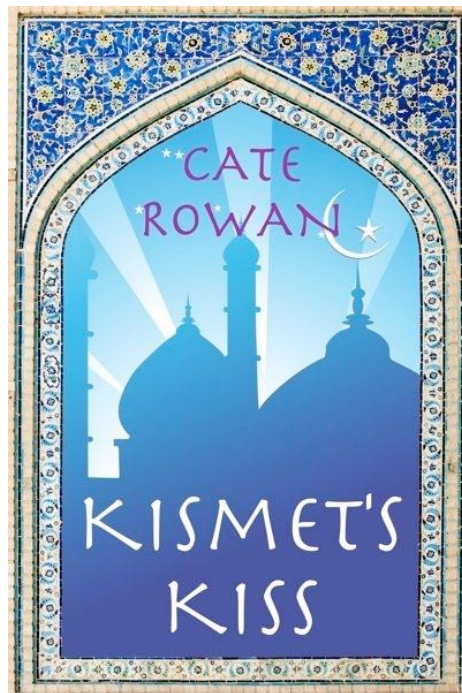




KISMET'S KISS

Cate Rowan

Kismet's Kiss by Cate Rowan

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Praise for *Kismet's Kiss*

"Magic, passion, and intrigue—*Kismet's Kiss* has it all! Cate Rowan's uniquely compelling fantasy debut is set in a fascinating and fully realized world where danger lurks in every shadow. Rowan is definitely an author to watch!"

– Alyssa Day, *New York Times* bestselling author

"*Kismet's Kiss* is a compelling tale of love and duty set amid the clash of cultures. A thoroughly enjoyable adventure!"

– Jana Oliver, author of the Time Rovers series and *Demon Trapper's Daughter*

"A wonderful Arabian Nights story laced with humor and scheming with intriguing twists."

– Robin D. Owens, RITA-winning author of *Heart Thief* and *Guardian of Honor*

"*Kismet's Kiss* is a lush, inviting, immersive gem of a book. No one who loves being swept away by a great story should miss this!"

– Kendra Leigh Castle, author of *Call of the Highland Moon* and *Renegade Angel*

"*Kismet's Kiss* has everything a reader of fantasy could ask for—suspense, action, incredible world-building and magic. What captured me most was a romance so exquisitely crafted that it kept me up all night, devouring every word until the very last page. This story is a one-sitting read to be savored again and again!"

– Shelby Reed, author of *The Fifth Favor* and *Midnight Rose*

About the Author

Cate Rowan has washed laundry in a crocodile-infested African lake, parasailed over Cabo, had monkeys poop in her hair, and swum with dolphins, but her best adventures are her story worlds. Her lush fantasy romances about magic, danger and passion in faraway realms have won more than thirty awards.

CHAPTER ONE

"She will come." Old Dabir's clouded eyes fixed on Kuramos, the Great Sultan of Kad, who had been holding vigil at his bedside for hours.

"She?" Kuramos enfolded his mentor's trembling fingers between his own bejeweled hands. "It doesn't matter, *Abha*. Sleep now. We'll talk later."

"There will be no later."

Kuramos's jaw tightened. His gaze slid away, seeking refuge among the scrolls, piled sketches, and leather-bound tomes cramming Dabir's sizable palace quarters. "Don't say such things. Your illness isn't like that of the others. You'll feel better in the morning."

Silence gnawed at Kuramos until he turned back to the bed. The gray eyes of the shriveled Grand Vizir were half-blinded by cataracts, but still held more wisdom than any other man in Kuramos's realm could claim. Those eyes gazed at him now, and neither man spoke further of the truth they both knew.

Kuramos's head grew heavy with grief, the muscles in his battle-proud neck almost too weary to hold it up.

"Call for her." Dabir's voice quavered. "She will come." His hand fluttered against Kuramos's enclosing palms like a bird preparing for flight.

Kuramos frowned. "Call who, *Abha*?" Dabir's relatives were long dead. The Grand Vizir was a venerable six hundred years old, and Kuramos had known him for nearly two hundred of those years. There was no one left.

"It won't be easy for you, *Zyru*," Dabir murmured, his voice so frail that Kuramos nearly missed the precious word. He could count the times it had been spoken to him, this endearment from a father to his son—as Dabir now was to Kuramos in all but blood.

"What won't be easy?" He flattened both hands around Dabir's, as if by calming the tremors he could prevent Dabir from leaving.

"You are the *husam al din* of our people. Your faith, your ways are dear to you, as hers are to her. Will you bend, or will she? Perhaps neither." Dabir gave a

short chuckle; it twisted into a hacking cough that racked his gaunt body.

Kuramos reached for an almond-scented handkerchief and held it to his mentor's mouth. When the coughing spell had eased, the white linen was stained with spatters of blood.

Dabir's gaze, less focused by the minute, swept Kuramos's face. "I wish..." But pain furrowed his brow, and the words faltered.

Kuramos swallowed and clasped Dabir's hand again. *Why, Naaz? Why must You take him now? Why must You take any of them!* He hurled his despair towards the goddess's home in the sky, but refused to look toward Her. Dabir would notice.

A soft tapping at the door yanked him from his thoughts. The sultan turned with a furious rebuke on his tongue.

His steward, Hamar, bowed deeply from the threshold. "O Lord, my most humble apologies for disturbing you, but Yaman needs your counsel. The illness has spread."

If it had been anyone else, or any other news, Kuramos would have flayed the intruder. Instead, he gave a terse nod. "Have him meet me in my chambers. I'll be there shortly."

Hamar bowed low again and backed out, closing the door without looking up.

Kuramos turned to Dabir. "I'm sorry, *Abha...*"

Dabir rolled his head feebly on the pillow. "It's time. Look to Teganne."

Teganne? Shards of ice in Kuramos's heart thawed in yearning, then bitterly re-froze.

Dabir's fingers, weightless as fallen leaves, tugged at Kuramos's hand, and at his heart. All hope drained away.

He raised the oval sapphire ring of the Sultanate of Kad to Dabir's parched lips.

Hoary breaths leaked from his mentor as he kissed the ring. "O Lord, I hope I have served you well."

"Always, Dabir ib Rubai." Kuramos's voice broke. "As I hope I have ruled you."

“Always,” came the whisper. “She comes. And I go.” With that, the life Naaz had bestowed upon Dabir departed for the Sands of the Dead.



Evening settled over the palace as Kuramos paced the elegant rugs and marble of his chambers. When servants entered on silent feet to light the torches and bring a beverage, he turned away and gazed at his garden of jasmine and roses under the silvered moon. At last the servants withdrew, drawing the massive double doors closed with a click.

The sultan leaned against the arch of an open window, lifted his glass and stared into the drink. Ice carried by oxen down the Ravia Mountains cooled his pomegranate juice. The chunks, cut to resemble the soaring arches of his palace, bobbed in the sweet red liquid like drowning men.

He hurled the glass against the mosaic wall, where it shattered with a satisfying crash. The juice slithered down the azure and ivory tiles, rivulets of blood against the span of his life.

How many others would die?

The best glass from Jindua was supposed to break into large chunks; the glass had been true. He knelt and picked up a shard. The wet surface glittered in the flickering torchlight.

