it, shared his vision. Then I pulled away roughly. "You know I can't," I said harshly. "What makes you think I could be with a professional killer?"

"This," he said simply, and then we were kissing again and it was better than before and I couldn't help it, I slid my hands up under his tunic and felt the satin smoothness that was his skin and—

"No!" I broke away completely, shaking violently. "It isn't possible, it can't happen—"

"Ah, *kasana*, but it can." He reached out to me again, running his hand lightly, teasingly over my chest. "No one from the docks would see you in the Silk District, and my employer gives me a more than generous living allowance."

I wondered if his employer lived in the Silk District as well. "You would only hurt me again," I whispered, catching his hand and stroking it.

"I'm sorry, Amaran, I truly did not mean to hurt you." Oddly enough, I believed him, the man who had been my closest friend and partner, until he betrayed me and left with the information he had been sent for.

"Well, you did," I said, unable to muster any anger at the moment. I ran my hand along his arm, across his shoulder, around the back of his neck and pulled him to me for another kiss. Then I deliberately broke it off and turned to leave. "Goodbye, Mahir," I said as I walked off, leaving him staring in stunned amazement.

Sick at heart, I forced my body to walk home calmly. I could scarcely believe what I had considered mere moments ago. . . giving up my job and all I believed in for *him*. I felt dirty inside, as though I was full of filth. Remembering his passionate touches did me no good.

I reached the comfortingly familiar inn at last, only to find him sitting in a corner booth, smiling at me. Against my will, that smile drew me into the crowded room. In a daze, I sank into the seat opposite him.

"What are you doing here?"

"You can't just walk away from me," he said. I could finally see him clearly, in the flickering light of the oil lamp hanging over the table. His eyes were soft, inviting. He looked more mature. The years hadn't changed him much at all. The way he caressed me with his gaze turned my guts into mush.

"Why not?" I said. "Give me one good reason why I should continue to associate with you, rather than locking you up." It was an empty threat and he knew it.

"Because you care," he said softly. I could feel my face turning a deep scarlet. I couldn't even deny it. It was true, I did care.

"Yeah, well, maybe I just can't live with that fact, okay?" Abruptly I got up and left. I shook all over, a mere leaf in a high wind. Damn him.

I made it to my room and shut the door, locking and bolting it. Then I undressed and curled up in a

miserable knot of pain around my pillow. I stared into space and aggressively silenced my thoughts, strangling them one by one until my head was quiet at last. Then I was finally able to fall asleep.

Part 3

What can I do? He is everywhere I go. I see him out on the streets, I see him at my inn, I even see him lurking near the station. I can't think. My work is suffering. Even with the hints he has given me, I have made very little progress on the case. Other constables are starting to worry. They think I am sick. I *am* sick, sick with passionate longing for the man who has returned from the past to torment me.

I become so practiced at avoiding him that when he is no longer there it comes as a shock. I feel dazed, disoriented, as I move through the day without him. First one, then another, then a third. . . I can't stand it, I must know where he is. I go to the King's Arms order a drink, settle in a corner. It doesn't take long.

"I thought you didn't want to see me again?" His voice is amused. He slides into the seat opposite me, sipping a drink.

"Ththock you," I muttered, and had the pleasure of seeing him choke on his beer at the unexpected profanity. "I'm getting nowhere on the case. If I could just—"

"Shh!" he interrupted urgently, looking wide-eyed at a new arrival to the bar. "Oh, hellfire."

"What's wrong?"

"That man over there, see him?" I nodded. "Well, he's working for the same employer as me. Now that he's seen me with you, so clearly a constable. . ." He trailed off, still staring at the other man.

"Well, I wouldn't give a clipped coin for the chances of either one of us surviving tonight without a fuss."

"Oh, lovely," I said sarcastically. *Present shifted to future.*

I stand and walk away. Mahir watches me leave, his stricken look closing off and becoming neutral as I walk out the door and away from him forever. A lifetime of bleak, empty days awaits, one in which I know I will always be alone. Because, of course, I know who I love, and I willingly abandoned him to his fate and chose the insufferably empty path that holds me trapped day after day, as the emptiness consumes me and my melancholy life dwindles into nothingness. . .

