

Fictional expansion of the Bible's II Kings 5, which may contain the first beauty-and-the-beast-like story. Personal transformation is not sought by the main character, but he experiences it on more than one level, as do other characters.

## **The Damascene**

By Daniel E. Karim

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An aerial photograph of a coastal city, likely Damascus, Syria, taken at sunset. The city is built on a peninsula and is illuminated by the warm, golden light of the setting sun. The surrounding water is dark, and the sky is a deep, dark blue. The overall mood is serene and historical.

# THE DAMASCENE

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## CHAPTER 2

Aziz and Fayyad spent half the day at the very diverse marketplace, eating and drinking their fill while cavorting with one dealer after another who had traveled from every direction to peddle products and people as strange as the profiteers were foreign. Aziz would find it beneath himself to peruse the latest stock of female slaves.

Merchants from the north included Assyrians, whose kingdom was growing strong in population and in industrial advances. While Assyria had yet to become a global powerhouse, many of its competitors knew from history that if it were ever to achieve massive economic prosperity, then territorial growth would surely follow.

Aziz focused on Assyrian crafts, hoping, as he explained to Fayyad, to gain insight into their latest works in metal. The Assyrians were first to produce helmets, but they did not trade in armor or arms. Aramean warriors gained from their Assyrian counterparts only what they could steal or take as spoils.

Aziz also hunted for jewelry but made no purchase. Dealers in precious stones needed very little physical space but a greater number of guards. A handful of jewelers could buy out the bazaar.

After exposing Fayyad to the wide variety of characters and cultures, Aziz led him toward an assigned destination unknown to Fayyad, who followed, no questions asked. Away from the marketplace and off the heavily traveled streets of the city they came upon a forge owned and operated by a uniquely talented

craftsman, who was in desperate need of a son to carry on his work. This unmarried but innovative swordsmith, Hakim, was anxiously experimenting with various methods of making stronger and sharper hand weapons. Aziz and Fayyad approached his large shop cautiously, since they heard the sounds of clanging metal mixed with intermittent obscenities they could barely discern. When Hakim came into view, they saw him wielding a sword unskillfully and striking armor attached to a tall and wide tree stump, around which the workplace appeared to have been built. The test dragged to a halt, as Hakim was worn out, on his knees, and wet with sweat. One of his paid servants approached to help him up. Angrily he refused assistance but then saw Aziz and a stranger curiously staring at him. Instantly he was compelled to hospitality, in keeping with ancient cultural norms and years of practice. His belligerence disappeared.

“Welcome!” he happily exclaimed.

Leaning on his sword as it pierced the ground, Hakim used it to help himself up. He directed his servants to bring food and drink, both of which were on hand at all times. A large bowl full of seasonal fruit was brought out, containing apricots, grapes, plums, some of which were starting to wilt, and of course pomegranates. Wine and water were also offered. Aziz accepted the wine, but not Fayyad, who also waived away the fruit.

“He sent you to check on me?” Hakim sternly asked Aziz. Before a response could be made, he snapped, “I’m glad! I need something from you!”

The master craftsman knew how valuable he and his work were to the kingdom, so he occasionally sounded as though he

had command over officers, including Aziz, who simply humored him by either playing along or ignoring his words.

“What can we report?” Aziz asked, committed to the business at hand.

Hakim sat motionless on a stool, garnering hope Aziz would understand. He also glanced at Fayyad and wondered who he was. There was no need to inquire as to his trustworthiness, because he was with Aziz.

“I have made progress,” Hakim began in a monotone, “but I know not when this journey will end.” Then suddenly he shouted at his servants, “I pray it does before I die! Keep the fire hot!”

Hakim was fully aware of the challenges that true experimentation brought. They required him to manage known variables and to prepare for the unknown. He experienced failure much more often than success.

“I need more materials!” Hakim desperately said. “Vital minerals from the east. The next caravan may be a month away!”

“Have you enough silver for the purchase?” asked Aziz.

“I don’t have enough of anything!” Hakim angrily cried.

Fayyad perceived growing friction between them and remembered Hakim’s initial expression of need.

“If I may,” nodding for Aziz’s permission, “I am Fayyad, your servant. What did you have in mind, when you said you were glad to see us?” Hakim immediately turned toward Aziz, looking perturbed and thinking, “Who is this young pup?”

Aziz quickly acceded to Fayyad’s apparent effort to calm things down.

“What can I do for you?” Aziz graciously asked with an inflated ego.

