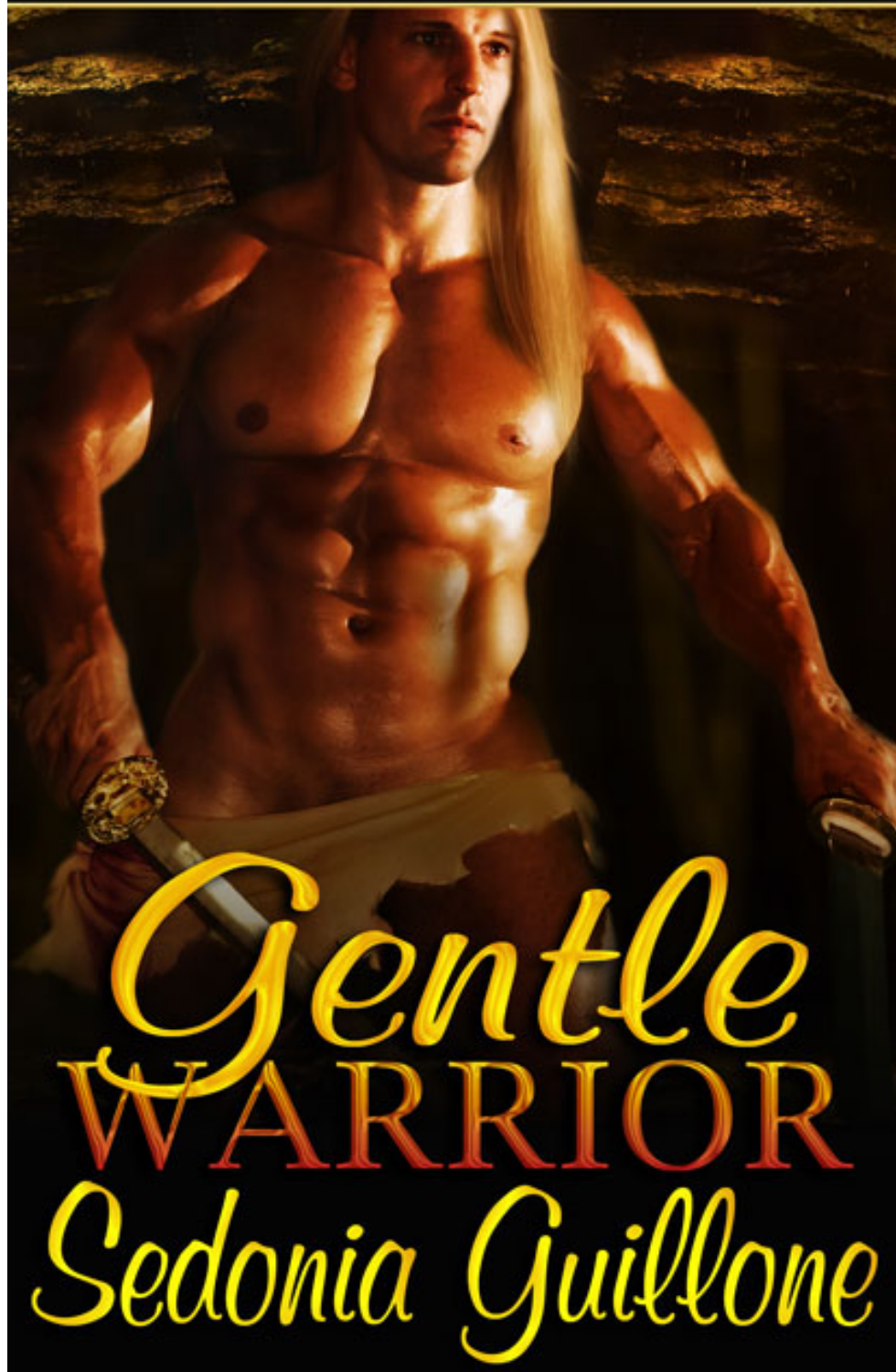


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Gentle
WARRIOR
Sedonia Guillone

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Gentle Warrior

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GENTLE WARRIOR

Sedonia Guillone

Dedication

For Mitch—the love of my heart and the guide of my spirit.

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Chapter One

Kingdom of Pierra, 3,548th year of Galen, Planet Adamah of the Weiran Solar System

Ariana slipped into the queen's chambers just after midnight. The guards on either side of the ornately carved wooden doors stood aside to let her through. They did not ask her to announce herself, for Ariana was Queen Maya's favorite slave and was allowed to come and go freely.

These men, heavily muscled and naked except for white loincloths around their hips, averted their eyes from Ariana as she approached, forbidden as they were to gaze on her beauty. If the queen's favorite should tell her possessive mistress that they had looked on her with lust, they would come to a very bad end.

Ariana brushed past them, her blue silken gown whispering about the curves of her body. She heard the guards shut the heavy doors behind her as she moved deeper into the inner chamber. The room itself felt like a cavern, dark and deep, lit only by the glow of flickering torches held in sconces on the stone walls. The air was heavily perfumed with sandalwood incense, an aroma that made her heady and languid.

The queen's gigantic bed stood in the middle of the room, a luxurious plateau of feather mattresses, fur coverings and silken pillows. Heavy wooden posts held up the massive canopy, draped with filmy curtains of dusky silk. Through them, Ariana could see the queen, seated on the edge of her bed, having her long ebony hair brushed by one of her maids.

When Maya saw her approach, a smile spread across her smooth, catlike face and she beckoned to her. "Ariana," she said in her silky voice, "Come, sit with me."

Ariana approached the bedside and kneeled in obeisance, then rose and seated herself on the plush fur coverlet. She looked on her queen with affection, on the

woman's sleek golden skin and shimmering raven hair. Of all the royalty and ministers in the palace, the queen had always treated her with the most kindness.

Maya turned to her maid. "You may go now, Celine. And tell Sorian to deliver my two favorite men from the *haram*." The queen smiled at Ariana. "We shall have a bit of fun this night."

Celine nodded and set the brush onto a tray, which sat on the bedside table. "Yes, my lady," she replied. The girl retreated obediently but not before casting a dark look at Ariana. The girl was jealous, Ariana knew, not only of Ariana's sumptuous mane of ruby-colored hair but also of her coveted place in the queen's heart.

Ariana felt the hatred like a knife slicing her skin. Even though she had been in service to the Pierran court for the last eight years since reaching her eighteenth birthday, she was still unaccustomed to the intrigues and backbiting inherent in all levels of palace life.

When the maid had left, Maya turned to Ariana, drinking her in with dark, velvety eyes. The queen's assured smile had faded somewhat, replaced by a troubled shadow. She reached up and entwined her graceful, jeweled fingers into the wild mass of Ariana's fiery ringlets. Ariana knew that it had been her crimson hair and cream-colored skin that had won the queen four years ago.

Maya had seen her for the first time in one of the court performances, a lustful, lurid show in which she had been on her hands and knees, pleasuring a man, her lips tight around his thick cock while behind her, another man threw off his loincloth and mounted her wildly, burying his shaft deeply within her sheath, his large hands gripping the curves of her hips. After the performance, the queen had asked her guard to bring Ariana to her chambers and had made the girl her personal slave. Since then, no one else in the court was permitted her services and in turn, no minister or royal dared touch Ariana, lest he or she provoke the queen's wrath.

"I wished to speak with you alone before our companions arrive," Maya told her, her words conveying a deep sadness. The queen was a woman of rapacious appetites,

rarely satisfied with one partner at a time. From the fact that Maya had called her here alone first, to talk, Ariana knew that what her mistress wanted more than mere satiation was comfort, a comfort that she seemed to take from her slave's company. Maya gazed on her as she let the soft curls slip between her fingers.

Ariana took the liberty of reaching out to touch the queen's cheek, a boldness that Maya allowed only her. "Are you troubled, my queen?" she asked softly.

The other woman sighed and she withdrew her hand from the copper fire of Ariana's hair to put it over her pale one. "Always," Maya answered. "Something is wrong among my ministers. I feel it." She shook her head. "They have never wanted a woman in power over them, especially one who has proven herself to be of equal strength."

"Have you told the prince?"

Prince Dorian had recently entered his twenty-third year and was next in line to the throne of Pierra after his mother.

The queen's eyes of dark velvet opened wide and she chuckled wryly. "My son? I wouldn't be surprised if he were behind what's happening. He is easily swayed by men like Dogon. I believe it was he who had my general try to kill me four years ago." She shook her head. "How I wish Elan, my elder, could be king," she said sadly. "He would rule wisely and well." Her beautiful face darkened. "But because his father wasn't my husband, he must hide, that they don't seek him out and kill him."

Maya sighed again. "If only Karan hadn't turned on me the way he did. I depended on him. My position has been greatly weakened without his protection. He was my prize." She fell silent and closed her eyes again and squeezed Ariana's hand.

Ariana remembered when General Karan had been found standing over the sleeping queen, a dirk raised in his hand. Ariana had just begun as Maya's personal slave and was on her way to her chambers when she heard the commotion echoing through the wide marbled halls of the palace. The general had been shouting something she couldn't understand, perhaps in his native language of the northern Veltlands.

Then she had seen him, a large warrior with a mane of silvery blond hair, struggling to free himself from the guards who were dragging him away. He possessed such great physical strength that it had taken four men of equal size to restrain him.

As his punishment for trying to murder the queen, he had been stripped of his rank, whipped and branded on the cheek and hand. His home and lands had been burned and his wife murdered. He was banished from the palace grounds, his life spared for the purpose of forcing him to live and suffer his humiliation.

It was said he had a daughter but no one knew of her fate. Since then, Karan had been seen stalking the cave-filled hills beyond the Sylvan lands just outside the kingdom. No one knew why he stayed so close to the place of his shame and agony but most people, even hunters, avoided that area, for fear of falling into his hands and being the victim of his revenge.

“You have ministers who are loyal, do you not, mistress?” Ariana asked.

Maya looked up “Aye,” she murmured. “But none so loyal as you.”

Ariana felt pity in her heart for her mistress, even though she felt the queen had abandoned Karan. Somehow, Ariana had always sensed that something else had happened, that Karan was innocent of such a crime as attempted assassination, although she didn’t know what the truth could be. More likely dark magery than anything else.

The heavy doors to the chamber opened then, cutting off Ariana’s response and two brawny men walked in. Maya’s favorite male slaves.

Ariana watched their near-naked forms as they approached the large bed, muscles shining with scented oil, and bowed to their queen.

Both men were from Marea like herself, Ariana observed, as her body came alive with heat from the sight of their muscled torsos, nearly as bulging as Karan, whose face and form Ariana had never forgotten. Tanned skin, wide yet graceful in movement, as only men who’d grown up by the sea, swimming and fishing, could be.

"Come, men," Maya said, her silky tone resumed. No one but Ariana ever heard or saw the sad, troubled woman of the previous moment. "Pleasure your queen."

Without speaking, both men stripped off their loincloths and obeyed. The huge bed barely sank under the weight of the two muscular males. Maya laughed and reached for the dark-haired man, immediately entwining one jeweled hand into his dark curls. He turned and closed his mouth softly over hers. The queen murmured deep in her throat and turned her body into his.

The other slave knelt close to Ariana, not having been given his order yet. Ariana's gaze moved between him and the queen entwined with her partner.

Maya broke her kiss and turned onto her back. "Ariana," she breathed, "You know what I like to see."

"Aye, my lady." Ariana's heartbeat rose. As she'd done so many times she reached out, cupped the golden-haired man's face in her hands and kissed him, knowing from long practice just what kind of kiss her mistress enjoyed witnessing.

Softly and slowly, she ran the tip of her tongue over the man's dusky lips, parting them to taste the inside of his mouth in light, quick circular motions along the inside of his lips and tongue.

A low moan issued from the man's throat and one large hand curled into Ariana's hair. A small ache pulsed in Ariana's chest at the touch. So many times she'd done this and each time had wished there were more between herself and the man she kissed and touched. She imagined they were in love. Perhaps he was a man as seemingly noble as General Karan.

"Ariana," the queen whispered, "Suck him, now."

Ariana pulled softly away from the kiss and glanced at her queen. Her partner was caressing Maya's breasts under her wrap, his lips burrowed in the curve of the woman's neck, teasing it with small nibbles and licks. Maya's dark eyes were velvety. "Please, do it, Ariana. Make me forget it all, just for a little while."

