

VLADIMIR BARTOL

Alamut

Translated from Slovene by Michael Biggins

NOTHING IS TRUE, EVERYTHING IS PERMITTED.
–The Supreme Ismaili Motto

OMNIA IN NUMERO ET MENSURA

Chapter One

In mid-spring of the year 1092 a good-sized caravan was wending its way along the old military trail that leads from Samarkand and Bukhara through northern Khorasan and then meanders through the foothills of the Elburz Mountains. It had left Bukhara as the snow started to melt, and had been underway for several weeks. The drivers brandished their whips, shouting hoarsely at the caravan's draft animals, which were already on the verge of exhaustion. One after the other in a long procession stepped Arabian dromedaries, mules, and two-humped camels from Turkestan, submissively carrying their freight. An armed escort rode short, shaggy horses, glancing in equal measures of boredom and longing at the long chain of mountains that had begun to emerge on the horizon. They were tired of the slow ride and could barely wait to arrive at their destination. They drew closer and closer to the snow-covered cone of Mount Demavend, until it was blocked out by the foothills that absorbed the trail. Fresh mountain air started to blow, reviving the people and livestock by day. But the nights were ice cold, and both escorts and drivers stood around the campfires, grumbling and rubbing their hands.

Fastened between the two humps of one of the camels was a small shelter resembling a cage. From time to time a small hand drew the curtain aside from its window, and the face of a frightened little girl looked out. Her large eyes, red from crying, looked at the strangers surrounding her as if seeking an answer to the difficult question that had tormented her for the entire journey: where were they taking her, and what did they plan to do with her? But no one noticed aside from the caravan leader, a stern man of about fifty in a loose Arab cloak and an imposing white turban, who would blink in disapproval when he caught sight of her through the opening. At those moments she would quickly pull the curtain shut and retreat inside the cage. Ever since she had been bought from her master in Bukhara, she had been living in a combination of mortal fear and thrilling curiosity about the fate that was awaiting her.

One day, as they neared the end of their journey, a band of horsemen raced down the hillside to their right and blocked their path. The animals at the head of the caravan stopped on their own. The leader and escort reached for their heavy, curved sabers and

assumed positions for a charge. A man on a short brown horse separated from the attackers and came close enough to the caravan that his voice was audible. He called out a password and received a response from the caravan leader. The two men galloped toward each other and exchanged courteous greetings, and then the new troop took over leadership. The caravan turned off the trail and headed into the brush, traveling this way until well into the night. Eventually they made camp on the floor of a small valley, from where they could hear the distant drumming of a mountain torrent. They built fires, ate hastily, and then fell asleep like the dead.

When dawn came they were back on their feet. The caravan leader approached the shelter, which the drivers had unfastened from the camel's back the night before and set down on the ground. He pushed the curtain aside and called out in a gruff voice, "Halima!"

The frightened little face appeared at the window; then the low, narrow door opened. The leader's firm hand grabbed the girl by her wrist and pulled her out of the shelter.

Halima's whole body was shaking. *Now I'm done for*, she thought. The commander of the strangers who had joined the caravan the previous day held a black bandage in his hand. The caravan leader signaled to him, and the man wordlessly put the kerchief over the girl's eyes and knotted it tightly at the back of her head. Then he mounted his horse, pulled the girl up into the saddle with him, and covered her in his vast cloak. He and the caravan leader exchanged a few words. Then he spurred his horse into a gallop. Halima shrank into a tiny ball and clung fearfully to the rider.

The sound of the torrent grew closer and closer. At one point they stopped and the rider briefly spoke to someone. Then he spurred his horse again. But soon he was riding more slowly and cautiously, and Halima thought that the path must be very narrow and lead right along the edge of the mountain stream. Cool air wafted up from below, and terror once again constricted her heart.

They stopped again. Halima heard shouting and clanking, and when they set off at a gallop again, there was a muffled rumbling beneath the horse's hooves. They had crossed a bridge over the rapids.

What followed seemed like a terrible nightmare. She heard a tumult of shouting, as though an entire army of men were quarreling. The rider dismounted without letting her out of his cloak. He raced with her first over level ground, then down some steps, until it seemed

to have grown very dark. Suddenly he threw his cloak open and Halima felt someone else's hands take hold of her. She shuddered in near-mortal terror. The person who had taken her from the horseman laughed quietly. He headed off with her down a corridor. Suddenly a strange chill enveloped her, as though they had entered a cellar. She tried not to think at all but didn't succeed. She was sure she was coming ever closer to the last and most horrible moment.

The man who was holding her began to feel along the wall with his free hand, which finally found some object and firmly pushed it. A gong reverberated loudly.

Halima cried out and tried to break free of the man's arms. He only laughed and said, almost kindly, "Don't wail, little peacock. Nobody is going to touch you."

Iron chains jangled and Halima once again saw flickers of light through the blindfold. *They're throwing me in jail*, she thought. The stream roared beneath her and she held her breath.

She heard the tread of bare feet. Someone was approaching, and the man who was holding her handed her off to the newcomer.

"Here she is, Adi," he said.

The arms that took her now were lion-strong and completely bare. The man's chest must have been bare too. She could feel this when he lifted her up. He had to be a real giant.

Halima submitted to her fate. From this point on, she paid close attention to what was happening to her but offered no resistance. Carrying her, the man ran across a springy footbridge that swung unpleasantly under their weight. Then the ground started to crunch beneath his feet, as though it were covered with fine gravel. She could feel the pleasant warmth of the sun's rays and light penetrating her blindfold. And suddenly out of nowhere came the smell of fresh vegetation and flowers.

The man jumped into a boat, causing it to rock heavily. Halima cried out and clutched onto the giant. He gave a high-pitched, almost childlike laugh and said kindly, "Don't worry, little gazelle. I'm going to row you over to the other side, and then we'll be home. Here, sit down."

He set her down on a comfortable seat and started rowing.

She thought she heard laughter in the distance—lighthearted, girlish laughter. She listened closely. No, she wasn't mistaken. She could already make out individual voices. She felt as though a weight had been lifted from her heart. Perhaps nothing bad awaited her in a place

where people were this happy.

The boat pressed up against the shore. The man took her up in his arms and stepped out onto dry land. He carried her a few steps uphill and then set her down on her feet. A loud commotion surrounded them, and Halima heard the slap of many sandals approaching. The giant laughed and called out, "Here she is."

Then he returned to the boat and rowed it back.

One of the girls approached Halima to take off her blindfold, while the rest spoke to each other.

"Look how tiny she is," one said.

Another added, "And how young still. She's a child."

"Look how thin she's gotten," a third observed. "The journey must have done that to her."

"She's as tall and slim as a cypress."

The blindfold slid from Halima's eyes. She was astonished. Endless gardens in the first bloom of spring extended as far as she could see. The girls surrounding her were more beautiful than houris. The most beautiful one of them all had removed her blindfold.

"Where am I?" she asked in a timid voice.

The girls laughed, as though amused by her timidity. She blushed. But the beauty who had removed her blindfold gently put an arm around her waist and said, "Don't worry, dear child. You're among good people."

Her voice was warm and protective. Halima pressed close to her while silly thoughts swam through her head. *Maybe I've been brought to some prince*, she mused to herself.

