

D.G. Novak

Shadrani 1: Prince of Gemen

PRINCE OF GEMEN

A Tale of the Shadrani

By

D.G. Novak

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Shadrani 1: Prince of Gemen

Introduction

"We have had reports on the planet Daleer."

"And?"

"It will come directly into his path in twenty years."

"Perhaps. We will wait to see what happens if it does."

"You know what will happen."

"I do not know. Nor can you. The Collector is unpredictable in these matters."

"He will not be unpredictable where this race is concerned. These beings will fascinate him."

"That is probable."

"We cannot allow it to happen."

"We must wait-and see."

Prologue

After the great population wars on Daleer, what was left of the habitable land was taken over by the weary survivors. Only the strongest had come through the holocaust, only those most determined to win out through fair means or foul. The inhabitants of the planet were called the Tsanziki, a people who worshipped one omnipotent deity, Tsandis. But it seemed that their god had abandoned his people when the population grew to such an extent that the Tsanziki were forced into war with one another to secure space to survive. When the battle cries died, two camps survived, the remainder of the people strongly divided between two of the great leaders who had battled so fiercely. First there was Gemen, called The Terrible, because of his merciless battle

tactics. But his followers trusted him and would follow him through the horrors of another war. Then there was Arath, called The Destroyer, because it was what he did best. But many people respected him and also flocked to his banner. These two remaining leaders had diametrically opposed concepts on how to contain and regulate their overly fertile people. They could not be reconciled, one to the other, and so to prevent more misunderstanding or perhaps more carnage, they took their followers and began separate societies within the limited confines of the ravaged planet of Daleer.

One

Princess Escallitani Q'Sadone Arath, her head held high in spite of her misery, waited for her father's arrival. She and her handmaiden Solte were standing by the four-wheeled coach that would transport her to her new home. Everything was packed, everything in order. But nothing was in order in her young life.

The only bright spot in her dark day was the appearance of her trusted friend Jala, the Royal Healer. At least she had convinced her father to allow him to accompany her for a while. He would ride with her until the first nightfall. "Courage, Calli," he said, using the name only those closest to her did. She was about to reply but then braced herself when she saw her father approach.

King Sadone Q'Seta Arath, a man not known for his patience, had run out of what little he had and no longer tolerated her appeals in this matter. She would be married before her next moon cycle.

Her father's gruff voice shattered what was left of the peace in her morning. "I expect you to conduct yourself well."

"Yes, Father."

"I'll not have any complaints from the man."

"No, Father."

From lowered lashes, she cut a quick glance at Jala. The tall, silver-haired man smiled at her as he watched her struggle to please her father. They both knew it was a waste of time. The only way to please him now was to give him a grandson.

The new serving girl hurried up beside them to offer a basket of food that had been prepared for the journey. Calli nervously watched the clumsy girl, knowing she was terrified of the king. Sure enough, her trembling hands miscalculated and instead of placing the basket on the seat, she spilled it onto the ground, jumping back with a muffled squeak.

The king had been speaking with Jala and hadn't seen the mishap, but turned at the sound. Calli blanched at the ready anger that suffused his face. Quickly, she stepped between him and the girl.

"It was not her," she said. "I spilled the basket."

Her father's eyes narrowed. "I hope your new husband will overlook your lack of grace," he growled.

"I'm sure your daughter is suffering from nerves," Jala interjected. "Surely she is not the first prospective bride, royal or not, to do so."

Calli threw him a look of gratitude while the ashen-faced serving girl scurried back to the castle.

"Nerves or no," her father continued, "you will spend the required month with Viceroy Reman and his family. Then, if you are agreeable to him, you shall all return here for the wedding."

She waited for him to continue. When he did not, she risked a question.

"And-if I am not agreeable to him?"

Her father stared at her.

"I see no reason why you should not be. You are pleasant enough to look at, if a little clumsy. Besides, he needs this alliance as much as I do."

"And," she said, "if he is not agreeable to me?"
Jala squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the explosion. It came as soon as the outraged royal could catch his breath.
"It is not for you to consider such things. He will be agreeable to you!"
His daughter didn't even wince at the tone that sent trained men-at-arms fleeing the room. Instead, she smiled prettily, having gained what she wanted by making the man positively apoplectic.
"Of course, Father," she said sweetly. "Will there be anything else?"
The king glared at her, not understanding why he felt bested, then dismissed the feeling and his daughter. Without another word, he turned and walked away, calling the captain of the guard to his side.
"Listen carefully," he said. "I wish you to keep close watch over my daughter during the journey to Galen. She seems less than dedicated in her duties and is behaving badly regarding this marriage. But I will have nothing, I repeat, nothing, compromise this union."
"Now," he continued as he fixed the captain with a riveting stare, "I know her. She will try anything to stop this journey. Your orders are to ignore any and all wild tales, fits, promises or threats she might hurl at you, and get her to her future husband. Is that clear?"
The man bowed gracefully. "Perfectly, my lord." King Sadone Q'Seta Arath watched the coach pull away and cursed the day that Tsandis had seen fit to punish him with a daughter.

* * * *

Once on their way, tears fell unabated as Calli watched the familiar surroundings pass by. She saw the village houses and barracks, with their open windows and doors to drink in the coolness of the morning; the bakery with a master baker who made the most delicious pastries; the smithy, who was always so dirty; the tailor, who was always so clean; the temple...
She closed her eyes and turned away.
Solte, also miserable at leaving the only home she had known, straightened her shoulders and tried to be strong for her lady. Chatting happily, she tried to lighten the mood, determined to make the best of things. She lasted in that determination for exactly as long as it took to lose sight of the great iron gate that guarded the large, safe walls of the city. Then she broke out in a cold sweat, peering outside the curtained windows of the carriage as if she expected the devil himself to appear. They traveled for a short time in silence.
When Solte could no longer stand the anxiety she felt, she addressed her mistress. "Why, oh why, must we travel to Galen? Couldn't the viceroy have come to Soris to meet you?"
Calli knew exactly why the maid was making such a fuss. She felt her own heart constrict with a terror born of lifelong habit as she thought about the impending journey through the forest, and the mysterious and feared enemy that lived there.
"Solte," she said with a certainty she hardly felt, "we have a full guard with us."
The maid looked at her mistress with widened eyes. "As if that would stop them."
"They are men," Calli retorted, "like any other."
Solte shook her head. "They are not like any other! They cannot be killed. And they-they howl at the moon like crazed beasts!"
Calli raised a hand to stop the tirade, but the maid wouldn't be silent.
"They are aligned with evil forces," she continued. "Everyone knows it. They cast strange spells over their victims and then they-" she grimaced, "-they drink their blood! Oh, Princess, are you trying to tell me you are not afraid of the Shadrani?" Her voice rasped fearfully as she said this last word, as if

the mere mention would summon one of the creatures into the sanctuary of the coach.

"Stop fussing so, Solte! People often travel through the forest with no mishap whatsoever."

Calli wondered as she spoke whether she was trying harder to comfort herself or her companion. Every youngster in Soris had grown up listening to horror stories about the Shadrani who lived in the forest surrounding the city. They were the mortal enemies of her father and all who lived within the safety of the walls that had been erected against them centuries ago.

The tales of these beings included hints of cannibalism and strange rites that had to do with sex-a topic absolutely forbidden to children, and so all the more tantalizing. But Jala, who had been more like a father to her than her own had ever been, had tried to teach her tolerance. Ignorance, he liked to say, bred unreasonable hatred and fear. Still Calli had never gotten over her primitive terror of the creatures that lived so close at hand. Only the great walls kept her safe. And now, for the first time in her life, she had left those walls.

"But all the stories!" Solte wailed. "And what about him? Oh, Tsandis! What if we should run into the Prince of Gemen?"

At Calli's sharp intake of breath, the maid realized that she had gone too far. As the princess watched, the maid threw her apron over her head and repeated the ancient words that would ward off the evil she had incited by the very mention of the name.

"I do not even believe this prince exists," Calli rallied. "He is but a story to frighten children."

Solte looked as if she wanted to believe her mistress, but they both feared there was more reason to believe the stories than to discard them.

"Besides," Calli continued, "I see no reason why such a creature, if he exists, would be the slightest bit interested in you or me. If the tales we've heard are true, wouldn't he be more likely to want to snatch one of the guards?"

Solte reddened. She knew her mistress was trying to lighten the conversation and the mood, but the maid found the reference embarrassing.

"Please, my lady," she whispered, "it is unseemly to joke about the depraved practices of the Shadrani."

Calli saw Solte squirm. She wasn't about to let her off the hook, though, after she herself was the one to force the subject.

"You mean their strange sexual practices?" she prodded. "You mean the rumor that the Shadrani males prefer males and the females also turn to their own kind?"

"Princess!" the maid cried in horror. "Please! To speak of such things..." She left off, looking about as if afraid of invisible ears that might overhear the conversation.

Calli reined in her mischief, feeling a little guilty about shaking up the young maid so badly. She reached over and touched the other girl's cheek. Solte returned the smile shining at her from her mistress's face. "You are full of mischief," she said fondly.

"And you," Calli returned, just as fondly, "are full of superstitions."

* * * *

Later that afternoon, the captain of the guard called a halt and ordered his men to set up camp. Since their departure from Soris had been delayed several hours by the last minute efforts of the princess to stop the journey altogether, they hadn't made good time. Added to that, he knew, as all Sorisi males did, that females simply could not handle the challenge of travel well and that he must not force them to march further than a few hours a day. Eager to have an end to this mission, he found his temper wearing thin over all this

female trouble, but struggled to hide it from the royal he was escorting. It took a moment for Calli and Solte to prepare themselves to leave the coach. They were dressed in their traditional clothes, with Calli wearing an elegant linen dress that covered her modestly to the tips of her toes, while Solte sported a simple cotton frock and apron. But each of them had to don the traditional paita, a veil that obscured their faces and fell to their waists-it was considered shameful for a Sorisi female to show her face in public.

Once they were ready, Calli and Solte stepped down from the coach and stretched their legs gratefully. Calli eyed the men on horseback and felt a stab of jealousy. How much more enjoyable this journey would be, she thought, if she could ride part of the way. But she knew that was out of the question. Ladies didn't do such disgraceful things, not if they were from Soris. Within the city-state of Soris, the female was considered inferior to the male and, to keep them that way, they were hobbled with social restraints. From their dress to their manners, in and out of public, the females walked a line of decorum that mandated how they were to behave as proper Sorisi ladies. They had their place, of course, and were valued quite highly, especially since a large percentage of them died in childbirth, Calli's own mother among them. The princess had often wondered why her father had not remarried in order to secure himself a male heir. But that, along with many things, remained part of the mystery of her aloof father. Her thoughts were interrupted when she looked up to see Jala approaching.

"How are you faring, Calli?"

"I would fare far better if I were at home in my room."

His smile was understanding. "Come," he said, "a walk will do you good."

They strolled only a short distance but stayed within sight of the camp. Now that they were in the woods, they couldn't take any chances. Calli found a fallen log and perched on it. Removing her veil, she patted the seat beside her, bidding Jala to sit. When he did, she turned to face him, twirling a lock of long silver-blond hair around her finger.

"I suppose there's nothing left to try?"

The man shook his head, his mouth forming a thin line. "You know how anxious your father is for you to have children--"

"Children!" She almost spat the word. "Sons, you mean!"

He patted her hand. "Yes, Calli, sons. Sons that can take up the mantle of the kingship he will leave one day."

She stared into his kind gray eyes. Handsome still, Jala weathered his older years with a dignity that Calli found inspiring. Many times in her eighteen years, she had wished that it had been he who had been her father, this cultured man who had taught her as if she had been a boy, blindly ignoring the current dictates in the city-state of Soris to only educate males.

Not only had he taught her about his own art of healing, but he had tutored her in everything she found of interest. If he couldn't teach her himself, he found her a tutor-with or without her father's knowledge. Even when she showed an interest in, and an aptitude for, the crossbow, he didn't hesitate.

He had been her last hope, and now that hope was gone.

She folded her arms defiantly. "Well, I won't have children at all!"

Jala grimaced.

Calli had been too sheltered. He took much of the blame for that upon himself, wanting to protect her from the reality of life within and without the walls of Soris; wanting, as much as her father did, to keep her innocent. But he couldn't begin to imagine her remaining childless for long once wed to the eager-no, lecherous was a better word-Viceroy Reman from the neighboring walled city of Galen.

"I doubt your future mate would allow that," he stated, not unkindly.

Calli pressed her lips together and puckered her forehead in a way that alerted Jala to trouble on the horizon.

"Princess," he said calmly, "there is nothing to do but accept this. Please tell me you are not trying to find yet one more way around your father."

She merely smiled.

Attempting to distract her, he stood and reached out a hand to her. "Come, Calli," he said.

"One of the soldiers is ill and I'm about to examine him." He got the expected response. Her face lit up. "Would you like to come?" She jumped up and joined him as he walked back to the camp.

* * * *

Her paita in place once again, Calli watched the Healer open his bag and breathed in the smells that she had come to love: the smell of medicine, herbs, potions and healing. It was her secret dream to be like Jala. But even had she not been the Princess of Arath, Calli knew she would never have been allowed to be a Healer. Such distinguished offices were left to males. She was prepared for the look of shock that crossed the man's face when Jala asked him if he minded if the princess watched while he was examined. Calli thought the man wanted to say that yes, he minded very much, but was afraid to risk her displeasure. He gave his consent. So she stood and watched Jala poke and prod, asking him pertinent questions as he did so. When he was done, he sent the man away and turned to her.

"Well?" he said. "What do you think?"

"The man has Derian's disease."

"Well done!" Jala said. "Derian's disease is very difficult to diagnose, Calli. You could take over my job tomorrow."

"No, I couldn't," she said bleakly.

Regretting his statement, Jala took her hand. "It does no good to wallow in your misery. I know this is not the life you want, Calli, but few of us have the lives we want."

She glanced up at him, wondering if he had the life he wanted. But she said nothing, not wanting to spoil the short time left them.

That evening, she said a tearful good-bye and watched as the Healer mounted his horse and disappeared in the direction from which they had come.

It was once again left to Solte to comfort her mistress. "Would you like some of your favorite herbal tea?"

Calli squeezed her hand in reply. "No," she said finally, "I think I'll go and offer a prayer to Tsandis. Perhaps he will listen if I ask just one more time."

Two

The next day, the company rose early to set about their journey once more. As they lingered over a light breakfast, Calli felt resentment growing at the captain of the guard who seemed so eager to seal her fate. But then she reasoned with herself that he was only doing his job. He was the picture of politeness as he helped first her, and then her maid up into the carriage. Solte was still anxious. She continued to scan the forest outside the window as the coach began to roll along. But after some time had passed and nothing horrible happened she began to relax a little, wanting to believe that, as Calli had suggested, most of the Shadrani horror stories had been invented or, at least, exaggerated.

Calli decided to help take the maid's mind off her fear. "Let's play 'pretend'," she offered. It was a game they had indulged in often as youngsters. Solte would pretend to be the princess, and Calli, the handmaid.

"Oh," said Solte, brightening, "we haven't done that in years!"

"I know, and I think this might be the last time we'll get the chance."

Solte's smile faded a little. Calli scooped up her hand.

"Come, Solte," she said. "Let's not be somber! Why not make the most of this trip?"

Calli's enthusiasm was contagious. Her maid was already in the game. "Yes," Solte answered, using her most imperious tone. "But I do not believe it is proper for you to imprison your mistress' hand in such a manner!" Their laughter was interrupted when the captain called out to them that they'd soon stop for a short rest. Suddenly, Calli grasped Solte's arm. "Change clothes with me!" she whispered quickly. "What?" "Don't you want to see what it's really like to be a princess?" Solte eyed her as if she'd just sprouted fangs. "Oh, please, Solte!" Calli continued. "Let's really pretend, just for the rest of the journey. You can be the princess you always wanted to be, and I-I can be free, I can make believe I'm not going to marry a man I don't even know." In spite of her enthusiasm, it was difficult to miss the small catch in Calli's voice. "I guess the veils would make it impossible to tell," Solte ventured. "Yes!" Calli cried. "We're the same height, the same size-they'll never guess." Suddenly, Solte's eyes twinkled merrily. As one, they began to unfasten the hooks and buttons that held their clothing. When they left the carriage, it was Solte who was handed down first by the attentive captain, Solte whose comfort was fussed over, Solte who was given a chair covered with the softest fur skin to rest upon. Calli giggled quietly as she sat on a blanket on the ground at her maid's feet. "Are you sure about this?" Solte whispered. "Oh, don't spoil it!" Calli knew from Solte's manner that she was wondering why the princess would think that sitting on the damp ground on a blanket would be preferable to the comfortable perch she now enjoyed. They spent the rest of the stop like that, Calli attentive to her "mistress," Solte acting as though such attention was normal. When they climbed back into the carriage, they pulled off their paitas and fell together, laughing. "That was so easy!" Solte cried. "I knew it would be. Nobody knows who I am." Solte's face fell. "That's quite awful, my lady." Three

The small party traveled east, parallel to the great city walls. They would continue east until they left the sight of the great walls of Soris behind them. That was the most dangerous part of the journey, they knew-the day or so between leaving sight of Soris's walls and catching sight of the walls of Galen.

The captain of the guard wasn't worried. There was little reason for the Shadrani to chance taking on so many skilled armed men. In fact, there had been very little trouble from the Shadrani lately. He knew that wouldn't last. He simply hoped it would hold until he was finished this latest assignment. The last time he had tangled with them...he shuddered and pushed the memories away.

Once again, they traveled only a short distance before stopping for the night, but Calli and Solte were more than ready to leave the confines of the carriage. Continuing their charade, they stepped down and waited while a few of the men erected the small tent that would serve as bedchamber for the princess and her maid. Once the braces were assembled and the shimmering blue cloth stretched over them, the tent took on the shape of a small pagoda. Pillows from inside the carriage were added to make it comfortable enough for its purpose. Meanwhile, the two females were handed a meal of cold meat, bread and cheese.

"Sorry," the captain said as he offered them the paltry dinner. "We cannot risk a fire."

It was all he said. It was all he needed to say. Solte shuddered violently at

the veiled reference to the Shadrani and moved closer to Calli. The captain cursed his thoughtlessness.

"I did not mean to frighten you, Princess."

"The princess is not frightened," Calli said defiantly, "she is merely chilled."

In a heartbeat, the captain unfurled his mantle and draped it over Solte's slim shoulders.

"He's so handsome," the maid whispered when the man turned to walk away. Calli's eyes rolled up in exasperation. Solte, it seemed, was always swooning over some man. Still...

The princess turned to watch the captain. Is he handsome? she asked herself. She supposed so, although she didn't really know what handsome meant. The more she was around Solte, the more she thought the word was simply used to describe the last male that had paid any attention to her maid!

Briefly, Calli wondered if she was missing something. She was the same age as Solte, but she had no interest whatsoever in males. In fact, whenever she overheard a female gushing over a man, she found no sisterly understanding, no rush of sympathy for a love scorned, no sigh of joy for a love found. She felt strangely cheated in her ignorance and longed for the feelings that Solte felt. Would she ever find the man who would make her heart beat faster? And here it was again. In spite of the paita, Calli had sensed the blush that caressed her maid's cheek when the captain had placed his cloak around her shoulders. Unbidden, irritation rankled.

"Oh, for goodness's sake, Solte," she chided. "You're supposed to be me. I don't go around mooning after my father's men."

"You don't moon over any man," Solte retorted.

The corner of Calli's mouth pulled down. "I suppose I shall have to learn to do so over my husband."

Their meager meal finished, the two females retired to their tent, washed as best they could in the small basin provided and, pushing thoughts of the fearsome Shadrani out of their minds, finally fell asleep.

In the morning, it was Calli who rose first. She dressed quickly in Solte's clothes and left the small tent to find the captain.

"Sir," she said when she had discovered him saddling his horse, "how long before we reach Galen?"

The captain was curt but polite. "At the pace we are traveling, it will be a few days' ride. Three at most."

She thanked him and walked slowly back toward the tent, her mind a jumble of unhatched plots and plans.

Three days at most!

The words rang through her brain like a funeral dirge. If only the charade could continue and Solte could be the one to wed the viceroy. But it couldn't, nor would it be fair to ask her maid to do something she herself didn't want to do.

I must convince the man that he does not want me, Calli decided. I will do whatever it takes to put him off. The princess, with her sheltered upbringing and innocent ways, had no understanding of how her looks might possibly inflame the viceroy. But, her new plan in place, she felt a little better. As soon as Solte stepped out of the tent, the captain was at her side, inquiring after her health. Calli couldn't hear the exchange, but she was certain he was being terribly solicitous. She exhaled her breath in a sound born of pure disdain. He barely had time for me, she mused. But she wouldn't mention it to Solte; she wouldn't spoil their game. The next minute, the maid was at her side.

"I've convinced the captain to let us bathe before we continue," she said. "I guess we're still in a safe part of the woods, but because of the...danger, we won't get this chance again until we reach Galen."

In spite of the reference to the Shadrani, Calli smiled. A cool dip in the river would be welcome.

"Wonderful," she said. "Where do we go?"

"Over that way," Solte said, pointing. "Two of the men will guard us-with their backs turned, of course," she added with an impish gleam in her eyes. They splashed about in the cool waters, talking and laughing and making Calli wish this journey, and her charade, could go on forever. Finally, though, they waded out, dried off and struggled back into their clothes.

Calli was just about to throw a quip over her shoulder at Solte when the oddest sound stopped them both in their tracks.

Ttthunk!

And followed immediately by another.

Ttthunk!

Startled, they gaped about them. It was Calli who understood first, the realization coming seconds after she saw the first and then the second guard fall. The arrows that had penetrated their skulls had been delivered with deadly aim.

Then Solte saw them too, opened her mouth, screamed, and everything seemed to move into slow motion.

Riding full-gallop from out of the trees to their left, the captain of the guard and one of his men swooped down the riverbank and each gathered one of the females onto his charger. Calli felt like a sack of grain as she was unceremoniously hefted over the shoulders of the horse.

Terror pounding through her heart, she searched ahead of her to see Solte secured in the captain's arms. Then she squeezed her eyes shut. A few seconds later, they flew open again when she felt the mount beneath her shudder, stumble, and begin to fall. There was only enough time to register the arrow that had lodged in the animal's chest and to hear the man that held her utter a violent oath before his words were cut short by the shaft that drilled into his throat. Calli clasped a hand to her mouth to stifle her scream as they all went down in a torrent of blood and thrashing hooves.

The princess rolled, the breath robbed from her body by the force of her fall. Her terror, however, gave her the strength she needed to find her feet and run blindly after the captain and Solte who were, with the rest of the guard, moving farther away from her with every stride of their great war-horses' legs.

Calli screamed for help. Solte heard her, turned her head and cried out in desperation. But it did no good. There would be no going back, no risking more men for the sake of a simple handmaid. Legs faltering, her lungs burning, Calli stumbled and fell. Through tear-blurred eyes, she looked up and caught a last sight of Solte reaching her arms helplessly in her direction, crying out as she and the captain of the guard disappeared into the thick forest growth. And then...silence.

It was more frightening than anything yet.

Calli gained her feet and ran to the nearest tree, huddling under it as she gaped around her in fear.

She had seen nothing; she still saw nothing.

Whoever, or whatever had attacked them had neither revealed themselves nor made a sound during the assault. Calli prayed fervently that whoever they were, they had moved off in pursuit of the fleeing party. They would never catch them. Some primal protective device in her brain wouldn't even allow the thought of Shadrani to surface. She sat, trembled, and waited.

After ten minutes, she was sure she was alone. She stood up, brushed herself off and took in a deep breath that expelled with a force that almost caused her to swoon when, from the tree above her, a figure dropped down, landing in front of her without a sound. Calli's heart again pounded horribly as she stared at the creature that was eyeing her just as intently.

"You can't just wander off, you know," it said.

Calli stiffened at the voice. Was it female?

Clad in soft leather boots, leggings and a short tunic, the creature's dress and height said male, right down to the short black hair that curled around the chiseled cheekbones. But it wasn't male. The voice and the hint of curve beneath the front of the tunic gave undeniable evidence to the contrary. As

Calli stood still, shock rooting her to the spot, another creature much like this one, though not as tall, came out of nowhere to join her companion.

"What do you think?" the new one said.

"Can't see much behind that thing," the taller one replied, pointing to Calli's paitya.

That was when Calli's mind took in the longbows slung over the shoulders of the two strangers. Her mouth gaped open as realization struck her. Her father's finest fighting men had been bested by two females! She must have made a small sound, because the two of them stopped and stared at her.

"Who..." she whispered, "...who are you?" She was still trembling from her ordeal, shock and fear still vying for first consideration in her mind.

"You're-you're not..."

The tall one grinned savagely. "Yes, we are," she said.

Calli fell back against the tree behind her, unable to prevent the cry of fear that escaped her throat.

"Oh, for the sake of Tsandis," the smaller one spat, "we're not going to hurt you!"

Suddenly, the taller one grasped her companion's arm, her head tilted, listening.

"Better not make any promises we can't keep," she said. "He comes."

Calli strained her ears but heard nothing.

"Who?" she murmured weakly, not wanting to know. "Who comes?"

Pale blue eyes riveted her.

"Why, the Prince of Gemen, of course. Surely you've heard of him."

The sound of her terrified breath escaping her body was the last thing Calli heard before everything went black.

Four

The sound of voices drew Calli from the hazy sanctuary she had found. She blinked and realized that she was on the ground, then grimaced as a vague feeling of disorientation washed over her. Suddenly, everything came back to her with a memory as frightening as the actual events. She froze, for once in her life grateful for the paitya that hid her face as her eyes glanced quickly around her.

Not far from where she lay, she saw the two females. They were facing her, speaking to someone, who from the height and breadth of his shoulders, Calli had to assume was male, although the length of the shiny black hair that fell over his shoulders would have branded him female in Soris.

Her heart pounded painfully in her chest as she recalled the last words she had heard. Then she remembered the amusement in the voice of the tall strange female as she had delivered the terrifying warning. No, her reason cried, they had been playing some cruel joke.

From somewhere inside, Calli's strong will protested the abuse of her terror. From the same somewhere, she found the courage to listen, to try to glean any information that might aid her in her desperate situation.

"Her name is Calli," she heard the shorter female say. "I heard the other one call her."

Calli stiffened momentarily as she realized finally, fully, the extent of her danger. If these creatures were Shadrani, prince or no, they must not find out her true identity. If they knew, if they even suspected that she was the Princess of the House of Arath...!

Silently, she blessed Tsandis for the silly game she had been playing with her maid. In these clothes, they would never suspect. But then, her keen mind reminded her, if she had been dressed in her own clothes, the captain of the guard would never have left her behind. But then Solte would be in her place. As terrified as she was, Calli was comforted that it was she and not Solte who was in this position.

She glanced up at the back of the male who stood not ten feet from her. A long black mantle hung from his broad shoulders, covering everything except the

bottoms of his shiny black leather boots. If he was the fabled Prince of Gemen, she decided, the stories were exaggerated indeed! His presence hardly seemed to warrant the kind of tales spun about him. Drawing in a deep breath, Calli drew up her knees and climbed to her feet.

As she reached her full height, she heard one of the females say something that caused the male to turn in her direction.

Calli looked up into his face and felt time itself pull to a terrifying halt. Her insides chilled as though a thousand icicles had exploded and left their shards imbedded in her gut.

Silver-blue eyes tore into her, mercilessly mocking every sane, logical reason she had just recited to keep her fear in check. Now her terror returned double-fold.

Tsandis-the hatred in those eyes!

He took two steps forward and stopped in front of her. She backed against the tree, praying that it would open up and swallow her. Her eyes wouldn't listen when her mind begged them to look away from him. They remained riveted on his face as he raked her with a look of such malignant loathing that it was all she could do not to cry out.

If her mind could have registered what she was looking at, she would have seen the extraordinary, chiseled features of a full-blooded Shadrani. His high cheekbones, straight aristocratic nose, strong jaw, and full-lipped mouth were as common to his breed as were the incredible, slightly slanted eyes that legend said could bore through your brain to see the thoughts hiding inside. Even the thin scar that ran the length of the left side of his face combined with the ugliness of his hatred couldn't mar the perfection that graced all Shadrani males.

But the only thing Calli registered was that, from the look in those Shadrani eyes, she suddenly believed every terrifying thing she had ever heard about the Prince of Gemen, and even then, she wasn't sure the tales had gone far enough!

It was all she could do to maintain her dignity and not cringe when he lifted a hand to tear the paita from her face. The only sound that escaped her lips was something that sounded like outrage. She felt the heat of color rise over her cheeks as she stood returning the stare of the only male beside her father and Jala who had ever seen her face.

His teeth clenched and his hands flexed as though they itched to settle around her throat. Calli wasn't the only one who had a sense of his violence for, as he took another step toward her, the tall female sprang suddenly to his side and took his arm.

"Erone!" she said sternly. "She is frightened enough!"

He pitched the paita on the ground and turned to the tall one.

"What, exactly," he growled through clenched teeth, "do you intend to do with this creature?"

"I intend to take her home with me."

The statement was not well received. But the tall female didn't back down, nor did she flinch under the scalding glare of the silver eyes.

"And, my brother," she continued, "I do not care what you think about it."

Five

They had been traveling for some time, and still, Calli's fear wasn't lessening. They had made no more mention of what was to be done with her, but Calli knew that if the prince had his way, she wouldn't live to see the sunrise, much less go home with his sister.

The frightening male spoke little as they journeyed, but the females kept up a light banter as if she weren't even there. From their conversation, Calli discovered that the tall one's name was Raesa and the other, Cera. The two females now shared Raesa's horse to leave the other for Calli to ride, although if it had been left to the prince, she would be walking.

Calli had to continually fight a feeling of unreality as she plodded along,

Cera's horse attached to the tether that Raesa had tied firmly to her own horse's saddle. It was mind-numbing that she was here, a prisoner of the creatures that she and Solte had discussed only days ago. Her mind kept saying, "It can't be, these beings don't really exist." But, that same mind kept waiting for the dark prince to jump off his steed, howl at the moon and devour her alive.

She shuddered at the gruesome thought, well believing that he was capable of it!

In an attempt to keep her sanity, Calli forced herself to study the forest around her. If she could break free, it would be good to get her bearings. Before long, she realized that they were headed toward the walls of Soris. The gloomy gray behemoths grew larger above the line of the trees. Hope lit her heart at the thought of her growing proximity to home. She would run the first chance she got.

The small party stopped abruptly as the leader reined in his dark horse. He glanced back at his sister.

"We will stop here to prepare."

Calli's mind reeled with unwanted images as she tried to imagine what they were preparing for. No doubt one of their unholy sexual rites, with her right in the middle! But as soon as the thought came, she felt slightly foolish. She wasn't even sure what her own people's sexual practices were all about. Still, she swallowed hard and couldn't help the question.

"Please," she said softly to Raesa, "why are we stopping?"

The tall female turned to her, surprise lighting her eyes.

"We are here to hunt," she answered shortly, then turned to her horse and untied her longbow.

"And..." again, Calli couldn't help herself, "what are you hunting?"

This drew a quick laugh from both females and a dark glare from the male.

"Not city-dwellers, if that's what you're afraid of," Raesa said. "We hunt an animal called choara."

Calli blinked, terrified anew. First Shadrani and now choara, a large, horned, fanged and clawed beast that could tear you apart without ruffling one of the hairs on its magnificent hide!

"But," Calli continued, glancing around in fear, "surely there are no choara this close to the walls. What would draw them here?"

Raesa and Cera exchanged a look that told Calli she shouldn't have asked, but the insight came too late. The prince's voice seared through her, causing her heart to thump erratically.

"Are you trying to pretend you do not know?" he demanded.

Calli was suddenly very tired. Tired of riding, tired of wondering if she would draw her next breath, but most of all, tired of being afraid. To her own amazement, she felt a shaft of anger course through her. She lifted her head and took on those Shadrani eyes.

That might have been a mistake.

But she held her ground.

"I see no reason to ask a question to which I already have the answer," she stated simply.

Unbelievably, the malice in the eyes deepened further to give them a look of molten silver. His voice was soft when he replied. Calli decided immediately that she preferred it loud.

"You would have us believe," he sneered, "that you are unaware of the method of population-control practiced by your people?"

Calli couldn't help a confused glance at the two other females. They looked uncomfortable, but not about to help.

"I-that is-we don't need population control. Nature takes care of it-"

"Pah!" he spat in disgust.

Calli, often one to fly in the face of danger, felt her ire continue to rise.

"At least," she said flatly, "we do allow nature to take its course, and have not regressed to-"

Immediately, she knew she had gone too far. His face darkened with rage.

"Regressed to what?" he hurled at her.

When she didn't answer, he snatched up her wrist. She let out a small cry, more of fear than of pain. "Speak to me, city-dweller!" The word sounded like sewage on his tongue. "What foul things do you accuse us of?"

Calli stood mutely and tried to stare him down. It was an unwise choice. Within seconds she had to look away, her discomfort only inflaming him more. "I'll show you the true meaning of foul," he spat.

Then he hauled her over to his horse, mounted, and dragged her up with him. Raesa called out for him to stop, but he either didn't hear her or chose not to listen. Within seconds, they were thundering through the trees, him urging the beast on to greater speed and her clinging for dear life.

They finally flew to a stop just when Calli thought she would let go and be damned if she fell to her death. He slid down and reached up with a cruel grip to haul her down beside him. Then he clamped her wrist in his steely grasp once again and dragged her toward a small rise. Calli had just enough time to realize that the two females were right behind her before she was pitched to the ground.

"Now look!" he demanded, pointing to the high walls that were visible through the thinning trees.

Calli looked over, but all she saw was home-home and safety. Her heart leapt hopefully. He grabbed the long braid that hung over her shoulder and yanked, forcing her face upward.

"Up there, city-dweller," he snarled. "What do you see?"

Calli blinked her eyes. There was a man up on the battlement. Briefly, she wondered if he would hear her if she called out for help. As she watched, the man pitched something over the side of the wall. Calli squinted, but couldn't make out what it was.

Then, she heard it cry.

Her features flattened, her ears denying the sound.

"What..." she whispered, "...what is it?"

The prince was unmoved by her shock. "What does it sound like?"

As she watched, another small bundle followed the first. This time, there was no mistaking the sound. In spite of the hand clenching her hair, Calli bolted to her feet.

"No!" she screamed.

"Yes," came the merciless voice close to her ear. "That is your population control. If you'd like to go and check, they're all female. But not all of them die when they hit the ground." He yanked her around to face him, completely unmoved by the horror in her eyes.

"That," he snarled, "is what draws the choara."

Then he released her hair as though it sullied his hand and Calli sank to the ground, doubled over and retched violently. Finally, weak from the spasms, she sat back on her heels, covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

Six

The forest was alive around them. Small birds darted to and fro, building nests or gathering food. The smaller animals that lived on the ground scurried around, unhindered by the presence of the Shadrani and their captive.

Calli sat in chilled silence. Raesa had warned her to be silent; that the choara must be taken by surprise. She needn't have bothered. The princess was in such shock that she hadn't uttered a sound since the horrible revelation that had been forced upon her.

She recalled the heated conversation that had followed the incident. Raesa had been angry with her brother.

"She really didn't know," she had said to him.

He had only turned on her. "And I suppose you think that makes her innocent?"

The topic had been dropped and the scene set for the hunt.

Now, Calli waited with Cera and the horses while Raesa and her brother disappeared into the trees as if they had been absorbed by them. As she sat on

the ground in silence, Calli's mind kept demanding answers to the questions that were now bubbling out of her newly wakened knowledge.

Did her father know of this?

Of course he knew-he was the king!

No! Her mind refused it. He wouldn't, he couldn't!

Then, she remembered the words hurled at her with such venom...population control...all female. Finally, her unwilling mind realized that it explained a great deal, like why there were so many stillborn female babies. They weren't stillborn; they were being murdered-thrown away like so much garbage!

She couldn't help the sob that escaped her throat, and though a hand flew to her mouth, it flew too late. She looked up in time to see the full-grown choara burst into the clearing, drawn by the slight sound. Its head was scarred from past battle but its single, viciously sharp horn was ready for more, the finely tuned instincts aware of sudden danger and ready to kill whatever it discovered.

It discovered Calli.

Turning its beady black eyes toward her, it lowered its head and charged.

Calli sat, frozen. She heard, rather than saw, the arrow that suddenly entered the side of the beast with a sickening thud. But it didn't stop the progress of the creature, only made it take one faltering step before continuing its charge. Suddenly Cera was at her side, grabbing at her. Then Raesa appeared, her concern for her companion etched on her face as she breached the clearing and shouted at the beast to turn it away from them. It worked, but Raesa's worry over Cera had left her at a disadvantage. Her hands flew to the quiver that rested on her back, but she hadn't a hope of clearing the arrow in time. The choara bore down on her.

Calli watched with morbid fascination as Raesa was suddenly pitched clear when her brother appeared beside her to give her a mighty shove. He turned, alone, to face the charging beast.

The prince had doffed his cape sometime before and now stood in only his linen shirt, leather breeches and boots. Briefly, Calli glimpsed for the first time the intricately carved silver amulet that hung around his neck. The long steel sword that he clutched in both hands shone ferally as it invited the beast onward.

And onward it came, in a frenzied rush at him. When the thing was almost on top of him, he dipped to one knee and raised the sword, cradling it against his shoulder to take the brunt of the attack. The sickening shriek of the creature shattered the calmness of the forest afternoon as it impaled itself upon the deadly sword.

The prince was driven back by the force of the charge and slammed against a tree while the animal strained forward, forcing itself further onto the sword. Its vicious horn swung back and forth in a blind rage, straining to tear flesh, now only inches from the prince's throat. Raesa, aware of her brother's plight, stepped around to where she could get a proper shot, and took careful aim.

"No!" Her brother's command stayed her hand.

"I'll not let Gadrel's vanity kill you!" she shouted.

"Do not interfere!" he warned, though the effort seemed to cost him.

Raesa didn't lower her bow, nor did she fire it; she stood, holding a bead on the beast, ready to defy her brother's demand if she thought it necessary.

But the prince continued to push against the great beast, until finally the sword found a path, unencumbered by bone or sinew, to the spot where he knew its heart to be. In the next instant, the choara shrieked one last time, shuddered, and crashed to the ground when its legs gave out as if they were made of kindling. Raesa ran toward her brother.

"Erone!" she called out. "Are you all right?"

He slid down the trunk of the tree that had supported him and sat looking at the fallen beast.

"Fine," he answered.

Raesa pulled up at his tone. She held out a hand to aid him in gaining his

feet and pretended not to notice the slight wince that crossed his face as he did so. She knew he was hurt. She also knew he would keep it to himself as he kept everything to himself these days.

Without another word, he pulled a long skinning knife from the sheath that hung at his side, knelt down, and went to work. Instead of insisting that he rest, that she and Cera could do the job, Raesa pulled her own knife, knelt down beside him, and joined him in the task.

* * * *

Calli, her morbid revelations momentarily eclipsed by the fact that she had now given the Prince of Gemen reason to be furious with her, rode in silence for the trip back to the Shadrani village. Once again, she knew that it was only Raesa's insistence that kept her alive.

On the way, it became clear that at least some of the tales she had heard regarding the Shadrani were true. It was embarrassingly evident that Raesa and Cera were more than simply friends. They did nothing to hide what Calli thought of as their unnatural relationship. In fact, they seemed quite open and at ease with it.

Now, she shuddered anew as she wondered what the odd woman's motives were for capturing her. Raesa's own brother had been less than understanding of her risking herself against so many armed men to gain the capture of the city-dweller.

In order to still her raging imagination, Calli took the time spent traveling to wonder about her chances of survival among the Shadrani. She knew that her death would be immediate if they had even an inkling of her true identity. Her father was the sworn enemy of these people and whatever else she did, she must give them no reason whatsoever to suspect that she was the Princess of Arath. She was doing a creditable job of convincing herself that things would be all right until they finally approached the Shadrani village nestled deep within the forest. Then, the sudden thought of being right in the enemy camp, surrounded by her childhood terror, started the familiar shivers of fear slithering down her spine.

They had just reached the clearing when a blur of motion barreled out of nowhere and launched itself at the male leading their party. When all had stilled, Calli stared in amazement at the child that rested in the prince's lap, small arms and legs wrapped securely around him and a lopsided grin on the mischievous face. He looked so like the prince that Calli was certain he must be his son, until Raesa shattered the moment with the unmistakable sound of a mother's voice.

"Danae!" she chided. "Do not hurl yourself about in that manner!"

She, as well as Calli, had seen the look of pure agony that had brushed her brother's face before his iron will had pushed it away. Now, to Calli's amazement, a resigned grin crossed that same face.

"He will miss one day, and learn his lesson the hard way."

The child wasn't the least chastised by his uncle's words.

"I will not miss," he said. "I never miss."

Then he leapt the distance between brother and sister and nestled securely in his mother's arms, his Shadrani eyes lighting with question when he looked on Calli for the first time.

Calli couldn't help it. She smiled at him. He gave her a look of pure astonishment, then buried his face in his mother's shoulder.

They rode into the village to greetings, and then suspicious stares as the residents noted Calli's presence. But any residual doubt Calli had as to the identity of the male that rode in the lead was removed by the respectful, almost reverent way the group was received. She knew now that she was, indeed, in the presence of the Prince of Gemen.

Now, it remained to be seen what would happen to her in it.

The village was an intriguing mixture of houses, caves, and tree dwellings. From the way it was arranged and the materials used in its construction, it blended in as though part of the forest itself. Calli couldn't help a surge of admiration at the cleverness that had accomplished this. Then, ahead of them, she saw the dwelling that had to be the home of her captors. Rising taller than the others, the structure included several layers of living space that also appeared to have grown naturally from the forest. A long winding and quite majestic staircase wound from floor to floor on the outside of the home, and the exterior was decorated with a lovely climbing and flowering vine.

A happy shout from the doorway of the house drew her attention. She watched a tall, muscled, dark-haired male strode toward them, a beaming smile on his handsome face. As he neared, the prince climbed down off his horse and stepped into his eager embrace. Calli felt an unnatural shudder.

One more of the tales verified.

"Welcome home!" the eager one said. "You've been gone over-long!"

"Do not hold me to blame, Gadrel." The prince motioned in Calli's direction.

"It seems my sister had to pick up this baggage on her way."

Gadrel's gray eyes gave Calli only a cursory, disapproving glance, as though she were some kind of odious, rash-inducing weed that had been discovered too late to prevent the welts.

Then his attention was all for the prince once more.

"Come," he said, clapping him on the back, "we'll celebrate your return."

The sharp intake of breath alerted Gadrel.

"You are hurt!"

"Not so much," came the reply. "Now, go to my saddle and retrieve the gift I've brought you." Calli watched with eyes widening in amazement as Gadrel lifted the magnificent choara pelt from the back of the horse. All the danger, all the risk, to bring this Shadrani a gift! Gadrel's eyes shone with delight as he reclaimed his place next to the prince. He said nothing about the pelt.

"Now," said the man at his side, "we must face the dragon, my mother."

* * * *

Calli followed the others into the council chambers of the House of Gemen. The elegant surroundings surprised her. Polished hardwood floor provided a rich gleaming backdrop for the intricately woven rugs that added a feel of heady opulence to the large room. On the walls hung tapestries of such fantastic design and artistry that, had the circumstances been different, they would have drawn a sound of awe from even the Princess of Arath.

They came to a halt in front of a long dark table that gleamed with the same attention as did the floor. Around the table sat the council members, overseen by Queen Mathena, ruler of Gemen.

The woman was dressed in a long silver-blue tunic that was edged with exquisitely brocaded silver ribbon and topped a pair of comfortable, baggy trousers made of the same silky material. Her manner and bearing drew a reluctant shaft of respect from the Princess of Arath who had expected...well, she wasn't quite sure what she had expected.

Then Calli's eyes were drawn to the male seated at the queen's right. He watched her as though examining something unwelcome found on his dinner plate. He was tall, elegant, and undoubtedly her enemy. Calli's attention shifted back to the queen as the woman stood.

"Good day to you, Erone," she said.

"Good day, Dragon."

Calli's eyes widened in astonishment, but the elegant woman behind the table simply chuckled good-naturedly, then turned her eyes on Calli. Calli didn't miss the sharp intelligence behind them.

"And what is this?" she asked her daughter. "A city-dweller?"

Raesa bowed curtly. "She is my captive."

"Well," came the reply, "let us deal with first things first." She turned and motioned Gadrel forward. The young man took a place next to the prince.

"Now," said Mathena, sitting back into her chair, "a gift has been given that you find appropriate?"

Gadrel nodded, stepped forward, and unrolled the choara pelt, laying it on the table with obvious pride. Calli noted the collective intake of breath that sounded in the room. She also saw the stab of anger that crossed the queen's face before she contained it, then looked up at her son.

"A fine gift, indeed," she stated, her voice taking on a steely quality. "And in keeping with our traditions-as I know you would, Erone-am I to assume that you faced the beast alone?"

A single dark eyebrow rose at the question.

Raesa spoke up quickly. "I was there, Mother," she offered, "in case anything went wrong."

The look her mother gave her stopped her cold. "Your queen did not address you," Mathena said, then turned back to her son. "I am waiting, Erone."

"Yes, my queen. I faced the choara alone."

The older woman rose from her chair with a speed that spoke volumes about her health.

"I am sure you are aware that the council discarded that tradition decades ago, yet even so, you chose this dangerous undertaking to secure a promise gift for Gadrel..." She paused and looked around the room at her attending council, apparently thinking better of airing her private concerns in so public a forum. "If you will excuse us, I believe this has become a family matter that will be continued in my chambers."

Without another word, she turned and headed toward two large wooden doors that stood to the right of the great table. Erone followed her. Raesa took Calli's arm and dragged her along as well. Inside the chamber, the tall Shadrani dropped her arm, motioned silently for her to stand back, and moved forward to join the discussion. Calli melted into the shadows of the room.

Queen Mathena rounded on her son.

"Erone!" she snapped. "What is wrong with you?"

The object of her ire faced her silently, arms folded across his chest.

His mother sighed. "I realize that Gadrel is insecure. But did it not occur to you that risking yourself in such a manner over a promise gift would be inappropriate for someone of your importance?"

"I merely wished the gift to be well-received."

His mother drew in a sharp breath. "Do you mean to tell me that your promised would not be satisfied with any gift, the obtaining of which did not at least involve risking your very life?"

Raesa, silent until now, quipped, "Mother, Gadrel would spit on anything less."

Erone turned a warning look on his sister.

"Well, he would," she laughed.

"Is it not enough," the queen continued, "that you defy the laws of the community and share shadra with him before the proper time? No," she held up a hand to stop his words, "do not bother to deny it."

"I had no intention of denying it," he said matter-of-factly, "but I do not share shadra with Gadrel-I merely give him mine."

The queen raised one eyebrow in a manner that left no question as to where her son had inherited the particular mannerism. "Do you expect me to believe that you have not taken Gadrel's shadra?"

"Believe what you will, Mother."

"But I thought this was the reason you accepted him. His shadra is reputed to be unusual, almost as strong as your own."

Her son's smile was sardonic. "So I have heard."

Even his sister turned at that, a shocked look on her face. "Do you mean to say that he has done this with someone else?" she said.

This time, the dark Shadrani threw his head back and laughed. "Spoken like a

true female!"

Raesa blushed slightly, whether from embarrassment or anger, Calli couldn't tell.