He slid the jagged tip across his index finger. Thick drops of blood welled to the surface and rolled over the shard. Real blood, now...the blood of his family, his household.

The Royal Physician, Yaman, had brought a list of those in the palace afflicted by the illness. Eleven names were on it: palace servants, stable boys, the master baker, a guardsman, the royal children's head teacher...and Dabir. Three had already died. Several others were very close.

None of his immediate family had been struck—yet. That his children's teacher was one of those near death worried him immensely.

Those who lived in Kuramos's palace, even the servants, ate unspoiled food, had fresh rushes for their pallets and drank from the blessed stream that flowed through the palace enclosure. They should be the least likely to succumb

to any illness—but they had. He’d had no reports of a blight spreading outside the gates. The hand of death was *inside* his home.

Naaz’s hand.

He turned away and felt glass crunch under his sandals. *I’ll call a servant to clean it*, he thought, then dismissed the idea. The last thing he needed now was another intrusion.

With his foot, he pushed the chunks into a pile. The juice stained the tawny leather of his sandal. He snapped off a broad leaf from the potted palm in the corner, folded the fractured pieces into the leaf and tossed the mess into the waste sack.

He reached for another leaf to wipe the juice from the tiles, but let his fingers drop away. The blood should stay. It was a reminder.

If Dabir were still alive, they would have found a solution, a way out, together. Now he would have to do that alone.

She will come, Dabir had said.

Had he meant Naaz?

Kuramos shuddered.

More of Dabir’s words floated back to him. *“Look to Teganne.”* Why there, of all places? Teganne...

Was it possible? Could “she” be Qiara?

Kuramos’s heart stumbled, and he stepped to the archway of his garden to let the fragrant, humid air fill his lungs.

Qiara had haunted his dreams for long months after he’d allowed her to escape. Beautiful, willful, insolent—and the most alluring woman he’d ever known. She was the princess of the neighboring realms of Teganne and Fallorm, and he’d have given half his sultanate to have her. Even though she’d been sired by that uncultured gerbil, Prince Alvarr.

But he’d let her go, and had given her damned sorcerer lover his freedom, too. Now they had a young child and ruled Fallorm, while Qiara’s parents held Teganne.

No, Dabir’s “she” couldn’t be Qiara. She was a married woman, forbidden to Kuramos—and the Grand Vizir had known it. Besides, Dabir hadn’t spoken of

Fallorm, but Teganne.

Teganne, *pah*. How could that cursed land of mages and fools help him save his family?

Behind him, the curtain of pearls dividing the harem quarters from his receiving chamber tinkled. He turned with a scowl, only to find his ebony-maned sixth wife, Sulya, with Tahir, their son. His expression thawed under the five-year-old's solemn gaze. "Tahir, my little leopard. It's a joy to see you. And you, Sulya," he said more absently.

"*Abha*," Tahir said, "I don't feel good." His dark hair was tousled, sweaty.

Sulya's sharp nails rested on Tahir's shoulder, her cold jade eyes tight with worry.

"He is fevered, O Lord." The undercurrent of alarm in her voice stabbed at Kuramos's self-control.

His gaze flicked down to the boy, whose skin seemed flushed and hot—just as the illness had begun in the others.

The sultan clenched his fists. *Naaz, you cannot take my son!*

In two swift strides, he'd gathered Tahir into his arms. "How long have you felt this way, *Zyru*?"

Tahir pursed his lips as if concentrating, then shrugged and laid his small head, light as a sparrow's, on his father's shoulder.

Kuramos looked over his son's head to Sulya, who stared back in brittle, wide-eyed fear.

CHAPTER TWO

Many miles away in the realm of Teganne, the Royal Healer Varene na Seryn stood alone by an unlit funeral pyre, gazing down on the lifeless body of the man she'd loved in vain.

Embroidered ivory vines spiraled over the black linen that draped from his thin shoulders to his calloused feet. The shroud hid the deadly gash he'd incurred rescuing a beggar woman from a gang of thugs, but Varene couldn't staunch her awareness of the wound, or of the life that had poured from it into the dust.

Once upon a time, the powerful magic in Findar's soul would have protected him, but a madman had torn away his magery years before. Varene's healing should have saved him, but she'd reached him too late.

Too late.

Now, for the first time in her life, she ran her fingers through Findar's ash-blond hair. It was as fine and soft as she'd always imagined. "All these years," she whispered, "I longed for you. I'd hoped you would stay here and see what was in my heart. That you'd end your wandering and be with me. That someday I could cure you of your restlessness."

She lifted an edge of the linen and stroked his knuckles. "You saved the beggar woman, 'Dar. But I couldn't save you." The cloth fell back into place, and leaning down, she kissed his finely-shaped lips. Her tear splashed his pale cheek.

On unsteady legs, she slipped back through the velvety grass to the waiting circle of mourners and took a torch from the hand of Alvarr, Teganne's ruling prince. Next to him, in a matching onyx mourning tunic, stood his wife. When Jilian's wet eyes met Varene's, each woman struggled for breath.

Varene returned to Findar and laid the torch on the kindling at the pyre's base. The flames hesitated, as if waiting for a signal, then licked upward and outward. Seeking. Burning.

Watching the fire writhe, Varene backed away until she stood beside Jilian.

Alvarr didn't speak, but Varene sensed the shared weight of his grief. The princess reached out and clasped Varene's hand, and the warmth and life of Jilian's skin contrasted with the memory of Findar's cold flesh.

As flames climbed the legs of the bier, Varene began to tremble. Soon even Findar's body would be gone—nothing but ash would be left of the man she'd quietly loved for five decades.

Burning wood scented the air. Through the rising smoke she stared at his face, peaceful at last in death. Mother Fate had quieted his journeying in the most final way.

And I was a fool.

Fire licked the bier's edges. She steeled herself for the moment when the flames would touch him, would take him into the beyond. She threaded her fingers tighter through Jilian's, seeking strength...but soon turned away, biting her lip to halt its quiver.

Alvarr muttered a quick spell, then placed his gentle palm at her back. "I've veiled the sight of it, 'Rene. No need for you to watch."

She touched the shoulder of her longtime friend in gratitude, then looked at Jilian, blank-faced. "Thank you. Thank you both." The princess embraced her as Alvarr stood close, head bowed.

"I'm so sorry," Jilian whispered.

Varene leaned against the princess and saw her own golden hair sweep over Jilian's dark locks like morning sun over shade. The image mocked Varene, because she could radiate no warmth this day.

She cast one last glance toward the pyre, now shrouded by Alvarr's shimmering screen. Smoke rose above, drifting away into the sky, remnants of the love she'd waited for. A love she'd been too silent and patient to induce.

And now the splinter in her soul was the guilt she'd never escape: Would Findar still be alive if she had bared her heart to him?



Kuramos strode through torch-lit palace halls with his son cradled against his chest, Tahir's small arms wrapped around his neck. Sulya followed hard on his

heels, her coiled anklets jangling “look at me, look at me” with every step.

“You’re taking him to Yaman?” she asked, low-throated.

“Yes.” He hoped she’d pay heed to his curt tone. For once.

