

The book cover features a man from the chest up, looking upwards with his head tilted back. He has a hairy chest and is shirtless. The background is dark and rocky, with a large, glowing orange moon in the upper half. A silhouette of a wolf is visible on the horizon line of the moon. The author's name 'April Reid' is at the top, and the title 'Deadly Desires' is at the bottom in a stylized font.

April Reid

Deadly
Desires

DEADLY DESIRES

...Every fiber of his body demanded he take her fast—hard—deep. *No!* A man who couldn't control his urges was not fit to direct the lives of others.

With fingers that trembled, Tariq cradled Kayla's face between his palms and gazed at her. As usual, her pale blonde hair was worked into a tight braid down her back, but a few pale tendrils had escaped. He wanted to loosen that disciplined rope of sunlight and watch it spread in glorious disarray around her nude form.

He'd been in a state of semi-arousal since she'd walked into the garden. The moment she'd settled so trustfully beside him, he'd grown harder. Now her tantalizing scent, her air of innocence mixed with feminine hunger, drove him beyond control—almost.

Determined to give her a choice, in spite of his body howling for release, he touched her forehead with his and said, "Kayla, I want to kiss you, not just your mouth, but all over. I'm telling you this to give you time to get away if you want."

Her silvery blue eyes turned darker under the stress of emotion and her lips parted in surprise. Instead of backing away, she leaned into him.

He swept his tongue into her mouth, tasting her complex flavors. She was the pure, hot, sweet wind blowing across the great sands. She tasted of warm moonlit nights in the garden of flowering delights.

Her hands gripped his shoulders. Her fingers dug into him. A low sound trembled in the air—a sound of sensual surrender...

PRAISE FOR DEADLY DESIRES

“OHHHH! I loved it, more fairy-dragons and their forever friends, and shapeshifters, this is erotic fantasy entertainment at it’s best. The romance between Kayla and Tariq is both very sweetly hot and sensual. Don’t miss anything by author April Reid...”

—Nancy Elekes
Owner of Sunshine Books

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DEADLY DESIRES

BY

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DEADLY DESIRES
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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CHAPTER 1

The great black wolf loped through the deep of night—weaving in and out of the mighty flamewood trees covering the lower slopes of Diyab Mountain in the Kaf Range. To his uncanny senses, the forest was alive with the scents, sights, and sounds of nocturnal creatures.

At his approach, tiny Firan-mice squeaked and dove into their burrows. Long-furred rabbits dashed ahead, stopped and rose on strong back legs to watch him draw closer, then changed direction and disappeared into the sharp-scented wild thyme.

A low-flying owl called to the dark predator, then slipped away on silent wings.

Still the wolf traveled along hidden trails, finally breaking from shadows onto the high plains of Saladin and into light from the moons of Qamar and its smaller sibling, Zurir. Both were full, their combined radiance gilding the desert sage, clump grass, and the sprawl of deadly Shaytan's Trumpet—its white-and-gold blossoms perfuming the air

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with evil seduction.

And yet there was another scent—alluring and far more potent to the great wolf—the sweet musk of a bitch newly in heat. The fur rose on the back of his neck. He let out a challenging growl for already the wind carried the odor of three other males seeking the same prize.

Moments later, he reached the top of a ridge overlooking a small valley that cupped a shimmering lake in its grass and rocky center.

A silver-white female stood with her back to the water, held at bay on three sides by the male wolves. Her flattened ears and her lips pulled back in a snarl made it clear none of the males were to her liking.

Black Wolf's muscles tightened at the unexpected desire to protect the female.

Mine. With a snarl he raced down the rocky slope, invading the small pack—slammed his shoulder into the one closest to the female, a gray male, and sent it rolling. At the same moment, a brown beast snapped at Black Wolf's hindquarters. He twisted away, then turned and slashed the brown wolf's side.

The third wolf, whose ragged ear proclaimed him the loser in an earlier fight, leaped past Black Wolf, intent on claiming the female.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Silver avoid Ragged Ear and close her teeth on his undamaged ear. Growling, Ragged slashed sideways, raking Silver's shoulder.

Black Wolf's ears flattened in fury. He slammed into Silver's attacker, tumbling him away from her.

The first two wolves teamed up with Ragged Ear. Dust rose from the moonlit ground. Snarls and growls of combat shattered the quiet night. Smaller nocturnal creatures dashed or hopped away. The ferocious joy of combat filled Black Wolf's heart and mind. He was alpha, the leader, the one who faced all dangers, all challenges—and won.

At his side—in spite of blood now staining her fur—Silver added

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her teeth and strength to fight off the challengers.

That scent of her blood provoked a new rage in Black Wolf. She was his by right of combat and her choice. She was his to protect.

Suddenly the fight was over. The three challengers crept toward him whining. Each rolled over, presenting their vulnerable throats and bellies to him—a sign of submission.

Black Wolf accepted their surrender, and granted them a place in his new pack. He turned to lick the wounds of his chosen alpha bitch, Silver, but she wasn't anywhere in sight. Not even her distinctive scent flowed fresh and strong, providing a guide to her location.

His hackles rose, stiffening his fur into a thick ruff. A low growl rumbled in his throat. Anger burned in his blood.

Throwing back his head, he sent a howl of rage and despair echoing across the mountains and plains.

His chosen mate had disappeared.

Before the last notes faded into the night, a familiar—and this time unwanted—urgency gripped Black Wolf.

He had to return to the city of men.

No. Denial rumbled in his chest and in his mind and wild heart.

The unwelcome call drew him step by grudging step toward the walls and towers, the sound of human sentries and restless horses.

The scent of hot blood beat in Black Wolf's nostrils again. Here was food—warm, raw, his and his pack's for the taking.

Another foreign thought rejected the choice of prey. How could he eat this dainty mare, or that great stallion, who both willingly carried him in a saddle and raced across the plains, his burnoose rippling in the hot winds.

The closer he came to the fitted-rock wall and a gate hidden by Rose of Shalimar branches, the more he fought the impulse to slip through the gates and once more become a man—Sultan Tariq Sayyid El Zafir, ruler of the country of Khatarza.

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* * *

Tariq scrubbed at his face with both palms, struggling to bring the room into focus. The scent of man filled his nose—a much shorter one than his longer, furry muzzle.

That man, Counselor Rashad El Dubir, spoke softly, as if soothing a wild animal. “The change was more difficult this time, my sidi.”

“By the gods, yes.” He clamped down on an urge to howl. “The beast that dwells within took charge and left me with minimal control.”

Rashad handed him loose white trousers and a fine white *kut’n* shirt trimmed with black and gold designs. “At your awakening, you chose the wolf shape.”

“For ten generations the wolf has been the preferred shift form for males in my line. Should I have chosen to become a mouse or rabbit, or a wild *nisr’uqab* eagle?” As he spoke, Tariq dressed in the light clothes and wound a black-and-gold sash around his waist. “When I made my vision quest, the wolf was the one creature who came to me in dreams and in physical form.”

“Then you made the right choice. Why does it now haunt you?”

Tariq retrieved his long dagger in its sheath from a nearby table, drew the wickedly sharp blade, and gazed at it thoughtfully. “Rashad, we have been companions and friends since we shared our first riding lessons together. In all that time, I have carried a deadly secret, passed on to me by my father.”

Replacing the dagger, Tariq tucked the sheath into the folds of his sash. “If, by my thirty-third birthday I have not found a virgin to willingly mate with me in body and mind, then each time Qamar and Zurir are both full, the beast inside will grow stronger, until I lose all my humanity.”

His friend’s tense expression eased. He gripped Tariq’s shoulder companionably. “By the thirteen devils of Ubar, is that all? Wherever you go, women gaze at you with speculation and lust. Finding a virgin

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eager to spread her legs for you should be easy.”

“There’s more than a quick fuck involved. When we join at the time of double full moons, she must give her trust, her body, and her mind to me completely. If not, she will become a victim to the beast and my first taste of human flesh.”

CHAPTER 2

Kayla Edana Binte El Qadir, Keeper of the Flame, sponged herb-scented bathwater across her throat and over her tender shoulders. Two lines oozed blood where Ragged Ear had raked her skin. She frowned. Transforming from one shape to the other would heal most wounds, unless her physical resources were low.

While she bathed away the stress of the night's events in the warm liquid, she recalled watching from her vantage point in the roseapple tree as Sultan Tariq transformed from the black alpha wolf to the even more virile male who ruled the nation of Khatarza.

At the memory of his powerful body gleaming in shafts of light from both moons, his male nipples like dark coins in the pelt on his chest—her breasts swelled and her own nipples tightened. She was virgin, and as a priestess would forever remain celibate. However, the teachings in her role as Keeper of the Flame had included lessons on the male anatomy and seduction so she could advise young, betrothed

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maidens on erotic ways to sexually satisfy a future mate.

Married, something I'll never know, she'd mused—for once dissatisfied with that part of her obligation.

At that moment, Tariq had faced in her direction, as if sensing he was under observation. Not even the thick pubic hairs had disguised his impressive male organ.

The memory made her heart leap in her chest. What would it be like to feel the press of that broad tip parting her tender folds, to experience the opening of her channel by his *qadib lahm*, his rod of flesh? At the thought, warmth and pressure coiled and clenched in the guarded area behind her own feminine curls. Lost in fantasy, she slid one hand between her thighs and pressed—released—pressed—released, while warm water swirled around heated flesh and pleasure flashed through her nerves.

"Tariq," she murmured, leaning against the cushioning linens covering the inside of the roseapple wood tub.

"Sultan Tariq, indeed," snapped her foster mother, Orrianna, as she strained golden liquid through a fine cloth into a crystal bowl. "Ever since you heard the proclamation calling all virgins, seventeen and older, to appear in the Hall of Assembly two days after the fullness of the moons, the sultan's name has been on your lips."

Ripped from her fantasy, Kayla vigorously applied the washcloth to her knees, raising them one at a time above the lavender-rose scented water. "Of course I've talked about him. So have all the other maidens I've met since his royal proclamation."

"You're not like other maidens."

"I've known that truth since the Fire Goddess first called me to her service." Kayla stared at the flames in the fireplace recalling the ecstasy of that cold winter dawn in the heart of the great desert plain when the voice had called her from her isolated shelter. By tradition, the day her monthly courses first began, she'd wandered into the lonely desert

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wilderness, built a *ma'zi* skin lean-to for shelter, and, fasting, had waited there five days. On the last day, she'd been awakened at dawn by the goddess clothed in gold and fire.

"When the goddess called me to be Keeper of the Flame and marked the back of my wrist with her symbol, she opened my ability to shape shift and told me I'd have to face many trials and temptations."

"Like your attraction to Sultan El Zafir." Orrianna dropped the straining cloth into a bowl of cold water.

"Yes. Sultan Tariq El Zafir." In the crackling fire, Kayla watched the shape of a man and woman embrace, then rise toward the chimney in a shower of sparks.

Kayla's foster mother touched her shoulder. "Sweetling, the goddess will give you strength to do what is right."

"As usual, little mother, you're correct." Kayla brushed Orianna's soft cheek.

To chase away the sadness she saw in her foster mother's eyes, Kayla playfully flicked some drops of water at her. "If I bathe much longer, I'll be as wrinkled as the seven elder sisters who sit within the shelter of Flame Temple and call blessings on all who pass by."

"Too true." Orianna's expression relaxed. Holding a wide bathing sheet warmed by the fragrant fire, she said, "Dry off, then I'll dress the wound on your shoulder."

Rising from the tub, Kayla stepped onto a thick woven mat, gratefully snuggled into the large towel, and sat on the padded ebonywood bench near the fire.

After placing the bowl of golden antiseptic on a low table at Kayla's elbow, her foster mother chided, "How is it these wounds still bleed after you shifted into owl form and back?"

"I changed four times tonight," Kayla said. "First to owl, then to wolf, back to owl, and finally my true, human form."

She raised a hand to forestall the lecture she saw trembling on her

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mentor's lips. "I knew I was pushing myself. In fact, I barely made the last shift after watching over Tariq's safe return."

Orrianna's mouth set in a grim line. Silently, she lifted the crystal bowl of sharp-scented liquid and poured it over Kayla's wounds, deftly catching the runoff in a fold of toweling.

Kayla winced at the sting, but didn't protest.

"No wonder your body didn't heal," Orianna scolded. "That last change was made dangerous by blood loss and depleted energy."

"I know, but I can't promise it won't happen again."

"Why risk your life for him when he doesn't know you exist?" Opening a crystal jar, she took a pinch of gray powder, sprinkled it on the injury, and covered it with a bandage.

Kayla gripped Orrianna's wrist. "That situation may soon change. The goddess has shown me an evil force hovering over Sultan Tariq."

"A danger to him and anyone close by, including his mate."

"You know I can never join with a man. The moment the goddess called me, my virginity was forever sealed."

"How else can you protect him?"

"I'll find a way."

* * *

Two days later, Kayla gave her name to the scribe and moved past the royal guards and into the great Hall of Assembly. Soft feminine laughter and conversation filled the sunlit room with its towering dome held up by columns inlaid with rich mosaics in blue, red, and gold. Seductive perfumes called to mind a garden of exotic flowers.

The rainbow of robes and jewels worn by the women shimmered and sparkled as if the treasures of all Khatarza had been emptied to clothe and adorn the virgins trying to catch the sultan's attention.

Kayla had chosen to wear a silky, ankle length white *galabiyya*, with a white-and-gold sash at her waist. Her loose, white robe with full, flowing sleeves was trimmed with the golden flame emblem of the Fire

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Goddess. The gold firehawk medallion was her only piece of jewelry—a necklace with an ancient history, but one she'd only possessed for an hour.

She touched the raised emblem with two fingers, feeling the vibrations of age and power. Her thoughts went back to the scene in her foster mother's cottage after she'd finished dressing.

