

The book cover features a portrait of a man with long, dark, wavy hair and light blue eyes. He is wearing a white, open-collared shirt. The background is a dark blue with some lighter blue, ethereal patterns. The author's name is in the top left, and the title is in the bottom center.

Kelli A.
Wilkins

Dalton's Temptation

A NOVEL

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

...He groaned as his cock stiffened. From this position, Oonish's satin scrap concealed nothing. She caressed her buttocks, then slipped a finger inside her covering. She moaned as she toyed with herself for a moment, then gazed at him over her shoulder. "May I sit with you, Your Highness?"

Dalton nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Oonish climbed onto the sofa and knelt on either side of his hips. She bent close, pressing her breasts against his chest. He licked his lips and took a deep breath. She smelled like roses. He closed his eyes as she lowered herself onto his lap and began rocking against his stiff penis.

"I feel your mood has improved greatly, Your Highness," she whispered. "Do you like what Oonish does?"

He opened his eyes and grinned. "Aye, but you're a very naughty girl."

She giggled and arched her back, shoving her breasts in his face. His head buzzed from the drinks, and he was tempted, so tempted, to take one tiny lick, just to know what she tasted like. The feel of her rubbing against his cock sent tingles up his spine. As she rocked against him, his hips jolted up out of reflex. How long would he be able to stand the delightful torture before he exploded?

Oonish wriggled on his lap. "I can feel you touching me through your breeches," she said, gazing into his eyes. The smoldering look of lust she gave him said it all—one touch, one taste, and he could have her for as long as he wanted...

ALSO BY KELLI A. WILKINS

The Dark Lord
A Most Unusual Princess
The Sexy Stranger

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

BY

KELLI A. WILKINS

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DALTON'S TEMPTATION
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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*Dalton's Temptation is dedicated to everyone
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CHAPTER 1

THE DECEPTION

“Elara will be furious!” Dalton paced around the king’s chambers and glanced at his father-in-law. “You know how she is. When she finds out about this, she’ll—”

“Yes, I know. Believe me, I know.” King Maxwell leaned back in his cushioned chair and stroked his red beard. “But under no circumstances is she going with you. Emperor Salizar is a madman, and the way he treats his subjects...” Maxwell shook his head. “If he didn’t control the sole waterway leading from Micosia to Soltang, no man in his right mind would enter into business with him.”

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"If he's that bad, why must Allan and I meet with him? Surely you'd have more influence—"

"I have no interest in returning to that den of depravity," Maxwell stated. "Salizar and I once had a strong disagreement over a particular matter and I have no tolerance for him. You, however, are a patient and reasonable man. You will be able to deal with him."

"Dalton's patient, alright. After marrying Elara, he can handle anything." Prince Allan chuckled as he rose from his chair and poured himself a drink. "I'm certain you can find a way to improve our trade situation with His Supreme Worship. He shouts much less than Elara does," he joked. "I noticed having a husband hasn't settled my little sister much, she's still a willful terror."

Dalton leaned against the wall and suppressed a grin. Allan was wrong. Marriage had settled Elara—somewhat. Now instead of acting out and having tantrums when she was bored or annoyed, she turned to lovemaking to alleviate her problems. From time to time she still needed a firm hand, but a quick trip to the bedchamber always eased her temperament. But when Elara found out he was going to Zarmatt without her, she'd throw a fit. And for the last few weeks she'd been acting moodier and more needy than usual.

"Allan, please. This is serious business." Maxwell sighed. "Which is why I want you to accompany him, Dalton. Allan's known for taking matters too lightly. The last time he went to Salizar's palace he made a worse agreement than the one we originally had. We ended up paying nearly double the usual

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port tariff, and—”

“My mind was distracted.”

Maxwell frowned. “So were other parts of you.”

Dalton grinned and sat on the maroon sofa. Allan and Elara were close in age and in personality. Their bawdy sense of humor combined with their foolhardy and reckless behavior made them quite a handful.

“But Allan’s primary responsibility is shipping. He understands the policies and tariffs better than I do,” he said. “How could I aid him in negotiations?”

“You won’t negotiate,” Maxwell replied. “Your role will be to ensure Allan stays out of trouble and conducts the negotiations sober—unlike last time.”

Allan shrugged and swallowed his drink in three gulps. “What happened last time wasn’t my fault. It’s that palace, it does things to people.”

Dalton scowled. At times, Allan behaved like an irresponsible, royal pain. “You mean I’m to travel with him, a grown man, merely to keep him out of trouble?”

Maxwell rose and took the glass from Allan’s hand as he started to refill it. “Aye, and trust me, he’ll need it. Salizar’s palace caters to male guests. No women are allowed inside, unless they’re for his *kharim*.”

Dalton arched an eyebrow. He’d heard wild tales from men who had supposedly gone to the palace and been pleased non-stop. “You mean the rumors are true?”

Allan nodded. “Quite true. The palace is filled with girls. Lots of girls—naked and willing girls. They’ll do anything

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you ask. They'll feed you, bathe you, suck you—"

"Enough!" Maxwell shouted at Allan. "Salizar uses the girls to distract his guests and gain the upper hand in negotiations." He turned to Dalton. "I know I can trust you. You won't be taken in by the women or their wayward charms."

"Of course not. I love Elara. There isn't a woman alive who can tempt me."

Allan laughed. "We'll see about that, Dalton. After two weeks surrounded by these women, your nuts will be as hard as rocks!"

"Allan! Please!" Maxwell rolled his eyes and looked at Dalton. "When you tell Elara, avoid mentioning exactly where you're going. She will be jealous."

"Jealous isn't the word! If she finds out you're going to Zarmatt to romp with naked girls, she'll scratch your eyes out—or cut something off," Allan chimed in.

Maxwell shot Allan a dirty look. "You'd best tell her now, Dalton. You're leaving in the morning. That doesn't give her much time to become settled with the idea."

He stood up. "Don't worry, I know just how to reason with Elara," he said with a smile.

* * *

Dalton opened the door to the royal suite and stepped inside. Elara stood at a table, adding water to a vase of flowers.

"Hello, darling. I've been busying myself, waiting for your

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return," Elara said sweetly. "May we go riding now? I swear, if I'm cooped up in this room another moment I shall scream."

"I'm afraid not." He sat down on the blue settee. "I have preparations to make."

Elara cocked her head to one side and brushed a lock of blond hair behind her ear. "Preparations for what? Why did my father summon you?"

He glanced at her and braced himself for the tirade he knew was coming. Beautiful, cherished wife or not, Elara's notorious temper could surface in a flash.

"He's sending me to Zarmatt tomorrow."

To his surprise, she smiled. "He is? I've never been there! It sounds exciting! When do we leave?"

He stared down at his brown boots. Elara wasn't going to like this. "*We* don't, *I* do. I'm going with Allan."

"Allan!" Elara banged the glass pitcher down. Water sloshed over the top, soaking the table. "You chose to take Allan on a trip to Zarmatt instead of me?"

"Nay, I did not choose him. I did not choose to go at all," he answered, running his hands through his black hair. "Your father informed me that I'm going to act as Allan's chaperone for a fortnight."

"A chaperone? Allan's a grown man. Why would he need a chaperone?"

"What did *you* need one for?" he teased. "You were a grown woman utterly without the need of my services, if I remember correctly."

Elara's green eyes narrowed to slits, and he continued.

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"And look what happened. I chaperoned you, and now you're married to your own personal guard." He grinned. Every so often he liked to remind Elara of how quickly she'd taken to him when he'd been her personal guardian.

"Very funny!" She rested her hands on her hips. "Allan is in no need of a guard, and I doubt he's going to fall in love with you! Why must you go?"

He leaned back on the settee. "Your father wants me to keep him out of trouble."

"Fine. I'll come, too. While we're there we—"

"Nay. 'Tis not a place for a woman."

Elara dismissed him with a wave of her hand. "Bah! I grow weary hearing about places that are unfit for women. Have you not noticed I'm different from most women? I can ride, rope, brandish a sword—"

"Yes, yes, I know. But you're still not going."

She pursed her lips and tossed her head back. "Then, pray, tell me, dear husband, if there are no women allowed in Zarmatt, what do the men do to amuse themselves all day and night? Drink and gamble? Or are they like the men in Silios Colony, who share each other's pleasures in the bedchamber and—"

"Elara!" He rolled his eyes. Even after four months of marriage, she still had the power to shock him. "You're not accompanying us, and that's all there is to it."

She folded her arms across her chest. "And what am I to do while you're gone? Sit in the corner and knit shawls like an old woman?" She marched around the table and headed for the

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door. "I'll speak with my father and tell him that I insist on going."

He reached out and clasped her hand as she passed by. "Do not waste your time. He'll not budge."

She pouted. "But I want to go with you. You promised me we would travel. The only place we've gone since we were married was Moselle, and I never saw any of the sights."

He chuckled. "That wasn't my fault. You weren't interested in leaving our honeymoon suite for anything other than food."

She grinned. "I thought you were pleased by my...fervor."

"I always am."

"Good." Elara knelt in front of him and rested her head in his lap. "Then, pray, take me with you."

"I cannot. Even if I wanted to, which I don't."

She stroked the front of his breeches. "Is that so? I bet I can change your mind," she said in a sweet, singsong voice as she rubbed him again.

Blood coursed to his groin and he felt himself stiffen. Time and experience had proven that once Elara was determined to get her way, she'd stop at nothing. There was no use arguing with her.

"I bet you cannot, but by all means, you're welcome to try."

He closed his eyes and recalled the muggy night several months ago when he'd been sleeping on this very settee. Elara was his not-so-innocent charge back then, and she'd tried to seduce him. It had taken every ounce of his will to resist her.

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But now there was no need to refuse.

Elara unfastened his breeches and he relaxed against the settee. She drew him into her mouth, then trailed her hot tongue over the head of his penis. The sensation sent a shiver up his spine, and he ran his fingers through her long hair as she pleased him.

Her excitement and enthusiasm toward lovemaking were unmatched by any woman he'd ever known. She was an eager student and delighted in learning all he had to teach. To his surprise, Elara was more than willing to let him dominate her in the bedchamber. Her only question when he asked something new of her was, "Will it feel good?"

She hadn't balked when he'd asked her to take him into her mouth for the first time. Most women he'd been with outright refused or slurped on him a few times, then left him to finish on his own—but not Elara. His virgin bride had quickly discovered that sucking him made him hard, and the harder he was, the better their lovemaking would be.

Elara pulled her mouth away and gazed up at him. "Do you like it? You're very quiet."

"I love it. Keep going." He was fully erect and aching for her wet mouth around him again.

She licked him. "Do you love me?"

He groaned. "Yes, oh, yes."

She wrapped her lips around the head of his member and sucked him hard, then withdrew. "Will you bring me with you?" she asked, then eased him into her mouth.

He waited, enjoying the blissful sensations before

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answering. "No."

Elara pulled her mouth away. "That's not the answer I want."

He opened his eyes. "I'm sorry, but that's the answer you're getting."

"Fine!" Elara stood up. "Then that's all of *that* you're getting!" She turned and stomped across the room.

"Come back here! You cannot leave me like this!" Her sudden abandonment was torture. Deep purple veins jutted out along the sides of his aching cock. In a few more minutes, he would have climaxed.

"Watch me." She smirked and folded her arms across her chest. "If *I* don't get what *I* want, *you* don't get what *you* want."

"Like hell!" He yanked his breeches up and stood. Dizzy from the lack of blood to his brain, he wobbled for a second, then steadied himself on the settee. "We've talked about this, Elara. No more games. I'm your husband and I won't be manipulated."

She pointed to his bulging breeches. "From the look of that tree branch between your legs, I'd say you could use a little manipulation," she said, giggling.

"That's enough!" He crossed the room in three strides, scooped Elara up, and threw her over his shoulder.

"Put me down! What are you doing?"

He flung open the bedchamber door. "I'm going to teach you a lesson, little Princess," he said, tossing her onto the center of their feather bed. Without hesitation, he stripped off

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his breeches and climbed onto the mattress.

Elara sat up. "Let me go!"

He pushed her down. "You, vixen, are going to learn that you cannot inflame a man's passions and then abandon him with his lust." He straddled Elara's shoulders with his knees, pinning her beneath him. His swollen penis jutted inches from her face.

She squirmed beneath him. "Are you mad?"

"Aye, with lust." He thrust his hips forward. "Now, finish what you started."

Elara stared up at him, her green eyes open wide. "You don't mean—"

"Aye. See if you can put something besides complaints in that pretty mouth of yours."

His chest heaved as he waited. He wasn't angry with her, merely crazed with lust and the immediate need for release.

Elara gazed into his eyes and licked her lips. Her eyes sparkled, and she writhed a little beneath him. He knew she wanted to suck him—the look of desire in her eyes betrayed her complaints. After a second, her tongue flicked across the head of his cock.

"Make your husband happy."

Her hot mouth closed around him. She worked him hard and fast, urging him on.

A raspy moan tore from the back of his throat. "That feels so good," he whispered.

Elara ran her hands along the top of his bare thighs, then clasped his buttocks tightly as she sucked him faster. A

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moment later, his hips jolted forward, and he exploded, shuddering and grunting as he came.

She swallowed his juices eagerly as he spilled into her. This was the first time he'd ever finished in her mouth. As his climax subsided, Elara swallowed once more, then pulled her mouth away. "Was that good?"

He looked down at her. She was grinning. "Best I've ever had. I couldn't move before I—"

"I didn't want you to. I wanted to take it all," she said, licking her lips.

He kissed her forehead, then moved off her and sat on the edge of the bed. "You're not angry with me for insisting?" Part of him felt guilty about the rough treatment he'd given her, but unless Elara had boundaries, she would manipulate people at every turn.

"Nay, my dear Dalton." She sat up and wrapped her arms around his chest. "I wanted to give you a remembrance for when you're on your trip." She hugged him tight. "I shall miss you terribly."

"I shall miss you, as well. Tonight I'll give *you* a remembrance. A big one that's quite satisfying," he teased.

She giggled. "Good, make it last until you return."

"I will, but if you grow eager in my absence I'm certain you'll have no problem satisfying your own needs until I return." He laughed.

"Dalton!"

"It's true! You were your own first lover. What other man can say that he met his future bride naked in a pond stroking

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herself?"

"You never complained about it," she said, batting her eyelashes at him.

"What man would? It only makes me love you more." He stood and picked his breeches up off the floor. "I'm sorry to leave, but I must make arrangements for the trip. I'll have servants bring up a few trunks and pack my clothing."

"Don't bother. Merely have them deliver the trunks. I shall pack for you."

"You will?"

"Of course. It's what any devoted wife would do." She grinned. "Besides, I want to make sure you don't leave anything behind."

* * *

Elara lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. She ran her tongue along the inside of her mouth and swallowed. Dalton's juices hadn't tasted anything like she had expected. Usually he pulled himself from her mouth before his climax, but this time she'd held on. She wanted to know what it tasted like—and it wasn't unpleasant at all.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts.

"Enter."

Four servants entered the room carrying two large trunks. They bowed low. "Your Highness, Prince Dalton instructed us to—"

"Yes, yes, I know. I will pack what he needs for the trip." She slid off the bed and waved them away. Having servants

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underfoot always bothered her. They listened in on every conversation and treated her like she was incapable of lifting a finger to help herself. She never understood how they could obey every order given to them like mindless fools. Didn't they have any self-respect?

"Your Highness, the prince—"

"Is not your husband, is he?" She rested her hands on her hips and stared at the bearded servant. He bowed his head. "I shall gather his wardrobe." She pointed to the door. "Out. Now. I'll alert you when you can collect the trunks."

"As you wish, Your Highness," one of the servants muttered and bowed low.

Elara waited until they left the room, then opened the first trunk. Thankfully it was deep and could hold a lot of clothing. Dalton would need enough clothes to last two weeks—and so would she.

She walked to Dalton's carved wardrobe and took out his velvet jackets, breeches, and tunics. He thought he'd go to Zarmatt without her, did he? Ha! Did he honestly expect her to stay behind? Although she knew nothing about Zarmatt, it sounded exotic and must be filled with interesting places to visit. While Dalton spent his days conducting boring man-business, she could see the sights and explore the shops. At night when his meetings were over, Dalton would have plenty of time to tend to her needs.

She strolled to her wardrobe and pulled out several of her favorite dresses. She folded them carefully and laid them on the bottom of the trunk. Her plan was simple. Before sunrise,

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she would sneak out of the palace and conceal herself in the caravan. All she had to do was keep herself hidden until they had traveled halfway to Zarmatt. Then, she'd pop out of her hiding place and surprise Dalton. By then, it would be too late for him to send her home. and he'd be stuck with her—whether he liked it or not.

* * *

“—and then another girl joined in. She kissed her thighs, then stroked her—”

“Dammit Allan, can't you talk about anything else?” Dalton snapped. For the last nine hours, Allan had been relaying tales of his exploits with the women at Salizar's palace. The constant talk of women and lovemaking annoyed him. To make matters worse, it had started raining as soon as they had left this morning. The miserable, damp weather made him more irritable than he already was.

“It's Elara, isn't it?” Allan asked.

He turned in his saddle and nodded. “I didn't get to say good-bye to her.”

Allan rolled his eyes and maneuvered his horse around a deep rut filled with muddy water. “Is that what's put you in such a foul mood? Elara's not one for long good-byes. It's probably her way of punishing you for not bringing her.”

“But I'm her husband. The least she could have done was see me off,” he grumbled. He'd been wondering about her all day. Where was she? What was she doing? Did she miss him?

Last night everything had seemed fine between them.

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They'd made love twice and Elara had fallen asleep in his arms like an angel. When he woke this morning, the space beside him in bed was cold and empty. Elara had left a note on the chest of drawers saying that she went for a walk and she would see him soon. He'd spent an hour searching for her, but she was nowhere to be found. Was she punishing him for—

A loud crash startled him, and he reigned his horse to a stop. "What was that?"

"The cart's flipped over. This damn trail is turning into a creek," Allan griped as he dismounted. "I'll check on it."

Dalton wiped rainwater out of his eyes. This trip was a disaster. He had no desire to leave Elara, and all Allan was concerned with were the lusty women waiting for him. Salizar gave his guests all the food, women, and drink they could handle, but for what in return? It all seemed too good to be true. Did he have hidden agendas or—

"Dalton! You must come with me, at once!" Allan said, running up to him.

"What is it now? Did my trunk break open and spill my clothes in the mud? Can't anyone manage to right a cart without supervision?" he grumbled as he dismounted and stomped back along the muddy lane.

"It's not that, it's something else," Allan's voice wavered. "You need to see for yourself."

"Of course I do. I must do everything." As he approached the cart, he saw the royal guards and horsemen standing in a circle, muttering to themselves.

"What are you all standing around for? The cart didn't just

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fall from the moon!" He shoved a guard aside and gasped. Elara sat on the ground, clutching a shawl around her shoulders.

He rushed to her side. "Elara!"

"Surprise! I told you I'd see you soon." She grinned. "But I didn't think it would be this soon," she added.

"Are you hurt?"

"Nay, I'm fine. My backside's a bit sore where I landed on it," she said as she rose to her feet.

He closed his eyes and thanked the gods she wasn't injured. She could have been killed when the cart flipped over! Elara had gone too far. She had deliberately disobeyed him and it was time for him to set her straight.

He opened his eyes and forced himself to sound calm. "Trust me, your backside's going to be more than a bit sore by the time I'm finished with you."

* * *

"Now, dearest, I only came along to surprise you," Elara said, backing away from Dalton. "There's no need to be cross with me."

"Cross? Why would I be cross, sweet wife?" he growled. "Because you disobeyed me, again?"

From the blazing look in Dalton's blue eyes, she knew he was furious. She'd never seen him so angry. His neck muscles jutted out, and his jaw was clenched tight. This was a tone of voice he'd never used on her before. It went beyond his usual exasperated, "I'm tired of your games" tone. She glanced over

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her shoulder. A narrow pathway behind her led into the forest surrounding the trail. If she ran fast enough—

“Now be calm, dear husband. I—”

“Calm?” Dalton arched an eyebrow and inched closer to her. “Trust me, wife, I *am* being calm. Try my patience further and I shall forget my manners with you.”

Dalton reached out to grab her, and she whirled around and darted through the trees. Although he would never harm her, it suddenly seemed prudent to put some distance between them. Perhaps a good run would tire him out and ease his temper.

“Elara, stop!” Dalton shouted as he chased after her.

As she ran, her skirt caught on a fallen branch and she sprawled to the wet ground. “Dammit!” Couldn’t any of her plans work out properly today?

Dalton was at her side in a flash. He grabbed her by the arm and hauled her to her feet.

“You, my dear, are in trouble!”

“Dalton, I—”

“Quiet!”

She struggled against him as he dragged her to a stump and sat down. Without a word, he bent her across his lap, yanked up her dress, and spanked her buttocks.

“Ouch! Let me go!” Another hard smack made her squeal. She kicked her feet and squirmed as he swatted her again.

“You want to act like a spoiled child? I’ll teach you what happens to little girls who don’t listen!”

His slap stung her tender buttocks and she yelped. Each heartbeat sent a hot rush of blood coursing to her backside.

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“Stop! I—”

He spanked her again. To her surprise, instead of hurting, the smack made her lower body tingle. Another slap sent a ripple of arousal through her, and she wriggled on Dalton's lap. What was happening? How could such a thing fill her with desire?

“Let me go!” She half-heartedly struggled against his grip and he swatted her again. This time, her nipples hardened beneath her dress.

Dalton righted her and clasped her shoulders in his hands. “Do you know you could have been hurt?” He shook her hard, and her head wobbled back and forth. “You almost got yourself killed!”

She gazed into Dalton's eyes and saw something she'd never seen there before—fear. Dalton wasn't merely furious with her, he was afraid for her safety.

“I didn't mean to worry you so.”

He hugged her. “I love you, Elara. I don't want to lose you.”

“You won't.” She pulled away and looked into Dalton's blue eyes. To her surprise, they were teary. “I'm truly sorry.”

“You could have been killed! What were you thinking? I told you to stay—”

“I know. I'm sorry I disobeyed.” She smoothed Dalton's wavy black hair away from his eyes. “I thought it would be a nice surprise for you.”

“Well, it wasn't! It was a damn stupid thing to do!”

His harsh tone surprised her, and she turned on her charms.

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It was the easiest way to make amends. "Forgive me love, but I only wanted to stay with you." She kissed the side of his neck. "Now that I'm here—"

"You're going back," he said, rising. "Tomorrow at first light."

"What? Why? I'm already—"

"Because I'm your husband and I order you to obey me."

"Obey you?" Her temper flared, and she rested her hands on her hips. "I'm to obey you like I'm a simpleminded servant girl or a—"

"Don't try me, Elara! I'm not going to stand here in the pouring rain arguing with you!" He clasped her hand and dragged her back through the trees. "You're going home where you belong."

"Where I belong?" She pulled from his grip. "If you think you—"

"If you think I'm going to let you run wild doing whatever you please, you're wrong. It's about time you followed some rules, starting now." He scooped her up and threw her over his shoulder.

"Dalton! Put me down!" She beat on his soaked jacket as he carried her through the woods. How embarrassing! Dalton had no right to spank her and treat her like a child.

As they approached the caravan, she noticed the cart had been righted. She felt her cheeks flush as she realized everyone was watching them. How much of their argument had they overheard?

Dalton barked orders at the servants. "Prepare our tents

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and tend to the horses. We're staying here for the night."

* * *

Elara lay on her stomach, sobbing into the pillow beneath her head. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. It had been an hour since Dalton's tirade, and she was still crying. Why was she so emotional lately? She hardly ever cried.

The pain in her backside had dulled to an occasional throb, but Dalton's actions had wounded her deeply. She'd never seen him so angry, and never before had he dared to strike her. Had she finally pushed him to the breaking point? She had hoped he would see reason and allow her to come along on the trip, but he remained adamant about her returning home. Why did he wish to be rid of her? Had he grown tired of her after only four months of marriage? Or were the rumors that he'd only married her for her dowry true?

The tent flap opened, and Dalton ducked low as he entered. "Still sulking to get your way?"

She glanced at him over her shoulder and sniffled. "Forgive me for acting upset, but it's the first time my husband ever beat me," she said quietly.

Dalton sat down on a low stool and pulled off his muddy boots. "Oh, come now. I didn't beat you. I merely gave you a few whacks on your back-end."

"It doesn't matter. You hit me! And for what? Because I wanted to come with you? Is that so terrible?"

"Nay, pet. What is terrible is the fact that you're out of control and refuse to listen to me or anyone else who breathes

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air. You do whatever you want, and one day it's going to get you into trouble. What if I'm not there to protect you or—"

"Oh, stop! I'm not a child! I'm a grown woman!"

"Then act like it."

She glared at him. "How can I if you put me over your knees and spank me?" She wiped a tear from her cheek. "You leave me beaten and bruised, then haul me—"

"Bruised? Where?" He knelt next to her and pulled her dress up. "I didn't spank you hard enough to leave a mark."

She shrugged. "Well, it hurts. How am I to ride tomorrow with my backside on fire? I'll have to—"

"You'll manage." He opened a leather satchel and pulled out a small jar. "This will tame the fire on your tender pink bottom," he quipped.

"What is that?"

"Salve," he answered as he uncapped the jar and plopped a handful onto her left buttock.

She shivered, and her nipples hardened. "It's cold and slimy."

"The better to smear around, pet," he said, smoothing the salve across her backside. "Tell me when it starts to tingle."

She closed her eyes as Dalton slid his hand across her buttocks. His gentle touch comforted her and she relaxed. Truth be told, he hadn't hurt her at all, but his punishment had shocked her—and her unusual arousal at being spanked shocked her even more.

After a minute, the salve began to tingle. She squirmed and parted her legs a little as Dalton applied another gob to her

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other buttock. His long fingers slipped between her thighs and lightly grazed her intimate parts.

"It can tingle here, as well," he whispered, his voice deep and husky.

She moaned and swallowed hard. "Show me."

Dalton eased his hand between her legs and spread salve along the edge of her privates. A warm rush washed over her, and she opened her legs wider. Dalton chuckled and stroked her slowly, teasing her with his fingers and then pulling away. She writhed beneath his hand. His tender touch mixed with the tingling salve sent her senses reeling. She'd never experienced anything like this before. It was wicked, yet—

"Rise onto your hands and knees."