“That donkey! He wouldn’t know how to cure a hangnail. He should have taken his rest long ago. What good can he do?”

“Let’s hope he can cure our son,” he growled. “Leave the past alone, Sulya.”

“Why? It will claw at us sooner or later.” She stretched her pace to his and yanked a stray raven lock behind her ear. “You should have let me bring Bairam here. *He* would have known what to do.”

Pah. Unlikely. Bairam was her brother, and an old irritant. No love was lost between Sulya and the physician Yaman, and Kuramos clenched his jaw at the memory of why. But Tahir was Sulya’s son, too. He couldn’t very well ban her from Yaman’s presence when her son was ill.

Tahir’s dark head slumped against Kuramos’s bare chest; the heat of the fever soaked his father’s skin. The boy peered ahead, but didn’t lift his head from its rest.

Nearing the Royal Infirmary, Kuramos spied the stone visage of Naaz above the door. Her divine face was shaped into forbidding lines, and She held the Scroll of Mercy aloft in one hand, the Torch of Vengeance in the other. He closed his eyes briefly and prayed that this time, the goddess’s mercy would be the stronger.

“Yaman,” he said, turning into the room, “Tahir is ill, a fever—”

He froze at the sight before him. Yaman, his Royal Physician, lay on his side on the marble floor, face toward Kuramos, pupils rolling up toward his brows. His body arched as if a tiger’s jaws clamped his back. A spreading stain of red soaked the edge of his honey-colored turban just above one ear.

Yaman’s assistant leaned over his master, frantically pressing *mir* leaves against the wound. Another man, whom Kuramos recognized as an undercook from his own kitchens, sprawled unconscious across a nearby table, blood running from a large gash in the bared flesh of his stomach. Yaman’s surgical instruments lay scattered over the floor as if they’d been kicked. And even as Kuramos watched, a twitching overtook the physician, growing more powerful

until his limbs flailed like thrown sticks.

“Yaman!” the assistant shouted. “Listen to me! Come back!”

When the physician’s limbs slackened, his assistant glanced toward the doorway. The fear lingering in his eyes crashed through Kuramos.

He thinks Yaman will die.

Kuramos crossed the floor and knelt at Yaman’s side, one arm still cradling Tahir. “What happened?”

The assistant moaned. “One of the spit-dogs bit the cook. He made it here, but Yaman...Yaman...He slipped on the blood, O Lord.” His shaky fingers pointed to a red pool on the floor beneath the cook. “He hit his head on the table. Then his arms, his legs—they jerked, as you saw...”

Tahir, who had been staring down at the physician, turned and nestled into his father’s shoulder. For a moment, Kuramos wished his son hadn’t witnessed the grotesque scene. But as a child of the sultan, death and blood were the least of what he would have to know.

Yaman’s eyes still strained upward as if to look back into his own skull. Kuramos placed two fingers below the physician’s jaw. The pulse weakened and ceased even as he found it. He straightened and stared down at the man who was supposed to cure the plague attacking his household.

Yaman was dead.

Kuramos gazed across the physician’s body at the frightened assistant. “Your name is Sohad?”

The man nodded nervously and continued pressing the wound, though his patient could no longer be helped.

Kuramos tapped Sohad’s arm. Surprised, Sohad stilled and released the leaves, as if now realizing they’d be of no more use. He peered at Yaman’s dead face and a keen rose from his throat, tears glistening in his eyes.

A grim breath hovered over Kuramos’s tongue. By all the gods, the man deserved to mourn his loss! But time was merciless. As was Naaz. “Sohad! How much do you understand of the illness spreading through my palace?”

The assistant looked up, trying to refocus his watering eyes. “Yaman and I discussed it...he didn’t know what it was.”

"And do you?"

He swallowed, clearly shaken. "No, O Lord."

"Then find someone who does."

Sohad bowed his head. "Yes, O Lord. And I will do my best for the patients, as poor as my contributions may be to your service—"

"The patients you speak of now include my son, Tahir." Kuramos's arm tightened around the boy. "See that your best includes protecting him from the fate that befell the others."

Sohad bobbed anew, fingers shaking against his thighs.

"I will send for Bairam," Sulya said from the doorway, her voice taut as a lash.

The sultan swung his head around. That drunken oaf couldn't find a cure if it were on his very plate, and his fawning presence would disrupt what little peace Kuramos might carve out in the next few days. Still, Sohadr's manner did not inspire confidence.

"Do that, Sixth Wife," he drawled, and watched the reprimand register in her blazing eyes. She coveted the position of the honored *Sha'Lai*, the First Wife of the Sultan of Kad. "But also tell my scribe to call the physicians of the city here."

Sulya's gaze shuttered as she bowed. "As you wish, O Lord." Yet she raised her head and glanced at her son, then back at Kuramos with a mute plea.

"Wife," he said in a softer tone, "I will do whatever I can for Tahir, and so will Sohadr. As, I hope, will Bairam and the others. Now go."

She nodded and backed out the door.

Kuramos turned back to the wide-eyed Sohadr. "Who else might know of a cure?"

"I...I'm not certain. I come from a small village in Gida Province, five days away..."

Panic clawed up the sultan's chest, but he concealed the cuts.

"O Lord, I could ask the herbalist from whom Yaman buys...er, bought...his medicines."

Kuramos stared at Sohadr for a moment, then nodded. *He may not have much*

experience, but perhaps he has a mind. We'll need that. "Send for the herbalist. And for any and all who may be of help."

Kuramos lifted Tahir so their eyes were level. "Sohad will take care of you, little leopard. Stay with him."

Swallowing once more, Sohad gingerly held out his hands, but Tahir clutched the sleeves of his father's kaftan. "Where are you going, *Abha*?"

"There's something I must do. But I'll be back soon to be with you."

He placed Tahir in Sohad's arms, and with another stern gaze at the assistant, reluctantly let go. He cast his son one last glance, memorizing his face, then rose and strode from the room.



Kuramos went straight to Dabir's quarters. His mentor's body was already being prepared for cremation, and for the first time in many years, Kuramos entered Dabir's rooms without him. The new silence wrenched his soul.

Books spilling from every nook held knowledge that the sultans of Kad and their subjects had gleaned over generations. Dabir had known each tome, and when asked a question, could instantly locate the right volume.

No longer.

Towering bookshelves grazed the clouds and blue sky that graced the domed ceiling. Joyous tears had glistened in Dabir's eyes the day Kuramos had surprised him with the trompe l'oeil mural. "My thanks to you, O Lord," he'd whispered. "Now I can be among my books and under Idu's vast heavens, all at once."

Kuramos drew his fingers across the books' russet spines and gold leaf lettering, wishing he could soak up their knowledge and find the answers he needed. Disparate thoughts and feelings careened in his head. He struggled for order, a path to take, but found none.

Idu and Naaz, god and goddess, father and mother, lovers and enemies. Architects of the world; destructors at will. With Kismet, Their son, They reigned over all creation, even as Kuramos ruled over the lives of the Kaddites. But Kuramos was mortal and thus fallible, while They were divine. And all-knowing.