Smiling fondly, Orrianna had said, "When you came to my care at eleven years old, you bore the delicate promise of a tightly closed rosebud. Today that beauty has blossomed."

Kayla had embraced her. "Orrianna—Mother—only someone blinded by love would see beauty in my ordinary face and lean shape. I spent too many years learning my keeper duties and ways to defend myself, while other girls grew in beauty and grace, and the tactics of flirting and enhancing their form."

"Sweetling, I'm honored to be your foster mother. Your years with me have filled my life with love and great joy. But always remember you came from a woman who loved you enough to send you to the goddess and Temple City with her blessings."

"She never contacted me once in all the years before she died," Kayla had said, filled with a wistful bitterness. "How can you say she loved me?"

"Separation from your town and parents was part of the training declared by the High Priestess of the Flame." Orrianna laid a comforting hand on Kayla's cheek. "Your mother and father pledged a year's profits to their local temple and requested me to be your foster parent."

Kayla had wiped a wet hand across her forehead. The only sound in the bathing room was the crackle of the flames in the carved-stone fireplace and the soft gurgle of water. "My parents begged themselves so you would raise me? Why?"

"Sweetling, I'm your mother's sister." Orrianna's shoulders had

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slumped. She suddenly looked years older. “Do you wish someone else had fostered you?”

“Never!” Kayla had gathered the older woman in an embrace. “You’re the most gentle, forgiving, good person I know.”

“Not always,” Orrianna had said wryly, returning Kayla’s hug. “I’m only human.”

She’d dipped one hand into her pocket and pulled out a soft, quilted pouch. “After your mother died, your father sent the contents of this to hold for you until the right time. Her last thoughts had been of you, and she wanted you to have her emblem of service to the Fire Goddess.”

My mother. Unbidden tears had filled her eyes. Caught in a whirlpool of sadness, loss, and love, Kayla had opened the pouch and drawn out a golden firehawk on an intricate gold chain. Her fingers trembled, knowing her mother had once held these same burnished links, had worn this great emblem granted only to those chosen by the Fire Goddess.

Her gaze swept up to her beloved foster mother. “When she became pregnant with me, she lost her calling as Keeper of the Flame.”

“It was her choice,” Orrianna had said.

“Did my mother know I’d be chosen?”

“She never said, but she may have known. Zara had many special gifts, including the ability to see into the future.”

Wistfully Kayla had asked, “Did my mother foresee anything more about my future?”

“Three separate visions showed you were in danger of being killed in a wild, lonely place.”

Orianna’s fingers had trembled as she tucked back a loose strand of Kayla’s hair.

Impulsively, Kayla had clasped her foster mother’s hand. “I’m listening,” she’d said softly.

“Yusuf and your mother were frantic with worry. The same vision

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three times meant it was a certainty, but they didn't know who or when. They and your two oldest male cousins kept watch on you as much as possible."

"My cousins were wonderful. Nathan taught me to ride, and Simon taught me how to track large and small game."

Her aunt had nodded. "They did the best they could to prepare you to defend your life, without you being frightened."

"I didn't know it was that serious."

Orianna had smiled. "They did their job."

She'd continued, "When you were called by the goddess, your parents knew you would have to leave River's Cross and live here in Temple City."

"And they sent me to the one who would love and protect me." Joy had bubbled up in Kayla's heart and soul. "Then my mother really wanted me with her. I'd often wondered what I'd done to make her hate me."

"Hate you?" Orianna had gripped Kayla's shoulders. "How could you think such a thing? Her heart broke to send you away. And your father mourned for both you and her."

"I know the truth now. I also understand why they and you had me instructed in sword, knife, and bow and arrow."

Her foster mother had nodded. "For your protection."

At the words, "For your protection," the hair had risen on the back of Kayla's neck. She saw the flash of a deadly sword blade, inscribed with odd symbols, poised as if to strike. Then the image had disappeared.

Just an overactive imagination, she'd chided herself. But she couldn't shake the sense of danger hovering on the horizon as she'd studied the medallion's sacred symbol more closely. "This hawk is different from the one worn by the High Priestess at the temple. It carries an ankh in its talons."

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“Yes, the key of life—a favor granted to the women in your lineage. You carry the seeds of paranormal gifts as did your mother, grandmother, and great grandmother—gifts stretching back through generations to Old Earth.”

Kayla’s mind had whirled in confusion. “How can that be? One called by the Fire Goddess is to remain celibate her entire life, or be shunned as one cursed by the goddess.”

Orianna had nodded. “That is true, even for the women of your lineage, unless you meet your soul mate—the one man who can meet you as an equal in heart, mind, soul, and paranormal gifts. He will be your one love, and you will be his salvation.”

* * *

Kayla didn’t know how long she’d stood transfixed by memories in the perfumed crowd of women when the sound of long horns and drums brought her back to the present.

Another flare of trumpet music announced the entrance of Sultan Tariq Sayyid El Zafir.

The great carved doors opened. The sultan paused, surveying the large gathering. Over his black desert pants and shirt he wore a matching loose, open robe, trimmed in gold. A long, curved, jeweled dagger was thrust into his gold-and-black sash. His white *kaffiyeh*, trimmed in gold, was bound by a black-and-gold *agal*.

Kayla’s heart skipped, then her nerves tingled and warmth spread through her body. She’d seen him in moonlight, but now, in the great hall lit by bright, jeweled lamps, he was magnificent.

As the crowd parted to give him passage to the throne, all voices stilled. Women quickly smoothed their robes and gazed at him hungrily.

Kayla was reminded of a pride of plains cats assessing their next prey.

The moment he stepped forward, the women bowed low before

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him. But not Kayla. She was a Keeper of the Flame and bowed to no one, except by choice.

Sultan El Zafir strolled toward her with the purposeful tread of a predator.

The women standing close to her eased away—as if afraid to be contaminated—until she stood isolated in a sea of color and jewels.

When he drew closer, her more acute senses of a shapeshifter brought her the heady scent of his masculine skin mingled with the sandalwood-citrus soap of his bath, and her body hummed with sensual awareness. Invisible fire danced through her blood. She felt waves of power radiating from him. Her firehawk medallion resonated.

The white *kaffiyeh*, held in place with the royal *agal* covered his hair, but she knew it was the black of a winter night before the moons rose. His face, bronzed by sun and wind, revealed innate strength and power. His lips were firm and sensual. All that paled in comparison to his green eyes—each iris flecked and ringed with gold—and filled with the light of a terrifying intelligence. Mentally, she took a steadying breath. She could get lost in those green and gold depths.

As he circled her like a Kaf leopard assessing its prey, she stood straight, chin lifted, hands fisted at her side. The weight of his glance seemed to touch every part of her body. Her breasts grew heavy, sensitive. The silky fabric of her *galabiyya* brushed her tender nipples and she was glad the robe hid them. Why did she feel threatened by his hot gaze, his confident masculinity?

Without a word, he left her, continued toward the throne and settled there, looking out across the perfumed and jeweled crowd.

His counselor called the first five names on the scribe's list.

Gracefully, the quintet walked forward, their bodies swaying to silent music. At the foot of the dais, they dipped in a deep curtsy, bending low until the sultan's counselor told them to stand, remove their outer robes, and slowly turn for His Majesty's inspection.

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* * *

Tariq curbed his urge to shift restlessly on the jeweled throne. From the moment he'd first met the cool defiance in the Keeper of the Flame's silvery blue eyes, he'd hungered to learn more about her. Her familiar scent teased his memory, but he couldn't place when or where they'd met before this day. She may have thought she'd hidden her sexual response to him, but his heightened senses had detected the musk of her wet *yoni* and the sensual need in her quickened breathing. Others in the crowd of eager supplicants had also been aroused. They didn't count. Only his mysterious Keeper with her unusual firehawk holding an ankh. Why did a virgin, dedicated to celibacy, wear a symbol of procreation?

Impatiently, he forced his attention back to the next group of virgins posturing and flirting at the foot of the dais. At Rashad's command, they removed their outer robes and turned slowly for inspection.

By the gods, Tariq thought, he'd seen more barely veiled breasts, pussies, and asses today than would be found in the fabled pirate slave markets of Zoltar. It occurred to him that in the past he would have enjoyed the sight, but then he hadn't been seeking a permanent mate.

So far, the only woman who piqued his interest was the one forbidden to him.

CHAPTER 3

“Your class was filled today,” said High Priestess Niobe from the doorway of the temple room where Kayla instructed young unmarried women. “I heard they paid special attention to your lecture and display of a few toys of arousal.”

After a reverent bow, Kayla straightened and moved closer to her superior. “That part of the instruction has always held the young women’s interest. Even more so these last two days, since the Assembly of Virgins. Some who had completed their studies returned for a refresher course.”

“You know the old saying, ‘Hope springs eternal in the human breast.’” Niobe smiled. “Every woman at the sultan’s assembly hopes to be the one he chooses.”

“Not me.” Kayla touched her firehawk pendant. “I only went in obedience to Sultan El Zafir’s royal proclamation.”

The Priestess gazed at Kayla’s firehawk and ankh. “The flame

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symbol you're wearing is different from the one you received at your dedication ceremony."

Kayla forced herself not to lay a protective hand over it. "This belonged to my mother. At my father's request, my foster mother had kept it in secret for me until yesterday."

"A wise decision. A new Keeper of the Flame could be confused by the dual message of celibacy and procreation." She gave Kayla a penetrating look. "Do you know how possessing the ankh changes your vows as Keeper of the Flame?"

"I found the answer in the ancient scrolls. The key of life grants me the choice to bond in body, mind, and spirit with my soul mate, and still remain true to my Keeper obligations."

"Good. You understand." The priestess nodded at the firehawk and ankh. "May I touch the sacred symbol?"

"Of course." Cupping the medallion on one palm, she held it out the length of the chain toward her superior.

The High Priestess reverently brushed her fingers over the incised figures and bowed her head as if meditating. A faint glow sprang up around the medal and flashed up the gold chain still circling Kayla's neck. She felt a buzzing sensation in the back of her skull. Then the sound of distant bells and a breeze scented with roses and blossoms from the sacred shagar trees wrapped around both her and the High Priestess. Niobe released the medallion. As one, they sank to their knees in the presence of the Fire Goddess.

She came to them in her aspect of the wise crone. *::Well met, my good and faithful servants::*

She rested one hand gently on Niobe's head. The priestess gasped and swayed. *::High Priestess of the Flame, your service to my people brings honor to this temple and this land::*

The goddess lay her other hand on Kayla's head and she caught her breath at the rush of power and sweet presence full of eternal wisdom.

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::Keeper of the Flame, Kayla, daughter of Yusuf El Qadir and Zara El Qadir, the women in your lineage have been granted the key of life. It gives you the choice to mate with your one true love, superseding even your vows to me::

Resting her hands on Kayla's shoulders, the goddess continued, *::Faithful daughter, in your heart and mind you carry the salvation of one man and the healing of a nation. But that same choice will put your body, mind, and soul in great danger—even death. Choose well::*

* * *

A day later and still pondering the goddess's words, Kayla followed the path through the outer garden to hers and her foster mother's home. Morning sunshine sparkled on the contents of her basket and on the last drops of dew from a rare mist the previous night. She'd risen before dawn, dressed in practical desert pants, *kut'n* top, and cloak, and walked to the temple gardens to harvest precious herbs found only on those sacred grounds.

Her fairy-dragon, Ivy, flitted around her like a pale green-and-pink butterfly. There was suppressed excitement in Ivy's thoughts, but the young fairy-dragon kept them hidden behind a screen of mindless chatter.

The reason became clear when Kayla saw the veiled chair attended by palace guardsmen, waiting in front of the house. Had the sultan sent them to arrest her for her bold behavior at the Assembly of Virgins?

Squaring her shoulders, she walked with greater dignity into the house. If Sultan Tariq El Zafir thinks he can intimidate a Keeper of the Flame, Kayla thought defiantly, I'll show him he's wrong.

* * *

Kayla's determination to resist the sultan's influence carried her through the long ride to his palace, then down the gold-veined white marble halls of the hundred-year-old building and up to the massive

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doors guarding his privacy.

At her side, Counselor Rashad El Dubir, who'd carried the sultan's summons and request she bring her Keeper's healing kit, dismissed their escort of six palace guards. He nodded at the two armed soldiers flanking the door.

Ivy crouched on Kayla's shoulder, unusually subdued.

Stroking the fine-grained scales on her forever-friend's head Kayla asked, *::Do you want to wait outside while I talk to the sultan?::*

::I will stay with you.:: Nervously, the fairy-dragon closed her eyes and rested her forehead against Kayla's cheek. *::The Ten Laws of Womanly Conduct say, 'Do what is right and conquer the fear.'::*

::I'll protect you from the sultan,:: Kayla promised. Ivy's fear of him was one more reason for Kayla to keep a distance between her and the temptation named Tariq.

Ivy's head came up and she opened her golden eyes wide. *::Not the sultan—Blackthorn.::*

::The sultan's fairy-dragon?::

::Mmmm.:: The faint scent of musky nutmeg—sign of a fairy-dragon's sexual arousal—drifted in the air. Ivy's eyes half closed. *::He's a real hunk.::*

::If he's such a hunk, then why are you afraid?:: A sudden thought kindled Kayla's anger. *::Has he hurt you? If so, I'll—::*

Ivy rustled her wings and raised one foot, then the other, careful not to grip Kayla's shoulder too hard. *::I'm not afraid of Blackthorn. I'm worried I like him too much and he won't like me.::*

As Kayla watched the doors into the sultan's quarters swing open, she realized she had the same problem with Tariq. She liked him too much.

Once she could have used her vows of virginity as a Keeper of the Flame to build her emotional and physical defenses against him. But her mother's gift and the Fire Goddess's words had stripped away that

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defense. Now the choice was hers—life at the temple or, if he chose her and he was meant to be her soul mate, life with the sultan.

