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## Chapter 1

### Jewels from the Desert

"Let me do it, Mother, you look after the others. They need you. They are upset at someone they thought their friend trying to kill father."

I carefully cleaned out any fibers and debris from the wound and then stitched it, put a clean pad on it and tied the pad in place. Lukenow was content to be in my hands, for he knew how clever I was with them. We were well away from where blood had been spilled, well away from those whose treachery could have ended in his death. My mother's brother Petros was the one who had insisted that my father wear a cowhide garment under the usual linen ones. I can learn much from this other Petros, for he sees into men's hearts in the same way I do. Petros the Elder, impressed at my quickness at taking care of the wound, watches me with a considering gaze. Good.

After my mother, Serena, saw how neatly I cleaned and then put stitches in to the dagger wound of my father, Lukenow, she never again referred to me as 'Little Petros'. Nor did anyone else.

My brother Diripi has Lukenow to teach him the tricks of sailing on the great green sea and not becoming the prey of the men of the sea or of any others who wish to seize what was been gained in trade. I was not for the sea as my father, and Diripi are. I have not that desire that haunts them. The unhappiness that comes to them if too far from the sea, any sea. Arudara, with his bright eyes and his talents for gems is on the way to the kin of my mother to learn from her father, Hoval, all that he needs to become a master gem and gold worker. So they will be with those whom they can learn from.

Now that I am known as Petros the Younger, I am looked at with new respect. They see that I am good with broken bones and infections and illnesses that are not well understood, and that sometimes I am able to save those who otherwise would go to join their ancestors. I learned of herbs from Serena, and I became interested in the other problems on my own. It interested me to figure out how to make the broken whole, and then it pleased me when I could. When I couldn't, I thought how to do better or wonder why I couldn't.

Petros the one for whom I am named, was sometimes known as Petros the Protector and has lately been referred to as Petros the Wise. I knew when we were newly met that I could learn from him what I needed. Arudara could make beauty with the gems and gold, I could see the beauty and sell it, but I could not make it. Diripi needed the great green sea as much as his father, Lukenow. He, like I, could see the beauty that Arudara made and could sell it and return with other goods, but could not make it. Little Sardow is already making beauty and will be better off with the kin who have many such beauty makers for her to learn from. Petros the Protector originally earned his name by protecting the first Sardow, who needed constant protection, just as her son Arudara

needs protection. She needed more than he because she was female and lovely to men's eyes. Her fate claimed her, and I believe Petros grieves still. All who knew her grieve still. Sometimes when Lukenow looks at little Sardow, I realize that he, too, grieves for his mate who was with him for such a short time.

Petros the Protector took me with him as we went on the journey to the land of two rivers, searching for those who would buy what our artists could provide. We found palaces that contained kings whose eyes gleamed at what we brought with us, and also merchants who saw they could make a profit with our goods. We sold everything we had with us, the bright greedy eyes letting us know that we should come again. They negotiated, as is traditional. We negotiated. All ended up satisfied. We were careful to let all know that the artists were not with us, were well hidden from the greed of those who would like to own them. Petros taught me discretion.

He said, "We will keep quiet about your gifts for healing, so as not to tempt those who would control them, by controlling you."

I saw many broken bones that I would have liked to set straight, but sometimes it was not wise to let those in power know that I was gifted with the healing arts. It hurt something in me to keep these talents only for our own kin, but I could not expose my companions to the greed of the rulers to seize whatever they might find useful, and my healing talents were useful.

Petros the Wise taught me that when we entered a town even if we thought we knew it, that the first task was to quietly learn all the alleys and back ways; to always have an escape plan from those who would seek either to rob us or entrap us for their own ends; how to defend against treachery with quick words and when needed, a quick dagger; to negotiate while knowing the value of what we were seeking to trade; to read men's hearts which I found easy and always had. Petros taught me to use that knowledge without drawing danger on myself and my kin.