They led her along a path that was strewn with white, round pebbles. To the right and left, flower beds were laid out symmetrically, filled with blossoming tulips and hyacinths of all sizes and colors. Some of the tulips were blazing yellow, others were bright red or violet, and still others were variegated or speckled. The hyacinths were white and pale pink, light and dark blue, pale violet and light yellow. Some of them were delicate and transparent, as though made of glass. Violets and primrose grew at the borders. Elsewhere irises and narcissuses were budding. Here and there a magnificent white lily opened its first flowers. The air was saturated with a delirious scent.

Halima was amazed.

They walked past rose gardens. The bushes were carefully pruned, and there were plump buds on the branches, some of them already producing red, white and yellow flowers.

The path led them still farther through thick groves of pomegranates, dense with red flowers. Then came rows of lemon and peach trees. They came upon orchards of almonds and quinces, apples and pears.

Halima's eyes widened.

"What's your name, little one?" one of the girls asked her.

"Halima," she whispered almost soundlessly.

They laughed at Halima so much that tears nearly came to their eyes.

"Stop laughing, you nasty monkeys," Halima's protector scolded them. "Leave the girl alone. Let her catch her breath. She's tired and confused."

To Halima she said, "Don't take them wrong. They're young and boisterous and when you get to know them better, you'll see they aren't mean. They're going to like you a lot."

They came to a cypress grove. Halima heard the purling of water from all sides. Somewhere far off, the water rumbled like rapids funneling into a waterfall. Something glinted through the trees. Halima was curious. Soon she was able to make out a small castle in a clearing, showing white in the sunlight. The castle fronted a circular pond with a fountain. They paused here and Halima looked around.

On all sides they were surrounded by high mountains. The sun bore down on the rocky slopes and illuminated the snow-covered peaks. She looked in the direction from which they had come. Between two slopes forming a gorge at the end of the valley there stood, as if dropped into place by design, an enormous rock resembling a mountain. On its peak stood a mighty fortress which shone white in the morning sun.

"What is that?" she asked fearfully, pointing toward the walls with two tall towers rising up at either end.

Her protector answered her. "There will be time enough for questions later. You're tired, and first we need to get you a bath, feed you, and let you rest."

Gradually Halima lost her fear and began to observe her escorts carefully. Each of them struck her as more charmingly and beautifully dressed than the last. The silk of their broad trousers rustled as they walked. Practically each girl wore a unique color that suited her best. Close-fitting halters were sumptuously embroidered and decorated with gold clasps, into which gemstones had been set. Beneath these were brightly colored blouses of the finest silk. Each of them wore rich bracelets on her wrists and necklaces of pearl or coral. Some walked

bareheaded, while others wore kerchiefs wrapped around their heads like small turbans. Their sandals had been artfully carved from colored leather. Halima looked at her own wretchedness and felt ashamed.

Maybe this is why they were laughing at me before, she thought.

They had approached the castle. It was round in shape and encircled by white stone staircases that led to its entrance. The roof was supported by numerous columns reminiscent of an ancient temple.

An older woman emerged from the castle. She was long and thin as a pole and carried herself very upright and, it seemed, proudly. She was dark skinned with sunken cheeks. There was something intense in her big dark eyes, and her thin, compressed lips gave an impression of obduracy and strictness. From behind her some sort of yellowish cat came trotting out, extraordinarily big, with unusually long legs. It caught sight of Halima and gave a hostile hiss.

Halima cried out in fright and pressed close to her protector, who tried to comfort her.

“Don’t be afraid of our Ahriman. He may be a real leopard, but he’s as tame as a lamb and wouldn’t harm anyone. When he gets used to you, the two of you will become good friends.”

She called the animal to come and took firm hold of it by the collar. She spoke to it until it stopped snarling and baring its teeth.

“See, he tamed down right away. Once you get your clothes changed, he’ll treat you as family. Now pet him, so he can get used to you. Don’t be afraid, I’m holding onto him.”

Halima fought back her instinctive fear. From a distance she reached forward, putting her left hand on her knee and, with her right, gently stroking the leopard’s back. The animal arched its back like a housecat and gave a contented growl. Halima jumped back, then laughed along with the other girls.

“Who is this timid monkey, Miriam?” the old woman asked her protector, piercing Halima with her gaze.

“Adi gave her to me, Apama. She’s still pretty frightened. Her name is Halima.”

The old woman approached Halima, sized her up from head to foot, and inspected her like a horse trader inspects a horse’s parts.

“Maybe she won’t be quite so useless. We’ll just need to fatten her up so she isn’t such a wisp.”

Then she added with particular anger, “And you say that castrated Moorish animal gave her to you? So he had her in his hands? Oh, that miserable, twisted thing! How can Sayyiduna put so much trust

in him?”

“Adi was just doing his duty, Apama,” Miriam replied. “Now let’s go take care of this child.”

She took Halima by one hand, while still holding onto the leopard’s collar with the other. She drew both of them up the steps to the building. The other girls followed.

They entered a high-ceilinged corridor that led all around the building. Polished marble walls reflected images like mirrors. Rich carpets absorbed their footsteps. Miriam released the leopard at one of castle’s many exits. He leapt away on his long legs like a dog, turning his charming little cat’s head back curiously toward Halima, who was now finally relaxed.

They turned into an intersecting corridor and entered a round room with a high, vaulted ceiling. Halima cried out in astonishment. Even in her dreams she had never seen this much beauty. Light poured through a glass ceiling composed of separate elements, each in a different color of the rainbow. Violet, blue, green, yellow, red and pale shafts of light filtered down into a circular pool where the water rippled gently, agitated by some unseen source. The many colors played on its surface, spilling out onto the floor until they came to a stop near the wall, on divans covered with artfully embroidered pillows.

Halima stood at the entrance with her eyes and mouth wide open. Miriam looked at her and gently smiled. She bent down over the pool and put a hand in the water.

“It’s nice and warm,” she said. She told the girls who had come in after them to prepare everything for a bath. Then she started to undress Halima.

Halima felt ashamed in front of the girls. She hid behind Miriam and cast her eyes down. The girls examined her curiously, quietly giggling.

“Get out, you nasty things,” said Miriam, chasing them away. They obeyed instantly and left.

Miriam gathered Halima’s hair into a knot on the top of her head so that it wouldn’t get wet, then submerged her in the pool. She scrubbed and washed her vigorously. Then she drew her out of the water and rubbed her dry with a soft towel. She gave her a silk blouse and told her to put on the broad trousers brought by the girls. She handed her a pretty halter which turned out to be too big, and then had her put on a brightly colored jacket that reached down to her knees.

“For today you’ll have to make do with these clothes,” she said.

“But soon we’ll sew you new ones your size, and you’ll be happy with them, you’ll see.”

She sat her down on a divan and piled up a bunch of pillows.

“Rest here for a while, and I’ll go see what the girls have fixed for you to eat.”

She stroked her cheek with her soft, rosy hand. At that instant they both sensed that they liked each other. Halima abruptly and instinctively kissed her protector’s fingers. Miriam made a show of scowling at her, but Halima could tell that she didn’t really mind. She grinned blissfully.