Dabir is gone, and now Yaman. Those who might have had the skills to decipher and treat the plague upon my house have been taken first.

Now the scourge has my little Tahir...

Naaz is thirsty for my blood.

Because She knows.

He turned on his heel and stalked back to his own chambers.

There under the torchlight, the pomegranate stain he'd made earlier drew his reluctant gaze.

His mouth twisted in a bitter smile. So stupid to think he could hide from a goddess. She'd bided Her time...but after all, She had all the time in the world. She had *created* time.

Blood. She wanted blood. And She would get it from him, one way or another.

She comes.

He knelt and touched the wall. The crimson had scarred dry and unyielding under his fingertips. "Naaz," he whispered, "if I give myself to You now, as I should have done that fateful day, will You release my family from Your doom?"

He leapt up and snatched the dagger of his father from the golden brackets on the wall. The gems encrusting its ivory hilt caught the light—emeralds, sapphires, and a blood-red ruby the size of his thumb.

A knife of his royal ancestors, of all his people. He turned the wickedly pointed blade until it flashed in the torchlight, then poised it just below his ribcage, ready to punch up toward his heart. The tip sliced through the sable edge of his kaftan like ghee and pricked his skin.

One thrust to save them. One thrust to spare their lives from death.

He took a breath, his last, to steel himself.

"No, O Lord!"

Kuramos whirled to discover Hamar, his steward, frozen in the doorway with mouth agape. At once, Hamar dropped to his knees and bowed his head to the floor.

"Almighty Sultan, forgive my impertinence. It is only my shock at the sight

of you...with that dagger in your hand. Please, please, do not take your life."

Kuramos's chest tightened, choking his words. "A scourge has come to my house, Hamar! Dabir has died. Yaman, too. Others have been taken and soon more will join them—including my children, the heart of my existence." His fingers clenched the hilt. "And you, Hamar, *you know what I did.*"

Hamar touched his forehead to the floor once more. "Yes, O Lord, I remember." His torso expanded with a long breath, and then, slowly, he sat up and looked the sultan in the eye. "But I also know why it was done."

"That *why*," Kuramos snarled, "seems not enough for Naaz."

Hamar dropped his gaze to his knees. "O Lord, most noble of men, if you feel you must do this, I cannot stop you. But I beg you to hear this: if you go, who will ascend the throne of your ancestors? Who will wield the Royal Scimitar of Kad? Who will hold your house and people together? You have not chosen an heir."

"No." Kuramos twisted his wrist, incising a small, bleeding crescent under his ribs. The pain sharpened his senses, tightened every nerve. "I've never wanted squabbling rivals in this house. My children were to learn, to strive, to grow wise, so I could choose the best of them to rule Kad when I am gone." Irony soaked his caustic laughter. "My wish has come to naught—none are now old enough to rule. And to save them through my own death, I would have to choose one to ascend my throne under the goddess's curse."

His fingers tightened on the hilt until his knuckles whitened. One stab to end it all, then an eternity among the slumbering spirits at Naaz's feet...

The blade plunged to the thick rug below, where it lay glinting above the crimson fibers, pointing at his heart.

Without a hand to hold the weapon, it was lifeless, powerless.

And so would be an empty throne.

So what was left to do? Catastrophe raged and his enemies circled, primed to strike.

Teganne, Dabir had said. *Look to Teganne*. A land of mages. And sorcery.
And *healers*.

Kuramos's people were famed as warriors and merchants...not physicians.

But at least in Kad, healing was righteously done, without heathen magic!

Still...before Yaman had died, the physician had not identified the illness ravaging the royal household. It seemed possible no one else would, either.

Sulya's insults notwithstanding, Yaman had won his physician's robe and his place in the palace by experience. Kuramos knew there were no others in his realm who could do better.

He turned to Hamar, still kneeling in the doorway. "Bring the Cage to me. Our need is great."

As the steward rose and backed out, Kuramos thought of Tahir, and wondered if need alone would be enough to bridge the chasm.

Dread pierced him. No matter what he did about the plague, Naaz's judgments could not be escaped.

And She might yet require his soul.

CHAPTER THREE

Varene couldn't shake the chill that had clung since Findar's funeral. Even now, sitting at a table in the Healing Rooms sorting herbs for storage, she had to force herself not to stare out the windows toward the grassy knoll where his pyre had burned. To spare herself that, she chained her mind to her task, letting the fragrances and monotony lull her into a semblance of oblivion.

Sharp raps on the window nearly jolted her out of her chair.

She whipped around, half-expecting to see a lanky, beloved face returned from the beyond. Instead, a yellow slash of beak and umber wings zoomed by, jabbing again at the glass.

Astonished, she threw open the casements overlooking the bustling castle yard. Above the merchants, lowing cartbeasts, and messengers, a bird soared to the height of the gray turrets opposite, spun on one wing with a loud caw, and swooped back toward her sill.

As he alit on the masonry, bronze talons glimmering in the sunlight, Varene eyed the red pouch studded with mysterious gold symbols that hugged his neck. He raised his feathered head and regarded her with black and haughty eyes. "You, woman," he rasped, "where is the Royal Healer?"

Oh-ho! A jencel-bird...and an arrogant one. Several of the talking jencels had been friends of the royal court for decades, but she didn't recognize this one. She planted her hands on her hips and gave him a cool stare. "Who wishes to know?"

His head popped up in affront, voice crackling like crumpling paper. "Woman, I've flown a long way for the Royal Healer! Fetch him, and be quick about it."

"You've already found *her*, jencel." She crossed her arms and stared down her nose at him. "Varene na Seryn, Royal Healer of Teganne." Her fingers drummed on her silk-clad biceps. "What do you want?"

The bird went still. She allowed the quiet to swell and reproduce while he

gave several slow blinks.

Finally he swept a wingtip forward and dipped his inky head. "My apologies, Healer. Ah, you see, where I live, well..."

Varene uncrossed her arms and raised a corner of her mouth. "Hmm. And where is this place you live, jencel?"

"My name is Gunjan." He took two jerky steps along the width of the sill and cleared his throat. "As to my home...er, I haven't prejudiced you against my mission?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. But stalling won't help." She narrowed her eyes. "Out with it."

He cast a quick glance at the busy yard behind him, then cocked his head to an almost impossible degree. "May we converse in private?"

Varene gestured toward the center of the room and stepped aside so he could fly past. He circled over the long racks of jarred herbs and medicines and landed on the arched back of her chair. "We're alone?"

"As much as anyone can be in a castle," she said dryly. "Solitude never lasts." She pulled a second chair from the table and sat facing him, leveling their gazes.

Gunjan turned his beak toward the wall and gave her a one-eyed stare. "I've come at the bidding of the Great Sultan Kuramos."

"Kuramos? The ruler of Kad? But that's..." *an enemy realm*. "So far from here," she continued, not quite smoothly. "Why—"

"I flew all night, Healer, and then some. But these wings are among the swiftest of all birdkind." His chest puffed out and he raised his eye above hers. "And my mission is urgent."

"Then tell it!" she snapped, though amused by his body language. Conceit was a known tendency of Kaddites. "I'm the Healer. Who is ill?"