“I – I have my eye on the daughter of a neighbor, who thinks he can do better for her than me,” a humble Hakim answered. Aziz breathed a sigh of relief, hearing the problem was purely personal.

“You gave me a scare, Hakim. I thought it was something... difficult.” With a chuckle Aziz added, “It’s always a woman.”

Hakim saw no humor in Aziz’s comment, which shoved optimism further from the innovator’s reach. Hakim nevertheless continued to explain his predicament, as if Aziz were a physician and Fayyad his assistant.

“I was thinking you might know him. Moneer. He owns three orchards and likes to deal in camels. Her name is Amal.” Hakim waited a moment then pleaded: “Or maybe you know somebody who knows him...to convince him she would do well with me!” As if speaking to himself with an innocent smile, he added, “I think – I know she feels for me also.”

“How do you know?” Aziz crudely asked, “And what does it matter?” he quickly added, suspecting his time was being wasted. “You want her? I arrange it.”

Hakim was tempted to accept Aziz’s offer and be done with it, but he held firmly to his belief she would not appreciate being handled like property, however valuable. He explained: “She isn’t – she just couldn’t be – so simple a creature, waiting to be wedded and bedded in servitude to the highest bidder. No, not with that sweet face, not with those adorable eyes that seem to open only for me.”

Fayyad was truly moved by Hakim’s combined illustration of love and rejection of the demeaning ways by which marital arrangements were commonly handled. Aziz, on the other hand,

suspected Hakim had exposed himself as delusional, which made matters worse. The frustrated doctor of metals had already established himself as absentminded. The powerbroker in Aziz nevertheless overlooked Hakim's weaknesses and pushed aside his sweet sentimentality to offer a different approach.

"If you succeed here, you will be so rich, her father will beg you for the privilege of cleaning up this place, and then he'll beg you to take his daughter!" Aziz paused, noticing Hakim's interest intensifying, and asked, "What is her age? What is yours?"

"I am thirty-six. She is perhaps twenty-six. What difference does it make, Aziz? We exchanged glances many times," Hakim shared, looking also toward Fayyad. "She has seen me at my worst, yet she sends me a sweet smile. It keeps me up at night!" Reluctantly he added, "She is a modest girl. Not an attraction for the world to worship. She is.... I am so drawn to her." Hakim's emotions were building, and he was drawing out Fayyad's sympathy while losing Aziz's. "I saw her eyes, closely once, and in them I saw a place I wanted to be. I pray I'm not deceiving myself. I believe she wants me too." Aziz was convinced this eccentric definitely needed a woman – any woman. But then, remembering when his eyes first met Maja's, Aziz began to empathize, and Hakim continued: "What she wants, who she wants, is everything to me. I want – I *need* to be wanted by her."

Aziz's conscience was pushed to the brink, as Hakim's confession was hitting too close to home. He didn't want to admit even to himself that he too needed to be wanted.

"Women are everywhere!" Aziz spouted. "Who has time to ask them what they want or who they want? You think they can even answer? You think too much!"



Hakim and Fayyad looked at each other, having taken Aziz's last utterance seriously. Aziz instantly realized his error – implying Hakim should think less. Everyone aware of Hakim's work, which included his latest admirer, Fayyad, knew he needed to remain intensely thoughtful all the time in order to achieve the much anticipated breakthrough. Humbly Aziz approached.

“All will be arranged...with all respect for the woman – Amal.” A very pleased Hakim replied:

“My thanks to you, my lord.” He then surprised Aziz by continuing to speak. “Women *are* everywhere. Our eyes seem to act on their own, looking at one then another, envisioning perfect pleasure at will – at *our* will.” Aziz's attention was rekindled. “But to discover a connection – one real enough to pursue – a sign of consent freely given....” Hakim paused and examined his visitors' faces, curious of what they thought of him and of his perspective. He then concluded, “They are more than soft, warm places to seed.”

Aziz turned away, declining to disagree and concealing his readable face, which was accepting of Hakim's brief sermon.

“And you?” Fayyad earnestly asked Hakim, “you will look to no other, if you achieve this woman?” Fayyad unwittingly caught both Hakim and Aziz off guard. Aziz held his tongue, assuming Fayyad was testing Hakim's convictions. After thinking a moment Hakim answered:

“Yes! I mean...no,” he added, resuming his pensive state. “You are young. We all have the weakness.” Aziz knew the weakness well, and his solution was to bring more women into his household. “But yes, I can!” Hakim wishfully proclaimed.

Aziz opted to leave Hakim alone in his fantasy. Fayyad hid his admiration of Hakim's insight and planned commitment to probably one woman. The officers departed for their abodes with an agreement to meet the next day at the home of their superior, Naiman, the leper.

