

A shirtless man with dark, wavy hair and a serious expression is shown from the chest up. He is holding a large, curved sword with a silver blade and a dark hilt. The background features a yellow castle with multiple towers and spires, set against a clear sky. The overall color palette is warm, with a lot of orange and yellow tones.

APRIL
REID

THE
SULTAN'S
REVENGE

The Sultan's Revenge
by April Reid

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The Sultan's Revenge
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Dark Passion

Desert Passion

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The Sultan's Revenge
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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my brother, Gordon

CHAPTER 1

The warriors attacked at dawn, riding battle-trained horses through Saleem-Jibal in a wave of clashing swords and triumphant shouts. Their dark blue head wraps, worn with loose white shirt, trousers, and burnoose, identified them as Tarkassans—ferocious fighters who held their own country's boundaries safe against all invaders.

Awakened by the palace alarm bells, Rima Janani Binte Al-Najib, Princess of Vardon, scrambled from under her warm covers and ran to the window of her third-floor bedroom overlooking the city. She swung open the casement window, with its precious leaded glass, and froze in horror at the scene unfolding before her stunned attention.

Instead of the usual daybreak scene beyond the palace walls—peasants balancing bundles on their head and merchants driving donkeys past the just-opened city gates into the market square—terror reigned.

Sellers already opening their booths in the *souq*, were being cut down by mounted warriors swinging sharp scimitars. Horses trampled sacks of fruit and grain—and fallen bodies.

As she watched in helpless dread, the stand where old Musa sold mint tea and his wife made warm *khubuz laham*—flat bread stuffed with meat and spices—two of the Tarkassan attackers set fire to the wood-and-brush booth. The elderly couple cowered together, clutching each other as their living went up in flames.

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One enemy raised his sharp blade to swing at Musa. Another warrior, on a black stallion, appeared from the fighters on one side of the market square. He deflected the blade using his own scimitar, set his mount between the first man and the burning booth, and allowed Musa and his wife to escape.

As Rima gazed at the powerful horseman, her heart pounded in her throat. In spite of him rescuing the couple, she should hate the warrior. Instead, an odd rush of heat warmed her face and tightened her nipples under the loose sleeping shift.

He paused, holding his mount steady, and looked up at her window.

Quickly she stepped back into the shelter of her room, but stayed where she could study him. Like the other Tarkassan fighters, he wore a blue length of cloth wrapped close to his head, but also concealing the lower part of his face. Unlike them, his desert shirt, trousers, and cloak were also dark blue.

Moments passed while she fought her puzzling reaction to the blue warrior. Then he gave a mocking bow in her direction, reined his great horse in a quick turn, and swept back into the fighting.

By then, the square and all the streets she could see from her window had filled with Tarkassan invaders fighting against her father's troops with him in the lead.

Her heart froze. She'd seen him in sword practice, but this was deadly reality. He fought with ferocious power and accuracy. His personal guards did their best to protect him.

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Shouts and death cries rose in the air.

Bodies of attackers and defenders fell. The dull red of blood stained the gray slabs of paving stones. Her father continued to fight, but slowly withdrew, with most of his men, toward the castle wall and out of her view.

At the same time as the foreign warriors battled with her father's royal guards, Uncle Wassif's palace, on the south side of the open market square, came under attack. His guards sent flights of arrows from the top of the high rock walls and out windows. They were answered with great clouds of arrows shot by both mounted and foot soldiers below.

The warrior on the black stallion seemed to be everywhere. Here, he caught one of the mounted fighters who, wounded, began to topple from his horse, and eased him into the arms of a foot soldier. Then the blue rider raced toward the gates of her uncle's palace, scimitar raised as if urging the attackers to greater effort. Every place he went, he was followed by another rider, carrying the white, blue, and gold banner of Tarkassa.

The blue rider was their leader.

Rima's fingers itched for her own hunting bow. Once in her hands, she'd take him out and dishearten his followers. Her fingers curved as if holding the smooth wood of the bow and a straight, carefully fletched arrow. But her weapons had been stored in the armory, away from her two younger sisters' busy fingers; all but her ceremonial crystal dagger.

The dagger. Rima dashed across the room to the storage chest, depressed a cluster of carved flowers to release the lock, and retrieved the sharp dagger in its sheath.

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Carrying the weapon, she left her rooms and ran barefoot down the stone corridor to the suite shared by her sisters, Iamar and Safa. If necessary, she'd use the blade to defend them and herself.

Never, in the history of Vardon, had an enemy penetrated the castle's defenses as far as the royal suites. Rima sensed this time would be different. Even now, the resonating waves of energy from the iron and steel weapons of the fighters battered at her mental shields. Her fear increased for the safety of the children and her mother, Queen Yamillah, still weak from childbed fever after a miscarriage.

The sounds of clashing swords from the floor below confirmed her foreboding.

That's where the family guards have gone.

Goddess protect them and give them strength, she thought in silent blessing.

As she raced past the opening to the staircase, the noises of battle grew louder and closer. For a moment, her courage wavered. If only she could crawl into bed, pull the covers over her head like a little child, and wait for her older brother, Haj, to come.

"Haj," she whispered, shrouded by an acute sense of loss. Six weeks had passed since Uncle Wassif had returned from a hunting trip with the awful news that his nephew, heir to the throne, had died in a sudden rock fall.

Her beloved brother was gone, but he had taught her to protect herself.

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A few steps before she reached the brassbound wooden door to her sisters' rooms, a shouted command of, "Find the women," caught her in a sickening wave of terror.

One of her mother's bodyguards, his scimitar unsheathed, opened the door. "The invaders have reached this floor, princess. Her Highness and the other princesses are inside."

Rima slipped past the guard, whirled to close the heavy door, and shoved the rod in place, her heart pounding with fear and determination.

Her mother cried, "Daughter, thank the goddess, you're safe. I couldn't send a bodyguard for you—"

"It's all right." Rima gave her mother a quick hug. "All the fighting men and women are defending the palace."

Eleven-year-old Iamar and nine-year-old Safa each clutched a heavy candlestick. Iamar said fiercely, "We won't let the Tarkassans get us."

Raising the makeshift weapon, Safa echoed her sister's words, adding, "Mama has Daddy's long dagger."

War cries and the clash of weapons outside their door stopped all conversation.

Even while she gestured for her sisters to help push a heavy wooden chest across the entrance, Rima prayed for the brave guard outside standing against impossible odds.

The fighting was fierce, but brief.

There was a short pause, then a heavy fist pounded on the brass and wood. "Open in the name of Sultan Barakah, ruler of Tarkassa."

"Never," the queen said defiantly.

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"Go away," Iamar said, her fingers tightening on the candlestick.

A male voice outside ordered, "Bring a battering ram."

Silently, Rima acknowledge the door wouldn't hold back the invaders for very long. She looked around the chamber, searching for a way to hide her mother and sisters from the Tarkassans.

Suddenly the door to Safa's suite opened. The blue warrior stepped through, followed by other fighters.

She glimpsed the shattered window in the other room. The sound had been lost in the fighting outside the hall door, but evidence of how they'd forced their way in was shown by the shards of colored glass littering the floor.

More destruction. Wildly, she leaped forward and buried her crystal blade in the blue warrior's upper arm.

Rough hands seized her, but not his.

A blow to the back of her head sent pain shooting through her body. As blackness dragged her down, the last image she carried was of the blue warrior reaching as if to catch her.

CHAPTER 2

Sultan Khalid Asad Hakim Barakah, known as The Lion, studied the people assembled in his great Hall of Reception. His personal troop of bodyguards stood in front of the royal platform, protecting him from enemies—including those at court.

From his throne, he could see every part of the room. But the section holding his greatest attention was the main entrance, its great doors open to admit the delegation from his vassal state, the Kingdom of Vardon.

At last my revenge will be complete. Khalid experienced dark satisfaction. This year the tribute included Almira Rima Janani Binte Al Najib, princess and firstborn daughter of King Rashid Al Najib.

Of course he would not mistreat the woman. All that was necessary to make his displeasure felt would be to install her in the harem and ignore her. Let her see his concubines and his most delectable *kadin* escorted down the Golden Road, the inner hallway from the harem to his rooms. Those chosen women would revel in days and nights of pleasure—while she would never experience sensual delights in his or any other man's arms. Then she would know the full bitterness brought on by the outrage her country had allowed to go unpunished three years earlier.

As he watched, the first tribute offerings presented were fashioned of wood from the forests that gave Vardon its name. A line of servants carried finely made tables, storage

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chests and carved screens, all inlaid with intricate mosaics of wood in colors from darkest brown to honey-colored.

One graceful chest captured his gaze. Perhaps it would awaken the interest of his younger sister, the gentle Adiva. "Bring the small chest for my inspection," he told his Grand Vizier, Kara-Mustafa Kiussem.

At a gesture from Mustafa, the servant approached the platform, while the rest of the long column of indentured servants went to their knees.

Leaving his throne, Khalid strolled down the carpet-covered marble steps to examine the cunningly made furniture. Would Adiva smile at the honey-colored wood with a design of flowers and leaves across the top and down each edge?

Then recalling where it had been crafted, he cursed. Any mention of Vardon made his sixteen-year-old sister grow quiet and hide her face behind a sweep of hair.

"Take these away and burn them. Let the smoke be a stink in the nostrils of whatever perverse gods are worshipped by the Vardonians."

Khalid returned to his throne, angry about anything that had come from that high mountain land of deception.

With each new tribute of gold, jewels, and bolts of fine cloth, his temper rose, but he kept it in tight control.

Finally, the veiled chair litter, carried by Vardonian servants, reached the base of the platform. The eight attendants—two for each shaft, front and back—settled their burden on the carpet, then sank to their knees.

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Minutes passed, measured by the slow drip of liquid in the water clock.

Pretending indifference, Khalid lounged on the rich cushions. Soon he would see the proof of his decision to wait three years until the virgin princess ripened into full womanhood—the better to suffer the fires of unfulfilled desire.

The curtains stirred and were pressed aside by slender fingers. The thick links of a captive's chain circled her left wrist as a token of her status.

Khalid raised a hand to halt his Grand Vizier from going forward to assist the woman.

"Remain at your station, Mustafa," Khalid ordered. "The first time I met the princess, she buried a knife in my arm."

The woman exited gracefully, drawing close her heavy, dark green cloak. The hood fell back revealing ebony hair, tamed by a silver cord into a sleek fall down her back.

Lust hit him hard. Three years earlier, at the age of sixteen, she'd been pretty, with a flash of courage and pride to match his. Now she was a full-blown temptation, but he knew how to master any lures put out by women, including those in his own harem.

The princess stared at him contemptuously. "I'm only sorry I missed your heart."

He heard a muffled gasp from the onlookers.

Smiling coldly, he said, "You should thank the goddess I read the intent in your eyes and moved."

"It is written, 'The gods protect madmen and fools.' Which are you, Sultan Barakah?"

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Stung by the scorn in her voice, he rose and, with one hand on his dagger, prowled down the stairs to confront his all-too-haughty captive.

At his approach, she raised her chin in defiance. Her green eyes blazed with anger. "It was my duty and my right to attack. Your troops had invaded our peaceful country and you were threatening my mother and younger sisters."

By the gods, in spite of her insolence, he admired her courage. Then his appreciation was wiped out by the memory of Adiva's ordeal—a crime he did not want to discuss in public. "Your father, who retains his life and serves Vardon at my pleasure, knows the invasion was fitting retribution."

"All lies," she challenged.

Angry mutters at her accusations rose from the onlookers.

Closing the small distance between them, Khalid gripped her left wrist above the iron chain, drawing her so close her warm, sweet breath mingled with his. "You are now indentured to me for life—my possession, as much as any of these tributes sent by your countrymen. Your food, your clothes, your well-being, and even your life depend on completely yielding to my will."

Rima turned pale. Khalid felt a momentary regret, then hardened his resolve. She was his by right of conquest and lawful tribute.

She took a deep breath, then boldly met his gaze. "I'll never yield my will to you," she spat.

He gave her a long, slow look, the kind usually reserved for green recruits. "If you plan to be my adversary, Princess,

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then you should learn that a wise warrior leaves himself—or herself—a way to escape in order to fight another day."

Her nostrils flared. Her lips thinned in fury. "Thank you for your unwelcome advice," she said in a scornful tone. "I'll restate my answer. The day I yield my will to you will be when lightning walks the cloudless night and both moons dance in the sky."

They remained face to face, her muscles rigid under his fingers. Her pulse raced under his fingers. Her eyes darkened to liquid jade.

His bond-slave kept her spine straight, her head lifted proudly as befitted a woman who carried the blood of royal warriors. If an observer didn't see the signs of captivity, the guards flanking the Vardonian princess could easily be there as protectors, not soldiers assigned to take her to a silken prison.

Damn, his balls ached with unfulfilled lust—an ache only pounding his cock into Rima's silken pussy could cure.

Since the first assassination attempt on him at fourteen, he'd learned to hide his innermost thoughts and emotions—to rule his own body. Other women had roused his lust, but none had breached his barriers of self-control until Rima.

I have to prove I'm in complete charge of myself, he thought harshly.

He recalled an old Earth cure for a hangover was, "The hair of the dog that bit me." He hadn't indulged in too much wine, but Rima's defiance made the blood throb hot in his *qadib lahm*—his rod of flesh—and he'd drunk of Rima's scent until

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he'd come close to losing control. To maintain that mastery, he needed her nearby and subservient to his will.

Instead of banishing her to the harem, he thought of a better revenge.

"Princess of Vardon," he said in a low, dangerous tone, "as my chattel, I can use your services ... and you ... any way I please—"

"Not in your bed or I'll strangle you in your sleep."

Khalid raised a hand to halt the two guards stepping forward.

"Not in my bed ... for now," he agreed. "However, you will be my personal servant. You will clean my sleeping chamber, draw my bath, help escort concubines to my couch of pleasure, and stand ready to assist in any way I wish."

* * * *

"Personal servant to the sultan," Rima muttered as she draped thick towels on the warming rods in front of the bathing room fire.

Two strides away, the sunken tub was filling with warm water gushing from a spigot in the wall. Another faucet supplied cold water. She added a handful of powdered herbs to the rising liquid, stirring the surface with her fingers to release their soothing and healing properties. Each day, as she cleaned the fused rock surface and sides of the tub, she marveled at the smooth, glassy surface formed by colonists from Earth over three hundred years earlier. Only the steps leading down into the rising water showed any use.

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With that thought came the image of the sultan entering the steaming liquid, naked except for the male hair under his arms, on his chest, and curling around his thick, broad rod of flesh. The sight never failed to stir her own hungry needs. Just thinking about his male strength—his powerful muscles, and the temptation in his sensual lips and eyes made her breasts swell and her *yoni* grow hot and wet.

How many nights for the last three years had she dreamed of the sultan in his guise of the Blue Rider? In those flights of fantasy, the Rider had been the powerful and gallant figure who had protected old Musa and his wife, and had rescued the wounded Tarkassan warrior.

Afterwards, he'd reveal his face, then come to her in her hot, hungry dreams and kneel beside her bed—touching and kissing all the sensitive parts of her nude body.

Then she recalled the puckered scar on his arm—the one she had inflicted the day his troops invaded Vardon; the day he'd humiliated her father and had terrified her mother and sisters. That day he had called in a Keeper of the Flame to witness his order for her, Rima, to come to him, untouched, in three years.

As if her honor would allow her to break a vow of chastity once made.

On the other hand, she'd made a silent pledge to retaliate against the sultan for his ruthless conquest of her once peaceful country.

Out of habit, Rima dipped a hand in the rising water to test its warmth, thinking of lost opportunities for revenge.

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How many times in the last week had she ignored the chance to seize his dagger and thrust it into his throat while he bathed, or smother him with a pillow as he lay unguarded in sleep? And why did the thought of exacting vengeance when he was unaware seem so distasteful—so wrong?

Absentmindedly, she rubbed the reddened skin beneath her loose captive bracelet. As always, the harsh throb of iron against her skin threatened her mental walls.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the distant sound of Sultan Khalid's voice issuing orders. Soon he'd enter the bathing room, disheveled and sweaty from weapons practice with his men, expecting the bath to be ready and fresh clothes laid out.

A curtained archway led to the sultan's sleeping quarters. Often, a woman's exotic perfume and the musk of sex rose from the twisted sheets after a night of passion with one of his concubines.

She'd already cleaned in there, ignoring—as always—his heady, unique scent on the pillows before she spread the freshly laundered soft *kut'n* sheets and *cazwool* blankets.

Bright morning sunshine poured through the windows set high on one wall for privacy. Its warm rays flowed across the cool, polished brown and rose feldspar floor, and lit the plush sheepskin rug spread beside the sunken tub. Soon the light would bathe the coiled power of Khalid's fit, tanned body as he rubbed a soapy sponge across his skin.