Finally, the queen held up a hand to stop the conversation. "Let us not have this digress into a discussion over the goods and evils of shadra. Great Tsandis, hasn't that been done often enough? I will simply request of you, Erone, as your queen, that in future you concern yourself more with your own well-being and less with Gadrel's dreadful pride."

The prince nodded once, shortly. Raesa, however, wasn't going to let it go.

"Mother," she said, deviltry dancing in her blue eyes, "your son will never do anything that will stand in the way of his shadra."

Her brother rounded on her. "Well, sister," he said, "at least I have that reason for my small insanities. Perhaps you can explain the insanity that led you to take on a full complement of Arath's armed men simply to capture a female city-dweller!"

He had her.

The queen's eyes widened slightly. "Great Tsandis!" she said. "You didn't!"

The female shot her brother a look of amused surrender. "Guilty," she said.

"Raesa," the queen said, "we will discuss this later. For now, I wish to question the girl."

"Question all you want," her daughter said, motioning. "She is right over there."

The other occupants of the room turned to see Calli huddled in the dark corner. The queen threw Raesa a look of curiosity when she realized that an intruder had been allowed in on the private family discussion, while her son rapidly dropped his easy manner and once again became the hate-filled Prince of Gemen.

"Come here, girl," Mathena said.

Trying to think of how Solte would act in the presence of this queen, Calli came forward reluctantly, her head bowed.

"What is your name?" Mathena asked.

"Calli...ah...your highness."

"And perhaps you could tell me, Calli, why there was such a large contingent of men-at-arms traveling with you?"

Calli's mind raced in a panic. "They-they weren't traveling with me, but with my mistress. She is a lady of some importance."

"Pah!" snorted the prince. "There are no ladies of importance in Soris! They treat their women like cattle!"

"Erone!"

"If this has nothing further to do with me, Mother," he said tightly, "I would like to leave."

"Fine," she replied.

The three females waited for him to exit the room. Then, Mathena turned to her daughter.

"I did not intend you to take on such danger in your quest, Raesa."

Her daughter merely laughed. "Oh, I couldn't help it, Mother! You know how I feel about those overblown knights of Arath; I only wish they knew it was two females who set them to their heels!"

"That would certainly surprise them," Calli said, drawing startled looks from her companions. "Forgive me," she added quickly. Then, as if she weren't even in the room, the discussion continued.

"But I was actually after the other one. From her clothing, she appeared to be quite refined. Perhaps she would have been more suitable."

The queen shook her head, looking at Calli intently. "I do not think that matters," she said, "but...we'll wait and see. Now, take her to Beirsa."

Calli followed Raesa obediently, but her mind railed against her treatment.

The prince had just accused the Sorisi of treating their women like cattle, yet that was exactly how these Shadrani were treating her! Why wouldn't someone at least tell her what was expected of her? Why had Raesa wanted to capture her in the first place?

She struggled against the strong urge to ask her captor, but knew that a simple handmaid would never have the effrontery to do such a thing. So, head down, she trailed behind her Shadrani mistress until they stepped through a large door and were confronted by a massive woman whom she assumed was Beirsa. "Good evening, Beirsa," Raesa said, confirming her assumption. "I'd like you to examine this female."

Calli couldn't stop her tongue. "Examine?"

"Yes," Raesa said, waving her off. "It is nothing. Just to see if you...well, if you are carrying anything unpleasant."

Calli's spine stiffened. "I assure you," she stated firmly, "I am not diseased!"

Raesa gave her a look that proved her relationship to her brother. "Are all maids in Soris so impertinent?"

The sudden reminder of her role turned Calli around. "Please," she whined, "I am afraid of...of examinations."

"It will be short and painless. Now, you will undress and cooperate."

That said, Raesa turned and left her alone with the large woman. Knowing she couldn't afford another slip, Calli swallowed her pride and quickly stripped off her clothing. Beirsa approached her and began to poke and examine her.

Unused to being touched by anyone but Solte, the princess struggled not to bolt away from the female. But the fact that the woman was surprisingly gentle, considering her size, allowed Calli to endure the ordeal.

It was only near the end when Beirsa bent to reach between her legs that Calli squirmed away with a gasp. Beirsa, still not uttering a word, wouldn't be denied, and through strength alone, forced Calli to submit to the all-too-private investigation.

By the time Raesa came back into the room, Calli was white with fury and outrage. She bit her tongue to keep from telling this Shadrani princess exactly what she thought of her, knowing that a maid would never, no matter the cause, have the nerve to do it.

Beirsa nodded to Raesa. Then Calli found herself led out of the small house and back the way they had come, back to the queen and her strange plans, back to the prince and his hatred.

Seven

Calli discovered over the next few days that she was going to receive no information at all regarding her fate. She found not knowing worse than her captivity. Her mind returned often to home and the happenings there. The sight of the baby girl that had been thrown from the battlements haunted her and she found herself anxious to get back and do something about the dreadful practice. She also thought often about Solte and what her maid was enduring in her absence.

But at least she had now abandoned all fears that the strange princess from the House of Gemen had captured her for her own sexual purposes.

Still, there was no one inclined to answer her multitude of questions regarding the people with whom she now found herself. She desperately wanted to learn about them, hoping that knowledge would erode the terrible fear of them that still lingered in her breast, especially when the dark prince was around.

But she was a city-dweller, an outcast, and a prisoner, and not a day went by that she wasn't miserably reminded of it. She was forced to remain locked in her room, her only exercise a small amount of time allowed outside in the walled garden that adjoined the house. It was there, one morning while she was trying to fill her day with some meaningful activity, that Calli came upon Raesa's son, Danae.

She was searching near the back garden for a certain type of herb that she liked to add to her tea when she unexpectedly came upon the child. He was standing on one leg, the other held, knee bent, close to his body which was perfectly still. Calli almost laughed out loud and asked him what he thought

he was doing before she caught sight of the serious expression on the young face, and reminded herself that she was among strange people. Instead, she sat down on the ground near him and watched. Minutes ticked by and the child didn't flick an eyelash. Calli found herself wondering at the intensity that emanated from one so young. She was just beginning to worry that something was wrong with the boy when slowly the bent knee unfolded, and Danae stood on both feet for a fraction of a second before he dropped backward, somersaulted and landed squarely in a comfortable sitting position not two feet from her. The young Shadrani eyes stared at her expectantly.

Calli stiffened. She hadn't thought that the child was aware of her presence. Now she sat looking back at him, wondering what she should say. "That was interesting," was all she could think of. The boy cocked his head and studied her with curiosity. "It is my training," he said. "I am going to be a Shadrani warrior." Calli tried to look impressed, although she had no idea what he was talking about. "You are a city-dweller," the small one said. Calli felt her heart constrict. Surely, this child wouldn't despise her. "Yes," she answered simply. Danae continued to study her. "City-dwellers hate us." "I don't hate you." "Then," he said with simple logic, "I guess you are not really a city-dweller."

This said, he seemed to have decided that she passed some kind of test. "Want to see what else I can do?" Calli couldn't help a small laugh born of pure delight at the boy. "Yes," she said, "show me." The quickness of his movements startled her. Before she knew what was happening, he had disappeared and was now hanging upside down in the tree over her head. She laughed again and clapped her hands together. "My," she said, "you are amazing!" This seemed to please the child for he left the branch, did a flip in the air and landed with hardly a sound on the ground before her, inspiring a sound of surprised delight from Calli. "But," the boy said, his face taking on a look of feigned ferocity, "Shadrani warriors are very fearsome, too!" Calli smothered her smile, struggling to put forward the proper attitude for the delightful youngster. "I have heard this," she whispered, as if in fear. The child nodded. "Sometimes," he said, "we can bite!" Before he had uttered the last word, he launched himself at her, pretending to try to bite her. Calli, now laughing openly, struggled to stop the little devil from nuzzling her neck. It tickled dreadfully. "Danae!"

The game stopped. The two of them looked up to see the Prince of Gemen striding toward them, murder in his eyes. When he reached them, he snatched Danae up in his arms and stood glaring down at Calli. "What do you think you are doing?" he snarled. His sister came up behind him. "Erone," she called, "what is it?" He handed her son over to her and continued to glower at Calli, who found the courage to gain her feet and meet his stare. "He was in her lap!" Erone shouted. "Oh, Danae," Raesa chided. "What am I going to do with you?" "We were only playing," Danae announced. "She isn't really a city-dweller." The look that Erone gave Raesa caused her to turn and hurry away with her child, leaving Calli alone to face her brother. "Do not accuse me of anything," Calli said calmly. "He came to that conclusion on his own when he discovered I did not hate him." A dark eyebrow rose at her. "And how, exactly, did he discover that?"

Calli frowned, at a loss. "Why, I suppose when I was kind to him, I..." Suddenly, the implication of his words struck her. "Oh, Great Tsandis!" she cried. "You don't really mean to suggest that I would do anything--"

"Anything what?"

Calli was so incensed she stuttered. "A-anything improper!"

"And what exactly is improper to the likes of you?" he spat at her.

Calli's outrage burned out of control. Suddenly, she didn't care who he was, who she was, or what the consequences of her words might be.

"Improper," she ground out between clenched teeth, "is me standing here listening to your sick accusations!"

The fire in the silver eyes went out immediately. What replaced it would haunt Calli for nights to come. The strange light of cold, calculating hatred was as palpable as a living thing; indeed, it felt like a creature set apart, living inside of him, writhing, seething, waiting for just the right moment to strike.

"If you touch that child again," he whispered, "I will kill you."

Eight

It was only three days later that the Prince of Gemen had occasion to make good on his promise.

Calli was in the great house helping Raesa round up one of Danae's pet jantra; the small, furry, winged creature had somehow escaped during the morning. Their task was suddenly interrupted when a horrified cry stopped them both cold. Enemy or no, the universal sound of pain caused them to share a look filled with dread before they ran, as one, out the door. Cera was running headlong toward them, anguish brightening her blue eyes.

"Raesa!" she shouted. "Come! It is Danae!"

"Oh, Great Tsandis, no," Raesa whispered before she fell into a run, following her mate. Calli ran behind, struggling to keep up.

They broke through a clearing and stopped in their tracks. There before them were several Shadrani who parted to reveal the Prince of Gemen, kneeling on the ground, holding the very still body of Danae in his arms, rocking him gently. Calli frowned when she saw that they were both soaking wet; then her eyes flew to the river over her right shoulder. Her expression flattened as she realized what had happened.

Raesa cried out and ran to her brother, reaching out to take the child into her own arms. Erone looked like a man in hell. Never had Calli seen such decimation on a face.

"He is gone, Raesa," said a deep male voice. Calli glanced over to see the man who had been seated next to Queen Mathena at the council table. "Erone tried to reach him in time," he continued, "but the water was too fast."

"No! He lives, Zeras! He must live!" Raesa screamed, shaking her son as if the jarring would bring him back to her. Her brother climbed to his feet and turned his back on the painful scene.

Calli didn't even stop to consider her actions. She ran to Raesa's side.

"Raesa," she insisted, "I might save him."

The woman stared at her, and Calli saw the light of desperate hope in her eyes.

"That is ridiculous," Zeras hissed. "The boy does not breathe; he is dead. How can you inflict more pain on her?"

Calli ignored him. Her eyes bored into Raesa's, pleading, begging her to believe.

"Please, Raesa, let me try!"

Without waiting for an answer, Calli began to pry the child out of his mother's arms. The fact that she let him go gave Calli illicit consent. Quickly, she laid the boy on his back and tilted his head back. Then, she forced his mouth open, pinched his nostrils, leaned over and put her mouth against his to force her breath into his body.

The action drew a gasp of outrage from the surrounding crowd. The sound caused

Erone to whirl, and the sight of the blonde woman leaning with her mouth pressed against his nephew sent him into a killing rage. He drew his long knife and came toward her.

But he hadn't taken three steps before Raesa intercepted him, her own knife drawn and a look on her face that brooked no argument.

"Do not interfere in this," she warned fiercely.

"Raesa," he hissed, "leave him his dignity."

"To the devil with dignity," she rasped back. "I do not know what city-dwellers know. I will do anything to have him back."

"He is dead!"

"No!" she cried. "It cannot be!"

Calli took her mouth away from the child in time to feel him stiffen, struggle for breath, and begin to cough. The strangled sound caused his mother and uncle to turn toward him. Calli held him while he choked up the water he had inhaled. Then, she glanced up and smiled at Raesa. She saw nothing but a blur as the woman leapt to her side, gathering her son in her arms and crying out his name in desperate relief.

Calli's eyes met those of the dark prince, and in them she saw not only the usual hatred, but also confusion, even wonder, as if he were no longer certain what this being was that he hated. Then he joined Raesa, kneeling beside his nephew to stroke his hair and kiss the top of his dark head.

Calli rose to head back toward the village, the crowd of Shadrani parting before her with a sense of-what was it? Fear?

* * * *

Calli had been summoned. She stood in her room, trying to find the courage to face the Council of Gemen. She had given herself away, she was certain of it. No simple maid would know what she knew; no simple maid would have what the Shadrani obviously thought of as magical power. She jumped as Cera entered the room.

"You must come!" the Shadrani said.

Calli nodded, drew in a steadying breath, and followed.

Silence fell inside the council chamber when Calli entered, and all heads turned to watch her as she approached Queen Mathena. Present were the usual council members, but also Raesa, with Danae seated at her right, and Erone, with Gadrel at his right. With as much courage as she could muster, Calli came to a stop before the intimidating queen and awaited judgment.

"Calli," Mathena began, "you are called here today before the council because it would seem that the House of Gemen owes you a life request. Usually these things are handled privately by the families themselves, but since it involves the ruling house, the council must be present." She paused, noting Calli's confused expression. "Now, since I'm certain you have no idea what a life request is, I will explain it to you.

"First of all, the life request is granted you because you saved the life of my grandson, Danae. Our gratitude to you for this act of mercy can in no way be expressed. But, in return for your kindness, you are allowed to make one request which we must fill, no matter how great, to the best of our ability." She paused to let the information take hold in Calli's mind. Then she continued, regret clear in her tone and manner. "The one thing I am afraid we cannot give you is your freedom. The viability of a life request is dependent upon it not being a threat to the Shadrani people as a whole, and I'm sorry to say that you now know too much about our life here to be allowed to return to Soris. But, barring that, I think, anything else you may request, we will try to accomplish for you."

Calli was speechless. They weren't going to kill her! They didn't even seem to care about how odd it was that a maid had done what she had done. She was so relieved that she couldn't contain a small sound of pleasure. The queen's

eyebrow arched.

"Are you quite all right?"

"Yes," Calli said quickly. "It's just that I...well...I don't know what to say."

"Say what you wish, and the House of Gemen shall grant it for you."

Calli's facile mind went to work. She wasn't going to go free, but here perhaps was a chance to make her stay among the Shadrani more tolerable. She knew exactly what she would ask.

"I would like to request," she said deliberately, "that I be allowed to learn about the Shadrani people." A collective sound of surprise filled her ears. "I would like to know about the House of Gemen, about your traditions and laws. I no longer wish to be a prisoner here or excluded behind closed doors, as an outsider would be. In short, I would like the privilege of being treated as one of your family, my queen, so that I may understand the Shadrani and their ways."

Calli didn't fully understand the delighted look that crept over the face of the queen, but she knew she had pleasantly surprised everyone in the room. Everyone, she was sure, except him.

She didn't dare risk a look in his direction, certain that his hatred would mar her victorious moment.

The queen finally raised a hand to still the hushed conversations that had sprung up at the request. Still smiling, Mathena said, "I do not think the council need be consulted on this matter. Your request is granted." With that she stood, stepped from behind the table, and motioned Calli to join her and her family in her chambers.

Nine

Calli's life in the Shadrani village changed dramatically. Only the dark prince remained unchanged, his hatred toward her as constant as a tomb. But it took two days for her to finally corner Raesa in the great room and ply the Shadrani woman with questions.

"All right, Calli," Raesa said, laughing at her impatience. "I'll answer your questions. Come, sit." She motioned toward the large chair beside her and Calli came eagerly to join her.

"What would you like to know first?"

Calli frowned. Now that the time was upon her, she found herself embarrassed by her curiosity. So many of the subjects were so foreign to her, so...uncomfortable.

"Come now," Raesa coaxed, "don't be shy. We Shadrani are proud of our traditions."

Calli looked at her new friend. And there was no doubt now that that was exactly what she was.

From the beginning, Calli had sensed a feeling of protection on Raesa's part, even though she had seemed determined to capture her. The feeling had persisted as the female shielded her against her brother time and again. But when Calli had given her back her precious son, she knew she had broken through what barrier remained and had gained a true ally.

"But there is so much I don't understand, Raesa. I don't even know where to begin asking."

"Well, perhaps I could start with a brief summary of our history since the Great War."

Calli frowned in confusion. Raesa's eyebrows shot up.

"You do know about the Great War?"

Calli shook her head, feeling utterly stupid. "I don't know anything about a war..."

"Great Tsandis!" Raesa cried. "Don't they teach you anything in that cursed city?"

Calli looked hopelessly lost. She began to wish she had never asked.

"I'm sorry," Raesa said, noting her discomfort. "I'll try to be

less...judgmental. Now...

"Many centuries ago, your people and mine lived together as one on this world. No, don't look at me like that, I really am telling you the truth!

"Anyway, we were all Tsanziki, and lived, I suppose, in as much harmony as people can. But something began to happen to the women. They began to die in childbirth. First, the odd case here and there, but then it reached the point where pregnancy was a certain sentence of death. Well, as you can imagine, the females stopped breeding and our people began to die out.

"Now, this took place over a long period of time, and nature, being what it is, decided to take a hand in our preservation. It accomplished this by making certain of our males so irresistible that females would even risk death to couple with them."

"But," Calli said, eyes wide, "how?"

"Well, first, by making them pleasant to look upon," Raesa answered. "And then, when even that began to fail...shadra."

"Shadra?"

"So!" Raesa accused. "The city-dwellers don't tell tales to children of how we came by our name, Shadrani. Well, that's small wonder I suppose, considering your people's repressive attitude toward sex.

"Anyway, I'll try to explain shadra later. For now it's only important that you know it came to exist. Shadra was the restoration of our people, but it very quickly became the curse, for as quickly as our women had begun to die in childbirth, they unexpectedly began to survive it again. But nature did not remove shadra, and soon we began to have a population problem.

"You know, don't you, that Daleer has relatively little habitable land?"

Calli nodded, thankful she at least knew something.

"Well, the population problem became so great that the Tsanziki began to fight among themselves over space. The fight turned into a bitter struggle that saw the Shadrani pointed out as the reason behind all the troubles that now plagued the planet. That was partly true, of course, but only partly, since all Tsanziki are terribly fertile. But the lines were drawn, and so began the Great Population War."

Calli sat back, shocked to learn that there had been a war on her planet and she hadn't even been aware of it. "The Great Population War," she repeated, as though uttering the words would make the event more real to her. "But, what happened?"

"Nobody won. It finally reached a standstill with only two great leaders left alive, one from each side. The Shadrani leader was named Gemen, thus our family name...He was an ancestor of mine. The leader from your people was named Arath-"

The sharp intake of Calli's breath caused Raesa to turn a searching look on the other female.

"And so," Calli breathed, "came the name of my-" she caught herself, "-my king's family."

"Exactly," Raesa stated. "And over the years, the differences have created walls, literally, between us."

Raesa spoke more carefully as she approached the next part of her story. "The main reason for the differences was the decision each side made about how to prevent the population from growing again to dangerous proportions.

"Gemen believed the only way to do that was to control the breeding process, but he understood his people well enough to know that he could never control their enormous sexual appetites. So our laws became such that sexual pleasure wasn't restrained, but congress between the sexes was. That meant that we became a same-sex oriented culture. We still have breeding, of course, to obtain our children, but it is done only by decree and only in the Shadrani manner."

"So," Calli said, her mind whirling to take it all in, "that's why! That is why you live the way you do."

"And you've been taught all your life to abhor us," Raesa finished.

Calli nodded. "But our way?" she began hesitantly. "Our way is to kill

babies?"

"Your way is to control the female population," Raesa answered. "No matter what it takes to do it."

Again Calli nodded, understanding beginning to seep through the years of repressive bigotry that marked life in Soris. The laws, the limitations, the dress, everything she knew about the way females were treated in the city screamed at her as proof of Raesa's tale, and yet, Calli resisted it. She wasn't ready to accept that she had lived so great a lie about her people, her father, herself.

She turned to Raesa. "But...are you happy?"

Raesa smiled at her. "I think I'm happier than you are."

"Yes, well," Calli said forlornly, "that wouldn't be too difficult."

* * * *

The next day, Calli corralled Queen Mathena. Raesa was off with Cera to hunt some game for dinner, and Calli still had many questions left unanswered. Mathena sat patiently waiting. Calli, however, wasn't patient at all and it became obvious in the clumsy wording of her first question.

"Tell me...how do you raise your children, and why do Shadrani females wear their hair so short and males wear theirs long, and-"

Mathena smiled and interrupted her. "You have many questions, Calli. But they are all related, so I will give you a long involved answer."

Calli smiled. "I'd love a long involved answer, my queen."

"Our society forbids congress between the sexes," Mathena began, "unless it is by decree. To inhibit any temptation, we've been set up as virtually two societies within one, a female society, and a male one. But do not misunderstand. Although the ways of life are separate, they blend nicely in many areas. Many male Shadrani have very close female friends, and vice versa."

"But only friends," Calli said.

"Absolutely. When a child is born, it is given over to the same-sex parent to be raised. And in raising our children, we try to encourage all Shadrani to be what nature makes them. But we do realize a difference between the sexes. For instance, a large number of our males seem to be drawn naturally to the life of a warrior. On the other hand, the females seem to be less interested in battle and more interested in-oh, say-hunting, perhaps."

Calli frowned, thinking she had already seen the chink in the Shadrani armor.

"What if a female wants to become a warrior?"

Mathena smiled. "Females are more than welcome to become warriors, Calli," she said. "But usually they do not. However, it's not because of some buried sexist bias that you're looking for. No, the reason, pure, simple and undeniable, is a matter of nature. Even though our women are bigger than yours, there are still few of them that have the strength, no-the sheer brawn-that's required to achieve warrior status."

Calli stared at her. "You said, 'few of them'."

Again, the queen smiled. "Oh, there have been female warriors. And believe me, they are every bit as fierce and terrifying as their male counterparts."

"So," Calli considered, "if I were a very large, very muscular and very determined female, I'd have no opposition here to becoming a warrior?"

"None."

Calli eyes brightened. "Ah, but what about the males?" she challenged. "What do you do with a male who wants to...sew clothing?"

"Why, we teach him how, to be sure he's very good at it!"

At Calli's astonished look, Mathena laughed openly. "As I said, Calli, we try to allow our children to be what their nature dictates them to be."

"So, you're telling me that you have virtually no roles, occupations or titles that are dictated merely by sex?"

Mathena nodded. "Only inasmuch as sex might determine their nature, as in the case of our warriors."

"And the hair?"

"Ah, yes," the queen said. "I was coming to that."

"In your society, it is females who are considered beautiful. Your women wear their hair long and adorn themselves with jewelry and fine clothing. In our society, the males far outshine the females when it comes to beauty. Nor are our females trying, as yours do, to attract men. In fact, just the opposite. "Our males are frighteningly sexual beings," she continued frankly. "It's the shadra. The warriors among us are the most sexual of all-which is often why they become warriors. It's only through their diligent training that they learn to curb their horrendous sexual drive and refocus it on the demanding training and physical challenges that accompany their lives." She stopped and measured her audience. "Is this all a bit...blunt for you?"

Calli closed her mouth and shook her head.

"Shadrani males wear their hair long because they are sensual creatures. There seems to be something about long hair that inspires lust in our people."

Calli's hand flew to her own long tresses.

"Oh, don't fret," Mathena laughed. "Your hair is fine. Plaited the way it is, no one would look twice at it!"

Calli exhaled in relief and dropped her hand.

"To finally answer your question, our females keep their hair short because they're practical, and less vain than our males."

"And," Calli ventured, "to discourage...congress between the sexes?"

Mathena smiled. "Yes," she said, "and that, too."

Ten

Life began to take on new dimension for Calli over the next week in the Shadrani village. It all began when a man came to the door one day asking for her. Astonished, it took her a few moments to discover that he had come on behalf of his son, who was ill. He had heard of the miracle she had worked with the young prince, and pleaded with her to accompany him to his child's bedside. Calli stopped only long enough to gather the herbs and potions she had been collecting and followed the man out.

When she knelt before the thrashing child, she knew immediately what was wrong.

"Has Zeras seen him?" she asked quickly, then frowned at the man's nod. Zeras, she had discovered, was the Shadrani Healer, and she had solidified his immediate hatred of her when she had made Zeras look so foolish by saving Danae when he had pronounced the boy dead. As she had been on that day, she was shocked by how ignorant the Shadrani were regarding the art of healing. She reached into her small leather bag and pulled out a vial.

"Help me," she said. "He must drink this."

The man didn't hesitate, but lifted the boy's head and helped to force the healing liquid down his throat. Within a few moments, the child was sleeping peacefully.

Calli smiled at the anxious man, then at his partner who stood in the far corner of the room, well away from the odd city-dweller.

"He'll sleep for a while," she said gently, "but when he wakes, he'll be very hungry."

The Shadrani looked at her in astonishment. "He will not die?"

Calli laughed and patted his hand, a gesture that seemed to make him extremely uncomfortable. "Certainly not," she said. "The potion I gave him will have him up in no time."

It did.

After that, Calli found herself more and more busy helping the Shadrani with their pains and sickness. She found that the work gave her a sense of pride and accomplishment she'd never known. The villagers came to accept and trust her more every time she eased an ache or restored a sick child. For the first

time in her life, Calli began to feel a purpose; she began to feel needed, and it was a heady feeling.

* * * *

Something awakened Calli from a sound sleep. She sat up quickly, straining to catch whatever it was. Before long, she heard it again. She frowned at the unfamiliar sound. It came from the prince's chamber, which was immediately next to hers. Usually no sound came through the thick walls, a fact that added to her concern, since the cries coming from the room must be loud indeed. Her thoughts now ever on healing, Calli slipped on her robe and stepped out her door into the hallway.

As she turned toward the prince's door, she caught sight of the tall Shadrani who towered before it. He stood, hands leaning on the hilt of his drawn sword, the tip resting on the floor. His large arms were bare but for the two thick silver wristbands that were traditional for Shadrani males. He saw her the moment she saw him. Calli couldn't help the sharp intake of her breath as he turned his silver Shadrani eyes on her.

Great Tsandis! her mind observed, are there no ugly Shadrani males?

This one, as all the others she had seen, was utterly beautiful. Almost as beautiful, she thought, as the prince. She startled herself with the thought, but then the male spoke, sending her thoughts flying.

"Is there something you need, my lady?"

Calli smiled at the title they had begun to use for her. My lady.

Then she stepped back in surprise at the cry that reached her ears from behind the door. She glanced up quickly at the man. He appeared to have heard nothing.

"I-" she began, only to be physically jolted once again by the alarming sound that reached her ears. "Is the prince all right?" she finally asked.

"He is."

The answer hardly satisfied her, since the sounds from behind the door were becoming louder by the second. "But," she fumbled, "he cries out!"

Calli didn't miss the hint of amusement in the silver eyes before the Shadrani said, "It is Gadrel you hear, my lady."

"Well, then," Calli said, "Gadrel is in pain. Please step aside and allow me to go to him!"

She was mortified when the large man threw his head back and laughed.

"I assure you, my lady," he said when he had gained control of himself, "he would not welcome your intrusion." His smile taunted her, making her blush furiously as the meaning of his words sunk in. "Those aren't cries of pain you hear."

Calli clasped her hands together and struggled to maintain her dignity in the face of his annoying mirth. "Of course," she said, as though she understood all along. "You guard the door because of this...this shadra thing."

"I do."

"Fine."

She turned and walked back to her room, still feeling, with every step she took, the teasing smile of the Shadrani behind her.

* * * *

"Tell me about shadra."

Raesa looked up into Calli's determined violet eyes. The Shadrani princess wasn't going to be allowed to avoid the question.

"Calli," she said, "I don't know how to. How do I explain shadra to a city-dweller-and a virgin to boot, Tsandis help me."

"Well, I'm not completely ignorant."

"Really?" Raesa taunted. "And what do you know?" She leaned back against the wooden bench in the garden where they sat and folded her arms, waiting for Calli's reply.

Calli felt her cheeks burn. If I stay with these people much longer, she mused miserably, my face will be a permanent shade of red!

"I...I have seen the animals in the city..."

Raesa politely bit back her smile. "So-at least you have some idea about the physical act."

Calli nodded.

"Well..." Raesa began resignedly. "And you do understand that there is pleasure in it?"

"I know that the male seems to enjoy it."

Raesa shook her head emphatically. "No, no, no!" she said. "The first thing I'm going to do is correct that stupid city way of thinking."

Calli stared at her.

"It's pleasurable-period!" Raesa said. "Great Tsandis! Why do you think we had a population war?" When her erstwhile pupil didn't answer her, Raesa continued more calmly. "Calli, females get just as much pleasure from sex as males do-except for shadra, of course. But I'm getting to that."

"Now." She stopped, seeming to struggle with the correct approach. "Our bodies are capable of giving pleasure, but a Shadrani male, well, he can take the pleasure that already exists and multiply it."

Calli frowned. "Multiply it?"

"Yes," Raesa said, thinking she had struck on an explanation. "If I were to liken sexual pleasure to glowing coals, for instance..." Calli nodded encouragement. "Well, if a male in shadra touched you, the coals would erupt in flames."

"Like throwing oil on fire?"

"Exactly!"

"But," Calli insisted, "how does he do that?"

Raesa shook her head, bemused. "No one knows quite how shadra works. But it requires a great deal of energy, and is one of the few times a Shadrani male is vulnerable." At Calli's questioning look, she explained. "His concentration on his partner is so great that someone could walk into the room whistling, cut both their throats and walk out again without them noticing. All I can say is that it involves an immense kind of mental concentration, the ability to draw on all your energy and focus it."

"The way a melting glass catches the rays of the sun?"

"Now you have it!" Raesa said definitely. "That's it exactly. Without the glass, the sun is hot, but apply the glass, and the sun burns."

Calli sat back and considered this. "And all Shadrani males have this ability?"

"We've found that if a male has even a drop of Shadrani blood in him, he has the ability, although those with less blood must sometimes be schooled."

Calli, feeling more comfortable now with the subject, told Raesa about her embarrassing encounter with the Shadrani guard the night before.

Raesa clucked her tongue.

"My brother," she said in amused disapproval, "shouldn't be doing that in the first place!"

"But isn't Gadrel his...his whatever?"

"Yes," Raesa smiled, "he is Erone's promised, but our traditions hold that they should not share shadra until after he officially becomes Erone's life-mate."

"Oh," Calli said. "That's why your mother was angry with him about it?"

Raesa answered her with a nod.

"Tell me, Raesa," Calli said suddenly, "what is it like?"

"Shadra? What makes you think I would know?"

"But...you had Danae..."

"Oh, Calli! I didn't share shadra to have Danae."

"But-" Calli began.

"No, no," Raesa interrupted. "We don't need it to have children. Besides, shadra has become a very personal thing to our males, something meant to be shared only with one's life-mate, although that rule is often broken. Of course, according to ancient tradition, a female can still request shadra in the mating chamber, but no one does, not anymore."

"Why not?" Calli pressed.

"Look at it this way," Raesa answered. "Would you like to experience something that overwhelming, and know that you'd never be allowed to feel it again?"

Calli's features relaxed as understanding dawned. "I see," she said finally.

"Besides, I'm not the least bit likely to give some great hulking male that kind of power over me, even for a little while!"

Her reference to a great hulking male brought a picture of Erone's Shadrani sentry to Calli's mind. She winced.

"That guard last night must have thought me dreadfully stupid!"

This time, Calli felt no shame as she watched the Shadrani princess laugh.

"No," Raesa replied, chuckling, "just a city-dweller! But I'd have given my best longbow to have seen Gadrel's face, had you been let in to aid in his ills!" Calli threw her head back and laughed along with her friend.

* * * *

That night and the next found Calli restlessly trying to sleep while the sounds of shadra from the next room pierced her senses.

Knowing now what it was, the cries created an odd, restless sensation in her, making her feel one moment as if she couldn't catch her breath and the next, that there was too much air. It was so dreadfully hot! Finally, she sought refuge.

Slipping out the door, she nodded politely to the Shadrani guard who still maintained his post. He nodded politely back. Padding quietly down the hall, she stepped into the large, comfortable room that waited at the end of the passage.

Feeling she could breathe at last, Calli curled up in the darkness on one of the great couches and was asleep almost instantly.

Some time later, she was again awakened by a sound. At first, she wasn't sure where she was, and her heart quickened in fear. Then, she remembered and raised her head a fraction to discover the source of the disturbance.

Light from both moons of Daleer spilled through the window and illuminated the far end of the room. Calli stifled a gasp when she saw the Prince of Gemen.

He stood looking out the window, his back to her. What startled Calli almost as much as his presence was the realization that he was naked from the waist up. In fact, the only thing he wore was his black leather breeches. She had the distinct impression he'd left his bed quietly to seek refuge, as she had. Her first impulse was to warn him of her presence, but something stopped her. She knew he'd leave the moment he realized she was there and, for some reason she couldn't fathom, she didn't wish him to go. She lay in silence, watching him.

He ran a hand through his long dark hair in a gesture that she'd come to recognize as habit. It gave her a peculiar twinge of pleasure just to be able to watch him, without worrying what she might do to anger him, without waiting for him to turn his disturbing hatred on her.

The gentle feeling grew as he turned, drew a deep breath, and sat down in one of the large chairs near the window. He leaned forward and placed his head in his hands in a gesture so full of despair that it was only the certain knowledge he'd shrink from her that kept Calli from rushing to soothe his pain. Her heart thumped in her breast as she watched him, torn between guilt over witnessing the private moment and the growing urge to go to him, consequences be damned. But her quandary was dissolved when Gadrel's voice

interrupted the moment.

"Erone?" he called quietly. "Are you in here again?"

Calli watched as the prince looked up, and for a second, didn't respond. Then, a look of resignation crossed his face and he answered the call.

Gadrel came quickly into the room, kneeling before Erone in a gesture that was blatantly intimate. But the prince didn't seem to take offense, for when the beautiful Shadrani traced a hand enticingly over Erone's body, he was rewarded by a soft throaty moan.

"Why have you left our bed?" Gadrel asked.

"I...couldn't sleep."

Calli felt a delicious shudder run down her spine, first at the sound of pleasure that escaped the prince's lips, then at the deeply sensual quality reflected in his voice as he responded to Gadrel's question.

Praying now that she wouldn't be discovered, but unable to tear her eyes away, she watched as Gadrel continued to caress Erone's body. And each time he elicited a quiet sound of pleasure from his promised, Calli felt something inside herself quicken.

Gadrel ran the tip of his fingers over hard nipples and Erone groaned, closed his eyes and leaned his head back. When Gadrel replaced his fingers with his mouth, Calli thought she must surely run from the room. But she was stuck, her chance for revealing herself having long since passed.

Erone lifted his hands and entwined his fingers in Gadrel's long dark hair.

Calli realized that her own breath had quickened as she continued to watch Gadrel's mouth work on the prince's body, still drawing shudders of pleasure from him and, vicariously, her. Then she heard Gadrel's breathless voice.

"Take my shadra, Erone," he begged between kisses. "I want to give it to you." Receiving no reply, Gadrel continued to plead. "Please, Erone. You must want it...please...take it..."

As he whispered this last, his hands dipped lower and began to work quickly on the fastenings of Erone's breeches. Calli's eyes widened in dismay. She must speak up, must make herself known! Great Tsandis! She couldn't remain here and watch this.

But, once again, luck was with her as Erone opened his eyes and reached down to still Gadrel's questing hands. Then he lifted the other's chin in a tender motion and spoke to him.

"I will have your shadra, Gadrel," he said, "when we are joined."

Gadrel let out a long breath and sat back on his heels, defeated. Calli let out her own breath when Erone helped him to his feet and quietly slipped out of the room with him.

Eleven

The late afternoon sun felt warm on her back as Calli finished the last of her harvesting. The final leaves placed in her basket, she straightened and stretched to work the kinks out of her back. At once, she felt the same feeling she had had for days now, that someone was watching her. She glanced around, but saw no one. The feeling was even stronger today than usual. It began to annoy her.

"All right," she said, "I know you're there, so you might as well come out." She was astonished when a young Shadrani male, no more than fourteen, materialized out of the surrounding forest.

"Who are you?" she asked, struggling to keep the shock out of her voice. He seemed as surprised to be caught as she was to catch him, and his voice gave the fact away.

"M-my name is Pashar. I meant no harm to you."

"No," Calli said quickly, "I didn't think you did. But why do you follow me?"

The boy blushed and looked down at his feet in a gesture that crossed all boundaries and racial barriers. But Calli was too innocent to catch it.

"I've never seen a-a city-dweller before," he answered quietly.

"Oh," Calli said, "that. Well..." She did a complete circle, allowing him to

see her from every angle, then stopped and smiled at him. "See, I'm not really so different."

Again the boy blushed, but this time his eyes didn't drop. Calli sensed something, but she wasn't sure what it was, so she put it down to the unsettling effect her presence still had on some of the villagers. When he continued to stand there, staring at her, she began to feel uncomfortable and her mind grabbed at the first thing it could to relieve the situation. "Well, Pashar," she said quickly. "I was just going to go find some more Trahoe leaves to put in my tea. Would you like to help?"

This drew a genuine smile from the boy. Calli felt relieved, certain she had done the right thing.

They walked a small way down the path before Calli stepped off the well-worn track to search the deeper forest for the leaves, Pashar right behind her. She saw a batch of them and pointed them out to the boy. He dropped to his knees beside her as she showed him how to pick only the right ones and place them gently into her bag. The atmosphere between them was light with smiles and laughter. There was no way Calli was prepared for what was about to happen. Suddenly, without a word, the boy reached out to touch the long blonde braid that lay on her left shoulder. Calli saw the hand approaching and watched as it first stroked, and then grasped the thick plait.

She looked up into Pashar's face, but the young boy was gone. What she saw instead were two Shadrani eyes blazing with a passion that momentarily stopped her heart. Even at the age of fourteen, Shadrani males were large, and suddenly Calli felt chilled with fear.

As she struggled with her shock, the boy reached out with his other hand to touch her face. She jolted and bit back a scream at the electric surge that ran through her body. She saw a frown cross the boy's features as though he wasn't involved in his own actions, but watched them from afar. Calli tried to wrench free from his grasp, but he had a lock on her hair and wasn't about to let go.

"Stop it, Pashar!" she cried. "You're frightening me!"

He made no reply. Instead, his hand shot forward once again, grabbing the front of her frock and tearing it away from her body. Now in a genuine panic, Calli swung at him, her connecting blow enough to startle him into releasing his grip. With a sob, she fled from him, running frantically down the path until she raced headlong into the garden, completely surprising the family of Gemen who were gathered there to enjoy the cool afternoon.

"Calli!" Raesa cried as the young girl ran into her arms and leaned against her, sobbing. In a second, Queen Mathena was at her side, scowling at the tear that decimated the front of her cotton tunic.

"What happened?" she demanded.

The sound of authority snapped Calli's senses back into place. Wiping the tears from her face, she gathered herself and searched for the right thing to say. What stopped her from saying the simple truth was her own ignorance. She had no idea what had really happened back there, was absolutely unsure of what part she might have played in it. Something in the boy's eyes-before he seemed to lose his mind-had touched her, and now she was afraid for him, afraid she had done something to incite the attack.

"Calli," Mathena repeated, her tone growing dangerous. "This is most serious." That was what she was afraid of! She made no reply.

Erone approached her. "Who tore your dress?"

The force with which the question was delivered made her visibly jolt, but still she did not reply. Then, from the forest behind them, the boy emerged, stumbling to his knees and falling face downward at their feet. Calli jumped away from him, the fear in her eyes giving away what she had been loath to reveal. Erone's face darkened as he bent and turned the boy over.

"Great Tsandis!" he spat. "He is in shadra!"

He glanced up and threw a dangerous, accusing look at Calli, then gently lifted Pashar in his arms and carried him into the house.

"Danae," Raesa said, "run and fetch Zeras."

She turned to Calli, took her by the arm, and walked her upstairs so that she could change her ruined clothing. Calli was now truly worried for the boy, and the look that Erone had given her made her want to be in the room when the story came out. So she changed as quickly as she could and went back downstairs.

They were all in the large antechamber, and all turned to watch her as she descended the stairs. Zeras was still in with the boy.

"Is he all right?" Calli asked. The question brought a sound of disdain from Gadrel.

"That will be enough, Gadrel," Mathena warned. Then she turned to Calli. "What happened, child?"

"I truly don't know," Calli answered. "He was helping me. We were picking Trahoe leaves, then suddenly...I don't know..."

Erone rounded on her. "What in the name of Tsandis were you doing alone in the middle of the forest with a male of that age?"

She glared at him. "That," she answered tightly, "is where the Trahoe leaves grow."

Erone turned his anger on his sister. "This is what your insanity has done!" he seethed, pointing at Calli. "This city-dweller wanders off into the forest alone with a male in the throes of adolescent shadra!"

"I didn't know he was in the throes of anything!" Calli cried. "We were just talking!"

"Talking!" Erone shouted, his voice taking on a tone that indicated he couldn't believe what he just heard. "I suppose you expect us to believe that you just talking to him threw him into shadra?"

He advanced on her. She backed away from him, shaking her head.

"I didn't do anything!" she cried.

"That's enough, Erone," Mathena demanded. "I believe her."

Her son whirled to face her. "You," he said angrily, "being a female...would!" The withering look his mother gave him finally stopped his attack. The door to the bedchamber opened and Zeras came out.

"He's all right," he said. "He told me what happened." His eyes cut toward Calli, unhappy that he couldn't tell a different story. "She is blameless." If Calli expected an apology from the Prince of Gemen, she was disappointed.

"But why?" Mathena asked. "What possessed him?"

Zeras motioned toward Calli. "Apparently he has been watching her for some time now. Tsandis help him, it seems that just being near this creature has the capacity to throw him into shadra. But he'll be well enough tomorrow to face his punishment." With that, he bowed to his queen and left.

Calli turned to Mathena. "Punishment?"

"Certainly," Mathena replied. "But, don't fret. Because of his delicate years, he will only be whipped."

"No!" Calli cried out. "Please..."

"There can be no leniency in these cases, Calli. Don't you understand? If you hadn't escaped him, the child would most certainly have raped you."

* * * *

The next morning, the Shadrani gathered in the village square to witness the punishment. There hung in the air such a feeling of mortification and shame that Calli began to believe the spectacle was carried out as much to inspire guilt as to inflict pain. She guessed that the whipping would be a gentle one. Still, she couldn't help but feel sorry for Pashar. After all, he couldn't control this damnable shadra thing!

She sat on the podium with the family of Gemen. Only Erone was strangely absent. Then, she saw Pashar come out of the house where he'd been waiting. Calli's heart shrank anew, for now there wasn't even the smallest trace of the threatening creature that had attacked her the day before. There was only a

young boy who was so shamed by his actions that he couldn't look anywhere but at the ground as he awaited his fate. Calli felt the motion of the crowd as they turned as one. She turned as well, and caught sight of the Prince of Gemen standing at the end of the long walk that stretched before the young penitent.

"Come, Pashar," he demanded.

Calli's blood froze at the sight of the long ugly whip that he held in his hand. Surely he wasn't going to use that thing on the boy? Her eyes flew back to Pashar in time to see the naked fear that crossed his face as he, too, saw the weapon. In desperation, she turned to Raesa and took her arm.

"Please, Raesa," she begged, "Tell me your brother isn't going to use that...that thing on him!"

Raesa turned to her. "It's all right, Calli. Erone's an expert with this weapon; there will be no permanent damage. Please understand, we don't enjoy inflicting pain. But if Pashar cannot be taught to control his shadra..."

"Then what?"

"The next time," Raesa replied, "he will have to be executed."

Twelve

Calli paced the floor impatiently as she waited for the Prince of Gemen to arrive home. She'd felt a little of herself die each time he'd mercilessly cracked the whip on the unfortunate Pashar this morning, and Calli was certain that he'd been taking out some of his anger at her on the boy. She was going to confront him once and for all.

When he arrived, he was in as foul a mood as she was. Neither that, nor the fact that his mother, Raesa and Cera were with him, deterred Calli from her purpose.

"I would speak with you!" she said to him. He merely narrowed his eyes and turned to leave, dismissing her.

"Do not walk away from me!" she shouted. This drew an astonished silence from everyone else in the room. Slowly, as if making a point, the prince turned back to her.

"What do you wish?" he whispered.

"I wish to know when I'm going to be allowed to breathe in your presence."

He made an expansive gesture with his hand. "The air is all yours," he sneered, then turned again.

Again, she stopped him. "I wish to know when you'll be able to find the courtesy to at least be civil to me."

This time, he turned more quickly. "I see no reason to be more civil than I already am."

"Pah!" she said, borrowing from him. "You aren't civil at all."

The three other occupants of the room stood and stared, their gazes shifting from one combatant to the other as they flung verbal barbs at each other. Erone's eyes flashed dangerously. "I don't care what protection my mother gives you," he snarled. "I am not required to give you anything more than I can stomach."

"You seem to be able to stomach a great deal when it comes to whipping young boys."

"You are to blame for that!" he thundered. "Not me!"

"Why? Don't pretend it's because he would have hurt me. No, you wouldn't have cared if he'd torn me to pieces! You whipped him because he did the unforgivable-he allowed a mere female to inspire shadra!"

Calli was trembling now, her anger out of control, the image of the whip striking the boy again and again urging her on.

Erone's hands clenched. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't I? I know that we do the same thing to boys where I come from. Only, we whip them if they lust after other boys."

"It is not the same-"

"It is the same!" Her voice was desperate, trying to reach him, trying to find

a way through the hatred. "Don't you see...in this, you are no better than the King of Arath!"

Any of the other three females in the room could have warned her, had they the time, that she'd gone too far with that, but even they were stunned at the violence of Erone's reaction.

The words were barely out of her mouth before he struck her with a backhand so powerful that it drove her halfway across the room. Calli was unconscious long before she came to land on the hardwood floor with a sickening thud.

Thirteen

Raesa, Cera and Queen Mathena stood to greet the Healer Zeras as he was announced.

"Mother," Raesa whispered, "he is not her friend."

The queen raised a hand as if to say she was well aware of the Healer's feelings for Calli. When he was admitted, and told of how Calli had come by her injury, he said not another word, but turned toward the chamber where she lay.

"Zeras," Mathena said, halting him. "I should like to see the girl well again. Someone will have to face the consequences if she dies."

Zeras swallowed, catching her meaning, then bowed slightly and slipped into the sickroom. They waited, the queen and Raesa seated, Cera gazing out the window.

After a time, Cera straightened. "He comes."

Raesa's mouth tightened in anger and she moved to stand, but her mother motioned her to stay put.

"Let me handle this."

The door opened and the Prince of Gemen entered. His eyes swept the room quickly, then came to rest on his mother.

"Is she...well?" he asked.

"Zeras is with her. We have had no word."

He nodded once, accepting the information, then stood quietly. Raesa eyed him with angry condemnation, then noted her mother's warning look and focused her attention back on the wall opposite her.

Some time later, Zeras came from the room and approached the queen, who, along with Raesa, stood to receive the news.

"I can do no more," he said. "She will awake or she will not." Then, he bowed quickly and left the room.

Queen Mathena turned to her son. "Come, Erone," she said.