"Twelve members of the Great Sultan's household—including his youngest son. And some have died."

Hearing that, Varene's own grief stirred anew. If only she could inure herself to death! It was a professional hazard to feel it so keenly. "What is the malady?"

The bird shook his head. "Before it could be identified, the sultan's Royal Physician passed away."

She raised her brows. "Of the illness?"

"Nay, from a simple accident, my lady."

"I see." Her indigo silk skirts rustled as she rose and began to pace.

"Describe the symptoms, please."

Gunjan swung his head the other way, sending the little red pouch dancing against his chest. "A terrible fever strikes, then a fiery, parched throat no liquid will soothe. Some patients hallucinate, others simply sink deeper into the fever, growing weaker. When the fever finally breaks, awareness returns, but it may only give false hope. Soon they cough—great racking coughs, often with blood. After that, death."

Varene mentally surveyed the hundreds of illnesses she knew, but though many shared some of those symptoms, she couldn't be certain any were an exact match.

"Healer," the bird added solemnly, "when I flew from the palace, the twelve patients had all fallen to their sick beds within a day. By now, many others may be ill or dying. Including more of the sultan's children."

Varene sighed with regret, spreading her palms. "From your description, I can't be sure what it is. It's difficult to be much help without having seen the patients."

Gunjan raised his wings high and stared straight at her. "That is why the Great Sultan summons you to Kad."

A shocked breath whooshed from Varene's lungs.

Flushing hot, she drew two steps back, and the horrors of her past—of shattered bones and charred flesh—gashed her mind anew.

Too late, she forced her traitorous feet to halt and slammed her mental gates against the memories, damning herself for her loss of control. *I will NOT relive it.*

Nor will I leave Teganne!



Sweat dampened the pillow beneath Tahir's head, and Sulya knew all the cool compresses in Kad wouldn't quench her son's fever—no matter what the physician's whelp said. Jaws clenched in resentment, she wrung a square of linen from the bowl of citrus water and laid it over his forehead, another on his bare chest.

Fidgety sleep had tugged him from his pain at last. He needed that rest, as much as he'd needed the fortifying broths she'd spooned into him, and her silent, bitter prayers.

None of the city's physicians had given her much hope. Even Bairam didn't know what to make of the illness or how to combat it—her own brother, who had always soothed her hurts as a girl, who had always been so brilliant, so learned! The brother she'd contrived to promote to a royal post, just as her birth family had long planned. Had he finally lost his brains to the bottle? She'd smelled liquor on his breath again, though he'd seemed lucid enough at Tahir's bedside.

Physicians had failed her. Faith must be her son's savior. And she knew what that would take, even if none of the pedantic doctors did, or the cowering servants she'd dismissed. Weren't her own pale hands there to soothe her boy, to give him the honor and comfort of her love? Her *royal* love—the love of a sultana of Kad?

She savored her elevated position anew, for she had studied all the arts of seduction and schemed for long years to reach it. And now, surely her son was destined for glory. For the throne of Kad itself!

Her son. Her only child, beloved by his royal father and all who knew him. The sultan's throne was Tahir's destiny, just as hers was to guide his hand and be forever known as the mother of Tahir the Valiant. Tahir the Lion. Tahir the Magnificent, Emperor of all the world.

He would surpass his father one day. Surely Naaz would grant her pleas, the prayers of a dutiful, devout, and ambitious mother... After all, Naaz had been an ambitious mother, too. And Tahir was Naaz's very descendent, from an unbroken line through countless generations of sultans. The divine Kismet Himself was Tahir's forefather! It followed that destiny would be kind. *Must* be

kind.

Her son would survive, take the throne, wield the Scimitar of Kad. His older siblings were of inferior wives, of lesser birthrights than her own. They weren't suited to rule. Tahir would ascend the Leonine Throne.

He must.

A familiar tall shadow crossed her son's flushed body. Sulya pasted a warm smile on her lips and looked up into the sea-green eyes of her husband.

Kuramos didn't acknowledge her. Instead, he gazed down at his son, worry etching his face. Still, her pulse leapt to see his love for the boy she had gifted him. It would all work. It had to.

At last Kuramos glanced at her, but as he did, his gaze cooled. *Oh Naaz, Naaz...* She should be used to that change by now, but it still stabbed, still sent pride dripping from her wounded heart.

She lowered her eyes and let her long waterfall of hair hide her face, curb the acid of her lips.

Kuramos knelt on the marble floor beside her and laid his large hands lightly over Tahir's, dwarfing them.

Even without looking, Sulya smelled her husband's skin, the musk of his cologne, and felt the warmth of his muscled body through her sheer arm-wrap.

Five years had passed since they'd said their vows. When had she lost the favor of her husband, the esteem of the most powerful and sought-after man in Kad? When had she failed her noble family and the thirty years of preparation, with her every stratagem and skill honed to attract and keep the sultan's influential regard?

"There's been no change in him?" Kuramos's baritone, usually full and penetrating, was hushed in deference to Tahir's sleep.

She couldn't staunch the venom in her alto. "He still walks at Death's side, if that's what you're asking." She swiveled to face him, her head held high and proud, but once again, he ignored her.

At least his eyes were on their son, and not on another woman. Perhaps she still had a chance to woo him back, to regain his love and especially his ear. After all, she'd quickly wrested his favor from his fifth wife—not that there'd been

much challenge in that. Some of the other wives, though, had proven more formidable competitors for his time and attention. Had any of them usurped his affections? Perhaps his smug second wife, out of long familiarity, or his haughty third...

Sulya's fingers clenched into small, ghost-white fists. No rival would stand in her way. In her *son's* way. She would do anything for Tahir. He deserved no less.

He was her chance at greatness.

Kuramos exhaled a deep, slow breath, and rose to leave.

She extended a pleading hand. "Stay, please, O Lord, my husband." If he stayed a while, spent time with her...

"I must go, Wife. My court will soon convene." He stepped toward the door.

"But Tahir needs you." She stood to add weight to her words. "Our son needs you." *And I need you. My family's plans hinge on it! I'm your newest wife, you should still love me...*

He paused, with his back still turned. "I cannot, Sulya."

Her own indrawn breath nearly snapped her in two. He couldn't have heard her unvoiced pleas—but that hardly mattered. Hurt and jealousy and frustrated ambition surged through her like wild beasts, snapping and clawing at her soul. "Lion of Kad, you son of gods—don't you even care about *your* son?"

He swiveled back and his eyes flicked to the boy. Her outburst had woken Tahir, now watching their exchange through feeble, half-mast lids.

The sultan's gaze chilled as it turned to her. "*Nothing* is more important to me than the lives and health of my children, Wife." His voice was low and blistering, his nostrils flared. "And yes, I am the Lion of Kad."

He lifted his left hand, and his sapphire ring flashed in the window's light. The ring was the symbol of his realm, of the sultan's purpose and responsibility—and his marriage promises to her and all his wives had been sanctified with it. The Great Sultan of Kad was forbidden to wear any other.

"Look closely at this, Sulya, for it is larger than you or me. Tahir is my son. Yes, the descendent of gods. And he must learn that the rule of Kad and its

people weighs heavier than the sultan's yearnings, if he is ever to become what you desire for him."