She obeyed without question. What was Dalton going to do? Apply more ointment to her tender area? That would be fun. Who knew a simple salve could make a person eager for lovemaking? She closed her eyes as Dalton toyed with her slick opening. A second later, he pushed himself into her.

Elara cried out as he filled her to the core. She bent her head down as he withdrew, then readied herself for his next powerful thrust.

"Does my princess like being mounted from behind?" Dalton asked as he pumped into her slow and steady.

"Yes, oh, yes...I never knew it could be done this way. It feels so different," she managed to gasp out as Dalton's hips bounced off her buttocks.

Dalton slid his left hand to her hard nub and stroked her. "This guarantees your delight. I won't last inside you much

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longer.”

“Go faster,” she begged. “I like this kind of ride.”

Dalton grunted and pumped into her quickly. The faster he filled her, the faster he stroked her, building up a rhythm that sent them both into a frenzy. She bucked hard and pursed her lips to keep from crying out as a shuddering climax overtook her. Dalton quivered deep inside her, then was still. As he withdrew, she flopped onto the blanket, her head spinning.

Dalton lay next to her. His chest heaved and beads of sweat dripped down his temple. “Now do you feel better?” He winked.

She snuggled against him. “That was wonderful! Why haven’t we done it like that before?”

He grinned. “I cannot teach you every perversion I know all at once. I was saving that as a surprise for later.” He kissed her forehead. “Now that I’ve done something nice for you, will you do something for me?”

“Anything, dearest husband,” she said, sighing. “Shall I rub your back or—”

“Nay, nothing like that.” He licked his lips. “I want you to go home with Allan’s guards tomorrow morning, without a fuss.”

She rolled her eyes. “I should have suspected as much.”

“I want you to be safe at home while I’m away. I don’t want to worry about you while I’m gone.” He kissed her cheek. “Pray, do this for me. It would make me happy.”

“What? To be rid of your wife?” She pursed her lips. “And if I refuse?”

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He shrugged. "If you refuse, I shall never mount you from behind like that again, sweet wife. And from this moment on, I shall forget all of my other lovemaking skills as well."

"You wouldn't deny me—"

"Oh, yes, I would." He nodded. "If you go home without a fuss, when I return, I'll make up for every moment we've been apart. But if there's a fuss, you will be a very frustrated princess for a very long time. You don't want that, do you?"

"Nay." She knew when to give in. Arguing with Dalton would be a waste of time. "As you wish. I promise I shall leave with the guards in the morning. But I will hold you to your part of the bargain. I expect to be sated the instant you return home."

He laughed. "I'll be looking forward to it."

* * *

"The princess must not be a satisfying lover, seeing how the prince had relations with her, then put her out this morning," the guard said, chuckling.

Elara nudged her horse into a trot along the muddy trail. For the last half-hour, the dark-haired guard had been talking about her and Dalton's encounter in the tent. Apparently the entire caravan knew that Dalton had "serviced" her, then sent her away this morning.

The guards snickered behind her, and she gripped her reigns tighter. How dare they! She was a princess and wouldn't be laughed at by lazy, foul-mouthed guards.

"Think she was a virgin?" she heard the fair-haired guard

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ask.

"I don't think so, but imagine being the first man to break into that," the dark-haired man answered.

That was it! She wasn't going to ride another inch with these two! She'd return to the caravan and report them. When Allan and Dalton heard about the guards' crude behavior, they'd have to let her come to Zarmatt. But before she rode off, she'd teach these ill-mannered beasts a lesson. They were Allan's guards and not as clever as her own. They would never suspect her of trickery.

"I was," she called out over her shoulder.

"Pardon, Your Highness. Did you say something?" the dark-haired guard asked.

She turned in her saddle. According to the badges on his uniform, the dark-haired fool was the head guard and outranked the fair-haired one. He, of all people, should behave properly around royalty, yet there was no mistaking the dismissive tone in his voice.

"I said I was a virgin—once." She tossed a lock of hair over her shoulder as his eyes widened. "Don't look so shocked. I've been listening."

"Forgive us, Your Highness. We were certainly not speaking of you," he replied quickly.

She took a deep breath and arched her back, letting her bosom stretch the front of her dress. "I'm certain everyone in the caravan knows what Dalton and I did." She let her breath out slowly. "At least one of us knows the sweet bliss of relief."

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The guards glanced at each other. "Of what do you mean, Your Highness?" the fair-haired one asked.

She studied him for a moment. He looked barely of age to be a guard, while the other man appeared several years older. "What is your name?"

"I'm Aubrey. He's Bennett," he replied, gesturing at the other guard.

"Aubrey dear, I've never spoken of this, but I suffer from a terrible affliction. It's agonizing actually," she said, squirming in her saddle. "It's a pain that is caused by a lack of..." she paused, "...unreleased passion."

She twirled her hair through her fingers and caught Bennett staring at her chest. "Tell me, did you hear any cries of passion or squeals of delight coming from the tent?"

"Nay, Your Highness," Aubrey answered. "We only heard Prince Dalton grunting."

Bennett slapped Aubrey's arm. "Forgive him, Your Highness, he's young and foolish." He grinned. "We would never listen—"

"You could listen forever and not hear one gasp of pleasure tear from my throat." She sighed. "I'm afflicted in that manner. I'm incapable of feeling the joy of...completion one should have when making love."

Aubrey gasped and she continued.

"You're both strong men, tell me, honestly now, have you always been able to bring your lovers to fulfillment?"

Bennett nodded. "Of course, every time. If I may be so bold, all of my lovers have peaked quickly and claim their

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satisfaction was caused by my great endowments.”

“Mine, too,” Aubrey added in a rush.

She pouted to keep from giggling, then wriggled in her saddle. “I’ve never known such bliss. Despite all that Dalton has tried, by hand and mouth, making love in every location possible, day or night...nothing ever releases me. I’m still suffering with the agony from yesterday. Every step this horse takes under me inflames me further. The saddle rubs against me and sometimes—” She flopped forward and half-slid off her horse.

Bennett dismounted and scooped her into his arms.

She fluttered her eyes open and let out a soft moan. “I’m so glad you’re here,” she said, squeezing his biceps. “Sometimes the immense pressure makes me lightheaded. If I could discover the secret to unlocking my passions...” She glanced at Bennett. “Dalton would be forever grateful.”

Aubrey cleared his throat and dismounted. “Perhaps a physician—”

“We’ve tried everything, except... Nay, I couldn’t.”

“Couldn’t what, Your Highness?” Bennett asked.

She licked her lips. “Well, there are *two* of you strapping guards, and you both claim to be able to sate your lovers. Mayhap if both of you... Nay, I could never ask such a thing!” she said, then spun around.

She held her breath and waited for Bennett to say something. Obviously he was the more experienced of the two. If she could fool him, Aubrey was certain to follow his lead.

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Bennett cleared his throat. "I believe I understand your needs, Your Highness. I assure you it would be an honor to 'serve' you, but what about the prince?"

"He never need know," she said, glancing over her shoulder. "Achieving release once could break the spell and cure me. I would be deeply indebted to you both."

Bennett and Aubrey looked at each other, then nodded. "We will be happy to 'accommodate' you, Your Highness," Bennett said, grinning. "But where shall we..."

"I've already thought of a place," she said, leading her horse off the main pathway and into the forest. "By that big tree." She gestured to a large oak. "It's away from the path should some scoundrel pass by."

Bennett and Aubrey followed her to the oak and tethered their horses to a nearby sapling.

"Now, I have some requirements. First, the breeches must come off...all the way off." She smiled. "I need to feel the full length of your manliness."

Bennett grinned. "Of course, as you wish," he said, unfastening his breeches.

"And your swords please." She held out her hand. "I wish to be poked with nothing but your rods."

The guards handed her their swords and she looked at Aubrey. He still wore his breeches. "Hurry and strip. My aches are growing with each passing moment."

She placed the weapons on the ground near the horses, then turned back. Bennett and Aubrey were naked from the waist down. She gazed at their privates and covered her

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surprise with a little laugh. Bennett's member was limp and shriveled, while Aubrey was semi-firm.

"I know my request came suddenly, but you're not sufficiently ready." She frowned and rested her hands on her hips. "I've heard that when men wish to stiffen themselves they practice self-manipulation, is that true?"

Bennett shrugged. "From time to time."

"Could you ready yourselves for me quickly? The anticipation of what's about to come is making my body ache more."

"We're to do *that*?" Aubrey asked. "In front of you?"

"Nay, I'll allow you some privacy." She bent down and picked up a small tree branch. "I want you to close your eyes and concentrate on your royal duty. Whichever one of you reaches the hardness of this branch the quickest shall be the first to slip inside, understand?"

"Aye," they said in unison.

"Good. Now close your eyes and tend to yourselves. I'll return to check your firmness." She hurried to her horse and opened her saddlebag. It was stocked with everything a traveler could need, including a long length of stout rope. She tied the rope into a lasso, then looked over her shoulder.

Aubrey and Bennett stood next to the oak, fiddling away with themselves. She clenched the lasso in her hand and sized up her targets. Her roping skills were not as advanced as her swordplay or riding abilities, but the guards were adequately distracted.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Elara, you are*

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a wicked girl beyond all redemption! She opened her eyes and let the lasso fly. It fell around both men's ribs and she tightened it quickly.

"Hey! What the—"

"Let go!"

Before they could wrest free, she yanked the lasso hard. Aubrey and Bennett fell back against the oak. Ignoring their protests, she wrapped the rope around the tree several times and knotted it securely.

"What's the meaning of this?" Bennett shouted.

"What do you think?" She stepped in front of them and gazed at their members. "Is that all you've got, Bennett? For all your talk of sating women, you've got nothing to show." She gathered up their breeches. "I've used larger worms for fishing."

He glared at her. "Treacherous wench! When I get free, I'll teach you. I'll—"

She shoved the crotch of the breeches into Bennett's mouth. "Quiet! You couldn't teach a cow to give milk." She tied the legs of the breeches around the tree, then turned to Aubrey. To her surprise, he was fully erect. "Now, Aubrey, that is quite an impressive rod. You are much larger and thicker than Bennett."

Bennett growled through his gag and struggled against the rope. Aubrey smiled at her. "Are you going to climb onto my lap and sate yourself, Princess?"

She rolled her eyes and let out a sigh. "No, fool. You're not getting any of me today either."

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“But I thought—”

She gagged him with his breeches and knotted the legs securely. Aubrey's brown eyes locked onto hers for a second, and she felt sorry for him. He was young and foolhardy; he couldn't be blamed for following Bennett's lead.

“Heed some royal advice, Aubrey. In the future, do the opposite of anything Bennett does,” she whispered in his ear. “Bennett will lead you into trouble, and I doubt he'll be retained as a guard once my father hears about his behavior. You, however, are in no trouble from the Crown.”

She took a step back and surveyed her work. It wasn't her best job, but it would do. What a sight they'd make for whoever found them—half-naked with their dingles hanging out!

“I'm returning to the caravan to be with my husband in Zarmatt,” she said as she mounted her horse. “I'm certain you'll free yourselves in time and be none the worse for wear. As for you, Bennett, I do hope you'll look back fondly on the day when you presented your pecker to a princess.” She laughed and galloped her horse down the trail.

* * *

Elara crept around the low-burning campfire, careful not to make a sound. She couldn't risk waking any of the horsemen. It had been tricky enough to sneak into the camp under a full moon without alerting the guards—it wouldn't do to get caught now.

She rushed to Allan's tent and crawled inside. The

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moonlight filtering through the canvas gave her enough light to see. Allan was sound asleep on his back, snoring. She shook his shoulder.

"Allan, wake up," she whispered.

He stirred and muttered something, then rolled onto his side.

She shook him again, harder. "Wake up!"

He snapped awake. "Huh? What the—"

"Shh. Be quiet!"

"Elara! What are you doing here? Dalton put you on a horse this morning."

"And I returned," she said with a shrug.

Allan sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Where are the guards?"

"Have you anything to eat? I'm starving." She rummaged around in Allan's saddlebag and found an apple. She bit into the sweet fruit and chewed for a minute before answering. "Those two? They were rude and repulsive. I left them."

"You rode here alone?"

"Trust me, I'm much safer alone than with that vile Bennett. He spoke ill of me and made crude comments...among other things."

"You should be home, not traipsing around in the woods in the middle of the night! It's dangerous."

She shrugged. "That's why I came back. It appears I'm going with you after all."

"Oh, no, you're not! Dalton—"

"Dalton will have no choice but to accept me along on this adventure now. What shall he do, send me back again?"

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Allan sighed and ran his fingers through his light brown hair. "We're not having an adventure. We're going to Emperor Salizar's palace in the northern area of Zarmatt."

"So?" she asked, taking another bite of apple.

"That's the place I went to last year."

She coughed on the apple. "There? You're going there? The place with the girls?"

"Aye."

"The place where you—"

"Aye."

"With my husband?"

Allan covered her mouth with his hand. "Shh, you'll wake the whole camp! Don't yell at me. It was father's idea."

She pulled his hand away. "Father's idea? Why would he do such a thing?"

"He wants Dalton to keep me level-headed and out of trouble," he explained. "The palace is designed to make men lose their reason."

"He'll be unfaithful to me!"

"Don't be silly." Allan shook his head. "He'd never do that."

"Oh, really?" She folded her arms across her chest. "I wouldn't be too sure. Dalton is easily tempted."

"How can you say such a thing about your own husband?"

"Because it's true. He starts out all noble, strong, and resilient, but after a while the temptation becomes too great and he gives into his manly urges."

"I don't believe you."

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"Well, you should. I know better than anyone does. He was my guard for a week."

Allan's brown eyes widened. "Do you mean to tell me that you and he...that you two were...intimate before you were wed?"

She bit into the apple and wriggled her eyebrows. "That depends how you define intimate."

He gasped. "Elara! How could you?"

"Oh, don't pretend to be shocked, dear brother. If I recall correctly...you told me that the last time you were at the emperor's palace you engaged in wanton acts with two...or was it three, women at once. You said that one of them licked the—"

"Shh! I told you, I was taken in by their charms."

"And Dalton won't be?" She shook her head. "He's already keeping secrets from me. He neglected to tell me that Zarmatt was the place with all the lust-filled women!"

Allan's mouth dropped open. "He never told you?" He smacked himself in the forehead. "Damn! Of course he didn't tell you! He knew you'd become crazed with jealousy."

"Exactly, and now that I know, I'm definitely coming along."

"You cannot! Women are not allowed."

"Then sneak me in. I'll pretend to be a servant."

"There are no servants, only *kharim* women. They serve all the men's needs—and I mean *all* their needs. They obey every request without complaint. They're docile and obedient and don't speak unless spoken to." Allan arched an eyebrow. "Do

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you honestly think you can act that way for a fortnight?"

She pursed her lips. Now she knew why Dalton had been so cross with her when she'd followed along. Was he planning on making love to one, or more, of the emperor's girls? Mayhap he hadn't taken to marriage as well as she thought.

Royals and nobles far and wide had spread rumors that Dalton only married her for her dowry. What if they were right? Each time she heard their whisperings and mutterings she felt like dying inside. Dalton told her to ignore them and insisted he loved her, so why would he sneak off to Zarmatt? Perhaps he'd grown weary of her complaints and disobedience. If he wanted her to obey and settle down, this was the perfect chance to prove that she could. It also would allow her to watch over him and see that he resisted whatever temptations were put before him.

She looked at Allan. "If you're going to take my husband to the palace so he can be serviced by a witless girl, then I should be the girl who services him."

"What?"

"I'm going to become one of these girls and test his loyalty. If he gives in and expresses interest in her, I'll know his true feelings for me. But if he resists, as he should, then nothing will be lost. Either way, it shall force me to be complacent."

Allan laughed. "Are you serious? You won't be able to do it."

She pinched his arm and he yelped. "Don't tell me what I can't do! Sneak me into the palace and arrange for me to be

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with Dalton!"

He scowled and rubbed his arm. "And if I don't?"

"If you don't, dear brother, I shall be forced to tell father how his prized statue of Artemisia got smashed to bits." She gave him a knowing look. "He still thinks it fell off the pedestal. If he learns the truth about how it got broken—"

"You wouldn't! He'd skin me alive! You promised not to tell."

"Do this favor for me and I'll forget what happened." She shrugged. "Dalton thinks I'm incapable of obeying him. I want to prove to him that I can, *and* ensure his fidelity."

"But it's dangerous! If you get caught—"

"I won't. Now do whatever it takes to ready me, because I'm going to be the best *kharim* girl in the land."

* * *

"Hurry up and get inside!" Allan whispered as he opened the door to the suite. "If you're caught out here—"

"I haven't been caught so far. I doubt the last three feet will pose much danger!" Elara griped and strolled into Dalton's chamber.

The large sitting room was decorated with thick carpets, sofas, and chairs in shades of dark blue and gold. A huge oak bar took up one wall, and an odd-shaped blue bench was positioned under one of the windows. She cocked her head to one side. How was a person supposed to sit on that? One end was sharply angled down to a wedge, while the other end angled upward. Back in the far corner she spotted what looked

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like a round, cushioned bed half-hidden behind gold curtains. What was that for?

Allan closed and locked the door behind them. "Must you always be so objectionable?" He sighed. "After all I've risked for you—"

"Oh, let's not start that again," she said, pulling off her wool cap and running her hands through her short hair. "Look at me! Why shouldn't I be cranky? You butchered my beautiful hair!" she complained as she walked to the blue horsehair sofa and flopped down.

The last day and a half had been awful! Allan had chopped off her golden locks and colored her short hair with henna. During the day, she'd ridden behind the caravan at a safe distance, then crept into Allan's tent to sleep at night. She'd been forced to wear a pair of his breeches and a long shirt to look like a man. For all its inconvenience, her disguise had worked perfectly. Allan had snuck her into the palace disguised as a manservant.

"Hush! We have no time for theatrics." Allan crossed the room and entered an alcove off the main parlor. "Come here."

She rose and found him rummaging through a small wardrobe. "What's that?"

"This is where the girls dress and keep their toiletries. Take off those clothes and put this on," he said, handing her a wooden hanger.

She stared at the scraps of bright pink silk dangling from the hanger. "Put it on? I don't even know what it is."

"It's what all the girls wear. Now go behind that screen

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and put it on.”

“Fine!” She ducked behind the screen and stripped, then took the jeweled halter top off the hanger. The silky material was low cut and held closed by a single hook in the front. She squeezed into the top and struggled to fasten the hook. Her breasts threatened to pop out, and she could hardly breathe.

She picked up the hanger and scowled. Where was the rest of the outfit? The only thing left on the hanger was a tiny piece of pink satin with two strings attached to it. She peeked out from behind the screen. “Allan, where’s the bottom? There’s nothing here except this,” she said, waving the scrap of satin in the air.

“That *is* the bottom.”

“What? I have handkerchiefs that are four times larger! I’m supposed to wear this? How? It doesn’t cover anything. I’ll be exposed!”

Allan grinned. “That’s the idea. It covers a little bit, just enough to give a semblance of modesty, while still providing easy access.”

“But—”

“Get dressed! There’s no time to argue!”

She fastened the tiny scrap of satin between her legs and shook her head. What was she doing? She was nearly naked from the waist down! People would be able to see everything! Was spying on Dalton worth this much trouble?

“Come out and let me see.”

She stepped out from behind the screen and felt her face flush. “See? Nothing fits, I—”

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“Good Lord!” Allan turned his head and held out a thin cloth belt with tiny gold bells sewn into it. “Put that on, then attach these to the belt,” he said, handing her several pink and gold scarves. “They’ll cover the obvious parts. Tell me when I can look.”

She fastened the belt around her waist and adjusted the scarves to cover herself. “How are these to conceal anything? I can see through them!”

“Just put them on! Or would you rather wear nothing?”

“I practically am!” She let out a sigh of exasperation, then winced. Her top was so tight it practically cut off her air. “I’m dressed—I think.”

Allan opened his eyes and chuckled. “Oh, aren’t you delightful?”

She rested her hands on her hips and the bells on her belt jingled. “Don’t mock me! I can barely breathe in this top, my lower half is experiencing a draft, and you expect me to wear this for a fortnight?”

“It’s not my fault you’re well-endowed. Try not to breathe deep, you might spill out the top,” he said with a grin. He handed her a bejeweled pink headdress and veil. “Here’s your headdress. Pin it to your hair, then attach the veil.”

She did as Allan instructed, although it seemed odd to cover her head and face when everything else was exposed. “Will I pass?” she asked, turning to him.

He frowned. “I hope so. Are you certain you wish to do this? It’s dangerous.”

She squared her shoulders. “Aye. Do you expect me to

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leave Dalton here surrounded by women who prance around in nothing but see-through scarves? When I set my mind—”

“I’m not concerned with your *mind*, I’m concerned with your *mouth*. Remember, Elara, you’re not allowed to speak unless spoken to. You’re not to have any opinions or thoughts, and you certainly are not to ask questions. You must obey every request put before you, by anyone. It’s expected that you tend to Dalton’s every need.”

“What am I to do? Stand here like an idiot and wait for orders?”

“Absolutely. Don’t do anything unless you’re given permission. You’re giving up your freedom and are entirely under Dalton’s control. You have one purpose here, to pleasure the man you’ve been given to.”

“Given to!” She rolled her eyes. “Really!”

“Hush! Everyone is going to be looking at you. You may not like what you hear or see, but you cannot show any reaction. One tiny slip up and it could all be over. If you’re found out—”

“I won’t be.” She stuffed her disguise into the back of the wardrobe and pulled out a pair of pink slippers. Like everything else, they were too small. “You’ll see I can do this.”

“Fine. I’ll get Dalton and bring him in. While I’m gone, line and paint your eyes. The cosmetics are over there.” He gestured toward a small vanity lined with bottles and jars. “And think of a name for yourself, something exotic...and be sure to disguise your voice with an accent.” He looked at her

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and bit his bottom lip. "There's still time for me to take you home."

"I'll be fine. Pray, tell me, should I be nervous?"

"Aye, if you have any sense in your head."

"Good then." She let out a long breath. "Then at least I know I'm doing something right."

Allan walked to the door, then turned back. "When we arrive, don't forget you must curtsy and address us properly."

"I will. Have no fear, I'll play the role so well I'll even fool you. Now go. I'll be ready for Dalton when he arrives."

Ten minutes later, Elara sat at the vanity studying her eyes in the looking glass. The thick black eyeliner and blue shadow she had applied gave her an exotic, mysterious appearance. With her short, henna-colored hair and heavily made up features, she barely recognized herself.

She rose and strolled into the bedchamber. An enormous four-poster bed took up one corner of the room. A man's wardrobe stood on the opposite wall. She spotted an ornately carved gold trunk near the bed and opened it. An assortment of silk scarves, a riding crop, and jars of perfumed oils were stacked inside. What was this here for? Was it a gift for Dalton?

After rummaging around for a moment, she closed the trunk and stood in front of the looking glass near the wardrobe. Her breasts spilled over the bejeweled edges of her pink and gold top. Whenever she moved the slightest bit, the bells tied to her waist jingled. The flowing scarves around her hips barely concealed her buttocks, and when she walked, the

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scrap of satin between her legs tickled her privates. Is this what men liked? Did they find this attractive? She felt ridiculous!

She frowned and tried to think of a new name for herself. Rosalind? Merinda? Trella? Nay, they were too dull. Oonach? She shook her head. Oonish! Yes, that was it! From now on, she'd be the obedient and dimwitted Oonish, whose only desire was to seduce Dalton. She bit her bottom lip. But what would she do if Dalton recognized her? Even worse, what would she do if he *didn't* recognize her and wanted to be intimate?

The door to the sitting room opened, and she heard Allan talking to someone. She sprinted out of the bedchamber and into the parlor.

Dalton strode through the doorway and scowled when he spotted her. "What's *she* doing here?"

CHAPTER 2

THE TEMPTATION

“What do you mean, Dalton?” Allan asked.

“Her. That girl. What is she doing here? I don’t want her here,” he grumbled and flopped onto the dark blue sofa. The girl wore nothing but flimsy scarves and looked like a pink nightmare.

“She’s your girl, for whatever you desire. She’ll—”

“Fine. Then I desire her to leave.” He looked at Allan. “I told you I won’t have anything to do with these girls.”

“Be reasonable. They’re here to serve you—in any way. They’ll lay out your clothes, give you back rubs, draw a hot

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bath, or anything else you wish. Think of her as a servant if nothing more.”

He sighed and rubbed his temples. For the last day and a half his head had throbbed with a deep ache. He'd been tempted to instruct Allan to ride on without him, but duty prevailed. Ever since he'd sent Elara home, he hadn't slept well and had been in a foul mood.

He studied the girl for a moment. She stood with her arms behind her back, staring at the floor. A pink veil concealed her face except for her eyes. Her short red hair was mostly hidden beneath a pink and gold headdress. Her arms, midriff, and long legs were bare. See-through pink and gold scarves partially covered her hips and buttocks. He sighed. If this was what all the women wore, no wonder King Maxwell insisted Allan have a chaperone.

The girl glanced at him and curtsied. “My name is Oonish. It is my pleasure to serve you, Your Highness.”

Dalton arched an eyebrow. As the girl curtsied, her large breasts jiggled, and he got a good view of her cleavage. If she weren't careful, her low-cut top would fly right off.

“Oonish, I am Prince Allan. This is Prince Dalton,” Allan said, sitting on the sofa. “Fetch His Highness a drink.”

“As you wish, Your Highness.” Oonish curtsied and rushed toward the bar, bells jingling.

“Isn't she great, Dalton? Just think, for the next two weeks she'll tend to your every need and—”

“Don't think we're staying here for two weeks. We're here on business. As soon as the negotiations are over, we're

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leaving.”

“Bah!” Allan waved him off. “You cannot rush the negotiations. His Supreme Worship is quite particular about who he speaks with and when. He follows a certain protocol.”

Dalton looked up as Oonish jingled toward him, carrying a drink. Would he be forced to hear those ridiculous bells for a fortnight? It could drive him into madness.

“For you, Your Highness.” She placed an amber colored drink on the table beside him and started to sit in the chair near the door.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Allan snapped.

Oonish looked at him, eyes wide.

“Get your ass out of that chair! You know you’re not allowed to sit on the furniture!” Allan pointed to the curtained area on the far side of the room. “Get where you belong, now!”