## CHAPTER 3

He had perfect balance. In one hemisphere of his life were his grand achievements and the endearment of the entire royal household, while on the other side was an ever-worsening disease, leprosy, which evened things out most of the time. He would, however, teeter now and again, whenever he felt a little more life being siphoned out of him, as his affliction behaved like a slow-growing parasite that cared nothing about its host.

Naiman was socially avoided as much as he was highly acclaimed within and without the Kingdom of Aram. With rare exceptions the only people who didn't fear contracting his condition were other lepers, and they, unlike him, were forced to live among themselves outside the walls of Damascus. Naiman was highly privileged, and his status allowed him to contain himself within a magnificent two-story mansion, which had been gifted to him by the king. It was situated right across from the palace. A stone-paved street divided the majestic structures, though Naiman's home was dwarfed by the king's massively larger residence, which stood on higher ground. It had been built on the centuries-old ruins of at least two previous palaces, whose settled rock and stone made for the sturdiest of foundations.

Routinely awake before sunrise Naiman took advantage of the quiet – a pleasant time for this tormented veteran of many great battles and wars. With more servants than it needed, the house had two primary occupants – despondency and loneliness – conditions that usually worsened if left unaddressed.

Time passed slowly, and guests were infrequent. Yet everything and everybody in the house seemed to be in suspense. Naiman's personal life was poised to become as interesting as his military career was glorious.

Born a healthy, only child to Adel and Kamlae of Damascus, Naiman was reared in moderate luxury and affluence. Treated like a prince, he naturally assumed a persona of leadership and superiority. A most beautiful boy at age ten, women of high society marveled at the sight of him and persistently claimed him for one of their daughters. He didn't know how perfect his life was, groomed to become a dignitary, husband and father, but not a warrior. All efforts, though, would abruptly come to an end, when Naiman became stricken with leprosy. Neither Adel nor Kamlae nor anyone else for that matter knew how or why, but cruel speculation nevertheless circulated throughout the city's gossip network.

First, the disease was the result of divine punishment for some offense committed by a member of the family against Rimmon, the kingdom's most popular deity. Next, there must have been a curse placed upon the boy early in life – the evil eye from a carrier of misery which had grown to fruition. Under either notion the life-changing event meant diminished social ranking for the entire family. Naiman was forced to live on the other side of the wall in the smaller of two leper colonies or encampments which included many abandoned children. Adel encouraged his son to make friends, but the boy was downhearted and lacked the desire to meet anyone new. Often he lamented the fact he could no longer feel the tender touch of his loving mother, and he deeply missed his previous life. Kamlae and Adel visited him

religiously and supplied him with every material necessity. He was, at first, not at all inclined to share his abundance. His grip on the tangible was strong, but it would loosen as soon as he began to reach for a worthy diversion.

An adult leper within his community, Ramiz, had been married and had fathered one son before becoming stricken. He gravitated toward Naiman after noticing signs of a refined upbringing. The endless supply of food was an added inducement. Ramiz saw beyond Naiman's selfishness and self-pity and made repeated efforts to befriend the boy. Mutual longing for companionship eventually led the odd pair to become friends. Naiman would meet Ramiz's son, Deeb, who was a soldier of low rank, always ready for crude amusement of any kind any time. Deeb visited his father occasionally and had no fear of the disease whenever they embraced. Deeb's spontaneous humor, usually at someone else's expense, was a curiosity to Naiman, who wondered whether Deeb's personality was typical of warriors.

Ramiz refused to watch his new young friend waste away emotionally as well as physically, so he suggested Naiman take up the sword just for sport. Some instruction came from Ramiz, but basic combat techniques were taught by Deeb. The protégé eventually perfected all the basics and began to improvise and build upon his knowledge. As he grew, he needed new clothes, so Ramiz, who was a tailor by trade, worked on unique designs that allowed greater movement while keeping the young combatant's skin covered. Adel greatly appreciated the attention his son was receiving and joined the effort. He brought samples of linen, satin, cotton, wool and a variety of leathers for Ramiz

to use. Each growth spurt brought a new creation. Armor-like features were added, as Naiman's swordsmanship noticeably improved.

By age sixteen Naiman's recreational pastime had led him to a whole new life. In uniform he donned a strikingly unusual appearance. Most of his skin, including his head, was wrapped in dark brown linen, reinforced with thick leather to protect his elbows, shoulders and knees. A specially fitted bronze helmet secured his head garb, and small plates of iron linked together for flexibility protected his back and chest. A wide raccoon-like opening in his facial wrap allowed ample but limited vision.