Unconsciously, she smoothed a hand across her shoulder and down over one breast, following the path of that imaginary sponge. Her nipple sprang to attention.

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"By the goddess, no!" She took a ragged breath, trying to dispel this traitorous attraction to her enemy.

A quick visual sweep of the bathing room showed all was in place.

Once more, she heard Khalid's voice, now closer. Soon he'd be at the door.

A low hiss drew her attention to a nearby section of carved feldspar where it arched against the ceiling. She spotted her two fairy-dragons perched in concealing shadows.

::Be strong,:: the larger male, Oak, urged as he spread his shimmering green wings to the handspan of a large human.

::We are here, dearling,:: crooned the smaller female, Willow. Her sky-blue wings, with their delicate tracery of silver, flared then settled sleekly along her sides. *::Just say the words and we'll rip the Sultan's eyes from his face.::*

Rima grinned at the bloodthirsty words coming from the usually peaceful fairy-dragon. *::What would your children and the other members of your flight think if they'd heard you?::*

::They'd offer to help,:: she said complacently.

Oak rustled his wings as a sign of agitation. *::Princess, I do not like the way this Tarkassan treats you as a servant.::*

::I am a servant. The other women in the harem, especially Faridah Um Mahir, Sultana Valide—the chief of women—have gone to great lengths to prove that to me.::

Rima frowned, thinking of the odd looks and sharp words from other concubines. *::Some of them whisper I'm poisoning the sultan's mind against his other women.::*

Their conversation stopped when the door swung open.

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Khalid, still hot from the heavy exercise, stalked into the bathing room. His princess indentured servant waited for him as she had the past seven days. Morning sunshine flooded in from the high windows. It turned her thin *kut'n* harem clothes translucent—revealing her ripe, puckered nipples, the luscious curves of her body, and the dark shadow of pubic hair guarding her virgin clit.

Virgin by his command—as one of the conditions of not razing Saleem-Jibal. At the thought of that unexplored feminine territory, his cock stirred, and Khalid silently cursed his lack of self-control.

Once more, he reminded himself she was the daughter of his enemy and niece of the man who'd raped Adiva.

Impatiently stripping off his shirt, he wiped the sweat from his face, dropped the soiled garment on the floor, and strode toward the bathing pool. As usual, the cleansing oil and bath sponge waited for his use. He preferred to wash his own body, as he did when out on long patrols. But today, he felt the reckless need to test his effect on the Vardonian princess—to arouse her, then leave her wanting and frustrated—as he had vowed.

He set his scimitar, in its well-oiled sheath, on the hooks designed to hold it within easy reach. Unwinding his sash, he dropped it beside the sheepskin rug, then shucked off his desert pants.

His cock, now heavier with arousal, seemed to fascinate the woman. She stared at it, then with her face half-turned from him, she circled around where he stood and gathered his soiled clothes.

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Impatient with her poor attempt to ignore his nudity, he snapped, "Princess Rima, look at me."

"Yes, my lord?" She lifted her emerald gaze to his.

"Did the Keeper of the Flame instruct you in the ways of pleasure between a man and a woman as she teaches every young woman?"

"She did, Sultan, in great detail as you had so ordered."

"You have ministered to me as body servant for this past week. This is not the first time I have stood before you unclothed. Why do you now avert your eyes?"

"Because you ... you..." Her eyes opened wider, the black irises expanding until they became deep pools of emotion.

"Because my co—my *qadib lahm*, my rod of flesh salutes you?"

Silently, she dipped her head.

Pleased with her response, Khalid stepped down into the gently steaming water and settled on the bathing shelf with his back against the far side.

The woman gazed at him, uncertainty in her eyes.

Lounging back, he gave her an arrogant look. "Remove your clothing and come bathe me."

Her eyes widened. She parted her lips as if to protest.

"Are you not my servant, indentured to me for life, and sent as tribute by your father in exchange for the peace and protection of Vardon?"

She straightened her spine and squared her shoulders, which made her lovely, unfettered breasts bounce under the thin *kut'n* top.

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"As you wish, master," she responded in a tone that said, Go to hell.

Khalid thought he heard a hiss, but they were the only people in the bathing room, so he mentally filed it away as something to explore later.

Then his attention was diverted when she stepped out of her sandals, removed her thin blouse and pants, and moved toward him into a sunbeam that coaxed blue fire in her shimmering black hair, and revealed the rich apricot-pink of her tight nipples and areolas. The only clothing she still wore was delicate silk panties.

Even as she shyly tried to cover her breasts with spread fingers, lust punched him in his belly. His mouth watered at the image of taking each beaded point between his lips, of sucking them—of tasting the salt and richness of her skin.

"Bring the cleansing oil and sponge ... body servant," he ordered, determined to master his passion, while reinforcing her lowly position in the palace.

At the words "body servant" her lips had tightened, but obediently, she walked across the plush rug to the steps of the bathing pool.

Her hair was bound into one long braid. When she leaned over to pick up the oil and sponge, the plait fell forward, brushing over one breast. Straightening, she swept the shimmering braid behind her with an automatic gesture and seemed to glide down the steps into the water.

As the liquid rose up her shapely legs, stopping just below where her thighs joined, blood throbbed low and heavy in his body. Then she moved toward him through the swirling bath

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water. The erotic sway of her hips and gentle movement of her breasts hardened his desire for her with every beat of his heart.

Damn! He was no untutored youth, unschooled in the ways of women. He'd learned early to avoid the trap of uncontrolled desire. "Bathe me," he commanded.

"Yes, my lord." She bowed her head in obedience. "With your permission, I'll cleanse your hair first. Please lean forward." She picked up the long-handled dipper, set on the edge of the bathing pool, and poured water over his head.

Next he felt the cool trickle of cleansing oil over his scalp. Her fingers speared through his hair, rubbing and massaging away the dirt and oil of the morning practice. With each stroke, he grew more conscious of her bare flesh gliding against his side, of her faint fragrance mixed with the herbal oil and his own masculine sweat.

He couldn't recall another time when having his hair washed had brought all his nerves to humming attention.

His balls tightened. His cock rose to greet her.

Deciding he'd tested his self-control enough, he said, "Stop fussing with my hair as if I were some shallow youth preparing to court a simpering virgin."

He felt the sudden tension of her body.

"As you wish, my lord," she said in a colorless voice.

The scrape of the large jug of rinse water was the only warning he had before cold liquid poured over his head and down his shoulders.

He let out a surprised yelp and reached for her as she backed away in a flurry of water.

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Khalid barely had time to register the sound of an angry hiss when a flying dragosaur, no larger than his hand, appeared between him and the princess.

With claws extended, the beast screamed and dove toward his eyes.

"Stop, warrior Oak," the princess said sharply, raising one hand between the two males. "This human is not worth your attention."

The small, green dragon veered away from her fingers and settled on her shoulder. The network of brown veins in his unfurled wings pulsed with an angry red flush.

A second miniature dragosaur, this time blue with silver veins, swooped between Khalid and the princess, hovered close enough to send a breeze fanning across his face, then darted away and settled on her other shoulder, opposite its companion.

Bemused, he stared at the beasts riding on Princess al Najib's bare shoulders. "The tales are true. You do have fairy-dragons in Vardon."

"We have many surprises in my country," she said proudly.

"You have proven to be one of the greatest surprises."

"Why?"

"You continue to fight the fate that brought you here, when other women would embrace the life of ease at court."

She lifted her chin and boldly met his gaze. "Am I supposed to giggle and kneel each time you speak?"

Hiding his amusement behind a stern expression, he folded his arms. "Yes. I am your sultan."

"Not my sultan," she snapped. "My captor."

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Her defiance aroused him—a fact that made him furious at his own lack of control.

Lunging through the thigh-high water, he gripped her wrist and drew her against his body. "You have forgotten your vow to obey me in all things, Princess of Vardon."

Her green eyes darkened to deep jade in anger. "How can I forget a vow forced upon me to save my parents and sibs?"

The fairy-dragons, dislodged from their perch on her shoulder, flew around him and Rima, hissing. First one, then the other dove past his head as if preparing to attack.

Pressing her wrist behind her back, careful not to exert pain, he said, "Call off your protectors, princess, or I'll send for traps and put them in cages."

"Oak, Willow, leave us," Rima said, watching his face with the fearful intensity of a cub watching the approach of a deadly drago-snake.

The small dragons made an odd humming sound that could have been protest. Then they shot up high and arrowed away.

"Wise decision." Capturing her other wrist, he eased it behind her back, arching her soft breasts against his chest.

Her head fell back and she gazed up, shadows moving in her eyes. Her breathing increased. With each inhale—exhale, her pebbled nipples brushed his muscles. Her sweet feminine fragrance drifted around them, mingling with the herbals in the water, and his own masculine scent.

His cock hardened painfully against her stomach.

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She struggled to move back, but he held her close, and each twist of her hips rubbed her firm flesh against his rigid cock—both tantalizing and tormenting.

He gazed at her enticing lips. Her mouth parted. Her soft breath wafted across his face. His heart pounded. Every part of his body demanded he taste her, take her.

Lowering his head, he brushed his mouth against hers.

She muttered, "No," and turned her face halfway to the side.

"Rima, yes," he murmured, following her tempting lips with his.

Her struggle raised his excitement. Involuntarily, he thrust his shaft forward.

She went rigid, then shivered.

"Princess, you make me hot," he said in a low, hungry tone. Once more, his *qadib* pressed against the thin silk guarding her cushion of curls.

She made a low sound and melted against him. Turning her head, she pressed her lips to his.

"Rima," he groaned. "So sweet, so soft and warm."

"Khalid," she breathed. "More."

Her mouth covered his hungrily. A surge of pleasure raced through his nerves, setting off sensual shock waves.

Releasing her wrists, he slipped his hands below the water, gripped her firm butt with both hands, lifted her, and thrust his aching dick into the cradle of her thighs. Only the thin barrier of her panties prevented him from penetrating her hot *yoni*.

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He wanted more. Sweeping her up in his arms, he carried her out of the bathing pool and lay her on the thick rug. Feverishly, he went down beside her and fastened his mouth on one of her small, luscious breasts.

As he suckled her tight nipple, he fingered and stroked her silk-covered wet *yonis* with the other hand.

She tightened her muscles around his fingers. Her hands fluttered against his sides, as if she were unsure what to do. Of course she didn't know, he realized. In spite of the sexual training he'd ordered, she was a virgin—as he'd required.

He switched his lips to her other breast, and slipped his fingers under the silk crotch of her panties. Her nether lips were swollen and eager. He only had to strip away the flimsy fabric and—

A sharp rap sounded on the door. A voice called, "Sidi, come quickly. The Princess Adiva has disappeared."

CHAPTER 3

"Adiva? Missing? By the gods, find her," Khalid shouted at the messenger outside his suite as he threw on his clothes.

Shaken out of the sensual haze, Rima caught up her harem pants and top, and slipped into them, ignoring the way they clung to her damp skin.

The sultan was already opening the heavy door when she hastily donned her brown servant's cloak, tied a scarf over her hair, and fastened the heavy veil across her lower face.

"My Lord, may I help look for the young princess?" she asked, bowing as she joined him in the hallway.

"Yes, go," he said impatiently. Then he continued issuing instructions as he strode down the corridor.

Rima walked through the long passageway lit by glowing panels along the ceiling. Those sources of light had been set there by the colonists from Earth three hundred years earlier, but the knowledge of how they worked had been lost. Four turns back towards the harem, she'd left the rich mosaic walls behind and entered a more ancient part of the palace. Like the Sultan's bathing room, this showed the smooth sweeps of the Earth colonists' cutting and shaping tools that had melted and fused the rock.

The bathing room. She froze, caught in the grip of erotic memories—the heady sensation of Khalid's warm lips against hers, the shivery brush of her nipples across his hard male chest, the liquid fire of his mouth on her breast and his magic fingers of seduction in her most intimate place.

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The rush of wings brought her attention back to the corridor.

Willow circled Rima's head, then settled on her shoulder.
::*The sad one is ahead in a small sleeping chamber.*::

Oak winged in from scouting the corridor behind them. He brushed the fingers of a front claw, with sharp tips retracted, down his mate's back before settling on Rima's other shoulder. Nobody comes, he reported. ::*The sultan has called the Sultana Valide into his presence, and demanded she explain the disappearance of the princess.*::

Recalling Khalid's anger, Rima shivered. "I feel sorry for Faridah."

Willow rustled her wings, then sleeked them against her body. ::*The sultan's stepmother will find someone else to blame for the disappearance of Princess Adiva—probably you.*::

"I was with Sultan Khalid."

::*That is true.*:: Willow brushed her muzzle across Rima's cheek affectionately. ::*But the Sultana Valide is devious.*::

::*I'll be careful,*:: Rima promised as she stroked the sensitive spot under Willow's lower jaw.

Spying the one door ahead that wasn't closed tight, Rima paused and sent a mental request for her fairy-dragons to stay out of sight while she approached the sultan's sister; adding a request to warn her if anyone else entered the corridor.

Calling silent encouragement, Oak and Willow lifted into the air and left to find a hiding place nearby.

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Quietly Rima pushed the door open. Her entrance was greeted by the fresh, woodsy scent of juniper and citrus from a burning sweet oil lamp. It only took a few seconds to see the meager contents of the room—a narrow bed with one blanket covering the mattress and two embroidered pillows propped against the wall, a bright rug placed beside the bed, and a small table holding the lotus-shaped lamp. Adiva sat on the edge of the bed with a carved wooden chest across her knees. As the Tarkassan princess gazed at the contents, Rima stepped inside the small room with a deliberately hard tread to announce her arrival.

Adiva jumped to her feet, dropped the chest on the bed, and turned to face her intruder, taking one step sideways to conceal the chest.

Rima bowed to the startled teenager. "Princess Adiva, your brother, the sultan, is worried about you. He has people out searching."

She twisted her fingers in the cloth of her skirt. "I'm not lost."

Gently Rima said, "Your brother doesn't know that. He's demanding an explanation for your disappearance from your stepmother."

Adiva's eyes took on a haunted look. "Oh, no. Now I won't have any privacy. Please don't tell anyone about this room."

"Even if I don't, someone is bound to search this part of the old palace. If nothing else, the scent from the burning sweet oil lamp will lead them here."

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The Tarkassan princess sat heavily on the bed beside the small chest, with her head bowed and shoulders slumped. "I never thought of that," she murmured.

To give the distressed teen a chance to compose herself, Rima studied the rich rug and pillows, and the cunningly-made lamp burning expensive oil. "How long have you used this room for a refuge?"

Adiva's head came up and she met Rima's gaze. "Since the day you arrived. Watching you defy my brother gave me the courage to slip away from Sultana Faridah's spies for an hour or two each day."

"Maybe your stepmother was trying to protect you."

Adiva gave her a long look. "The only person Faridah Um Mahir wants to protect is her son, Prince Mahir."

"I don't remember seeing a boy with the Sultana Valide."

"Prince Mahir is fourteen. He and his guards have a suite with the bachelors. Most of his day is filled with lessons and in training to be a warrior leader when he grows up."

"Like Sultan Khalid?"

"Yes, like my older brother."

Thinking of Haj, Rima asked, "Does Mahir know about your secret room?"

"No." Adiva traced a dreamflower blossom carved along the edge of the small chest. "It would be the same as telling the Sultana Valide."

"People say the sultan wants you to be happy." Rima gestured toward the graceful chest. "That looks like one of the tribute pieces made by a master cabinetmaker in Vardon. Isn't it a gift from Sultan Khalid?"

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Adiva's fingers caressing the chest, froze. She dipped her head. Her hair veiled her face as she spoke in a low voice, thick with emotion. "My brother, as *sultan*, ordered the chest to be burned, along with all the other offerings made in wood from Vardon."

While she hadn't been inside the Hall of Reception when the sultan had issued the order, Rima had heard of it from other women in the harem—as proof of Khalid's disgust of everything Vardonian.

"Then how did it come into your possession?"

The young princess swept her hair away from her face and boldly met Rima's gaze. "When Khalid ordered the chest burned, I was watching from the hidden Women's Gallery. I sent Lila, my trusted servant, to see where the wooden offerings were stored for burning. Later, I sent her to distract the guards, while I took the chest and hid it."

Recalling the harem gossip, Rima said, "I heard you hated everything from my country."

"Not everything. Only the men who kidnapped me away from my home and..." She took a deep, sobbing breath. "And raped Lila while I watched. They told me I would be next."

Filled with compassion, Rima said, "That was three years ago, so you were only thirteen."

Adiva nodded. "A very sheltered thirteen." Her voice trembled. She closed her eyes as if trying to shut out the violence she'd witnessed.

Rima's heart ached for sad young woman and for poor Lila. Closing the few feet between them, she settled on the edge of

the cot and drew Adiva into her arms. "You're safe. Sultan Khalid will protect you."

The young princess buried her face against Rima's shoulder. "That's the problem. He wants to keep me so wrapped in protection, I can hardly breathe."