“Many apologies, Your Highness,” Oonish muttered and hurried across the room, bells ringing as she ran.

Dalton watched her part the gold curtains and sit on a low cushion. “There’s no need to yell at her, Allan.”

“They’re used to following orders. They know what’s expected of them.” He stood up. “I’m going across the hall to meet my own little playmate. I’ll return in a few minutes.”

He sipped his drink. “Fine, go ahead. Don’t be too long.”

Allan laughed. “I’ll try to be quick.”

Dalton closed his eyes and leaned his head back on the sofa. The drink was starting to take the pain out of his head, but it did nothing to ease his heartache. He still felt miserable

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and wanted to go home.

A moment later, a knock on the door interrupted his peace. "Oonish, answer that."

He heard her bells tinkle as she crossed the room.

"Pardon, Your Highness. Men are here with trunks."

"Fine, have them bring them in."

Bells chimed past him and faded into the other room. He followed the sound of Oonish's bells as she moved from the bedchamber, to the door, and then finally came to a stop next to the sofa.

He opened his eyes. "Must you wear those damn bells? My head aches and I cannot stand to hear them! Remove them!"

"But Your Highness, if I—"

"Do as I say," he snapped.

She nodded. "As you wish."

Oonish unfastened the string of bells around her waist and they dropped to the floor—along with her scarves. To his dismay, she stood before him wearing nothing but a tiny scrap of pink satin between her legs. He tried not to gape. "For heaven's sake! Is that all you wear?"

"Aye, Your Highness. For ease of pleasure. Shall I remove it?"

"No! Put the scarves back on."

"But my bells—"

"Blast the bells. I'll let my head fall off, but I won't allow you to walk around here naked."

"As you wish, Your Highness," she said as she refastened the bells around her waist.

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“Go unpack my trunks, and try not to clank about.”

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was tired and cranky. Perhaps a nap would ease his pained head.

A moment later, Oonish jangled into the room. He sighed. “What is it now?”

“Your Highness, I am unsure what to do with this.”

He looked over his shoulder. Oonish was holding Elara’s emerald green dress. He stood and snatched it from her hands. “Where did you get this?”

“It was in the trunk, with the others.”

“Others?” He brushed past her and marched into the bedchamber. His trunks stood open near the wardrobe. Several of Elara’s dresses were neatly folded at the bottom of the trunks. He chuckled.

“That little imp! Now I know why she wanted to pack my trunks for me. She planned it all along.” He trailed his finger over the green satin bodice and smiled. “It seems Elara found a way to accompany me after all.”

His tension eased as he brought the dress close to his nose and caught a whiff of her perfume. Having this part of Elara near him made him feel better. He missed her terribly, especially since he was stuck here with this dolt of a girl.

He looked at Oonish. “These belong to my wife, Princess Elara. She thought she could come with me and packed them to wear. She will be furious when she realizes she’s without her best dresses for a fortnight.”

“They are very beautiful.”

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"As is she. I miss her already." He handed Oonish the green dress. "Hang this next to my things and leave the—"

He broke off as he heard a knock at the door. "That must be Allan. I'll let him in. You finish in here." He entered the sitting room and opened the door.

A raven-haired *kharim* girl wearing flaming red scarves stood outside his doorway.

"Yes, what is it?"

"I am Dashuri, Your Highness." She curtsied, then strolled into the room. "I am here to serve you in any way. I shall give you many pleasures."

He closed the door behind her. "I already have a girl. Where did you come from?"

"I am to pleasure you, Your Highness. Did you wish for two girls?"

"Nay, I don't even want one. Did Allan send you here?" He turned as he heard Oonish jingle out of the bedchamber.

"Your highness, I—" She stopped as she spotted Dashuri. "Who is she?"

He scowled. There was no mistaking the jealousy in Oonish's voice. Didn't the *kharim* girls get along? "Oonish, meet Dashuri. She's also here to pleasure me. But right now, the only thing that would please me is to be left alone," he said with a sigh. "Why don't—"

A rapping on the chamber door interrupted him. "I swear, if this is another girl, I'm going to leave and you can all stay here and pleasure yourselves!"

He yanked open the door. Allan stood in the corridor. A

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brown-haired girl dressed in green was stroking his chest.

"Oh, it's you! Get in here!" He grabbed Allan's jacket sleeve and pulled him into the room. "What is the meaning of this?"

"The meaning of what?" He gestured at Dashuri. "Who's she?"

"That's Dashuri. She's here to pleasure me. Did you summon her for a joke?"

"Nay, Dalton. I didn't, I swear. There must have been a mix-up, or mayhap a guest canceled and they sent her to you as an extra," Allan answered quickly.

"I don't need an extra half-naked woman! I don't even want the one I started with." He rolled his eyes. "Why don't you take her?"

Allan grinned and wrapped his arm around the girl in green. "I have Aliesk to tend to my needs. Loosen up and have some fun, Dalton. With two girls, you can have twice the enjoyment."

He flopped onto the sofa and gulped down his drink. "I'm not having *any* enjoyment. I don't want fun, I don't want Oonish, I don't want Dashuri, and I don't want to be here."

Allan instructed Aliesk to stand near the door, then sat down on the sofa. "Dalton, what's wrong?"

He stared into his empty glass. What he was about to say would sound ridiculous, but it was the truth. "I miss Elara."

"Is that what this is all about? Is that why you're acting so miserable, because you miss her? Are you drunk? The liquor here is much stronger than at home."

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"Nay, I'm not drunk, but another drink is a good idea. This one has dulled my aching head." He waved his glass in the air. "Oonish, fix me another. Bring Allan one, as well."

"As you wish, Your Highness," Oonish said as she jangled toward the bar.

He groaned. "Those damn bells. Why must she wear them?"

"Order her to take them off."

"I did, and that was worse." He smirked and leaned close to Allan. "She's not a true redhead. Down below she's honey colored."

Allan gasped and his eyes widened. "You saw her—"

"How could I not? She's hardly wearing anything under those scarves. That little pink scrap hides nothing."

Oonish brought him a drink and he took a healthy swig. He closed his eyes for a second as the thick liquor burned down to his gut. It tasted like mead, yet was flavored with a blend of peculiar spices. Allan was right about the liquor. It was much stronger than what they had at home, and it was working its magic on him. The room suddenly seemed incredibly warm. His head had stopped throbbing, and he felt pleasantly numb.

"See? I told you you'd like it here," Allan said, raising his glass. "After a few of these drinks you'll be rolling on the floor with Oonish, Aliesk, and Dashuri," he teased.

Dalton blinked a few times to clear his head. "What am I supposed to do with two girls? You must take one of them away."

Allan smiled. "I won't argue. Two girls are better than one."

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But let's have some fun with them first. We'll hold a contest to determine who stays. Have Oonish and Dashuri perform for you, and the one you like best, you keep. I'll take the other one. Agreed? It'll be harmless, you'll see."

He frowned. "Somehow I doubt that. But at this point, I don't care if they flip a coin to decide." He pointed at Dashuri. "You there, do whatever it is you do."

"Your wish is my desire, Your Highness."

Dalton watched as Dashuri began gyrating her hips in small circles. The red scarves around her waist flew up as her movements got faster and faster. Unlike Oonish, her waist was covered in tiny silk tassels that swayed back and forth. After a moment, she began a slow, sultry dance and slid a strap of her top off her shoulder.

He leaned back on the sofa. Perhaps Allan was right. What harm could come from watching the girls here? As long as he didn't touch them, he wasn't being unfaithful to Elara.

Dashuri removed her top and tossed it to the floor. She squeezed her breasts and pinched each of her nipples until they hardened.

He felt a stirring in his loins and squirmed a little. The liquor was having a powerful affect on him. Instead of feeling drunk and giddy, he was growing complacent and lust-filled. He studied Dashuri's body as she removed her hip scarves one by one. She was a light bronze color, and her lean legs and flat stomach didn't have a bit of fat on them.

Dashuri stripped down to her red satin covering. A rush of blood surged to his groin as she slid her fingers into the scrap

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of cloth, then rocked her hips. She turned, then bent forward as she eased the covering down, exposing herself to them.

Dalton gasped. Dashuri's privates were shaved bare and decorated with tiny gold rings. From her obscene position in front of him, he could see every bit of her. She straightened up and tossed the scrap of red satin into his lap.

"She's pierced!" Allan exclaimed, leaning forward. "Wouldn't you love to lick every inch of her?"

Dashuri rolled her hips from side to side, then reached down and began toying with her golden rings.

His pulse surged, and he felt his member throb. "That's enough!"

"Dalton! Let her continue. She was just getting warmed up!"

"You don't want to wear her out, do you?" He looked at Oonish. She had been standing near a side table watching everything. "You, now it's your turn."

"Oh, this should be fun." Allan chuckled. "Oonish, do something impressive if you wish to remain with Prince Dalton."

Oonish stepped in front of him and swayed her hips back and forth. He watched her for a moment, then Allan nudged him in the ribs. "Look over there."

Dashuri sat on the gold cushions at the far end of the room. Her legs were parted wide and she was playing with her golden rings.

"My Lord! Have they no shame?" he muttered.

"Not a bit. That's what makes them so desirable," Allan

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commented. "They'll do anything. I could order them to—"

"I understand." He turned his attention back to Oonish. She was performing a slow stretching routine. She bent herself all the way backward, then straightened up and bent forward, touching her toes.

He glanced at Dashuri. She had changed position and lay on her back with her legs extended high into the air. When she caught him looking, she rolled onto her stomach and pushed up onto her knees, offering him a full view of her privates from behind. Dashuri was doing everything possible to draw his attention away from Oonish.

Oonish's bells jangled, and he turned to see what she was doing. She parted her legs and slowly slid down into a full split, then bent forward until she lay flat on the floor. Her supple movements were suggestive, but nothing at all like what Dashuri had done.

He cleared his throat. "That's enough Oonish, you may rise."

She obeyed. He caught her glance at Dashuri, then look away.

"Well, that was no contest," Allan said, rising. "I guess I'll take Oonish with me."

"No, take the other one."

"What? Why? Dashuri's clearly the more enticing one. Didn't she arouse you?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Of course she did. My blood's pounding and I'm as stiff as a sword—and that's exactly why I'm *not* keeping her. I don't want her here; she'll cause

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trouble.”

“You mean she’s too tempting?”

He motioned for Allan to follow him as he walked to the bar. He wanted to be out of Oonish’s earshot for what he had to say. “Aye. What man wouldn’t want her? I’ll keep Oonish. I’m not attracted to her.”

Allan laughed. “You’re going to keep Oonish because she does nothing for you? You’re not interested in her at all?”

“Nay,” he said, pouring himself a drink from the crystal decanter. “But she’ll do for making drinks and such.”

Allan grinned. “Fine. Just remember, you chose this, Dalton.” He motioned for Aliesk to come forward, then turned to Dashuri. “You’re mine now. Gather your scarves, but there’s no need to dress, it will merely delay our fun.”

Dashuri rose from the cushioned area and followed Allan to the door. He draped his arms around both girls. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Fine. Don’t forget we have work to do.”

“Oh, loosen up! I’ll drop by before supper to collect you. Have fun with Oonish,” he teased as he escorted the women through the doorway.

Dalton closed the door and strolled to the bar. As much as he liked Allan, he grated on his nerves at times. All he thought about was having fun and bedding women. He never took anything seriously.

A ringing noise behind him captured his attention and he turned. Oonish stood near the sofa with her head bowed.

“Forgive me, Your Highness. I am sorry I displeased you,”

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she muttered.

He stepped closer to her. "What do you mean?"

Oonish glanced up at him and he saw tears in her eyes.

"Dashuri is much more beautiful than I. If you wish to have her, I will go. I only wish for you to be happy," she said, her voice cracking.

He sighed. Women were the same all over. Oonish was sulking, and he had a good idea why. "You heard what I said to Allan, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"And you're upset because I do not find you attractive?"

"Aye. Mayhap if I had taken my clothes off—"

"I'm glad you left yours on. It leaves something to the imagination." He cleared his throat. "There's no need to feel shame because you kept yourself covered."

"But I am here to please you, and—"

"You're still here, aren't you?" he asked. "I sent Dashuri away because she's trouble. You're not."

"I am grateful you kept me, Your Highness. I shall do anything you wish to—"

"Don't say that. It's degrading." He shook his head. "Dashuri stripped off her clothes and toyed with herself, but I found such an open display vulgar." Oonish gave him a puzzled look and he continued. "Do you know what she's probably doing with Allan and that other girl?"

Oonish nodded. "It is what is expected of us."

"And that's what makes it unattractive to me. She doesn't want Allan, or me, or anyone else. She merely does what she's

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commanded to do with anyone, at any time.” He shook his head. “I love my wife and I’m not going to betray her, no matter how many gold-ringed harlots spread their legs for me.”

“You are very devoted to her. Is there nothing I can do for you, Your Highness?”

“Aye,” he answered, rubbing his temples. “Take those bells off. My head is throbbing again.”

“As you wish.” Oonish removed her bells and scarves. “Shall I draw you a hot bath? A good soak would relax you. Your muscles must be knotted from your long journey.”

“Aye. A bath and a nap before supper sound fine. What harm that can come from that?”

* * *

Elara turned a lever and filled the marble bathing tub with hot water. She sat back on her heels and sighed. Part of her felt like crying. After only an hour of pretending to be Oonish, she was tired of the charade. Allan had some nerve making Dashuri dance in front of Dalton! What was he doing? Deliberately trying to tempt Dalton into being unfaithful with that whore?

Dalton had been so mesmerized by Dashuri that he hadn’t even watched her bending and stretching. And to make matters worse, he was only keeping her because she wasn’t attractive! She turned off the water. Dalton thought that Oonish was incapable of arousing him, eh? Then it was time to prove him wrong.

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"Is it ready?"

"Yes, Your Highness," she answered as she rose. Dalton stood in the doorway, fully clothed.

"Shall I undress you?"

"I can manage that on my own, but fetch me a dressing gown. I'll need it after the bath."

"As you wish, Your Highness." All this simpering was making her cranky! She went into the bedchamber and took a silky blue dressing gown out of the wardrobe. How could these women obey every whim of their masters each day of their lives? It was sickening!

When she returned to the bathchamber, Dalton was already sitting in the tub. She frowned. So much for seeing him nude! She wanted to catch a glimpse of him and see if he was still stiff from Dashuri's obscene dancing.

She took a bar of soap off a nearby shelf. "Shall I wash you, Your Highness?"

"Aye. Start with my back."

Instead of kneeling on the floor, she seized the opportunity and plopped into the tub behind him.

"Oonish! What are you doing?"

She extended her legs on either side of his hips. "Bathing you, Your Highness. Relax and enjoy. The warm water will soothe away your troubles."

"I doubt that," he grumbled.

Elara dipped the soap into the water and lathered Dalton's wide back. She took her time and trailed her hands over his hard muscles. She loved stroking his thick chest and broad

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shoulders after lovemaking. Sometimes just looking at his nude body made her eager for him. "You are very strong, Your Highness, with many big muscles," she whispered in his ear.

He chuckled. "I train hard to stay in good condition."

She massaged his back. "I shall give you a good rub. It will drain the tension out of you and make you feel good." She kneaded a knot in his neck, and he moaned.

"That feels good. You have very skilled hands."

"All the better to give you pleasures. You're so stiff." She reached around Dalton's shoulder and started lathering his chest.

He groaned and leaned back against her a little.

"Does your head still pain you?" She knew Dalton could act like a bear when his head ached.

"It's fading."

"Good." She grinned. If she got him to relax, she could work her magic on him. "I am happy you kept me, Your Highness. I promise not to disappoint you. I will make your stay here most pleasurable," she whispered as she trailed her soapy hand across his flat stomach.

"I'm sure you can, Oonish. I have no doubt of that," he said, chuckling.

"Tell me, do you find me attractive? Do I make you stiff with desire or is Dashuri the only girl for you?"

"I've never seen a girl with rings before. Do you have piercings down there as well?"

She giggled and pressed her breasts against his back. "You

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can explore me and see for yourself.”

He cleared his throat. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Whenever you would like to look, just ask.” She grinned. Little by little, she was breaking through his defenses. As she went to re-lather her hands, the soap slid out of her grip and disappeared under the water. “Oh, let me get that.”

She reached around Dalton’s hips and slipped her hand between his legs. Her fingers grazed his penis and she gasped. He was hard! “My word! Are you still so inflamed from Dashuri’s dance?”

“Nay, that faded. It’s the warm water. It stirs me.”

“I knew you wished to keep me for your pleasures,” she whispered as she closed her hand around his solid organ. Dalton moaned, and she stroked him a few times.

“Get your damn hands off me!” Dalton clasped her wrist and pulled her hand away. She squealed as he yanked her forward. “I love Elara and I’m not going to be unfaithful to her.” He glared at her over his shoulder. “If you ever touch me like that again I shall have you punished. Do you understand?”

She whimpered and nodded. Dalton was squeezing her wrist so hard she thought he’d snap it. “Yes, Your Highness. Forgive—”

“Get out of this tub and bring me my dressing gown,” he ordered as he released her.

She stepped from the bath and took the blue gown off a peg. It was some small consolation to know her trickery had worked on him—a little too well. Her wrist still stung where Dalton had grabbed her. She presented him with the dressing

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gown and he snatched it from her hand.

“Go turn down my bed.”

“As you wish.” She hurried into the bedchamber and turned down the silky blue and gold bedding.

Dalton entered the room and gasped. “Dear God, Oonish! I can see everything!”

“What?” She looked down. The tiny scrap of satin covering her privates was soaking wet and completely transparent.

She glanced at Dalton. His robe had come open, and his rock-hard member jutted out of the front. “I can see you, as well,” she said, her voice coming out deep and breathy.

Seeing him so stiff sent a hot rush of blood to her soaked privates. She swallowed hard and resisted the urge to rush across the room, fall to her knees and suck him. If they were home, she’d lead him to the bed, eagerly part her legs, and take him quickly. Many mornings after a hot bath they’d fallen into bed together and sated their lust like animals.

Dalton closed his robe and walked to the bed.

“Shall I climb in with you?”

He shot her a steely glare. “I’m going to take a nap—alone. Close the door on your way out,” he said, slipping into bed and pulling the bedclothes up to his shoulders. “Wake me before supper.”

She knew better than to argue. “As you wish.”

Elara left the room and strolled into the parlor. Now what? In her effort to inflame Dalton’s passions, she had sparked her own. She sat in the gold cushioned area, her lower body

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throbbing with a familiar, urgent need.

Deep down, she was glad Dalton had stopped “Oonish” in the bath. It proved his loyalty to her—that time. But what about the next time? What would happen if he gave into her teasing?

She flipped onto her back, settled among the satin pillows, and slipped her hand under her tiny covering. She closed her eyes and envisioned Dalton, wet, soapy, and hard as she rubbed herself. In the coming fortnight, she'd have many other opportunities to test Dalton. Two weeks without making love would weaken his resolve and make him vulnerable—but how much temptation could he take before giving in?

* * *

Dalton rolled over in his sleep. He heard bells jingling again. What was Oonish doing now? He'd told her to stay in the outer room. He opened his eyes. Oonish trotted around the foot of the bed. The room was dim and shadowy. How long had he been asleep?

“Good, you're awake, Your Highness. I would not want you to miss anything.”

“Miss what?” he grumbled and tried to sit up. As he did, he realized his arms were bent over his head. His wrists were tied to the wrought-iron headboard with long pink scarves.

“What is the meaning of this?” He moved his legs and found his ankles were bound as well. “I order you to untie me, now.”

“Nay, Your Highness. You must stay here and be

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pleasured. It is my duty,” Oonish said as she unhooked her belt. Her scarves and bells fell to the carpet, revealing her tiny covering.

He looked away. What was she going to do? “I wish for you to—”

“You wish for this,” she said, turning her back to him and wiggling her buttocks. He swallowed hard. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, Oonish *was* enticing.

She glanced at him over her shoulder. “Nice, yes? You wish to feel?” she asked, caressing her buttocks.

“Yes, but you must untie me.”

“Nay, Your Highness, you shall feel another way.” She drew the satin bedcovers down, exposing his naked body.

“What are you—”

She climbed on the bed and straddled his hips. Only a thin strip of satin separated them. “Don’t fight it, Dalton. You know you want to give in.”

“Get off me.” He struggled against the scarves binding him to the bed. If Oonish teased him now when he was helpless to resist—

“Enjoy it.” She sat down across his hips and began rubbing her bare buttocks against his groin.

His penis sprang to life in an instant. He moaned and pulled hard on the scarves. “I order you to stop! You must obey me,” he croaked out.

“Do you like me better than Dashuri? Did I stroke you well in the tub?”

“Yes,” he whispered. “Now, pray, stop. I’m married,

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Oonish. I love Elara.”

“You can love me, too,” she replied, stripping her covering off. She reached between them, then brought her hips down, impaling herself on his throbbing organ.

He cried out as he sank deep into her hot, slick, opening.

“You know you want me,” Oonish said in between grunts of pleasure. “I’ll make you feel good. Don’t fight it.”

He lay helpless as she bounced up and down on him. “You feel good,” he whispered as she rode him. His climax built and he thrust his hips up, working himself into Oonish faster. Seconds later, he was overcome with spasms. The bed bounced under their weight as they climaxed in unison. “Oonish! Don’t stop!”

“Your Highness? Is something wrong?”

He furrowed his brows. Someone was shaking his shoulder.

“Are you awake?”

He opened his eyes. Oonish stood at the side of the bed.

“What are you doing in here?”

“I heard you calling out for me. You were making noises in your sleep.” She glanced at the bedclothes. “Oh! Now I see why. I am sorry I woke you. I hope your dream was satisfying, Your Highness.”

He followed her gaze to the rumpled coverlet. The bedclothes were twisted around his hips and his right hand clutched his penis. The dark blue and gold sheets were dripping with fluids.

“Dear Lord,” he muttered and closed his eyes. “Get a cloth

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to wipe up this mess.”

“As you wish,” Oonish said, then went into the bathchamber.

He released his spent member and pulled the sticky sheets away from his body. How shameful and disgusting! Not only had he betrayed Elara in his dream, Oonish had caught him—

“Sometimes when a person denies himself pleasure, the body finds its own way of achieving release,” Oonish said as she stepped to the bed and handed him a warm, wet cloth. “There is no shame in it. Many a night I have woken shuddering and quaking from a dream only to find the fingers inside me were not from a lover, but my own. It—

“That’s more than I care to hear.” He wiped off his hand, cleaned himself, and gave the soiled cloth back to her. “Dispose of that and fetch me my breeches. We’ll visit Allan and then go downstairs for supper,” he said. He didn’t care where he went, as long as he got out of the room. “You’re never to mention what happened here, do you understand? No one must know.”

Oonish nodded and handed him his breeches. “I understand, Your Highness. Do not worry. We do not speak of what we see here—or of what we do.” She giggled. “Awake or in dreams.”

He frowned. Oonish knew he’d been dreaming about her. It wasn’t a surprise that he’d had the dirty dream. She’d driven him half out of his mind in the bath. Something about her seemingly innocent behavior drew him to her. Mayhap now that he’d had a much-needed release, he wouldn’t be tempted

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by her charms again.

“Dreams are the only place you shall ever touch me, Oonish.”

She cocked her head to one side and looked up at him. “Until you request otherwise, Your Highness.”

* * *

Elara followed Dalton across the corridor to Allan's room. He knocked on the door then turned his back to her. After he'd dressed, he hadn't spoken to her again. She knew he felt embarrassed about what had happened. Had he truly been dreaming about Oonish? She hadn't exactly been truthful about what she'd heard. It was true that he'd called out Oonish's name, and from the grunts coming from the bedchamber, she knew the type of dream he'd been having long before she'd entered the room. She had merely feigned surprise to spare him feeling shamed.

A muffled sound came from the other side of the door. Dalton looked at her. “Did he say to come in?”

“I believe so, Your Highness.”

Dalton opened the door and they entered Allan's suite. It was decorated in the same style as Dalton's, but in shades of crimson and black.

Allan cried out, “Keep going! Yes! Yes!”, from behind the closed bedchamber door.

She glanced at Dalton. His mouth hung open a little.

“Allan! It's nearly time for supper.”

The groans and cries of pleasure from the other side of the

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door increased. Elara heard the two girls squeal. What was he doing to them?

“For heaven’s sake, Allan! We’ll be in the corridor!” Dalton turned to her. “Come along, Oonish.” He dragged her toward the door. “I’m not going to stand here and listen to him screw.”

Dalton pulled her into the hallway and slammed the door shut. He paced back and forth, his wide chest heaving. “Unbelievable! Not one member of this family bears any shame or responsibility for anything. Allan knows we’ve got to meet the emperor for supper and what’s he doing—”

“Both girls at once, from the sound of it,” she interrupted.

Dalton chuckled and leaned against the wall. “Well, that’s obvious.” He grinned. “I hope he finishes up soon. We cannot be late.”

“Perhaps we—”

The door opened, and Allan popped his head out. His hair was rumpled and he wore a crimson dressing gown. “What’s the meaning of interrupting me? If you wanted to watch, you could have asked. I’m sure they won’t mind if you sit in.”

Dalton arched an eyebrow. “I knocked. You said come in.”

Allan laughed. “No, I said, *I’m coming*.” He opened the door wider. “Never mind. I’m done now.”

Elara rolled her eyes. From Allan’s tone of voice and boisterous behavior, she knew he’d been drinking. She followed Dalton into the parlor. Dashuri and Aliesk were seated in their cushioned area, nude. She caught Dashuri giving her a nasty look and turned her back to her.

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"I'll dress and we'll go to supper. I've worked up quite an appetite. Tell me, Dalton, how was your afternoon with Oonish?"

"Fine. Will you hurry?"

"Certainly." Allan strolled into the bedchamber. "Oonish, bring me a drink while I dress."

"From the way you're staggering around, I don't think you need another drink," Dalton griped.

"Stop acting like my father. It's not becoming," Allan called out. "No wonder he sent you to watch over me. You're too serious. You're going to spoil all my fun."

"From what I just heard, you've already had plenty of fun."

"Oonish, my drink, now."

Elara looked at Dalton. He nodded and sat on the sofa. "Go ahead, but don't make it strong."

She walked to the bar and fixed Allan a drink. Why did he want her to serve him? He had two other girls to wait on him. She carried the drink into the bedchamber and he closed the door behind her.