For an instant, a fleeting heartbeat, she saw something deep in his eyes—a compassion, a regret she knew he'd never voice. For that brief moment, she understood the burden of his power, and his pain.

She recoiled.

Seeing that, his gaze shuttered again. In the space of her next rigid breath, he stalked out.



Varene stared at the Kaddite bird. Did he even realize what this sultan of his was demanding? How could she possibly leave Teganne?

She turned away and expelled a short breath. No, neither he nor the sultan knew the cost. Few could even guess. The escape from her destroyed homeland of Fallorm all those years ago had been no mean feat. Teganne was her home and her haven—her *reward*.

"Healer!" Gunjan raised one taloned foot. "Why are you silent? Surely you see how crucial—"

Her voice was as flat as she could make it. "I can't go."

"But why? The royal family of Kad, the sultan's very children..."

To explain would be to relive it all.

Varene took a deep breath and sought for a logical excuse. "Jencel, you flew here in a day, but it would take me ten times that to ride to Kad. If the illness spreads so quickly, the journey would prevent me from being of any use."

"That won't be an issue." He gripped his pouch with his talons, dipped his beak in and pulled out a small ring with a bright inner glow.

Puzzled, she held out her hand for the silvery thing.

Although she had only a little *kyrra*, the soul power used by mages, her years of healing had strengthened and honed what she had. The moment the ring dropped into her palm, she knew what it was.

She darted to the hall door and swung it open.

"Where are you going?" squawked the bird.

“Ardan!” she shouted down the corridor. “Bring Their Highnesses here at once!”

“Aye, m’lady,” came the page’s distant reply.

“Healer!” The bird’s wings were raised in alarm. “This was to be private, no one else is supposed to know—”

She glanced at Gunjan. “I can’t take the journey—but even if I could, I would have asked leave of my sovereigns. You thought I’d depart in stealth?”

The bird tucked his head under a wing with a dramatic moan. “The Great Sultan will be so angry with me.”

Varene snorted. Still, perhaps the rumors about Kuramos held truth. He was called a tyrant—merciless, even brutal, to anyone in his way. Certainly Teganne and Kad were mutually hostile...though Alvarr had never yielded to Kuramos, she noted with pride.

Everyone knew the culture of Kad oppressed its women. Kuramos himself had a harem of wives, and had even schemed to capture Qiara, the princess of Teganne. Moreover, Kad scorned Varene’s kind of healing, and magic of any kind—which said much about the man who’d led Kad for nearly two centuries.

And then there was the bird’s wording: *the Great Sultan summons you to Kad*. Was the sultan of an enemy realm daring to command her? If so, that was the height of arrogance—though not unexpected, given the rest.

The bird was still wailing under his wing, and her patience waned. “Stop, Gunjan.” As she crossed to him, he paused and peeked out between his feathers. “Much better. Listen, I couldn’t have gone to Kad the way you think. I can’t make a Crossing without a mage to send me.”

The bird untucked his head, sputtering. “But...you’re a Tegannese Healer! A sorceress!”

Varene laughed out loud, but the sound of running footsteps interrupted her. Prince Alvarr appeared at the door, followed a moment later by Princess Jilian, both dressed for riding. From the saddle marks on their breeches and their outdoorsy scent, they’d only just returned. Knowing them as she did, Varene bet the grass in their tousled hair meant they’d done some mutual disrobing, too.

She stifled a smile. “Your Highnesses, this is Gunjan—a messenger from Kad.”

Alvarr's flaxen head swung around and he gave the bird a hard stare.
"Kad? Kuramos sent you?"

As Varene and Gunjan explained the bird's presence, the prince's scowl deepened. When they finished, his face was turning a fetching shade of red. *Ah, here we go.* Having known him for decades, Varene took a tranquil breath and prepared to wait out the storm.

But just as he opened his mouth, Jilian touched her husband's elbow. When he turned, she gave him a mild look. He held still for a moment, gazing at her, and then took three slow, deep breaths before facing the bird with passable calmness.

Gunjan, apparently oblivious to the prince's ire, balanced on one leg. "Your Highness, much animosity has occurred between our two lands. There is, as you know, a...history."

The bird's pretentious tone implied Teganne was to blame for that history. Alvarr crossed bulging arms as the three humans shared a cynical quirk of the brow.

Gunjan drew himself up, much like a pompous man, to speak again. Varene bet that his mien reflected his master, the sultan.

"Despite that history," the jencel continued, "my Sacred Lord Kuramos has need of your aid. Prince of Teganne, will you allow your Royal Healer to journey to Kad?"

Varene narrowed her eyes. So she'd been *told* to come, while Alvarr was given the courtesy of a request? Such meager regard these Kaddites had for her own rank and sex.

Alvarr, still appearing serene, waved one finger at the bird and muttered a spell. "*Priyar fok.*"

The bird blinked and cocked his head. "Hello? Hello? Why has everything gone silent?" He turned toward Varene. "Where's all the noise? I can't even hear myself! Wh—"

Alvarr growled and snapped his fingers. The hubbub halted mid-word as the bird froze in place, beak half-open.

"Thank Fate! That tongue needed a rest," the prince said with a satisfied nod. But the levity evaporated as Alvarr stepped toward her, shaking his head.

“Rene, you can’t mean to do this.”

She blinked. “Of course not. Though I’d like to hear why you think I shouldn’t.”

“The Sultan of Kad *cannot* be trusted! The dealings I’ve had with him...” Alvarr cupped a weary hand behind his neck. “He is ruthless. Think of it—he tried to steal you away without even telling us! And Qiara...” His gray eyes hardened. “My daughter and best friend held hostage! That he freed them in the end can’t compensate for the offense.”

Her lips thinned. “No. Of course not.”

Jilian spoke then, worriedly. “And what if this is all a plot to make you another hostage?”

Varene snorted again. “I know you both love me, but I’m not a princess with a realm for my dowry. Anyway, the bird expected a male Healer, not me. My gut says he tells the truth. And...there is this.” She extended her fingers, displaying the ring.

Alvarr emitted a sharp laugh. “Is *that* what Kuramos did with it!”

She passed the object to the prince, who inspected it with a low, foreboding whistle. “A shadow of the FireRing in Kad. He claimed it had been demolished... Sly of him. Certainly no one could get through it at this size. He gave no hint that his ‘demolition’ was reversible.”

He tossed the ring onto the floor, where it clung as if magnetized. Under his whispered spell, the ring pulsed and expanded, finally reaching three feet in diameter. It shimmered for a moment, then disappeared.

Sobered, Alvarr looked over at Varene. “That was one of the last pieces of magic left in Kad, I’ll wager. As I enlarged the shadow here, the true Ring in Kad was resized to allow Crossings. I can send you there instantly.” His voice softened. “You may be right. Kuramos wouldn’t offer the Ring—wouldn’t risk a breach in his defenses and permit magic back into his realm—unless his need were great.”

Varene nodded and pursed her lips. Despite her initial resolve, her thoughts were now ricocheting. She tugged on her habitual ponytail. Leaving Teganne was an appalling thought, one she’d never expected to consider. Her breath hitched as she fought the sparks of memory that threatened to yank her

under, drown her in guilt and terror.

