

D.G. Novak

Shadrani 2: Sons of Gemen

SONS OF GEMEN

A tale of the Shadrani: Book 2

By

D.G. Novak

NCP Release July 2006

© copyright D.G. Novak

Cover art by Jenny Dixon, © copyright July 2006

ISBN 1-58608-929-3

New Concepts Publishing

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or is merely coincidence.

Chapter One

Vancouver, Canada

Sometime in the near future

The dream was always the same.

He was running, running from something indescribably awful. At first there was only a mild threat, a sense of general anxiety, but it quickly began to grow into a feeling of fear.

Of menace.

Of terror.

Behind him, the thing that pursued him grew ever closer, and the boy felt his heart start to trip wildly. He strained to move his legs faster, but found his strength ebbing rapidly, as though the earth itself was bleeding it from his body. With a silent prayer he pushed himself past all boundaries, his whole being vibrating with the adrenalin of fight or flight. But this was not something he could hope to fight. All he could do was try to escape. All he understood was that if this darkness reached him, he would be lost... all would be lost...

He awoke with a start.

The boy looked out onto the back alley, squinting against the golden intensity of the late afternoon sun as he jolted awake from his nightmare. He had fallen asleep here in the corner of the fire escape outside the small apartment he shared with his mother. The spring sunshine had caressed his skin, kissed his face, and seduced him into slumber with its warmth. Not a difficult feat, since he was sleeping so little at night lately.

Dallas Devlin was fifteen years old.

And so far, his life wasn't going too well.

Closing his eyes, he breathed in deeply to absorb the sounds and smells of the city, to touch base with reality and stop the thrumming of his heart. Below him, life played out its stark reality like a grimly-penned melodrama. The homeless wandered aimlessly, stopping to sift through garbage for anything they could turn into quick cash. Drug deals went down on a fairly regular

basis and Dallas knew exactly what the pretty, young males who showed up on the corner were selling. Such was life in a low-rent apartment. His mother saw none of it, it seemed. The woman had the uncanny ability to walk down the filthy street and not be accosted by even the dirt and debris, let alone the human garbage that lingered there. In spite of it all, this was a time of day Dallas treasured. A time when the world was ending its work day and people were coming home to loved ones. A time when you could hide within the walls of your home, safe for the moment from the ravages of the outside world. Dallas raked a hand through his dark hair as he shifted to make himself more comfortable, while the sharp smell of a neighbor's cooking wafted on the breeze from one of the open windows in the complex. Onions, garlic, and some kind of fish, he thought. Dallas wrinkled his sensitive nose and felt his stomach demand action. He was hungry, but it could wait. For the moment, he turned his attention to the large, familiar book that sat on his lap. It was a singularly strange piece of work, dark with age, the cover made from some kind of leather, though which animal had given its life for the protection of the tome, he could only guess. There was no author's name attached, nor was there a title to it. It was quite fitting, he mused, that the book was so strange and seemed almost alive... threatening. It had belonged to his father. He ran a hand over the dark, smooth cover and wished, not for the first time, that the mysterious thing could talk. He suspected if he knew its history, he would know his father. Then the thought made him shudder. That might not be such a good thing. Dallas loved to read, especially a good fantasy story, but his obsession with this particular book also sprang from the fact that it was the only thing he had of his father's. He would read it every few years, picking it up whenever he had a spare moment, whenever he needed something to take him away from his mundane existence. And he needed that now. Gently sliding the volume open, he turned to the page where he had left off. He had read about half of the story this time around and once again, found himself captivated by the tale of Erone and Calli, he the Prince of Gemen and she the royal daughter of his mortal enemy, King Sadone of the Sorisi. Erone's people, the Shadrani, held same-sex marriage as not only sacred, but mandatory, so his love for the princess was forbidden on many fronts, and hers for him had almost cost her very life. But Dallas liked the fact that they had fought against all odds for the right to love one another. He had reached the point in the story where it looked like the star-crossed lovers were going to be allowed to be together. Settling in, he began to read...

* * * *

Planet of Daleer

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 had 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 warriors 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. Arath chose to repress, control and dominate the females of his race, the Sorisi. Within his camp, the women walked a strict line of sexual decorum. And when that did not work, the choice was female infanticide. Gemen, knowing he could never curtail the inclinations of his passionate, fertile people, the Shadrani, chose to create a same-sex society where children were conceived and born only through royal decree. 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. But now, the unlikely love between the Queen of Arath and the Prince of Gemen had brought the planet again to the brink of war.

* * * *

The City of Soris
Planet of Daleer

The sound of his boot heels clicking would have echoed sharply off the stone floors of the castle keep if not for the soft leather bindings he'd used to render them silent. As it was, the man padded softly, creeping along the dark hallways and rooms, keeping to the darkest of shadows. Before he rounded any corner, he carefully stole a glance to be sure the way was clear. He'd been given all the information he needed by those who had hired him, they had told him that he would meet with no opposition. But he trusted no one. He was used to treachery, deceit and betrayal. He was used to this kind of work. Raising his head, he listened, barely breathing, motionless in the darkness. He heard nothing. His senses registered only the almost palpable silence that hung like a presence in the still night air, and the faint scent of the polish that was applied religiously by the household servants and was evidenced in the high gloss on the furniture and the plank wood floor. Still he waited, careful unto distraction about his approach, to be caught in this endeavour would mean certain death. Finally, he began to move again. Slowly, painstakingly, he made his way to the chambers where he knew they would be sleeping. Typical, he thought, as he rounded the last corner to peer down the long hallway that led to the royal bedrooms, the ones who want the deed done the most are never the ones to dirty their hands with it. But that was all right with him. He would not get much work as an assassin if any of his clients had the guts to do the nasty work themselves.

* * * *

In the royal chambers of Queen Escallitani of Soris, her young son, Revan, lay in his bed and pretended to sleep. The child's eyes were closed and he kept his breathing slow and even so that his mother would not know that he remained awake in the bed, ready to strike, his small dagger clutched in his hand. It did not occur to him that a seven-year-old would spark little fear into the heart of anyone who might intend him harm. He was not just any seven-year-old boy - he was the seven-year-old heir to the throne. He could hear his mother moving quietly around the room, getting things together for their flight from the city. She had told him nothing, not wanting to frighten him, but Revan heard things, knew things she wouldn't understand and he was determined to protect her during this dangerous time.

So, he pretended to sleep until she shook him gently to wake him. "Mama," he said quietly, "what is it?" She placed a finger to her lips and whispered in his ear. "Just come now, my darling, and say nothing. We are leaving the city." Revar rolled out of bed with the economy and speed of movement that always brought a small gasp of awe from his mother. She should be used to it by now, he thought in passing, after all, I get it from my father.

* * * *

Satisfied that his way was clear, the assassin moved forward like a silent shadow. As he approached the solid wooden door that barred the way to the royal chambers, he stopped and considered the deed he was about to do. He had no problem with murdering the child, the boy was an abomination. But the mother? It gave him pause to think of actually killing her. His queen. Still, she had it coming, he knew. In truth, she was nothing but a whore, consorting with those cursed, dark, Shadrani, making peace with them, inviting them into the city. His city. The thought made him shudder. It bolstered his resolve to remember all the crimes she had committed against her own people. His hand tightened on the handle of the long, viciously sharp knife he carried. Silently, he inched the door open and slipped into the quiet chamber. It was so easy, just as they had told him. The royal bed now lay within easy reach. In the inky darkness, he could just make out the figure under the covers, motionless. His heartbeat doubled as he approached and thought of plunging the knife in. He must be quick about it. He couldn't allow her to cry out and warn the child sleeping next door. He would kill her swiftly, silently, and then get rid of the creature she had spawned, and things would return to normal in his world. He felt a rush of anticipation at being this near his target. The queen. So still. So unsuspecting. A few more steps and she would be his. He raised the lethal weapon above his head, readying for the strike. Then he drew in one long, rasping breath and began the deadly plunge downward. The blade sliced through the air of the royal chambers, then came to a dead halt a foot away from its target. The assassin blinked, confused, thrown by the unexpected block. His eyes and his mind snapped together at the same time to register the iron grasp that held his arm. Then he caught the glint of feral, steely-blue eyes that razed him even in the darkness of the room. He had time to register only one terrifying thought before his life was snatched from him as quickly as snuffing out a candle flame. Shadrani!

* * * *

Queen Escallitani-known as Calli to her friends-shifted uncomfortably on the bed of vegetables upon which she sat. Her long golden hair, usually coiffed and pampered into the latest style, tumbled loosely around her shoulders. Her nose wrinkled as she breathed in the rank, musty odor of the borrowed clothes she wore to hide her true identity. They were those of a kitchen maid, and she was certain they hadn't been cleaned since they were new. He could have chosen a more comfortable disguise, she complained to herself. Aloud, she asked Habda, the large Shadrani who drove the cart that carried them, "Why will you not tell me where Erone is?" Habda rolled his eyes skyward. If she only knew where his prince was, he thought, there would be hell to pay. "He is elsewhere, my lady."

The queen frowned, considered pursuing the question, then clamped her mouth shut, knowing that the large man was the most loyal of Shadrani and would never give up any information that his lord, the Prince of Gemen, did not want him to.

"Then tell me of Pashar," she said instead. She knew that the usually reticent Habda would wax rhapsodic about his life-mate any chance he got.

Calli had been instrumental in bringing the young man into Habda's life and had watched with delight as Pashar had totally captured the heart of the fierce Shadrani.

As expected, a large grin crossed the face of the huge male at the thought of his love. "He is well," he replied, "and becoming a warrior of great standing among our people."

"I cannot believe he let you out on your own tonight."

At this the large Shadrani looked a little uncomfortable. Calli's eyes widened and, in spite of the situation, she couldn't help the small chuckle that escaped her.

"He has no idea what you are up to, has he?"

Habda frowned. "Some things are better left unknown."

"Oh Habda," she said, laughing. "He will kill you when he finds out you have been risking your life again."

Habda's face grew more serious.

"Not when he learns it was risked for you, my lady."

Calli sobered, touched by the statement, then sat back and fell silent. As the wagon rolled quietly along, her mind replayed the events of the past several hours and her violet eyes threatened to fill with tears of anger and frustration. Fleeing one's own castle in the middle of the night was not something she would have chosen to do. But with this, as with many things in her life, she had been given no choice.

For the early part of her young life, Calli had been ruled with an iron fist by her father, Sadone, the ruthless King of Soris. Then, no sooner had she been freed by the death of the murderous man, when she was shackled with her crushing responsibilities as Queen of Soris. Not to mention the horrendous task of raising her son and protecting him from the truth of his Shadrani heritage.

Ironically, it was the enemy of her people who had first accepted her for exactly what she was. It was only among the Shadrani that she had found any real peace. And even though her stay with them and the ensuing love she had for their prince had cost her dearly, she would not have changed a thing. Still, she knew she would sorely miss many things about her home in Soris. She would especially miss Jala, who was the Royal Healer and the man who had all but raised her. She could still see the kindness in his dark blue eyes as he'd kissed her on the cheek and sent her off. She had tried to persuade him to leave with her, but he had declined, insisting that he could be much more useful to her if he stayed behind.

And she did not know how she would get by without Solte, her handmaiden. But the spunky young woman now had her own life within Soris, married as she was to the Captain of the Guard. Calli felt her heart constrict with affection when she thought of the maid. No sense worrying over her, she reasoned, she isn't fleeing from assassins! Then, the slight movement of her sleeping son drew her attention.

He lay curled against her, snuggled up for warmth under the large, coarse blanket that concealed him from the world that would see him murdered in his bed. Even in sleep, he was the picture of his father.

A perfect little Shadrani boy.

Unruly black hair spilled across his fine features as he slept beside her. The shadow of the long lashes that fringed his startling silver-blue eyes lay dark against his cheek. He looked like what he was, an innocent sleeping child, there was nothing to indicate that, in fact, he was the main reason for the stirrings of war and subterfuge that had invaded their lives of late. She stroked his face softly, her heart thumping painfully at the thought of what

could have happened, how heartlessly they would have murdered a seven-year-old boy.

Calli issued a silent prayer of thanks to her god, Tsandis. They were safe now. The disguise had worked and they had trundled down the cobbled road and out of the walled city of Soris like so many other itinerant, ragged merchants that roamed between the city states selling their wares. Not a second look had passed their way. Now the only thing that continued to gnaw at her mind was the whereabouts of the Prince of Gemen.

Her lover had been vibrant with rage when he had told her of the plot that had been uncovered against her. Calli smiled as she remembered the flash of his eyes. Even with murder in them, they continued to be the most intoxicating pair of eyes in creation. But he was also reckless and stubborn and she wouldn't put it past him to...

"Great Tsandis!" she spat at Habda. "Tell me he is not in the city!" Habda squeezed his eyes shut against the tirade. How to deal with this?

"He is elsewhere," he repeated.

"Elsewhere, as in the city?"

The grinding of his teeth was the only indication of the stress the large warrior was enduring. If Calli had been a Shadrani female, she would have known to drop it there. But Calli was far from Shadrani. In fact, she was far from any female Habda had ever known. Perhaps that was why his prince continued in his fascination with her.

"I will say only that he is elsewhere."

Calli climbed onto the seat beside him with alarming alacrity, grabbing at the reins to stop the wagon.

"Turn this thing around!"

He looked at her as if she had just uttered a blasphemy. "My lady," he pleaded, searching for something to bring her to her senses. "Surely you would not go back there. Your son-"

"I said nothing of my son. He will stay with you, but I am going back there if Erone-"

Her words were cut short when she heard the unmistakable sound of hoof beats thundering toward them from the direction of the city they had just fled. She threw a questioning look at the large Shadrani. He simply smiled, knowing well the sound of that horse.

"He comes."

Calli set her jaw and stepped down from the wagon, her arms folded against her breast as she waited for her love to catch up with them.

The wait was not long. He arrived in a flurry of hooves, his long mantle pulled tight against the chill of the night. Long dark hair swirled behind him, and his shockingly pale blue eyes narrowed as he caught sight of them just in time to rein in his spirited mount.

"Habda!" he called out in surprise. "I thought you would make better time."

Habda threw him a look. "You seem to forget the cargo I carry," he replied blandly.

A heartfelt smile graced the beautiful face of the Prince of Gemen as he left his horse and swept up the Queen of Soris in one swift motion.

He wrinkled his nose. "My lady needs a bath."

Calli was not going to be distracted. "Put me down, you great idiot!"

He dropped her abruptly. But the grin remained on his face.

"What were you doing back there?" she demanded.

He was the picture of innocence. "I was merely waiting for the passing of the wagon. Although," he indicated the state she was in, "in truth, I would not have known you in that clever disguise."

Despite her resolve, Calli felt herself blush, realizing the picture she must make. She was used to looking her complete regal best in his presence and for a fleeting second, his tack to take her mind off her purpose worked. She brushed a little of the dirt from her plain frock, then glared up at him.

"Are you saying you were not in the city?"

Erone threw a resigned look at Habda who simply shrugged and shook his head.

"And if I said I was not?" he replied, growing more serious. She indicated his clothing. "Then I would ask you whose blood that is." He glanced down, only now aware of the evidence of his wrath. Taking up her hand, he gazed into her eyes. "It is neither yours, nor my son's, and that is all that matters." She softened against him. "And, my lord, I trust it is not yours?" "It is the blood of the one who would have murdered you both in your sleep." "And you were not hurt?" Habda issued an outraged sound that he quickly swallowed. He knew his prince could dispatch the most skilled Sorisi swordsman with no difficulty whatsoever. But Erone was not offended by her unwitting slight. "I am unharmed, my love." She went into his arms and he held her close to him, treasuring the feel of her in his embrace, still vibrating with the thought that those who coveted his son's throne had meant to murder them both for it. "Revar?" he asked. She indicated the back of the cart. Gently, he pulled the cover back and looked down on the sleeping boy. He felt emotion threaten to choke him at the blind hatred that had plotted his child's death. Would there never be an end to it?

* * * *

Queen Mathena of the House of Gemen, mother of two, doting grandmother, and ruler of the Shadrani, stood and paced her Council Chambers. The gleaming dark wood of the council floor danced with her image as she strode purposefully back and forth and the silver, calf-length tunic she wore rustled noisily as if to mirror her impatience. "Where are they?" she barked at her daughter, Raesa. Raesa and her life-mate, Cera, had also been sitting, waiting impatiently for news. Cera was small and delicate of feature. Although a deadly shot with a bow, she was a gentle female who was also a well-respected artisan among the Shadrani. Raesa, like her brother, was tall and proud and constantly ran a hand through her short, dark hair as she sat. She also had the same steel-blue eyes as did her brother. Those eyes now cast a weary glance at her life-mate before she addressed her queen. "Mother, they will come. Erone will not allow any harm to befall them." The stately woman stopped pacing and turned a look on her offspring. "And who will protect him, do you think?" Raesa lowered her eyes, uncomfortable that the queen had voiced her own fear. Raesa's son Danae, who had been sitting quietly in the corner, went to Mathena and took her hand. His Shadrani features beamed with conviction as he spoke. "Do not worry, Grandmother. Erone will have no trouble handling the Sorisi." Mathena looked down on her grandson and smiled. "You think that your uncle could sprout wings and fly, don't you dear?" A look of speculation crossed the face of the thirteen-year-old. "I am sure I have seen him do so," he said, grinning. The three in the room laughed at the statement... They were used to Danae's worship of his uncle. Since his biological father had died young, Erone had been the only father the boy had known. He absolutely adored the man, and the feeling was mutual.

* * * *

As the wagon pulled up outside the House of Gemen, Calli smiled to see Pashar step out of the shadows of the dwelling. She and the young Shadrani exchanged a nod before Pashar went into Habda's eager embrace. "I was worried," she heard the younger man say.

Habda's smile was resigned. "I did not think you would notice me gone." Pashar stepped back and pointedly looked him up and down. "You are a lot of Shadrani to misplace."

Both Erone and Habda laughed with delight, then Erone turned and helped Calli down from the wagon, lingering over the feel of her in his arms before setting her gently on the ground.

"Shall we go face the dragon?" he said.

Calli smiled at the affectionate name he used for his mother. "I look forward to seeing her."

The occupants of the large room turned as one when the door to the Council Chambers finally opened and the small travelling party entered. Mathena moved forward to greet them, relief etching her striking features.

"Calli," she said, stretching out her arms to embrace the woman. "Welcome back among us. Although I wish the circumstances were different."

Calli managed a weary smile for the formidable woman.

"I suppose I am officially in exile now," she said. Then her smile deepened when Raesa and Cera also embraced her.

But Danae, now too old for such things, went to his uncle's side and checked on his cousin who was sleeping peacefully in Erone's arms.

"He is alright?"

"He is fine," Erone answered.

"I am glad you are all safe, although I was not worried."

Erone ruffled his hair affectionately. "Ah, the faith of the young."

Mathena noted the weariness in Calli's eyes. "Come, sit," she offered, then turned her attention to her sleeping grandson. Gently smoothing the hair from his face, she bent and kissed the boy on the forehead. "I cannot believe he slept through any of this."

"Was I ever that trusting?" Erone queried.

A wry smile lit Mathena's face. "Once, yes. But I have not seen it in you recently."

"I will see him to bed," Erone finished, not in the mood this night to spar with his mother.

"I will come too," Danae piped up.

"You are tired," Raesa said before she and Cera trailed her brother out the door, "we will visit in the morning."

Calli watched them exit. Only when they had left the room did she allow her shoulders to sag in a release of tension.

"You poor dear," Mathena said. "You must have been terrified. Here, let me pour you some tea."

Calli took the offered cup gratefully. "I do not know what to do. I am a queen without a throne."

Mathena patted her hand. "You mustn't worry about that tonight. You are safe with us, and that is all that matters at the moment."

"But the throne of Soris cannot be abandoned. It rightfully belongs to me and to Revan in his turn."

"Do not forget, Calli, that the throne of the Shadrani also belongs to your son. Perhaps it is for the best right now that he be allowed to live among us and learn more about his father's people than he ever could have behind the walls of Soris-even with your help," she finished.

Calli sighed in defeat. "I hear the sense in your words, as always, my lady. It is just that I seem to be constantly fretting over Revan's future."

Mathena chuckled quietly. "That is the curse of motherhood," she said.

"Although I do admit that you have more than your share of burden, raising the heir to both thrones."

"In truth, I am relieved to be here with you. I will have need of your wisdom through this."

Suddenly, Calli's weariness overcame her. She brought a hand to her mouth in an effort to hide the yawn that threatened.

"We will discuss this further in the morning." Mathena offered. "I believe that escaping assassins and worrying over the recklessness of my son has taken

its toll on you tonight."

Calli smiled and stood up. "Yes, my lady, the recklessness of your son is also a constant worry to me."

Mathena took Calli's arm and walked with her toward her chamber. "Do not take him too much to task. He was worried sick himself. And it is simply not in his nature to stand by and do nothing."

Calli shook her head. "Whoever was sent to do the deed," she mused, "must have been sore surprised to find a Shadrani warrior in the room where he expected only a defenceless woman and child."

"Whoever was sent to do the deed," Mathena finished darkly, "deserved exactly what he found."

* * * *

Once she had Calli safely secured away, Queen Mathena made her way to her son's room. She knocked and called out softly, then slipped inside at his answer.

Stepping toward him, she smiled at the anticipation that graced his face. He was expecting his love to come to him soon, and, tired as she was, Calli would be there.

There would be shadra in this room tonight, Mathena knew, although she could never mention that she knew it.

Shadrani law forbade any male from sexual congress with a female except through royal decree, and that, only for the purposes of breeding. The relationship between her son and the Queen of Soris was forbidden, ongoing, and an open secret.

And shadra! Well, no male would even consider sharing his sacred shadra with a female!

None but her son, Mathena thought dryly. As it always did, the thought of shadra made her scowl with frustration. The thing confounded her. This unaccountable ability of the males of her race to focus and magnify sexual pleasure until the feeling became fiercely intense, almost unendurable, had naturally been denied her. She, like any Shadrani female, had never experienced the euphoria, the ecstasy that was shadra, and so would never truly understand its devastating appeal.

"I know you must be expecting-err-company, my son," she began. "But I would have a word with you."

Erone gestured for her to sit. Mathena declined the chair. She would not be staying long.

"Because of the events of tonight, I suspect that you are bent on wrecking further havoc on those responsible."

Dark anger clouded the silver eyes that regarded her.

"None would blame me."

The queen drew herself up. "I would."

Erone frowned and tilted his head slightly.

"What is it you have come to say, Mother?"

She pressed her hands together, choosing her words carefully. "My son, I have ruled our people for a great while. But it will not be long now before you, and then Revar, take up the mantle and the responsibility from me. So for now, I beg you to remove any thoughts of retaliation." She held up a hand to stop his ready protest. "Think on it for a moment. Think about your son. For it is against his people that this blow would be struck."

He nodded. "Yes, Mother, I have thought about it. It is what stayed my hand from further violence last night. But I do not intend to make the entire Sorisi population suffer for this, only the ones who plotted it."

She shook her head. "What you intend and what will happen may not be one and the same, my son. Violence has a way of getting out of control and gaining a life of its own."

"But Prince Velos must not think that his treachery will be tolerated."

She nodded. "Normally, I would agree with you. But anything you do will have a

direct impact on Calli and your son. Never forget that he is not only heir to the Shadrani throne, but the Sorisi as well." She stopped and watched him absorb this. "Promise me, Erone, that you will take no further action in this matter for now. Let things be and let your son live among us in peace for as long as it is possible."

The Prince of Gemen stood and studied his mother for a moment. "I have always valued your council, my queen," he said finally. "You have my promise... for now."

* * * *

Prince Velos of the House of Soris stood in the doorway of the royal bedchamber and stared up, open-mouthed, at the horrific sight that unfolded in front of him.

His brown eyes were deep-set in his angular, thin face and those eyes now shifted from ceiling to bed and back again. Then his mouth drew back in a tight-lipped grimace as the sharp smell of blood left its coppery taste at the back of his throat. He fought the urge to gag. The chamber was astir with soldiers-his soldiers. Only those he most trusted were on the scene.

"How did he get him way up there?" he asked in amazement.

The Captain of the Guard looked up at the headless body of the assassin that hung upside down from the highest rafter, the blood still dripping from the severed neck.

"Shadrani like to climb," was all he said.

"Get him down!" the angry royal shouted, while the soldiers scrambled to obey, uncertain how to begin the daunting task. "And for the sake of Tsandis, find his head!"

Velos turned to the captain. "She has gone to the Shadrani, of course."

The captain merely grunted an agreement. There was little emotion of any kind on his plain, but earnest face.

"Well, it matters not," the Sorisi prince continued. "I would have been far happier to see them both dead, but having them hiding among the Shadrani is almost as good. The people of Soris are bound to turn to me when they know."

"I cannot see any other outcome."

"After all, I am the dead king's nephew, and my cousin is certainly not fit to rule. She proved that without doubt."

"Without doubt, my lord."

Velos' dark eyes turned again to watch the men struggling to find a way up the wall to cut the rope that held the body.

"Why take the time to do something like that? Why not just kill him and flee?" The captain studied his new lord. "You do not know much about the Shadrani, do you?"

"I know that they are an abomination that must be purged from existence!"

"This is a warning of sorts," the captain explained. "All those involved in the attempt on the life of the queen and her son will find themselves the same."

Velos made an effort to look unmoved but could not contain the icy shudder of fear that ran down his spine.

"Ridiculous!"

The sound of the comment was eclipsed by the loud, wet thud of the body hitting the floor as the soldiers finally managed to free it.

Velos turned away in disgust. "Clean up that mess," he ordered, "And you," he said to the captain, "come with me."

* * * *

When they had reached the security of the prince's chambers, the captain saw that Velos had included his trusted councillor, Sebbac, in the invitation. The man was the human equivalent of a vulture. His dark, piercing eyes darted everywhere, saw everything, and he hovered over the prince as though he was

going to be his next meal.

"Now," Velos began, "what to do next."

"We must tread carefully my lord," said Sebbac, stroking his long beard, "do not move too quickly in your search for the throne."

"I do not see why I need to tread carefully, when my cousin, the whore, had actually begun peace talks with the Shadrani."

"But that is exactly it. The people are nervous. You must be certain not to make them more suspicious of the House of Arath. And it may not yet be time to come out openly against the queen, there are many here still loyal to her." Velos' eyes narrowed as he considered this. Then he turned to the Captain of the Guard.

"What do you have to say?"

The captain seemed to consider for a moment. "Your councillor is right," he answered finally. "You must tread carefully."

"Must I sit and wait longer!" Velos spat. "I have waited now these two years since my uncle's death and I am ready to take charge of the affairs of Soris." Sebbac's face radiated sympathy. "My lord, you have been the picture of patience--"

"I will be patient no more!" the prince sputtered, "I will declare the throne mine and there will be none to dispute me." He turned to the captain. "I trust that your soldiers are with me?"

The captain bowed low. "We are at your command, my lord."

A satisfied grin lit Velos's face. "Then tomorrow we tell the people of Soris that their queen has deserted them for her Shadrani lover. And I will step in to take up the mantle that she has so carelessly thrown away."

* * * *

Calli soaked in the tub long enough to remove the earthy smell she had accumulated during her flight. Then she brushed out her hair until it gleamed, slid on her heavy velvet robe, and padded down the hall.

Still uncomfortable with breaking Shadrani law, she checked to see that the long hallway was empty before taking the steps that led to her love's door. She rapped softly once. Instantly, the door opened and she was drawn inside and into the arms of the Prince of Gemen.

His lips found hers in the darkness and she sagged against his hard chest, surrendering to the desperate passion that this man always stirred in her. He eased her against the wall, his hands gently pulling at the robe that kept him from his purpose.

Calli rubbed the hard column of flesh that strained against his leather breaches, but he pulled her up tight to stop her.

"My lady," he whispered, "my passion has gone too long unabated. Do not tease me further, I beg you."

Calli smiled cattily at him. "Does my lord fear the simple touch of the woman who loves him?"

He growled deep in his throat. "Yes, my lady, I fear you greatly. It is insanity to have you here... in my room... alone."

That said, he lifted her and carried her to his bed. She lay there, waiting, as he stripped off his clothes and stretched out beside her. In a swift, gentle movement, he covered her with his body and rained kisses up and down her neck, stopping long enough to nibble on her earlobe as he did. His long, hot tongue stroked the inside of her ear and she felt a heat like quicksilver shoot through her.

Calli closed her eyes and gave herself over to the sensual tide that was being unleashed on her. This is what I need, she thought, this is exactly what I need to erase the pain of this terrible night. She sighed with pleasure, wrapping herself around her love as all further thought fled.

The intensity of her passion for the Shadrani once more took her away, away from the world that threatened her. They had both been prepared to risk everything for the love they shared, indeed were still prepared to do so and

at this moment all was worth it. The pleasure that Erone stoked in her grew until she felt she could no longer breathe with the heat of it. But she knew there would be more, much more, before this night was over. Wriggling under him, she tried again to reach the hard flesh that pressed against her. Once more, Erone captured her hands. "My lady," he rasped. "Leave me to do it." Nuzzling his neck, she bit him gently. She was rewarded by a low moan of impatience as he bent to take a nipple into his mouth. He knew she loved this, and he lingered over the sensitive flesh until she begged him for release. But he delayed the inevitable, pushing her, taking her ever higher on the climbing spiral of passion. As Erone bent himself to his pleasurable task, he struggled to contain the pulsing shadra that writhed so near the surface. He was close to losing his battle, he knew, but he fought to stave it off, wanting the sweetness to last a while longer before it was taken over by the madness. But he had been weeks without his love and the strain was too much. His eyes blazed as he intertwined his fingers, pressed his hands together, and summoned the ancient urge. Calli felt the subtle shift in him and her heart quickened when she realized that the moment had come. She took a deep breath and steeled herself for the touch of shadra. Outside the door, Habda took up his usual position as shombar, the traditional guard to the royal house. His sword unsheathed, he would stand there all night, guarding his prince during this most vulnerable time of shadra. From inside the room, he suddenly heard the loud cry that issued from the throat of the Queen of Soris. He did not move nor even flinch at the sound. He had heard it many times before.

* * * *

The first thing Revlar saw when he awoke, hours later, was his cousin, sitting regarding him curiously. "How do you do it?" Danae asked. Revlar sat up and rubbed his eyes. "What?" "Continue to convince your mother that you do not really know what is going on." In spite of himself, Revlar's impish grin played across his young face. He shrugged. "It is what she wants to think," he answered simply. "So you just let her believe what she wants." "Do not forget, Danae, it is easier for her to believe what she wants... she is not Shadrani." Danae nodded, both at the sense in the words and in understanding of what they meant. In a world that believed the only good Shadrani was a dead one, you kind of had to be Shadrani to understand their uncanny ability to suss out even the most subtle of threats. The most benign movement, even a shifting of the wind, could be a sign, a portent, a warning. His cousin was wise far beyond his tender years, but then Danae could only wonder what kind of life the other boy had known. The city of Soris had been the enemy of the Shadrani for too long for even an innocent Shadrani child to go undamaged within its borders. Erone's first son had been murdered there, deep in King Sadone's dungeons. Danae shuddered at the thought. He had spent some time there as a boy himself, until Revlar's mother had risked her life to rescue him. It all seemed so long ago. But now the hatred had flared again and war loomed on the horizon like an unnatural thundercloud. Danae shook off the dark thoughts. It was a beautiful day. There were trees to climb and hare to hunt. And Revlar was home.

Shadrani 2: Sons of Gemen
Chapter Two

Vancouver, Canada

"Dallas, are you home?"

The boy looked up from his book when he heard his mother call from inside their small apartment.

"Yeah, Mom," he replied, climbing inside.

Sarah Devlin graced him with a smile that seemed to be reserved for her only child.

"How was school today?" she asked as the groceries she carried teetered dangerously in her arms.

"Good. Here, let me help with those." Dallas came over quickly to take the bags. "Sit down, I'll put them away."

She threw him a grateful look, then collapsed into an easy chair, stripped off her shoes, and put her feet up.

Watching her brought a sad smile to her son's face. Sarah Devlin had been very beautiful once. Now her features were drawn and weary, dragged down by the weight of worry and motherhood. She would never even consider wearing make-up. When you added that to the frumpy clothes she wore, she became one of those women who pass as invisible in their everyday lives. And that was how she wanted it.

Dallas wondered often what had happened to her, what had hurt her so badly that she had retreated from life. But he never asked. Partly because he respected her privacy, but mostly because he suspected that all of it had something to do with the one man who had ever reached her. The man she would never talk about.

Now Dallas had become the sole focus of his mother's existence, and she sacrificed daily so that he could have a decent life. Too much so, he thought. Working at the local food market entailed hours of standing during her shift. Then she made extra money by teaching music three nights a week. In fact, the upright piano standing in the corner of their living room was the only remotely expensive thing she owned. Dallas admired his mother, but he didn't understand how she could not need more in her life.

He knew he needed more.

Like an amnesiac who spends his days trying to reach for memories that continue to elude, just beyond his grasp, Dallas seemed to be constantly seeking something. He wasn't sure what it was, he only knew that he was restless, so restless that he was often up nights prowling the apartment. And prowling was the word for it.

The strong compulsion to get out, to run, to just move was an almost physical ache that nagged at him and only became stronger as he grew older. He suspected the urge was something he'd inherited from his father.

Dallas was afraid it was a dark thing.

"Did you practice after school?" his mother asked, looking toward the piano.

He nodded, and then went back to his chore.

When he had finished, the boy came over and began to massage his mother's feet. He was rewarded by her contented sigh.

"That feels sooo wonderful, honey."

"You should get some new shoes, Mom."

"Yes, I know. Maybe next month."

But Dallas knew there would be no new shoes for her next month. Something would come up. Something she believed he would need and the money would go there.

He felt guilty about it, had often offered to get a job to help out, but she had patently forbidden it.

"You must focus on school," she had insisted. "And a job, even part-time, would interfere with that. Besides, you will spend enough of your life fending for yourself. I want to take care of you now while I can."

It was no use arguing with the woman. So instead, he did what he could to help, cleaning and cooking as much as she would let him. And this, her daily foot massage. After dinner, they talked together a while, then Sarah, exhausted from her day, went to bed early, leaving Dallas alone to pace.

* * * *

At school the next day, Dallas was just opening his locker when he heard the voice of his best friend, Terry Archer.

"Hey, Dev," the boy greeted him, using his favorite nickname. Then, as Dallas dug into his locker for his books, Terry leaned against the wall and silently studied him.

Far too pretty to be a boy! he thought, not for the first time.

Dallas' dark mane was shot through with dazzling auburn highlights, as though the sun had painstakingly searched his hair and proclaimed only those locks worthy of bronzing. His green eyes were slightly slanted, shone with the color of pale emeralds, and were fringed by long, dark lashes. Add to that a face that looked like it had been carved by Michelangelo, and a body that was lean, rangy, and tightly muscled even at his early age, and you got the kind of guy that drove girls wild. Terry had even seen some of the guys at school give him the once over. But he never mentioned it.

Terry himself was a complete contrast.

The boy's light brown hair had a mind of its own and inhabited his head like a nest of invading field mice. His body was thin and angular and often seemed out of his control. But his brown eyes twinkled with laughter and he had a sunny disposition that served as a salve to Dallas' intense nature. He was basically painfully shy, which made him a target for the nasty side of high-school life.

Dallas was also a magnet for trouble. Because of his unusual looks, he was highly popular among his female co-eds and it brought a lot of jealousy his way. The two stuck together for support.

His books retrieved, Dallas turned to join his friend and they moved off down the hall. They hadn't gone but a few feet when they were stopped short by a group of large boys.

They weren't friendly.

Dallas glanced around him, knowing there were too many of them to fight, his quick mind already understanding there was no way out of the predicament. He addressed the leader, the largest of the boys and someone who had openly declared himself an enemy.

"What can I do for you, Glen?"

Glen sneered at him. "Where are you and your girlfriend going?"

The comment brought nasty snickers from the others.

"We have English now," Dallas said, unmoved. "And you're kind of in the way."

A meaty hand shot out to push him and he was forced to take a few steps backward.

"Well, thanks for the help," Dallas said calmly, "but the class is actually in the other direction."

Terry stared at him. He never understood why Dallas didn't simply knuckle under, like everyone else did, with these bullies. But his friend had taken more than one beating because he just wouldn't do it. Terry himself stayed where he was, rooted to the spot. He hated confrontation of any kind and was a self-professed coward when it came to physical pain.

"You trying to be funny?" Glen snarled.

"Oh, hell no," Dallas replied dryly. "I wouldn't waste the effort on someone who would have to ask."

Terry couldn't help a chuckle at that, but he ducked his head quickly and muffled the sound as he thought better of it. Too late.

Glen whirled on him and shoved him, hard, so that Terry stumbled backward, lost his footing, and landed on the floor like a pile of sticks. The bully was

bent on further damage, but he never got the chance. Dallas was on him in a flash, getting in a few really good punches before the others jumped in. The fight halted abruptly when one of the teachers heard the scuffle and came out into the hall to break it up. But Glen promised further violence under his breath, glaring at Dallas before walking away.

When the coast was clear, Dallas turned to his friend. "You okay?"

Terry nodded. "Yeah, I can always count on you to go mental and help if I get into real trouble."

And it was true. Terry had seen Dallas take some pretty bad beatings but he had never seen his friend fight as hard as when someone he cared about was threatened.

Protective. That's what it was.

But Terry didn't really care what it was; he valued the friendship of someone who would step up for you.

Dallas smiled. "Yeah, well now we have to get ready for the segue of the century-from hall combat to English."

* * * *

The windows of the car were fogged so badly that it was impossible to see outside-or inside, for that matter. That was just as well as far as Dallas was concerned. He felt the annoying, sharp dig of the side armrest in his back as he maneuvered to adjust the girl that straddled him.

"Jennifer," he instructed, "will you just wait a minute."

But the pretty blond on top of him giggled and shook her head. "Dallas, I've waited all day for this."