"Why do I have to fetch you drinks? Isn't it bad enough that—"

"Shh, keep your voice down. I wish to speak with you." He took the drink from her and swallowed half of it. "How is Dalton?"

"Agitated. He doesn't like to be late. You know how punctual he is."

Allan took a ruffled shirt and breeches out of the wardrobe

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

and stepped behind a dressing screen. "Yes, punctual and boring. Really, Elara, you must do something to loosen him up. I don't want him hovering over me ruining my fun while I'm here."

"Ruining your fun? You were just breaking the bed with two girls! And you're drunk!"

"Shh! So? That's the fun of coming here. You get to do whatever you want at any time of the day or night. It's complete freedom."

"You're here to work! Dalton's right, you're too busy screwing around to care about what you're supposed to do."

Allan came out from behind the screen and sat on the rumpled bed. "You're one to talk," he said, picking his socks off the floor. "Tell me, *Oonish*, what would your precious Dalton say if I ripped that veil off and exposed your charade?"

She rested her hands on her hips and shook her head. "I hate it when you drink! You become obnoxious and belligerent and say whatever comes into your head with no regard—"

"What's going on in there? Allan, you'd best not be starting up with *Oonish*!" Dalton called out.

"I'm dressing! Be out in a moment!" Allan shouted over his shoulder as he pulled on his socks. "Listen to me, when we go to supper you must be quiet and complacent like never before. Fall to your knees when the emperor enters, and stick close to Dalton at all times. Salizar must be addressed as 'Your Supreme Worship' and nothing else, understand?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, I'm ignorant! I've done a good

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job fooling everyone thus far, why should dinner be any different?"

"Because people in the main areas are liable to do anything. The men will take liberties with the girls in front of others and not care who watches. No matter what you see or hear, you must be quiet, understand?"

She sighed. "Fine."

"How has everything been with you and Dalton? Does he suspect the truth?"

"Nay. Why would he?" She glared at him. "I'm merely the girl he kept because he wasn't attracted to me!"

Allan let out a laugh as he buckled his boots. "That was funny, wasn't it?"

She kicked him in the shin with her pointed slipper.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"You! I should tear out your eyes for what you did! You made me humiliate myself in front of Dalton! I had to do some ridiculous dance—"

"Did you? I wasn't watching. I was more interested in Dashuri."

She growled and kicked him again. "And why did you send that pierced whore to our room? Are you trying to—"

"I didn't send her," he said, standing up. "Dashuri is his real *kharim* girl, the one who was assigned to him. I did you a favor by taking her away from him."

Her mouth dropped open and she took a step back. "You mean he's supposed to be with *her* for two weeks? Oh, Allan!" She shook her head. "I saw how he looked at her."

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

"I know." He grinned. "What man alive wouldn't want her?" He slipped an arm around her waist. "Look, little sister, if you truly wish to test Dalton's loyalty, leave them alone for a while. You'll see how strong his convictions are when he's around a real woman."

She yanked away from him. "*I am* a real woman."

"Please! Do you think little Oonish can compare to Dashuri? For heaven's sake, you saw the way she moves. She practically ripples..."

"Good Lord! She's out there with him!" She opened the door and raced out of the bedchamber. Aliesk and Dashuri were still sitting on the cushions where Allan had left them.

"Oonish, get back here!" Allan chased after her. He grabbed her arm as she crossed the sitting room.

"Allan! What are you doing?" Dalton shouted.

"Nothing, I—"

"Let her go." Dalton stood up. "Now listen here, I don't care what you do with these two, but leave Oonish alone. She's mine."

"Really, Dalton? Don't tell me you've grown fond of this little creature already. You can do much better. Trade her in for an enchanting woman at supper or—"

"I've had enough of this! You're drunk! Grow up and act like a man."

Allan laughed. "I am a man. Just ask them," he said, gesturing at Aliesk and Dashuri.

Elara squealed as Dalton pulled her away from Allan. "I'm not going to stand here and listen to your asinine ramblings.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

We're leaving. If you know what's good for you, you'll sober up a bit before I see you again."

Elara glanced at Allan as Dalton dragged her toward the door.

"So you've chosen Oonish, have you, Dalton?" Allan chuckled. "Have fun! You don't realize what a special treasure you've got there!"

* * *

Dalton stepped into the Great Hall and gazed at the sights before him. Everywhere he looked, women paraded around in various stages of undress. Some were topless, but most were completely nude—except for the required headdress and veil.

A group of musicians played in the high balcony, filling the room with flute and sitar music. The air was thick with the spicy scent of incense. Long dining tables had been arranged along the outer edges of the room. A raised wooden dais decorated with jewels and silk stood in the center of the Great Hall.

He wandered around the room with Oonish jingling along behind him. A topless girl wearing yellow scarves approached him carrying a tray of drinks.

"With His Supreme Worship's blessing," she said.

He took a small, clear drink from the tray and tried not to stare at her ruby red nipples. She squeezed one of her breasts and looked at him. "Touch?"

"No."

"Lick or suck?" She tweaked her nipple.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

"No. Let another taste you." He sipped his drink and turned away.

Everywhere he looked, he saw men being pleased on cushioned benches and settees. A naked man had a girl bent over a peculiarly angled bench and was pumping into her behind. A small group of men cheered him on.

He shook his head. It was no wonder why Salizar had become so wealthy and powerful. He gave his guests anything they wanted, in exchange for their complete loyalty. Enough liquor and eager women would make any man sign any paper put before him—whether or not it was a good business deal.

Dalton walked toward the far corner of the room and peeked behind a black curtain. Two fair-haired girls were dancing together on a low platform. Now this was interesting. He grinned and entered the tiny chamber. This would certainly lighten his mood.

Watching nude women frolicking with each other—or themselves—always excited him. Perhaps that was why he'd become so enamored with Elara. She was unabashed about satisfying her own needs.

He sat in a chair in front of the stage and sipped his drink. The girls stroked each other's backs and buttocks as they swayed to the music. One girl stepped behind the other and slowly trailed her hands across her breasts. The plaything moaned as her nipples were pinched and squeezed. The girl slid her hands lower, easing them between her playmate's parted thighs.

He leaned forward to get a better look as the girl parted her

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

friend's lower lips. She slipped her fingers inside and began stroking her.

"I see you decided to enjoy yourself after all."

He snapped from his fantasy and turned around. Allan stood at Oonish's side, with Aliesk and Dashuri behind him.

"I leave you alone for ten minutes and here you are, watching girls finger each other," he teased.

"Allan!" He looked around to see if anyone was listening. "It's not like that." He cleared his throat and stood up. "I was waiting for you and they—"

"—shoved a sword in your trousers?" he said, laughing.

He glanced down. The front of his breeches jutted out several inches. He pulled his jacket down to cover himself. How could he have gotten so hard so quickly?

"I don't know what happened," he said, following Allan out of the curtained area and back into the main room. "But it was harmless. I've seen naked girls before. I've taken my fair share of lovers before I was married. There were women before Elara, you know."

"Sure, Dalton. There's no need to explain your lust to me."

"If you must know, I'm saving all of my 'lust' for my beautiful wife who's waiting for me at home."

Allan took a drink off a tray as a serving girl passed by.

He watched Allan swill down the drink and scowled. The drinks! They were small, yet powerful. "Allan, there's something in those drinks. Some type of elixir that makes one fall prey to lustful urges and lose control."

"You expect me to believe that?" He rolled his eyes.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

“Salizar doesn’t need to force lust on his guests, just look around.” He gestured with the glass. “Naked women humping and sucking everyone in sight—”

A bell rang, cutting off his words.

The music stopped, and couples disengaged all around them. The servers filed out of the room through a side door.

“What’s happening?”

“The bell signals the guests to take their seats,” Allan answered and hurried toward a table near the front of the room. “Let’s sit there. We’ll be one of the first served, and we’ll have a good view of the entertainment all through dinner.”

Dalton followed Allan to the table and sat down. Oonish knelt on a cushion behind him.

“When Salizar enters, he speaks to each guest individually.”

“About what?”

“Anything. And his comments are not always,” Allan paused, “polite or in keeping with royal protocol. He enjoys teasing people. It makes him feel superior.”

“Yes, and he obviously enjoys having people fornicating everywhere. It’s disgusting.”

Allan finished his drink and set the empty glass on the table. “You say that now, but if I hadn’t come along when I did—”

“They reminded me of Elara,” he stated. “Besides, a man is allowed to fantasize.” He sighed. “Do you think Elara’s all right?”

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Allan glanced at Oonish. "Aye, however, I'm sure she would not be happy to learn how those girls tempted you."

"I wasn't tempted to do anything. I was merely enjoying them enjoying themselves," he admitted with a sly grin.

Allan's eyes widened. "Ah-ha, so you do have a wild side! Interesting, and we've only been here a few hours."

A trumpet blared from the balcony, and a man dressed in a dark blue jacket and breeches stepped through a set of gold curtains. "That's Salizar's assistant, Davalos," Allan whispered.

"All hail, His Supreme Worship, Emperor Salizar!"

Everyone stood, then bowed low as Salizar entered. Dalton looked up to catch a glimpse of the exalted one and was stunned by what he saw. Salizar was obese. He wore a long red and gold caftan, and his bald head was adored with a bejeweled crown.

"Be seated," Salizar said. "Dear guests, I hope you enjoy the privilege of being invited into my palace of delights. I'm certain you will be as generous in your offerings to me, as I am generous in my gifts to you." Salizar raised a golden chalice into the air. "And now, we eat."

A door on the left opened, and serving girls entered carrying trays of food. They stopped at each table and served bowls of soup. Dalton looked at Allan. "What about our girls? Don't they eat?"

Allan spooned soup into his mouth and nodded. "When a bell rings, they go off to a different room for their meal." He motioned toward Salizar. "Get ready. He's coming."

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Dalton turned as Salizar approached the table. He and Allan stood and bowed, then took their seats again.

"It is a pleasure and an honor, Your Supreme Worship," Allan said quickly. "We are—"

"Yes, yes." Salizar waved Allan into silence with one fat hand.

Dalton took a long look at Salizar. Up close, he was even more repugnant. His bloated, pig-like face was covered in a sheen of oil, and his fat fingers resembled sausages.

"I wish to hear from Prince Dalton. Tell me, how are you taking to your new title and new bride?"

"Just fine, Your Supreme Worship. Princess Elara and I--"

"Elara." He laughed. "She is a prize, is she not? How hard was she to break in? Or has she not yet allowed you to consummate your marriage?"

Dalton heard Oonish's bells tinkle behind him, and he arched an eyebrow. "Pardon? I don't believe I understood you."

"You heard me," Salizar said, chuckling. "Everyone knows her reputation. No man would willingly wed such a cold-hearted wench—unless, of course, there was great reward involved."

Dalton leaned away from Salizar. His rancid breath stank like a mixture of fish and cheese. He wanted to smash his fist into Salizar's fat face, but forced himself to resist.

"So, *prince*, was it the title or the dowry that enticed you most? It certainly wasn't her 'treasure box' now was it? Everyone knows King Maxwell had to bribe someone to take

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his man-hating daughter off his hands. Was it worth it, Dalton? When you shove yourself inside her, do you think of something pleasurable, like the wealth and estates you've earned?"

"I love Elara. That's why I married her. The title and dowry were of no concern to me," he replied, forcing his voice to sound pleasant. "You seem to forget, Your Supreme Worship, that I came into the marriage with a title and estates of my own."

"Yes, a mere duke, bearing gifts from your uncle's crown." Salizar leaned close. "I do hope you're enjoying the girls here. I don't imagine that icicle you married fulfills any of your needs."

He stared into Salizar's mud-brown eyes. "I'm happily married. I will not be needing the services of your whores."

"But he is keeping one as a servant," Allan added quickly. "That way she'll be available should he loosen up and change his mind."

Salizar nodded. "Hmm, yes...being married to Elara, I can see why you would be put off to women for a while."

Dalton jumped to his feet. "Now just a minute! You—"

"Forgive him, Your Supreme Worship." Allan yanked on Dalton's sleeve and forced him to sit down. "He's had too many drinks, and it was quite a long journey here."

Salizar grinned. "You would be wise to follow Prince Allan's lead, Dalton. Even Elara's brother does not grow angry when I speak the truth about her." He chuckled. "I look forward to negotiations with you tomorrow, Dalton."

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

He shot Salizar a look that would bend a sword. "Prince Allan will be meeting with you."

"Not any more. You are. Mid-morning. It should be an interesting conversation," he said, then strolled to the next table.

Allan turned to him as soon as Salizar moved out of earshot. "Have you lost every bit of your mind? You cannot—"

"That fat son of a bitch had no right—"

"Get up!" Allan hauled him to his feet.

"What are you doing?"

"Saving your miserable life! Come with me." Allan dragged Dalton across the room and shoved him out into the corridor. Oonish, Dashuri, and Aliesk followed behind them.

"I cannot believe you spoke to the emperor in that manner! What's gotten into you?"

"Me?" He folded his arms across his chest. "That pig-faced pervert stands there insulting me, you, and Elara, and you do nothing? What's gotten into *you*, Allan? All your smooth talking was useless back there."

"I know better than to go head-to-head with Salizar, especially in his own palace. I'm no match for him, Dalton, and neither are you. You cannot insult—"

"What am I to do? Sit there like a schoolboy and be degraded and humiliated? Or better yet, let him say those disgusting things about Elara and do nothing?" He shook his head. "I will not stand for that, not from anyone, especially that impotent slug. The next time he opens his fat mouth, I'm

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going to—”

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned around. Oonish rose onto her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Oonish! What are you doing? This is no time to cuddle. Get your hands—”

“Shh, you mustn’t say such things,” she whispered in his ear. “The other girls are listening closely to your words.”

He glanced at Dashuri and Aliesk. Oonish was right. They had heard every word he’d said about Salizar. But why was Oonish warning him? He gazed into her green eyes and nodded slightly. “Release me. I wish to go back to my meal.”

Oonish obeyed and stepped back.

“What did she say?” Allan asked.

“She offered to take away my anger and replace it with a nicer feeling,” he lied, then ran his hands through his hair. “I’m sorry, Allan, I know my outburst was wrong. It was incredibly stupid of me to speak to Salizar the way I did, but ever since the wedding all I’ve heard is that I married Elara for her riches—as if I were a pauper on the street prior to the ceremony. Nobody believes I truly love her.”

“Arranged marriages are common, Dalton. It’s natural for people to speculate.”

“But it’s none of their damn business. We’re—”

A bell rang, interrupting him. “What’s that?”

“The dinner bell for the girls,” Allan answered, then turned to Oonish. “Go with Dashuri and Aliesk. Do not concern yourself with Dalton’s anger, little Oonish.”

Allan clutched Dalton’s sleeve and steered him back into

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the Great Hall. "Come on. Have a few drinks. It'll help settle you down."

* * *

Elara followed Dashuri and Aliesk down the carpeted corridor, still raging at Salizar's words. How dare he say such things about her! Dalton had every right to defend her honor and she was proud of him. Under different circumstances, Dalton would have punched Salizer's teeth out. It was all she could do to keep quiet herself!

She entered a large dining room and stopped, her anger quickly replaced by fear. More than fifty *kharim* girls stood lined up at a banquet table. She bit her lower lip. What should she do? Get in line? Was there protocol or ritual involved in this?

Elara watched Aliesk take a small tray from a side table and stand behind another girl. She walked to the table and followed suit. No matter what, she had to blend in. If she did something wrong, it would be noticed immediately. She couldn't risk arousing anyone's suspicions.

Even though she'd never waited for a meal in her life, she stood in line and waited her turn to be served. Her mouth watered and her stomach growled at the smell of food. She hadn't eaten a thing all day. Lately, her appetite had been peculiar. Some mornings the thought of eating anything made her ill, and yet at other times, she couldn't devour enough food.

Elara observed the girls closely as they were served and

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took their seats. Thankfully, they removed their veils to eat, but they did not speak. The room was utterly silent. Weren't they allowed to talk to each other when the men weren't present?

She moved up in line. The uniformed man behind the table placed a bowl of broth, a slice of plain bread, and a piece of fish on her tray. She stared at it. Was that all? She frowned. Now she knew why all the girls here were so thin; they weren't fed much beyond what kept them from starving.

She took a seat at an empty table far away from Dashuri and Aliesk. Dashuri was the last person she wanted to be near. If she caught that pierced whore making eyes at Dalton again, she might snap and give her a beating. She removed her veil and gazed around to see if anyone noticed. What if someone realized she wasn't a real *kharim* girl?

She ate her food quickly. The soup was lukewarm and the fish tasted like wood, but she was grateful for it. If she were home now, she'd be enjoying a hearty meal and wearing a proper dress, not starving and half-nude. What was she doing here? This was the most outrageous thing she'd ever done, and for what? To try to seduce her own husband? Allan was right. Her plan was a waste of time.

After all, Dalton was behaving himself. Even though he'd watched those two women dance together, he hadn't touched them. But what if Dashuri had stayed in his room as was planned? She'd seen the lustful look in Dalton's eyes when Dashuri stripped and danced for him. Would Dalton have given in to temptation?

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A girl yelled, breaking the silence in the room. Elara glanced over her shoulder. Two uniformed guards were dragging a girl away from her table. What was happening? She watched as the girl was pulled to the front of the room and stripped naked.

"Let her punishment be a lesson to you all," one of the guards shouted. "Disobedience is not permitted. This one has spoken out of turn. Beware, lest this be you next time!"

He removed a whip from his belt and cracked it in the air. "Utter a sound and you will be thrown to the dogs. You have displeased a guest of His Supreme Worship," the guard bellowed. The whip snapped down on the girl's back and buttocks. She flinched, but did not make a sound.

Elara turned away as the guard whipped the girl. She folded her trembling hands in her lap and tried to block out the sounds of the whip cracking against flesh. Is this how they punished all the girls who misbehaved? Now she knew why Allan had warned her against this foolish stunt. It was more dangerous here than she had realized. What would happen to her if she got caught?

* * *

Elara followed Dashuri and Aliesk into the Great Hall. The guests had finished their meals, and the music and entertainment had resumed. She walked to Dalton's table and knelt on her cushion. Three empty glasses were lined up on the table in front of Dalton. She wasn't surprised. Allan must have given him the drinks to settle his mood.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

"Oonish, would you be so kind as to fetch us a tray of sweets?" Allan asked, grinning. "They're on a table over there," he said, gesturing across the room.

She rolled her eyes and stood. "My pleasure, Your Highness." Allan was deliberately ordering her about like a slave. And, for now, she was. It would be foolish to disobey him here, but when they got home he'd pay for this!

She stood in front of the dessert table and stared at the scrumptious treats. Her stomach rumbled at the smell of chocolate. What she wouldn't give for one of these desserts! She filled up a tray with pastries and cream-filled cakes and weaved through the crowd.

As she approached Allan's table, she nearly dropped the tray. Dashuri was topless and writhing on Dalton's lap! Her bare hips rocked up and down on his crotch in time to the music. Elara looked down and saw that Dashuri's red scarves lay on the floor next to her top.

"Oonish, you're back. Be a good little girl and give me one of those treats," Allan said.

She glared at him and was tempted to plop a frosted cake on his head. Instead, she carried the tray to him and bent close. "What is she doing?" she whispered.

"Having some fun. And from the look of it, he is, too." He laughed.

"Make her get off him!"

"Hush! Don't fret so, little Oonish." Allan bit into a cream cake. "She's only offering him a sample of her treats. If he wishes to indulge—"

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"Allan!" she growled through clenched teeth.

He smirked. "If you want her off him, do something about it. Dalton's a grown man and I don't see him protesting."

"Fine!" She straightened up and carried the tray to Dalton. His face was an inch away from Dashuri's tiny breasts, and he had a bemused smile on his face.

Dashuri rocked her hips faster and glared at her over her shoulder.

"Your Highness, beg pardon, would you like a taste of something sweet?"

Dalton shook his head. "Just set the tray down."

She frowned and put the tray on the table. A second later, Dashuri picked up a long, cream-filled cake and began feeding it to Dalton. Elara clenched her fists. If she caused a scene, she might be dragged away and whipped—or worse. She closed her eyes and used every bit of self-restraint not to scream and scratch Dashuri's eyes out. How could she get that filthy slut off of her husband?

Allan cleared his throat. "Now, little Oonish, don't feel left out. Come sit with me."

She sat next to him and leaned close. "How do you expect me to stay here and watch this? It's cruel," she whispered.

"Don't fret, I'll step in if things become too physical—unless Dalton would like to have an end-to-end."

"What is that?" She'd never heard of such a thing.

"I shouldn't tell you. It's perverse."

She leaned closer to Allan and slid her hand down his chest. His eyes widened as she grabbed hold of his shirt—and

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several-dozen chest hairs.

"You got Dalton drunk and your whore is riding him right in front of me. Now is not a good time to try my patience. If you do not tell me what I wish to know, I'll tear every one of those gold rings out of her in front of everyone."

"Calm down! I'll tell you, but I warn you...it's vulgar. In some places doing such a thing is illegal. In fact, most of the things that take place here are illegal, that's why the men are so eager to let loose and do depraved acts." He licked his lips. "In an end-to-end, the woman goes to her hands and knees. A man stands behind her and... you know."

"Enters her?"

"Aye."

"In the proper place, or does he bugger her?"

"Oonish!" Allan rolled his eyes. "The proper place."

"And then?"

"Another man goes to her front and puts his...you know..."

"Big throbbing prick?"

"Must you be so crude? You shouldn't speak that way!" he muttered.

She smirked. Allan balked at her crudeness? She giggled. "It's fine for me to dress like one of these girls and live like one of them, but I'm forbidden to speak of the very acts they perform?"

"You're not wanton like them, Oonish. You couldn't be if you tried."

She folded her arms across her chest. "Ha! Little do you

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know! So at this end-to-end the man's rod goes where?"

"In her mouth and she sucks him," Allan answered as he finished his drink. "I told you it was crude. You shouldn't know of such things."

"How do you know that I don't? I am a married woman," she whispered. "Dalton and I do all sorts of things. We know every inch of each other intimately."

Allan shook his head. "I do not wish to hear this from you."

"But you shall. Mayhap I will tell you everything." She rose from her cushion and plopped herself into Allan's lap.

"Oonish!"

She draped her arms around his neck. "Hush! Now, dear brother, either you pull that slut in heat off Dalton or I shall tell you stories that will make you blush like a maiden's who's just seen her first naked man."

"Oonish!"

"Do it! Else you shall hear about how I learned to—"

"Enough! Get off."

She hopped off Allan's lap and stood next to the table.

"Is something wrong with the girl?" a deep voice asked from the other side of the table.

Elara turned and gasped. She was staring right into Salizar's fat, greasy face. He stood so close; he could kiss her if he wanted to. Her skin prickled. Something about him terrified her.

"Nay, Your Supreme Worship, not at all," Allan said, pulling her close to him. "Oonish is a delightful girl. Very

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obedient and quiet. Her words of enticement make a man lose control.”

“And I see that Dalton is enjoying himself.”

Elara looked at Dalton. Dashuri was draped over him, grinding away on his lap. Dalton’s eyes were closed and he had a broad smile on his face.

Salizar leaned over the table and slapped Dashuri hard on her buttocks. She jumped, and Dalton opened his eyes.

“I caught you, Dalton!” Salizar laughed. “I knew you would give in to this lovely creature. She is hot and willing. Enjoy her. You deserve to be sated by a real woman for a change.”

Elara took a step forward and Allan yanked her back.

“You’ll like her. She’s one of my favorites. Tell me how good she was in the morning,” Salizar said as he walked off.

“Get off me, you whore!” Dalton squirmed beneath Dashuri, but she clung to him. He clasped her shoulders and shoved her away. She landed on the floor in a heap.

Dalton stood and glared at Allan. “This is all your fault! What were you thinking, getting me drunk and telling her to play with me! I hope you’re happy! I just humiliated myself!”

“Dalton, I—”

“Salizar is never going to let me live this down! After the meeting with him tomorrow, I’m going home. I’ve had enough!” He pushed past Allan and stormed across the Great Hall.

She glanced at Allan, unsure of what to do.

“Don’t just stand there looking stupid, Oonish. Go after

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him," Allan ordered. "Calm him and fix this. You cannot let him leave."

She nodded and raced after Dalton, her bells jingling as she ran.

* * *

"I never should have come here. I miss you, my love," Dalton muttered as he fingered the hem of Elara's satin dress. "I wish you were here with me."

A knock on the chamber door interrupted him. He pursed his lips and let the green dress fall back into the wardrobe. Who dared bother him now? He stomped to the door and pulled it open. Oonish stood in the corridor. "What do you want?"

"Prince Allan sent me to—"

"To what? Tell me to come downstairs? Well, I won't. I've been humiliated enough for one night."

"Nay, Your Highness, he said that I should see how you are. You left in—"

"How I am? I'll tell you how I am! I'm disgraced and—"

He realized the door was still open. "Get in here! I'll not announce my shame to the rest of the world!" He pulled Oonish into the room.

"Disgraced?" she asked, turning toward him. "Why?"

"Why? Are you such a feeble-minded creature that you did not see with your own eyes what happened?" he snapped as he paced around the parlor. "Dashuri was...I let her...dear Lord!"

He turned away. How could he have betrayed Elara so

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easily? Why had he fallen into the clutches of that she-devil? Damn Allan! It was all his fault for giving him those drinks.

"I'm afraid I am at fault for what happened," she said quietly.

"You? You had nothing to do with Dashuri climbing into my lap."

"If I were more desirable, you would not have wished for her to sit with you." She stepped toward him, bells tinkling. "Pray, give me a chance to prove I can be enticing."

He sat down on the sofa. "Nay, I cannot stand any more enticing this evening. I'm ashamed of myself, especially after I told Salizar how devoted I am to Elara. He'll never let me forget this."

Oonish stood next to the sofa. "It is natural for a man to like girls. You were not distressed when you watched the girls dancing with each other. I saw how you liked it."

He shook his head. "That was different. They weren't touching me. Dashuri was grinding against my—"

"I know. And I wished for you to make her stop."

"I couldn't. I think they put a potion in the drinks. After only three, I lost all reason and was eager for...relations," he said, clearing his throat. "But I won't make the same mistake again. I'm leaving. Allan can deal with Salizar's negotiations. I've embarrassed myself enough."