Stroking Adiva's back soothingly, Rima said, "Can't you tell him how you feel?"

The young princess raised her tearstained face and brushed her hair out of her eyes. "If I even say 'Vardon,' he stops me, saying, 'Don't worry. Nothing from there can ever harm you.'"

"Is that why I wasn't supposed to talk about my country? One of the servants told me it was because any mention of the land of trees made you grow silent and withdrawn."

"That's not the reason," she burst out indignantly. "From the moment I walked into Khalid's camp, people kept asking me questions about what happened, until I got tired of answering. I tried to tell them the really awful things happened to Lila, but they just kept asking me how it felt to be violated by big, sweaty raiders."

"It made it worse when I wouldn't let the Healer Priest touch me." Adiva shuddered. "He acts like I'm a child with no thoughts or feelings of my own."

"Maybe he wanted to help you."

"Not old Jabul. He answers to the Sultana Valide. She said my refusal to be examined proved I'd been raped."

Adiva twisted her fingers in her skirt. "The harem women were worse. They would act sympathetic and concerned, but I

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saw the gleam in their eyes that warned me they were only looking for fresh gossip."

Recalling her own experiences with the pampered and bored women, Rima said, "They tried the same with me."

"What did you do to make them leave you alone?"

"I either ignored them"—Rima grinned at Adiva—"or I'd give them a puzzled look and ask—oh, so innocently, 'Why would you want to know that?'"

Adiva laughed. "I'll have to use that next time someone asks me a rude question."

Rima's heart swelled with delight to see the young princess's pleasure. "You should laugh more often. It puts color in your cheeks and a sparkle in your eyes."

Abruptly, Adiva grew serious. "That's what Shab told me when he helped Lila and me escape from the kidnappers."

"Escape? I thought Sultan Barakah and his men rescued you."

"It was a young Vardonian man who smuggled us out of the kidnapper's fortress. He never told us his real name. When I asked, he said, 'Call me Shab—friend.'"

Adiva smoothed her fingers over the closed lid of the small chest. "When Lila couldn't walk because of her injuries, our rescuer—our Shab—carried her in his arms for miles, following animal trails, across stony ground, and through water to hide our passage."

Taking a deep breath, she continued, "For two days, we heard the snarl and roar of trained tracking ripto-dragosaurs and the shouts of their handlers. Shab found ways to throw them off the scent. Near the end of the second day, he hid

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Lila and me in a secure place and disappeared. By the time he returned, bloody and grim, the sounds of the searchers had faded away in a different direction."

Clasping the young woman's free hand, Rima said, "That was a terrible ordeal. You were fortunate to have Shab's help and protection."

"I know." Adiva sat up straighter and brushed away the strands of hair clinging to her tearstained cheeks. "During the last day and night of travel, he told us there were signs of an army approaching from Tarkassa. Finally, after dark, we reached the top of a long ridge and saw my brother's men setting up camp by the light of cooking fires and lanterns."

"Your Shab was amazing to lead you and Lila directly to Sultan Khalid in that vast range of Kaf mountains." Rima touched Adiva's cheek. "Did Khalid greet your rescuer with many thanks and reward him generously?"

"They never met. Shab said he'd return to Vardon once he watched us walk safely into the Tarkassan camp."

Any other question Rima had was lost when she felt the mental press of a critical message from Oak. ::*Men of the Sultan's guards are at the entrance of this corridor.*::

With a quick, ::*Thanks,*:: to the fairy-dragon, she said to Adiva, "The searchers are coming."

The young woman's face grew chalky. She snatched up the chest, cradling it close to her body.

"I can't let them find this," she gasped. "They'll burn it." Her fingers tightened on the carved wood. "And everything inside."

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Impulsively, Rima said, "I'll meet the searchers and lead them away from your hidden sanctuary."

Hope flared in Adiva's eyes. "You'd do that for me after my brother has made you a servant indentured to him for life?"

"I don't blame you for the sins of your brother." Aware of the passing time, Rima said, "Is there another way out of here so you can slip away?"

"Yes. A secret passage into the Women's Garden and a place to hide the chest."

"Then hurry, while I delay the searchers."

* * * *

Late in the afternoon, Khalid Barakah, Sultan of Tarkassa, lounged among the rich pillows and cushions of his divan in the Women's Garden, lazily observing his concubines as they vied for his attention and favors. Foxy Gina Binte Al-Zero, his chosen *kadin*, with her red hair and mercurial temper, postured and posed while slyly plucking blossoms from the dreamflower vine. Did she think to enthrall him with the erotic fragrance of the creamy petals?

The stunning, Sariya, Pearl-of-the-Moon, with pale hair and blue eyes, casually leaned over to adjust the ankle strap on her embroidered sandal. The deep neckline of her loose silk blouse provided him with a full view of her lush breasts—the tips and areolas generously rouged a berry red.

Auburn-haired twins, Jahara and Jamila played in the gold-and-blue fountain and shallow pool. Their translucent, white silk harem pants and tops—thoroughly wet—clung to their

enticing curves in a way guaranteed to stir the cock of any male.

So why did his gaze keep returning to his captive servant, Rima, where she and Adiva played a lively game of Nard on the close-clipped lawn at one end of the garden?

Earlier, he'd ordered a central net set up at his sister's request. Now, in the cooler air just before sunset, she dashed around on one side of the net, swinging a lightweight racket as she batted a tiny feathered ball back and forth with Rima.

Adiva's laughter spilled across the fragrant air and warmed his heart.

His stepmother clicked her tongue in disapproval. "It is beyond proper for the Princess Adiva to play a game with a lowly body servant and to romp around like an unbroken colt."

Indolently, Khalid clasped his hands behind his head. "Sultana Valide, your duty is to oversee the health and well-being of the palace females. Nard is good exercise."

Faridah clamped her lips and bowed from the waist since she was seated on a lower divan. "With all due respect, Sultan Barakah—may you live a thousand years—as the Sultana Valide, I object to the Princess Adiva spending so much time with the Vardonian bondwoman."

"The Vardonian captive princess has brought laughter to my sister."

Wondering why he felt the need to defend Rima, he took a sip of the cool fruit juice Faridah had placed on the ornamental table beside him. "When Adiva disappeared from the harem last week, I asked you what had driven her to go

off on her own, and what you were doing to help her overcome her sadness and shy ways."

He dropped his lazy pose and turned the full force of his demanding gaze on the sultana. "Your fumbling excuses did not satisfy me. On the other hand, since she has been allowed more contact with the Vardonian princess, my sister's self-confidence and her joy in living have grown. That improvement pleases me."

Faridah's expression went blank. She bowed her head in deference. "Your will, my Lord."

As if summoned to distract him, Gina whirled closer, brushing a suggestive hand down his bare chest, then pausing to fondle one of his nipples with practiced fingers.

His unruly body responded—both nipples coming to attention.

Kneeling at his feet, the concubine cradled his aroused cock pressed against the *kut'n* fabric of his loose pants. "Does my *sidi* wish me to serve him?" she offered, squeezing his engorged dick with practiced pressure.

In the past, her erotic skill had filled his body with the hot blaze of lust.

Not today.

"Enough." He drew her hands away from his body, suddenly disgusted with how easily she could bring him to a mindless—and a curiously empty—response.

Frowning, he released Gina's hands and took a drink of the juice at his elbow.

Jahara and Jamila still played in the fountain spray. They'd removed their thin blouses. The pale skin of their unfettered

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breasts sparkled with water drops in the slanting rays of sunset.

Unbidden came the image of Rima, the first time he had ordered her to remove her clothing and bathe him. Clad only in silk panties, she'd walked down carved rock steps into the bathing pool to serve him at his orders. Her unpracticed sensuality, her modest actions as she had shyly tried to cover her breasts with spread fingers, had held a greater punch of lust than the most practiced wives of his seductive concubines. Recalling those moments still made his mouth water. He had been the first man—the only man—to take each beaded nipple between his lips, to suck them into the heat of his mouth—to taste the salt and richness of her skin.

"My Lord," a feminine voice murmured, drawing him away from the heated memories.

"Sidi," another said in a seductive tone.

"Master."

The scent of heavy perfumes and the touch of soft hands fluttering down his face, across his arms and chest, brought him back to the reality of the moment.

His other concubines had gathered around him, once more seeking to draw his attention, while his *kadin*—his chief concubine, Gina—still knelt at his feet. "Master, why did you stop me from serving your obvious needs?" She gave him a coy smile and stroked his cock. "Have I displeased you?"

Impatiently, he waved one hand. "No."

Sitting back on her heels, she trailed her hands down the outer sides of her breasts, then cupped and lifted them, with the swollen nipples pointed toward him. "Do you wish us to

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seek the privacy of your royal suite? Perhaps to punish me for my forwardness?" She gave him a flirtatious look and slowly licked her lips. "Then you can instruct me in new ways to give you pleasure."

Once he would have led her to his rooms, not to punish, but to while away the evening in sexual games.

But not this time. Not since the morning he'd tasted the untouched sweetness of Rima's lips and the hot silk of her breasts.

He stood, scattering the women like so many pampered butterflies, drank the rest of the sweet and tart juice prepared by Faridah, and strode down the shaded path in the fragrant garden to his private entrance.

Two women from his elite guards came to attention, one quickly opening the door.

As he stepped into the cool hallway, the joyous sound of Adiva's laughter reminded him once again of the Vardonian princess whose friendship had made the change in his sister.

The captive woman whose presence in his palace was part of his revenge against the people who had kidnapped and mistreated his young sister.

That same woman who invaded his thoughts and had turned his full enjoyment away from his *kadin* and concubines.

By the gods, it was an invasion he should fight.

CHAPTER 4

As Rima watched Khalid walk away through the golden sunshine and dappled shadows cast by the fragrant jacaranda trees, she struggled against her growing attraction to him. It wasn't just a physical awareness and appreciation of his masculine grace and strength, or the addictive touch of his hands, lips, and body on hers. The more she observed his interaction with the palace servants and officials, the more she saw their respect for this sultan.

Twice, she'd found her way to the Women's Gallery where observation windows, overlooking both the Hall of Reception and the Court of the Divan, were hidden behind decorative latticework of white marble. There she'd witnessed his fair and reasoned decisions as he listened to petitions and accusations, and dispensed swift justice.

Her thoughts flashed back to the invasion of Vardon. As soon as her father and his men had laid down their weapons, Khalid had commanded his warriors to treat the captives with dignity. And he'd sent his own healers to aid the injured prisoners.

She looked across the garden to where he'd disappeared into the palace. Each day, it was more difficult to think of him as the enemy, the conqueror of her country. Daily she found new reasons to admire him.

Some inner warning made Rima turn at the moment the Sultana Valide swept up to her, eyes narrowed in anger.

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"Kneel, you daughter of a diseased dog, and listen carefully to my words."

Silently, Rima knelt—to show respect to her as the sultan's stepmother—not to the woman who routinely exacted punishment on those who could not defend themselves.

Gina and the three concubines arranged themselves in a half-circle across from Faridah, with Rima in the center.

From the corners of her eyes, Rima saw that the wary servants had melted into places out of the Sultana Valide's line of sight, but still close enough to respond to her orders.

The very air was heavy with the five women's anger and animosity.

Faridah had forced her to kneel on a path of fitted stones. Rima's loose *kut'n* pants gave no protection against the hard rock.

Gina pressed a slipper-clad foot on Rima's head. "Bow lower, Vardonian bitch. It's time you learned your true position here in Tarkassa."

"Perhaps a taste of the lash would teach this bitch proper behavior," Jahara said.

Her twin sister, Jamila, added, "A *bastinado* applied to the soles of her feet would prove ... instructive."

Sariya, Pearl-of-the-Moon, said, "Is she trainable?"

Rima fought her own seething rage at the insult. Any sign of emotion would only encourage the vindictive women.

Shy Adiva spoke up. "Leave her alone. She's smarter than all of you together."

Mentally, Rima groaned. The young princess didn't know her words could make the situation worse.

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Willow protested from where she, Oak and a newly-arrived flight of fairy-dragons had settled in the jacaranda trees.

::Those Tarkassan females are mean, but not the Sultan's sister.::

::Please stay hidden,:: Rima urged.

Before the fairy-dragon could respond, the sultana spoke. "Princess Adiva, you're tired from your strenuous exercise. You should rest. I'll send a goblet of my special juice to you in your suite."

Rima waited for the young woman to obey her stepmother, as she always had in the past, and braced herself for harsh instruction once Adiva had left.

Instead of going, the princess said, "I'll only leave if Princess Rima comes with me."

In a purring voice, Faridah said, "My dear stepdaughter, it is my duty to shield you from unpleasantness or danger. This lowly servant is both. She needs to understand her position here in the palace."

Out of the corner of her eye, Rima saw Faridah beckon to a serving girl. "Please escort the Princess Adiva to her quarters. If she proves reluctant, call a guard for help."

::We come now?:: Oak's mental voice was full of anticipation. *::Willow and the younglings are furious at those palace bitches for humiliating you.::*

::A little longer,:: Rima pleaded, knowing Oak would strike when he decided it was necessary—not when it was prudent.

In the seconds it took to communicate with the fairy-dragon, the serving girl had stepped forward to lead Adiva away.

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The young Tarkassan princess said sharply, "I won't go without Rima. And that's final." Her voice rang with a note of determination stronger than Rima had ever heard from the young woman.

For a moment, the women standing around her froze. Even the sunset breeze paused, as if it also sensed a coming storm from the Sultana Valide.

"Goddess protect us," Rima murmured.

Then, to distract Faridah, she deliberately sat back on her knees and stared up at the imperious Chief of Harem Women. "Sultana Faridah, it is written that, 'She who would rule those around her should first learn to rule her own actions.'"

"Silence!"

Pain exploded in Rima's face. The unseen blow sent her sprawling across the hard rocks of the pathway.

Dazed, she gazed up at Faridah, then saw the kick aimed at her side barely in time to roll away.

As she moved out of the sultana's reach, Rima caught a glimpse of the young princess stepping between her and the vindictive woman.

Rima had barely stopped when Gina dragged her head up by the hair, and spat, "When we're finished with you, the sultan will kennel you with the dogs."

Behind her tormentor, Rima saw the young princess struggling with one of the twins. At that moment, a flight of fairy-dragons swirled around Gina. Two of the younglings dug their claws into her hair and pulled. Screaming curses, she released Rima and batted at the fairy-dragons.

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The others in the flight darted away. Their mental cries indicated they were hunting for more targets. Willow hovered in front of her. *::Your face is bleeding. Who did this? I'll claw her skin to ribbons.::*

"Wait. Stop!" She reinforced her command mentally. *::Do not harm Sultan Barakah's people.::*

The flock of fairy dragons rose, like so many angry butterflies, and hovered above the cringing women.

Faridah screamed, "Guards, arrest the Vardonian bitch. Drag her away. And bring traps for these vicious flying beasts."

At her command, two female guards stepped smartly forward. One reached for Rima, while the other aimed a business-like, glittering sword at her vulnerable chest.

Willow and the flight of younglings hissed their anger, but they were held in place by obedience to Rima's command.

The *kadin*, Gina, screamed, "Vardonian whore, you have bewitched the sultan, using the dark arts of the Lost Lands. Why else does he ignore me, his chosen *kadin*?"

The other concubines shrieked more accusations.

At Gina's charge of using the dark arts, a cold knot coiled in Rima's stomach. What if her secret connection to metal was discovered? Would she be condemned to a black witch's lingering and painful death?

The guard who helped Rima stand kept her face expressionless, but her eyes revealed disdain for the squalling women. Silently she reached into the small pouch on her belt, withdrew a square of white *kut'n*, and gave it to Rima with a muttered, "For your cheek."

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Suddenly aware of the burning sting, she touched her cheek, then examined her bloody fingertips.

Murmuring her thanks, Rima pressed the cloth to her throbbing face.

"Take the filthy Vardonian creature away ... now." Faridah struck a dramatic pose, one hand on her throat. "I will personally lay charges against her with my son, the sultan."

"That will not be necessary ... stepmother." Khalid strode toward them, with Oak flying just ahead. "I will determine the fate of the Vardonian princess and all those involved."

His dark gaze settled on Rima. "Who inflicted your injury?"

"I did not see who struck me." She struggled to keep from glancing at the Sultana Valide. She didn't want to place Khalid in the position of choosing between a member of the inner circle and an outsider. She'd heard servants gossip about the dangers, even in court, that surrounded him—as they had his father.

He stepped closer until his clean, masculine scent flooded her senses and made a heaviness throb low in her belly.

Then he spoke again, his words jolting her back to the awareness of danger. "Amira Rima Janani, daughter of King Al Najib, swear on your honor that you do not know who struck you."

Bowing low, she said, "Please, *sidi*, do not ask. You would not like the answer."