Jennifer was the most sought-after girl in school; she also had a reputation for being quite a bitch. She had taken one look at Dallas and gone after him with a vengeance. They had been dating now for a couple of months, but the sex had started right away.

Dallas liked sex.

No, that wasn't quite the right way to put it.

He loved sex.

He struggled until he managed to shift himself, even with the girl on top of him. Now comfortable, he closed his eyes and allowed the feeling to wash over him, that sweet insistent ache that turned into such pleasure, sweeping him away from everything unpleasant in his world, giving him respite from his ordinary, suffocating life. He barely registered that Terry was in the front seat with his girlfriend. They were always quiet though, where Jennifer definitely was not.

Later, Terry teased Dallas about it when they were alone. They had dropped their dates and were sitting together on a park bench, watching the night sky.

"God Dev, you sure know how to make the girls scream."

Dallas smiled, the side of his mouth kicking up in a derisive gesture.

"I'm not sure how to take that."

Terry chuckled at him, shaking his head. "Man, you've got it made. Every girl in school is hot for you and now you're jumping Jennifer! Do you know how many guys would cut off their left ball to fuck her?"

Dallas nodded. "Yeah, and I also know how many would cut off both of mine if they thought it would get them a better chance."

His friend threw his head back and laughed. Terry liked Dallas enough to hide the fact that he too, was a little jealous of him.

Dallas stood suddenly. "Got to go," he said.

Terry understood. He jumped up and fell in beside him. "How is your mother?"

Dallas shrugged as he moved. "She's good, I guess. You know how it is."

"Yeah, I know."

* * * *

Dallas entered the foyer of his apartment building. Once a fancy hotel, the

place had definitely seen better days. The worn runner gave only a hint of past glory as Dallas took the stairs two at a time until he reached his apartment on the third floor. Like the rest of the building, the finish on the door was in sad repair, worn away by the hands of time and past inhabitants. Just as he was about to insert his key into the lock, the door across the hall opened and his new neighbor stepped out.

Dallas had met Hans DeWit before. He had even been to his apartment once. Blond, good looking, and fit in a way that only aesthetics can be, the man was an artist, and a good one, from what Dallas had seen.

"Hello Dallas," he said. "Just getting in?"

The boy turned to him and smiled. "Yeah. I guess you're just going out, huh?" Hans grinned wickedly. "For me, the night is just beginning." Then he winked and headed down the hall.

Dallas watched him until he was out of sight. He found himself fascinated with the man. For one thing, he wondered what it must be like to have that kind of freedom. To just come and go as you please and stay out all night if you wanted.

Not to have a mother to answer to.

He felt a stab of guilt at the thought, then turned his key in the lock and walked in the door.

Sarah looked up from her book. Her smile was forced; she hated him going out at night.

"Did you have a good time, dear?"

Dallas shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah I did, Mom."

He offered nothing more because he hated lying to her and never did if he could help it. She seemed to understand this on some level and so rarely pushed him.

"That's good," she said, then stood and closed her book softly. "Well I think I'll head to bed."

Dallas felt a moment of loss as he watched her exit the room.

They had been so close when he was younger. He remembered falling asleep most nights listening to his mother telling him stories of Ireland. Sarah Devlin had been born there and had emigrated when she was thirteen.

His mother's eyes shone with real pride when she told her son about his heritage, that one of his ancestors had been Brian Boru, Ireland's greatest king. Dallas wasn't sure he believed that, but true or not, he loved the stories.

Boru had been the first king to unite all the tribes of Ireland, and therefore accomplish the impossible by bringing peace to the war-torn land. It was said that the great man's rule was so just and strong that during it, a woman, unescorted, could walk the length of Ireland wearing all her finery and jewels and not be accosted in any way.

"Never forget, honey," his mother would say on those nights, "you are a descendant of kings."

The tales of Ireland also spawned an interest in battles and military in general in the boy, and by the age of nine, Dallas could sit down and draw out complicated combat strategies of the greatest military minds from Alexander the Great to Norman Schwartzkopf.

In those early days, his mother had been his best friend and it seemed nothing was off-limits between them. He remembered once he had even broached the delicate subject of relationships with her. He had been ten at the time.

"What do you think about love, Mom?" he had ventured. And he never forgot her answer.

"Love?" she said. "Well I guess I'm not qualified to say much about it, darling. Only this: you have no business even contemplating entering into a relationship with another human being unless you are capable of both trust and faith, even in the face of indications to the contrary. Then you need to adore the other person beyond reason, through right and wrong, thick and thin, good and bad."

"Just like in the wedding vows," Dallas offered. She sighed sadly. "Yes, just

like that. But," she hesitated a moment as if considering exactly how to finish her thought, "what do you think are the chances that, should you manage all these extraordinary things, you will find someone else who also can?" Dallas frowned, not wanting to accept her logic. "I think people can have faith and trust."

"Perhaps only the young, my darling. Life has a way of beating such niceties out of you."

"But," Dallas protested. "What if I'm really lucky and I find all of that?" His mother's smile was both sad and adoring. She reached over and stroked a hand through his dark hair. "If you find a love like that, Dallas, then whatever happens... hold on. Hold on to it, baby."

But it had been years since they had spoken together of such things, and now those days of closeness were long behind them.

Ever since puberty had struck, a wall had sprung up between them. He no longer confided in his mother. Much as he loved her, he hadn't felt comfortable sharing the new, unfamiliar feelings that were rocking his world.

Dallas didn't know why his mother had such a problem with him growing up. He did know that it had something to do with sex. He understood that she was a good Catholic woman, but her revulsion of the act went far beyond any edict ever issued from a papal summit.

So he kept to himself.

And he had become used to his isolation. Instead of focusing on it, he tried to fill his life with the things that interested him. History, books, music. His mother had also taught him to play the piano.

He was good at it.

There were times he felt that music was the only thing that kept the darkness at bay.

* * * *

The next day, Dallas got home from school early. He didn't feel much like working on the piano, so he decided to get a start on his homework. He had just settled in when a quiet knock on the door drew him from his books.

Rising, he went to answer it.

Hans Dewit stood in the hall, his white smile dazzling.

"Heard you come in," he said. "Want to come over and see my latest project?"

Dallas was happy for the diversion.

"Sure," he replied.

Moments later, the artist unveiled his creation. It was a spectacular wash of bold color that evoked a strong visceral reaction in Dallas.

"Wow," he whispered. "That's really something."

Hans smiled at him. "Glad you like it."

Then he moved to sit and indicated that Dallas join him. The young man took a chair opposite and noted the faint smile that crossed Hans' face.

"Are you afraid to sit near me?"

Dallas started at the question.

"Ahh... no."

Hans gestured with a hand.

"Then come over here. There's something I want to ask you."

Dallas did as he was asked and found himself almost smothered by the physical force of the artist. Hans was not a shy man and, as he talked about how he wanted to try something new in his work, he touched Dallas often on the arm or shoulder.

Finally he came to the point.

"So, the main reason I asked you over today is to see if you would pose for me."

Dallas' face registered his surprise.

"Pose?"

Hans chuckled at the reaction.

"Yes Dallas. You have the most amazing face. I'd love to paint it."

Dallas just looked at him for a moment, unsure. "My face? Are you serious?" "Yes, I'm serious." Hans turned and gazed directly at the young man. "I've never seen such eyes. And that mouth-" He stopped, seeming to shake himself. "Anyway, will you do it?" Dallas considered it for a moment and then shrugged. "Why not?" Hans' smile was blinding. "Great! We can start tomorrow after school, if that's okay." Dallas agreed. "But I'd better get back," he said. "My mother will be home soon."

* * * *

Hans felt his hands begin to shake as he pressed the buttons on the pay phone. He was nervous being outside, exposed. He wished he could have called from his apartment, but the man he was phoning would only accept a call from a safe line. He was cautious. So cautious. That was what had kept him alive for so long. Hans quelled the emotion that washed through him as he waited for the man to answer on the other end of the line. He was anxious to please him and knew he was doing a first-rate job. As always, his heart raced when he heard the silky voice. "Hans, how is it coming with the boy?" Breathlessly, Hans gave his report, trying not to make himself sound too arrogant. But he was good at his job, and he was looking forward to completing it. He had been sent to seduce the boy and then teach him everything he knew about pleasure. And he knew a lot.

Chapter Three

City of Soris
Planet of Daleer

Jala, Healer to the Royal House of Arath, sat and listened to the laughter and song of the feast. But instead of sharing in the frivolity of the moment, the corners of his mouth turned down in disgust. He did not approve of the extravagance that Prince Velos indulged in nightly. In truth, he did not approve of Prince Velos. And now that Calli had fled the city, he was more determined than ever to help the young queen in her efforts for peace. Even now, he smiled when he thought of the feisty young woman that he had raised as his own. When she was but a girl, he had taken Calli under his wing and had taught her everything he knew about the art of healing. Jala was proud that he had been such an influence on her, he couldn't have been more proud had she been his own daughter. In fact, he believed, had he been allowed to have children with the one woman he'd wanted to, his real daughter would have turned out very much like the Sorisi princess. Although she would have been Shadrani. As always, thoughts of Queen Mathena brought bittersweet memories. His love for her had cost him everything, even his life as a Shadrani. It had been many years now since he had been banished from his own people for his unforgivable sin of desiring a woman. It was only because Jala had had a Sorisi grandmother that he had the looks he needed to get by in the city. No one in the city-state knew the truth about him, and that suited his purpose perfectly. It was the secret he had kept for so many years, and continued to keep, in the service of the Queen of Arath. The raucous sounds of revelry suddenly drew his attention across the room. As he studied Prince Velos, he wondered what had managed to put the royal into

such a foul mood this night.

* * * *

Velos was in a black humor. Scowling at the room and life in general, he looked over at his councillor and spoke to him in a voice that was hushed, but nonetheless, filled with impatience.

"I am hearing unpleasant rumours."

Sebbac's eyebrows lifted in question. "Rumours, my lord?"

"About the people, the rabble, who seem to want my whore of a cousin back on the throne."

"Ahh," said Sebbac, "those rumours." The older man stroked his long, white beard, his dark, piercing eyes momentarily still while he considered. "Do not put much store in those rumours, my lord," he said finally. "I think you can always expect some of the people to be unhappy with whomever sits on the throne."

"Then you think it is nothing?"

The question was answered with a short nod of the greying head.

"Perhaps you are right," Velos admitted, "although I will leave nothing to chance. I want every spy and informant we have to keep an extra close watch on things. If there is even a hint of rebellion or aid going to the queen, I must find a way to do away with her and her Shadrani bastard once and for all."

* * * *

Solte, former handmaiden to the exiled Queen Calli, sat and watched her husband sharpen his sword. She missed her lady dearly. They had been closer than sisters, indeed had shared a number of adventures together, and she still harbored a deep and abiding affection for the queen and her son. That is why she was doubly proud of her husband. He was one of the main figures in the underground movement to return Calli to the throne.

But the enterprise did have its share of danger.

Solte shuddered with dread every time she thought of what would befall her husband if he were found out. She prayed it would never happen.

The captain looked up and saw her watching him. They had been married for some time now but, unhappily, were still childless. He knew she missed young prince Revavar terribly, since she had taken care of him as her own for the years before he and his mother had been driven from the city.

"You are worrying again, Solte."

She came over to stand behind his chair and planted a kiss on the top of his head. "Isn't it a wife's duty to worry about her husband?"

He smiled up at her. "Velos will never suspect me. And as for you, I told him that in spite of your long association with the queen, you were no threat because you are my wife and therefore subject to my wishes."

She made a face at him.

"Do not frown," he laughed. "It is a good thing that he is so short-sighted. It keeps him from seeing what is going on."

She sighed. "It is not him that worries me, but Sebbac."

"Well, at the moment Sebbac is too busy trying to manipulate the prince to have much time for anything else."

"Still, my husband, watch your back."

He regarded her a long moment before he spoke. "Do not worry, Solte," he replied finally, "my back is safe."

* * * *

Shadrani Village

Planet of Daleer

"Did you hear what I said?" taunted the boy as he circled the two younger children. "Prince or no, we don't want any dirty Sorisi playing with us."

Revar clenched his fists and his teeth as fury roiled near the surface. He knew his friend Lira was just as angry. Her mouth was drawn into a tight little bow and her fists were bunched even tighter than his own. Revar had been living full-time with his father's people for two years now, and he had found acceptance among most of them. But there were still those who held his Sorisi heritage against him. And at those times-times like this-his anger was ready and quick. His father had cautioned him to hold his temper when faced with such prejudice. It was not easy, but he would do anything to please his father.

"There is nothing wrong with our ears!" Lira snapped. "We are simply not listening to you, you great oaf."

The boy fit the description. He was large for his age, much larger than either Revar or Lira, but she did not seem to care about such things. Because Lira showed the taint of her Sorisi background more than most, she couldn't afford to care about such things.

All pure-blooded Shadrani were dark haired, with eyes the color of light blue crystal in the sun. Branded by her blond hair and dark blue eyes, Lira could not hide the fact that her grandmother had come from the city-state of Soris. In fact, her ancestor had been one of the few babies to survive the murderous fall from the walls of Soris. The Shadrani regularly visited the site to rescue what infants they could from the terrible place where the city-state pitched their unwanted female babies.

Sorisi birth control.

Lira's impudence caused the larger boy to lose his temper. He took a step toward her, slapped her hard, and sent her reeling to her knees.

Revar completely lost control.

Flying at the bully, his rage burning, Revar tackled him and managed to drag him to the ground where he sat astride him, punching as hard as he could. But the sheer weight of the other boy eventually gave him an advantage. He bucked and squirmed until he had the upper hand and then it was Revar who found himself pinned. Blows rained down on his face and there was little he could do but try to fend them off. Lira gained her feet and hopped onto the bully's back, pummelling him and yelling for him to let Revar go.

All to no avail.

Then, just as the pain was becoming unbearable, Revar felt the boy being lifted off him, squirming and protesting. He opened his eyes to see Danae dropping him on the ground in no gentle fashion.

"Get out of here, Rathos," his cousin warned, "before I show you what it feels like to have someone twice your size beat on you!"

Rathos scrambled to his feet and disappeared.

Lira was helping Revar get up off the ground as Danae approached and did a quick check to see if anything was broken. He inspected Revar's face and grimaced at the blood that flowed from the battered nose.

Revar managed a grin at his cousin. "I am all right," he said. "But I am happy to see you."

Danae regarded him a moment, then smiled as well. "I do not think anything is broken," he said, touching him gently. "Come, I will get you cleaned up."

"He was coming after me," Lira said, as the three started off down the path to home, "but Revar jumped on him first."

Danae was not at all surprised. He had noticed the angry welt on Lira's cheek. And his cousin had a huge need to fix any injustice that came his way. "But you are unhurt, Lira?"

She nodded her blond head. Then her eyes flashed blue fire. "But I would have tsrounced him if Revar hadn't first!"

Danae threw his head back and laughed. "I know you would have tried, you fierce little thing," he remarked, "and then I would have been saving you from the beating."

She grinned, liking the fact that he had called her a fierce little thing.

Then her smile faded. She pulled Danae down to whisper in his ear.

"His father will be angry with him."

"Do not fear, little one. I will see that he is not."

* * * *

A short while later Revar was called to stand before his parents. Danae was there as well, having just explained the events that had gathered them. Revar felt uncomfortable being the center of such attention. Not for the first time in his young life, he wished he could purge himself of his hated Sorisi heritage. He glanced at his mother, feeling guilty at the thought.

"Tell me what happened, Revar," his father asked.

The boy squirmed a little.

"Well," he began, "Rathos wouldn't let us play with them."

"Us?"

"Lira and me."

A look of unhappy understanding crossed his parents' faces before they put it aside.

"And then, well, then he started saying things..."

"What things?" his father probed.

Revar did not want to repeat what had been said, did not want to see the look of pain on his mother's face when she realised what her heritage was costing him, did not want to see the look of anger on his father's face when he heard, once again, of the prejudice toward his son.

"Revar?"

"That... that they did not want any dirty Sorisi playing with them."

Erone sat back in his chair, struggling to contain his anger and Calli closed her eyes against the sadness that welled within her. Revar just stood in silence, waiting. Finally, his father rose and approached him. Gently, he inspected the bruises on his son's young face.

"Still," the man said, "I am proud of you for standing up to Rathos. You did notice that he is considerably larger than you."

A light of hope sparked in Revar's eyes. "Ah... yes, Father."

"But you went after him anyway."

"Well-he was hurting Lira."

"And you do not allow anyone to hurt your friends, do you?"

Revar looked up at him.

"Not if I can help it, Father," he finished quietly.

Erone smiled at him. Lifting a hand, he smoothed the boy's hair.

"I think you have done enough damage for one day. Now, go kiss your mother and find your bed."

Instantly obeying, Revar stepped into his mother's waiting hug. She fussed over him a little until he convinced her that he would survive. Then he turned and headed for his room.

* * * *

The middle of the night found him tossing with nightmares. In spite of his efforts to be strong, Revar was hurt badly by any rejection and felt the pain of it deeply. He had been experiencing that rejection all his young life, first in the royal court of Soris and now among his father's people.

Sitting up, suddenly awake, he glanced around his room and felt a strong compulsion to escape its confines. He slipped out of bed and padded down the hall to where his cousin's room lay. Quietly, he pushed the door open and approached the bed.

Danae was sound asleep.

Revar's mouth turned down in disappointment. He went to leave and had just reached the door when he heard his cousin's quiet voice.

"Nightmares again?"

Revar felt relief flood him as he turned and whispered into the darkness.

"Yes."

Danae lifted the covers. "Come, little prince."

Without another word, Revar climbed up into the warm bed and snuggled against him. Danae wrapped him up and held him close.
Revar closed his eyes, sleep finding him quickly in the reassuring sound of his cousin's heartbeat.
Chapter Four

The coffee shop echoed with the clash of dishes and the din of laughter and conversation. The smell of fried food was so ingrained in the place that it would likely linger long after the last hamburger was ever cooked and eaten in it.

Dallas and Terry sat in a booth near the back, nursing their cokes and joking together.

Suddenly, Terry reached up and put a hand on Dallas' arm. "Uh oh," he said, "she looks mad about somethin'!"

Dallas turned in the direction his friend was facing and saw Jennifer approaching with a black look on her face. She flounced up to the table and shot a meaningful glance at Terry.

"I need to talk to Dallas alone," she announced.

Dallas nodded at his friend, and Terry slid out of the booth and trotted off. Sitting down in his place, Jennifer flipped the hair out of her face and leaned in.

"I-ah-I've got some kind-of-bad news."

Dallas frowned. "What?"

"I think I'm... you know."

"You think you're what?"

Her perfect forehead knit together in agitation. "For crissake, Dallas, I think I'm- " she leaned in further and lowered her voice "-pregnant."

Dallas' eyebrows shot up. He felt his stomach lurch at the words. "What?" he said tightly. "I thought you told me you always took care of that."

Her eyes spit fire at him. "Well I do, but nothing always works, Dallas!" She crossed her arms in agitation. "And it is yours if that's your next question."

He sat back and stared at her for a long moment. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet.

"When will you know?"

"What?"

"You said you thought you were pregnant. When will you know?"

Her mouth fell open. "What kind of a thing is that to say? We have a lot to talk about."

"Not if you're not pregnant."

"You're a son-of-a-bitch, Dallas," she hissed, standing and glaring down at him. "And you're not going to weasel out of this!"

Flipping her long blond hair out of her face, she turned and stormed off.

* * * *

"Wow," Terry said when Dallas told him later. "What if she is pregnant, what're you gonna do?"

Dallas sighed heavily. "I don't know. I can't even think about it until I'm sure she is."

"You know, Dev, Jen's been getting pretty jealous over all the fuss you get from other girls. I wouldn't put it past her to make this up, just to get your undivided attention."

"Yeah, that's the first thing I thought when she told me. But... if it is true I've got to start thinking about how to handle it."

"She can always have an abortion."

Green eyes spat emotion at him. "No!"

His friend was taken aback at the reaction. "But, Dallas, that's probably the best answer. You know she wouldn't just have it and then give it away, let alone raise it on her own."

"Then I'll take it." Dallas' voice trembled with the strength of his conviction. "I don't want her killing my baby."
Terry fell silent, thanking his lucky stars that this wasn't his problem. Suddenly he wasn't jealous of his friend at all.

* * * *

Dallas got home that afternoon and plopped down on the sofa. His world was spinning. He didn't even want to think about how his mother would react if this thing was real. Letting out a long breath, he ran a hand through his dark hair, wishing for the thousandth time that he had a father to turn to. It was only when he heard the knock on the door that he remembered his promise to his neighbor. Resigned, he went to answer it.

"What's wrong?" Hans said. "You look like hell."

"Aw-nothing," Dallas replied, "I've just had a bad day."

"You want to skip it then?"

The young man thought about it. "No," he said finally, "maybe it'll keep my mind off things."

* * * *

Sitting still, just doing nothing, actually felt pretty good. Hans chatted a bit at first, but then fell silent as he began to really get into his work. Dallas felt a little uncomfortable in the beginning, sitting there while the man studied him openly and avidly. But, every now and then, their eyes would meet and Hans would smile brightly at him. Dallas found himself smiling back. After a while, he wasn't uneasy any longer. In fact, he found he was enjoying it more than he thought he would.

An hour or so into it, Hans called a break.

"I don't want to wear you out the first day," he explained.

He went to the cupboard and pulled out a plastic bag. With dexterity born of lots of practice, he rolled a joint and lit it, inhaling deeply. Then he offered it to Dallas. The young man hesitated only a second before he took it.

"Want to tell me about your day?" Hans asked.

Dallas let out his breath and grimaced.

"Problems with a girl."

Hans' eyebrows shot up. "Ahh, I should have guessed. A boy like you must have plenty of girl trouble."

Dallas smiled a little. "I try not to, but-" His smile faded. The drug was already making him a bit light-headed. "She says she's pregnant."

Hans uttered a sound that was a mixture of outrage and disgust.

"That's one of the better tricks they have," he said. "And what can we do about it? All they have to do is 'forget' to take a pill, and next thing you know, we're trapped!"

Dallas looked over at him. "Sounds like you're talking from experience."

Hans' smile was bitter. "Not really," he said. "I don't have much to do with women."

The statement registered as strange with Dallas.

"Don't you like sex?"

Hans looked directly at him.

"I didn't say that."

Dallas was caught, hung up in the intense eyes.

"There are a lot of different ways to have sex," the man continued.

Dallas felt his pulse jump. "Ah, yeah," he said, "I guess there are."

"Does that... bother you?"

Dallas studied the man before he answered. He had put a lot of thought into the whole sex thing.

When he was just a toddler, a cure had been found for all kinds of sexually transmitted diseases, including the dreaded AIDS. So having sex had lost the chilling effect of being life-threatening.

Besides it not instilling terror any longer, Dallas had come to the conclusion that sex was a much-maligned form of recreation. People were hypocrites who, on the one hand preached that only married people should have sex-only for the purposes of procreation-and then did everything they could to prevent conception.

What it came down to for him was: if sex was mostly for the pleasure of it, what did it matter why or with whom you did it, as long as nobody was forced or hurt?

"No, it doesn't bother me," he answered finally.

"Okay then." Hans stood up. "Well, I've kept you long enough for one day."

Dallas felt the fog lift a little from his head. He stood awkwardly. "Yeah," he said. "I better go." He turned and headed for the door.

"See you tomorrow?" he asked.

Hans smile was dazzling. "Tomorrow it is, Dallas."

* * * *

Sarah Devlin picked up the phone and began to dial. She had never called the number from her home before, always afraid that Dallas would somehow overhear. But Dallas wasn't home yet, so she had time to place the call and she was almost desperate for a listening ear. The welcome sound of the familiar voice that answered calmed her nerves, as it always did.

"It's me," she replied to his greeting.

"Sarah!" the voice enthused. "It's good to hear from you. Everything's all right? Dallas...?"

"Yes, yes, I think so," she offered. "I just-I need someone to talk to about him, he's growing up so fast."

"From everything you've told me so far, it sounds like the boy takes after you and not his father. I think you shouldn't worry needlessly."

"I know you're probably right. He's such a great kid and I haven't seen any indications that he is at all like... like him."

The conversation continued and Sarah was far too engrossed in sharing her concerns with the only person in the world who could really understand them to notice the front door opening.

Dallas heard his mother speaking worriedly on the phone and it raised a red flag for him. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but it happened before he even understood what was occurring.

"But it seems he is already keeping secrets from me," he heard her say. Then silence as she listened. Then she said, "I don't know, Mack. It's difficult enough being a single mother, what do I do if he starts behaving-you know-strangely?"

Dallas felt his stomach clench at the words. He realized it was time to make his presence known. He stepped into his mother's line of sight and saw her pale as she realized he must have heard at least part of the conversation.

"I'm sorry, I have to go," she said, and hung up the phone quickly. Then she stood looking guilty, unsure what to say.

"Who were you talking to?" Dallas asked.

"No-one, really." She turned away and tried to change the subject, but Dallas was insistent.

"I heard what you said, Mom. About how worried you are about me. Why? Is it my father?"

Her face was a mask of regret and sadness. "Please, baby," she whispered. "I'm so sorry you overheard that, but... I don't want to discuss your father, you know that."

Dallas felt his anger flare. "I know you don't," he snapped, "not with me, but it's okay to pour your heart out to some stranger on the phone."

"He's not a stranger," she said, then regretted it as Dallas seized upon it.

"Then tell me who he is. I heard you call him Mack. If you can't talk about my father, then at least tell who this guy is."

She stood looking at him silently. Her hands were wringing together in the

nervous habit that let him know he was pushing her too hard. But he couldn't give up. Not this time.

"Please, Mom," he begged. "Can't you see how important this is to me?"

Her eyes filled with tears. "Dallas, I know," she managed, "but sometimes it's just better not to know the truth."

Her tears stopped him, as they always did. He loved his mother enough to back off, and he did. Without another word, he turned and went to his room, closing the door behind him.

Chapter Five

Revar sat balanced on the limb of a large tree and stared up at the blue skies of Daleer. He had just turned thirteen and his entire life had changed. Not that his life had been exactly routine to begin with.

For one thing, he didn't know any other children who'd had to flee their own homes in the middle of the night. The fateful event had happened six years ago now, and he had managed to put most of it behind him. But he knew it had badly affected his mother. She still nursed the hope that they would return one day to Soris and reclaim the throne.

Revar wasn't so certain.

He wasn't even sure he wanted the throne of Soris, though he would never say so to his mother. He had never felt like he'd belonged in the city-state and now that he was older, he understood better why.

His looks betrayed his Shadrani heritage.

Always, there had been whispering behind his back, always, he had felt a dislike, even a threat, from many of the people around him. He liked it much better here. Even though there was still a certain amount of prejudice here, the Shadrani were much more forgiving of his Sorisi blood than the other way around. And though he had been in more than a few fights over the last few years, for the most part, he felt accepted here, and loved.

Certainly loved.

His grandmother doted on him. So did his aunts, Raesa and Cera. And, of course, his mother. His father, he was sure, must love him too, although at times it was difficult to see it.

"Revar!"

The call broke through his thoughts. He stretched his neck to look down at the ground below him, spying the girl who stood there, hands on hips, scowling up at him.

"Go away, Lira," he shot back at her. "You know we are not supposed to play together any more."

Lira was undaunted by the reply. She stood her ground, dark blue eyes defiant.

"That's stupid."

Revar knew that look. His mouth forming a grim line, he began to climb down out of the tree. Lira should know better, he thought as he descended. Now that he was thirteen and "of age", he was no longer allowed to spend any time with females other than family. It was only going to be more difficult if she continued to fight it.

He landed silently beside her.

"Lira, you're going to get us into trouble."

"But I miss you."

He smiled at her. He missed her as well. They had weathered some difficult times together, helping each other through the cruel teasing of their playmates.

She was a tough little thing.

There were days, though, when he found her hard to take. It was because she tried too hard. At least that is what he told himself. But somewhere deep inside, he knew it had something to do with his father.

When Lira's mother had died, the man had taken her under his wing. It seemed to Revar that whenever he and Lira had found mischief together, which had been often, Erone had defended her. But Revar supposed that was partly because of

his mother, that his father saw much of the woman he loved in the beleaguered part-Sorisi girl.

"Where is Danae?" Lira asked.

Revar thought about the cousin who had become his best friend, even with the difference in their ages.

"He is training, of course."

Danae was becoming a Shadrani warrior. Every Shadrani child, male or female, was trained in the art of self-defence until they came of age. Then they were free to choose whatever life they wished for themselves. Many chose to continue their martial training and become warriors, the defenders of their people and much honored by them. But not all of them succeeded in their goal. The Shadrani warrior was a perfect blend of physical superiority, passion, skill, and intelligence. It often happened that a candidate would have a strong supply of one of these traits, but not enough of the others. As a result, many of them were thwarted in their efforts, and though there was no shame associated with failure in this arena, any Shadrani who did so found it hard going to accept it.

Danae had always wanted to be a warrior. And he was turning into a good one.

Revar had also made that choice. And today, he would begin.

"I hear that he is one of the best of his class," Lira said.

"Well, he would be."

"Are you becoming a warrior just because Danae did?"

Revar laughed shortly. "No Lira. I've always wanted to."

An awkward silence fell. Revar pondered the changes in their lives as he watched Lira study him. It was funny, he thought, even a month ago, he was comfortable with this girl. Now, with the new restrictions that had been placed between them, he was constantly aware that he must avoid her.

"I should go," he said finally, "or I will be late for my first class."

"Your father would not like that."

He did not answer, but he agreed with her.

His father would not like that at all.

* * * *

Revar tried to ignore the sweat that trickled uncomfortably down his back. Even in the light clothing that was traditional for this, he was sweltering. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. The training that he had had up until now, he realised, was for children.

And they were no longer children.

The man leading the class was none other than his own father, although Revar could not see him as father at the moment, but only the Prince of Gemen, legendary warrior and the natural teacher for the recruits to basic training.

"Be still!" his father ordered, as they took the swari stance.

Balanced on one foot, his other leg awkwardly bent at right angles to his body, Revar willed his body to obey.

He was very grateful, in that moment, that he had begged Danae to tutor him early and that Danae had been willing. Revar felt that he would die of shame if he faltered for one second in front of his father. As it was, the stand was difficult, and as the moments ticked by, many of the boys around him wavered, some actually fell.

Erone bent to help them up, ignoring the blush on their young cheeks. "Try again," he said gently.

Revar doubted his father would be anywhere near as easy on him. It seemed he was always hard on him lately. Even though he was one of the few who actually held his ground, still and perfect, there would be no words of praise for him. The boy pushed the thoughts out of his mind.

Such things would weaken him.

The class went on for three hours, and in that time, Revar knew with certainty that if he had not put in extra work, he would, like some of the other boys, have dropped from exhaustion before it was over. He wondered now, as he had on

numerous other occasions, if it was the Sorisi in him that made him falter. The idea shook him and he missed a step in the treasured chira as the class drew to an end.

"Revar!"

The warning shout echoed through the quiet afternoon like a thunderclap. The boy blushed to his toes. How could he have made a mistake now? He knew this! Chira was as familiar to him as his own name!

"S-Sorry Father," he stammered and quickly caught up with the movements of the others.

For the remainder of the class he would not meet his father's eye. He just wanted the class over, so he could go somewhere and hide until the mortification he felt went away.

At last, the exercise came to an end. After the ritual bow, he gathered his things and fled.

* * * *

Hazy morning sunlight filtered through the heavy curtains, casting dancing patterns of light on the wall while Calli sat back on the bed and studied the Prince of Gemen. He lay on his side, his face relaxed after they had spent the night unleashing their passion on each other. To one who did not know him, he looked to be sleeping quietly.

But Calli knew he was not asleep.

She drew in a deep breath, inhaling the smell of him, leather and soap and the scent of their recent lovemaking. No longer able to keep her hands off him, she reached over and ran a finger lightly down his hard chest.

"Careful, my lady," he murmured.

"It is not more passion I am after, Erone," she said quietly. "I wish to speak with you."

He sat up and looked at her. As it always had, the affect of his full attention made her heart flutter in her chest like a virgin schoolgirl. But she would not allow his potent sexuality to distract her.

"It is about Revar." She watched him lean back against the wall, waiting.

"Must you be so hard on him?"

"Am I hard on him?"

She released her breath in a sigh of irritation. "You know you are."

"If I am," he replied, "it is only because of the great responsibility he bears."

She considered this a moment.

"But Erone, since he does bear so much weight on his shoulders, would it not be more help if we supported him?"

"You support him, my love. As does my mother, my sister, and everyone else. He does not need that from me. From me, he must learn to rule. That is not an easy task."

"But you learned, and your mother was not-"

Her words were cut short by the chuckle that escaped him. "Forgive me, Calli," he said. "But you have no idea what kind of mother I had. You know only Mathena-the grandmother. Believe me, Mathena-the queen-was not indulgent with me. She could not be. Since my father was-let us say unpredictable-she felt it was up to her alone to mould me into someone fit to rule. She was very hard on me."

Calli could not help a smile at the reference to Jareela, Erone's father, a man who had been legendary even among the Shadrani for his sexual proclivities. In spite of it all, he had been well tolerated and well loved as the rascal he was.

"And how did that make you feel?"

He shrugged. "There were days when I hated her. But I learned as I grew older, the wisdom in her hardness. I know now why she did what she did, and I am grateful that she taught me to be as strong as she did."

Calli sighed and sat back on her heels. "But can you not at least show him

that you love him in some small way?"

He smiled at her and took her hand. "He knows I love him. It is merely his youth that creates doubt at the moment. Believe me, he will come to truly understand how much I love him on the day he realises I risked losing his love to teach him the strength he needs."

She reached up to touch his face. "I do not always understand your Shadrani ways, my love. But I pray you are right about this."

He drew her into his arms and nuzzled the soft, milky skin at the base of her neck. "Do not forget that Revan is also Shadrani, Calli, and I am right about him. Now, let us talk no longer about this."

Drawing his fingers through her long blond hair, he pulled her face close enough to brush her lips softly with his own.

"In fact," he said, his voice husky with desire, "let us talk no longer..."

Chapter Six

"You're the perfect subject," Hans said as he called for another break. Dallas stood and stretched momentarily before re-settling himself on the comfortable sofa. "If the subject is sitting still, I'm hardly any good at it," he said laconically, "although it's hardly something that requires talent."

Hans smiled at him. "That's another thing I like about you, Dallas, you have a quick wit."

He lit a joint and handed it to the boy, then sat down beside him.

They had become friends quickly. Dallas found himself confiding more and more in the man, telling him things he had never told anyone else. With Hans, it seemed comfortable to do it.

"Tell me, how is the girlfriend thing going?"

Dallas sat back. "You were right," he said. "She's not pregnant. She made it up, one of her friends told me today."

"Hah! I knew it! You can't trust them, you know."

Dallas smiled at the older man. He was becoming used to Hans' dislike of females. Although he himself didn't think that all women were as manipulative as Jennifer, he was beginning to see that he was going to have to be more careful in the future.

"And this friend of hers," Hans continued. "I suppose she thought she was going to get a shot at you for giving you the information."

Dallas laughed at him. "You make me sound like the lottery or something."

He saw something change behind the man's eyes.

"You're far more precious than money, Dallas."

Dallas was struck by the intensity of the words. He couldn't think how to respond so he just sat there, looking at the man.

Hans lifted a hand and stroked it gently down Dallas' cheek. Suddenly, there wasn't as much oxygen in the room.

"You know," he intimated. "There is a way you can have all the pleasure you want and never have to worry about pregnancy."

Dallas understood immediately what was going on. He didn't quite know how he knew, but he instinctively knew that this man was offering to have sex with him. He was surprised at his own reaction, how unfazed he was by it.

Instead of pulling away in anger, he found himself searching Hans' face, looking for what, he wasn't sure. He wondered vaguely if perhaps the drugs had something to do with it. Then he thought, no, it's because he wouldn't have a problem with it, trying it on, to see if it fit.

"And what would that be?" he found himself replying softly.

Dallas would have been truly shocked if he had any idea how deeply sensual and enticing his reply had been.

He hasn't a clue, Hans thought briefly as he felt himself harden painfully. No idea at all what kind of power he has.

Irresistibly drawn to the boy, he leaned in slowly, carefully, and brushed a gentle kiss across his lips.

Dallas felt the shock of the first touch. His eyes closed as he felt himself respond. Then it was gone and his entire being rebelled at the take away. Without thought for consequences, he leaned in quickly and returned the favor, kissing the man with a depth of promise that robbed his breath and left him gasping.

"God, Dallas," Hans rasped when he could, "I want you."

Dallas chuckled low in his throat, not recognizing his own voice. "What are you going to do about it?"

The question and the deeply sensual way it was delivered moved something primitive within Hans and he pulled the boy roughly to him, kissing him with blind passion, praying he wouldn't be refused.

But Dallas had no intention of refusing the man. His body had responded so quickly and completely that there hadn't been time for his rationality to kick in, no time for his mother's voice in his ear.

Leaving behind all his inhibitions was easy, so damned easy, under the hands of this man. And those hands were all over him now, eliciting a sharper, deeper pleasure than Dallas had ever known.

God, is this what it's supposed to be like? he thought as he felt his whole body turn to liquid lust. No female had ever reached him like this; none had ever elicited half the heat he was feeling at the moment. It simply didn't occur to him to question it. Instead, he allowed himself to sink into it, further and further, until all that was left was the feeling of thrumming pleasure that made him want to cry out mindlessly.

As if from a distance, he felt his jeans coming undone, then the heat of a mouth on him. Closing his eyes, he leaned back and groaned at the feelings washing over him. The pleasure was so overpowering that it was over in a few moments.

"Jesus," he whispered as his head began to clear. "That was... I've never felt anything like that."

Hans smiled like a cat. "That's just the appetizer," he purred.

Dallas couldn't believe his ears. He raised his head to study Hans' face. "You telling me there's more?"