Oonish walked behind the sofa and began massaging his neck and shoulders. "Perhaps that is what the emperor seeks. He delights in playing games."

He thought about her words as she worked the tension out

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of his shoulders. "True. Once he finds a weakness in a man, he exploits it. You heard what he said about my marriage to Elara."

"I did," she replied, squeezing his shoulders hard. "It was decent of you to deny it."

"Of course I denied it. It isn't true. I love Elara more than anything." He closed his eyes. It felt good to talk to someone about these matters. Even though Oonish was far less intelligent than Elara, he felt relieved to share his thoughts with someone. Allan wasn't listening to any sort of reason.

"Do you feel better, Your Highness?"

"Yes, very much." He yawned. "Be a good girl and bring me a glass of water. My head still throbs from those drinks I had."

"As you wish."

As Oonish stepped around the sofa, he gave her a light smack on her backside. He immediately regretted his action. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to—" He chuckled. "I sometimes do that to Elara."

"For misbehaving?"

"Nay, 'tis not a punishment, but a sign of affection. She likes a little swat now and then. I think it excites her. Tell me, do girls enjoy that?"

Oonish cocked her head to one side. "Some do, if it is followed by tender lovemaking." She walked to the bar and poured him a glass of water. "What would your princess think of this place?"

"I'm sure she'd consider the conditions you're kept in

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appalling, but she'd find the idea of anything goes titillating."

She crossed the room and handed him the water glass. "I do not know this word, tit—"

"It means exciting. Arousing the senses."

"Arousing? Your princess would be aroused by what happens here?"

"More than likely." He drank the water and put the glass on the side table. "People think Elara is prudish because she is strong-willed, but trust me, she is far from reserved."

"But the emperor—"

"The emperor is an ass," he said as he walked into the bedchamber. "Everything he said about her is a lie. She's sweet and gentle most of the time, but she can be difficult when she sets her mind to it." He took off his jacket and tossed it onto a chair. "Allan can be troublesome in the same way. He's a decent fellow, but that trick he played on me with Dashuri is typical of him. He thinks this is funny, I don't."

Dalton sat on the bed and removed his shirt and boots. "Tell me something, Oonish, why do you speak so? The other girls are always silent. You even warned me to mind my tongue when I was shouting about Salizar."

She bowed her head. "I could be punished for speaking openly, Your Highness, but I feel safe when I am with you. I could not allow you to say more in front of the other girls. They may be silent, but they have ears."

"I see." He nodded as he pulled back the bedclothes. What Oonish said made sense. All the *kharim* girls were constantly hovering around the men. They could overhear all sorts of

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conversations. Did they share what they learned with Salizar? He scowled as Oonish slipped into the bed. "What do you think you're doing?"

"It is time for bed, yes?"

"Aye. And your bed is out there." He gestured toward the parlor. "You have cushions to sleep on."

"But I thought you—"

"Go, Oonish. Do not try my patience. I've had a long day, and I must be in a clear state of mind for my meeting."

"I will rub your back or—"

"No." He shook his head. "Out. Now. The only person I allow in my bed is my wife."

"If it would please you—"

"For heaven's sake! I'm not arguing with you!" He scooped Oonish into his arms and carried her into the sitting room. "You stay here." She squealed as he dumped her onto the gold cushions.

"But Your Highness—"

"Pleasant dreams, Oonish," he called out over his shoulder as he walked back into the bedchamber.

* * *

Elara reclined on the wedge-shaped bench and munched on a piece of toast. She closed her eyes and savored the zingy orange marmalade. Finally! For the first time since she'd arrived, her belly was full—and that was only because she'd brazenly broken the rules. After Dalton had left for his meeting, she'd taken the liberty to devour his unwanted

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morning meal. It wasn't as hot as she would have liked, but it tasted delicious.

Earlier this morning, she'd taken a few moments to pamper herself properly. After a good soak in the tub, she applied scented oils to her skin, cleaned her teeth, and put on a clean satin covering. She'd discovered a drawer in the small wardrobe filled with them, but unfortunately they were all the same horrid pink.

She squirmed and readjusted herself on the angled bench. How could a person sit on this? One end pointed high in the air, while the other end sloped to a lower angle. There was nowhere flat to sit. It seemed she'd be bent in half no matter how she positioned herself.

A knock on the door startled her, and she quickly reattached her veil. The knocking grew more insistent, and she hurried to the door and opened it.

"Allan! What are you—"

"Did Dalton leave yet?" he asked, rushing into the room.

She closed and locked the door behind him. He looked a fright. His brown hair stuck up every which way, his wrinkled shirt was buttoned wrong, and his breath reeked of stale liquor. Thankfully, he was alone. They could talk freely.

"Aye, two hours ago. Not that it matters to you."

"But it does! I forgot to give him some papers yesterday. He needs them for the negotiations," he said, holding up a sheaf of parchment.

"This is a good time to bring them!"

"I just woke up and—"

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"And what?" she snapped, resting her hands on her hips. "You managed to gather your senses for five minutes when that whore wasn't riding you?"

"Elara! Lower your voice!"

Her blood boiled, and she glared at him. "Don't tell me what to do! You're lucky I don't knock your head off for what you did last night!"

"Me? I thought you wanted to test him! Isn't that what you came here for? To find out—"

"I wanted to find out *my* way, not get him drunk and let that pierced slut rub all over him." She shoved Allan in the chest with both hands and marched across the room. "You got him drunk and put her in his lap!"

"I told you I'd stop them if they got—"

"Sure, I'm to believe you!" she said, reclining on the angled bench.

"Get off that!" Allan pulled her to her feet.

"Why? What's wrong with sitting on it?"

"It's not for sitting. It's for..." He rolled his eyes. "You know...relations."

She scowled. "That? How? You cannot lie flat on it."

"It's not for doing it *that* way." He pointed to the high end. "A girl is bent over there so her area is easily reached while the man stands behind her and...you know."

"Oh, I see. And the lower side?"

"The girl lies on her back and the angle of the wedge elevates her...parts. It allows the man to stand and push... Really, Elara, you shouldn't hear this," Allan said, turning

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away quickly.

She giggled. "What's wrong, dear brother? Embarrassed?"

He turned back to her. "I came here to give Dalton these papers, not to discuss...positions."

"Why not? You've got Salizar's whore in your bed. I'm sure she knows a thousand positions! I bet she can even lick herself!"

"You are crude and disgusting!" He shook his head. "I cannot believe how jealous you are. She didn't do anything to Dalton."

"She would have! And if I were you, I'd be careful around that walking hole, Allan. She's too quiet. I don't trust her."

Allan threw his hands up in the air. "Trust her? She's a *kharim* girl for heaven's sake! They don't do anything except what's ordered of them and—"

"Yes, but they have eyes and ears. They witness everything that happens." She cocked her head to one side. "And how do you know what they've been ordered to do before you got here?"

"You're suspicious of everything." Allan tossed the papers on the table and headed for the door. "When your esteemed prince returns, tell him I wish to speak with him. I'll apologize for last night. I was drunk and—"

"What else is new? You think everything's a game when you've been drinking. It's no wonder father sent Dalton to chaperone you."

He turned to her. "You stand there and judge me? Don't forget, little sister, that you've been in a heap of trouble

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yourself...many times. And if you're not careful around here, you'll find yourself in more trouble than you ever imagined."

"Oh, get out! I'm weary of your dreadful shouting," she said, folding her arms across her chest. "Go fill your whores. I'm sure delightful Dashuri misses you. It's been five whole minutes since you've toyed with her golden rings."

"Fine!" He yanked the door open. "You think you're so smug and have everything manipulated to your advantage, but I warn you; one slip up and you'll regret it. Don't come crying to me when your plan backfires," he said, marching from the room and slamming the door behind him.

* * *

"And what would the tariff terms be for cargo coming into port early?" Salizar asked as he drew the girl's breast into his mouth.

Dalton sighed. For the last three hours, he'd sat in Salizar's private sitting room presenting King Maxwell's proposition for the trade routes, cargoes, and tariffs. Salizar was too busy fondling the nude girl in his lap to pay attention, and on the rare instance His Supreme Arrogance spoke, he asked him to repeat everything.

"I believe I already answered that, twice," he replied.

"How many ships came into port early last year? And what was the percentage of tariff paid on those?"

Dalton shuffled the stack of parchments on the table before him. He had no report detailing early ship arrivals or tariffs paid last year. He closed his eyes. Salizar would not overlook

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such a glaring error.

"You don't know, do you?"

"Nay, I'm afraid I do not. If you recall, Prince Allan was supposed to present the materials to you himself. I'm—"

"Not qualified to do the job, eh? I see that."

He bristled at Salizar's words. "Prince Allan is in charge of shipping. My duties are—"

"What exactly? Tell me, *prince*, what does Maxwell charge you with? Anything important, or are you merely used to keep the princess in line?"

Dalton arched an eyebrow. "With all due respect—"

"Don't be ashamed," Salizar said, slipping his hand into the nude girl's crotch. "Many men have been hired, or shall I say, *bought* for much less than what Elara had in her dowry. It's nothing to be ashamed of. We—"

"It's *Princess* Elara, and I have nothing to be ashamed of."

Salizar laughed. "Of course not. You're a dutiful son-in-law. Maxwell rewards you well for taming his daughter. After all, nobody wanted to court her properly, and no man would willingly bed her if not for her riches. Had she married into this family, she would have been tamed quickly and taught to behave like a proper woman."

Dalton's heart skipped a beat. "This family? What do you mean by that?"

Salizar grinned. "Your dear father-in-law never told you? I made an offer for Elara on behalf of my second son. I thought he would enjoy the challenge of breaking her. I made Maxwell a good deal, full access to all my trade routes in exchange for

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her.” Salizar frowned, and his fat chins wriggled. “Sadly, he declined.”

Dalton shook his head. Now he knew why Salizar kept acting so obnoxious toward him; he was jealous of his marriage to Elara. “I’m pleased to hear King Maxwell had the good sense to tell you to go to hell,” he said. “Elara would not have been happy here. She’s not the helpless, stupid type your men like.”

“She would have been, in time. We have ways of breaking them. Perhaps you should try a few on her.” Salizar leaned forward in his chair. “Now, dear prince, what shall we do about your failed attempt at negotiations?”

He gathered his papers together. “I’m sure King Maxwell wouldn’t want me to waste my time here with no results. Prince Allan and I will be out of the palace within the hour.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Salizar growled. “I’m not finished with you yet.”

“And if I insist on leaving?”

Salizar shot him a steely look. “Then I would insist on reminding you about all of Maxwell’s ships that are sailing in my waters. Think about all the precious cargo they’re importing—and the crewmembers on board. You wouldn’t want anything to happen to them, would you?”

The evil tone in Salizar’s voice told him he wasn’t bluffing.

“Now, Dalton, how does it feel to be helpless and trapped? I imagine you’re used to it. Does Elara make you feel helpless in the bedchamber?”

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He clenched his jaw and didn't answer.

"Even after suffering a passionless marriage, you refuse the girls I've provided. Why is that?"

"I have no desire to touch your whores."

"Mayhap you *cannot* touch my girls. Is that it? Has bedding Elara stripped you of your manhood? Are you incapable of filling a woman with your limp prick?"

He bolted to his feet. "That's enough! Shut your fat mouth, Salizar, before I forget my manners!" He scooped up his papers. "If you wish to resume talks in an intelligent manner, consult Prince Allan." Dalton marched across the room and pulled the double doors open. "I have nothing more to say to you."

"Get back here! I haven't dismissed you!"

"Drop dead!" he shouted on his way out.

* * *

Dalton stormed into his suite and slammed the door behind him. Salizar's crude words still rang in his ears. Was what he said true? Did people see him as a weakling who had married Elara for her wealth? Had that disgusting pig truly tried to buy Elara for his son?

He stomped to the bar and poured himself a drink. Botching the negotiations hadn't helped his mood any; it only reinforced how weak and foolish he felt.

He heard bells jingle behind him and he turned. Oonish stood in the bedchamber doorway.

"Greetings, Your Highness, how—"

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"I do not wish to discuss it." He downed his drink in two gulps and poured himself another.

Oonish stepped closer to him. "Your Highness, Prince Allan came while you were gone. He left these documents for you." She took a sheaf of parchment off a table and handed it to him. "He said they were most important."

He stared at the documents and frowned. These were the missing reports he'd needed at the meeting. If Allan had given them to him last night, he could have presented the facts to Salizar and been spared his humiliation.

"Damn him!" He threw the papers across the room. "These are useless to me now! If Allan wants to present these to Salizar, let him meet with him himself. I'm through."

He walked to the sofa and flopped down. Oonish followed him, bells tinkling. Damn those bells! He swore he heard them in his sleep this morning.

Oonish knelt at his feet. "I am sorry you did not have a good meeting. Mayhap—"

"Mayhap nothing. Let Allan deal with it. This is his responsibility, not mine. I'm merely a chaperone to a grown man who cannot keep his breeches on and drinks until he falls down," he grumbled, then gulped his drink.

"Would it help if I rubbed your shoulders?"

He sighed. "Fine, go ahead if you must. What difference does it make? I'm stuck here with you."

Oonish stood. "Would you prefer another girl tend to you instead?"

"Nay, I didn't mean it like that." His words had come out

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harsher than he'd intended. He had no right to snap at Oonish, she'd done nothing wrong. "I don't want another girl," he said. "You're fine. It's just that... I want very much to leave and I cannot."

She moved behind him and began rubbing his shoulders. "Because of the negotiations?"

"No, because of that madman. Salizar refuses to let me leave. He implied that if I left it would have consequences on King Maxwell's ships."

"I see." Oonish was silent for a moment. "Do not think of the emperor or of your business duties. You are here with Oonish now, I will make you relax and feel good," she whispered in his ear.

He closed his eyes as Oonish worked the tension out of his neck and shoulders. "If I have another drink I won't need to relax, I'll pass out," he muttered. The powerful liquor was having an effect on him already. His body felt heavy and numb. Oonish was right, if he relaxed and didn't think about anything, he would feel better.

"If it would please you, I shall put on a show, to make you happy."

He sighed. Oonish wanted to put on a show? Fine. What harm could it cause? "If you can do something to lift my terrible mood, I'll give you a team of horses."

"I would not require such a gift. Merely knowing that I please you is reward enough. May I?"

"Go ahead." He opened his eyes and watched her walk around the sofa. She stood before him.

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"First, I shall show you something you have not seen before."

"What is that?"

"This." She unhooked the front of her top, exposing her right breast.

"Oonish!"

She parted the top wider, so he could see both breasts. Her rosy nipples were hard. "You like?" She giggled. "You've never seen those before."

"Yes, I like." He sat forward on the sofa and stared at her chest. "You're very well endowed."

She inched closer. "Would you like to touch me?"

He leaned back and shook his head. "Touching is not allowed."

"Would you like to look closer?"

He grinned. "I can look at whatever you wish to show me, but I cannot touch."

"May I touch myself? I saw how you liked those girls last night when they touched each other."

He swallowed hard. Oonish wanted to touch herself in front of him? "By all means, go ahead," he replied, his voice coming out low and husky.

Oonish cupped and squeezed her breasts, then toyed with her nipples for a moment. "That feels good! It makes other parts of me tingle," she whispered.

He sipped his drink. Who knew Oonish could be so sensual? And here he thought she was nothing but a dimwitted girl.

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“Do you like my bells?” She swished her hips from side to side and her bells tinkled. “If they bother you, I could remove them.”

He smiled. “Yes, why don’t you take them off? I do like them better on the floor.”

“As you wish.” Oonish slid her hands over her chest, across her stomach, and down to her waist. A moment later, the bells landed on the carpet, along with her scarves. She stood before him wearing nothing but a scrap of pink satin.

He squirmed as a rush of blood surged to his groin. God, she looked good.

“You like?”

“Aye. And I take back what I said before, you do arouse me.” He winked. Her not-so-innocent show, combined with the drinks, was getting to him.

“Good, I hope you like this.” She turned and bent forward at the waist.

He groaned as his cock stiffened. From this position, Oonish’s satin scrap concealed nothing. She caressed her buttocks, then slipped a finger inside her covering. She moaned as she toyed with herself for a moment, then gazed at him over her shoulder. “May I sit with you, Your Highness?”

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

Oonish climbed onto the sofa and knelt on either side of his hips. She bent close, pressing her breasts against his chest. He licked his lips and took a deep breath. She smelled like roses. He closed his eyes as she lowered herself onto his lap and began rocking against his stiff penis.

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"I feel your mood has improved greatly, Your Highness," she whispered. "Do you like what Oonish does?"

He opened his eyes and grinned. "Aye, but you're a very naughty girl."

She giggled and arched her back, showing her breasts in his face. His head buzzed from the drinks, and he was tempted, so tempted, to take one tiny lick, just to know what she tasted like. The feel of her rubbing against his cock sent tingles up his spine. As she rocked against him, his hips jolted up out of reflex. How long would he be able to stand the delightful torture before he exploded?

Oonish wriggled on his lap. "I can feel you touching me through your breeches," she said, gazing into his eyes. The smoldering look of lust she gave him said it all—one touch, one taste, and he could have her for as long as he wanted.

He bent his head back against the sofa as Oonish worked her hips against him faster. All of a sudden he realized she had built up a steady rhythm. She was using him to pleasure herself!

A man could only take so much torture. The liquor, Oonish's teasing, his stabbing erection...he couldn't hold out forever. The room spun as she rode him, grinding herself onto him faster and faster. He closed his eyes and let the sensations take over. He still had his breeches on and yet...

"Fill me, Dalton, I beg you."

He clasped her waist and thrust his hips up to meet hers. "Like that?"

Oonish groaned and drove herself down harder onto his

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lap. "Yes, it feels good! Don't stop!"

A second later, he regained his senses and opened his eyes. "Get off me!" He stood up quickly, dumping Oonish onto the carpet.

She stared at him, wide-eyed. "What did I do wrong?"

He hauled her to her feet. "Ride me, will you? You whore!"

"But you liked it! You almost—"

"Shut your mouth!" He smacked her hard on the buttocks. "How dare you think I'd soil myself and betray my wife! I'm through with you!" Oonish squealed as he dragged her to the door and yanked it open. "Get out!"

"Nay! I'm sorry, I'll—"

He shoved her into the corridor. "Go back to Salizar and tell him his scheme did not work!"

Oonish rushed toward him and clung to his arm. "Forgive me! I—"

"He couldn't tempt me with the other whore, so now he's using you to make me break my vows? I think not!" He pried her hands off his biceps and pushed her to the floor.

"Dalton! Don't do this!"

He slammed the door in her face.

* * *

Elara sat on the carpet, weeping and shaking. What the hell had just happened? One minute Dalton was happy and enjoying himself, then the next minute he'd turned into a ferocious beast! His blue eyes had blazed with a fury she'd

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never seen before—and hoped never to see again.

She looked down and realized her top was still open. Her breasts were exposed to the world! She covered herself quickly and stood. Dalton had struck her and called her horrible names! How could he do such a thing?

She crossed the hall to Allan's room and knocked on the door. There was no answer, so she pounded harder. When Dashuri opened the door, Elara pushed past her and rushed into the parlor. Allan sat reclining on the sofa with a drink in his hand. He sprang to his feet at the sight of her.

"Oonish, what—"

"He struck me!"

"Who struck you? Calm down!"

"Dalton! He's gone mad!"

"Shh, come with me." Allan hustled her into the bedchamber and closed the door. She sat on the bed, crying into her hands.

"Dalton hit you? I don't believe it! Why would he—"

"I was only trying to make him feel better!" she wailed.

Allan put his arm around her. "Shh, take a few deep breaths and tell me what happened, piece by piece."

She sniffled and leaned against Allan's shoulder. "He came back from the meeting terribly distressed. I sat in his lap and started teasing him and..." she paused for a second. "...and he wanted me!" She burst into tears. "The next thing I knew, he threw me on the floor and told me to get out!"

Allan shook his head. "I knew something like this would happen. You can only push a man so far, Elara. What did you

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expect? You're parading around nearly nude and toying with his emotions." He frowned, then continued.

"I told you your little game would have consequences, but did you listen? Of course not! Yesterday you were upset because he *didn't* find you attractive, and today you're upset because Dalton *does* find you attractive. So which should it be? Do you want him to want you, or not?"

She pouted and looked at Allan. "I don't. But what am I going to do? He threw me out! He said I should go back to Salizar! I can't go there! Do you know what would—"

"That's not going to happen." Allan stood up and patted her shoulder. "I'll speak with Dalton and calm him down." He sighed. "But remember, little sister, if I fix this, you cannot start teasing him again. You must leave him alone, understand?"

Elara wiped her eyes and nodded. "Yes. I'll be good, I promise. Please Allan, make this right. I cannot bear the thought of him hating me."

"Sure, you promise—just like you promised to go home," he grumbled as he crossed the room. "Stay here until I return." He tossed his dressing gown on the bed. "And for heaven's sake, cover yourself."

"What if Dalton won't take me back? What'll I do?"

"Then I'll be stuck with you myself. Lucky me," he said, rolling his eyes.

* * *

Dalton stood at the bar and downed another drink. His

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blood still boiled. To think, that little trollop had nearly made him break his vows! He paced around the room and kicked over a footstool. What the hell was he doing here? This entire trip had been nothing but a waste of time! How could he have said those things to Oonish? For the briefest second, all thoughts of Elara had disappeared from his mind. All he could think about was shoving himself deep inside Oonish.

He heard a knock at the door, and turned. Now what? He marched to the door and flung it open. Allan stood in the corridor.

“Good afternoon. May I—”

“Get in here!” He grabbed Allan by the front of his shirt and pulled him into the parlor. “You’re just the man I want to beat to a pulp,” he growled.

“Dalton! What—”

“Sit down!” He shoved Allan onto the sofa. “This is all your fault! Every bit of it!”

“Dalton, calm down. What happened at the meeting?”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” He hurled his glass against the wall and it shattered to bits. “Don’t tell me anything, you sniveling little twit!”

He paced back and forth, pleased to see the look of fear in Allan’s eyes. “I went to your meeting and sat there for hours being grilled about taxes and tariffs and cargoes—everything that is supposed to be your responsibility. And what do I find? I’m missing several important documents! Where are they? Who knows? Where’s Allan? Drunk in bed with the emperor’s private whore!”

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"Dalton, I'm—"

"Shut up!" He whirled around to face Allan. "Do you have any idea how stupid I felt? I was made out to be a fool, again. Then Salizar asks me what duties I *can* perform, besides watching over my wife."

"What?"

"Yes." He nodded several times. "When Salizar finished humiliating me about the negotiations, he started in on Elara. He implied the only reason I'm given any official duties is because I married her."

"That's not true!"

"It's what everyone thinks. Everyone laughs about how being married to Elara has emasculated me. To them, I'm merely a joke!"

"That's it!" Allan stood up. "We're leaving. I'll send for the—"

"We cannot leave. We're trapped here."

"How so? Salizar cannot hold us here against our will."

Dalton shook his head. "No, but he reminded me about all the ships your father has in his waters. He insinuated that they could meet with some accidents if we tried to leave."

Allan ran his hands through his hair and sighed. "I'm sorry, Dalton, I truly am. When I woke up this morning and found those papers I brought them straight to Oonish, but she—"

"Oonish!" he spat. "Don't mention that whore's name to me again. I no sooner get back here then she's crawling all over me. She took off her clothes and climbed into my lap."

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"She was only trying to make you feel good."

"Ha! She was trying to seduce me, trick me into breaking my vows." He paced around the room, his chest heaving. Shouting at Allan wasn't solving his problems, but it did make him feel better. "That's what Salizar's plan is, to trick me into being unfaithful to Elara."

Allan scowled. "That's ridiculous! Why would he care?"

"He has his reasons," he said, flopping down in a chair near the sofa. "I cannot take this any more. Last night it was Dashuri in my lap, today it was Oonish. I love Elara, and God forgive me..." He closed his eyes. "I wanted Oonish," he confessed. "I didn't care about anything else. I came within a second of being unfaithful."

"No, you didn't."

He opened his eyes and looked at Allan. "Of course I didn't. My common sense prevailed. I threw her off me and yelled at her. Then she said something back to me—I don't even remember what it was—and I hit her."

Allan gasped. "You struck her?"

"I smacked her hard on the ass, then tossed her out." He let out a long breath. "I cannot have her here. Oonish does something to me."

"I'll bet," Allan said, chuckling.

He glared at Allan. "Wipe that smirk off your face or I swear you'll be picking your teeth off the carpet!" he snarled. "She's going back to Salizar. I don't care if he passes her around to every man here."

"Don't say that! You cannot send her away."

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

"Don't tell me what I can't do." He stood up and walked to the bar. He felt like smashing every glass and bottle in sight. But what would that change? Nothing. He was still trapped here.

He poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher. "That whore is never to step foot near me again."

"Dalton! That whore is your wife!"

He froze, the glass halfway to his mouth. "What did you say?"

"Elara isn't back at the palace," Allan muttered. "She's here. Oonish is Elara."

Dalton dropped the glass and raced across the room. He balled his right hand into a fist and yanked Allan to his feet. "You have exactly two seconds to explain yourself!"

"Don't hit me!" Allan shielded his face with his hands. "Elara rode back to the caravan after you sent her away. I tried to convince her to go home, but you know how she is," he blurted out. "She was determined to come here. I snuck her into the palace."

He shoved Allan away. This didn't make any sense. How could Oonish be Elara? It was impossible—but it did explain why Oonish aroused him so deeply.

"Do you mean to tell me that you brought my wife into this pit of perversion, knowing the penalties—"

"She insisted. I warned her, but you know she never listens."

"And you let her do this?" He grabbed Allan again. "You ignorant bastard! Salizar tried to buy Elara from your father!"

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

He's obsessed with her and you brought her here!" He pushed Allan, and he fell back onto the sofa. "If anything happens to her..."

"It won't, I swear! I've been looking out for her."

"How? By letting her walk around half-nude in front of eager men? How can you watch over her when you've got your head buried between a whore's legs?" He shook his head as he paced around the room. "Why? Why did she do this?"

"She wanted to make sure you'd be faithful. She thought that if she was here, she could watch you and—"

"She wanted to test me."

"And she did, from what I heard."

He clenched his fists. "I swear, the moment we're home safely, you and I are going to exchange blows." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Where is she?"