Either choice carried a heavy responsibility, but the greatest change would come if she decided on life with Sultan Tariq.

She resolved to take time and consider all the facts before making any decision. She'd begin by approaching Tariq El Zafir in a neutral manner, as she would any who came to petition her as a Keeper of the Flame.

The advisor led her along the corridor through the royal quarters, crossed the sultan's office, and went out into a secluded garden. A short distance away, Tariq sat on the edge of a stone wall surrounding a natural waterfall and pool and gazed down at something cradled in his hand. His magnificent fairy-dragon, black with gold on its wingtips and muzzle, perched on a shagar tree branch at one side also staring at what Tariq held. Two adult water-dragosaurs, known as dabblers, waited at his feet. The green-and-blue male dabbler had raised up on his hind legs and propped one paw, with claws retracted, on the sultan's knee. The yellow-and-blue female stared up at what the sultan held. Both had their stubby wings—used to swim, not fly—folded close to their bodies.

As Kayla drew closer, she saw he cradled a dabbler youngling on the cupped palm of one hand, and gently stroked its head and back with a long, broad finger. The baby's grayish color and its wings halfway unfurled and drooping were signs it was injured or ill.

Forgetting any formality in her concern over the youngling, she sat on the stone rim beside Tariq and studied his small patient. "What happened? Have you called for a healer?"

"He got tangled in a *shaytan's* trumpet vine," Tariq explained in a quiet tone. "Blackthorn released him and led his parents with their son to me. I've been bathing him in water from this natural spring to cool and soothe him."

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At the words, “*shaytan*’s trumpet,” Kayla’s heart sank. The poison in the seductive fragrance of the blossoms and in the sap running through the stems and leaves could damage a full grown human, both physically and mentally. What had it done to the fragile, sentient youngling?

“Is that why you asked for my healer’s kit?” She opened the *cazleather* case she’d set on the paving stones beside her feet.

“I know I can trust your knowledge, the purity of your compounds...and your compassion.”

“Who wouldn’t want to help a youngling?” As she spoke, Kayla settled cross-legged on the natural paving stones, with her full desert pants protecting her from the rough textures. She closed her eyes and centered herself—finding the balance between earth and sky energies.

She smiled gently at the female dabbler. “May I hold your youngling? I’ll do my best to help him.”

The female placed one paw on Kayla’s knee and looked intently into her eyes. At that moment, a disturbance on the psychic plane resonated in the back of Kayla’s skull and stirred the hair on her nape. A worried voice said, *::You are a good human like the sultan. You will help our son.::*

Smothering her surprise at the dabbler’s unknown psychic ability, Kayla raised her cupped hands to Tariq. “Apparently I have the mother’s permission to treat the youngling.”

“It’s about time,” he muttered, carefully transferring the injured dabbler into Kayla’s care.

Cradling the fragile patient in one hand, she took a small, folded towel from the top of the items in her case and placed it on her lap.

Gently she eased the youngling into the *kut’n* nest, then opened a crystal flask of golden antiseptic. The sharp scent of marigolds and cloves flooded the air as she carefully swabbed his sides, tummy, and back. “This mixture will purify the youngling’s wounds and begin the

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healing process,” she explained. “When it dries, I’ll apply a soothing ointment to continue the healing.”

She glanced at Tariq, then stroked the youngling’s head as she continued, “Sultan El Zafir’s quick first aid with spring water prevented further damage.”

“Hand me the flask and a swab,” Tariq said. “I’ll tend to Blackthorn’s injuries. He already washed in the fountain.”

Kayla’s gaze flew to the black-and-gold fairy-dragon. Ivy perched beside him on the branch, crooning worriedly.

::Are Blackthorn’s wounds deep?:: Kayla asked her forever-friend.

::Not deep, but he’s in pain and trying not to show he’s hurt, the silly male.:: Ivy’s tender tone revealed her feelings for the great fairy-dragon.

Kayla gave the medicinal items to Tariq and continued her silent conversation, while stroking the dabbler youngling. *::Blackthorn is a warrior like his bond-friend. They guard the expressions they show the world.::*

Tariq may guard his thoughts and emotions from the world, she thought, aware of his gentle handling of the injured Blackthorn, but his actions showed in his compassion to his fairy-dragon, as they had in his care for the youngling dabbler.

The baby stirred in her lap, opened his eyes, then stretched out his short wings. As Kayla watched, the grayish cast left his hide, replaced by the normally vibrant green scales with yellow markings on muzzle, neck, and wingtips.

Both adult dabblers chirred happily and the little one, rustling his wings, answered in his higher tones.

Kayla drew two small jars from her case and passed one to Tariq, saying, “For Blackthorn.”

Opening the other crystal jar, she showed the yellow with gray flecked contents to the parents. “This is a compound of fine oil,

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calendula, and a healing powder. I'll come here every morning for the next four days, with the sultan's permission, and spread it on the youngling's wounds."

"Granted," Tariq said, while spreading the medication on Blackthorn's wounds.

As she smoothed the ointment on the streaks left by the *shaytan's* trumpet poison, the youngling's tongue flicked out to sample the sharp-scented medication. He shuddered. Kayla smiled reassuringly at the parents. "It won't hurt him, but the taste will probably prevent him from sampling any more."

::Just like a baby:: Instead of worried, the dabbler mother's tone sounded warm and indulgent. *::Everything goes to his mouth::*

The male dabbler placed one paw, claws still sheathed, on Kayla's hand. *::We owe you much for saving our firstborn from more suffering::*

::Sultan Tariq El Zafir and his bond-friend were the first to save him:: Kayla responded, still stroking her tiny patient.

::That is true:: The dabbler turned his gaze to Tariq.

Kayla saw the brief flicker of surprise in the sultan's eyes, so fleeting she would have missed it if she hadn't been watching closely.

He looked at her. "Did the male dabbler speak to you, mind-to-mind?"

"Both he and his mate."

"I've never heard of dabblers communicating with a human, except by gestures."

The dabbler youngling in Kayla's lap wriggled and flicked out its silvery tongue.

Feeling the warm glow of satisfaction at the evidence of the youngling's quick recovery, Kayla once more cradled the little dabbler in one hand and lifted him up to face her. "You're feeling better and eager to go, aren't you?"

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In answer, the green-and-yellow miniature of his parents flicked his tongue in and out rapidly, then spread the fragile wings it used for flying through the water.

Kayla smiled. "You can play in the water as soon as your parents give you permission."

To the youngling's parents, Kayla said, "The medicinal ointment has been absorbed into the places in need of healing. Water won't wash it away. I'll spread a new layer on tomorrow."

Both dabbler adults crooned.

Once more the hair on the back of her neck rose in response to movement on the psychic plane and the deeper voice of the male dabbler said, *::I, Running Water, speaking for my mate, Quiet Water, and as leader of our pride, offer help to you, Keeper Kayla and to you, Sultan El Zafir if you ever need it::*

::I accept your offer with thanks:: Kayla pressed her hand against the paw extended by the male, then the female. She settled the youngling on his mother's back and watched Quiet Water raise her folded wings to keep the little one in place.

Kayla sensed Tariq had also answered Running Water, when he also touched each dabbler parent.

After the dabblers disappeared into the low-growing plants around the fountain, Tariq extended a hand to Kayla and drew her up from the ground to sit beside him once more. They sat quietly side by side as if they had done so many times. Heat radiated from his powerful body. The scent of herbal soap and clean male teased her senses. She fought the urge to lean against him...no, it was more, much more. She wanted to rub against him like an amorous cat, to feel his long, capable hands and fingers caress her breasts and touch her other hidden tender parts she so precisely explained in her lessons on sexual delight; explained, but had never experienced.

She stood, smoothing her pants and hoping he didn't see the way

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her nipples had tightened under her soft top—or notice her flushed face—or detect her faint musk of arousal.

* * *

He had. To Tariq's acute senses, the signs of Kayla's sexual arousal called to him more than all the legendary *houris* who served Great Vashta, god of pleasure.

As it had in the Assembly of Virgins, the faint, heady musk of Kayla's wet *yoni*, her quickened breathing, and the thrust of her breasts told him her body wanted him. To break the curse, he needed more. He needed her total commitment—heart, mind, and soul.

The once inviolate Keeper of the Flame now wore the ankh which symbolized she could make love with the man she chose.

He came to his feet in a rush. He wanted to be that man.

Every fiber of his body demanded he take her fast—hard—deep.

No! A man who couldn't control his urges was not fit to direct the lives of others.

With fingers that trembled, Tariq cradled Kayla's face between his palms and gazed at her. As usual, her pale blonde hair was worked into a tight braid down her back, but a few pale tendrils had escaped. He wanted to loosen that disciplined rope of sunlight and watch it spread in glorious disarray around her nude form.

He'd been in a state of semi-arousal since she'd walked into the garden. The moment she'd settled so trustfully beside him, he'd grown harder. Now her tantalizing scent, her air of innocence mixed with feminine hunger, drove him beyond control—almost.

Determined to give her a choice, in spite of his body howling for release, he touched her forehead with his and said, "Kayla, I want to kiss you, not just your mouth, but all over. I'm telling you this to give you time to get away if you want."

Her silvery blue eyes turned darker under the stress of emotion and her lips parted in surprise. Instead of backing away, she leaned into

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him.

He swept his tongue into her mouth, tasting her complex flavors. She was the pure, hot, sweet wind blowing across the great sands. She tasted of warm moonlit nights in the garden of flowering delights.

Her hands gripped his shoulders. Her fingers dug into him. A low sound trembled in the air—a sound of sensual surrender.

CHAPTER 4

Tariq's mouth was warm and firm on hers. After that first hot joining, he moved his lips and tongue back and forth across hers, just enough to make her want more. His hard-muscled body pressed against hers. His smell—the clean spice of desert and mountain winds mixed with a hint of masculine temptation—stirred her senses.

She felt his warm hand slide around to the back of her head. The other one gripped her buttocks drawing her so close his rigid erection pressed against the soft delta between her thighs.

He wanted her. The very thought sang through her blood and made her dizzy.

His mouth left her lips. He kissed and lightly nibbled along her jaw line to where her pulse hammered in her neck. Her knees grew weak. She slipped her arms around his neck, wrapped in his sensual magic.

He moved back to her hungry mouth. Gently he sucked her lower lip into his mouth, bit it softly, then kissed her with a fire that promised

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to melt her bones.

While her body still rang with that kiss, he eased her hands away from his neck, kissed each palm, then sank to his knees and pulled her *kut'n* pants down around her ankles. The flower-scented breeze tugged at her silk panties and wrapped around her bare legs. Droplets of water from the fountain misted her sun-warmed skin.

Tariq said in a voice thickened by passion, "I want to show you another type of kiss."

"Kiss?" she murmured, recalling the lectures on sensuality she'd given to other virgins, but had never thought to experience—except in dreams of forbidden pleasures.

"Kiss and taste your nether lips, your *yoni*."

"Taste me—there?"

He cupped her mound. "Yes, here."

Her head whirled at the idea and she braced one hand on his shoulder. She knew she would always remember this moment, when this wonderfully masculine warrior knelt at her feet asking to touch her in the most intimate of places—asking to give her pleasure.

His erotic, eager male scent filled the air. In the same thick tone of arousal he said, "If the answer is no, tell me now and I'll walk away."

Walk away? Was that what she wanted? Just the feel of his warm fingers between her legs had sent ripples of anticipation through her nerves.

"Yes. Touch me."

"Thank the gods," he said on a long breath, and cupped her buttocks in his strong hands.

Everything in her tightened, waiting...

He left her panties on and placed his mouth on her through the sheer fabric. She sucked in her breath and felt the gush of warmth flood her panties.

"So sweet. So responsive," he murmured, the dark tones resonating

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in her bones.

She felt his hot breath. Felt the texture of his hair brush the inside of her thighs as he explored her body. The gentle scrape of his teeth created a sensation she'd never before experienced.

He pulled her closer and held her in the strength of his warrior fingers. For a few seconds, an old fantasy surfaced and she was his captive—his slave ready to serve his every need; to experience his every delight. Then the rasp of his tongue across the silk—the twice-cursed thin barrier that kept her from feeling him completely—broke the spell. A slave would be naked before her master.

“Tariq, please.”

“Please, what?” He looked up at her.

Sunlight glimmered in his black hair. His green eyes, each iris rimmed in hammered gold, glittered in his tanned face. She read the silent command in those compelling eyes. He wanted her to say how much she wanted him.

Mind and body on fire, she gave him the truth. “I want you to taste me with nothing in between.”

Flames glittered in his eyes, and, in the next heartbeat, he yanked her panties down and took her.

She gasped and watched him touch her more intimately than anyone else had ever done. Watched his mouth claim her. His lips and teeth and tongue pushed her higher, gently tortured her, then licked and soothed her swollen flesh—and started all over.

The sun shone hot on the blooming flowers. The fountain splashed. She could hear guards exchange sign and countersign outside the garden walls. At any moment someone could intrude on them, and it didn't matter. All she cared about was the next swipe of his tongue. The next intimate kiss.

She gripped his shoulders tighter, refusing to give way to the weakness in her knees.

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He chuckled. His hot breath brushed across her *yoni*—her most sensitive flesh—and fired the rippling sensations building between her legs. Desire coiled tighter.

He tasted, teased, and suckled as her mind whirled.

“Tariq!” His name spilled from her lips in a moan.

He made a low sound of satisfaction and redoubled his sensual efforts, using his tongue to send her higher, faster, in a rush of splintering lights and colors.

Lacing the fingers of one hand in his thick, silky hair, she cupped his head against her pussy. At that moment, her muscles tingled and the hot coil of desire in her womb tightened...tightened...until she shattered in the sensual flames.