"Honor?" Faridah laughed cynically. "She's a Vardonian captive, no more than a servant indentured for life as reparation for the sins of her father and country."

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Khalid silenced the sultana with a look, then once more focused his attention on Rima.

Before she was forced, by her honor, to speak, the flight of fairy-dragons circling overhead, broke out into a chorus of joyful greetings. Oak said, *::Our eldest son has chosen his human companion.::*

Adiva came forward, stepping carefully so as not to dislodge a precious burden. One of the teenage dragons, Silvertip, a young male with rich shades of green on his body and a silver muzzle and wing tips, rode on her shoulder. She had a dazed smile on her face as she gently stroked the fairy-dragon's head.

"Look. He spoke to me. He wants to be my forever-friend." She gently scratched the iridescent scales on Silvertip's throat. "He protected me."

Silvertip opened his mouth, with its impressive display of razor-sharp teeth, then closed it with a snap and nuzzled the side of Adiva's face.

"Protected you from whom?" Khalid's cold voice promised retribution.

Too late, Adiva seemed to sense the deeper undercurrents of palace politics.

Rima sent a quick message to Silvertip. *::Tell the youngling princess to speak with caution.::*

She saw the exact moment when Silvertip relayed the instructions. Adiva ducked her head and said in a low voice, "It all happened too fast."

Silently, Rima applauded the Tarkassan princess. She'd deflected the question without lying.

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Willow chose that moment to land, with unusual force, on Rima's right shoulder, forcing a muffled groan from her. She hadn't remembered twisting that shoulder when she fell, until the moment it took the fairy-dragon's extra weight.

Khalid's eyes narrowed as he studied her. "Besides your cheek, where else are you injured?"

When she didn't answer immediately, he looked at Faridah. "What has happened here that caused injury to my body servant? Why did you summon guards to arrest her?"

Sultana Valide stiffened, then pursed her lips—the very image of outrage—and pointed one long finger at Rima. "This captive acts as if she is in charge of the harem and Princess Adiva."

"Tell me one action to back up your claim." Khalid's tone was cold and precise.

Faridah made a helpless gesture. She looked at each of the sultan's women, as if willing one of them to answer. When she couldn't find help there, she blurted out, "There have been so many, I don't know where to start."

Khalid folded his arms and studied the Sultana. "I repeat—name one transgression."

"She has neglected her duties to you and, instead, has been teaching the princess to use a bow and arrow."

"The captive servant, Rima, has not overlooked anything related to the cleanliness and comfort of my rooms."

Faridah's mouth crimped in annoyance. "The devious bitch has led the Princess Adiva onto the archery field and exposed her to danger from your guards as they practiced."

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Rima saw him glance her way, then frown at Sultana Valide. "Did you ask my sister if she had my permission to learn the use of bow and arrow?"

"Why would a female member of the royal household ever need to learn such an unfeminine skill?"

"Perhaps to defend herself from another kidnapping." The edge of impatience crept into Khalid's voice.

"Another kidnapping?" Faridah said angrily. "Who wants damaged goods?"

"Damaged?" Menace dripped from every syllable of Khalid's question. The very air seemed to freeze.

Faridah blanched and trembled. "My Lord"—she went down on her knees—"forgive my rash words."

He studied her a moment. "You have said enough, widow of my father. Return to your suite and count yourself fortunate that I honor his memory."

He gestured to the female guards. "Escort the Sultana Valide to her quarters, then take up your duties there. She is to remain in seclusion until I personally order otherwise."

The guards saluted, each with a fist over the heart. The senior officer added, "As you wish, *sidi*."

Obviously chastened, Faridah rose to her feet with the help of some serving girls, and went quietly.

One dark look from Khalid sent Gina and the concubines toward the arched harem door, followed by the serving girls. With a gesture, he indicated Adiva's servant, Lila, should remain.

While the other women departed, Khalid stared at his young sister, where she sat on a white marble bench in the

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shade of a jacaranda tree holding the green-and-silver fairy-dragon on her lap. She didn't seem to notice the fragrant purple blossoms drifting across her hair and shoulders as she and Silvertip gazed at each other. She scratched the spot between his ears. He crooned softly.

Rima saw the worry and compassion in Khalid's eyes.

Pitching her voice low, so Adiva wouldn't hear, Rima said, "She's so wrapped up in bonding with Silvertip, she didn't notice or hear anything else since she answered your last question."

"She didn't hear Faridah's vile words?" His voice held a note of hope. He gripped Rima's upper arm and stared into her eyes as if seeking signs of falsehood or truth.

"Trust me. When Oak and then Willow chose me as a forever-friend, nothing else mattered except the joy of bonding." She nodded toward the enraptured pair. "Have Lila stay nearby to watch over Adiva for the next few hours. See that she eats and drinks. Willow and Oak will take turns monitoring their son."

"Thank the gods you know how to help my sister."

"Speaking of help, how did you know to come to my rescue?"

Khalid glanced at the fairy-dragons holding vigil over his sister. "Your flying guardian, Oak, came for me and led me here."

Rima's heart filled with wonder. "I've never heard, except in folktales, of a fairy-dragon communicating with another person not bonded by forever-friend ties."

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Khalid rubbed the back of his neck and gave a rueful grin. "He was pretty damned insistent I follow him."

After the arrangements for Adiva were made, Khalid led Rima to the living room in his private quarters.

Cupping her chin in one hand, he studied the long scratches marring her delicate skin.

Why had the Vardonian princess refused to name her attacker?

And why in all the thirteen hells did her scent, the feel of her flesh, just her standing close to him send the blood pounding into his cock?

"If you've seen enough," Rima said in a flat tone, "with your permission I will go and tend my face so the blood doesn't interfere with my duties."

"Your duties can wait. I'll send for the Healer Priest, Jabul."

A quick expression of distaste flickered across her face. "Please, do not bother him."

Khalid knew he should send her distracting presence away. On the other hand, the sooner this unwelcome lust burned itself out, the sooner he could banish her from his sight and forget her.

He hoped.

Drawing his hand away from Rima's face, he said, "Since you refuse the services of Jubal, I'll treat the scrapes."

"Don't bother ... Your Highness." She gave a low bow, then moved toward the inner hallway door.

"Stop!" He blocked her progress. "You're my personal servant. Your good health is my responsibility."

She stiffened and boldly met his gaze. "A scratch on my face will not interfere with my tasks."

He touched a link of the captive bracelet. "This iron chain says you will obey my orders. Is that not true?"

"I am bound to your commands, master," she said through stiff lips.

"By the gods, you are the most stubborn woman I've ever met."

"Shukran, thank you." She inclined her head—every inch the royal princess he'd captured years earlier; every inch the proud woman who'd defied him in his own palace, while surrounded by her enemies.

A woman with courage to match his.

Abruptly, he gripped her upper arm and led her to a padded bench near the fireplace. After filling a silver water basin, he opened his first aid supplies and spread them on the same carved marble table.

Silently cursing the person who'd injured Rima, Khalid cleansed the scratches and applied a healing ointment.

Why should I care about a minor injury? The simple explanation that she was his servant didn't begin to explain the turmoil in his thoughts or his impulse to shield her from even the small sting of the *alcoholium* he'd used to cleanse her wound.

"*Sidi*, may I return to my duties?" Rima said in a breathy voice.

Had she been as affected as him by his touch? He gazed at her upturned face. Her green eyes had darkened with either anger or passion. Time to find out which.

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He went down on one knee in front of her, cupped her face between his palms, and touched a light kiss to her lips. They were pliant and smooth under his mouth. *Sweet*. She tasted warm and sweet—and he wanted more. His groin grew heavy. His cock rose.

He was her sultan; she, his captive servant. He could do what he wanted ... to take her quick and hard. To plunge into her virgin heat and claim her as surely as the great dragons of the night claimed their mates for life.

No. He sat back on his heels and struggled to control his primitive impulses. He would not dishonor her or lose his own integrity. At the moment she'd become his captive, he'd become honor bound to keep her safe—even from himself.

In a surge of lust and revenge, he'd lost sight of that truth. "*Sidi*?" she murmured, laying her trembling fingers on the side of his face.

With that one touch and word, he knew she was acting out of passion, not anger. The knowledge shook his resolve.

Gone was his intent to introduce her to the delights of erotic acts between a man and a woman, then set her aside. In spite of the instructions she'd received in those techniques, she was an innocent. And, by the gods, he wanted her even more—when she was willing.

Rima stared at him. He felt that scrutiny to the depths of his soul.

Before he could form the words to send her back to her room in the servants' quarters, she licked her lips and bowed her head. "Forgive me, *sidi*, for touching you without permission."

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"I want to feel your hands on me." Curling his fingers around her upper arms, he drew her closer and heard her quick expulsion of breath.

"Damn. I brought you here to doctor your cheek and shoulder." Annoyed that he'd forgotten his purpose—again, he stood and moved back a step to put some space between them.

"My cheek feels much better." Her smile lit her face with genuine pleasure.

Once more he was struck by her lack of artifice. "How did you grow up in a harem without learning the wiles a woman uses on a man?"

"Harem? In Vardon?" She shook her head with a half smile. "We don't have harems in my country. Besides, my father didn't need other women. He and Mother were devoted to each other, and still are. Their love filled all of our lives."

Bending her head, she apparently found a smudge on her *kut'n* pants and brushed at the dirt.

Khalid noted she used her left hand instead of her right. "Show me your right shoulder."

Her head came up, tears shimmering in her eyes. She fixed her gaze on him. "It's much better."

He crossed his arms. "I'll be the judge. Show me."

With obvious reluctance, she unfastened her thin *kut'n* blouse and drew the fabric away from her body.

Ignoring the lure of her graceful breasts, Khalid studied the bruises already marring her shoulder and upper arm. *Forget calling in the healer priest.* Unless she was injured

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beyond his own knowledge to heal, no other man would be allowed to touch this woman.

* * * *

Rima shivered under the impact of Khalid's hot gaze. His hands, hard from daily sword practice, had touched her cheek as gently as a warm breeze.

Minutes earlier, he'd disappeared down the passageway leading to his bedroom and bathing room. Now he was back with a stoppered flask in his hands.

He opened the container, poured a small puddle of pale-green oil into one palm, rubbed his hands together, then spread the warm oil over her bruised shoulder.

As he massaged her aching muscles, the clean scent of lavender and bluetip pine flowed from his hands.

She closed her eyes at the rush of memories from the morning he'd ordered her to enter the bathing pool with him. She'd sprinkled the same herbs in the water, and they'd mingled with his enticing masculine scent as he'd folded her into his arms and kissed her until all reason had flown away like unruly young fairy-dragons on their first solo flight from home. He'd drawn her lower body to his rigid penis and pressed in against the thin panties guarding her *yoni*. Her whole body had throbbed with the need to rip away that last barrier and open her hot, aching vagina to his *quadib lahm*.

Now he slipped behind her, moved her fall of hair, bound in a plain cord, to the right side of her neck, and stroked more scented oil across her upper spine and left shoulder.

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Fighting her almost helpless attraction to Khalid, she said, "My Lord *Sidi*, I sustained no injury on—"

In a low, rich voice, he said, "It is written to have balance in all things."

"Yes. Balance," she agreed, caught once more in the spell of this tender warrior.

His warm breath flowed across her skin—already sensitized by the fragrant oil. His strong thumbs and fingers kneaded and pressed into tight muscles, loosening and soothing away knots of tension. As her pain disappeared, she became more aware of Khalid's vibrant body only inches from hers. A slow heat pooled in her lower belly. A hungry pressure grew between her thighs—one she'd felt before at Khalid's touch; one that had left her aching for relief; one she had instinctively known, then and now, only he could ease—could satisfy.

Helplessly, her head tipped back.

"Better?" he asked, both hands cupping her shoulders.

She licked her lips, trying to formulate an answer, while her tongue felt too heavy to say a word.

"Rima"—he pressed a lingering kiss on the back of her neck—"your skin is like living silk."

Any words she might have said were lost in a heady rush of desire.

With a knowing chuckle, he moved around the bench, and once more knelt, facing her.

She stared into his black eyes where flecks of silver shimmered in their depths. In the past, his eyes had seemed devoid of emotion. Now they blazed with passion—and

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strangely—a hint of need. In a flash of insight, she realized this great sultan, who ruled a wild land and led hard, disciplined warriors, wanted her, not just as a sex object, but more.

She lay her palm on his cheek and felt the ripple of muscles tensing under her touch. "My lord, my *sidi*, yes," she said, "touch me. Teach me the reality of the sterile lessons I learned from the Keeper of the Flame."

Moments passed as he studied her. The only sound in the room was the crackle of flames in the fireplace. Khalid's gaze swept over her with a slow, hot force that heated her blood.

"Touch you?" he muttered, slowly drawing one finger across her lower lip.

"Teach you?" He cradled her bare breasts in his hands as if they were the most precious gifts in the world.

Fire licked across her arms and down her body. Her lips yearned for his mouth. Her body trembled with the need to make love with him.

Love?

As she gazed into his dark eyes; felt the hard strength of his fingers carefully holding her tender beasts, the realization burst into her mind.

By the great Mother of Creation, I've fallen in love with my enemy.

CHAPTER 5

"You're my enemy." Rima jumped to her feet, trapped between Khalid's strong body and the heavy bench. "I almost forgot. How could I be so stupid?" Her voice trembled in agony at how close she'd come to completely surrendering her will.

Slowly, the sultan stood. His eyes, so warm minutes earlier, were now flat and cold. Scooping up her blouse, he tossed it to her. "Clothe yourself. We're finished."

Finished? The finality in that one word shook Rima.

Instinctively, she caught the garment and held it in front of her breasts. Her traitorous body ached at the loss of his touch. His clean, masculine scent still enticed her.

Goddess help her, she didn't want to be banished forever from his presence.

Rima licked her lips and said softly, "You say we're finished?" She dropped her blouse and let it dangle from her fingers at one side. "Is that what you really want?"

He folded his arms across his bare chest. His gaze raked across her body as if assessing her value.

Moments passed, measured by the crackle of flames in the fireplace—and her racing heart.

She eyed the bulge of his *qadib* testing the soft fabric of his pants. He still wanted her. That thought gave her courage to close the small distance between them.

"*Sidi*"—she swallowed hard—"I ask again, please touch me. Teach me."

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"You have made your choice." Abruptly, he strode to the door, shot home the bolt, then returned to her. "Let the lessons begin."

He swept her into his arms, his battle-hardened muscles holding her easily. His mouth captured hers as he strode to the divan. She yielded to him. Her blood raced through her veins, heating her breasts and making them more sensitive to his touch. He brushed away the pile of loose pillows on the brocade cover, and placed her on the padded surface.

Every inch of her body responded to his nearness, drowning out the small voice reminding her she was in the arms of her enemy.

He stretched out on the divan, half over her, his mouth on hers, greedy and demanding. She opened her lips to his—to accept the thrust of his tongue. He kissed her with a blazing male hunger, as if he wanted to draw her very essence into his—as if he couldn't get close enough.

She couldn't help responding to his need—to the wild rawness that called to everything in her that was primitive and female. Her own passion ignited. She kissed him back, clinging to him, her fingers gripping the muscles in his bare shoulders.

His lips left hers to press against her throat, while his one hand stroked her skin from under the curve of her breasts down to the thin fabric covering her *yoni*. With each sweep, his fingers moved closer to her tight, sensitive nipples, then on the down sweep, dove under her waistband and fingered the curls just above her throbbing slit.

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She moved her hips restlessly. A great aching need built between her legs, deep in her womb. Visions of cool fire danced in her mind. Dimly, she heard the soft, gong of the metal bowl on the table near the bench. Her captive's chain bracelet stung her with a flash of heat. Hastily, she strengthened her mental walls against her sensitivity to metals.

In that brief moment, Khalid's lips left her mouth. He kissed the tip of one nipple. The exquisite sensation flew through her blood like lightning across the mountain skies. He kissed the tight tip again, then raised his face and looked down into her eyes. "You like that," he stated in a low, thick tone. "Your eyes are dark with pleasure."

"Yesss..." she could only murmur, caught in the magic of his touch.

His hard, strong fingers circled her nipple, barely brushing the beaded tip. "Your breasts are high and firm; your nipples tight and surrounded by the sacred ring of life the warm, rich color of ripe apricots." Lowering his mouth, he muttered, "A feast to feed a man's soul." His tongue swept around and over first one, then the other needy tip. He gently blew across her breasts, and she made a humming sound low in her throat. Oh, Goddess, she wanted him to do more—to fill the empty place deep inside.

As if he heard her silent cry, he bent his head and drew one nipple into his warm mouth, sucking it with a rhythm that sent matching fire racing through her body—a hot passion and desire for Khalid.

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He cupped her other breast in his hand, gently kneading it as he brushed one callused thumb across the sensitive tip. The very roughness of a warrior's hand both frightened her by its strength, and made her feel safe.