The prince reluctantly followed her as she moved into the sickroom. When they reached Calli's bed, Mathena turned to him once more.

"Look on her!" she commanded, pointing to the unconscious girl. "See what your hatred has done!"

Erone shifted his gaze to where Calli lay. He winced as his eyes took in her battered face, the entire right side swollen hideously and bruised beyond understanding. Struggling with his shame, he raised his eyes to his mother, but the look she gave him froze any words he had intended to say.

"I know you have suffered a terrible loss," she said, "and I've waited these past two years for you to return to me. But all you have done is nurse your hatred." She stopped, drawing in a breath to help control her anger and disappointment. "Tell me, Erone-," she motioned once again to Calli, "-tell me what you can possibly find in this gentle creature to hate?"

In the silence that followed the question, there was no answer from the Prince of Gemen. He drew a ragged breath, ran a hand through his dark hair, turned and left.

* * * *

Danae sat in the sickroom, watching his mother pace. His grandmother sat gazing sadly at Calli's face. He felt the strength coming from her, almost as if she were willing the strange girl to live. He didn't understand why, but he knew the queen somehow felt responsible for her being hurt.

But it wasn't her fault.

Danae knew it was Erone that had hurt Calli. Goodness, but his uncle didn't like her at all! Though why, Danae couldn't understand...He thought she was nice and even fun. But maybe, he thought, it was because she was so pretty. Females weren't supposed to be pretty like that!

Calli blinked her eyes painfully as a low moan escaped her throat. Raesa and Mathena came immediately to her side.

"Calli?" Raesa probed gently. "Calli, can you hear me?"

Struggling with the dizzying pain that pounded in her temples, Calli finally focused on the woman in front of her.

"Raesa?" she whispered.

She winced as the room erupted in cries of joy. "She's awake, Mother," Raesa said. "Oh, thank Tsandis! She's all right."

Danae smiled, pleased that all the grownups in his life were happy again.

All except one.

Slipping out the door unnoticed, he went to find his uncle.

* * * *

Gadrel sat and watched Erone wear a path in the well-polished floor of his chambers.

"Oh, Great Tsandis!" he growled. "Why do you worry so? What does it matter if the creature dies?"

Erone stopped and turned a scowl on his companion.

"I should not have struck her."

Gadrel only laughed. "She taunted you beyond reason! I, for one, am glad you struck her."

Erone continued his pacing. "You would be."

"Of course I would," Gadrel continued, missing the barb. "She's been nothing but trouble since she arrived. I don't think poor Pashar will ever be right again. What did she do to him, anyway?"

Erone stopped again. "Believe it or not, Gadrel," he said evenly, "she did nothing but show him a little kindness."

Amused denial shone in the gray eyes. "I'm certain of that."

"Don't you understand? It matters not what she did. I had no right to strike someone so...so defenseless."

"She deserved it."

"For what? Giving her opinion? The last time I heard, that wasn't against Shadrani law!"

Gadrel scowled at him. "She is against Shadrani law! How can you defend that basrati?"

Erone slammed a fist down on the sturdy tabletop. "If you cannot give me peace, Gadrel," he snarled, "then be gone from me!"

Gadrel's face was dark with anger as he stood and swept out of the room. He hadn't been gone five seconds when Danae appeared. He looked up at his uncle who stood in the middle of the room, head down, eyes closed, hands resting on his hips. Without a word, the boy approached and began to climb into his arms.

Erone's eyes flew open when he sensed the presence. His heart lurched painfully as he gazed down at the small dark head that moved up now to snuggle against him. "Danae," he whispered, though it was another name that came first to his lips. He gathered the boy to him and stood rocking him gently. "My lady is well," Danae said against his neck. Erone closed his eyes and drew a deep, relieved breath. "Thank you, Little Fox."

"Please stop fussing over me!" Calli laughed.

Raesa stood and looked uncomfortable. "I must confess," she said, "I'm not used to the role of nursemaid."

Cera laughed as well at her mate's overblown worry. "Calli is much stronger than she looks."

"No doubt," Raesa said. "And thank Tsandis..."

Mathena and Calli turned in time to see Erone step through the door, but Raesa had her back turned and was unaware of his presence.

"...or my brute of a brother," she continued, "would surely have broken her skull with that blow he delivered her!"

Cera cleared her throat and motioned toward the door with a quick jerk of her head. Raesa turned to see her brother standing there. She moved aside, expecting him to come forward. But instead, he turned to the still-open door and motioned to someone standing outside.

The room fell silent as Pashar entered, looking sheepish and drawn. He bowed stiffly to Mathena and Raesa, then turned and walked toward Calli, head down, looking studiously at his feet.

Calli felt pity tighten around her heart as the boy approached. This wasn't necessary, she breathed to herself-hadn't the poor thing suffered enough? But she said nothing, merely waited for the boy to complete whatever mission his prince had sent him to do.

Pashar stopped in front of her. His hands nervously fingered the long horsehair rope that hung from his hunting belt. He still wouldn't look at her.

"Please," he murmured finally, "please forgive me."

Calli was so moved by the desperate wrenching in his voice that she began to reach out a hand to him. Then, she stopped. Her eyes flew to Erone. His expression warned her not to lay a finger on the boy. She drew back, clasping her hands together in an effort to control them.

"Oh, Pashar," she said gently. "Of course I forgive you. I know you meant no harm. Please, think on it no more."

Finally, his eyes struggled up to her face. Then his expression flattened in horror.

"Did...did I do this?" he whispered.

Calli's hand flew to the bruise on her face. "No," she said quickly, "Oh, no Pashar! That was-" once again, her eyes darted to Erone. He looked away from her uncomfortably. "That was something else," she finished.

Raesa caught the exchange. It only made her angrier with her brother. Why, the girl was sparing his pride, covering up for his cruelty so that Pashar wouldn't think badly of him!

"If someone hurt you, my lady," Pashar said tightly, "I'll gladly speak with him for you."

Calli's mind whirled. Yes, she could just see this young Shadrani taking on the Prince of Gemen! Wouldn't that add to her popularity here! And how long would Pashar last-maybe ten seconds?

"That's fine, Pashar," Erone said from the door.

The boy turned, bowed to his queen and Raesa, then came to a stop before Erone. Slowly, he looked up at his prince.

Erone gave him a quick nod of assent, and the boy was gone. Then, the prince turned to Calli. He stood for a long moment, seeming to struggle within himself. "I'm glad you are well," he said, then turned and left.

"Huhh!" Raesa spat. "That was some apology!"

"Oh please, Raesa," Calli said, "leave him be."

Queen Mathena sighed heavily. "He owes you more than an apology, I should think, Calli. But I doubt you'll ever get more than you just did." The room fell silent at the weight and sadness of her words. "I only wish," she said finally, "that you had something among your potions to cure hatred."

Calli looked at the queen for a long moment. "Tell me," she asked, "why does

he hate me so?"

"It isn't you personally that he hates, Calli, but all city-dwellers."

"But why? What is this thing that haunts your son?"

Mathena rose to her feet. "Tell her, Raesa," she said, "for she has earned the tale. But I will leave. I don't care to hear it again."

* * * *

Raesa sat and stared out the window, collecting her thoughts. Calli didn't rush her. In the heaviness that had descended following her question, Calli began to feel wary, anxious, and sorry once again for her unending curiosity. "Calli," Raesa began, still not looking at her, "in beginning my explanation, I'll ask if it is true that you have some affection for my son."

"I have great affection for your son," Calli said. "Danae is an exceptional child."

Raesa nodded. "Yes, he is exceptional. But he wasn't always exceptional for there was, once, one very much like him."

Calli frowned at the statement, but kept her silence.

"Erone's son," Raesa explained. "His name was Kielan, and he was the absolute light and joy of my brother's life. He was as adorable, mischievous, and precious as my own Danae. But he was even more adventurous." She managed a small, fond laugh. "If you think Danae is hard to keep track of...Kielan was never where he was supposed to be, rarely listened to cautions or threats and then, when you tried to punish him, he'd do something to make you laugh so hard that you forgot what it was you were angry about in the first place." She shook her head. "Ah, he was a sweet little fox, that one."

Then her expression lost all trace of humor.

"Two years ago, he became too adventurous. It seems he took on a dare from some of the other children, to climb-climb, mind you-the walls of Soris. He was taken by your king's guards."

Calli's eyes widened.

"We don't teach our children to hate," Raesa continued. "Up until then, we didn't teach them much at all about the city-state, except to stay away from it. So, although Kielan knew he had been caught misbehaving, I'm sure he didn't hesitate at all to tell the guards exactly who he was. I can just see him now, telling them to let him go, or his father, the Prince of Gemen, would be angry with him!"

Calli frowned in confusion. She had never heard of a Shadrani captive, let alone a child.

Raesa's tone turned bitter and ugly. "Erone went absolutely out of his mind. King Sadone himself sent us word that he had Kielan. He wanted an exchange, he said, prince for prince, the boy for his father.

"None of us trusted Sadone's word. We begged Erone not to go. But there wasn't a thing in this world that was going to keep my brother from trying to rescue his child.

"Your king was clever about it. He gave us no time to devise any kind of plan for rescue. All we could do was accompany Erone as far as the edge of the forest. From there, he went alone to face Sadone and make the exchange."

She stopped and swept a hand over her face as though to banish the memory of her tale. Then, she continued.

"We waited for hours. Kielan never came. Sadone had never intended to let him go. And why would he, when finally he had within his power the two remaining princes in direct line to the throne of Gemen? Your king-

"Please," Calli interrupted, her face now ashen, "please don't call him my king."

Raesa gave her a searching look, then nodded grimly and continued. "Sadone sent us no further word. We were frantic with worry, but all we could do was sit and try to make desperate plans to scale the damnable walls, or launch

some kind of suicide mission, or-oh, Great Tsandis," she said sadly, "it was a terrible ordeal. Your mind does cruel things to you at a time like that. Every time I looked at Danae, I imagined him behind those walls, and I knew what Erone was going through and there was nothing, nothing I could do!"

Calli reached out and laid a hand gently on Raesa's arm when she heard the painful catch in her voice. "But Erone escaped," Calli offered. "He got away." Raesa made a hopeless sound. "Did he?" she whispered. "Well, his body is here, at least.

"There are those within your city who bear us no hatred. It was a few of those brave souls who helped Erone escape, but they couldn't find Kielan, and they had to lie to my brother and say the boy had been rescued, to get him out of the city."

Calli was completed unaware of the tears that had begun to stream down her cheeks as Raesa came to the last of her story.

"We never found out what happened to Erone behind those walls. The only thing we do know is that he was cruelly tortured-the scars he bears on his face and body prove that. But he has never uttered one word about it."

Calli shook her head, still denying.

"That's why he hates so much. He has survived by convincing himself that he'll be given his revenge. He has waited, harboring his malice, for two years. Waiting for Tsandis to answer his prayers, so that he may strike out against Sadone."

"But Kielan!" Calli cried, unable to turn from the fate of the child. "He is somewhere still within the walls of Soris!" She struggled on despite the definite shake of Raesa's head. "Please listen, Raesa," she said desperately, "I'm not without...without friends in the city. I can discover his whereabouts, I know I can."

She continued to ramble until Raesa turned to look at her, and the look in her Shadrani eyes stopped first Calli's words and then her heart.

"Calli," she said slowly, "they sent us his head."

Calli's hand flew to her mouth, smothering a sharp intake of breath. She sat in utter silence for moments, only her eyes displaying the horror that was playing havoc with her mind. Then she began to scream. She was screaming still when Cera and Mathena burst into the room to discover the source of the terrible sound.

Fifteen

The day room was quiet, and Calli sat looking at nothing in particular. She had been occupying herself in the same manner since she'd heard the terrible story of her father's cruelty two days ago. She found little energy to even administer her healing and had asked that, unless it was a life and death situation, she be left in peace.

As if she would ever find peace again.

She could barely sleep, for her dreams were filled with images of a small boy with Danae's face fleeing in terror from her father, crying out to Calli to save him. And she just sat there, frozen to the spot, until his disembodied head landed on her lap. Then Calli awoke in a cold sweat.

Raesa had indeed given her a good reference point in mentioning the similarity between Erone's son and hers. Even in the short time she'd been there, she had grown to adore the little Shadrani. She couldn't imagine losing such a child in any manner, but to lose him in such a way...

She shuddered and stood up to stretch her legs.

As she reached the window, she caught sight of Danae scampering madly about in the yard, as he was wont to do. She had asked him one day what he was doing, and he had turned to her as if she were odd and said, "I am running." Then he had gone back to it, making Calli laugh with delight.

And even now, the sight of the little one dashing around the trees in such earnest fashion made her smile in spite of her mood. Then, she saw him stop dead and smile widely. She knew that smile. It meant his uncle approached.

Within moments, she saw him. Pashar was with him, as he always was these days. She moved back from the window a little, not wanting to be seen, but not moving away far enough to block her view.

Raesa had told her a little about the young Pashar. His father had died shortly after they had lost Kielan and, though the duty now fell to the House of Gemen to see to his coming of age, in the grief that followed, the young man had been lost in the shuffle. They hadn't even realized he had begun his shadra and, Raesa had reassured Calli, even though he'd given her a fright, it was a good thing the incident had happened so that they caught it in time. Calli had to admit that she was still dreadfully curious about shadra. So, she sat down in one of the comfortable chairs, curled her legs up, and watched. Erone sat on the ground, crossing his long legs. Pashar followed suit. So did Danae, looking so serious that, again, Calli couldn't help a small laugh of delight. His uncle glanced over at him, then smiled himself and turned his attention back to Pashar.

Although she couldn't hear the words, Calli watched intently as Erone spoke to Pashar, using his hands to emphasize or clarify his thoughts. The young Shadrani listened intently, not saying a word, merely nodding from time to time. Erone put a hand to the boy's forehead, then touched him gently on his eyes, mouth, and over his heart, speaking all the while.

Calli's forehead puckered as she watched. The man was such an enigma. She couldn't believe that this man so gently teaching Pashar was the same one who had brutally taken a whip to him not a week ago; the same one who had given her the cruel bruise that still colored her cheek. But it was the same man, the Prince of Gemen, worthy in some ways of all the terror that her father's propaganda had spread about him, but worthy also, Calli thought, of at least her sorrowful sympathy.

Sixteen

For the third time since her arrival in the Shadrani village, Calli stood before the Council of Gemen. This time, however, she had absolutely no idea why she had been summoned. But, as before, the queen, her family, and her council were present, including Calli's now resolute enemy, Zeras.

The queen seemed uncharacteristically reticent and, for some reason, it sent a shudder of apprehension up Calli's spine. Finally, the woman stood, drew herself up to her full height, and addressed her council.

"My friends," she began, "I have called you here today to address a matter of grave importance to us.

"You are all aware of the growing problem we've had in producing offspring. In fact, my own grandson, Danae, is one of the last surviving children born to us."

Calli frowned. She had heard nothing of this.

"I have consulted Zeras-" Mathena continued, turning to acknowledge the Healer with a nod, which he returned, "-and all the elders in the village, and it seems we have each come to the same unpleasant conclusion: our Shadrani blood has been too greatly diluted in our limited population."

Nods and confirmations greeted this.

The queen continued. "You are all aware as well, of the terrible tragedy that befell the House of Gemen these two years past." Calli's eyes were drawn to Erone. He showed not an ounce of emotion, but Gadrel placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I have reached a difficult decision, but one that I will neither alter nor open to discussion for the members of the council." This drew an abundance of surprised murmurs. Calli realized that whatever was coming was unusual.

"Erone, rise!" Mathena commanded. Calli watched him stand, a look of confused apprehension clouding his features. "On this night, Calli-," she gestured toward the girl standing in the middle of the floor, "-a female that I find to be noble and kindhearted, will reach her moon-phase."

Calli blushed hotly. Great Tsandis, what an announcement to make!

Then she saw Erone's face begin to take on a look of growing astonishment, and she knew something awful was coming.

"At sundown, she will be prepared, and will wait for you in the mating chamber--"

"No!" Gadrel cried. He stood up so quickly that his chair fell over and hit the floor with a loud bang.

"Gadrel!" Mathena warned.

"No!" he shouted again. "I am his life-mate! I have some say in this!"

"You are not his life-mate!" Mathena snapped back. "Not yet, anyway. And since you cannot control yourself in the council room, I would ask you to leave."

Gadrel pounded the table once in outraged anger, then stormed out of the room.

Throughout this exchange, Calli had stood in stunned silence, only her mind moving rapidly, sorting the words...mating chamber...moon-cycle. No, no, she thought, they couldn't mean... surely they wouldn't dream...

But then, she looked into Mathena's face and knew.

Her eyes flew to Erone, searching for some kind of clue as to how he was going to prevent this thing. And prevent it he would, he had to! Great Tsandis, this couldn't be possible, couldn't really be happening! Calli's eyes begged him to convince the queen of her folly, but the prince seemed as taken aback as Calli. He stared at his mother, looking as though she had pronounced a death sentence on him.

"As I was saying," Mathena continued, "Erone will go to the mating chamber at sundown--" She stopped as her son finally reacted. He was shaking his head, slowly but emphatically.

"Erone!" Mathena said.

"I will not do this!" he shouted.

"You will!"

Calli trembled at the tone in the woman's voice. Silence filled the council chamber.

"You are the Prince of Gemen," Mathena continued more quietly, but no less forcefully. "And you have no children. It is time you did, not only to fulfill your duties, but also to help heal you of the terrible hatred that has eaten away at your soul. Now, you will go willingly, or I will have you forced. I'll use whatever method that is open to me as your queen, including shadra, yours or anyone else's necessary, to accomplish this."

Erone looked as though he was having difficulty breathing.

"Do you understand?" his mother snapped finally.

Her son's eyes blazed outrage at his mother, but the prince bowed stiffly to his queen, turned and left the room.

* * * *

"Raesa," Calli said, "there must be a way to stop this."

The tall Shadrani looked at Calli guiltily. "No," she said. "Not a way I can think of, Calli. I'm sorry." Then, she continued to fasten the buttons down the back of the traista, the traditional gown that was worn in the mating chamber.

Calli had spent the time since the pronouncement trying to find a way to stop the event, but all she'd succeeded in doing was discovering that the gentle woman she knew as Erone's mother ruled with an iron fist when it came to being Erone's queen. Now, there was little time left. She sat down in dazed shock, still trying to convince herself that this wasn't really happening.

Raesa's voice broke through. "It's not so bad, really."

Calli gave her a scathing look.

"I don't have time to convince you of that, I suppose," Raesa said sadly. "So I'll just tell you what's going to happen, okay?"

Calli continued to sit in silence, staring at her. So the Shadrani plunged ahead.

"First of all, you don't have to do anything, just lie there...and...you know, he'll do the rest."

"The rest?" Calli finally found her voice.

"It's over quickly, Calli. And it's only painful the first time."

Calli's eyebrows shot up. "The first time?"

Raesa nodded. "You must join him in the mating chamber for seven nights."

Calli stood and headed for the door. Raesa grabbed her.

"You can not escape this, Calli! I'm telling you, my mother is so determined that she would force you."

Calli turned a look on her.

"She would!" Raesa said. "It's much better if you just go in there and...get it over with."

Calli went back and sat on the bed, covering her face with her hands, her mind still searching for an escape. But finally, she dropped her arms and looked up at Raesa. "Anything else I should know?" she asked bitterly.

"Yes. Erone will be...prepared, beforehand. That is...it's just as abhorrent to him, Calli, so Zeras and Gadrel will put him in tahgor."

"What's that?"

"It's a state that's induced using-well-using Gadrel to stimulate him, and Zeras to administer a mild drug."

"Oh, that's justice," Calli spat. "I get pain and he gets the drug!"

"You don't understand," Raesa pled. "He's the one who has to...you know...perform."

Calli reached her feet again. "This is outrageous!" she snapped, unaware that, in her anger, she was sounding more and more like the princess she was and less and less like the handmaid she pretended to be. But Raesa was far too distraught herself to notice it.

Cera poked her head in the door. "It's time."

Raesa looked at Calli, who had paled at the announcement.

"One last thing," Raesa said. "You must not speak, or you will break the tahgor. Above all else, Calli, you must be silent!"

* * * *

Calli sat on the soft fur pelts that covered the mating bed, and waited for the Prince of Gemen to come through the door. Be silent!? she mused to herself. I'll damned well scream at him-that would serve him right! She was too angry to remind herself that he was as much opposed to this as she was. She was too angry to do anything but sit and fume. But she jumped and clasped her hands together nervously when the latch lifted and the door swung open long enough to allow the prince entry.

He was wearing only a heavy black richly embroidered robe that fell to the ground, covering even his feet. Calli watched him stand a moment, struggling with the disorientation that had been produced in the summoning of tahgor. Immediately, her anger was replaced with a stab of pain and self-pity. She was about to give her virginity away, finally, to a man who was so repulsed by the idea that he had to put himself nearly out of his mind to accomplish it! All the fight went out of her and when he approached, he had no difficulty pushing her gently back onto the pelts and climbing up beside her. But when he began to pull the shadra up and spread her legs with his knees, Calli couldn't bear it.

"Please my lord!" she whispered, grabbing his hand to halt its progress.

"Please don't!"

Erone shook his head and blinked as though trying to see through a haze. Then Calli saw recognition in his eyes, followed by a flash of discomfort that drew a painful groan. Putting a hand to his head, he sat up and leaned back against the wall, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Please, my lord," Calli said, coming to kneel at his side. "I didn't mean to

cause you discomfort."

"Weren't you told to be silent?" he rasped.

"Yes, my lord."

He lifted his head long enough to give her a pained look. "Do you never do as you're instructed?"

Calli wet her lips nervously. "Very seldom, my lord."

This drew a quiet chuckle, which not only astonished Calli but also caused her to shudder, for some strange reason, right down to her toes. But the effort seemed to pain him and he drew in a sharp breath between clenched teeth.

Calli grew alarmed. "Please, my lord. May I help with this pain?"

"Great Tsandis!" he said, not unkindly. "Do you know nothing at all of males?"

She felt her cheeks redden, although in this light, he wouldn't notice it.

"Very little, my lord."

He shifted uncomfortably and winced once again. "It will pass," he said, then looked at her.

His face grimaced this time, not in pain, but at the sight of the large bruise that still marked her ivory skin. A guilty look washed over his features as he glanced away quickly.

"It looks worse than it is," Calli offered.

His voice was barely audible. "I...had no right to strike you."

"No," Calli said, her voice strained painfully, "but, I certainly shouldn't have said that dreadful thing to you."

He looked at her, but she was studying her hands as they rested in her lap. Her pain confused him.

"I am...short of temper these days."

Calli looked up into his silver eyes and, for the first time since she met him, did not see hatred there. Her heart, with a mind of its own, lurched joyfully in her chest. But she only smiled halfheartedly, still afraid of his rejection.

His lips drew into a thin line as he took in a long breath and leaned his head against the wall. "Well," he said, "what would you like to do for an hour or so?"

"An hour or so?"

"That's how long we'd be in here if we were doing what we are supposed to be doing."

Calli's sharp gasp caused him to focus on her once more. "But, Raesa said it would be quick!" she said, mortified.

Another quiet chuckle assaulted her senses. What was it about that sound?

Calli shuddered.

"Are you cold?"

"No!" Calli answered, far too quickly.

"There's no need to be frightened," he said, misinterpreting her shiver completely, "it is quick. But it would take that long for me to sleep off the tahgor; that is, if I were still in it."

"Oh," she said, watching him nervously. Was he actually trying to be friendly? The prince turned to her then and answered her silent question. "It is the sight of your face," he began. "Until I struck you, I had been unaware of how much my hatred had cost...I would never have done such a disgraceful thing before."

Calli listened silently to the brief confession, then decided to test the water further.

"If you'll allow me, my lord-since we're in here with nothing to do-I would like to see to your shoulder."

He turned to study her. "You are sporting an ugly bruise given at my hand, and all you can think about is easing my pain?"

"There is little else to do, my lord."

He closed his eyes and groaned.

"Or perhaps not," Calli said quickly, misinterpreting the sound.

"No, no, it's all right."

She reached up, then halted. "I'll need to touch you."

"I thought as much," he said dryly.

Consent given, she rested her fingers against the shoulder that had borne the brunt of the choara's attack and squeezed. Then she gasped and quickly snatched her hands away. His eyes snapped open as he searched out an explanation for the odd behavior.

"You...you are so hard!"

He couldn't help the wicked grin that kicked up a corner of his mouth. "So I'm told."

Calli stared at him, knowing she was missing something. He shook his head, waved a hand, and bade her continue.

All of this behind them, Calli took her task seriously. She noticed him wince a few times as she kneaded the muscles deeply, trying to reach the affected areas. But she didn't let it deter her from continuing her work. Then, when she looked up again, she was surprised to see that he was sleeping. She dropped her hands, sat back on her heels, and studied him.

While she had worked, Calli had tugged at his robe in order to get a better angle at the injury. Now it lay off his shoulders, exposing his hard bronzed chest and upper body. She took in the sight of him, wincing once at the deep scars that reminded her of something she didn't want to remember. But it was easier than she imagined to banish those terrible things as she sat and watched the gentle rise and fall of his chest.

Without her mind telling it to do so, her hand lifted and traced a line down the tightly muscled torso. He moaned gently in his sleep and Calli once again felt the odd tingle that shot from the back of her neck to settle somewhere in her middle. She closed her eyes and wondered what it would be like to hear him cry out the way Gadrel had those nights in his chambers.

Could she ever draw sounds like that from him?

Calli's eyes shot open as she suddenly realized where her thinking had wandered. She quickly drew her hand back and moved to the other side of the bed where she sat and waited for the Prince of Gemen to awaken.

Seventeen

The following morning, Calli rose early and padded down the winding cut-log staircase and into the morning room. There was a gentle fire still burning in the large stone fireplace, so she put some water on to make the herbal tea that she drank every morning. She had just taken a cup of the steaming mixture in her hands when Raesa's voice called to her.

"I'm about to enjoy a walk in the gardens, Calli. Will you join me?"

Taking her cup with her, Calli stepped out into the fine morning with the Shadrani princess. Sometime during the night it had rained, for there remained in the air the elemental scent of damp earth and rejuvenated greenery. Calli breathed in deeply, enjoying the musty odor, the smell of decay and of rebirth.

They walked in silence for a short way, not uncomfortable with it, when Raesa finally said, "I have to tell you something."

Calli stopped and turned to her.

"I've been feeling so guilty about it, that-well, I just need to tell you."

"Please," Calli urged.

"About your capture...Well, before we came upon you, Cera and I had been out for weeks, scouting for a female from the city with the express purpose of bringing her back here for breeding to Erone."

Calli stared at her.

"Oh, it wasn't his doing-he knew nothing about it. It was my mother's idea. And at the time, I thought she was right. Actually, I still think she's right, it's just that I feel so badly that it had to turn out to be you. I mean-well-you know what I mean."

Calli managed a smile. She was no longer worried about the mating problem, since she had found a simple way to prevent it. All it took was a few words to break Erone's tahgor.

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" Raesa asked. "Last night, I mean."

"No, he didn't hurt me." Calli touched her arm. "Don't worry, everything will be fine."

Raesa frowned and shook her head as they continued to walk. Around the next bend, they came upon the Prince of Gemen and his nephew, Danae. They were standing perfectly still, legs spread, knees bent, their hands crossed at the wrists and closed in tight fists held out in front of their chests, shoulder-high.

Erone was bare from the waist up. He wore loose linen breeches fastened by a single strong drawstring. On his feet were not his usual knee-high leather boots, but moccasins made of soft ivory suede that reached mid-calf and were held in place by leather thongs that crossed his leg from ankle to knee. On his arms were traditional silver Shadrani wristbands. And the little one at his side was dressed exactly the same.

They began to move.

Slowly, as if each effort were made against some tremendous resisting force, the two Shadrani went through fluid, graceful motions, in perfect symmetry, and with a barely contained power and beauty that tugged at Calli's heart. Her eyes traveled over the body she had dared to reach out and caress the night before, and she couldn't stop the warm feeling that seeped through her while she watched the muscles ripple and play beneath the smooth, tanned skin. As the ancient dance continued, Erone broke out in a light sweat, the sheen causing him to glisten in the morning sun like a bronzed sculpture. Calli was struck by the picture that the princes made, like mirror images, only separated by age.

"It's beautiful," she whispered. "What is it?"

"This is chira," Raesa whispered back. "All Shadrani warriors that have come of age must practice it every day."

"But, surely Danae has not come of age!"

Raesa smiled. "No," she said quietly. "But Danae would eat a bug if Erone did it first! We mustn't disturb them, he needs this to help control his shadra," she ended, then took Calli's arm and led her a short distance away where they sat down on the thick carpet of grass and continued to watch.

"This shadra thing is going to take a long time to understand," Calli said.

"If you ever understand it, you'll be further ahead than I am," Raesa declared. "But it's good that you try, now especially, since the child you'll soon carry may be male."

"Yes," Calli said, seizing upon the opportunity to press Raesa with more unanswered questions. "And because of the...possibility that I may have a Shadrani child, there are things I'd like to clear up...unpleasant stories that I heard while growing up. I'd like to hear your side of them."

Raesa turned her full attention on Calli, eager to defend her people. "I will answer any questions you have."

Calli began to list the points, counting them off on her fingers as she did.

"You cannot be killed?"

"We are very difficult to trap, and even harder to kill," Raesa explained. "My brother even escaped from within your city walls!"

Calli considered this, then nodded.

"You howl at the moon?" she continued, knowing even as she said it, how silly it sounded.

Raesa laughed. "No doubt, the sounds of shadra."

"Aahh-yes," Calli said. "Well, I've already discovered the reason for your sexual practices, but..." She left off, wondering if this last would offend Raesa too much to mention.

"But?" the Shadrani probed.

"We were told you drink the blood of your sexual partners," she said quickly, adding an uncomfortable laugh to let Raesa know she thought it was ridiculous. Raesa frowned. "Oh...that."

Calli's smile died a very quick death. "You don't mean to say there's truth in it?"

"Well," Raesa said reluctantly, "sort of."

Calli's eyes widened. "What do you mean... 'sort of'?"

Even Raesa's extreme discomfort wouldn't deter Calli from pressing, for her heart began to pound at thoughts of how close she had come to certain death last night, locked in a room alone with one of these creatures.

"Well, it hasn't happened in a long time."

Calli straightened and took Raesa's arm, drawing the woman's undivided attention. "Raesa," she said, "you are frightening me. Please explain this!"

Raesa took a deep breath. "It's shadra," she said. "To achieve and maintain the state drains the life-force from the Shadrani. Even after a short while in the state, a male can die if he doesn't receive the proper nourishment immediately after."

Calli frowned. "You mean to say that these great Shadrani warriors can be killed by...by making love?"

Raesa nodded. "Their bodies are so ravaged by shadra that they will die within a few hours if they don't replenish themselves. And what they mostly need is protein."

"It has happened in the past," she continued unwillingly, "that a Shadrani has been unable to get the nourishment elsewhere, so..." She left off.

"So, he drinks the blood of his partner?" Calli asked, horrified.

"It's only to keep from dying!" Raesa said defensively. "But that doesn't happen anymore since we discovered hazzah, a potion that serves to feed our males when they have this need."

"So, they drink this hazzah instead of..."

"Yes," Raesa ended. "It hasn't happened in decades, Calli."

Calli relaxed at that, though her heart still beat erratically at the notion of drinking blood. She shuddered, and only then did she become acutely aware of Raesa's embarrassment.

"I imagine," Calli said sardonically, "that you keep a lot of this hazzah on hand!"

Raesa looked at her quickly and caught the smile playing at the corner of her mouth. "It is necessary," she admitted wryly.

They both began to chuckle. But Raesa quickly touched Calli's arm to stop the intrusive sound lest they disturb the chira still continuing not far away.

When Calli looked at Erone now, it was with new eyes, like discovering that an animal you had categorized as feathered had suddenly grown fur overnight.

"Who was the mother of Erone's son?" she asked suddenly.

Raesa's face saddened. "Kielan's mother was Niri. She was the last shean of our people." Calli didn't bother to ask what that meant, for she knew that Raesa would explain it. She did.

"Sheans are advisors to the House of Gemen," Raesa continued. "They are always female, and have a unique ability. Niri could sense things, often see into the future. Sometimes she would warn of attack or tragedy long before it happened, and Mother relied on her greatly at the council table." She looked at Calli.

"Have you nothing like this in the city?"

Calli shook her head.

Raesa's smile was resigned. "I guess we don't either, at the moment. Sheans have become more and more rare, and we begin to despair that we'll ever see Niri's like again. She was well-respected, and very, very fierce."

Unreasonably, jealous resentment began to eat at Calli. "She sounds very special," she admitted. "I suppose Erone was eager to mate with her."

Raesa's look was astonished. "Eager! Great Tsandis, no! Neither of them looked forward to the actual mating!" Then, she chuckled. "I remember Niri warning him before they went into the chamber that if he dared show any hint of pleasure at this 'abomination,' she'd cut off his--"

She stopped abruptly at Calli's widening eyes. "Let's just say," Raesa finished, "that they did it to create a special child. And they certainly succeeded in that."

"I haven't met this Niri woman."

Raesa shook her head. "She didn't survive Kielan's death. Erone tried to stop

her from seeing the...grisly message Sadone sent, but he was not successful. That night, she died by her own hand."

They fell silent, Calli's eyes ever on the Prince of Gemen.

"What of Erone? Who is his father?"

Raesa smiled genuinely now. "Erone's father was Jareela, a legend among our people. He was a very great warrior and had the strongest shadra ever recorded among the Shadrani. That's why he was chosen as consort to a queen."

"But he no longer lives?"

Raesa shook her head. "Many of our Shadrani males don't live to see their older years, but few expected Jareela to have a long life."

"Let me guess," Calli said sardonically. "Because of his shadra."

"Ah," Raesa said, laughing, "you are learning! Jareela was...well, if Shadrani males are sexually active, then you'd say that Jareela was the ultimate Shadrani male."

"He cared not one bit about what he called our 'ridiculously overbearing' rules of conduct," she continued affectionately. "He bedded whomever he wished, whenever he pleased, and we all breathed a sigh of relief, I'll tell you, that there was no tendency in him toward basrati, or every female in the village would have been large with his child!"

Calli smiled in spite of the unpleasant word. Basrati, she'd learned, was the word the Shadrani used for those who committed the unforgivable sin of feeling attraction to the opposite sex.

It wasn't a term of endearment.

"Anyway," Raesa continued, "he finally bedded the wrong male, or the right one, I guess, depending on how you look at it." At Calli's questioning look, she explained. "The last male he bedded happened to be Tiro, the new life-mate of my mother's brother."

"Great Tsandis!" Calli cried, scandalized.

"You don't know the half of it," Raesa confided. "Tiro captured his shadra."

"What do you mean, 'captured' it?"

"It means that Jareela had such a strong affect on Tiro, or Tiro on him--there are different schools of thought as to how this thing works--that Tiro was able to absorb Jareela's shadra and send it back to him. It happens, but it is rare. It is called perfect shadra, for usually only one male at a time can reap the benefits of the act. But when shadra is captured, both parties feel the pleasure equally. I don't fully understand how it works any more than I fully understand any aspect of shadra. All I know is that Tiro actually came to own Jareela's shadra, and he could no longer share it with anyone else."

Calli sat back and let her breath out. "Goodness," she said.

From Raesa's attitude toward the shocking events, Calli came to the conclusion that anything this rascal Jareela had done was to be looked upon with extreme tolerance by his people.

"So what happened?" she asked.

"One night, my uncle entered the chamber where they were in shadra and killed them both, then himself."

"Good Tsandis!"

Raesa gave her a resigned look. "Such are the ways of shadra."

Calli looked back at Erone and his nephew. "And Danae?" she asked. "Who is his father?"

Raesa's eyes danced with mischief. "Jareela," she answered, then laughed at Calli's expression. "Now I've truly shocked you."

"But..."

"Jareela wasn't my father, Calli. We aren't allowed to share more than one child with the same partner, so my mother had to mate with someone else for me. But all my life, I admired Erone so much that I decided very early on I wanted my first child to be sired by his father. Oh, I suppose this all sounds very incestuous to you, but when you find a good bloodline, you take advantage of it." Calli clamped her mouth shut and told herself not to judge. But the more she found out about these people, the more she felt that she was far, far out to sea, with no land in sight.

* * * *

Later that day, Mathena suggested that Calli take a nap in preparation for the difficult evening in the mating chamber. Calli resisted, wanting to accompany the females on the riding outing they had planned. But the queen was adamant. "You will be much more likely to catch Erone's seed," she stated, "if your body is rested for it, rather than bounced around on the back of a horse for the afternoon!"

Calli, of course, lost the argument.

So now she lay in the morning room, not at all sleepy, looking out the large windowed doors that were opened onto the walled yard adjoining the house. As she watched, for the second time that day, Erone came into her sight. But this time, he was in his usual dress and he had Pashar and Gadrel with him. This had something to do with shadra. She sat up to watch.

"Pashar," Erone said, his voice drifting through the open door, "this task will be difficult."

The boy's eyes shone with determination mixed with more than a little trepidation as he nodded to his prince. Then Erone approached him and began to unbutton his shirt.

"Now, you must try to focus on my voice," Erone instructed, "the way I have taught you." As he tugged the shirt off the boy's body, he turned and nodded to Gadrel.

Calli watched as Erone's promised bent his head and closed his eyes, then clasped his hands together and brought them up to rest against his mouth.

"He summons shadra?" Pashar asked tremulously.

Erone clapped a hand gently on Pashar's shoulder. "He does. And you must withstand it."

"But-" Pashar began.

"Don't worry," Erone said. "You are ready."

Calli frowned, but found herself studying Gadrel with fascination, the ritual of shadra calling seductively to her curiosity.

Finally Gadrel lifted his head, unclasped his hands and opened his eyes. He began to pace, rhythmically, deliberately, reminding Calli of a feral animal caught in a cage. Erone moved a short distance away from Pashar and directed the boy's nervous attention away from the male behind him.

"Look at me," he demanded.

Pashar focused on him, pressing his lips together in determination. Calli found herself squarely in his corner. Whatever challenge Erone was about to make him face, she wanted him to overcome it. She sat up straighter as Erone caught Gadrel's eye, and nodded to bring him forward.

Although Calli had no idea what was happening, she found herself both repelled and mesmerized by the look of horror mixed with shattering pleasure that danced over Pashar's young face the moment Gadrel touched him.

Erone's promised stood behind the boy, pressing against his back and, in a manner so seductive it affected Calli across the yard, began to run his hands over Pashar's naked upper body. She heard the sharp intake of the boy's breath as his eyes flew to Erone, begging him for guidance.

"Focus, Pashar," Erone demanded. "Focus!"

With an effort that, from the strain on his face, appeared staggering, the boy battled to retrieve both his breath and the shards of his self-control. When he achieved the smallest gain, Erone looked to Gadrel.

"Enough."

Instantly, his promised lifted his hands as though the boy's skin burned him, turned and walked back to his place. He began to pace again.

When he disengaged the boy, Calli's breath caught to see Pashar stumble slightly, as though his legs were no longer worthy, but he gathered himself quickly. Then he looked up to Erone, and Calli knew that his struggle had been

aided by his desperation to gain an ounce of respect from his prince. For some reason, it caused her heart to constrict with pride. But then, just as she thought Pashar had won, Erone nodded again to Gadrel.

Calli's hands worried the pillow beneath them as she watched Pashar try to fend off another of the sensual attacks. She heard his ragged breathing, saw his eyes pleading with Erone to call off his promised. But Gadrel continued to savage him. Pashar's head swept from side to side.

"Please, my lord," he rasped out. "I...I cannot..."

"You can!" Erone demanded.

Once again, Pashar focused on the prince and, once again, managed to gain some semblance of control. Once again, Erone called Gadrel to a halt.

Growling his disappointment, Gadrel moved away, but as he did so he shot Erone a look of impatience that was mixed heavily with the sexual arousal he was battling himself. Calli felt her cheeks redden at the blatant invitation.

Then, the Shadrani closed his eyes and began, yet again, to pace.

Pashar was struggling in earnest now to remain standing.

Calli couldn't understand how Erone could just stand there, watching, and not lift a finger to help him. But the prince merely sharply commanded the boy to keep his feet, and somehow, he did.

Then, to Calli's utter amazement, Erone nodded again to Gadrel. A small cry of pity escaped her lips when she saw Pashar's stricken look. He was gasping now for air, his eyes wide and trying desperately to remain focused on Erone, while Gadrel's hands attacked him with a ferocity that stripped him, irrevocably, of his dignity.

Wrenching cries escaped his lips and assaulted Calli's raw nerves as she willed him with her mind to banish this thing. The boy strained valiantly, on the edge, holding off the inevitable, then Gadrel's hands crept under the waistband of his breeches.

"Gadrel!" Erone shouted. "Have mercy!"

But Gadrel showed no mercy at all. As his hands groped, he nuzzled the boy's neck and then began to tongue the inside of his ear. Pashar threw his head back, closed his eyes, and surrendered with one long, keening cry of pleasure. Gadrel fixed Erone with a triumphant, wicked grin, then turned the boy in his arms and assaulted his mouth with his tongue.

Erone threw his hands up in the air and turned to storm into the house, slamming the door behind him.

"Aiser!" he shouted. The serving boy appeared almost immediately. "Bring hazzah!"

Then he turned and saw Calli.

She steeled herself for his rebuke.

"I thought you were sleeping," was all he said.

"It's difficult with..." She gestured to the yard.

"Hmm," he agreed, then frowned as Gadrel pulled Pashar to the ground with him.

"You probably do not want to watch this."

She colored and turned away from the window to focus on him as he glowered his disapproval.

For a moment, he continued to monitor the two in the yard, then what he saw wrenched a sound of disbelief from his lips. He threw his hands in the air again.

"Gadrel," he spat, "you son of a dog!"

Calli sensed that the statement wasn't as serious as it might be.

"The...training goes well, my lord?" she ventured.

He pitched himself into a nearby chair and crossed his arms.

"It would go better if my promised wasn't determined to cure the boy by beating him over the head with his shadra!"

"Does he need a cure, my lord? I thought only some guidance."

Erone looked at her. "Guidance he needs, yes, but also a cure. He is besotted with you."

Calli's eyes didn't waver from his. "I see," she said. "Perhaps I could help, then, by being...less kind to him."

Erone gave a wry smile. "I do not think so. For you aren't cruel and Pashar isn't stupid. But-" He stopped as if considering a decision. "I may request your help in a few days."

"All right."

"It will be unpleasant."

"Watching your lesson today, that doesn't surprise me."

The door opened and Gadrel came in. He stood unsteadily on his feet and looked at Erone, who gave him a withering glance, then motioned toward the large mug now sitting on the table in the corner. Gadrel turned, reached for the hazzah, sat down and drank it in one long breath. Erone stood and went into the garden, returning a moment later with Pashar in his arms.

As he laid the boy gently on the large couch, Calli moved toward them.

Catching her motion, Erone looked up and shook his head gravely, indicating she stay away.

"But, won't Pashar need this...hazzah as well?" she asked tentatively.

She blushed at Gadrel's mocking laugh.

Erone shot him a glare. "No," he answered curtly. "He isn't in shadra, only suffering the consequences of it." Then he rounded on his promised. "Do you enjoy turning young boys to rubble beneath your fingers?"

Gadrel's grin told Calli that he was altogether unmoved by Erone's disapproval.

"It was most gratifying," he replied silkily. "You should try it some time."

"He wasn't ready to be rewarded."

Gadrel fixed him with another of those sexually loaded looks. "But I was," he said, then rose and headed out the door.

Pashar stirred and opened his eyes. "My lord," he whispered. "I...have shamed you."

Erone touched his cheek gently. "No, Pashar," he said, "you did very well. It was Gadrel who shamed me...He cheated."

The boy's eyes closed and Erone lifted Pashar's head gently to place a pillow beneath it. Then he stood and walked to the door. Before he left, he turned to Calli.

"I spoke with the dragon today," he said. "She knows you're still a virgin."

He held up a hand to stop Calli's ready question. "Oh, don't ask me how. It is some damnably female thing about 'you don't look right.' So, I feel I should warn you; tonight, with or without tahgor, with or without your permission...I will bed you."

Eighteen

The Prince of Gemen entered the mating chamber for the second night. Calli watched him with trepidation. When he approached the bed, she realized that he wasn't present-not mentally, that is. He had summoned tahgor. She felt a shot of anger. By Tsandis, if she had to face this thing with all her faculties, so did he!

"My lord?" she said loudly.

As on the night before, Erone seemed muddled for only a moment, then was present and uncomfortable. But tonight, he did not stop his assault on her body.

Calli gasped and struggled against him when he pushed gently at her and began to position himself between her legs.

"Great Tsandis!" he whispered. "Will you lie still and let us have an end to this?"

"I'm frightened!"

This stopped him momentarily. "It will only hurt a small amount," he said patiently. "You'll see."

Calli bit her lip and allowed him to push her legs apart. But when she felt his hard manhood probing at her intimate flesh, she couldn't help a gasp of terror.

Once again, he stopped. Then, to her astonishment, he lifted a hand and

stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers, gentling her the way he would a skittish colt.

"It's all right," he whispered.

Calli shuddered, now not from fear but from the erotic shivers his low silky voice so easily coaxed from her. The conflicting sensations caused her mind to reel in disorientation.

Erone continued to speak softly to her and caress her gently until Calli began to calm. She finally relaxed completely and drew in a deep, steady breath. At that precise moment, he plunged deeply into her, taking her face between his hands at the same time.

Calli cried out in surprise and pain, the sharp sound shattering the silence of the ancient chamber. Her eyes widened with accusation while she struggled against him, grasping at the steely muscles that graced his arms.

"Stop it, Calli," he commanded gently.

His use of her name shocked her. So much so that she went still and looked into his eyes. She saw the regret there and knew, finally, that he wasn't enjoying this any more than she was.

"Try to relax," he instructed.

Then he began to move, slowly, gently, but even so, the motion fired the pain again. But this time Calli endured it and discovered it quickly dissolving. He hadn't lied to her at least. After a few more motions, Erone closed his eyes, shuddered, and then came to rest above her.

Calli, still breathing quickly, watched him, waiting for his next move, but he merely withdrew from her gently, then lay back beside her on the bed and brought an arm up to rest against his forehead.

She waited a few moments, then turned to him.

"Is it...over then?"

"Yes," he said, "it's over."

Calli frowned, searching her feelings. She was relieved, wasn't she? Yes, of course, her mind said, relieved. But her body seemed to think there should be something else. It nagged at her, pulled at her, forcing her eyes shut as she tried to name this new unsettling sensation. His voice made her jump.

"Are you all right?"

She looked up to see him watching her. "Yes," she said. "That is, I think so. I'm...I'm just..."

He sat up, crossing his legs, then lifted a dark eyebrow as he waited for her to complete her thought.

"You called me Calli."

"Isn't that your name?"

"Yes, but you never call me that."

"I don't? How extraordinary. What do I usually call you?"

"Well, nothing much, I guess." Calli began to wish she had kept her mouth shut. "Oh, it doesn't matter."

Erone chuckled softly.

Calli's pulse raced maddeningly.

"I shall have to start calling you 'my lady', the way Danae does. After what we've just done together, I suppose you warrant the title."

As she looked into his teasing silver eyes, Calli felt her entire body respond to him. Unbidden, against every fear or misgiving she had ever known or uttered in her life, Calli found herself drawn to this Shadrani with a force so powerful that she actually had to struggle to keep from reaching out to him.