When Deeb saw his father's work, he instantly thought Naiman would bring entertainment and humor to his friends and captain. Happily he pictured many becoming frightened of the disease and therefore frightened of Naiman, whom he hoped would join their ranks and be used for some untried military tactic.

Naiman was not among the largest or strongest of men, but size didn't matter, given his skill set. He had also developed a unique likability, which impressed Deeb's captain, Kumar, who had expected to meet an embittered and difficult young man. To his pleasant surprise he witnessed for himself what Deeb had told him about Naiman's personality and proficiency in arms. Following an astounding demonstration, Kumar observed Naiman focusing on everyone and everything except his disease and became convinced Naiman offered a great deal of promise. He therefore asked him to fight under his command. Naiman, who had hoped for the invitation, readily accepted. The captain knowingly took the risk of creating upheaval among his men, as

no leper had ever fought with them. For that matter no leper had ever expressed the desire or was even remotely qualified to join them. Kumar's confidence in Naiman was sure, because the new recruit's identity did not appear to have been wrapped around his disability.

Naiman would soon be tried by fire in a brief engagement with a band of Israelite warriors, who had wandered into hostile Aramean territory. Although the leper literally and defiantly stood his ground, easily killing three, he became convinced he could be more lethal on horseback, which required yet another, more complex set of skills. He needed to become one with his horse and ambidextrous with his sword and shield. Within a few months he appeared to be well on his way to achieving his far-reaching goal. Many of the foot soldiers with whom he had been fighting were relieved, as they had been fearful of his disease and felt safer with him off the ground.

Naiman did not fear death and always followed an invisible, indiscernible path, which seemed never to offer any choices. Over time the mightiest and most experienced warriors came to respect him. He moved swiftly through thick engagements, bringing instantaneous death to countless men left in his wake. It was the absence of something most dear to him – a normal life – that drove his seemingly endless and extreme desire to succeed on the battlefield.

Appreciated yet untouchable, Naiman would eventually climb the ranks, after having established a keen acumen for military strategy as well as combat. His role as a leader, though, naturally fostered loneliness, but, after having been a leper most of his life, he was accustomed to alienation. Ramiz's early

intervention saved him from a dead-end existence, but his later successes created a medium within which childhood deprivations would take on a life of their own.

He was twenty-three, when his emotional pain had built up beyond his ability to contain. His men would witness what seemed an act of insanity. Standing before countless Israelites in the distance prepared for an all-out battle, Naiman's interior walls unexpectedly broke open, compelling him to remove all of his clothes. On horseback and in command he charged ahead of his men. Instinctively they followed. He had merely wanted to see his enemy's horrified faces, as he flashed and slashed across them. The unavoidable sight led to the instant demise of Israelites directly in his path who had stopped cold in shock and disbelief. Other stunned enemy-observers made themselves easy targets for Aramean archers. Although Naiman and his men were outnumbered, they prevailed, and the surviving Israelites were ready to be taken prisoner. Naiman declined and let them go. The entire experience stupefied seasoned warriors on both sides.

What witnesses saw that unforgettable day was a hairless, humanoid figure of maybe a man, covered in ghostly white skin and adorned by lesions and wounds from the past, some of which Naiman never realized he had sustained. In that regard his disease had given him an advantage. He could feel no pain, no superficial pain at least. The nerves in his skin were dead. The lack of tactile function would, though, bring about further torment, mostly when he was alone, when he dwelled upon the denial of a woman's affectionate embrace. He had long become sterile and impotent.



Naiman's brothers-in-arms would report nothing that smacked of mental instability. They didn't want to risk his removal from command. Over the years, though, Ben-Haddad had heard enough impressive accounts to want to welcome the hero publically into his court. As frightening as Naiman appeared fully dressed, the king found him a most pleasant man, who also happened to have been instrumental in securing so many major victories that he was made commander of all the kingdom's forces and was given the mansion in which he lives. He was then twenty-eight years of age. The king also bestowed upon him the privilege of accompanying him on his infrequent occasions of temple worship.

Ben-Haddad was aging fast. At fifty-two he chose his eldest of three sons, twenty-four-year-old Samir, to succeed him. The future Ben-Haddad II knew of Naiman's personal circumstances and thus did not see him as a threat. In fact Samir respected him greatly, since at first his father so enjoyed his company. The heir-apparent would learn to look up to Naiman as a true man of valor and eventually consider him a friend.