Please," she called in a high, breathless voice. She arched her chest against his mouth and tangled her fingers in his dark hair to draw his head closer.

"Gods, woman—yes." He took the other nipple into his mouth, and cupped her dampened globe, working his sensual magic on both breasts. Slowly Rima twisted beneath his chest and plucked at the sash holding his *kut'n* pants, desperate to feel his entire body against hers—desperate to reach those unknown heights only hinted at in her sexuality lessons.

Slowly, as if reluctant to leave her throbbing breasts, he lifted his chest from her lower body, then deliberately pressed his knee between hers, spread her legs, and settled between them.

She felt the hard erection of his *qadib* and knew she wanted him to fill her—to ease the pressure building low in her body. Rima had explored that feminine place with her own fingers when the sensual instructions by the Fire Priestess had stirred her own sexual awareness. But her hand had never been enough. And now she knew why. Her femaleness had been made for Khalid's maleness—to feel his cock slide into her damp vagina, past the, "honeyed lips of paradise," and thrust home to the mouth of her womb.

"*Sidi*—lord and master, take me now," she gasped.

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"Soon," he promised, "soon." Rising to his knees, he stripped away the rest of her clothes and his, leaving her open to his pleasure.

"Now?" She arched her back, raising her breasts toward him, silently begging for his touch, his lips, his mouth.

"Just a little longer, sweet princess." He slid down her body until his head rested between her legs. His thick hair brushed the sensitive skin of her inner thighs and her lower body clenched in anticipation.

With a rough sound, he gently parted the fleshy lips guarding her *yoni* and she shivered. He lapped at her slit with his warm, rough tongue—each swipe sending waves of intense pleasure racing through her nerves.

Lost in a storm of sensations, she scrabbled for something to hold onto and found the padded edges of the silken divan.

And still his tongue and mouth drove her higher. Nothing mattered but the heat and powerful tension consuming her body.

Mindlessly, she writhed beneath him, vaguely aware when his mouth left and moments later, the broad head of his cock slowly entered, stretching her opening. Partway in, he stopped then drew out, only to slide in again and again. A new inner coil of need grew tighter and tighter with each sweet invasion.

"Little dragon-tamer," he muttered, "I can't wait much longer."

Locked in her own hunger, she choked out, "Don't wait. Fill me now."

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"Gods, yes." Reaching between their bodies, he stroked her tight bud, then thrust deeper, filling her to the fullest.

There was only a flash of pain, but it was swallowed up in the sensual ecstasy made by his hands and body.

"I ... want. I ... can't," she sobbed, helpless in the throes of an erotic storm.

Wordlessly, he drew her into his arms, holding her safely as he set about with deep and shallow strokes, giving her more pleasure than she'd ever experienced.

CHAPTER 6

With a soft, "*Shukran*," to the guard who held the door open, Rima stepped out into the dark palace staging area. Khalid was leaving on a scouting trip with his small band of select guardsmen. She had come to wish him a safe journey.

As she watched the scouting party assemble, Rima mused about the many changes the last five days had brought since she and Khalid had first made love. Her duties as his body servant had been lightened. Khalid had assigned other members of the staff to do the cleaning. By his orders, they had also removed the mattress and all his old bedding, and replaced them with new.

Each night, he took her to bed and introduced her to new delights in lovemaking. Each morning, she rose with the knowledge she was still his indentured captive, without the security and privileges of the concubines or his other servants. She even needed his permission to step outside the walls surrounding the palace grounds.

Tomorrow night, both moons would be full, and the first rays of sunrise would touch the center of the Heart Stone, signaling the summer solstice. Both here in Tarkassa and at home, sacred fires would be lit and special prayers offered up to the Supreme Goddess.

In Vardon, from her early teenage years, she had joined the line of singing, dancing women as they circled the temple three times before entering to worship. This year, she'd offer up prayers in the quiet of her room.

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One more change, she mused sadly.

Standing in the darker shadows of the entryway, Rima threw back the hood of her heavy cloak and inhaled the fresh scents riding on the desert breeze. It was so much like the pine scent from the forests of Vardon, her heart filled with sad yearning for the home she'd never again see.

That's the past. She drew up her hood once more to hide any evidence of tears. Here in Tarkassa was her future.

While those thoughts passed through her mind, Qamar had already set, and Zurir was sinking below the western vermillion cliffs that gave the capital city their name. As the pearly gray light of predawn slowly bloomed in the east, the towering sandstone face rising in the west came to life in ripples of pink, orange, and red.

The small band of soldiers in white desert clothes, their faces framed in a blue head wrap and with a *lisam* draped around their throats, waited beside their mounts. Each man was armed with a sword and a short horse bow. Their mounts had a quiver of arrows lashed within easy reach of the rider. Extra water skins swung from saddle hooks behind where the rider would sit.

They were prepared for a long, hard ride.

Khalid appeared, once more dressed in blue, leading his great black stallion.

After gesturing for his second in command, Dahab, to join the men, Khalid, still leading his mount, met Rima. He stared at her intently, as if measuring her for some task.

Proper protocol in front of other people forced her to wait for him to speak. Even though her heart raced and a sensual

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warmth coiled low in her belly at his presence, she folded her hands and tried to appear calm.

"Rima, I'm pleased by the friendship growing between you and Adiva." He extracted a small bundle from where it had been tucked under his belt. "I'm returning your knife with the understanding that, if necessary, you may use it to protect her without fear of reprisal."

"Protect the princess?" Rima unrolled the covering, and cautious of the sharp crystal blade, drew it out of the strong sheath made of tyrano-dragosaur hide. "Aren't her guards loyal?"

"Yes, but where Adiva is concerned, I trust you more than any guard."

His confidence sent a warm glow through her. "Adiva is like a sister to me. I'll keep close watch on her while you're gone."

He nodded. "Good."

As they talked, Oak and Willow fluttered out of the dawn sky. Willow came to rest on Rima's shoulder and Oak settled on Khalid's.

"Take Oak with you," Rima said. "If you need to send back a message, he could reach us quicker than anyone on horseback."

"I will." He brushed the backs of his fingers across her cheek. "I'll miss our nights together."

Abruptly, he turned, swung onto his horse, and went to meet his men.

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As Rima watched Khalid lead his scouting party through the open gates, she knew she would count the days, the hours, until his return.

By the Goddess, it would be a long, lonely time.

* * * *

Khalid had been gone a day and a night, and Rima had returned to her rooms in the harem wing, when Adiva's servant, Lila, awakened Rima just before dawn.

"Please, Lady Rima," Lila said, kneeling. "Stop the princess before she sneaks out of the palace. She's going on a long trip alone and I'm afraid for her."

Rima scrambled out of the covers and reached for her clothes. While she dressed, she asked, "Why is the princess slipping away from her home and safety?"

"She wouldn't tell me, but she made the decision right after she was awakened by the chief body servant of the Sultana Valide."

"The sultana's servant?" To protect Lila in case someone questioned Adiva's servant later, Rima kept her treasonous thoughts to herself. "Delay the princess. Remind her she needs to wear warm clothes at night and to be prepared for midday heat. I'll come as quickly as possible, ready to travel."

Lila bowed. "I'll ask her to wait long enough for me to smuggle some dried foods from the larder. At this hour, the kitchen will be empty."

"Good idea." Rima laced her sturdy desert boots. "If I can't talk her out of going, I'll travel with her."

"*Shukran*," Lila said and hurriedly left.

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Rima quickly finished dressing and added a warm cloak. Conscious of the passing time, she asked Willow to contact her son, Silvertip, and ask if Adiva was ready to leave.

While Willow silently communed with Adiva's forever-friend, Rima collected a few travel items and the crystal knife Khalid had returned to her. She concealed the short bow and arrows she'd used in practice under her winter cloak.

If she couldn't talk the young princess into waiting until Khalid returned, the two women were in for a perilous trip.

* * * *

Rima wasn't able to convince Adiva to wait.

The Tarkassan princess had shown a surprisingly steely determination. "Shab is desperately ill. He's with friends at a camp in Bloodrock Canyon, but he sent a message asking me to come to him secretly."

"Bloodrock Canyon? That's in Vardon, a two days' ride from here."

"I must go to him immediately," Adiva said, quietly firm. "Through Green Valley Pass is the most direct route."

"How do you know it's from Shab? What proof do you have the message is real and not a trick to get you away from the protection of the palace guards?"

"He sent this." Reaching under the neckline of her blouse, Adiva extracted a golden medallion on a fine cord and held it out on her palm. "He was wearing it when he rescued Lila and me."

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Rima stared at the medallion, a twin to the one she'd left in safekeeping with her mother when she'd come to Tarkassa. "That bears the royal symbol of Vardon."

"Shab didn't tell me that. I wonder how he got it." She slipped the cord from around her neck and passed it to Rima. "What do you think?"

Opening her sensitivity to metals, Rima closed her hand around the golden disk and felt the resonance unique to the gold and traces of other elements used only for the royal family. Reverently, she traced the Vardonian pine tree set against a lightning bolt. Then, barely breathing, she turned it over. On the back, she saw Haj's initials intertwined. With that proof came a flood of memories of happy days with her older brother. She closed her eyes, struggling to regain control of her whirling emotions.

Adiva touched her arm. "Rima, are you all right?"

"Yes. Just thinking about Haj." With great reluctance, she returned the medallion to Adiva. "You asked how your friend acquired the medallion. I believe he found it in Vardon on my brother's body."

"How could that be? Shab isn't a killer."

"I didn't say Haj was murdered." Rima rubbed the middle of her forehead. "Six weeks before the sultan invaded Saleem-Jibal, my brother died in a landslide. Shab may have found his remains."

They slipped out of the central palace gate, mingling with the servants going to the Summer Solstice festival.

Many carried food baskets and bundles, prepared to spend the day in town, stopping to picnic when they grew hungry.

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Anyone who bothered to take a closer look at Rima and Adiva saw two young servant women off to spend a day honoring the Goddess, celebrating, and browsing through the marketplace.

Rima and Adiva gradually worked their way to the outer edge of the crowded market to where the traveling horse sellers held their stock in rope corrals.

Haj had taught Rima how to choose a good horse, and also the finer parts of bargaining.

At the second horse trader, she found two strong, calm mounts and struck a deal that included clean, supple, well-mended tack and a horse blanket for each.

As they each led their mount out of town, through the open gates, the guards barely checked them, other than to warn them about the dangers of two women traveling alone.

Like other travelers, they stopped at the public spring and filled their water skins from water flowing out of stone pitchers held by carved water sprites.

* * * *

Two days later, high in the mountains near the border of Vardon, Rima and Adiva halted on an overlook shaded by an ancient fireoak. A few paces behind them, the bulk of the mountain rose higher. An unexpected bonus was the small spring flowing from the side and rippling down a steep series of rocky steps into a glittering pool.

Rima dismounted, ground hitched her gelding, Swiftwind, and went to help Adiva ease out of the saddle.

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Willow and Silvertip swooped down and perched on a thick branch overhead. Willow said, *::The young princess has been a good traveler. She helped collect firewood, prepared the sleeping spots, and never complained.::*

Silvertip ruffled his wings and settled them smoothly along his sides. *::My forever-friend is brave and strong, but this has been a hard trip for her. The sultan has kept her sheltered.::*

Smiling, Rima looked up at the two fairy-dragons.
::Silvertip, how did you get so smart?:

::I learned it from my parents.:: The young male opened his mouth in a parody of a human smile, then snapped it closed. *::Now I have a new teacher—my forever friend.::*

By now, Adiva had dismounted and stood beside her patient gelding, Chocolate, one hand braced on the saddle. Silvertip rocked forward off the branch, glided down, and made a gentle landing on her shoulder. Tenderly, he rubbed his silver-tipped muzzle on her cheek, crooning soft, encouraging sounds.

Rima closed out the silent conversation between the princess and the young fairy-dragon to give them privacy.

She asked Willow, *::Did you see any signs of danger within an hour's ride, other than the hunting pair of tyrano-dragosaurs in the valley?:*

::All clear,:: she said with a flip of her blue-and-silver wings, *::but that can quickly change.::*

Rima raised her voice slightly, "We'll stop here for lunch."

"Thank the goddess," Adiva said, stroking Silvertip's head.
"What can I do?"

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"Set out some fruit, cheese, and flat bread, while I get water and tend to our horses." Rima opened one saddlebag and took out a small bundle of food. Adiva joined her carrying the rain tarp that had been folded over her bedroll.

As the young princess spread the ground cover and set about unpacking food, Rima led the horses to a spot where they could browse on the foliage near the spring and reach the small pool for water. She loosened their saddles, slipped off each mount's bridle, and replaced it with a halter so they could easily eat and drink.

While the horses grazed on the grass and tender plants, Rima filled the water skins with cold liquid bubbling directly out of the mountainside. As she performed the routine task, her thoughts went back to her last conversation with Khalid as he'd prepared to leave on a scouting trip.

He'd brushed the backs of his fingers across her cheek, saying he'd miss their nights together. Closing her eyes, she struggled with the heady rush of heat at the memory of those joyous, intimate times.

Before leaving, he'd shown his faith in her when he'd returned her crystal knife, saying he trusted her to protect Adiva.

Rima's stomach clenched. Trust could be fragile—easily broken if one person even suspected the other had betrayed him. Is that what Khalid would believe when he returned to the palace and found her and Adiva gone?

* * * *

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Khalid strode into the harem and brushed off the attention of his perfumed concubines. Once, he would have lingered, enjoying their seductive poses, but compared to Rima's natural grace and sensuality, they seemed artificial.

"Summon the Vardonian princess," he ordered, eager to see her following three days of chasing—but never catching—a small party of bandits. After he'd finally turned toward home, there'd been no more signs of them. Scouts he'd sent to backtrack their trail reported the farmers and herdsman in the region had returned to their normal activities, each one sending thanks to Sultan Barakah for ridding them of the rogues.

He frowned at Rima's delay in coming to him.

::Oak,:: he asked the green-and-brown fairy-dragon perched on his shoulder, *::where is Rima?::*

::Ask the wind.:: With that ambiguous response, the little creature sprang into the air and flew the short distance to the decorative fountain set in the curve of windows at one end of the harem.

Khalid turned at the sound of a door opening, set to greet the enticing woman who'd haunted his thoughts the last three days.

Instead, Faridah hurried toward him.

"Son of my beloved husband"—Faridah sank into a deeper curtsy than she'd ever granted him—"I await your pleasure."

"Rise, Sultana Valide, Chief of the Harem Women." Khalid completed the formal ritual.

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Before he could again order Rima's presence, Faridah grasped his hand. "Please, come into the privacy of my quarters and all will be made clear."

The odd note in Faridah's voice and her nervous glances warned Khalid something wasn't right.

He strode in—all senses alert—and settled in the chair she'd indicated. Oak came to rest on his shoulder.

In the meantime, the Sultana Valide poured some beverage from a pitcher into a jeweled goblet and added ice brought from the high mountains and stored in an ice cave. Then she unlocked a small ornate chest on the low table placed in front of the chair where he sat. She raised the lid, and took out a wrinkled sheet of paper with one of its edges scorched. "Two days ago, I learned that your Vardonian bond servant and Princess Adiva were nowhere to be found in the palace."

"Missing?" He snapped to his feet, seething with anger. "You should've sent word immediately."

"I did. The messenger is still looking for you."

He started toward the door, determined to find Adiva and Rima. "How could they have left the palace unnoticed—and why?" he asked in a cold voice.

"Wait, honored stepson. This note to the bondservant may tell us."

"To Rima?"

As he swung around more fully to face the sultana, she smoothed the paper and gave it to him. "When my chief handmaiden went to Rima's room, she found this at the front of the fireplace where it had escaped the flames."

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Khalid turned his attention to the note—haunted by a bleak foreboding.

The opening salutation was like a fist to his gut.

My Dear Niece,

The time has arrived for you to escape the grasp of that Tarkassan rogue, and come to me at Bloodrock Canyon with the Princess Adiva. Use the Green Valley Pass. It's the quickest route. As we planned, I have sent her the royal medallion and a forged note from the one she knows as Shab. She'll be easy to persuade.

Do not inform your father. He is a traitor to the Vardonian people.

Your Loving Uncle,

Wassif

Khalid crumpled the note, so consumed by rage a fine, red mist fell across his vision. Adiva would be back in the hands of the man who'd kidnapped and raped her. Almost as bad was the fact Rima had schemed to make it happen.

"The Vardonian bitch deceived both my sister and me," he said bitterly.

Faridah rested one hand, briefly, on his arm. "I tried to warn you—"

Impatiently he waved her away, too occupied in controlling his anger to speak. A deep sense of betrayal ate at his soul.

Oak spread his wings and leaped into the air, hissing his displeasure. *::Do not speak ill of the Princess Rima.::*

"To the devil with you," Khalid said in a voice so cold Oak faltered in the air and Faridah stumbled back a few steps.