Miriam was barely gone when Halima felt overcome with fatigue. She closed her eyes. For a while she resisted going to sleep, but soon she told herself, “I’ll get to see it all again in no time,” and then she was asleep.

When she first awoke she didn’t know where she was or what had happened to her. She pushed aside a blanket which the girls had used to cover her while she slept and sat up on the edge of the divan. She rubbed her eyes, then stared at these young women’s kind faces, illuminated in the multicolored light. It was already late afternoon. Miriam crouched down on a pillow beside her and offered her a dish of cold milk, which she emptied greedily.

Miriam poured more milk from a colorful jug, and Halima drank this down in one draft too.

A dark-skinned girl carrying a gilt tray approached and offered her a variety of sweets made of flour, honey and fruit. Halima ate everything in front of her.

“Look how hungry she is, the orphan,” one of the girls said.

“And how pale,” another observed.

“Let’s put some blush on her cheeks and lips,” a beautiful light-haired girl suggested.

“The child has to eat first,” Miriam rebuffed them. She turned to the black girl with the gilt tray. “Peel her a banana or an orange, Sara.”

Then she asked Halima, “Which fruit do you prefer, child?”

“I don’t know either of them. I’d like to try them both.”

The girls laughed. Halima smiled too when Sara brought her bananas and oranges.

She soon felt overcome by so many delicious things. She licked her fingers and said, “Nothing has ever tasted this good to me before.”

The girls burst into uproarious laughter. Even the corners of

Miriam's mouth turned up in a smile as she tapped Halima on the cheek. Halima could feel the blood starting to beat in her veins again. Her eyes shone, her mood improved, and she began to speak openly.

The girls sat around her, some doing embroidery, others sewing, and they began asking her questions. Meanwhile, Miriam had pressed a metal mirror into her hand and started painting her cheeks and lips with blush and her eyebrows and lashes with black dye.

"So, your name is Halima," said the light-haired girl, the one who had advised coloring her cheeks. "And I'm called Zainab."

"Zainab is a pretty name," Halima acknowledged.

They laughed again.

"Where do you come from?" the black girl they called Sara asked her.

"From Bukhara."

"I'm from there too," said a beauty with a round, moon-shaped face and ample limbs. She had a cute, rounded chin and warm, velvety eyes. "My name is Fatima. Who was your master before this?"

Halima was about to answer, but Miriam, who was just then applying color to her lips, stopped her.

"Hold on just a minute. And all of you ... stop distracting her."

Halima swiftly kissed the tips of her fingers.

"Stop that," she scolded her. But her scowl wasn't quite convincing, and Halima could clearly sense that she had won their general good will. She glowed with satisfaction.

"Who was my master?" she repeated when Miriam had finished coloring her lips. She inspected herself in the mirror with obvious satisfaction and continued. "The merchant Ali, an old and good man."

"Why did he sell you if he was good?" Zainab asked.

"He was penniless. He'd lost all his money. We didn't even have anything left to eat. He had two daughters, but their suitors cheated him out of them. They didn't pay him a thing. He had a son too, but he disappeared, probably killed by robbers or soldiers." Her eyes filled with tears. "I was supposed to become his wife."

"Who were your parents?" Fatima asked.

"I never knew them and I don't know anything about them. As far back as I can remember, I lived in the house of the merchant Ali. As long as his son was still at home, we managed to get by. But then the bad times came. The master would moan, pull out his hair, and pray. His wife told him to take me to Bukhara and sell me there. He

put me on a donkey and we went to Bukhara. He asked all the merchants where they'd take me and who they'd sell me to, until he met one who worked for your master. This one swore by the beard of the Prophet that I would live like a princess. Ali settled on a price, and when they took me away he started crying out loud. So did I. But now I can see that the merchant was right. I really do feel like a princess here."

Misty-eyed, the girls glanced at each other and smiled.

"My master cried, too, when he sold me," Zainab said. "I wasn't born a slave. When I was little some Turks abducted me and took me to their grazing lands. I learned to ride and shoot with a bow and arrow like a boy. They were all curious because I had blue eyes and golden hair. People would come from far away to look at me. They said that if some powerful chieftain found out about me, he'd probably buy me. Then the sultan's army came and my master was killed. I was about ten years old at the time. We were retreating from the sultan's soldiers, and we lost a lot of people and livestock. The master's son took over the leadership of the tribe. He fell in love with me and took me into his harem as a real wife. But the sultan took everything away from us, and my master went wild. He beat us every day, but he refused to submit to the sultan. Then the chieftains made peace. Merchants came and started to trade. One day an Armenian noticed me and started to dog my master about me. He offered him livestock and money. Finally the two of them came into the tent. When my master saw me, he pulled his dagger and tried to stab me, so that he couldn't give in to the temptation of selling me. But the merchant held him back, and then they closed the deal. I thought I was going to die. The Armenian took me to Samarkand. He was revolting. It was there that he sold me to Sayyiduna. But all that is long past ..."

"Poor thing, you've endured a lot," Halima said and stroked her cheek compassionately.

Fatima asked, "Were you your master's wife?"

Halima blushed. "No. I mean, I don't know. What do you mean?"

"Don't bother her with those questions, Fatima," Miriam said. "Can't you see she's still a child?"

"Oh, what happened to me was bad," said Fatima, sighing. "My relatives sold both my mother and me to some peasant. I was barely ten years old when I had to become his wife. He had debts, and since he couldn't pay them, he gave me as payment to his creditor, but he didn't tell him that I'd already become his wife. So my new

master called me all kinds of abusive names, beat me and tormented me, and screamed that the peasant and I had cheated him. He swore by all the martyrs that he would destroy us both. I didn't understand any of it. The master was old and ugly, and I'd shake in his presence as though he were an evil spirit. He let both of his former wives beat me too. Then he found himself a fourth one and he was as sweet as honey with her, but he'd just beat the rest of us all that much more. Finally we were saved by the leader of one of Sayyiduna's caravans, who bought me for these gardens."

Halima looked at her with teary eyes, then she smiled and said, "See, in the end you came here, and things are all right."

"Enough storytelling for now," Miriam interrupted. "It will be dark soon, you're tired, and we have work to do tomorrow. Take this stick and wash your teeth with it."

It was a thin little stick with tiny, brush-like fibers at one end. Halima quickly understood its function. They brought her a dish with water in it, and when she had finished this task, they took her to a bedroom.

"Sara and Zainab will be your companions," Miriam told her.

"Good," Halima replied.

The bedroom floor was covered with soft, colorful carpets. Carpets covered the walls and were hung between the low-lying beds, which were covered with tastefully embroidered pillows. Beside each bed was an artfully carved dressing table with a large silver mirror affixed to it. A five-canded gilt candelabra with strange, twisted shapes hung from the ceiling.

The girls dressed Halima in a long white gown of delicate silk. They tied a red cord around her waist and sat her down in front of the mirror. She could hear them whispering about how sweet and pretty she was. *They're right, she thought, I really am pretty. Like a real princess.* She lay down on her bed and the girls put pillows under her head. They covered her with a feather quilt and left on tiptoe. She buried her head in the soft pillows and, in a state of fairy-tale happiness, fell blissfully to sleep.