Thoughts of mortality would grow within the king's contemplation, and the idea came to him to make one last expression of his love for his general. Ben-Haddad went to extremes to find a special surprise gift that would last the one-of-a-kind hero the remainder of his relatively short life expectancy. Naiman, then thirty-two years old, would never have sought it for himself, and the king knew that.

On the day Naiman was to receive it, he entered the king's court with his longtime personal servant, Barsoum, who was equally ignorant of what the king planned but was nevertheless

quick to avoid the limelight ahead. He had clothed his master in the finest linen, beneath ceremonial armor made of gold. No helmet, but his head was neatly wrapped in deep blue cloth, secured by a decorative leather band. He wore soft, thin deerskin gloves lined with silk which appeared joined to his long-sleeved tunic by wide silver bands. His face was concealed behind a dark leather mask, which projected an intimidating image appropriate for war. It had been made a year earlier to hide the progressive deterioration that was making his nose and cheeks hideously deformed.

Naiman had been told the king wanted to commemorate his service to the kingdom with a gift, but, “how could,” Naiman wondered, “he exceed his generosity – the mansion?” The general would thus conclude his military career was likely ending with a token of the king’s appreciation. He nevertheless pressed himself to walk forward as usual, toward an uncertain end, dragging with him his likeable personality.

Dignitaries and devoted well-wishers, including his parents, greeted him at arm’s length. A wide path gradually opened, and he noticed it led not directly to the king but to an elaborately dressed woman in the distance. She was facing the elevated throne, where the king was sitting. Some people were standing close to her, as she too seemed to have been the focus of attention. The social commotion did not soon quiet down, for the king wanted Naiman to receive all the accolades he was due.

As the hero gradually proceeded, he began to fixate on the woman, asking himself, “What might she have to do with this?” An instant later he unnerved himself with the idea she might actually be the gift. He had never seriously considered having a

wife. Throughout his adult life, though, his imagination had created several of them. Each time he formed a pleasing picture, it would suddenly blur by realism, and she would run away screaming.

Naiman knew his curiosity about the woman didn't matter, since there was no turning back. He couldn't insult the king by leaving or refusing to go on. Ben-Haddad's feelings would have been deeply hurt. Naiman therefore continued to walk, slower though. He assumed that if she was meant for him, then the contract had already been finalized, meaning she had already expressed her willingness to dedicate her life to him.

The woman was Aleena, the seventeen-year-old daughter of the most socially ambitious family in the city. Her parents, Rasook and Wadia, spent her entire life preparing her to marry somebody – anybody – of massive means and influence. As the youngest of three children, a boy and two girls, Aleena was her parents' last hope for becoming rich. They had been living comfortably but were extremely materialistic. Wadia was severely bitten by the bug of avarice, which made her behave like a spoiled child always in want. There was no arguing with her. Her offspring were a means to an end – a prosperous one.

Rasook was proud of his son, Khalid, but not as proud as Wadia. Khalid seemed always to think himself a prince – a predictable result of his mother's treatment. He married a woman of his choice, though she was not high on Wadia's list of prospects. The pretty, innocent girl happened to love Khalid, but that well-known fact failed to elevate her in Wadia's eyes. Even the four children she bore made little difference, but Wadia

would find some consolation in knowing Khalid contemplated an additional wife.

Rasook and Wadia's middle-child, Najima, wasn't very pretty, but she worked like a horse. They let her marry the first suitor she thought suitable, and she gave birth to three children by the time Aleena turned thirteen. Rich in grandchildren but far from reaching their material goals, Rasook and Wadia intensified Aleena's training.

Tutors were hired to teach her the highest social skills. She had already been taught personal hygiene, proper speech and manners. The proud parents were amazed at Aleena's transformation between the ages of fifteen and seventeen. She had always been an unusually beautiful child, but she was fast becoming the most strikingly attractive woman in the city. Her outstanding poise added greatly to her value.

Her personal preferences were, for the most part, irrelevant. Wadia's choices of clothing and activities were routinely touted as superior, while Aleena's increasingly exceptional physicality made her parents nervous and fearful something would go wrong. By age sixteen she could not appear in public without bringing the flow of commerce and conversation to a dead stop. She had become so divinely developed and ripe for marriage that Wadia began seriously to suffer from anxiety over the possibility her daughter might fall in love with the wrong man. So, when the king's chief counsel, Hazael, paid Rasook and Wadia a visit and confidentially informed them of the king's desire for Aleena to be given in marriage, Wadia was beside herself. A visit from someone of so high in rank and intimately connected with royalty

was honor enough, but to hear her greatest goal may soon be realized? She needed every bit of self-control she could muster.