The man looked like he was going to devour him on the spot. "We can keep going until you tell me to stop."

Dallas' smile was wicked. "Then you're in trouble," he mused, "because I never want to stop."

Hans pulled him closer. "Music to my ears, my young one."

Chapter Seven

The bathing pool was steamy and deliciously warm on this sunny afternoon. The strong scent of sulphur wafted on the air and Revar breathed deeply of it, knowing from his mother, of its beneficial qualities. Sighing, he leaned against the rocky edge and let his cares dissolve with the heat of the natural springs. His classes seemed to be going better—at least he was avoiding being singled out by his father.

The training was brutal and unrelenting, but he knew it had to be. In a world that seemed to want all Shadrani dead, his people took the matter of their defense very seriously.

Immediately after breakfast, the students underwent three hours of wracking physical conditioning, each exercise designed to challenge and stretch the limits of their young bodies. Some of the youngsters fell ill because of the rigors of this portion of training alone. Those students were given only one chance to recover and try again.

After the noon break, the training continued, but the afternoon courses also focused on strengthening the will and spirit of the warrior. At times, they were made to stand for hours on end without moving a single muscle. In the heat of midday, the students sometimes passed out from lack of water and exhaustion. They were taken away and given one more chance to pass muster. If it happened a second time, they were immediately dismissed for good. Mental

toughness was as important as physical strength to the Shadrani warrior and they were tested and tried in every way imaginable to ferret out any sign of weakness.

They were also taught the art of tsinsa. This was an ancient form of fighting that focused on defeating your enemy using only those things that could be found in your surrounding environment. Rocks, trees, dirt, even the physical momentum of gravity could be used to overcome the enemy. Once they learned all the moves, they learned to do them blindfolded, taught to rely on senses other than their eyes when facing a threat. The dark of night could be as deadly an enemy as the blade of a sword.

Day by gruelling day, the students learned all of it. And after his initial fear and self-doubt, Revar had risen to the challenge.

Breaking the quiet of the afternoon air, the chatter of the other young trainees made him smile to himself. As always, their talk turned to matters involving their budding sexuality.

"Have any of you yet visited Menare, the pleasure giver?" one of them said.

"The man has a mouth made of fire," another answered, while others agreed enthusiastically.

Menare was the man who took on the task of instructing young Shadrani males in the art of sexual pleasure.

"How does one get a job like that?" a third chimed in. This brought great laughter all around.

"Revar," the first one called, "you probably know."

Revar opened his eyes. "I think he simply was enlisted on the strength of his talent," he said glibly.

The comment brought an even greater round of laughter.

Revar closed his eyes again and let the others continue their banter. But his thoughts remained on the conversation. He himself had not yet made the acquaintance of the pleasure giver and wondered when his father would make arrangements. Every Shadrani male that came of age was eventually taken to Menare to be introduced to the pleasures of the flesh.

Of course, Revar knew that most of the boys were well on their way to learning on their own. But he had not yet ventured into that daunting arena. Not that he hadn't had feelings already. But he had decided not to take any steps on his own.

In truth, he was a little concerned about it.

In truth, he knew his father was too.

Even though Erone had taken a female lover, a fact that was generally known in the community, no one talked openly about it. Certainly, no one wanted to use the unpleasant word, basrati, in any way that might apply to the Prince of Gemen. Basrati was a term that was reserved for those who indulged in unsanctioned congress with the opposite sex.

Such an ugly word would never be used to describe the heir to the throne.

It seemed to make all the difference that his father had taken many male lovers before the Queen of Soris had come into his life. For some reason, that served to cleanse him of the sin of his indulgence. It was more acceptable to the Shadrani that Erone had made the choice to have a relationship with a female. It made it easier for them to rationalise that the prince was not so much perverted, as he was less than picky about where he found his passion. Revar's mouth drew down at the corners as he thought about how unfair it all was. His father could get away with even the worst transgressions and yet he was going to be under dreadful scrutiny until the Shadrani were convinced that there was not a trace of basrati in the new heir to the throne.

Revar understood that was because he himself was half Sorisi, and that made his sexual preference questionable. He was under suspicion of being basrati by nature, which would be unforgivable.

In some instances, punishable by death.

He was drawn from his private thoughts when the casual bantering of the others became excited speculation. He opened his eyes and looked up to see some of the older boys approaching. He didn't have to see him to know that Danae was

among them. When he finally picked him out from the group, his cousin smiled and waved.

The jealous glances from the others gave Revar a shudder of pride when his cousin climbed into the water beside him, tousling his hair with affection as he did. He knew that Danae was an object of desire for many of the boys. He even knew that Danae was already gaining a reputation for his sexual activity. But somehow, he felt that the older boy would always belong to him in a way that he never would to another. He couldn't explain it, didn't really understand it, and never discussed it with anyone else.

But he was sure of it.

"How are you liking your training?" Danae asked. Revar rolled his eyes skyward, drawing a low chuckle from his cousin. "It is a different world from the children's classes," Danae admitted.

"I thought I was going to die the first day," Revar confessed. "I am so glad I had you to prepare me."

"You are a natural for it. I know you do not believe this yet, but you are going to do fine."

"I would settle for not embarrassing my father at this point."

Danae studied his younger cousin. He didn't know why the boy was so uncertain. Of course he understood how it could happen. He had witnessed firsthand the struggles that had plagued Revar since the moment he had arrived in the Shadrani village. But all Danae saw when he looked at him was a boy with more will and determination than any he had ever known.

"How is Lira taking all this?" he said, in an effort to change the subject. Revar shrugged. "I have had to speak with her a few times. You know how she is."

The sound of Danae's laughter again echoed off the walls of the cavern. "I do. And I do not believe she is going to give up that easily."

"What can she do?"

Danae grinned. "I only know that if there is a way to bend the rules, Lira will find it."

* * * *

Revar joined the other boys as they lined up to begin their class. Then the quick murmur that ran through their ranks made him strain to see what had drawn the reaction. His eyes widened in shock when he discovered the source. His father was approaching the class as he did every day, but this morning, he had a new recruit in tow. Like all the other boys in the class, Revar struggled to hide his reaction when he recognised the newcomer as none other than Lira.

It was not unprecedented that a female join the ranks of the warrior class. It was simply quite rare.

Revar groaned inwardly as he realised that Lira had indeed found a way to bend the rules. Danae was going to love this one!

"Lira has come of age," his father announced. "And she has decided to become a Shadrani warrior." There was no sound from the ranks. The boys merely stood with quiet respect.

"Now, it has been some time since we have had a female recruit and you may not know the rules involved," he continued, "so I will tell them to you."

"Lira is to be treated no differently than any of the rest of you. She will have the same rights as you, will wear the same clothes, and is even allowed to grow her hair if that is what she wills."

This drew the slightest reaction from the class. Because long hair was known to stir sexual excitement in the male Shadrani, only males were allowed this vanity. Shadrani females kept their hair short, tidy... and safe.

"Also," Erone continued, "any of you who are found to be treating her differently will be immediately dismissed from this program."

There was utter silence after that pronouncement. The humiliation of being thrown out of training would be unbearable.

"Are there questions?"

No one dared.

Erone turned to Lira. "Please join the class."

Revar had to give her credit. She did not look the least bit intimidated by the amazing task she was about to tackle. She walked into the midst of the class with absolute confidence and stood silently waiting for instruction.

When Erone began to bark commands, she obeyed gamely.

Revar couldn't help but glance her way occasionally to see how she was doing. He was a bit concerned. But she seemed fine, better in fact, than he had been his first day. The thought irked him a little, so he stopped focusing on her. He could not allow anything to break his concentration.

* * * *

Lira stood trembling silently as she pushed herself beyond endurance to continue.

Just let me finish the class, she prayed. Just let me do well my first day. It was nothing more than sheer will power that kept her going-she was not going to fail at this.

Lira had made up her mind some time ago that she would take this path. Then she had kept it to herself, as she kept so much to herself, not wanting the teasing and ridicule that would undoubtedly follow. But this would shut them up once and for all. Becoming a Shadrani warrior would finally earn her the acceptance she had longed for all her young life.

She felt her muscles turning to jelly under the relentless physical strain. Sweat poured off her, betraying the cool exterior she was trying so hard to maintain. Five times over, she was sure she could not take any more, but more came and she pushed harder. Then just when she knew she could not stand another moment, the class mercifully ended.

The trainees had a few moments to catch their breath and then Erone began chira. He did not bother to hide his smile as Lira joined in with the exercise, but the shock registered on more than one young male face before it was quickly stifled.

Chira was a discipline of the Shadrani male. Invented centuries ago, its purpose was singlefold: to help the male control his raging shadra.

What did a female need with chira?

Being female, Lira would not have even been shown the moves. But secretly, she had studied Danae and Revar as one cousin taught the other the ancient ritual. She had watched and learned. She knew it better than most.

When the exercise was over and the bows were given, Revar approached, shaking his head.

"You are amazing, Lira."

She threw him a suspicious look. "Why? Because I want the same thing you want?"

"You know what I mean. If you have done this just to shock everyone, it may backfire on you."

Her eyes spit blue fire at him. "I am as serious about this as you are, Revar. Maybe more. So do not ever think you know why I do anything!"

That said, she turned and stormed away from him.

* * * *

That night, a great commotion roused the Shadrani from their beds in the small hours of the morning. Quickly, they gathered at the village square as accusations flew and fingers were pointed.

Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, Revar followed his parents out into the yard and then to the steps of the square where Queen Mathena was calling for order, and quiet.

As the Shadrani looked on, a young male and female were dragged forward by a guard and thrown at the feet of their queen.

"These two were caught," the guard said, "sharing intimate rites."
A gasp of outrage went up from the crowd. Revar couldn't help a look at his parents. His mother paled at the scene, but the only reaction his father gave was the slight working of the muscle in his jaw.
They broke this rule all the time, Revar knew.
Once again, he wondered why what was law for the average Shadrani seemed not to apply to the Prince of Gemen.
Mathena shouted again to quiet the onlookers. Then she directed her attention toward the two kneeling in terror at her feet.
"Is this true?"
There was no answer.
"Is this true?" Mathena repeated.
The female merely nodded, her eyes squeezed tight. The male looked up and addressed his queen. "P-please, my lady," he stammered. "Have mercy."
Mathena glared at him.
"What excuse do you give for this behavior?"
"N-none, my lady. There can be no excuse."
"Take them away," Mathena ordered. "I will pass judgment in the morning."
Then she turned and went back to her room while the two unfortunates were taken to a holding cell. The crowd dispersed quickly, anxious to find their own beds.

* * * *

The next morning, Revar stood beside his parents in almost the same spot and listened as his grandmother made her pronouncement.
"You will be flogged," she said sharply, "and as a lesson to other young people, you will be left overnight in the square."
The harshness of the sentence brought a hushed silence. Revar looked over at Lira. She looked as if she would be ill.
"There can be no tolerance of this," Mathena warned. "I am letting you off easy this time. If it happens again, stronger measures will be taken."
The two offenders were taken to the middle of the square where they were stripped to the waist and their hands bound to a pillar. Their parents were the ones who were to flog them, a form of punishment for them as well because they had somehow failed in their duties. The mother of the girl and the father of the boy were given a whip made of sturdy leather and since they were being watched by their neighbors, they would wield them with little pity.
As the hiss of leather sounded in the morning air, Calli turned away. She looked across the courtyard and caught the eye of Pashar, Habda's mate. Even from the distance, she could tell he was remembering a time long ago when he had been the recipient of the lash. That sentence had been passed because Calli had innocently incited shadra in the youngster. The one wielding the whip on that day had been none other than the Prince of Gemen himself.
She shuddered at the memory.
Still, the lashing was not intended to do permanent damage. Painful, yes, but more humiliating and degrading than anything else.
Calli determined that she would aid in healing the two once their ordeal was done. She was no longer needed as Healer to the Shadrani, since they had trained their own after she had left them. But she would insist on helping. It was the least she could do.
Chapter Eight

Dallas sat in class and let his mind drift as the teacher droned on. It wasn't a problem; he scored perfect grades without exerting much effort.
His mind, of course, was already moving forward to after school. Soon he would be in Hans' apartment and then in his bed.
God, he loved having sex with the man.
He knew tricks that Dallas hadn't even dreamed of.

He sensed himself begin to respond just thinking about it and he felt his impatience rising as quickly as his male flesh. He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, feeling as if the class would never end. But it did, finally, and Dallas fairly bolted out of his desk and down the hall. On the way to his locker, he was stopped by the usual number of females, looking to hook up with him. He was polite and gentle with all of them. But he was no longer interested. None of them could offer what he had waiting for him at home. He couldn't help smiling to himself as he wondered what they would think if they only knew. But in his heart of hearts, he didn't care. As long as he could have what he needed now, it didn't matter. His world was right for the first time in a long time. His restlessness was all but gone, and he was sleeping nights. He had even stopped thinking about his father.

* * * *

Dallas held nothing back as he worked on Hans. He wanted to make the man scream, wanted him to drown in pleasure. He was rewarded a few moments later by the sharp cry that escaped the man's lips as he released himself. Sitting back and grinning, Dallas felt the power for the first time. And he liked the feeling. Hans' eyes registered both admiration and a little trepidation when they opened. "You are quite a student," he said. Dallas laughed. "I like the subject." Hans ran a hand gently through the boy's hair. "Christ, you're unexpected." Dallas studied him. "Unexpected?" "I just mean that you surprise me." "But in a good way." Hans grinned. "In a very good way. Now come here and show me what else you've learned."

* * * *

Sarah Devlin folded her arms against her body and exhaled sharply. She was prickling with feelings of confusion and anxiety. Dallas was acting strangely. He was even more solicitous of her than usual and seemed to be in a good mood all the time. It was odd, she thought, that such a thing would concern her. But it did. Always one to trust her maternal instincts, she was getting some major warning bells going off where her only child was concerned. She had even done the unthinkable and had searched his room while he was out. Never had she done such a thing before. Even though she had found nothing, she decided to confront him that night. "Dallas," she said, "is everything all right with you?" The boy looked up from his homework. "Sure, Mom." She sat down at the table with him. "You would tell me if there was something wrong, wouldn't you?" Dallas felt sudden dread as the razor-sharp instincts of his mother found their mark. "Mom, everything's just great. Really." She studied him a moment, then relented. Reaching over, she grasped his hand. "You know I love you, baby." He closed his hand over hers and felt emotion well up. "I love you too, Mom," he said. Then as she headed for her room, he stopped her. "Please don't worry. Everything's fine."

* * * *

Hans dialed the number and waited. It had been some weeks now since he had

seduced the boy and he knew his master was becoming impatient. But for the first time in his life, he was having trouble with his duties.

The boy was just too much.

Hans had expected to run up against the usual barrier, a wall built of fear, guilt, and hesitation. Instead, he had found a door made of the thinnest crystal, a door that had opened at his merest touch. And behind that door, the boy was a brimming reservoir of erotic hedonism. His deeply sensual nature had spilled out and flooded Hans with a sense of unworthiness that he had never experienced. He felt humbled in the presence of this sexual creature.

Diminished.

He had been warned, but had scoffed at it, thinking himself too good to become involved, too above it to have a fifteen-year-old affect him.

But the boy had gotten to him.

He had fought the reality, but now knew it was the truth. What he had to do was hide that truth from the man on the other end of the line.

"He's not quite ready yet," he said.

"You said he was learning quickly."

"He is, but... you said you wanted him to know what I know, didn't you?"

"That is why I sent you, Hans. You are the best."

"Well, that takes time."

This was answered with brooding silence. Hans felt his blood chill.

"Hans... is there something you would like to tell me?"

"No," he answered much too quickly.

"I told you the boy would likely be powerful."

"It's nothing like that. I just want you to be pleased."

"I will give you one more week."

That was the end of the conversation. He had one more week with the boy and then he would lose him.

His master had spoken.

Chapter Nine

Revar's visit to the pleasure giver finally came. He stood and listened while his father explained to him that this was the day he would truly leave his boyhood behind. Revar felt his pulse quicken at the thought. He also felt his fear rise. What if he did not like what Menare taught him? Great Tsandis, what if this proved once and for all that he was basrati?

His father sensed the hesitancy in him.

"Do not be overly concerned, Revar," he said. "This is simply a rite of passage and nothing to be worried about."

Revar merely nodded and swallowed, not trusting his voice. Feeling more like a child than he had in some time, he followed his father to the infamous door.

The entire village knew what was happening. There would be no privacy afforded simply because he was a son of Gemen. It was a mark of pride to be old enough for this induction, and all males made the journey sooner or later.

As they entered the chamber, Menare stood and greeted them. He was tall and beautiful, as were all Shadrani males, but he also carried the aura of sexual mystery and intrigue that came with his office. Revar felt his male flesh stir in anticipation as he looked up at the man.

Then, as he watched, he was momentarily shocked by the heated look Menare gave his father. And even more startling was the teasing grin his father gave back. It suddenly came as a revelation to Revar that the males in the village might still desire his father. The boy had come to think of the man as belonging solely to his mother. Sometimes, he realized, he forgot that the Prince of Gemen had had a life before Calli had come into it.

Erone had even been promised, at one time, to another Shadrani male.

Gadrel had been a cousin of Gemen, a fierce warrior in his own rite, and a threat whom Erone had killed to prevent him from murdering Calli in a jealous rage. But that had all been so long ago. Revar hadn't even been born when it happened, but had heard the tale from Danae.

"You may leave him with me," Menare said, drawing Revar from his musings. Erone's grin was smug. "Do not take out your frustration on the boy." Menare's smile turned wicked. "Would I do that, my prince?"

* * * *

Hours later, walking away from the house of the pleasure giver, Revar felt a profound sense of relief wash over him. He hadn't merely enjoyed the experience; he had savored it and felt a deep and unbridled certainty that it was right for him.

The man's mouth and hands had brought him to the heights of pleasure over and over again. Then Menare had taught him the finesse of his art and had even shown him how to touch and stroke another male to elicit the maximum amount of pleasure possible without shadra.

Even though he suspected that Menare had indeed used him to take out his frustration at not having his father, Revar wouldn't have changed it. Smiling happily, he made his way back to the royal dwelling. It had been a good day.

* * * *

The night air stirred the tapestry at the window and sighed as it eased into the bedroom of the young royal. Then, abruptly, the sound of thunder threatened and, following closely on its heels, a heavy downpour of rain began to fall.

Revar sat up with a start. Sweat covered his body with a light sheen that made the bedding beneath him damp and uncomfortable. His heart was beating at an alarming rate and he felt his emotions raging out of control at the frightening crush of lust that was throbbing through him. With a sudden shock, he realized what was happening to him, that it had come at last.

Shadra!

He struggled to get out of bed. Then he struggled to stand. Neither endeavour was easy. His orientation was completely off and he feared the intensity of the feeling that was raging through him would certainly kill him. He tried to remember everything he'd been told to expect with the onset of this most treasured of Shadrani traits, but his mind was having difficulty focusing on anything. It occurred to him then that he needed help, that he couldn't possibly go through this on his own. Stumbling and now terrified, he went to find his cousin.

* * * *

Danae had been sound asleep, but something brought him abruptly awake. Not knowing why, he pulled the covers off and slipped out of bed, heading down the hallway toward Revar's room. He had just turned the corner, when he caught sight of his cousin, doubled over and on his knees, the look on his face one of pure agony.

Danae knew immediately what was happening and that this was what had awakened him. His keen instincts had sensed, even in his sleep, that there was shadra nearby. He remembered vividly his own first time and a shot of empathy raced through his body.

First shadra was incredibly painful and dangerous. If you physically shared it with anyone, it was often the case that you became unnaturally attached to that one for the remainder of your days. No self respecting Shadrani wished to give another that kind of power over him, so it was vital to withstand the first few attacks alone, to conquer and master the urge.

"Revar," Danae called gently as he approached.

His cousin looked up at him from his place on the floor, his silver eyes blazing with the fire of shadra. Danae kept his distance but continued to speak to him in a firm, gentle voice.

"Listen to me now. Stand and begin chira."
Revar shook his head. "I-I cannot."
"You can and you must. Here, I will do it with you."
Slowly, Danae began the ancient movements, all the while encouraging his young cousin to join him.
Revar marshalled his will, telling himself that he was in safe hands, that his cousin would not let any harm come to him. His pride and his respect for Danae spurred him on. He did not want to disappoint him.
Somehow, he managed to stand. Then, even though his brain was saying it was impossible, he began to awkwardly mirror Danae's movements. The voice of his cousin cut through the haze, reassuring, encouraging, and soothing him. It went on for five minutes, then ten, then, after twenty minutes of constant struggle, Revar began to feel an easing of the fire.
They continued the chira until Revar collapsed from sheer exhaustion. Danae left him long enough to fill a chalice with life-saving hazzah and return to leave it for him, still reluctant to approach.
Reaching over to grasp the cup, Revar drank greedily from it. He knew the nourishing fluid would replenish his system from the ravages of shadra. Without it, or some other similar form of nutrition, he would be dead within hours. His mind registered dimly that nothing he had ever tasted in his life was as good. The liquid shot through his system, calming, healing, until finally, he passed out on the floor.
Only then did Danae approach. He bent to lift Revar, but felt the gentle touch of a hand on his arm as he did so. Surprised, he turned to see his uncle.
"Erone!" he said. "I did not hear you approach."
The prince bent to gather his son into his arms. "Thank you, little fox," he said softly. "You have been more than a friend to him."
Danae preened under the praise from this man. Then he stood back and watched while Erone carried his son back to his room.

* * * *

The warm mid-day sun was a welcome relief from the rain that had washed the village the night before. Raesa and Cera sat together in the heat and watched the young female Shadrani train.
"She is relentless," Cera said.
Raesa narrowed her eyes and studied Lira, the object of their discussion. "I would like to have recruited her for my archers," she said. "But she is going to make a fine warrior."
Raesa was in charge of a troop of female archers who could attack at will, kill everything in sight, and disappear before the enemy even knew it was under threat. It was a deadly little army and she knew her brother, as commander of the Shadrani forces, valued their contribution highly. They had been a major contributing factor, many times, in saving Shadrani lives.
"Is it only her archery skills that interest you, Raesa?"
The princess turned a look on her mate. Then she laughed openly at her. "Do not tell me you are jealous, Cera!"
Cera colored a little, but did not reply. The response caused Raesa to soften. She reached up and touched the other woman's face. "After all this time," she said quietly, "do you think anyone else could draw me from you?"
Cera pressed her lips together. "She is quite spectacular," she offered.
Raesa looked over and once again studied the female warrior. She nodded.
"She is that," she agreed. Then she turned back to Cera, "but she is not you."

* * * *

Lira's arms burned with the effort it took to continue wielding her sword. But she knew it was the same for all the trainees in her class. Now sixteen, she was one of the tallest of them, a fact that irked her friend Revar no end. He himself was a little small for his age and she knew that weighed on him

terribly.

Not that his size was keeping him from being one of the fiercest fighters among them. She was aware of him in the periphery of her vision, passionately lunging at his opponent, forcing the other, larger boy back against a large tree and then "finishing" him off with the killing stroke. His opponent, a good-natured boy named Bonn, dropped his sword and grinned.

"You wore me out, Revar!"

Revar grinned back at him. "I think it is your late nights that are defeating you."

Bonn's smile widened. "Then I suppose you shall always defeat me."

The two shared a laugh.

Lira found herself distracted by the sound. These hulking great males were forever bantering back and forth about their sexual exploits. She found it tiring at times. Her focus wavered and almost gave her opponent a lethal opportunity.

Almost.

Then she forced her mind to concentrate on the young man opposite her. She marshaled her anger and her determination and within five minutes, had managed to win her match.

There was no anger or resentment from her opponent. She had earned the respect of every single one of her classmates, including Revar.

Lira had worked like a woman possessed to develop her body, struggling through strenuous workouts and endless classes to become as muscular as her female anatomy would allow. Luckily for her, her genes had co-operated and she was able to grow tall enough and strong enough to continue with her class, where some of the males had already been eliminated over the years because of their size or some tendency to injury.

Lira breathed a deep sigh and unbuckled her sword. She always felt good after competition. She rarely lost and when she did, it was to Revar. But she beat him as often as she lost to him and that gave her great satisfaction.

"Lira," Revar called to her. "Come and join us at the pool."

She turned to him and smiled. "Not today," she said. "I need to study."

He put his hands on his hips in a gesture that always reminded her of his father. "And what are you studying that takes all your afternoons?"

"Nothing you need to worry about."

Revar narrowed his eyes as he looked up into her face. She was several inches taller than he.

"I never worry about you, Lira," he replied.

She threw her head back and laughed as he grinned and walked away.

* * * *

Within the private glade, she found him waiting for her. Certain that no one was near to witness it, she went into his arms. He bent to her, kissing her mouth with a ferocity that snatched the breath from her body. She surrendered to him, as she had on so many occasions before, shuddering with the knowledge that what they shared could jeopardize everything she had worked for, everything she wanted, including her very life.

Lira knew she did not love him.

That feeling, she would always have for another.

But she wanted this, had always wanted it, although she didn't realize what it was she was feeling when she was younger.

Within the Shadrani village, there were no lessons for young females on how to deal with their feelings for young men. Females did not have feelings for males. From the time they were young, they were taught that they would one day choose and commit to another female of their liking. It was as simple as that. Of all the things Shadrani that Lira prayed she had inherited, this appeal of a same-sex partner was the one she had wanted the most. It was the single thing that would put her Sorisi heritage to rest once and for all. But she had not been that lucky. She had inherited her size, strength, and determination

from her Shadrani forebears, but she could no longer fight the knowledge that she was basrati-through and through.

As they fell together on the soft blanket of wild grass, she closed her eyes and moaned her appreciation, glorying in the feel of his male body.

* * * *

Revar silently studied Danae while his cousin completed his training for the day. He was learning so much from the older boy. Even as he watched, he committed every move, every parry, to memory, hoping it would stay there, locked up in his brain until the time came when he needed it. Danae was an excellent swordsman, but then, all Shadrani warriors were.

The Shadrani prided themselves on their swordsmanship more than any other skill of warfare. From the time they entered their first class, the young warriors were prodded and poked, jabbed and stabbed at, until it became second nature for them to be around the deadly weapons.

All the recruits used wooden swords at first, but soon graduated to weapons made of metal, the razor-sharp steel dulled so that the youngsters would not harm each other too much. As the years passed and their skill grew, the warriors began to use real swords, but even these were not right for them. The Shadrani purposely trained with large, ungainly weapons, both the weight and the length was wrong. But the students learned to use these swords expertly, becoming so adept with them that they could easily defeat the enemy even using such clumsy articles.

Then, when they graduated, they were given a proper sword; one forged with ancient knowledge and fashioned to custom fit each Shadrani. Each blade was crafted for perfect balance in the hand of its intended warrior and was carefully measured, the exact length to be as long an extension of the arm as was possible. The end result of all this was that the Shadrani could fight for hours without tiring, used to a heavier, clumsier weapon. It made them fast, deadly, and almost invincible in battle.

As Danae put his gear away, he was approached by a classmate who walked up to speak with him quietly. Revar recognized the young warrior and felt a brief stab at the intimacy that was obvious between the two.

Surian was a fierce cadet who had been in trouble more than once because of his quick temper. But his feelings for Danae showed on his face as they spoke. Unbidden, anger welled up in Revar's heart and he had to fight to keep from walking away in a huff like a spoiled brat. Instead, he stood his ground and waited for his cousin to notice him.

When he did, Danae dismissed the other boy and walked over.

"Are you still studying, Revar?" Danae said, ruffling his hair. "You must take some time off from all your training."

"Do not do that!" Revar bit, still fighting his emotions.

Danae's face registered surprise.

Revar immediately felt remorse.

"I-I am sorry, Danae. But I am not a child any longer."

Danae studied him a moment. "I know that. And please forgive me, I will no longer treat you like one."

Revar watched the older boy walk away and felt his heart lurch. Then he had to fight the urge to run after him. Run after him and tell him that he hadn't meant it, that he loved it when he ruffled his hair, that any touch at all from him was-"Great Tsandis," he said aloud to the empty field, "I have a crush on my cousin!"

* * * *

Not knowing who else to turn to, Revar confided in Lira. She listened quietly as he confessed his feelings, then studied him a moment before speaking.

"I guess I am not totally surprised," she said.

He gaped at her, horrified. "You mean you can tell?"

She smiled indulgently. "No, not that, but you have always worshipped him in a way, and I suppose it is not unexpected that those feeling would grow into something else. You are not the first Shadrani to have that happen." Frowning, he considered her words. "He can never know, Lira. Promise me you will never tell anyone." Lira smiled sadly and agreed. After all, she was good at keeping secrets.

Chapter Ten

"You mad at me?" Dallas turned to find his friend Terry standing behind him. He smiled reassuringly. "Why would I be mad at you?" Terry shrugged. "Dunno. I just don't see much of you anymore." "I know. I've been kind of into something." "Yeah? What?" "It's... sort of private." "Private! You've never had anything private to keep from me before and-hey, wait a minute." He studied Dallas, his face flattening as he thought he'd stumbled on the truth. "It's some hot new babe, isn't it?" Dallas looked at his friend. For a moment he was tempted to tell him everything. Then the moment passed. He nodded. "Yeah, that's exactly what it is." Now Terry was full of enthusiasm. "And you can't tell me because it's someone... someone you shouldn't be messing with." Dallas knew that Terry lived vicariously through his sex life and was always going off on wild fantasies about it, but he was struck by how accurate the other boy's musings were. "Right again." "Come on, Dallas. Give me a hint. I'll bet it's someone older. I always wanted to sleep with an older woman-maybe even two. Wow, what would that be like...?" They walked off down the hall, Dallas smiling indulgently while his friend spun off into his own private porno world. They had only gone a short distance when Dallas looked up and saw Hans. He stopped short in surprise. "What are you doing here?" he said. Hans looked a little rattled, something Dallas had never seen before. "I need to speak with you," the man answered. Terry's eyes went from one to the other. He had no idea who this guy was. "This is school," Dallas said tersely. "We can't do this here." Hans took hold of his arm. "It's important, Dallas. I need to talk with you now." Something in the man's eyes got to him. He turned to Terry. "I'll catch up with you later." "But we have Math class-" "I'll see you later," Dallas said, with a little more force. Terry moved on ahead and into their next classroom, but not without a questioning backward glance. He didn't like the feel of this.

* * * *

They walked back to Dallas' locker, where the hall around them was empty. "We need to go away," Hans announced. Dallas' brows knit together. "What do you mean, 'go away'?" "I mean get away from here, far away. The sooner, the better." The look on Dallas' face was incredulous. "Are you crazy? I can't just up and leave here." Hans began to pace. His behavior was really starting to spook Dallas. "Look, I can't get too far into this right now, but you have to trust me and just come."

Dallas began to back away, shaking his head. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Why not?" Hans snapped. "What's keeping you here?"

Dallas didn't reply, he just kept moving away. Hans followed, his face suddenly dawning with realization.

"It's your mother, isn't it?" he seethed. "It's always your damned mother. Well it's too late to worry about that."

Dallas froze in his tracks. "What do you mean, 'too late'?"

Before Hans could reply, Terry came around the corner with the Math teacher in tow.

"What are you doing with that boy?" the teacher demanded.

Hans didn't answer. He turned and bolted out of the school.

* * * *

Dallas stood in the apartment, vibrating with rage and resentment.

"Who was that man in the hall with you?" his mother asked again, "and what did he want?" When she received no answer, she grabbed up his arms and pleaded.

"Is it drugs, Dallas? Please tell me what you're involved in!"

"It's nothing!" Dallas snapped.

"Your teacher didn't think it was nothing. He was concerned enough to call me."

"He's an idiot."

"Why, Dallas? Because he cares about what happens to you?"

"It's none of his business," the boy shouted. "Or yours either!"

"How dare you say that," she hissed. "Everything you do is my business."

Dallas felt his outrage growing as his patience diminished. Years of frustration sounded in his voice. "That's just it! I feel like I live in prison, Mom. What? You think I'm going to turn into my father!"

Her face paled at his words, but he was too far gone to even notice.

"I can't live like this any more," he bit. "You've got to back off me!"

"You're only fifteen, Dallas," she snapped. "You're not an adult yet."

"I'm not a child either, but you still treat me like one!"

"You don't understand! You're not ready for the world."

"Well I'll never be ready for the world if you won't let me out in it!"

Their voices grew louder with each accusation. Dallas had never defied his mother so much before.

Sarah's face darkened. "What does that man want with you?" she demanded, suddenly shaking him.

When she received no answer, she became frantic, shaking him more violently.

"What are you doing with him?"

"Stop it, Mom!"

"Tell me what is going on!"

He grabbed her arms and pulled away, forcing her off of him.

"Damn it," he shouted. "It's none of your fucking business!"

She slapped him, hard, her eyes flashing. "You are just like your father!"

The sound echoed like a rifle shot in the small apartment.

Sarah's hand flew to her mouth and her eyes mirrored instant regret when she saw the look of pain and confusion that quickly spread over her son's face.

Dallas stood a moment, suspended in shock, then he turned and fled, not stopping to look back. He took the stairs three at a time and hit the street running.

Sarah Devlin didn't even attempt to stop the tears that began streaming down her cheek. "Oh Dallas," she whispered to the empty apartment. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it."

Chapter Eleven

"Do not continue to fight against your size," Danae said.

Revar stopped his swordplay, dropped the tip of his blade to rest on the

earth, and looked into his cousin's face.

"What do you mean?"

"Use your size to your advantage. Like this..."

Danae twisted and swiveled, bringing his sword up against an imaginary opponent, lopping off the imaginary head. Revan's features broadened as understanding dawned.

"Let me try," he said.

For two more hours, they continued the private training. Revan had always counted on his cousin to help him learn more quickly, more thoroughly. Danae was happy to oblige, the tutoring allowing him to spend more time with this cousin that he treasured.

They had been at it for hours and were growing weary, when Revan noticed Surian watching from the edge of the field. Danae saw him at about the same time and nodded to him briefly.

"Is he waiting for you?" Revan asked tightly.

Danae merely shrugged. "I do not know."

It seemed he was either unaware of Surian's feelings, or was determined to ignore them. But when the other boy continued to linger, Danae decided to talk with him.

"Wait here a moment," he said to Revan, "I will find out what he wants."

"He wants to speak with you, Danae," Revan blurted, "it's easy to see it."

Frowning, Danae turned without comment and walked over to the other boy. Revan watched while they spoke. He could not hear what they said, but he noted that Surian was growing more angry by the moment. Then the young man simply threw his hands in the air and stomped off.

"What is wrong with him?" Revan asked when Danae returned to his side.

"Nothing important," Danae replied, "he seems to think he has some claim on me."

Revan blanched at the thought. "And does he?"

Danae shrugged. "No more so than some others I have been with."

Revan felt his jealousy rise at the thought of his cousin with any other male, but he fought it, knowing it would spoil his time with him.

Wanting to regain the carefree afternoon, he clamped his mouth shut, raised his blade, and challenged Danae once more.

Finally they both dropped on the practice field, panting and exhausted.

"I need the baths," Danae stated, "I am sweating like a warhorse."

"I'll race you there," Revan called, on his feet and laughing before Danae had a chance to reply. A broad grin crossed Danae's face as he leapt up and took off after his impulsive cousin.

Revan won the race. Not simply because of the head start, but because he was smaller and faster. He stripped off his clothes and dove into the warm water, not surfacing until he heard his cousin behind him.

Danae swam up and dunked him under the water, laughing when Revan came up sputtering and shaking the water from his dark hair.

"You cannot treat me that way," Revan cried, giggling, "I am going to be your king someday!"

Danae laughed and dunked him again. "You are not my king yet!"

This time Revan swam under the water and pulled Danae's legs out from under him, plunging him into the inviting water. His cousin came up grinning, and then reached a hand up to smooth the long dark hair from his eyes. Revan reached out to help, an innocent gesture that quickly became something else. Something unexpected.

No sooner had Revan touched his cousin's long hair when he felt something hot and primitive shoot through his veins. He struggled for control as the now familiar onslaught of shadra seized his body.

"Danae," he muttered, in warning or commiseration, neither of them ever knew, for the impulse was upon him immediately and just as quickly out of his control. His hand, still stroking his cousin's hair, suddenly became a conduit of white-hot sexual energy.

Danae went rigid as the first shockwave of pleasure rocked through him. It

expelled the breath from his body and almost cost him his footing in the bathing pool. He struggled to keep his legs under him and to halt the feelings that were engulfing him. But he knew he would lose, that both of them were lost. The instant, blinding lust inspired by shared shadra was not a thing that could be overcome.

They came together as their mouths locked in an explosive kiss. Without heed or restraint, their tongues explored each other as though their very lives depended upon it. Danae fought the scorching, primitive urge to take his cousin right there in the bath, to fiercely plunder the younger boy and indulge the raw delight that was coursing like liquid heat through his veins. His body shuddered, fighting against his mind as he clung to the last shred of his will power.

"Great Tsandis, Revar," he gasped when they broke from each other, "stop this!"

Revar did not even have the will to reply. Instead, he leaned in to kiss his cousin once more, forsaking all reason and sanity to the shadra that was spinning out of his control.

The piercing pleasure almost took them under again and Danae, being the older and more experienced, managed to maneuver them to the shallow end of the pool and the sandy, secluded beach that was often the scene of trysts between young lovers.

But Danae had also surrendered by now and had no intention of stopping. In fact, if Revar had pulled away from him, he would have torn at him to keep him near. He was as lost to this ancient urging as was his young cousin and they finally abandoned themselves to it, and to each other. Every touch, every look only served to heighten the wrenching lust that had sprung up between them. Danae attacked his young cousin with a ferocity that frankly terrified him. As the terrible, wracking pleasure ran amok in his body, the last coherent thought that went through his mind was that he had never felt a shadra as potent, as clear, and as devastating as Revar's.