She saw something smolder in his eyes as he watched her battle against this unknown enemy.

"What is it?" he whispered.

The voice was too much. That low sensual rasp that graced his words pushed her past her own resistance. As if from a distance, Calli felt herself cross the bed and come to kneel before him. Her breath was erratic, her pulse pounding in her temples.

"My lord," she breathed, "it's simply that I thought there was more to this

mating."

Erone's eyes lightened further. He shifted uncomfortably. "Such as?" Calli was beyond help now, totally caught up in the sexual web that this Shadrani had begun to spin around her from the moment she first laid eyes on him.

Her insides felt molten with longing, waiting for something, some word, some look, some something from this devastating male that would ease the ache in her. She didn't recognize her own passion-laced voice when she spoke.

"Such as this, my lord."

Vividly remembering the way Gadrel had touched him, Calli lifted a hand and stroked it under the front of his robe, pulling it open as she did. What was left of her sanity expected him to reach out and strike her, but he did not. Instead, he riveted her with his gaze as she brazenly caressed him. Her hands came to a stop, fingers poised above each hard nipple.

Calli gave him a look that would have shocked herself with its heavy sexual intensity as she hovered teasingly.

Erone's breath labored at the look. His eyes turned to quicksilver.

Calli smiled seductively, waited one tantalizing second more, then reached forward and drew a fingernail lightly along both nipples, watching him like a cat as she did. Erone's eyes flickered shut as he drew in his breath with a sharp, hissing sound.

Then, in an explosive motion, his arms shot out and wrenched her across the distance between them. Calli left all sanity behind and fell against him, melting into his embrace, responding with a heat she couldn't believe existed when she felt his mouth bearing down on hers. His lips seared her, yet she pressed hungrily against them with her own, crushing their mouths together in a mindless frenzy.

He kissed her roughly, deeply, almost in a rage. Calli sank against him, her thoughts swirling like a dust cloud out of control, spinning over her head and away, leaving nothing in its wake but feeling, this delicious feeling of want that drew low moans from the back of her throat.

When Erone finally broke away from her mouth, Calli gave a sharp sound of disappointment. His breath rasping, he reached up and pulled her arms from around his neck, clasping them in front of him, as if to prevent them from assaulting him further. Calli felt her entire body rebel at the cold interruption but she remained as she was, kneeling beside him. Slowly, his iron will gave them both the time they needed to regain control.

When it finally arrived, Calli felt hot shame wash over her. She pulled her arms from his grasp and turned away from him.

"I...cannot believe I just did that," she rasped.

Erone smoothed a hand through his hair and drew in a deep, steadying breath.

"It's this room," he said. "Such things have been known to happen in the mating chamber."

Calli clasped her hands together and let the excuse hang in the air. "If we...are finished," she whispered. "I..."

"Please," Erone said, indicating the door.

Her pride in shreds, Calli barely managed to control her tears of shameful humiliation until she was back in her own room.

* * * *

The next day, it was as if nothing untoward had happened between them. The family shared the morning meal in peace, only Gadrel adding to Calli's discomfort with the unpleasant looks he continued to throw her way. But Erone seemed in a good mood. Calli wondered if that was because of the satisfied smile his mother gave him when the queen noted the way Calli colored at his presence.

"I need you to help with Pashar today," Erone said.

Staring at her plate, Calli almost didn't realize that he had been addressing her. Her eyes lifted unwillingly to his face.

"I don't think she's up to it," Gadrel taunted. "Perhaps you frightened her too much last night with your dreadful manhood."

"Gadrel!" Mathena chastised.

"Oh, it's all right," Calli said. "I suppose he has to make a fuss about someone's manhood, since his own seems to be so much in question."

This brought an astonished silence from everyone in the room and a deep tremor of apprehension to Calli as she realized what she'd said.

But then, Raesa could contain herself no longer, and she burst into gales of laughter. To Calli's surprise and relief, so did Erone. He gave no sign of apology as he addressed his now fuming promised.

"You well and truly deserved that one, Gadrel."

His face dark with anger, Gadrel got up and left the room. After he was gone, even Mathena joined in the laughter.

"It seems," she said, chuckling, "that our kitten has claws!"

* * * *

"Pashar will be here shortly," Erone said as Calli stood before him, waiting for instruction. Her eyebrows raised in question when he placed his hands on his hips and began to walk around her, studying her sharply as though she were a prized pig he were about to buy.

"Raesa!" he thundered, causing her to jump. His sister appeared moments later.

"Tell me," he said, indicating Calli's plain woolen tunic. "Does she own something more...more..."

"What is your intent?" Raesa asked.

"I wish to check my progress with Pashar."

Raesa's eyes went to Calli and then back again to her brother. Her face dawned with realization. "Ahh, I see," she said. "Leave her to me."

She took Calli's arm and led her upstairs to her dressing chamber.

Calli watched with curiosity while Raesa went into her wardrobe and rummaged around. She finally pulled a peach-colored traista from the closet and looked at it, then at Calli. "This is good," she stated. "The color will do you justice."

"What is it," Calli asked as she slipped into the gown, "that I'm supposed to do?"

"You need to do nothing more than look very appealing."

Calli frowned. "But I would have thought that was the last thing he'd want!"

"He's trying to teach Pashar not to respond to you. And if the boy can learn to ignore you when you tempt him most..."

She let Calli's quick mind finish the thought.

"Now, this hair," she said, looking at the braid twisted into a tight coil around her head. "Take it down, will you?" She bent and began searching through a drawer. "I had a brush here this morning," she mumbled.

Calli worked at the tight braid that she always kept in her long blonde hair. She was pulling the tangles out with her fingers when Raesa turned, brush in hand, and stopped, staring at her open-mouthed.

Calli eyed her in astonishment, then quickly turned to glance behind her in an effort to see what had struck the girl dumb.

"Oh, my lady," Raesa laughed. "It is you." She handed Calli the brush. "You're quite beautiful, you know."

"Oh, nonsense," Calli said, untangling her mane with a few quick strokes. "I'm quite ordinary, really."

They headed downstairs.

"Poor Pashar," Raesa mumbled as she watched Calli move toward her brother and the unsuspecting boy.

Erone's head shot up when he heard the sharp intake of breath from his young

charge. He frowned and followed his line of sight. Taken completely off guard, he barely recovered in time to halt his own gasp when he saw Calli standing just outside the doors of the great house.

Her thick blonde mane fell to her waist in rich cascades that brushed her shoulders and created a frame of spun gold for her delicate face.

Calli moistened her lips nervously, unaware of the effect she was having on the man before her.

As he watched her tongue dart between her lips, Erone was glad that he'd chosen to wear the loose-fitting work shirt that hung outside his breeches like a tunic. He could feel his sex growing hard and heavy at the memory of that mouth on his, hungry and demanding, in a way he would never have believed possible from a female.

She stood waiting for his instruction.

He cleared his throat.

"Steady, Pashar," he said as he beckoned her forward.

Calli approached hesitantly while Pashar struggled valiantly to look anywhere but at her. The trouble was, he had to struggle too hard. Within moments, Erone knew what he had to do.

"Calli," he said, not daring to look at her himself, "please, just...stay where you are. Pashar..." he said, pointing to a spot directly in front of him. Swallowing, the boy stepped up beside his prince.

Calli's heart beat erratically when she saw Erone bow his head and press his clasped hands against his lips.

Shadra.

Pashar realized it, too, and his eyes widened in fright. Then, when Erone lowered his hands and looked up, Calli stiffened at the intensity reflected in his eyes. He turned those eyes on Pashar.

"Look at her!" he commanded. Though his voice was barely a whisper, Calli found her knees trembling at the force that emanated from Erone.

As the boy stared at her, Erone raised his right hand and, with the first two fingers, touched Pashar on the neck just below his ear.

Calli swore she saw the surge of energy that sprang like an electric charge from Erone's hand. This time, there was no hint of pleasure in the sound that came from the boy. Pashar screamed in agony. But Erone wouldn't allow him to duck away as he tried to do. He took him by the arm and held him steady.

"Look at her!"

Pashar struggled to do as he was told and the instant he did, Erone delivered another painful touch that left the young Shadrani on his knees, trembling and sobbing. Calli glared at the prince. It was only her own terror of him that kept her from either coming to Pashar's aid, or fleeing herself.

"Stand!" he shouted.

Pashar fought for some time, but finally gained his feet. This time, Erone only pointed grimly at Calli and the boy took a deep breath before he focused his eyes on her again. The third touch sent him to his knees with a cry so heartbreaking that even in her own terror, Calli could no longer keep silent.

"Stop!" she cried as she rushed at Erone and pushed against his chest in a futile effort to move him away from the boy.

"Calli, no!" Raesa screamed from the window.

Erone's eyes flashed with fire as he grabbed her flailing wrists and Calli, realizing too late, braced herself to receive a first-hand taste of the power that had sent Pashar to his knees. But Erone's touch didn't inspire pain in her; it inspired something else entirely.

Molten rivulets of pleasure ran up her arms from the place where he touched her, and Calli's sharp intake of breath caused his eyes to narrow instantly. By the time Raesa reached them, Calli was trembling with the hot sexual flashes that stabbed at her from the fingers of the Prince of Gemen.

"Erone!" Raesa shouted. "Release her!"

Calli searched his eyes, and shuddered to realize that he was allowing only a small fraction of his shadra loose. She also knew that he was taunting her deliberately, knew somehow that he was in control of his power, but that he

was walking the razor's edge with her now, holding them both over the very brink of the shattering pleasure that was only a few motions away.

Playing with her.

But it was a dangerous game, for in the tremulous shocks that wracked her body, Calli felt his desire as strongly as though it were a promise he had whispered to her in the night. Then, Mathena's voice broke through.

"Erone!" she demanded sharply. "Release her immediately!"

His fingers opened and Calli felt the fire evaporate from her body. To her shame, she also felt her legs give out. It was only Raesa's quick arm that prevented her from dropping to the ground like a stone.

Nineteen

Calli chastised herself over and over again as she waited that night in the mating chamber. When was she going to learn to leave these people to their own devices? Pashar seemed perfectly well after the dreadful incident, but she had once again slipped in her masquerade as handmaid and almost inspired an attack from the Prince of Gemen himself. Now, she had to face him in this room and she was certain he would be furious with her.

The door opened and Erone entered. He stood there a moment, then raised a hand to stop her as she opened her mouth to shake him from his stupor.

"You needn't waken me, Calli," he said, coming to sit on the bed beside her.

"I am not in tahgor."

Calli found herself pleased, both by this news and the fact that he didn't seem at all angry with her.

"I don't like the effects of that potion of Zeras's at any rate. I pitched it when he wasn't looking."

"And Gadrel, my lord?"

"Oh, I allowed Gadrel to do his part. He'd be fit for murder if he knew I was coming to this room without benefit of tahgor."

This took her aback. "Your promised is jealous. Of me?"

Erone smile wryly. "My promised," he said, "is jealous of the wind that caresses my face."

Calli's eyebrows shot up. "Well," she said playfully, "I've often found the wind to be impertinent myself."

He looked at her. "Have you indeed?"

"Oh, certainly," she continued in the same vein. "Perhaps he would like you to summon your shadra and banish it."

He chuckled. "I don't believe my shadra is quite that powerful,"

There was that tingle again. But Calli made a determined effort to push away the feeling. She wasn't going to have a replay of last night! In fact, she hoped that he'd use her quickly, so she could leave.

"I suppose, then, since you're ready?"

As if offering herself for some unpleasant sacrifice, Calli lowered herself on the bed and closed her eyes. She lay there for a few moments before finally looking over to see him stretched out next to her, propped up on his elbow, watching her.

"My lord?"

"Yes?"

"Aren't you going to...?"

"I was thinking about it."

"Oh," she said. "Is that necessary-without the drug?"

He laughed quietly at her statement. "Many things may be necessary-without the drug."

She turned her head fully toward him now, trying to discern his meaning, but he gave nothing away.

After a time, Calli said, "Are you still thinking, my lord?"

"No," he said. "I'm ready now." Then, to her surprise, he sat up on the bed with his back against the wall. "Come to me, Calli," he demanded softly. Her pulse jumped at the familiar, sensual tone. She sat up and studied him.

"But," she said, "aren't we going to do this in the...usual fashion?" Her answer was a smile heavy with meaning and a slow shake of his dark head. Calli wasn't sure she liked this turn of events. She had hoped to get out of here quickly tonight, while her self-respect was still intact. But something in her heart was calling her every kind of fool for even questioning his invitation.

She drew in a deep breath and crossed the distance between them. When she was settled before him, Erone looked up and frowned at the tight coil that held her long hair in place. Without so much as requesting her permission, he reached up and pulled out the pins that held it.

Calli's pulse increased as she noticed the effect her cascading hair had on the male in front of her. He grabbed a handful of it and brought it close to his face, inhaling its fragrance, rubbing it between his fingers.

"My lord," Calli said breathlessly. "Is that necessary?"

"It will help tremendously in my task."

He speared his fingers through the heavy mass near her temples, pulling her head back as he did. The pulse in her neck jumped erratically and he bent his head to press his lips against it.

Calli gasped as his lips branded her flesh. Her eyes widened at the feel of his tongue tracing a pattern down the delicate column of flesh.

"Please, my lord," she begged, "are you certain this is necessary!"

"Unquestionably," he murmured against her creamy shoulder.

Calli's resolutions fell one by one, torn away by the relentless sexual onslaught of the man now biting gently on her collarbone. She shuddered in his arms, but gritted her teeth against losing herself the way she had the night before.

Her mind did not rebel when she suddenly realized that he'd undone half the buttons of her traista, but her breath drew in sharply when he pulled the material down over her shoulders, exposing her upper body. He bent to nuzzle her breast before taking the nipple gently into his mouth and stroking it hungrily with his tongue. Calli was breathless now, holding onto her resolve by the merest thread. She pushed him away weakly.

"Please, please don't..."

"Don't what, Calli?" he whispered as he kissed his way up to her ear. "Don't do this?" He sucked gently on the lobe, then bit as he left off. "Or this?" he said against her skin as he trailed kisses from her ear to her mouth. "Or this?" he said thickly, then placed a hand alongside her neck, supporting her head, and bent to her mouth. But he didn't kiss her. Instead, barely making contact, he traced the contours of her lips with his tongue, playing with her sensuality, waiting for the flame to catch.

Calli's resolve evaporated and she exploded against him, hungrily devouring the lips that had teased her to this dizzying moment. When he slipped his tongue inside her mouth, she shuddered anew at the delicious sensual warmth that spread between her thighs and radiated like a pulsar along every inch of her body. Groaning, she arched against him, frustrated that the angle wasn't what she needed, not knowing what would be.

Erone's hands fumbled with the robe that lay between him and his desire.

Tearing it open, he broke away from Calli's kiss long enough to instruct her.

"Here," he said, pulling her toward him. He lifted her traista up to her waist, then fastened his hands on her upper thighs, lifting her as though she were weightless, and lowered her onto his lap.

Calli's eyes flew open as she realized what he was doing. His eyes blazed as he looked up at her, watching her face while he dropped her inch by inch onto himself. She steeled herself for the pain, but felt only a singing stab of pleasure as he penetrated her slowly, completely.

Calli threw her head back and moaned in appreciation. This brought a sensual chuckle from the prince. She snapped her head back, her eyes devouring the lustful fury that blazed from his own.

"Move for me, Calli," he whispered.

Determined now to wreak as much havoc on his body as he was on hers, Calli

moved against him instinctively. She was rewarded by his wrenching groan of pleasure, her sense of power over him heightening her craving for him. "Like this, my prince?" she said huskily. His ragged gasp answered her. "Or like this?" His eyes closed and he clenched his teeth. She waited until he looked at her again. "Perhaps like this," she finished. Erone let out a loud groan and lifted her off him. In a fury of possession, he threw her back on the bed and thrust into her savagely. Calli cried out and met every motion with an answering one of her own. The need he'd created inside her devoured her, flaming higher with every stroke he pulsed into her, heating her until she thought she must ignite the room with her fire. Drawing quick short breaths, she clawed at his back and wrapped her legs around him. A tight coil of pleasure sprang free like a raging torrent and washed over her, drowning her in sweet spasms that wracked her body and thrust Erone into his own climax. He cried out his pleasure against the nape of her neck, then gradually came to rest against her. As their breathing slowed, Calli smiled the satisfied, knowing smile of a female now acquainted with her own pleasure. Erone finally raised his head and looked into her eyes. "The kitten does have claws," he said teasingly. It was Calli's turn to chuckle. "Did I hurt my prince?" "Nothing I wouldn't have you do again." Then his eyes grew serious. He climbed from the bed, straightened his robe, and left the chamber.

* * * *

The next day, the house was in a flurry of activity. Two of the females from the village were about to be mated and there was a buzz of excitement over the joining ceremony that was going to take place. Calli stood in the large kitchen of the great house and helped the women prepare. The day was hot and the kitchen hotter, since the fires had been set early in the morning to begin the cooking and baking that would go on until the ceremony began that afternoon. Calli wiped the sweat from her forehead with the long sleeve of her muslin tunic. "Come," Raesa said, noting the motion. "We've done enough. Let's go into the morning room and rest." They left the kitchen and walked into the cool, cozy chamber that adjoined it. As they entered, the prince looked up from his book and smiled teasingly at their disheveled appearance. "Don't look so smug," Raesa chided him. "The last time one of your warriors took the joining cloth, you didn't fare nearly so well by this time of day." She was answered by a taunting, one-sided grin before her brother went back to his reading. Calli sat down in the chair farthest from him, her mind a tumble of confusion and resentment. She was having difficulty controlling her pulse in the presence of this male, and he didn't even seem to notice that she was in the room. Raesa took the chair beside her and handed her one of the two mugs of Chadderdown wine she carried. Calli, unused to drinking spirits, threw a quick look at the prince, then accepted it gratefully. "I don't understand," she said after a few sips. "In the city, the women are left to do all the kitchen work. But I would have thought that here, among the Shadrani, there would be a more fair attitude."

Raesa smiled at the statement that gave away more than Calli realized. "There is," she replied. "It's only that we Shadrani acknowledge the differences between the sexes, and at celebrations like these we take them into consideration. For example, the joining today is a female one, so it's up to the females to plan and prepare for it. All of the activities will be those enjoyed most by the female half of the population here. Although," she threw Erone a sidelong glance, "you'll never convince me that many of the males don't enjoy them, too."

If she had meant to bait her brother, she failed miserably. He seemed to be absorbed in his book and didn't look up.

"The responsibility for these celebrations also falls on the shoulders of Erone and me as the children of the House of Gemen. The last joining we had," she continued, "was male, and I was the one enjoying a day of leisure while Erone worked like a common dust-boy to see to the day."

"Well that explains it," Calli said thoughtfully.

Just then, Danae came into the room and plopped himself down on the floor in front of his uncle. He seemed restless, and Calli's heart went out to the child, who probably found himself ignored by everyone today as they either waited for or rushed about preparing for the grownup feast.

Cera came out of the kitchen, a large basket in her hands.

"This is the last of the pastries," she said, handing it to Raesa. "They must go over to the great hall."

She turned back to the kitchen and left Raesa staring at the treats as though she was tempted to fling them across the room for interrupting her much-needed rest. Then she looked up at her son.

"Danae," she said, "come and take these to the great hall for me."

The boy rose, but Erone, not even looking up from his page, said, "Danae, you will do no such thing."

Calli stifled a smile at the little one, whose head swiveled between the two grownups, waiting for a victor.

"Erone," Raesa complained, "it won't harm to have him do this one small thing for me!"

Looking up and chuckling softly, Erone touched his nephew on the shoulder. "Go and rescue your mother," he said.

Danae came to take the basket. He pulled open the cover to see what was inside and came up grinning, his eyes bright with anticipation.

"That's right," Raesa said, touching his cheek. "They're whistleberry, your favorite. Now, get them to the great hall, and we can all enjoy them tonight." Without another word, the boy scampered out the door, leaving the three adults smiling after him.

"It will cost you for me to keep my silence about this," Erone said, teasing.

"Oh, for Tsandis's sake!" Raesa said. "Don't you have anything better to do today than torment me?"

He shook his head.

"Where is Gadrel?"

"Gadrel is hunting," came the easy reply, "and he's in a disagreeable mood."

Raesa snorted. "And what did you do to put him there?"

Erone looked up, the picture of innocence. "I merely obeyed my queen's command to bed this blonde-haired city-dweller," he said expansively.

Calli gritted her teeth. Last night in the mating chamber she was "Calli", and today she was "this blonde-haired city-dweller"! What game was he playing with her? She almost opened her mouth to make a sharp reply, but Danae chose that moment to come back from his questionable errand.

As soon as the boy entered the room, Calli heard the prince stifle a laugh. She looked over to see his hand at his mouth, his eyes focused on the floor as if to help contain himself. Calli frowned, then glanced over at the little one. She couldn't help the same reaction when she saw the telltale signs of whistleberry juice staining his young cheeks. Danae's look wandered from one to the other, trying to understand what was causing this reaction. When Raesa looked up at him, a strangled cough came out of her throat before she had time

to contain it.

"Danae," she said sweetly, "come here."

His eyes now wide, knowing something was amiss, Danae crossed the room in such an obviously unwilling manner that it was all Erone and Calli could do to contain their mirth.

"Tell me," Raesa said, still in the honey-sweet manner, "did any of the whistleberry pastries find their way to the great hall?"

Neither Erone nor Calli could contain themselves any longer. Their laughter rang out in unison, bringing a look from the small boy that begged them to shed some light on his predicament.

"Danae," Erone choked, "there's evidence on your face!"

His small hands flew to his cheeks as he threw his mother a look of wide-eyed trepidation. This only drew more helpless laughter from Calli and Erone while Raesa gave him a meaningful look, held out her hand to him, then took him out the door with him throwing beseeching looks over his shoulder at his uncle. The two left in the morning room continued to laugh for a few moments. Then Calli wiped the tears from her eyes and sat back.

"Oh," she said fervently, "he is precious!"

"Yes," Erone answered. "He is that."

Still looking after him, "I would love a child like that," she said wistfully. Erone looked at her. "That's good," he said, "for you will have one."

* * * *

It was a few hours later that the villagers gathered around the same large clearing that had been used for Pashar's humiliating punishment. Apparently, it was used for all purposes that involved the interest of the Shadrani population. But the atmosphere today was much different.

The space was festively decorated with garlands of flowers and ivy. The podium from which the family of Gemen had witnessed Pashar's whipping was now decked with ribbons and more flowers, and waiting for the celebrated couple to arrive. Calli found herself fascinated once again with the customs of these people who were so different from her own.

She looked around at the happy faces and found she felt no misgivings at all that she was about to witness two females pledge themselves together in love. As she gazed, she caught sight of Pashar, but he didn't seem to notice her; he was engaged in conversation with a boy a few years older than he was. The look he turned on his new friend did much to assure Calli that Erone's training had paid off. Then the joining couple appeared, and walked hand in hand through the throng and up to the podium.

As they stood together on the platform, Mathena came toward them with a long, intricately embroidered cloth with delicate silk tassels attached to either end.

She waited while the two Shadrani faced each other and joined arms, clasping each other just below the elbows. Then Mathena draped one end of the elegant cloth around the first female's shoulders, wound it around their clasped arms and finished by draping the other end around the second female's shoulders. Calli smiled at the significance of the simple gesture. This must be the joining cloth that she had heard Raesa mention today. When she was finished this, Mathena left the podium.

A reverent hush came over the Shadrani and Calli quieted, too, now caught up in the seriousness of the moment.

"I take you to me," one of the celebrants began, "for my life-mate, forsaking all others to the pleasure of my body. I will share your joys, your laughter, and your tears; I will endure your anger and your disappointments, and I will hold you in my heart for as long as there is breath in my body."

There was a brief moment of utter silence, and then the second female began to recite the same words.

Calli was moved by the sweet simplicity of the vows. From the corner of her eye, she saw Cera take Raesa's hand and knew, in the look that passed between them, that they were remembering their own day of joining. Then, drawn by a force she couldn't control, her eyes sought out the Prince of Gemen.

He was standing not too far away, Gadrel now at his side as they watched the tender moment together. Calli felt a stab of jealousy at the possessive way Gadrel held his arm, and she was giving herself a lecture on how ridiculous that was when the prince glanced over and their eyes met.

It was he who looked away first, but Calli had seen something in his eyes that warmed her. Or was it merely that she wanted to see something? All thought fled when her glance shifted and she saw Gadrel glaring at her with a jealous warning in his eyes. She looked away quickly.

The crowd erupted into cheers and laughter as the two on the podium were released from the joining cloth and closed together in a long tender hug. Then they were followed in merry procession as they made their way to the great hall.

The celebration was complemented by a large group of Shadrani musicians who played stringed instruments of different sizes and tonal qualities. The players were both male and female, and seemed to range in age from teen to elderly. Calli found the music exotic. The slower tunes were haunting, heavy with poignant romanticism, but the faster ones were sensual, earthy, with a primal erotic beat.

When the feasting was done, the true festivities began and Calli was treated to something that she hadn't even known existed...the Shadrani tradition of song. She sat fascinated while she listened to moving tales of love, sad songs of loss, and stirring vocals about great Shadrani warriors and the glories of battle.

Again, she sought the prince among the guests. Calli found her nerves rubbed raw with the now exaggerated way Gadrel fawned over his promised. All she could think about was that in a short time, she'd be alone with Erone and he would touch her again in the manner that caused sweet fire to course through her veins. For her, the time couldn't go quickly enough.

But Erone seemed unaffected. It rankled her to watch the way he accepted-no, encouraged-Gadrel's attentions. Once again, Calli's mind gave her heart a lecture on the folly of being jealous of someone for acting as though he had some rights to the one who was promised to him!

What did she expect?

She didn't know.

It seemed she wasn't sure of anything any more, except the now desperate longing she felt for a simple touch from the Prince of Gemen. When Raesa finally came to take her for preparation, she was breathless with anticipation.

As she entered the mating chamber, Calli looked up and was startled to see the prince already there, pacing the floor impatiently. He stopped, and they stood and looked at each other as the door slid quietly shut behind her.

Calli's heart was already thumping erratically. But the sight of him, his dark hair spilling over his shoulders, wearing the long black robe that did little to hide the perfect body beneath it, almost caused her to cry out.

It was his eyes that helped her maintain her dignity-those Shadrani eyes that burned into her with a look bordering on desperate accusation. She stood mutely as he muttered an oath and crossed the floor between them, pulled her roughly into his arms and assaulted her mouth with his own.

Calli's knees grew weak as she melted against him. Without breaking the kiss, he lifted her, wrapped her legs around him and pressed her back against the wall.

When his mouth finally left hers, her breath was coming in strangled moans that were echoed sweetly by his own. She gasped in surprise when his strong fingers grasped the front of her traista and yanked mightily, tearing it away, leaving her naked to him. Then his lips traveled down her neck, burning a trail to the tender place where her shoulder curved up to meet it.

"Take your hair down," he commanded thickly, not stopping in his attack. Calli reached up and pulled out the offending pins, then let her hair fall in a cascade around her. He buried his face in it and continued to assault her body with his strong fingers, eliciting cries of pleasure from her that only urged him on.

Calli felt his hard sex between them, branding her as it pressed into her flat belly. She arched against him wantonly, burning for him with a passion that wrenched at her sanity. He continued to torment her, to stroke and kiss and bite until Calli could no longer stand it. She reached down and grasped him. His head snapped up with a sharp gasp and Calli found herself staring into his face as they stood frozen perfectly still for what seemed a small eternity. His eyes blazed with a silver fire of passion, his nostrils flared with desire. Calli answered the greedy look with one of her own. They stood, suspended...

Then Erone reached down, pulled her hand away and drove into her, wringing a sharp cry of pleasure from them both and plunging them over the edge of their desire.

When they came to rest, Calli dropped her head onto his shoulder. He carried her over to the bed where he gently laid her down and then sat next to her, his back against the wall.

Calli watched him as he sat, one leg drawn up, and the other stretched out before him. She moved to sit up as well, searching for something to cover her nakedness.

When Erone saw her intent, he stopped her.

"Don't cover yourself," he said. "I wish to look at you."

Calli drew herself up and gave him a pointed look. "I'd say the same to you."

Erone glanced down at the ceremonial robe he still wore, and chuckled.

"That's one of the things I've come to like about you, Calli," he said, shrugging the garment off. "You say what is on your mind."

Calli blushed as he displayed his body to her in a manner that spoke of no shyness or embarrassment. But in spite of her color, her eyes took him in, hungrily devouring every line, every hard muscle, everything she knew she'd never have had the opportunity to view had she remained in her former life. When she finally met his eyes, he lifted an eyebrow.

"Did you wish me to comment, my lord?" she said.

He threw his head back and laughed. "That isn't necessary, Calli," he said. "I know what I look like."

Her own eyebrow rose at the comment. "Are all Shadrani so arrogant, my lord, or is it merely your station that makes you so?"

Still chuckling, he shook his head. "Oh, no. Even the lowliest Shadrani is arrogant beyond belief. It's a mark of the breed."

She couldn't help the smile that played on the corner of her mouth. Tsandis help her, even his arrogance charmed her!

"I saw Pashar today," she said, wanting to change the subject. "He was with someone."

"Yes," Erone replied. "I think we can safely say that Pashar now controls his lust for you."

She looked at him seriously. "But you do not."

His eyes darkened, but there was no anger in his voice when he replied, only the same arrogant confidence. "No," he said, "I indulge in it."

"Why?"

"Because I can."

She hadn't expected that. He smiled at her surprise.

"Don't you understand how you fascinate me with your passion? I didn't consider a female to be capable of such a thing."

"Surely your women are passionate!"

He chuckled. "Not with me they aren't!" Then his face grew more serious. "If we must do this thing, Calli, why not gain some pleasure, if pleasure is possible?"

"But...I thought such a thing would be forbidden!"

"It is. But no one speaks of what occurs behind these walls. We Shadrani are not so close-minded that we don't realize the act of breeding can release some...difficult passions. And although it's not acceptable to gain pleasure from the act, it is considered a...forgivable indiscretion if that should happen."

Calli stared at him. "Forgivable?"

His eyes swept her body, making her heart rate increase rapidly. "Well," he said, his voice now thick, "perhaps not forgivable, but," he reached out and took a handful of her hair, "understandable."

She was aware of two things as he reached toward her: the frantic rise and fall of her chest, and the large, rock-hard shaft of flesh that rose from him to send a shiver of delicious anticipation down her spine.

"Am I doing that to you, my lord?"

He smiled wickedly. "I believe you have something to do with it." He stroked a hand through her mane. "Perhaps it's this hair," he said. "We really should cut it off."

Her eyes widened in dismay. He chuckled again, softly, sending an arrow of pleasure that pierced to her woman's core.

"Do not fret, Calli. I would leave it, temptation and all."

Then he pulled steadily on her tresses, drawing her face closer to him while he took her hand and guided it toward his pulsing column of flesh. They both drew in a breath when her hand closed around it.

"Now," he rasped, "as to this thing you've caused, and your concern over acceptability, I leave it to you, Calli. How would you rather mate-the way it was the first time, or the way it was moments ago?"

"Do you need an answer, my lord?"

"I would have one."

She gave him his answer when she fell upon him, burying her hands in his long, black hair and assaulting his mouth with her own.

* * * *

Later that night, Calli watched Erone as he laughed and exchanged barbs with his Shadrani warriors. It warmed her heart to see the deep respect and affection that he inspired in his followers. But she couldn't help but wonder what would become of that respect if they knew of the pleasure he'd taken with her not an hour ago. She hadn't noticed Mathena come up beside her until the older woman spoke.

"I feel perhaps this will be little comfort to you, Calli. But I haven't seen my son thus since before Keilan was taken from him."

Calli felt her throat constrict. Did the woman know? She turned to her.

"It seems," the queen continued, "that the prospect of another child is just what he needed, even though it's an unforgivable thing to force upon you."

Calli let her breath out. She could find no reply to the statement, not knowing if it were apology or explanation. But Mathena, having said what she wanted, merely put a hand gently on Calli's shoulder and moved off.

For the remainder of the evening, Calli did her best to enjoy the festivities even while her eyes betrayed her, ever seeking the Prince of Gemen.

Twenty

During the rest of the week that Calli was to meet with the prince in the mating chamber, she saw precious little of him during the day. She found the separation only bearable in the knowledge that, come nightfall, she'd be in his arms, at least for a while, and he would banish the longing that sprang up in her now at the very thought of him.

But the seventh and last night they were to be together, Calli found the joining unbearably poignant. When Erone came to rest on top of her, she

couldn't help the quiet sob that escaped her, or the painful tears that rolled down her cheeks. He withdrew from her and sat up, regarding her curiously.

"What is it?"

Calli sniffed, sat up as well, and tried to look as though she was in some kind of control. "It's not important," she said. "Just something I'm sure you'd call 'damnably female'."

He didn't smile. "Why are you crying, Calli?"

Suddenly, she didn't care what he thought; she needed to tell him, needed to let it out.

"This is our final night together, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"And, if I quicken with your seed, then you and I will never...do this again, isn't that so?"

He nodded again, this time frowning.

"Well, that makes me sad!" she ended, almost belligerently.

"But, haven't I given you pleasure?"

She glared at him. "Of course you have, you son of a Plantarian worm! That's just it!"

Both black eyebrows shot up and Calli's hand flew to her mouth as she realized what she had said. But then his low chuckle disarmed, and then charmed her, as it always did.

"Well, that's the first time I've been called such a thing," he said. "But I would know, is it my mother or father that you're slighting with that remark?"

"Forgive me, my lord," Calli said, "my misery has made me forget my place."

He laughed genuinely at that. "You've never been in your place, Calli! Tell me, are all maids in Soris as badly trained as you are?"

"I'm an exceptionally pathetic case."

He looked at her for a long time, and she looked back, drawing in every detail of the picture of him in this room with her. Then he sighed heavily, pushed himself from the bed, and headed for the door.

Calli's heart cried out against his leaving. Before she could stop them, her lips did as well.

"Wait!" she pleaded, coming to stand between him and the exit. He looked down at her with that one cocked eyebrow.

"I...may I at least have one last kiss?" she asked helplessly.

"You may not," he answered, then pushed her gently aside and left her standing alone, staring at the door as it closed behind him.

Twenty-one

Every morning when Calli awoke, she sat up and turned her mind inward, searching for some sign of pregnancy. It had been two weeks now since she'd lain with her prince, and she found it unbearable to be with him during the day, knowing that now it was Gadrel who enjoyed him at night.

And enjoy him he did.

Calli was certain that the exquisite Shadrani male who was Erone's promised cried out particularly loudly these last few weeks, waking her-purposely, she felt-from what little sleep she could find to torment her with jealous imaginings.

As a result, she often wound up sleeping on the couch in the morning room. It was becoming a ritual between her and Habda, the large Shadrani who guarded Erone's door, to nod to each other as she padded down the hallway, pillow in hand.

And it was showing on her.

Her nervous condition led Raesa, at least, to be certain that she must be pregnant. But while all others silently prayed for the positive announcement, Calli hoped for just the opposite. She wanted to go her full moon-cycle. She wanted one more week with her prince. So it was with a joyful whoop that she discovered the familiar bloodstains on her clothing as she awoke one day.

The news was received with disappointment by most, but with steely anger by

Gadrel. He glared at her as though she had managed to do this thing on purpose. Calli had to wince at his insight, for she wasn't entirely sure that she hadn't somehow convinced her body it needed just a little more time with the prince.

But she would have to wait another few weeks to have that time, and as the days passed, Calli found her patience sorely tested. And it didn't help matters that Erone seemed to be in a surly mood all the time. But it was Gadrel that caused the fine thread to snap.

* * * *

Calli was sitting in the morning room with Raesa, Cera and Mathena when Danae burst onto the scene.

"Calli! Calli, come quickly!" he cried.

"What is it?"

"Erone needs you!"

"Is he hurt?" she called after the child, but received no answer, since he was already on his way. Her heart thudding in an odd panic, Calli gathered her medicine bag and joined the others as they ran after him.

They followed Danae to the Shadrani practice field, where they found Gadrel lying on the ground with Erone leaning over him. Calli paused. Then, when Erone glanced up at her and waved her forward, she came to kneel beside Gadrel. There was a nasty wound in his chest that oozed blood onto the stark white of his linen shirt. Calli winced, then reached to move the shirt to allow a better look at the gash. Gadrel slapped her hand away.

"Don't touch me!" he spat. "Zeras will tend me."

"I sent for her," Erone said.

"Yes, I'm sure you did," came the angry reply, "but I'll not have the basrati touch me!"

Calli saw Erone stiffen when the unpleasant word was uttered. She dropped her hands to her sides.

"I'm sorry I troubled you," Erone said coldly. "It would appear my promised would rather lie in pain than show common sense."

"Your promised would rather bleed to death than have that foul thing touch him!"

"She's merely trying to help."

Gadrel's eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't have thought so a month ago."

"What is that intended to mean?"

Gadrel glowered in reply. Calli gained her feet.

"If I'm not needed..." she said quickly, then turned and left without waiting for a reply.

She passed Zeras on her way back to the other three females and Danae, who stood waiting on the edge of the field.

"What happened to Gadrel?" Raesa was asking her son.

Danae looked up at his mother, his little face open with honesty. "He and Erone were practicing with their swords, but they were talking, too, and then their talking got kind of angry and..." He looked down at his small boots and found something very interesting to kick at in the dirt below them.

Mathena and Raesa exchanged a glance. Raesa dropped to one knee. "And what, Danae?"

"And I think Gadrel got mad and started to really attack. I mean," he said, sounding like he didn't want to tell it, "Erone said something to him about being the last Shadrani in the village to enjoy Gadrel's shadra..."

This brought a shocked gasp from the group, but the little one didn't seem to hear; he continued as if he'd forget the exact words if he didn't get them out fast enough.

"...and then Gadrel said that..."

He looked up at Calli and blushed.

"Go on, Danae," Calli said.

"...he said that why shouldn't he give his shadra away, since Erone was only interested in rutting with that basrati bitch..."

Raesa clapped a hand over the boy's mouth and pressed a hand to her own breast as if to still the beating of her heart.

"That's fine Danae," she said. "I think we get the idea."

Mathena's face was absolutely pale. "Great Tsandis!" she muttered. "This is getting out of hand!" She turned to Calli. "I apologize for this," she said.

"Of all the players in this unpleasant drama, you are the only innocent, and I cannot tell you how sadly I look upon the day that two Shadrani warriors come to real blows on a practice field over...over...well, over anything!"

She turned and walked away, still shaking her head.

* * * *

That night found the entire house of Gemen taking a wide skirt around its favorite son. He had locked himself downstairs in the wine cellar, and proceeded to work his way through the previous year's stock. Calli, unable to bear Gadrel's presence, bade them all an early good night and went to her room.

She was almost asleep when some soft sound awakened her. Pushing the covers back, she sat up and saw that the door to her chamber was standing open.

Frowning, she slipped out of bed and went to push it shut. She had just reached out when something grabbed her hand and shoved the door closed. She was pulled, rather clumsily, into the arms of the Prince of Gemen.

"First rule of defense-" he said with a lopsided grin, "-always check behind the door."

Calli struggled in his grasp. "You're drunk!" she whispered.

"I don't think so," he said seriously. "But I might be."

"My lord!" she rasped quickly. "You must leave this room at once!"

"That's unlikely...I have just arrived!"

"Sssh," she pleaded. "They'll hear you downstairs."

He chuckled tipsily. "I don't care if they hear me in the city-state." He

pulled her closer to him. "I think I owe you one kiss, Calli."

She kicked his shin and he let her go with a low curse. Moving quickly, she ran to put the bed between them.

"My lord," she said, now frantic, "please, please, leave this room. If they find you in here..."

"I don't care if they find me in here!" he said loudly.

"Will you be quiet?" she cried. She jumped onto the bed to avoid him as he crossed the room to grab her. But even in his state, he was too fast for her and he caught the end of her long braid as it whipped past. Calli yelped and strained away from him the length of it like a dog resisting its leash.

"Let-me-go!" she bit, emphasizing each word.

"No!"

She suddenly relaxed. "All right," she said.

When she moved toward him, he dropped her hair and sat down to take her into his embrace, but instead of falling into his arms, she leapt off the bed and put the room between them. She stood breathing rapidly as she waited for his next move.

He tried to stand, but the wine was becoming too much for him. Instead, he sat on the bed and looked up at her.

"Calli," he said longingly. "Please come to me."

She felt her heart wrench painfully at the misery in his voice.

"I...I can't," she whispered.

His eyes, shining in testament to the feelings that he'd never name sober, begged her from across the room. "Please, Calli..."

His words tore her apart. She fought to control the lump that had begun to

form in her throat.

"Oh, Erone," she whispered. "Do you think I don't want to?"

Hope lit his eyes and his smile was tender. "Then come to me, my kitten, and bring your claws."

Calli shook her head, now sobbing softly. "I can't," she repeated. "I will not be the cause of your death."

His smile faded, his shoulders slumped, and he looked at the floor, then passed a hand over his eyes, groaned, and lay back on the bed. She came to him quickly.

"Calli," he whispered.

She stroked the hair back from his face. "Quiet now," she soothed. "Sleep is what you need."

"No," he whispered, "I need you..."

He continued to call her name, and she gently stroked his cheek until he passed out under her tender ministrations. Calli lifted his hand and pressed it to her lips, enjoying the dizzying sensation of feeling him for a long moment before she stood, straightened herself, and went downstairs. She burst into the room where the family sat and looked directly at Gadrel. "If you don't mind," she said icily, "your promised came upstairs and, in his drunken state, mistook my chambers for his. He is, at this moment, passed out soundly on my bed!" Gadrel, in spite of his wound, shot to his feet. "What?" "I believe you heard me," she said crisply. "Now, I'd appreciate it if you would remove him immediately so I can get some sleep!"

Twenty-two

The day after the incident, Erone was more removed than ever. Other than mumbling a few words to Calli about "inexcusable drunkenness", he avoided her. She allowed him his space, understanding that he was marshaling his will to fight the compelling desire that seemed to spring up between them now whenever they were within eyesight of each other.

Her own desire unnerved her; Erone's frightened her. Not only because of the raw strength of the emotion, but because of the consequences it would bring should it wrench free from his grasp. She had meant it when she said she wouldn't be the cause of his death, and she had no doubt that that would be the end result should his feelings for her become known.

She also tried to convince herself that his interest in her was transitory, something that fascinated him only in its novelty, and which was certainly not worth dying over. With that thought uppermost in her mind, Calli threw herself into her healing work in an effort to channel her own emotions.

One day, she went to check on one of her patients, a man who had been injured while hunting. The last time she had looked in on him, he'd been recuperating well, but this time, as she entered the room where he lay, she gasped at his drastically worsened condition.

"Altor!" she cried, coming to his side. "What has happened to you?"

The man struggled, but couldn't speak, so weakened was his state. His life-mate, a usually jocular fellow named Pelon, answered.

"Just after you left last time," he said, frowning, "Zeras came to check on him."

Calli's eyes widened. "Zeras? What was he checking for?"

Pelon seemed uncomfortable, but then he answered. "He gave us to think that you were trying to poison Altor, and took your medicine away."

"Took it away!" she cried. "Oh, but that's why he's so much worse!"

The muscles in Pelon's jaw worked. "I began to think as much. If you hadn't shown up at our door today, I would have come to find you."

Without another word, Calli set about mixing a new batch of the potion that would save Altor's life. She had Pelon help her spoon some of it into his mouth with instructions to repeat the process every four or five hours. Then she gathered up her belongings, and set out in search of Zeras.

She finally found him in the great hall, surrounded by a number of Shadrani

warriors. They were laughing and telling tales, generally making merry the way males do, and Calli, had her anger not been so great, would have balked at entering such a potentially masculine scene.

But as it was, she was fit to be tied and didn't even notice the amount of surging brawn and muscle that surrounded her. She caught sight of Zeras, narrowed her eyes, and headed straight for him. When she reached him, she grabbed his arm and spun him about.

"What do you mean by counteracting my medical advice?"

The man's jaw dropped, as did most of the others in the great hall. "What are you about?" he said.

"I'm about telling you what I think of you, Zeras, you pompous, self-serving horse's ass!"

Zeras sputtered and backed away while Calli, her eyes spitting fire, advanced on him. The sight of the large man retreating from the small female caused a number of the other males in the room to hide their amusement behind their hands or suddenly discover fascinating things to look at on the ceiling.

"Do you realize," Calli continued, "that Altor could have died if I hadn't discovered your-your-damnably perfidy!"

This brought a collective look of shock from the group. Not only did females, especially ones this size, never scream in the face of a male Shadrani, but they never used profanity of any description.

"Here!" came a voice from across the room. "What's happening?"

Knowing the voice well, Calli froze on the spot.

When Erone broke through the group, he took one look at Calli and frowned.

"It would seem," offered Habda, who was nearby, "that my lady has some quarrel with our Healer."

Erone's look passed from Zeras to Calli and back again.

"Is this true, Zeras?"

"I don't know what is amiss, my lord," the Healer replied. "I was merely having some wine with my friends when this creature appeared out of nowhere and began to call me...names."

Erone threw her a look. She glanced away, still holding her head up. "Names?" he said. "Such as?"

"Well," Zeras said uncomfortably, "I don't recall."

"Something about a pompous horse's ass," Habda chimed in.

This drew a round of muffled laughter from the group, giving Erone much insight into the standing of the Healer Zeras within the community. Still, he turned and addressed Calli.

"I do not know how such things are handled in Soris," he said, "but we Shadrani do not usually go about hurling names at each other. Now, I suggest that you and Zeras meet before the queen and have this thing straightened out."

They turned and headed for the council chamber. Every one of the males present tagged along, anxious to see the outcome of this battle between the kitten and the lion.

"Did she truly call him a horse's ass?" Erone said to Habda.

"She did, my lord."

"Well, I'd say the man got off easy. Not long ago, she called me the son of a Plantarian worm."

Habda chuckled. "That's truly astonishing, my lord."

Erone answered him with a raised eyebrow. "Isn't it?" Then he joined his mother at the council table.

Calli was allowed to tell her side of the story, then Zeras told his. But his story had such a sneaky way of making his actions sound reasonable that he had Calli fairly seething by the time he was finished.

Mathena, no fool, called for Pelon, and when he told his side of the story, it was obvious to everyone that Zeras had allowed his jealousy to not only get in the way of his healing, but to actually threaten the life of a Shadrani.

The queen was disappointed and furious when she stood to make her pronouncement.

"Zeras," she said, "I am forced to relieve you, as of this moment, of your title as Healer in this community."

A hush fell over the room. Calli felt dreadful. She hadn't meant for this to happen!

Zeras was visibly shaken, but struggled to maintain his pride. When the queen dismissed him, he turned and left the room, his back ramrod straight.

"Calli," Mathena said. "We would be pleased if you would accept the-ah, recently vacated-position as Healer to our people."

Calli drew in her breath. All her life she'd dreamed of doing this very thing. She only wished she hadn't accomplished it with Zeras's humiliation. When the queen raised a questioning eyebrow at her hesitation, Calli's answer came quickly.

"Yes, my queen. I would be most honored."

Mathena smiled. "Good," she said, then dismissed the room.

* * * *

"Ow!" Danae cried. "Erone, it hurts!"

The Prince of Gemen bent to quickly gather his nephew into his arms. "Where do you hurt, little fox?"

Danae pointed to his ankle. "Take me to Calli! Please!"

Erone grimaced as he strode toward the chambers where Calli had set up her new practice and her new home.