Reality returned abruptly and I shook my head to clear the illusory heartbreak, ignoring Mahir's questioning eyebrow. I reached out and took his hand. "If I'm already condemned, I might as well enjoy it. So now what do we do?"

He looked at me, startled. Then a smile of pure joy lit his features and made my heart stutter. "*We*," and the smile got even brighter, "can have dinner in my rooms while we wait for him. He won't try anything in the open, and I'd rather face him together."

I felt an answering smile on my own face, and said, "Show me the way."

So he did, pausing to tell a serving girl to send up dinner for two. Her eyes flicked to me and she looked faintly surprised, then we went towards the stairs together.

Mahir lived in much more style than I did. While my room was cozy, yet strictly functional, his suite was downright opulent. The whole place reeked of money. I settled myself comfortably on a velvet couch. He sat near me, with a look of wonder on his face.

"I can't believe you're here," he said softly.

"Neither can I," I admitted, lost in the gaze of those impossibly beautiful dark eyes.

"Oh, *kasana*," he breathed, reaching out to touch my face. I leaned into the caress, closing my eyes briefly.

"What does that mean?" I opened my eyes to look at him. To my surprise, he blushed.

"Never mind," he said. With the universal bad timing of servants everywhere, there came a knock on the door, signaling the arrival of dinner. He opened the door, and a servingman brought in a heavily laden silver tray, setting it down on the table. He left quickly, and we applied ourselves to the excellent meal.

A curious feeling of euphoria filled me. So this was madness. I actually felt hungry, for the first time in at least a week. Mahir seemed content to eat in silence, merely glancing at me now and again through long lashes. When I caught his eyes, I smiled at him, but continued eating.

Once the splendid meal was finished, Mahir drew me with him to the couch in front of the fire, with a good view of the doorway. Settling into the velvet cushions, I leaned my head against his shoulder.

"Any time now," he said, giving me a squeeze. "He'll want to get us when we're sleepy and relaxed after the big meal." I nodded agreement. Personally, I felt anything but relaxed. Every nerve crackled.

"So tell me," I said, voice rough. "Tell me before I get in any worse trouble."

I broke off, searching for words.

"Tell you what?"

"Why did you go?"

"A threat to you," Mahir replied, perhaps the last thing I ever expected to come out of his mouth. His arm tightened around my shoulders.

"What?"

"My employer at the time knew I cared for you, more than I should. After all, you were the only person I spent time with, and. . . Never mind. He felt you were a risk he didn't want to take. He said, and I believed, that if I approached you again, he would have you killed. Simple."

"Simple." I snorted, my hand stroking his thigh. "You could have sent a message."

"Amarun. . ."

"I missed you," I said. "All those years. Even though you betrayed me, even though you vanished without a trace, I wanted to see you again. And now I have, and you've driven me right out of my mind."

"Were the circumstances different, I'd do better at that."

The attack took longer than we had anticipated. After a while, both of us began to relax our guards. We were talking and laughing together like the old friends we were when a noise at the door cut us off midlaugh. Seamlessly, as though we had rehearsed this a dozen times before, we rose from the couch and moved to either side of the door. I loosened my shortsword in its sheath, as Mahir checked his inventory of weapons. The door opened.

The man came through like an explosion, turning to face us as though he knew where we would be.

"Hello, Carlyle," Mahir said pleasantly. "How nice of you to drop in." A slender, glittering blade appeared in his hand.

"Mahir," the other man spat out. "I should have known you'd turn traitor. Never did trust you."

"Dangerous words, Carlyle." He sounded slightly bored. "I don't suppose you'd like to get on with this now, would you? Or would you prefer to stand around and exchange insults all night?"

With a wordless growl, Carlyle attacked. I watched in open-mouthed appreciation as Mahir went into action. I had never seen him fight before, and he truly presented a breathtaking sight. Even in the close confines of the sitting room, he had little trouble defending himself against his opponent. He moved like. . . water. Flowing, liquid movements kept him away from his opponent, who stumbled around like an enraged bull. Mahir toyed with the other man, dancing out of reach and allowing the other to wear himself out with futile, frustrated attacks. Then the unexpected happened. Carlyle threw his long knife aside and pulled something that looked like an ice pick out of his boot. He lunged forward, ducking under Mahir's guard to connect with Mahir's midsection. Mahir went down in a crumpled heap.