His arms swept up around her, and held her limp body in the safety of his strength.

* * *

Holding Kayla’s warm, pliant form close to his chest, Tariq inhaled her rich scent mixed with the musk of sex. Blood still hammered in his cock and balls.

She’d never lain with a man. He would be the first. He could demand his sexual rights as a ruler—a right he’d never intended to invoke—to claim her as his own and introduce her to the art and fire of lovemaking tonight when both moons weren’t full.

A deep memory stirred. For moments he ran free as the black wolf, following the scent of a bitch newly in heat; one he somehow knew belonged to him. A low growl formed in his throat—

“No!” he denied, shocked by how close he’d come to letting the beast within him dominate his actions.

“Tariq?” Kayla’s gaze sought his, and he quickly looked away to hide the beast still prowling in his depths.

“Is something wrong?” She tensed, stepped away, and hastily pulled on her clothes. “Did I displease you?”

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“Gods, no.” He rubbed his face with both hands fighting to erase the black wolf’s desires. “I should ask if I shocked you.”

A slow smile lit her face. “You were wonderful. Now I know why women love to...make love.”

He gazed at her standing straight and proud, her pale blonde hair shining in the sunlight and a teasing smile on her lips. Thank the gods he hadn’t frightened her.

“Come with me,” he ordered, sweeping up her cloak from where she’d left it folded on the fountain rim. “I have something to show you.”

* * *

Kayla caught her breath after the long climb up the stone stairs of Observation Point, and gazed out across Temple City and beyond.

The roughly conical hill where she and Tariq stood at the far end of the palace grounds was a long-extinct volcano, weathered and shaped for eons by the forces of nature. She knew from the records that the first settlers from Old Earth had used their long-lost knowledge to carve and fuse the stone walls and erect the lustrous dome roof for this round outlook. Time had softened the slopes. Birds, other animals, and wind had planted the wild thyme, false-orange, and other vegetation waving above the decomposed cinders and lava.

The volcano was long dead, but the male at her side had enough internal fire to kindle her own desires with a touch.

Hastily she stepped away from him and went to the side facing Diyah Mountain.

Tariq moved up beside her. Once more wrapped in his heat and delicious male scent, her thoughts flashed back to the night she’d stood at the edge of a lake, in her wolf form, trapped by three male wolves. Then Tariq—the black wolf—had raced to her rescue, and they’d fought side by side.

Lost in reverie, she took in a quick breath when Tariq spoke. “You

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said you weren't afraid of me, but just moments ago you slipped away from my hand."

Deliberately he widened the distance between them and studied her with an unreadable expression. "I brought you here to show you Temple City and the surrounding land. That's all."

"Oh." It took a few moments for her to regain her composure. Her damp panties and the still-sensitive flesh they covered reminded her of Tariq's hands, of the way his mouth and teeth and tongue had introduced her to erotic delights. Now the tender, skilled lover had disappeared, replaced by a coldly impersonal ruler.

She turned from him and looked out past the sandstone-brick buildings, past the ancient stone walls, to the farms and orchards laid out in neat parcels, marked by irrigation ditches. A fine green haze of spring vegetation lay on both the fallow land and cultivated plots. Bright colored blossoms on the trees promised an abundance of fruit in summer and fall. The Diyab River flowed out of the high plains, past the farms, disappeared behind the city walls, and was lost to view from where she stood.

Horse-drawn carts, piled with early vegetables or other items, rumbled toward the open gates. Passenger coaches, riders, and travelers on foot made their way along the main road linking Temple City with other parts of Khatarza.

She turned to him and said, "The road doesn't look as busy as usual."

His mouth flattened into a grim line. "Commerce and the number of visitors have grown increasingly less as the bands of slavers have become bolder. People are growing afraid to travel, and I don't blame them." He rubbed his forehead with one hand. "I have scouts out watching the main roads and some of the trails through the Kaf Mountains and across the High Plains of Saladin. My troops are spread as thin as possible and still be effective."

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“Have you thought of asking the fairy-dragons to watch for the slavers and let somebody know? Blackthorn could pass your request to them. The bonded ones will want to protect their forever-friends from being captured or killed. Maybe they can persuade their wild cousins to do the same.”

“Good idea. I’ll ask Blackthorn to contact other fairy-dragons.” He started to move toward her, but checked his step. Instead, he stared at her with a bleak expression. “I have to do more to protect my people. My men caught three spies right here in Temple City. Two others have eluded capture so far.” He slammed one fist into his other palm. “One of those elusive spies is Hammer, chief of the slavers. The other is Pig Eyes, his second in command.”

Kayla closed the distance between them and laid a hand on his lower arm, feeling the corded muscles quiver beneath her fingers. “He’s taunting you by coming here, but that foolish pride will be his downfall. After you capture him, his men will fall apart.”

“You’re right about the slaver bands. Without a strong, ruthless leader, they’re an undisciplined rabble.” Tariq covered her hand with his. “You give me hope.”

“I may give you hope, but you have given the people of Khatarza fresh energy and a better life. I see it in the expanded croplands and herds, in the new library and schools. People smile more on the streets and rejoice more in Flame Temple. All this has come about since you ascended to the throne.”

Tariq gave her a sober look. “It’s my job to look after the people of Khatarza.”

Impulsively, Kayla turned her hand over and linked fingers with him. “What can I do to help?”

He brought their joined hands to his lips, kissed her fingers, and said, “You can become my life-mate.”

* * *

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Tariq's life-mate. At the thought, Kayla's heart raced. Three days had passed since Tariq's proposal and she still felt a lurch of excitement at the memory.

Had it been a dream?

No. The memory of that moment in the ancient lookout, with the cool winds swirling around them and his warm hand treasuring hers, was engraved in her mind and heart.

She studied her image in the full-length mirror set in the corner of her old, familiar room—the room where she'd slept since Orrianna had become her foster mother. Kayla's unconfined hair fell loose and silky down her back. Instead of her soft desert pants or the formal Keeper of the Flame robes, she was dressed in a flowing, white, ankle-length *galabiyya* with no ornamentation, as tradition dictated for the solemn blood-covenant of life-mate. She wore no jewelry, not even the firehawk symbol. Reluctantly she'd left that precious medallion with the high priestess. It was now Niobe's choice whether to return the medallion or save it for the next female in Kayla's line chosen by the Fire Goddess.

Tonight, she'd sleep in the palace beside her life-mate, Tariq. At the thought, a knot rose in her throat and a shiver of anticipation loosened her knees.

Only one thing could mar their happiness—his reaction when he learned of her ability to shape shift. The fact that he had that same gift didn't change the reality she'd kept her ability from him and secretly watched him in his wolf form. She had to tell him tonight before the ceremony.

Orrianna called from the front room, "Kayla, please come here." The odd note in her foster mother's voice hastened Kayla's steps.

Orrianna held the door open and the flower-scented breeze flowed in. Outside, the last colors of sunset were rapidly giving way to the soft dark of night. One of the guards posted by Tariq had lit the pathway

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lamps. Ivy flitted through the garden, searching for unwary insects attracted by the flaring light.

A movement on the low steps caught Kayla's attention. She brushed her foster mother's shoulder reassuringly and moved out onto the porch to meet the alpha pair of dabblers and their youngling who waited there. She'd grown fond of them, especially the little one, Fast Water, who had surprised her by his rapid physical growth and development in communicating with her.

Unmindful of her white garments, she crouched down on the swept stones to be closer to their eye level. "Greetings, Running Water and Quiet Water. May I help you or your youngling?"

The female took a step forward and greeted Kayla with tongue flicks. *::We have brought flowers to celebrate your joining with Sultan Tariq as life-mates::*

::Me first. Me first:: Fast Water pushed up and down on his front legs in a frenzy of excitement. He scrambled down from his mother's back, dashed into the shadowed fairy roses lining the pathway, then reappeared with a rain-lily held in one front paw, while he made his way more slowly on three legs.

::For you:: He extended the delicate blossom to her. *::I picked it all by myself::*

The youngling's mother gave a sharp chirr.

He glanced at his father and ducked his head. *::Well, almost by myself. The water came down hard. Daddy helped::*

Quiet Water crooned to her child and tenderly licked the side of his muzzle. Still holding the flower up to Kayla, he leaned against his mother.

Kayla accepted the rare blossom, found only in the mists of a waterfall, and inhaled its delicate fragrance of nutmeg and rose. "You and your father were brave to collect this." Leaning closer to the youngling, she traded tongue flicks. "Thank you for your sweet

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courage. I'll always cherish this gift."

As she straightened to her feet, the guards, who'd warily watched the exchange between her and the dabblers, snapped to attention facing down the road.

That's when she first became aware of the sound of marching feet. Tariq rode slowly on his great white stallion toward her, escorted by palace guardsmen, some carrying torches. Behind him marched the bearers with the veiled travel chair for her. This time the curtains had been tied back for all to see the sultan's bride.

At the bottom of the path, the procession came to a halt. Tariq swung off his mount in one lithe move, gave the reins to a waiting handler, and strode up the flower-lined pathway to her.

He was also dressed in simple style all in white—full sleeved desert shirt, bound with a white sash wrapped around his strong waist, *kut'n* loose pants, and his head bare. Even the sword he carried, as the symbol of protecting her, was in a plain, well-used scabbard.

His gaze seemed to devour her, but all he said was, "Are you ready?"

"To go with you? Of course." She held out her hand to him, eager to feel his touch.

His fingers slipped across the pulse in her wrist before clasping her hand, and she quivered at the secret caress.

In a voice so low only she could hear it, he said, "By joining me, you are walking into greater peril than you have ever known. I swear I will do what I can to protect you, but the time may come when even I will be your danger." The intensity in his tone left no doubt he believed every word.

"And if I choose to humiliate you by walking away?"

Swiftly he said, "Better my humiliation than your death."

The force of emotion in his answer stunned her. It also convinced her of the depth of his commitment to her and to their joining.

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She dipped her head and kissed his fingers, while her loose hair slid around their hands, clinging to his sleeve and hers in a golden veil. Then straightening, she looked into his turbulent eyes. “Come with me, my *sidi*. Come and be my life-mate.”

He murmured, “Remember my promise,” then turned her toward the travel chair.

At that moment, wild dabblers appeared out of the shadowed garden. They moved in the usual formation of males guarding the outside and females with infants or younglings on their back in the protected middle. Lamplight revealed their softened rainbow of red, blue, yellow, silver and green. Each had his or her claws retracted in a sign of peace.

Rushing Water bobbed his head, once, in a sign of respect. *Our pride has gathered an offering of thanks for you, Keeper of the Flame and for you, Sultan Tariq.*

When he finished, a mixed group of males and females came forward, balancing two wreaths on their backs. One wreath had been woven of rain-lilies, each a creamy white flower with its delicate pink center. The other wreath was made of the equally rare slender, dark green rain-lily leaves.

Stunned by the magnitude of the effort that had gone into gathering and forming the priceless wreaths, Kayla glanced at Tariq then said, “The sultan and I are honored by your gift.”

Fast Water skittered in front of them, jumping up and down in excitement. *I helped.* Raising up on his hind legs, he propped one front paw on his mother. *Put them on. Put them on.*

Carefully lifting the wreath of rain-lilies with both hands, Tariq said—aloud for all to hear, “The water dabblers have honored my soon-to-be-life-mate and me with their gifts.”

He placed the fragrant wreath on Kayla’s head, circling her forehead. “Your turn,” he said in a low tone.

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Using great care, Kayla lifted the wreath of leaves in both hands, marveling at the exquisite work that had gone into twining the stems together. Their unique scent of nutmeg and fresh rain swirled around her. Following Tariq's example, she said—aloud, “My soon-to-be life-mate and I thank the water dabblers for their symbols of loyalty and friendship.”

Reaching up, she crowned Tariq with the precious wreath.

The dabblers murmured among themselves with many clicks and chirrs. Another dabbler couple moved up behind the alpha pair.

Rushing Water said, *::This is my second in command and his mate. They stand as witness to a vow I make on behalf of our pride. As long as Sultan Tariq El Zafir rules Khatarza, we will keep diligent watch over all water sources and work to keep them flowing free.::*

* * *

Tariq El Zafir stood beside his life-mate-to-be in the light of torches illuminating the broad stone stairway of Flame Temple. Niobe, High Priestess of the Flame waited at the top landing and entrance to the temple. Palace guardsmen, hand-picked by Tariq, lined the way, with torch bearers behind them.

Blackthorn and Ivy, who had accompanied the procession, flew up to a vantage point where one of the soaring columns met the temple porch roof.

Tariq clasped Kayla's cold hand and gave her an encouraging smile. “Are you ready?”

“For you? Yes, but...” The silver of emotion dominated the blue in her eyes. “Tariq, there's something about me you should know.”

Impatient to get on with the ceremony, he said, “Tell me later. We're too damned exposed here, but the people of Khatarza have the right to witness their sultan bound to his life-mate.”

He gave her a swift kiss to close her lips, then turned and started up the stairs. After a hesitation so brief only he noticed, she paced at his

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side up each step. Flowers had been strewn on both sides of their pathway, but carefully swept from where they would place their feet. The fragrance of those combined with the delicate scent of the wreaths they each wore and the night air carrying the smells of spring.

Spring. Time of the grass moons, he thought. A cold chill slid down his back. In three weeks the Lemon Grass constellation would glitter just below the Great Basket. On the night Qamar and Zurir moved into the curve of the Basket, they'd be full and his curse would be at its most potent.

Tonight the half moons were on the wane and it was safe to make love. On this cheerful thought, he and Kayla reached the last step before the level porch where the high priestess stood.

An altar had been set up behind her in the open for all to witness the ceremony.

She blocked their progress with her tall golden staff of office, demanding, "Who are you and what is your purpose in approaching this temple dedicated to the Goddess of Fire?"

