



To Defy a Sheikh (Harlequin Presents)

By Maisey Yates

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The cost of defiance

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Now Samarah must decide: imprisonment in a cell...or in diamond shackles as his wife.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

New York Times Bestselling author Maisey Yates lives in rural Oregon with her three children and her husband, whose chiseled jaw and arresting features continue to make her swoon. She feels the epic trek she takes several times a day from her office to her coffee maker is a true example of her pioneer spirit.

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Sheikh Ferran Bashar, ruler of Khadra, would not survive the night. He didn't know it yet, but it was true.

Killing a man was never going to be easy. But that was why she'd trained, why she'd practiced the moves over and over again. So that they became muscle memory. So that when the time came there would be no hesitation. No regret.

She waited by the door of the sheikh's bedchamber, a cloth soaked in chloroform in one hand, a knife stowed securely in her robe. There could be no noise. And she would have to surprise him.

How could she have regret? When she knew what his legacy had brought onto hers. Tradition as old as their kingdoms demanded this. Demanded that his line end with him.

As hers had ended with her father. With one lone, surviving daughter who could never carry the name. With a kingdom that had lost its crown and suffered years of turmoil as a result.

But now was no time for emotion. No time for anything but action. She'd gotten herself hired on at the palace a month ago for this very purpose. And Ferran had been no wiser. Of course he hadn't. Why would he ever look at her? Why would he ever recognize her?

But she recognized him. And now, she'd observed him. Learned him.

Sheikh Ferran was a large man, tall and lean with hard muscle and impressive strength. She'd watched him burn off energy in the courtyard, hitting a punching bag over and over again. She knew how he moved. She knew his endurance level.

She would be merciful. He would feel nothing.

He would not know it was coming. He would not beg for his life. He wouldn't wait in a cell for his life to end, as her father had. It would simply end.

Yes, unlike him, she would show mercy in that way at least.

And she knew that tonight, she would win.

Or she would be the one who didn't live to see morning. It was a risk she was willing to take. It was one she had to take.

She waited, her muscles tense, everything in her on high alert. She heard footsteps, heavy and even. It was Ferran, she was almost positive. As sure as she could be with footsteps alone.

She took a deep breath and waited for the door to open. It did, a sliver of light sliding across the high-gloss marble floor. She could see his reflection in it. Broad, tall. Alone.

Perfect.

She just needed to wait for him to close the door.

She held her breath and waited. He closed the door, and she knew she had to move immediately.

Samarah said a prayer just before she moved from the shadow. One for justice. One for forgiveness. And one for death, that it would come swiftly. For Ferran, or for her.

He turned as she was poised to overtake him, and her eyes met his. It stopped her, dead in her tracks, the glittering in those dark depths so alive. So vibrant. He was striking, beautiful even.

So very familiar.

In spite of all the years, she *knew* him. And in that moment, all she could do was stare, motionless. Breathless.

That moment was all it took.

Ferran stepped to the side, reaching out and grabbing her arm. She lifted and twisted her wrist, tugging it through the weak point of his hand where his fingers overlapped, as she crossed one leg behind the other and dipped toward the floor, lowering her profile and moving herself out of harm's way.

She turned and sidestepped, grabbing his shoulder and using his thigh as a step up to his back. She swung herself around, her forearm around his neck, the chloroform soaked rag in her hand.

He grabbed her wrist, a growl on his lips, and she fought to tug out of his grasp, but this time, he held fast. This time, he was expecting her escape.

She growled in return, tightening her hold on his neck with her other arm. He backed them both up against the wall, the impact of the hard stone surface knocking the air from her.

She swore and held fast, her thighs tight around his waist, ankles locked together at his chest. His hand wrapped around her wrist, he took her arm and hit it against the wall. She dropped the rag and swore, fighting against him.

But her surprise was lost, and while she was a skilled fighter, she was outmatched in strength. She'd forfeited her advantage.

She closed her eyes and imagined her home. Not the streets of Jahar, but the palace. One she and her mother had been evicted from after the death of her father. After the sanctioned execution of her father. Sanctioned by Ferran.