Then came the catch. Hazael added that Aleena's husband was to be Naiman. They were stunned, knowing of him and his disease. Wadia fought hard to minimize the deflation of her excessively high spirits. Rasook shared her sentiment.

"Excellency, please pardon my question, but why him?" the careful father asked, believing the union would mean a miserable life or even death for his most precious asset, who would also fail to produce more grandchildren. Wadia, though, was quick to pump herself back up to give the proposal serious consideration. Not caring to hear the answer to Rasook's question, she anxiously awaited the terms of the offer, which she fully expected to be lucrative. The selfishness of both parents prevented them from thinking to ask the equally poignant question, "Why her?" Continuing his presentation, Hazael would answer both questions.

"The king wants a woman to match the magnificence of Naiman, who is like a son to him in need of...companionship. Aleena's qualities make the choice very easy. And the king can be extremely generous when pleased. I assure you this union will gratify his majesty greatly."

Wadia figured her daughter must have been noticed at the events they had attended at the palace. Neither Wadia nor Rasook could imagine disappointing the god-like king who sat at the pinnacle of their social aspirations.

"What our king has in mind," Hazael said in a low tone, "is a surprise for *both* Naiman and Aleena. Neither of them shall know in advance that their union has been arranged, decreed and

blessed by the king himself...with your blessing too, of course.” The single-minded parents instantly became co-conspirators, agreeing with the idea of a surprise. They thought it best their daughter not know out of fear she would refuse to marry. Hearing no objection, Hazael perceived it was time to give the marital brokers a glimpse of the payoff. “And in token of the king’s appreciation he will bestow upon you a gift of property – a new home, with two additional servants, gold and silver enough to fill a chest. And for *you*,” he added, turning toward Wadia, “for the one who gave birth to the rarest jewel in the kingdom, these precious jewels.”

As he spoke he produced a beautiful necklace worth a fortune and handed it to Rasook to put on Wadia. She was so impressed and overwhelmed that she bowed her head and took Hazael’s hand and kissed it. Hazael was expressionless.

“May this demonstrate the king’s commitment,” he added, sounding businesslike, “but his remaining gifts will not be transferred, until after he openly recognizes the marriage in his court in, say, seven days?”

“Yes, Excellency!” Wadia answered without hesitation while continuing to stare downward in admiration of her prize.

Hazael quietly made his exit like a merchant who had shrewdly taken advantage of simple, clueless customers. Rasook, however, began having second thoughts. The gifts amounted to more wealth than he had ever dreamed of acquiring through a marital transaction. He also realized that fear had played a role in inducing him to commit to the arrangement. Unbearable was the thought of his family becoming victims of the king’s wrath or that of Hazael, who had the king’s ear. He rationalized that for

Aleena's sake Naiman's wealth was more than enough to make up for his leprosy, and, as far as grandchildren were concerned, he felt he didn't really need any more. Later that day Rasook and Wadia broke the news to Aleena.

"Daughter," Wadia began, "the greatest honor a young woman could ever receive is the king's personal desire for her to marry a very special man."

Aleena instantly became excited, sensing she was to be so honored.

"Whom shall I marry?!" she asked.

Wadia was pleased her daughter was so presumptuous.

"By order of the king you may not know his name before the celebration *at the palace*. He wishes to surprise *both* of you." Wadia hoped to impress Aleena, but the daughter's impulsive excitement quickly gave way to apprehension, followed by worry, and then fear, as she fully comprehended the plan and its extreme peculiarity.

"Is he known to my mother and father?" Aleena innocently asked.

"We have thought of only you," Wadia replied, as if prepared for the question, "and we approve this marriage. You will surely join a household that will fulfill your *every* desire." Wadia disregarded the likelihood her daughter would want to bear children.

Wadia's words quieted the bride-to-be but failed to ease her concerns. The obedient daughter appeared to accept what she had been told, though she harbored suspicion her parents were lying about something. She had never heard of a marital arrangement between prominent people which was shrouded in secrecy.

The week went by slowly and without a word about the groom. There were, however, a few impressive diversions caused by deliveries from the palace. Aleena was given an elaborate wedding gown with a full headdress, along with an array of bracelets and a necklace fitting the occasion. She would also receive a heavy dose of nervous excitement laced with fear, which steadily grew into an involuntary fast. She could not eat or drink anything from the afternoon before, through the day of, the wedding. All morning Wadia and her maidservant meticulously prepared the bride as though working to perfect the sale of a precious commodity. Aleena was not inspired to feel any of the joy she thought she should feel but nevertheless tried her best to be optimistic.