This was the last thing he needed.

He'd increased his chira to two hours a day and almost exhausted himself every night with Gadrel, but he couldn't banish the devouring hunger that Calli had awakened in him. As a last resort, he used distance, both emotional and physical, to keep up the walls between them. But now the physical boundaries, at least, were about to be crossed.

When Calli opened to his knock, her eyes widened in surprise. They stood for a moment before Erone remembered why he had come.

"Danae has hurt himself."

Calli stepped back quickly and ushered them in, then indicated to Erone to put Danae on the table in the center of the room. This done, the prince moved as far away from her as he could, into the corner where he crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall. Still, his eyes devoured the sight of her as she stroked a hand through Danae's thick black hair and smiled into his eyes.

"Now, where does it hurt?"

He pointed at his ankle. Calli lifted it gently and began to probe delicately.

"Does this hurt?" she asked.

The little one shook his head.

"How about this?"

Again the shake.

"This?"

"Uh-uh," he said.

Calli frowned, then cast a glance at the prince. Even in the dark shadows, she saw the glow of desire in his eyes and she drew in her breath sharply at the rush of heat that swept her senses.

"What happened to him?" she managed.

"I don't know," he replied, his voice husky. "He was on the ground when I found him."

She tore her eyes away from Erone and tried to focus on Danae.

"Did you fall?"

He nodded.

She lifted him and set him on the floor.

"Can you walk at all, Danae?"

He took a step and then lifted his foot and cried out again. But, Calli noticed, it seemed to be the other foot that hurt this time. She picked him

up, set him on the table and looked to Erone.
"May I speak with him alone for a moment?"
The prince looked mildly surprised, but then turned and left without comment.
When he was gone, Calli leaned on the table, her face close to Danae's.
"Now, what's this about? There is nothing wrong with your ankle."
Danae looked sheepish and studied his fingers.
"Danae?" she pressed.
"I...just want you and Erone to like each other."
Calli stood back and drew a deep breath as she placed her hands on her hips.
Great Tsandis! How to explain this to a little boy?
"We do like each other," she attempted. "It's just that we...well, we have to sort out some things, that's all."
He looked up. "What things?"
She ran a hand through his hair. "Grownup things, darling," she finished. "I'm going to take you back to your uncle, and I don't want any more of these pretend accidents, okay?"
He nodded. She lifted him into her arms and carried him to the door.
When Erone went to take him, Danae wriggled away and jumped down.
"Calli fixed me!" he called out and took off down the path.
Erone stared after him. "That was quite a cure."
Calli laughed and when he turned back to her, their eyes locked for an intense moment. Calli looked away first, studying the ground, her shoes, anything but the man standing before her, sending her body into traitorous torrents of want.
Erone knew he should leave, intended to leave, but his heart somehow managed to overrule his mind and he remained rooted to the spot, fumbling with the braiding on his belt and searching for something to say.
He felt like a twelve-year-old.
"Are you...enjoying this new position?" he said finally.
She nodded, wishing that he'd go, wanting desperately for him to stay. His nearness was suffocating.
"Tell me, where did you learn this...art of medicine?"
She swallowed. "There's a Healer named Jala in the city. He...found it in his heart to teach me."
When he could think of nothing more to say, Erone still stood there, studying her, causing the intensity between them to build until Calli could no longer avert her eyes. She looked up at him and saw her own feelings reflected painfully in his face. She knew he was going to reach up and touch her cheek, knew it and knew she had to stop it, for the moment he touched her, she was lost...they were both lost.
"My lord," she said quickly. "Isn't there something to which you must attend?"
He shook himself as if coming back from a distance, cleared his throat and nodded.
Then he turned and was gone.
When he had left, Calli leaned against the doorpost and let out a long breath.

* * * *

Erone turned in the bed, careful not to disturb Gadrel. He'd been trying to sleep for hours, but it did no good. Nothing could take away the empty hole that had been blasted in his soul the night he'd left Calli in the mating chamber.
He sat up, trying to convince himself that it was only a week or so before he'd be back in that chamber with her, but he railed against the wait, his impatience, and Shadrani law in general.
Great Tsandis, what had she done to him?
For some time after her arrival, Zeras had been circulating rumors that she was a sorceress, aligned with the evil ones, and at this moment, Erone could

believe it was true. At this moment he wanted to believe it was true, for that would absolve him of the terrible guilt he felt every time she stirred his lust. But he knew she was no such thing; he only knew what she did to him, and that was absolutely against everything he believed in. With a silent oath, he threw back the covers and walked down the hall to the morning room. There he stood and looked out the window, drawing in great breaths and trying to still his wayward thoughts. But this night it did no good. He poured a glass of Chadderdown wine and drank it in one long swallow. On other nights that had, at least, dulled the ache. But this night it failed to soothe him. He knew it was no use. Even as his mind called him hypocrite, his hands reached for the door and he slipped into the dark of the night, wearing only his black leather breeches and a mantle of shame.

* * * *

Calli tossed restlessly. Then something made her sit up with a start. She heard someone in her outer rooms, she was sure of it. Slipping out of bed, she went and quietly opened the door to peek beyond it. Erone froze when the door cracked. Calli recognized him immediately, standing with the moonlight reflecting off his broad shoulders. "My lord!" she whispered. "Is something wrong?" He hesitated, then swung himself up onto her table. "Yes," he whispered. "I have need of you." She frowned, feeling all too vulnerable alone in the darkness with this man. "But, can it not wait until morning?" He shook his head. "Come, help me." She crossed the floor and went for the lantern. He caught her wrist. "No, Calli," he said. "You will not need light to see my pain." She knew instantly what was happening, knew it from the fire in his eyes and the answering joyful leap of her heart. "Where does it hurt, my lord?" Her wrist still in his grasp, he pulled her hand to him and placed it over his heart. "Here," he said softly. He took her other hand and drew it down to place it on the hard shaft of flesh that strained beneath his breeches. "And here." Calli barely had his name out of her mouth before he pulled her to him, enclosing her in his arms and his legs as if he would keep her from escape. But there was no need, for Calli was already lost, as lost as he was the moment she'd seen him in that dark room. Their mouths devoured each other. For what seemed an eternity of bliss, they reveled in the freedom to kiss each other hungrily. He nibbled at her lower lip, then sucked it into his mouth and followed by thrusting his tongue into her mouth to ravage it with a sensual invitation that had Calli squirming beneath him. She answered every thrust with one of her own but soon, the feel of his tongue stroking her mouth began to stir the need for another kind of plunder. Slowly, the sweet, womanly longing to be touched and petted and kissed gave way to the primitive female need to be possessed. Her body arched against him, sending him the age-old message. Erone responded immediately, drawing her up onto the table with him and pulling at her nightshirt while she fumbled with the laces that held his breeches. When he plunged into her, Calli closed her eyes and drew in a sharp breath. "Oh, my lord," she whispered. "I've ached for you." Her admission drew a strangled moan from him. He buried his face in her hair. They moved together to a rhythm that thrummed with a primitive rage as they

pressed each other on toward the summit of their pleasure. Neither of them cared what the consequences would be, neither could think beyond the next moment of exquisite torment that sent them spiraling out of all control. Erone was desperate for her; he couldn't penetrate her hard enough, deep enough, long enough. He ravaged her, whispering her name.

Calli threw her head back and bit the back of her hand, her mind still keen enough to fear discovery from her cries of pleasure. Erone saw the motion and quickly smothered her cries with his mouth, drinking them in as if they were the sweetest summer wine.

They strained together, exploded together, and fell together, gasping for breath when they finally came to rest on the table. Calli lay still until Erone gathered her into his arms and carried her to bed where he came to rest beside her.

"No," she whispered. "You cannot stay here...!"

He answered her by covering her mouth with his, blocking out any protestations, silencing any common sense and making love with her until the betraying first rays of the sun came through to tear them from each other's arms. Calli smiled in a state of lethargic bliss when he bent to kiss her one more time before leaving.

The prince crept back to his chambers and slipped quietly inside the door to find Gadrel still sleeping soundly. He had seen no one on his short trip back, and drew a breath of relief when he settled into bed to fall into a deep, untroubled sleep. He'd been too dulled by the drug of satiated desire to see the flash of Zeras's eyes as he watched from behind the corner of the great house.

Twenty-three

"This is a terrible accusation you make!" Queen Mathena snapped. She stood looking down at Zeras, who was still on one knee before her.

"But it is not the prince's doing," the Healer said. "He is the most vigilant of all Shadrani! It is that female—I tell you, my queen, she has bewitched him!"

Mathena exchanged a look with Raesa. "That will be all, Zeras," she said. "You may be certain that we will be on our guard to monitor such activity, should it occur a second time."

When the man had left, she turned to her daughter.

"Could this be true, Raesa?"

"I believe that Zeras is merely peddling his spite, Mother. It's unfortunate, for him perhaps, that he has chosen to insinuate the Prince of Gemen while doing it."

"But that's just it," Mathena said. "Surely he wouldn't have dared say such a thing if there wasn't some truth in it. Why not accuse Calli of some other thing that wouldn't also implicate his future king? No," she shook her head.

"I'm afraid there is something to this. Though I cannot believe the tale Zeras tells, I will put a close watch on Erone."

* * * *

That night, the Prince of Gemen had just pulled Calli down under him when the door flung open. The lantern light that suddenly illuminated the room also illuminated the intertwining of their naked limbs. Calli cried out and struggled to cover herself while the prince found his feet, muttering a violent oath and avoiding the faces that silently accused him of shattering the oldest and most revered of the Shadrani laws. Habda bent and tossed him his breeches and Erone pulled them on, but not before throwing a murderous look at Zeras's smug face.

Mathena stood still as a statue as she took in the scene before her. "Have

them dressed," she said darkly, "and brought before me."

* * * *

Erone and Calli stood together in the middle of the council chamber and, along with the rest of the room, waited for the queen's pronouncement.

Word had spread fast, and the chamber was full to overflowing with Shadrani in various stages of dress, having been taken from their beds at this uncivilized hour with this unfathomable news. Gadrel stood like a coiled cobra, ready to strike anything in his path. His eyes murdered Calli ten times over.

Calli's mind raced in prayers to Tsandis, begging her god not to take Erone's life, begging for mercy, begging for anything that would remove this terror from her heart. She glanced up at her prince but his face was a mask of stone, his eyes riveted on some point in the floor ten feet before him.

Then Mathena gained her feet and the room seemed to take in a collective breath.

"Calli," she said, causing the girl to jump in her anxiety, "I understand that because of your beliefs, the activity you were engaged in tonight is less profoundly repugnant to you than it is to the Shadrani.

"Although," she added, "I do believe, even in Soris, there is usually some rite of vows employed beforehand."

Calli blushed hotly.

"And," Mathena continued, "since I am responsible for bringing you into this village, I must take much of the blame upon myself for actions resulting from your presence. After all, one doesn't bring a songbird into one's house and then complain that it is singing.

"I also take under advisement your unselfish healing contribution to this community and in considering these things, absolve you of any punishment for this crime."

Zeras gaped at her. "But my queen!" he interjected. "The female has put some spell on him! How can you say-" He stopped short when Mathena threw him a withering look before turning to her son.

"But you, Erone-" she said accusingly, "-you do know better. I cannot express the outrage I feel to have to stand before our people and pronounce judgment on the Prince of Gemen for breaking the most sacred law of shadra!"

Calli's eyes widened at the implication. Great Tsandis! she prayed, No, no! Erone stood, unmoved, waiting.

"But even in your case," his mother continued, "I must take some of the blame upon myself, since it was my own folly that forced you into the mating chamber with this female. That is," she said deliberately, "where this strange obsession began, I take it."

She waited, but there was no response from her son.

"Erone!"

He lifted his eyes finally. "My queen?"

"Did you find pleasure with her in the mating chamber?"

Calli watched the familiar play of the muscles in his jaw as he clenched his teeth together before answering.

"Yes."

There was a muffled sound of shock from the room. Mathena raised a hand to squelch it.

"And it was you who sought her out later, I take it, to repeat this pleasure without even the benefit of the mating chamber to conceal your depravity?" Her voice was muffled fury.

"No!" Calli cried, taking a step forward. "It wasn't his doing. Zeras is right; I did bewitch him!"

"Calli!" Mathena warned. "Do not compound your sin with wild tales, for I am neither overly superstitious nor inclined to accept such a simple explanation for such a heinous act!"

The girl reddened, lowered her head and stepped back to her place. Mathena turned again to her son.

"Did you seek her out?"

Erone's lips pressed together as he drew in a deep breath. "Yes, my queen." The sound of shocked outrage was louder this time, and Mathena had to shout to calm the noisy room. Her voice betrayed her only the smallest amount when she continued.

"May I at least presume that your shadra is intact?" She threw a scathing glance at Gadrel. "At least, where this female is concerned?"

He nodded once.

Mathena let out a sigh of relief. "Then, because I do take some of the responsibility for your actions, and because of your standing in this community, I find it possible to waive the death penalty."

Calli's breath let out in blessed relief. Her eyes flew to Erone. He hadn't moved.

"But," his mother said, "I would have you swear to me, before your people and your council, that you will, here and now, relinquish your unnatural desire for this female."

For the first time since they had entered the room, Erone turned to Calli. She trembled as their eyes met and his took in the sight of her, traveling down the length of her as though he would commit her to memory.

"Erone!" Mathena demanded. "Will you give up this female?"

He looked solemnly into violet eyes that pleaded with him to give the answer his mother sought.

"No," he said.

This time, the room exploded. In the noisy aftermath, Gadrel stepped down from the table and left the chamber. When the ruckus finally quieted, Mathena visibly trembled with outrage.

"Then, until such time as you do, I declare you imrati!"

Erone's eyes left Calli's to focus on his mother, while the room went deathly silent. Calli desperately searched the faces before her, trying to understand what sentence had just been passed.

"Habda," Mathena said, "you will escort him to the edge of the village. He will be allowed only what he carries with him."

Habda didn't move. He continued to stare at his queen in shock until she shouted his name a second time. Only then did he move, with obvious reluctance, toward his prince and motioned for Erone to accompany him. Without another word, the Prince of Gemen turned and followed him out the door.

* * * *

Calli watched Erone retreat from the room, and then was taken into the queen's chambers where Mathena and Raesa waited for her. Mathena looked furious; Raesa, defeated and sorrowful.

"What is it?" Calli cried. "What does this imrati mean?"

"Explain it to her, Raesa," Mathena said.

Calli sat down and faced the Shadrani princess.

"Imrati is a Shadrani word that means spirit," Raesa said. "To proclaim him imrati means that Erone no longer exists for us."

Calli's heart chilled. "How can he not?"

"He'll be there, Calli, but we won't acknowledge his presence. No one is allowed to speak with him or touch him."

Calli drew back, beginning to understand.

"No one is allowed to help or comfort him, nor feed, clothe, or shelter him. He'll receive nothing from us. It's as though he were dead. We cannot even utter his name."

Calli paled. "But," she whispered, "this is a terrible punishment."

"The punishment fits the crime," Mathena stated. When Calli turned to her, she

continued. "I want to be sure you comprehend the seriousness of this, Calli. If anyone speaks to him or touches him, breaks the imrati in any way, it will mean the immediate death of both parties."
Calli felt a cold shudder slide down her spine.
"Do you understand what I'm saying to you?" Mathena demanded.
Calli swallowed. "Yes," she nodded, "I understand."

* * * *

At the edge of the village, Habda and Erone came to a halt. The large Shadrani guard unbuckled his sword and knife and dropped them on the ground. "It would appear," he said to the clear morning air, "that I have lost my weapons in the forest somewhere."
The corner of Erone's mouth kicked up in a wry smile. But he said nothing. Then Habda turned to him.
"I will say this one last thing to you, my prince," he said fervently. "We await your return."
He spun and left the Prince of Gemen standing alone to face his future and his regrets.
Twenty-four

The morning sun shone through the large window and fell upon Calli, waking her gently with its golden rays. She sat up, stretched, and hurried from her bed to throw open the windows as she did every morning.
And there he was, as he'd been every morning since his sentencing, waiting on the ground where he had slept.
Waiting for her to come and greet the morning.
He quickly gained his feet when he saw her and then they stood, only a few feet away, drinking in the sight of one another.
Erone smiled at her and Calli smiled back, leaning forward to put her chin on her hand as she rested her elbow on the sill.
"Good morning, forest," she said.
Erone's smile deepened, but he didn't say a word, only folded his arms and leaned against a tree to watch her take up her brush and pull it through her long blonde hair.
Calli turned to the sound of Raesa's voice.
"There are a few still ill today."
When Calli turned back, her prince had gone, as though he'd never been there.
"I'm coming," she said to Raesa, then quickly dressed.
When she reached her tidy office, she went to work to make up more of the potion that was fighting the food poisoning that had struck the village. Thankfully, none of the cases were severe, and all she really needed to do was ease the suffering.
But by the time she finished her mixing, then delivering, then checking all her patients to be sure that they were all right, she was tired, hot and sweaty. She ran a hand across her forehead and drew in a long breath.
"Habda," she said, "I think I'd like to bathe again today. Do you mind taking me?"
The large Shadrani smiled. "Not at all, my lady."
When she was ready, he fell in behind her and kept his watch until they turned the bend in the road that cut them off from sight of the village. There, as if materializing from mid-air, the Prince of Gemen appeared, as he did every day. Calli continued to walk as though nothing was amiss and, as he did every day, Habda fell back and allowed his imrati prince to fall into step beside the blonde female. He watched them until they disappeared down the path, then turned, shaking his head, and went back to the village.
They walked in silence, each knowing they would never break the law of imrati

and thus end the other's life. But there was joy in the company they shared. The first day or so, it had been terribly difficult for Calli to remember not to speak to him or reach out to him, so strong was the temptation. But then she knew that the only way she could continue to enjoy even this small comfort was to obey the laws to the last letter.

When they reached the small clear pool nestled under a rock shelf that helped conceal the Shadrani village, Calli went to the edge while Erone approached the craggy cliff across from her and climbed halfway up the rocks to rest and keep guard over her.

Calli dove under the water and then took up soap to wash first her hair, and then her body. Erone's eyes followed every sweep of her hand and every diving, cleansing motion that sent her into the water until she came up a final time and waded out, looking like a golden water goddess. Small rivulets of water cascaded down her body and flew from her hair when she shook the heavy mass. She sat down and began to brush the golden mane dry, her eyes fastened on Erone while she did so.

It was an achingly erotic ritual, but also one that filled them with an odd kind of sweet satisfaction, as though they had made love with their eyes, at least. Erone stretched out and leaned on his elbow while he watched her, jealous of the brush that was free to sweep through the silken curls. There they stayed, until the late afternoon sun let them know that it was time to return.

* * * *

Habda entered the great hall and caught sight of Pashar sitting at one of the trestle tables, his head resting in one hand while the other drew bored patterns on the wood below his fingers. The great Shadrani knew that Erone's imrati was causing trouble here, too, for the lad had been once again left adrift in the savaging sea of shadra. Remembering his own coming of age, Habda approached the boy and sat beside him.

"Tell me, Pashar," he said. "Why aren't you working on your chira?"

Pashar's lips thinned as he shrugged. "I didn't have a chance to learn it all. And now that the prince..." He caught himself and looked up. "Now I have no one to teach me."

"Come then, I will teach you."

Pashar's face brightened as he looked up and realized the man was serious. Without another word, he fell into step behind him.

"Habda," Mathena said, as the large Shadrani passed her on the way out.

"Weren't you to watch over Calli today?"

Raesa turned as well, and threw the man a questioning look.

"My presence wasn't needed," Habda answered, "for she is well-guarded by a spirit who lives in the woods." He bowed to his queen and left the room.

Mathena and her daughter exchanged a glance heavy with meaning before Danae broke it with his innocent question.

"Why is everyone mad at...at you-know-who?"

Raesa gave him a quelling glance. "I thought we spoke of this matter, Danae." The little one nodded his head. "Yes, but I still don't understand. Why can't he and Calli be friends?"

His grandmother sighed heavily, gave Raesa a pitying look, then rose and left.

"Calli isn't...one of us," his mother said. "It's all right for them to be friends, but only a certain kind of friend."

"You mean because she's different from us?"

"Yes, sort of..."

"Oh," Danae said, finally thinking he understood.

Later that afternoon, Danae brushed his pony and thought over the situation. He knew that being from the royal house, you had to sometimes be careful about things like friends or life-mates. He knew that Gadrel had been chosen as

Erone's life-mate partly because he was also from the House of Gemen, though a distant cousin. Calli was different from them. Calli wasn't royalty. Calli was just...Calli.

* * * *

That evening, Raesa came to Calli's room to impress upon her, once again, the importance of maintaining Erone's imrati. Habda's comment that afternoon had unnerved her. When she entered, she found the female Healer sitting on her windowsill, staring into the garden outside. Calli was sipping from a large mug of Erone's favorite brandywine.

"The nights grow cold," she said softly. "And this strong liquor does much to banish the chill from my bones."

Raesa frowned, knowing Calli rarely drank spirits. "If you are chilled, my lady, why not have someone stoke the fire, or-"

Her words stopped dead when she saw Calli lift the cup from her lips and place it a small distance from her on the windowsill. A strong, deeply tanned hand reached out and lifted the mug. Raesa drew in her breath and moved farther into the room until she could see her brother standing outside the window.

Erone turned the mug in his hand and drank from the same spot that had touched Calli's lips, sharing a kiss in the only way that was left to them.

Raesa felt her heart break at the tender, painful sight. In that moment, she knew beyond a doubt that this obsession her brother had for the blonde-haired city dweller had become love. Knew it and despaired in the knowledge, for there was no place in either world for it.

She didn't have the heart to do what she had come to do, and she knew now that there was no need. Calli understood the imrati well enough, for she was bending, but not breaking its laws by leaving the cup for him. They had neither spoken to nor touched each other, neither did she give him the drink. She merely abandoned the goblet long enough for him to drink from it.

Raesa sat down in the large chair near Calli's bed. "Tell me, Calli, what would you say to the Prince of Gemen, if he were here?"

Calli turned to her and knew from the tender look on Raesa's face that she had finally accepted the unacceptable, that she finally knew the truth. She turned back and looked into Erone's eyes.

"I would tell him," she said fervently, "how I miss him, and long for his touch. I would tell him how I ache to feel his arms around me, and lie awake at night, remembering."

Erone drank in the words, needing to hear them, needing to know that he wasn't alone in this yearning abyss.

"I would tell him," she finished, a catch in her voice, "how much I love him."

This said, Raesa found her feet and came to the window. She took Calli by the arm and drew her away, noticing, from the corner of her eye, that Erone moved away as well, to come to rest on his mantle that was spread on the ground. But the nights were indeed getting colder and the mug of brandywine was left on the windowsill, in case some passing spirit should have need of it in the night.

Twenty-five

Calli was determined to find the cause of the outbreak of food poisoning that had shaken the village. Zeras had chosen this disaster to again spread rumors that she was a spy who had been sent from the city-state and was intentionally poisoning them all.

Gadrel, still the promised of the Prince of Gemen, threw his support behind the Healer, and there was enough ill will in the Shadrani toward any city-dweller that Zeras's words didn't fall on totally deaf ears.

Calli was bent on clearing her name.

She checked all the food and found nothing wrong with any of it. Nor was this sort of thing usual, Mathena told her, since the Shadrani were meticulously clean and vigilant about keeping their foods from spoiling. In fact, Mathena said, she never remembered an outbreak of this kind in the village. While that fact tended to lend evidence to Zeras's claim, what it did for Calli was trigger a small warning device that pointed her in the Healer's direction as the cause of the illness. Now, if she could only discover how he managed it.

Resentfully passing up her afternoon with Erone, Calli went into the great hall and sat on one of the large benches, searching her mind for clues as to how he could have affected so many, so badly.

She herself hadn't been afflicted, so she considered what the others had eaten that she hadn't. But she had already checked that out, and had found nothing. She rested her elbow on the table in front of her and frowned. It had to be the food, how else could they all have contracted food poisoning? Yet the only thing that she hadn't shared was the wine...

The answer came to her as swiftly and as surely as if the angels had delivered it to her. It wasn't the food at all...it was the wine! She jumped up and forced herself to remember words that Jala had spoken long ago. There was a plant whose leaves could induce the same symptoms as food poisoning, but it had to be administered in liquid form.

Taralweed!

She pressed her mouth into a thin line, certain now that it had been Zeras, for who else would know enough to do such a thing? She stormed into the kitchen.

"Aiser," she called. "What happened to the barrel that held the wine from the banquet a few nights ago?"

He frowned, thinking. Danae, who was with him, said, "I think it's out near the burning pile, my lady."

She left the kitchen, in a hurry to reach the place where the Shadrani burned their refuse before someone threw the barrel, and the evidence, into the flames.

Calli squinted against the brightness of the sun as she caught sight of the burning pile. No smoke rose from the area, and she realized that there had been no cause for hurry. There was no sign of anyone nearby as she began to search around her, looking for the barrel. Finally, she spied it.

With a cry of discovery, she ran toward it and lifted the lid. She bent over and ran her finger along the bottom, coming up with a trace of wine. She held the drop near her nose and sniffed. Yes, the smell was faint, but there. She tasted it. Absolutely! There was taralweed in the wine!

Anger shot through her as she realized what Zeras had done. She spun on her heel to head back to the village. But she had no time to even cry out as Zeras came at her out of nowhere, hunting knife in his hand and murderous intent shining in his Shadrani eyes.

Calli's instincts took over. She swerved to flee, but was too slow for the deadly Shadrani. As she wrenched away, the blow came. Calli felt the breath robbed from her body. She looked down to see the long handle of the knife lodged in her side. Her eyes wide with shock, she sank to her knees, remaining conscious only long enough to see the Prince of Gemen cut Zeras in two with one sweep of his great sword.

* * * *

The Shadrani came out of their homes and shops, all falling silent as their prince passed by them, Calli in his arms and a look of desperation on his face. He carried her up to her old room in the great house and laid her gently on the bed. Within seconds, Raesa and Mathena were there, coming to her side and calling out instructions. Erone moved away to the corner of the room.

Danae, who had followed Calli and witnessed the entire thing, had run ahead of Erone to tell his mother and grandmother what had happened. Tears streamed down his young face as he watched everyone fuss over the pale form now lying motionless on the bed.

"Mamma!" he cried. "She won't die, will she?"

Raesa made a motion to Cera, who gently lifted the young boy into her arms and took him outside. Then she turned to her mother, ever aware of her brother's silent presence in the room.

"What are we going to do? There's no Healer to tend her."

Mathena sat back and let out a sigh. "We can only do our best," she replied.

"I will go find Altor. He's experienced in dressing some battle wounds."

Raesa couldn't help lifting her eyes to her brother. His expression was tortured. As soon as his mother left the room, he came to Calli and took up her hand, pressing it against his lips.

"Altor will do his best," Raesa said to the room in general. "But he won't be able to save her from this terrible wound."

Erone dropped his head on Calli's breast to smother the cry of pain that wrenched from his lips as he heard the truth in the cruel words.

Twenty-six

Jala rose from his reading and blew out the candle in the library. Then he trudged up toward his room. It seemed he had aged twenty years in the past month. He still couldn't believe that Calli was gone.

Tsandis, how he missed the child!

But the case of mistaken identity had finally been discovered when the wedding party had returned home. Solte had been nearly out of her mind, and the king...well, the king had been in a murderous rage when he discovered that his only daughter had been taken by bandits, or worse, into the forest. He sent out a large armed search party that combed the woods for days but they found nothing except her paिता. Having received no word of ransom, no word of anything at all, King Sadone had finally accepted the possibility that his daughter might be dead.

The Healer of the House of Arath wearily opened the door to his chamber and stepped inside. He struck a match and held it to his lantern and as he did so, felt the cold razor edge of a blade that rested, suddenly, against his throat. "Don't cry out," rasped a voice from the darkness.

Jala froze, but the lantern caught and the light played on the face of the man before him. Jala felt his breath draw in sharply.

"You are Shadrani!"

"I am."

"What do you want with me?"

"You are the Healer, Jala?"

"Yes."

"I have need of you, for my love is dying."

Jala, his mind still in a whirl, began to gather his things. "What happened to him?"

"She suffers from a knife wound."

Jala glanced up in surprise. "She? But...what of your own Healer, then?" He felt his heart quake at the steely desperation in the reply.

"It was his hand that delivered the wound, and I sent him to perdition where he belongs, though not soon enough."

"Great Tsandis," Jala whispered, then stopped when the lantern flickered brightly to offer a better look at the Shadrani.

"You are the Prince of Gemen!" Jala breathed.

"I was...once," Erone said, then snuffed out the lantern and moved to the door.

* * * *

They stopped only once on the road, and that to allow the Healer to tighten his saddle girth which had loosened. Like a man possessed, the Prince of Gemen set a tortuous pace, sparing neither horse nor rider in his desperate race to save Calli.

When they broke into the clearing of the village, Jala was exhausted, winded, and not a little apprehensive about his surroundings. Erone led him into the great house and straight up to the room where Raesa continued to keep a vigil. Dropping to one knee beside Calli, Erone's breath exhaled in a flood of relief when he saw the shallow but definite rise and fall of her breast.

Raesa eyed Jala suspiciously. "Who are you?"

He threw a look at Erone's back. "I am Jala," he answered, "the Healer from the city."

Raesa's eyes grew wide as she realized what her brother had done. She turned to say something to Erone and remembered, just in time, the imrati. Jala looked at her oddly, then came to the bedside.

"Calli!" he gasped, as he finally saw her face.

"You know her?" Raesa said.

Jala's mind did some quick deducting. They didn't know who she was, couldn't, for if they did, she would not be alive.

"I...know her from the city," was all he said. "I'd like to be left alone with her, if that's possible, because..." he turned to Raesa, "...you aren't necessary, and you..." he turned to the Prince of Gemen, "...scare the hell out of me!"

* * * *

Calli stirred, moaned, and opened her eyes. When she focused, it was the face of Jala that sharpened in her vision. She whispered his name, a question in her tone.

"Yes, it's me, Calli."

Her eyes filled first with joy and then with fear as they darted around the room.

"There's no one else here," he said. "I sent them away."

"Jala," she whispered, "they don't know...who I am."

"I thought as much," he soothed. "They are none the wiser now that I'm here."

"They think I'm a simple handmaid."

"Shhh," he soothed. "Now is not the time for you to worry. You must rest, Calli. You've lost a lot of blood and your body needs to recuperate."

"Erone?" she rasped.

"The prince? He's fine, though worried about you."

She sighed in relief and let the darkness take her once more. A few moments later, the door opened and Erone stepped into the room, moving immediately to the bed.

"I could stay away no longer."

Jala stood up wearily and moved to sit in a chair in a corner of the room.

"Have no fear," he said. "She is saved."

Erone searched his face. "Truly?"

Jala smiled and nodded. "She needs rest, but she'll be fine."

Exhaling a great breath of relief, Erone sank to his knees and caught up Calli's hand, smiling as he brought it to his lips.

Watching the motion, Jala leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees.

"And for my trouble," he said, "I'd like to hear the story of how a Shadrani male has come to feel as you do about a female from the city-state."

Erone looked up at him.

"I suppose," Jala continued, "that same story would explain how the Prince of Gemen came to be imrati."

His eyes narrowing, Erone sat back on his heels and regarded the man. "How do you know our words?"

"I am Shadrani," Jala answered blandly. "I was banished from this village before you were born."

The prince didn't even try to hide his surprise.

"For what crime?" he asked finally.

Jala threw a pointed look at Calli. "For much the same one as you're guilty of, I suppose. I lusted after a female."

Erone turned and stroked a hand across Calli's forehead.

"How did you escape the sword?"

"The king's daughter pled for my life."

One black eyebrow shot up. "My mother?"

Jala nodded. "It was she I lusted after."

A second eyebrow joined the first. "My mother?" he repeated.

Jala laughed. "Oh, don't worry! It was a one-sided thing, your mother is as Shadrani as they come. But we had become close friends, and she didn't wish to see me die over it."

Erone considered this. "So," he said, "she saved your life, but you were exiled. How did you come to the city?"

Jala sat back and stretched his long legs out before him. "When I left here, I fell in with a man who lived near the edge of the forest. I never learned much about him, for he was mute and the only way we could communicate was through sign language. But for some reason, he knew more about healing and saving lives than anyone I had ever heard of."

"When I showed an interest in it, he taught me. I stayed with him for six years, until the day he died. Then I decided to try my luck in the city."

Erone threw him a surprised look.

Jala smiled.

"Oh, such a venture would never work for you, since you'd stand out like a red flag with your Shadrani features. But thanks to my Sorisi grandmother, I have enough of the look to pass in the city."

"My reputation as a Healer soon gained me the attention of the king, and..."

He left off with a shrug.

"How could you bear to be in the service of such a man?" Erone snarled.

Jala darkened at the words. "I know you are his bitter enemy," he said. "And I know why. It was I who was instrumental in securing your release two years ago when he held you in that hell-hole of a dungeon."

Erone wrenched his eyes away and fought with the memories that still wounded him with every thought.

"I only wish," Jala continued, his voice now a whisper, "I could have saved your son."

"It's enough," Erone rasped, "that I know someone tried, that he wasn't without...some pity." Silence hung in the air. Then Erone stood and put a hand out to Jala. "Come," he said, "you must be tired, and I would see to your comfort." He led the man to Habda and left him, wordlessly, in his keeping. Then he returned to Calli's room.

* * * *

The next morning, Mathena and Raesa opened the door to check on the patient and stopped at the picture that confronted them. Calli was still asleep. On the floor beside her, curled up in his mantle and sleeping soundly, was the Prince of Gemen.

"Great Tsandis!" Mathena whispered. "I never thought I would see this!" She moved into the room and gestured helplessly at her son. "The future King of the Shadrani," she said, "sleeping on the floor like a dog!"

Raesa turned to her. "Are you speaking of the spirit that guards Calli, my queen?" she said pointedly.

Mathena winced. "This isn't going to go away, is it?"

Raesa shook her head slowly. "No, mother, it isn't."

Erone stirred, looked up, and came to his feet. He sent a glance over to Calli and was reassured by the healthy glow that once again graced her face. Then he gathered his mantle, swept past his mother and sister, and left the great house.

Twenty-seven

Calli stretched in the afternoon sunshine. Then she drew her fingers through her long hair and turned to look at her prince.

Erone was seated on his perch on the rocks above Calli's bathing pool. He returned her lazy smile. With Jala's help, she was healing quickly and her strength was returning.

Now that the Healer was in the village, Calli felt both relieved to have someone to share her secret and frightened anew at the prospect of it coming out. She watched the figure that guarded her from the rocks and wondered if Erone's feelings for her would withstand the truth.

He had vowed to destroy her father, had promised revenge. And what better revenge than to take his daughter the way Erone's son had been taken? Calli closed her eyes and pushed the dreadful thoughts away. There was no reason to fear that their love would ever come to such a test.

She opened her eyes and sat up quickly.

Erone was nowhere in sight.

Scanning the pool and surrounding area, she found no trace of him. Frowning, she gained her feet just in time to hear the approaching horses. Calli's head swiveled as she turned to watch the five heavily armed men gallop into the clearing. She recognized the cut of their armor as they came. They were some of her father's men-at-arms.

"Here," the first one shouted, "what's this?"

Calli, dressed only in her muslin robe, stood watching the men who continued to sit astride their war-horses and stare at her.

"Could be a water nymph," a second said, but Calli didn't miss the way his face clouded with lust as he raked her with his eyes. "But I'll have to take a closer look."

She searched the faces quickly, looking for some sign of hope, some sign of help, but all she saw was deadly intent, or apathy. The man dismounted and took a step toward her.

She backed away.

"Looks like you'll have to earn your sport," one of the others taunted. One by one, the men dismounted, some to watch the ugly game and some simply to water their animals.

Calli's heart pounded with fright as she faced the large man. She knew she could outrun him, if she could get past him. Fleeting, she thanked Tsandis that Erone had taken this moment to disappear. Taking in the size of the men and the amount of weaponry they carried, she shuddered to think what would happen to him had he been discovered there.

The man lunged again and Calli once more slipped out of his grasp. Laughter from his mates turned his mood ugly. "Come on now, little wench," he said, drawing his knife. "It'll go badly for you if I have to chase you much more." Calli heard the sound long before she understood what was causing it. She and the man threatening her stood rooted to the spot, watching one soldier fall and then another before the third managed to clear his sword and make a feeble effort to attack something he could barely see. The man close to Calli dropped his knife, his eyes widening in terror.

"Shadrani!" he cried, then sprang to his horse and galloped away.

Calli heard the ring of steel upon steel and focused on the sound, catching sight for the first time of the avenging wind that stopped, swiveled, disengaged his sword and cut his opponent down all in one fluid motion. He turned to meet the last man, whirling on the spot and driving the sword

through his neck before the other had time to even launch a strike. Calli heard the sickening sound of metal grazing bone. And then everything was still. In the center of the carnage stood the Prince of Gemen, still poised to strike, his silver eyes raking his surroundings for further danger. Seeing none, he turned to Calli. She stood, trembling, staring at him as though she'd never seen him before. She had become so used to her sweet love, the tender prince who touched her with a gentleness that fired her blood. She'd dismissed every frightening story she'd heard about the Prince of Gemen. But at this moment, they flooded back to her. His ferocity rooted her to the spot. Slowly, Erone lowered his sword. He watched her, some part of him telling him not to approach. Then he realized what he must look like. He glanced down at himself, and saw the blood and gore spattered over him. Keeping the distance between them, Erone went to the pond and stripped off his offending clothing. When he was finished, he dove into the water and stayed under until he was halfway across the small pond. When he came up, he lifted a hand to smooth the long wet hair away from his face. Turning back, he saw Calli still watching him. Damn it! He hadn't meant to strike at them all. In fact, he thought he'd only have to kill one or two. But when he saw her threatened again with a blade, and the last time he'd been too late...something savage had taken over. He cursed himself, knowing he must seem a brutal killer to her at this moment, wondering if she'd ever look upon him the same way again. He stilled in the water, his heart the only sound he could hear as he watched her sliding out of her robe. Then she poised on the edge of the pond. Oh, Calli, no! his mind whispered. Don't...don't! But his heart didn't seem to hear. "Yes, Calli!" he cried. "Come to me!" She dove into the water and he swam to meet her, reaching her as she came up for air. He allowed her one saving breath before he pulled her into his arms and ravaged her with his kiss.

* * * *

Jala sat and eyed his queen with amusement. Mathena was pacing the floor, sounding off. "To think," she snapped, "that he actually went into that cursed city to get you!" She stopped, looked at him, and then continued pacing. "I don't know what to do about this...this obsession!" She walked back and forth a few more times, then turned again to Jala. "Well?" she demanded. Jala's eyebrows shot up. "Well what, my queen?" "Don't you have any suggestions? After all, you're...somewhat acquainted with these things." The Healer threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, you tickle me, Mathena," he said. "My 'acquaintance' with this particular thing cost me my place in this village, and my life as I knew it. I'm afraid I've made it a point to forget everything I ever knew about my 'acquaintance' with it!" She threw her hands up. "Perhaps if his father had lived..." This drew another chuckle from Jala. "Yes," he smirked, "I know just what Jareela would say." The corners of Mathena's mouth turned down. "You're right," she admitted. "First, he'd tell me that Erone got this unfortunate preference from my side of the family." "And then," Jala finished for her, "when you weren't there, he'd tell Erone to go ahead and bed the city-dwelling wench." Mathena couldn't help a sardonic smile. "What a rascal he was," she said fondly. "I'm surprised someone didn't kill him sooner!"

They both chuckled at this, then fell silent. When the queen spoke again, there was desperation in her voice.

"What if I send her back to the city, Jala? Would she be all right there-I mean, now that we dreadful Shadrani have had our hands on her-or would things go badly for her?"

Jala stiffened. How to answer this question? He still felt some loyalty to his own people, but he would never betray Calli.

"Before I even address that, Mathena, I must ask you what makes you think he'd let her go? After all," he continued, "I doubt that he'd allow her to be taken from him, after he braved the entire army of the king by coming to the city to find me."

"And stretched the limits of imrati beyond rational comprehension!"

Jala smiled at her. "You know as well as I do that the spirit judgment can be abandoned to save another life. Your son conducted himself well and within the mandate of his imrati, I think." He shook his head. "I must say, though, you must have been absolutely desperate to declare him such."

"I was and still am," she said solemnly. "But what frightens me is that even imrati won't stop him."

Twenty-eight

The man quivered in his boots while he waited for his king to summon him. When the signal was given, he moved quickly to step in behind the captain of the guard, who escorted him into the royal chambers.

King Sadone turned an intimidating look upon the common soldier who stood before him. He didn't like to share the company of such creatures, but if the story he'd heard was true...

"I understand you had a run-in with the Shadrani in the forest yesterday?"

The man gulped and nodded. "Fearsome it was, my lord," he said.

"Yes, I'm sure," Sadone said sardonically. "But you remember where it was? You could lead us there if necessary?"

The man's eyes widened. "I could, my lord, but I'll not go back there."

Sadone's eyes blazed at him. "You will if I tell you to! Now, I heard there was a female?"

The man nodded.

"Well, don't stand there like an ass, man," Sadone snarled, "tell me about her!"

"W-what would you like to know, my lord?"

"What did she look like?"

The man looked at the floor. "Ahh, well now, right pretty she was. She had long, long blonde hair, like spun gold it was."

The king's eyes sharpened. The look in them caused the soldier to take a small step back.

"Go on!" Sadone spat.

"Well, ah...her eyes! Her eyes were like violets, my lord! Never seen a color like that before in my life."

King Sadone stood absolutely still for such a long time that the soldier peered at him questioningly.

"How many men were with you?" the king asked suddenly.

"Five, sir, including me."

"And how many Shadrani were there?"

The man's lips tightened. He glanced nervously about the room.

"How many?" Sadone shouted.

"O-one, as far as I could tell, my lord, but I never saw anything like it.

Like a demon out of hell he was, my lord, cutting down my men before they even had a chance!"

Sadone dismissed the soldier, then turned a burning gaze on his captain. "Make ready my army to march," he breathed. "For my daughter lives, and she's in the keeping of the Prince of Gemen."

* * * *

Erone closed his eyes and let the feel of Calli wash over him. She trailed a lock of her blonde hair across his chest, teasing his flesh as she sat astride him in their hideaway behind the waterfall.

The imrati had shattered beyond repair when she had come to him in the cool waters under the falls where they now lay together. That was two days ago. For him, knowing he'd almost lost her twice, and for her, having been so close to death, had dulled the bite of the death sentence that now hung over them both. He let out his breath in a sensual moan as she bent and teased a nipple with her tongue. For her effort, she was rewarded with a sharp stab of pleasure when he bucked beneath her, thrusting deeper, shooting waves of ecstasy through them both.

Calli threw her head back and lifted her hair from the back of her neck with a native eroticism. She was becoming used to the wanton behavior that seized her with just one look from her Shadrani lover. Glancing down, she saw him watching her, his eyes shining with a fierce silver light. She lowered her lids and threw him a sharp sensual challenge.

He took up the challenge, flipping her over on her back and pulling his hot, pulsing flesh from her body. Her breath went with it; her eyes flying open in question.

"Calli," he whispered, "wait for me."

She lay still beneath him, only her breath betraying the raging of her body. He held her there, waiting in exquisite torment before plunging into her again, once, and then withdrawing to leave her writhing beneath him.

"Erone!" she cried.

He chuckled softly, nuzzling her neck. "You have no patience, my kitten. I'll have to teach you."

He trailed kisses across her breasts before taking first one, then another hard nipple into his mouth and sucking gently.

Calli cried out and wound her fingers in his long dark hair, then trailed them across his broad shoulders, drinking in the essence of his sheer male power. While his mouth continued to feed hungrily on her breasts, his fingers stroked her body, teasing, moving lower to attack the sensitive flesh on her inner thighs. Her knees drew together instinctively.

"Open for me," he demanded gently.

The muscles in her thighs relaxed minutely.

"More," he coaxed as his fingers sought the intimate female flesh at the center of her core.

When he reached his goal, Calli's legs fell open to him of their own accord, allowing access to her most private flesh. Her mind dulled with a depth of sensual lethargy she hadn't known existed. She gave herself to him completely. Erone sensed her surrender and reveled in it. Bending his dark head slowly, he traced his tongue across her swollen flesh, holding her open to him when she bucked against the contact.

Calli gasped quietly, the soft sound a mixture of shock and delight. She closed her eyes to the burning sensation and let her prince have his way with her. His mouth devoured her, teased, licked and nipped her, wracking her with aftershocks of pleasure that threatened to take her over the edge of sanity.

"You taste sweet, my kitten," he murmured against her flesh.

"Erone," she whispered, the word both a caress and a plea.

She thrashed beneath him, until he could no longer bear the wait. In one quick motion, he moved up and plunged into her, sending her into spasms and bringing himself to a searing climax that tore his control from his grasp and her name from his lips.

Twenty-nine

It was early in the morning, just after the first rays of the sun had brightened the sky, when the first alarm came. Calli sat up in her bed, confused by the sounds, then rushed to the window.

Erone wasn't there.

Throwing a simple cotton dress over her head, she sped from the room, only to come to a dead stop in the hallway, shocked momentarily by the buzz of activity. Everyone was running. Raesa and Cera brushed by her and she ran behind them.

"What is it?" she cried.

"We're under attack!" Raesa shouted over her shoulder.

Calli followed them into the large antechamber that allowed a view of the square in the center of the village. Raesa and Cera shouldered their longbows and prepared their quivers, while the terrible sounds from outside drew Calli to the window, eyes wide, her heart pounding in her breast.

The square was filled with Shadrani warriors locked in mortal combat with her father's soldiers. Everywhere, swords met and were turned away with the vicious ring of metal against metal. Before her frightened eyes, men fell to horrible deaths while all around, others stepped over them to attack or defend. Unaccustomed to the sight and sound of battle, Calli felt her stomach heave at the brutality of it.

The Shadrani hadn't even had time to saddle, and so were at the disadvantage of fighting from the ground while the forces from Soris had come in on their great war-horses.

And there, in the forefront, was the Prince of Gemen.

Calli was, for the first time, glad of Gadrel's presence. He was right there with him, guarding his back while together they hacked away at the men who threatened them.

"Calli," Raesa cried. "Please, stay in here with Danae!"

Calli turned to see the little one come to the window with her, before his mother and Cera darted out the door and into the heat of the battle. Danae's eyes widened as he watched the life and death scene before him. He quickly searched out his uncle, and Calli didn't have the heart to turn him away from the ugly sight.

"What do they want?" he cried.

Calli shook her head. "I don't know, Danae," she whispered, then cried out as Erone ducked a blade that swung at his head. Her hand at her mouth, she prayed as she had never prayed before.

* * * *

Erone was echoing the question of his young nephew in the silence of his mind as he raged in the throes of combat.

What did they want?

He thought of those few soldiers he had killed a few days ago. They had been near the village, certainly, but the Shadrani rested secure in the knowledge that the Sorisi, even if they found the village, feared them too much to launch an attack. Surely it wasn't the loss of a few soldiers that had brought this on. And yet, here they were. The city-dwellers were falling quickly to the Shadrani sword. But more kept coming, and by in the battle.

What was it?

What had brought them?