"I am Tariq Sayyid El Zafir. I have come to seek the blessings of the goddess and to join with Kayla Edana Binte El Qadir in blood covenant as life-mates."

"Do you promise to protect, cherish, and provide for this woman who stands beside you?"

"I so vow, even unto death." As he spoke the words, he felt them settle in his heart and knew every syllable was true.

While the priestess began her formal challenge to Kayla, Tariq looked at this woman who was willing to give up her calling to join with him. Her face, her body, her brave spirit all appealed to him. Certainly he found himself half aroused whenever she was nearby—like now, he thought wryly.

The priestess having finished her questions to Kayla and accepted the response said, "Enter into the presence of the goddess to complete

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your vows.”

Tariq linked hands with Kayla and together they moved up the final step to the altar. The night breeze rippled the heavy white-on-white brocaded cloth covering the top surface. A length of white *kut’n* lay beside a crystal knife.

The high priestess swept up the knife and held it high for all to see. Torchlight glistened on the sharp blade. She said, in a voice pitched loud enough to be heard by the people filling the temple square, “The two who stand before you have selected the most solemn and binding of all joinings—a blood covenant.”

The crowd greeted this announcement with a low murmur. Blood covenants were rare.

Extending the knife to him, hilt first, she said, “Sultan Tariq El Zafir, you will draw first blood from your life-mate-to-be’s wrist and second blood from yours.”

Bowing his head in deference to her authority, Tariq accepted the knife and turned to face Kayla. “This will hurt,” he said in a low tone.

“I have faith in you.” She held out her right wrist with the vulnerable underside exposed. Veins pulsed under her delicate skin running across the bend of her wrist. Carefully, he selected the least vulnerable place to cut. As he took her arm in a firm grip, he looked into her eyes. The trust he saw shook him more than any words.

With one quick swipe of the blade, her blood began to flow. He made a similar cut on his left wrist, then linked his left arm around her right one and pressed their wrists together to mingle their blood.

Murmuring ancient words of blessing, the priestess bound their joined wrists with the length of white fabric. Next, she retrieved the firehawk and ankh medallion from a pocket in her robe and placed its gold chain around Kayla’s neck. He felt Kayla’s body stiffen and looked over at her.

Her face glowed with an inner light. She’d tipped back her head,

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eyes closed, with her left palm held up as if receiving a flow of blessings, while her lips moved in a soundless prayer.

As if she felt his concern, she looked at him and said, “The goddess, through Niobe, has returned the rights and duties of a Keeper of the Flame to me, even as your mate.”

“Thank the goddess,” he murmured, gratified by the joy in Kayla’s eyes.

The ceremony continued. Two acolytes stepped forward, removed the formal binding from his and Kayla’s wrists, presented the stained proof of the blood covenant to Niobe, then bound the wounds in red *kut’n*.

Retrieving her staff from the chief acolyte, the high priestess gave three sharp raps on the stone platform and announced, “Tariq El Zafir and Kayla, daughter of El Qadir, having survived the questions and the blood oath, are now joined forever as life-mates.”

While the word life-mates still echoed in the air, Tariq felt a buzzing sensation in the back of his skull. Then the sound of distant bells resonated through him as a fresh breeze scented with roses and the blossoms of the sacred *shagar* trees tugged at his clothes.

Cool flames danced across their heads, arms, and shoulders.

He heard Kayla gasp, “The goddess comes.”

Then the weight of power drove him and Kayla to their knees.

CHAPTER 5

Tariq's sleeping chamber. Feeling shy, Kayla stood in the center of the room and watched her life-mate go down on one knee in front of the carved redstone fireplace to add more logs to the low flames.

She shivered—not from cold, but from anticipation of what the night would bring.

As the flames leaped and crackled, he rose and came toward her with a smile edging his lips. “Nervous?”

“I...yes. I don't want to disappoint you.”

“You could never disappoint me.” He touched her cheek lightly with his fingers. “You were magnificent at the joining, especially the blood-covenant ceremony. The Flame Goddess certainly approved.”

His mouth drew closer to hers and his warm breath flowed across her cool skin as he added, “Who am I to dispute a goddess?”

Kayla held her breath. Then, as his lips came down on hers, she exhaled ready to plunge into a deeper meeting of mouth and tongue and

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teeth. But he surprised her by dropping a kiss on her forehead just below the wreath of rain-lilies.

"You smell of paradise," he murmured. "A paradise I want to explore...slowly."

Leading her to a spot warmed by the dancing flames, he said, "Wait here."

He went to a heavily carved chest set against the wall, opened it, and took out two blankets, two pillows, and a pad made of curly *caswool* hides.

Carrying the stack back to where she stood, he spread the pad in front of the fireplace, topped it with both blankets, and piled the pillows at one end.

Puzzled, she asked, "Is that where we'll sleep?"

"We'll sleep in my...our bed, but first we'll relax and do some exploring by the fire." His eyes gleamed with sensual promises.

"Explore? Like you did in the garden?"

He gave a low laugh. "Yes, my sweet innocent. Like we did in the garden and more—much more."

At the exquisite memory of his mouth on her *yonis*, first through the damp silk of her panties, and then when the panties were gone, hot, needy pressure built between her thighs.

She went down on both knees on the pallet, and tugged him down. "Let the discovery begin, Captain Zaber," she said, naming the starship captain who'd discovered the planet centuries earlier and brought the first settlers there.

"Captain? Call me, 'lover.'" On his knees facing her, he brushed one hand across her breasts, and grinned as her nipples rose hard against the material.

"Turnabout is fair play." Dipping her head, she licked one of his dark nipples through the soft fabric of his shirt.

"Little dragon," he said in a husky tone. "You're asking for a sweet

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lesson in making love.”

“So, teach me.” Emboldened by his obvious desire for her, she flicked one finger over the hard nub under the damp circle in his shirt.

“Feeling bold, are you?” While he spoke, he unwrapped his long, white sash and put it aside.

She held up her wrist wrapped in red. “I’m your life-mate. It’s my privilege to be bold with you.”

Tenderly he clasped her hand and carried it to his mouth. “And it’s my privilege, as your life-mate, to touch you and love you all over your body beginning tonight.” He kissed the spot at the base of her palm above the red bandage.

While the edgy flow of desire rolled through her body, he carefully bit the fleshy part just below her thumb and sent a fresh shaft of pleasure tumbling after the first.

My own formal Keeper lessons in seduction had not included the power of a nip to the hand, she thought, intrigued.

In the meantime, Tariq had removed his shirt, and now sat cross-legged with his gaze fixed on her.

Firelight illuminated his body from one side, glowing on his muscular chest and the dark male coins in the night-dark pelt.

Drawn by memories of the night she’d watched Tariq shape shift from the alpha wolf to the more virile human, she curled her fingers in the soft pelt and watched his muscles ripple in sensual reaction.

“Finish what you started,” he ordered in a ragged tone.

Delighted she could explore in reality what she’d only dreamed about, Kayla lapped at his hard male nipples; tasted the tang of salt on his skin; drank in the heady scent of his musk.

His breath sighed out on another groan. His fingers brushed the side of her jaw, then fumbled under her chin. “Enough,” he said, “before I lose control for the first time since my early teens.”

“Lose control?” She blinked at him, momentarily confused by being

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pulled from her fantasy-made-reality. “Oh.” As comprehension sank in, she turned to scramble away.

“Wait.” He stopped her with a light touch. “Don’t go. I need you here more than I need my next breath.”

His declaration thrilled her, but the hint of vulnerability in his eyes moved her even more.

“I’m not going anywhere.” She plucked at the waistband of his loose desert pants, fully aware of the bulge tenting the fabric. “You promised to teach me.”

“Teach you...yes.” He removed the rest of his clothes, and switched his attention to undressing her. As he lifted each foot to slip off her sandals, his hands brushed across her legs and splinters of delight flashed through her nerves. Gripping the hem of her *abiyya*, he slowly lifted it up her body, while the backs of his fingers secretly brushed nude flesh.

She held her breath, aware of each gliding touch of sword-hardened skin. Pressure gathered between her thighs. Her breasts swelled. The tight sensitive tips ached for Tariq’s touch, for his mouth.

“Lift up,” he muttered. Seconds later her panties joined her other garments beside the pallet and she settled once more in front of the fireplace.

Nude, they sat cross-legged on the thick pad facing each other, knees touching.

Firelight glowed across Tariq’s hard, muscular body. Her gaze was drawn to the shadowed place between his legs where his cock bobbed gently above the thicket of male hair.

He glanced down, then gave her a wry smile. “Yes. There’s no way to hide my desire for you.”

He picked up the single rain-lily blossom from where she’d left it beside the pallet and stroked the side of her face. “My life-mate,” he said in a tone that throbbed seductively. “Clothed, you please me in all

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ways. Unclothed, you take my breath away.”

He dusted the flower down the center of her body, from her throat, lingered between her breasts, swirled around her belly button, and left it touching her *yoni*.

At each inhale-exhale, the brush of the petals against her tender flesh sent little sparks of pleasure through her nerves.

His eyes glowed with passion. “Seated there, clad only in firelight, and wearing a crown of priceless flowers, you look like the goddess of spring.”

“I m...no...goddess,” she managed to gasp through a mouth gone dry.

“Thank the gods. I want you, a living, breathing woman.” He raised his palms facing her. “Press your open hands to mine and we’ll finish the next step in our blood-covenant—the linking of our major energy centers.”

Lifting her palms and fingers to his, she felt the heat and power in his hard hand touching hers so carefully.

“Now the link begins,” he murmured. “Touch my body as I touch yours.”

As he placed one hand on her forehead, his fingers brushed the wreath of rain-lilies, releasing a fragrant wave of nutmeg and rose.

Following his example, she rested her fingers on his brow. Suddenly her senses were overwhelmed by the multiplied sounds and scents around her; the high-pitched crackle of resin in the burning logs; their aroma so evocative of campfires in the mountains, and warmth at home in wintertime. She heard the faint sounds of conversation in other parts of the palace as people went about their activities, the chirr of wild dabblers in the garden, and Tariq’s soft breathing.

Her heartbeat throbbed in her ears. The faint scent of *caswool* rose from the pad mixed with the clean aroma of the soap used to wash the blankets.

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All the while, pressure grew between her thighs caused by the petals of the rain-lily brushing her clit.

"The heart link is next," he murmured, placing his warm hand between her breasts. At his touch, a living, pulsing green light flooded her mind, gathered power, and flashed across her arm to her hand pressed against his heart.

He froze and stared at her. Desire simmered in his eyes. Lifting his hand to cup the side of her face, he said in a low tone, "The depth of your compassion and ability to love stun me."

"I was raised with love." She drew his hand back to her breasts. "Let me love you now."

"Little dragon, you tempt me beyond all reason." He fondled both breasts, leaned forward and kissed each beaded nipple, then sat back, with obvious reluctance in every move.

Those kisses had scorched through her body and lodged in the swelling flesh between her thighs, while the rain-lily danced against her moist, humid clit.

He inhaled a shuddering breath and wiped his damp forehead. His cock had grown more rigid. And the firelight disclosed the ruddy stain on his cheeks that had nothing to do with the dancing flames.

"Kayla, life-mate, we have to complete the merging of our energy centers, even if it kills me."

"I'm ready."

At his hot look, her heart took a perilous leap.

"Two more to go," he said in a choked tone. "Next the center of desire and procreation."

Curving his fingers between her thighs, he brushed aside the rain-lily blossom and pressed his hand against her mound, where the heavy coil of energy was growing. She felt the motion of his fingers rubbing her outer lips, then a quick squeeze that left her gasping.

She braced her hands on the pad slightly behind her and threw back

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her head, eyes closed, every sense tuned to his magic touch.

“You’re so beautifully sensitive,” he muttered, switching to a slow, gliding up and down motion across the flesh of her clit. Her body melted at his expert strokes. She hungered to feel his mouth there, as she had in the garden.

His warm hand curved over her mound and paused. She murmured her displeasure and he chuckled.

“More playtime later. We still have the ceremony to complete,” he said in a voice simmering with passion.

Opening her eyes, she met his gaze in the glow of firelight and saw he was as caught up as she was in the sensual strands.

Following his example, she fingered the base of his penis with one hand, watching it quiver at her touch. Wrapping the fingers of her other hand around the broad shaft, she slowly drew her hand up and down the silky length to the tip, while gently squeezing his balls. She varied her rhythm, sometimes soft and slow, then other strokes fast and with more pressure.

He threw back his head, closed his eyes, and said, “Gods, yes, like that.”

She watched a small bead of pre-cum appear on the broad tip. On impulse, she bent forward and licked the shimmering drop. This time the light filling her heart and mind glowed with the deep orange of the sun as it set.

Tariq cleared his throat, and lifted her chin on the curve of his fingers. “My little not-so-innocent, you make me weak and renew my spirit at the same time.”

Still caught in the grip of lust and joy, she stared at him. “What? What happens next?”

“The foundation link.”

He rocked forward, his chin on her shoulder—skin touching skin, and his warm hand curved around the base of her spine. He fingered the

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sensitive spot deep in the fold between her buttocks. She lost her breath at the swarm of new sensations, and tightened her muscles to prolong the pleasure.

“More later,” he promised in a voice laced with hunger. “Finish the ceremony first.”

Inhaling the masculine scent of his skin, she touched him as he had touched her, lingering at all the most sensitive places. Red light flared behind her eyelids. Through a haze of desire she sensed their combined connection deep in the planet below them.

He pressed her back onto the soft pad, and stretched his long, hot, aroused body partially over hers, with the weight of his chest propped up on his elbows. “Life-mate,” he muttered gazing down at her, “this is later.”