"In my room. She ran to me crying when you threw her out. She's terribly upset, Dalton. I haven't seen her this hysterical since we had to put one of her horses down."

He leaned against the bar. "Now I know why Oonish is so jealous of Dashuri," he said, chucking. "I'm amazed Elara restrained herself last night."

"It wasn't easy to hold her back." Allan stood up. "Elara knows her trick was wrong. She's beside herself with grief to think that you wanted Oonish."

"Is she?" He arched an eyebrow. "Well, she's going to get more upset, believe me."

"What do you mean?"

"Elara needs to be taught a lesson. If she wants to play

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

dress-up games and pretend to be Oonish, fine, I'll allow it. Hell, I'll even play along."

Allan cocked his head to one side. "I don't understand."

"Elara will be Oonish for as long as we're here. Bring her to me, but don't let her know you've disclosed her secret. Tell Oonish I'm sorry for what I did and that I want her back."

"But—"

"Do it! Elara thinks it's funny to test me, does she?" He grinned. "Let's see how much fun she has when I turn the tables on that little minx."

* * *

"Come on, get up," Allan said.

Elara wiped her eyes and sat up on Allan's bed. She'd been wailing like a helpless child ever since he'd left. She felt awful about teasing Dalton like she did. How could she have pushed him so far?

"Did you speak to him?"

"Aye. We had a long talk and I calmed him down. He's agreed to take you back, but it wasn't easy." He gestured for her to rise. "Come, he told me to bring you to him."

She stood up and tied the dressing gown closed around her waist. "He's not still angry, is he?"

"Nay, he's settled down. But if you know what's good for you, Elara, you'll be quiet and obedient from now on."

"I will, I promise. I learned my lesson, believe me." As she followed Allan out of the room, she noticed Dashuri standing near the bedchamber door. Elara glared at her. Nosy whore!

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

Had she been listening to them?

She kept quiet as Allan led her into the corridor. What should she say to Dalton to make amends? "When I see Dalton, should I—"

"Do nothing, except what he tells you to do. Remember, you must not speak unless spoken to," Allan said, knocking on Dalton's door.

Dalton answered the door and ushered them inside. She stood near the sofa with her head bowed.

"Look at me, Oonish," Dalton said.

She glanced up at him and he stared into her eyes.

"You've been crying. Go do whatever it is women do to pretty themselves after their tears have dried."

She nodded and headed toward the alcove. Dalton reached out and stopped her.

"Where do you think you're going wearing that?" He pointed to the dressing gown. "Prince Allan may allow you to cover up, but I shall not permit it. Undress at once."

Elara sighed. Even though she was practically naked beneath the robe, she had no choice but to obey Dalton. "As you wish," she muttered as she slipped the gown off and handed it to Allan.

"Good girl, Oonish, now go make yourself presentable," Dalton ordered.

She stepped into the alcove and sat down at the vanity. Her eyes were red from crying, but thankfully the eye paint hadn't come off. She fixed a few smudges and powdered her nose as Dalton and Allan spoke in low voices.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

"I'll be taking my leave," Allan said to Dalton. "Dinner is in about three hours. I'll see you then."

She heard the outer chamber door close. What would Dalton do to her now that they were alone?

"Come out, Oonish. I wish to speak with you."

She entered the parlor and found Dalton sitting on the sofa. He waved her over and she stood before him. He cleared his throat. "I shall allow you to speak freely for a few moments. Tell me, is there anything you wish to say?"

"I'm sorry I angered you, Your Highness. I shall not be forward with you again. I will only do as you request," she said, hoping her apology would appease him.

"Sit with me."

Before she could protest, Dalton pulled her onto his lap and cradled her in his arms.

"Ah, little Oonish, do not feel sorry for what you did, it pleased me." He squeezed her closer to his chest, and she squirmed.

"I understand why you are afraid, but do not fear me. I'm the one who should apologize," he said, stroking her back. "Until today I have never struck a woman in anger in my life, and I'm so terribly sorry that I lost my temper with you—especially you. You're a simple-minded, gentle creature. I should know better than to harm you."

She frowned. Simple-minded? Is that what he thought of her?

"Allan and I had a long talk, and he explained everything to me. I acted like a fool before," Dalton said as he slid his

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hand down her back and around to her bare stomach.

She tried to wriggle away, but there was nowhere to go. Dalton had her pinned in his arms, his face only a few inches from hers. She glanced down and realized he had a clear view of her cleavage.

“Don’t be nervous, Oonish. I shan’t harm you. I want to make amends for striking you...by making you feel good,” he said, dipping his fingers into her halter-top.

She tensed. What was he doing? “But, Your Highness, I thought touching wasn’t—”

“Touching is good, Oonish. Allan explained it to me. You are a gift from Salizar. To refuse you is an insult to him, and I need to be in his good graces,” he explained, fondling her breasts with his fingers.

She gulped as her nipples hardened in a flash. “But, Your Highness, your wife—”

“—is not here,” he replied as he unhooked her top and cupped her breasts.

A quiver of desire shot through her, and she moaned. Her breasts had been extra sensitive to the touch lately. Even a casual caress made her body throb with lust.

Dalton chuckled. “You like that, don’t you?”

“Aye,” she whispered.

“Good. I want you to like what I do to you. You are very gentle and complacent, *Oonish*, nothing like Elara. Sometimes she resists me and leaves me begging for release.” He twirled his thumb across her nipple. “But I shall be able to have my fill of you, Oonish.”

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She closed her eyes and tried to think clearly, but the feel of Dalton's hands on her tender breasts distracted her. What had come over him? Was he drunk? Did he honestly intend to have her? She had to reason with him, make him reconsider what he was doing.

"But you said you love your wife."

"I do. But then again, I love a lot of things; horses, wine, swordplay..."

She scowled. Was he comparing his love of her to that of his horses? She forced her voice to sound sweet. "Surely your princess is more precious to you than your horses."

He shrugged. "You heard what Salizar said about me marrying for the title and dowry."

Her stomach dropped, and a chill settled over her. "But you denied his outrageous suggestions."

"Of course I did," he said, pinching her nipple. "Do you think I wish it announced before the entire court?" He shook his head. "It's embarrassing."

"But it's not true, is it?" she blurted out. How could he say such things about her? "You didn't marry her for—"

"Do not concern yourself with such matters. We have pleasurable things to do, Oonish. It's bathtime."

"You wish a bath now?"

"No, it is *your* bathtime. I feel terrible about how I acted earlier, and I wish to make it up to you." He squeezed her left breast, then slid her off his lap. "I want to show you how tender I can be. Go fill the tub and wait for me."

"As you wish," she replied, then headed into the

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

bathchamber. She had no choice but to obey, no matter what Dalton said—or did.

* * *

Dalton heard the water running in the tub and shook his head. He had to hand it to Elara, she was good. If Allan hadn't divulged her secret, he might never have known that she was Oonish. How had she managed to act so calm when he'd been deliberately antagonizing her?

He knew talking about the dowry would enrage Elara, and she had turned to stone in his arms. He planned on pushing her farther and farther until she finally snapped and confessed who she really was. After all, she couldn't go on playing this game forever—could she?

He entered the bathchamber. Oonish stood near the tub with her back to him. He reached out and caressed her buttocks. She yelped and whirled around.

"Just admiring your behind. It's very firm and well shaped. I like that."

She nodded but didn't speak.

"There's no need to be shy, Oonish. You may speak to me, cry out my name in ecstasy, or ask anything you wish," he said, wrapping his arms around her. He grabbed her buttocks and squeezed hard while pulling her lower body against his.

She whimpered and tensed.

"Shh, do not be afraid. I am a good lover. You will melt in my arms and succumb to my touches." He rubbed her buttocks. "Now get in the tub."

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Her eyes widened. "Your Highness, I shall do anything you ask, but I cannot remove my headdress. It is forbidden."

He grinned. Elara was very clever indeed. "The parts of you I wish to feel are below the neck, and the parts of you I wish to taste are below the waist," he said, chuckling. "I have no interest in looking at you. Now be a good little girl. Strip and get in."

She removed her clothes, stepped into the tub, and started to sit down.

"Don't sit, stand. I wish to watch you." He handed her a bar of soap. "Now bathe yourself."

She dipped the soap in the water and lathered up her left arm.

"No, no, I do not wish to see you wash your arms! Really, Oonish!" he said in mock exasperation. If Elara was going to play stupid with him, he'd treat her like a child. "You do not understand what I wish, so I see that I shall have to do this for you." He rolled up his sleeves and knelt on the floor near the tub. "Hand me the soap."

Oonish obeyed, and he dunked the soap into the warm water. He lathered up his hands and leaned close to her. "This is how you wash."

He trailed his hands over her breasts, stroking her soft skin. She squirmed, and he grinned. He'd take his time with her, get her good and aroused, then deny her any release. It would serve Elara right to be stimulated and then forced to suffer with unfulfilled lust.

He rubbed her breasts in circles with his palms, then

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tweaked her nipples through the soapsuds. "I want to make you very clean, for later," he teased. "And now for the best parts of you." He re-soaped his hands. "Part your legs."

She didn't move.

He looked up at her. "Oonish, this is no time to be shy. Open your thighs. Don't act as if they've never parted before."

"Your Highness, I'm afraid I might slip in the water."

"Not to worry. Place your hands on my shoulders to steady yourself as I wash you."

She rested her hands on his shoulders and opened her legs a little.

"Wider, Oonish. Don't make me lose my patience with you. I'm sure I can get another girl to eagerly open her legs to me."

Elara parted her legs wide. He grinned. "Good girl. Next time, don't make me insist."

He slid his soapy hands up her inner thighs, then lightly grazed her mound. She whimpered and clutched his shoulders tighter. "You like that? Good, I shall take my time here. I intend to get inside each of your tender, pink folds."

Elara moaned and pitched forward as he slipped a finger inside her. He wouldn't let her enjoy herself for too long. He knew a way to make her crack. He soaped his hands and trailed two fingers in between her buttocks. She yelped and pulled away.

"What are you doing?"

"Easy, easy," he soothed. "Do you like it when men take you here?" he asked, stroking the sensitive skin between her

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buttocks.

"I...I have not been had there," she stammered.

"You haven't? Good! I shall enjoy being the first to have that honor." Truth be told, he had no interest in that "unnatural place," but he knew the mere notion repulsed Elara. "You see, my wife never lets me enter her there, and I've heard it's much more pleasurable for a man, especially a well-endowed man."

Elara shuddered, and he slid his soapy finger up and down in the cleft between her buttocks. "You see, Oonish, I can be rather...unconventional in my desires. Some women are afraid of my peculiarities," he said, lathering his hands again. "But I know you'll be accommodating, after all, *Oonish*, it's what you do." He waited for Elara to say something. He half-expected her to shout that she'd had enough and tear off her veil, but she didn't.

He washed her slowly, taking his time to caress her tender folds and twirl her sensitive rosebud. How was Elara holding back her passion? If he'd done this to her at home, she would be writhing and begging for release. Her self-control was amazing, but he wasn't done tormenting her yet.

"I believe you're clean enough now. Rinse off." Elara sat down in the tub and rinsed clean. "Good, now come with me." He helped her step from the tub and scooped her into his arms.

Without a word, he carried her into the bedchamber and laid her on the bed. He stood over her, admiring her wet, nude body. Their gazes locked, and he saw a flicker of confusion in her green eyes.

"Don't look alarmed, Oonish. I shall not take you in the

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backside until later. Right now, I wish to taste your sweet juices. Open your legs.” Surely Elara would confess her secret now.

“Your Highness, are you certain—”

“Don’t question me.” He clasped her ankles and paused for a second, almost certain Elara would try to kick him. When she didn’t, he parted her legs and knelt between her thighs. He glanced at Elara. Her eyes were closed. What was she thinking?

“Now, Oonish, if you need to scream or shout, do so. Don’t hold back anything.”

Elara remained silent. Was it her way of punishing him, or giving in? It wasn’t unlike her to do the opposite of what someone told her. Either way, he was here, and he was going to enjoy himself.

He flicked his tongue across her, and she whimpered. He grinned. Good, she was responsive. He leaned into her, licking her all over, then entered her with his tongue. She groaned and arched her hips.

Dalton slid his tongue along her fleshy folds, savoring her warm juices. She tasted clean and smelled like soap. Elara gasped and wrapped her legs around his head. He rolled his lips around her hard nub and she writhed on the bed, whimpering.

Elara wriggled beneath him, raising her hips to meet his mouth. She was so close, so ready. Her breath came in short gasps and he felt her muscles tensing. Another moment of this and she would explode. At the last second he pulled away and

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sat up. "I'm done. Get up."

Oonish's eyes fluttered open. "I thought you were—"

"What? Going to spend the rest of the day eating you? I've had my fill. Remember, Oonish, you're here to sate *me*, not the other way around. I merely wanted to make sure I liked the taste of you."

He stood and walked into the bathchamber. Elara was good, very good. He had expected her to cry out or confess, just so she could have her climax. He washed his face in the basin and rinsed out his mouth. When he returned to the bedroom, Elara lay where he'd left her.

"Your Highness, if it would please you," she paused and trailed her hand down her belly. "I could touch myself. Would you like to watch that?"

"Don't you dare!"

"But Your Highness, it—"

"Save your eagerness for tonight, Oonish, when I shall be the first to take you—you know where." Her eyes widened and he grinned. "I'm going to take a nap, but I cannot trust that you will not toy with yourself."

Dalton walked to the golden trunk and opened it. Last night at supper, Allan had explained that the trunk was filled with scented oils and other treasures that enhanced lovemaking. He pulled out four long scarves and stepped to the bed.

"What are you going to do?" Oonish asked as he knelt over her chest.

"See that you do not enjoy yourself." He bound her wrists

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to the wrought-iron headboard with two scarves, then moved down the bed and lashed her ankles together with the other scarves. To his amazement, she didn't utter a peep of protest.

"That should keep your fires contained until this evening," he said, lying down on the bed beside her. "Rest well, Oonish. We have a long night ahead of us."

* * *

Elara wobbled a little as she entered the Great Hall. The loud music and thick scent of incense disoriented her for a moment. She shook her head to clear it and glanced around. Ever since she had eaten dinner, she'd felt odd. A warm pulsing sensation coursed through her entire body, and she felt so damn hot. What was wrong with her?

She spotted Allan across the room and headed toward him. She had to find out what he'd told Dalton this afternoon. Whatever he'd said to him had turned him into a lustful animal.

Allan smiled at her as she approached. "Hello, Oonish. How was your supper?"

"Fine." She leaned against his shoulder for support and wrapped her hand around his biceps. "I feel strange. There's something wrong with me. I'm so hot and flustered." It was hard to describe the feeling flowing through her lower body. "Everything's hazy."

"I bet it is," he said, chuckling. "Did they give you a drink at dinner?"

"Aye. It tasted like mead, but I'm not drunk. I'm

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something else.” She licked her lips. “I feel...like I...need a...man,” she whispered.

Allan rolled his eyes. “You were given an elixir to make you eager for tonight.” He smirked. “I imagine all the girls were.”

She rested her head against his shoulder. “What did you tell Dalton? One minute he’s throwing me off his lap, the next he’s soaping me up in the tub.”

Allan laughed. “He did what?”

“He washed me, touched me, and did wickedly delightful things to me. The way he tortured me nearly made me confess. For some reason, he’s suddenly eager to have me, I mean Oonish. What would he do if he knew I’m not really—”

“Don’t say it! For heaven’s sake! There are hordes of people around!”

“But Dalton’s not supposed to want *me*, he’s supposed to be loyal to his wife, not rubbing my— Good Lord! Look at that!”

She pointed across the room. Dalton sat on a loveseat with Dashuri. His hand rested on her upper thigh.

“I’ll rip her skin off!” She lunged forward, but Allan held her back.

“Don’t draw attention to yourself! The girls do not fight over men.”

“This one does! What if she offers to...and he accepts and...I’ll die!”

“Hush! If you wish to get her away from him, do it cleverly and quietly. But do not go over there,” he said

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steering her toward a table laden with desserts.

"Fine!" Elara pulled away from Allan and spotted two fat men gorging themselves at the end of the dessert table. She looked back at Dalton and saw that Dashuri had removed her top. That whore!

"She's eager is she? Let's see if she's ready for this!" she muttered.

Elara squared her shoulders and walked toward the two fat men. They turned as she approached. "Beg pardon, honored guests, but I come with a message," she said, then bowed low.

"What is it?" the fatter of the two asked.

"Do you see the girl behind me on the settee? The bronze-skinned one wearing red?"

"With her tits in that man's face?" the other man asked.

She bristled and forced herself to stay calm. "Yes, Dashuri. She is quite talented in pleasuring men."

"So? All of you are."

"She wishes to have an end-to-end with you."

"What?" The man wearing green dropped his chocolate cake. "She does?"

Elara grinned. "Aye, but it is forbidden for her to ask. I was sent to suggest you summon her for that purpose."

"What's an end-to-end?" the dark-haired man asked.

"A fuck and suck," his friend answered. "One of us gets to ball her, while she sucks off the other. Then we switch."

Elara shuddered at his crudeness. "Merely go to her and command her to do your bidding. She may feign shock, but trust me, she is quite eager." She looked up and saw Allan

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strolling toward her. "I must go now, my master has arrived." She bowed quickly and hurried to Allan's side.

He scowled as he led her away from the dessert table. "What were you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Have you lost your mind talking to those two men? They could whisk you away and—"

"They're not interested in me. See?" She gestured across the room. The two fat men were standing in front of Dalton. A moment later, Dashuri rose and went with them. She giggled. "My problem is solved."

"Great! Now what am I supposed to do?"

"Don't sulk. You still have Aliesk. Now take me to Dalton. This elixir is making me eager. My whole body tingles, and each time my little satin scrap touches my skin, I shiver with needs." She giggled. "I want to bring a few barrels of this love potion home with me. I'd drink it every day and never leave my bed."

Allan laughed. "And they say *I'm* bad."

* * *

Dalton grinned as he saw Allan walking toward him with Oonish at his side. As he'd expected, his plan to make Elara jealous of Dashuri had worked perfectly. He patted the empty space on the settee.

"Come sit with me, Oonish. You do not need to watch over us, Allan. Oonish is in good hands."

"Good, I'm glad to be rid of her. She's drunk on some sort

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of passion potion.”

Dalton arched an eyebrow and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “Is this true?”

“Aye, Your Highness. I’m...hot...all over.”

“I’m leaving. You two deserve each other,” Allan teased, as he walked away.

“Tell me, Oonish, how do you feel?”

“Ready and willing to do as you please, Your Highness.”

He cuddled closer to her. Elara’s words came out a little muddled, but she wasn’t acting drunk. She seemed very complacent, much like he felt last night. Had she been given the same drink? Would the elixir make her eager to talk?

“Did you like what we did this afternoon?”

“Aye, very much. Your kisses left me aching for more of your touches.”

He smiled. “Good. If you want more kisses, tell me, what did you do to Dashuri?”

“What?” Her eyes widened. “I did nothing.”

He stroked her shoulder with his fingertips. “Do not lie to your prince. I saw you talking to those two horrible men, then they came and took her away. What did you say, Oonish?”

She shrugged. “I told them she wanted an end-to-end with them.”

His mouth dropped open. “That is very naughty, Oonish.”

“But I had to! I couldn’t bear to see her with you! I should be the one with you tonight!”

He slid his hand up her thigh. “And you will take her place?”

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"Aye, eagerly. I will do all that you request. Without question, all night," she replied breathlessly.

He stood up. "Good. Then come with me. It's time we went upstairs."

* * *

Elara followed Dalton into their suite. Part of her felt nervous, but other, more intimate parts were ready for whatever delights Dalton had planned.

"Light some candles," he said as he went into the bedchamber.

She lit several candles around the sitting room and tried to calm her racing heart. Her body ached to be filled. After being tied to the bed all afternoon and left so close to her climax, she desperately needed release. Her pent-up desires combined with the powerful potion inflamed her like never before. If she weren't touched soon, she'd faint. Yet, if she and Dalton made love...

"This should keep us busy for a while," Dalton said as he carried the gold trunk into the sitting room.

What was he going to do with that? She noticed he'd taken off his shirt and jacket. Just seeing him half-undressed sent a new wave of lust through her.

Dalton opened the trunk and rummaged around inside. "Allan told me about the different oils in here." He took out a purple vial. "This is for making a man hard. I don't need that." Next, he held up a blue bottle. "This is to get a woman wet." He shook his head. "You don't need it. I don't wish to drown

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in your juices.”

He withdrew red and green vials. “These are interesting. The red one is to make a person hot, while the green is to cool a person.” He paused and looked at her, “You said you were hot, Oonish. Let me cool you. Come here.”

She stood next to him, her chest heaving. What was he going to do?

Dalton unhooked her top and tossed it over his shoulder. “You won’t be wearing that again.” He ran his hands across her breasts, and she moaned. “Yes, you are hot, and eager. I feel how swollen your breasts are with desire.” He flicked his tongue across her nipple, and she gasped. “Yes, just as I thought. You’re too eager. I cannot have that. It’s time to cool you down.”

He poured a bit of the oil into his hands and rubbed it on her right breast. A chill ran up her spine, and she shivered. Instead of cooling her lust, the spicy-scented oil made her skin tingle. She bent her head back as Dalton rubbed her breasts.

“Tell me how it feels.”

“Cold and tingling. I wish it were everywhere,” she hinted.

“Now, now, we’re not here for your pleasures, Oonish. Only mine.” Dalton put the vial down and led her to the angled bench. He turned to her. “Undress me.”

“As you wish.” She unfastened his breeches and pulled them past his hips. The flickering candlelight illuminated his semi-solid member. She licked her lips. If she weren’t wearing this damn veil, she’d...

“Remove your scarves.”

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She obeyed. The bells jingled as they hit the carpet.

“Good. Now do exactly as I say.” He turned her around and bent her over the high end of the bench. “I am going to rub myself against you. I wish to be very hard for our encounter.”

She tensed as Dalton rubbed his member in the cleft between her buttocks.

“Easy, love. I’m just making us both ready.”

Dalton thrust his hips forward, as if penetrating her from behind. He reached around and caressed her breasts. After a minute, she relaxed.

“This feels good, yes?” he asked, shoving against her again.

“Aye, it does,” she admitted. The feel of his solid cock rubbing against her bare buttocks excited her. “I like it.”

“Good, now push back against me a little.”

She wriggled her backside and Dalton shoved faster. Her head spun and everything seemed hazy, as if she were having a perverse dream. As wicked as this felt, there was no harm in it. So what if she was nearly naked and bent over the bench with Dalton thrusting behind her? It felt good. Right now nothing else mattered.

“I want you, Oonish,” Dalton whispered in her ear. He pulled away for a second, and eased her tiny scrap of satin to one side.

Elara moaned as Dalton trailed his fingers along her wet opening. She parted her legs wider so he could touch her again.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

The next thing she knew, Dalton rammed himself into her. She squealed and fell forward on the angled bench as he pumped into her. She closed her eyes, vaguely aware of Dalton's lust-crazed grunts as he thrust hard. He sped up the pace, his hips slapping against her buttocks as he shoved deep. By the gods this felt good!

Each stroke increased her passion, and she pushed her hips backward, impaling herself on Dalton's thick rod. Her climax built, and she whimpered, begging for the release she so desperately needed. A second later, she came, squirming and writhing as her body trembled.

Dalton didn't stop. Instead of letting her settle down and catch her breath, he readjusted his hands on her hips and shoved into her again with one, solid stroke. She shivered as he filled her to the core. Dalton's hips pounded against her buttocks as he exploded into her with forceful thrusts. Guttural moans tore from his throat as he pumped against her a few more times.

Elara swallowed hard and tried to catch her breath as Dalton's climax ended. He remained inside her, panting like he'd just run five miles. What should she do now?

"That was the best I ever had," he muttered as he withdrew. "I'm spent. For now."

Elara straightened up slowly. All of a sudden, she felt embarrassed to be seen bent over the bench in such a vulgar way. She looked at Dalton. His cock glistened with juices in the candlelight.

"I liked that. You are very eager and passionate, Oonish,"

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

he said, smiling. "I want to try that other way as soon as I'm hard again."

A sense of shame washed over her, and she covered her breasts with her hands. What had they done? Dalton had been just unfaithful to her and didn't care! She felt like throwing up.

"May I take a bath, Your Highness? I wish to be clean for you...for later."

"Certainly. Perhaps by the time you've finished, I'll be ready for you." He grinned. "But don't worry, I'll go slow and be gentle...as much as I can be."

"Of course, Your Highness," Elara muttered, then hurried into the bathchamber. She closed the door and bent over the washbasin, willing herself not to be sick.

How could Dalton do this? What had happened couldn't be blamed on any damn elixir or Dalton being drunk—he did it because he wanted to have Oonish. But she had no excuse for acting like an animal!

She turned on the hot water and sat down in the bathtub. Dalton said that Oonish was the best he'd ever had! She burst into tears. What had come over her? How could she knowingly have done such a terrible thing? What they'd done couldn't be undone. There was no going back now. What was she going to do?

CHAPTER 3

THE REDEMPTION

Dalton waited outside the bathchamber. He heard Elara's sobbing clear as day through the door. She was upset—and she should be. Mayhap seeing the consequences of her actions first-hand had snapped some sense into her henna-dyed head.

He leaned against the doorjamb and sighed. Tonight hadn't gone the way he'd planned. He hadn't intended to be physically intimate with Elara—he'd merely wanted to tease her into a frenzy, then leave her needing more. But Oonish, or Elara, felt so good he couldn't resist. He frowned. This game had gotten out of control. It was time to make Elara confess.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

He opened the bathchamber door. Elara sat in the tub, hiding her face in her hands.

"Come into the bedroom. I wish to speak with you," he said, then left her sitting in the marble tub. A moment later, she entered the bedchamber wrapped in a towel.

"What are you wearing this for?" He snatched the towel off her and threw it on the floor. Elara's eyes widened. "I hope you're satisfied. You got what you wanted. I betrayed my wife. Now what should I tell her when I return home? Should I confess what I've done? I was a loyal, devoted husband until tonight. What do you have to say about that, *Oonish*?"

"I'm sorry, Your Highness." She bowed her head and covered her nakedness with her hands. "I do not know what to say," she said, sniffing.