* * * *

Calli, holding Danae in her arms, moved away from the window as the soldiers drew nearer, then she gasped when she recognized her father's captain of the

guard. He was pointing toward the great house.
"See if she's in there!" he shouted above the din of battle.
Calli froze. She should have guessed. They were looking for her!
In a momentary panic, she searched her mind for what to do, but any decision was taken out of her hands when the door flew open and the captain stormed in, followed by several of his men. His eyes focused on her. She drew Danae behind her protectively. "Princess," he said, "we've come to rescue you."
Danae's little head shot up at the address. Calli backed away, keeping the child behind her. "No!" she cried. "I don't want to go with you! Please, leave me here and leave these people in peace!"
The captain scowled at her, then motioned for his men to take her. But the first man that laid a hand on her felt the sting of sharp Shadrani teeth sink into his leg.
"Oww! Great Tsandis!" he bellowed. "The creature has bit me!"
Before Calli could stop him, he backhanded the child, sending him crashing to the floor.
"Danae!" she cried out.
Murder in his eyes, the soldier clasped a hand to his wound and lifted his sword to strike the boy as he scrambled to his feet. Calli rushed between them, her hand raised against the strike. Danae grasped her leg and clung for life.
"You go through me to harm him!" she challenged.
The man blinked at her, his weapon suspended.
The captain shouted at him. "Stay your hand, man; she's the king's daughter." Then he turned to her. "Come with us willingly, then, and we'll let him be." He had left her no choice.
Calli dropped quickly to one knee and smoothed the hair from Danae's bleeding face.
"Listen to me, little fox," she said, using Erone's pet name for him. "You stay here and hide in this house until your mother or Erone comes to get you. Promise me." His face a mixture of terror and resentment, he nodded. Calli pulled him into her arms and hugged him tightly for a second, then rose and went willingly with the captain of the guard.

* * * *

Erone's arm grew numb, but he was immune to the feeling, immune to everything but the keen senses that had kept him alive in a world that believed the only good Shadrani was a dead one. From the trees above them, Raesa's females with their longbows rained a steady torrent of death on the enemy.
His blood raged anew with hatred as he thought of the man that had sent this attack. Every soldier that died under his hand was the King of Arath; with every stroke of his blade, he vowed that one day he would strike a blow to ravage his enemy the way he'd been ravaged. Then a flash of long blonde hair caught the corner of his eye.
"Calli!" he shouted, seeing her mount a waiting horse. But a loud curse and the sharp ring of steel near his head brought him back to the battle.
"Perdition!" Gadrel snarled while he fended off the blow that had been aimed at Erone's head. "That cursed female will kill you yet! Watch your back, Erone!"
Torn between the battle and going after Calli, Erone's heart wrenched as he was drawn irrevocably back to the former. But the sight of her riding off lent new fervor to his sword as he swung at his enemy with a desperation born of the need to finish this and go after her.

* * * *

The king's men, having what they came for, began to fall back. But they continued to engage the enemy to give the captain time to get the Princess of Arath away. Gadrel sensed the minute change in the battle and quickly disposed of his man. When he saw Erone strike down his opponent, Gadrel lifted his great sword and clapped his promised on the back of the head with the steel grip, catching him as he collapsed.

"Habda!" he called out. "Erone has fallen!" He waited until the great Shadrani rushed to his side, then left the prince in his keeping. He took to his horse and rode after the blonde city-dweller.

This was the best chance he'd get to rid himself forever of this pestilence that plagued Erone's life. Knowing the forest as well as he did, it would be easy for a lone Shadrani to follow the fleeing party and pick just the right time to move in and strike her down. He raced like a fluid shadow, one with his horse as he closed the distance between himself and Calli.

* * * *

Raesa kissed Danae's head and thanked Tsandis that he wasn't more badly hurt. "They took Calli!" he wailed.

"I know they did," his mother said. "But she'll be fine, don't worry."

"But--"

Raesa raised a finger to her son's lips and quieted him. "Jala said you must be quiet for a while," she whispered. "So I'm going to go check on Erone, and then I'll come back later to see you."

"But I need to see Erone, too--"

"Not now, Danae. In a little while, okay?"

Danae looked as if it wasn't okay at all. But he nodded dutifully.

* * * *

Gadrel had overtaken the rescue party and had been riding, unseen, parallel to them for only about a mile when the captain of the guard gave the signal to slow their horses for a much-needed rest. When they came to a stop, the Shadrani slid off his mount and crept forward, waiting for his chance to move on Calli. But soldiers surrounded her, and he knew he'd have to be content to blend in with the forest and wait.

"Why didn't you wish to come with us, my lady?" the captain of the guard asked.

Calli didn't answer him. She merely continued staring stonily in front of her.

"Will you at least curb my curiosity and tell me why the Shadrani didn't bother to ransom you?"

Gadrel's eyes narrowed. Ransom? A handmaid?

Still Calli didn't answer.

"Your father was certain you were dead," he pressed. "And I thought so as well. Who would have thought the Shadrani would have allowed the Princess of Arath to live among them?"

Gadrel straightened and stood stock-still. Still, his sharp eyes focused on Calli. The Princess of Arath!

When he continued to receive no answer from her, the captain gave up. "Come, Princess," he said, "we must move on now."

The party mounted and continued on, but its Shadrani shadow stayed behind. Smiling now for the first time in weeks, Gadrel waited until the sound of their retreating hoofbeats had died, then took to his horse and headed back to Erone.

* * * *

The Prince of Gemen moaned and opened his eyes, raising a hand to the lump on the back of his head. Then he sat up quickly, the image of long blonde hair disappearing among armed soldiers nagging at his memory.

Looking over, he saw his mother and sister watching him. He bit his tongue to keep from asking the question that was uppermost in his mind.

"I've abolished your imrati," Mathena said, as if reading his thoughts.

"Where's Calli?" he said.

His mother threw up her hands in disgust.

Raesa answered him. "We don't know, Erone." She looked at him seriously. "But we do know that those soldiers attacked to get her."

His eyes narrowed. "Why would they do that?"

"Great Tsandis knows!" Mathena answered. "But I intend to find out."

Erone shook his head. "Sadone wouldn't risk so many men just to rescue a handmaiden."

"No, he wouldn't," came a voice from the door. Gadrel moved in and stared into the face of his promised. "But he would to rescue his daughter."

Erone stiffened and gave Gadrel a threatening look. "What are you talking about?"

"I went after her," Gadrel admitted. "I thought perhaps I would have a chance to kill her and be rid of her--"

Erone stood slowly, menacingly.

"Hold your temper," Gadrel said. "I didn't lay a finger on her. They stopped to rest, and I heard them talking. It seems your blonde-headed Calli is the Princess of the House of Arath."

Mathena and Raesa exchanged a shocked look while Erone's eyes took on a dangerous sheen. "You lie," he breathed.

Gadrel laughed. "No," he said, "that's the beauty of it...I don't have to. That's why I didn't bother to kill her. I knew that this news would cure you of her once and for all!"

But Erone wasn't listening. His fists clenched as he took a step toward his promised. "Gadrel," he seethed, "this is a vile story."

Gadrel's eyes narrowed. "It's no story, but the truth."

"I don't believe you!"

"Believe this, my promised," he hissed, desperate to break her spell. "She sat with those men and derided you, telling them how she had the Prince of Gemen following her around like a trained pony."

"Gadrel..." The warning in his voice went unheeded.

"Oh, yes, and she said you weren't a bad lover, considering that you were Shadrani."

The sharp intake of breath let him know that he had hit his mark with that one. They stood and glared at each other. It was Gadrel who finally spoke again. "You've been humbled once more by the House of Arath!" he snarled. Erone's eyes closed and he drew a breath between clenched teeth.

"Go from my sight, before I slay you on the spot."

When Gadrel had disappeared, Raesa turned to her brother. "What if he speaks the truth?" she said gently.

"He lies!" her brother shouted. "He would say anything to turn me from her!"

* * * *

A short time later, Erone had the chance to finally meet with his little nephew. Danae looked sad and defeated as he came to hug his uncle.

"I tried to stop them," he said. "I bit one of them."

Erone smiled. Then he pushed the boy away to hold him at arm's length and

study the nasty cut along the side of his head. "And is that how you received this wound?"

Danae nodded and gingerly touched the spot.

"You did well, little fox," Erone said. He stood and went for the door.

"But," Danae stopped him, "I wanted to talk to you."

Erone turned. "Is there more?"

Danae brightened. "Yes," he said. "Calli is a princess!"

Erone's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Danae, you mustn't believe the stories that Gadrel is spreading."

Danae frowned. "Gadrel told me no story."

"Then why do you say this thing?"

"Because the man that took her said it."

Erone's face paled as he dropped to one knee and looked at his nephew. "What?" he said. "What did he say?"

Danae was shaken by the look in his uncle's eyes. He hadn't expected him to be mad about it.

"First, he called her Princess," he answered. "And then he said she was the king's daughter."

Throughout the village, the Shadrani raised their heads when the wind carried the wrenching cry of anguish and rage that tore from the throat of the Prince of Gemen.

Thirty

The council chambers of Gemen were full to overflowing. Seated behind the great table were Queen Mathena and her council, accompanied by Erone, Gadrel, Raesa, and Cera. Opposite the formidable gathering stood one man: Jala, Healer to the House of Arath.

The Healer waited silently while Mathena called for order, and then pierced him with her Shadrani eyes.

"Jala," she began, "we are here to determine what fate shall befall you for your deception regarding the true identity of the female that was known to us as the handmaid, Calli."

Jala's only response was a slight tightening of his lips. His eyes scanned the faces at the table, then came to rest on the prince.

Erone wasn't looking at him. The prince's eyes were focused on the middle distance, somewhere straight ahead of him. One hand was curled in a fist that rested against his mouth; the other was palm down on the council table.

Jala drew in his breath when he felt the powerful force that emanated from the man. He didn't have to look into those eyes to see the hatred that burned there, nor did he have to look any farther than the stories he'd heard circulating the village to know that that hatred now burned for Calli, the Princess of Arath. He threw a dark look at Gadrel, knowing he was the source of the fuel that fed the silver fire in the eyes of the Prince of Gemen.

"Jala," Mathena said, "I would hear your story."

The Healer took in a deep breath. "My queen," he began. "I was present at the birthing bed when the Princess of Arath came to this world. Indeed, it was I who delivered her into it. And from that day, I nursed her when she was ill, held her when she cried, scolded her, punished her, praised her, and taught her things no other female in the city-state of Soris would ever dream of learning.

"In short, my queen, Calli, though not my daughter, is like a daughter to me, and I was not about to reveal her true identity since I knew that it would result in her immediate execution.

"I would like to add, in her defense, that she acted with no harmful intent in maintaining her deception, but only as anyone else would do, to save her own life--"

"You cannot say this," Gadrel shouted, "for you don't know her intent!"

Mathena turned Gadrel. "Have patience!" she chided. She turned back to Jala.

"His words hold some truth, for you cannot know what was in her heart."

The Healer's eyes went to Erone. He hadn't moved. It was as if he wasn't even in the room.

"I know her, my queen," Jala said. "I know that her heart is as kind as her face is fair, and-", he delivered this last at Gadrel, "-I know that she wouldn't use deception to manipulate people to her own ends."

Gadrel's eyes narrowed dangerously. Mathena interceded.

"Still," she said, "if you had spoken up, perhaps there may have been a way to prevent the bloodshed."

"If I had spoken up," Jala said angrily, "the first blood shed would have been hers!" He glared at the queen, then crossed his arms and stood quietly.

"Have you nothing further to say?" she asked finally.

"I have not," Jala said. "Now, if you don't mind, I have battle wounds to dress, so I pray you to make up your minds. Either put me to the sword, or let me go to my work!"

Mathena straightened at the comment. "Since I'm not the injured party in this case, the decision over your fate doesn't rest with me." She looked toward her son. "Erone?"

All eyes in the room turned expectantly on the prince. Jala, in spite of his brave words, felt his heart tremble a little at being at the mercy of this man who appeared to have none left.

Erone neither moved, nor blinked an eye. But behind his closed fist, his words were definite.

"Let him go."

The room buzzed as Jala spun on his heel and left. Gadrel turned a cold look on his promised.

"Why did you do that?"

"He saved me once. I pay my debts."

Then he pushed his chair back, rose and walked out of the council chamber.

* * * *

The King of Arath paced the floor while he spoke his thoughts aloud to his captain of the guard.

"Something in this doesn't feel right," he said. "Why would she refuse to leave with you? I'd have thought the chit would have jumped into your arms and begged you to carry her out of there."

The captain didn't comment, nor did he think he was supposed to.

"And in the middle of all of this, my Healer disappears without a trace!" He turned to his man. "Any word on that?"

The captain shook his head.

Sadone stroked his beard as he walked. "Perhaps they've bewitched her in some way." He stopped and turned once again to his companion. "I'll have to watch my back around her from now on, of that I have no doubt." He resumed his march. "At any rate, I can't believe the Prince of Gemen will take any of this gracefully." He turned and headed for his daughter's room. "Keep a steady company of men watching the forest."

* * * *

Solte tried everything she could think of, but still couldn't draw the princess from her terrible state of misery. The handmaid shuddered every time she thought about what must have happened to her at the hands of those dreadful creatures that had captured her. Her lady wouldn't speak of it. Her deathly silence was hard on Solte, as if she hadn't been through enough! First, there was the terrible month in the city of Galen where she spent every day trying to convince someone to listen to her.

But would they?

No!

They actually believed she was the princess herself, playing out this dreadful story just to avoid marrying the viceroy. Toward the end of the stay, she was certain that many of those around her had decided that her mind had been badly affected by the Shadrani attack, and that she wasn't really all there any more!

But none of that was as bad as facing the king when she got home. He shouted and raged and looked as though he were going to blame her for all of it. And then, those awful weeks when she had thought her mistress dead. Solte had cried and cried. Now she had her princess back, but she wasn't the same; perhaps would never be the same again.

She was about to ask if Calli wanted some of the tea she liked to drink when the door opened and the King of Arath walked in. Solte jumped to her feet, curtsied quickly and fled the room.

"I've sent word to Galen," Sadone said. "Viceroy Reman will be here as soon as possible."

Calli turned from her perch at the window and fastened her father with a look of amazement.

"You mean to say that he still intends to marry me?"

Her father scowled. "Not that it didn't cost me. I've had to triple your dowry to get him to agree, after you've been--"

"After I've been what?" Calli said.

Her father's eyebrows shot up at her tone. "After you've been among those filthy Shadrani," he answered.

Calli laughed bitterly. She might have even understood it had her father known about her intimacy with Erone, might have found it in her heart to understand his outrage that she had done this thing with his worst enemy. But he didn't! His ignorance of the people he hated and the blind way he fed that hatred made her so angry and bitter that she became reckless.

"Just what is it that everyone thinks the 'filthy Shadrani' did to me, Father?"

His face darkened with anger. "I won't speak of it!"

But Calli was immune now to his anger. "I'm sure I know," she said. "Certainly it must have to do with...sex?"

The king's eyes widened with shock. He took a step back as Calli advanced on him, her eyes shining with an unnatural light.

"Yes, that's it," she whispered. "The dirty Shadrani and their strange sexual rites. Shall I tell you what they did with me, Father?"

"Great Tsandis," he whispered, "you are possessed!"

She laughed. "Yes, not in my right mind," she said. "Nor will I marry your precious viceroy!"

At that, her Father came around. "You will marry him!"

"I will not!"

She reeled from the force of the blow that sent her to the floor. Her father turned on his heel and left her lying there.

* * * *

Danae sat in his favorite tree and looked down at the world below him. He was puzzled by all the changes that had taken place, and much less innocent since his own near brush with death.

He had been really scared when that man had hit him. No one had ever hit him before. No one would dare strike a prince from the House of Gemen! And then he'd acted like a baby and hid behind Calli, and she'd saved him when he wanted to save her. That made his cheeks hot with embarrassment.

But mostly he was sad, sad for his grandmother because she looked so tired these days, sad for his mother because she kept watching her brother with that

funny look, and most of all sad for himself, because he had lost Erone. Danae didn't know why, but ever since he had told Erone that Calli was a princess, his uncle hadn't been the same. First, there was that awful look on his face, and then the cry that scared him so much he jumped halfway up the wall. And then, nothing. Erone wouldn't play with him or laugh with him or even call him 'little fox' anymore. Danae felt terrible about it. Like it was his fault. He knew that Erone had come to like Calli and wanted to spend time with her. And everyone was trying to make him stay away from her because she wasn't like him. But Danae had found out she was like him. He was a prince and she was a princess. So now, everybody should be happy. But nobody was happy. Danae frowned as the facts tumbled around in his head. He would have to ask Erone. His uncle would understand that all this confusion made his head dizzy. He climbed down from his perch and went to find the prince. It took him some time, but he finally discovered his uncle sitting under a large tree near the fresh pond that the Shadrani used for bathing. Even before he approached, Danae could see that he was in a bad mood, but the boy didn't understand why looking at the beautiful pond with its crystal clear waterfall made him angry. "Uncle," he said, coming to a halt before him, "I need to ask you something." "Not now, Danae." Danae stood and looked at his uncle for a while longer, but the man didn't even seem to know he was there. "Why are you mad at me?" the boy cried. Erone's eyes focused on him briefly. "I am not mad at you." "Then why are you mad at Calli?" Danae didn't miss the dark shadow that passed across his uncle's face before he turned away from him. "Go away, Danae," he said. "Leave me in peace."

* * * *

Danae left his uncle and went straight to his mother. Raesa was restringing her favorite longbow, but turned away from her work when she saw the look of anguish on her son's face as he came to her. He climbed up on her lap and began to cry. "Danae!" she said. "What is it?" "What's wrong with Erone?" he sobbed. Raesa's eyes closed and she took in a tired breath. She sat back, hugging her son closer to her. "Erone is very sad," she said. Danae sniffed and wiped at his tears. "He doesn't seem sad, he seems like he's mad." "Well, yes. I guess he's mad, too." "But he's mad at Calli!" Danae cried. "Why?" Raesa ran a hand through her hair and struggled with the right thing to say. "I think it's because Calli lied to him." Danae pulled away and looked at his mother. "Because of being a princess?" She nodded. "But, maybe she had to lie! You told me that sometimes people have to lie, and it's not bad if they have a good reason." Raesa's smile was tender. "Yes, Danae. And sometimes people just can't understand why other people lie, and they take a long time to get over it." Danae frowned and thought about this. Then he leaned back against his mother and snuggled into her while she held him close and made him feel safe and wanted and loved once again.

* * * *

The next morning, Danae was up very early. He snuck into the kitchen, took some of the whistleberry tarts that were left from the night before, and put them gently into his leather bag. He put a bridle on his pony, Stout, hopped on his back and headed away from the Shadrani village.

Even though he was frightened by what he was about to do, he knew he had to make up for his cowardice. He was a Prince of Gemen, and if he had been less frightened during the attack, maybe Calli wouldn't have been taken. Now, he had to go find her. He had to bring her back so that she could tell Erone why she had to lie to him, and then everything would be all right again. He dug his heels into his little mount, and the pony sprang away.

* * * *

Jala was surprised that the Prince of Gemen had agreed to a meeting with him. But he had, and this was the Healer's chance to try to reach him before his hatred destroyed Calli and shattered what was left of the shaky peace between the Shadrani and the Sorisi.

When he entered the morning room in the great house, he was disappointed to see that Gadrel was with the prince. But as Erone indicated that the Healer should sit, he dismissed his promised.

Gadrel gave Jala a venomous look when he crossed the floor and exited the room. But Jala wasn't unnerved by Gadrel. He was, however, more than a little anxious in the presence of the prince. He glanced up to meet eyes that bored into him with pitiless ice as he steeled himself to say what he had come to say.

"I don't know what revenge you are planning," he said frankly, "but I've come to ask you to leave Calli out of it."

Erone's eyes narrowed at the remark. "What makes you think I plan anything?"

Jala's reply was definite. "You have the look of a man bent on his own undoing."

Silver eyes fired at him from across the distance that separated them. "I'd suggest, Jala, that you mind your concerns and leave my own to me."

"Calli is my concern," the Healer shot back. "What score you have with the King of Arath, settle with him. Don't bring an innocent into it."

Now dark amusement flashed in Erone's gaze. "Innocent?" he sneered. "I assure you, there is nothing innocent about the Princess of Arath."

"Gadrel feeds your hatred," Jala insisted. "Don't listen to him! I-"

Erone raised a hand. Jala clamped his mouth shut.

"I should have listened to my promised when this thing began!" He was leaning forward now, his eyes flashing brighter, though his voice was becoming quieter rather than louder. Jala felt a shiver of fear. "What I listen to now is my own heart, and it tells me that the only way to strike at Sadone is through his daughter."

In spite of his fear, Jala couldn't help the question. "What do you intend?" The fire in the prince's eyes flamed ominously, then settled to a dull gleam.

"Go back to your healing."

Jala, knowing he had been dismissed, came to his feet. "I beg you one more time," he said, "do not use Calli to avenge yourself."

The corner of the prince's mouth curled up in an unpleasant smile. "You seem most anxious to save this female," he said. "Don't tell me that the basrati bitch seduced you as well."

Jala drew in his breath sharply. He took a step forward. "Prince or no," he seethed, "I ought to knock you senseless for that."

Erone glared at him. "You're welcome to try."

But as they stood facing each other, Raesa came into the room, a worried frown on her face.

"Erone," she said, "I can't find Danae. Have you seen him?"

The prince turned from Jala and looked at her. "He's in a tree somewhere, Raesa," he said shortly.

"He is not in a tree!" she cried, his quick dismissal poking at her nerves.

"I've looked everywhere for him!" Her eyes shone with anxiety, and the look finally caught her brother's attention.

He frowned, totally forgetting the man stood before him. "Have you tried the stable-" "You're not listening!" she shouted. "I've tried everywhere! He's never done this before!" "Come," Erone said, "I'll help you find him."

* * * *

Danae stopped his pony and looked around him. My, but it was a long way to the city! He wondered how much farther he'd have to go, but the density of the forest prevented any glimpse of the great walls. So he climbed down and sat under a tree, digging into his bag and pulling out the last tart. He munched on it while he tried to decide what to do.

He had come this far, and now he must be very close to finding Calli. But he didn't want to be alone in the forest when night came. Suddenly, an idea came to him. He would climb this tree. Then he could see how far away the city was! He glanced over at Stout. The pony was lipping happily at the sweet grasses that grew on the forest floor.

"You wait here, Stout," the boy said, rubbing the pony's velvet nose. "I'll be right back."

He hopped up and disappeared into the branches.

* * * *

"His pony is gone!"

Cera turned a look of fear on her life-mate as she gave her the news.

But Raesa, too far gone to even react, merely brushed by her to run to the stables. Erone was at her heels.

When they arrived at the stables they found that, indeed, the pony was missing, but Erone found something far more ominous.

"Where could he have gone?" Raesa said, searching about her as if her son would appear if only she looked hard enough. But her brother had spotted Stout's hoof prints, so easy to pick out among the maze of larger ones. And he was now following them quickly to see where they led. Raesa saw what he was doing and trailed behind him. He stopped at the edge of the village and looked ahead at the path that led away.

"He's taken this road," Erone began, "but it leads in many directions-" His words cut short when he heard his sister's strangled cry. He whirled and looked at her. She was standing, her eyes wide with fear, her hands clasped to her mouth. "He's gone to find Calli," she whispered painfully, "Oh, Great Tsandis, he is riding to the city!"

* * * *

Danae finally reached the top of the tree and he stopped, holding tight to a branch while he craned his neck around. Then he saw them, the great walls of Soris. He frowned at the sight.

My, they were large! But they didn't look too far away now. If he hurried, he might reach them before the day ended. His decision made, he scrambled down the tree. His pony was tired, he knew, but Stout had often earned his name,

and Danae knew he would run a great deal more for his little master before he would disappoint him.

Danae landed on the ground without a sound and froze at the sight that greeted him. Standing all around the tree, waiting for him to come down, were soldiers. He didn't have to look too hard to recognize that they were the same kind of soldiers who had taken Calli. In spite of his resolve, he was suddenly very frightened.

They moved in on him. Quick as a wink, Danae dodged the men while they lunged clumsily in their efforts to corner the agile boy.

"Tsandis!" one of them shouted as he came up with nothing but air for his effort. "I thought I had him!"

"These Shadrani are slippery," another one spat, lunging and also missing the boy. "Get him, Hausa!"

The one named Hausa missed him, too, with his hand. But when the boy slipped past, he shot a foot out and tripped him; then, issuing a curse, he delivered a vicious kick to the side of Danae's head that sent him sprawling face down in the dirt.

They tied him and hauled him across the back of a saddle like so much meat. The last thing they did before taking their Shadrani captive back to the city was put an arrow through his little pony's heart.

* * * *

Mathena stood outside her door and watched the small army of Shadrani mount up. Her heart was sore, but her mind resolute in this matter. She could allow no more children to be murdered by the King of Arath.

Even had she wanted to stop this raid, she knew she couldn't. She had seen that clearly when she looked into her daughter's eyes and discovered the same unsettling light that had shone in her son's since the day his own son had disappeared.

When the rescue party was ready to go, Erone rode up to his mother, as was customary. She lifted a hand in blessing.

"Go with Tsandis," she said firmly, "and do what you must to bring my grandson safely home."

Her son gave her a quick bow and turned his horse. He urged the great black beast forward and his mother watched him thunder out of the village, his sister and his loyal warriors behind him.

Thirty-one

Calli was taking her customary walk along the great walls. She needed the fresh air and the exercise. She needed to think.

First of all, how was she going to rid herself once and for all of this damnable viceroy? She had no intention of marrying him. She loved Erone. Loved him, and was absolutely determined to find her way back to him.

She knew a way out of the castle that would allow her to slip past her father's guard unnoticed. Jala had shown it to her when she was a child, taking her through it and telling her that it would be their secret, a way for Calli to get away should the city ever fall to enemy invasion.

The trouble was, she hadn't used it since then, and she was a little worried about how safe the passage would be, hidden underwater as it was. But she'd have time to check it out. Then she could carefully plan her escape and go back to her love.

She had heard him call after her the day she was taken from him, and that memory and the memory of everything else about him tortured her with longing. She had to get back to him, that was all. They'd find a way to work out everything else.

The rusty grinding of the large wheel that raised and lowered the formidable

spiked gate of the city interrupted her thoughts. She looked down to see several of her father's guards waiting to ride into the city. Squinting into the sun, she raised a hand against it to get a better look at the bundle that was tied to the back of one of the saddles.

Then she saw it move.

"Ho, friend," cried the keeper of the gate. "What have you got there?"

"A small Shadrani," came the reply, "to warm the king's heart!"

Calli's face paled.

Danae!

It would be just like him to follow her. Even as she prayed to be proven wrong, she turned and fled down the stairway that led to the courtyard. She had to stop them. Stop them before they got to her father. Demand that they let the child go!

But some more rational thought brought her up short just before she burst into the courtyard, and told her to watch from the shadows instead to find out what they were going to do with him. She recognized immediately that it was indeed Danae, and her heart sank in fear for him.

"Put it in a cell," the man in charge said, "until I have time to let the king know."

Calli watched them lift the boy and carry him roughly into the large section of the castle where they kept prisoners. The look of fear on his young face wrenched at her heart, and it was all she could do not to cry out to him. But she didn't. Instead, intense determination took hold of her.

She knew she was his only hope. She would still her fears and calm her panic so that she could think straight, because the Princess of Arath was going to die before she'd allow anything to happen to the little fox.

* * * *

"Solte," she said, "you must help me. I have no one else I can trust."

The handmaid looked askance at her mistress. "But," she said, "why are you doing this?"

"Because he's alone and he's frightened, and he's only a child!"

"But he'll be all right," Solte insisted. "Surely they wouldn't harm a child, even a Shadrani one!"

Calli winced at the words, for they so clearly echoed the response she would have made herself only weeks before. She closed her eyes against the ignorance that pervaded every fiber of life here in Soris.

"Solte," she said finally, "they'll kill him. They've done so before."

Solte's eyes widened with shock. "Oh, I can't believe that, Princess! I can't-" But her words died at the look on Calli's face. She knew from that look that, whether she believed it or not, her mistress absolutely did.

She pressed her lips together and frowned.

"What must I do?"

Calli let her breath out and clasped her handmaid to her, hugging her with raw gratitude.

Ten minutes later, the Princess of Arath and her handmaid made a trip to the dungeons of Soris. The odd looks they received when she asked where to find the Shadrani prisoner in no way deterred their progress. Finally, she reached the level wherein she was told the prisoner was kept. The guard jumped to his feet when he took in the royal finery of her clothes and realized who had come into his lowly hallway.

"M-my lady!" he stuttered. "What are you doing in this awful place?"

Awful it was.

The smell and the filth around her made her sick at heart, thinking of the small boy who waited in terror here, and of her love who had been tortured here, and of another boy who had never lived long enough to rid himself of the stench of the place.

"I am curious about the Shadrani prisoner," Calli said, keeping her voice devoid of emotion. "I would like to see if it's the same dog that held me captive."

The man's face relaxed in understanding. "I don't think it is," he replied, pointing to a door. "The one in there is but a lad."

Calli's heart leapt with relief as she noted his gesture. Now at least she knew where he was. She walked to the door, as if still curious, to allow Solte time for her part.

When Calli's back was turned, the maid inched closer to the guard, brushing against him slightly until he turned to see what had grazed him. When she had his attention, she lifted her paita, only a touch, enough to allow him one quick look at her face and the open invitation in her eyes.

The guard's eyes widened. Never did a female in Soris lift her veil to a man...well, at least it had never happened to him! When Solte saw the lust that sprang up in his eyes, she lowered her veil quickly, but brushed him suggestively when she passed him to go to her princess.

"Come away from here now, my lady," she insisted. "Haven't you been through enough?"

Calli let herself be led away. The first part of her desperate plan had worked very well.

* * * *

The Prince of Gemen took his sister in his grasp and shook her-hard. They were standing over the body of her son's little pony, and she had begun to scream.

"Stop it, Raesa!" he demanded. "You'll do your son no good with hysterics!" She clamped her mouth shut and stared at him. When she had seen the little pony that her son had loved lying there, still and cold, she finally, fully understood the horror her brother had endured two years ago. In that second, the pony had been her son and her heart had exploded.

"How?" she whispered. "How did you endure it?"

But he didn't answer the question. "Danae is alive," he said instead. "They've taken him to the city. We have time. Think on that, Raesa, and keep everything else at bay."

"How do you know?" she pled. "How can you be sure we have time?"

"Because I know the way the king thinks," came the reply. "He won't kill Danae until he's found a way to use him."

Raesa had to put her faith in that; somehow she found a way to do it.

As her brother turned away from her, his jaw set unpleasantly. Yes, he knew the King of Arath. Better in some ways than anyone would believe.

Thirty-two

Calli pulled on the tunic, leggings, and soft kidskin boots that Solte had taken from the wardrobe of one of the many stable boys who labored for her father. Her maid watched nervously while she dressed.

"My lady," she begged, "please change your mind. Your father is angry enough now. I don't know what he'll do if he catches you at this mischief!"

Calli, her mind on the task ahead, didn't even hear the entreaty.

"Are you ready?"

Solte searched her face, saw the determination there, and finally nodded.

They slipped out the door of Calli's chambers and crept down the hallway, Solte leading the way in case they should encounter anyone, and Calli keeping to the dark shadows on their way to the dungeons of Soris.

* * * *

The Shadrani lined up along the grove of trees growing near the lake that supplied water to the city-state.

"We'll wait a while longer," Erone said. "We'll need the darkness."

Raesa's patience was at its limit. "I can't wait!" she snapped. "I'll go alone if we don't go now!"

Her brother turned to her. "You don't know where to find the passage under the water, Raesa," he said sharply. "Our task is dangerous enough. We must wait for night!"

But Raesa's nerves had snapped. She stood and made a rush for the water. Erone understood her desperation too well. He guessed her move and stopped her before she'd gone ten feet, yanking her up strongly against him.

"Raesa!" he hissed. "What would you do? Claw against the walls with your bare hands? It doesn't work! Believe me, I tried it!" At the words, Raesa's heart yearned for her son and ached for her brother. But he had reached her. She bent her head and nodded. They knelt upon the forest floor and waited.

* * * *

Solte sidled up to the guard who stood watching her approach with a mixture of surprise and anticipation on his face. "I came back," she said throatily. She raised a hand to stroke the front of his tunic. "I just had to see if you felt as hard as you look."

The guard's eyebrows shot up at the statement. But he had no intention of stopping her inspection. By the time Solte had declared that, yes, he was truly a fine specimen, the man was breathing rapidly and the look in his eyes let her know it was time to move on to the next phase.

In a blatantly sexual invitation, she raised her paita and smiled at him. It was his undoing. He took a step toward her and she backed away, looking behind her as if for a suitable place to continue the assignation. But she beckoned him on and he followed her until he had left his wits, his station, and his keys, behind him.

The moment he was out of sight, Calli crept from the corner where she was hiding and grabbed the keys.

Her hands trembled as she began to work them in the old lock, searching for the one that would open Danae's cell.

Great Tsandis, she thought, I didn't think there would be this many keys!

It was the first of a number of things she would come to realize she had overlooked in her quickly laid plan.

Glancing over her shoulder in nervous anticipation, she fumbled with another and then another until, with a sense of relief that almost made her swoon, she heard the lock catch and turn.

Pulling the heavy door open, she stood outside the cell and searched the darkness, but she saw nothing. Her heart froze as she realized they could have taken him somewhere else.

"Danae?" she whispered frantically. "Danae, are you in here?"

There was no answer. She squeezed her eyes shut and leaned against the door.

"No," she prayed miserably, "please, please help me find him."

"Calli?"

She barely heard the little voice, so filled with terror and hope. She whirled to search the darkness once more.

"Danae!" she called. "Danae, it's me! It's Calli. Come to me, little fox!"

At the familiar name, the boy flew into her arms.

A quiet sob escaped her lips as she crushed him against her. He hadn't uttered another sound, but she knew from the way he hugged her neck that he was terrified. She remembered they didn't have much time. Pulling away to look into his face, she winced when she caught sight of him.

His face was streaked with dried blood, dirt and tears, and his clothes were torn and filthy. There was a nasty bump on the side of his head, and there was straw in his hair. Something about that last thing touched her so deeply that she wanted to close her eyes and cry. But instead, she touched his cheek tenderly and looked into his Shadrani eyes.

"I'm going to take you home, Danae."

A small sound escaped him as he nodded his head.

"But I need you to help me and be very brave and very quiet."

He didn't speak, but continued to nod emphatically, the corners of his mouth turning down as he struggled to be brave.

"All right, then," Calli whispered, gathering him to her. "Let's go."

She crept along the halls of the dungeon, heading ever downward, down to where the water from the lake outside the city walls found its way into Soris, and where she would find the passage that would take her and Danae to safety.

Her heart thudded in fear now that she had no one to go before her and warn of discovery. With every step, she prayed. With every step, she was certain that around the next bend they'd be discovered, and the small boy holding onto her for his life would be torn from her arms and murdered.

Calli's mouth set in a grim line as she renewed her vow to save him. She reached down to reassure herself that the crossbow she had fastened to her belt was still there, and, having touched it, she continued on her way.

* * * *

The small room reverberated with the sharp sound of the slap that left the guard surprised, confused, and not a little frustrated.

"The very idea!" Solte bristled. "I merely wished a bit of sport, a smattering of romance! The notion that you would think...that you would assume...Oh!" She adjusted her much-askew bodice and stormed out the door.

* * * *

Calli froze at the sound of approaching footsteps. Her eyes scoured the passage around her, but she saw nowhere to hide within the narrow hallway. They could run, she thought, but which way? She couldn't tell from the sounds whether they came from in front of or behind them!

She felt Danae's hand touch her cheek and looked into his face. True to his word, he spoke not a syllable, but pointed a small finger upward. She followed his gesture and saw the crossbeam rafters in the low ceiling.

Smiling in relief, she hoisted him up and then, unused to lifting her own weight, struggled a little but managed, with Danae tugging mightily on her arm, to get herself up as well. She held her breath as the two large guards passed directly below them, talking and laughing as they went. Calli thought they would hear her heart thumping even above their conversation, but they moved on, leaving the gloomy hallway as silent with their passing as it had been before their coming.

Calli waited a few minutes, then dropped down as quietly as she could. Danae fell lightly into her arms, and she kissed his cheek and smiled into his face. "Clever little fox," she whispered, drawing, for the first time, a tiny smile from him. Then she gathered him again, and they continued their slow descent.

* * * *

King Sadone muttered a violent oath as his feet stumbled in the darkness of

the dungeon hallway.

"Watch your step, my lord," Hausa said, drawing a look of venom from the man.

"Did this small Shadrani say anything?" Sadone asked.

The man-at-arms laughed unpleasantly. "Didn't give him a chance to say anything. Put a good boot to the side of his head to stop him wiggling away."

The king wasn't deterred by the reply. It didn't matter whether the boy had spoken to anyone else. He would find out who he was.

Sadone knew the child wasn't his son, for he had killed that spawn with his own hands two years ago. But he hoped fervently that the captive was important enough to use against him. And use him he would; for trade or murder or mutilation, Sadone didn't care, as long as he could make another strike against the Prince of Gemen.

* * * *

Calli exhaled in a sound of utter relief when they finally crept into the large water room and found it empty. She lowered Danae to the floor and only then realized how tired her arms had become from carrying him.

Approaching the swirling pool, she frowned and searched her memory for exactly where the passage was.

It had been so long ago!

She sat by the water and chewed nervously on her lower lip. If only she'd had time! She had meant to come and check this all out, but then she hadn't dared wait because of Danae.

Suddenly, she was frightened as she searched the dark waters.

What if she couldn't find the passage?

What if it had been sealed over or blocked or...oh, her mind raced with a hundred ways for this thing to go wrong. Then Danae, who was standing beside her, leaned against her and put his dark head against hers. She put an arm around him. "We'll be home soon," she said.

Scanning the walls, she finally remembered the marker that indicated the location of the passage. It was a stone that was just enough darker than those around it to make it recognizable to one who knew how to look. And Jala had taught her how to look all those years ago. Her heart now lifted, Calli turned to Danae.

"We have to go into the water," she said. "There's a passage under-" She stopped short at the look of pure horror that crossed his face.

Then it came to her.

Erone had told her that since his near-drowning, Danae was terrified of the water.

Oh, Great Tsandis! she thought, as she looked into the boy's fear-filled eyes. She hadn't thought of that!

* * * *

The guard stumbled to his feet and uttered a greeting when he saw the King of Arath approach.

Tsandis, this wasn't his day!

First, that wench who had stirred his blood to boiling, only to throw a refusal in his face like a wet towel, and now the king, standing there glowering like a demon!

"Where is the Shadrani child?" Sadone demanded.

"He's over in yonder cell."

"Well, open it!"

The guard fumbled with the keys, tried the wrong one at first. Then, throwing a quick apologetic look over his shoulder, finally found the right one, turned

it in the lock, and opened the door, stepping aside so that his king could enter.

He exchanged a loaded glance with Hausa when a few moments later they heard a violent exclamation. The king, his face like a thundercloud, stormed out of the cell.

"He is not in there!" he shouted.

* * * *

Calli took the little face into her hands.

"Danae," she said softly, "I know the water frightens you. But it's the only way out."

He shook his head, his eyes darting to the dark pond.

Calli closed her eyes and prayed that no one would come down to draw water and discover them. They were so close. So close!

"Then we'll both die," she said gently. "For I won't leave you, and we can't escape any other way."

His eyes widened.

"Do you trust me, Danae?" she continued.

He nodded.

"Then you have to believe me that I won't let anything harm you. I'll take you safely through the water."

He swallowed nervously and eyed the water again, considering. She smoothed the hair from his face. "Be brave, my little Shadrani warrior."

He pressed his lips together and nodded quickly. Calli's sigh of relief was issued at exactly the same time as the alarm went up throughout the city that the prisoner had escaped. But they were too far underground to hear it. She moved into the water and waited for him to come into her arms. Calli's heart wrenched when she felt him tremble in fear.

"We'll take three deep breaths," she said. "And then hold the last one."

He nodded.

"And then you hold on tight to me, and don't let go."

Again, he nodded.

They stood in the cold water and took the first two breaths together. When they had filled their lungs with the third, Calli dove under the surface and swam as hard as she could toward the passage to freedom that lay just a few feet away.

* * * *

The Shadrani waiting by the water heard the loud alarm and stood back, looking at each other in surprise. "Great Tsandis!" Habda growled. "This is a fine time to raise the call to arms, just when we're preparing to sneak into the city!" Raesa's breath exhaled in a sound of desperation. She looked toward her brother. Erone stared grimly at the walls before him. He thought a long time before speaking.

"We can't risk going in now."

The sound of outrage from his sister drew him to turn toward her.

"I'll go in alone," he said. "One Shadrani stands a better chance to slip by unnoticed, for if we all go, one of us is sure to be seen by guards, who are now on the lookout."

Raesa heard his words, and her mind accepted them. But suddenly she was afraid for him as well. As much as she wanted Danae back, she felt a certainty that her brother had cheated death too many times within the walls of Soris.

That this time, he wouldn't win.

"Erone-" she began, but he was already preparing to go.

* * * *

In the darkness of the passageway, Calli struggled along, trying not to think about the boy that clung so desperately to her. She couldn't allow anything to break her concentration, for she couldn't remember anything about this tunnel. She had to struggle with her own fear that she had lost her way or worse, that she wouldn't get them to the other side in time.

Terror ripped up her spine when she swam against a barrier under the water. Tsandis! They had closed it off, blocked it! And there was no time to go back; they didn't have enough air left.

Now, Calli had to fight against panic as she desperately clawed at the obstacle. Danae continued to hold her, but she could tell from his sudden movements that he was beginning to run out of time. No! her mind cried. She couldn't believe that this could happen. That she had risked so much and tried so hard to save this boy, and would only wind up drowning him!

Then, like a vision from the past, she saw Jala taking her hand and swimming with her through the tunnel. Yes! She remembered. They had come upon this obstacle. It wasn't new. She must turn right here and then the opening was there, right there! Swimming now with desperate panic, she veered right and stroked as hard as she could with the last bit of oxygen that was left in her lungs.

She and Danae broke the surface of the water and they both drew in great gulping breaths of air. Calli crushed him to her, and felt hot tears of joy roll down her cheeks as she squelched the cries of relief that threatened to tear from her throat. She swam toward shore, thanking Tsandis over and over in her mind for saving them.

But night was falling, and she realized suddenly that they'd be out in the forbidding forest alone with only her crossbow to defend them.

And the village was a long way away.

Great Tsandis, she hadn't thought of that!

* * * *

The splashing in the water didn't escape the sharp hearing of the Shadrani on the shore. Alerted and on guard, they turned toward the sound, squinting against the growing darkness to see what was moving toward them. They were silent as the night, their swords gleaming at the ready.

Calli and Danae crawled out of the water and came to rest on the shore, both of them breathing hard in an effort to still their adrenaline-charged hearts. But Raesa, even with the distance and the fading light, could see the small shape that came out of the water. She stood and took a few steps forward, as if in a trance.

"Danae?" she called, her voice tremulous with hope.

Calli and the little one scrambled to their feet and turned in the direction of the call.

Danae stood for only a second, unwilling to believe his happy ears. "Mamma?" Raesa cried his name and ran to him at the same time that he raced toward her. Danae flew into his mother's arms and she fell to her knees, sobbing and kissing his face.

Calli felt the tears on her face multiply as she watched the joyful reunion from a distance. Then, she saw the Shadrani materialize from the forest as if by magic. Her eyes searched for the one face she desperately needed to see. And then they found him. Her heart had time for only one small leap of joy before it froze painfully in her chest.

Even from the distance that still separated them, Calli could see it. His eyes

spewed hatred at her in a way that made even his first treatment of her seem tame.

In that second, she realized a number of things. She realized that the Shadrani had come to rescue Danae or die trying, she realized that her love had discovered, finally, who she was, and she realized, with a hopeless wrench of her heart, that he meant to kill her for it.

Erone watched her standing by the water and his hatred flamed with delight at the sight. Tsandis had delivered her right into his arms! He smiled viciously as he swung into his saddle.

"Get them home safely," he shot at Gadrel.

His promised had no time to ask him where he was going but merely stood, watching as the great black horse gathered himself and sprang away.

Raesa stood between them. She looked back to see her brother mount his charger, then looked ahead again to Calli who was standing, frozen to the spot. Danae trembled in her arms and she pressed his head against her breast and prayed for the female that had delivered him yet again into her arms. She heard the thunder of great hooves and shuddered as her brother plunged by her.

"Run, Calli," she screamed. "Run!"

Calli had begun to back away when she saw Erone take to the horse, but then she froze in shock. The sound of desperate warning in Raesa's scream slapped her to her senses and she turned and fled in terror.

But she knew she could never outrun the dark horse that ate the distance between them. Her heart pounding against her breast, she ran anyway, her fear urging her to risk a glance back at him.

He looked like a demon from hell, eyes flashing with silver fire, his mantle billowing out behind him as he swept down on her, leaning forward in his saddle to press the animal on.

Tsandis, he meant to run her down!

A cry of genuine terror wrenched from her throat as Calli turned back and continued to flee, the ground shaking beneath her from the thundering hoofbeats of the great beast now almost on top of her.

Raesa watched helplessly as, without his horse missing a stride, her brother bent down from his saddle, grabbed the fleeing girl, and shoved her roughly onto the horse in front of him. Then they disappeared into the night, leaving nothing behind but the echo of ominous hoofbeats.

Thirty-three

The Shadrani rescue party slowed their pace now that they were certain there was no one in pursuit. It would be hours before they reached the village, but Raesa no longer cared. All she cared about was that her precious son now lay sleeping in her arms, safe from harm. Careful not to wake him, she urged her horse forward to catch up with Gadrel, who now led them.

"Tell me," she said as she drew up alongside. "Where has my brother taken the princess?"

Gadrel threw her a resentful look.

"Somewhere to murder her in private, I hope."

"By that statement, I take it you don't know where he's taken her."

He gave a short bitter laugh. "Erone doesn't confide in me regarding that basrati female. After all, I'm only his promised."

Raesa reined in a little and let him ride ahead again. She felt useless, frustrated that she couldn't help Calli. All she could do was hope that her brother's hatred hadn't changed him even more than she or their mother feared.

* * * *

Calli was sore and bruised from the rough handling she had received at the hands of the Prince of Gemen. But she didn't complain. She didn't speak at

all, not even to ask where he was taking her, for she knew they weren't going to the village.

They'd been riding for hours, and not a word had passed between them. But Calli felt his hatred like a heat that seeped between the clothing that separated them. But this heat chilled her. So she rode in quiet acquiescence, unwilling to stir the unnatural flame.

One of the moons of Daleer was full and the other half, so there was sufficient silver light to see the sheer rock face that rose above them while they approached at break-neck speed. Calli's eyes widened in fright as they drew ever closer to the cliff.

Great Tsandis! Did he intend to ride them into the wall? When it loomed up directly in front of her, she squeezed her eyes shut and let out a small cry of fear, expecting at any moment to feel the smash of solid rock against her face. But instead, the horse went through it, and then veered sharply left. Calli's eyes flew open. It was an optical illusion! There was actually an opening in the wall that couldn't be discerned until you were right on top of it. She looked back in wonder, but any hope of rescue or discovery fled. A few minutes later, they rode up to a small cabin that was built into the rock wall, a clear stream running near its door. Erone dismounted, grabbed her wrist and yanked her down beside him.

Calli's anger flared at the cruel treatment.

"You don't have to throw me about!" she snapped at him.