* * * *

One hour later, they lay on the banks of the pool, exhausted. Danae managed to open his eyes and look over at Revar. His heart quailed. His young cousin was in trouble. He was in the first stages of deprivation and was beginning to tremble and convulse. Physically drained and emotionally spent from their sharing, Danae did not even have the energy to rise and go in search of hazzah. And Revar needed it badly. His teeth chattered as a deadly chill began to set in.

Revar was dimly aware of what was happening. He whispered his cousin's name, his mind moving farther and farther away. It seemed the more he tried to focus, the harder it became.

Danae tried to call out for help but the weak sound that came from his lips was lost in the leafy cover of the forest.

"Revar," he whispered. "Hold on. Someone will come."

With what little strength he had left, he managed to move closer to his young cousin and take his body into his embrace, trying to calm and warm him. He knew even as he did it that it wouldn't be enough. Dread settled like dark ice in the pit of his stomach. In that instant, he realized how much he cared about this intense and vulnerable young man, how much he desperately wanted to save him.

And save him, he would.

He had never seen it, but he knew that the killing rage would soon take hold of Revar. His body, so starved after the ravages of shadra, would attack any living thing within reach and savagely tear it apart, desperate for the protein that would save him. It was Shadrani life preserving itself and Revar would have no more control over it than he did the color of his eyes.

Danae knew it would be his blood that would flow. Strangely, it didn't frighten him. Instead, he felt a sense of calm descend as he thought about

giving his life so that this young prince would live. Then he heard the insistent voice of his cousin when the younger boy came to the same realization.

"No!" Revar breathed, as if from a dream. "Danae-no!"

"It is all right, Revar. Take what you must."

Revar's eyes snapped open. The pain was terrible, more terrible than any of the stories he'd heard about it, for stories could only take you as far as your imagination could go, and nowhere in all his imaginings could he have conjured an agony so devastating.

Some dark and deep urge within him was focused on his cousin's throat, the quickest way to kill. What was worse was that he knew he was not going to be able to resist it much longer.

"Give me your mouth," he whispered, "Danae-please!"

Surrendering to his fate, Danae managed to lean in and kiss his cousin, knowing in his heart that he was saying goodbye.

But Revar fought with every ounce of strength left to him. He coaxed Danae's tongue free and then bit down, immediately tasting the blood he so desperately needed.

Danae winced at the sharp pain, but found it a quick and easy unpleasantness that was replaced almost at once by soothing pleasure. His cousin was drinking from him, taking his blood to replenish and save himself. And in the process, hoping to save Danae as well. But Danae had little hope that the meager amount of fluid would enable the younger boy to continue to fight the killing urge. Revar trembled anew with the effort it took to resist the impulse to rend and tear. As soon as he tasted the blood, a red haze came over him and he was almost lost to the primitive need to take more, to rip flesh and bury his face in the lifeblood and take and take until there was no more.

Many Shadrani had died this way, caught unprepared and unlucky when shadra came upon them. But Revar fought with every speck of willpower that he had honed over the years, fought against the urge to tear at his cousin. He knew that if he could only hold out a while longer, just until there was enough blood in his system for the need to abate...

Slowly, so slowly, Revar felt the rage losing its terrible grip on him. His mind began to clear a fraction at a time. Danae was almost unconscious, the loss of blood rendering him even more helpless and depleted. Revar's need flared anew at the sight of his vulnerable cousin. It would be so easy... quick and merciful.

He wouldn't feel a thing...

No! Revar's mind insisted. He continued to take the life-giving fluid, treasuring each drop, wondering if he could ever stop himself from drinking. Then, as suddenly as it had come over him, the madness was gone. Revar was left with a feeling of intense contentment as he continued to pull on Danae's tongue. He had never felt so close to his cousin, like they had merged into one somehow, as if sharing his blood had made Danae part of him. He wanted it to go on forever.

But nature again took over and Revar stopped drinking. Then his brain sent a message to his salivatory glands. His physiology worked to release the healing compound that every male Shadrani had the ability to manufacture. With his last conscious effort, Revar caressed Danae's tongue with his own, accelerating the clotting process to heal the gash that he himself had inflicted. This done, the young prince fell unconscious, beside his cousin.

* * * *

The bright morning sunlight invaded his dreams as he struggled to swim to the surface of reality. It was a long way back. Finally able to open his eyes, Revar did not understand at first where he was. He blinked to clear his vision and then realized that he was home, in his own bed. The sunlight dappled the wall and he could smell the familiar, inviting aroma of fresh bread that wafted in from the baker down the way.

Then memories clashed in his head and a sudden terror took hold of him. He threw off the covers, struggled to pull on his clothes, and headed for the door. But he had barely opened it before he saw his cousin standing outside, his sword drawn, on guard in front of his room.

"Danae!" Revar breathed. He ran a hand through his long, tousled hair. "Great Tsandis, I thought..."

Danae smiled at him and bowed deeply.

"Good morning, my prince."

Revar suddenly felt the exhaustion that had claimed him the day before. He stumbled back into his room and sat down heavily on the bed, head in hand. Danae followed him in, closing the door behind him.

"Are you unwell, Revar?"

The younger boy looked up, shaking his head. "I-I thought I had killed you," he said miserably.

"I assure you, I am quite well."

Revar would not look his cousin in the eye. Danae bent on one knee so that he was level with him. "You must not worry. I am a little tired, but I am fine."

Revar finally managed to look up. "I am sorry, Danae."

"Why?"

"Why? Because of- of what happened."

"Are you referring to your shadra?"

Revar nodded mutely.

Danae reached out a hand and stroked the hair from his young cousin's face.

"But I am not sorry," he said gently.

Revar felt his skin come alive under the delicate touch. "But... you asked me to stop."

"Revar," Danae said, "I was thinking of you, not me."

Revar studied the features of the young man kneeling before him. He felt his heart flutter in his chest. Surely he couldn't mean... surely he couldn't feel...

"I... do not understand."

Danae smiled. "You will. Now come, put yourself together, your father wishes to see us."

Revar's face, so full of hope, fell in disappointment. He groaned and dropped his head into his hands once more.

"He will murder me."

"If he is angry," Danae replied, "he will be angry with both of us. Come, Revar," he repeated, pulling gently on his cousin's arm, "he waits."

* * * *

They entered the Council Chamber with as much dignity as they could muster under the circumstances. Only Revar's father, the Prince of Gemen, was present.

He looked up from his documents when they entered, set his work aside, and fixed his gaze upon them as they came to stand before him.

"My lord," Danae began, bowing low, "the fault in this matter is mine-"

"No!" Revar interrupted, stepping forward. "It was my doing-"

"Revar-" Danae cautioned.

"No Danae! I will not allow you to take the blame for this."

Erone's gaze passed from one to the other as they fought with each other over the blame issue, but it was Revar who won out.

"Father," he pressed, "it was my fault and I should take the punishment... whatever that might be," he finished a little less certainly.

Erone rose from his chair and came to stand before the two boys, his arms folded across his chest.

"Am I to understand you thought I would be displeased with this development?"

If Danae was surprised, it did not show on his face, but Revar's mouth dropped open in shock. He and his cousin exchanged a glance.

"I... well... yes," Revar replied.

He felt his entire being relax at the large grin that crossed his father's face.

"But nothing could be further from the truth," the man said. "Revar," he continued, taking his son's face in his hands, "I dared not hope for this for you."

Then he turned to his nephew. "And you, Danae," he said, "may I know if you are prepared to make your promise?"

Revar's eyes widened in wonder. Promise? Great Tsandis! He turned to Danae, his heart thundering as he waited for an answer.

But Danae did not hesitate. "I am," he replied, then turned to study his cousin while a look of pure happy amazement crossed the younger's face.

"From the look of you, Revar," his father chuckled, "I do not need to ask for your reply."

"No, my lord," Danae said, now serious. "Please ask him, for I need to hear the answer."

Revar's head was spinning as he continued to be captured by his cousin's intense silver eyes.

"Revar," his father's voice broke through, "are you ready to make your promise?"

Not trusting his voice, Revar merely nodded, still searching his cousin's face, looking for the sign that this was not real.

But the nod was not enough for Danae. "Say the words," he urged gently. "Say them to me."

Revar felt emotion choke him. "Yes, yes, I am ready," he cried, then fell into his cousin's embrace, laughing and feeling seven-years-old again.

"I will leave you," Erone said. Then he touched his son's cheek to get his attention. "But Revar," he warned, holding up a cautionary finger, "no shadra today."

The two youngsters laughed again as the man exited the room, then became serious when they turned back to one another.

Revar searched his cousin's face as though he still could not accept that any of this was real.

"I do not believe what just happened."

"It is not too late to change your mind, Revar. The law gives us a year."

"I am not going to change my mind! Do you know how often I have thought of this? I never dreamed you felt anything like this for me."

Danae's smile was bittersweet. "I have loved you since the first instant I saw you, Revar," he said softly. "Of course, when we were younger, I did not desire you the way I do now."

Revar felt a familiar tug of desire himself at the admission.

"And... when did that start?" he asked; now thoroughly enjoying the conversation.

Danae hesitated.

"Tell me Danae."

"It was a while ago, when we were bathing with the others. I realized that some of the older boys were flirting with you and it made me furious." He stopped momentarily, considering how to continue. "My own behavior was confusing me. I knew you had come of age, I knew you were probably exploring your shadra. But every time I thought of you being intimate with someone else, I... I do not know why, it just felt wrong to me."

Revar shook his head. "I had no idea."

"I fought hard to hide it," his cousin admitted. "I was quite shaken by it. Suddenly, the little cousin that I used to tease and put to bed was beginning to haunt my dreams."

"And... what did I do in your dreams?" Revar urged quietly, while the atmosphere in the room grew heavy with sexual promise.

"I would rather not say," Danae replied.

Revar bent toward him, his lips brushing his cousin's. "Would you rather show me?"

Danae leaned into him, catching his mouth in a passionate kiss. They clung to

each other, searching for the truth of their feelings and finding it in this most elemental of joinings. Their bodies, their mouths, simply could not lie. When the feeling became too intense, it was Danae who cut off the embrace. "If we do not stop this now...", he breathed, "no shadra, remember?" Revar's gaze was heavy with sensuality. "You could give me yours, Danae." Danae felt himself yearning to do just that, but he pushed the urge aside. "I will, my prince," he promised. "But you must wait for it."

* * * *

Jala released the bird into the air and watched it wing its way into the leafy cover of the forest of Daleer. The Shadrani would have the message by nightfall. He stood at the casement and breathed in a deep sigh. The regent, Velos, with the help of that scoundrel, Sebbac, had for years, managed to poison enough of the population against Calli so that a popular uprising to restore her hadn't been possible.

But all that was beginning to change. After so long, there had finally been some progress toward his goal.

The reasons weren't hard to figure out.

Velos was a self-indulgent little despot who had raided the royal coffers and alienated and impoverished many of the middle to lower class inhabitants of Soris.

Where you may not reach people with reason, Jala scoffed, you could always reach them through their coffers!

Now the average man was beginning to remember how prosperous and promising things had been under Calli's careful rule. The average husband was also becoming tired of hearing his wife complain, since Velos had re-instituted the wearing of the hated paitya, a veil that covered females in public from head to foot. As queen, Calli had abolished the law. She and every other Sorisi female despised the paitya and everything it stood for.

Jala smiled as he thought about the smatterings of unrest that he had sensed in the city. He wanted Calli and her son to know that the tide was turning.

And with the help of some of the better placed citizens, he was going to continue to stir the pot.

Chapter Twelve

Sarah Devlin was beyond worry, she was practically hysterical. Dallas had been gone for some time and she had no idea where he may have headed. Pressing her fingers against her temples, she squeezed her eyes shut as she remembered the look on his face when she had struck him. A desperate sob escaped her. She hadn't meant to hit him. More than anything, she hadn't meant the hurtful words she'd thrown at him.

Dear god, what had she done?

Her nerves were so frayed that when the phone rang, it caused her to shriek and jump with anxiety. She was almost afraid to answer it. It was no surprise to her that her hand was shaking when she picked up the receiver.

"Sarah, it's me," the voice on the other end said.

She sat down hard, melting in a puddle of relief. "I'm so glad you called."

"Listen to me. I don't want to alarm you, but I think you should pack up and leave there-as quickly as possible."

Sarah felt a familiar blanket of dread settle on her heart. "What is it? What's happened?"

"I think he's found out about Dallas."

She dropped her face into her hand. "Oh, my god."

"Don't panic, Sarah. Just get some things together and get down here. This is the safest place for you right now."

"I don't know if I can..."

The man gave her the impetus she needed.

"You have to do this," he said. "Think of your son."

Her voice sounded stronger when she replied. "Yes," she said, nodding. "Yes, I'll come. We'll come."

* * * *

Dallas had been walking for hours. He wasn't sure how much time had passed, he had just kept moving forward, fighting the feelings that were threatening to choke him. His mother had never struck him before.

He could still feel the hot sting of her hand on his face and he fought the tears that threatened at the memory. His initial anger had dissipated some time ago but he was still left with the hurt that her words had caused, a hurt that was far worse than the pain of the blow.

He knew what she thought of his father.

Finally coming to a stop, Dallas lifted his head and got his bearings. He was about an hour's walk from home and it was almost dark. He stood for a moment, thinking about his future with his mother.

The fight had been terrible, but at least he had reached her on some level. Maybe he had even created a crack in her defensive wall. If he pushed it now, he was sure he could get some long-coveted information from her. Then they could begin a new life with no more secrets. They could start fresh.

And he had to have that. He could no longer live under the restraints his mother placed on him. Surely, she would understand that now. Somehow, he had to make her understand.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and turned for home.

* * * *

As he finally rounded the corner on his block, the first thing he saw was the blue and red flashing lights of police vehicles. The boy stopped in his tracks, registering that the activity was centered on his building. As the realization dawned, so did a growing, numbing dread. His mind already denying the sense of inevitability that stabbed at his heart, he bolted forward at a dead run.

Dashing past the gathering crowd, he managed to slip by the police, but they chased him up the stairs, shouting out for him to stop.

"I live here," he called over his shoulder.

No, no, his mind kept begging as he raced up the stairs two at a time, "don't let it be her, please god, don't let anything happen to her!"

He reached the top of the stairs and his blood froze when he saw the police milling around the open door of his apartment. With a cry of fear, he surged forward, but only made it as far as the door before a pair of strong arms pulled him up short.

"Hold on there," the man said.

Dallas struggled. "Let me go! I live here!"

The man looked at him. "Are you Dallas?"

"Yes! Let me in!"

But instead, the man hauled him back away from the apartment. "You don't want to go in there, son," he said gently.

"My mother!"

"You can't help your mother now--"

He never finished his thought. The boy jerked violently and slipped out of his hold. Before the man could stop him, Dallas ran headlong into the apartment. What he discovered there made him pull up short, the breath exhaling from his lungs with the force of a body blow.

Hans DeWit was sitting on the floor with his back against the living room wall. Dallas knew it was Hans because he was wearing the same clothes he'd had on that afternoon. But the handsome face was barely recognizable. The left side was all but gone, grey matter, bone and blood splashed across the wall behind him. Dallas felt his head go light.

Then he saw the figure that lay a few feet away. It hardly looked like a human

being, let alone his mother. His mind reeled, struggling with the images, trying to understand. Then he took in the gore that was splattered everywhere. So much blood... the walls were dripping with it.

Suddenly, he felt his bile rise. Running to the bathroom, he knelt over the toilet and vomited violently. He continued to retch, tears flowing freely down his face, until he thought he would pass out from it. Then he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder as a cold cloth was handed to him.

"Here, take this," said the man from the hall. "And let's get you out of here."

His mind still numb with shock and denial, Dallas struggled to his feet and let the man lead him out into the hall and back to the stairs where he sat down.

"I'm Detective Hines," the man said. Then he sat down as well, and waited for Dallas to pull himself together.

The boy struggled a while longer, then wiped his face and looked up finally.

"What," he whispered painfully, "... what happened to her?"

"Was hoping maybe you could tell me something about that. But it's plain to see this was a surprise to you." The detective waited a few moments, then continued. "As best we can tell, your neighbor-" he thumbed through his notes "-Hans DeWit, came into your apartment, killed your mother, and then inflicted a single gunshot to his own head."

Dallas' ears refused to accept what they were hearing. "He killed her?" he whispered, staring off into middle space. "I can't believe he killed her." The detective's eyes narrowed. "You know any reason why he would do that? Motive would be a big help right now."

Dallas continued to stare ahead vacantly, his mind still reeling at the enormity of what he was hearing.

The man kept probing. "I'm guessing it was something like a love affair gone bad. Maybe your mother called it quits and this Hans fellow didn't like that." Dallas looked blankly up at the man.

"What?"

"I'm asking if your mother and your neighbor had something-"

Dallas was shaking his head, his eyes again welling with tears. "No," he murmured, "it wasn't like that."

"You want to tell me how it was then, son?" the detective asked gently.

There was no answer.

"Why did he do it?"

Dallas squeezed his eyes closed. "I... he..."

"He what?"

"He w-wanted..."

"What did he want?"

Dallas' reply was unintelligible.

Detective Hines leaned in. "I'm sorry, son, I missed that. He wanted what?"

"He wanted... me."

Hines sat back as realization crossed his face. "Oh," he said.

And to his credit, he said nothing more.

* * * *

The man sat in the dark car outside the apartment building and watched the commotion going on around him. Silently, he cursed his luck. There was no opportunity for him now that the police had arrived.

He had missed his chance at the boy.

For now.

Hans had been too solicitous on the phone. It had been obvious that he had developed feelings for the young man. That had been his downfall.

The man put the vehicle into gear.

That was one mistake he would never have made.

* * * *

Detective Hines eventually finished questioning Dallas. He snapped his notebook closed and ran a hand over his face.

"You have any relatives you could stay with?"

Dallas didn't. "Yes," he said.

"I'll arrange a ride for you."

The boy hesitated, his brain now working overtime. "Can I get some things?"

The man studied him. "You sure you want to go back in there?"

"I'm okay now," Dallas lied.

"Sure then."

The boy stood, surprised at how steady he was on his feet. How could life be so unchanged? Somehow, he thought, the world shouldn't work the same way as before, even the force of gravity should have altered with the death of his mother.

Woodenly, he moved forward into the apartment.

Most of the police had gone by now, and the bodies had been removed. There was only chalk and tape and the still nauseating smell of death in the air. He turned his face to avoid the sight and headed for his bedroom.

As he threw some things into his backpack, Dallas made some decisions. He was on his own now, but he wasn't about to tell Detective Hines that and wind up in the social system. Besides, he had realized something while the detective had been questioning him.

With cruel repetition, Dallas' brain had replayed the image of Hans as he'd seen him, propped against the wall. His mind had been trying to register what had been wrong with the horrific scene in his living room. Because of the shock and grief, it had been like reaching through a dense fog, searching for an ephemeral thing that constantly slipped out of reach just as he was about to grasp it. But he finally got it.

The bullet had entered Hans' head on the right hand side, tearing a path of destruction on its way through.

Hans was left-handed.

It was then that Dallas finally understood Hans had been trying to warn him about something. Looking back on it now, he knew that the odd behavior earlier that afternoon had been some kind of protective ploy. With a jolting shock, Dallas realized that Hans hadn't killed himself and probably hadn't killed his mother either. The man had been truly afraid of something, or someone.

That someone had done this.

And Dallas wasn't going to allow that someone to get away with it.

What he was going to do was find some answers.

When he was finished packing, he slipped quietly into his mother's room.

Her purse was sitting benignly on the dresser where she always kept it. That stopped him short, another thing that was just too normal in these circumstances. Seeing it there and being in her room was suddenly too much for him. All the pain and horror came rushing back. He felt as if his legs could no longer hold him and he sat down heavily on the bed, fighting the tears that continued to threaten just below the surface.

But he knew he had no time for tears now. He had to get away. It took a huge effort, but he forced the emotions away and stuffed the purse into his backpack. Then he silently slid the window open and stepped out onto the fire escape.

A few minutes later he had disappeared into the night.

* * * *

The bus moved steadily down the highway as Dallas gazed out the window. Taking his mother's purse had given him two precious aids in his new course in life. First, he had her bankcard and access to the money she had managed to save there. It wasn't much, but it was going to be enough to get him where he was headed.

Second, and more important to him, he had her address book, and the phone

number that he'd hoped to find there. The name scribbled beside it was simply 'Mack'. It was the number of the man she had been talking to on the phone that day, the only long distance number in her book. Dallas had looked up the area code and found out it belonged to San Francisco. The bus had just crossed the state line into California. He was going to get some answers from this "Mack".

Chapter Thirteen

It was tournament day.

The young students had finally completed the years of grueling training that produced a Shadrani warrior. It was the day that every Shadrani warrior lived for during those long, trying years, the final contest where each member of the class competed with the others to determine who was, simply, the best. Revavar was resolved to be number one. He stood in his room in the early morning, dressed and armed, preparing for the games to begin. He had grown several inches in the last year and was now one of the tallest in his class. No longer was he haunted by inadequacies and fear. Instead, he felt an energizing mix of pride and excitement as he pictured the day ahead. Danae, having graduated years before, would be joining his family today to watch the festivities from the stands. Erone, also, would be watching, and Revavar felt a small thrill go through him as he thought of how much it would please the man to see his son win the day.

He knew he was good enough to do it. With few exceptions, he was the best at everything. Those few other recruits that had momentarily beaten him, he had bested on another day.

Mentally and physically prepared, he left the royal dwelling and walked calmly toward the large arena where the games were to take place. As he arrived, he saw that almost all the other recruits were already there, jesting and taunting with each other, anxious to show off all they had learned. He searched for the familiar blond head that was equal in height to his own. "Have you seen Lira?" he asked a friend nearby.

He was answered by a shake of the head. "Maybe she has decided not to test herself against us."

Revavar did not answer, but the side of his mouth kicked up in a wry grin. Only I, he thought, have any idea what today means to her. She would not miss this day if she were on her deathbed.

Then, as if in answer to his thoughts, Lira came around the corner and strode into the gathering. She was dressed in full warrior attire, as were all the others. The leather breeches that hugged her hips rippled subtly as she moved with strength of purpose that was difficult to miss. Revavar noticed the smile on the cocky young recruit he had been addressing slip a little at the sight of her.

Lira had no real idea what kind of fear she struck in the hearts of some of the less talented recruits. No matter how hard they trained or how many times they told themselves they could best her, they simply could not. There was a fierce determination and mental toughness about her that eventually won out over most of her opponents.

She arrived today, as the rest of the class had, ready for the challenge. More than ready.

Lira had been waiting for this day for a very long time. This was going to be the culmination of all her hard work and dedication. Today, she would be the best. Today, she would win the respect of every Shadrani present.

She turned and looked up into the waiting crowd, waving when she saw Erone and Calli. They had been so good to her, encouraging her when things were difficult, supporting her when it seemed no one else did.

And there was Danae, sitting, as always, on the right side of his mother. At the moment, he was leaned across her, sharing some story with Cera. The other woman threw her head back and laughed at the tale, while Raesa gave him a less-than-serious scolding glance.

Danae, Lira thought, always joking around. As she watched, he turned his head, caught her eye and waved at her. She smiled and returned the gesture. She did not doubt his affection for her, but knew he would be cheering his promised today. She turned to look for Revar and found him approaching her.

"Good luck, Lira," he said, touching her on the shoulder.

"And the same to you, my friend."

Both of them knew, as they looked into the other's eyes, that they would be the final two in the final contest. Each of them believed they would win.

* * * *

Erone stood and announced the commencement. The recruits paired off in the assigned order and began the contest.

The first competition was wrestling. In order to keep the games fair, relative size was taken into consideration. Lira found she was facing a male of roughly the same weight and build as her. But she knew he did not have her cunning.

And in Shadrani wrestling, wits usually won out over brawn.

She dispatched him in no time at all, completely baffling him with a feint to her left while she actually drove right and directly into his midsection, knocking the wind out of him and sending him to the ground. The applause was generous and she stretched out a hand to help her red-faced opponent to his feet. He took it graciously.

"You are a demon, Lira," he said, rubbing his injured stomach.

"Sorry about that," she said, smiling as she moved to the sidelines.

As soon as her round was finished, she sought out Revar and found him off to her right, clutched in a desperate battle with his opponent. She had been a little fortunate, she realized, with her first round. Revar's opponent was known to be a much greater threat in this activity than hers had been.

But as she watched, Revar's quick mind and determination began to turn the tide in his favor. Before long, it was obvious that he would win and shortly after that fact became known, he did toss his opponent to the earth.

One by one, the battles were won, and the winners went on to contest each other while the losers were assigned to the second rank where they competed against other losers.

After the wrestling, there were only group challenges, where the contestants were ranked in each of the sports and then the top two were chosen from there. Only the last event would be a duel between the remaining leaders, a test of sword skills between the two ultimate winners.

The next contest was the spear toss. It was not so much distance that counted here, but accuracy. The long spikes were tossed at targets placed along the field. There were four throws given, with each recruit taking their best two scores. When all was over, Revar was first and Lira second.

Then came the long bow. Lira knew she would have no difficulty winning. She had always been best in her class at the long bow. And win she did, but Revar came in a very close second. Then came the crossbow. Again, she expected to win, but Revar surprised her and shot better than he ever had, edging her into second place.

It was now becoming obvious that Lira and Revar would be the final contestants, a fact that surprised no one there. But there was still the foot race. The course was six miles long and covered a grueling terrain. Four miles into it, Revar and Lira were out front and running against each other. Revar's mind kept telling him to slow down, not to expend all his energy too soon. He knew they still had two miles to go and he was feeling the effects of oxygen starvation in his burning lungs. Lira too, looked as though she was suffering. Her face was set in a stern grimace as she drew in wracking breaths of air and continued racing like the hounds of hell were on her heels.

* * * *

Back in the stands, word was filtering in from the officials set at points

along the course. Revar and Lira were in the lead and pulling away.
"I knew it!" Danae said. "He is going to win."
Erone looked over at his exuberant nephew. "Do not be too certain."
Danae turned a look on the older man. "You think he will lose the final duel to Lira?"
"She has beaten him before."
Danae smiled and shook his head. "Not today, Erone."
Calli looked up at her prince. "Surely you do not wish him to lose."
"I wish him to win the day, my love."
She gave him a curious glance, and turned her attention back to the latest report coming in about the race.

* * * *

There was a mile left and they were far enough ahead of the pack that it had become a race between the two of them. Revar was in terrible pain and could hear Lira's ragged breathing as well.
Why does she not let up a bit, he thought, the others are so far behind. Then he realized, the others were, but he was not. He slowed up just a fraction, thinking she would as well. But she surprised him. No sooner had he backed off then she actually pushed harder, pulling away from him.
Revar cursed under his breath and renewed his efforts, but it was too late, Lira crossed the finish line a foot ahead of him. They both fell to the earth, panting for air, their lungs fit to bursting with the effort they had expended. Finally, Lira rose and turned to offer her hand. Revar grinned up at her and took her offer, gaining his feet in one graceful motion. The crowd cheered wildly, loving every moment.
They were given plenty of time to rest before their final match. All the other recruits had to finish their contests first. While they were waiting, Revar and Lira sat in the stands with Danae and watched the others compete.
"There is Rathos," Revar said, "looks as if he is ready to throw his sword at Bonn!"
Lira laughed. "He would have better luck using it as a pummel!"
"Perhaps you should have coached him, Lira," Danae threw in.
Calli looked over and smiled at the three companions. Watching Danae now, she could hardly believe this great Shadrani warrior was once the little boy she had rescued from her own castle. She remembered the feel of him in her arms as she swam under the city walls in a desperate attempt to get him away from her father's vengeance.
He had been so small and so frightened then.
A loud cheer broke her thoughts and brought her mind snapping back to the present. The other contests were over. It was time for the grand finale.
Erone walked with Revar and Lira to the center of the arena. In a clear, strong voice, he introduced them to the deafening cheers of the crowd, then turned and wished them each, in their turn, good luck.
The Prince of Gemen had never felt as proud as he did at that moment. His two children-for he did view Lira as a daughter-were the finest of a very fine class of warriors.
No sooner had he returned to his seat than a hush fell over the crowd. Revar and Lira saluted each other with their weapons, and the match began.
For the first part of the duel, all was quiet except for the steady clash and clang of the heavy broadswords as they met, rang sharply, and retreated from each other. Sparks flew in the afternoon air as steel fell upon steel.
The crowd was breathless with the anxiety that saturated the arena. It happened sometimes that contestants were badly injured or even killed during tournament day. But that was the farthest thing from the minds of the two in the arena center at the moment. The resolve that swirled around them was palpable, like an aura bestowed by some long-forgotten war goddess. Every Shadrani in the stands could feel it, and they shuddered with pride at the feeling. This was what Shadrani ferocity was all about.

Lira knew she could never overcome Revar's superior strength. Her only chance against him was to outfox him. And she would. Nothing was going to take this victory away from her.

Revar was enjoying the fight. He attacked, parried, and dropped back in defense, keeping his wits about him, knowing that Lira would try to out-maneuver him. He grinned at her, but she did not smile back. Her face was set with grim resolve.

Then, she chanced a risky move. Lunging at Revar, she intended to strike the flat of her blade at his sword arm, inflicting enough stings to force him to drop his weapon. The crowd gasped as they saw the bold play. But Revar saw it too, and moved quickly to avoid the blow. The move was well timed, but Lira, desperate to gain her advantage, swiveled again instantly and sought to strike another blow from the opposite side.

Revar swerved and parried and Lira was caught on the tip of his sword. His heart constricted when he felt her flesh tear at his hands. The crowd rose to its feet with a collective gasp.

Lira sidestepped away, blood now trickling from her side.

She stood drawing in her breath against the pain.

There was no motion from the crowd, only a hushed silence that hung heavily on the mid-day breeze.

Then... slowly... Lira raised her sword again, inviting Revar back to the challenge. The crowd hesitated, as did Revar, then the cheering began and grew until it shook the earth even to the spot where the two were standing.

"You are hurt, Lira," Revar said over the roar.

"I am not finished," she replied. "Come Revar, you will not win this contest so easily."

He stood a moment more, undecided, until she lunged at him, and he repelled her advance instinctively. The duel was back on and the two fought now in earnest. Lira showed no effects from her wound although Revar knew it must be paining her terribly.

They came together, their swords ringing, their bodies pushing against each other. Revar strained against her, looked into her eyes... and knew. He knew, finally, that this was a battle Lira could not lose. That the spirited girl he had known all his life would die at his hand today before she would allow him to beat her.

The realization shook him and Lira gained the advantage momentarily. Her movements were so quick and so calculated that she almost succeeded in freeing his sword from his grasp. But Revar recovered just in time to hold onto his weapon and move out of her deadly reach.

* * * *

In the stands, Erone watched the display silently. Whatever emotions swam within him did not register on his face. He knew his son. Only his eyes narrowed as he waited for the outcome of this telling match.

Calli's face was pale at the bloodletting. She knew that the young recruits were sometimes injured in the games, and had been prepared for some unpleasantness. But to see Lira bleeding at the hands of her son was something for which she had not been prepared.

Danae was torn between the two. Now that Lira was injured, he wished she would call an end, as was her right. But in his heart he knew that she would not.

* * * *

Revar's mind was also tumbling with emotions. The blue eyes of his opponent continued to challenge him, even with the blood seeping from her wound. She was becoming tired, had to be, although she showed none of it.

He knew all he had to do was continue to rebuff her advances and time would take care of the rest. He knew that even a concerted, sustained effort from him now would probably wear her down enough for him to be victorious, but as

he continued to search her face, he wondered at what cost. Seeing Lira's increasing desperation, his mind was made up. She continued to come at him like a thing possessed. The crowd, down to even the most Sorisi-hating among them, absolutely adored her at this moment. They were still on their feet, cheering blindly as she continued to press her attack. Lira knew she was running out of time, but she was buoyed by the support and affection coming from the stands around her. Her heart swelled with emotion: pride, and the unbridled joy of final acceptance. Tears stung at her eyes but she fought to keep them from forming, they would only hinder her attack. Then suddenly, she knew what she was going to do. Committing herself to her plan, she moved in and set it in motion. However, Revlar was ready for her and for a moment she thought it wasn't going to work. But then, just at the last possible second, he guessed wrong. She fainted left and came up under his guard, her sword at his throat. Then all she could hear was the deafening roar from the crowd, all she could see was Revlar's blue eyes, inches from her own. Finally, she heard what he was saying.

"You got me with that one, Lira."

Understanding hit and she dropped her sword, turning in time to see Erone approaching. Revlar stood silently and watched as his father took Lira's hand and raised her arm in victory while the crowd continued to go wild with appreciation. Watching them walk away, Revlar bent to pick up Lira's sword, then followed behind, as the loser was meant to do.

When they reached the podium, Revlar stepped up and handed Lira back her sword to the continuous roar of the crowd. Erone elevated Lira's hand in victory once more, then took his son's and raised it as well. They stood there, the three of them, while the cheering continued. It wasn't until Erone released her arm that Lira fell in a heap at his feet.

* * * *

"She is fine," Calli assured them all as she came out of the sick room.

"Understandably exhausted from the blood loss. A good night's sleep is what she needs."

"It is too bad she will miss the celebration," Danae said.

"She will not miss the effects of the brandywine tomorrow morning," Erone noted, smiling at him. Then his smile faded as he turned to his son.

"Revlar," he said, catching the young man as he was about to leave with Danae, "I would like a private word with you."

Revlar felt dread form in his chest. He exchanged a glance with Danae before following his father into the Council Chamber.

Erone closed the door and moved behind the table where he conducted most of his official duties.

Wanting this to be over with, Revlar took a deep breath and spoke up.

"I am sorry, Father."

Erone's steely eyes glanced up to pierce his son with their directness.

"Sorry? For what?"

Revlar hesitated. "I did not win the day."

Erone's mouth kicked up in a wry smile. "There are many ways to win the day, my son."

Bewildered by the statement, Revlar looked at the floor.

"I am not displeased with you, Revlar," Erone added. But his son continued to study the floor. "Are you disappointed with yourself?"

Revlar looked up sharply. "No."

Erone searched his son's eyes. "No," he said, "I suppose not."

Revlar frowned, confused as he often was, by this enigmatic man.

Erone picked up some parchment on his desk and seemed to be looking it over. His son took this as a sign to leave. He turned to go and then stopped in his tracks when his father addressed him softly.

"One more thing?"

Revar turned and waited silently.
"The last move Lira made to defeat you?"
The young warrior nodded.
Erone's eyes narrowed. "I taught you that when you were fifteen."
Revar studied his father's face. Then his mouth turned up in a self-deprecating grin.
"It... must have slipped my mind."
Slowly, Erone nodded in agreement.
"It must have," he said.

* * * *

Lira sat and considered her options. For the moment, she seemed to be safe in her deception. Her sexuality had not yet been called into question. She had not yet become an object of doubt.
Not yet.
She knew that was because it was not entirely unheard of for Shadrani females to go through life without taking a partner. Queen Mathena herself was such a woman. She had eschewed the joining cloth to devote herself to her children and her rule, in that order. Besides, everyone knew that female Shadrani were far less sexual in every way than their male counterparts.
Lira ground her teeth.
Less sexual, my ass!
If she had to be this damnably basrati, why couldn't she at least have a small sex drive! Was that too much to ask?
She guessed it had to be, for she found herself constantly driven to her self-destructive behavior in spite of all her efforts to curtail it.
Her lover was besotted with her, she knew. It caused her no end of guilt to know that each time they met, he was putting his life on the line. He was an adult and capable of making his own decisions, but Lira still fretted over it. Her guilt and worry were only worsened by the knowledge that she could never love him in the way he wanted.
Several times, she had tried to end it, telling him she could no longer risk the chance of discovery. Then her needs would begin to stir and she would find herself taking back her resolutions, hating herself for her weakness. But eventually she would relent and it would begin again.
He had even spoken of them leaving, finding a place away from both Shadrani and Sorisi, where they could be free to be together.
Lira simply listened to these musings indulgently. She knew there was no such place and, even if there were, it would never work, for they would both miss their home and loved ones too much—at least she would.
Especially him.
She dropped her head into her hand and fought off the despair that threatened at the very thought of him. Why could she not rid herself of these feelings? How could life be so cruel that she was destined to continue to long for the one thing she could never have?
But it was.
And she did.
He would never know. She had promised herself that, no matter how she longed to tell him. It would only complicate his life, not to mention the fact that it could ostensibly end hers.

* * * *

Revar looked into the blue eyes he had come to adore and pulled Danae closer to him. Stroking him in just the way he knew drove him to distraction; he nibbled at his mouth, and then moved lower and licked seductively at his hardened flesh.
Danae closed his eyes as a hoarse moan escaped the back of his throat.
"Revar," he whispered, "what that does to me."

"I can see what it does to you."

Danae reached over to draw a hand down his lover's chest and was rewarded by the frisson of pleasure that ran underneath it.

His cousin was always ready for his touch, indeed, would drop anything at any time to turn his mind toward sex. He was what the Shadrani called ajdin. It meant that his shadra was unusually strong and pulsed very close to the surface.

Ajdin was something that a Shadrani could sense, even smell, in another male, and in sufficient quantity could drive even the most placid individual into fits of lust. It had been this, Danae knew, that had made him so jealous of Revlar. The other boys had also sensed it, although his cousin himself had not seemed aware of it at the time.

But Revlar had turned out to be a turbo of sexual energy, even for a Shadrani. Danae truly loved his cousin and would have taken him anyway. But the ajdin-well, that was just icing.

He guessed the other boy got it directly from his father. The Prince of Gemen fairly vibrated with it, and certainly his father, Jareela, had been legendary for it.

No matter where he got it, Danae grinned his pleasure as Revlar unleashed all that sexual force upon him.

His breath became ragged and short when he again felt the heat of the mouth on him. Even Menare, the pleasure giver, had nothing on Revlar. The boy's imagination and natural sexuality made him far and away the best sexual partner that Danae had ever experienced. He was beginning to lose control and knew his shadra would unleash itself before long.