He shook his head. He knew the truth about what had happened, but Elara didn't. For all she knew, he *had* been unfaithful. Was she crying because she thought he had committed adultery or because of what she'd done? A horrible thought raced through his mind. What if it really *wasn't* Elara? A chill ran down his spine. What if Allan had played some God-awful trick on him? Once and for all, he had to be sure.

"Drop that phony accent and take off the veil, Elara. I know it's you."

She took a step back. "Your Highness! I'm not—"

"Now, Elara. I'm tired of your lies."

"But—"

He yanked her veil off.

Elara gasped, then flashed him a little smile. "Don't be

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

angry. I wanted to surprise you.”

“Surprise me? How could you do such a thing? Do you know how dangerous it is for you to be here?”

Elara picked the towel off the floor and covered herself. “I didn’t see the harm. I only did this because I wanted to be with you,” she said, stepping toward him. “Is that so bad?”

He turned his back to her. “Be with me? You wanted to spy on me! How could you deceive me like this?”

“Deceive you? But you knew it was me! I don’t see the harm.”

He spun around. “The harm? You snuck here to trick me into being unfaithful and you see no harm in it? This was a cruel and vicious trick, even for you, Elara.”

“Dalton! I wanted to—”

“What? Try to seduce me?”

“Try?” She rested her hands on her hips. “I believe *you* seduced *me*. This afternoon you were bathing me, touching me. You tied me to the bed and—”

“I was trying to make you reveal yourself.” He shook his head. “All I wanted was for you to take off that veil and be honest with me, but you didn’t. You lied to me, and for what? To see if I’d succumb to temptation and try to screw Oonish?” He stared into her green eyes. “Well, you got what you wanted, because I did.”

“Don’t say that! You knew it was me—”

“Nay, not the entire time. I didn’t find out until Allan told me this afternoon—after you ran to him crying your eyes out.” Elara’s mouth dropped open, and he continued. “What

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

happened between me and Oonish on the sofa this afternoon, all that moaning and grinding away, that was real. Your trick nearly worked, Elara. I wanted Oonish more than anything—and I didn't know it was you."

"Don't say that, Dalton! It's cruel."

"It's the truth," he snapped. "And at least one of us is being honest. Do you know how stupid I felt when Allan told me who you really were? And here I was, acting the fool, resisting the advances of my own wife!"

He paced around the room, his anger building. Now was the perfect time to clear the air with Elara. She would hear him out once and for all. "Tell me, how did it feel when you sat crying in the tub, thinking that I'd been unfaithful? Did you like how it felt knowing that I'd had the best time ever with another woman?"

She bowed her head. "Nay, I didn't."

"Why didn't you tell me who you were? I gave you plenty of chances."

"Because I knew you'd be angry with me, like you are now."

"Angry? After only four months of marriage, my wife distrusts me so much that she dresses like a whore and tries to trick me into being unfaithful! Why should I be angry about that?"

Elara's eyes narrowed to slits. "And what if I hadn't taken Dashuri's place in your room? She was supposed to be for you! How faithful would you have been if that scrawny slut had—"

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

"You don't trust me at all, do you?" he asked quietly.

Elara looked away.

"You are the most jealous woman I've ever met!"

"I wouldn't be jealous if I didn't love you!"

A silence hung in the air between them, and he let out a long sigh. "For heaven's sake, Elara! What do you think, that the moment I'm out of your sight, I'm going to rip off my breeches and shove myself into the first woman I find?"

"Don't be crude!"

He stood in front of her. "I'll be any way I damn well please. Now answer me."

Elara folded her arms across her chest. "I saw how you stared at Dashuri when she danced for you. I'm not stupid. I heard what you said to Allan."

"What did you expect me to do, lie and say that she's a hag? And looking at a girl is a far cry from breaking my vows. You don't honestly think I'd screw that filthy whore, do you?"

Elara bit her bottom lip and was silent for a moment. "I thought that...you might turn your attention to someone more...agreeable if you had the opportunity."

"Why would—"

"People think you married me for my dowry." She gazed up at him and he saw tears welling in her eyes. "It's all I hear. Even Salizar said it at supper. Sometimes I wonder if it's true."

Her words cut through him like a knife. "How could you think that?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I know I'm not a good wife. I'm too stubborn and moody.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

I worry that you regret marrying me. Please Dalton, don't disavow our marriage." She burst into tears and clutched his arm. "You're all I have! If I lose you because of what I've done here—"

"If you were me, what would you do?"

"I'd be angry," she said, sniffing. "But I'm so sorry. From now on I promise—"

"Promise?" He pulled away from her. He wasn't about to be softened by a few tears. "Ha! I've heard your promises before. You promised you'd stay home. You promised you'd ride back with the guards, and yet here you are. Your words mean nothing to me. You break promises as easily as people break bread."

"But—"

"I make promises, too, Elara, but I keep them. I promised to be a faithful, loving husband, and I am. What if I suddenly started breaking all my promises to you? What if I had taken Dashuri as a lover? I resisted her because I could never betray the vows I made to my sweet, trusting wife. Yet look how you treat me. Was this worth it?"

"I'm sorry. Please forgive me, I'll—"

"You always say that and yet you never mean it." He walked to the bed. "I've had enough arguing for tonight. I'm going to get some sleep," he said, pulling back the bedclothes.

Elara moved to the side of the bed and started to get in. "You'll see, Dalton. I'll make it up to you and—"

"No." He held out his arm, blocking her from climbing into bed. "I don't want you near me tonight."

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

"Dalton!"

"Go to your cushions, *Oonish*." He pointed to the sitting room. "You belong out there. And don't cry and plead with me. I have no more patience for your lies and tricks," he said. "I hope you and Allan had fun with your game while it lasted, because it's over. I don't know how Allan snuck you in here, but I'm damn sure neither one of you thought about how you're going to get out. Do you think Salizar will let you waltz right out the front gate, *Oonish*?"

"I, I didn't think—"

"Nay, of course not. Why should you stop to consider the consequences of what you do? You always find a clever way to get what you want." He stared into her eyes. "But not tonight, little princess. Sleep out there alone and think about what you've done to the husband you claim to love so dearly. Mayhap in the morning I'll wish to speak with you again."

"Dalton, let me—"

"Do as I say, Elara."

She nodded. "As you wish, Dalton. But, pray, know that I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you," she whispered as she headed into the parlor.

* * *

Elara rolled over on the gold cushions and gazed out the window. The sun had barely risen over the horizon. She let out a deep sigh and rubbed her eyes. All night she'd lain awake, crying and thinking about Dalton's words. Deep down she knew he was right—about everything.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

She had gone too far by impersonating Oonish. Dalton was furious with her, yet he wasn't yelling and shouting. His cold and indifferent demeanor frightened her more than if he'd smashed the furniture to bits. He acted as if he didn't care about her any more.

She swallowed hard. What if he disavowed the marriage? After this stupid stunt, he had plenty of reasons to be rid of her. She'd do anything he asked to save their marriage. But what if it was too late? What if the damage she'd done was irreversible?

She rose and knocked on the bedchamber door. "Dalton, are you awake?"

"Come in."

She entered the shadowy room. Dalton lay on his side in bed.

"Did I wake you?"

"Nay. What do you want?"

"I thought about everything you said, and I'm sorry—"

"I'll bet." He frowned.

"I truly mean it," she said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"How can I trust you when you always do what you please? I've done a lot of thinking, Elara. I love you dearly, but no man—"

"Don't disavow our marriage!" She threw herself into his arms. "I love you, and I'll die if I lose you! I swear, I'll change. I'll be good and—"

"I've heard that before."

"I mean it!" She pressed her cheek to his bare chest. "If

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

you want to, you can have Dashuri. I know you like her, and I won't make a fuss or protest. Considering how terribly I've treated you, I'd deserve it if you went with her."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'd never do that to you."

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and looked at him. "But I don't know what else I can offer you. If you don't believe anything I say, how can I prove my sincerity to you?"

He was silent for a moment, then spoke. "Be Oonish."

"What?"

"You heard me. Oonish was pleasant and didn't cause trouble. Obviously if you can *pretend* to be Oonish, you can *be* Oonish."

"But I thought you didn't want me to trick you—"

"This is no deception, it's my wish," he said, locking his gaze onto hers. "For the duration of our stay here, you'll be completely submissive to my every request. It's the one way for you to prove to me that you can change. Do this and it should make up for what you've done," he explained, then slipped out of bed.

She furrowed her brows. If Dalton wanted her to be like Oonish, she would. She'd do anything to make him happy. "I will. I'll do anything you ask, no matter what, without question."

"Good. Now let's test you, shall we?" He pulled on a dressing gown and strolled into the parlor. "Go paint your eyes and put on your veil."

She followed him into the sitting room and watched as he

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

pulled a cord that summoned servant girls. "Are we to have a morning meal now? Shall I dress?"

"There's no need for that. Go and do as I said, Oonish."

"Yes, Dalton." She sat down at the vanity and began painting her eyes. What was Dalton up to? She didn't mind pretending to be Oonish again. If obeying Dalton's every wish was what it took to redeem herself, she'd do it willingly.

A knock at the door startled her, and she quickly pulled on her veil and headdress. She heard voices. Who was Dalton talking to?

"Oonish, come out here."

She entered the sitting room and stifled a gasp. A naked servant girl stood in the center of the room.

"This is Myley," Dalton said. "She's here to entertain me."

Her heart skipped a beat. Was Dalton going to be unfaithful to teach her a lesson? "What do you mean, Your Highness?"

Dalton grinned. "What's better than having one naked girl in my room?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure."

"Having *two* naked girls in my room," he replied, chuckling. "Do you remember the girls we saw dancing together in the Great Hall?"

She nodded. They had done much more than dance together.

"You and Myley will duplicate that—with each other."

She scowled. Dalton expected her to touch this girl in that way? She didn't even know how.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

Dalton sat on the sofa and waved her over. She stood next to him. "You know what to do to pleasure yourself, so merely do the same to her," he whispered. "Now put on a good show for your prince," he said, giving her a swift smack on her behind. "Myley will start on you, Oonish." He directed Myley to approach her. "You may begin."

Elara held her breath as Myley stroked her shoulders, then slid her hands down to her breasts. Even though Myley's hands were soft and gentle, she tensed and felt the urge to pull away.

Myley stepped behind her and squeezed her breasts with both hands. Her nipples hardened, and a warm rush flooded over her. By the heavens! Myley's touch was exciting her! She glanced at Dalton. He was watching intently. Obviously this little show was pleasing to him—and it was starting to please her, as well.

Myley's hands slid lower, caressing her stomach, ribs, lower belly, and—

"Oh, my!" Elara cried out as Myley slipped her hand between her thighs. She moaned as Myley teased her with her fingers.

"Feels good, doesn't it, Oonish?" Dalton asked.

"Yes, Your Highness," she answered, her voice coming out husky. "She's well-trained and knows just where to—oh, yes!" She rocked her hips forward as Myley eased two fingers inside her.

Elara closed her eyes and let Myley work her fingers in and out, tickling and teasing her. This was wicked and

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

perverse, but it certainly felt good.

“Good girl, Oonish. Now it is your turn. Trade positions.”

Her eyes flew open as Myley pulled away. “What? I should—”

“Do the same to her. I wish to see you explore her, pleasure her,” Dalton said.

She swallowed hard and took a deep breath as she faced Myley. How should she begin such a thing? She reached out and stroked Myley’s breast. It felt like a soft peach. Is this what Dalton experienced when he made love to her? She cupped Myley’s other breast and gave them both a light squeeze. It felt odd to be touching another girl like this, but it wasn’t unpleasant.

She rubbed Myley’s nipples in small circles with her thumbs, hardening them in an instant. After a moment, she trailed her hands down Myley’s stomach until she reached her mound. Now what? She had never been so close to another naked woman before.

“Keep going, Oonish. Don’t be shy,” Dalton said, leaning forward on the sofa.

She touched Myley tentatively, then slipped a hand between her parted thighs. Her fingers grazed Myley’s lower lips, and she explored her soft folds. She was used to touching herself, but everything felt different from this angle. Was she doing this right? Myley wasn’t slick, and she rubbed her for a moment. After a few seconds, Myley grew slippery, and she probed her opening.

“How does that feel?” Dalton asked.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

“Warm and wet.” She wriggled her finger inside Myley, and she gasped.

“Very good, Oonish. Now both of you, come over here and lie down on the cushions.”

Her heart raced in her chest as she obeyed Dalton. What else did he have planned for them?

“Oonish, lie on your back. Myley, lie next to her.”

As she lay on her back on the cushions, Dalton winked at her. “Myley, show Oonish where to touch you.”

Myley lay on her side and placed Elara’s hand between her legs. Elara stroked her and quickly found her slick opening. Myley reached down and glided her fingers into her.

“Now enjoy yourselves.”

Elara moaned softly as Myley teased and twirled her sensitive rosebud. She parted her legs wider and rolled onto her side, facing Myley, so she could reach higher into her. They built up a steady rhythm together as they writhed and panted on the gold cushions.

Elara closed her eyes and gave herself over to the experience. Myley’s touch was sending her into a frenzy. Even though she knew Dalton was watching, she didn’t feel embarrassed. If anything, she liked knowing that she was pleasing him with her eagerness to play this game.

“Stop! Move aside, Myley, but let Oonish keep touching you,” Dalton said as he walked toward them.

Elara glanced at Dalton and saw that the front of his dressing gown had come open. His penis jutted out like a sword. Myley let him get into position, but stayed close

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

enough so Elara could still reach into her. Dalton knelt over her and disrobed.

“Oonish, keep touching Myley while I do this,” he said, thrusting himself into her.

She cried out and wrapped her legs around his hips as he pumped into her hard. She toyed with Myley as Dalton filled her. The faster he went, the faster she stroked Myley. After a few moments, Myley whimpered and shuddered. Elara felt Myley’s inner muscles clench around her fingers as she climaxed. Just then, Dalton pulled out of her, breaking the spell.

“Keep your eyes closed and turn over, Oonish.”

She rolled onto her hands and knees, eagerly anticipating Dalton’s solid member entering her from behind. Instead, she felt movement between her parted thighs, then a tongue licked her.

“I want all of us to enjoy this,” Dalton said as he unhooked her veil.

She scowled. If Dalton was in front of her, then...Myley was beneath her!

“Open wide.”

She did as Dalton instructed, and wasn’t surprised to feel his thick rod enter her mouth. It was wet and tasted salty.

“You’re getting an end-to-end yourself, Oonish.” Dalton chuckled. “You know what to do.”

Elara closed her eyes and sucked Dalton eagerly. Her senses reeled as Myley licked her. If anyone knew what she was doing, she’d die from embarrassment, but it felt so good!

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

Now she understood why people came to the palace. It allowed them to do all the wickedly erotic things they longed to experience, but in secret.

Her body tingled as Myley worked her toward a climax. Every so often, her hot tongue twirled around her hooded nub, sending a jolt of lightning up her spine. A moment later, she exploded in an orgasmic frenzy. Myley clutched her hips and licked her faster as she writhed on the cushions. She sucked Dalton hard. He grunted and called out her name as he spilled into her mouth.

As her climax faded, she felt Myley slide out from beneath her. Dalton pulled away, and she collapsed onto the gold cushions, panting hard and utterly spent.

Dalton smiled down at her. "Very nice, Oonish. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Yes, Your Highness," she answered in between gasps of breath. There was no need to lie to him. She *had* enjoyed it, every second of it! As a regal princess, she should be mortified at what had just happened, but deep down, she didn't care. She wanted to do more, to try anything, because she liked it.

"Good. I found it quite stimulating myself," he replied. "This is just the start of our fun today." He winked. "Now it's time for the two of you to take a bath."

* * *

Dalton rolled over in bed. What was that noise? Something had woken him. Someone was pounding on the outer chamber

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

door. Was Allan looking for him?

He sat up. Elara lay curled onto her side, sound asleep. He grinned. He was surprised at how quickly she'd taken to his most unusual requests this morning. Elara's initial shyness at touching Myley had been replaced by an intense interest in exploring every inch of her. Watching Elara pleasure Myley with such fervor had excited him, as well. After frolicking together all morning, they'd finally dismissed Myley and returned to bed for a few hours of much-needed rest.

"Elara, wake up." He shook her shoulder a few times and she opened her eyes.

"More already? Could we sleep a few—"

"It's not that."

The pounding at the main door grew louder, and he slipped out of bed. "Get dressed and put on your veil."

"Who's beating down the damn door?"

He pulled on his breeches. "I don't know, but be on your best behavior until I find out."

"Prince Dalton! Are you in there? Open this door at once!" a male voice shouted through the outer door.

Dalton opened the bedchamber door and crossed the sitting room in three strides. "Dammit! I'm coming!" He unlocked the door and yanked it open. Davalos, the emperor's assistant, stood in the corridor.

"What is the meaning of this rude interruption? Unless the palace is burning down—"

"His Supreme Worship has summoned you to the Great Hall," Davalos said, barging into the room. "He expects you

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

directly.”

“Oh, he does, does he? I thought he was finished with me,” Dalton snapped, folding his arms across his chest.

“No. He wishes to discuss trade negotiations.”

He frowned. This was peculiar. Why did Salizar insist that he come at once? Was it to catch him at a disadvantage? “Fine, I’ll prepare some notes and—”

“No. He has requested you be brought to him now. I’ve come to collect you, immediately.”

“And Prince Allan? He’s in charge of the neg—”

“He’s being taken to His Supreme Worship as well,” Davalos replied, staring into his eyes.

Dalton shivered as a chill ran up his back. Taken? Royalty wasn’t “taken” anywhere. “I need a moment to ready myself. Step out so I—”

“No. I am to bring you and the girl at once.”

“The girl? You mean Oonish? Why her?”

Davalos glanced around the room. “There is a feast waiting. She is expected to serve.”

He arched an eyebrow. He didn’t believe that for a second. Why would Salizar specifically ask for Oonish when there were dozens of other girls in the palace? He decided not to argue with Davalos. It could be dangerous.

“Fine. Give me a moment to put on a shirt and shoes. I need to look presentable.”

“I shall wait here. Be quick.”

Dalton entered the bedchamber and found Elara dressed and waiting by the door. He knew she’d been listening.

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

"Oonish, we have an appointment with Salizar." He saw her eyes widen.

"What does—"

"Shh." He covered her veiled mouth with his hand. "He's listening."

He dressed quickly, his mind racing a mile a minute. What did Salizar want with them? Why were they being dragged out of here in such a rush?

Elara knelt in front of him and helped him with his boots.

"Why must I go? I don't like him," she whispered.

He patted her shoulder. Even though he wouldn't admit it to her, he feared for her safety. "Don't fret. I'm sure this is merely his way of showing dominance."

Elara gazed into his eyes. "You're not still angry with me for coming here, are you?"

"Of course not. I cannot stay angry with you, pet. Especially not when you take to your 'punishments' so readily." He winked. "Now be on your very best behavior, *Oonish*."

Elara nodded.

He rose and returned to the sitting room. Davalos stood near the angled bench. "See? That didn't take long. I need to gather my papers..."

"Your Highness, your dressing jacket!" Oonish rushed out of the bedchamber, bells jingling. He took the green velvet jacket from her and pulled it on.

"There's no time for you to gather anything!" Davalos snapped. "I was ordered to bring you as you are. Let's go,

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

now.”

Dalton clenched his jaw as they followed Davalos into the corridor. Nobody ordered princes to do anything. “We should wake Prince Allan. He’s a very deep sleeper,” he said, heading toward Allan’s door.

Davalos clasped his arm and held him back.

Dalton whirled around. “How dare you put your hands on me! I’m a prince! I shall not be grabbed like a common street vendor!”

“Prince Allan has already been taken downstairs,” Davalos replied. “And Emperor Salizar is waiting for you.”

Dalton glanced at Oonish. In all their fun, he’d forgotten they were trapped in the den of a madman. What did Salizar have planned for them? Deep in the pit of his stomach, he feared something had gone terribly wrong.

* * *

Dalton looked around the Great Hall. Salizar sat perched on his dais, grinning. Three guards were stationed on either side of the platform. Dashuri lounged at Salizar’s feet. He frowned. Why was she here? Where was Allan?

He bowed low. “Greetings, Your Supreme Worship.” He heard Oonish’s bells jingle and glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. Good girl. She had remembered to curtsy.

“You may rise, esteemed prince,” Salizar said.

He straightened up and noticed Davalos had moved to Oonish’s right side. “You wish to discuss the trading?”

“Yes.” Salizar stood and stepped down off the dais. “I

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

have a proposition for you regarding the terms.”

“Perhaps we should wait for Prince Allan. He—”

“If you wish.” Salizar turned to the guards. “Bring him in!”

The guards left and returned a moment later with Allan. He was unshaven, shirtless, and wore rumpled breeches. The guards roughly escorted Allan to his side.

“For heaven’s sake, Allan! You could have at least taken the time to dress,” he muttered.

“That wasn’t an option. I was forcibly pulled from my bed. You’re lucky I had time to grab breeches off the floor.” He nodded toward Dashuri. “What’s she doing here? I was wondering where she’d gone off to.”

Dalton turned to Salizar. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I wanted you all present to hear the terms of my offer. Prince Dalton, I shall accept King Maxwell’s trade terms without hesitation under one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ve attended my dinners, you’ve seen how I like to entertain my guests. I want you to perform for me tonight, with Dashuri.”

“You want me to...” He cleared his throat. “...screw her in front of your guests for your amusement?” He shook his head. “Never. I’m not a slave that you can order to do—”

“If you deny my request I shall have you and Allan put on horses and ridden out of Zarmatt immediately.” Salizar grinned. “You’ll leave with the clothes on your back and nothing more.”

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

Dalton took a deep breath and forced himself to show no reaction. If Salizar made them leave now, they'd never be able to get Elara out.

"I'll do it," Allan offered. "I'll be glad to demonstrate my prowess at—"

"I didn't ask you!" Salizar shouted. "Now, Dalton, tell me, why would you refuse such an offer? It's a simple request."

"I'm married and I will not betray my wife."

"Yes, your princess." Salizar inched closer to him. "Tell me, would you be eager to accept my offer if I ordered you to perform with this one?" he asked, gesturing at Oonish.

Dalton squared his shoulders. "She has nothing to do with this."

"Oh, yes, she does!" In the blink of an eye, Salizar grabbed Elara and ripped the veil off her headdress.

Elara screamed and tried to break away from Salizar.

"Leave her alone!" Dalton lunged at Salizar and was immediately restrained by two guards.

"Get your damn hands off her!" Allan rushed to help Elara. A guard struck him in the back of the head with the hilt of a sword. He crumpled to the floor.

Dalton struggled against the burly guards holding him. Davalos kicked him in the stomach, knocking the air out of him.

"So this is the infamous Princess Elara," Salizar said, laughing. He stroked her shoulder and she whimpered.

Dalton straightened up, gasping for air. "Touch her again and I swear I'll—"

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

"You'll do what, noble prince? I could have you and Allan killed right now. This charade did not fool everyone." He nodded at Dashuri. "She came to me with the knowledge of your deception."

He glared at Dashuri. Elara had warned him about the girls listening in on conversations, and she was right. Dashuri had kept more than her legs open in Allan's room—her ears had been open, as well.

Elara dropped to her knees in front of Salizar. "Your Supreme Worship, do not punish Dalton. My husband should not be forced to suffer for my foolishness. Pray, allow me to explain why I came here."

Dalton looked at Elara. What in heaven's name was she doing?

She folded her hands in front of her. "Everything you've heard about my marriage is true. It is shameful how I have treated Dalton. My father decided that I must be taught how to behave in a way that is pleasing to my husband. Where else can I learn such lessons but here?"

Salizar scowled. "Go on."

Dalton saw Elara lick her lips and she continued.

"I needed to be taught not to speak my mind, to be more accommodating and gentle in certain areas. Your palace is filled with women who are well behaved. I learned much here, and I modeled myself after your girls in every way. Dalton and my father have you to thank for teaching me. My short stay here has reformed me. In a way, you can also take credit for training me."

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

Dalton bit the inside of his lip to keep from smirking. Elara's soft and sweet tone of voice was very familiar to him. She used it whenever she wanted to get her way. She could certainly turn on her charms when they were needed, but would this act fool Salizar?

"I see. So you have been reformed?" he asked.

"Yes, Your Supreme Worship." Elara nodded. "And now I beg you to release us. Show us your grace and mercy and allow us to go home, where your praises will be lauded."

"You wish to go home, eh? You will...as soon as I have finished with you!" He shoved Elara hard, and she fell onto her side. "You think you can trick me? Foolish woman! If you had truly learned your lesson, you would not have dared to speak!" He motioned for a guard to grab her. "You'll be my entertainment tonight, princess. I'm certain you'll learn complacency after each of my guests have had their fill of you!"

"You bastard! Let her go now or—"

A guard held the tip of a sword to Dalton's throat, and he settled down.

"Don't think I shall overlook your illegal treachery," Salizar growled at Dalton. "I'll keep you alive, for now. I want you to watch what happens to your beloved princess. It will be the last thing you see before you're executed." He smirked. "Guards, take them away!"

* * *

Elara yelped as the guards shoved her into the tiny room.

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She stumbled forward and fell onto the dirt floor. A moment later, Dalton followed her. Two guards dragged Allan into the chamber, then slammed and locked the door without uttering a word.

Dalton knelt at her side. "Are you hurt?"

"Nay." She sat up and looked around the windowless room. A feeble shaft of light came through the bars in the wooden door. There was no way to escape. What were they going to do? Never in her life had anyone laid their hands on her, let alone threatened her like Salizar did. "We have to get out of here! Salizar's going to kill us!"

"Shh, come here." Dalton gathered her into his arms and she cuddled up next to him. "It's going to be all right. Don't get upset."

"How can I not get upset? This is all my fault!" She burst into tears and sobbed against Dalton's chest. "If I'd never come here and caused all this trouble, everything would be fine. My jealousy got us sentenced to death! I'm the worst wife in the world! Why did you marry me? You'd be better off—"

"Hush, don't talk that way," Dalton said, squeezing her tight. "I married you because I love you. I've never regretted a moment at your side since I met you—except perhaps right now." He sighed. "Because I'd much rather be home."

She sniffled and looked up at Dalton in the dim light. There could be a way to make amends for all the trouble she'd caused him. "Salizar wants me, Dalton. He might let you and Allan go unharmed if I agree to—"

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

"Don't even say such a thing!" He shook his head. "I will not let that pig touch you."