He only yanked harder and she fought against his pull, until he lifted her roughly into his arms, strode to the cabin, and kicked open the door to deposit her on the floor inside. Calli rubbed her wrist while he lit the lantern. Then, when the flame caught, she began to look around her.

It was a small place, but comfortably made up. A frown creased her forehead when she saw that it was clean and well stocked.

He had planned this carefully.

She turned to him, and saw that he was watching her.

"Why have you brought me here?"

A dark eyebrow rose at the same time that a corner of his mouth turned down in a look that shone with pure mockery.

"Can't you guess, Princess?"

Calli shuddered at his use of her title, for the way he said it made it sound like blasphemy. She looked around again, but saw no clue. Then her eyes rested on the large bed that occupied most of one side of the room. On the wall next to it, there was fastened a long length of chain with a metal cuff on the end. Her eyes widened. She turned to search his face and felt panic rise as she saw the unpleasant light that flickered in his eyes.

"You're here for my pleasure, Princess," he sneered. "I mean to use you as I please until I rid myself of this unnatural desire you've raised in me." He moved toward her as he spoke, his tone seething with quiet menace. Calli backed away from him.

"And when I am done," he continued, "when you have been so defiled by the Prince of Gemen that no Sorisi would allow you to touch his garbage, then...", he smiled unpleasantly, "...then I shall take your life with my own hands."

A small cry escaped her as she faced his terrifying hatred. She shook her head against it, but he neither saw her pain nor cared about it.

"And then shall I have my revenge," he finished, "on your father."

"You cannot really mean this!"

The flame in his eyes simmered to a dull silver. Calli felt her fear multiply when he spoke, his voice a harsh whisper.

"Take your hair down."

She backed away from him, shaking her head. He lunged at her, crushing her to him and tearing cruelly at the pins that held her hair. Calli cried out in pain and struggled against him, but only succeeded in inflaming him further. When the golden cloud was free to cascade down around her, he stepped back again. Calli's heart quailed to see the lust that shone dangerously in the silver eyes.

"Erone," she pled fervently, "don't do this."

"Do not speak my name!" he snarled at her, causing her to jump. His eyes raked the tunic, leggings and boots that she wore. "Take them off," he demanded. Calli lifted her chin and stood her ground. "No," she said.

He exploded at her, tearing at her clothes and cursing viciously when she tried to defend herself against him. Calli cried out and struggled in helpless fear and protest while he lashed out at her, ripping away her tunic and groping painfully at her breasts.

"No!" she screamed when he bent and took a nipple into his mouth, biting at it harshly. She pushed against him, trying to strike out, but he had her arms pinned to her sides as he continued his attack.

Calli fought to free her legs to kick at him, and she was rewarded by his violent oath before he lifted her and threw her onto the bed, covering her body instantly with his own to prevent her escape. She managed to free her hands and claw at him once, but that only succeeded in urging him to rip away the tights that kept him from his goal. He drove into her, taking her with cries of brutal pleasure.

His cruel strokes wrenched small helpless moans from her throat as her mind fought against this realization of his terrible hatred. When he was finished, he pushed away from her, sat back on his heels and looked at her.

Calli lay motionless, only her chest moving as it heaved in an effort to gain oxygen. Her arms were thrown wide, her head turned away, for she couldn't bear to look at him. Her hair was all in tangles and spread, like a thrown rag, across the large bed.

Erone gained his feet and yanked what was left of her clothing off of her. She made no move to resist him. Then, reaching out to the chain that hung from the wall, he brought it to the bed and fastened the cuff securely to her ankle. Without another word, the Prince of Gemen left her to go outside and see to his horse.

* * * *

"Oh, this is beyond enough!" Mathena snapped. She looked at her daughter, then at Gadrel, finally at Jala. "What is he thinking?"

She received no answer. She hadn't really expected one, for it was obvious to her that no one could possibly know what her son was thinking. "He'll bring the rage of Arath upon us once again," she finished, then turned to Gadrel and Raesa. "Go make ready your warriors, for I expect we'll see the forces of the king before too long."

* * * *

King Sadone Q'Seta Arath paced his chamber like a caged panther. The rage on his face would have made one pale, if there had been someone there to witness it. He stopped and glanced down again at the letter in his hand, as if it were some living, vile thing that might yet sting him if he didn't watch it carefully.

That Shadrani dog again had his daughter!

Oh, how he seethed against the fate that had taken the girl from him again.

Tsandis knows how he went out of his mind the last time, thinking her gone but praying, hoping against hope that she would turn up, somehow, somewhere.

And she had.

And-oh, Great Tsandis, his relief had been overwhelming.

But now! He cursed the circumstance that had placed the stupid chit into his enemy's hands once more. And this time, he knew what he had. The note had made it perfectly clear. It also made perfectly clear what he was going to do with

her!

The king stopped and exhaled his breath in a hiss of rage as he thought of the Prince of Gemen exercising his perverse lust upon his daughter. Not because he cared one whit about Calli, but because she was his property, the untouched vessel through which he would secure the continuation of his line. It was for that reason, Sadone knew, that the Shadrani intended to defile her. And the dog had left no course of action open, for he had sworn to kill her immediately if there was so much as one raid against his accursed village. Oh, the bastard had him! And he knew he had him! The King of Arath made a vicious fist, crumpling the note, then he threw his head back and screamed in impotent rage.

* * * *

Calli leaned against the wall behind her and watched the Prince of Gemen sharpen his hunting knife. She knew now the extent of his thirst for vengeance, for it had ravaged her as thoroughly as he had, leaving her feeling broken and numb. But still, her mind continued to search the man before her, looking for some sign of her lost love.

Glancing up, Erone caught her looking at him. He returned her perusal and Calli began to shrink when she saw the unnatural light of desire that sprang, once again, into his eyes. She realized that there was now no separation in his feelings, that everything blended together, and that now, his hatred and his vengeance were indistinguishable from his desire for her. She drew back as he approached the bed.

"Are you frightened of me, Princess?" he mocked.

"As I would be of any madman."

He sat down and lifted a hand to stroke her long hair. "You've caused this madness."

She shook her head. "Not me," she said. "It's your hatred that has driven you to it."

He grasped her hand and guided it to his straining manhood. "Has my hatred done this?" he taunted.

She searched his eyes and found nothing but heated malice. "I don't know what has done that, for it's neither love nor any normal desire that causes it."

He grinned unpleasantly. "Come, Princess," he whispered. "And teach me again what is normal."

Calli moved against the wall as he bent his mouth to hers, but she couldn't wrench away from him. The shock of his lips made her draw in her breath sharply. She raised her hands to push against his chest, but found herself quickly losing the desire to fight him.

His lips moved tenderly over her mouth, but Calli didn't trust the sweetness. Not at first. She remained stiffly unresponsive beneath him, her eyes open and staring. But the insistent longing that was always just below the surface whenever he was near began to surface and twine itself around her resolve, choking it off with tender malice, making her breath quicken and her heart race.

She closed her eyes and returned his kiss, opening her mouth to allow his waiting tongue access for plunder. She felt the vibration of his dark sensual chuckle against her lips as he sensed her surrender. The sound fired her lust deliciously. She moaned and drew her arms around his neck. Erone left off her mouth and shifted them both on the bed so they were now lying side by side, and went to work on her in earnest.

Calli could do nothing but throw her head back and moan her pleasure as his mouth assaulted her body with exquisite ferocity.

Her fingers were twined in his hair, sometimes clenching and pulling at it, but he didn't seem to mind. When she vibrated beneath him, he moved away long enough to strip off his clothes and come back to her side. His tongue flicked

in her ear, bringing a sensual shudder from her.

"Do you want me?" he whispered.

"Yes," she gasped. "Yes, I want you."

"Good. That's the way I want it."

Calli was too far gone in her need to understand, or even care about, the statement. She writhed beneath his hands and drew her legs around him in anticipation as he moved to take her. Once more, her surrender seemed to stoke his dark needs, for he grinned wickedly at her wanton desire. Then he took her, slowly, deliberately, urging her to indulge her lust, to whisper to him of the forbidden feelings that he inspired, until he raged with her to a place where they were beyond revenge and hope, and finally fell with her back to earth.

The smile on his face was one of sweet victory.

* * * *

Queen Mathena rose and walked the floor as she waited for her summons to be answered. As Erone's mother, she was loath to do this, but she couldn't, in all good conscience as his queen, do anything else. She looked up when Gadrel entered the room.

"You wished to speak with me, my queen?"

Mathena bade him sit, then studied him.

Gadrel had been the perfect choice for her son. They had been friends as children, partners in mayhem as boys, and had been drawn together naturally when they had helped each other through the ravages of early shadra.

Not only was he himself from the House of Gemen, Gadrel was fierce, loyal, and dedicated to the ways of the Shadrani. Add to that his reputable shadra and his obvious passion for Erone, and he was the perfect match for a king.

"There still has been no sign of threat from Soris, I take it?" she said.

Gadrel shook his head. "I do not know what the King of Arath plans. I would have Erone here now, for he seems to read the man's mind."

Mathena straightened at the mention of her son.

"It is about Erone that I wished to speak with you."

The Shadrani warrior leaned back and waited for his queen.

"Gadrel," she began, "you are a fine Shadrani and a credit to the sword you wield."

His eyes narrowed as he wondered what had triggered this flattery.

Mathena smiled. "Oh, I don't seek merely to plump up your ego, Gadrel. It's simply that I wish you to know I admire you, and you are to take what I'm about to say in the proper meaning."

Now Gadrel sat up. "Perhaps you should just say it, my queen, and allow me to make my feeble effort at understanding."

She smiled genuinely. There were definitely times that she understood her son's choice in this male. But then her smile died at the seriousness of her task.

"Gadrel," she said, "I'd like to offer you the chance to...to free yourself from your promise to Erone."

The Shadrani didn't attempt to hide his surprise. Mathena raised a hand to still any reply.

"I want you to think about it," she continued. "For years now, you've waited for him to agree to a joining day."

"But he mourned his son, my queen."

She nodded. "Yes, he did. But then there's this business about your shadra. Is it true he's never taken it?"

Gadrel looked away uncomfortably and Mathena chided herself. She was always too blunt with these great males about their shadra. Erone had once told her that she could never understand it because she would never experience it, and she guessed he was right, for she was always embarrassing someone with her

indelicate handling of a matter that the Shadrani male held next to sacred. "I apologize," she said quickly. "I am not-gracious-when it comes to this subject."

Gadrel looked at her. "I do not know why Erone chooses to...refuse me. But I'm certain that will change when we are joined."

Mathena approached the next cautiously. "But now, there is this business with the Princess of Arath."

She saw the muscles play in his jaw as he ground his teeth together. "My queen," he said, "one way or another, the Princess of Arath will soon be dead and no longer a consideration."

Was he so sure of her son, then? For Mathena herself still wasn't convinced that Erone could bring himself to kill Calli.

"I have only offered you this, as any proper queen would, for you've been patient beyond understanding in the matter of my son and his...peculiarities."

Gadrel smiled finally. "Do not fear, my queen. For I will change neither my mind nor my promise, and nothing and no one will make me give up the Prince of Gemen."

* * * *

Erone took the plate of food and came to the bed where Calli was chained. She watched him approach, her eyes uncertain. He sat beside her on the bed, lifted a morsel of food and brought it to her lips, feeding her by hand as he'd been doing every day. She looked at the food, then at him, waiting.

"Open your mouth."

Calli studied him a moment, then obliged. He slid the food between her lips, watching her mouth as she took it from his hand and chewed it quietly. He raised another piece and drew it to her lips, but this time, when she opened her mouth to take it, he bent and gave her his mouth instead. Then he drew his head back and gave her the food.

With each morsel, it was the same. Directly before feeding her, he bent and took her mouth, his tongue invading, seeking, caressing. Calli felt hot wisps of desire begin to stir, then writhe in her body at the erotic act. She struggled against the feeling, knowing he was using it for her ultimate defeat.

But Erone wouldn't be denied, and when the meal was over, he bent to unfasten the cuff from her ankle.

"It's time for your bath," he said.

Lifting her into his arms, he carried her outside. Then he stripped off his clothing and took a long length of leather thong from his saddlebag. Bending down to her, he fastened one end to her wrist and the other to his own, then lifted her into his arms and carried her outside to the river.

Calli didn't try to stop him; she had learned that she couldn't prevent him from doing exactly as he wanted with her. He had proved that, both sweetly and cruelly, time and time again.

When they reached the river, Erone waded into the cool waters of the eddy that widened it on one bank near the cabin. Here, the water was deep and more still.

Calli still in his arms, he moved into the stream until it reached his shoulders, then he released her long enough for her to tread the water a few strokes, her eyes questioning.

The slight current in the eddy began to carry her slowly away from him. He smiled like a cat as he watched her move the small distance; then took up the rawhide and pulled her toward him, slowly, deliberately, his eyes raking her with silver lust, until she felt his hands take hold of her legs and slowly spread them.

Calli's pulse was raging now and she couldn't help the delicious shudder of anticipation that riddled her as he stood waiting, holding her spread before

him like a sacrifice.

When he saw her desire course through her body, he fixed her with a searing look and pulled her slowly onto his throbbing flesh. Calli gasped at the feel of him, so hot against the cool water, but still she struggled to maintain control. Erone took up the challenge, knowing the coolness of the water would help him keep his own passion in check.

"Wrap your legs around me," he whispered.

She did so and was rewarded by a long, plundering kiss that was almost her undoing. Then he released her lips and lay back in the water, closing his eyes and luxuriating in the coolness of it while his sex burned with the heat of the female that straddled him.

Calli wanted to close her eyes, too. She wanted to feel free to indulge in the pleasure, longed to feel safe enough to let herself go with him. But she couldn't, for she no longer trusted him. So she fought against it.

Erone was merciless. He continued to hold her in the intimate embrace as he relaxed and splashed around in the comfort of the water. Then he gathered her closer to him and dove under the surface, stroking with powerful arms to draw them along the bottom of the pond and Calli clung to him, all the while feeling the heat of his pulsing flesh buried deep within her.

When they surfaced, he planted his feet on the bottom and stood up, letting her upper body fall away from him until her head rested in the water and her hair fanned out behind her like a billowing wet cloud. He clasped her arms just below the elbows and rocked her back and forth, using her weightlessness in the water to help. Calli closed her eyes at the exquisite pleasure of the motion, and couldn't contain the smothered moan that came from the back of her throat.

Erone smiled at the sound, then continued in his sexual siege.

Thirty-four

The Princess of Arath squinted as she worked at the cuff on her leg. If she only had something sharper, she might be able to get the lock. But all she had was one of the pins that Erone had yanked from her hair the first night they had arrived.

She had little enough time alone to work the lock, and she blessed the luck that was keeping her captor away now. Briefly, her eyes flew to her crossbow that sat in the corner of the room far away from her reach, and she issued a prayer that she could get this cursed lock open so that she could get her hands on it.

Calli had been in the cabin for two weeks and every day that passed, Erone had become more distant, more unpredictable. She knew that part of the reason for this was the fact that his plan wasn't going exactly as he had intended; his desire for her hadn't ebbed one fraction. What else was fueling his foul temper, she could only guess at.

But she knew time was running out for her.

* * * *

Outside the small cabin, Erone paced back and forth in a rage. He had bedded this female so many times that he couldn't remember what it was like not to have her legs wrapped around him. He had taken her every way he could think of or imagine, and still-still he couldn't quench the fire that burned for her! His pacing came to an abrupt stop when he realized that, even now, just thinking about all the ways he had plundered her was drawing a familiar tightening in his groin as his sex grew hard once more. Issuing a dark oath, he turned and headed for the cabin.

* * * *

Calli gave a muffled cry of relief as the cuff suddenly snapped open. But as she pulled her leg free, she heard Erone's footsteps on the porch. She ran to the corner of the room and took up her crossbow, aiming it at the door. When Erone entered the room, his Shadrani instincts went on full alert. Even as he noticed that Calli wasn't where she should be, he turned in the direction of the weapon that threatened him from the corner of the room. He froze when he caught sight of her standing there, the weapon aimed steadily at his heart. Then he moved into the room and closed the door behind him. "Do not move!" Calli warned. "I'm a good shot with this." "Do us both a favor, then, and let it fly." She frowned, trying to understand his trick, but soon realized that he was deadly serious. "I don't wish to kill you." Erone smiled sardonically. "Why not? I plan to kill you." Calli struggled to avoid the intent in his eyes. She scanned the room, looking for clothing. "Throw me your shirt over there," she said, pointing. But he merely stood where he was, watching her. She froze as he began to walk toward her, slowly but deliberately. "Stop!" she cried. "I will shoot you!" "You had better stop talking about it and do it," he hissed. Calli aimed the weapon in earnest now, her heart pounding in her breast, her finger resting on the trigger. "Stop!" she cried again. But he didn't stop, not until he stood directly in front of her and raked her with his eyes. Calli looked up at him, the weapon still held ready between them. "Let me go," she whispered. "No," he said. Calli's mind screamed at her to fire the weapon. Fire it into his black heart and end this torment once and for all, but her heart could only see the silver of his eyes and remember a time when they had flashed with loving desire for her. With a quiet sob, she lowered the weapon and sank to the floor, her shoulders heaving as she cried out her pain and frustration. Erone bent, picked up the weapon and put it away. Then he returned to her, lifted her and carried her to the bed, snapping the cuff back in place. Before he went back outside, he opened a cupboard and pulled out a bottle of brandywine.

* * * *

Calli didn't know how long she'd been asleep when she felt herself being shaken. "Wake up," Erone growled. She turned and sat up, knowing the moment she saw him that he'd had too much to drink. Leaning back against the wall, she studied him. His dark hair was loose and falling about his shoulders with a mind of its own. He still wore his leather breeches and boots, but his shirt was undone, exposing the exquisite amulet that rested against his bronze chest. His eyes shone at her with a mixture of hatred and pain. He thrust the half-empty bottle at her. "Drink," he said. "I don't want to." Without warning, he grabbed her, holding her to him while he forced her mouth open and poured the fiery liquid down her throat. Calli coughed and sputtered, then swallowed obediently. When he let her go, she wiped her mouth and glowered at him. "I do not like to drink alone," he said.

"Why are you drinking at all?" she shot at him. He studied her, taking in her appearance, the golden mane, the full ripe breasts, the way her tongue darted, even now, between her lips when she was nervous. A groan of frustration escaped him. "I drink to forget," he slurred miserably. Calli leaned back against the wall. "To forget what?" His eyes looked at her, then shifted away to focus on the floor. After a long moment, he whispered, "My son." In spite of her situation, Calli felt pain stab at her heart with his admission. It was the first time she'd ever heard him mention his dead child. "He was the same age as Danae," he continued, still staring into space. "Just a baby..." He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut. Calli fought the urge to reach out to him. "Two days from now is the anniversary of the day he died," he said. "At least...the day I found out he had died..." He trailed off, and Calli felt a cold shudder slide down her spine against the terrible memory that must be playing in his mind. "Why do you torture yourself with this?" He turned to focus on her unsteadily. "Why?" he breathed. "Because it's my fault, that's why...my fault he's dead." Calli shook her head. "It's not your fault that my father hates the Shadrani." He smiled unpleasantly. "Your father hates the Shadrani, yes, but he hates me most of all." Calli frowned at the statement. Erone stood and looked down on her, his voice bitter. "Shall I tell you, Princess, of the first time I met your father?" Her frown deepened. He smiled darkly and took another drink from the bottle. "Yes," he continued, "I think you should hear it before you die, for it has some bearing on your death." He began to pace the floor beside the bed. "I was twelve years old the first time I met the King of Arath. My shadra had just begun, and I was tormented and restless...very restless." He stopped talking and took another drink, but continued to pace. "Back in those days, your father still used to hunt in the forest. I was curious about this king that was our sworn enemy, and wanted a chance to have a look at him." He stopped pacing then, and his eyes seemed far away. "Stupidity of youth," he breathed, then sat on the bed and leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. His voice grew deadly. "I came too near his camp and was captured." Calli caught her breath, watching him, waiting. He glanced down and touched the silver medallion that hung against his breast. "They knew who I was because of my amulet. When they took me to your father, the first thing he did was stare at me for a long, long time. Then, he asked me if I was frightened. I said no...but I was." Calli grew rigid at the look she caught in his eyes. "He thought that was funny," Erone whispered. "And I hated him for it." The story stopped abruptly and Calli wondered if that was all there was to it. But when he began again, she realized that he had been steeling himself to tell it. "Then he said that we could strike a bargain, that he would let me go..., " he continued, turning a burning gaze on her, "...if I would give him my shadra." The look of shock on Calli's face drew a bitter smile from him. "Yes, Princess. Your father-the Hypocrite of Arath-wanted me. "I told him I would die before giving him my shadra. He thought that was funny, too." He drew a hand through his hair and inhaled a ragged breath. "But in his ignorance, he thought he could force it by raping me. His men held me down while he did." The strangled sound that came from Calli's mouth went unheeded as he plunged on, intent on finishing the tale.

"He took my body, but I kept my shadra from him, and when he was finished with me, he left me lying on the ground like a discarded piece of garbage." Once more, the bottle came to his lips. Calli waited, not wanting to hear any more, knowing she had to.

"They thought I was so humbled that I'd be no further trouble to them, so they became careless, laughing among themselves while I lay at their feet. But I was waiting for a chance to strike. And as soon as I got it I grabbed the knife closest to me, and castrated your father."

Calli squeezed her eyes shut. "Great Tsandis," she whispered.

"In the shock at what I had done and the blood that your father was losing, I managed to escape."

He fell silent. When Calli finally gazed up at him, she found him looking at her.

"Your father could have no more children," he continued. "That's why you're so precious to him. And that is why, two days hence, I will kill you."

He got up then and left her.

Thirty-five

Calli was beyond feeling fear as she rode with the Prince of Gemen on the journey back to the Shadrani village the next day. She finally fully understood the hatred that drove him, and silently cursed the man who had inspired it.

Her father, the man who found the Shadrani so repugnant because of their sexual choices, the man who exuded moral outrage at the mere mention of the Prince of Gemen, was the man who had begun this private war by brutally raping a fiercely proud young boy.

What had Erone called him...the Hypocrite of Arath?

Yes, he was that, all right, and much worse.

She shifted gently and felt Erone's answering movement behind her. She wondered if he was as acutely conscious of the physical contact between them as she was. But then she decided he wasn't. He had gained his revenge on her, using her, making her cry out for him like a bitch in heat. Now he had moved past her, had already put her behind him.

He hadn't spoken to her since his terrible story had been told. All he had wanted to say to his enemy's daughter had been said last night. He would waste no further words or energy on her. Her heart a shattered stone in her chest, Calli drew in a breath and leaned back tiredly against the wall of muscle that rode behind her.

Erone winced as she laid her head back against his shoulder as though he were a piece of furniture, there for her comfort. For the hundredth time that day, he cursed himself for his continuing weakness toward this female. Looking down, he caught sight of the slim thighs that lay against his, the shirt that he had found to cover her barely doing the job. He closed his eyes and tried to will away his desire by analyzing what it was about her that drew this response.

He had always been used to the male body, and Gadrel's hard muscled frame, so like his own, had given him much pleasure over the years. Nor had his promised been the only male that Erone had enjoyed.

So it was with his people, so it was supposed to be.

Yet, he glanced down again at the softly rounded thighs and shuddered when he remembered the strength with which they grasped him when he lay inside her. The image drew a quiet sound from him as he barely managed to contain a groan of desire.

Great Tsandis, but he wanted her again!

Erone realized finally that his great plan for revenge had backfired on him, for he had thought to ravage and humble her, but all he had succeeded in doing was making himself feel a monster for his cruelty.

And his addiction to her was now worse than before.

Having indulged it daily at his whim, his body now rebelled savagely against

his mind's interference with its pleasure and wracked him with physical pain as he rode along, feeling her supple body resting against his.

But he had made a vow that once they left the cabin, he would never again touch this witch of a female; that he'd put her and her strange allure behind him. Tomorrow, she would be dead and he could reclaim his life and his standing among the Shadrani. The Prince of Gemen was returning to his people, his heart restored and shadra intact.

Calli again felt the prince shift behind her. Tomorrow, he intended to end her life, but she couldn't, even now, find any hatred in her heart for him. Even now, she continued to love him. And because he no longer loved her, Calli wasn't daunted by the thought of death. Better to die, she believed, than live without him. Still, she ached for one last embrace of tender longing from him. Before she died, Calli desperately wished that he would take her in his arms once more, the way it had been when he thought she was no more than a simple handmaid but had come to love her anyway. Enough to risk his title and his life for her.

Calli closed her eyes and wished for it to happen, willed him to hear her plea, begged him to turn her in his arms and kiss her with that sweetness that she remembered with bitter longing.

Erone ground his teeth together. His vision was clouding, the periphery shifting out of focus from his raging desire for the Princess of Arath. What would it hurt, his traitorous mind reasoned, to stop here a while and take her one more time? Soon, they'd be at the village and he would never again touch her, except to kill her. She'd be gone tomorrow. What harm could it do?

Calli, too, realized that the village was close. She'd begun to recognize the scenery they passed. Suddenly, she was desperate to stop the journey, desperate to have only a few more moments with him. She straightened and gathered her courage.

Erone was about to disgrace himself, about to shatter his own vow when Calli's voice broke through his internal argument.

"My lord," she said softly. "We're almost at the village?"

He managed a reply, though the words were hoarse with strain. "It is ten minutes hence."

"Then," she continued, "may we stop here a short while?"

Erone pulled up his horse and slid to the ground. Calli didn't wait for him to assist her; she threw her leg over and slid down beside him. As she touched ground, she felt him move away from her, keeping his distance as though she were plague-ridden. She felt her hopes disintegrating at the cold action.

Erone went to his horse and began to fiddle with the cinch, keeping the animal between himself and Calli. He had almost talked himself out of his vow when she had broken the spell.

Almost.

He watched her surreptitiously over the back of his mount as he adjusted the saddle with quick, hard movements that betrayed his agitation. She looked like a fallen angel, her long hair streaming lushly to her waist and spilling over her shoulders.

The shirt he'd given her did more to advertise the promise of the body that moved beneath it than it did to cover it, and the scuffed boots that slouched around her calves made her look like a sensual wood sprite. Erone groaned inwardly and shifted his eyes back to the girth, which he yanked so hard that his horse neighed and began to prance nervously, his ears laid flat against his head. The prince lifted a hand and stroked the animal.

"Sorry, boy," he soothed.

Calli watched the calming caress. Never before had she been jealous of an animal. If only he would touch me that way, just once more, if only I could make him forget who I am, if only... His eyes looked up to meet hers and darkened with ugly suspicion.

"Was there a reason you wished to stop here?" he asked coldly.

Calli felt what was left of her heart dash against her ribcage. She shook her head, not trusting her voice, then moved toward the horse, ready to proceed.

Erone sprang up into the saddle, then took her up and deposited her back in her place.

They continued toward the village.

Thirty-six

"He comes!"

The familiar cry that heralded the return of the Prince of Gemen was met with joy by most. His mother and sister felt only apprehension. They came out of the great house and stood next to Gadrel as they waited.

"Look!" Danae cried from his mother's arms. "It's Calli!"

Raesa and her mother exchanged a relieved look before the queen glanced over at Gadrel. The unpleasant blaze of his eyes didn't bode well for a peaceful homecoming.

Amid looks of confusion and relief, Erone rode up to the great house and finally came down from his war horse, his female captive sliding down behind him.

As soon as Calli touched ground, Danae rushed into her arms. She closed her eyes and struggled with her emotions as she hugged the little Shadrani to her.

"I knew you'd come back," he said against her neck.

Erone gave his sister a withering glance that had her quickly gathering up her son. Before she moved away from the girl, however, she reached up and put a hand against her cheek. Calli looked into Raesa's eyes and knew that the mother in the Shadrani female was thanking her. She also knew that the sister of the Prince of Gemen was transmitting her abhorrence of her brother's actions.

Mathena faced her son.

"Good day to you, Erone," she said.

"Good day, my queen."

"May we suppose that you have returned to us for good?"

"I have."

Mathena gestured toward Calli. "I shall prepare to call the council together--"

"There need be no council!" Erone interrupted sharply. "Her sentence has been passed, and will be carried out tomorrow."

This drew a murmur from the crowd and a look of keen interest from Gadrel. Mathena's eyes narrowed as she studied her son. "It is true that in cases that concern him alone, the Prince of Gemen may take such matters into his own hands. And since this matter does involve you most dramatically, there has been precedence for this."

Raesa stepped up beside her mother and gave her brother a searching look.

"What sentence have you passed?"

"She will die tomorrow."

Gadrel didn't even attempt to smother the cry of joy that came from his lips, but it was lost among the other sounds of surprise and shock.

Raesa whirled on her mother. "Can he do this?"

Mathena's eyes never left her son. She nodded slowly. "By what method is this to be accomplished?"

Erone's eyes shone silver as he replied. "Shadra."

Calli stiffened at the crowd's response to his pronouncement. Even Gadrel looked shocked.

"No!" Raesa cried. She grabbed her mother's arm. "Mother, please. She must warrant some mercy! Danae wouldn't be alive today if not for her!"

Mathena raised a hand to quiet her daughter. Her eyes bore into her son's.

"Erone, as your queen, I request that you chose another method. For this female has indeed shown our people more kindness than to be rewarded by such a terrible death."

Her son shook his head. "I will not change my mind. When the sun rises tomorrow, I will take her life with my shadra."

He turned then and went to Habda. "Take her to the mating chamber," he demanded, "and see that she stays there." He spun and gave his sister a

considering look. "And Habda," he finished, "she is to have no visitors." As the large Shadrani bowed quickly and led Calli away, Erone continued to glare at his sister. "I wouldn't have you go to her in the middle of the night," he said, "to give her a quick death."

* * * *

Calli didn't sleep at all that night. By the time the two Shadrani females came in the morning to prepare her for her execution, she was drained, broken, and ready to die. She offered no resistance, but realized with a mild shock that she was being readied in much the same way as she'd been prepared for her mating with the prince. She glanced around the room, and suddenly understood his intent.

He wanted to recreate the scene that had begun this madness. To have Calli waiting for him in this chamber, wearing a pale yellow traista that even at that moment was being buttoned from behind, and then to take her life with his hands. It was his final effort to free himself of her, to wash away all trace of their forbidden relationship with the stain of her blood.

She shuddered at the diabolical thinking.

When she was finally ready, the females took up their brushes, sponges and towels, and turned to leave her. Before they left, however, the younger of the two lingered in the doorway, then turned and, with a look of pity on her face, bowed graciously to Calli.

The tribute caused a lump to form in the princess's throat. She acknowledged the bow, then watched the door close behind the girl. In the looming silence that followed, she sat on the bed and waited for the Prince of Gemen.

Dawn had just begun to cast its revealing light upon the village when Calli heard the familiar click of the door catch. She leapt to her feet, her heart hammering painfully as the door slowly opened. But it wasn't Erone who entered. Habda came into the room, carrying a large goblet. Without looking at her once, he walked to the bedside and set the cup down, then turned and left abruptly. Calli looked into the chalice.

Hazzah.

Erone, at least, would survive his shadra. She whirled as the door opened yet again.

Her suspicions regarding Erone's choice of place and dress were confirmed when she noted that he wore the familiar ceremonial mating robe. But this time, he wouldn't take her into his arms and drive her mad with passion and delight; this time he would take her life.

Reflexively, she took a step away from him.

Habda once again entered the room and stood waiting respectfully while the prince closed his eyes and summoned his shadra. When Erone finally lifted his head, the large Shadrani turned and withdrew, slamming the large locking bolt into place behind him.

Terror finally seized Calli as the ominous sound echoed in the room and the prince raised his head to look at her. His eyes burned with the blue light of shadra, and there was nothing in them but cold, hard resolve. He moved toward her.

Calli trembled at his approach, but was determined to stand her ground and meet her death with dignity. She raised her chin defiantly as he came to a stop directly in front of her. Still, it was all she could do to look into those flaming eyes.

Slowly, the Prince of Gemen raised his right hand, and with his first two fingers reached toward a spot beneath Calli's ear. She swallowed hard and steeled herself for the contact, but nothing-nothing in her wildest imaginings could have prepared her for the pain that seared her body at his touch. She screamed in agony and wrenched away from him, her eyes now wide with terror as she backed away, all thought of dignity long fled.

How could anything be so terrible?
Thirty-seven

Mathena sat in the morning room and watched her daughter pace. At least it helped her keep her own mind off the merciless execution that was taking place. Never had she heard of anyone actually invoking the right of death by shadra!

Partly, that was because most Shadrani males never managed to achieve the ability to kill with it, and partly it was because the death was so painful that it was too abhorrent to even the fiercest of males.

But apparently, not to her son!

Mathena sighed and rubbed her eyes wearily.

"There must be something we can do about this!" her daughter pleaded. "If he must kill her, at least can't we force him to be merciful?"

Mathena looked up at her daughter. They had been over this ground many times in the last twelve hours. "Raesa," she said quietly. "I do not approve any more than you do of what is happening, even as we speak, to the Princess of Arath. But Erone has been well schooled in Shadrani law. He knows he is within his rights, and neither you nor I can stop him."

* * * *

Calli backed against a wall as she trembled and waited for the second touch from her tormentor. She looked into his silver eyes to beg for pity, but saw none there. Instead, he reached steadily forward and connected once more with her neck.

Calli's eyes rolled back in her head as she screamed again, almost passing out from the shattering pain before he broke the touch. She sank to her knees and sobbed, covering her face, completely stripped of her dignity.

"Rise!" he demanded.

"No!" she begged, thrusting an arm out against him. "Please, have mercy!"

"Was there mercy for my son?"

She lifted her head, her eyes pleading, but he seemed immune to her pain. He bent and pulled her roughly to her feet, pinning her back against the wall. Calli struggled desperately against him, her head tossing from side to side as tiny sounds of fright escaped her lips. She was frantic now, her control ripped away by the white-hot pain that was being inflicted on her. She lashed out at him, trying anything to stop it, anything to halt the deadly progress of the hand that moved toward her with vicious intent.

But she could neither move nor stop him. Finally, she could only slump hopelessly, her eyes raised to his in a final entreaty.

"Go on, then," she whispered. "Kill me."

His eyes blazed at the words, his fingers moving ever closer. Calli searched his face, searched his eyes.

"Go on!" she shouted, her voice now racked with sobs. "I would rather die than live with you hating me."

Something in the liquid silver shifted and focused, but the hand continued to come. Calli turned her face away and squeezed her eyes shut, certain that the next touch would rip her apart.

But the hand of death halted momentarily on its ghastly mission. As though trying to shake off a demon, Erone tossed his head from side to side and drew a sharp breath between clenched teeth.

His fingers curled into a fist as Calli waited, poised on the brink of eternity. Then his hand opened, began to shake violently, and continued on its course.

Calli felt the heat of Erone's fingers as they neared. She squeezed her eyes tighter and couldn't stop the whimper of terror that sounded in the back of

her throat. Let it be quick, she prayed, oh Great Tsandis, have mercy! It was almost upon her, only inches away, millimeters...

Then the touch came, and Calli threw her head back against the wall as her eyes shot open and she gasped sharply. But it wasn't pain that had caused her response.

It was pleasure.

Unbelievable, raging pleasure that shook her to the core and left her so suffused with desire that she couldn't even draw a second breath, and her face paled from lack of oxygen. Then Erone's voice shattered the air with a wrenching cry.

"No!"

He snatched his hand away, leaving her bent over and gulping air into her burning lungs. Still breathing rapidly, Calli straightened and looked into his eyes.

She saw immediately the desperate struggle that raged within him. It danced across his face, first resentment, then confusion, longing, and finally, fear. In her relief, tears streamed down her face as she watched him battle himself. "Erone," she whispered. "Don't fight your love." She reached out to him.

"Instead, fight your hatred."

He cried out, backing away from her touch and shaking his head as if to refuse her words. His eyes were a terrible reflection of emotion.

"Oh, my love," Calli said gently, "let go of your hatred, set it free, like a feather on the wind." As she spoke, she moved toward him. He continued to back away. "Erone," she pleaded. "Don't fight me any longer."

He stopped and she came to a halt still some distance from him, waiting, allowing him the small space. His eyes scoured her face as though he would find the answer to his terrible struggle in her eyes.

And as he searched, he did.

"Why can't I hate you?" he whispered.

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she answered. "Because you love me, my prince, as I love you. And neither Shadrani law nor Sorisi hatred can ever change that."

She reached out to him slowly, as if he were a frightened animal that would bolt at sudden movement.

"Come to me, Erone," she whispered. "Come bring me your shadra."

Erone poised on the edge of indecision for only a moment before his heart hurtled him forward. With a wounded cry, he gathered Calli into his arms and they both gasped in shock at the pleasure that coursed through their bodies as they touched.

But in spite of the intensity, he bent his head and covered her lips with his own. Their mouths fused and their bodies strained against each other, sending electric currents of almost painful ecstasy shooting through them.

When Erone finally left her mouth and bent his head to kiss her neck, Calli threw her head back and cried out, laughing and sobbing, out of her mind with the feelings that drove her near insanity. But she didn't care; she threw herself into it, glorying in its intensity, glorying in her Shadrani lover. Erone heard her cries, and they twisted the knife of pleasure even harder in his body. He savaged her, licking, biting, kissing, each touch leaving him shuddering as she was, each moment bringing them closer to the inevitable. He knew the danger and didn't hesitate. He sensed the yawning abyss that opened before them and ran willingly toward it.

For the first time in his life, Erone's shadra ripped free of his control.

* * * *

Raesha turned on her mother.

"I can't bear this any longer!" she cried. "It's been almost two hours. Surely no one can sustain shadra this long, not even Erone!"

Unknowingly, she was voicing her mother's own thoughts. "I can't believe he is still in there with her, Raesa. Perhaps his conscience has finally come awake and he is ashamed to show himself."

Raesa shook her head as she headed for the door. "I don't care, Mother. And I don't care if I have to take on that great brute, Habda. I am going into that room!"

Mathena, herself at the end of her rope, accompanied her daughter to the mating chamber.

Habda looked up from his post as Mathena and Raesa approached. He could read their thoughts in their faces. He raised a hand to stop them.

"I have just barred Gadrel from entering here," he said, "and I feel no greater compunction to allow you passage." He bowed quickly. "If you will forgive me, my queen."

Raesa sputtered in outrage, but Mathena touched her arm to quiet her. "He's only doing his job, dear," she said, then turned to the warrior.

"You say Gadrel was here?"

"Here, and fit for murder."

Mathena's eyes narrowed. "Why? My son has no doubt had enough time to kill the princess."

Habda shifted uncomfortably.

"Habda," Mathena said, "if she isn't yet dead, don't you think Calli has suffered enough?"

The great Shadrani looked down at his boots. "Indeed, my queen."

"Let us pass," Raesa pleaded. "Have you no mercy?"

Habda looked up at Raesa then shifted his focus to his queen.

"It's all right," Mathena assured.

Nodding, he stepped aside.

Raesa hauled back the bolt and pushed open the door, fear at what she would find causing her to pause before she entered. Then she and her mother stepped into the room. They both drew in a startled breath at the sight that confronted them.

Raesa, her mouth open in wonder, walked toward the mating bed while Mathena gathered her wits and quickly turned to Habda.

"Do not let anyone else in this room, especially Gadrel, Tsandis help us!"

Habda stared at her, then heard the low purring sound that came from the mating chamber and his jaw dropped. As Mathena pushed the door closed behind him, he drew his sword from its sheath.

"Great Tsandis!" he breathed and turned away.

Mathena approached the bed to stand beside her daughter, who had dropped to one knee and was staring, unashamed, at the bodies that lay entwined on the furs.

"What is it?" Raesa breathed.

"Look on it well," Mathena replied, sitting suddenly, as if overcome. "For you will likely never see it again."

Raesa looked up long enough for her mother to see the question in her eyes.

"Perfect shadra."

Raesa's eyes widened. "She has captured him!"

Mathena nodded. Raesa leaned closer, trying to determine if the low purring sound came from Erone or Calli.

"It is your brother," Mathena explained. "It's the sound of his pleasure, for he is truly one with his love."

"I have never heard any Shadrani make such a sound," Raesa said. She listened.

"It is...not unpleasant."

In spite of the situation, Mathena smiled. "You know, I'm almost jealous of them."

Raesa looked up in surprise.

"They are united in a way that's beyond our understanding."

Raesa again looked down and studied the couple. They moved only slightly, as if the frantic thrusts of mating had been constricted by some invisible hand. She frowned at the slight rhythmic meeting of their bodies.

"But," she said, "it continues?"

"They are suspended in ultimate pleasure, Raesa. The entire act of breeding has been slowed to a fraction of its normal speed. He feeds her his seed slowly."

Raesa stood and shook her head, as if she had just seen a dog fly. Then her eyes caught the goblet on the table next to her and she gasped.

"Mother! The hazzah-he hasn't taken it!"

Mathena smiled at her daughter's concern.

"Fear not, Raesa," she said, gesturing to the couple before them. "He feeds." Her daughter's frown deepened with confusion.

"He has bitten her tongue," Mathena said. "He drinks her blood."

Raesa's shocked gasp brought only a chuckle from the queen. "Don't worry, daughter, she feels no pain, only pleasure. And he won't take too much. As his seed comes to her slowly, so her blood comes to him, a drop at a time, but enough to replenish his shadra. Which explains how he has continued it this long."

Again, Raesa shook her head.

"This is unbelievable!" she breathed.

Unbelievable was the word that drifted through Calli's mind as she floated somewhere beyond the confines of the mating room. She was well aware of the vibrating pleasure that continued to thrum through her body. She still felt Erone deep within her, still felt the stinging, sweet vibrations his movements produced, although she had no idea how much time had passed.

And she was aware of a strange, wonderfully erotic sensation in her tongue as he sucked gently on it, like a newborn. But beyond that, she was gone.

But she wasn't alone.

Here in this ultimate valley of shadra, she felt Erone all around her. She was with him-no, she was in him as he was in her.

And he felt as innocent as a child.

There was no trace of his hatred as they floated together in this shadowland, only his love and his joy. Calli felt it as if it was her own, not as a mere declaration but as if he had somehow managed to pull her into his own heart and allowed her to feel what he felt, know what he knew. Indeed, he had merged his soul to hers, until their thoughts, hopes, their very emotions became so entwined as to be inseparable.

Even more than the raging physical pleasure that Erone's shadra had produced, Calli reveled in this feeling of intense union. It made her want to laugh and dance and shout to the heavens.

But more than that, it made her weep with love for him.

"Come, Raesa," Mathena said. "Let us leave them in peace."

Raesa stood, still watching the rare sight before her. Then she turned and followed her mother out the door.

Thirty-eight

The Queen of Gemen rose and watched the young Princess of Arath enter her chambers. The girl looked tired, but there was also a look of peace and joy on her face that Mathena knew would never grace her own. They sat and faced each other.

"Gadrel did not see you?"

Calli shook her head. "He still believes I am dead, my queen."

Mathena nodded. "Well, let's keep it that way. At least, until Erone awakens."

Calli fixed the queen with a steady gaze.

"Is it true," she began, "that since I live, the House of Gemen owes me a life request...for bringing Danae out of the city?"

Mathena frowned. "Yes," she said. "Of course we do, my dear, but that can wait."

Calli shook her head. "I wish to make it now, and to you alone, if that's permitted."

Mathena studied her sharply. "I am permitted to do many things, Calli," she

said wryly. "Aside from the way my son behaves, I am still queen here." Calli didn't smile.

Mathena steeled herself. "What is your request?"

The girl hesitated only a moment before she began. "I'd like to be allowed to go home to Soris, to leave here in peace." Mathena's eyes opened in surprise, but she didn't miss the way Calli's fingers clasped together, making her knuckles turn white.

"I would request of the House of Gemen that no one follow or try to dissuade me from this decision. That I be allowed to have my life back."

Her request made, Calli sat back and looked up at Mathena.

"It is not your own life that concerns you, child," the queen said gently, "but my son's."

Calli winced at the insight, her voice a breath of pain as she replied, "I can no longer cost him what I cost him."

Mathena sat back in silence.

Calli's eyes glistened with unshed tears as she faced the mother of the man she loved with all her heart.

"I wish to leave now, while he still sleeps. I...I don't think I could be this strong if I had to see him..." She looked away quickly.

Mathena leaned forward. "Calli," she said, "if you were to stay, I wouldn't be disinclined to-speak on your behalf..."

Calli shook her head, her voice bitter. "The Prince of Gemen can never take a female for his life-mate."

Even as she said the words, Mathena knew that she was right and saw again the hopelessness of the situation. It had only been the sight of this girl and her son, bound together in the intimate embrace of shadra, that had stirred the queen's dormant romanticism. She shook her head, chastising herself for her folly, and despising the world in general for tearing these two apart.

"You are right about that," she said.

"And what of Gadrel? Do you think he would just accept this?"

The queen shook her head, forcefully this time. "Gadrel would never give up my son. One of them would have to die."

Calli gasped at the thought.

Mathena's eyes shone as she regarded the young princess. "Calli," she said fervently. "If ever I doubted that you love my son, you have just proven it to me."

Not able to meet her eyes, Calli studied the floor and waited.

Wishing in her heart that she could somehow choose another option, Mathena bowed her head and granted Calli's request.

As the princess stood to leave, she turned to the queen. "I hope that there can be peace between our people some day. I intend to work toward that when I arrive home."

Mathena looked up, then rose and came to her.

"Princess Calli," she said, laying a hand against her cheek, "knowing there are Sorisi like you, I believe, for the first time in my life, that peace may be possible."

"But it will never happen while my father lives," Calli said.

Without a backward glance, she turned and quickly left.

* * * *

Erone stirred and moaned gently as he swam to consciousness. Even before his eyes opened, his arm reached out to search the bed beside him. "Calli?" he called softly. But he received no answer. Opening his eyes, he saw that she wasn't in bed with him. He struggled to sit up. Tsandis, he was weak as a kitten! But a happy smile crossed his face as he sat up and stretched.

"Calli?" he called, louder this time. Then he looked up and saw his mother standing at the foot of the bed, watching him oddly, as though he were made of

spun glass.

"Mother?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

Mathena moved to sit beside him. She reached out her hand and stroked an errant lock of hair from his face, as she hadn't done since he was a child.

"I'm here to take you in my arms, my son, and hold you." Her voice was strong but radiated pain. Erone felt his heart constrict. She drew her hands to either side of his face and looked into his eyes. "Your love has left you."

"No!" Erone struggled and began to move, but his mother's hands closed tighter about his face, drawing his attention with their iron gentleness.

"She has made a life-request of the House of Gemen," she continued evenly, "to be allowed to return to her own life."

Her son's eyes now reflected panic. Mathena felt her heart break. "She has done this for love of you, Erone-to give you back your life."

"I want no life without her!"

"You must let her go."

"I can't!"

"Erone!" She looked into his eyes for a long time, until the panic changed slowly to pain. "You must!"

In her strong and typically direct way, his mother had voiced the inevitable, and in voicing it had torn away the veneer of hope that even Erone knew was too thin to hold up.

Her son squeezed his eyes shut and began to shake his head. Mathena drew him into her arms and held him, rocking him as she had done when he was a child, soothing his pain in the only way she could while he wept his anguish against her shoulder.

Thirty-nine

Calli cowered into the cover of the forest brush and looked up at Habda. He didn't speak until the party of men-at-arms had passed.

"They are a scouting party, nothing more."

The princess drew in a deep breath as they mounted and headed toward the city once more. As they moved out, she wondered what had kept her father from attacking the village again after Erone had taken her. Even now, she and Habda had encountered only a few small parties of men.