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Oak opened his jaws. Smoke, and the faint odor of sulfur, trickled out. *::I would flame you for the insult to my princess, but that would displease her.::*

::Her actions more than displease me. Get out of my sight.::

A low growl erupted from the fairy-dragon. He flew around the room once, then disappeared through a concealed ventilation shaft.

Khalid shook his head in disgust. He'd lost his self-control to the point where he argued with a creature small enough to sit on his shoulder.

The note crackled as he crushed it in his fist. "How in the thirteen hells did this come to my body servant undiscovered by the guards at the gate?"

"I do not know. Lila has disappeared and even the other servants conspire..."

He brushed aside her answer. "It doesn't matter. I'll wait until I have Adiva and that lying, deceitful Vardonian bitch back in the palace."

* * * *

After the break for lunch, Rima and Adiva made their way down the winding trail toward the valley. The soft cllop of the horses' hooves and the rising temperature lulled them. Willow dozed on Rima's shoulder and Silvertip napped on Adiva's bedroll lashed behind her saddle.

They were partway through a narrow section of trail when a spatter of rocks tumbled down the mountainside. Rima sat up straighter and unhooked her short bow. Her skin crawled

with sudden tension. She scanned the potential hiding places above and around them.

Then an arrow flashed across the trail in front of Rima, embedding itself in a tree trunk on the other side.

Willow launched herself into the air, calling, *::Danger, danger.::* Silvertip joined her.

In the brief moment it took for Willow to take wing, Rima notched an arrow in the string, and fired it at the bowman.

She looked back at Adiva in time to see a bandit leap at the young princess from a boulder. Adiva's horse shied away and the bandit tumbled to the ground.

Another bandit raced toward the princess with his sword raised. Heart pounding, Rima took a deep breath to steady her aim, and shot an arrow at him. It missed when he moved at the last moment. Quickly, she set another arrow and fired. This time the bandit went down with the arrow in his chest.

She swallowed back her nausea and notched another arrow, grateful her mount had been trained to respond to leg signals.

Silvertip dropped from the sky, spitting flames at Adiva's attackers.

Willow hovered a moment longer, then swooped down, flaming a bandit who raced toward Rima. His screams seemed to fuel the other bandits' fury. They galloped toward her from the front and the rear. Others swarmed from both sides of the trail, appearing out of the dust churned up by the horses' hooves.

A man gripped her horse's bridle, dragging on it to stop her mount. Leaning forward, she slashed his hand with her

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crystal blade. A blow to her right shoulder paralyzed all the nerves in her arm. It hung useless. The knife fell from her fingers. Then she was besieged by the two riders and more men on foot.

While she twisted and turned, fighting for her life, she was aware of the two fairy-dragons spouting fire and wreaking havoc among the attackers.

Behind her, Adiva screamed.

Before the despairing sound died, cruel hands pulled Rima off the horse and took her down to the ground, forcing her hands behind her. Sharp pain blossomed in the back of her head.

Then she knew nothing more.

CHAPTER 7

Rima woke with aching muscles and a dull pain in her head. It was sunset—close to full dark—but she didn't remember making camp or falling asleep.

The smoke from a fire carried the aroma of roasting meat. Adiva's been busy, she thought—smiling at idea of that once-pampered princess catching game, cleaning and skinning it out, building a fire, and—

"She's conscious," a male voice announced.

"It's about time," another man said. "Look at me, prisoner."

Prisoner? Rima tried to sit up and discovered she was already in a seated position, hands tied behind her back, and bound to the rough bark of a tree by ropes. Her cloak was gone and she shivered in the chill.

"Rima, thank the goddess you're alive," Adiva said in a low voice.

"Silence, prisoner," the harsh voice commanded.

Slowly, Rima turned her face toward the sound of her friend's voice. Adiva had been similarly bound to a nearby tree. She was watching Rima. In the last orange glow of the setting sun, Adiva's face showed streaks of dried tears and a bruise on one cheek.

At this evidence of abuse, Rima's temper flared. She tugged on her bounds, but only succeeded in rubbing the ropes into her already-tender wrists.

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"Struggle as much as you want, bitch." A bald, beefy male wearing a grimy leather vest over his shirt, and dark pants tucked into desert boots, swaggered into view. "Ain't nothin' to me if you cut up yer own skin."

Rima went still and pasted a disinterested expression on her face.

The beefy male moved closer, one hand resting on the ornate hilt of his sword in its scabbard. "Yer lovin' uncle, Prince Wassif Al Najib, is eager to see you and Princess Barakah. He has unfinished business with her." He gave a nasty laugh.

Adiva gasped.

The bandit leader grinned at her, then looked at Rima. "Too bad our leader issued orders to save you bitches for himself. I kinda fancy a tumble with a piece or two of royal tail. So do my men."

Adiva let out a low sob.

He chuckled and strolled away, shouting for someone named Zero.

Rima said, "Don't give up. We're still alive. When Uncle Wassif arrives, he'll make them release us."

"You don't understand," Adiva said in a shaky tone. "Wassif Al Najib is the man who kidnapped me and raped Lila."

* * * *

Two days after he'd left the palace, and three days from the time his sister and Rima had slipped away, Khalid reined to a halt on an overlook high in the mountains near the

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border of Vardon. An ancient fireoak near the canyon edge caught the last rays of the setting sun in its topmost branches. A few paces behind him and his small band of trusted warriors, the shadowed bulk of the mountain rose higher. The sunset glow reflected back muted orange and gold light from spring water rippling down a steep series of rocky steps into a dark pool.

When he'd started out in pursuit of the women, he'd set a hard pace, determined to catch the deceiving bitch before she delivered Adiva to the bastard at Bloodrock Canyon. The first blaze of near-madness he'd experienced while reading the note had settled into a cold contempt for a woman who would willingly betray a friend.

Now he was beginning to have doubts. He thought of the scorched note currently in his carry pouch. What proof did he have, other than the word of a servant totally dedicated to Faridah, that it had come from Prince Wassif Al Najib?

Captain Dahab joined him. "*Sidi*, I have found more footprints of the princess and your bondservant, and signs of their horses heading east."

"Good work, Captain." Khalid looked back at his other men. They had each dismounted to give their horse a rest, but stood ready to swing into the saddle at his order.

"We've traveled since before dawn with only a short pause to water the mounts," Khalid said, putting aside his desire to immediately follow the women's trail in spite of the gathering night. "Soon it'll be dark. The men and their horses need a break and there's room off the trail to camp where there's fresh water and forage."

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Dahab bowed, then strode away, leading his mount and issuing orders.

Oak came to land on Khalid's shoulder. *::Willow and her forever-friend have been here with your sister and Silvertip. Their scents are in the grass and trees.::*

Khalid reached up to stroke the fairy-dragon's head. "Since we left the city gates, you've done well in finding Rima and Adiva's trail. Now we have to reach them before they ride into danger—if it isn't already too late."

* * * *

Rima had barely absorbed the distasteful knowledge that her father's brother was a kidnapper and rapist when she suffered another shock. From a distance, the disheveled, vacant-eyed servant who answered to the name Zero looked like her brother, Haj—the one whose death she still mourned. She told herself it was a trick of the failing light, but the resemblance was incredible.

As he shuffled toward them, carrying two battered metal cups, Adiva said, in a disbelieving tone, "Shab? That looks like Shab."

"The one who rescued you?"

"Yes. He doesn't recognize me," Adiva said in a low voice. "I've changed a lot in three years."

Both women fell silent at the approach of the baldheaded guard striding behind the servant.

Zero reached Rima, gave her a blank stare, and held out one of the mugs. This close, in spite of new scrapes and

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bruises, she knew it was her brother. What had happened to him in the last three years?

"Yer brain's as empty as yer name," the guard said, stopping behind the servant. "How can the bitch hold a cup with her hands tied behind her back?"

Zero turned a vague look at the guard. "Uh, I dunno. Mebbe you could cut her ropes?"

"Fool! Hold the cup ta her lips. Make sure she drinks every drop. Prince Wassif has ordered the sleepy cup fer both bitches."

"Sleepy cup?" Zero sniffed at the cloudy liquid in the metal container. "It smells like a drink of *cazwool*-for-brains."

Rima's heart lurched. Haj used to tease her by calling her *cazwool*-for-brains. Was it a coincidence or did he recognize her?

The guard took a menacing step toward the servant. "Just hold the cup to her lips, dummy."

"Yes sir, yes sir." Zero crowded close to Rima, his body between her and the guard. He tipped the cup to just below her lower lip, but dribbled the liquid down her chin and into her clothes, all hidden by the shadows.

"Sleepy time," he crooned.

Rima took the hint and yawned. She'd identified the odor of the spilled liquid as the brew of a powerful herb used for a sedative. The drink would have made her helpless to give even token resistance to whatever happened.

Moving to Adiva, he started to extend the second cup, then tripped over a hidden root and sprawled on the ground, splashing the liquid across the dirt.

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"Fool!" The guard placed the hard sole of his boot on Zero's butt and shoved him into the ground. "Get another cupful for the Tarkassan bitch from the captain."

Rima's throat ached with anguish and defeat. The Haj she knew would have fought back, not passively accepted insults.

Playing the part of someone drugged, she let her head loll forward, and closed her eyes to slits. Maybe an opportunity would come to escape—although how that could happen, with her and Adiva tied up, and Adiva soon to be drugged, she didn't know.

From a hiding place in the trees, Willow said, *::Don't give up on the princess or your brother. He brings a cup for her, but this has water not a sedative.::*

Rima's spirits lifted. *::Does Haj really recognize me?::*
::Yes. He didn't know his true identity until the bandits brought Adiva and you into camp.::

Haj. Her brother still alive. For one precious moment she felt dizzy with joy, then the danger of their circumstances overwhelmed her with the force of a landslide. They were guarded by hardened warriors—cold and dangerous—whose only goals were to loot, rape, and destroy.

In spite of her effort to stay fully awake, exhaustion caused Rima to doze off. She suddenly woke with someone's hand over her mouth. A familiar voice muttered, "It's me. Haj. Don't make a sound."

She gave a small nod, while her heart swelled with happiness at her brother regaining his memory. Mentally, she reached for Willow to share the good news. But the fairy-dragon's mind was focused on something else.

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Haj said in a bare whisper, "Adiva said Willow is contacting Oak."

"Then Oak will tell Khalid where we are."

"We'll meet him on the trail." Haj slashed the ropes binding Rima to the tree, and started on the ones around her wrists. "Almost through," he said in a barely-there tone.

Rima looked toward the camp where the bandits slept. Pale light from both moons showed the men rolled up in blankets. Beyond the clearing, the forest loomed in black, impenetrable shadows. All was quiet. Even the fire had died down to a few glowing embers. She started to ask about guards. Earlier, she'd seen the first one settle on a boulder where he could watch over the bandits and prisoners.

"Got it." Haj said. "Hurry before our escape is discovered."

Rima tried to rise. Pain from the returning blood circulation throbbed through her arms and shoulders, but they wouldn't move. Even her leg muscles refused to obey.

"Give me a minute," she said through teeth clenched in agony.

Haj nodded and went to release Adiva.

Rima heard a muffled moan from the Tarkassan princess, and looked anxiously at the sleeping bandits. Still quiet.

By now she was able to struggle to her feet. Every passing second marked the time left before they were discovered. Her mind fluttered in circles—like a fairy-dragon with a broken wing—shouting, hurry, hurry.

She staggered to where Haj supported Adiva, and silently pointed to the surrounding forest, mouthing the words,

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"Horses. Escape." With each step, she found her strength and control improving.

Haj nodded in the direction of the rope corral holding the bandits' mounts, set on the other side of the sleepers.

Halfway carrying Adiva, he led the way into the sheltering dark of the trees. Rima's mouth was dry with apprehension. She searched the shadows for guards.

Still quiet.

They crept from tree to tree, always drawing closer to where the horses dozed.

One man stood guard, his shoulder propped against a tree where ropes forming the temporary corral were fastened.

She'd noticed most of the bandits using saddle blankets as part of their bedroll, but a few blankets had been draped over thick bushes nearby. Among those were hers and Adiva's.

Willow fluttered down and landed on her shoulder. *::Oak says the sultan and his men are camped where we stopped under the old fireoak. As soon as they break camp, they're coming to help.::*

Coming to help Adiva, Rima thought, but what about me? In Khalid's eyes, have I become a runaway bond-servant, condemned to be punished, or will he understand I had to leave with his sister for her own good?

During the time she'd wrestled with the problem of Khalid, Haj had gestured for her and Adiva to stay hidden. Then he'd disappeared into the night.

She realized he was going to do something about the guard.

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Suddenly the guard slumped forward, caught by Haj who lowered the man to the ground, then pulled him into the cover of the forest.

Haj came into sight again, easing under the ropes and into the corral. He moved so quietly, the horses weren't disturbed.

Rima murmured to Adiva, "Let's go help. Swiftwind and Chocolate know us."

Together, the women moved slowly toward the double rope side. They each lifted their own saddle blanket from the collection on the bushes, slipped into the corral, and approached the horses they had ridden all the way from Vermillion.

Torn between the need to go slowly and the fear their escape would be discovered before they got away, Rima murmured to the horses—the sound no louder than wind sighing through the trees.

Her gelding lipped at her hair and blew a warm gust of greeting.

"Hush, Swiftwind." She patted the strong neck, then smoothed the horse blanket into place. There was no time to find her saddle. That didn't matter. Many times she and Haj had ridden without saddle or bridle in Vardon when they brought in mounts from the sprawling Royal Home Farm pastures.

Acutely conscious of the passing time, she quickly clipped lead ropes onto Swiftwind's halter to use as reins, then did the same for Adiva's horse, Chocolate.

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The bright moonshine illuminated their every move. Anyone who woke and glanced in the direction of the corral would raise an alarm.

Even as she and Adiva led their horses through the opening in the corral where Haj had cut the ropes, and into the trees, Rima knew she had to do something to delay the bandits' pursuit of them.

She gestured to Haj and Adiva to ride in a northwest direction, mouthing, "I'll join you."

Adiva shook her head.

Haj drew closer to Rima and whispered fiercely, "You go first with the princess. I'll scatter the other horses and catch up."

Even in the pale moonshine, Rima recognized the stubborn set of her brother's mouth. She leaned to the side enough to grip the halter on Adiva's mount, and sent her gelding forward with the other horse beside, trusting to Swiftwind's and Chocolate's better night vision to avoid obstacles.

Keeping her voice low, Adiva said, "Let go of my horse. I have to help Shab—uh, Haj."

"Haj works faster alone." Rima turned her attention to the dangerous ride, where an unwary rider could be swept from the saddle by low-hanging branches.

Willow sat in front of her, claws gripping the edge of the saddle blanket, directing their passage between and around the thick, pitch-dark trees. Adiva had sent Silvertip to guide Haj. The muffled sound of Chocolate's hooves in the thick layer of fallen leaves assured her Adiva was right behind them.

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With each passing moment, Rima listened for sounds of pursuit, while icy chills of fear rippled down her spine. Had Haj escaped safely after releasing the bandit's horses?

"Goddess protect him," she prayed in a whisper.

Moments later, Willow announced, *::Haj comes, but bad men follow.::*

Rima slowed Swiftwind to a walk and made room for Adiva to come up on one side. Keeping her voice low, so only Adiva could hear, Rima said, "Haj is coming, but the bandits are close behind him. Be ready to change direction when he arrives."

"I'm ready." Adiva squared her shoulders and sat straighter. "Can we help him?"

Rima grinned. "I have an idea. If it works, the bandits will get a surprise."

* * * *

Khalid scanned the winding trail ahead, bathed in the pink shadows of early dawn. The tension coiling in his gut had begun before sunrise when Oak had wakened him to tell him Adiva, Rima, and their rescuer had escaped from the bandits.

Even as he and his men had quickly rolled up their bedrolls, lashed them behind their saddles, and headed out, the bitter question had driven him—would the escapees reach this trail and his protection, or had they been cut off by the rogues?

Now Khalid and his party were partway through a narrow section of the trail, caught between the mountainside to his

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right, and a steep drop-off to the valley on his left. Ahead, a lone pine tree clung to the edge.

Loose stones from a previous small landslide made the passage hazardous to the horses' legs and hooves. Khalid let his stallion choose the way through the rubble. Bending from the saddle, he scrutinized the ground for hoof prints. He'd come to recognize the distinctive prints left by one of Rima or Adiva's mounts. The right front horseshoe had a notch filed on an inside edge. That flaw made their trail easy to follow for anyone who could read tracks. Once again, Khalid wondered if it had been done deliberately by the horse trader.

Dahab, close behind, said, "This slide happened either yesterday or last night."

"Yesterday, judging by the tracks."

A short distance farther along the trail brought them even with the pine. A perfect spot for an ambush, Khalid thought. That's when he saw an arrow embedded in the tree trunk. His blood went cold. Had Rima or his sister been wounded or killed?