It was what his promised wanted, had wanted since they had pledged themselves. The more Danae had tried to repress it, the more Revlar had pushed, until finally one day Danae had exploded with it. The experience had been shattering for both of them. And his cousin would no longer be denied it.

Revlar leaned back and gave Danae a look of molten lust.

"Danae," he breathed, "share with me."

The simple request was uttered with such a sexually loaded rasp, that Danae felt his sex harden even more.

"Revlar," he purred, "come and take it from me."

Chapter Fourteen

Dallas closed the door of the phone booth behind him. Dropping his money into the machine, he punched in the number, his heart hammering in his chest. He had rehearsed what he was going to say to the man named Mack, but realized his brain had ceased functioning now that he was so close to getting some answers. He felt his hopes plummet when a recorded message came on, telling him the number was no longer in service. With a violent curse, he slammed the receiver down and leaned back against the glass.

Now what?

His money was quickly running out and he knew he couldn't afford to stay in the rundown motel he had found for much longer. He hadn't eaten since noon the day before, but didn't want to waste money on food when he was going to need it for the room.

He walked down the street, his mind on anything but his hunger-until he passed a coffee shop. His stomach rumbled at the delicious aromas that wafted out the door as it opened. Dallas stopped, thought about the change in his pocket, then reluctantly walked in and found an empty table. He picked up a newspaper that some former customer had left behind and began to scan the want ads. But it was only a few moments later that he threw the paper down in disgust.

There was no way he was going to get a job. He wasn't qualified to do anything. Who was going to hire a fifteen-year-old with no job experience? He fought the despair that threatened him, and then looked up in surprise when a complete stranger sat down across from him.

"Hello," the man said, his eyes darting around the place.

Dallas frowned at him. "Hello," he replied hesitantly.

"Saw you come in," the stranger continued, his voice a quiet hush, "and I was wondering if you were working."

Dallas tilted his head a little and studied the man. "Working?"

The man's smile was nervous as he again glanced around the small shop. "Don't jerk me around," he whispered. "Are you interested or not?"

Suddenly Dallas understood.

"You think I'm a prostitute."

The man paled. "Aren't you?"

Dallas hesitated, searched the man's face and then his own heart.

"Not yet," he said quietly.

The man looked painfully uncomfortable as he stood quickly and left without another word.

"Ya want somethin' to eat?"

Dallas glanced up into the kindly face of a round, middle-aged black woman.

"Umm-just a coke, please."

She nodded and then moved off. A few moments later she returned with a large glass of soda and set it in front of him.

"We get the odd street boy in here," she said, "and sometimes it brings those types 'round."

Dallas looked up, a question in his eyes. Then he understood that she had witnessed the exchange. "Yeah, I guess that can happen." When she moved off again without further comment, he drank some of his soda and went back to wondering what his next move was going to be.

He was just thinking that maybe it wouldn't have been such a bad idea to have taken the man up on his offer, when a plate loaded down with a hamburger and fries materialized in front of him.

He sat back against the booth and looked up at the woman.

"I-I didn't order this."

She nodded. "I know you didn't. But you look hungry."

Then she toddled off.

Dallas stared after her, then stood and followed. When he reached the counter, he leaned in and spoke softly. "I can't afford to pay for that."

She nodded again. "I know you can't. But, like I said, you look hungry."

Then she was gone again to take care of the next table that came in.

A sound of disbelief escaped his lips as Dallas watched her go. Shaking his head, he went back to his table and devoured the food waiting there. When he was finished, she again materialized.

"Guess I was right."

Dallas was smiling now as he watched her retreat. For a few moments, he watched her while she moved around the small restaurant and took care of the ever-increasing lunch trade. Then he stood and headed for a table that had just been abandoned. He scooped up some of the dirty dishes and carried them to the back, totaling astonishing the older black man cooking in the kitchen.

Then he came back out to finish the job.

The woman caught sight of what he was doing. Turning, she watched him for a moment, hands on hips. Then she approached.

"Whatcha doin' there?"

He smiled at her. "Trying to pay for my lunch."

They stood a moment, looking at each other, then she handed him a dishcloth and went back to work.

For the next two hours Dallas helped, clearing and cleaning tables while the woman concentrated on taking orders and getting the food out.

Finally, the rush was over. The last table was cleaned and they were the only ones left in the cafe for the moment. She turned to Dallas and, for the first time, smiled at him.

"Well, I guess you turned out to be a real help, didn't you?"

He shrugged.

"You done this before?"

"Not really. I used to help my mom-" The memory caught him off guard and he

wasn't prepared for the pain that chased, hard, on its heels. He drew in a sharp breath and swallowed.

The woman frowned. "You all right?"

Not trusting his voice, Dallas merely nodded.

"You know," the woman said, "in a coupla hours, this place's gonna get real busy again."

Another nod.

"You want to come back, give me a hand? I can't pay much but..."

Dallas felt his pain ease as hope lit his heart. "I-that would be great."

"Name's Rosie Johnson," the woman said, sticking out a hand.

"Dallas Devlin," he replied, shaking her hand.

Chapter Fifteen

Erone sat, troubled, on the throne of Gemen, his mother having retired and leaving him to rule. He and the rest of the family were awaiting the arrival of Vajra, the shean who had requested-no demanded was more like it-an audience with him.

Vajra was just coming on thirteen and she was well known for her strange outbursts and odd behavior. But, she was the only shean to be born of the Shadrani over the last twenty years or so and she was valued highly.

Most highly prized was her gift.

Apart from claiming to be able to see and communicate with the dead, sheans sensed things that others could not, knew things that they had no business knowing, and, foremost of all, sometimes gained a glimpse into the future. Sheans were always female, and had always been of immeasurable use to the House of Gemen.

Erone straightened as the door opened and the pale wisp of a girl walked in. Bowing before him as custom demanded, she then settled herself onto the floor before the group. Erone exchanged a look with his sister, Raesa. Then they simply waited for the girl to speak.

It took some time and soon became obvious that the shean was under a great deal of stress. Erone was tempted to ask if she needed aid of some sort, but quickly stifled the impulse, knowing that to speak now would shake the girl's composure even more.

Finally, she opened her mouth and began.

"I have had a vision, my lord," she said. Then stopped.

"Please, Vajra," Erone said quietly, "share it with us."

The girl shuddered visibly. "It is most terrible."

Erone's jaw muscle worked as he heard this. He had sensed that it would be something bad. Suddenly, he didn't want to know. Suddenly, he wished nothing more than to take his beloved Calli and disappear, just leave the Shadrani and all the incumbent responsibilities of being king behind. He drew in a deep breath.

"Take your time, Vajra," he said, "but please tell us what you saw."

"It is difficult to explain," the girl began. "I think it cannot be true and therefore have almost convinced myself that it is just a bad dream and not a vision at all..."

The group before her remained silent after her short explanation. It was clear she didn't want to continue, that she wanted to convince herself it was just a bad dream. But she also knew her duty, and knew she could not shy away from it.

"In my vision," she said, "we are being attacked by strange creatures."

"What kind of creatures?" Revar asked, too anxious to keep quiet any longer.

Vajra's eyes closed. "Terrible creatures," she whispered, "monsters."

The family exchanged glances.

"Are you certain that these creatures are not just city-dwellers?" Raesa queried.

The girl shook her head vehemently as tears filled her eyes. "No, they are most certainly not Sorisi. Although they walk like men, they have scales on

their flesh and eyes like a serpent. They have great mouths with sharp teeth and they are... they are pitiless."

She stopped then and looked at the floor.

Erone sat back in his chair while exclamations of astonishment and doubt came from those around him. This was outrageous! And yet, no ruler of Gemen had ever gone wrong taking the visions of a shaen seriously. He felt his pulse skipping erratically as he steeled himself for the next question.

"Where do these creatures come from, Vajra?"

She looked up, terror in her eyes.

"From the sky, my lord."

* * * *

"But you cannot believe such a tale!" Calli said.

"She is a shean, Calli," Erone replied. "I know you do not have them in the city and so it is difficult for you to believe or even understand."

"Monsters from the sky?"

He took her face in his hands. "I have trouble with it, too. But I must put some credence in it."

"What are you going to do?"

"I spoke with her further on the subject and she seems to believe that the only way to escape the creatures is to head out of the forest and beyond the waters."

Calli's eyes widened in fear. "Beyond the waters," she repeated. "But we do not know what lies beyond the waters. The tales I have heard frighten me more than the creatures from the sky!"

Erone, fully versed in the wild tales and frightening stories that had been relayed by those few lucky survivors who had returned from beyond the waters, struggled with his own doubts as he tried to reassure her.

"Bedtime stories made to frighten children."

"Oh Erone," Calli whispered. "This cannot be true. What of Soris? Did she see them attacking Soris as well? Perhaps we can all find shelter there."

Erone took her hands in his own. "The walls of Soris will not keep out these invaders, my lady. Think on it. If they come from the sky, what good are walls?"

As always, his reassuring touch and direct manner calmed her. She drew in a deep breath. "Then tell me what you need from me, my lord, and I shall do it."

"I will need some people from your city. Those who know how to build boats and sail them."

Her eyes widened at this. She knew how deathly afraid of the water most Shadrani were. They were relatively comfortable with the streams and rivers that flowed through the forest, but the thought of the open sea sent most of them reaching for their cups.

"You are really taking this that seriously?"

He nodded.

"And are you telling me that you actually think you are going to convince these Shadrani of yours to get into these boats?"

His smile was grim. "I think that if Vajra's vision comes true, there will be little choice."

"I will make arrangements," she said.

* * * *

Revar looked up from his work and put a hand to his eyes to look out over the large expanse of water. He felt an involuntary shudder. Surely his father didn't intend them to cross this!

He glanced around the worksite where he and every other able Shadrani had been working around the clock since Vajra had uttered her terrible prophesy.

The Sorisi who had come to show them how to build the boats had been wary at first. But their obvious devotion to his mother, their queen, had eventually

overcome their initial misgivings about the Shadrani. Some were even becoming friendly.

One thing was certain; this boat building was tedious work, even for a conditioned warrior.

"Wouldn't you know the king's son would be taking more time off than the rest of us," Danae teased as he came up behind his promised.

Revar smiled. "Well, I don't see the king's nephew working so hard at the moment."

"Come," Danae said, sitting down and patting the earth beside him. "It is time we both took a rest."

Throwing himself on the ground, Revar hugged his knees and studied his cousin.

"Are you going to be all right in the boats?"

"I am not going in those cursed things," Danae vowed. "I am just humoring your father by building them."

Danae, even more than most Shadrani, had a dread of the water, since he had almost drowned when he was a boy.

Silence fell while each of them harbored their own thoughts. Their joining ceremony was coming up soon, but even the preparations for that had been put on hold while the boats were being constructed.

Revar looked up at the sky. "Do you think it could be true?"

Danae followed his glance. "It sounds too fantastic, but..."

"But Vajra is a shean," Revar finished.

"If it is true, I do not see why we cannot just fight them where they stand, instead of fleeing like a herd of sheep."

"Vajra said they have weapons that are far beyond us, that our swords and arrows will be useless against them."

Danae shook his head. "I do not know what to think about the monsters from the sky," he said. Then, rising to his feet, he stretched out a hand to help Revar up. "But I do know we must finish these damnable boats or your father, the king, will have our heads."

Chapter Sixteen

"Food's up!"

Dallas responded to the call and picked up the plates waiting for him.

Balancing them with newly-found expertise, he reached the table and set them down.

The three men at the booth eyed him as he did.

"If you aren't just the most gorgeous thing," one of them enthused.

The corner of Dallas' mouth kicked up as he straightened. "Anything else right now?"

When the looks he got indicated exactly what else they would like, Dallas shot them a scolding glance.

"Anything from the menu?" he amended.

The men laughed good-naturedly, then craned their necks to watch him leave.

"You know," sighed one, "I like the food here, I truly do, but I'd come in and order just to watch him walk away."

Rosie came up beside him in the kitchen.

"You sure been good for business."

"You don't mind all that gay trade, huh?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "They eat food, honey," she said, "just like anybody else."

He laughed at her and she winked back, moving backward out the swinging door with both arms loaded down.

The underworld of the gay community had taken notice of him, and word had gone out on the grapevine. Business had almost doubled in the short time he had been there. At first they came in only to gawk, but they quickly found out that not only was he gorgeous, but also bright and funny. This caused them to take him to their hearts and they loved to come in and exchange barbs with him.

Dallas had been there for several weeks and he found the job gave his days some structure. It was good for him right now to have someplace to go and to be doing something positive. The money wasn't nearly enough for him to survive on for long, but it was helping. His search for the mystery man in his mother's life was at a standstill. So was the search for her killer.

* * * *

That night as he was leaving the restaurant, he was pulled up short by a couple of unsavory-looking men who stepped into his path. "We'd like to have a chat with you," one of them said. Dallas' survival instincts went on full alert. He shook his head and tried to move around them, but they stepped into his way again. "Now don't be rude, boy," the other advised. "We have a business proposition for you." Dallas looked at them. "What are you talking about?" The first man nodded toward the cafe. "You cause quite a commotion in there, don't you?" Not liking where this was going, the boy merely shrugged. "Can't be making much money though." Dallas' eyes narrowed. "And I suppose I could make a lot of money with you." The men smiled unpleasantly. "Now you're starting to understand," one of them said. They reminded him of rats about to eat. "And," Dallas probed, "what exactly would I be doing to make so much money?" Their smiles turned even uglier. "A smart boy like you should be able to figure that out." Dallas shook his head. "Not interested." Then he stepped around them again. The larger of the men reached for him, but his partner stopped him. "Let him go," he said. Turning to Dallas he said, "You just think about it for a few days. We'll be back." Chapter Seventeen

Jala, Healer to the royal house of Arath, crept along the deserted alleyway until he spotted the dark Inn. His cloak and hood wrapped tightly around him, he opened the door and cautiously walked inside. It was a good choice for a meeting place, full and noisy enough that he and his companion wouldn't be noticed among the other customers. He scanned the room until he found the man he was looking for, then strode over and sat down in the dark corner with him. "I didn't think you were coming," said the Captain of the Guard. "It isn't easy getting away," Jala replied. "Velos barely trusts me as it is." "But he still doesn't suspect...?" Jala waved a hand, dismissing the concern. "No, no, I don't think so. He knows that I served Calli and her father faithfully, but I used that to convince him that I am loyal only to the throne of Arath." "And since he now sits on that throne..." "My loyalty belongs to him," Jala finished. "The man is a maggot!" the captain spat. Jala merely nodded and took a sip of the ale that had been ordered for him. "But thank Tsandis he is a maggot that is not too smart." The captain leaned in closer. "But Sebbac is smart enough for both of them. I still believe it was he who convinced Velos he deserved the throne in the first place." Once more, Jala nodded agreement. "And will continue to push until he wields all the power in Soris." A muffled curse escaped the lips of the captain as he considered the fate of

his city. "I am not overly fond of the Shadrani," he confided, "and I do not understand the queen's fascination with them. But she is still the queen!" Jala clamped his mouth shut. He wondered what this Sorisi would do if he knew he was sharing his innermost feelings with a Shadrani. They clipped their conversation short and leaned back in their chairs when the serving girl came by to ask if they'd like more ale. Jala kept his face hidden behind the hood he was wearing while the captain convinced her that they needed nothing. When she had moved on among the crowd, Jala leaned in again. "Any news of his plans?" The captain took a long draft from his tankard and shook his head. "I am keeping my ears open. But I'll have to be lucky to catch something. Those two don't want anyone to hear too much about their plots and will confide in none but each other. Sebbac, especially, doesn't let anything slip." Jala considered this a moment. "Then I shall have to try to force the issue a bit." The dark eyes of the captain studied this man he knew so little about. Then he nodded. "Be careful about it."

* * * *

Velos folded his arms and considered the man standing across from him. "Tell me Jala," he said, "what was so urgent you couldn't wait to see me?" The tall, lean Shadrani bowed deeply before the pretender to the throne. He knew he would have to tread lightly here. If there was even a hint in his manner that he was digging for information... "I had a thought that I wished to share with my lord." Sebbac's eyes narrowed as he heard this. "Speak, Healer," he demanded, "and be quick about it." Velos shot his councilor a look of mild irritation, but said nothing. Jala answered. "I have done so little in aid of your cause, my lord. But it has occurred to me lately that I might be of great service to you in the future." "How's that?" Velos asked. Jala moved a little closer to the throne, keeping his voice low. "The queen trusts me." Velos frowned. "And...?" It was clear he was too dense to pick up the thread of the conversation. But Sebbac, the human bird of prey, did not miss it. "My lord," Sebbac said, resting a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "I believe the Healer is offering his services to us... as a confidant of the queen. He could go places some of us may not, hear things others may not." His steely glance raked Jala as he stood quietly before them. "However," the councilor continued, now addressing the Healer, "what makes you think we would have need of someone the queen trusts?" Too smart, Jala thought. "I think nothing, Sebbac," he answered amicably. "I am simply informing you that I am in your service, should the need for me arise." His response seemed to please Velos, who grinned unpleasantly, but Sebbac remained cold and aloof. "We thank you for your offer," he said shortly. "You are dismissed."

* * * *

Back in his chambers, Jala swore beneath his breath as he threw himself into his favorite chair. He hadn't ingratiated himself as much as he had hoped. Sebbac. He was going to be tough. The Healer ran a hand over his tired eyes. He had learned a few things today. First, Sebbac's increased caution convinced him that he and Velos were hatching some plot against Calli and her son. And

second, if he wanted to get any information out of the arrogant prince, he would have to maneuver to get him alone, away from the influence and guidance of his councilor.

* * * *

The serving girl burst into the room, her paita almost flying from her head. "Come quickly, Healer," she panted.

Jala looked up from his work. "What is it, child?"

"It is my lord Velos," she gasped, "he is very ill."

Without another word, Jala gathered up his bag and followed the girl to the royal chambers.

Sebbac was standing guard over the bed, his presence, as always, threatening in its intensity. Jala shoved him aside unceremoniously.

"Outside," he demanded.

Before the man could protest, Jala turned on him. "I am here to save his life," he spat, "and I do not need you in the way!"

Sebbac seemed to consider this before he turned and left the chamber, but not happily.

"Go girl, quickly, and bring me hot water," Jala said, knowing there was no real rush. The only thing he needed to cure this "illness" was the herbal antidote to the mild poison he had slipped into Velos' food last night. He took the prince's hand in his and felt his pulse, putting on a serious face.

"Tell me what you are feeling, Velos."

The man did look pitiful. His eyes were dark circles and the skin of his face was as pale as the sheet that wound him.

"I-it is my stomach," he managed. "I can eat nothing. It will not s-stay down." Having said this, he rolled over and retched into the large pot that stood at the side of the bed.

Jala felt a moment's guilt at having caused so much pain, but then remembered that this was the man who had ordered the execution of Calli and her son. His resolve strengthened. He reached into his bag and brought out the herbal mixture that he had made ready the night before. Without another word, he took bowl and pestle and began to grind it. By the time the girl had returned with the water, the herbs were ready to be stirred in and mixed quickly.

"Here," Jala said, helping the sick man raise his head, "drink all of this down."

Velos resisted until Jala held his head firm.

"You must trust me and drink this."

Obedying the command, Velos managed to swallow all of the pungent liquid. For a second, Jala was worried that he would not keep that down either, but the man finally sank back onto his pillows and let the medicine work.

Jala sat at the bedside while Velos slept. He knew the man outside was anxious to hear how his lord was doing, but he had no intention of easing Sebbac's burden any quicker than he had to. Also, he needed to have some time alone with Velos once he woke up. He would still be a little disoriented and weak and Jala intended to take full advantage of that to find out what he could. Finally, the sick man stirred and opened his eyes. He took a few moments to orient himself to his surroundings, then, upon seeing the face of the Healer, the events of the previous evening came back to him. He looked relieved.

"How are you feeling?" Jala asked.

"By Tsandis," Velos said, "you have saved me. I feel much better."

Jala patted his hand. "That is good, my lord. But you must not tax yourself now. More bed rest is what you need. I will stay here by your side in case you need me further."

"Further?"

"These cases have been known to relapse."

A mild groan came from the sick man. "I hope not. That was unpleasant."

Suddenly the door flew open and Sebbac burst into the room, the serving girl on his heels.

"He would not listen," she complained to Jala.
The Healer dismissed her concern. "It is not your fault, child." Gently, he waved her away. "Just close the door behind you."
Sebbac bent over the bed. "You are better, my lord?"
"Thanks to Jala, yes."
"But," the Healer interrupted, "he needs more sleep, Sebbac. Now that you have seen him better, you must leave him alone to rest."
"And what of you?" Sebbac challenged. "Will you also leave him?"
Jala bowed low. "If I am no longer wanted, I shall leave."
"No!" cried Velos from beneath his covers. "I need him here, in case this is not finished."
Sebbac remained silent a moment. "Very well, my lord," he said finally, then turned and left, but not before giving Jala a narrow, warning glance.

* * * *

Danae felt his stomach heave as the huge sails fluttered and the large boat turned in the water. Many of the other Shadrani were getting their "sea legs", as the Sorisi ship builders called them, but he was still having a little difficulty. Not wanting to hold up the drill, he swallowed hard and tried to concentrate on the task at hand.
There were several of the Shadrani ships out, and they were all faring well in the small storm. The Sorisi had proven to be good teachers and worthy seamen. But then, they used the large port on the other side of the city walls to further their commerce with others of their kind who lived on Daleer, so they had years of experience with it.
"Danae," Revlar shouted, grinning. "You have gone green again!"
Danae nodded good-naturedly at the chuckles this brought from those around him. Shading his eyes against the sun, he glanced up to watch his cousin. Revlar, of course, was being taught how to captain the vessel, and he was an eager and quick student. Even in his debilitated state, Danae couldn't help a stab of possessive pride as he took in the sight of his beautiful, long-legged cousin calling out orders, the wind whipping his long hair around his face. Revlar had no trouble with the motion of the ship, he moved on board as he did on land, quickly, and with a sure step, even climbing the rigging in a heartbeat to help a mate who was having difficulty with the sail.
More than a few of the other Shadrani threw lustful glances his way. But Danae was becoming used to it, and he was sure enough of his cousin's devotion that he did not find the interest offensive. He simply could not hold any Shadrani to blame for admiring such a perfect specimen.
Danae managed a weak smile for his promised when the younger Shadrani finally came to his side.
Revlar's face now grew more serious.
"Perhaps we should go back," he offered. "You are suffering more than you should."
"No!" Danae insisted. "I will stay out here until I learn to deal with this-this damnable raft!"

* * * *

The Shadrani closed his eyes and contemplated the grave consequences of what he was about to do.
He was certain that ridding his people of the tainted prince would ultimately be seen as an act of supreme sacrifice and nobility. And Prince Velos had promised him: with the boy gone, so would go the threat of war.
He shook his head in disgust as he thought of Prince Revlar. No Shadrani, he firmly believed, was really expected to accept a half-caste Sorisi as their leader!
If his plan worked, surely his people would rise up and join him against the current king. And once Revlar was gone, his people could go on without the

threat of the Sorisi taint in their leader, not to mention who-knew-what kind of political agenda the boy might have.

Surian did not dwell on the real motivation behind his treason: he wanted Danae, and he wanted him badly enough to kill for him.

He had convinced himself that his former lover had been coerced into the promise with Revar. That his powerful uncle had exerted pressure to ensure the union, knowing it would give his bastard son the credibility he needed.

He believed that once Danae was free of the Sorisi prince, he would return to his senses. Danae would once again be his.

Surian knew that if he failed, he would be executed immediately. His king would see to that. But if it came to that, it would be worth it. And some day, wouldn't his people thank him for freeing them from the unnatural heir to the throne? Perhaps they would write songs about him.

That thought made him smile.

* * * *

The large window hung open over the royal yard and colorful garden. In it sat Calli, watching her son and his promised.

Danae was braiding Revar's hair in the newest warrior fashion, leaving most of it streaming long down his back while managing the wild mane around his face with a plait on either side. Calli couldn't hear the exchange of words, but she didn't need to. The tenderness in Danae's hands as he gently tightened the weave was enough.

"What is so fascinating?" Erone asked, coming up behind her. "Ahh... the promised couple."

She turned from the window to look up at him. "They seem to be very much in love."

Silver-blue eyes narrowed as he studied her. "Seem to be," he said. "I see you are having some difficulty, my love, in believing that your son is truly Shadrani."

She said nothing, merely shrugged.

"Or is it that you have difficulty believing that my son is truly Shadrani?"

She looked up in time to catch the humor in his eyes and smiled at him. "I only want him to do what makes him happy."

"And you do not think that Danae makes him happy?"

"He seems to..."

"There is that word again."

She reached up and took his face in her hands. "Erone, I am concerned that he is making choices in his life to please you and not himself."

Dark eyebrows lifted. "I am hardly the one to counsel him on his sexual choices. I have never pressured him one way or the other."

"But do you not see? Everything pressures him. The fact that he is Shadrani, the fact that he is Sorisi, the fact that he is your son, that he is the future king--"

"Hush now, my lady," he said raising a finger to her lips. "You fuss too much over the boy. But I will speak with him about the matter if you wish."

Her smile brightened the room. Erone felt the familiar tug of near painful desire for her as she fell into his arms.

"You are the most wonderful and clever of all Shadrani," she whispered, nibbling his ear.

"Calli," he managed, "you know what that does to me... Calli..."

* * * *

Later that afternoon, Erone found his son at the target range, practicing with the long bow. He drew him aside, nodding to Danae who was, as always, at his side.

"Come, walk with me."

The younger man fell into step beside his father. They walked a distance in

silence, then, when Erone was certain they were alone in the dense forest, he sat down on a fallen log, inviting his son to join him.

"Your joining day is coming quickly," he began.

The radiance of Revar's answering smile almost caused him to give up the talk, but he wasn't one to go back on a promise to Calli.

"I need to ask you something, Revar, and I need an honest answer from you."

Revar's smile faded as he sensed the seriousness of the words.

"Of course, Father."

"Your mother is concerned-" He stopped and cleared his throat, "actually, we are both concerned, that you have been given very little choice over which lifestyle would suit you better, Shadrani or Sorisi. Wait," he said, holding up a hand when he saw a quick reply coming from his son, "hear me out before you speak.

"I do know that you have always felt the outsider, first in the city and then here when you and your mother came to live with us. I do not believe you have ever had the chance to explore who you really are." He paused then and looked into his son's eyes. "Revar," he said firmly, "I do not care on which side of the walls of Soris your desire lies. Do you understand me?"

Revar blinked and nodded.

"Now tell me, have these things been troubling you as your day approaches?"

"No, Father," Revar replied. "When I was younger, I-I will admit I was afraid that I would be more Sorisi than Shadrani."

"But that is my point," Erone cut in, "you must not choose your lifestyle out of fear."

His son considered this. "I do not think I have, Father. As I grew older, I began to feel the same things as my classmates. One day, I just knew that the Shadrani in me was much stronger than anything else."

"And Danae? You are certain he is the one?"

Again, the radiant smile broke across his son's face. "If you only knew how I felt about Danae, Father, you would feel no need to worry."

He was answered with a nod.

"And you have never had thoughts about what it might be like to lie with a female?"

Revar blushed. "W-well, I have wondered at times. But I-I have never been curious enough to want to actually try it."

"You will, you know, when your mating time comes."

Revar nodded grimly.

"And that does not worry you?"

More thought was given before the boy replied. "I suppose that I do not actually know how I will feel, since I have never done it. But," he added, "it could not possibly be better than the way I feel with Danae."

Erone nodded. "Good enough," he said, "then let me take you back to him."

* * * *

Jala hurried with the note, his heart pounding in his breast. This news had to reach the Shadrani as soon as possible. If he failed in this... well he couldn't even think about the consequences.

Just as he had hoped, Velos had spilled all his plans to the Healer as he lay ailing. And those plans had made his blood run cold.

Revar would be murdered, struck down without warning, and the assassination would take place during the joining ceremony itself. The mindless cruelty of the act had made Jala blanch when he heard it.

He fumbled with the paper as he signed his name. Then he attached the note to the bird and sent it on its way.

"Tsandis speed your flight," he whispered.

In his haste, he did not notice the figure that watched him through the darkened door.

* * * *

The day of joining dawned bright and clear. No cloud would dare darken the sky on an event as blessed and anticipated as a mating ceremony within the Royal House of Gemen.

The Shadrani village was abuzz long before daybreak with preparations and planning. Much of the work was already done, but there was always a great deal of food preparation that could not be done beforehand.

This was an especially happy occasion since the day belonged to none other than the Prince of Gemen himself. All the males in the village had eagerly thrown together to make certain the celebration would be a great success. Only Calli felt left out, forbidden, since she was female, to have any part in the preparations.

She wandered about the royal dwelling feeling a little lost and abandoned. Her wandering finally took her into the large room where Erone, Habda and Pashar were overseeing final preparations. There she plopped down into an empty chair and heaved a large sigh.

"Why do you not simply try to enjoy the day, Calli?" Erone asked when he saw her long face.

"I would enjoy it if I could help," she said miserably. "It is the most important day in my only child's life, and all I am allowed to do is sit around!"

Erone exchanged a look with Habda. "You should be glad, my large friend," he said dryly, "that the mother of your son is a proper Shadrani female and will not give you this kind of heartache when his day of joining arrives."

Pashar laughed aloud, while Habda grinned at his king. "My young Bathar is far away from any joining, my lord," he replied. "Do not have him grow so quickly."

Erone again addressed the restless woman. "How can you feel you are not involved, Calli, you are the boy's mother."

She threw him a look that made him reconsider his remarks.

"All right," he said finally, "why do you not go and give our son some help in his preparation, as much as he will let you."

Her face lit up with a dazzling smile as she jumped to her feet and planted a great kiss on his cheek before racing out the door.

Erone turned in time to see Habda grinning at her departure.

"That one," the large Shadrani stated, "is more trouble than ten Sorisi."

Erone smiled in return as he nodded. "She is that... but she is worth it."

* * * *

When it finally came time for the ceremony to begin, Calli was nervous. She wanted to be dignified and regal for her son, but every time she thought of how her son looked on this day, and how happily he looked forward to it... she couldn't help but feel tears threaten.

Lira, standing close behind her, also felt tears threaten, but for a very different reason. On this day, she would watch the one she had always loved promise himself to someone else.

She had known the day was coming, had always known it would. And she had almost convinced herself that she could handle it. But now, standing, waiting for the joining party to arrive, she wasn't sure she would be able to bear it. Erone stood on the dais in the middle of the village square. As king and leader of the Shadrani, it was his duty to preside over the ceremony. Few things in the last number of years had given him as much joy as this day. The joining of his son with another of the House of Gemen who was so adored by the people would mean the end of so much turmoil. It was the one thing that was needed to put Revan's past behind him for good. He knew even Calli understood that. His silver eyes sought her out until he spotted her among the crowd, standing next to his mother.

Once the celebrants arrived, she would be allowed to join them on the dais, not because she was Revan's mother, because normally mother's had little to do

with their son's weddings, but because she was also the Queen of Soris, and was an honored guest here.

Finally, the sweet sounds of an altenwood flute brought a hush to the gathering. All heads turned to watch Revar and Danae approach the marriage dais, side by side.

In spite of her resolve, Calli began to blink back tears when she saw her son. His long hair had been brushed out and flowed around his shoulders like a mantle of the darkest sable. His wedding tunic was spectacularly stitched with gold and silver that stood out like lightening against the royal blue background. His breeches and boots were made of the softest buck leather, and the amulet around his neck that declared his heritage and bloodline shone, as if in grand approval, in the midday sun.

His cousin was equally splendid in similar dress. But Danae's tunic was the color of fine, deep claret, and, of course, there was no amulet to adorn his chest.

The couple moved slowly past the crowd until they came to rest in front of Erone and, at that time, he motioned Calli to join them. She stepped up and took her place next to her son.

Erone lifted the long, intricately embroidered joining cloth and waited for the young men to clasp arms. Then he took the sacred material and began to wind it around them, starting at the shoulder of one, twining it down around their joined arms and ending by draping it over the shoulder of the other. This done, he stepped back and let them recite their vows.

Lira struggled as she listened to the oath of promise exchanged. When the last words, "as long as there is breath in my body," rang out and hung on the afternoon air, she breathed them as well, knowing that they also applied to her. Her love was hopeless, but it would be with her always.

With the strength she had learned in warrior training, she pushed away the pain and tears, straightened her shoulders, and determined to be the best friend that she could be upon this happy occasion.

As soon as the formal joining was finished, the feasting began. The great banquet hall was full to bursting with people and the large trestle tables groaned under the weight of the food that decorated them. Every Shadrani baker, cook, and winemaker had gone to the greatest lengths to please the young prince and his father, the king.

There was much laughter and tale telling, interrupted often with music that ranged from songs of love to odes to war. Gifts were offered to the new couple, so many that the chronicler of the House of Gemen finally threw his hands up in despair and declared that he could not keep track.

After the feast, the entertainment began in earnest. Calli laughed herself giddy at the antics of one of the jesters and forgot all about feeling left out. Her son was seated directly across from her and kept throwing her winks or exaggerated faces that made her laugh almost as much as the entertainment. Much brandy-wine and ale was consumed and the atmosphere within the village was one of great jubilation and rejoicing.

Only one Shadrani refrained from libation, only one kept apart from the celebration, though not so much that he brought attention to himself.

He was biding his time.

Surian's pale eyes burned as he held himself back for just the perfect moment to strike. He would never have a better chance than today, when the half-breed prince was so accessible and the guard was down throughout the village. He sat back, lounging in the dark recesses of the great hall, and waited.

* * * *

During a lull in the activity, Lira approached the new couple and offered her joining gift. She had hand-beaded two leather saddlebags, one for each of them. Both had the emblem of the House of Gemen, but Revar's also displayed the shield of the king. It had taken her hours of painful concentration to complete this astonishing task, since sewing of any kind was not her strong

suit.

Both Revar and Danae knew this and so were doubly moved by the loving gift. They stood up to embrace her in thanks, an action that drew the attention of half the hall.

Unless she was your mother, a male did not hug a female in the land of the Shadrani. But warriors, no matter what their sex, were allowed to embrace. It only took a few seconds for this realization to dawn, then the attention of the crowd was again drawn by the music and entertainment.

Lira was thankful for the diversion. She blinked back painful tears as she felt his arms about her for a few brief, precious seconds. Then he was gone again. She did not know how she found her way back to her seat.

* * * *

The night grew older and it soon came time for the couple to retire. The dark Shadrani warrior, who had been waiting for just this moment, pushed his way stealthily through the crowd, wanting to be on hand when the boy embraced his parents before heading for the joining chamber. It only took him a few seconds to be close enough. He joined with the others around him in the traditional goodnight song that was sung at all Shadrani weddings.

May all your roads be dry and sunny

All your days be graced with song

May all your wine be sweet with honey

Your winters, short, your summers, long

May all your children thrive and grow

May humor paint each stop and start

May every year that passes show

The love renewed within your heart

The warrior watched as he sang and, just as he had hoped, the young prince went first to his father and embraced him, then turned toward his mother.

The Queen of the Sorisi was now directly in front of Surian. He reached inside his tunic and put his hand on the long knife he kept there.

But as Revar reached his mother, the crowd jostled and Surian was thrown off balance. By the time he righted himself, the young prince was moving out of his mother's embrace.

Surian quickly assessed the situation. He had to move now, he might not get another chance. In a motion too swift and unexpected, the dark warrior drew his weapon and sprang toward Revar's back.

Calli saw the flash of steel out of the corner of her eye, and her motherly instincts told her that Revar's life was in danger. Without the time to even issue a cry of alarm, she sprang to put herself between the cruel blade and her son. But before she could prevent the deadly weapon from reaching its mark, a streak of blond hair and the flash of another weapon assaulted Calli's sight.

She could barely register that Lira had halted the man in his tracks. She had stopped the knife and knocked the attacker unconscious with the hilt of her own before anyone was any the wiser. Anyone, that is, except for Calli and Erone, who was now at Lira's side, helping with the unconscious warrior.

"Too much brandywine," Lira said to those around her, in explanation of the fallen man.

She and Erone managed to carry Surian into the waiting room just off the great hall. Calli was right behind them.

"He was going to kill Revar," she whispered, as if saying the terrible thing too loud would still bring it about.

Erone's voice was gentle. "He did not succeed, Calli."

Her eyes shone with outrage and fear. "But why? A Shadrani! One of his own people..."

"He was enlisted by your treacherous cousin," Erone replied. "And I also think he wanted Danae for himself." He shook his head sadly as he gazed down upon the fallen warrior. "There is nothing so bad," he muttered, "as a Shadrani

gone bad."

Calli had heard the old adage many times before, but it did little this night to ease her fears.

Erone turned to Lira and put a hand on her shoulder. "I knew I was right in appointing you shombar tonight," he said, "we are all in your debt, and more." The blond head nodded once in acknowledgment of her king's praise.

"Please go back now," he continued, "and be sure nothing more happens."

As Lira quickly returned to her duty, Erone called for the guard and had the unconscious man taken to a holding cell. Then he turned to Calli.

"There is no need for further worry, my love."

"You knew something would happen."

"Perhaps I have simply grown cautious in my old age."

"But--"

Erone raised a hand. "Please, Calli, let us wait to discuss this. I do not wish to mar our son's celebration. After Lira managed to subdue Surian without ruining the day, I think the least we can do is go back out there and help celebrate the rest of it."

Calli swallowed. "What if there are others?"

"He is in good hands. I do not think anyone is going to get past Lira. Also, I have it on good authority that Surian was the only assassin at today's celebration."

"What authority?"

The question made him grimace. He did not want Calli to know how Jala was risking himself to spy for him. She would only fret more.

"We will discuss it later, my love."

Curtailling any further protest, he led her back out to the great hall, where the celebratory couple was being escorted into the joining chamber.

To the sound of cheers and encouragement, the great door slowly closed behind Revar and Danae. Then Lira drew her long sword and stood with her back to the portal. Taking up the traditional stance of shombar, protector to the royal house, she placed the tip of the blade on the floor and rested her hands upon the hilt.