The large Shadrani beside her had no such second thoughts, however. He'd ensured himself that his prince's note came into the hands of the King of Arath. He glanced over at the princess and felt a strong surge of fondness and respect for the city-dwelling female. Although he didn't understand her feelings for the prince, he knew she had them and that she was deserting him now out of pure love.

"It isn't far now, my lady." Calli nodded and rode on, her eyes fixed ever on the road ahead as if to look back would be tempting the fates.

* * * *

A few hours later, Calli waited in her chambers for her father, surprised at the calm that had settled on her. She was prepared. More than prepared, she was looking forward to it. The King of Arath, however, was in no way prepared for the daughter that turned to face him with unswerving intent when he entered her rooms.

She waited in silence while he looked her up and down as if Erone's touch had left stains.

"You can't see the wounds left by the Prince of Gemen, Father," she said.

"They are in my heart, and are not visible to the eye."

The king's face reddened with rage, but before he could open his mouth to voice it, Calli interrupted.

"Do not," she whispered dangerously, "say one word!"

Completely taken aback at her intensity, not to mention her nerve, the rage fled his face and was quickly replaced with shock.

"I have come home of my own free will, to strike a bargain with you."

"A bargain! What-" the king began.

"If you don't shut your mouth and listen to me," Calli hissed, "I'll withdraw my offer before it is given."

Once more, her forcefulness stopped him short. He clamped his mouth shut and eyed her suspiciously.

"I will marry your viceroy," she continued, "and I'll give you the grandson you want."

At that, a smug expression crept over her father's face. She obliterated it with her next remark.

"And in return, you will leave the Prince of Gemen and his people to live in peace."

His rage smashed out of him. "You are in no position to bargain!" he bellowed.

"I'll force your marriage in any case!"

Calli smiled sweetly at him. "Not if I tell the viceroy certain...intimate details of my visit with the Shadrani prince."

Her father sputtered in fury. "He won't believe you! A Shadrani male would never...!"

Her eyes narrowed dangerously as she advanced on him, feeling a rush of satisfaction as the bully backed away, eyeing her as if afraid she might leap on him.

"He will believe me. No virgin would ever tell such shocking tales! And as for him being Shadrani, let's simply say that he is less fussy about who he beds than many of his fellow warriors."

Sadone's eyes narrowed. "You'll do no such thing," he spat, "for you'd seal your own fate by spreading such tales about yourself."

Calli laughed, dismissing his comment. It completely unnerved her father.

"In case you're thinking to wait until I am wed and then break your promise to me," she breathed, again deadly serious, "know you this...that I would not hesitate to tell all of Soris the revolting story of your first encounter with the Prince of Gemen."

Only a hint of fear showed in his eyes before he squelched it. But Calli saw it. Saw it and gloried in it. Oh, Erone, she thought, I am giving you your vengeance!

"I do not know what evil tales you have heard-"

Calli raised a hand as if to strike her father. The man actually flinched. "Do not insult me! It's no lie, and you are nothing more than a vile beast who enjoys indulging his pleasure by raping young boys!"

Sadone's eyes widened, but he remained silent.

"Nor would the proof lie far from sight," she spat. "For how else would you explain your embarrassing lack of parts?"

She watched the muscle in his jaw twitch erratically and knew that she had won.

"Never think," Calli finished, her voice quivering, "that I would hesitate to expose you. Now...you'll shut your mouth, and stay out of my way!"

With that, she turned and stormed out of the room, leaving her father staring in horror after her.

Forty

Pashar broke into the room where the family of Gemen sat quietly waiting. He quickly spotted Erone, then bowed and looked up as if unwilling to speak his news.

"Gadrel is preparing to ride to the city," Erone said for him.

"Y-yes, my lord," Pashar replied.

Erone rose, drew in a sorry breath, and turned to strap on his long broadsword.

Mathena and Raesa were on his heels as he went to face his promised and stop

him from shattering a life-request of the House of Gemen. He reached the square just in time to see Gadrel preparing to mount.

"Gadrel!" he shouted. "You will not violate this trust."

Gadrel turned from his horse and faced Erone, his gray eyes spitting fire. "I ride to re-capture the shadra of my promised!"

Erone shook his head, oblivious to the crowd now gathering. "She is under the protection of Gemen."

His promised took a few menacing steps toward him. "She is under your protection, you mean."

Jala came to stand by his queen and her daughter as the confrontation unfolded. Mathena exchanged a worried glance with him, then turned back, her eyes riveted on her son.

"Either way," Erone said, "you may not threaten her."

Gadrel struggled in one last effort to reach the prince. "The only way to release your shadra from her is to kill her!" His voice shook with the emotion he'd held in check for too long. It took on a threatening edge. "Erone, do not ask me to bear this! I won't take you without your shadra!"

"That is your choice."

As they stood facing each other, the atmosphere in the square began to change subtly. The gathered warriors sensed it immediately. It took a few seconds more for the others to pick up on it.

"Great Tsandis," Mathena breathed.

Gadrel's face took on a menacing look. "I choose to kill the bitch," he hissed.

Erone's eyes narrowed. "You do so over my body."

Gadrel's long-worn temper came unraveled with a black, whipping vengeance. The hiss of his sword escaping its scabbard caused Raesa to jump and grab Cera's arm. He hefted it into both hands and glared at Erone.

"Then, you die!"

Erone had begun to draw his sword as soon as he saw Gadrel's hand touch the hilt of his own. If he hadn't, he wouldn't have been ready for the vicious lunge.

Mathena stifled a cry at the sharp ring of steel meeting steel. It wasn't that she was in any way an innocent in viewing the bloodletting that often accompanied quarrels among her warriors. It was just that this was the first time such a spectacle had included her son. She almost took a step forward to stop it, but Jala's hand caught her arm.

"You know you can't halt this, Mathena. It has been a long time coming."

She nodded, drew a ragged breath, and trembled with the effort of maintaining her queenly calm. But she stayed where she was.

Erone lifted the great sword to intercept another deadly blow from Gadrel. His own fiery temper was beginning to boil as he faced the man who was to be his life-mate.

"I do not wish to kill you, Gadrel," he warned when they moved apart to circle each other.

Gadrel's answering laugh was sharp with bitterness. "You've been killing me slowly for many years!"

He lunged again and Erone strained at the effort to hold him back as they pushed at each other, their swords and bodies pressed together.

Mathena's hand clutched the long tunic she wore, turning her knuckles white. Jala tried to reassure her, but she wouldn't listen.

"He's tired," she breathed. "Gadrel is only marginally less skilled than he with a sword, and Erone is still recovering from shadra."

Jala's eyes narrowed as he studied the two combatants. "Do not fear, my queen," he said, "tired or no, for your son fights for love and Gadrel, only for jealousy."

The words were barely spoken when another shattering clash of steel sounded. The Shadrani people were silent as they watched the deadly match. If any of them had favorites, they kept it to themselves.

Erone managed to force Gadrel back one more time, but his mother was right; he

was tired, he dropped his defenses only a fraction as he did so. Gadrel moved in on the opportunity and drew first blood when he connected with a slash that laid open Erone's chest.

Raesa cried out and turned her back, squeezing Cera's hand painfully. Danae, also having trouble watching, climbed up into his mother's arms and buried his face in her neck.

Erone stumbled back a few steps, barely managing to heft his sword up to catch the next killing blow that descended on him. But he was fighting with not much more than his iron will.

"You tire," Gadrel taunted. "Could it be you spent your energy last night on that basrati whore?"

Erone snarled, swiveled and, using Gadrel's weight against him, gave him a mighty shove that sent him almost to his knees. But his promised was well trained, and he gained his balance and his wits quickly.

Too quickly.

He thrust his blade up as he straightened and the razor edge slashed against Erone's leg, leaving a gaping slice in the flesh on his thigh. The wound was deep, and the prince fell to one knee as the pain seared through him.

The crowd of Shadrani drew in a collective gasp when their prince went down.

"What's happening?" Raesa cried to Cera.

"Your brother is down," Cera choked.

"No!" She whirled and saw him struggling to stand.

"Let me pass," Gadrel snarled, "and I will spare you."

Erone shook his head as he gained his feet. The act of further defiance seemed to snap any sanity that Gadrel had left. He attacked his promised with a snarling vengeance, beating him back until he and Erone were locked in a deadly embrace, the muscles on their shoulders bunching and their biceps bulging as they strained against each other.

Sweat now poured off the two Shadrani, but neither noticed. All Erone could think about was keeping his wits, for what was left of his strength was ebbing out of him along with his blood. Gadrel pressed against him, his face only inches away.

"You want that female more than you ever wanted me," he spat. "For that alone, I will kill you!"

At that instant, Erone was convinced he would, for the determination in Erone's heart couldn't equal the hatred in Gadrel's eyes.

But then his promised made an error.

"And when you are dead," he seethed, "I'll still find your basrati bitch and cut her heart out!"

Whatever rare essence or mix of genetics that produces an exceptional Shadrani warrior roared awake within Erone and spun him into a frenzy. His eyes blazed molten blue fire.

Too late, Gadrel realized his mistake.

With a cry of inhuman rage, Erone shoved Gadrel away from him and launched a series of ferocious swinging attacks that drove his opponent back until he was against the forest wall. There he was forced to hold his ground and fend off the man who had turned into an avenging demon from hell.

Sensing the turn in the battle, Mathena felt her anxiety ease minutely, for the duel was far from over. Her eyes raked her son. His shirt was in tatters and his body, from the waist down, was now soaked with blood. The wound that lay open on his leg was bleeding with a steady pulse that increased her alarm double-fold. If this match didn't end soon, her son would bleed to death before her eyes!

But Mathena had never been in the high savage state of bloodlust that had seized Erone. His mind ignored his wounds as it flexed with years of Shadrani discipline to out-guess and out-maneuver his opponent. With an intensity that signaled to Gadrel his own demise, Erone bore down on him-relentless, pitiless, his eyes blazing silver fury.

Finally, Gadrel's anger blinded him to anything but vengeance against Erone. In his mindless rage, he gave himself away, signaling with his eyes to the

razor-sharp senses of his opponent what his next move would be. With a cry of fury, he lunged at Erone's throat for the final kill, but Erone saw it coming, dodged and instead drove his sword into Gadrel's chest. The Shadrani warrior was dead before he hit the ground. The silence that descended in the air of the forest afternoon had a heavy, eerie quality. Erone stood over Gadrel's body, looking down on it, his breath labored. As his people watched, the great sword slid from his fingers and he sank to his knees, then fell facedown beside his promised.

Forty-one

Queen Escallitani Q'Sadone Arath sat at her hand-carved desk and stared into space. Her father had been dead now for a week, but no one really missed his presence, not since Calli had taken over the shaky reins of rule four years ago.

When her father's mind had begun to unravel, she'd automatically picked up the pieces of his kingdom, even though her son was officially king. But even in Soris, no one expected a five-year-old to be up to the office. Her mouth relaxed into a smile when she looked over at her son, Revar, who sat trying to work an Arlerian puzzle. His frown deepened as he reached up to stroke a lock of his long black hair from his face in a gesture that tugged painfully at Calli's memory. Then his silver eyes flashed with delight as he fit one more piece into the intricate quiz.

He was the image of his father.

Calli's smile turned into a frown as her mind recalled the tumultuous events of the last six years.

The princess had married the Viceroy Reman, just as she'd promised her father. To her relief, it turned out that her husband's reputation as a rake had been manufactured in order to conceal the truth—he was impotent and not terribly interested in sex at all.

But she found him, after all, to be not a bad sort and when she discovered that she was pregnant with Erone's child, they struck a deal to conspire with each other. She wouldn't snitch about his masculine failings, if he acknowledged the child as his.

It was a good solution.

But the man wasn't healthy, and succumbed to a nasty virus that had gripped him only a year after they were married. Calli mourned him in her way, and then returned home at the request of some of her father's council.

When she reached home and found her father in his semi-unhinged state, Calli took over. She used the precious opportunity to begin radical changes within the social fabric of Soris, some of which were taking a long time. But others, like discontinuing the use of the loathsome paita, had caught on immediately. One of the first things she did was stop the butchering of baby girls. Female children were now given over immediately to their mothers for safekeeping. There was still a small problem when the mothers died in birth—it would take a long time before the males of Soris would want the bother of raising a female child alone.

But Calli's quick mind came up with a solution. She sent the unwanted children to the Shadrani. There they found loving homes and would grow up to replenish the weakening bloodline.

Calli shook her head, her smile sardonic. If her father hadn't been half-crazy by that time, his daughter sending Sorisi babies to the Shadrani would have made him so!

She knew that Sadone's unhealthy mental state had begun when Erone had held him powerless to do anything about his daughter's abduction. Then, when Calli came home and confronted him, it ripped a larger hole in the fabric of his sanity.

But, ironically, it was Revar, who in his innocence, had never understood his grandfather's cruel behavior toward him, who'd finally pushed him over the edge. Calli winced as she remembered her young son running to her room that

night last week to take her hand and drag her to her father's chambers where the man lay dead, his eyes staring open in horror.

It was one more thing to add to the list of differences that made her son's life miserable. Revlar was different, and not even the fact that he was the future king could alter the reactions people had to him.

What tore Calli apart was watching her son suffer through it. She had come upon him more times than she cared to remember, scrutinizing himself in the looking glass. She knew he was wondering why his appearance was so different. But in his brave little way, he struggled with it silently.

Sadone hadn't helped at all, for he'd reviled his grandson the moment he was born, when it became obvious to anyone with knowing eyes that he was Shadrani. But little Revlar, typical to his Shadrani nature, took his grandfather's rejection as a challenge and only sought him out the more. The boy asked his mother time and time again why the man didn't like him, but Calli could only bear to say that he didn't like anyone-which was true enough.

Her father's cruelty contributed to his own decline. It was obvious, to Calli at least, that Revlar was a constant reminder of the little boy whose life Sadone had so viciously snuffed out eight years before. Toward the end of his life, the king was sometimes seen running from the boy, screaming in terror that a spirit haunted him. Revlar ran after him, his eyes wide with wonder, only making things worse.

But it was one night last week that the little boy decided to confront his grandfather. He went to the man's room in the middle of the night. Calli could still see the fear and guilt on Revlar's face as she tried to explain to him that it wasn't his fault that his grandfather's heart had stopped beating, not really.

She sighed and wondered how Erone would react to the strange set of circumstances that had allowed his son to innocently reap the revenge that he'd craved for so long.

She hadn't heard a word from or about her love since she'd left the Shadrani village. True to his family's honor, Erone had followed her life-request to the letter.

Now, Calli herself had shattered the sanctity of the pledge. As soon as her father died, she began making plans to invite the Queen of the Shadrani to Soris. She'd been making minor inroads in Soris over the past five years in her quest for peace with the Shadrani. Calli was determined that, in her lifetime, she would see a ruler of the House of Gemen walk into the city-state, free from fear, to greet a ruler from the House of Arath. She wanted it now more than ever, with her young son snared directly in the middle of all the hatred and bigotry.

So it was that she sat nervously waiting for the next day to arrive. At ten o'clock tomorrow morning, the Queen of Arath would welcome the Queen of Gemen to her home!

* * * *

Calli grew nervous as the hour approached. Part of the reason she wanted to meet with Mathena was because of Revlar. She needed her advice, her wisdom. Should Erone know about him? Ultimately, she supposed he'd have to, but when, how...?

She shook her head to clear it, determined to make a good appearance in her first, albeit controversial, act as queen of her people. The reception room was full of people, some of them resentful, she knew, but more of them, she hoped, curious to actually meet Shadrani.

Security was alarming. Calli had threatened dire consequences on anyone who allowed any mishap whatsoever to befall one single Shadrani who visited today under her protection.

She wore her most splendid gown, a flowing gossamer of watered silk, in honor

of the occasion. The bodice was cut square to reveal the tops of her lush breasts, and it had a raised waist that first gathered the rich material, then let it fall sensuously to the floor in wafting folds. Her bare arms were almost covered with the silver bracelets that always adorned females from the House of Arath at state functions. Her hair was caught up in its usual braid and wrapped around her head, where it was securely fastened. A single large and priceless diamond rested in the center of her forehead, suspended from the thin silver band that circled her head. She looked every inch the queen she was as she waited in breathless anticipation for the Queen of Gemen. But as the announcement was made and Calli's eyes, along with all others in the room, turned to the door, it wasn't the Queen of the Shadrani who entered with the large contingent of armed warriors, but her son, the Prince of Gemen. Calli's breath drew in sharply at the sight of him. It was difficult for her mind to accept that he was actually here, moving with the same cat-like grace that she remembered.

Moving toward her.

Her thoughts rioted as he approached, chastising her memory for being so lax, for allowing her to forget how strongly his mere presence affected her. She had forgotten how exquisite the man was.

Great Tsandis! she thought, my knees are shaking!

Calli barely marshaled herself to look into his face as he approached. He hadn't changed much, she noted, but there was a tiredness around his eyes. The Prince of Gemen stopped five feet from her and fell to one knee. Calli hoped her voice wouldn't shake.

"Please rise," she said.

When he did, he looked up at her, but Calli saw no hint of his emotions in his eyes. They were hooded and guarded, as was his face. His voice sent a silky ripple down her spine when he spoke.

"I hope you are not disappointed, my lady," he said. "But I wasn't about to allow my mother to enter such a...," he glanced about him, "...potentially dangerous situation."

Calli felt like a fool. Of course not! What had she been thinking? Mortified, she felt her cheeks flush.

"Forgive me," she said, "I'm rather new to my duties and allowed my...enthusiasm to perhaps outweigh my good sense. But I had so longed to speak with your mother."

A dark eyebrow rose at her. "Is it something you cannot discuss with me?"

Calli's mind raced. She was suddenly glad she'd decided to excuse Revar from this reception. Great Tsandis! One look at the two of them together and people would know...they would just know!

But she smiled and gestured toward the large room where refreshments were waiting to be served. "Of course not. Please, come and replenish yourselves after your journey."

Erone fell into step beside her as she turned and led the large company into the lavishly decorated ballroom. Once inside, the tension eased a little, though it was obvious to Calli that it was going to be a very long time before Sorisi and Shadrani were comfortable in each other's company.

Some of the males from the city-state threw scathing looks at the Shadrani warriors, and Calli wondered fleetingly if it was because of their professed disdain of their sexual choices, or because of the reaction the exquisite males got from the females of Soris.

At any rate, the attention seemed to unnerve the Shadrani as much as it irritated the Sorisi. She watched with amused hopelessness for a moment before she spied a familiar face. Her smile wide, she crossed the small distance between them.

"Habda!" she cried as she stopped in front of the large Shadrani. He turned and grinned at her, bowing respectfully.

"My lady."

Then her eyes caught his companion, and her mouth fell open momentarily.

"Surely this can't be Pashar?"

Now full-grown, Pashar still had difficulty looking Calli in the eye. His smile was lopsided as he, too, bowed to her.

"But you are so large!" she cried with delight, bringing a small blush to his face.

"I think it was the food, my lady," Habda said, grinning.

Calli laughed with delight, then turned to Erone. Her smile faded when she noted his stern expression. Suddenly, she remembered who she was and just how much responsibility she carried. She indicated a door just off the center of the large room.

"I would like to speak with you in private, if you don't mind," she said calmly.

Erone nodded once and moved to accompany her, but before they entered the room, Habda put out a large hand to stop his prince, then opened the door and entered first. Erone stood patiently waiting. Calli's heart sank as she realized what was happening.

"I wouldn't lead you into a trap," she said.

He shrugged. "Some things may be beyond your control."

Habda came out, nodded, and moved away. Calli felt hurt as they walked into the room and she gestured for Erone to sit.

He declined.

"If it isn't too much to ask," he said bluntly, "I'd like to end this meeting quickly. My warriors are anxious, and the longer we remain, the more chance there may be some...mishap."

Calli looked at him for a moment, then realized he wasn't being petty, merely a wise leader.

"Of course," she said. She poured a glass of brandywine and handed it to him. Erone eyed the glass quietly.

"Oh, Great Tsandis!" Calli spat. "I'm not about to poison you, either!"

He ignored her and turned to study the room instead.

"What of your husband, my lady?" he asked, his back to her. "Does his lack of presence bode that he is loath to meet with Shadrani?"

She sighed and put the goblet down.

"My husband died shortly after we were married."

He turned to her, his eyes flashing regret, the first real emotion she'd seen since his arrival. "I'm sorry."

Calli attempted a smile. "He was a decent fellow. But...I did not love him."

For a moment, their eyes held. Then Erone looked away.

"Now, will you satisfy my curiosity?" Calli asked, sitting down. "I long for news of your people."

Erone finally sat as well. "What would you like to know?"

"How are your mother and sister...oh, and Danae! He must be growing so quickly!"

For the first time, a small smile played at the corner of his mouth. "You sound exactly like they did when I left, begging me to bring back news of you," he said sardonically. "They're fine, all three, and yes, Danae is growing. He's almost as large now as Pashar was when you first met him."

"Speaking of Pashar," she said, "he and Habda...?"

He nodded. "They are promised."

Calli smiled. "I'm happy for them." She forced her lips to maintain the smile as she asked the next question.

"And what of your promised? I did not see Gadrel among your warriors. Surely, you and he are joined by now?"

"Gadrel is dead, my lady," Erone said. "I killed him myself the day you left us."

Calli's heart twisted. No! her mind cried, that's part of the reason I left! She cast her gaze to the floor.

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"It was necessary," Erone said simply. "He sought to disgrace the House of Gemen by ignoring your life-request."

When Calli's forehead frowned in a question, he answered the unspoken.

"He meant to follow and kill you."

"But why?" she cried. "I had left you to him!" Her head shook in confusion.

"There was no reason for him to fear me!"

Erone's smile was anything but happy. "He had reason, my lady. He sought to free my shadra from you."

Calli stared at him. "Your shadra?"

"You took it from me the night I meant to murder you."

Calli's hand flew to her mouth as she realized what he was saying. "I...all this time...you haven't...Great Tsandis," she breathed.

Erone didn't answer. He didn't need to.

Suddenly, Calli understood the lines of strain around his eyes. "Oh, Erone," she whispered. "How much I've cost you!"

He looked over at the use of his name, but she was sitting, her eyes shut, head bent, not looking at him. He fought with the sudden urge to go to her, but instead, looked away and waited for her to contain herself.

When Calli lifted her head, there was a light of anticipation in her eyes. "But there's yet a way that I can give you back some of that cost."

Erone frowned. "That isn't necessary, my lady."

"Oh, yes," she said fervently. "Yes, it is." She rose and headed for the ornately carved door that stood behind them. "Give me but a moment," she said. As Calli put her hand on the door, Erone straightened. His right hand instinctively went to the hilt of his large broadsword. He sat, poised, waiting.

Calli stretched out her hand to her son. "Come here, darling," she said. "Here's someone special for you to meet."

Erone frowned and tried to see past her. As she turned, a small boy in her arms, he bolted to his feet.

Calli's smile was blinding. "This is my son," she announced, "who will be the new King of Arath."

Erone's face turned to stone when he saw the little face that looked up at him.

The child is Shadrani! his shocked wits managed to reason. But as he looked and listened to Calli's words, the truth dawned on him like an ash that glows to ember, then to flame. Calli felt her heart leap with happiness when a smile of pure joyful understanding finally crossed his beautiful face. His eyes devoured Revar, but he didn't move toward the boy. He stood where he was, shock and momentary indecision rooting him to the spot.

Instead, Calli came to him, basking in his happiness, joyful herself that she'd finally done something to atone for all the misery she had brought him. Revar stared at the man before him, studying him openly and without a trace of shyness.

"You look like me," he said.

Amazingly, Erone's smile widened. "Yes," he said. "I certainly do."

Calli laughed gently. "Would you like to go to Erone?" she coaxed. Revar wasn't shy, but he still wasn't sure he wanted to go to the dark stranger with the bright eyes. He shook his head and cringed against her.

"It's all right," Erone said gently. "Don't rush him."

Calli sat with the boy on her lap and Erone sat beside them, greedily drinking in every detail of his son. He drew a hand through his hair and looked as though he didn't know what to say. But Revar fixed that. He glanced up at Erone's amulet and exclaimed, "I have one like that!"

Erone smiled. "Like this?" he teased. "I don't think so!"

Revar's head moved up and down emphatically. "I do," he insisted. "Want to see it?"

"Yes," Erone laughed.

With one checking glance at his mother, the little one scampered off her lap and darted out of the room. Erone stood and moved after him a few steps, devouring him with his eyes until he was out of sight, as if he couldn't get enough of him. Calli smiled and rose as well, watching him as he closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

"I have a son," he whispered.

Stepping closer to him, Calli told him proudly about their child. "He's very bright," she began.

He looked up at her, his hand poised in mid-action.

"And he's quick to laugh, but he does have a temper, and..." Her voice failed at the familiar fire that had begun to burn in the silver eyes before her. She hadn't realized how close she was standing. Swallowing, she tried to step back. But his hand reached out and stopped her. Calli's heart pounded. Not knowing what else to do, she continued her proud description of their son.

"He's quite headstrong, but not mean..." She was falling into those eyes, being pulled in by the force of the man before her. "Oh, Erone," she whispered finally, "he is Shadrani through and through-"

She didn't manage another word, for Erone bent and captured her lips with his. She started at the feel of his mouth, but his kiss was gentle, searching, almost painful. Calli returned it haltingly, still fighting with the practical voice that screamed at her to stop.

Then his mouth became more demanding. He drank her in, waiting for her to surrender until, with a small cry from the back of her throat, she opened her mouth to him and welcomed his plundering tongue, twining it with her own, savoring his kiss and the bittersweet memory of it.

He tore his mouth away from her. A quiet moan wrenched from his throat as he first threw his head back, then brought it forward to rest his forehead against hers, his eyes squeezed shut. Calli felt the thundering of his heart as he stood, his hands pressed against the wall on either side of her. She stroked his hair and touched his cheek, all the while whispering his name, until he finally spoke, his voice a choked whisper.

"Calli," he rasped, "how I've burned for you."

"Oh, my love," she whispered before he lifted her chin and kissed her again. This time, there was nothing gentle in the kiss. Calli felt her desire rage out of control as he pressed against her, hungry, demanding, as though he were inhaling her, taking her sweet essence through her mouth. Suddenly, her body remembered the sharply erotic feel of his mouth sucking on her tongue. She moaned and sagged against him, wanting nothing more than to tumble again with him into that sweet ravine of shadra.

Revar stopped dead in his tracks and stared at his mother. She was kissing that strange man. My, how she was kissing him! His eyes grew wide as he watched the two before him cling together as though their lives were at stake. Suddenly he was afraid, and jealous.

"Mamma!" he cried.

Calli managed to break off the kiss, but it left them both weak and straining for breath. She turned to her son while Erone glanced away, knowing the fire in his eyes would alarm his son.

"It's all right, Revar," she gasped. "Erone and I have known each other a long time, since before you were born."

She moved away, leaving Erone struggling with the overwhelming urge to snatch her back and show his son, firsthand, just how well they knew each other. Finally, his will overcame his emotions, and he turned to Revar, squatting down to meet him face to face.

The boy reached up and handed Erone his amulet, but now there was a trace of resentment in his eyes. The prince pretended not to notice.

"This is a rather large adornment for such a small boy," he said.

The little boy drew himself up. "But I'm a king," he said.

Erone smiled at him. "So you are, little one. And even a small king deserves respect." He fell to one knee and pressed a hand against his heart in a gesture of supplication.

"Command me, my small king, and I shall obey."

Revar's eyes opened wide. He glanced up at his mother, who hid a smile behind her hand. Then he frowned and turned back to Erone.

"Don't kiss my mother any more."

Erone's smile turned to a wry grimace. "That's a very harsh command, little

king."
"But why?"
Erone sat back on the floor and drew the boy to him. Revlar didn't resist.
"Do you have a puppy?"
The boy nodded.
"And you love your puppy?"
"Yes."
"How do you know you love him?"
The little one pointed to Erone's chest. "Because he makes me feel funny here."
His father nodded. "And when you get this funny feeling, it makes you want to slap your puppy?"
Revar laughed. "No!" he disputed. "It makes me hug him!"
"Oh, I see," Erone said. "I used to kiss my puppy's ears."
"Me, too." Revlar grinned.
"How would you like it if you could never hug your puppy or kiss his ears?"
The little boy frowned, thinking. "Not very much," he said finally. Erone drew his son closer to him and searched his young face. Calli felt her heart throb with love at the sight.
"Well, I love your mother very much," he said. "Even more than I loved that puppy. So is it all right, then, if I kiss her-just sometimes?" He stroked his son's dark hair. "She has a lot of kisses. There will always be plenty for you."
The boy frowned, then glanced back at his mother. Calli's smile was radiant.
"All right," Revlar said.
Erone clasped his hand to his chest and bowed again, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "I thank you for your mercy, small king."
Revar grinned, then moved aside so the prince could gain his feet.
Erone stood and looked hungrily into Calli's eyes.

* * * *

Habda backed away from the kitchen girl that walked past him, raking him with a suggestive glance.
"Great Tsandis!" he whispered to Pashar. "The way that female is looking at me!"
Pashar laughed at the large Shadrani. "What did you expect, Habda? You're truly in basrati country now!"
Habda didn't seem to hear him, but merely continued to mumble something about "shameless damnable creatures" that made Pashar throw his head back and laugh.

* * * *

"Mamma!"
The frightened cry from over their heads drew Erone and Calli from their hungry inspection. They looked up to see Revlar sitting perched on the edge of a shallow shelf that jutted about two feet from the ceiling. His little face was pale as he looked down at them.
"Revar!" Calli cried. When Erone touched her arm to calm her, she turned to him. "You see!" she cried. "He's always climbing something!"
"It is instinctive for Shadrani to climb," Erone answered casually. Then he turned back to look up at his son, his hands coming to rest against his hips in another motion that seemed instinctive for Shadrani...at least, for this one.
"Why are you frightened?" he said.
"It's too high!" came the little voice.

"Well, how did you get up there?"

Revar gulped and chanced a look down.

"Climbed."

"I see," said Erone. "And how are you going to get down?"

Revar threw a beseeching glance at Calli. "Mamma will send someone."

Calli blanched at the questioning glance Erone threw her. "It's true," she admitted, "that's what I normally do."

Dark eyebrows drew together in a gesture of disgust. "Great Tsandis!" he spat. "A coddled Shadrani!"

To Calli's relief, he turned his attention to his son once more.

"Your mother isn't going to send someone this time," Erone said. "Now, climb down to me."

At the commanding note in his father's voice, Revar instinctively began to comply. But then he saw the drop and froze again. "What if I fall down?"

His father's voice was steady, confident, and brooked no defiance. "You will not fall."

The boy looked down into Erone's waiting eyes and found the confidence to overcome his fear. In his Shadrani heart, he knew somehow that the man below him would die before he'd allow any harm to come to him. He started down. Calli watched in wonder as the boy inched carefully down the tapestry that he had climbed until he was just within reach of his father. Then, to her delight and Erone's utter joy, Revar leapt from the wall into his father's arms and hugged him.

"I did it!"

Erone closed his eyes tightly and pressed his son to him. He struggled with the lump that formed in his throat, but couldn't have spoken a word if his life depended on it.

* * * *

The atmosphere in the ballroom was a little less joyous, however. One of the females from Soris had decided that Pashar was just too adorable to pass up, and she'd been flirting outrageously with him. That in itself would have gone fairly smoothly, but for the male from Soris who believed he had some claim on the girl.

What started out as Pashar struggling to be polite was turning into something quite different.

"Can't you stick to your own kind?" the man growled.

"Oh, leave him alone," whined the female who had begun the trouble.

The hotheaded man glared at her, then at Pashar. "I didn't think you Shadrani liked females!" he spat.

Pashar's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. Habda moved a little closer.

The little flirt wasn't making the situation any better. "I think I could make him like me, though," she purred suggestively.

Pashar smiled politely and said, "I don't think so," before he took his leave.

Now, the female was spurned and angry. She turned and went to the hothead, who immediately decided that he'd show this Shadrani pup how to treat a female!

When Pashar turned away, he went for his sword.

* * * *

"As you can see," Calli said, "he needs his father. I had hoped to talk with your mother about perhaps bringing him to visit. Would that be all right?"

"All right?" Erone echoed. "It's more than I could have hoped for."

The object of their discussion was sitting across the room from them now, comparing Erone's amulet with his own while his parents had their boring,

grownup talk.

Calli smiled. "I want him to know your people...his people. I want him to spend as much time with you as he can."

Erone beamed at her. "How soon can you come?"

She studied him. "Are you sure it will be...all right?"

Erone's eyebrow lifted sardonically. "I will endeavor to behave myself, Calli."

She smiled, knowing that if he didn't, she wouldn't have the strength to. "I think we can be there in, say...ten days?"

"We shall await you," he said. He took up her hand, turned it over and kissed her palm.

Just then, Altor broke into the room. "There is trouble, my prince!"

Without a word, Erone gained his feet and followed the man out. Calli turned first to her son. "Stay in here, Revar," she demanded, then went after the prince.

Entering the ballroom, Calli felt the tension crackling in the air. On both sides of the room, swords were drawn, and it was only the barest thread of control that kept the room from exploding in violence. She turned and saw Erone approach Habda.

The large Shadrani was holding a man up along the wall, his eyes gleaming with menace. The terrified man was gaping silently and dangling like a broken puppet. Pashar, standing beside the two, was talking to Habda, trying to reason with him.

"Please, Habda," he insisted. "Put him down. The entire room has gone on alert!"

But Habda didn't seem to hear. At least, not until Erone's voice broke through.

"What happened here?"

"This basrati pig," Habda spat, "drew a sword on Pashar while his back was turned!"

Erone's eyebrow lifted as he assessed the man with a look of disdain. "That was brave of him," he said sardonically.

"Yes, my lord," Habda hissed. "Sorisi courage."

Revar peeked around the corner. His silver eyes shone as he watched the way his mother's new friend took control and everyone seemed to listen to him, even that very large man who was holding the smaller one up by the front of his shirt.

Erone turned to his warriors. "Put up your swords!" he commanded. They did so instantly.

Erone clapped Habda on the shoulder. "Let him down, my large friend," he laughed, motioning to Pashar. "I think he didn't bargain on finding you cub under a lion's care."

As he knew it would, the humor in the remark eased Habda's temper. He released the man, who fell to the floor with a loud thump. Then he turned to his prince.

"My lord," he said. "If you're quite finished with your politicking, I think it is time to leave this place."

Erone nodded. "Gather the men, Habda. We'll withdraw as soon as they're ready."

He turned and joined Calli once more.

"Oh, Tsandis," she said softly, "this isn't going at all well!"

"On the contrary," Erone grinned. "No one was killed. I think it's an excellent beginning!"

She smiled grimly as they walked back to the room. Once inside, Erone bent and lifted his son into his arms.

"How would you like to come and visit me?" he said.

Revar frowned. "Aren't you going to stay here?"

Erone and Calli exchanged a glance.

"No, Revar," Erone continued. "But you and your mother are going to come and visit with my family in the forest."

At that, the silver eyes widened. "In the forest?"

"Yes," Erone smiled.

"Can I climb a tree?"

Erone threw a teasing look at Calli. "You can climb all the trees you want, and your mother can't say no."

Revar turned to affirm this amazing statement and saw his mother smiling in acknowledgment. He let out a whoop of joy and hugged his father tightly.

Erone kissed the top of his head, then set him down. Not trusting himself to kiss Calli again, he bowed instead.

"Until next week, my queen."

She managed a smile, then followed him out.

When the Shadrani were safely on their way beyond the great walls, she turned on the hotheaded man who was still rubbing his chafed neck.

"And what," she said, her eyes gleaming every bit as dangerously as the large Shadrani who had held him, "is your name?"

Forty-two

"He comes!"

The entire village poured out of homes to welcome the new Ruler of Arath.

Erone had been too impatient to wait, and had ridden ahead to meet the traveling party that consisted of Calli, Revar, and ten men-at-arms, who only accompanied them until the prince arrived before Calli sent them back to the city.

As they rode into the clearing, Mathena's eyes quickly noted that Calli hadn't changed much in the six years since she'd last seen her. There was more of a stillness about her, but Mathena knew that came from being both mother and queen. Then her eyes rested on the small boy who sat before Erone on the saddle, and seemed more than content to be there. Her face broke into a wide smile.

Her grandson!

And Great Tsandis, wasn't he a picture-perfect little Shadrani?!

Calli dismounted and walked into Mathena's open arms, then turned to hug Raesa.

"Welcome, welcome," Mathena said, taking up her hands. "It's good to have you back among the Shadrani." She turned and saw Erone waiting expectantly, his son still in his arms.

The little boy climbed down and approached Mathena, then turned to his mother. Calli nodded slightly. Revar turned back and bowed nicely to Mathena. "It is my fortune to know you," he recited.

Mathena seethed with delight, then bent down on one knee. "And I am happy to know you, small king."

Revar stared at her, then bent his head forward. "Is it true you are a dragon?" he whispered.

Mathena threw her head back and laughed. Then she fixed her son with a mock-threatening glance, which he completely ignored.

"Your father teases you," she said, then quickly shot Calli a chagrined look as she realized she might have spoken out of turn.

"It's all right," Calli said. "We told him on the way here. He knows that Erone is his father."

Revar smiled and tilted his head back to look up at Erone. He was happy to have a father; he had always wanted one. But he was especially happy that his father was this man. He liked the way he laughed and the way it felt when he hugged him, all safe and warm, like with his mother, only...more fierce!

Erone smiled back at the little face. Yes, the boy had taken the news well, breaking down the last barrier to his happiness. Well-he glanced up at Calli-almost the last.

Calli caught sight of Danae and her smile widened even further. When he came forward, however, he didn't hug her, merely bowed respectfully and smiled affectionately. Calli understood. He had begun his shadra. Adolescent males in

the throes of shadra didn't hug females.

She introduced him to her son. "Revar," she said, "this is your cousin Danae. When I met him, he wasn't much bigger than you are."

Revar smiled up at the larger boy. He was so happy! Not only did a lot of his father's people look like him, but here at last was a playmate that did, too. He was instantly determined to be friends. Danae didn't take much convincing. "Erone told me something about you wanting to climb trees?" he said.

"Yes!" Revar cried. "Lots of trees!"

Danae chuckled and held a hand out for the little one to clasp. "We'll start with my favorite," he said.

"I suppose I'll be the last one to hug my queen," came a complaint from behind Raesa. Calli looked up at the familiar voice and flew into Jala's arms. When she stepped back from him, her smile was radiant.

"You look wonderful," she said.

"As do you. Motherhood agrees with you."

They fell in as the group headed toward the great hall for the festivities that had been planned in honor of the visit.

"Jala," Calli said quietly. "I need to know what happened the day I left."

The older man frowned at the memory. "It was not a pretty sight, Calli."

"Erone told me that he killed Gadrel."

"It was necessary."

"That's precisely what he said. But," she frowned, "I don't imagine that Gadrel died quietly."

"No, Calli. He and Erone battled to the death in a sword fight."

Her gaze shifted up quickly. "Nor can I imagine Gadrel actually trying to kill him."

Jala smiled ruefully. "Oh, he tried all right, and came very close; so close that we almost lost both of them."

This time, she stopped and turned to him. "Erone almost died?"

His face serious, Jala looked into her eyes. "He came closer to death than anyone I've ever seen, Calli. I was certain I'd lost him."

Calli's face paled, but she took Jala's arm as they again fell into step. It was disquieting news, but it was exactly what she'd needed. It was the kind of sobering reality that would help her to stay away from the Prince of Gemen. Erone was having his own problems keeping his traitorous thoughts in check as he glanced across the room at Calli. At least his mother had had the foresight to put the table between them!

Calli had her own life now. Great Tsandis, she was the Queen of Arath! And even though they shared a son, he knew that things were really no different today than they'd been six years ago when she'd left him. He clenched his fists under the table and turned to concentrate on the entertainment.

But even that betrayed him. The Shadrani were shameless romantics, and every second song mourned a lost love or sang of a broken heart. Frowning, he decided that he'd slip out of the room for some much-needed air when he felt a tiny hand grasp at his own. He turned and looked at Revar.

"Come and sit with us!"

Erone glanced up. Calli threw him a helpless look.

He allowed the boy to drag him over to where she sat. He groaned inwardly. She had to be seated on a bench—at least a chair would have offered him escape from physical contact! But Revar stood impatiently waiting for his father to sit.

Talking to himself, Erone sat gingerly next to Calli, trying to keep from actually making contact with her. She knew very well what he was doing and seemed intent to help out, but Revar would have none of it.

"Please move over, Father," he said. "There's no room for me on the end!"

Erone scowled. "You may sit on my lap."

Revar shook his head, looking over at Danae who had quickly become his role model. "Danae doesn't sit on his father's lap!"

"Great Tsandis!" Erone spat. But he slid over.

The second their thighs touched, he almost jumped. But he didn't. Instead, he

sat back rigidly and set his jaw in determination. Calli closed her eyes against the heat that invaded her where their flesh met. There was nothing for it, she decided; she'd have to learn to endure his presence. She had no choice, for herself, for him, for their son, no choice at all.

By the time Revar did climb onto his father's lap, Erone and Calli were too lost in the enjoyment of their nearness to shift apart.

Her head almost rested on his shoulder and when he turned to speak with her, their lips were only inches apart. For the last half-hour, Calli's heart had been hammering painfully in her chest, and Erone's breathing had become strangely erratic. But neither of them moved. It was exquisite torture.

Mathena and Raesa watched the pair from across the room.

"Nothing has changed, Mother."

The queen shook her head. "I didn't really expect it to. One doesn't lose one's shadra to a passing fancy." She reached over and patted her daughter's hand. "Didn't you have something to do, dear?"

Raesa's look of shock was quickly subdued. She didn't know why she was surprised. Her mother never missed a thing!

"Ah, well," she said. "I suppose there must be something for me to attend to."

Calli and Erone looked up when Raesa approached and gestured to Revar, who was now almost asleep on Erone's lap. "Come, Calli," she said. "I'll help you put my nephew to bed. I'd like to speak with you about something."

Calli rose immediately while Raesa bent to take Revar from his father's arms. She breathed a sigh of disappointed relief to be moving away from Erone.

Good, she thought, now I'll just stay away from him.

Erone watched the two walk away.

Thank Tsandis, he thought, now I'll just avoid her.

* * * *

Raesa bent and kissed her nephew on the cheek, then waited while Calli did the same. She snuffed out the light and the two of them moved quietly out the door, pulling it closed gently behind them. Calli turned to walk back down the hall, but Raesa took her arm and steered her in the opposite direction.

"The thing I needed to talk with you about," she said, "is this way." Calli frowned at the odd behavior, but allowed Raesa to guide her down the hall.

Finally, they came to a stop in front of a door that Calli remembered all too well. When Raesa opened it and stepped inside, Calli hung back.

"Come on, Calli," Raesa said, motioning her forward. "I chose the mating room for privacy!"

Still feeling unsure, Calli walked in. She gasped as memories flooded her with choking force. Nothing in this room had changed one iota since she'd last been in it, and its sameness was almost suffocating. Still, her eyes devoured the room, drawing in every detail, allowing every memory, sweet and painful, equal consideration in her mind.

Raesa watched her.

"I'll be right back," she said suddenly.

When Calli whirled to question her, the female was already at the door.

"I need to get something," she said. "Don't go away!"

Calli frowned at the door as it closed behind Raesa, but in truth, she was glad to be alone in this room. Glad to have the luxury of her memories and her thoughts to herself.

* * * *

"But can this not wait for morning?" Erone said as he followed Habda down the

hall.

"Oh no, my lord," Habda replied. "I believe it's...ah...most urgent." Erone's dark eyebrows grew together. Rarely did this Shadrani behave strangely. Something was up! When they came to the door of the mating chamber, Erone's dark eyebrows shot up in an exact opposite motion of the one before. But before he could say anything, Habda pushed the door open and was waiting respectfully for his prince to enter.

Erone drew in an impatient breath as he brushed past the large Shadrani and into the room.

Calli turned when she heard the familiar sound of the door clicking open. Then, like a dream from the past, her prince walked into the room. When he looked up, however, he seemed as surprised to see her as she did him.

"Calli?" he said.

"Um...my lord," Habda said, gaining their attention. "We decided that you'd probably need some time to...ah...discuss your son."

Calli's mouth fell open.

Erone's eyebrow shot up. "We?"

"Yes, my lord. We the warriors and...perhaps some members of your household."

Calli's eyes closed as she realized what the Shadrani was saying. Erone continued to stare at him.

"I am certain there is a great deal to...ah...discuss, my lord, so, we don't expect to see you for several hours. Of course, I will be directly outside the door...if you should need anything?"

With that, he turned and withdrew, throwing the locking bolt home behind him.

Habda took his post outside the door, leaning on his great sword. "Six years without shadra!" he spat, shuddering at the thought. "That is far the other side of enough!"

Erone continued to stare at the closed door for a moment. The impact of what had just happened stunned him momentarily.

Calli's heart thrummed as she stood and watched him. She understood as well as he did what had just been done. For the first time, it actually seemed there might be hope for them.

Tears threatened her eyes, as her emotions climbed to a fever pitch after six starved years away from her love. But the tears were forgotten when he turned to face her. His beautiful eyes shone with an intensity that radiated his love and raked her with a look that set her body on fire. As always, his low, silky voice sent a luscious shiver down her spine when he finally spoke.

"Calli," he whispered. "Take your hair down."

About the Author

Dawn G. Novak was born one snowy January morning in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Even from a very early age, her artistic abilities became apparent. Before the age of seven, she had begun to draw and paint, and when she was eight years old she entered one of her drawings into the annual Calgary Stampede Art Festival. Those who knew her were not surprised when it earned her an honorable mention from the judges, no small feat for one so young. It was not long, however, before Dawn soon turned her growing talents toward the two other loves that would govern her life-music and writing.

From the very beginning, Dawn's teachers recognized and encouraged her writing skills. She won the Curtis Award in 1968, an honor given to the one student who, out of all the students in the province of Alberta, achieved the highest grade in literature. Still, Dawn soon found herself drawn more and more toward the world of music. At the age of thirteen, she taught herself to play the guitar and soon she and her two sisters were performing at local charity shows and church functions. It was at such an event that an agent approached Dawn and her sisters and asked if they would be interested in performing professionally. The trio agreed that it might be fun and soon Dawn, who at the age of fourteen was too young to play in bars, found herself singing in supper

clubs and dining lounges throughout the Calgary area.

Ultimately, what had started as a bit of a lark turned into a career and Dawn would end up spending over twenty years on the road, performing across Canada and even recording in Nashville. Eventually her two sisters would drop out of the industry but still she continued on, playing in other bands along the way. However, it wasn't until she began her solo career that her old love-writing-began to push itself back into the forefront of her life.

In 1981, Dawn began to write again. At first, it was simply to try and alleviate the boredom of life alone on the road. Soon it became much, much more. It became a burning desire to tell her own stories, in her own way. What started out as a short story became a novel, which in turn became the cornerstone for a series, which will ultimately become...well, that is up to fate, and to those who love a great yarn.

Dawn has long since quit the music business, but every year she happily leads her friends and family in laughter and song to celebrate St. Patrick's Day. Extremely proud of her Irish heritage, and ever mindful of the legacy of "storytellers" in the grand tradition, she is constantly striving to challenge herself and to grow in her writing. Today, most of her time is spent with the newest loves of her life, the Shadrani.

She has been fortunate enough to travel extensively, and now lives in Mexico with her husband, Michael, and their two cats.

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