"*Nooooo!*" I howled, and felt the madness overtake me. I attacked Carlyle with everything in me, driving him back until he was trapped against the wall. Where Mahir's fighting style was filled with grace and beauty, I fought like a constable: direct, brutal, efficient. Get the job done as fast as possible, without doing permanent harm to the opponent. But this time, I meant to do permanent harm. Mahir

still curled on the floor, groaning, clutching his midsection in agony. I disarmed Carlyle and held my blade to his throat. The madness sang through me body and soul. "What are your intentions?"

"Only a constable would ask that," Carlyle sneered. He tried to duck away from my blade and bring his weapon into play, to no avail. I stepped into him, applying more pressure to both his throat and my disabling hold on his arm. Carlyle grunted.

"None of that," I growled. The skin on the man's throat parted slightly and he froze, eyes wide. "I'll ask again, and suggest you answer correctly. What are your intentions?"

"Kill the thtocken traitor," Carlyle replied, casting a vicious look at where Mahir writhed on the floor.

"Wrong answer," I said, and the madness and I killed him.

I let the body fall and crossed the distance separating me from Mahir in a single bound. He lay on the floor, groaning, sweat rolling down his face as he tried to move.

"Hold still, love," I said, kneeling beside him, trying to get a look at the wound. At least there wasn't much blood.

"Green satchel," he groaned, detaching one hand from his wound and waving it in the general direction of the sleeping chamber.

I darted into the other room, surveying its contents quickly. Bed, wardrobe, trunk. . . Green satchel, sitting on a low table. I grabbed it and ran back to Mahir's side.

I opened it for him, unsurprised to see it contained a full healer's field kit, and he fumbled for a bottle inside. Once I saw which bottle he was after, I grabbed it for him.

"This one?" I held the bottle up for inspection.

"Yes," he panted. "Pour some on the wound."

I uncorked the bottle and splashed some of the wholesome-smelling liquid inside onto the small hole in Mahir's side. Almost immediately, his agony eased. Breathing hard, Mahir closed his eyes and relaxed from his painful curl. He rested for a brief moment, then rolled to his feet.

Shocked by his rapid recovery, not knowing what else to do, I stared and recorked the bottle of miracle cure.

"Thanks," he said, voice hoarse. "Carlyle?"

"Dead," I said, tucking the bottle back into the satchel and waving towards the body as I stood.

"Oh gods, Amarun," he said, giving the corpse a wide-eyed stare. "I can't believe *you* did that."

"He hurt you," I said simply. The madness still had me firmly in its grip. I could feel the familiar fire sliding through my veins. "Let me see."

It was nothing, really, just a shallow puncture in his side. "Silly Mahir," I teased, "to let such a small scratch take you down." I kissed him, savoring the sweetness.

"Yeah, well, easy for you to say. I happen to know that ice pick is kept coated with a nerve-stimulating poison, so it felt more like getting stuck clean through with living fire. Can we get out of here now?" He glanced meaningfully at the body.

"Where to?"

"Anywhere but here. I doubt we'll be in much favor with anyone, right now."

"Good point." I took time for another slow, loving kiss, then helped him with his packs. Obviously he'd had to make a quick exit from *somewhere* before, because he kept most of his essentials in travel packs on the floor of the wardrobe.

We set off through the back ways of the inn. I didn't even wonder why I was doing this. The madness had taken hold of me firmly and refused to let go. I didn't even hesitate to steal a horse and tack from the stable. Law and obedience meant less than nothing anymore. No, I had found the name of my madness, and its name was *Mahir*. Giving up the fight filled me with a sense of freedom and rightness, and I embraced it eagerly.

Under the stars, a safe distance from Trade City, I find that indeed madness has its rewards. Every touch, every kiss, every hot panting breath binds us closer together.

*We breathe as one, hearts pounding in unison. Our souls merge. And I know,
whatever the future may hold, I will never be alone again.*

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