The celebration was over for her.

She would stand there all night.

The fierceness reflected in Lira's eyes did much to allay Calli's fears and she joined Erone back in the Great Hall to watch over the rest of the festivities.

* * * *

Erone paced the floor of the council room as he considered the assassination attempt and how he must respond to it.

Surian had held out for some time before breaking down and admitting who had really hatched the plot against Revar. After that, he had been executed on the spot.

Of course, Erone had known all along who was behind it, Jala's warning note had been clear in that. But, as Calli had been on that frightening night, he was still awestruck that one of his own people had been involved.

He stopped and shook his head in sad wonder. He had known there were Shadrani who resented his son and Calli. He had known there were even some who were against Revar ever taking the throne. But it must have been the father in Erone that had convinced himself that no Shadrani would actually conspire with the Sorisi to kill the Prince of Gemen, no matter what.

Now he knew that was not true. Something had to be done. He searched his mind to find a diplomatic solution to the problem, something that would protect Calli and Revar and his claim on the throne without destroying the fragile peace.

But what?

His hand came up to run through his long black hair and he sighed audibly as the answer ran away from his thoughts no matter how they pursued it.

Then Erone seethed with fury as he considered the man who had plotted the killing. Once before, he had left a warning for Prince Velos. But Mathena had intervened, had asked him to choose peace, had forced him to consider his son's position in all of this.

That was all over now.

No Sorisi could be allowed to get away with what Velos had. No Sorisi could be allowed to attempt to assassinate a member of the Royal House of Gemen twice, and be left alive.

The Regent must die.

And there must be no doubt as to how or why he had met his unpleasant end. Erone would see to that. The message had to be clear that anyone who threatened the House of Gemen would meet a violent and unpleasant death. He knew the peace would be violated and possibly even shattered by the act, but he felt he was left with no choice.

His thoughts scattered when Calli came into the room, looking like the queen that she was.

"I know what you are thinking," she stated. "And I want you to know that I agree with you."

"You do?"

She nodded. "I have sat here too many years, enjoying watching my son grow, and have left matters in Soris unattended for far longer than I should have."

"The Regent must die, Calli."

"I know. I will issue a royal order for it immediately."

"Do you think anyone will carry out your order?"

She looked long into the silver-blue eyes.

"You will."

Chapter Eighteen

Dallas Devlin was scared.

He was fifteen, alone, and running on this night for his life. The men who had stopped him in front of Rosie's coffee shop had come back.

And they had come back hard.

"You got to know, boy," one of them said, "that this restaurant is in a bad part of town. Why, anything could happen to your boss as she's tryin' to make her way home."

Dallas had wanted to strike out and hurt the man, but instead, he'd stuffed his anger inside and kept his wits about him. His brain had gone into overdrive as he'd tried to find a way out of the situation.

He had struggled with his conscience and fought with the voice of his mother inside his head, but, finally, he had given in. He didn't see that he had any other choice.

He couldn't bear the thought of anyone hurting Rosie Johnson.

He had done it for nearly a month. The men who'd paid him for sex had been mostly decent to him and the work hadn't really bothered him.

It was the no-choice part that did.

So one afternoon, after his shift, he had talked to Rosie, explained what he was going to do.

"You go do what you have to, son," she had insisted. "Don't you worry about me, I got my own protection."

Dallas hadn't asked her for any further explanation.

He had run.

But he hadn't run fast enough or far enough. And now they were on his heels.

* * * *

Cautiously, he peeked around the corner of the alley he had ducked into, praying he had lost the shadowy figures that were chasing him. For the moment, he could hear no following footsteps, nothing but the gentle susurrus of night sounds that permeated the soul of the city.

Starting off again on a dead run, he headed down the alley and back toward the street that he hoped would lead him to safety. But as he rounded the corner, a vice-like grip fastened on his arms. Merciless hands dragged him back into the darkness of the alley he had just fled.

There were three of them, he thought, but it didn't matter now-they had him. Dallas struggled against the strong hands that held him, but he knew it was hopeless. They beat him to the ground and began kicking him brutally, grunting with dark satisfaction as they did.

His consciousness fading, he was only dimly aware that hands were on him again, dragging him to his feet. A voice inches from his face hissed, "Alright you little cocksucker, I'm gonna fix it so you don't have such a pretty face. Nobody's gonna want you when I'm done with you."

Dallas caught a glimpse of steel in the darkness. His terror doubled, giving him renewed strength. Once more, he struggled against the hands that held him. But it still did no good.

Even in the darkness of the alleyway, he could see the knife moving toward his face. He forced his head back until it was pressed hard against the wall behind him. Then all he could do was brace himself for the first stinging bite of the blade.

But the cut never came.

Instead, the sharp report of a gunshot nearly caused him to jump out of his skin. He heard the bright ricochet of the bullet off the wall far above his head.

"Drop that knife and get away from the boy," warned a voice from out of the darkness, "or I'll use this thing on you."

Dallas exhaled with relief when he felt the grasping fingers suddenly release him. Gasping and doubling over, he watched his attackers dart furtively into the night.

Now feeling the pain that his terror had previously numbed, the boy groaned and slumped to the ground. His last conscious image was the face of his rescuer bending over him. The stranger's voice registered concern, but it was also edged with annoyance.

"Wouldn't you just know it," he said.

* * * *

Slowly, reluctantly, Dallas opened his eyes. He had no idea where he was as he glanced around the massive bedroom.

Sunlight streamed in through the windows and across the room, illuminating the richness of the Oriental carpets and antique furniture.

He turned his head to survey more of his surroundings and discovered that he was not alone. A man stood nearby, silently gazing out the window into the morning light, a man whom he recognized faintly from the night before.

The man was a study in quiet grace, not overtly handsome, but striking nonetheless, in the way he carried himself. His features were pleasant: brown eyes that indicated a keen wit and quick forgiveness, a straight nose that gave way to a sensitive mouth, and hair that was so blond it would likely appear silver on certain sunny days. He was tall and slim and well-tanned. It was obvious that he took care of himself. He turned in time to catch Dallas inspecting him.

"Hello," he said, walking over to sit on the bed beside the boy.

"You were the man in the alley last night."

A nod.

Dallas managed a smile. "It's a good thing you carry a gun."

"I don't normally. I was in more danger of hurting myself with it than anyone else."

Dallas pondered the odd admission. "Well, you probably saved my life."

"I'm not sure about that," the man replied, smiling, "but I do think I saved your face."

"Well, whatever... thanks." Dallas sat up gingerly, then wished he hadn't as a

wash of pain ran over him. He winced. "You a doctor or something?"

"No, but I have a friend who is. I called him over last night, you were in pretty rough shape. According to him, you're going to have to stay put for a while."

"Here?" Dallas glanced around. "How come I'm not in the hospital?"

"I thought it would be more-ah-discreet if I brought you here. Hospitals have a nasty habit of wanting to know why you're there."

"Oh... yeah."

Dallas felt his face color slightly and wondered why it should embarrass him that a complete stranger knew what he had been doing.

His head felt fuzzy, light. The man's next statement explained it.

"Jerry-the doctor-left some painkillers with me in case you need more. You've got a few cracked ribs, not to mention some deep cuts and bruises that are going to take a while to heal."

"I don't need to stay here. I don't want to be any trouble."

The older man studied him a moment. "It's all right, you won't be any trouble. And it will be nice to have a new face in the house for a while."

Silence fell then and hung in the air for so long that Dallas became uncomfortable.

"By the way," he said to break it, "I'm Dallas Devlin."

"Yes," the man said, nodding as if it were a foregone conclusion. "And I am Mackenzie Ste. Claire." Then, he sighed, "but my friends call me Mack."

Dallas' eyes widened at the name.

Mack!

He was about to open his mouth and start asking questions, when the door opened and a young girl carrying a plate of sandwiches came into the room. Her long blond hair was tied neatly at her neck and her blue eyes shone with anticipation as she stood in the open doorway and regaled the man with her own questions.

"Is he awake yet? Will he be hungry? Is it all right if I meet him now?"

"Yes, probably, and yes," came the smiling reply.

The girl came over and set the plate down near Dallas.

"I'm Shanna Ste. Claire," she said. "Mackenzie's niece. And you're Dallas, right?"

The boy nodded, but he continued to feel Mackenzie Ste. Claire's deep scrutiny. He knew that this was the man he'd been looking for and he longed to get him alone, to press him for some long-awaited information. But the young girl before him had a warmth and enthusiasm that took his mind off his quest for a few more moments.

"Gosh! You look like you really hurt," Shanna said sympathetically.

"It's not so bad." Dallas warmed to the sincerity in her clear blue eyes.

"Only when I laugh."

"Well then," she quipped, throwing Mack a significant glance, "I'll just have to see to it that nothing funny goes on around here for a while."

Her uncle grinned harder.

"How old are you, Dallas?" she asked.

"Fifteen."

"I'm fourteen, but Mack tells me I'm precocious. He says it gets us both into trouble."

"And if you're precocious," said Dallas, "then I guess you know what precocious means."

She giggled with delight at that. "It means I know more than I should for my age."

"If you know so much, princess," Mack offered, "I think you'll agree it's time we left Dallas to eat his lunch in peace."

Reluctantly, Shanna followed her uncle to the door. Then she turned once more.

"Is it all right if I come back later?" she asked.

Dallas nodded. "But I'd like you to stay please, Mr. Ste. Claire."

The man gave him a resigned look. "Only if you'll call me Mack."

Once Shanna had left the room, Mackenzie walked back and sat down on the bed.

"I know what you're dying to ask me," he began.

"You do?"

"It's about your father."

The boy sat back against the headboard, his face expectant.

"Look, I'm sorry. But I can't tell you much of anything about him."

Dallas' breath expelled in a rush of disappointment.

Mackenzie continued his explanation. "I did know your mother. We met when we were young and became close friends. But then she left the country and we lost touch for quite a while."

"But I heard her talking to you, I thought you would know something."

Shaking his head, Mackenzie explained, "She called me fairly often to talk about you. I guess she wanted some male advice on raising a son. But she never wanted to talk much about your father."

Dallas searched the man's face. His instincts told him that he wasn't hearing the entire truth. He closed his eyes as his hopes crashed. "Damn," he cursed softly. "I was so sure you would know. That's why I came here."

"And I'm glad you did." Mackenzie studied the boy a moment. "I've been looking for you, Dallas," he said. "I promised your mother that if anything should ever happen to her, I would take care of you."

"That's why you were in that alley last night."

The man nodded. "I've been trying to find you since I heard about her death."

"And I guess you don't have any idea who killed her."

Mackenzie frowned. "I was told that it was some neighbor--"

Dallas shook his head. "It wasn't."

"Why do you say that?"

"I just know it wasn't," the boy finished. Then he closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "I think she knew something bad might happen to her." His green eyes opened and looked evenly at the man. "Or else why would she ask you to watch out for me?"

Mackenzie felt his stomach tighten. The boy was too quick. "Mothers worry about such things. At any rate," he changed the subject. "You shouldn't be thinking about all that right now. It's too upsetting. You need rest and sleep. And you need to stay put."

Dallas frowned. This man was avoiding his questions. And as long as he believed he wasn't getting the whole story from Mackenzie Ste. Claire, he wasn't going anywhere.

"I'll stay for a while."

Mackenzie's face relaxed. "Good," he said, "that's good."

* * * *

A few days later, Mackenzie Ste. Claire stood and gazed out the sliding glass doors that opened onto an enormous patio, pool, lawn and garden. The scenery blazed with color from the variety of flowers that Shanna adored and tended daily. A stone wall divided the colorful area into sections, while sculpted benches gave relief from the extensive, pervasive green of the manicured lawn. It was on one of these benches that Dallas and Shanna sat, engrossed in conversation.

Mack smiled at the animated gestures of his niece. She was telling Dallas some amusing story and the young man was smiling openly at her. The two had taken to each other immediately. Dallas seemed to be filling some of the void in Shanna's life.

It was rare that his niece found someone she liked enough to open up to. She was so bright and advanced for her age that she found her schoolmates tedious, a fact that they - naturally enough - found insulting. She was isolated and lonely and her uncle worried over all of it.

A frown clouded Mackenzie's features now as he considered how badly Shanna would want Dallas to stay on.

He wasn't sure how much longer he could lie to the boy.

* * * *

"Where are your parents?" Shanna asked, suddenly growing serious after they had laughed half the morning.

Dallas' face closed. This was dangerous territory.

Shanna picked up on it right away. "Sorry," she said, "sometimes I seem nosy, but I don't mean to be."

He warmed to her honesty. "It's all right," he finally replied. "I never knew my dad."

Shanna nodded.

"Then Mom... Mom died last month," he managed to say. "I don't have any relatives and I didn't want to live with strangers so I took off on my own." Shanna felt her heart tug with sympathy as she watched her new friend struggle to keep his emotions in check. She knew enough not to mention his mother again.

"You're pretty young to be on your own," she said. "Weren't you scared?"

He shrugged. "I didn't really think about that. The way I saw it, I didn't have any choice." He shifted slightly, wanting to change the subject. He couldn't imagine exposing this young girl to the reality of his recent activities. "What about you? Where are your parents?"

"My mother lives here too-you just haven't met her. She's kind of withdrawn and doesn't go out ever." Pointing to a section of the large home, she continued. "You see those rooms on the east side of the house? That's where she lives. But I don't see her very often."

"Why not?"

"She doesn't talk much."

"But she talks to you?" Dallas asked, frowning when Shanna shook her head.

"What's wrong with her?"

"I'm not sure. Uncle Mack said she was really in love with my father and that when he died she kind of..." she gestured with her hands "... cracked up, I guess."

Dallas wasn't fooled by the girl's attempt to be nonchalant. He knew pain when he saw it.

"I don't remember my father at all," she continued, "I guess we have that in common." Then her face brightened. "Except I have Mack. He is my father as far as I'm concerned."

"Yeah," Dallas said quietly. "He seems like a nice man."

They fell silent, comfortable in each other's company, even after such a short time.

Shanna surreptitiously studied her companion as he gazed off into space, the breeze catching tendrils of his dark hair and throwing them about his face. His mouth was full and sensual, his nose nothing short of aristocratic. The most startling thing about him, however, was the color of his eyes-green, crystalline eyes that seemed to look right through you.

Such a beautiful boy, Shanna mused to herself, even with the bruises still on his face.

"Dallas," she ventured, "... are you gay?"

He shot her an astonished look.

She started to babble. "I don't mean to be nosy again. It's just that-you know, you're so pretty and all, and I can only think of one way you could survive on the street since you don't look like you're much into drugs, and..." She trailed off, noticing the look of shock only growing in Dallas' green eyes.

"Geez," he whispered, casting his glance away from her, "you really are precocious, aren't you?"

"Not that I mind!" She jumped up to face him, sincerity shining in her face.

"I don't, really. You see, Uncle Mack is-gay, I mean-and if it's all right for him, I don't see anything wrong with it. Please, I hope I didn't hurt your feelings."

"No," Dallas said, showing a faint smile. "You just caught me off guard."

Suddenly, he needed to justify himself to this girl who was trying so hard to make him feel comfortable. "I didn't want to work the streets, Shanna-" "You don't have to explain! I don't think you're bad or anything. Mack says you shouldn't judge people, especially if you haven't been in their position. I don't know what I'd do if I was in your place-if I lost Mack-it scares me just to think about it."

Dallas studied the unusual girl who was now nervously chewing on a fingernail, her long blond hair curling down her back. He wanted to say something to re-assure her.

"I don't think I've ever met anyone like you," he said, smiling gently. Fear clouded her eyes as Shanna snapped her head up to look at him. "You don't think I'm strange do you? I mean, I'm really not so different... do you think?"

Dallas was startled by the response. "No, no," he replied quickly, wondering what in the world he had said to upset her. "You're just really understanding, that's all. I mean you're different in a nice way."

He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the apprehension disappear from her face.

"I think you're nice too," she said.

Mackenzie called them in for lunch.

* * * *

The days began to pass without much notice as Dallas found himself settling into a routine in the Ste. Claire household. He was healing quickly and, because of Shanna's immediate attachment to him, was feeling more needed than he ever had in his life.

Although his time was spent mostly with Shanna, Dallas did the best he could to help Mackenzie in any way he thought would be useful.

He was beginning to feel guilty about staying on.

"Please Dallas, don't be ridiculous!" the man countered when he heard this.

"It's not as if we can't afford to keep you here. And your presence is so good for Shanna. Anyway, I wasn't aware you had somewhere else to go."

"I don't have anywhere else to go," Dallas answered bitterly, "but I don't like living off other people either."

"I'll make a deal with you," Mackenzie offered, "just stay till summer holidays are over and Shanna goes back to school."

Dallas looked at him doubtfully. "And then what?"

"And then," the man opened his hands in a trusting gesture, "then you can move on."

The boy thought about it. "If that's what you want," he said finally.

"That's what I want," Mack affirmed.

At least the boy has pride, he thought.

* * * *

Dallas had been there a month and still had not met Shanna's mysterious mother, Arianna. The woman roused his curiosity. He could not understand why anyone would shut out such a daughter. His affection for the spunky girl was growing daily, and the woman's indifference baffled him.

On a deeper level, Shanna's pain over her mother's neglect mirrored his own at not knowing his father and that drove him to want to help the girl.

Finally he confronted Mackenzie with it.

It was early evening and the two of them were alone in the den. Mack was studying some business papers while Dallas pored over a book on classical mythology. Shanna had insisted he read the lengthy volume so that they could discuss one of her favorite topics.

"What is really wrong with Arianna?" Dallas asked, finally breaking the silence.

"I thought Shanna told you."

"She told me what you told her, but what's the truth?" Mack looked up, a warning in his eyes. "Leave it alone, Dallas. For all intents and purposes, that is the truth." "You must see what she's doing to Shanna. That girl cries every time she comes from one of her visits with her mother. How can you defend the woman? " "Arianna is my sister-in-law," Mack explained. "And though I don't agree with a great many things she has done in her life, she still has a right to exist in the only way she knows." "Shanna would be better off with no mother at all." "Undoubtedly," Mack muttered. "But the situation can't be changed, Dallas. Shanna has got to learn to live with it."

* * * *

The next day, Dallas asked Shanna to introduce him to her mother. "I don't know," the girl said cautiously, "she doesn't like strangers. Besides, we'd better ask Mack first." Dallas knew that her uncle would disapprove. "Why do we have to ask Mack? I just want to meet your mother, that's all." "Well... maybe it would be okay," Shanna said, warming to the idea. "I might get her to talk if I brought a friend to see her."

* * * *

Silently, they entered the east wing of the large home. Dallas glanced around uneasily. "It's sure quiet in here." "I know," Shanna whispered, "it makes you kind of afraid to talk doesn't it? Like the walls are listening." She gave Dallas a hushed tour until they stood outside the huge oak door that guarded Arianna's bedroom. Shanna wrung her hands nervously and gave Dallas one last hopeful look before she knocked, then entered, drawing him in behind her. The room was dark for the middle of the day and it took some time for Dallas' eyes to adjust to the lack of light. Then he saw the woman. She was sitting in a chair, motionless, staring vacantly into space. Squinting into the darkness, Dallas strained to see her better. Something told him not to approach. "Hello Momma," Shanna said timidly. "I hope you're feeling well today. Mack is out in the garden, and it's such a nice day. Maybe you'd like to take a walk." Nothing... not even a blink. Shanna was undaunted. "Well, maybe later," she sighed. "Anyway, I brought my friend Dallas to meet you." She motioned for him to step forward and as he did so, Shanna made the introduction. The woman didn't even acknowledge his presence. Dallas was thinking this wasn't such a great idea after all. "Won't you say hello?" Shanna probed. Still nothing. "Please don't be so rude, Momma." The walls absorbed the sound. She doesn't even know we're here, Dallas thought as he studied the silent figure. He noted the resemblance between mother and daughter, but this woman looked so defeated and pale. With a growing sense of trepidation, he drew close enough to see her face clearly. Her eyes held such a haunted look that it was all the boy could manage to stand his ground and do what he had come to do. "Mrs. Ste. Claire," he said, clearing his throat, "I just wanted to tell you that I think you have a really great daughter." No reply.

He looked uneasily at Shanna. The girl was smiling gratefully.

"Anyway," he continued, "I'm glad to meet you."

He swallowed hard as uneasiness chilled him.

"Mrs. Ste. Claire?"

Placing a hand gently on her arm, he bent down so the woman could not avoid looking into his eyes.

Before Dallas knew what was happening, she lunged at him, scratching, clawing, and biting like a demented thing, while he struggled to fend off the terrible fury she was unleashing.

"Momma!" Shanna cried. She jumped in and tried to drag her mother away, all the while begging for her to stop. Tears now streaming down her face, she fought, without much success, to position herself between Dallas and her raging mother.

Only moments later, Mack raced into the room. It was all he could do to subdue the hysterical woman.

"Get him away from me!" she screamed. "Mack! Get him away from me or I'll kill him-I'll kill him!"

Shanna sobbed in horror while her mother threw Dallas such a venomous look that the boy bolted out of the room.

* * * *

Dallas was in the bathroom tending his wounds when Mackenzie found him a while later.

"That wasn't a terribly bright thing to do," the older man said.

"No kidding!" Dallas snapped back. "I thought she really took to me!"

Mack's face softened as he noticed the welts appearing on the boy's face. He took the cloth from Dallas' hands and began to doctor the wounds himself.

"Shanna rushed to your defense," he said. "She told me what you were trying to do. I guess your heart was in the right place."

"Does she always attack people like that?" Dallas said angrily. "She really is nuts, you know, I thought she was going to kill me!"

"She doesn't trust strangers and will tolerate few people besides Shanna and me. She won't bother you if you just stay away from her."

"No problem." Dallas said fervently.

Mack let it go. He studied the boy as he tended his wounds. "These must hurt," he offered.

Dallas shrugged. "I'm kind of used to it," he said dryly. "I seem to get beat up a lot."

"I have someone who can help you with that."

The boy looked up at him. "You do, huh?"

Mackenzie Ste. Claire nodded. "I'll call him tomorrow, if you like. He can show you a few things."

Despite the situation, Dallas' mouth kicked up in a derisive grin. "Yeah, at least so I can handle one crazy woman."

Mack continued to dab at the scratches on the boy's face. "Damn it," he cursed gently, "Shanna should have known better than to take you there. Life would be so much easier if she would just give up and accept the situation."

"Well I haven't known her very long." Dallas said, regarding the man who was ministering to his wounds so tenderly. "But Shanna doesn't strike me as the kind who would give up on anything."

"Hmm," Mackenzie agreed, "I guess that's part of what makes her Shanna. It seems to be her lot in life to take on the impossible. Just as it seems to be yours to get into trouble."

"And yours to rescue me," Dallas replied softly.

Chapter Nineteen

"How much longer do you think we can get away with this?"

Lira looked up at the man who lay beside her, his head propped on one elbow as

he gazed down on her face. She shrugged with a nonchalance she did not feel. "As long as we are careful, I see no need to worry." He threw his head back and laughed. "Well I, for one, worry constantly." Sitting up, he crossed his legs and regarded her solemnly. "It is one thing for our king to carelessly bed a female, but for me... well, I somehow think it would be a far more serious offense for me." Lira felt irritation prickling when she sat up as well, and faced him. "If we continue to be careful," she repeated, "nothing will happen." He reached over and stroked a hand through her long blond hair. "I pray you are right, Lira." Then he stood and quietly left her there. Neither of them had any idea how quickly their fears would become a reality.

* * * *

The next day on the practice field, Lira was just finishing her grueling routine, when suddenly, she was gripped by a sharp, crushing pain. Her breath expelled from her body and she dropped to her knees, clutching her belly. The last thing she remembered was the sky turning black above her.

* * * *

Calli paced the floor and wrung her hands. She and the family of Gemen were waiting outside the sick room for news of Lira's condition while the Healer, Tebba, was in with her. Calli was terrified that her fears would be justified, she was pretty sure she knew a miscarriage when she saw one. She cast a glancing look at Erone. If he suspected anything, he was hiding it well. His face was a mask of calm concern. Revar and Danae were pacing the floor as well, fussing over the fate of their childhood friend, and Calli closed her eyes and prayed that, for once, her quick diagnosis would be wrong. But the door opened, and Tebba's face was grave and pale when she gave the pronouncement. "She was carrying a child, but nature has seen fit to take it." The entire room went still. Calli took in the shocked looks on the faces of her son and his life-mate before turning to Erone. There she saw a mixture of pain and regret. Her heart went out to this man that she loved, for now, he was in a terrible quandary. He loved Lira like a daughter, had always doted on her and taken pride in her. Now, her actions doubly endangered her precisely because of her affiliation with the House of Gemen. Calli knew that Erone would have to be more judgmental of her than any other. The other thing that became crystal clear in Calli's quick mind was the effect all this would have on her relationship with the King of Gemen. She had been among the Shadrani long enough to understand that Lira's unfortunate behavior would now shine a blinding light on the royal house. Even Erone would have to tread lightly after this and that would necessitate a major change in their relationship. She hadn't meant to do it, but Lira's actions would effectively use up what little tolerance the community had for such things. The irony of it all was that, if she had not been a warrior, if she had not taken such a larger than life role in the Shadrani village, her conduct may have been looked upon a little more kindly. But as it was, she had broken a huge trust that had taken her all her life to build. Calli felt sympathetic tears well in her eyes. Finally, Erone spoke. "Are you certain, Tebba?" The Healer nodded her dark head, her face clearly showing her regret at the information. "But she will recover?" "She will." Erone dismissed the Healer and when she was gone, he turned to the group

assembled in the room.

"Leave me," he said quietly.

"Father-" Revar began, but was cut off when Erone raised a hand to stop any comment he might have made.

"I will not speak of this now. Leave me," he repeated.

They filed out of the room. Even Calli left, knowing better than to challenge the man she loved at a time like this.

When they had reached the sitting room downstairs, Revar turned to his mother.

"What will he do?"

Calli shook her head. "I do not know, Revar."

Then she watched her son pace, watched Danae stare quietly at the floor, despised herself momentarily for grieving the loss of her freedom with Erone when Lira's very life might be at stake. Finally she drew in a deep breath.

"He will have pity on her. No matter what, we know that."

Revar's head shot up, his eyes a mirror of pain. "He cannot have pity, Mother. Not for this. Not now."

Calli fought to stave off the defensive feelings that threatened to engulf her. She knew her son was not accusing her, but her guilt was such that her feelings were difficult to control.

Danae came to her aid. "Perhaps he will find some way, some loophole in the law."

Revar knew the law better than anyone else. As heir to the throne of Gemen, it was his duty to know the law inside out and he had been studying it painstakingly ever since he'd arrived in the village.

"Great Tsandis," he whispered, shaking his head, "there is no loophole."

* * * *

The room was quiet as the Council of Gemen awaited the reply from the warrior who stood before them.

"Who is he?" Erone repeated.

Lira stood silently, staring at the floor, not daring to look up into the eyes of her king. He approached her and spoke for her ears alone.

"For pity's sake, Lira," he breathed, "give me his name. The law will allow me some latitude if you repent of this and offer him up."

Her blue eyes finally lifted and met his. He saw genuine pain and regret in them. He also saw that she would never cede to his wish. In truth, he hadn't expected her to, and therein laid his dilemma.

Years ago, when he himself had been accused of this crime, his mother, then queen, had been given a legal way out. Since she had been instrumental in causing her son's offense and he was a member of the royal house and heir to the throne, she could choose to lift the sentence of death on him in lieu of other punishment.

But for Lira, this was not the case.

She was neither royal, nor young enough to be granted a second chance. A female with her background and her experience had no excuse for her actions and no recourse open to her. And worst of all, she had committed the terrible sin of conceiving without royal decree. Even more so than lying with a male, this had outraged the village against her.

It was this that Revar had realized two nights ago when the terrible ordeal had started. He sat now at the table with the others and watched Lira stand firm. Like his father, he knew she would never give up the name of the one who had impregnated her, for it would be a death sentence on him as well. Emotions ran rampant within him as he watched the scene unfold. He didn't have to look at the rest of his family to know they all felt the same. They had spent many hours leading up to this moment trying to uncover a way out of this mess.

A way out for Lira, and a way out for Erone.

But even Mathena, who had ruled the Shadrani for so long, could come up with neither law nor loophole to aid those she loved in this affair. The Council of Gemen sat silently as they waited for Erone's pronouncement.

"Lira," he whispered, "give me a way to help you."
Once more, she looked deeply into his eyes. "Forgive me, my lord," she said,
"but I cannot."

* * * *

Erone walked the council room, his heart heavy, his hopes in pieces on the floor. Lira had been sentenced to death. And it had been done by his own decree. This was the worst of all possible times for something like this to happen. The looming war and welfare of his son were far the other side of enough to have on his plate without this.

Lira, of all people.

He stopped suddenly and drew a hand raggedly through his dark hair. If she had only given him a name...

Then he spat his outrage and began to pace again. She would not be Lira if she had done such a disgraceful thing. The one thing-the only thing-that offered him any tiny bit of hope was that the male had not come forward. His mind gnawed on that bit of information and he did not hear the door open.

"May I enter, my lord?"

He turned and stopped at the sight of her. He hadn't been with her since this had happened, hadn't dared expose her to the kind of risk it would now entail. His pain was a knife under his ribs when he saw the plea in her eyes.

"You may come in, Calli," he answered sadly, "but you may not try to change the direction of the wind."

The comment brought a dull smile to Calli's face as she joined him in the room.

"Is there no hope then?"

"Pah!" he spat. "Do you not think I have tried to find some hope? I have worn the cursed floor out pacing, trying to think of something, anything that can save her."

Calli felt emotion tighten in her chest. "You must not blame yourself, Erone."

He stopped then and looked at her. "Who else should I blame? All these years, she has seen me do whatever I want, flaunting the law."

"But she understood that and knew the difference."

He moaned and placed both hands on his head, as if it would explode. "There is no difference, Calli! Great Tsandis, that is what drives me insane. The greatest injustice here is that it is me who is judging her!"

"But she is Shadrani, Erone," she said gently, "and knows that you are the king and must follow the law."

He walked over finally, and flopped onto the large chair that occupied the center of the table.

"The law!" he spat. "I want no part of it tonight."

Calli was silent after that. Then she moved forward and gently sat beside him.

"My lord," she began, "is there no word from the young man?"

He turned to her, and for the first time allowed a grim smile to play across his lips. "You are too quick by half, Calli."

"Well, if you do not know who is responsible, you cannot catch him when he helps her escape."

His smile now deepened. "Exactly so."

"Nor even know whom to watch, for that matter."

He reached over and cupped her cheek with his hand.

"Ever my clever Calli," he said.

She leaned in against his palm. "Ever my love," she replied.

Chapter Twenty

The beginning of school term came and went. Still Dallas stayed on.

In the short time he had been there, his unrelenting curiosity had uncovered nothing more about his father. The fact that Mackenzie continued to deny he had even known the man only further convinced Dallas he was hiding something.

But what?

Nor was the boy any closer to finding out who had killed his mother. It gnawed at him constantly, the anger and need for justice festered like a burr under his skin. But he was learning patience, and he was content to wait for the time being.

What he had learned, was a little about the family that had offered him their hospitality.

The Ste. Claires were originally from France. In fact, Mack and Shanna were fluent in the language and often spoke French together when they were alone. The family fortune had been amassed by Mack's grandfather, a ruthless businessman who had taken a failing vineyard and turned it into one of Europe's leading producers and exporters of fine wine.

Mack's father, Yves, had inherited it all, and had come to believe that the secret to further successful expansion lay in moving the business to California. He believed that the state so rich in fertile soil would also prove rich in financial opportunity.

He had been right.

Dallas learned quickly that Mack was especially reluctant to discuss his brother, Marius, Shanna's dead father, and the husband that had driven Arianna to the brink of insanity.

The older man's reluctance to part with information only spurred Dallas to inquire more persistently. He reasoned that if he could get the man to talk about his own family, maybe he would also give up some information about Dallas' father.

The boy found a perfect opportunity to press the issue when Mackenzie decided to take a rare vacation from business to spend some leisure time by the pool.

"You didn't like your brother much, did you?"

Mackenzie looked up and issued a long sigh.

"For god's sake Dallas, you ask a million questions."

"It seems like you have a million secrets," the boy shot back.

"I hardly knew Marius, he was much older than me. In fact, he and Arianna were already married when I was born. Then he had a falling out with our parents and we never saw him. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"I suppose it will have to, won't it," Dallas said, not at all satisfied.

"So-this is how the other half lives!" called a friendly voice from inside the patio doors.

Mack and Dallas turned to welcome Jerry Colson. He was the doctor that had tended Dallas on his arrival at the Ste. Claire estate and he visited often to check on Arianna.

Dallas liked this man.

Somehow, he looked like a doctor, with his neatly trimmed brown hair and searching hazel eyes. He had an even disposition and a friendly air that made everyone feel comfortable with him. Dallas knew he was also gay, as were most of Mackenzie's close friends. As Dallas watched the two men leave to make their way to Arianna's room, he pondered the relationship between them. He was certain they were friends and not lovers. Mackenzie seemed monk-like in his existence, causing the boy to wonder if he ever needed anything more than friendship.

* * * *

Little did Dallas know that he was the topic of conversation between Mack and Jerry as they approached the east wing.

"My young patient seems to be settling in nicely," the doctor quipped, throwing his friend a suggestive glance.

"Oh for gods sake Jerry," Mack said, annoyed, "he's just a baby."

"Some baby!" Jerry exclaimed. "He's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life!"

"Your life's not over yet," Mackenzie muttered as they entered Arianna's room.

* * * *

It took Shanna some time to get over the shock of seeing her mother attack Dallas. She had never seen Arianna like that, had never known her mother was capable of any emotion. But at least she now had some idea where her own temper came from.

For Mack's sake, she tried to control it and she was getting better at it, but some days she just couldn't help herself.

It was on just such a day that Shanna arrived home from school and tried to sneak past Mack and Dallas who were sitting in the den just off the entrance hall.

"Hold on, princess," Dallas called, adopting Mack's pet name for her. "Come in here and give me another hint about what you're going to give me for my birthday."

It had become a game with them. Dallas' birthday was in two days and Shanna had been so excited about her gift to him that the boy questioned her about it every chance he got.

He won't think I'm such a princess if he sees me like this, Shanna thought miserably. Her head down, she tried to slink up the stairs but Dallas took her by the arm and had coaxed her halfway into the den before he turned to look at her.

"God!" he said, seeing her swollen lip and bloodied face. "What happened to you?"

"I... fell off my bike," she muttered, not daring to look at the man who had risen from his chair and was striding toward her.

"Come now," Mackenzie said softly, "you never fall off your bike. You were in another fight, weren't you?"

Shanna pressed her lips together and shoved her hands into her pockets. "I couldn't help it Mack, really... he just made me so mad!"

Mack heaved a sigh of exasperation. "What kind of shape is your worthy opponent in?"

"Worse than me," she said quietly. "But he deserved it... he did!"

"What did he do?" asked Dallas, feeling a now familiar twinge of admiration for the feisty girl.

"He... he said some stuff."

"What stuff?" Mack asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Just stuff ... I'd rather not tell you. Please Mack, can't you just believe that I had a good reason?"

Dallas didn't doubt her at all, although she did have a temper, she wasn't mean.

Mack looked weary. "All right," he surrendered, "I believe you. Now let's go get you cleaned up."

* * * *

Dallas panted and moved, sweat dripping down his back as he followed the movements of the man who had been coming to teach him self-defense.

The man's name was Akira. He was Japanese, and the martial art he was instructing was called Shorinji Kempo. They worked together for a while on goho, the hard techniques that included strikes and kicks. Later, they would focus more on juho, the part of the discipline that included throws and releases. Dallas found himself getting lost in the moves, his mind and body coming together in a pleasant mix of ferocity and calm.

Finally, the master called a halt. He bowed respectfully to the young man.

"You have a natural gift," he said.

Dallas smiled genuinely at the praise, and bowed himself. "Thank-you, Akira," he said in the perfect Japanese he'd been rehearsing. "I must hurry with this gift, so that I will no longer suffer from my clumsiness."

The older man smiled at this. "It is not clumsiness that deters you, young one, only lack of training." He shook his head. "I have never seen such raw

talent."

Dallas laughed a little. "You do me too much honor, master."

All trace of laughter left the face of the man beside him. "No," he said, bowing, "it is you who honors me."

* * * *

His class over, Dallas showered, dressed and hurried out the door and across the lawn of the large estate, intent on meeting Shanna after class. It was the first time he had visited her at school and it took him a while to locate her. She was walking with a group of her pals, he thought, but when he got close enough to hear the conversation, he knew they were not her friends.

"Oh, poor little Shanna," one of them quipped maliciously. "I bet your faggot uncle doesn't have much time for you anymore since his new boyfriend moved in."

Good God! Dallas thought, is this what she has to put up with every day! It was on that day that Dallas first saw a side of Shanna that he would come to so admire, a side that was perhaps responsible for so much that was yet to come.

She turned to face her tormentor, fists clenched, eyes narrowed.

"In the first place, Maryanne Sutter, if my uncle is gay, maybe it's because he doesn't want to end up married to a fat, nasty woman like your mother! And in the second place, Dallas is too young for him. Some people consider things like that you know-not like your father, who looks at me like I'm dessert every time he sees me, and I'm only fourteen!"

That succeeded in bringing the conversation to a crashing halt. Up to that moment, Dallas had seen Shanna as a vulnerable little girl who needed protection from the world. But here she was, protecting him. Him and Mackenzie.

Shanna turned to leave the stunned group and saw him standing there. Her face paled.

"Well done, princess," he said, grinning.

"Oh, Dallas, please don't tell Mack what they said. It would just upset him."

"All right," he said, throwing an in-your-face look at the group of girls who were now staring after him, openmouthed. "Your secret's safe with me. Besides, it looks like you can handle a lot more than Mack gives you credit for."