The first rays of daylight shining through the window awoke her. She opened her eyes and saw the designs on the wall hangings, woven in bright colors. At first she thought she was still with the caravan. On the wall she saw a lance-bearing hunter on horseback chasing an antelope. Beneath him a tiger and a buffalo faced off, while a black man carrying a shield shoved the point of his spear at a raging lion. Beside them a leopard stalked a gazelle. Then she remembered the previous day

and realized where she was.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” Zainab, who had just propped herself up in bed, called to her.

Halima looked at her and was astonished. Her hair poured over her shoulders in ample locks and shone in the sunlight like pure gold. *She's more beautiful than a fairy*, she thought. Enraptured, she returned her greeting.

She looked toward the other bed, where Sara was sleeping, half naked, her full dark limbs shining like ebony. The conversation woke her too, and she slowly began to open her eyes. They glinted like two dark, white-irradiated stars. She fixed them on Halima and smiled at her oddly. Then she lowered them again quickly, like a feline confused by a human stare. She got up, went over to Halima's bed, and sat down on it.

“Last night when Zainab and I went to bed, you didn't notice us,” she said. “We kissed you, but you just murmured something ill-tempered and turned your back.”

Halima laughed, though she was almost frightened by the other's gaze. She could also see the light down that covered her upper lip.

“I didn't hear you at all,” she replied.

Sara devoured Halima with her eyes. She would have liked to hug her, but she didn't dare. She glanced furtively toward Zainab.

Zainab was already seated at her mirror, combing her hair. “We're going to have to give yours a wash today,” Sara said to Halima. “Will you let me wash your hair?”

“That would be fine.”

She had to get up so her companions could lead her to a separate washroom.

“Do all of you bathe every day?” she asked incredulously.

“Of course!” the other two laughed. They immersed her in a wooden bathtub and splashed her playfully. She shrieked, dried herself with a towel, and then slid into her clothes with a pleasant, refreshed feeling.

They ate breakfast in a long dining hall. Each of them had her own place, and Halima counted twenty-four in all, including herself. They sat her at the head of the table next to Miriam, who asked her, “So what do you know how to do?”

“I can embroider and sew, and I know how to cook.”

“What about reading and writing?”

“I know how to read a little.”

“We’re going to have to work on that. And what about verse making?”

“I’ve never learned that.”

“Right. You’re going to have to learn all that and quite a bit more around here.”

“That’s fine,” Halima said happily. “I’ve always wanted to learn things.”

“You should know that we enforce strict discipline when it comes to lessons. You will be no exception. And let me warn you about one other thing. Don’t ask questions about things that aren’t directly related to your studies.”

Miriam struck Halima as much more serious and strict than the day before. Still, she sensed that the older girl liked her. “I promise I’ll obey you in everything and I’ll do everything just the way you tell me,” she said.

She could sense that Miriam held some favored rank among all the others, and she grew curious about this, but she didn’t dare to ask questions.

For breakfast they had milk and sweet pastries made with dried fruit and honey. Then each of them was given an orange.

Lessons began after breakfast. They went into the glass-ceilinged hall with the pool that Halima had admired the day before. They sat around on pillows, each of them with a black tablet resting on her crossed legs. They got their slate pencils ready and waited. Miriam pointed to a place for Halima to sit and handed her her writing implements.

“Hold it like you see the others doing, even though you don’t know how to write yet. I’ll teach you later, but for now you can at least get used to the tablet and pencil.”

Then she went to the doorway and with a mallet struck a gong that hung on the wall.

A giant Moor holding a thick book entered the room. He was dressed in short striped trousers and a cloak that reached to his feet but was left open in front. He was shod in plain sandals and had a thin red turban wrapped around his head. He let himself down onto a pillow prepared for him and sat facing the girls, his weight resting on his knees.

“Today, my sweet little doves, we continue with passages from the Koran,” he said, piously touching his forehead to the book, “in which the Prophet speaks of the joys of the afterlife and the delights

of paradise. I see a new young student among you, clear-eyed and avid for learning, hungry for knowledge and pleasing to the spirit. So that no drop of wisdom and holy learning escapes her, let's have Fatima, clear-witted and sharp, repeat and interpret what your careful garden-er Adi has so far managed to plant and cultivate in your little hearts."

This was the same Adi who had brought her to these gardens yesterday. Halima recognized his voice immediately. The whole time he spoke she valiantly resisted an urge to laugh.

Fatima lifted her lovely, rounded chin to face the teacher and began reciting in a sweet, almost singing voice, "In the fifteenth sura, in verses forty-five to forty-eight we read, 'Behold, the god-fearing shall come to these gardens and to the springs: enter in peace, for indeed we shall take the ire from their hearts and they shall sit down on pillows with each other. They will feel no fatigue and we shall never cause them to leave ...'"

Adi praised her. Then she recited several other passages by heart. When she finished, he said to Halima, "So, my silver doe, fleet-footed and avid for learning, did you hear in the pearls of your companion and older sister what my skill, my depth of spirit has sown in the bosoms of our gentle-eyed houris and nurtured into fulsome buds? You must also blow all childishness out of your heart and listen intently to what my holy learning reveals to you, so that you can be happy both here and in the afterlife."

Then he began to dictate slowly, word by word, a new chapter from the Koran. The chalk squeaked across the tablets. Moving slightly, the girls' lips silently repeated what their hands were writing.

The lesson came to an end and Halima caught her breath. Everything had struck her as so silly and so strange, as though none of it had been real.

The Moor stood up, touched his forehead to the book reverently three times, and said, "Lovely young maidens, my diligent pupils, skillful and quick, enough learning and scattering of my wisdom for now. What you've heard and dutifully written on your tablets you must now inscribe on your memories and learn thoroughly and by heart. As you do this, you must also instruct this sweet quail, your new companion, in the ways of holy learning and convert her ignorance into knowledge."

He smiled and a row of white teeth shone brightly. He rolled his eyes portentously, leaving the schoolroom with great dignity.

The curtain had barely dropped behind him when Halima burst

out laughing, and some of the others joined her. Miriam, however, said, "You must never again laugh at Adi, Halima. Maybe he seems a bit strange to you at first, but he has a heart of gold and he would do anything for us. He's expert at many things—the Koran, worldly philosophy, poetry, rhetoric ... And he's equally at home in both Arabic and Pahlavi. Sayyiduna also has tremendous confidence in him."

Halima felt ashamed and lowered her eyes. But Miriam stroked her cheek and added, "Don't be concerned that you laughed. But now you know, and you'll behave differently in the future."

She nodded to her and went out into the gardens with the other girls to rake and weave.

Sara led Halima into the bath to wash her hair. First she brushed her hair out, then she undressed her down to the waist. Her hands trembled slightly as she did this, which made Halima slightly uncomfortable, but she tried not to think about it.

"So who is our master?" she asked. Her curiosity had finally gained the upper hand. She realized she held some power over Sara, though she didn't understand why.

Sara was instantly ready to oblige.

"I'll tell you everything I know," she said, her voice quivering strangely. "But you'd better not tell on me. And you have to like me. Do you promise?"

"I do."

"You see, all of us belong to Sayyiduna, which means 'Our Master.' He's a very, very powerful man. But what can I tell you ..."