"Yes, my lady," she whispered. She smiled and lifted her gown over her head, letting it fall to the marbled floor, then lowered herself to the man's tight erection. His shaft, surrounded at the thick base by a nest of springy dark blond hairs, jutted in a determined curve from his body. A tiny droplet of seed oozed from the tip and Ariana made a show of licking it off, causing the man to groan. His large fingers curled again into her hair and he pushed his hips slightly against her lips as she took him into her mouth.

Mm, he did taste good, clean and male. Ariana closed her eyes and slid her lips over the plump head while lightly grasping the base of his thick cock with her fingers. The man's fingers tightened in her hair and Ariana pretended he was her lover, that they adored each other and would fall asleep in each other's embrace when the pleasure of sex had spent itself.

"Yes, Ariana, that's beautiful." The queen's husky voice carried to Ariana's ears and she knew Maya was pleased. Urged on, Ariana slid her fingertips across the man's balls, caressing the tight roundness with careful strokes. He groaned again and began a pumping rhythm with his hips. Each thrust pushed his cock deeper into Ariana's mouth and she tightened her lips, enjoying the silky glide of the hard muscle against the softness of her tongue.

Ariana slid both hands now to the man's hard round buttocks. She squeezed them, felt the power of their flex as he pumped gently against her sucking. She felt the queen's gaze on her and heard the queen moan as her handsome partner, no doubt, had now slipped his fingers into the queen's sex and caressed her as she watched the show.

With a sigh, Ariana relaxed her throat muscles and took her partner in as deeply as she could. He moaned and grasped at her hair. His cock twitched against her tongue and she felt his impending climax. Tightening her lips, she increased the pressure and squeezed his ass cheeks. That was all it took. Warm seed spurted, hit the back of her throat and slipped down. She did love the salty-sweet taste and swallowed it, as if somehow, this man's life force could bring her the love she craved.

When the man's had emptied himself fully, she let his cock slip from her mouth and sat up. Her own body pulsed with heat, tingling in her nipples and sex but the man did not seem inclined to give her release, sitting back as he was panting.

A feminine moan turned her attention. The dark-haired man was nestled between Maya's thighs, riding her. The queen's jeweled hands gripped his backside and a smile stretched her lips.

Ariana turned away, respectfully waiting until the queen had her fill and stretched out alongside her equally satisfied partner, sighing contentedly. She turned over and smiled at Ariana. "My dear," she purred, "You are a treasure beyond jewels."

"Thank you, my lady."

"I daresay I won't need my sleeping potion this night." Maya yawned. "I am unusually tired." She looked at the two men. "Thank you for your services, gentlemen. You may return to your quarters."

Wordlessly, they both bowed and slipped off the bed. Ariana watched their muscles flex as they each retrieved their fallen loincloths from the floor and tied them back on their hips. As they bowed again and retreated, Ariana tried to ignore the ache in her chest. Once again, her wish for a strong lover to cradle her in his arms to sleep would not be real.

When they were gone, Maya gestured to the goblet one of her chambermaids had placed on her bedside table before Ariana came in. The queen always had difficulty sleeping and relied heavily on her chemist's mixture of sleep-inducing wildflowers. "I suppose I should take my potion anyhow. My dreams are fevered and horrific otherwise."

"I'm sorry for that, my lady. I would only wish you happiness, even in your sleep." And she meant it. In spite of the queen's selfish arrogance, Maya had kindness in her too.

Maya purred her satisfaction. "Were you anyone else, Ariana," she murmured, "I would think you were merely flattering me." She leaned over and pressed a kiss onto

Ariana's hair. "But I know you speak only the truth to me. It's one of the reasons I cherish you."

Ariana stroked her mistress's obsidian hair. "Thank you, my lady," she whispered, even though Maya's words had brought a shiver to her bones. She hoped her honesty with her queen really did mean something.

General Karan's honesty had not. It had been said he never lied to Maya and that he had served her with unerring loyalty. He had once been a slave himself, snatched from a traveling group of Veltlanders. His physical strength had been evident even as a boy and the Pierrans placed him in the army. Karan killed his first man at fourteen, while still only a page. He had risen to his rank through hard work and sheer determination and strength. The queen rewarded him with wealth and a beautiful Pierran wife. What reason would he have had to turn on her and come at her with a knife as she slept?

Ariana had always suspected foul play against the general but didn't dare broach the subject with her mistress who was now much more at ease. There was no fruit to gain in dredging up the bitter past. No doubt, a conjuror's hand was responsible for the queen's attitude toward General Karan but Maya believed herself invulnerable to magery and would be angry with Ariana for suggesting otherwise.

So Ariana kept her silence. Her queen was plagued enough with troubles in the present and Ariana's only duty was to bring the woman comfort and pleasure.

Maya sat up and reached for the goblet on her bedside table. She dipped her forefinger into the potion and smoothed a few drops onto Ariana's lips.

"Have a sip, my sweet Ariana."

Ariana took the goblet. "Yes, my lady," she answered.

She didn't wish to drink the potion but to refuse would be a suspicious act. She lifted the golden chalice to her lips and took as tiny a sip as she could, struggling as she swallowed not to show her mistress how offensive the potion was.

By the gods! The concoction burned a trail of liquid fire down her throat, all the way to the pit of her stomach. The next she knew, her eyelids began to flutter heavily, as if they were made of lead instead of flesh.

Terror overtook Ariana as she realized what was happening. She could feel the chalice being lifted from her hand.

“No!” Ariana struggled to cry out to the queen. *It’s poisoned!* But her whole body and face were growing unbearably heavy and numb. Helplessly, she fell back against the pillows as the shadowy, incense-filled chamber faded to gray.

In her haze, she heard the emptied goblet clatter on the marble floor. Then she felt the queen’s supple body slump against hers, just as the gray faded to black.

Chapter Two

Ariana opened her eyes to a fierce pounding in her head and churning in her stomach. She did not know how long she'd slept, for the queen's bedchamber was windowless and remained a cave of torchlit shadows at all times.

At first she didn't remember the evening before. She felt a weight on her body and looked down at the queen whose head of obsidian hair lay on her stomach.

She put a hand on the queen's cheek. "My lady," she whispered.

The queen, who usually slept with deep, sigh-filled breaths, lay unnaturally still.

"Mistress," Ariana said, a bit more loudly.

The queen did not stir and Ariana began to remember what had happened.

Terror rising, she pressed her fingertips to the queen's pulse. There was no movement. Maya's heart no longer beat.

Ariana cried out softly as she realized her queen was gone, leaving only the lithe golden body, now an empty shell. She covered her mouth to stifle her cries of grief and horror. The only person in the world who gave her anything resembling love and affection was gone, ripped from her by some greedy, power-hungry traitor. She slumped over Maya's body and clung to her, sobbing quietly in the shadows.

Her tears were interrupted by voices echoing in the antechamber. Ariana's heart surged fiercely when she realized what would happen if she were found leaning over Maya's corpse.

First the general, now me.

Frantically she disengaged her body from the queen's and slipped off the large bed. Without a chance to look back at her mistress, she snatched up her gown from the floor

and slipped behind a wall tapestry, into a small opening in the stones only she knew about.

The opening brought her into the palace's network of underground passages. Ariana had discovered them as a child playing around the palace. Even then she had been in service, fetching and carrying for the kitchen slaves. But in her spare time she was allowed to play.

She had been young then, no more than eight when the Pierran soldiers had invaded her village, taking women and children for slaves. Her red hair had made her a prize and she had been kept working until she was old enough to serve with her body.

The secret passages were ancient, woven into the structure of the palace only shortly after Lord Galen had created mankind.

Ariana's discovery of the passageways had renewed her, giving her something she could call her own, a sanctuary where she could be alone with her thoughts and feelings. The dark, damp corridors were like a womb and it was in their depths that she knew peace.

Many times she had thought of escaping Pierra through the passages and making her way back to her homeland. But she was a slave with no money and no other skills besides her arts of pleasure. She did not even own a pair of sandals. None of the *haram* slaves did, for there was no need of footwear when most of one's life was spent in a bed. When the queen had taken her for herself, Ariana had then become afraid to leave the one person she believed loved her.

Now, however, she plunged ahead in the pitch blackness, any reservations about escape, vanished. Her life depended on flight. She needed no light, as she knew the dank hidden maze better than she did the palace that concealed it. She did not hesitate or even cry out when her bare feet stepped on one of the maze's furry, long-tailed inhabitants who squealed in protest.

Ariana knew of one exit to the outside world. During her childhood explorations, she'd found daylight stealing through chinks in the stone. There was a round block of

wood sealing a hole in the stones. She'd pushed it and found she'd reached the far corner of the palace wall. A thick cluster of gnarled old trees concealed the opening. From there she would be able to swim the moat and go into the cover of the Sylvan Lands.

As she'd known, faint rays of light showed up ahead as she approached the corridor that led to her escape. Swiftly, she moved along the cool packed earth, using the damp stone walls to guide her. The escape hole was small, with barely enough room to spare as she pulled the wooden block aside, dropped to her hands and knees and crawled through. The gnarled trees covering the escape hole tore at her dress, skin and hair and the rocky soil dug into her palms and knees. But she lunged ahead, desperate to get as far away as possible before the queen's body was found. The first of the three Weiran suns was rising and the other two would soon follow, leaving her completely visible.

Ariana plunged into the moat, splashing her way across the freezing water. Once across, she scrambled up the steep muddy bank and ran across the meadow, finally able to disappear under the thick canopy of the Sylvan Lands.

* * * * *

Inside the forest was dark and cool, with only faint shafts of sunlight piercing the overhead branches. Ariana stumbled around for what seemed hours, unable to find any sort of path. Her feet and hands were badly scraped and she grew hungry.

As the day wore on and the first Weiran sun began to set, she grew exhausted from the potent combination of terror, hunger and grief. She wanted to curl up into a ball on the loamy ground and rest but forged on lest soldiers from the palace come upon her and punish her as they had once punished the general.

The forest began to darken as the second sun faded over the horizon. What little light penetrated the forest canopy was rapidly fading. Ariana looked frantically around in the darkening gloom, whimpering in fear and frustration. Since she was a little girl,

she had known only the palace where all her needs for food and clothing were met. Her only survival skills were those necessary for dealing with palace intrigues. Out here, she felt utterly helpless. Her only hope was to stay in one spot and rest until the morning. The third sun was almost gone and soon the darkness would swallow her.

Ariana crouched down, pressing her injured palms into the damp rotting leaves on the forest floor. She dropped to her knees, taking the first moment of rest she'd had all day. Soon her eyelids grew heavy and her head and shoulders drooped. She did not fight sleep, surrendering to the possibility of a few hours' escape from her peril.

In her dreams, she heard the night animals crying and croaking. Footsteps sounded on the wet leaves, pattering in her ears. Suddenly she gasped, ripped from sleep by a pair of huge, iron-strong arms gripping her from behind. With her arms pinned tightly to her body, Ariana could not move and felt herself being hauled up roughly from the ground. She started to scream but a large hand clamped down on her mouth. Her toes dragged along the ground as her assailant carried her swiftly through the forest.

Though the forest was pitch black, her attacker moved with the sureness of a wild creature with night vision. Even in the midst of choking and bouncing around, Ariana realized that the man who carried her was not one of the palace guards. Not one of those men would be able to move through the Sylvan Lands in the black of night with such ease.

She did not struggle or try to scream again and soon, her kidnapper stopped and slung her over his shoulder the way peasants did sacks of wheat or barley.

The man wore skins of *chaya* beasts and the fur of his clothing brushed her face as her cheek bobbed against his powerful backside. He did not slow down until he reached a break in the trees. From her upside down position, she could make out the fiery orange ball that was the Weiran moon, deep in the purple sky. But that was the last thing she saw, for hanging upside down had caused all the blood to rush into her head. She was so nauseous from not eating and from being bounced upside down, that

when her captor began climbing into the rocky hills of the caves, the world went black...

* * * * *

When she awoke, she found herself in a shadowy room. Firelight flickered off stone walls. She blinked. Was it possible she'd been having a nightmare and was still in the queen's bedchamber?

But when she tried to rise, she couldn't. Her wrists were bound together behind her back and her ankles were bound at the end of her outstretched legs. She was sitting up with her back against stone, looking out into what appeared to be a cave.

Her captor was in the middle of the room, crouched by the fire, bent over something she could not see. Beyond him, was a yawning hole through which she could see the dark night and the Weiran moon.

The man was large and even covered in his tunic of furs, Ariana could make out his warrior's build. Part of his muscular back was exposed, the skin crisscrossed by deep angry scars. The firelight glinted off his mane of silver-blond hair. Ariana caught her breath. She knew exactly who had captured her.