Suddenly his hands and mouth streaked over her, finding, touching and tasting her most sensitive places. Pressure coiled tighter, hotter between her thighs. Her *yonis* was already damp. The musk of her desire rose around them, while she slowly writhed under him in a hungry haze.

“I want you, now,” she said, dizzy with need, while everything within her ached for release.

She felt his fingers at her clit, felt them move in and out in a slowly increasing pace, each time slipping deeper. She twisted her hips against those magic fingers, silently urging them to go deeper, harder.

Patience,” he said in a thick voice. “I want you ready to take all of me.”

“I am ready.” Her hands scrabbled blindly across his damp skin and finally gripped his waist. Her back arched. Wild for relief, she demanded, “Now. Fill me now!”

“Yes.” His strong fingers raised her buttocks, holding her in position. “Now.” He plunged forward and buried himself in her depths. She cried out at the warmth, fullness, intense pleasure. “Tariq!”

CHAPTER 6

Tariq woke in the quiet of his sleeping chamber with Kayla in his arms. The fire had burned down, but still provided some light.

Carefully, so he wouldn't awaken her, he eased up on one elbow and gazed down at her as she slept, her pale hair a wild frame for her peaceful expression.

She hadn't looked peaceful earlier this evening, he thought, smiling at the memory. In fact, she'd lived up to the nickname of little dragon in her uninhibited responses to love play. After their first tumultuous joining in front of the fire, he'd carried her to bed and they'd made love again and again, until they'd both dozed off in a daze of completion.

While he studied her sleeping form, his cock had already decided it wanted more, but he denied himself that pleasure. She'd been virgin when she'd come to him. She needed more time to recuperate.

As he studied his life-mate, his acute hearing noted the increase of guard activity in the hallway outside his suite and hushed commands.

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Immediately, the slavers came to mind. He started to slip out of bed and go check on the disturbance, but Kayla's murmured, "Tariq?" stopped him.

He gave her a tender kiss and said in a soothing tone, "Go back to sleep, life-mate."

"Sleep," she muttered, closing her eyes again. "Sounds good."

He watched her a few more moments to assure himself she slept. Then he pulled on his pants and strode through his suite to the door at the main corridor.

The two soldiers posted to protect his quarters stood guard with crossed spears against a city guardsman who paced back and forth in front of the heavily carved and reinforced doors.

When he caught sight of Tariq, he saluted with one fist over his heart. "Your Highness..."

Before the city guardsman could say more, one royal soldier drew his sword and pointed it at the agitated man's chest.

Tariq said, "Stand easy, soldier. I'll take care of this."

As the guard returned to his station beside the door, Tariq turned his attention to the city guardsman and learned more slavers had been seen slipping into the city, had escaped capture, and were hiding in Temple City.

Duty to his people obligated him to help the guardsmen locate the slavers before they kidnapped, ravaged, and sold more young women and men.

His deep need to protect Kayla made the elimination of the slavers' threat imperative.

Striding toward the fireplace to add more wood before leaving his life-mate, he stumbled and froze. The back of his scalp tingled. An image flooded his mind—the flash of a deadly sword blade, inscribed with odd symbols, poised to strike Kayla.

* * *

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Standing beside the branches of the Rose of Shalimar where it masked the gate in the rock wall, Tariq spoke to Counselor Rashad. "I'm going out tonight in search of the slavers who escaped capture earlier."

"On your joining night? What about your life-mate?"

"Kayla's safety is one reason I must find the dogfuckers."

With the boldness of an old and valued friend, Rashad said, "It's dangerous for you to prowl the city in wolf form. Someone might ignore the law against selling wolf pelts, and kill you for your fur."

"I've lived with that danger on other nights."

Rashad curved his fingers over Tariq's shoulder. "My *sidi*, please listen. You can protect your life-mate when she's with you and keep her safe in the palace when you're gone."

Tariq shook his head. "I can't keep her confined to the castle. The Fire Goddess has allowed Kayla to continue her duties as a Keeper of the Flame, and she honors the obligation."

"In that case, surround her with guards when she's away from the palace."

In spite of the seriousness of the moment, Tariq grinned. "Knowing my life-mate, she won't tolerate that much restriction."

Rashad made an impatient motion. "You're the sultan. Just give the order." With that, he turned and unlatched the heavy gate.

Blackthorn had quietly settled on a branch in a nearby roseapple tree. He rustled his wings to catch his bond-mate's attention. *∴Rashad has not yet found a life-mate.∴*

Tariq looked up and found the fairy-dragon—a black shape in the shadowed branches of the tree. *∴When my friend finally joins with a woman he loves, he'll understand.∴*

* * *

Tariq, in his black wolf shape, prowled through the streets of Temple City, hunting for deadly prey. Light from both waning moons

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gilded the sandstone brick buildings, and sent blue shadows across the streets and walled gardens. Carefully nurtured *argan* trees spread their blossom-filled branches in the small pocket parks tucked between groups of homes.

As the wolf moved deeper into the city, he passed through the *souk*. Shops and street booths were closed until the next morning, but the air was still heavy with the scents of wild thyme, nutmeg, roses, and the hot, rich aroma of freshly slaughtered meat.

In one shaded booth, sweetened mint tea had been sold and sipped from tiny glass cups. In the next space, a fruit and vegetable merchant's produce had left the mingled aromas of spring pears and lemon grass.

Twice he caught the residual scent of blister tree sap on human flesh and knew a slaver had been at that spot.

Black Wolf silently approached the far end of the marketplace from upwind. It had been set aside for merchants selling tanned *caswool* and tyrano-dragosaur hides. His need for extra caution came from the neighboring pens of horses and the sturdier enclosures holding raptodragosaurs trained as guard beasts or hunters.

His goal lay beyond in the twisted streets of dilapidated and abandoned dwellings and taverns with rooms to rent. Anyone venturing into this area went armed and ready for trouble; even the city guards patrolled in pairs.

As he slipped into hiding outside the Roaring Dragosaur Inn, a white owl passed overhead, close enough for him to feel the faint rush of wind from its wings. It swept out of sight, probably hunting for a dinner of firan-mice.

His amused speculation was cut off abruptly by the elusive scent he'd been seeking. Two occupants of the inn bore the scent of blister sap mixed with wild mint. Only slavers willingly endured the corrosive touch of the fiery sap. Mixed with green from mint, it made an indelible tattoo on their shoulder identifying them as a true member of the

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slavers. Others not bearing the mark, who kidnapped and sold people, risked slow torture and death at the hands of the slavers for cutting into their profitable business.

Smothering a growl, the wolf crept toward an open window. He lifted his furry snout, sampling the rancid smells of crude ale, stale food, unwashed bodies, and another elusive whiff of the slavers' mark.

The bottom of the window had been set at the level of a grown male human's waist, so wolf/Tariq had a clear field of vision into the dim, smoky room. It took only moments to trace the pungent scent through the miasma of stinks to the two ordinary-looking travelers seated at a table with their backs to an inner wall. They were in earnest discussion with a plainly dressed townsman, bearing a sword in its well-used scabbard.

Once the wolf located them, he settled down with a predator's patience, watching for a chance to cut them out of the herd.

While the trio talked, the travelers kept his soft-brimmed traveler's hat pulled low to hide his face.

After more conversation, Tariq saw the stranger pass a small, heavy bag to one of the slavers. Was it payment for a delivery, or more likely an order?

He sent a mental call to Blackthorn. *::When the dogfucker in the traveler's hat leaves, try to get a look at his face so we can identify him later.::*

::I can do better. Watch.:: The door opened with a bang and the white owl flew in, heading straight for the startled trio. It made one pass at the table, scattering dirty dishes, then swept up a mug in its talons and dropped it on one slaver's head. Chairs scraped and tipped over as the three men scrambled back from the table.

White owl made another pass, hooked its claws into the buyer's soft hat, flew toward the window, then veered away and out the door.

Cursing, the man tried to shield his identity with one hand. He

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glanced toward the window, then he ran heavily away into the dark, but Tariq/Black Wolf recognized one of the city's prominent merchants.

Before anyone shut the door, the owl came back with Blackthorn following. The owl flew in a great looping path around the interior of the inn, snapping its powerful beak at anyone who tried to get in its way.

Blackthorn entered and perched on an open rafter over the door, spreading his black wings and displaying his impressive mouthful of sharp fangs.

While the militant fairy-dragon stood guard over the exit, the owl dove at the slavers, battered them about the head with its wings, and swept out of reach.

Anyone foolish enough to swat at the owl or aim a weapon at it found himself or herself a target for Blackthorn.

Slowly the owl forced the slavers to abandon the table. Each dash they made toward the door was stopped by a burst of flames from Blackthorn—close enough to warn, but not singe—or White Owl's flying sweep of talons through their hair.

With a defiant shout, first one, then the other, slaver cleared a path through the jumble of tables, chairs, and patrons, and escaped through the window. The moment they landed on the ground Black Wolf snarled and sent them scrambling once more, for their lives.

::A city guard patrol is on its way, alerted by a messenger from the innkeeper,:: Blackthorn said.

::Good. We'll herd the dogfuckers in their direction.::

Blackthorn mentally sang, *::Ain't we got fun,::* as he and the white owl flew after the fleeing men.

::Fun,:: Tariq agreed and added a low, menacing growl.

One of the slavers glanced back over his shoulder and screamed, "Wolf!"

The patrol came around the corner, ahead of the fleeing men,

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moving double-time. One guardsman shouted, “Halt.”

The human traffickers changed direction, but found their way blocked by Blackthorn. They darted toward an alleyway to the right. White Owl was there holding a squirming firan-mouse in its talons. Swooping low, owl dropped the living creature onto one slaver’s shoulder, where it clung for long moments, in spite of the man’s frantic effort to brush it away.

Just as the patrol guardsmen arrived, the owl made one more pass and tore away part of the second man’s sleeve, revealing the slaver’s tattoo.

Black Wolf slipped backwards into a shadow and watched the capture of the slavers.

He was sure of two things—there were more slavers out there in hiding, and the white owl was not just an intelligent bird, it was a shapeshifter.

CHAPTER 7

Kayla finished bundling her hair on top of her head and fixed it in place with two smooth ebony hair sticks. Slipping out of her pale blue robe, she laid it on the padded flamewood bench, walked across the thick *caswool* pelt rug, and went down the three steps into the sunken bathtub. She settled in the warm water and poured bathing lotion into the pliable cells of a sponge.

Ivy was ahead of her, floating in the rose-scented liquid. The fairy-dragon's golden eyes were closed. Her delicate wings lay unfurled on the surface and water rippled around her pink-and-pale green body.

"It didn't take you long to get accustomed to the palace luxuries," Kayla teased.

::About as long as it took you to fall into the sultan's arms,:: Ivy answered, lazily swishing her wings.

::Speaking of my life-mate, where's his forever-friend, Blackthorn?::

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Ivy opened her jaws in an exaggerated yawn. *::How would I know? He doesn't discuss his plans with me.::*

While she thought about the two fairy-dragons and the many times she'd seen them cuddling in the two weeks since the blood covenant ceremony with Tariq, Kayla ran the soapy sponge down each arm and across her shoulders.

Knowing her forever-friend's shy attraction to Blackthorn, Kayla said aloud, "We've all been busy chasing down the slavers and their customers. Did you stop to discuss your plans with Blackthorn before following buyers to their homes or hiding places?"

::No.:: Ivy folded her wings, ducked under the surface, and came up shaking her wings before answering. *::That was different. If I had taken time to tell him and discuss plans, the quarry would have escaped.::*

"Did you tell Blackthorn your reasons afterwards?"

Ivy splashed water at Kayla. *::Have you told Sultan Tariq you're the shapeshifting white owl who's been taking so many chances in the fights with slavers?::*

"He'd get more protective, order me to stay home out of danger, and I'd have to disobey." She wiped a wet hand over her face trying to hide her uneasiness. "Worse, he might not understand why I haven't told him I can shapeshift."

::Would that be so bad? He's your life-mate. He should know.::

"I have my reasons."

Kayla's thoughts went back to when she was six years old and playing with friends in front of her parents' shop in River's Cross. Partway down the *souk*, a crowd had gathered around the booth of the old woman who sold headscarves she wove and beaded, and animal figurines carved by her crippled husband.

Curious about the crowd, Kayla, after a quick glance toward her mother busy with a customer, joined her friends as they ran to see what

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was happening.

The crowd had pulled the woman out of her booth and surrounded her chanting, “Shift, shift, you damned shapeshifter.”

The woman denied the charges and begged them to leave her alone, but the mob took up the cry, “Kill the shapeshifter.”

One of Kayla’s friends—a worldly eight-year-old—said, “A dirty shapeshifter. She’s in big trouble now.”

Someone threw a rock at the woman’s back and she fell to her knees. Another rock smacked her chest. Through the tight press of people, Kayla saw more rocks thrown at the woman.

Horrified by people hurting the woman who’d always been kind to her, Kayla tried to squeeze through the crowd and make them stop.

The mob surged forward. More rocks and stones flew.

Then she heard her father’s familiar voice close to her ear saying, “Quiet, dearling. We can’t help her now.”

He scooped her up in his arms and carried her back to the shop. By then the town patrol had arrived and was dispersing the crowd. Kayla’s last view had been of a silent, bloody form sprawled facedown on the ground surrounded and blanketed with rocks and small stones.

She sighed. Even today, the memory filled her with anger and sadness.

Ivy’s welcoming hum brought Kayla’s attention back to the present, just as Tariq squatted down beside the edge of the bathtub.

“Two beauties,” he said. “I’ve brought a friend for Ivy. Kayla, you’re mine.”

Blackthorn came down on Tariq’s shoulder and waited while Ivy scrambled out of the water. The two fairy-dragons flew away together.

“Life-mate, you’re mine...always,” Kayla said. As her dark memories faded, she felt her smile grow brighter. “Want to scrub my back?”