"Tell me! Tell me!"

"Maybe you'll never even see him. I and several of the others have been here for a year already, and we haven't."

"What is this about 'Our Master'?"

"Be patient. I'll explain everything. Do you know who is first after Allah among the living?"

"The caliph."

"Not true. And it's not the sultan, either. Sayyiduna is first after Allah."

Halima's eyes widened in a shiver of astonishment. It was as though she were experiencing a tale from the *Thousand and One Nights*, only now she wasn't just listening to it, she was in the very midst of it.

"You're saying that none of you has yet seen Sayyiduna?"

Sara bent her face right down over Halima's ear.

“Not exactly. One of us knows him well. But no one must ever find out that we’re talking about this.”

“I’ll be silent as a tomb. So who’s the one who knows Sayyiduna?”

She already had a clear sense who it might be. All she wanted now was confirmation.

“It’s Miriam,” Sara whispered. “The two of them are close. But you’d better not give me away.”

“I won’t talk about it with anyone.”

“Then it’s all right. You have to like me now that I’ve trusted in you so much.”

Curiosity tormented Halima. She asked, “Who was that old woman we met in front of the house yesterday?”

“Apama. But it’s even more dangerous to talk about her than Miriam. Miriam is kind and likes us. But Apama is mean and hates us. She knows Sayyiduna well too. But be careful you don’t let on to anyone that you know anything.”

“I won’t, Sara.”

Sara washed Halima’s hair faster.

“You’re so sweet,” she whispered. Halima was embarrassed but pretended not to have heard anything. There was so much more she needed to find out about.

“Who is Adi?” she asked.

“He’s a eunuch.”

“What’s that, a eunuch?”

“A man who isn’t really a man.”

“What does that mean?”

Sara began explaining it to her in more detail, but Halima rebuffed her irritably, “I don’t want to hear about that.”

“You’re going to have to hear about a lot of other things like it.”

Sara was visibly hurt.

The washing finished, Sara began to massage Halima’s scalp with fragrant oils. Then she brushed her hair out. She would also have liked to hug and kiss her, but Halima cast such a menacing look up at her that she was afraid to. She led her from the washroom out into the sun so that her hair could dry faster. A group of the girls weeding flower beds nearby noticed them and approached.

“Where have you two been all this time?” they asked.

Halima lowered her eyes, but Sara responded volubly.

“If only you’d seen how dirty the poor thing’s hair was! It was as if she’d never had it washed in her lifetime. I barely managed to get

it under control, but she's going to need at least one more thorough washing before we get it to where it needs to be."

Thank goodness Miriam isn't here, Halima thought. She would have picked up on her bad conscience immediately, and if she'd started asking, Halima wouldn't have been able to hold back. She would have seen that she hadn't been able to keep her promise not to ask questions even for a single day.

When the other girls left, Sara scolded her.

"If you're going to act like that, everybody's going to guess that you've got secrets. You've got to carry yourself like you don't know anything. That way nobody's going to start probing ... I'm going to join the others, but you stay out here in the sun and let your hair dry."

Halima was now alone for the first time since she had arrived in this strange world. She didn't really know anything—neither where she was, nor what her role was to be. She was surrounded by sheer mysteries. But this wasn't entirely unpleasant. Just the opposite. She had found her balance in this fairy-tale world quite well. For one thing, there was plenty of fodder for her imagination. *It's best if I pretend to be ignorant*, she thought. *That way people won't suspect me, and I'll be able to get on their good side. And then they'll be more inclined to take care of me.*

Sara had provided her with more than enough riddles to keep her mind busy. Miriam, whom she had gotten to know as kind and good, now had another, mysterious face. What did it mean that she and Sayyiduna were close? What was Apama's power that she could be mean but also know Sayyiduna? And that silly Adi, who Miriam said had Sayyiduna's complete confidence? And finally, who was Sayyiduna, this powerful "Our Master" whom Sara could speak about only in whispers?

She couldn't hold out long in one place. She turned down a path and started encountering new things. She bent over some flowers and watched and scared off some colorful butterflies that were perching there. Worker bees and bright-colored bumblebees covered in pollen buzzed all around her. Bugs and gnats flew this way and that, all enjoying the warm spring sun with her. She had already forgotten her miserable former life and the arduous journey that had been so full of fear and uncertainty. Now her heart sang with happiness and the joy of life. It was as if she really had found heaven.

Something moved in a coppice of pomegranates. She listened

closely. A slender, lithe-legged animal leapt out of the foliage. *It's a gazelle*, she thought. The animal stood still and looked at her with its beautiful brown eyes.

Halima overcame her initial fright. She crouched down and began calling it, instinctively mimicking the strange Koran interpreter.

“Gazelle, my little belle, let's hear you bleat but don't retreat, my slender-legged, my lissome-legged ... See, I can't do any more than that because I'm not learned like Adi. Come on, come to Halima, who's pretty and young and likes the sweet little gazelle ...”

She had to laugh at her own eloquence. The gazelle stepped lightly toward her with its muzzle outstretched and started sniffing and licking her face. It tickled pleasantly, and she began to laugh and offer playful resistance as the animal nudged at her more and more forcefully, until she suddenly felt something else just as live touching her earlobe from behind and breathing into it. She looked around and was petrified with fear. Yellow-furred Ahriman stood right up beside her, eagerly competing with the gazelle in expressions of kindness. She fell backwards, barely landing on her hands. She couldn't scream and she couldn't get up. Her eyes full of fear, she stared at the long-legged cat and waited for it to leap at her. But evidently Ahriman had no intention of attacking. Soon he began to ignore her completely and tease the gazelle, catching it by the ear or craning with open jaws toward its neck. They had to know each other well and were obviously friends. Halima regained her courage and put an arm around each animal's neck. The leopard started to purr and knead like an ordinary housecat, and the gazelle put its tongue against her face again. Halima fawned on them with the sweetest words. She couldn't grasp how a leopard and a gazelle could be friends in this world when the Prophet had said that Allah was reserving that miracle for the inhabitants of paradise.

She heard her name being called. She arose and went in the direction of the voice. Ahriman padded along behind her. The gazelle kept him company, periodically ramming into him like a baby goat. He didn't pay much attention to it, only from time to time snapping at its ear.

Her companions were waiting for her and told her it was time for a dance lesson. They tied her hair up on top of her head and led her into the glass hall.

Their dance teacher was a eunuch named Asad, a young man of average height with smooth cheeks and supple, almost feminine limbs. He was a dark-skinned African, but not as black as Adi. Halima

thought he was cute and silly at the same time. When he came in, he took off his long cloak and stood before them in nothing but his short yellow trousers. He bowed slightly with a gracious smile and contentedly rubbed his hands. He called on Fatima to play the harp, and at the sound of the instrument began to twist and turn expertly.

His art consisted mostly of an expressive belly and a strong command of his muscles. Flourishes with his hands and feet were little more than a rhythmic accompaniment to the movements of his belly. First he showed how it was done, then the girls were supposed to try it after him. He ordered them to take off their halters and bare themselves to the waist. Halima was embarrassed, but when she saw how casually the others undressed, she readily followed them. He designated Zuleika as the lead dancer and placed her in front of the rest. Then he sent Fatima to assume her place, and he took a long, thin flute and began to play.