As she watched, he turned around, obviously aware of her gaze on him. When he saw her eyes were open, he rose from the fire and approached her.

Karan knelt down, thrusting his large face close to hers. His eyes were a deep blue, the color of the sky when all three Weiran suns shone at once. He had high cheekbones and his strong jaw was covered with a wild silky beard the same color as his hair. Though the beard was full, it did not quite cover the queen's brand on his right cheek. Ariana saw in him the beauty of raw male power and in spite of her fear, felt a slight pulsing between her thighs.

"Who are you?" he growled, so close that she could feel his warm breath on her face and smell the smoke of the fire in his beard.

"I'm Ariana," she said softly. "I was the queen's slave."

"Aye? Is that so?" he replied in a Pierran heavily tinged by his Veltish accent. "Did she send you to spy on me?"

At his question about Queen Maya, Ariana felt her eyes fill with tears. "My lady's dead, sir. Someone poisoned her. I'll be to blame. I fled for my life."

Karan's eyebrows drew together. He wore a fierce expression and looked about to answer her harshly. But as he continued to stare into her eyes, he seemed to think the better of it and softened. "Why do you address me thus?" His tone was less gruff.

"Address you how, my lord?"

"Like that. With titles of respect. Don't you know who I am?"

"Aye, General. I know who you are."

Karan's face went dark and he reached out, grabbing a fistful of her hair and forcing her head back. "Do you mock me? Why shouldn't I drag you back down there to suffer your punishment as I suffered mine?"

Ariana began to tremble. Rivulets of fear pulsed through her bound body. She stared widely at him, grimacing from the pain of his hold on her hair. "Please don't, my lord," she begged. "I don't want to die there! I'm innocent!"

Karan once again pushed his face into hers, so close that their noses almost touched. "What if you're lying?" he growled. "I could just kill you right now."

Ariana looked into his eyes. After long years of struggling to survive as a slave in the palace, she had developed a sensitivity that enabled her to anticipate another's needs, motives and feelings just by a look or a gesture. Sometimes, even by the footfall of her approaching queen, she knew the woman's mood and what treatment would please her most.

Now, her gaze plumbed the depths of Karan's eyes, past the glittering blue to his soul. Underneath the anger he showed her was great suffering and torment. She felt his goodness and nobility. And she also knew he did not really want to hurt her.

All her fear left her in that moment. "I would rather die by your hand, lord. By the hand of one who is honorable and decent. And innocent. I know —"

"Stop it!" Karan hissed, releasing her hair as if it had burned him. He continued to stare at her. But after several moments, the ferocity drained from his features. He did not move away and though he looked at her less harshly, his eyes still radiated mistrust.

Ariana squirmed again in her bonds. Her wrists were horribly chafed and pain radiated upward, all the way to her shoulders. "Please, my lord! Don't let them find me! I throw myself on your mercy!" She stifled a sob, though tears escaped unbidden. They ran down her cheeks and she was helpless to stop them or wipe them away as she watched Karan for his next reaction. He seemed to have some sort of battle going on inside him but what it was, she couldn't tell.

As he watched her, his eyes began to rake over her body as if he had just become aware of her beauty.

Under his gaze, Ariana realized that she was almost naked. Her silk dress, already sheer enough to show the outlines of her breasts and pubic mound, was badly torn, exposing her nipples. The skirt of her gown had also ridden up her legs, making her thighs visible almost to her sex. One more inch and Karan would have been able to see the red curls that covered it.

"What will you give me in return?" he asked, his voice having fallen to a more husky tone.

Ariana felt the gentle pulsing resume between her thighs.

"Whatever you wish, my lord," she answered. "I swear it. But please, unbind me, I beg you. I'm in pain and I haven't eaten since yesterday. And I'm cold. I promise, if I prove to be a wretch, you may kill me."

Something in her voice must have touched Karan, for he gave a start, as if shocked from a trance.

"Forgive me," he said softly. "I have become the animal they tried to make of me." He leaned over and untied her wrists and ankles. "I'm sorry. I'll bring some bandages."

He went to a corner of the cave and disappeared, returning with a bowl of water and a rag. Gently, he washed her cuts, carefully taking each hand and foot in his large hand and smoothing the wet rag over the damaged skin. Then he patted the wounded parts dry and bandaged them.

His touch was surprisingly gentle and Ariana leaned back, closing her eyes with relief. When she opened them again, Karan had gone to the fire and brought her back a crude wooden plate with a piece of roasted meat on it and a goblet of water.

"Here," he said, setting her meal on the ground beside her. "It's not palace fare but it's all I have." He sounded embarrassed.

"Thank you, my lord. For me, it's a feast." The smell of the food made her mouth water and she devoured it like a starving beast, grateful that the general had turned his back on her ravening and gone to the fire again. She washed her food down with greedy gulps of water.

When she'd finished, Karan took her plate and cup. He then went to a trunk against one wall and pulled out some fur skins. He set one on the floor for a bed and draped the other one over Ariana's near-nakedness.

"There," he said. "Sleep now."

Ariana looked up at him, almost in tears. "Thank you, lord," she said in a whisper. "You are kind."

He looked down at her. The fierceness was gone from his face and she saw only sadness. Had she not been so pained and exhausted, she would have embraced him and placed a tender kiss on his lips.

He sighed. "Sleep now," he repeated. He turned and went back to his place by the fire.

The warmth of the flames reached Ariana and she lay down, wrapping the fur covering tightly around her. She felt the beginnings of illness stir in her body, remembering her chill in the freezing water along with all the other grief and stress she'd endured.

She glanced at the general's strong crouching form. Now she could hear the gentle scraping of a knife blade against wood. Her head still hurt and her body ached mercilessly. She knew how utterly helpless she was now, how completely dependent on Lord Karan's sense of honor for her life.

Ariana closed her eyes, lulled by the crackling of the fire and, strangely, by the general's nearness. She knew deep in her being that in spite of how he had treated her at first, he was truly a man of honor and would keep her safe from the palace guards. For his protection, she would gratefully serve him. She had nothing else to give but her body.

Except her heart. He so obviously had gone deprived of the softness of love. She craved to give that to him as well. He was everything she'd seen when she looked into his soul. He was decent and honorable and strong. He had all of Maya's good qualities without her rapaciousness. Ariana had loved the woman but was not blind to her faults.

The sounds of Karan's wood carving grew fainter. Ariana felt herself succumbing to sleep. But not before she uttered a silent prayer to Lord Galen. *Please, Lord!* She begged silently. *Let it be your will that he would have me!*

Chapter Three

By the gods but she is exquisite! Karan thought every time he looked at her in her sleep. She had been slumbering for nearly a full turn of Adamah around the Weiran suns and he recognized by the rasp in her breath that illness was overtaking her. He knelt down and placed a large, calloused hand across her forehead. The skin burned to his touch and her sensual lips had turned from dusky rose to a chalky purple.

Karan blamed himself for her condition. After the way he had manhandled her and stared her down with his general's glare, speaking to her as he would a prisoner of war, only a miracle would have made her feel no effects.

He remembered the way she had gazed steadily back at him, refusing to be cowed. She had answered his every question with dignity and respect. A respect he knew he didn't deserve. But by doing so, she had reawakened something in him he had long thought dead, murdered by the queen and her vicious minions. He had felt once again the racing of a warrior's blood in his veins, not because of the fear he had engendered in her — that had made him ashamed — but because of her words.

The girl's avowed faith in his honor had made him feel the power he still possessed, crouched within him like a panther or a *chaya* beast ready to spring on its prey. Perhaps that was what had made her so beautiful to him, what had made him burn with an unexpected desire to possess her. No man worth his blood could resist such faith shining from a woman's eyes. The last woman who had looked at him that way had been Lilya, his beloved and the mother of their daughter, Lara. Only days before all the horror...the last time he'd made love to her and she'd whispered his name...

Karan shook himself from his agonizing memories and tended to the ill woman, the slave called Ariana.

Her fever lasted several days, during which Karan only left her side to grab a mouthful of food to keep him going. He'd tended many a wounded and sick soldier on the battlefield but never had he feared for a fallen man's survival as he did for hers. Though he had known her a mere few days, he feared losing her. If she died, he would be alone again, simply battling for existence, haunting the lands surrounding the palace, waiting for some sign to tell him when he could penetrate its walls and rescue Lara from her Pierran slavers.

To this day, the raucous laughs of their captors echoed in his memory.

"She'll make fine bed sport one day for the future king!" one of them had giped before dragging Lara off to the palace and him to be whipped, branded and set loose like wild game for the hunt.

Karan pulled back the fur covering, allowing the heat of fever to escape Ariana's body. The gown she wore was torn and soiled beyond repair. He reached out and grabbed hold of the silken cloth, tearing it as easily as a spider's web and pulled it away from her body so he could bathe her. Had she not been so ill, he would have taken more time to gaze on her beauty, the cream-colored skin and fiery hair, both on her head and her pubic mound. He had not lain with a woman since the Pierrans had felled him. The sight of her caused his long-slumbering drive to awaken.

He soaked a rag in a bowl of cool water and tenderly passed it over Ariana's burning skin, across her neck, down her chest to the underside of her breasts. He dipped the rag back into the water to rinse from it the body heat it had absorbed and wrung it out again. He continued on her stomach and over her mound where the water caused the scarlet curls to glisten. Gently, he parted her legs and wiped the cool cloth between them, parting her vaginal lips where the heat of fever gathered and was trapped.

When he had finished bathing her, he left her uncovered so that the air would chill down her fever. When her skin had cooled slightly, he replaced the fur coverlet and watched, crouched beside her, for her teeth to stop chattering and her body to stop

shivering. For a moment, her eyes opened and he thought she gazed at him. The emerald pools were glassy from the fever. He realized she was not seeing him. She whimpered and closed her eyes again, making him wonder what images were passing through her fevered dreams.

He shivered again with the fear of losing her and dug into his heart for his long-buried faith. He reached out his large hand, from which the queen's brand would never fade and tenderly smoothed back her hair.

"By your grace, Lord Galen," Karan muttered, "Let her live." The force of his prayer grew with each passing of his hand over her brow. "Please," he whispered, beseeching the god he had worshiped until his downfall. "Let her live."

Ariana never remembered having so many dreams. She only knew that when there was a pause between them, she would open her eyes, wishing to rise, only to find her body heavy and molten, surrounded by crackling flames.

She succumbed to the dreams, a hazy mosaic of scenes from her life that passed through the engulfing fire. Mostly, she saw Maya gazing on her, a bewitching smile on her golden face. She could hear the queen's silvery laughter falling in a silken shower around her and see light glinting off her raven hair. She felt Maya's lips pressing against her hair and her mistress's graceful fingertips squeezing her hand in an affectionate way.

Sometimes, though, in spite of her fevered dreams, she would become aware of the general. She would feel his large hand cradling her head, gently ladling cool sips of water between her parched lips. She felt the damp cloth that he passed over her burning skin. A few times, when she opened her eyes, she would see his face hovering amidst the flames, watching her with concern.

He was still there when the flames cooled and perspiration drenched her hair and skin. He had been watching her and she swore she saw moisture glistening in his eyes when she looked up at him. She didn't have the strength to speak or to lift her head but

she was happy to see him and managed a weak smile. Though she wanted to stay awake, she couldn't and began to drift back into a cooler, more restful sleep. But not before she felt his large hand caress her brow.

By the next night, she was able to sit up with Karan's help. He leaned her back against the wall for support and crouched beside her, spoon-feeding her some broth he had made. He brought the spoon to her lips and let the broth slide between them in careful and tender movements, as if she were a child. She thought to herself she had not received such gentle care from a man since her father.

Natan had been a kind and loving man, a Marean fisherman by trade. He had loved her and her mother very much, always generous with affection, never stingy. Her mother too, had been a loving woman, a timid soul who had been coaxed from her fear by her husband's love. Her parents' example had imbued her with abiding faith in love as a living force and this faith had carried her through the worst suffering she could have imagined.

Ariana had been eight when the Pierran imperialist forces invaded her seaside village in Marea. She had watched her father slain by their swords and had cradled her dying mother in her arms when Shira was too weak to survive the rugged journey south to Pierra with the other captured women and children.

The strength of Natan and Shira's love beat in her own heart, which she had never been able to close, even in the face of the worst cruelty. She had not closed it to Karan in those first moments when he had captured her and tried to make her feel terror.

And now, in the face of his kindness, Ariana felt for him a depth of gratitude and love that she had not even experienced with Maya.

"Thank you, my lord," she said between sips of broth. "I haven't been treated so gently in many years."