“Thought you’d never ask.” Tariq pulled off his boots and stripped

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away his clothes with a speed that told how interested he was to scrub her back and other parts.

Instead of using the underwater stairs, he took one long step down into the water and sent small waves sloshing back and forth. Her breasts bobbed in the perfumed water.

Tariq settled behind her with his legs on both sides of her hips and her back against his hot, muscled chest. His masculine scent of honest work and male readiness fired her desire. His arms brushed her sides as he cupped her breasts in his sword-hardened hands.

"These are my beauties," he murmured.

"Yours," she agreed, already caught in his sensual spell.

Ignoring the bathing sponge, he poured the liquid soap into one hand, rubbed his hands together, and smoothed the cleansing solution down her sides, between her breasts, and across her ribs and stomach under water. His fingers moved up, stroked the under curve of her breasts, and circled around the swollen globes as they waited for his touch.

Teasingly, his fingers circled the edges of her areola again and again, never touching her achingly taut nipples.

"Tariq, life-mate, please!" she begged, twisting so his hands would brush her sensitive tips.

"Please, what?" His hands stilled. "This?" He pressed an open-mouth kiss to the side of her neck.

"No...yes." A second hot kiss, this time followed by a quick nip to her shoulder sent her thoughts splintering.

Just when she thought she couldn't stand the sensual torture any longer, he caught her nipples gently between thumb and forefinger. Waves of pleasure raced to her toes.

"More," she said on a soft gasp.

His hand slid between her thighs and cupped her. "Like this?"

Before she could answer, his busy fingers slipped inside and

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pumped her to a fast, hot orgasm. Her hips arched up against his hand. She rocked in mindless pleasure. Every part of her silently screamed its desperate desire for all of him to touch her, penetrate her.

Suddenly, he swept her up in his arms, carried her out of the water, and stretched her out on the thick *caswool* pelt rug, and knelt there.

Air cooled the water drying on her body, while the heat from his great body warmed her.

Kneeling beside her, he studied her with eyes full of desire. “Your bright hair, like your soul, shines even in the dark.” Tenderly, he removed the ebony hair sticks, and watched as the silky strands slithered and uncoiled.

“Little dragon,” he murmured, leaning to lick each nipple in turn. “Do you know how beautiful you are, all soft and flushed from your perfumed bath?”

Bonelessly, she flapped one hand at him. She tried to answer, but her lips wouldn’t form the words.

As she floated in a haze of sensual wonder, he cupped her butt, lifted her hips, and plunged in, filling her full and deep. Slowly he drew out to the very edge, then slid back in—time and time again, while heat and need coiled in her womb.

Gold blazed against the green in his eyes. “Tell me you want me, Kayla, all of me. Tell me you surrender not only your body, but all of your heart, mind, and soul.”

“Tariq”—she fought to clear her thoughts—“even before we confronted each other at the Assembly of Virgins, I wanted you. That want turned to love. I love you and willingly surrender to you.”

“Gods, Kayla.” He lifted her hips high and plunged deeper, filling her to the mouth of her womb. She felt the rush of hot seed, then the tightening and ripples in her channel walls signaled another orgasm.

Trembling from the power and hot, sweaty beauty of their lovemaking, she wrapped her legs around him, let go of everything but

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her one deadly secret, and let him take her beyond thought.

* * *

Tariq carried Kayla to their bed, lay down and drew her into his arms. The scent of roses blended with the sensual musk from their lovemaking wrapped around them. He listened to her soft breathing and looked bleakly into the night. Daily, she grew more precious to him. She was generous in her lovemaking, generous in her surrender.

Now that he'd passed his birthday, would that willing submission be enough to protect her from the beast in him in two weeks when both moons were full?

Could he avoid making love to her on that night? It should be a simple matter for him to say, 'No.'

On that not-so-comforting thought, he drifted into sleep.

* * *

Black Wolf loped through the palace halls, snarling at the men standing guard. The stink of human fear sparkled in his blood. His ears twitched at the voices calling orders along the length of these marble walls that kept him confined.

He reached the tall, metal-bound door that instinct told him offered escape to the outside.

An unarmed human ran toward him. A dim part of his brain offered the name, Rashad.

"Sidi, why did you shift indoors?" the man asked.

Black Wolf sensed his concern and the beginning of fear. He growled and clawed at the wooden barrier, leaving deep marks.

Hastily Rashad opened the door and Black Wolf was free.

Once outside, Black Wolf leaped into the air and snapped his great jaws for the sheer joy of living.

Both moons were full. Their combined radiance spread across the palace walls and fitted rock sidewalks and road leading out to the high

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plains.

Rabbits. Firan-mice, food—his memories reminded him. But the sweet, hot blood of four-footed prey—horses—was much closer in the shelters—stables—around the corner.

Then there was another scent—far more alluring—the fragrance of a human female warm from her bed and a night of loving.

The fur rose on the back of his neck. A growl rumbled deep in his throat.

The woman ran through the night toward him calling, “Tariq, come back. Shift to human form before someone kills you.”

Her garment flapped around her like a wounded bird. Her hair shimmered in the moonlight, like the fur of a tasty rabbit. She was no small prey. Instead, here was enough tender, warm flesh to feed him and his new pack.

He sent out a howl inviting Brown Male, Gray Male, Ragged Ear, and his alpha bitch, Silver, to come and feast.

By this time, his prey was within an easy pounce. She must have had a sudden awareness of his intent.

She said, “Tariq?” in a shaky voice.

He roared, “I am Black Wolf,” and with one great leap, knocked her to the ground.

It only took one deep bite to rip out her throat and silence her screams.

CHAPTER 8

Tariq woke beside Kayla with a low growl caught in his throat. Sweat beaded his body. His heart raced. He barely made it out of bed, past the privacy screen, and through the door into the walled garden, where he fell on hands and knees and was viciously ill.

When the spasms were over, he crawled a few lengths away from the malodorous mess and rolled onto his back near the fountain.

He flung one arm over his eyes to shield them from the pale moonlight—reminders of what could happen on the night both Qamar and Zurir rose bright and full. *Gods, I killed her. In my dream I ripped out her throat!*

Again bile rose in his throat at the sickening last image of his nightmare—a dark dream that could possibly come true unless he found a way to prevent it.

He heard the door open and the soft footfalls coming in his direction. Wearily, he dragged himself into a sitting position against the

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fountain and watched Kayla come toward him, her robe swirling around her sweet body.

For a few sickening moments he was flung back into the dream...

Her garment flapped around her like a wounded bird. Her hair shimmered in the moonlight like the fur of a tasty rabbit. She was no small prey. Instead, here was enough tender, warm flesh to feed him and his new pack.

By all the devils of Ubar, he had to send her away before—through no fault of her own—she brought his madness and her death.

In the last few steps before she reached Taqir, Kayla watched his expression change from despair to grim determination.

His face was slick with sweat. She'd seen where he'd vomited, and her heart turned over in her chest. Her beloved was ill.

Kneeling beside his listless form, she touched his clammy forehead and felt him shudder. "Tariq, dearling, do you want a sip of water?"

"Water?" He blinked at her like a person waking from a nightmare. He seemed to ponder her question. "That would taste good."

She rose and plucked a cup-shaped leaf from a nearby green-chalice bush, filled it with clear water from the fountain and brought it to him.

When his hands trembled as he tried to grasp the fragile leaf without spilling its contents, she wrapped the fingers of both hands around his. Her heart ached at the sign of weakness in this usually strong man.

He drank the cold liquid and then gave her a sad smile. "My thanks, little dragon, for the water and for coming to my aid."

His voice sounded stronger, but there was an undertone of some undefined emotion.

When he declined her offer of another drink, she laid the leaf under its mother bush and knelt facing Tariq. "You're ill. I'll help you inside and call a temple healer. They have greater knowledge of cures than I do."

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“That won’t be necessary.” Lifting one hand, he tenderly traced the line of her cheek. “Touching you is better than any cure a professional healer could use.”

She pressed her hand against his, enjoying the feel of his returning strength. “You have my love, life-mate. For you, I’d dare anything.”

He snatched his hand away. His tone turned harsh, “Always guard your heart, Kayla, for your own protection.”

“Guard my heart?”

For a moment, his eyes had gone wild, like a wolf cast out of his pack and in pain from the separation.

With trembling fingers, she touched his lips. “Tariq, look at me. What’s wrong? How can I help?”

Instead of answering, he sat rigid, unseeing, as if struggling with some inner demon.

Not knowing what else to do, she gently stroked his shoulder and murmured, “It’s all right. I’m here.”

Finally he let out a great gust of air and the light of intelligence and reason was back in his eyes. “Gods, Kayla, I’m sorry I went off like that. Did I frighten you?”

“I wasn’t afraid, but you worried me.” She stood and offered her hand. “Come with me, beloved. Together we’ll solve whatever is troubling you.”

He stood without touching her and braced his legs apart, as a warrior commander would do when issuing orders. “Kayla, my life-mate, I want you to leave the palace and me—to go away to your father’s home and not return.”

“Leave you?” Her mind whirled and froze. She couldn’t think—couldn’t take in the enormity of loss and betrayal. How could she live without Tariq?

“Kayla?”

The pain in that one utterance gave her hope. “Go to my father’s

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house for how long?”

“Until I come for you.”

Then he carefully walked around her and back to their suite.

* * *

Two weeks later Tariq inspected the sturdy bars sectioning off part of the cave. Sometime in the past, during the early days of settlers from Mother Earth, a natural opening along one seam of granite in the ceiling had been altered to provide light in the cave’s dark interior. The same lustrous material that had been used for the dome of the sheltered outlook on Observation Point sealed the skylight from the elements.

Tomorrow night, light from both full moons would flood the cage and its occupant. In that bright beam, he’d test, to the fullest extent, the power of the curse since bonding with Kayla, and his ability to resist shifting into wolf form. If he did fall to the curse, he’d be locked away from the world, and guarded by his trusted friend.

Rashad touched his shoulder. “Friend, is this cold prison necessary? You’ve sent your life-mate away during the time of danger.”

“If I succumb to the curse, there’s no place on all of Traber safe for Kayla, as long as my Black Wolf form exists to hunt her down.” Once more the horror of his dream slicked his body with sweat. “The curse says she’ll be my first victim. You understand the implications.”

“Once she’s dead, Black Wolf will rage through the people of Khatarza and slaughter all who cross its path.”

Tariq gripped his friend’s shoulder. “Even you, Rashad my friend, even you. That is why you must kill the mad wolf—and release my soul.”

* * *

Kayla hugged her knees and stared into the campfire. Behind her, a small sleeping tent had been erected for her use.

The metal plate of food prepared by the palace guard cook sat

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barely touched beside her.

Captain Jabir, leader of the small company of guards handpicked by Tariq to escort her to her father, knelt at her side. He saluted and said, “Sultana Kayla, did the food displease you? The cook is concerned.”

“The food is excellent. I’m just not hungry tonight. Please give my apologies to the cook for not eating more.”

“No apologies are expected.”

He refilled her cup with cool water from the spring where they’d stopped for the night, and carried it to her. Instead of immediately returning to the other men, he paused and said, “I can see you are troubled by this trip to River’s Cross. Remember I’m here to serve you as my sultana and as the Keeper of the Flame, who brought comfort to my dying mother and held her hand when she slipped away to the other side.”

Silently, he rose and rejoined his men and women.

As her escort settled into their blanket rolls for the night—except for the posted guards—Kayla’s uneasiness grew. Why had Tariq insisted on her going to her father’s home, a four-day trip from Temple City? In spite of his urging, she’d delayed as much as possible, while he’d worked to ensure a safe trip for her.

She picked up the plate of cold food and ate a few bites. Her intuition said she’d need the strength through the night and into tomorrow.

Still wondering why she’d been sent away from her life-mate so soon after the blood-covenant, when deep inside she knew he wanted her, she gazed up at Qamar and Zurir. Both had reached the Great Basket constellation above the spray of stars forming the Lemon Grass constellation. Tomorrow night both moons would be full as they moved into the curve of the Basket—a powerful event that happened only in springtime. It was a magical night of passion and rejoicing. Eight months later, the babies born were called Grass Babies. They and their

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parents were honored as the living promise of another fruitful year.

Kayla's thoughts were interrupted when Ivy fluttered out of the dark and landed on the ground facing her. *::Blackthorn is worried about his forever friend.::*

::Is Tariq ill or injured?:: she asked, shaken by the thought of her beloved in pain.

::Blackthorn doesn't know. It's something about a curse and him being forced to shift into a wild wolf forever.::

The text of an ancient scroll flashed through her mind. *::The El Zafir curse. The keeper who recorded it thought the curse was an allegory not real.::*

Ivy stepped from one foot to another in agitation. *::The sultan thinks it's real enough to have himself locked in a cave tomorrow night and guarded by Rashad, with orders to kill Tariq if he shifts to wolf form.::*

While Kayla still reeled with shock at this information, Blackthorn flew out of the night and landed beside Ivy. In his strong mental voice, he said, *::My forever friend needs you beside him, but he fears for your life. Ivy said your love is strong enough to save him.::*

::Of course I'll come. You lead, but first I must tell the leader of this escort, so they can return to help.::

She saw Captain Jabir walking among the sleeping members of the escort, as if making a final check before seeking his own bedroll. She motioned for him to join her, and he came swiftly.

His soldier's penetrating gaze searched her expression and studied the two fairy-dragons. "Why has the sultan's Blackthorn come? Is there trouble?"

"Trouble? Yes. And I must go to him immediately."

"Sultana El Zafir, you've traveled long today. I'll send a messenger on a swift horse."

"All your horses are swift. You just didn't push them hard today—

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probably at my life-mate's orders to make this an easy trip for me."

Jabir inclined his head. "That is true. Tell me the source of the danger and I'll alert the palace guard."