It was only now that Halima began to notice Zuleika. She undoubtedly had the most beautiful figure of any of them. She was first in dancing and Asad's assistant at lessons. Whatever he wanted she performed with precision, with the others imitating her. Flute in hand, he went from one girl to the next, expertly evaluating the agility and movement of their muscles, correcting them and showing how it was done.

After the lesson Halima was tired and hungry. They went out into the gardens, but they couldn't go far, because they had another subject coming up—verse making. Halima complained to Sara that she was hungry. Sara showed her where to wait for her, then slipped into the building and came back in a short while. She put a peeled banana in Halima's hand.

"We're not allowed to eat between meals. Miriam is very strict about that, because she's afraid we'll get fat. She'd punish me for sure if she knew I'd given you anything."

Halima had never heard of anyone not being allowed to eat just so they wouldn't get fat. Just the opposite. The fuller formed a woman or a girl was, the more she was praised, so she hardly welcomed Sara's news. And what to make of the fact that the meals in this strange place consisted of nothing but delicacies?

It was time for the girls to head back to the classroom, where Adi was about to serve as their poetry teacher. This was a subject that struck Halima as fun, and she was immediately excited about it. This day he explained the short verse system of the ghazal, and all

of the girls were supposed to use their inventiveness to contribute. Miriam recited the first verse and was free after that while the girls competed with each other to add verse after verse. After about ten lines they exhausted their resourcefulness, leaving only Fatima and Zainab, who kept doggedly at it until they too finally ran out. Adi left Halima out of both the first and second rounds so she could get the idea of it. She clearly had such a good time listening that Adi called on her to get ready as they moved into the third round. She was a little afraid, but also flattered that he already had this much confidence in her, and part of her also wanted to see how she measured up against her companions.

Miriam delivered the first verse.

"If like a bird on wings I flew ..." Adi waited for a moment, then started calling on them in sequence. They responded.

Zuleika: "I'd always keep the sun in view."

Sara: "And follow toward the morning dew."

Aisha: "I'd help the orphaned destitute."

Sit: "Would sing them songs of every hue."

Jada: "And guard that all the notes were true."

Here Adi amiably nodded toward Halima and called on her to continue.

She blushed and gave it a try.

"So you and I could fly ..."

She got stuck and couldn't go on.

"It's on the tip of my tongue," she said.

They all laughed, and Adi winked at Fatima.

"All right. Fatima, you help her out."

Fatima completed Halima's line, "Then you and I could fly, we two."

But Halima instantly opposed this.

"No, that's not what I meant," she said. "Wait, I'll get it."

And, clearing her throat, she truly did.

"So you and I could fly to heaven above."

Her words were met with an outburst of laughter. Red with anger and shame, she got up to run to the door, but Miriam blocked her way.

Then they were all at pains to comfort and encourage her. Gradually she calmed down and wiped her tears away. Adi explained that the art of making poetry was a blossom that could only be attained with prolonged effort and that she shouldn't despair if she failed the first

time. Then he called on the girls to continue, but most of them had already run out of rhymes. On their own, Fatima and Zainab took up a kind of dialogue.

Fatima: "Let what you've heard, Halima, be for your education."

Zainab: "Fatima, you're the last one to give lessons, in my estimation."

Fatima: "Can I help it if my greater knowledge is an irritation?"

Zainab: "Nonsense, you should know yourself and know your limitations."

Fatima: "All right, it's clear enough to me, my candor brings your indignation."

Zainab: "Not in the slightest. If you must know, your arrogance is the provocation."

Fatima: "Beauty breeds contempt. Plainness has no consolation."

Zainab: "Was that one aimed at me? From you, you overfed mutation?"

Fatima: "Now that's a nice one. Should we all praise your grim emaciation?"

Zainab: "Not on my account. I can't help laughing at your indignation."

Fatima: "Oh, really? And how should I react to your prevarication?"

Zainab: "You think that your attacks can shield you from humiliation."

"Enough, my doves," Adi interrupted them. "You've flaunted your lovely rhymes and learned maxims, you've disputed, gone on the attack, vied with each other and wrestled in spirit, made beautiful music with daggers flying. Now forget your quarrel and make peace. Enough learned elegance and spoken grace. Now off to the dining room with all of you."

He bowed good-naturedly and left the classroom. The girls poured out after him and found their places for dinner.

Breakfast was waiting for them, having been laid out on the table, and this meal was served to them by three eunuchs: Hamza, Telha and Sohal. It was at this point that Halima learned that they had the services of seven eunuchs. Apart from the two teachers whom she already knew, and in addition to the three serving them at table, there were also two garden keepers, Moad and Mustafa. The kitchen was run

essentially by Apama. Hamza, Telha and Sohal were simply her assistants.

These three tended the housekeeping. They cleaned, straightened, washed and maintained order throughout the house. All of the eunuchs, however, lived together with Apama in some garden separated from theirs by moats. The eunuchs had their own building there. Apama lived in a separate house.

All of these details served only to kindle Halima's curiosity. She didn't dare ask questions in Miriam's presence. She could barely wait until she and Sara were alone again.

The meal struck Halima as a regular feast. A succulent wild fowl roast in an aromatic broth, a variety of vegetables, crepes and omelets, cheese, breads, and honeyed pastries with fruit inside. And to wash it all down a glass of some drink that strangely made Halima's thoughts spin.

"That's wine," Sara whispered to her. "Sayyiduna allows us to have it."

After the meal the two of them went to their bedchamber. They were alone and Halima asked, "Can Sayyiduna really permit wine if the Prophet forbids it?"

"He can. I told you he's the first after Allah. He's the new prophet."

"And you say that no one but Miriam and Apama has seen Sayyiduna?"

"No one else except Adi, who is his confidant. But Adi and Apama can't stand each other. Apama can't stand anyone, for that matter. She was very beautiful when she was young, and now that that's all lost she's bitter."

"Who is she, actually?"

"Shhh. She's a horrible woman. She knows all the secrets of love, and Sayyiduna brought her here for us to learn from. You'll hear about that this afternoon. They say when she was young she had lots of lovers."

"Why on earth do we have to learn so many things?"

"That I don't really know, but I think it's so we can be ready for Sayyiduna."

"Are we supposed to be in his harem?"

"Maybe. But now you tell me if you think you like me yet."

At this Halima scowled. It made her angry that Sara asked her such nonsense when she needed to find out so many important things. She

lay back on her bed, clasped her hands behind her head, and stared at the ceiling.

Sara sat down next to her and gazed fixedly at her. Suddenly she bent down over her and began kissing her passionately.

At first Halima ignored her. But eventually the kissing became bothersome and she had to push Sara away.

“I’d like to know what Sayyiduna plans to do with us,” she said.

Sara caught her breath and arranged her hair.

“So would I,” she replied. “But nobody talks about it and we’re forbidden to ask.”

“Do you think it would be possible to escape from here?”

“Are you out of your mind, asking things like that when you’ve only just arrived? If Apama could hear you! Didn’t you see the fortress at the top of the cliff? The only way out is through that. Help yourself, if you dare.”

“Whose castle is it?”