Karan looked down, avoiding her gaze as he lifted the spoon to her mouth.

"You needn't thank me. I had to make up for the way I treated you." His voice was a murmur full of shame.

Ariana gazed on his downcast features. In spite of her weakened condition, she felt her woman's desire for him begin to rise, a warm rippling in the crevice between her thighs that radiated upward into her breasts, causing a tingling in the pink tips.

"I understand why you did it," she said softly. "I would have done the same."

Karan looked at her and she felt the space between them fill with his self-reproach. She sensed there were many things going on in his mind and heart that he wasn't telling her. She found herself hoping, however, that one of them was desire for her.

"Your gown was destroyed," he told her. "I will sew you a new one from skins. They'll keep you warm and dry."

Ariana stared at him, wanting to protest his offer. She did not want him to go to such trouble. But she was naked under the fur cover he'd given her. She had nothing else and no way of getting it for herself.

"Thank you, my lord."

Karan watched her and she wished he'd reach out and caress her hair again the way he had during her fever. But he did not.

"How did you know I was innocent?" he asked softly.

Ariana looked into his eyes. Their color was the blue of the placid sea, reflecting the pale morning. Her heart ached.

"I cannot say how, my lord. You only showed me what is there inside you."

Karan looked as though his eyes would fill with tears. "One of her ministers, Dogon, it was, told me of a plot against the queen." His voice was a low growl. "He asked me to protect her."

Ariana nodded. She knew Dogon only too well. He had been the one to take her virginity. He was a cruel man whose sadism went beyond the bounds of what could be considered pleasurable sex play. He had delighted in her virgin's pain, thrusting into

her as hard as he could in spite of her whimpers. After that, she cowered in her *haram* quarters every time he called for her and knew it was only by Galen's grace that she had escaped Dogon without permanent scars to her flesh or her soul.

"I did not suspect him for a moment, though I should have," Karan went on. "My loyalty to Maya blinded me to his deviousness. So I went to her chamber as soon as I was given an alarm that her murderer lurked in the shadows where she slept.

"The guards let me through. I didn't know they were part of the whole thing. As soon as Maya awoke and saw me over her with the knife, she screamed." He fell silent and bowed his head. "The worst part is she believed them. I never have understood why. I served her with my heart and soul."

Ariana felt her heart squeeze with pain and wished she were strong enough to comfort him in the way she wished.

"There are conjurors in the palace, my lord. No doubt Dogon employed them to bewitch the queen's mind. There is no other answer."

Karan sighed deeply. "Perhaps you are right. And if that's so, it does take some of the sting out of it to know she would have supported me otherwise."

Ariana felt a tear collect in her eye and she reached out a weak hand, putting it over Karan's branded one. "She would have, lord. She was a selfish woman in some ways but not a cruel one. I knew her well. She would not have knowingly turned on you."

Karan looked at her, his expression twisted in pain. He set down the empty bowl and spoon and picked up her hand, bringing it to his lips, pressing them into her soft palm. Then he held it to his cheek.

Ariana's eyes fluttered closed at the pleasure of his silken beard against her skin. Slivers of heat began to shoot through the slit of her sex and she could feel the musk gather, like wet rain clouds before a storm. Her breathing deepened.

"I curse those who made you a slave," he said in a husky tone. "I wish Galen's wrath on them."

Her deep breaths caused the fur skin around her to loosen. She let it fall, wanting him to gaze on her nakedness. Her breasts were already swollen, nipples tingling in erect peaks.

Karan reached out to cover her but Ariana grasped his hand. She stared at him, silently imploring him not to pull away as she slowly moved his hand over her breast, pressing it down so that his fingers closed around it.

With her hand over his, she moved it around, bidding him to rub the swollen orb of flesh.

"Please, my lord," she whispered. "Have me."

She heard his breathing grow ragged. His eyes smoldered as he gazed on her. One breast was still bare, willing him to bend and kiss it, the other, tingling exquisitely under his calloused skin. He appeared to be waging an inner battle between her seduction and something in his conscience.

He started to pull his hand away but Ariana held him fast and gave a small whimper of protest.

"You owe me nothing, Ariana," Karan said gruffly. "Galen should strike me down for exacting a price to protect you. You are not my slave." She stared into his eyes, realizing his mistake. He saw her as his slave. In the palace, the general had never used slaves, always refusing the queen's offer of a bed-slave at palace banquets. Ariana's heart ached. She was no longer a slave. Her slavery had ended with her beloved queen's wretched death. She loved Karan's soul as she appreciated his warrior's body. These feelings were utterly new and had closed over her like one of the giant waves her father's boat used to battle when he was fishing at sea. She felt her lip tremble and tears gather in the corners of her eyes.

"I give myself to you willingly, Lord Karan," she said in a near-whisper. "I know who you are and I love you. I would follow you anywhere."

Ariana waited for him to lean forward and kiss her. She wanted him so badly to nuzzle her breasts and cover her body with his. But he still watched her, a strange,

twisted look of guilt darkening his chiseled features. Her panic mounted and she bit down on her lower lip, which trembled violently.

Suddenly, her control collapsed and she began to sob. She lifted Karan's hand from her breast and brought it to her lips, showering the rough skin with kisses and her desperate tears. Her anguish, borne so many lonely years with her grief locked inside her, now spilled out, brought to the surface by Karan's kindness. He had nursed her the way her father had so many years ago whenever she was ill. When she was an innocent girl, back before the horrors began.

Karan reached out and pulled her into his arms, letting her soak his silky chest hair with her tears. She clung to the warrior for a long time, with fistfuls of his tunic in her clenched hands. She felt little and safe against him, in a way she hadn't since Natan had last comforted her. Karan stroked her hair and placed small kisses on the top of her head where the scarlet tresses parted.

"Beautiful little woman," she heard him murmur.

With each stroke on her hair, she felt her tears begin to pass, leaving her heart cleansed and peaceful. Once again, she became aware of the man who held her, of the way his chest hairs brushed her damp cheek and his strength surrounded her. She breathed in the scents he carried of wood smoke, animal skins and earth. With each breath, she felt her body melt into his. Her lips were against his chest and she began to dapple the broad muscles with soft, moist kisses, pressing her tongue to the salt of his skin. She moved across his breast and feathered her tongue over one of his nipples, eliciting a soft groan of pleasure from him.

Suddenly, she felt his hands grasp her arms. Gently but firmly, he held her away from him.

She looked at him, wide-eyed, frightened that he was about to turn her away even though he had seemed to want her.

"What is it, my lord?" she asked. "Don't I please you?"

Karan sighed. "Your beauty makes me ache."

“Then why...”

But her question was crushed by Karan’s kiss. Her eyes fluttered shut as the pleasure of his lips overwhelmed her. She brought her arms around him, pressed her fingertips into the hard ridges of muscle in his back. The exquisite heat of surrender radiated through her, moistening the pink cleft between her thighs. She parted her lips wider as Karan languorously explored her tongue with his. She moaned as he wove his fingers into her hair, his other hand cradling her from behind as he gently laid her down on the fur skin.

Karan tasted Ariana’s lips as if they were the sweetest, most succulent fruit. Soft and velvety, her tongue hot and moist, he lost himself in the feel and scent of a soft woman, the first balm to his aching soul he’d had in so long.

Her moans, caused by his mere kiss, unleashed him and he paused to tug at the rawhide laces of his tunic so he could feel his bare skin against hers. He wanted to pleasure her as she had never been before. A slave’s pleasure depended on her mistress or master’s whims. But he wanted to take all the time necessary to make her feel adored and treasured, saturated with loving.

The taste of Ariana’s mouth drove him mad. Pulling from her mouth, he kissed a fiery trail down her delicate throat to one breast and tugged the dusky nipple between his lips and tongue like a hungry babe. The rosy peak tightened immediately and he delighted in how she arched her back to meet his mouth. He intended to kiss and lick the length of her body, part the lips of her cleft and massaging the sweet spot with his tongue until she writhed in ecstasy.

But when her hands roamed over his hips and buttocks, squeezing them and bidding him to penetrate her, his intentions were lost. He had been away from a woman’s body for too long. He could not wait.

Fitting his hips between her spread thighs, he slid his cock into her, letting out a long groan of pleasure at once again feeling the slippery heat of a woman’s sheath.

Fighting for self-control, he thrust slowly at first, stopping each time to poke the head in and out in small movements before plunging in again.

With each thrust, Ariana moaned, her head thrown back, her pale neck curved upward. He teased and nibbled the soft skin under her jaw and braced himself on his elbows so he could grind against her sweet spot, hoping to bring her to climax before he exploded.

Once again he leant down and captured her mouth in a sweet, deep kiss. Her complete surrender made him feel enveloped in feminine softness, as if he were returning to the dark peace of the womb. Her legs were stretched as wide open as she could to accommodate his warrior's body and he could feel the soles of her feet resting on his buttocks.

"I'm sorry, Ariana," he groaned. "I won't last much longer."

She reached up and smoothed back the wild silvery gold mane that hung in his eyes. "Please, my lord," she breathed, "Have your pleasure."

Karan closed his eyes with the visceral sense of power her words evoked in him. He hadn't intended to react that way, to be a possessor, a master. But she demanded it of him by her nature, by her faith in the man he was and her surrender to him. He had mastered her with gentle strength and now, they were both beyond return.

He did not have to worry about her satisfaction, for his thrusts against her swollen, taut clit brought her to orgasm and she released several small cries, one with each spasm of pleasure. She fell limp in his arms and after only a few more thrusts, Karan too, had his release, his warm seed spilling out inside her.

When the last spasm had passed, he lay over her, covered her with his relaxed body. He closed his eyes, enjoying the silky feel of her small hands caressing his back and hips.

All praise to Lord Galen, he offered silently. He had never thought to have the gift of a woman's sweetness again. Perhaps all things were possible. Perhaps the same grace

that had brought him Ariana would restore to him the other woman he loved—his beautiful daughter, Lara.

He pressed a kiss to Ariana's damp cheek. "Thank you," he whispered.

Ariana reached up and caressed his hair. Her green eyes shone up at him.

"Lord Galen loves me through you," she said softly.

Karan rolled his weight off her and lay next to her, gathering her against him. He pulled the fur covering over both of them and kissed her hair. "It is I who should be grateful," he murmured into her luxurious ringlets.

Resting his cheek against her hair, he delighted in the soft sound of her breathing. She was not fully recovered and he felt how their passion had spent her strength. He kept his arms around her protectively.

Before he closed his own eyes in sleep, an image of the Pierran guards making their way into the hills came to his mind. No doubt a search for the escaped slave was in progress.

The Pierrans would most certainly pay him a visit, wanting to know if he harbored her. The men he had once commanded loved to pass through occasionally and taunt him, not understanding he could wring their necks with one hand if he chose.

But he chose not to. If he killed any of them, the army would swarm him and any chance he had of saving Lara would be destroyed.

They were the scum of the planet.

He shuddered to think of the fate they had planned for the queen's supposed assassin.

They'll never get Ariana, he swore silently. Never.

Chapter Four

For the first time since she was a little girl, Ariana woke with a smile on her lips. Never had a night been so sweet as the one that had just passed. Several times during her sleep, she had awakened to feel Karan's warm strength holding her close. She'd breathed in the aroma of his warm skin. His strong arms around her made her feel a safety she'd forgotten could exist.

But now, she didn't feel the heat of his body beside her. He no longer held her. He must have moved away from her in his sleep. She turned over to snuggle closer but only her body covered the fur skin.

Ariana sat bolt upright, looking wildly around the shadowy cave for him. She almost began to sob, terrified that he had left her when she became aware of the sound of water spilling in a shower against the rocks, just outside the entrance to the cave. She turned and looked.

Karan was there, naked in the morning sunlight, pouring water from a jug over his hair and body.

She blinked, her panic receded momentarily as the stirring began between her thighs. Rising to her knees, she watched, captured by the magnificent vision.

Karan bent over to fill the jug from a basin. He straightened and sluiced the water over his head and down his back and chest. The sunlight glinted off the droplets in his hair and now clean-shaven cheeks and off the rivulets coursing over the bulges and curves of muscle of his scarred back and hard round buttocks.

He then turned so his front was to her, still unaware he was being watched. The water had plastered down the silvery gold hair of his chest, accentuating his broad strength.

The sight caused the pulsing in her sex to radiate upward into her breasts, tightening the pink tips.

Karan set down the jug, reached for a large cloth and began to towel himself as he entered the cave.