"The sultan isn't in Temple City." She turned to Blackthorn and spoke out loud. "Where will my life-mate be when the trouble strikes?"

::In a cave half a day's ride north of the city. I can show you::

Suddenly she found herself viewing the partially concealed opening of a cave halfway up the side of a mountain that rose from the High Plains of Saladin.

"Captain Jabir, if you make your mind receptive and allow me to touch your forehead, I'll show you where the sultan will be tomorrow by sundown."

The captain stiffened. "It is not proper to touch or be touched by another man's life-mate, unless he is present and gives permission."

"Is it proper to allow your sultan—your *sidi*—to be placed in danger when you have the chance to protect him?"

Precious moments passed while the honorable man obviously struggled to solve his dilemma. Finally, he bowed and then sat on the ground, cross-legged, in front of her. "I choose to protect my *sidi*. Afterwards I will present my sword to him, so he may kill me if he believes I have dishonored you."

"Let us begin." Clearing her thoughts of all distractions, she sketched a quick sign of protection for Jabir, Blackthorn, Ivy, and herself. After centering herself, she pressed two fingers to the captain's forehead. True to his word, he'd opened his thoughts to her.

Careful not to look at anything but the place ready to receive directions, she laid her hand on Blackthorn's head. Thoughts and images poured into her mind, beginning with the familiar high road into Temple City, to a less traveled road from the city and across one corner of the high plains up into the Kaf Mountains.

Here the images slowed and expanded. Details appeared of places

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to stop for clean water, treacherous parts of trails, and finally the cave entrance.

The flow of images stopped. Kayla wiped one hand across her face, trying to clear her thoughts.

Captain Jabir fixed her with a hard gaze. "I have seen the place where you say my sultan will stay tomorrow night, but I haven't seen proof that he will, or evidence of other than usual danger."

Before she could answer, Blackthorn mantled his wings and let out a growl that woke the sleepers and brought one guard running with drawn sword.

Quickly Kayla reestablished contact, through her, between the militant fairy-dragon and the captain. With Jabir, she saw the future as Tariq and Rashad approached the cave just as the setting sun's rays turned the sky orange and gold. The image suddenly winged from cave to a multiple of pictures—as if seen through many eyes—to a group of armed slavers gathered in a mountain valley.

Blackthorn's mental voice explained :: *A flight of wild fairy-dragons are keeping watch on these men. A spy in the sultan's palace has learned of El Zafir's plans and sold that information to the slavers. Now they wait until the night of the Grass Moons, when he will be vulnerable and alone—once the counselor is dead.::*

This time when Captain Jabir looked at Kayla, there was belief in his eyes.

He rose to his feet. "We'll break camp immediately and go to Sultan El Zafir's rescue. I pray to the gods we'll be on time."

"Wait, captain." Kayla quickly stood. "I have a way to reach him more swiftly, but first I must have your word to keep the knowledge secret." When she saw his hesitation, she drew the firehawk medallion from under her garment and said, "I swear as a Keeper of the Flame and Taqir's life-mate, the secret will cause no harm."

Jabir saluted with his clenched fist over his heart. "You have my

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word to keep your secret.”

Relieved, she said, “I’m a shapeshifter. I’ll use a form that will take me to my life-mate faster than any horse.”

A quick scan of the camp assured her no one was looking in her direction. She tapped into her ability, felt the momentary dizziness when she changed into owl form, and stood a moment longer with her shed garments around her clawed feet.

“The White Owl,” Jabir said with an expression of awe. “You and the Black Wolf tracked down the slavers in Temple City.”

Kayla bobbed her great feathery head.

Once more the captain saluted.

As Kayla and the two fairy-dragons lifted into the sky, the captain called, “Go in power. We will follow quickly.”

* * *

The sun had just set and twilight softened the mountain and valley when Kayla studied the entrance of the cave where Tariq waited for the moons to rise and his fate. When he saw her, would he forgive her for not telling him of her special ability?

Rashad stood guard at the entrance, concealed from anyone below by a screen of fallen rocks and bushes.

Kayla and the fairy-dragons had seen the large band of slavers on the march, about an hour by foot away from this location. Blackthorn would alert Tariq before they reached the mountain path. Captain Jabir’s troop would arrive about the same time.

She had less than an hour left with her life-mate before the final battle.

As planned, Ivy and Blackthorn swooped down and distracted Rashad long enough for Kayla to slip behind him on silent wings and into the cave.

Tariq sat on a bedroll, caged into one small part of the cave by sturdy iron bars. The entrance into the cell was held shut by a locked

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chain. His cloak had been cast carelessly aside, and his knife and dagger were hung on a rocky wall outside the bars and beyond his reach.

The cave was in deep shadows, except for the circle of pearly twilight flooding from an opening in the water-carved ceiling. Tariq's head was bent as he studied something in his hand. Her owl's acute vision focused on a gleam of black. She realized he held her ebony hair sticks, and her heart skipped a beat. Even in a prison of his own choice, he'd carried something of hers.

A light breeze from behind her curled through the cave, carrying her scent. Tariq's head snapped up as he rose to his feet and stared at her.

"You're White Owl who helped catch the slavers."

She shifted to her true form and said, "You're Black Wolf, the one who tracked them down."

"Kayla?" He took three steps forward and crashed against the bars as if he'd forgotten they were in the way. "You knew?"

"I knew you were a shapeshifter months before the Assembly of Virgins." Cold in her bare skin and afraid he would hate her for concealing the knowledge they could both shift, she hugged her arms close and braced herself for rejection.

She heard Rashad enter behind her, say, "My pardon," and retreat.

Then Tariq threw back his head and laughed—great rolling peals of mirth. Still laughing, he picked up his cloak, took a key from his sash, and opened the cell door.

"Kayla, life-mate, come here." Chuckling he moved toward her with the cloak held invitingly open.

She rushed into his arms, and snuggled against him, while he wrapped the warm garment around her. Scooping her up, he returned to the cell, now open, and settled on the bedroll with her in his embrace.

A great load of worry and fear melted away from her heart. Happy

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tears rolled down her cheeks.

Murmuring soothing words, he kissed the salty drops from her face. “Little dragon,” he said in a low voice, “I can’t tell you what a relief it is you know my secret ability. When I came to realize I love you, I was afraid if you learned the truth about the black wolf, you’d hate me.”

She sniffed back tears and gave him a tremulous smile. “I had the same worry about you learning of my ability.”

Then his words—I love you—fully registered. She touched his lips in wonderment. “You love me?”

“Gods, yes!” His mouth covered hers hungrily. Her needs blazed up to meet his.

* * *

The time that passed seemed as long as eternity and as short as a single heartbeat when Tariq laid Kayla on the padded bedroll, still kissing. He’d left the cage door unlocked. If he felt the warning signs of the unwilling shift, he’d throw her out and lock himself inside. The key had been made for a human’s fingers, not an animal’s paws. She’d be safe from him.

He raised his head and studied the treasure of her body—the feast ready for his taking. Memory of the dream made him draw back.

Kayla lifted a lazy finger to his forehead. “Beloved, we were ready to make love when you moved away and your worry lines deepened.”

He took a deep breath and prepared himself for her horror and rejection when she learned the deadly truth. “The blood of shapeshifters runs strong in my family line, but it carries a deadly curse that appears every seventh generation. It last appeared six generations ago. I’m the seventh.”

“The El Zafir curse.” She fingered the laces at the throat of his shirt. “I’ve read about it and its cure in ancient scrolls.”

Honesty and his love for her compelled him to say, “If the cure fails, you’ll be my first victim.”

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“Tonight we know all of each other’s secrets.” Her hands fluttered down his chest, setting off small sparks of heat through the *kut’n*. “I came to you a virgin, willing to totally submit to you, and I did...several times.”

She tugged at the bottom of his shirt. “This is the night of the Grass Moons, the most powerful night of the year for beginning new lives. It’s the night to cure the curse for you and all new generations to come.”

Hoping against hope she was right, and wild to feel her skin against his, he rose long enough to shed his clothes before straddling her.

“Life-mate.” He fought against his vicious arousal. “The light of the twin full moons has reached us through the ancestors’ clever skylight. If I fuck you now, we won’t know the cure is true, until it’s too late to turn back.”

Smiling, Kayla wrapped her fingers around his cock and raised her hips to meet its broad head. “Take me now, life-mate. Fill me hard and deep. Fuck me until there’s no separation between us, hearts, minds, and bodies.”

He growled, “You talk too much.”

Again she raised her hips, brushing her clit across his thick cock. “I love you.”

Hunger, fire, fear and need stormed through him. He barely registered the shape of her under his hands, the scent of her body, the arousing musk of her desire, then he plunged into her hot sheath—filled himself with her sweet moans of surrender.

The blaze and power of the Grass Moons rode him as they rolled across the pad and onto the cold stone floor, pumping wildly—bound tighter to each other than any curse could break. He rolled with her on top—some dim recess of his brain telling him to protect her. She gave a low moan. He felt her internal muscles shudder and tighten. She set her teeth on his shoulder, bit down, then threw back her head and cried his

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name through her raging release. And he let himself give his heart, mind, soul, and seed into her keeping.

* * *

The light from the full moons still bathed their bodies when Tariq raised his head to look at his amazing woman. She should have been as exhausted as he was —more exhausted because she'd shapeshifted and then joined him in the most furious lovemaking he'd ever known.

Her silvery-blue eyes met his. She gave him a small half-smile. "How do you feel? The curse gone?"

Closing his eyes to shut out the distraction that already had his cock humming again, Tariq probed his mind. The dark places that had been his constant companion since he'd learned of the curse were gone. Even the one holding seeds of the curse had disappeared.

Before he could answer her question, Rashad ran into the cave shouting, "*Sidi*, arm yourself. The slavers are coming up the mountain toward us."

Tariq leaped to his feet. "How many?"

"An army."

As Rashad turned and went back to the entrance, Tariq said, "Wait one minute. Kayla and I have lifted the curse. You won't have to kill me if I shift to wolf form."

"May the gods bless you. That was one order I never wanted to carry out, unless I had to do so to protect your soul."

Tariq gripped his friend's upper arm in silent thanks. "One more thing. Kayla knows I can shift shapes. So can she."

Rashad's eyes widened and he nodded to something behind Tariq. "A shapeshifter. That explains how the sultana got past me."

The counselor went outside and Tariq turned to Kayla. Instead of her human form, the white wolf stood outside the cage staring at him through silvery eyes that held a touch of blue.

"Silver—Kayla, you have two animal shapes?"

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She slid her front paws forward and bowed her head in acknowledgement. Her mind voice came to his, as rich and loving as her human voice, *::When the Fire Goddess opened my ability to shift, she gave me multiple forms, but I'll always be in human form when we make love.::*

“Me too.” He shifted to the black wolf. *::Let's go meet the slavers on our choice of ground, not theirs.::*

* * *

Black Wolf stood guard at the top of the path leading up from the high plains of Saladin. The flood of light from Qamar and Zurir, high overhead, bathed the shrubs and trees growing on the mountainside, and gilded Silver's fur.

Pride filled his heart at her courage. He licked the side of her muzzle and tasted the blended flavors of Silver and Kayla.

She nuzzled his side and rolled onto her back with her throat bared in a show of surrender and complete confidence in him. Again, he silently vowed to protect her...always.

Standing at the edge of the small shelf of rock in front of the cave, he sent out a powerful call, summoning the other members of his pack to come and join the attack. Their returning calls said they were coming fast.

The night was alive with the myriad scents of sage, wild thyme, mountain laurel and pine. The peppery scent of flamewood trees lower down the slopes did nothing to mask the stink of sweat, well-tended weapons, and the unwashed bodies of the slavers toiling up the narrow and treacherous path.

Rashad, and Silver stood with him, Black Wolf, waiting for the combat to begin.

Returning from a scouting trip, Blackthorn settled down on a convenient boulder, fluttered his wings and slicked them along his body. *::The wild fairy-dragons are close. Captain Jabir with his patrol*

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will make contact with the rear section of the slavers by time the front climbers reach us.::

An arrow flew between Black Wolf and Silver, and the fight was on as three slavers pushed through the narrow gap between tall boulders and a pine tree just below the cave. Growling, Wolf attacked the closest man, lifted him by one shoulder and threw the cursing slaver down the mountainside. Silver dispatched the second attacker as swiftly as she had fought off undesirable suitors the first night Black Wolf had seen her.

Ivy and Blackthorn swooped down, flaming the attackers who struggled to pass ones closer to the trio in front of the cave,

Swinging his sharp, curved sword, Rashad slashed and wounded or killed the enemy right and left.

The flight of vengeful wild fairy-dragons joined the battle. Soon the night sky was filled with the hiss of flames and the screams of men burned and blinded by the very creatures they once used for idle target practice with bows and arrows.

The fighting became so furious, Black Wolf lost sight of Silver and Rashad in the press of slavers trying to kill him, but the presence of his life-mate always lingered in the back of his mind.

At last, Jabir's troops cut their way to the cave and its defenders. A few more skirmishes settled the last of the attackers.

The wild fairy-dragons flew away with Tariq's thanks.

He turned to Silver and a chill formed in his stomach at the bloody patches on her fur. *::Are your wounds serious?::* he asked urgently.

She licked one front paw, then swiped her long tongue over a deep cut on his side. *::I should ask you the same thing, but you'll probably go all male on me and say it's just a scratch.::*

Automatically, he started to say, "It's just a scratch," but stopped himself. Instead, he asked, *::Do you want to go back into the cave and shift to human form so your wounds will heal?::*

DEADLY DESIRES

::No. Most of this blood is from slavers, not me. I want to go home—our home. I want to soak in the tub, play with you in the tub, make love in our bed, and fulfill every one of your not-so-deadly desires.::

And they did.

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 <http://www.april-reid.com>.

* * *

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