“Whose?! Everything you see around you here, including us, belongs to Sayyiduna.”

“Does Sayyiduna live in that castle?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“And I don’t suppose you know what this country we’re in is called?”

“I don’t know. You ask too many questions. I doubt even Apama and Adi know. Miriam might.”

“Why just Miriam?”

“I told you that they’re close.”

“What does that mean, that they’re close?”

“That they’re like husband and wife.”

“Who told you that?”

“Shhh. We girls figured it out.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t, you’ve never been in a harem.”

“Have you?”

“Yes, I have, sweet thing. If you only knew. My master was sheikh Moawiya. In the beginning I was his slave. He bought me when I was twelve. Then I became his favorite, his lover. He used to sit on the edge of my bed and gaze at me, just like I’m sitting here now. He’d call me his sweet black cat. He fell in love with me. If only I could tell you what it was like. He was a magnificent man. All of his wives were jealous of me. But they couldn’t do anything about it, because he loved

me best of all. Their envy and anger alone made them grow older and uglier by the day. He would take me with him on his expeditions. Then once we were attacked by an enemy tribe. Before our men could set up a defense, their bandits seized me and took me away. They sold me at the market in Basra to a buyer for Our Master. I was miserable.”

She started to cry. Thick, heavy drops fell on Halima’s cheeks and breast.

“Don’t be sad, Sara. Things are good for you here with us.”

“If I knew that you liked me even just a little, I’d feel better. My Moawiya was so handsome and loved me so much.”

“I like you, Sara,” Halima said, letting herself be kissed.

Then she started back in on the questions.

“Was Miriam in a harem too?”

“Yes, but it was different for her. She was like a queen. Two men were killed because of her.”

“Why did she come here, then?”

“Her husband’s relatives sold her to avenge her unfaithfulness to him. She had brought terrible shame on the entire family.”

“Why was she unfaithful to him?”

“You wouldn’t understand that yet, Halima. He wasn’t the right one for her.”

“He must not have loved her.”

“Oh he loved her all right. He loved her so much that it killed him.”

“How can you know that?”

“She told us about it herself when she first came here.”

“Wasn’t she here before you?”

“No. Fatima, Jada, Safiya and I were the first. Miriam came after us. At that point we were all still equals, and only Apama gave us orders.”

“So how did Miriam get to meet Sayyiduna after that?”

“That I really couldn’t say. He’s a prophet, so maybe he sees and knows everything. One day he sent for her. She didn’t tell us that, but we could sense it. Since then we stopped being equals. She started giving us orders, even opposing Apama. Her power grew and grew, and now even Apama has to obey her, and she hates her for it.”

“All of this is very strange.”

Zainab came in and sat down at her dressing table to adjust her hair and put on makeup.

“Time to go, Halima,” she said. “Apama is our next teacher, and

you'd better not cross her. Be careful you don't come running into the classroom at the last minute. Here's some blush and black dye for your cheeks and eyebrows. And rosehip oil for perfume. Miriam gave it to me for you. Come on, get up!"

She and Sara helped get her ready. Then the three of them left for the classroom.

Apama entered, and it was all Halima could do to keep from laughing. But the look in the old woman's eyes and the ominous silence that descended at her appearance were her warning to be careful. The girls stood up and bowed deeply.

The old woman was strangely decked out. Baggy trousers made of black silk flapped around her bony legs. Her halter was red bordered with gold and silver stitching. A small yellow turban with a long heron's feather covered her head, and giant gold hoops encrusted with gems hung from her ears. She wore a necklace of large pearls that had been draped several times around her neck. Her wrists and ankles were adorned with artfully crafted and precious bracelets and anklets. All of this finery only served to highlight her ugliness and decrepitude. On top of it all, she had painted her lips and cheeks a flaming red and shadowed her eyes with black dye so that she truly looked like a living scarecrow. With a wave of her hand she had the girls sit down. Her eyes sought out Halima. Inaudibly she sneered, and then she began to speak in a shrill voice.

"You've done a good job of getting the little one dressed up. Now if we can just get her to stop staring bug-eyed at people, like some young calf that's never seen a bull and has no idea what's coming at her. So listen close and learn something useful. And don't think for a minute that your companions just dropped out of the sky with what they know. Some of them rutted around harems before coming to my school, but it wasn't until they came here that they got an inkling of how challenging an art the service of love is. In India, my homeland, instruction begins at the tenderest age. For it's wisely said that life is short and learning deep. Do you have any idea, poor thing, what a man is? Do you know why that black abomination that brought you to our gardens yesterday isn't a real man? Speak!"

Halima's whole body was shaking. In desperation, her eyes sought out help from those nearby, but the other girls were all staring at the floor.

"I think your tongue has gotten caught in your throat, you hayseed," the old woman drove at her. "All right, I'll explain it to you."

With a kind of wicked pleasure she began to explain the subject of men and women.

Halima was mortified and didn't know where to look.

"Do you understand now, little one?" she asked her at last.

Halima timidly nodded, even though she hadn't heard half of it and the half she had was still unclear.

"Almighty Allah himself has commanded me to beat this exalted wisdom into the heads of these silly geese," she exclaimed. "Can these crickets even imagine how much skill, how much innate instinct is required if you want to fully satisfy your master and lover? Practice, practice, and more practice! Only that will bring you to your goal. Thankfully, providence has robbed you of the opportunity to shame the high art of love with your coltish lust. A man is like a sensitive harp on which a woman must play hundreds and hundreds of different melodies. If she's clumsy and stupid, then oh, what pitiful sounds will come from it. But if she's gifted and has learned something, then with her deft hands she'll be able to produce harmonies on the instrument that have never been heard before. Uncultured monkeys! Your desire should be to make the instrument given to you produce more sounds than anyone ever thought were in it. And may the good spirits never punish me by making me hear some talentless strumming, squeaking and squealing."

She proceeded to explain in detail what she referred to as her high art and learning, and Halima's neck, ears and face flushed red with shame. Yet she couldn't help but listen. A spine-tingling curiosity coursed through her. If it were only she and Sara, or if only it weren't for Miriam, who was her greatest source of embarrassment, then she might have even found Apama's descriptions entertaining. As it was, she kept her eyes cast down, for some strange reason feeling guilty and complicit.

Finally Apama finished. She left the classroom with great dignity and without saying or bowing goodbye. The girls rushed outside and went walking through the gardens in groups. Sara clung to Halima, who didn't dare to approach Miriam.

But Miriam called her of her own accord. She put an arm around Halima's waist and drew her down a path alongside her. Sara followed them like a shadow.

"Are you starting to get used to our way of life?" Miriam asked.

"Everything seems strange and new to me," Halima replied.

"I hope it's not unpleasant."

“No, not at all. I really like it. There are just so many things I don’t understand.”

“Be patient, dear. That will come with time.”

Halima leaned her head against Miriam’s shoulder and caught a glimpse of Sara, and she had to smile. Sara’s face had a look of tormented jealousy.

People like me, she thought, and her heart leapt.

The path led through some bushy plantings to the edge of the thunderous torrent that dashed through the rocks far below. Halima observed that the gardens must have been built on top of a cliff.

On one of the riverside rocks lizards were sunning themselves. Their backs shone like emeralds.