It was near this land that we heard of the desert dwellers. On the rolling sands that rippled like the waves of the seas, what we saw first were puffs of stirred up sands and then we saw those strange creatures known as camels; ungainly, they might be thought ugly, but they could go for long periods of time without water, so ungainly or not they were essential to the desert dwellers. We visited the tents of these wandering people who lived in a harsh land with no water and only occasional oasis where water could be found and also the dates that these hardy people used to sustain themselves. My nose rebelled at the odors of those who had no way to cleanse themselves but it soon became accustomed.

We came upon the beautiful creatures that run with the wind, tails held high and flowing with their liquid gait, alert faces held high above their arched necks. I lost my heart when first I saw them, and understood why they are beloved by their men folk as war mares. Being bred for their gentle and affectionate natures, these graceful creatures lived in the tents with the women and children. They amazed us, for we had never before

beheld horses that were so docile and sweet tempered. The stallions were not used for war, for they would not be reliably quiet as the mares were.

War, and livestock, not jewels, are what these men desired. They, though they treated us as honored guests, were indifferent to the beautiful gems that my kin sent us out with. They were more interested in ways to transport water and dates, which were needed by them to stay alive. Living their lives under the starry skies, cold at night, hot during the day, they thought only of their next skirmish and of acquiring what other wanderers coveted.

They permitted me to ride one of the war mares. Really, though, it was the mare who gave me permission. I slid onto her back and off we went. I bent over her neck as she picked up speed, then she slowed, as if she knew what was in my mind. She wheeled quickly, and if I also were not quick, I would have found myself on the ground. She went up a small hill as if it were nothing and then swift as the wind, carried me back to her master. The sounds of her hooves, of the wind through my hair, the feeling of her warm body as I leaned over her arched neck, the strength of her muscles that lay beneath her sleek hide, these memories will be with me always.

I stood by her head and caressed her, thinking I had never been so free in my life. It was flying as the birds fly, swooping as the birds swoop to get their prey. I wanted to stay with her forever.

“You have the soul of a desert dweller.” The leader of the tribe said to me.

I nodded agreement and replied the truth in my heart, “I have duties to my kin.”

He understood, “You will always have a home with us, should you desire one or need one.”

I know that it cannot be.

I rubbed the mares' ears, and gently scratched their faces, ran my hands down their sleek sides and realized sadly that even though I had lost my heart to these glorious creatures, that I could not live the life that these creatures demanded as their due. I spent many a night scheming as to how I could. But my life was with my kin, my brothers and sisters, my artist brethren. We live our lives, far from the desert, in towns that would seem cramped and foreign and hurt the very souls of these desert dwellers.

My uncle Petros and I traveled further on that journey than we originally intended and saw much that was strange to our eyes, but we found many places where the destruction that we were used to had not yet come. I say, not yet, for my teacher, Petros, taught me to look at the small changes in the rains that fall, or do not fall, or the winds that breathed hotter than they had, or the trembling of the earth, and know that we must once again be wandering in unknown ways to find ways to sell our artist's goods and provide for our people. Just as Lukenow had to be wary on the seas as those who would

prey on him had to be avoided and the storms that came had to be endured and survived. Petros told me the story of how he and Sardow and many of their kin had gone to the valley where Hasna grew up, the valley that was now dead with only the whisperings of ghosts as residents, and how his talented sister had foreseen the chaos that we are now living through.

He asked, "Do you see what is coming, in the way of my gifted sister Sardow?"

I replied, "No." After a pause, I continued, "Was that a gift or a burden to her?"

"Both", his warrior's face showed nothing, but I knew that he grieved for his lost loved one. All who had known her grieved for her. None were reconciled to her joining her ancestors.

"Is little Sardow like her?"

His face softened, "The very image of her, in her face and her body as well as her gifts. Yet she has not been burdened with the far-seeing eye."

It is as I thought, but I asked him, for he, I knew, would tell me plainly. I did not ask my mother, for she is frightened at the resemblance of the newest Sardow to the original one. I did not want to stir up the memories in her. Memories that provoke her to finger her dagger and look dangerous; memories from those hard times.

Many seasons passed, and I grew into my adult body and gained, I thought, much wisdom. Petros the Wise taught me how to use my own gifts for seeing clearly and to conceal them so that others would only see what I wanted them to. I adopted, or tried to, his warrior face and his quiet ways that could put others at their ease if he wished.