"But, Dalton! He's going to—"

"Shh, let's just sit here and think." He kissed her cheek and rocked her back and forth in his arms. "Elara, love, pray forgive how I acted last night. I shouldn't have gotten so angry with you."

"I deserved it." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I had no right following you here and pretending to be Oonish. I swear, if we get out of here I'll make it up to you. I'll do anything you ask."

Dalton kissed her again. "You've already done enough. I'm sorry about this morning. I feel ashamed of myself for what I asked you and Myley to do."

She giggled. "I didn't mind. It wasn't unpleasant, just different. I know you liked watching us."

"Aye, but a decent husband doesn't ask his wife to do those perverse things."

"What sort of things did she do?"

Elara gasped. "Allan!" She pulled from Dalton's arms and rushed to Allan's side. "Are you hurt? How long have you been awake and listening to us?"

"Long enough to turn my stomach hearing you two coo and carry on." He winced as he sat up. "Where are we?"

"A holding cell," Dalton answered.

"How long are we being held?"

"Until they come for us," Elara replied, then bowed her head. "Salizar wants me to be his entertainment this evening."

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

Allan scowled. "What are you going to do, torture everyone with your horrible dancing?"

Dalton leapt to his feet and yanked Allan off the floor. "No! She's going to be taken by every male guest in the palace!" He shook Allan like a ragdoll. "This is all your fault! You brought her here!" He balled his hand into a fist. "I should—"

"Dalton! Stop!" Elara tugged on his jacket sleeve. "Beating him bloody won't help! It's not his fault! I tricked the guards and—"

"The guards!" Dalton turned to her. "What did you do with the guards? Did you harm them?"

"Of course not." She shook her head. "I left them tied to a tree. I'm sure they've gotten free by now. They were dimwitted, but not completely stupid."

"Then there's hope." Dalton released Allan. "Once the guards are free, they'll ride back to the palace and tell your father—"

"What? Cleave off my head?" Allan interrupted. "They failed in their royal duty and lost the king's only daughter. They're not likely to confess to that. It's a death offense."

"I don't think they would be too eager to help me anyway," she added. "I wasn't very nice to them."

"Why? What did you do?" Dalton asked. "How did you trick them?"

Elara bit her bottom lip. "Trust me, you don't want to know. You'll merely get angry with me again." She sighed. "But it was a good idea, Dalton. Eventually someone might

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miss me at the palace.”

“Who? The servants you shout at constantly?” Allan snapped. “We cannot rely on anyone to come to our aid. If we’re going to get out of here, we have to save ourselves. I’m not going to sit here and wait to be tortured or killed when all that separates us from freedom is a locked door.”

“But how do we get out?” Elara asked.

Allan rolled his eyes. “For heaven’s sake! Did that henna seep into your brain and make you stupid? We’ll use your head.”

“My head? How? Dash my skull against the door and—”

“Nay, feeble-minded sister, we’re going to use this,” Allan said as he ripped off her headdress.

Elara yowled. “Ow! That hurt! It was—”

“Pinned on, I know.” He unfastened the hairpins from the headdress. “I’ll bend these into shape, work the lock, and get us out of here.”

“You know how to pick locks?” Dalton asked.

“Of course I do,” Allan answered indignantly as he strolled to the door.

Dalton rolled his eyes and shook his head. “What kind of family did I marry into? And, pray tell, what do we do once we get free? We have no weapons.”

“Yes, we do,” Elara said. “Before we left, I slipped a small dagger into your inside jacket pocket. The way Davalos spoke to you in the room worried me, and I didn’t want you going anywhere unarmed.”

He kissed her. “That’s the devious woman I married!”

DALTON'S TEMPTATION

Allan fiddled with the door lock. A second later, it clicked. "We're all set."

Elara rushed to the door, her bells jingling. "Let's go!"

Dalton pulled her back. "Not yet. We need a plan."

"It's simple. We'll run away."

"No, Dalton's right," Allan agreed.

"This is no time to stand around talking. The sooner—"

"Elara, listen to me." Dalton clutched her shoulders in his hands. "We'll need to fight for our freedom, and fight hard, no matter what. I'll burn this place down if that's what it takes. But if you're captured..." he paused and cleared his throat, "...and the worst is about to happen, don't let them win. Do you know what I mean?"

She closed her eyes and swallowed hard. She understood. Their fight would be to the finish if necessary. "A vow is a vow, Dalton." She gazed into his blue eyes. "I'd sooner die than let that fat prick touch me."

"Wait for the right time, then find a weapon, any weapon, and use it freely, Elara. This isn't a game," Allan stated. "You're my sister and I'll protect you, no matter what."

"That's very noble of you, Allan," Dalton said.

Allan chuckled. "It's about time I did something noble in my life." He opened the door and peered out. "Hello! Guards!"

"Allan! What are you doing?" Elara snapped.

"If I call the guards to us, we can steal their swords," he replied. "We need to be rescued!" He paused for a moment. "Very rich people in need of rescue! Great rewards!" He

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stepped into the hallway, then turned back. "It's safe, and we're alone. Let's go."

Elara clasped Allan's hand and followed him down the deserted corridor. Her heart pounded like a drum, and her body broke out in a cold sweat. Escaping was dangerous, but the idea of sitting in the cell waiting to be taken to Salizar was a fate worse than death. Once they got upstairs, where would they go?

Dalton trailed behind her. "Allan, go up the staircase and turn to the right," he whispered.

They crept up the narrow stairwell single-file. As they rounded the corner, Allan stopped abruptly, and backed down three steps.

She squealed as he stepped on her foot. "Ow! Allan! Why did you stop? Keep going."

"I'm afraid I cannot," he muttered.

"Why in the blazes not?"

"Because the guard standing before me has a rather large sword pointed at my neck."

She heard Dalton curse behind her.

Davalos peeked around the bend in the stairs. "It's nice to see you all together. We were just coming for you, Princess. It's time to ready you for this evening's entertainment."

* * *

Dalton steeled his nerves as he, Elara, and Allan were led down the corridor by three armed guards. With only a tiny dagger as a weapon, any attempt to escape would be futile—

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for the moment. When the time was right, he'd make a move to free them. Biding their time would allow them to seize the best opportunity.

Elara clasped his hand and gazed up at him. He saw tears in her green eyes. He swallowed the lump in his throat and gave her hand a light squeeze. For her sake, he must remain strong. But if he lost her...

"Dear sister, now would be a good time for you to become as vulgar and as unappealing as possible," Allan said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You're not due for your female monthly by any chance are you?"

"Allan! How dare you say such a thing to me!"

He shrugged. "Merely a thought. If you were, it would work to your advantage. That makes a woman most undesirable."

"You're disgusting! And for your information, I've been blissfully lifted of that wretched curse for the past two months."

"What?" Dalton stopped walking and turned to Elara. "Is that true?"

"Aye, and I'm happy to be rid of the blasted thing!"

His heart skipped a beat. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what? That I'm not suffering and uncomfortable with female pains?"

"No, if you haven't had it, that means you're—" He stopped himself. Elara was well schooled in many areas, but obviously reproduction wasn't one of them. Now wasn't the

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time to tell her what he suspected; it would only worry her.

“Why are you grinning like that? We’re about to be killed and you look like you’ve just found a box full of gold,” she said.

He squeezed her hand. “I’ll tell you on the way home.”

The guards opened the wide doors to the Great Hall and shoved them forward. Dalton noticed a large wooden table had been brought into the room and set near the dais. His stomach dropped as he spotted the thick ropes fastened at either end. Two high-backed wooden chairs sat four feet from the table.

Davalos stood on the opposite side of the table. “As you can see, preparations are being made. His Supreme Worship has invited everyone to witness this,” he said, laughing. “Now it’s time your princess became presentable.”

Dashuri rose from her perch on Salizar’s dais and stepped forward.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite plaything,” Allan snapped. “Come for one last ride before—”

“Quiet!” Davalos shouted. “Guards, take the girl and make her ready.”

Two guards grabbed Elara. She kicked and struggled against them. “Bastards! Let me go!”

“Release her!” Dalton rushed at the guards, then stopped as he felt the cold steel of a sword jab into his ribs.

“Move, and I’ll have you mortally wounded. You’ll bleed to death slowly,” Davalos snarled.

Dalton watched helpless as Elara was dragged cursing and screaming from the Great Hall. Dashuri followed her out and

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closed the doors behind her.

"What about us?" Allan asked. "Do you have any idea what will happen to you when my father—"

"By then it will be too late for you. Tie them down securely," Davalos ordered the guards. "They should have a good view for tonight's fun."

Dalton and Allan were forced into the chairs at sword point. The guards bound their hands behind them. He turned to Allan. "Promise me something. No matter what, you'll find a way to get Elara out safely—even if it means leaving me behind. If I must sacrifice myself for her freedom, I will."

Allan squirmed against the ropes. "Wow! You really are in love, aren't you?" he teased.

"This is no time for jokes, Allan. She's carrying my child."

"What?" Allan's brown eyes widened. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Pretty sure. But she doesn't even suspect it."

"So that's why you had that grin on your face! Congratulations! But I cannot leave you behind. If I did, Elara would skin me alive. Don't worry, we're going to get out of here."

"How? We can't fight our way out."

Allan rolled his eyes. "I've been getting out of scrapes since I was ten years old. And I learned long ago, that when you cannot *fight* your way out of a mess, you do the next best thing."

"What's that?"

"*Bribe* your way out."

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* * *

"Take your hands off me!" Elara shouted at the guards as they pulled her into a suite. "I'm a royal princess and I demand that you—"

Dashuri slapped her across the face.

Elara gasped. "You hit me! You filthy whore!" Her pulse surged, and she kicked at Dashuri. "I'll have your head!"

"We'll see about that!" She walked into the bathchamber. "Bring her here."

Elara allowed the guards to drag her into the room. A deep bath filled with hot water awaited her, and a servant girl wearing purple scarves stood near the tub.

"See that she is cleaned for His Supreme Worship," Dashuri ordered. "I'll return in a few moments."

The girl nodded.

Elara kicked Dashuri in the leg as she passed by. "I'm not finished with you, slag. Not by a longshot."

"We'll see how bold you are after tonight," Dashuri snorted. "If you survive," she added as she left the bathchamber, followed by the guards.

The servant girl touched Elara's shoulder, and she slapped her hand away. "Don't touch me!"

"You must wash."

She folded her arms across her chest. "I refuse."

"But you must be clean for His Supreme Worship," the girl said.

"His Supreme Worship can go screw himself! I will not be clean for that fat slug. I'd sooner roll in manure." She looked

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away. If she delayed getting into the tub, it would give Allan and Dalton time to escape—and give her a chance to think of a way out of this mess.

“As you wish.”

The serving girl left the bathchamber and returned with a guard. Elara yelped as he ripped her clothes off, scooped her up, and plopped her into the tub.

“How dare you manhandle me!” She slapped him hard across the face.

“Bitch!” He grabbed the back of her neck and shoved her head under the water.

She held her breath as long as she could. After a minute, her lungs burned. She kicked and thrashed, desperate for air. The guard released her, and she came up coughing and choking.

“I hate you!”

“Obey this girl, or else,” he snarled, then left the room.

Elara sat immobile as the serving girl took a bar of soap off the shelf and began washing her.

“You are very lucky. It is a great honor to serve His Supreme Worship,” the girl said as she reached between Elara’s legs.

She grabbed her wrist and bent it backward. “Touch me there again and I’ll snap your arm in three places.” The girl’s eyes widened, and she released her. “If being with Salizar is such an honor, you go with him.”

The girl shook her head. “I am not worthy.”

An idea came to her, and she grinned. “Of course you are.

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You have served here faithfully. You adore Salizar, don't you?"

"Of course!"

"Then why not show him how eager you are to please him? You cannot let Dashuri always be his favorite. How can you ever hope to earn his favors if you're never given the chance to show your talents?"

The girl cocked her head to one side. "But you are the chosen one for tonight."

"Me? I'm no good." She shook her head. "I don't like the feel of men crushing me and shoving that thing far inside. Then when it's over, the mess..." She grimaced. "I would only disappoint His Supreme Worship and ruin his evening. Imagine how his guests will be disappointed! Salizar would be shamed! You don't want that, do you?"

"No, of course not!"

"But you...you would please Salizar and his guests. Once he knew of your skills, you'd become one of his favorites. If you were me, you could experience the pleasures and joys only a few special women know," she said, then waited, hoping the dimwitted girl would take the bait.

"But how could I become you?"

"I'll show you." She stood up in the soapy water. "But you must tell the guards to wait in the corridor."

Ten minutes later, Elara stepped back and admired her work. The serving girl wore a bejeweled blue and gold halter and scarves. Her brown hair was hidden beneath the blue headdress. The girl was thinner than she was, but they were

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nearly the same height. She prayed the deception would work—at least long enough to make an escape.

“My, you look so pretty,” she said. “Emperor Salizar will love you.”

“But this is wrong. His Supreme—”

“How can pleasuring Salizar be wrong? It’s your honor and duty. And what did I say about talking? You must be silent.” She covered the girl’s face with the blue veil.

Elara squeezed herself into the girl’s purple costume. The top was extremely tight, and she had to crush her tender breasts together to fasten the hook in front. She put on the headdress and fastened the veil just as Dashuri entered the room.

“Good, she’s ready. It’s time.”

Elara held her breath and prayed the girl would play along. Thankfully, she bowed her head and remained silent.

Dashuri chuckled. “So, the princess has nothing to say. Not going to beg for your freedom?”

“I don’t have to, bitch!”

As Dashuri turned to her, Elara kicked her hard in the stomach. Dashuri landed backward on the floor. In the blink of an eye, Elara straddled her shoulders and punched her in the jaw. Dashuri didn’t lift a hand to defend herself. “I see they taught you everything, whore, except how to fight!”

Elara ripped Dashuri’s veil off and stared at her. She had a big nose and a wide mouth with crooked teeth. “My God, you’re ugly! My horse is prettier than you are. No wonder they cover your face.” She smirked. “I meant to ask you, how

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did you like your end-to-end with those two hearty men?"

"Gua—"

Elara covered Dashuri's mouth with one hand, then reached between her legs and grabbed hold of her red satin covering. She felt each one of Dashuri's gold rings through the thin material. "Make a sound and I'll rip these out!"

Dashuri's eyes widened and she lay still.

She pulled off Dashuri's headdress, stuffed it into her mouth, and hauled her to her feet by her black hair. "Let's go, wench. It's time you got cleaned up."

Elara dragged Dashuri into the bathchamber and bent her head over the tub. She pulled off two of her red scarves, bound her hands together, and looped the scarves around the water faucet. Dashuri tried to kick her, and she smacked her across the mouth. Dashuri's head hit the side of the marble tub.

"That's for touching my husband, you filthy whore!"

Dashuri tried to spit out the headdress, but Elara shoved it back into her mouth. She yanked off Dashuri's satin covering and tied it behind her head, holding the headdress in place.

Dashuri's eyes blazed with fury.

She stood up and rested her hands on her hips. Dashuri was firmly bound and gagged. She wouldn't be going anywhere. "If you know what's good for you, wench, you'll sit here quietly. If I ever see you again, I shall not hesitate to end your life."

She straightened her headdress and strolled into the sitting room. The girl in blue stood near the sofa, trembling and wide-eyed. "If you don't want to end up like her, you'll do exactly

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as I say.”

* * *

Dalton stopped struggling against the ropes as the guests filed into the Great Hall. They muttered amongst themselves and pointed to them, but nobody addressed them directly. Most averted their eyes as they took their seats.

“I wonder what Salizar told them,” Allan mused. “It isn’t every day that you wander down to supper, find two princes being held captive, and do nothing.”

“For all we know, Salizar is rewarding their good behavior.”

Dalton watched as several girls came into the room and began serving drinks. The powerful elixir would make the men eager to take part in Salizar’s games.

“Hey! Earl Graystone!” Allan called out. “Do you think you could trouble yourself to remove my ropes? I seem to be stuck here.”

The earl glared at Allan and turned away.

“Fine! Act that way, you pompous old fart! I hope you know I deflowered your daughter at the midsummer ball two years ago!” Allan looked around. “Duke Wesley of Thirkhill, I see you there, hiding behind that potted plant. Be a good sport and loosen the ropes, eh?”

“I cannot. His Supreme Worship has given us instructions—”

“And what if I give you something more? How would you like an estate in Lerwick? Dalton’s uncle has plenty of fine

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land. He'd certainly be grateful for your intervention. Mayhap you'd rather have a castle? A stable of stud horses?"

The fair-haired duke shook his head.

"What about the rest of you?" Allan yelled. "Have you forgotten the vastness of our combined wealth? The first one of you with balls enough to stand up and release us shall be greatly rewarded."

"Any man who helps you shall be rewarded with death!" someone called out. "You broke the rules. You must pay for your disobedience!"

"Cowardly bastards!" Dalton shouted. "Have you no souls? You cannot simply sit there and do nothing while—"

A trumpet blared, cutting off his words.

Dalton craned his neck to see as the main doors opened. A serving girl and two guards escorted a woman wearing blue into the room.

"Elara!"

She ignored him and took her place at the foot of Salizar's dais. The serving girl in purple moved back and stood to the left of his chair.

"For God's sake, Elara, run!"

"Dalton, look up there." Allan gestured with his head toward the balcony. Several figures were moving about in the shadows.

"What did he do? Invite the whole empire?"

"I wouldn't doubt—"

The trumpet blared again, and Salizar entered the room with Davalos. The guests applauded as Salizar climbed onto

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the dais and sat on his throne.

“Honored guests, it gives me great pleasure to include you in our special festivities this evening. Throughout the meal, each of you shall be brought to this table to sample a special treat—”

Dalton turned his head and blocked out Salizar’s words. He couldn’t bear to listen. Why wasn’t Elara trying to get away? She couldn’t have given up, could she? Had they drugged her?

“Elara!”

The serving girl in purple knelt before him and removed a scarf from her waist. “Shh, do not disturb Salizar,” she whispered. She loosely wrapped the scarf around his mouth and stroked the front of his chest.

He glared at her as she slipped her hand inside his jacket and withdrew the small dagger. How had she discovered their only weapon so quickly?

Her green eyes locked onto his, and she winked. She stood up, concealing the dagger in her palm.

Dalton breathed a sigh of relief and let his shoulders slump forward. By the mercy of the gods, Elara had somehow managed to free herself.

“Dalton! Don’t just sit there! Do something!” Allan muttered.

Elara smacked Allan on the top of his head. He whirled around. “You little bitch!”

Dalton moved his head and the scarf fell away from his mouth. “Quiet! Don’t draw attention to us,” he whispered to

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Allan as Elara walked behind their chairs. A moment later, she started cutting through his ropes with the dagger.

He gazed around the room. All eyes were on Salizar. The fat bastard was still spewing nonsense to the royals about the honor they were about to be given. He felt the rope loosen around his wrists. Elara had nearly sliced through.

Salizar clapped his hands together. "Now, come to me, Princess."

Dalton watched as the girl in blue climbed up to the dais. Salizar rose from his throne and stood before her.

"I now present to you, Princess Elara!" Salizar ripped off the blue veil and gasped. The girl bowed her head. "What is the meaning of this? This isn't Elara! Where is she?" Salizar shouted at Davalos.

"Oh, shit!" He heard Elara mutter.

Allan glanced over his shoulder at Elara. "Run!"

Salizar shoved the impostor off the dais and pointed at Elara. "Get her!"

Elara placed the dagger in Dalton's hand just as two guards grabbed her. She screamed as they dragged her to the dais. "Let me go! Get your hands off me!"

Dalton sliced through the ropes as fast as he could. Every second was precious if he stood any hope of saving Elara.

"Did you think you could fool me?" Salizar shouted as he ripped off Elara's purple veil. "Now you shall suffer doubly!"

Elara dropped to her knees in front of Salizar. "I beg you, Your Supreme Worship, spare me. Spare us all." She clasped her hands together and looked up at him. "My father is

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wealthy. He'll pay anything you ask, merely set us free."

Salizar laughed and gazed around at the nobles. "See how she begs me for mercy? She knows I hold her pathetic life in my hands. Mayhap I shall be generous and spare her life, once I've had my fill of her."

"Have your fill of this!" Elara brought her forearms up fast, ramming her clasped fists into Salizar's crotch.

Salizar yelped and doubled over, holding his groin. "Kill them!"

Elara jumped off the dais just as Dalton freed his hands. A guard rushed at him, and he kicked him in the stomach. The guard stumbled backward. Dalton leapt to his feet and smashed his fist into the guard's nose. He heard Elara scream and looked up in time to see Davalos grab her around the waist and slam her onto the wooden table.

"Dalton, watch out!" Allan warned.

He turned and found himself face to face with a guard, sword raised for a fatal blow. Before he could blink, a flurry of arrows shot out of nowhere. The guard went down.

"What the hell?" Where had the arrows come from? He spun around. The royals were shouting and scrambling away from their tables. Several nobles, including the Duke of Thirkhill, were beating on the doors, trying to get free.

"They've been barred! We're all trapped!"

"Dalton! Over there! The table!" Allan shouted.

He ran to the table. Davalos had Elara pinned down and was struggling to climb on top of her. An arrow shot into his side, knocking him to the floor.

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"The next man to move, dies!" a voice bellowed from the balcony.

Everyone froze. Dalton peered up into the balcony. King Maxwell emerged from the shadows, surrounded by a band of archers.

Elara scrambled off the table and rushed to Dalton's side. He wrapped his arms around her. "Are you hurt?"

She clutched him around the ribs. "No, but I was so scared," she whispered.

He kissed her forehead. "You did good, love."

"If you two are done kissing, would it be too much trouble to set me free?" Allan wriggled in the chair. "I'm still a hostage."

Salizar rose to his feet and turned toward the balcony. "You have no business here!"

King Maxwell stepped forward, his loaded bow pointed straight at Salizar. "I've come for my daughter. Make one move toward her and I'll put an arrow straight into your black heart."

"I demand—"

"You demand nothing! You and the rest of these so-called nobles are nothing but worthless scum! Your cowardice will not go unnoticed," King Maxwell said, gazing around the room. "We're leaving, now. Try to stop us and the floor of this perverse palace will puddle with blood."

The main doors opened, and a dozen royal guards marched in.

Dalton picked up the dagger and cut the ropes binding

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Allan's hands. "Nice rescue," he teased.

"We're still alive, aren't we?" Allan joked as he stood up.

"Dalton, there's a carriage waiting outside. Take them and go. The guards will escort you," Maxwell shouted from the balcony.

"You're not going anywhere!" Salizar screamed.

King Maxwell let his arrow fly. It landed an inch in front of Salizar. "I should kill you for what you tried to do. Don't tempt me," he growled. "They leave freely. Anyone who tries to stop them shall be mortally wounded."

Dalton clasped Elara's hand and strode to the double doors. "Let's go."

"Wait for me!" Allan said, following close behind. "I don't want to be around when father starts asking questions!"

* * *

Dalton jerked awake as his head bumped against the interior of the carriage. He straightened up and glanced down at Elara. She lay curled up on the seat, fast asleep with her head in his lap. In an effort to avoid facing his father, Allan had opted to ride in the carriage traveling behind them.

The king sat across from him, fuming. After he had given him a brief explanation of what had happened, Maxwell hadn't said much.

Maxwell cleared his throat. "I've lain two wives to rest, and today I came quite close to burying two of my children. How could you let this happen? Elara nearly—" He closed his eyes for a moment. "I shouldn't blame you. I should have

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known she'd try to follow you. When she didn't appear for supper the day you left, I grew suspicious. I had the entire palace and grounds searched, to no avail."

"She hid in the supply cart. When I found her, I sent her home under escort. But—"

"She tricked the guards and rode off, I know. A guard named Aubrey came to the palace and told the gatekeeper that Elara had run away." Maxwell grinned. "By the time I finished questioning him, he was the color of milk and weeping like a child."

"Only one guard came back? I sent her home with two. Where's the other one? Did Aubrey say how she tricked them?"

"I got all the details. When you hear what she did you're likely to put her over your knee." Maxwell clenched his jaw and shook his head. "Once we're settled, these willful, disobedient children of mine are going to be very sorry they pulled this stunt! Allan is just as much, if not more, to blame for this as Elara. I don't care how old they are, I'm still their father, and they're going to answer to me for this!"

Dalton stroked Elara's short red hair. "I think you'll see a different side of Elara from now on. Her little adventure turned out to be anything but fun. She had quite a scare. I think she's learned her lesson."

"We all had a scare." Maxwell took a silver flask from his jacket pocket. "When I found out where she'd gone, I feared the worst. I couldn't let her fall into the clutches of that madman. I summoned the guards, sent word to your uncle, and

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left immediately.” Maxwell took a sip of liquor and handed the flask to him.

“I’m glad you did. I’ll admit, I was worried.” He took a long drink and gave the flask back to the king. Although neither of them spoke of it directly, it *had* been a close call. If the guard hadn’t stepped up and done the right thing, or if Maxwell had been delayed, the situation could have had a deadly outcome.

“Will Salizar seek revenge?”

“I highly doubt it. Despite his claims of power and strength, deep down he’s a coward who thrives on exploiting those weaker than he is. But then again, he’s deranged, and he was publicly humiliated.” Maxwell scratched his red beard. “It might be prudent for you and Elara to go away for awhile. Perhaps you should spend some time in the country or visit your relatives in Lerwick.”

He nodded. “That’s a good idea. Elara’s going to need her rest, especially for the next several months.”

“Why?”

Dalton rested his hand on Elara’s belly. “Because if my suspicions are correct, you’re going to be a grandfather.”

Maxwell chuckled and raised the flask to his lips. “Boy, are you going to have your hands full.”

KELLI A. WILKINS

Kelli A. Wilkins is a multi-published author who writes in several genres. Her romance novellas, *A Most Unusual Princess*, *The Sexy Stranger*, and *The Dark Lord* were winners in the 2005 Amber Quill Press Heat Wave Contest. Kelli has completed five (as yet unpublished) full-length romance novels and has published dozens of romance, horror, and science fiction short stories. Her non-fiction pet care books include *Cats*, *Quick & Easy Cat & Kitten Care*, *The Simple Guide to Cats*, and *Hermit Crabs for Dummies*.

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