Adrenaline shot through her and she twisted to the side, using her body weight to put more pressure on his neck. He stumbled across the room, flipped her over his shoulders. She landed on her back on the floor, the braided rug doing little to cushion her fall, the breath knocked from her body.

She had to get up. This would be the death of her, and she knew it. Ferran was ruthless, as was his father before him, and the evidence of that was the legacy of her entire life. He would think nothing of breaking her neck, and she well knew it.

He leaned over her and she put her feet up, bracing them on his chest and pushing back, before planting her feet on the floor and leveraging herself into a standing position, her center low, her hands up, ready to block or attack.

He moved and she sidestepped, sweeping her foot across his face. He stumbled and she used the opportunity to her advantage, pushing him to the ground and straddling him, her knees planted on his shoulders, one hand at his throat.

Still, she could see his eyes, glittering in the dark.

She would have to do it while she faced him now. And without the benefit of chloroform either putting him out cold or deadening his senses. She pushed back at the one last stab of doubt as she reached into her robe for her knife.

There was no time to doubt. No time to hesitate. He certainly hadn't done either when he'd passed that judgment on her father. There was no time for humanity when your enemy had none.

She whipped the knife out of her robe and held it up. Ferran grabbed both of her wrists and on a low, intense growl pushed her backward and propelled them both up against the side of the bed. He pushed her hand back, the knife blade flicking her cheek, parting the flesh there. A stream of blood trickled into her mouth.

She fisted his hair and his head fell back. She tried to bring the blade forward, but he grabbed her arm again, reversing their positions. He had her trapped against the bed, her hands flat over the mattress, bent a near-impossible direction. The tendons in her shoulders screamed, the cut on her face burning hot.

"Who sent you?" he asked, his voice a low rasp. "I sent myself," she said, spitting out the blood that had pooled in her mouth onto the floor beside them. "And what is it you're here to do?"

"Kill you, obviously."

He growled again and twisted her arm, forcing her to drop the knife. And still he held her fast. "You've failed," he said.

"So far."

"And forever," he said, his tone dripping with disdain. "What I want to know is why a woman is hiding in my bedchamber ready to end my life."

"I would have thought this happened to you quite often."

"Not in my memory."

"A life for a life," she said. "And as you only have the one, I will take it. Though you owe more."

"Is that so?"

"I'm not here to debate with you."

"No, you're here to kill me. But as that isn't going to happen—tonight or any other night—you may perhaps begin to make the case as to why I should not have you executed. For an attempt at assassinating a world leader. For treason. I could. At the very least I can have you thrown in jail right this moment. All it takes is a call."

"Then why haven't you made it?"

"Because I have not stayed sheikh, through changes in the world, civil unrest and assassination attempts, without learning that all things, no matter how bad, can be exploited to my advantage if I know where to look."

"I will not be used to your advantage."

"Then enjoy prison."

Samarah hesitated. Because she wouldn't forge an alliance with Ferran. It was an impossible ask. He had destroyed her life. He had toppled the government in her country. Left the remainder of her family on the run like dogs.

Left her and her mother on the streets to fend for themselves until her mother had died.

He had taken everything. And she had spent her life with one goal in mind. To ensure that he didn't get away with it. To ensure his line wouldn't continue while hers withered.

And she was failing.

Unless she stopped. Unless she listened. Unless she did what Ferran claimed to do. Turn every situation to her advantage.

"And what do I need to give in exchange for my freedom?"

"I haven't decided yet," he said. "I haven't decided if, in fact, your freedom is on the table. But the power is with me, is it not?"

"Isn't it always?" she asked. "You're the sheikh."

"This is true."

"Will you release me?"

He reached behind her, and when he drew his hand back into her line of vision, she saw he was now holding the knife. "I don't trust you, little desert viper."

"So well you shouldn't, Your Highness, as I would cut your throat if given the chance."

"Yet I have your knife. And you're the only one who bled. I will release you for the moment, only if you agree to follow my instructions."