“Look how pretty they are,” Miriam said.

“Ugh, I can’t stand them. They’re vicious.”

“Why?”

“They attack girls.”

Miriam and Sara both smiled.

“Who ever gave you that idea, child?”

Halima was afraid that she’d blurted out some inanity again, so she answered carefully.

“My former master told me, ‘Watch out for boys! If they jump over the wall and break into the garden, run away from them, because they keep a lizard or a snake under their shirts and they’d let it loose to bite you.’”

Miriam and Sara burst out laughing. Sara devoured Halima with her eyes, while Miriam, biting her lip, said, “Well, there aren’t any mean boys here, and even our lizards are completely gentle and tame. They haven’t done anything nasty to anyone yet.”

Then she began whistling. The lizards turned their heads in all directions, as if looking for the person who was calling them.

Halima huddled between Miriam and Sara, where she felt safer, and said, “You’re right. They’re pretty.”

A little pointed head poked out of a crack in a rock and darted its forked tongue out. Halima froze in terror. Its head rose higher and higher and its neck grew longer and longer. Then there was no doubt: a big, yellowish snake, undoubtedly attracted by Miriam’s whistle, had crawled out of the crevice.

The lizards darted to all sides. Halima screamed. She tried to pull Miriam and Sara away, but they held firm.

“Don’t worry, Halima,” Miriam said, to calm her. “This is our good

friend. We call her Peri, and when we whistle she crawls out of her little hole. She's so well behaved that none of us can complain about her. In general we're friends in these gardens, people and animals alike. We're cut off from the rest of the world and take pleasure in each other."

Halima relaxed, but she wanted to get away from there.

"Let's go, please," she pleaded.

They laughed, but complied.

"Don't be so afraid," Miriam scolded her. "It should be obvious that we all like you."

"Do you have other animals?"

"Lots of them. In one of the gardens we have a whole menagerie. But it takes a boat to get there, so sometime when you're free you can ask Adi or Mustafa to take you."

"I'd like that. Is this place we live in very big?"

"So big that you could die of hunger if you got lost in it."

"My goodness! I'm not going anywhere alone again."

"It's not that bad. The garden we live in is actually on an island surrounded by the river on one side and moats on the other three. It's not that big, so if you leave it but don't cross any water, you can't get lost. But over there, at the bottom of that rocky cliff face, is a forest with wild leopards."

"Where did you get Ahriman from that he's so gentle and tame?"

"From that forest. Not that long ago he was still just like a little kitten. We fed him with goat's milk, and even now we still don't feed him meat, so that he doesn't go wild. Mustafa brought him for us."

"I don't know Mustafa."

"He's a good person, like all our eunuchs. He used to be a torch-bearer for a famous prince. It was very tough work, so he ran away. He and Moad are the garden keepers. But it's already time to go back to the classroom. Fatima and Zuleika are going to train us in music and singing."

"Oh, I like that!"

The singing and music lesson was a pleasant diversion for the girls. Miriam gave them complete freedom. Changing places frequently, they would play Tartar flutes, strum on the harp and the lute, light into the Egyptian guitar, compose and sing humorous songs, critique each other and argue, while Fatima and Zuleika tried in vain to command their attention. They laughed, told stories, and

enjoyed the chance to let go.

Sara once again clung to Halima.

“You’re in love with Miriam. I saw it.”

Halima shrugged.

“You can’t hide it from me. I can see into your heart.”

“So, and what of it?”

Tears welled up in Sara’s eyes.

“You said you were going to like me.”

“I didn’t promise you anything.”

“You’re lying! It’s why I’ve trusted you so much.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

It had gotten quiet, and both Sara and Halima turned and listened. Fatima had picked up a guitar to provide her own accompaniment as she began to sing. Beautiful, old songs full of yearning.

Halima was entranced.

“You have to write the words down for me,” she said to Sara.

“I will, if you’ll like me.”

She tried to press close, but Halima pushed her away.

“Don’t bother me now. I have to hear this.”

After the lesson they stayed in the classroom. Each one took up her own work. Some sewed or wove, or headed over to a huge, half-finished rug and resumed work on it. Others dragged several beautifully carved spinning wheels into the hall, sat down at them, and started spinning. They chatted about ordinary things, about their former lives, about men and about love. Miriam oversaw them, walking through their midst with her hands behind her back.

Halima thought about her. She didn’t yet have any work of her own. She listened to one conversation, then another, until finally her thoughts focused on Miriam. If she and Sayyiduna were “close,” what was it that took place between them? When she was in the harem, did she also do the things that Apama had described? She couldn’t believe that. She tried to shake off such ugly thoughts and convince herself that it couldn’t be true.

They had supper right before sunset, then they went for a walk. Suddenly darkness settled on the gardens and the first stars came out above them.

Halima walked down a path hand in hand with Sara and Zainab, conversing with them in half-whispers. The sound of the rapids grew steadily closer as the alien and eerie landscape stretched boundlessly before them. Halima felt a twinge of emotion, bitter and sweet at

the same time, as though she were a tiny creature who had gotten lost in a strange, magical world. Everything struck her as mysterious, almost too much so for her to grasp.

A light flickered through the thickets. The small flame started moving, and Halima timidly clung to her companions. The flame got closer and closer, until at last a man carrying a burning torch stepped before her.

“That’s Mustafa,” Sara said, “The garden keeper.”

Mustafa was a big, round-faced Moor dressed in a colorful cloak reaching almost to his feet and tied at the waist with a thick cord. When he saw the girls, he gave a good-natured grin.

“So this is the new little bird that the wind blew in yesterday,” he said amiably, looking at Halima. “What a tiny, fragile creature.”

A dark shadow danced around the flickering torch. A huge moth had started circling around the fire. They all watched as it nearly grazed the flame, then darted in a broad upward arc and vanished in the darkness. But then it would come back, and each time its dance became wilder. Its circuits around the flame grew narrower and narrower, until finally the fire caught its wings. They crackled, and, like a shooting star, the moth hit the ground.

“Poor thing,” Halima exclaimed. “But why was it so stupid?”

“Allah gave it a passion to attack fire,” Mustafa said. “Good night.”

“That’s strange,” Halima mused, half to herself.

They returned and went to their bedchambers, undressed, and lay on their beds. Halima’s head spun from the day’s events. That ridiculous Adi with his rhyming sentences, the agile dance master Asad, tarted-up Apama with her shameless learning, mysterious Miriam, the girls, and the eunuchs. And here she was in the midst of all this, Halima, who for as long as she could remember had dreamt of far-off lands and longed for miraculous adventures.

“It’s fine,” she told herself and tried to go to sleep.

Just then someone touched her lightly. Before she had a chance to scream, she heard Sara’s voice speaking right into her ear.

“Stay completely quiet, Halima, so that Zainab doesn’t wake up.”

She climbed under the blanket and snuggled up against her.

“I told you I don’t want this,” Halima said just as quietly. But Sara showered her with kisses and she felt powerless.

Finally she managed to break free. Sara started to coax her and whisper lovesick words in her ear. Halima turned her back, stuck her

fingers in her ears, and fell asleep instantly.

Sara was unsure what was happening with her. Feeling disoriented, she returned to her bed and climbed in.