Then came the moment, mid-afternoon. Royal guardsmen arrived to escort her and her family to the palace.

While standing before the king, Aleena heard some commotion coming from behind her. Curiosity made her turn her head slightly to the right, and her peripheral vision revealed the path formed by the crowd. Turning a bit more she caught the figure of someone gradually approaching. "It must be him," she thought. From the sound of the people she concluded he is very well-liked. Contained joyful excitement mixed with youthful impulsiveness rapidly began their takeover. She just had to take another look. While pretending to adjust her veil, she stole a glimpse and instantly turned back into position with eyes popped wide. Not having been able to discern who or what she saw, the mild tension she had been feeling spiked.

The king appeared very pleased with himself, and it never occurred to him that the specially chosen woman might feel



anything but deeply honored. After all, Hazael had told him she was more than willing to dedicate herself in service to the throne by becoming a life-long companion to his beloved Naiman. Ben-Haddad would commend Hazael for coming up with the idea of giving Naiman so grand a gift.

Aleena needed to maintain her composure, because the king was apt to shift his focus to her any second, and serious consequences awaited anyone who disrupted a ceremony or breached protocol. Rasook and Wadia, who stood close behind Aleena, and Hazael, who stood where he could see everything, fully expected her to keep her eyes forward and to keep quiet. Her veil, however, covered only the lower half of her face, so the king could see her evocative eyes. Naiman had caught her taking both glances and was relieved she didn't turn and run for her life. Aleena, though, could not stop her compulsion to look yet again. Dangerously close to turning her back on the king, she twisted to the right and saw a dark, masked figure decorated in gold. It appeared like something she might confront in a bad dream. On her immediate return to position she began to feel sick. Questions raced through her mind: "Who is he? Why the mask and gloves?" She thought of how she had never seen a person so completely covered in public, at least not outside a leper colony.

Then the shock hit. "No!" she silently shrieked. "This is not happening! This can't be happening! They didn't tell me!!"

With a look of horror Aleena instinctively turned toward Naiman, and Wadia instantaneously leaned forward and angrily whispered in her ear.

“For the sake of all our lives, turn around! It’s the great Naiman! He is extremely powerful! Now fulfill your duty to the king and to your family!”

Aleena slowly returned to position with the help of her mother. The devout daughter had only heard rumors about the man, none of which seemed to matter, true or false, good or bad. The feeling of complete betrayal was overshadowing everything else, and she could not get herself to accept their plan. Her refusal seemed to have been the only force keeping her knees from giving way, as she stood motionless. Numb.

Sensing the man nearing, her vivid imagination placed his hands on her precious body and caused nausea to ensue. Nearly uncontrollable fear and outrage began to generate, and her eyes were giving all her thoughts and feelings away. Absolute rejection of this very bad arrangement was her first inclination. Her second was immediate suicide.

Naiman comprehended an inescapable dilemma. From the woman’s eyes and body language this must have been a surprise to her as well – an extremely displeasing one, from which he wished he could save her. But she was still the likely precious gift from his beloved king and father, being presented without any apparent option to refuse.

He stopped one short step away from her, and by then he too was feeling sick, except his reaction was precipitated by grief from the sight of her horrified eyes and shaking hands. The last thing he wanted to become was a curse-come-true for this poor girl.

The suspense had built up in Aleena so intensely that she just knew his hands were about to reach out and grab her. Although

he made no physical contact, she nevertheless pictured him doing so and let out a split-second scream. Instantly she covered her mouth with her hands and recoiled, only to be caught by Rasook and Wadia, who were by then standing so close to her she could feel them breathing on her. They again warned her not to disappoint the king and tried discretely to keep her upright and forward. None of them, though, noticed that the onlookers had become quiet, eagerly awaiting the first meeting of the royally decreed couple. After Aleena's high-pitched outburst, though, the crowd turned from respectfully silent to shocked and fearful of the consequences.

The king had seen everything and had become very angry with Aleena, whom he had never met. From his standpoint she had managed simultaneously to betray him, ruin his surprise and subject his dear friend to public humiliation. He rose from his throne and took a deep breath of disgust and disappointment while glaring at Aleena. All his subjects stood perfectly still as he turned to Naiman.

“She was to have been my gift to you, my son! Now she is deserving of death!” the king forcefully declared. “That is my judgment, but I leave her punishment in your hands.” In the gravest of tones, “Do you want her head?!”