Ariana's gaze met with his as he drew closer. She could feel the heat of the moisture radiating from his body. Suddenly, tears of relief rushed to her eyes and spilled out. She hadn't realized how afraid she'd been that he'd left. She lunged forward and threw her arms around him, pressing her face into his stomach, just above his silky abundance of sexual hair. "I thought you'd left," she murmured against his skin.

She felt Karan's large hand on her hair. "I meant to finish and be back next to you before you woke," he said softly.

Ariana sniffled, smiling at the simple joy of his tender caress. Karan continued to stroke her hair. "I'm sorry I frightened you, Ariana. I should have known." He stood quietly, caressing her hair and face.

She began stroking his buttocks and hips, her fear giving way to the desire that had begun moments before. She pressed her nakedness against his legs and nuzzled the nest of hair at the base of his shaft. She wanted so badly to please him, to give him the love and pleasure he'd been deprived of for so long. She heard him moan softly, his cock rising in response to her hands roaming over his bare skin.

His erection swelled against her cheek and without thinking she lowered her face and captured his shaft in her mouth. She closed her eyes, delighting in the delicious feel of the smooth, velvety skin over hard, veined muscle.

Slowly, gently, she sucked him, sliding her lips up and down the length of his hardness, stopping each stroke at the tip to smooth her tongue over its swollen ridges as she whispered her hands over his buttocks and thighs and over the heavy life-filled sac between them.

Karan moaned, stroking her hair with both hands. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back. Her mouth was a warm wet sheath and he gently pulsed his cock in and out, the fingers of both hands entwined in her soft red tumble of curls. This beautiful woman who was pleasuring him with such love caused his already finely honed senses to flare even more and he could smell the musk of her cream rising, the scent filling the air around them.

He could hear the low murmurs of pleasure in her throat and feel them vibrating on his shaft as her mouth slid up and down on it from head to base. The sounds caused his blood to mount and his heart to beat faster. The sudden desire to hear her cry out from pleasure seized him and in one swift motion, he withdrew from her mouth and crouched down, his hands on her upper arms. He looked at her flushed cheeks and lips moist from suckling him. Gently he pushed her back.

“Lie down,” he told her in a gruff whisper.

She fell back under his hands, her legs spread wide. Her breasts and sex were swollen and the cream he had smelled had saturated her ruby curls and glistened in rivulets down her inner thighs.

Karan knelt between her parted legs and raised his body over her, lowering his lips to hers.

He began with her mouth, seizing it in deep, hot kisses. Fighting the driving need to take her immediately, he moved slowly downward, trailing a moist path of warm kisses down her neck and breasts, stopping to nibble and suck the hard tips.

For a long time, he worked his way down her soft yielding body. The earthy scents of her skin and musk filled him and he experienced a visceral surge in his loins that radiated through his entire body. He could not wait another moment to taste her most hidden parts.

With gentle fingers, he parted the lips of her sex, burying his face into the musky folds. When his warm tongue met her sweet spot, she moaned loudly and raised her

hips. Her glistening cream covered Karan's lips and flowed into his mouth, down his throat as he laved the slick pink skin in languorous circles with his tongue.

Ariana's cries grew louder and more frenzied and she writhed her hips in the depths of pleasure. The sound delighted him and he slid his large fingers inside her as he continued to suck the hard nub. In moments, he felt her sheath tighten around his fingers as the spasms of climax coursed through her. He continued his ministrations until she fell limp. Then he raised his head and looked at her.

She was smiling up at him, her arms outstretched, inviting him to have his pleasure. Karan felt his groin tighten again and he raised himself up, settling his large body between her legs. In one motion, he slid into her, as smoothly as a sword to its sheath.

Ariana grabbed his buttocks as he moved up and down, pulling him as deeply into her as she could.

"Lord Karan, Lord Karan," she whispered in between kisses. She looked up at him, her emerald eyes glossed over with love and pleasure. "Come, my lord," she coaxed. "Fill me."

Karan thrust hard in long, smooth motions, driven to a fever by Ariana's words. With each plunge into her, the pressure mounted, readying to burst. He raised himself up on his hands, his palms flat on the fur skin and ground his cock against her, around and around until a climax shuddered through him and he spilled his warm seed into Ariana's womb.

He moaned, thrusting until the ripples of his orgasm ceased. When they had, he collapsed gently on top of Ariana, stroking her fiery hair. Fleeting, he wished his life force could take root inside her and produce a child. But it was common practice for bed-slaves to be sterilized with herbs so that they would not bear children who would then take away time from their master or mistress's pleasure.

"I love you, Ariana."

Ariana lifted her face and kissed his cheek, reaching up and lacing her fingers in his silky hair.

"I love you, my lord," she whispered back.

Together, they lay entwined for a little while, until suddenly, Karan pulled away and sat up, his ear trained toward the opening of the cave.

Alarmed, Ariana sat up too and tried to listen as Karan did. But all she heard were the birds crying to each other as they circled on the wind currents and the whoosh of the breeze as it passed between the huge rocks of the hills.

"What is it, my lord?" she whispered.

Karan listened intently for another few moments before answering. Finally, he turned to her, his face dark.

"They're out there," he said in a low voice. "They're looking for you."

Her eyes opened wide and she reached out and grasped Karan.

"Don't let them find me, lord!" she begged.

Karan put his arms around her, holding her tightly to him. "Never," he whispered. "We have some time. But not much." He looked at her, smoothing her unruly hair off her face.

"I'll bring you into the port city tomorrow. I'll put you on a ship to the Veltlands. You'll be safe living with my kinsmen. They'll take you in if you tell them I sent you."

But Ariana released a strangled wail and buried her face into Karan's chest. "No, my lord!" she cried. "I can't leave you! Please!" She began to sob.

He stroked her hair, silently cursing the Pierran beasts. How he did want to take her himself to his homeland and live peacefully among his own. But he couldn't leave. Not without Lara.

He lifted Ariana from him and tilted her face up toward his. "There's another way," he said gently. "I know an old conjuror, Nedda, whose son I once rescued from death in battle. She'll do anything for me. I'll ask her for a potion to change your appearance. I

know one exists. When the Pierran dogs come here several days from now, they'll see only my wife, not the runaway slave they seek."

Ariana sniffled and when he released her, she fell against him. "I'll take it, my lord," she breathed. "Anything to stay with you."

He embraced her again and caressed her hair.

"I'm sorry, Ariana," he said sadly. "I wish I could take you myself. I would bring you back to the Veltlands and live with you as husband and wife. But I cannot."

She raised herself up and looked into Karan's face, his chiseled features etched heavily with unspoken grief. She reached up and stroked his branded cheek.

"Why not, my lord? What is it?"

"It's Lara," he said. "My daughter. She's...trapped in the palace. They took her for a slave. She's about to reach eighteen and will suffer the same as you did in the palace *haram*."

"My lord, I'm so sorry." Without thinking she grasped one brawny arm.

He sighed deeply. "I've not spoken of Lara in so long because of the pain. To say her name is to relive the horrors as if they had just happened. Sometimes in my dreams I can still hear Lara's screams as her mother fell under a Pierran blade and feel the bite of the lash and burning of the branding iron as it seared my flesh."

Tears stung in Ariana's eyes. Surely this beautiful man before her had suffered easily as much as she had. She pictured a young woman, alone and frightened, being preyed on by other slaves, both men and women, as well as the ministers and royals. They would force her to her knees, whip her and make her spread her legs wide open for all the court to see at once while another slave mounted her publicly.

Ariana knew she couldn't let that happen. Lara would not have Queen Maya to take her in and protect her from the palace's predators like Dogon. Her chest tightened painfully. Galen forbid that Dogon would get his filthy hands on Karan's daughter!

She looked piercingly into Karan's eyes. "I'll get her out of the palace, my lord," she said.

* * * * *

Karan looked at her. Had he not felt she loved him, he would have thought he was being mocked. Yet the sound in her voice was one of truth. For the first time in four years, he felt a ray of hope. "What do you mean?" he asked and stared at her as she told him of secret passages in the palace she'd used to escape.

"When you give me the potion to disguise my appearance," she went on, "I'll pose as a slave for the king and take Lara. We'll escape through the passages."

Karan looked into her eyes. In their emerald depths he saw her determination. But a slave? "No, Ariana. There must be another way. How can I possibly expect you to be a slave again?"

Ariana leaned in closer. "I'd only be posing as a slave this time, my lord. I can do it."

He grasped her arms gently. "Do you really think it's possible?" His voice was unable to conceal the desperation he'd felt all those years.

"Yes, lord," Ariana said softly. "It's very possible. I'm the only one left who knows about those passages."

But Karan suddenly released her arms. He hung his head.

"I can't ask you to risk your life like that. I couldn't go on if something happened to you."

He felt her small hand on his forearm and wondered how such a delicate creature could have such inner strength.

"I want to do it, my lord," she answered. "But maybe if you took the potion..."

Karan hung his head. Of course, he'd considered this solution a million times. "I can't. It won't work. No potion can hide the brands or the whip marks. I would be

recognized at once and killed. And then Lara would be completely alone." Karan's shoulders sagged under the weight of his grief.

Ariana took his hands, squeezing them. Her resolve radiated into his calloused skin. "Please let me, lord," she begged. "I want you to have your daughter back."

Karan stared at her as if he couldn't believe she was real. "Praise Lord Galen," he whispered. He lifted her hands to his lips and pressed a reverent kiss into the soft flesh. Then he held them against his scarred cheek.

"I'll take you and Lara to my home then," he promised her. "We'll live among my kinsmen and you'll never have to fear another moment for your life."

He watched her eyes glisten with tears.

"I'd love nothing better, my lord," she whispered.

Karan pressed another kiss into her hands and then leaned forward to kiss her cheeks and forehead and hair.

"Just come back to me alive and well," he said.

"I will, Lord Karan," she whispered, tilting her head back. "I will."

Chapter Five

Ariana spent the rest of the day helping Karan prepare food and learning how to sew a shift for herself out of fur skins. Crouched by the fire next to Karan, she watched, fascinated, as he deftly pulled a large needle in and out of the skins and in very little time produced a shift for her. She was delighted as she pulled it on over her head. It was by far the warmest and most concealing item of clothing she'd worn in many years and she spent a long time stroking the smooth leather and cozy fur.

In that same day, Karan taught her how to make a fire, boil water and cook grains for their morning porridge. He showed her how to pluck birds before cooking them and how to skin an animal, roast the meat and make broth from the bones. After their evening meal, they sat by the fire, drinking warm mead and discussing their plan to rescue Lara. Then they made love again and fell asleep by the crackling fire.

The next morning, Karan left for the port city with a pile of *chaya* skins to trade for the things they needed and a promise to return by sundown. But before he left, he showed Ariana a hiding place down by the water pool where she would never be found if someone came looking there. But, he assured her, his senses had told him they had at least one more day.

Ariana spent the time sweeping the floor of the cave and shaking the dust from the skins they slept on. She cooked some more food the way Karan had shown her and she loved him all the more for having taught her. She felt a growing sense of peace in gaining useful skills.

As he had promised, Karan returned just as the third Weiran sun was sinking below the horizon.

Ariana ran to him and squeezed him in an eager embrace. Karan was tired from his travels and sat by the fire while she proudly served him the food she'd prepared.

When he had settled in and finished a cup of mead, he showed her the outfit of many-colored silks and gold bangles for her wrists and ankles he'd brought back with him for her role as Ilani, King Dorian's new slave.

But then he took out a beautiful comb, ornately and delicately carved from precious *coria* wood.

Ariana stared at it as he gently placed it in her hand.

"It's for you, Ariana," Karan told her softly. "In the Veltlands, a comb is one of the gifts a husband gives his new bride."

"It's beautiful, my lord," Ariana breathed. "Thank you." Tears rushed into her eyes and spilled out. Not since her mother and father were alive had anyone given her a gift, not even Maya.

Karan reached forward and embraced her. "On our wedding night, I'll comb your hair for you," he promised.

He held her for several moments then released her and went back into the pack. He rummaged around, pulling out a small glass vial, which he held out to her.

"Here it is," he said. "I begged Nedda's assurances that you will not be harmed by it."

Ariana took the vial from Karan and pulled out the stopper. She hesitated one moment when she saw the concern in his eyes, then tilted her head back and swallowed all the liquid.

In moments, her insides were on fire. She felt as she had swallowing Maya's poisoned sleeping potion. Her skin and eyes felt as if they were being scorched or torn with knives and she fell to the ground in a fetal position, crying out in pain. Another horrible sensation gripped her, like thousands of poisonous insects swarming over her eyeballs and she squeezed them shut, fighting down the hideous nausea that churned her stomach.