"He tries so hard to protect me, I'd like him to think it's working."

"You just let me know if I can make things easier for you."

"Oh, you do make things easier, just by being here. Besides, I think you're good for Mack."

"Oh, you do, huh," Dallas mused. "There you go being precocious again."

She answered him with a smile as he threw his arm around her and together they headed off toward home and Mack and safety.

* * * *

Mack and Shanna went all out for Dallas' birthday. There were boxes and boxes of gifts, everything they could collectively think of that a sixteen-year-old boy could need.

Dallas' face flushed with excitement as he opened the brightly wrapped presents, then fussed gratefully over each one. There had never been such bounty in his life and he even managed to push thoughts of his mother from his mind when they threatened to intrude on the happiness of the day. In the end, there were two boxes remaining, one from Mack and one from Shanna. Dallas opened Shanna's last present slowly, enjoying her anticipation. It was the gift she had been teasing him about for weeks.

He uncovered a graphite portrait and started when his own face peered out at him from beneath the paper. Dallas let his breath out slowly at the detail of the work, then saw Shanna's name boldly scrolled across the bottom right corner.

"I'm not good enough with oils yet," she apologized, "but I hope you like it."
"It's... just amazing," Dallas admitted.
"She spent hours on that," Mack beamed proudly, "I'm afraid I have nothing to match her gift. Shanna seems to have all the talent in the family." With that, he handed Dallas his final gift.
Dallas unwrapped the beautiful package to discover a solid platinum St. Christopher medal on an exquisite, but sturdy chain.
"You can never tell," Mack said, blushing slightly, "perhaps it will protect you in some way."
"Why?" Dallas teased softly as he slipped the chain around his neck. "You going somewhere?"

* * * *

Hours later, Mack sat back and listened to Dallas stroke the keys of the grand piano that sat in the corner of the den. He was playing Chopin's Etude in D, one of Mackenzie's favorite pieces. The man sighed with pleasure as the gentle strains washed over him, wiping away the stress of his day and the worry of his week. When Dallas finished the piece, he came over to sit beside him.
"I've been wanting to ask you about that ring you wear," the boy said.
Mack glanced down at the elegant gold ring with the ruby stone.
"It's the Ste. Claire ring," he answered. "There-" He held his hand up, allowing a closer inspection. "You can see the name in the design."
Dallas nodded, relieved that it was not a gift from a lover.
"All the male Ste. Claires wear them," Mack explained. "It's sort of a tradition, a gift handed down from father to son."
The conversation grew a little tense as it always did when the Ste. Claire name was brought up.
Dallas changed the subject.
"I don't know how I'm going to pay you back for all you've done for me," he said. "You spent too much money for my birthday."
"Let's not bring that up again," Mack chided. "I told you before, the money means nothing. And as for paying me back, I'm sure that some day you'll find a way to do it. You strike me as a very resourceful young man."
After a considered silence, Dallas offered, "I can think of one way I could start right now."
Mack looked over and, catching his meaning, shot him a warning glance.
"Now, you listen to me, Dallas. Stop looking at me as if I'm...you know... available, or something, because I most definitely am not." Then, seeing the hurt expression on the boy's face, his tone softened. "I don't mean to hurt your feelings. I'm flattered by your offer, but... you mustn't feel obligated to me in that way."
"You don't understand," Dallas said fervently, "It's not that I feel obligated. I want to."
"No, Dallas! What you're feeling is just misplaced gratitude."
"I'm not a baby, Mack! That's not what it is and you know it. Can you honestly say you haven't felt the same thing?"
Mackenzie ran his fingers nervously through his blond hair.
"Dallas," he said hesitantly, "Dallas... there's no question that you are an extremely attractive young man and, yes, I have noticed it-I'm not dead, you know! None of that matters, however, since nothing-I repeat-nothing is ever going to come of it. Do you understand me?"
"I understand," Dallas said.
I just don't believe you, he said to himself.
Chapter Twenty-One

He inched along the darkened path, making sure he was neither seen, nor heard, in his approach. Up ahead in the inky black of night, his Shadrani eyes could make out the figure that stood guard over the holding cell. He knew his timing

had to be just right.
He wouldn't get a second chance at this.

* * * *

Inside the cell, Lira paced the floor like the caged animal she felt herself to be. Her mood swung from pain to anger to sorrow. She had lost everything she held dear, and all because she couldn't control the one thing she needed to control to continue with her life as she knew it. She had been arrogant and over-confident, she now knew. But with the clear, uncomfortable knowledge of hindsight, she realized that there was no hope for her. Tears now threatening, she threw herself down on her bunk and began to sob.

* * * *

He moved closer to the small building and hunkered down. He was waiting, waiting for his partner in crime to do his part. The wait seemed interminably long, but he was patient and determined in his task. Then, just when he thought something had gone amiss, he heard it. Coming on the night breeze, cries of alarm and shouts of warning rose above the trees. He waited and watched until the guard began to show signs of uncertainty. But the sounds of struggle were becoming impossible to ignore. Finally the guard, certain his charge was well locked behind closed doors, left his post to aid whomever was in peril in the forest.

* * * *

Lira heard the noise from inside her cell and it set her nerves on edge. She was trained to expect the worst and there were those in the village, she knew, who would want to ensure that she received her just punishment. For several days now, she had been afraid that someone would make a try for her. Drying her eyes, and steeling herself, she got up from her bunk and moved silently to wait behind the door, prepared to take on anyone who had come to do her harm.

* * * *

The way now clear, he crept to the door of the cell and pulled out the rusted, ancient key. Then he placed it in the lock and tried it, cursing mildly as it squeaked in protest and stuck terribly. But finally, he heard the solid click and he slowly pushed the door open to step inside.

* * * *

She pounced on him, striking him with a closed fist as he came into the room. Luckily, his instincts had flashed in time and it was just a glancing blow, but it was still enough to send him sprawling to the floor.

"Great Tsandis, Lira," he spat, "is that any way to treat your rescuer?"
"Revar!" she cried. "What are you doing?"

He gained his feet and threw her a doleful glance as he tested his chin with his right hand. "Getting beat-up for my trouble," he quipped.

Her face suddenly darkened with worry for him. "You cannot do this," she whispered. "Not even your father would understand-"

Revar brandished the rusty item in his hand. "Where do you think I got the key?"

Her eyes widened.

"But never mind that," he said quickly. "You have to get away from here." They both stopped dead as more noise sounded from beyond the trees. Revar couldn't contain a chuckle of delight. "I do not know how much longer Danae can keep that up."

In spite of the situation, Lira smiled a little. "He does sound like a herd of ailing cats."

Revar took her arm, growing more serious.

"Come Lira."

"But, Revar" she protested, miserably, "there is nowhere for me to go."

"Bonn awaits you near the old mill."

She stopped, her face flattening at the words. "Bonn? But... how did you know?"

He looked at her a moment, studying the face he knew so well. "Lira," he said gently, "I have always known."

She sobbed then, and threw herself into his arms.

"Oh Revar," she whispered.

"No," he said, "there is no time. Go now. Go!"

Stepping away, Lira turned and ran.

Revar made to follow, then more noise from the forest made him stop. He listened a while longer and then began to laugh helplessly.

"Oh, Danae..." he chuckled, "you are far the other side of too much."

* * * *

"This is outrageous," spat one of the Council of Gemen.

Erone sat quietly, letting the anger rage around him.

"How did she escape?" demanded another.

"It would seem," Erone said, "that the one with whom she consorted came to release her."

Again, he sat quietly while the council members continued to complain.

Revar sat still and took his cue from his father. His mouth remained closed.

Now and then, he exchanged a careful glance with Danae.

"At least," the first council member said, "we will now know who it was, since he will also be missing."

"Exactly so," said his king.

Even as this fact was offered, two guards came in and announced that Bonn had disappeared, along with all his belongings and two horses.

"So," spat the second council member. "It was Bonn. We should mount a search party immediately."

All eyes turned to Erone. He merely sat silently, seeming to consider this option. As he had hoped, someone else stated the obvious.

"Why go after them?" stated the first council member. "They are both warriors and we would have to send more warriors to retrieve them. I, for one, do not wish to risk the lives of our fine forces for such as they."

This was met with agreement all around. Revar looked to his father. Only because he knew the man so well could he see the slight relaxing of tension in him at the words.

"So be it," said the King of Gemen. "Let their exile be their punishment."

* * * *

Jala was uncertain how much longer he was going to be able to continue undetected as he passed information from the city-state of Soris to the man who was his true King. For the time being, he had fooled Prince Velos, having earned his confidence with the fake poisoning, but he knew Sebbac was keeping a sharp eye on him.

The fact that Surian had not succeeded in his vicious attack had thrown them both, Jala knew. And now they were starting to wonder if there was an informant among them. He did not want to be around when they discovered it was him.

At any rate, things were heating up.

Since Velos' murder plot had again been foiled, he was talking a lot about declaring outright war on the Shadrani and attacking their village. Jala shook his head sadly. The carnage would be terrible. All for the sake of one man's

greed. He stood and took down quill and paper, then began to pen the note that he would send to the Shadrani king.

"Situation here critical... prepare for war."

Moving toward the large cage of birds, he reached out to unlatch the door to the coop.

But he never got that far.

* * * *

Erone's mood was somber as he took the bird down from its roost. Would he ever be able to tell Jala how grateful he was? The man had saved his son and continued to risk life and limb daily in his service.

He read the note, his face growing still as the import of the words worked their way into his troubled mind.

"Habda!" he called, "summon the Council."

* * * *

"But, this note is wonderful news!" Calli said as she and Erone waited for the others to join them in the council room.

Erone did not reply. He had finally broken down and told her about the aid that Jala had been offering. If the note was real, it wouldn't matter any longer.

"You do not agree?" she said against his silence.

"I am skeptical."

"My lord," she said. "How can you doubt Jala?"

His frown only darkened. "I do not doubt Jala, but the note."

"But is the note not from Jala?"

"Perhaps."

Then they said no more, but waited as the members of the council began to file in and take their seats. When all was settled, Erone stood and addressed them, holding up the missive.

"I have received word that there has been a rebellion in the city of Soris."

This news brought an outcry from the council members and Erone held up a hand to quiet them. Revlar exchanged a look with Danae and then his mother. She looked happy, expectant.

"Is the news from a reliable source?" one of the council members asked.

Erone frowned. "Usually."

Silence fell as they considered this.

"The reason I have called the council together," Erone continued, "is that what is in this note directly concerns the Prince of Gemen."

All eyes in the chamber turned to Revlar.

"What is it, Father?" asked the young prince.

"Jala is asking you and your mother to come home to Soris. He insists that the last thing needed to ensure the stability of the overthrow is your presence." Now the room erupted with talk. Danae reached under the table and took Revlar's hand, squeezing it reassuringly.

Revar again exchanged glances with his mother. He could see the determination in her eyes. She was going home. Standing, he addressed the council.

"If my mother decides to go back, then I must go with her."

"Of course, Revlar," his father said. "We accept that. I have asked the council here to discuss whether either of you should go back."

* * * *

For several hours, the occupants of the room argued, some insisting that Calli and her son must go back, that it was the only chance for lasting peace with the Sorisi. Others, like Erone, were hesitant, suspicious of the contents of the note no matter whom had sent it. But in the end, it was Calli herself who had to make the decision.

"There is no choice in the matter," she announced finally. "We could discuss this for days, but in the end, I must return to my people."

The room fell silent.

The members of the council had come to respect this female, some had even grown to love her.

"My lady," one of them asked finally, "do you trust the one who sent this note?"

"It is from the best possible source," Calli answered. "Someone I would trust with my life."

"That is good," the man replied solemnly, "for that is exactly what you will be doing."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Dallas was awakened by the sound of terrible screams.

Arianna.

Wondering what was wrong with the strange woman, the boy came out of his room in time to see Mack running in the direction of the east wing.

"Please, see to Shanna," the man called over his shoulder as he disappeared.

After one knock on Shanna's door, Dallas slipped into the girl's room. He found her sitting up in bed, her face drawn. Taking her hand gently, he sat down beside her. "It's all right," he soothed, "Mack has gone to her."

Shanna nodded, trembling slightly until Dallas drew an arm around her.

"She probably just had a nightmare or something," he said softly.

"It happens quite often. She keeps telling us my father comes to visit her."

"Uhh... isn't he dead?"

Shanna smiled sadly and nodded. "The whole thing scares me so much I'm afraid to go into those halls after dark."

"Wow," he whispered, "she really had it bad for that guy."

The screams faded and shortly after, Mack reappeared.

Dallas moved aside to allow him to sit beside Shanna and take her into his arms.

"It's all right now, princess," he whispered.

"She saw him again, didn't she," Shanna said, tears clouding her eyes.

"She thought she saw him," Mack corrected softly.

* * * *

One month later, Shanna's birthday dawned sunny and bright. She was fifteen and thrilled about it, it was tantamount to adulthood as far as she was concerned.

The day was spent with the three of them doing all the things she loved best. Her uncle lavished her with presents, knowing that she could never be spoiled by any amount of attention.

When she had opened all of Mack's gifts, Dallas came to her with a small package.

"This is for you, Shanna," he said. "Happy Birthday."

Then he turned, handing Mackenzie a similarly wrapped gift. "And this... well, it's just a thank-you, Mack."

Shanna unwrapped a small crystal Pegasus and Mack, a bottle of his favorite, albeit expensive, cologne.

Shanna squealed with delight and threw her arms around Dallas. "He's beautiful!" she cried.

Mack was somewhat less effusive but his thank-you was sincere. It wasn't until after Shanna had gone to bed that all hell broke loose.

"The gifts are lovely, Dallas and they are appreciated," Mack said tightly, "but may I ask-where did you get the money?"

"What does it matter?"

"Just tell me you didn't go out and turn a couple of tricks for it."

Dallas glared at him. "Damn it, why don't you understand? I had to do

something for you and Shanna. And anyway, it's not that big a deal... it's not like I've never done it before."

"That was before," Mack snapped angrily. "Before you came to live with us. While you're under my roof, I'll not have you selling yourself like a common whore!"

Dallas' face darkened. "Oh, now I get it," he said. "For a minute there, I thought you were actually worried about me. But that's not it at all, it's just your precious Ste. Claire name you're trying to protect. Well you don't have to worry about it anymore. Tomorrow morning, I'm gone!"

He turned away. Mackenzie caught his arm.

"Dallas wait! Please-you don't understand. I'm sorry I snapped at you, but don't take your anger out on Shanna. Can't you see how much it will hurt her if you leave like this?"

"Is that all there is to it?" Dallas asked, unable to still his shaking voice.

"That's the only reason you want me to stay? Because of Shanna? Is it? Is it Mack?"

Mackenzie Ste. Claire looked into the young man's face and could not answer him. They struggled with each other silently.

Finally it was Mack who turned away.

"I can't give you what you want," he said.

* * * *

It was impossible for Dallas to sleep. He didn't want to leave; he was beginning to love Shanna like a sister. But it was not thoughts of the young girl that were keeping him awake.

Why was Mackenzie fighting him?

Dallas wanted him more every day and the man just kept pushing him away. He would leave in the morning... it was the only thing he could do. The only choice left to him.

Shanna would understand. He knew she already suspected his feelings for Mack. If he explained it properly, she would understand.

Suddenly, he felt the old restlessness settling in on him. The closeness of the room was starting to drive him crazy. He climbed out of bed and drew on his jeans.

Quietly, he slipped into the hall, eerie silence ringing in his ears. He headed toward the den, but then stopped when he thought he heard sounds coming from the east wing. Turning, he inched forward and listened again... there was something.

Probably just Arianna dreaming again.

He tried to dismiss it, did an about face and took two more steps toward the den. But his curiosity got the better of him. Turning back on his heel, he made his way toward the peculiar woman's room.

* * * *

Later, Dallas would wonder what had beckoned him on that night. As it was, he found himself drawn, almost against his will, to discover something of what was happening in the strange house before he left it.

Entering the east wing, he felt a shiver of apprehension judder down his spine. The hallways and closed doors were ominous in the daylight-they were terrifying at night.

Get a grip Dallas! he reasoned silently. All this talk of ghosts and things had really affected him.

His eyes could barely see in the unyielding blackness of the hallway. But as he came closer to Arianna's rooms, he noticed a shaft of light in the darkness ahead of him. Some moonlight had escaped into the hallway. Dallas stepped forward, realizing that the door to her den was open. Would she be in there in the middle of the night with no light on? His nerves getting the better of him, he backed up and pressed himself against the wall, silent, listening.

Nothing.

But still...

Dallas waited, almost holding his breath. Whoever or whatever was in that room had sensed his coming.

That's ridiculous! he said to himself. If there is anybody in the room, it's a woman half-crazy with grief and she's making you crazy too!

Cautiously, he peeked in the door. He saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Determined to overcome his fear, he gathered up his courage and stepped into the room. "See," he said aloud as if trying to convince the darkness, "nothing to be afraid of."

Then out of nowhere he sensed it, like a fleeting, powdery scent that hung threateningly in the air, the evidence of a presence so overpowering he froze in his tracks.

From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed some movement behind him. He whirled and searched the darkness.

"Who's there?" he asked, his voice a little shaky.

There was no reply.

But there was someone there; he could feel it, someone hidden in the dark recesses. Suddenly, all he wanted was to get as far away from that room as possible. His heart throbbed in his chest as he primed himself for flight. Then a figure clad in white slipped into the room, the moonlight playing on her face.

It was Arianna.

The scissors she clutched gleamed ferally in her hand. She did not seem to notice Dallas, but crept stealthily toward a darkened alcove in the room as if she saw something there that the boy did not.

It was his chance to run.

Then... she stopped.

Dallas felt his blood freeze as Arianna turned slowly to face him. Without a word, she attacked.

He dodged quickly to escape the scissors as they sliced the air. From somewhere in the shadows, he was certain he heard a man's dark laughter. Then, as Arianna launched her second attack, he managed to duck around her. Once free of the room, he ran full speed down the hall with her screaming after him.

Dallas was just about out of the east wing when he almost ran headlong into Mackenzie. Arianna came up on them quickly, brandishing her weapon. She stopped when Mack pushed the boy behind him and drew himself up to face her. "Arianna," he said gently, "give me the scissors. You don't want to hurt anyone."

"But Mackenzie," she said, sounding like a little girl, "I have to kill him. Somebody has to kill him."

"He's not who you think he is," Mack reasoned, pulling Dallas from behind him.

"Look at him, Arianna. Please... take a good look at him."

The woman regarded Dallas with sizzling hatred that slowly melted to curiosity and then indifference as she realized the truth in Mackenzie's words. She dropped the scissors and retreated down the hall as if nothing had happened.

* * * *

Moments later, Mack led Dallas into the den and sat him down. He was trying to calm the boy, even pouring him some brandy when he saw how visibly shaken he was.

"Maybe I'm going crazy too, Mack," Dallas said, "but I swear there was somebody or something in that room."

"You mean Arianna?"

Swallowing some of the liquor, the boy shook his head. "I mean besides Arianna."

Mack paled. "What did you see?"

"Nothing, I guess. It was more like I sensed something-I don't know. And I'm

sure I heard somebody laughing."

The color drained further from Mack's face.

"It was a nasty laugh, Mackenzie," Dallas said fervently.

The older man turned away. Dallas wasn't about to let it go.

"You know what's going on here. I know you do. Don't you think I earned the right to know tonight?"

"Not if you're leaving in the morning," Mack sighed, wearily rubbing his forehead.

He watched the boy sit angrily back in his chair.

"Look Dallas, I'll make a deal with you. You stay with us, go back to school and graduate," he held up a hand to stop the boy's protestation. "It's what I promised your mother. If you'll do that, I'll tell you the whole story right now."

"Yeah? Well I could be dead before I ever see my prom," Dallas said, remembering the look in Arianna's eyes

"I'll make sure you're safe. I think she realizes now that you're no threat to her."

"What's the deal with that anyway? Who does she think I am? Marius? I thought she loved him."

"I'll explain it all to you Dallas. But first-the bargain?"

Dallas exhaled angrily. "I can leave after I graduate?"

"You will be free to go. I'll not try to keep you here any longer."

There was a long silence. But in the end, it wasn't a difficult decision for Dallas.

"It's a deal," he said finally.

Mack walked over to the bar and picked up the bottle of cognac. Coming back to sit beside Dallas, he poured himself a generous glassful.

He took a long swallow of the amber liquid, sat back, and began his story.

"Much of what I'm about to tell you may seem confusing. I would ask you to just bear with me and all your questions will be answered once you've heard the whole story."

Dallas nodded.

"In the first place, I'm not really a Ste. Claire, at least not in the biological sense. I was adopted into the family.

"Secondly, Marius was not Arianna's husband, he was her brother."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jala worked frantically at the lock on his cell door. All he had for the job was a metal piece that he had managed to remove from his belt before they took it from him. He had opened locks before in such a manner, but none had been as rusted and ancient as the one that now frustrated him.

And time was against him.

* * * *

The Captain of the Guard shuddered as he watched his men drill. They did not know it yet, but the city was preparing for war.

The regent and Sebbac had been scheming again. The two were still too cautious to openly plot against the queen, but the captain knew they were going to make another move soon.

He didn't like the idea of war. Not just because he knew how many would die, but because he was still dedicated to bringing Queen Escallitani home. His covert activities had as yet gone undetected and he had a circle of friends who were of like mind, but if it actually came down to war...

He turned when he heard Solte approach, her face growing somber as she approached the drill arena.

"So, it will be war, then, my husband."

He nodded gravely. "Prince Velos is not ready to declare it yet, but something is definitely afoot. Perhaps he is holding off until the troops are more

conditioned. It has been too long since any of us has seen real battle." She squeezed his hand and looked up at him. "I do not want you to see battle. Have you considered what we discussed?" His lips pressed into a thin line as he remembered the conversation they had when he first told her he believed war was imminent. She had stated, right then and there, that she wanted to go to the Shadrani. If there was to be a war, she said, her place was at the side of her mistress, the queen, where she had spent so much of her life. The captain was a soldier, and all his life had been trained to protect his city against the Shadrani, to do as he was told, no matter what his head told him to the contrary. But, in spite of these life-long habits, he could never give his support to Velos. He knew that the man was wrong, and not just wrong, but evil in that he did not care how many would have to die in order for him to claim a throne that would never rightfully belong to him, no matter how he tried to justify it. But the bitter truth was, the captain did not know how much he could do if the battle broke out, how many would be on his side. His party of rebels had made few sophisticated plans on the overthrow and things were moving far too quickly now. "We will see, Solte," he said. "We will see."

* * * *

In the Shadrani village, the frenzied ship-building was almost complete and that had left the village free to prepare for the triumphant return of Calli to her throne. She was torn by the development. On one hand, she had waited years for this day to come. On the other, it would mean the end of her time with Erone. But if she could make a lasting peace between their people, it was worth the pain of separation. She had tried to persuade Revar to stay behind for the time being, but nothing in the world was going to convince her son to allow her to ride into Soris without him.

* * * *

Jala leaned back, momentarily, against the wall of his cell. His fingers were now bleeding from the effort to force open his lock. He cursed himself for a fool. He had underestimated Sebbac and now Calli would pay for it. Even now, he was sure, she and Revar would be on their way back to Soris, not knowing they were about to face jail and execution. And there was little he could do to stop it. His last hope lay in this desperate attempt to escape and somehow warn them before it was too late. He went back to work.

* * * *

As the large Shadrani contingent drew nearer to the great walls of Soris, Erone did not feel any easing of the tension in his soul. Perhaps it was simply his history with the large stone barricade that caused his unease. But as he glanced over at Calli, he knew nothing was going to prevent her from entering those walls once more. Then, as he looked on, a great cheer rose from the battlements. Calli's face broke into a relieved smile. Her people were welcoming her home. The large portcullis was opened and stood unguarded, the way lined with cheering Sorisi.

* * * *

Jala's face flattened with relief when he heard the rusty click. His heart pounding in his throat, he leaned lightly on the door. It gave.

* * * *

Stopping once to exchange a long look with Erone, Calli then turned to Revar and spurred her horse on toward the gate. Ever on guard, Erone's eyes scanned the walls, watching the cheering soldiers, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Something was nagging him...

* * * *

Jala knew the castle well. Years before, he had helped Erone escape these very dungeons by leading him down to the bowels of the building where the water flowed into an underground cavern. He knew Calli had used the same underwater passageway to rescue Danae when he had been imprisoned here as a boy. However, it was not downward that Jala climbed this time, but up. Up, because the lower passage had long since been destroyed, and up because he could hear the cheering even through the thick walls of the keep. Time was running out.

* * * *

Revar rode proudly beside Calli, feeling great joy for her. He knew how important this day was to his mother. Stifling his disappointment at leaving Danae behind temporarily, he resolved to do everything he could to help her with her triumphant return. They had almost reached the portcullis and Erone's insides were now churning. He continued to scan the walls, looking for any sign of danger, any indication that this was other than what it seemed. There was nothing.

* * * *

Suddenly, Jala heard voices from up ahead. He pressed himself against the wall and prayed that whoever it was would not take this passage. Seconds later, his prayers were answered as the voices receded in the distance. Swallowing in fear, sure every step would be his last, he wound his way up. He had to reach the top of the keep. Then, daylight appeared as he rounded a corner. That, and discovery. A cry went up to his right and he turned to see two guards running toward him. Without a second thought, Jala ran and flung himself off the edge of the battlement.

* * * *

Erone continued to raze the walls with his keen eyes, looking for something. Looking for what?

Then it suddenly struck him.

Where was Jala?

The man who had been instrumental in instigating this uprising should have been at least at the gate to welcome Calli. Erone was about to call out and spur his great horse forward when a piercing cry rose above the cheering. The cry was one of warning that was soon joined by gasps of shock as one by one, the people on the ground looked up to see the figure that plummeted from the tower keep.

Erone's keen eyes identified him immediately.

Jala!

Calli and Revar were about to ride through the portcullis when the cry sounded and they pulled their mounts up short. Calli looked up and her heart broke as she recognized the voice that had uttered the fatal warning. Watching Jala

fall, she was momentarily stunned in pain and confusion. But the Shadrani in Revlar came to life and he acted quickly, drawing his sword and moving in to protect her. His first thought was to get them both out of there. He grabbed at the reins of her horse.

"Mother!" he shouted, "ride!"

But she was already turning and speeding away as her own soldiers drew weapons to attack her.

Some of the Sorisi troops seemed taken aback by the sudden attack on their queen while others moved quickly to get between the mother and son.

Revlar did not hesitate, but cut them down even as he spun his horse to escape. Calli drew her crossbow and began to shoot, her fear for her son calmed somewhat when she saw the ferocity with which he fought.

Then, suddenly, there were Shadrani all around them. Calli looked up into the enraged face of her love as he circled his troops around his family and then moved to kill a few more of the soldiers who were thinking better of their choices and fleeing back to the safety of the city.

"Away!" he cried, "they will soon have archers on the roof."

Even as he said this, the missiles began to fly, but the Shadrani were too fast. They sped away from the walls, out of range of the arrows and down the road, not stopping until they had vanished into the thick forest that was their home.

Once they were out of danger, Erone pulled up his troops. In one fluid motion, he leapt out of his saddle and drew Calli down off her mount. He cradled her in his arms while she sobbed helplessly over the death of Jala. Revlar stood near, stroking her golden head and feeling the loss himself.

"Habda," Erone said finally, "take two men and go retrieve the body of the Healer, Jala. We will make for home."

The large Shadrani nodded, then called on Pashar and one other to help.

Solemnly, the three rode back toward the oppressive walls.

Calli tried to protest. "But will they not be in danger?"

Erone soothed her fears. "Not all your soldiers were in on this deceit, my lady. There is likely pandemonium inside the walls of the city and Velos will be far too preoccupied with keeping order there right now. Nor will he be expecting us to risk coming back for a dead man."

A dead man.

Calli felt her heart break anew at the words. But she sniffed and straightened herself. Jala would not want her to fall apart, especially now, when war was coming closer with the speed of a racing thundercloud. Pulling herself together, she remounted.

"Let us return to the village," she said, "and prepare his funeral."

* * * *

The raft was only large enough to hold the bundles of firewood and the body of the fallen Healer. The Shadrani gathered round and prayers were offered for his safe journey to the other land. In typical Shadrani style, what they could find to represent his favorite things in life were also lashed to the pyre, in case he had need of them along the way.

Calli and Mathena clung to each other in sorrow as two warriors pushed the craft out into the large body of water, wading with it until the tide took it and began to pull it out to sea. Then they splashed back to shore and waited with the rest until the raft was a long way off shore.

The sun was dying over the horizon of the water, and both sea and sky were alive with shimmering reflections of purple, peach, and gold.

What a fittingly beautiful way to say goodbye to this dear man, Calli thought, her heart stabbing with terrible sorrow at the finality of it all.

Then Raesa took up her bow. Touching the arrow to fire, lit for just that purpose, she drew back, aimed, and let fly her missile. It struck true, and moments later, the funeral pyre sparked, sputtered, then roared, as flames engulfed it.

For a long while, the Shadrani stood and watched, until the flame became a mere speck on the horizon. All the while, they silently issued their prayers to Tsandis to make room in his home for Jala, the Healer, the most loyal of all Shadrani. Then, one by one, they turned and headed back to the village. Mathena, Calli, and Erone were the last to leave the spot. Erone took his mother's arm and was startled to see the tears that ran down her cheeks.

"Mother," he said gently. "You loved him."

It was not a question, and Mathena did not reply.

"It would have comforted him," Erone added, not unkindly, "if he had know it." Mathena straightened, then walked on without a word. Erone turned to Calli, a question in his eyes.

She smiled at him sadly. "He knew, my love," she said. "Never doubt it."

* * * *

Solte sat alone in her prison cell and cried miserably. She tried to think of what her mistress would do in her place. Calli had always had a plan, had always been more brave than she.

But the woman wasn't thinking of a way to save herself. She now had nothing to live for. All she could think about was the safety of her queen. Her greatest fear was that she would be used somehow against Calli. Never, would she allow that to happen.

Her eyes squeezed shut again as the terrible events of the past few days unfolded in her mind.

After the aborted attempt to capture the queen and her son, the Captain of the Guard and his co-conspirators had taken advantage of the confusion to mount their rebellion.

It had all gone terribly wrong.

They had expected the people to rise up and strike with them, but the people had turned out to be terrified and confused by the turn of events and by the time some of the braver ones figured it out, it was too late. The few who continued to fight were cut down, one by one, but the captain had been taken alive.

Solte had stood, held between two guards as they led her husband forward and, as a warning to all who would defy the regent, cut off his head.

* * * *

"What will we do with the treacherous maid?" Velos asked.

Sebbac's dark eyes narrowed. "We will keep her alive for now. There may be further use for her."

Velos' frown grew deeper. "I want her killed, just like her husband. That should deter any of the rabble from further rebellion."

"Oh, she will die, my lord. After she has served our purpose."

* * * *

The next morning found the Shadrani village seething with activity. Erone and Revar walked among the troops, sparking morale and overseeing the massive war preparations.

Suddenly, every head lifted and began to turn in the direction of the forest as keen Shadrani ears heard the approach of horses. Erone called for calm and silence. Then he drew his sword and stepped out to challenge whomever was approaching.

Riding determinedly out of thick brush, Lira and Bonn appeared. A surprised murmur ran the length of the assembled warriors as they watched the two fugitives approach their king.

Erone regarded them silently, his face betraying no emotion when Lira rode up and reined in her mount beside him.

"My lord," she said. "We have come to beg you to overlook our sins long enough that we may ride with you to battle."

A solemn hush fell over the clearing. Erone studied them both a moment. "You understand," he said finally, "that this will alter neither your status nor your sentence of death."

Both riders nodded.

"We want to fight for our people," Lira pressed, "as you have trained us to do. If we must die, let us die in service to you, my lord."

Erone did not have to study his warriors to know how this turn of events was affecting them. With the heightened emotions of the moment, he knew that all of them were feeling their throats constrict with respect and pity for what these two were offering, no matter what their previous transgressions.

He nodded. "Let it be done then."

Immediately, Lira and Bonn were accepted back into the ranks of the Shadrani fighting forces. Revlar and Danae smiled warmly at them, but belayed any conversation as Erone quickly called them back to their preparation.

All around, warriors saddled their great horses and Raesa's females made sure their quivers were full and their bowstrings tight. The smell of impending death loomed in the air like some long dreaded but expected creature of the night.

As she prepared, Lira tried to ignore the hiss of swords being driven into scabbards, the clank of buckles being tightened and the determined chatter that had her nerves on raw edge. She glanced over to where Danae and Revlar were preparing and wondered if they, too, felt the fear.

"Do not forget to double cinch your saddle," Revlar called over to her. She merely grinned back at him. He had naturally taken a leadership role among the younger Shadrani and she took no offense at his gentle reminder. He would be nagging most of them before this trouble was over.

* * * *

Inside the royal dwelling, Erone prepared to leave the women he loved. Mathena came toward him and touched a hand gently to his face.

"Stay well, my son," she said, "and know that my love goes with you."

Erone felt his throat constrict with emotion. His mother did not often give over to emotional speech. He took her hand and kissed the back of it.

"My queen," he said.

She let go of her son reluctantly, then turned and left him with Calli.

Once alone, Erone took Calli into his arms and kissed her fervently.

"Return to me, my love," she whispered, when they parted once more.

"You have my word, my lady."

Then he stepped away from her and headed out the door to oversee the last of the preparations.

Once all was in order, the force mounted and, following their king, thundered off toward the city of Soris.

* * * *

They arrived just after nightfall. Erone had his warriors set up a perimeter and then wait, knowing that his plan would work best during the sleepy hours of the morning. The troops sat quietly in the chill. No fire was permitted, nothing to alert the guards on the walls of their presence. Erone knew that Velos would expect some reply from the Shadrani for yesterday's perfidy, but he hoped the man would not be expecting it this soon.

Revar, seated between Danae and Lira, felt his stomach tighten and his palms dampen as the interminable wait played havoc with his brain. He turned to his mate.

"I am not looking forward to this," he whispered with a tight smile.

"No," Danae agreed. "Nor am I, and I am not about to attack my own people."

Finally Erone gave the signal and the archers took their positions. Then, as

he signaled again, a hundred flints were struck and fires touched to arrows swathed in pitch. Deadly in their aim, the archers let go their fiery missiles, stopping only long enough to knock another and fire again. Meanwhile, Erone and his warriors surrounded the main gate of the city from where he knew the defensive attack would come.

Suddenly, the sky above the walls began to flicker with the light from the numerous fires that were now burning in the city-state. Sounds of alarm went up in the blackness, and cries of confusion rang in the night.

"Prepare!" Erone shouted moments later as the creaking portcullis began its rusty ascent and the soldiers of Soris began to pour out of the city. They were mounted, as were the Shadrani, and Erone noted briefly that Velos had to have been well counseled indeed to have his troops prepared for even this possibility. Then his mind focused as the first clash of steel announced the beginning of battle.

Lira was relieved to finally test herself against her enemy. Her training had been brutal, but it had done the job. She wheeled and struck, lunged and hacked, cutting her way through the Sorisi, finding pleasure in the momentary shock that crossed their faces before they were felled by a female. Her long blond hair flying, she looked like an apparition from her enemies' worst nightmare, moving amid the carnage, relentless in her attack, a she-devil come to exact revenge upon them all.

She fought alongside Revar and Danae, her pledge of protection still in place. But Revar did not need her help or her protection, and even if he had, Danae would have beaten her sword to the mark. The three star pupils fought on with discipline and instinct keeping them alive in the battle that was surging desperately around the gates of Soris.

The Sorisi fought gallantly to force back their foe, but the Shadrani, fuelled by the knowledge of the cowardly attack on their prince, did not give an inch. Finally, it became clear that the Sorisi were fighting a losing battle and, one by one, they backed toward the open gate and retreated into the city. The Shadrani did not follow. They finished the rout and, once the din of battle had died, began the grim task of checking their dead and wounded. Danae had received a deep slice across his shoulder but would not accept any attention until the more badly injured were taken care of. He sat with Revar and Lira, neither of whom had a scratch on them, while they waited for the adrenaline to clear their systems.

Then a call came up from the great walls and Erone stepped forward to address his enemy. The creaking gate opened and Velos walked out a short distance, Sebbac at his side.

"This fight is a waste," shouted Velos.

"For you," replied Erone, bringing a quiet murmur of laughter from his troops.

"We have done nothing to provoke this."

Velos' cloying lie raised the hackles on Erone's neck.

"You have attempted to take the lives of your own Queen and the Prince of Gemen," he thundered. "We come here for you, Velos. Your city and your people will be spared if you surrender yourself to us."

"You speak nonsense," sputtered Velos, but then the conversation was taken over by Sebbac.

"We have someone here who may interest you," he shouted.

Erone's eyes narrowed dangerously as he studied the woman that was dragged forward. He immediately recognized Calli's faithful handmaiden.

"She is nothing to me," he called.

"I think now it is you who lie," Sebbac answered scornfully. "If your whore wishes this creature to live, then she must surrender herself."

Erone let the ugly comment hang in the night air, a dark bird of war between them.

Revar came forward to stand beside his father, but Erone raised a hand, signaling him to hold his tongue. He knew his son harbored a great affection for Solte and did not want such emotion to cloud the issue.

"We want the queen," cried Sebbac.

"You will not have her!" Solte cried suddenly.

Erone froze as he caught the quick movement from the maid.

"No, Solte!" Revar shouted.

But he was too late, and so were the Sorisi, to catch the determined woman before she wrestled herself out of Sebbac's grasp and began to run toward the Shadrani. But she wasn't going to get far, and everyone knew it.

Velos drew his dagger and fired it, catching the woman squarely between the shoulder blades. She died quickly, her blood staining the ground beneath her.

A cry of outrage filled the forest and the sound covered the retreat of the two Sorisi who scurried back behind the gates. Erone fought the anger that threatened to choke him. His voice was steely and dangerous when he spoke at last.