Naiman calmly completed his approach and slowly put his left gloved hand out for Aleena to take. The king's curiosity was greatly aroused, so he willingly accepted the delay in his general's response. Dreadful fear of execution had drawn tears out of Aleena. She blinked several times to clear her vision, only to see her executioner's gloved hand waiting for her. She then looked into the eyes of the mask, hoping a merciful human being

was inside. Seeing no mercy, hopelessness moved in for the kill. Her parents had sentenced her to life with a leper, and the king wanted her beheaded. It was all so surreal. She felt as though she were outside her body, watching a nightmare unfold. The stress within her was so extreme, her ears started ringing. She witnessed her right hand slowly going out to meet the glove. The rest of her body floated to wherever the mask was leading. After two careful steps forward, Naiman reached into his lungs and gave a loud and distinct answer.

“Yes, my lord! I want her head!”

Gasps and cries created an ominous atmosphere. Wadia nearly fainted, and Rasook began grieving his daughter’s sure death. Hazael was so outraged that his hands, hidden beneath his robe, formed fists so tight they were shaking. Aleena felt as though her heart had been stabbed, while her empty stomach was causing her to feel queasy and light-headed. Naiman had instantly changed from figure of darkness to dealer of death. But with his very next breath he boisterously demanded:

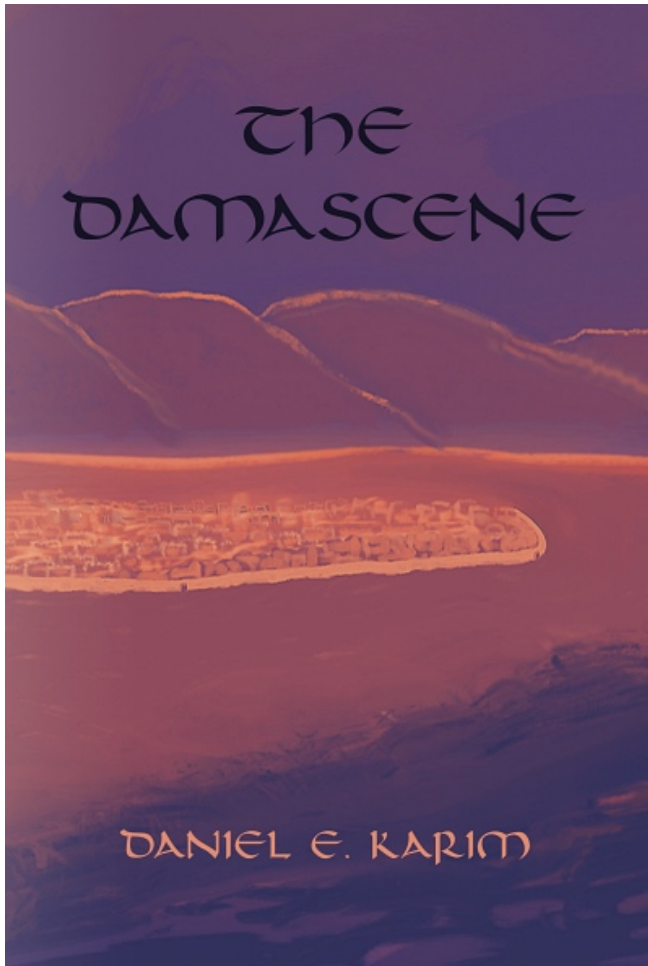
“I want her head and everything attached to it!”

Aleena suddenly gasped for air and in a flash turned toward the mask with bulging eyes, desperately holding her breath in sick suspense. She didn’t know whether he was sparing her life or wanting her in pieces. The mystery was so terrorizing, and the confusion so debilitating, that she became undone and finally exhaled, collapsing into Naiman’s arms. Her knees could no longer bear her weight, and she could no longer bear her life.

With eyes closed upon helpless resignation of body and spirit, she maintained a modicum of consciousness and could sense herself being transported all in one piece but without hope of

survival. She perceived her executioner walking steadily while carrying her securely in his arms. Unaware of the distance or the time that was passing, her thoughts ventured for a moment: “Does something worse than death await me?” The question failed to generate any concern. Depleted of physical and emotional strength, she was unable to move, let alone put up a struggle, even if she were so inclined. She was not. Her mind took its leave, and her body followed.

Four hours later she awakened a married woman, alone on a comfortable bed in Naiman’s house.



Fictional expansion of the Bible's II Kings 5, which may contain the first beauty-and-the-beast-like story. Personal transformation is not sought by the main character, but he experiences it on more than one level, as do other characters.

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