"That depends on what they are."

"I want you to get on the bed, in the center, and stay there."

She stiffened, a new kind of fear entering her body. Death she'd been prepared for. But she had not, even for a moment, given adequate thought and concern to the idea of him putting his hands on her body.

No. Death first. She would fight him at all cost. She would not allow him to further dishonor her and her family. She would die fighting, but she would not allow him inside of her body.

Better a knife blade than him.

Ferran wouldn't...

She shook that thought off quickly. Ferran was capable of anything. And he had no loyalty. It didn't matter what he'd been like in that other life, in that other time. Not when he had proven all of that to be false.

She didn't move, and neither did he.

"Do we have an agreement?" he asked.

"You will not touch me," she said, her voice trembling now.

"I have no desire to touch you," he said. "I simply need you where I can see you. You're small, certainly, and a woman. But you are strong, and you are clearly a better fighter than I am, or I would have had you easily beaten. As it is, I had no choice but to use my size advantage against you. Now I have the size advantage and weapon. However, I still don't trust you. So get on the bed, in the center, hands in your lap. I have no desire to degrade or humiliate you further, neither am I in the mood for sex. On that score, you are safe."

"I would die first."

"And I would kill you first, so there we have an agreement of sorts. Now get up onto the bed and sit for a moment."

He moved away from her, slowly releasing his hold on her, the knife still in his hand. She obeyed his command, climbing up onto the bed and moving to the center of the massive mattress. Beds like this had come from another lifetime. She scarcely remembered them.

Since being exiled from the palace in Jahar she'd slept on raised cots, skins stretched over a wooden frame and one rough blanket. In the backs of shops. In the upstairs room of the martial arts studio she'd trained in. And when she was unlucky, on the dirt in an alley. When she'd arrived in the Khadran palace, as a servant, she'd slept in her first bed since losing her childhood room sixteen years ago.

The bed here, for servants, was much more luxurious than the sleep surfaces she'd been enjoying. Sized for

one person, but soft and with two pillows. It was a luxury she'd forgotten. And it had felt wrong to enjoy it. The first week she'd slept on the floor in defiance, though that hadn't lasted.

And now she was on Ferran's bed. It made her skin crawl.

She put her hands in her lap and waited. She had no reason to trust his word, not when his blood had been found so lacking in honor. And not when he'd carried that dishonor to its conclusion himself.

The execution of her father. The order had been his. And no vow of bonds between royal families, or smiles between friends had changed his course.

As a result, she did not trust his vow not to touch her either.

"I'll ask you again," he said. "Who sent you?" He still thought her a pawn. He still did not realize. "I am acting of my own accord, as I said before."

"For what purpose?"

"Revenge."

"I see, and what is it I have not done to your liking?"

"You killed my king, Sheikh Ferran, and it was very much not to my liking."

"I do not make a habit of killing people," he said, his tone steel.

"Perhaps not with your hands, but you did set up the trial that ended in the execution of Jahar's sheikh. And it is rumored you had part in the overtaking of the Jahari palace that happened after. So much violence...I remember that day all too well."

He froze, the lines in his body tensing, his fist tightening around the knife. And for the first time, she truly feared. For the first time, she looked at the man and saw the ruthless desert warrior she had long heard spoken of. Thirty days in the palace and she had seen a man much more civilized than she anticipated. But not here. Not now.

"There were no survivors in the raid on the Jahari palace," he said, his voice rough.

"Too bad for you, there were. I see you know from where I come."

"The entire royal family, and all loyal servants were killed," he said, his voice rough. "That was the report that was sent back to me."

"They were wrong. And for my safety it was in my best interest that they continued to think so. But I am alive. If only to ensure that you will not be."

He laughed, but there was no humor to the sound. "You are a reaper come to collect then, are you? My angel of death here to lead me to hell?"

"Yes," she said.

"Very interesting."

"I should think I'm more than interesting."

He stilled. "You made me fear. There are not many on earth who have done so."

"That is a great achievement for me then, and yet, I still find I'm unsatisfied."

"You want blood."

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