He dismounted, sent one of his men ahead to keep watch on the trail, then scanned the ground for blood or other evidence of more violence.

Dahab joined him in the search. They could read the signs of men and horses in combat. It hadn't taken long for the bandits to overwhelm the women, but it was evident by the spent arrows with Rima's colored fletching that she'd fought.

Dahab called, "*Sidi*, the bandits left one of their dead."

Khalid strode toward his second-in-command, still scanning the surroundings for more clues. He caught the

glimmer of something trapped at the base of a clump of bunchweed on the side of the road and hunkered down on his haunches for a closer look.

"Rima's knife." He gripped the hilt of the distinctive crystal knife, filled with greater foreboding. She never would have left it behind. One more evidence of her capture.

The rising sun glittered on the blade, reminding him of three years earlier when he'd invaded Saleem-Jibal and gained access to the royal suites by breaking through a decorative window of leaded glass.

He'd been caught off guard by the slender sixteen-year-old when she'd stabbed him in an effort to defend her mother and siblings.

Years later, after being brought to Vermillion as a captive, Rima had shown kindness to his sister. As a result, Adiva had blossomed into a self-confident young woman.

Only days ago, he'd returned the knife to Rima so she could protect Adiva.

Khalid looked around at signs of the resistance put up by the two lone women against a party of hardened fighters.

It was clear Rima had fought to defend, not betray, Adiva.

A chill of premonition slid down Khalid's spine. Would his request for her to protect his younger sister end with Rima's injury or ... death?

More shaken than he cared to examine by the idea of Rima wounded or dying, Khalid carefully wrapped the sharp blade in one of the broad strips of *cazleather* he kept for emergency repairs, and tucked it into his pouch.

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Then he joined Dahab and studied the corpse at their feet. Rima's arrow protruded from the man's chest.

Crouching beside the body, Khalid searched for evidence of who had hired the bastard. Moments later, he held a copper medallion set with a Vardonian pine tree against a bolt of lightning. The name of the dead fighter's leader circled the emblems—Wassif Al Najib.

* * * *

Tired from a night of alternately riding and walking to save their horses' energy—while dodging trees and their pursuers—Rima and Adiva crouched in the sheltering bushes and studied the section of woods curving along one edge of open grass, and the path crossing the lush valley.

Midmorning sunlight bathed the steep flank of the mountain beyond and the beginning of the trail leading up through Green Valley Pass, then across to Tarkassa and safety—if they could out ride and outwit the pursuing bandits.

"Out ride," Rima muttered. "How? Our horses are close to exhaustion."

Adiva rubbed her face tiredly. "When Haj gets back from scouting the back trail, maybe he'll have good news."

"We can hope for the best and prepare for the worst," Rima said, parroting her mother's instructions for times of trouble.

::Haj is coming fast,:: Willow said as she swooped down to a branch beside Rima.

"Get ready to move," Rima said. "Haj is in a hurry."

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Silvertip burst into sight, followed closely by Haj leading his mount.

"I finally learned how Wassif's men were able to find our trail so quickly." He crouched beside Swiftwind and pointed at the fresh tracks. "The right front horseshoe has a notch filed on the inside edge."

"Oh, Goddess," Rima said in dismay. "I've been leading them to us all the time."

Adiva touched her shoulder, "Don't blame yourself, sister of my heart. It isn't your fault."

Haj straightened and gave Rima a brotherly kiss on the forehead. "Adiva's right, sis. Stop acting like a goatasaur having a fit."

Rima noticed him holding Adiva's hand, and the look of trust on the sixteen-year-old's face. That trust solidified a plan taking shape.

"Let's separate for a short time and confuse our 'dear uncle's' men."

She stopped her brother's protest the moment he opened his mouth. "We can meet on the trail at the spring where Adiva and I ate lunch. Haj, you and Adiva go through the woods to the beginning of the trail, then ride as fast as you can until you're out of sight around the first turn. I'll follow right after I see you start up the trail."

Rima raised one hand to forestall comments. "Wassif wants to rape Adiva, not me. I'm his niece, but she's a princess of Tarkassa, and would provide him a legitimate claim to the throne, once he forces her into marriage."

"I'll never marry the pig," Adiva said hotly.

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"The Vardonian Weapons Master once told me, 'Anyone can be broken.'" Rima saw a sudden rush of birds from the woods to the east and knew Wassif's men were coming closer. "Get going before they kill Haj as a traitor."

Adiva gave her one startled look and said, "Promise you'll come as quickly as you can."

The moment Rima said, "I promise," the young woman set her horse toward the screen of trees leading to the mountain trail.

Haj gave Rima a resigned look. "Don't do anything foolish, sis. I want you around three years from now when I persuade Adiva to marry me." Then he followed the princess.

Rima waited, giving her brother and the young Tarkassan time to get closer to the mountain trail. When she judged enough time had elapsed, she turned Swiftwind in the direction of the pursuers.

As she trotted closer to the source of disturbance, she fought her desire to wheel and run. She had never trusted Prince Wassif Al Najib, but, for her father's sake, she'd concealed that dislike. Now the freedom and lives of Haj and Adiva depended on distracting Wassif and his followers long enough for her brother and the young princess to climb up the trail and out of sight.

Rima entered the forest and paused, shivering at the sudden cool after the hot sun on the open meadow. Sunshine and shadow—light and dark, she thought. A corollary for good and evil. And she was riding toward evil.

Rima shook her head at her own foolishness. You're getting too philosophical, she chided herself.

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Mindful she could be under observation, she looked over her shoulder through the screen of trees, pasted a frightened expression on her face, then trotted in the pursuers' direction. Her heart beat faster. An acid taste of fear burned in her throat. At the same time, part of her worry eased. She'd seen Haj and Adiva reach the trail and start up. Soon they would be out of sight.

Judging the time was right, she once again headed for the rogue Vardonians.

Soon she heard the sounds of horses ahead, and the rumble of men's voices as they called back and forth. It was obvious they were arrogant enough to feel nothing would oppose them in this valley.

She mind-called to Willow, *::Dear heart, don't interfere with my attempts to distract Wassif and his men.::*

::Not even a token attack?::

::He knows you and I are bonded. If you act hostile, he'll suspect my intentions.::

::Not even one little flame?::

Rima could swear Willow was pouting. *::Save it for later. You'll know when.::*

During the brief exchange, Rima had worked her way closer to the pursuers. As the party crossed a small glade, she sent Swiftwind forward in a canter.

"Uncle Wassif, Uncle Wassif," she called—adding an edge of hysteria to her voice. "Thank the Goddess you came. I was so scared."

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She pointed to the beefy guard in the grimy vest. "He made the men tie me to a tree. He said mean things and threatened me."

Rima wanted to gag over her own act, but Wassif brought the men to a halt, apparently curious about her actions.

As long as she was on Swiftwind, she could, hopefully, catch them by surprise and bolt away.

Then more riders came into view, and she realized her only hope of delaying Wassif long enough for Haj and Adiva to get far enough away was to dismount.

Praying to the goddess for strength, Rima slid off her horse and stood with her head down, fighting her overwhelming desire to escape.

She heard Wassif's command to his men to stay alert, and the creak of his saddle as he stepped down to the ground.

"Niece," he said with false concern.

"Uncle Wassif." She gripped his cloak and clung as if he offered the only safety in a nightmare. She even managed to work up a tear, knowing he would see it as another weakness—anything to delay him and his followers.

Grimy Vest bowed from the waist and said, "Pardon, Great Leader, but Zero and the Tarkassan bitch—"

Rima overrode his words, demanding, "Uncle Wassif, you're not listening. I said this ... this creature was mean to me." She pouted like an overly-indulged young woman and prayed he didn't remember her usual behavior at home in Vardon.

Surprisingly, Wassif patted her shoulder. "Calm yourself, niece. Gork thought he was protecting my interests."

The Sultan's Revenge
by April Reid

Gork flashed her a crooked smile revealing stained and broken teeth—and a self-confidence in his own dubious charms. "Ready for that tumble in the brush, Miss High-and-Mighty?"

"Now, now, Gork, that's no way to talk to my brother's daughter." Wassif's hand slid down to her breast and, to her nauseated horror, squeezed.

It took everything in her to endure his touch. The whole situation was balanced on a knife blade whether or not he believed her.

She had to distract him as long as possible.

Then any solution was taken out her hands when he said, "Bring the chains."

She drew back, horrified at the prospect of close contact with so much metal. "Chains? Why?"

"Daughter of my traitorous brother, my sources tell me you have caught the fancy of Sultan Barakah. I'll use you to squeeze ransom from him or lure him into my hands so his enemies may bid for his body—living or dead."

"Khalid is too smart to fall for your tricks." Furious, she lunged at Wassif with her fingers curled to scratch his face, his eyes—any part of him she could reach.

Someone caught her from behind and held her in a position that prevented her from wiggling loose.

Following procedure for handling a reluctant prisoner, Gork snapped manacles on her wrists. At his brief hesitation, Wassif gestured for them to be connected by the thick links in front of her body, not behind her back.

The Sultan's Revenge
by April Reid

Any possibility of mercy was denied when he commented, "At least you can earn your keep by cooking for me as we travel, and later whoring for my men—once we reach my stronghold."

Next, the guard fastened a heavy iron collar around her slender throat, locked it, and attached a chain leash to the ring set in the front.

With each touch of iron, Rima fought to build walls of protection in her mind against the call of the metal.

In a haze of pain, she watched Gork hand the key and the leash to Wassif.

How long would she have the energy to protect her mind and body from the deadly consequences of her gift?

CHAPTER 8

Khalid lay concealed in the heavy undergrowth and twilight shadows watching Wassif's men settle around camp for the evening meal.

Earlier, he'd burrowed into this hiding place just as scouts rode into camp and reported, "All clear."

His first sight of Rima in chains had blinded him with rage. Only the hazy knowledge that revealing himself now would likely result in her suffering more punishment or death kept him frozen in place.

Once the camp was set up, Wassif had removed the leash from her neck collar and tested the links between the wrist manacles. While he'd worked, his hand had strayed to her breasts, and he'd fondled them roughly until her nipples peaked in reaction to the physical stimulation.

Wassif had taunted Rima, saying, "You pretend indifference, but your body wants me."

All the time, she'd stood silent and unmoving as if oblivious to his actions. But her face had turned as pale as bleached bone.

Now the men not occupied with grooming the horses lazily watched Rima, where she crouched beside a roughly made fire pit defined by a ring of rocks. She was tending fist-sized loaves of flatbread baking on a flat metal cook sheet. From time to time, the chains clattered on the rocks or metal. Each time, she winced and trembled.

The Sultan's Revenge
by April Reid

Strips of meat from the skinned and gutted bodies of six rabbits had been strung on wood skewers and sizzled over another section of the cook fire.

The combined aromas filled the air with a mouth-watering scent, reminding Khalid's stomach of the many hours since his last hasty meal of dried beef jerky and journey bread.

A splash of dull red on Rima's clothes showed she'd been the one to prepare the fresh kill for the bandits. Khalid already knew that from her footprints and other signs surrounding the spot where the rabbits had been field-cleaned. He'd been tracking her and the rogues since the afternoon.

Earlier, he'd left Adiva and the Vardonian prince with his men partway up the mountain pass. Anyone following their trail would believe they had all left the valley and were returning to Vermillion.

Traveling alone and on a little-used trail, he'd easily avoided the rogue's scouts. A larger party might have warned Wassif and prompted him to injure Rima, but one person could slip through.

The air was already growing cold in this high valley region, but Rima wore only a servant's festival clothing—*kut'n* pants and embroidered blouse—more suitable for the midday warmth in Vermillion. Each time she bent or stretched, the fabric pulled tight over her shapely breasts. The sight seemed to transfix the watchers.

Silently, he cursed the men and Rima. Who did she think she was, displaying her breasts when they belonged to him?

The Sultan's Revenge
by April Reid

The moment the thought formed, he wanted to kick himself. By all the devils of Ubar, Rima wasn't posturing to display her body ... she was a captive, forced to cook for Wassif's men.

He watched Rima stand and bow to Wassif. "The fire needs more fuel. May I gather some?" she asked in a subdued tone.

Khalid grinned. He'd heard the false note, but it was obvious Wassif thought she was truly cowed.

The exiled prince waved permission. "Stay within the clearing."

"Yes, master." As she turned, she hid a short, sharp stick under her sash.

Khalid smiled grimly, filled with pride at Rima's quick wit and bravery. In fact, he mused, the whole time he'd observed her and the camp, she'd maintained a meek, frightened posture. Her compliance had lulled the men.

At her first step away from the fire ring, the rope fastened to a chain around her ankle snaked along the ground, piling up drifts of dirt, twigs, and leaves. The other end had been tied to the slender trunk of the tree where Wassif's captain, Gork, lounged.

Khalid watched as she gathered dry sticks from the clearing edge. Arms loaded, she shuffled back toward the fire.

Gork called, "Watch where you're going, you clumsy bitch." On the last word, he pulled on the rope and tripped her. Because of her firewood burden, she couldn't break her fall, and went down—hard.

Others joined Gork in roaring with laughter.

The Sultan's Revenge
by April Reid

Khalid wanted to strangle the lot of them, but forced himself to stay concealed. The timing had to be right for him to stage a one-man rescue.

Oak's mental voice interrupted, *::We flame now?::*

::Wait until dark. We'll have a better chance to catch the bastards by surprise, rescue Rima, and escape.::

::Willow says waiting is hard,:: Oak reported. *::She says Rima has many bruises and the metal on her is draining her energy.::*

::Metal drains her energy? How? Why?::

::It is her gift. She's a metal sensitive.::

Khalid thought of the iron links around Rima's wrist. He'd sent orders for her to wear it from the moment she'd left her home to come to him as part of Vardon's tribute. Sometimes he'd seen her rub the skin under the chain. *::Did her captive bracelet cause her physical distress?::*

Oak's mental voice throbbed with anger as he answered, *::Every day.::*

* * * *

Rima gazed at the men settled in clusters around the camp. Full night had swept across the land while they'd finished their evening meal. Skins of wine were passed back and forth. Some quietly talked while they idled away the time before they sought their bedrolls. Others played a tense game of dice, with occasional threats and brief flurries of violence as they won and lost *dirhems* and property.

She didn't care what they did as long as she didn't draw their attention. She'd seen the surreptitious looks in her

direction, and experienced their crude comments as she'd served the food.

Two men had already climbed into their bedrolls and slept. They were probably the ones assigned as guards for the middle of the night.

Shivering in the cold, she finished cleaning the battered plates and cooking pans. Each time her chains clashed it became more difficult to maintain her internal barriers against the metal's pull.

As her mental walls grew fragile, the hum of magnetic iron deep below the valley floor resonated through her blood, joining with the chime of silver strands layered in the mountains. She had reached the point of exhaustion, but didn't dare relax her guard.

To distract herself, she added wood to the fire, grateful for the warmth, then checked the pot of oats simmering on a flat rock at the edge of the flames. When it was thick enough, she'd cover the pot and put it aside, ready for the rogue Vardonians' breakfast.

Wassif had informed her she would sleep at the base of the tree where the rope on her ankle was fastened.

A chill crept down her spine. Would she survive the night untouched by rape?

She felt a welcome presence in her mind as both Oak and Willow crooned reassurance.

Oak said, *::Haj and Adiva are safe. They travel with Khalid's handpicked guards.::*

::Khalid made it to safety?:: Rima fought to keep her expression placid, but her heart leaped with joy. *::Wassif*

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bragged about how he'd chased Khalid and his guard back to Vermillion like a pack of scared firan-mice.::

Rima ducked her head and rearranged a couple of logs at the fire's edge to hide her expression. Fiercely she said, *:: I'm glad they tricked Wassif and got away safely.::*

Willow said in a gentle tone, *::Dearling, the brave sultan has returned alone to rescue you. He only waits for the best moment to surprise Wassif's followers and release you.::*

::Alone? To face Wassif's hardened warriors with no backup?:: The heady joy she'd felt evaporated like water in dry sand. *::Tell him to go away—to go back to Tarkassa.::*

Rima's attention was forcefully drawn to the sudden commotion among the dice players. She watched Gork jump to his feet, throw down a limp wineskin, and stalk toward Wassif, one hand on his sword.

"I'm tired of chasing around the fuckin' countryside when we could be back at home base with plenty of entertainment and women—willing or not."

Wassif stood and faced Gork. "If you hadn't allowed Zero to escape with the two women I wanted, we'd be halfway back home."

The beefy brute spat on the ground. "That's what I think of your plans."

He glanced at Rima, then looked back at Wassif. "We still have one bitch here. You want to keep her t' yerself, but the boys and I have other plans."

A rumble of agreement came from many of the dice players and others seated around the temporary camp.

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Wassif gripped the jeweled hilt of his sword. "I'm your leader and the one who pays for your services."