And yet...

By training and by calling, she was a Healer. She restored health and life to all those she could, and did her best to comfort and soothe when she couldn't. This Kaddite illness was a deadly puzzle that needed an answer. Her kind of healing might find a solution where Kad's physicians had not.

Jilian reached for Alvarr's hand and they faced her silently. Their expressions spoke of misgivings, but also compassion—for her, and perhaps, even if grudgingly, for the sultan whose family was suffering.

Varene looked back at the frozen bird. He'd flown a very long way to reach her. Tegannese healing was the best in all the realms. Everyone knew it. She was proud of that.

But Death had still come for those she'd loved. And it had bested her. Again and again.

She would have given anything for Findar to be alive, or...

No. Don't even think it.

But here was a chance to save others. No guarantees—there never were—but a possibility. And some of the ill were *children*. She had no right to ignore them.

Alvarr and Jilian shared another glance. When the princess gave an almost imperceptible nod, the prince's gaze returned to Varene. "Varene na Seryn, you're a free woman, and shall make your own choices. You alone can choose your path, or decide where your skills might best be needed."

"Thank you." She gave them a wan smile and her pulse accelerated. Her choice, her decision.

"With the Ring, you can reach Kad in seconds," Alvarr murmured. "But since Kad has no mages to send you home to us, your return would have to be the slow method, on fyddback. You'd be gone for many days."

"I understand."

"Then," Jilian asked, "dear one, what do you wish to do?"

Varene looked around the Healing Rooms, both her refuge and domain for so many years; a place as familiar and precious to her as her own hands. She

looked out the window, past the grey walls of the castle and the lush fields along the river to the soaring, white-tipped mountains beyond. Toward Fallorm and all her reasons for staying here.

But her gaze rebounded, and there in the prince and princess's eyes were love and acceptance. And a reflection of the strength she would soon need.

There had never really been a choice. No options.

Varene na Seryn, the Royal Healer of Teganne, fixed the bird with an intense stare of her own and nodded for Alvarr to unfreeze him.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Kaddite nobles who pleaded their petty disputes before the sultan's court received only half of Kuramos's attention that day. It was fortunate for them that half his attention was still worth a great deal.

He sat tall on the Leonine Throne, listening to a long line of opponents argue like jealous monkeys. He passed judgment and sentences, upheld honor and approved justified revenge. But the image of his son, lying so still and pale in the bed, never left his mind.

And neither did his awareness of the empty chair of ibis skins and feathers on his right. The chair that had been Dabir's.

Outside, golden sun baked the white domes and spires of his city. Even in the shelter of the marble palace, thick air weighed upon the jewelry-laden brows and necks of those present. Male servants in loincloths waved giant palm fronds, circulating the air as best they could, but sweat beaded the skin of the litigants and the other nobles watching from the tasseled carpets.

Attending the sultan's judgments of the nobility was a privilege reserved for men of high rank, an ancient tradition Kuramos privately thought bizarre. Who under Naaz's sun would willingly waste time on the bickering that pervaded such afternoons? But that was the irony. Kuramos wanted to escape but could not, while those without responsibilities here attended of their own accord. Even his foes.

Especially his foes. But they were always looking for a stumble, a misjudgment they could use to their advantage. Seeking out malcontents they could entice to their cause. And with petty cases like these, someone would always be dissatisfied.

"O Lord," the latest complainer shrilled as his forehead touched the floor, "I beg of you: please do not allow my neighbor to insult my family! Last week he built a fence that cuts off our access to our own lirrfruit trees! My cook can no longer gather our own fruits to brew for breakfast..."

Kuramos's hands twitched, aching to curl into fists. Tradition, indeed—ancient family conflicts and jealousies played out again and again, differing only in the details. Today Death stalked the corridors of his palace, yet here he must sit, pretending all was well. If he did not, if word of the illness reached his foes, the strength of his rule and of his very dynasty would be shredded by poisonous treachery.

And how well his enemies had already pruned that dynasty! They'd sliced off its leaves and branches, burned and hacked at it until only twigs remained to shake in the oncoming gale.

The goddess would have Her revenge at last.

"But O Lord," whined the neighbor who'd built the offending fence, "consider what he keeps from you: his own father sold me that land *and* those trees! A handshake sealed the bargain thirty years ago, and though I have permitted his cook to take fruit from *our* trees until now, it is within my right to fence my own property. Furthermore—"

At precisely the moment when the sultan knew he would burst a vein if he didn't wrap his hands around both neighbors' necks, a shriek echoed through the great hall.

Kuramos's gaze streaked to the open doorway of the antechamber and he shot to his feet, palming the hilt of the scimitar belted at his waist. His guards had leapt to attention at the scream, then relaxed at what they saw. Kuramos, however, remained in a fighter's stance as he took in the spectacle.

A splendid blonde in foreign garb wrestled with three palace guards for control of a well-stuffed travel pack. Her prudishly long skirts swirled around her as she gave one man an impressive clout across the chin. Adding to the confusion was Kuramos's own jancel, dive-bombing the guard who gripped the hellcat's squirming waist.

"You fools!" the woman yelled. "You'll crush them! Lay one more hand on that pack and you'll wish your life were over!"

Amazingly, the guards' faces reflected a curious mixture of contempt and...fear.

The woman turned toward the crowd of astonished courtiers but her gaze raced past them all to slam headlong into Kuramos's. The impact sent his pulse

staggering. Eyes blue as cornflowers, and as cutting as tempered steel...

"You!" she shouted into the room. "Is this how you treat the Healers you beg to come to your family's aid? Call off your dogs!"

Murmurs shot through the room. The nobles stared at the disheveled and furious woman, and then their gazes rose to their sultan—some with horror, others with venomous pleasure.

But Kuramos's mind was already roaring like wind over desert dunes. The woman's indigo skirts were Tegannese in style... Gunjan, who'd been sent to fetch the Royal Healer of Prince Alvarr, was with her...

His jaws ground together. Aghast and furious, he finally understood the last words of Dabir ib Rubai.

"She" had come.



The dark, empty blur of the magical Crossing from Teganne had lasted only a few moments, with Varene's unease bolstered by the pinpricks of Gunjan's talons on her shoulder and the rough canvas of the pack she clutched in both hands. But when she emerged in Kad's FireRing, everything went wrong.

Through the blur, an incredulous male voice roared out: "A woman? Where's the *Healer*? Teganne has deceived us!"

Shapes like flat diamonds glinted and rose around her. She fought to focus her eyes, and soon realized a cadre of guards with raised spears surrounded the Ring. Her heart almost leapt into her skull.

Gunjan launched himself over the guards' heads, screeching, "She IS the Healer, she IS the Healer!" Even after the men reluctantly lowered their spears, their contemptuous expressions displayed their thoughts: *A woman, a Tegannese Healer—a sorceress!*

Varene glared back, swimming in a sea of adrenaline fury. Flight wasn't an option—she had no power to go back through the Ring. That left only fight, and she was alone and unarmed. She bit her tongue and took a shaky breath, struggling for control.

