

Midnight Confession

Word Count: 797

I scan the messily written note for the umpteenth time: *Meet me tonight at our spot when the moon is at its highest.* -S

I know exactly where he means. The crumbling fountain at Old City's center. We would play over there for hours when we were children. Pretending to be pirates and brigands, dreaming of what lay beyond our little island's horizon.

A quick glance out the window tells me I ought to get going if I'm to make it there on time. I grab the shabby cloak hanging by the door, but stop briefly to inspect myself in the mirror.

Fussing with the hood for a few seconds, I abruptly stop myself "It's just Salim. What am I worried about?"

A lot, actually - mainly about my feelings for him. Seeing him again after all these years, I thought the ease of our friendship would return as naturally as the rise and set of the sun. But when our eyes connected that first time in the market, it wasn't the spark of recognition I felt, that's for sure.

We hugged in greeting like we used to but my thoughts kept drifting to how much more solid he'd become on his travels. "What are they feeding you over there?" I jest, sneaking a squeeze of his forearm in as we separated from the embrace. "And you? You're a bit squishier than I remember," he shoots back playfully. I crossed my arms defensively, "What's that supposed to mean, Salim?" His hearty laugh echoed against the stone building, drawing attention and heightening my embarrassment. But his sincere, "Don't worry, it suits you," killed any choice words I'd prepared to retaliate with.

Remembering the silly moment pulls a soft giggle out of me, but my anxiety quickly bubbles back to the surface as I approach the fountain. Salim is already there, pacing back and forth the way he always did when something was on his mind. I steel myself with a steadying breath and quietly make my presence known.

"Salim?" He turns to me, slightly startled but that expression is quickly replaced with a smile that shines almost as bright as the waning moon.

"You're here,"

I blithely lift an eyebrow. "You thought I wouldn't show?"

"I couldn't be sure with the way you've been cutting our interactions short lately," he reproaches. The stern gaze accompanying his statement forces my eyes to flutter down guiltily.

I'd been avoiding him because I could no longer ignore my growing feelings. Feelings that are strong enough to interfere with my glamor. He can't know the truth about me. Luckily, my powers are strongest at night, so there won't be any slip ups while the moon is high.

His furrowed brow softens, "I didn't call you here to scold you."

"Why *did* you call me out here?" I ask, lowering the hood of my cloak.

"I called you here," he begins, "to tell you what I've been meaning to for the past few weeks."

I look up at him expectantly. A silent moment passes between us as he studies me intently.

"Do you remember the day you and your Baba settled here?" he opens.

"Like it was yesterday." It was years ago, shortly after Mama died. I couldn't have been more than 7 years old. Baba said he wanted to move back to his ancestral home for my sake, but really I think it was to minimize his own grief.

Zakhara being such a small island, all the villagers naturally came ashore to welcome him back and help us unpack our boat.

"I tried to get your attention all afternoon," he reminisces. "When you finally acknowledged me, you gave me the most half-hearted wave."

"If by getting my attention, you mean by staring a hole into my head," I chuckle.

"Even then, I couldn't keep my eyes off you."

Well, that was unusually smooth. My throat dries instantly and I'm suddenly aware of just how close we are right now.

"Ayla," he breathes, and that's when I knew.

When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe on their lips.

"Don't," I plead in a whisper.

But he doesn't back down; a warm, calloused palm settles against my cheek. "I'm nowhere near as poetic as you. In fact, I'm not very good with words at all. I've never been. But one thing I've always been sure of is that I belong to you, Ayla. I don't know if you'll have me, but I'm yours, always."

My eyes flutter shut as I gently lean into his hand, indulging myself for a moment. Then, I take it between my palms and slowly peel it away.

"You wouldn't say that if you knew what I was."