"I'll take the princess bitch as payment. The boys will back me because they'll all have a turn after I get tired of fucking her until she screams."

Drawing his sword, Wassif said, "I will not have a traitor among my men. Your services are no longer required. Men, seize him."

No one moved.

Silently, Gork drew his sword. He slashed at Wassif and barely missed. "I'll take my pay—now."

Wassif deflected the blade and beat in against his opponent in a flurry of thrusts. Both men seemed evenly matched.

While Rima kept an eye on the two fighters, she gripped the rope tied to her leg shackle and rubbed it back and forth on a sharp rock, frantically hoping the sounds of the fight would mask the clank and rattle of her chains as she worked to free herself.

Oak appeared out of the dark, carrying a bundle in his claws. *::Sultan Khalid has sent your knife. Get ready.::*

With a low cry of joy, she opened the roll, snatched up her crystal knife, and cut the rope tether.

As the last strand parted, she heard a hoarse cry and froze. Had someone noticed her escape attempt?

No. She watched Gork hammer aside her uncle's blade and thrust his curved sword into Wassif's chest. He pulled it loose and stabbed again, this time lower, while blood poured out of the fallen man's body.

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After wiping his bloody sword on Wassif's cloak, Gork extracted the set of keys for Rima's chains from the dead man's pouch and held them high, saying, "Now I'll take my pay."

Silently, Khalid appeared out of the dark at her side, his sword already in his hand. "Blackfire is waiting in the trees behind us. He knows you. Slip away and mount him, while I cover your escape.

At that moment someone discovered Khalid and shouted, "The Tarkassan bastard is here."

Cursing, Gork charged toward Khalid with his sword ready, while the other fighters drew their weapons or scrambled for bows and arrows.

"I can't leave you." Rima gripped her crystal knife, hampered by the chains between her manacled wrists.

"Get out of here," Khalid ordered, even as he stepped forward to intercept Gork.

"Not without you." Rima plucked the end of a burning branch from the fire and swung it back and forth in a sizzling arc between them and two swordsmen.

Oak and Willow dove into view, flaming the fighters who threatened Rima and Khalid. *::We have called for help,::* Oak said, targeting a bowman as he notched an arrow. *::Soon more fairy-dragons will come.::*

::Tell them to hurry.::

Moments later, the promised flight of fairy-dragons appeared and attacked the Vardonian rogues.

Rima, sickened by the coppery smell of blood and the stink of burning flesh, lost track of time as she battled to protect

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Khalid's back while he faced off with Gork. Other swordsmen came at him in twos and threes. By some miracle, only a couple of sword thrusts got past his blade, but they were enough to leave blood trailing from his arm and thigh.

She heard a mental cry from Willow and watched helplessly while her bond fairy-dragon spiraled toward the ground with one wing sliced from body to tip. Oak and two other fairy-dragons followed her down, cushioning her fall with their bodies. She couldn't fly, so they formed a circle of protection above her.

Rima paid for her own distraction when the blade of a sword, wielded by one of Gork's close friends, swept toward her shoulder. Automatic responses, drilled into her by her old sword master, took over. She deflected the blade with her crystal knife. The force shattered the glittering stone, but the iron blade grated on her right wrist manacle and rattled the chain.

"Goddess, help," she gasped.

Suddenly an unknown part of her mind opened. A stern voice said, *::Faithful daughter of Vardon and Tarkassa, I have heard your plea. Are you willing to do anything—even give your life—to win this battle between evil and good?::*

::Yes. Anything, Great Goddess. However, if it is Your will, please spare Sultan Barakah and help him return safely with his sister and my brother to Tarkassa. Khalid is a good and fair man. The country will prosper under his reign::

The Goddess spoke again. This time her voice was gentle. *::Daughter, you see him through the eyes of love.::*

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::That is true, but it hasn't blinded me to his character.::

She caught her breath at her own boldness. *::May I have your answer?::*

::There will be pain for you, but Sultan Khalid Barakah will be spared.::

::Then I am content. Please show me what I must do.::

The exchange between her and the Goddess had taken no more than the speed of thought. Suddenly, Rima knew how to take the warring strands of metallic vibrations and shape them into a powerful whole.

First she called on the iron miles deep beneath her feet, and felt the boiling energy as it rushed to the surface and into her blood. With it came the first wave of pain, but she was ready—knowing it would get worse. Next she called to the silver and copper in the mountains, adding their resonance to the growing power. While she worked, the metal of nearby blades, shaped by force and fire, pressed against her mind. Now she added them to a throbbing ball of energy.

Sparks flickered around her—sparks that sent a jolt through anyone who touched her, except Khalid.

An arrow sped into the zone of protection. The iron head added its strength to her power while the shaft disappeared in a blaze.

Raising her chained wrists in the air, Rima called on the Goddess to use her as a channel to unleash the power against the rogues.

Lightning rumbled in the cloudless sky. High above, the stars twinkled, and both moons dipped and glowed.

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On the ground, streaks of potent energy danced across the camp and into the trees, striking down all who had called Wassif, "Master."

As swiftly as they had come, the spirit flames winked out.

Rima had one moment of clarity to look around the camp and see the fallen men and melted blades before she collapsed.

Khalid, with the slain Gork at his feet, had watched Rima in awe as the luminous ball had formed around her then sent out spears of light to decimate Wassif's men.

Now, she swayed on her feet, hair plastered to her head by sweat, and her skin gone gray.

Before he could reach Rima, her manacled hands went to the iron band circling her throat. Gasping, she sank to her knees and clawed at the metal.

Rima's obvious pain knotted his guts.

Calling himself a thousand kinds of fool, Khalid searched Gork's body for the key to unlock the collar. A low, angry hum came from the collar and the chain fastened between her wrists. The sound echoed in the long dagger at his waist and the smaller one strapped above his ankle. Even his sword, laid beside him on the ground, resonated.

As he dropped to one knee to reach the lock, the key in his hand vibrated and grew warm. He gripped the collar—shocked at the warmth in the metal—unlocked it, pried open the iron band, and drew it from her neck.

She slumped forward, bracing herself on her hands. The iron chain holding her wrists clattered on the hard-packed

dirt. Her heavy spill of hair fell to one side of her neck, revealing an angry red welt in the shape of the ring.

Quickly, he unlocked the manacles, racing the growing heat in them and the connecting links. His fingers brushed the captive's chain circling her wrist. Even that was warm, but he didn't have the tool to cut it away.

Rima, caught in the power of the iron bonds, fought to free her mind from the metal's seductive call. It would be so easy to surrender—to join the cleansing flames and let the iron in her blood, the copper and other trace elements in her body fuse with the bands of ore deep in the planet.

"No," she protested. "I won't give in..."

Her protective mental walls wavered. Every metallic object in the campsite vibrated.

On her hands and knees, she fought through the blinding pain of her gift gone rogue while her vision blurred. As her control slipped further, energy from Khalid's weapons joined in the attack.

She heard Khalid ask, "By all the demons in hell, what's wrong?" His fingers gripped her shoulder. At the moment of contact, she sensed a disruption in the power flow.

"Goddess, help!" Drawing in her last shreds of control, she raised a wall in her mind to cut off the deadly stream before it totally drained her life force.

She couldn't think. Her muscles trembled at the effort to support her body. An odd weakness swept through her blood, and she felt her barriers begin to crumble.

Khalid's hand tightened on her skin. "Answer me," he demanded.

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by April Reid

"Need ... closer ... contact." Her own voice sounded far away.

Would she finally be consumed by the fire?

CHAPTER 9

A week after Wassif's death and her battle using the power of her gift, Rima strolled through the fragrant Women's Garden at the palace in Vermillion with Willow riding on one shoulder. A guardswoman assigned to help the fairy-dragon followed at a respectful distance. Willow was making a good recovery. Her slit wing was still bandaged and bound to her body to facilitate healing, but she was in a lighthearted mood.

::Of course I'm cheerful,:: Willow had answered when Rima asked if she was really feeling okay and not putting on an act for Oak's sake. *::Everyone in the palace treats me like a heroine—special food, fine sand to polish my skin, and warm, fragrant oil massages.::* The dainty fairy-dragon made a low humming sound of pleasure. *::Besides, my mate shouldn't blame himself for me being injured. The gods know, he took dangerous chances in the fight.::*

::Both our men are stubborn and protective,:: Rima commented. She carefully settled Willow on the padded perch set in the shade of the jacaranda tree, then reclined against the pillows on the divan.

::So true.:: Willow lifted her uninjured wing, gave it a shake, and smoothed it back along her side. *::Your Sultan Khalid growled at everyone in sight until he was satisfied you were healing.::*

::I don't remember much about the trip back to here. It's mostly a blur of confusion and pain.:: Rima rubbed the bridge of her nose with two fingers. *::But I do remember waking up*

long enough once we arrived to see Khalid toss the healer-priest, Jabul, out of the sleeping chamber when he tried to make me drink some of Faridah's special mixture.::

::Jabul was sent into exile.:: Willow lashed her tail. ::The sultan suspected the healer of attempting to poison you, but Jabul said it was a mild sedative. He accidentally spilled it before it could be tested.::

"Why did Khalid think Jabul's potion was poison?" Rima asked out loud.

"Because Oak told me it was bad," Khalid said as he came to sit beside Rima. "I trust him, but not Faridah."

Rima saw the weariness of betrayal in his eyes. She lay one hand on his cheek. "Don't blame yourself if the widow of your father chose to conspire against you. She's hungry for power and manipulated everyone around her to increase her influence."

"She can manipulate all she wants from lifetime confinement in the Castle of Sighs. She's on the way there now, guarded by Dahab and members of my hand-picked troop. Sariyah, Gina, Jehara, and Jamila are with her, but only as long as they choose to stay."

"You honor your father's memory with this decision. Faridah will live out her days in peace and luxury."

The darkness fled from Khalid's eyes. "You're right. He would have understood."

"What about Mahir?" Rima asked, thinking of the Khalid's teenage half-brother.

"I let him decide." Khalid's eyes glinted with pleasure. "Faridah squalled like a singed firan-mouse when Mahir chose

to remain here and, as he said, 'Learn to be an honorable man.'"

"Smart choice."

Khalid stroked the diamond-and-ruby engagement ring on her left hand. "I made an even better choice when I asked you to be forever mine in marriage."

"Tomorrow," she agreed. "I'm happy my parents and sisters, and Haj will be with us."

"They should be here. They're family and now our closest allies."

Gently, Khalid folded her fingers in his strong hand, and the lovely, sweet warmth of desire spread to her heart. "Are you lonely with the other women gone?"

"Are you teasing me? I have Adiva and Haj, now that he's Vardon's royal ambassador to your court, and my fairy-dragon friends." Smiling up at him, she added, "Best of all, I have you."

Rising, he slipped his hands under Rima and swung her into his arms. "Speaking of you and me, we still need to discuss your challenge when you first arrived."

"My challenge?" Passion and excitement rose in her as they reached the door of the sultan's suite.

She barely noticed the guard who saluted and opened the door. Her thoughts were already on making love with Khalid.

As he had the first time they'd made love, his mouth captured hers while he carried her past vases overflowing with blossoms to the divan in the living room of the private quarters they now shared. This time the entry door was

bolted and the heady perfume of moonflowers and roses filled the air.

Brushing aside the lavishly embroidered pillows and the brocade cover, he lay her on the cushioned surface and stepped back less than an arm's length. As he looked down at her, the flecks of silver in his black eyes glittered like molten stars in the desert night. Anticipation shivered along her skin.

"Khalid," she murmured, tasting the richness of his name, "my *sidi*, my beloved lord, it has been over a week since we made love. I'm well and strong. Come to me. Touch me."

"Soon, my little dragon tamer." His gaze traveled slowly and seductively over her body. "First, I want to see you in only your skin."

Kneeling on one knee beside the divan, he slipped each button of her *kut'n* blouse, and spread the halves apart, framing her breasts. "Beautiful," he muttered. His warm breath sent ripples of pleasure across her skin. "These tight buds"—he licked first one nipple then the other while lightning streaked through her blood—"tell me your body is readying itself for me."

"Yes," she said. She spread one hand on his firm chest, and feeling the heat of his flesh through the fabric. "I was ready the moment you sat beside me in the garden."

"Patience is one of the ten womanly virtues." His gaze was intent on her bare skin. "Your scent, the warmth of your flesh is intoxicating." Cupping her breasts in both hands, he fanned the nipples with his thumbs.

Fire streaked through her nerves, but she ached for more and faster.

The Sultan's Revenge
by April Reid

Catching him by surprise, she rolled away from his hands and scrambled to her feet on the other side of the divan.

"Forget the laws of womanly conduct. I don't need lessons. I need you—your body, around me—in me." As she spoke, she unfastened her desert pants, and slipped them and her silk panties down her legs, until she stood before him clad only in sunlight streaming from the high windows.

She watched his passion, so carefully controlled in his touch, blaze in his eyes. Suddenly he crossed the divan in one step, crushed her body to his, and ravaged her mouth with his until all coherent thoughts fled. Her heart thundered in her chest. His pleasing, heady male scent filled her lungs.

Just as abruptly he released her, steadying her with one hand until she caught her balance. The moment she sat on the edge of the divan, he quickly stripped away his clothes.

Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of his hungry cock rising from the male thatch. Seductively, she reached out and stroked his warm, smooth penis.

He shivered. A drop of pre-cum shimmered on the tip. With a low groan, he took her down to the divan, and stretched out over her, his mouth on hers, greedy and demanding. She opened her lips to his—to accept the thrust of his tongue. He kissed her with a blazing male hunger, as if he wanted to draw her very essence into his—as if he couldn't get close enough.

Her senses spun as she responded to his need—to the wild rawness that called to everything in her that was primitive and female. Her own passion flared even higher. She kissed

him back, clinging to him, her fingers gripping the muscles in his bare shoulders.

Then his hands and mouth were everywhere—sliding down her breasts, her stomach, a lash of warm, lazy tongue circling her navel, and the hot, shimmering probe of his mouth and lips between her legs, nipping and soothing her most tender opening.

Her mind whirled. Her lower stomach grew hot, full, needy. Tension coiled tighter with each probe of his talented lips and tongue. Little ripples started deep inside her womb.

"Fly with me now," he muttered. One more hot thrust sent her soaring over the edge. Then as her whole being clenched in helpless pleasure, he slid up her body, and slipped deep into her hungry sheath.

A long time later, when the sun had set and moonlight glowed in the quiet room, Khalid lifted his head and gazed into her eyes. "When you first came to me, you vowed to never yield your full will to me unless the moment came when lightning walked the cloudless night and both moons danced in the sky."

He paused to taste each breast, and she shuddered in ecstasy. "The night you fought the rogue Vardonians, lightning rumbled in the cloudless sky and both moons dipped and glowed. Do you remember?"

"I remember." She drew his fingers to one breast. "Beloved, I had already given you my heart and soul. At that moment I also gave into your safekeeping, my will."

As he slipped into her waiting *yonj*, he said in a voice vibrating with commitment and sensual pleasure, "A lifetime

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together with you has become more than this sultan's
revenge ... it has become my salvation and my joy."

April Reid

April Reid is the pseudonym for award-winning author Barbara Clark, who wanted to stretch her writing skills into the romantica genre. Readers will find the same quality in stories by "April," as they have come to expect in stories by "Barbara." The only difference is the stories will be more steamy and over-the-top. Always, they will be action-filled ... in more ways than one.

You can visit her website at www.april-reid.com.

* * * *

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When Rahim Al Sayyed, Sultan of Aradi, sees the flame-haired Alyssa Palonui standing in chains on the slaver's block, he makes the highest bid, telling himself it's to save her from the vicious owner of a brothel. Rahim doesn't know she's a princess of Oceanus and betrothed to his deadly enemy—the one who caused his father's death.

As they journey across planet Traber, into the enemy's stronghold, and the cave of night-flying dragons, Alyssa and

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Rahim explore growing paranormal gifts and the deep, dark passions hidden in each other's heart, mind, and soul.

* * * *

**Don't miss Smooth Finish, by Adrianna Dane, available
at AmberHeat.com**

Cody Marx had dated Jared Creed for a short time back in high school and she'd never forgotten him. But when Jared's stepfather died and his half brother, Kenny, got into trouble, they drifted apart. Years later, they're both professional subcontractors working on the same remodeling project—the old MacKenzie Homestead just outside Esmerelda, Massachusetts.

Cody and Jared have both changed and matured since those teen-age years, but will the innocent spark of passion ignited long ago burst into the blazing flame of revitalized desire?

* * * *

**Don't miss I Want, by Adrianna Dane, at
AmberHeat.com!**

Antoinette Travis knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to do exactly what was necessary to make it to the top. Outside of sleeping her way there. And she was certain her rival got the promotion that should have been hers by doing exactly that. Angry at losing the job that would have given her what she wanted, she stalks out of the office and heads

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