Then, suddenly, the horror ended, the pain, the nausea, withdrawn, like a rogue wave on the sea that dies almost as soon as it springs up. Ariana lay on the ground, panting from her ordeal, still unable to open her eyes.

When she finally opened them, Karan was staring at her, his expression caught between misery and wonder. "By the gods!" he whispered as he reached out to smooth back her hair and offer her a ladleful of water.

Ariana shook her head, refusing the water. Slowly, she started to lift herself to a sitting position, then felt Karan's large hands, helping her. When he had her upright and held her in place, she at him. "It worked, didn't it?" she whispered.

Karan nodded. "Aye." His voice was hushed, full of reverence in the face of the power of magery. "If I hadn't known you..."

She examined her hands. Her skin had darkened from its porcelain white to a deep burnished gold, darker even than the Pierrans. They were the hands of a Sinayan woman from the lands south of Pierra where the three suns shone strongly year round. The Sinayan slaves in the palace, both men and women, were prized for their dark, exotic sleekness.

She picked up a lock of her hair and examined it. It was now darker than Maya's hair had been, so dark it emitted a bluish sheen where the firelight glinted off it. She looked back at Karan.

"What color are my eyes?"

Karan moved closer and delicately took her face in his hands. "They're of the deepest mahogany, Ariana," he replied softly.

Ariana lifted up her shift to gaze down at her pubic mound. The curls down there too, had transformed to the same blue-black as her hair. She lifted her shift up farther, exposing her breasts. The nipples were dark brown, instead of the pink they had always been.

Karan released her face and whispered his fingertips over her nipples, the curves of her breasts and then down across her mound of dark hair.

Ariana quivered under his touch. She felt as if he were not with her but someone else. With a sudden pounding in her heart, she looked into his eyes. "I'm not me anymore, my lord," she said. "I'm someone else. I fear you'll love her more."

Karan smiled gently. He leaned forward and brushed his lips across hers.

"Have faith, beautiful woman," he said. "After a time, the spell will wear off and you'll look as before. Then you'll know how much I love you."

She sighed as tears once again rose and spilled from her eyes.

"I'll find her, my lord," she whispered, even though the thought of going back there made her tremble. "I'll bring her back to you."

Karan kissed her again, even more tenderly than before.

"I know you will," he said.

* * * * *

The Pierran soldiers came the next morning, as Karan's razor-sharp instincts had told him.

The third sun had just climbed into the sky. Karan and Ariana crouched by the fire, eating breakfast when they heard the men's voices growing louder as they made their way up the rocks.

Karan grasped her shoulder, drawing her with him to their feet. They stood up and waited as the voices drew closer and their footfalls could be heard scraping the rocky soil.

Ariana's heart trembled painfully in her chest and Karan's touch went far to soothe her.

The figures of two soldiers in white tunics filled the entrance of the cave. They let out derisive snorts of laughter at the man and woman standing inside.

"What do you want?" Karan asked, his voice full of his warrior's dignity. He stepped toward them, still the general he had once been.

Their faces registered momentary fear and they held out their spears like staffs as if in warning for him to stay back.

"You know why we're here, old man," the taller of the two answered. He had golden hair and a cruel glitter in his eyes.

Ariana shuddered inwardly to hear Karan addressed with such blatant disrespect. She realized that the same magery done on the queen had been used on the soldiers. Nothing else could cause them to address a superior with such horrible disrespect, no matter his lot. She remained silent, hanging back in the shadowy cave.

"We're looking for the slave girl," the other one said. He was half a head shorter than his companion. Dark-haired but just as cruel-looking. "The one who murdered Her Majesty."

"I've seen no such girl," Karan answered. "I live here peacefully with my wife, Arvit."

The first soldier laughed. The derisive sound echoed through the cave.

"Is that so?" He looked past Karan to Ariana, beckoning her forward. "Come here, woman," he said.

Ariana stepped away from the fire and came to stand next to Karan who put a protective arm around her shoulders. She endured the lewd gazes the Pierran soldiers raked over her and burned fiercely inside at the continuing injustice Karan suffered at their hands.

Several minutes passed before they were satisfied.

"The slave woman has bright red hair and green eyes," the blond soldier said to Karan. "If you see her, tell her she's going to the dogs when she's found."

Ariana felt her knees almost give way under her and leaned heavily against Karan. When the soldiers were gone, she fell into his arms, struggling to catch her breath.

Karan lowered her down onto the fur skins. Briefly he caressed her hair, then rose and went to a barrel where he filled a goblet with mead. He crouched down, holding the cup to her. "Drink, Ari," he coaxed softly.

She took it from him, fighting to keep her hands steady as she brought it to her lips. The sweet warmth of the brew calmed her and she sat quietly, staring into the fire. She felt Karan's gentle hand on her shoulder.

"You don't have to do this, sweetling," he said softly. "We'll find another way."

But Ariana gazed into his eyes, once again feeling her determination. Karan had saved her from a long tortuous death. He'd treated her with kindness, comforted her and made her feel beautiful and loved. "There is no other way, my lord," she said. "I can't let your daughter languish in the *haram*."

Karan then lowered himself down behind her, pulling her back to rest against his strong body while he caressed her hair and shoulders. "I owe you my life for this, Ariana," he said.

"And I owe you mine. Lord Galen has blessed me."

Karan squeezed her protectively. "We must go tomorrow," he said. "Lara reaches her eighteenth year in less than six days. She will no doubt have been placed in the *haram* quarters this close to her service."

Ariana suppressed a shudder and let Karan's chest absorb the weight of her body. She took one of his hands and brought it to her lips in a soft kiss.

"Aye, my lord," she replied. "Tomorrow is what I intended."

* * * * *

Karan led Ariana down the road to the palace gates. To the fellow traveler, they appeared as a slave trader and slave.

Karan wore a hooded cloak that concealed his branded face in its shadows. Ariana trailed behind him on a length of rope. She was dressed as Ilani the slave, the rope around her wrists and bare feet both indications of her status. Layers of sheer silk

whispered against her bronzed skin and gold bangles tinkled softly on her wrists and ankles like tambourines with each step she took.

The night before, Karan had removed her bandages and made sure her skin was mostly healed from the cuts and scratches. To complete their disguise, he had bound her wrists and walked several paces ahead of her, with her on the leash, as was the slave traders' custom.

Ariana stomach churned and she struggled to keep a placid expression, her gaze trained steadily on Karan's heavy cloak of dark wool.

They reached the palace gate around midday when all three suns were at their peak. Guards and soldiers stood at the entrance, white gold-trimmed tunics brilliant in the sun, spears and swords in their hands.

One soldier stepped forward at their approach. "What is your business here?"

"I bring a gift for the king," Karan answered in a gruff voice from the shadows of his hood. "From the vassal prince of Sinay." He prodded Ariana a few steps forward. "A slave to comfort His Majesty in mourning."

"We were not told to expect such a delivery," the soldier replied.

Her pounding painfully, Ariana watched the guard's expression. Most royal gifts were offered with a more ornate procession of bearers.

Karan cleared his throat. "I would not tell His Majesty of such an oversight if I were you," he said.

A shadow of fear passed quickly over the soldier's face and he turned to the guards.

"Have her brought to the king," he ordered. "His Majesty will want his delivery right away."

Ariana desperately wanted to look back at Karan just once. But to do so would have been dangerous. They had made their farewells the night before in each other's arms. Karan had kissed her one last time in the forest before going out onto the main road. So

she gazed steadily ahead of her, carrying herself with a sense of dignity that belied her inner turmoil.

Karan handed her tether to the guard and waited just a moment before turning back to the road.

Ariana sensed his eyes on her as the guard led her through the large iron gates and up the wide steps to the front doors of the palace. There, she was handed to yet another guard who led her down the airy marble halls that had once been her home.

Within moments, she knew where she was being led. She fought to swallow the lump forming in her throat as the heavy carved doors loomed up ahead. The ministers had wasted no time installing the prince in his mother's former bedchamber.

New guards stood at their post by the antechamber doors. Ariana shuddered to think of what the former guards' fate might have been for having let her escape the morning of the queen's murder.

She wondered with mounting fright if her passageways had been discovered. This was a terrible oversight on her part, she thought frantically. What if they had been and she and Lara were trapped in the palace with no way out? The spell that disguised her would eventually wear off, revealing her true identity. She had not brought more potion. If the guards found a vial on her, they would suspect poison meant for the king and slit her throat where she stood.

Once back to her original appearance, she would have to face her punishment, a slow, tortuous death carried out in the center of the palace square for all to witness.

A valet emerged from the inner chamber carrying an armload of wet towels. He stopped and eyed her as the guard explained who she was.

"The king has just finished bathing after his morning athletics," the small, effeminate man said. He sounded almost possessive. "I will have to ask him if he wishes for company so early in the day." He disappeared back into the chamber and re-emerged moments later. "She may go in," he told the guard, narrowing his eyes at Ariana.

The guards opened the heavy carved doors and Ariana was led into the shadowy bedchamber she knew so intimately. The impact of seeing it again touched off a flood of memories, not the least of which was that of waking up and finding her beautiful mistress dead.

"Wait here," the valet instructed before he left.

In moments, King Dorian emerged from the bath chamber, naked except for a towel swathed around his narrow hips.

Ariana recognized him immediately. She had known him since he was a boy.

Now, in his twenty-third year, Dorian was the male image of his mother, possessing the same supple golden body as Maya, only with a man's musculature and a light dusting of ebony hair on his chest.

He looked at Ariana from the same velvety dark eyes and catlike face and smiled the same sleek yet warm smile. Only his hair was different. Though dark, like Maya's had been, Dorian's was shorn almost to the scalp in the fashion of young Pierran athletes.

Ariana had to fight not to let her breath catch in her shock. This was the closest she had ever been to Dorian and had not expected the queen's presence to be so strong in him.

She and the guard who held her tether both dropped to the marble floor and made their obeisance to the young king as he strode toward them.

When they rose, Dorian dismissed the guard and stood, studying his new slave with his mother's appreciative gaze. "Prince Hatari has been most generous," Dorian said. "I must be certain to thank him."

Ariana bowed. "That won't be necessary, Your Majesty," she said. "Your enjoyment will be all the gratitude he would want."

Dorian smiled and touched her cheek with his fingertips. "You know the prince's mind well," he observed. "Perhaps he has tasted you himself."

She smiled seductively, as she had been forced to practice many years. "The prince would want to guarantee your satisfaction, my lord," she answered in a silky tone.

Her answer made the young king's breath quicken. He picked up a lock of her hair, testing its texture between his fingertips.

"Soft," he said. "Exquisitely soft. Do you have a name, dark mistress of beauty?" he asked in a hushed tone. He continued to finger her hair.

"I am called Ilani, Your Majesty."

"Ilani," he repeated. "Your name fits you well." He released her hair and picked up the rope that bound her. "Come," he said, tugging gently on her tether. "It's time to unwrap my gift."

Ariana followed Dorian obediently to the large bed. The pillows and coverings had been changed to darker, more masculine shades. She felt a bit of relief. The changes made it a bit easier to block out the memory of the last time she had seen this bed.

Dorian pulled off his towel and climbed onto the bed, settling himself comfortably against the pillows. He lay back, staring up at her. Ariana had to admit he was beautiful, a mutual feeling, based on the erection he sported. Had the circumstances been different, she might have been glad to serve him.

"This was my mother's chamber," he told her. "I hope that doesn't seem morbid to you. But her spirit is strong in here and I take comfort from it."

Her heart quickened at Dorian's statement. Strange he would say such a thing to a slave. "On the contrary, my lord," she managed to say, "I find it touching that you feel that way. The queen must have been a wonderful woman."

"She was." Dorian sat up suddenly and swung his legs over to sit on the edge of the bed. "You're too far away, Ilani," he said and tugged the rope, forcing Ariana to step closer to him. He pulled until she came to stand between his thighs then dropped the robe. His almond-shaped eyes roved up and down her body with a velvety stare. "You're bewitching me, Ilani." His voice had fallen to a near whisper and he grazed the fingertips of both hands up her bare arms.

The king's touch was surprisingly gentle...almost...innocent, and Ariana fought down the sudden ache she felt for him. He had no idea what was being done to him through magery, how he had been thrust into the position of king for some dark mage's purpose. Slaves always knew such things about their royals and the royals never understood the truth.

Dorian leaned forward and nuzzled her breasts through the silky folds of her gown. To Ariana's surprise, he rested his head against her, like a boy seeking comfort. "I wish you would touch me," he said.

"I cannot, my lord. I am bound."