A dubious guardsman poked his spear into her canvas sack of herbs and

remedies. The liquid silverwort she'd carefully sealed in a pig's bladder welled up through the slice.

Lout! She pinned the guard with her gaze. "What manner of Kaddite idiot are you?"

The beefy guard, clearly unwilling to accept impertinence from an infidel female, raised his palm to strike her. She kicked up, and the surprise in his eyes as he doubled over, wheezing and gripping his groin, was a momentary salve to her pride. Too late, she realized she'd worsened things. The next guard rushed her, cocking his fist.

A man behind her boomed, "Halt, Liro!" Before she even had a chance to turn, she'd been pinioned horizontally under the boomer's exceedingly large and hairy arm.

"Let me go!" She twisted, struggling, but he strode into a broad hallway with her dangling beneath his tree-trunk arm like a child's straw doll. Another guardsman swung her pack into his arms and a second followed, while the others stayed behind to guard the Ring.

"Don't shake that!" she yelled at the oaf with the pack.

"Obey her order," rumbled her captor.

My order? Varene, pinned and staring down at the marble floors speeding past, choked back an ironic laugh.

The hairy man's arms clamped her ribs like a vise until she could barely breathe. *Enough!* Writhing like a snake, she managed to squirm from his grasp. She dove behind him to grab her pack, but the other guards scrambled to seize her, their big sandaled feet slip-sliding on the polished marble, arms flailing at the shrieking jencel as he swooped and clawed.

When Varene turned and spied an astonished audience, she knew she stood before the court of the sultan. Her gaze swerved instinctively to the dais and the dominant stance of the dark-haired man upon it.

The sultan whose tale of deathly illness had tugged her from her homeland wasn't at his children's bedsides, as Alvarr or Jilian or any caring parent would have been. He was *holding court* over a throne room full of lavishly dressed and bejeweled noblemen, as though nothing were wrong.

"You!" she shouted at him, struggling to free herself from the guard's

relentless grip. “Is this how you treat the Healers you beg to come to your family’s aid? Call off your dogs!”

A hush befell the room. Varene, still shaking in rage, took a harder look at the Great Sultan.

Eyes as green as the merciless ocean stared down at her, and the onyx curl that strayed over his forehead in no way eased the force of his gaze. He’d set his mouth in a feral line that could have tipped toward kindness or to cruelty in a second. The vee of chest bared by his low kaftan displayed the powerful muscles of a soldier who understood the right of might. The snowy pearl dangling from his left ear only augmented the hardness of his expression.

As her courage traitorously deserted her and she swallowed, his voice roared out like a thunderclap.

“Leave me. All of you but *her!*”

Gunjan, her unexpected ally against the guards, emitted a shivery cheep and soared away. One of the guards pushed her into the throne room. As one, the troop executed a deep bow and backed out of sight. When every noble in the room mirrored the guards’ retreat, the ridiculous panorama of forty obsequiously bobbing backs nearly erased Varene’s apprehension.

Nearly.

As the double doors behind her slammed closed, she realized she was alone with the Sultan of Kad. A sultan whose eyes glittered ominously.

“Come here.”

She held defiantly still, but the man commanding her was a monarch and she was not. Despite her high title, she wasn’t even a blooded noble. In Teganne, that hadn’t mattered. Here...

She moved reluctantly toward him, traversing each foot of the long room as if approaching her grave, but her spine was ramrod-straight and her chin high. She’d earned her position through dedication and excellence—more than was true for some of those born to rule!

He said nothing as she approached, just crossed his gold-banded arms and brazenly took her measure, from her bedraggled ponytail and glistening brow, down her long, wrinkled gown to her scuffed silk slippers.

She halted several feet from the dais under his fierce appraisal, and soon became all too aware that she'd neither bowed nor curtsied to him. Doing so now seemed... a bit belated.

Besides, what she really wanted to do was punch him.

She took a deep breath, wishing it were possible to start over and hold her temper. "I'm sorry. I only meant—"

"I do not recall giving you permission to speak."

Her teeth snapped shut with an audible, insolent click. How dare he? She was here to save his family. One of her eyebrows rose to her hairline and several choice invectives seethed on her tongue.

"So," he drawled. "*You* are the Royal Healer of Teganne."

How she hated the way he said "you"—as though she were far less than he expected! She clenched her jaws so tightly she thought her teeth would grind to dust. After all, he hadn't given her *permission* to speak.

"Yes," he said, inclining his head gravely. "You should now answer."

An enraged rush of breath shot out of her. "I'm the Royal Healer you sought, yes."

"What is your name?"

"Varene na Seryn. Of *Teganne*." Where no one in the royal court would treat a visiting Healer in such a scornful manner!

He narrowed his eyes. "Well, Varene na Seryn of *Teganne*. By presuming to command *me*—in this very throne room and in front of the highest-ranked nobles in Kad—you gave me and my entire realm flagrant insult." His nostrils flared. "Far worse, your loose tongue has confirmed for those nobles what had only been rumor before: that there is a grave illness among the Ruling Family. My family." He stepped off the dais, looming over her. "You've handed them a weapon: the knowledge that my throne may soon be vacant for the hyenas to battle over!"

Her jaw slackened. None of that had been her intention. She recalled now that Gunjan had asked her to keep things quiet, but the "welcome" she'd been given had been far beyond the pale.

"So, traveler." His face, now only inches from hers, radiated displeasure.

She fought the urge to recoil. "You may be the Royal Healer of Teganne. You may be the friend and privileged servant of that shivering hare, Prince Alvarr. But in my palace," he said, eyes flashing, "in *my* realm, the holy birthplace and land blessed of gods, you will treat *ME* with respect. Is that clear?"

Ire surged through her blood. Undeniably, it had been a mistake to loosen her tongue. Discretion was crucial in her profession as well as in royal courts. But after the attack she'd faced for doing the man a favor, his hubris was unbelievable. "Certainly," she ground out. "And how, exactly, would you like me to address you?" *Arrogant Ass?*

A caustic smile curled his lips. "'O Lord' is proper, as is 'Great Sultan'."

"I see." She waited two eons-long heartbeats before she continued. "O Lord." The words caught like chalk in her throat.

No doubt he'd noticed the delay. She would bet those cold eyes of his didn't miss much.

Without responding, he let his gaze roll past her as if she were beneath his notice. The rest of him followed, striding by her like she was flotsam in his wake.

She turned, agape at his arrogance. Was he just going to leave her standing here?

But instead of stalking off, or calling his guards to throw her out, he picked up her travel sack of herbs and gently swung it over his own royal shoulder. "Come, Varene na Seryn. I will take you to your patients."

The glance he cast her was measured and sure. Then, without looking back, he stepped through an arched doorway along a side wall.

Varene stared after him, blood hammering in her temples. Kuramos's quicksilver shift of mood, his hospitable, almost deferential gesture, left her bewildered. The cloak of indignation she'd clung to since her arrival now sagged somewhere at her feet.

Next slumped her certainty. In the palace of the Great Sultan of Kad, perhaps all was not as it appeared.

Her pulse stumbled like a drunken drummer as she followed Kuramos out of the glittering throne room.

* * *

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