Dorian lifted his head, looking down at her wrists. "Ah! I forgot! This won't do." He lifted her hands and untied the knot. "Perhaps another time it would add spice to our play but not now." He pulled the rope off her wrists and cast it aside. The velvety look in his eyes deepened. "I want to see you dance for me," he whispered, his voice growing dusky. "There is nothing more beautiful than a woman dancing." Then his brow furrowed. "Should I summon musicians? Oh, no time. Galen's teeth. Would that I didn't have another council in just a few minutes."

Ariana's heart pounded, both with fear and relief. She pulled a smile to her lips. "I can dance perfectly well without music, Your Majesty." With a graceful flourish of both hands, she began a dance for which she'd been trained by the palace's best instructors. "See?"

Dorian nodded, his dark eyes rapidly growing duskier as he watched. "Aye. You are most beautiful." His broad chest began to rise and fall more heavily. "I understand why my mother was so enamored of her slave." He raised himself on one elbow and looked up at her. "I understand why she wanted Ariana in her bed every night."

A jolt of fear shot through her body and she nearly lost her footing. Years of practice, however, helped her keep her balance without missing a step. "Thank you, my lord," she managed to utter. Coming to stand in one place, she raised her arms and wound her hips. Their gazes locked then and Ariana felt a pang of sympathy for

Dorian. He seemed in this moment like a boy – though his body was a man's body – a boy who'd been thrust into a dangerous world he knew nothing about.

"There is something about you, Ilani," he went on. "Something safe and loving. Perhaps it's the same thing Ariana had. I feel as if I've known you a long time."

Her heart surged painfully with sudden fear. "That's not possible, my lord," she said and danced a circle so that her back was to him long enough to even out her expression. "Though it's kind of you to say. I've lived all my life in Sinay. Until now."

When she turned back around, Dorian's eyes were hooded. "Ilani, I don't know how much longer I can simply watch you like this without having you."

Ariana's insides jumped. Her mind shot about quickly for a solution. Pasting as seductive a smile as she could muster, she gave another wind of her hips. "I would love to watch you pleasure yourself, my lord, while I dance."

To her relief, the king grinned. "Oh, I think we shall have many fun times together." Then he leaned back and palmed his cock.

Ariana sped up her movements and was rewarded with the speeding of his hand on his rigid shaft. She palmed her own breasts over the sheer material of her gown and rubbed them before sliding one hand down and whispering her touch over her sex.

"Oh...oh...oh," Dorian groaned. His hand jerked up and down, faster and faster. "Ilani," he breathed, tilting his head back.

His eyes squeezed shut and Ariana saw the eruption of milky seed coat his hand and chest. Under different circumstances, the sight would be erotic, but now, she felt only relief.

Dorian wilted, breathing heavily. Seeing his satisfaction, Ariana slowed her dance and knelt in a respectful posture. When she peeked up, Dorian's head was still thrown back and his chest heaved, hand resting on his cock. "That was amazing, Ilani." He looked up at her, eyes still dusky, glazed. "I didn't even touch you. I can imagine what it will be like."

Ariana winked at him. "'Twill be glorious, my lord. I have many surprises in my possession."

His boyish smile gave her another pang, made her sorry that she was deceiving him.

"This is your home now, Ilani," he said. "You may come and go from my chamber as you please." He rose and sat up. "I will inform the palace guards," he said in a near whisper. "But you must be discreet, for they are suspicious of personal slaves at the moment."

Her heart lurched but she looked at him all innocence. "Why is that, Your Majesty?"

"Because of Ariana," he answered. "They believe it was she who poisoned my mother. She disappeared the morning of the queen's death. The army is searching the entire kingdom but have yet to find her."

She nodded, struggling to conceal the tempestuous churning of both fear and hope within her.

"I see," she said. "I will be careful, my lord. And thank you. You are a kind and gracious king. I wish you long life."

Dorian looked down at the milky seed on his torso. "I suppose I should bathe quickly again before my meeting. I regret I must send you back to the *haram* for now." He grinned. "Should I keep you here in my chamber, I'll never make it in time."

Ariana bowed. Her heart thrashed about in her chest now. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

Dorian began to head back in the direction of the bathing chamber. When he passed her, he bent his head to hers and kissed her cheek, a surprisingly sweet gesture. "I wish you to stay with me tonight," he said.

Ariana looked down. She did not like deceiving Dorian but she knew it was the only way of escaping with Lara. "Yes, Your Majesty," she said. "I am yours."

Dorian left, telling his guards that his new slave was free to roam about as she pleased.

Ariana could hear him speaking to them as she pulled on her gown and wandered about the shadowy chamber, acting as if she were exploring it for the first time.

She approached the tapestry that hid the entrance to the secret passage, touching the weaving with delicate fingertips. After a quick look over her shoulder to make sure she wasn't being watched, she lifted the tapestry away from the wall and peered underneath. The spot was undisturbed. "By Galen's grace!" she breathed. How ingenious the original builders had been the way they concealed the opening stone so perfectly!

Heaving a sigh of relief, she went to the doors of the chamber and knocked so that the guards would open them. When they did, she passed through and left the antechamber on her way to the *haram* to search for Lara.

Chapter Six

Ariana walked briskly through the palace halls to the women's side of the *haram* quarters. She passed by the guards into the main room, steeling herself before entering, as she had always done.

The scene was the same. Women of all different skin and hair tones lounged about on silken cushions and brocaded couches in various stages of undress. Some were whispering together in small groups while others plucked pieces of fruit or sugar candy from bowls, popping them into their mouths disinterestedly. All of them looked bored.

When she entered, most of them turned and looked at her, some with mild interest, others with jealous hostility. There were many more *haram* slaves than there were courtiers and royals to service. The addition of yet another slave only worsened the situation.

Ariana ignored them, feeling a bit safer under the protection of her disguise. She peered around the room at the women's faces, most of them familiar, in search of Lara whom Karan had described to her in great detail. She did not see anyone who matched Lara's description and her stomach churned with alarm. Lara's absence from the main hall meant she was either off servicing a minister, or in one of the smaller sleeping cubicles, being claimed by an older slave.

Ariana headed swiftly for the sleeping rooms in the corridor, which branched off the main room. She made her way briskly down the huge hallway, stopping a moment to listen at the beaded covering to the door of each cubicle. The sleeping rooms were quite small, with space enough only for a cushioned bed and a small chest for the slaves' silk gowns.

When she had nearly reached the end of the hall, she heard a woman's faint cries carrying in the air.

"Please, no!" the girl was pleading. "Leave me alone!"

Ariana lunged forward, her blood prickling through her veins, until she found the cubicle the cries were coming from. In one motion, she swept aside the beads and stepped into the small room.

Lara was there, on the bed, being held down by a slave Ariana knew as Mardya. Mardya straddled Lara, pinning the girl's wrists against the bed. She had pulled Lara's silks down, exposing her breasts.

"Hold still, girl," the woman snarled, unable to fulfill her intentions for the girl's writhing and struggling.

"Get off her now, Mardya!" Ariana bared her teeth, her hands balled into fists. She was ready to rip the other woman off Lara if necessary.

Mardya looked up at her. Her dark eyes flashed angrily. "Who are you? How do you know my name?" She kept her iron grip on Lara who thrashed and flailed underneath her captor.

Ariana froze momentarily when she realized her mistake. She had to deflect Mardya's suspicion as quickly as possible. "I was warned about you as soon as I arrived here," she said. "I see the things I was told are true! You are beastly!"

Mardya narrowed her eyes, her lips curled in a snarl. "Get out of here! This girl is mine!"

"The girl is going to belong to the king," Ariana corrected her. "Perhaps you would like to argue the matter with His Majesty yourself."

Mardya scowled at her opponent but she released Lara's arms and climbed off her. She stalked past Ariana, bumping into her viciously as she threw the beads aside and disappeared.

Ariana did not waste a moment seeing to Lara who had curled up in a fetal position on the bed, sobbing. She knelt by the crying girl, placing a gentle hand on her back.

At her touch, Lara cringed. "Please, don't hurt me!"

"I won't hurt you, Lara, I promise," she said soothingly. She smoothed the girl's silvery blond hair off her face.

Lara raised her tearstained face and looked at her. "How do you know me?" she choked out.

Ariana continued to stroke the girl's hair. Lara had her father's hair and eye color and her mother's Pierran golden skin and almond-shaped eyes. Even in her distressed, rumpled state, Kara's daughter was breathtakingly pretty.

"I'm...a...friend of your father's," she answered, searching for the right words. "I'm here to bring you back to him."

At this, Lara's eyes opened wide and her tears stopped. She sat up suddenly. "Father?" she whispered. "He's...alive?"

Ariana smiled gently. "Yes, Lara. Alive and well, by Galen's grace."

A shadow of doubt crept over Lara's face. "Are you really here to save me? Why is he not here himself?"

"I swear on my own life what I tell you is true. But I cannot explain now. I will answer all your questions when we are away." She rose and sat next to Lara on the bed. "Did she hurt you?"

Lara pulled her silks back over her breasts. She shook her head and sniffled. "No. But if you hadn't come..." her voice trailed off and she sat quietly, staring at her hands. Her tears began again.

Ariana reached out and took Lara into her arms, holding her as she sobbed. "I'm sorry, sweetling," she said gently. Her heart ached for Lara, knowing how she'd suffered. They needed to get out of here immediately.

Furiously, she raked her mind for the safest yet quickest plan for escape. The safest escape hatch was the one that led from Dorian's chamber. No one would see them leave from there. They must wait until after dark or risk being seen in their brightly colored silks. Their only chance was to hide for the rest of the day in the king's bedchamber.

Ariana sighed with another pang of guilt for the young man she had beguiled so swiftly and so effectively. In her heart, she prayed to Galen to bless Dorian with safety and well-being and to reward him for the service he had unknowingly done her and Karan.

She put her hands on Lara's shoulders and bid her to look up. "Listen, Lara," she said in a gentle yet brisk tone, "You must address me as Ilani until we are gone from here. I am assigned to bring you to the king as a gift. Do you understand?"

Lara nodded as the tears coursed down her cheeks. She sniffled and wiped her face with the heel of her hand.

"Do you have a comb?"

Lara pointed to the small chest. "In there."

Ariana took out the comb. She sat back down behind Lara and began to run the comb gently through the girl's hair. "We must make you look ready to be presented to the king for his pleasure as soon as he returns from his Council meeting," she told her as she let the girl's white-gold tresses fall temptingly down her back and shoulders.

When she had finished, she re-pinned Lara's gown and smoothed it down, erasing the signs of Mardya's ravaging. She looked into Lara's eyes, at her chiseled yet delicate features. She was as much the image of Karan as Dorian was of Maya. "Are you ready?"

Lara looked at her, wide-eyed. She was frightened but Ariana saw her steel herself. Lara was, after all, a warrior's daughter. "I'm ready."

Ariana took Karan's daughter by the hand and led her out of the cubicle, down the corridor and into the main room. She felt the other women's eyes on them as they entered the room. Mardya was there too, darting them with poisoned looks. But no one said a word or tried to stop them. Each one knew her fate if she dared to contradict the king's wishes.

The two women went past the guards into the marble halls, Ariana leading in the direction of Dorian's chambers. She listened to dull thud of their bare feet on the plush

red carpets lining the marble floors. The soft sound was the only thing that drowned the harsh pounding of her blood in her ears.

When they reached Dorian's chambers, they came to a stop in front of the guards.

"I bring a gift for the king," she told them.

"His Majesty is in council," one of them said.

"Yes, I know. He told me," Ariana answered lowering her voice into a seductive tenor. "But we wish to be here when my lord returns. I felt it would be a pleasurable surprise for him."

Her words hit their mark, strengthened by Dorian's previous orders to let her come and go freely. The guards opened the heavy carved doors and permitted them through, closing them heavily behind the two women.

Once inside, she released Lara's hand and breathed a heavy sigh. Their trial wasn't nearly over, although, by the will of Galen, they were more than halfway. She turned to Lara.

"Stay with me," she told her as she made her way toward Dorian's bath chamber. She peeked inside. The valet was not there. The giant steaming pool of water stood empty of bathers. A golden towel rack had been refreshed with piles of clean white linens and there was a marble table with a luxurious chair where the valet helped Dorian with his toilette.

She looked at Lara and bent close to her ear. "Now we go," she whispered. "But you must be brave. The passageways are dark and we share them with other little creatures. Don't make a sound."

Lara nodded obediently and reached out for Ariana's hand. Karan's daughter was a brave young woman and a frightened little girl all contained in one exquisite form.

Ariana grasped her hand and squeezed it comfortingly before leading her to the tapestry. Carefully, she pulled it away from the wall and pushed in the small stone

door, taking care not to make any loud scraping sounds. When she had it opened, she urged Lara in ahead of her and replaced the door.

Standing up, she found Lara's hand again in the dark and began to lead her, proud of the way Lara bravely stifled her whimpers each time she stepped on a furry tail and received a squeal of protest.

The memory of her flight of the previous week was strong as she traced the path once again, using her free hand along the stone wall to guide them. It took nearly an hour to reach the opening by the palace wall where the gnarled trees concealed it. The afternoon sunlight stole through chinks in the stones, giving them a bit of scant light by which to see each other's faces.

Ariana crouched by the opening. In the faint rays of light, she watched Lara crouch too. They sat, facing each other. Ariana reached out and touched Lara's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Lara nodded. "Yes, I am." She was silent a moment. "What is your real name, mistress?" Her tone was filled with gratitude and respect for the woman who was delivering her from bondage.

"Ariana."

"Ariana," Lara repeated in a whisper. "You must love my father very much to have risked your life like this."

Ariana smiled. "I do love him," she answered. "He saved my life. My heart is his. But I would have come for you anyway. I have suffered the same as you and would only wish your happiness, as I wish his."

Lara was watching her. A glint of tears shone through the shadows. "Thank you, mistress Ariana."

Ariana squeezed Lara's hand. "You're welcome," she said softly. "Now, we wait for the suns to set. Your father will be waiting for us at the edge of the forest."

In the near-darkness, she heard the girl sniffle.

"I can't wait to see my father again," she said. "I thought I never would."

"Soon, you will, child," Ariana reassured her. "Soon." And she stared out between the cracks in the stone, as she waited for darkness to fall.

* * * * *

Karan stared out from the edge of the forest. The hours that had passed were some of the worst he'd ever known, nearly as bad as those of his punishment. Would Ariana find Lara alive? And if so, could she really get them through those passageways? How long would he stand vigil here, as he'd done for these past four years, waiting for something that might never happen?

The suns were sinking quickly behind the horizon. In the forest at his back, the night sounds began and the field before him disappeared in shadows. His heartbeat rose to a painful speed. The next few moments would decide the rest of his life.

Then he saw movement. His breath caught. He squinted, studying the shadows for forms. Two forms. Female. It was them! He started from the cover of the trees to the edge of the field. One hand went to the knife in his belt, the knife he'd fashioned from cave stones by his own hand. One figure, the taller one, was waving her arms.

Karan broke into a run toward them. Joy made him practically fly. In moments they'd be under cover of the trees and head to the other side of the Sylvan lands where a Beren caravan heading north would surely be in progress.

As he got closer he heard Ariana's screams.

"Karan, no! Get back!"

Karan's blood ran cold. That's when he saw them, a troop of Pierran soldiers, carrying spears, running after the two women. There were at least ten men in pursuit and they were fast closing in.

Pulling the knife from his belt, he brandished it and sprinted. Anger burned in his veins, spurred him forward. The secondhand armor he'd traded for in the village and

now wore made speed difficult, but with Ariana's and Lara's lives potentially crushed in a moment, he knew nothing else but their defense.

He reached them just as the Pierrans closed in. Ariana lunged toward him, one hand grasping Lara's. "Karan, no!" she cried.

"Halt now!" the commander of the troop yelled.

Karan grabbed Ariana's shoulder and yanked her behind him, putting himself between the women and the soldiers.

The troop surrounded them, spears all pointed. "These slaves are escaping," the commander, distinguished by his more ornate helmet said. "Hand them over and you'll suffer no consequences."

Karan pressed closer, feeling both Ariana and Lara's trembling forms against his back and side. "Rot in the underworld," he growled. "They're coming with me." Though truly, he didn't know how he'd fight their way out in spite of his skills.

A sudden growl echoed from the edge of the forest. All the soldiers jumped. Karan jerked his gaze in the direction of the sound. A *chaya* beast. They were huge, fierce, and hungry at this time of night. The scent of humans had no doubt carried in the night air to the hungry animal.

"Ariana," Karan said in a low voice, "Whatever happens, you both stay with me. You hear?"

"Aye," she said, her voice shaking. "We hear."

The growl vibrated again through the air, closer this time. The soldiers backed away, spears pointed toward the trees.

Karan's grip tightened around his knife. If he could just draw some blood from one of the soldiers, the beast would come running. The Weiran moon cast a glow on all the figures and Karan chose the nearest man. "I'm going to attack one of them," he said so only the two women could hear. "Don't move."

"Aye, my lord."

The beast growled again. Confusion rippled through the troop of men. That was the moment. Karan lunged, knife outstretched and caught the soldier's exposed thigh with the blade. The man screamed and swung at Karan but wasn't fast enough. Karan pushed him down and grabbed his spear.

In the ensuing chaos, a few soldiers came at him. Spear points pricked him but Karan was too fast and too angry. He managed to fell a couple of men.

And then the soldiers' cries rang out. Like a river parting around him, the soldiers retreated.

Karan lunged for Ariana and Lara and threw his body over theirs, just as the giant lumber *chaya* beast emerged from the trees, its long powerful body speeding in their direction.

No soldiers helped the man Karan had wounded as they fled for their own lives. The beast closed its jaws around the man, stilling his cries immediately.

Knowing the animal had its supper of the man he'd wounded, Karan lifted himself off Ariana and Lara. He grabbed their hands and hauled them up. "Let's go. Now!"

He tugged and they followed him into the cover of the forest, the dark forest of trees he knew without light to see by. There would be time to check them for injuries once they were far and away from the Sylvan lands, from the caves and on a Beren trader's cart.

Only then would he be able to stop and enjoy the life he'd just been given back.

Epilogue

The Veltish snows whirled in the winter darkness. But inside the longhouse, the large fire in the center of the main room blazed with cheery warming light. Karan's clansmen were celebrating the homecoming of their long-lost son and had readily made him chieftain so that his aging father, Solen, could finally rest.

Tears glowed in the old man's eyes, reflected by the firelight. His life would end soon enough, yet it would end happily now that his son was restored to him. Karan had brought with him a beautiful, brave wife and a daughter who, at her tender age, already showed signs of one who holds power. At first opportunity he would consult with Sha'ul, a sorcerer who lived on the edge of the nearby forest. If Sha'ul saw the signs as well, he would have her trained as a sorceress.

Solen's only regret was that Karan's mother had not lived to see her son's joyous return. The former chieftain lifted his heavy goblet of mead to the faces around him, each one illuminated by the crackling flames. "Long live my son!"

"Long live Karan!" the clansmen repeated in hearty unison before the drinking of mead silenced the large room.

Ariana, once again the fiery-haired, emerald-eyed beauty, sat by her husband and stepdaughter. The girl was asleep beside her, her head resting on Ariana's thigh. She stroked Lara's hair. The poor girl was still exhausted from the arduous journey north and by the grief that still burdened her. Ariana felt nothing but love and empathy for her. She herself knew how unshed tears ripped at the soul and prayed that Lara would be able to heal now that she was back with her father and among people who loved her.

Tears glowed in Karan's eyes as he embraced each of his kinsmen. When he had finished, his gaze fell on his sleeping daughter. He set down his empty cup and knelt to pick her up.

He and Ariana bade everyone good night and went down the connecting hall to where the sleeping rooms were. Lara stayed with two of her cousins, Renna and Kira, sweet girls who immediately accepted her as a sister. They were in their beds, whispering together. But when they saw Lara asleep, they quieted and lay still.

Ariana leaned over and kissed the sleeping girl on the forehead before following Karan to their room. Once there, she embraced her husband, nuzzling his beard which had begun to fill out again, and letting her hands roam over his broad hard back, downward. There had not been many opportunities to make love on the journey home. The caravan of Beren nomads who'd accompanied them north had been very kind and helpful but also very social. There had been no privacy for the several months it took to reach the Veltlands. So now, in the few days since their arrival, they had coupled every night and first thing in the mornings before rising.

Karan took Ariana's face delicately in his large hands and captured her lips in a soft kiss.

She closed her eyes and pushed her body closer against him. She opened her eyes again when unexpectedly, Karan ended their kiss and gently pulled away.

"I have something for you," he said.

Ariana looked at him. "What is it, my lord?"

Karan went over to the chest in the corner where he kept his clothing. He reached in and pulled out a small glass vial, much like the one that had held the disguising potion. He brought the vial over and put it into her hand.

She felt confused and a flash of worry jolted through her. "I don't understand, my lord. Do you wish to see Ilani again?"

Karan chuckled and reached up to caress her hair. "No, Wife. Though no man is above the temptation to appreciate all female beauty, that isn't what this is for."

"What is it, Husband? Is it from Nedda?"

Karan smiled. "No. It's from Sha'ul, the local sorcerer."

Ariana frowned. "Do you wish to alter my appearance again?"

To her surprise, he chuckled. "Of course not. You're the most beautiful woman in the world to me. This potion..." he paused and his smile faded, "was made to restore your womb. Sha'ul said it was proven to reverse the effects of the herbs you were given in the palace."

Ariana stared at the vial as Karan's words began to be clear to her. She looked up at him, her heart quickening. "You mean I'll be able to..."

"Bear a child. Yes. It might take a few doses. But I have more in the chest." Karan reached up and gently squeezed her shoulders. "If that's what you want, Ariana. I'll love you either way. I don't want to think about life without you."

Ariana's breathing grew ragged with emotion and her eyes hot with salty tears. She hadn't realized how much she'd hated having been sterilized. Her world had been so small and lonely, her only satisfaction that of having served her mistress to Maya's satisfaction. Now, her life, which had taken such a bitter turn all those years ago, was only growing sweeter. She opened the vial and swallowed its contents without hesitation.

No sooner had she done so, she felt a tingling in her womb that radiated outward, like gentle fingers massaging her insides. The potion was far kinder than the one she had taken to become Ilani.

Ariana smiled up at Karan who stepped forward and gathered her into his arms.

"I believe it's working, my lord," she said softly.

Karan smiled at her. Desire gleamed in his blue eyes.

"Let's test it now," he said. He bent down and claimed her lips in a deep, hot kiss. Her body melted against his, her softness into his hard strength. Her fingertips traced the ridges of his triceps and she arched her neck upward when he began to nibble and lick the skin of her throat.

"We'll try a thousand times if we must," he breathed between kisses. He stood back so she could raise her woolen gown over her head. She let it fall to the floor and stood under his hungry gaze, naked except for her woolen stockings and leather garters.

Ariana had never had stockings and garters in her life and found she liked them very much. Karan favored them as well, especially when she wore nothing else. She saw him drinking in the sight of her pale skin, her hair glowing in the lantern light, flames of fiery scarlet cascading down her shoulders and over her swollen breasts, the soft woman's stomach and her mound of red springy curls.

She bent over to untie the garters but Karan reached out and stayed her hand.

"Those will wait." He pulled off his tunic, trousers and boots and picked her up, laying her down on their bed, underneath him.

Ariana spread her legs wide open, her sex already soaked and swollen for her warrior. She thought of Karan's words. "A thousand times," she repeated in a whisper as he slid into her, stretching the soft pinkness. Her eyelids fluttered closed as she lost herself in Karan's strength and scents of earth and smoke. She tilted her face upward, seeking deep, hot kisses.

"My beautiful Ariana." Karan's voice caressed her, like a hand moving through her entire being. His lips closed softly over hers and Ariana breathed in her husband's scent of musk and smoke fire as his muscular body possessed hers.

Thick and hard, he filled her, his shaft caressing her clit with each thrust. His mouth pulled away from hers and the heat of moist kisses continued over her throat.

Ariana threw her head back, eyes closed, a smile curving her lips as she clutched at Karan's broad back. *This* was what she'd craved for so long, ached for all those years in the palace.

Several more thrusts and her release made her lower body clench, waves of pleasure that made her cry out, left her panting and completely saturated with bliss. Galen had truly blessed her already. Child or no child.

She had love.

Karan stiffened. He groaned with the release of climax that Ariana could feel in her passageway, the warm gush of her husband's life force filling her.

He hovered over her, his face dusky, blue eyes smoldering with desire, love and everything else Ariana had ever wanted.

She smiled up at him. "And then I'll pray for a thousand more," she whispered just before Karan's lips captured hers.

About the Author

Award-winning multi-published author of erotic romance, Sedonia Guillone spends her days writing deliciously naughty romances—when she's not cuddling with the man she loves or watching kung fu and samurai films and eating chocolate.

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