"You will all die."

The Shadrani set up their tents and shelters and settled in.

The siege had begun.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Yves and Monique Ste. Claire were childless for years," Mackenzie said. "They had everything they desired in life except the family they both wanted so desperately. Well," he shrugged, "you can imagine how thrilled they were when it finally happened."

"Although the pregnancy was difficult, Monique gave birth to a baby boy and, a year later, a beautiful little girl."

He sighed and ran a tired hand over his face. "I don't know why Marius and Arianna turned out the way they did. I used to think it was because their parents had waited so long for children and they spoiled them terribly. But now I think some people are just born bad."

Dallas looked up at the comment. "You really think that's possible?"

Mackenzie bit back the ready reply that formed on his lips. The boy would understand soon enough.

"I think anything's possible, Dallas. Remember I told you that Marius had a falling out with my parents?"

He was answered with a nod.

"Well it was the night they came home and found him in bed with his sister."

"Yikes," Dallas breathed.

"Exactly," Mack agreed. "They threw him out. They threw them both out, since Arianna seemed to be completely under her brother's spell. Then they spent quite a few years suffering remorse, regret and guilt, until they decided to change their lives."

"That's where I came in," he said. "They adopted me when I was a young boy, moved to California, and started fresh."

He stopped and took a long draft of his cognac. "Everything was going fine until one night, Arianna showed up again on our doorstep."

"She came home?"

Mackenzie nodded.

"Without Marius?"

Another nod. "He was dead."

Dallas shivered at the thought. "How old were you then?"

"I was eleven," Mack replied, "and I'll tell you, I was having a difficult time understanding what was going on. A 'friend' brought her home, and if the old saying is true, that you can tell people by who their friends are, then Marius must have been a real charmer..."

There had been no announcement of her coming, no warning. She and the man with her merely appeared one evening as if they were making a routine family visit. The friend was a dark and distinctly unpleasant character. When Yves opened to his knock, he stood on the doorstep and looked down his nose at him. There was an innate sense of threat about him that caused Yves to take a step back.

"Your son Marius is dead," the man stated. "I have brought his family home to you."

"His family," Yves asked uncertainly.

The friend nodded, then turned and motioned. Into the room walked Arianna, her face blank and vacant, even her stride indicating a complete indifference to life in general.

At her side was a ten-year-old boy.

The atmosphere in the room turned eerily electric when the child entered.

Everyone froze, staring at him as if he could not be real.

Yves, Monique, and Mackenzie did not immediately sense the depth of the scrutiny in his gaze; they could only continue to gape at him while his mere presence rooted them to the spot. He was, without doubt, the most exquisitely beautiful child any of them had ever seen. It took their collective breath away to watch him move silently toward them.

Long, blue-black hair hung shaggily about his forehead and shoulders, adding a dimension of vulnerability to a face that could only belong to an angel. His mouth was full and sensuous, seeming to hold an everlasting pout. And his eyes! No one could possess such eyes! They were such a pale shade of blue that they appeared more like molten silver and they shone with an unsettling fire of intensity.

They were eyes that knew too much.

Eyes that revealed nothing.

Even at the age of ten, he asserted an uncanny influence over the space he occupied... and the people in it.

The friend's voice broke the spell. "This is Dominic Ste. Claire," he announced, obviously enjoying himself, "Marius and Arianna's son."

Mack struggled to hold Monique as her knees gave out. Yves came to assist, helping his wife to the nearest chair.

"You could have prepared us better," he spat angrily.

The man feigned astonishment. "I thought you'd be pleased to have such a grandson. Just look at him! You can cross two continents and never find anything like this little beauty."

He stroked the boy's dark hair, momentarily lost himself in those astonishing eyes.

Yves grimaced at the look that passed between them—it was obvious that the man had more than a friendly interest in the child.

"Doesn't the boy speak?" Yves said, hoping to divert their attention.

"I speak five languages," the child replied. The voice was as disquieting as the boy, soft and silky, with just the trace of a French accent. His silver eyes darkened. "Does that suit you?"

Yves felt himself growing more and more uncomfortable in the presence of the unusual child.

"That's... most commendable," he mumbled.

The friend grinned darkly. "He is very bright. But he does have a temper." He indicated an ugly scar on his neck as he continued to gaze down on the boy.

"This will testify to that, won't it, my pet? One night, while his father and I were playing with him, he tried to tear my throat out with his teeth. Why don't you show them your bad temper?"

He grinned maliciously as he twined his fingers in the boy's long dark hair, pulling cruelly until Dominic's feet barely touched the ground.

"Couchon!" the child hissed between clenched teeth. "Let go of me!"

The man only yanked harder.

Kicking viciously, Dominic missed his captor's groin by inches before the man released him suddenly, then struck him with a backhand so powerful it knocked him halfway across the room and left him sprawling on the floor.

Mackenzie's eyes grew round with shock at the cruel behavior. Without a thought, he ran to help the other boy up.

"Are you all right?" he asked, bending to take his arm.

Dominic jumped up and away from him as if he'd been burned.

"Do not touch me!" he snarled, throwing Mack such a look of hatred that the confused boy backed away.

"He is not used to kindness," the friend mused, "you would do well not to

waste it on him while he is here."

"You mean you intend to leave him here," Yves gasped.

"I intend to leave them both here," the man replied, eyeing Arianna disdainfully. "She is no good to anyone anymore, and, much as I hate to leave this little treat, my lifestyle will not allow for a ten-year-old boy.

"Come now," he quipped as he noted the dismay in Monique's eyes. "Arianna is your daughter and she needs someone to take care of her. As for Dominic, you should be flattered. Marius had been offered as much as a million dollars for him. Do not look so horrified... he obviously did not sell him."

With that, he bent down on one knee and motioned to the boy. "Come here, Dominic," he said enticingly. The boy moved away warily, hesitated, and then slowly approached, a cautious look on his face.

"Now you remember what you've been told," the man said, looking meaningfully into his eyes, "... you remember." Then he stood, turned, and, without a final goodbye to anyone, walked out the door.

* * * *

Dallas sat with rapt attention as he listened to the strange story of the Ste. Claire family. With every word, he was coming closer to understanding the strain in the home that now offered him its shelter.

Mackenzie had stopped for a moment. To collect himself, Dallas thought. There had been a marked change in the older man's tone when the boy, Dominic, had entered the story.

Taking another swallow of cognac, Mackenzie continued...

Arianna and Dominic were given the east wing to live in. It was remote and separate, but still allowed Yves to keep an eye on them. It seemed a logical solution for all concerned.

One evening, Mackenzie went to the wing in search of his younger counterpart. In spite of Dominic's initial hostility toward him, he was determined to make friends, thinking that it would be ideal to have a playmate living under the same roof.

There was no answer when he knocked at Dominic's door, so he peeked in, calling his name. Discovering the room empty, Mack stepped inside, content to wait for the other boy.

He glanced around the room. It was neat and tidy, obsessively so. Clothes were fastidiously folded away and the few things that the boy owned were lined up, in their place.

Order ruled here.

Mackenzie walked over to the nightstand and looked at the book that was lying there. Here might be a way for him to connect with the other boy, since he loved to read himself. He had just picked the volume up and was about to thumb through it when the door opened and Dominic entered.

The strange boy's beautiful face darkened with fury when he saw the intruder. Then he noticed the book in Mack's hand.

"Put that down," he said dangerously.

Something in his eyes made Mack drop the book immediately. "I-I didn't mean any harm," he stammered defensively. "I just came here to-well, uh-I thought we could be friends..."

He trailed off at the look on Dominic's face.

This boy would never be his friend.

Dominic advanced toward him threateningly. "I do not need any friends," he whispered darkly.

"Why do you hate me so much?" Mack cried. "I haven't done anything to you!"

Dominic ignored the question, stalking him like a cat with its prey. Mack backed away, chilled by the dangerous warning in the silver eyes.

"If I ever find you in my room again, touching my things, I will kill you."

Mack finally became angry. "Who do you think you are anyway?" he said incredulously. "You don't just go around killing people!"

Dominic stopped, slowly raising an arm to point a finger at Mack. "You will

not ever come into my room and you will not ever put your hands on what is mine."

"It's just a stupid book," Mack taunted, "I wasn't going to steal it, I didn't hurt it, I just picked it up!" He scooped up the book to emphasize his point. It would be the last time in his life he would ever dismiss a warning from Dominic.

By the time Yves arrived to investigate the shouting, Dominic had almost choked Mackenzie to death.

* * * *

In the weeks that followed, Mackenzie avoided the other boy religiously. It was becoming clear to the Ste. Claires that it was going to take a long, long time for the odd grandchild to fit in anywhere. He did not do anything like a normal boy.

When the family sat down to meals, even the distant Arianna would join them. Dominic would take his food and retreat to his room. It seemed he rarely slept at night; Yves would often wake to find him up and about. When he did sleep, he wouldn't wake until long into the afternoon. He did not think, act, or play like other boys. He kept to himself most of the time, preferring his own company.

"Am I permitted to use the library?" he asked his grandfather one day.

"Yes Dominic," Yves replied evenly. "This is your home now. You do not need to ask permission."

Try as they would, Monique and Yves could not help a growing sense of revulsion at the boy. He had, after all, been born of the unnatural union between brother and sister and, beautiful as he was, every time they looked at him they were reminded of their own failings. It did not take Dominic long to pick up on their feelings. The boy took a fiendish delight in throwing it back in their faces every chance he could.

He ignored Arianna as effectively as she ignored him, skirting a path around her and talking past her as if she were part of the furniture. When Arianna did acknowledge his presence, it was to scold him for merely being in the room or to slap him out of her way. She despised her son and made no effort to hide it.

Yves was certain he understood why the woman hated her own son. On the night the dark man brought them home, the look he had seen pass between Dominic and the stranger left little to the imagination. And when the man had made the comment about how he and Marius "played" with the boy... Yves shuddered. He could just imagine what kind of a game it had been.

With a certainty that chilled his blood, Yves knew the boy had been sexually abused by his own father. It didn't require much further thought to realize that Arianna must have learned to hate her son because he had taken Marius' attention away from her.

Yves sat down with his wife to discuss the difficult issue and they agreed it was their duty to try everything to give Dominic a normal home to live in. They enlisted Mackenzie's aid as well. But Yves struggled with the words to help his son understand the strange child better.

"He's not like you, Mackenzie. Because of the way he was raised, he doesn't know any better right now. Your mother and I are hoping that if we just try to give him affection and show him, by example, what it's like to be loving and normal, maybe he'll change."

Mack's young face indicated that he did not think Dominic would ever be normal.

"Please Mackenzie," Yves said, "we've got to give him a chance."

Mack did not entirely understand, but he knew it was important to his parents that he make a special effort where Dominic was concerned. He would do anything to please his parents.

Dominic had different ideas.

He made a concerted effort to make every day just a little unpleasant for his

young adopted uncle.

He was finally enrolled in Mackenzie's school and quickly became the center of attention. That was when Mack found out that Dominic was quite capable of being charming to get his own way. Within weeks he was beginning to turn all Mack's friends away from him.

But it did not take long-much to Mack's relief-for the school to contact the Ste. Claires to inform them that Dominic did not belong in that particular educational milieu.

"He's far too bright to be educated in the mainstream," the principal told them, "he should be in a special school for gifted children."

Once they found such a school and had Dominic secured away daily within a system that at least offered him a challenge, things seemed to settle down a little.

* * * *

The years passed tumultuously. Dominic was always in trouble in some way or another. He somehow managed, however, to stay just short of serious trouble. As often and as effectively as he could, he would drag Mackenzie into it. Mackenzie was no match for his brilliance and as they grew older, he found he was no match for his size. The younger boy grew rapidly, maturing physically and mentally at an alarming rate.

But when Dominic turned thirteen, the real trouble began. Puberty had arrived and his sexuality broke open with the ferocity of a bursting damn.

Yves and Monique received a devastating call from his school shortly thereafter. Dominic was caught in the middle of one of the biggest scandals the establishment had ever had to face. He was having an affair with one of his teachers. The guilty party was fired on the spot when the secret was discovered. Charges were pending.

He was a married man with three children.

Shocked and outraged, the Ste. Claires confronted Dominic with it.

"You should not have let that man touch you," Monique said sternly.

Dominic's gaze was scathing. "You do not understand," he said blandly, "I seduced him."

Yves barely muffled a sound of fury. "You cannot go around seducing older men!"

"Why not?" came the icy reply.

When the two simply stood and sputtered at him, the boy continued. "Anyway, it is not just older men, and I will continue to do it."

Monique finally found her voice.

"Why?" she shouted. "Why must you do these things?"

He looked at her as if she were simple-minded.

"Because I like it."

As if that were all the justification he would ever need.

* * * *

Mack decided he could best help his parents by keeping an eye on Dominic himself. He soon found it was a full-time job. His only consolation was that the younger boy's energies were now all concentrated in one area: physical pleasure.

By the time he turned fourteen, Dominic could easily pass for a boy years older. Gay males and straight females would fall in love with him on sight. He would use them mercilessly, untouched by their adoration, and then refuse to have anything to do with them.

He bored easily. It seemed he was incapable of emotional involvement of any kind. Sexual pleasure was the only thing that appeared to reach him in any way; it was the only thing Mack had ever seen him enthused about.

He pursued it with heartless desperation.

While all this was going on, Mack was having difficulty with his own

sexuality. He was shy with girls, always becoming too uncomfortable to take his sexual encounters past the point of curious touching. It didn't help matters that any girl he managed to get close to would take one look at Dominic and forget that Mackenzie existed. And the younger boy took savage delight in taking the attention away from him. It was useless for Mack to warn the smitten females of Dominic's nature, they dismissed his warnings as jealousy. They always paid for it.

* * * *

Just when all seemed hopeless, Mackenzie met a sixteen-year-old girl named Diedre. Her warm personality and quick wit created an instant bond between herself and the self-conscious Mack. She was good with him, always there with a ready smile and a joke to brighten his darker days. After his consistently bad treatment at female hands, the young man was amazed that someone with the girl's refined good looks and obvious intelligence would find him interesting. He found himself looking forward to her visits with something akin to relief. As soon as Dominic noticed the closeness between her and Mack, he went after her with everything he had. Diedre knew how Mackenzie felt about Dominic. She tried to resist. She was even successful for a time. But the girl was astonished at the ways Dominic found to work on her resistance, to break down her resolve. He turned out to be charming and bright. He was even sweet with her, and she never saw any evidence of the nasty character that Mackenzie had spoken of. Within a month, she was hopelessly involved with him. Once she surrendered to him, his attention was lavished on her so completely that it was difficult for her to even function properly. She had never heard of a male with such a capacity for sexual activity. Her response to him frankly unnerved her. It seemed she could not get enough of him. Diedre was afraid that she was falling in love with Dominic and was daily feeling more and more guilty about what she knew was a betrayal of Mack's friendship. Try as she would, however, she could not pull herself out of the younger boy's spell. Finally, Dominic arranged for Mackenzie to find them together. As he blundered onto the calculated scene, the older boy's face clearly displayed his devastation at the sight of the girl he had come to care for taking such passionate pleasure in Dominic. Catching sight of him, Diedre recoiled from the look of desperate pain on his face. She quickly pulled out of Dominic's embrace and gathered her things, tears streaming down her face as she finally realized the unwitting part she had played in the boy's cruel plan. "I'm so sorry, Mack," she whispered painfully before she fled the room in shame and humiliation. Mackenzie never saw her again. Dominic seemed to change subtly after that. He appeared almost apologetic to Mack, going out of his way to do nice things for him. This uncharacteristic behavior continued for so long that Mackenzie's initial suspicions about it began to give way.

* * * *

One night when Yves and Monique were out, Mack retired to his room early, intent on catching up on some homework. It was his habit to study in bed, and he was just settling down to read when his nemesis entered the room. "What are you doing?" Dominic asked quietly.

Mack looked up, his face showing momentary surprise at the unprecedented visit. "I thought I'd study for a while," he answered. "Unlike you, I have to work to get good grades."

"Yes," Dominic said absently, strolling over to sit on the bed beside Mack, "I suppose that is rather annoying for you."

Mackenzie was unsettled by the simple nearness of the other boy. His pulse began to thump erratically and he had the unbidden desire to tell him to just get out. But he also knew how important it was to his parents that he and Dominic get along. This was the first act of friendship Dominic had ever offered him. He felt he couldn't just reject it out of hand.

Within an hour the two boys were talking comfortably, with Mack struggling to hide his surprise that Dominic was capable of such amicability. He showed incredible insight and sensitivity as they discussed friends, problems with school, anything and everything that would mutually interest adolescent boys. Inevitably, the conversation turned to sex. Mack was defensive about it.

Dominic approached it cautiously.

"You still have not done it, have you?"

"I might have if you'd stay out of my way," Mack replied bitterly, remembering the girl who had hurt him so much with Dominic.

Dominic tuned in immediately. "You are still angry with me because of her?"

"You shouldn't have used her like that."

"She did not care about you, Mackenzie. Otherwise she would not have let me touch her. She is not important."

"Nobody's important to you," Mack snapped, immediately sorry as he caught the momentary stab of pain that swept over those exquisite eyes.

"Perhaps that is because I do not trust anyone."

Mack looked down at his book, fumbling with the cover. Suddenly he was ashamed of himself for forgetting the pain that Dominic's father must have inflicted on him, pain that he himself would never have to deal with every day.

"You should give some people a chance."

"What people?" Dominic questioned solemnly. "My own grandparents think I am a freak." He looked searchingly into Mack's eyes. "Who am I supposed to trust... you?"

"Well, you might try," Mack said tenuously. "All I ever wanted was to be your friend."

"I thought you hated me."

Mackenzie shook his blond head. He was beginning to feel overwhelming sympathy for the younger boy; he suddenly seemed so vulnerable and confused.

"You do things to make me hate you," he said. "I didn't set out to hate you."

Dominic sighed and closed his eyes, speaking more to himself than to Mack.

"Perhaps I want to give people a reason to hate me. They are going to hate me anyway."

He said this last with such a note of despairing resignation that Mack felt his heart wrench. He put his hand on the other boy's arm.

"Dominic," he said gently, "people wouldn't hate you just because of what you are. It's not your fault... about your... your parents."

He had touched an emotional wound. Tears rolled silently down Dominic's face as he turned away.

Mack reached out to him. "It's all right," he said. "You'll see, everything will be all right."

The boy fell into his arms. They sat holding each other in an atmosphere charged with heightened feelings and unchained emotion.

Then Mackenzie started when he felt a soft, gentle, nuzzle on his neck. He froze, afraid to move as Dominic kissed his shoulder, firmly but cautiously.

"Do not be afraid Mackenzie," the boy whispered, "I just want to be close to you."

He continued his caresses, inching slowly along Mack's neck and shoulder. Struggling to understand that Dominic simply knew nothing else, Mackenzie did not protest. He was caught between pushing the boy away and just giving in to his odd show of affection. Mack knew that the former would set things back

between them, perhaps permanently. So he decided on the latter. He closed his eyes and shuddered as a thick, warm feeling began to swim through him. His eyes remained closed while Dominic kissed his ear, his cheek, his forehead, moving gently down his face until he reached his mouth. Barely making contact, Dominic teased playfully at Mack's mouth again and again, more firmly each time until they were locked in a deep, penetrating kiss. A momentary surge of panic coursed through Mackenzie as he suddenly realized he had lost complete control of the situation. But it was already too late for him to stop the flood of heated desire that was washing over him. He found himself returning Dominic's kiss with equal passion, not caring about the consequences. Nothing was important to him at this moment except the way the other boy was making him feel. Trailing slowly over Mack's body, Dominic's searching hand inched lower until it slipped under the covers to find its target. Mack started and gasped when he felt the touch, breaking off the kiss. He made a feeble effort to push the boy away. "No Mackenzie," Dominic whispered against his lips, "let me... please, let me make you feel good." It did no good to resist. Mack could not fight the waves of pleasure that were drowning him, could not stop the white-hot passion that inundated his senses. All he could do was surrender to the ecstasy, to the sensual riptide that was Dominic.

* * * *

In the weeks that followed, Mackenzie learned everything there was to know about the kind of pleasure one male can give another. Days passed by much the same as they had before his sexual involvement with Dominic. He rarely saw the other boy in the cold light of day. Dominic would come to him every night. At first Mackenzie felt guilty about it, wondering at how easily he had given in to the sensual boy. Then he found himself justifying his weakness. It was merely curiosity, he reasoned, a natural reaction to the full awakening of his sexuality, no matter who or what had triggered it. Meanwhile, he lived for the nights when Dominic would silently slip into bed beside him. He longed for the soft, seductive quality of the other boy's voice in the darkness, instructing him, urging him to do things he never would have dreamed of doing... with anyone. Somehow, Dominic made it all right. Mack refused to consider the possible repercussions of his actions. It wasn't as if he was doing anything wrong, he told himself, he was merely exploring new experiences. More than anything, he completely refused to contemplate what his parents would think if they found out. He convinced himself that they would never know.

* * * *

Yves was finding it particularly difficult to sleep. Arianna was becoming increasingly distant and restless; she was beginning to "see" Marius everywhere. Drawing on his robe, the worried man slipped out of bed to check on his daughter. She was sleeping soundly. Her father stroked her cheek and pulled the covers up under her chin. Looking down on her, he heaved a weary sigh. If only things had been different. Returning down the hall, Yves noticed that Dominic's door was open. Peeking in, he found an empty bed. Where was the peculiar boy now? There had been no evidence of him in the darkened east wing. Yves was just about to leave when his eyes rested on a magazine lying open and face down on the boy's bed. His curiosity piqued, he walked over and picked it up. The pages were filled, in blaring color, with some of the worst pornography he

had ever seen. Yves shuddered and dropped the magazine as if it had bitten him.

Sputtering with disgust, he stormed out of the room, determined to find the boy. Somehow, he promised himself, he would reach Dominic. Someone had to show him the path of destruction he was on.

The boy was not in the library. In fact, he was in none of the places he usually was on those numerous nights that he did not sleep. A growing sense of dread began to accent Yves' worry. There was only one place he had not looked, considering it out of the realm of possibility.

He couldn't be with Mackenzie.

Why would he be with Mackenzie at this hour of the morning?

Yves had been through enough with Marius to suspect the answer to that question. He made his way to Mackenzie's room, stopping outside the door, his heart in his throat.

Please, oh please god, he prayed silently, don't let him be here.

Then, without a knock or any form of warning, he opened the door and snapped on the light.

Both boys registered surprise on their faces as they sat bolt upright, the revealing light blinding them momentarily. Mackenzie's face was flushed with the heat of sexual excitement.

Yves closed his eyes on the scene and quietly walked away.

Frozen with guilt and shame, Mack sat staring at the open door.

How had this happened?

How had he allowed it to get so far out of control?

A feeling of creeping dread crawled up his spine when he turned to the boy who had orchestrated his downfall.

Dominic's gaze was piercing as he stared into Mack's stricken features.

"I guess that is the end of that," he said coldly.

Then he slipped out of bed and walked out of the room, leaving the other boy to stare after him in horror.

A sob of bitter pain and utter humiliation tore from Mackenzie's throat as tears welled to sting his eyes. But he was also filled with a desperate need to find his father.

He had to explain.

No matter how terrible it was, he had to find a way to explain. He climbed out of bed and eventually found Yves sitting alone in the den, his face buried in his hands.

Fighting to keep his emotions in check, Mackenzie approached slowly to sit beside his father. His hands clutched and unclutched as he struggled to still his trembling and find the impossible words that would explain behavior he could not himself understand.

But no words would come as Mackenzie looked at the man who had been more than a father to him, this man who had taken him when no one else wanted him.

Now he was suffering because of him.

It tore at the boy's heart to know he was the cause of any pain for Yves. He cursed his weakness, cursed his blindness. He choked on the self-loathing that rose up inside. But more than that, as he watched his father cry silently, he was filled with an overwhelming hatred for Dominic.

Finally he forced himself to speak.

"Please Pappa," he whispered. "Please don't hate me." Raw emotion clenched his throat, making it difficult to speak. "I'll understand if you want me to leave, but please... please don't hate me."

Yves looked up, his heart wrenching when he saw the shame and desperation on the boy's face. His own pain was forgotten as he realized how deeply Mack had been wounded by the turn of events.

"I do not hate you, Mackenzie," he said painfully, "I could never hate you."

Mack came into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably. "Oh, Pappa," he choked, "I never meant to hurt you. I'd never do anything to hurt you."

Yves gently smoothed the hair from Mackenzie's face.

He loved this boy completely.

He forgave him instantly.

"It's all right," he soothed, "I don't blame you for what happened." Then his jaw clenched as anger worked its way to the surface. "It's him, damn him! I curse the day he came into our lives. Damn him! Damn him to hell!" Neither Yves nor Mack noticed the boy lingering in the darkness by the doorway, watching the scene between father and son. His pale blue eyes were icy and hard and unreadable.

* * * *

There was no cause for worry, following that night, about a resumption of the sexual relationship between Mack and Dominic. Dominic never approached him again.

Mackenzie would have killed him if he had.

Yves and Monique gave up on hoping and gave up their efforts to help.

They gave up on Dominic.

Collectively, they issued thanks that he seemed to pick up on the change in attitude, avoiding all three of them religiously.

Then one day, his meals were sent to him. Upon investigation, he found that one of the rooms in the east wing had been turned into a mini-library. He got the message.

* * * *

Dominic graduated from high school before he turned fifteen. There was no celebration. A few months later, Mackenzie turned sixteen. Yves and Monique threw an elaborate party for him. Dominic was not invited.

His withdrawal from the family was complete. His grandparents were determined to pretend he had never been born. They would do anything to protect Mackenzie from him. It was relayed to him that they would no longer interfere with his frantic pursuit of pleasure, they only hoped he would be discreet. He would receive nothing from them, no support, no hope, and no love. They would merely supply him with a place to live until he was old enough to be on his own.

After that, they sincerely wished never to see him again.

An uneasy truce was established.

* * * *

On many long nights Mackenzie would lie awake, tormented by tears of bitterness. His hatred for Dominic only grew as he came to blame the other boy for what he had become.

If only the vicious boy had not seduced him.

If only he had not opened those doors that would never again close.

It was becoming clear to Mack that he had been deeply damaged by Dominic's treachery. Although he fought the frightening possibility, he knew that he would never live a "normal" life. He would never love a woman and have a family, but would spend his days in an agonizing search to find the kind of ecstasy he had found in Dominic's arms.

So, Mackenzie was beginning to travel in the gay world and it was impossible, through that effective grapevine, not to hear stories about his nemesis.

The boy would be sixteen soon and had already developed a taste for the bizarre and the unusual. Stories of his escapades became so pervasive that it was impossible for Mack to tune out or leave each time talk turned to Dominic's latest sordid encounter.

It seemed that nothing was too perverse for his young enemy.

Mack didn't know whether Dominic was actually homosexual, he did know first-hand that the boy simply did not care where he found his pleasure. Right now it served his appetite to be with males and he was quickly acquiring an almost cultish appeal.

In the gay world, where sensuality was heralded as sacred, Dominic was the

apprenticing god.

* * * *

In the months that followed, Mackenzie saw Dominic only once. It was on one of those nights that the older boy was having trouble sleeping.

He slipped out of bed and headed for the kitchen, his thoughts on a mid-night snack. As he came around the corner of the room, he saw that the fridge door was open. Frowning, he moved closer and realized that Dominic was sitting on the floor in front of the open door. The other boy did not see him, and Mackenzie did not want to make himself known. He was just about to turn and sneak back to bed, when he saw the small stream of blood that was running across the white tile floor.

That stopped him cold.

He stepped a little closer and saw it was meat that was causing it. Raw steak that the other boy had in his hands and was devouring as if his life depended upon it.

Mackenzie felt his stomach heave at the dark savagery of it. He turned and fled back to his room.

* * * *

Wanting the troubled youth out of their lives as soon as possible, Yves changed the legal age on the trust fund. The document was now set up so that Dominic could begin to draw his inheritance at sixteen. With this, he hoped the boy would be encouraged to leave. So it was that the entire household anxiously awaited Dominic's coming birthday, certain that once the boy's inheritance was secure, he would be gone.

Yves was also certain that Arianna would be much less agitated with the boy gone. Seeing him seemed to trigger tragic memories of Marius. More and more often now, she insisted that Marius came to her in the night. It meant nothing to her that Marius was dead; she was convinced that the bond they had shared transcended such earthly bounds. She was getting worse every day.

Dominic's birthday came and went without fanfare, merely a sigh of relief that turned into exasperation as it became increasingly obvious that he had no intention of leaving. Weeks passed while his frustrated family hoped each day for news of his departure.

Then one day, Arianna strolled blissfully into the den where Yves and Monique were discussing the possible motives behind Dominic's tenacious presence. Interrupted by her arrival, they turned to study their pathetic daughter. She was so content with life now that she had convinced herself Marius was back with her.

Monique frowned. Something about her daughter seemed different today.

"Are you feeling all right, dear?" she asked.

"Yes Mother," Arianna replied absently, "you don't have to worry. Marius promised me that things will soon be different. Once I have this baby, we'll be together again."

Her parents gaped in unison.

Baby!

That was it, Monique thought desperately, that's what was different. Now that she looked with knowing eyes, it was obvious that Arianna was pregnant.

She crossed the room to take her daughter's arm and search those vacant eyes.

"Who?" she asked tersely, "who is the father of this baby?"

"I told you," Arianna answered, looking at her mother as if she had lost her mind, "Marius."

Yves and Monique exchanged helpless glances, their minds struggling with the same facts. Marius was dead. How could a dead man make her pregnant? Who could have done this? Who could have convinced her so thoroughly? Yves' blood froze as the only possible solution seared through his thoughts.

Monique turned to him stonily, the same conclusion forcing itself on her. "No,

Yves," she said bleakly. "Not even Dominic would do that. God no... not his own mother."

But at that moment, Yves knew with unmitigated certainty that Dominic was responsible. He had taken advantage of Arianna's demented state, had convinced her that he was her dead lover. With the darkness to conceal him and her blind eagerness to believe, it would have been easy for Dominic.

That night, Yves cried in his wife's arms. Monique cried with him, for the hopelessness of the situation, for Arianna, and for her unborn baby.

What kind of a child would come of that unholy union?

Dominic somehow found out that Arianna's pregnancy had been revealed. The Ste. Claires checked his room to find his things gone.

It was as if he had never been there.

Then it was discovered that Arianna was carrying twins, which only added to her parents' dismay. They were afraid of the children before they were born.

* * * *

The night that Arianna went into labor, Dominic materialized at the hospital. Neither Yves nor Monique would acknowledge his presence and he had the good sense to keep some distance between himself and his family. But Mack could not help studying the silent enigma across the room from him.

Why had he done it?

What drove him to do such despicable things?

Almost as if he had heard the silent question, Dominic lifted his dark head and turned to meet the older boy's eyes. Mack felt a reflexive shiver, starting at the intense reaction he still felt under the scrutiny of that gaze, still trying, unsuccessfully, to discern what emotion governed the expression in those eyes.

A few hours later, the doctor came out.

"Your daughter had a difficult time, but she's fine and should be out in a day or so."

Yves shifted anxiously. "The babies," he said, "are they all right?"

"Yes," the doctor replied. "They are a little small, but, barring complications, they should be just fine." He smiled reassuringly. "They are beautiful babies. Not identical twins, a boy and a girl."

"Are you certain they are all right?" Monique asked nervously.

Dominic threw her a black look.

The doctor regarded her curiously. "Yes," he repeated, "they're fine."

Dominic approached the group.

"Disappointed, Grandmother?" he said disdainfully. "What were you expecting, horns and a tail?"

With that, he turned on his heel and disappeared out of their lives.

A few hours later, they discovered that Shanna's tiny brother was also gone.

* * * *

As Mackenzie came to the end of his story, the newly risen sun was sending soft pinpoints of golden light across the Ste. Claire den.

"Yves died when Shanna was two, his heart finally gave out on him. Monique did not last long after that, she wasn't strong enough to face life without him. Before they died, I promised them both that I would try to restore some kind of dignity to the Ste. Claire name, to protect Shanna from the past and prevent Dominic from ruining the family." He sighed wearily. "I've had no such problem with Dominic, thank god. I haven't seen or heard from him since the night Shanna was born."

Dallas sat in silence; drained, exhausted, feeling as though he had himself lived through all the events that Mack had unfolded during the night. Trying to envision the strength it would take to hold up under such circumstances, his respect deepened for this man who had dealt with the turmoil most of his life.

No wonder he kept secrets.

"Mack," he said quietly, "you can't keep the truth from Shanna forever. She's bound to find out. She's too curious and too smart not to."

"I know, I know. I just don't know how or when to tell her. And she's more than just smart." He shook his head sadly. "Her IQ has been tested at over 150... she's so much like Dominic in so many ways."

"Like him?" Dallas protested. "You can't mean that."

"No, no Dallas," Mack replied, smiling slightly at the boy's protectiveness.

"I don't mean she's disturbed like Dominic. It's just some of her ways. The way she thinks or reacts to a particular situation, the way she analyzes things. Perhaps she's too bright. Perhaps they're both too bright."

"I don't think it's possible to be too bright," said a small voice from a corner of the room.

Mack and Dallas started and turned.

She sat quietly looking at them, only her eyes revealing the struggle raging in her mind.

"Oh my god, Shanna," Mack whispered in horror, "how long have you been there?" Her voice broke a little when she answered him. "I heard the whole story, if that's what you're asking." She struggled to her feet. "I heard Momma in the hall last night and came down to see if Dallas was okay. You didn't notice me come in... I couldn't help listening."

Dallas felt a tug at his heart as he watched Shanna struggle with the devastating truth.

Mack continued to stare at her. Finally, he made an effort to speak.

She interrupted quickly. "It's all right, Mack. I'm fine, really. It's a relief actually, to finally know. Well-" she made a small attempt at humor "-because I thought it was going to be something bad."

No one laughed.

Crossing the floor, Shanna sat beside her uncle. "I guess I have a brother out there somewhere, don't I?"

Mackenzie didn't answer. He merely continued to stare at her as though she would crumble to tiny pieces before his eyes.

"Please Mack. I can handle it. Really... just... don't look at me that way. Don't treat me any differently."

Dallas understood what Shanna was doing. There was no point in wallowing in the tragedy, nothing could change the past.

"Mackenzie," he said quietly. "It's better this way. You don't have to pretend anymore. It's better that she knows."

"I suppose you're right," Mack said, finally finding his voice. He took Shanna's hands in his and gazed into her eyes. "You don't have to face any of this alone, princess. I'm here for you. We'll work this through together." Shanna offered a sad smile as she nodded silently, putting on a brave face. Suddenly she turned to face Dallas. "Did you see someone in Momma's rooms last night?"

Dallas hesitated. He threw an inquiring glance toward Mackenzie, who gave him back a resigned look. "I'm pretty sure someone was there. But it was dark."

Shanna turned back to her uncle. "If there was someone there, who would you say it was?"

Mack paused momentarily, his old habit of lying coming to the fore. Then he decided it was, indeed, time to be honest. "If there was someone in that room last night," he said tightly, "it could only have been Dominic."

Shanna bolted out of the chair and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Mack demanded.

"Maybe he's still there," Shanna replied, her voice edged with determination.

"Shanna! My god, no!"

Hearing the fright in Mackenzie's cry, Dallas headed her off at the door.

"Get out of my way!" she demanded.

Mack came up behind her and swept her up in his arms. She made no effort to stop him, but fell limply into his embrace. His voice trembled with emotion when he spoke.

"You are never to go near your father, Shanna. Do you hear me? Never! Stay away from him-he'll destroy you!"

Shanna closed her eyes finally and began to sob. Carrying her back to the sofa, Mackenzie hugged her tightly to him, rocking her while she cried. Dallas slipped quietly out of the room, giving them some time alone. As he dragged himself up the stairs, he suddenly felt weary and much older, wondering how he was going to protect Mack and Shanna. Because he knew there had been someone in that room with him earlier. And he guessed it must have been Dominic. He didn't know what he could do about the man, but he knew one thing for sure: he would never enter the east wing again, night or day.

* * * *

Mack closed the east wing of the house.

The door to the connecting hallway was bolted and the key locked away. He moved Arianna into a new room close to his own, determined to never again allow Dominic to torment her. Most of all, he worried about what he would do if the man returned to force a confrontation with him.

Even before the incidents of that night triggered his worry, Mack had often wondered what kind of a man Dominic had grown into, shuddering at the possibilities.

His worries proved unfounded. There was no more talk from Arianna of ghostly visitors; there were no more strange nightly occurrences in the Ste. Claire home.

As time passed, Mack convinced himself that Dallas had been mistaken in his belief that someone had been in the east wing that night.

Even Dallas began to wonder. He admitted that perhaps it had been his imagination. At any rate, it seemed to calm Mackenzie when Dallas told him that he could have been wrong, and the young man would do anything to ease Mack's burden.

Still... the east wing remained closed.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Days turned into weeks as the siege of the city of Soris continued. Erone knew that by now, Velos would have sent for help from some of the neighboring Sorisi strongholds. But it would take some time for them to arrive and he was prepared to meet any and all attacks. Even the seaward approach was covered. Nothing would deter the wooden ships quite as much as the fiery missiles launched from Raesa's troops.

His warriors were strong and resolved in their purpose.

In the midst of the wait, Erone worried for Revar. At times he forgot that his son was half Sorisi, but that knowledge was not far from his thoughts as they camped outside the formidable walls and waited for Velos to surrender. He knew his son harbored a large amount of guilt at the thought of the innocent Sorisi who were suffering inside.

Daily, they received news from home and daily, Calli begged for information back about what was happening.

"What do you suppose is happening in there, Father?"

Erone looked over at his son, and then up at the great walls. He shook his head.

"We can only hope that the people of Soris will eventually rise up against Velos."

"Do you think that is possible?"

"Jala felt that there was enough support for your mother for it to happen, but it may take time."

"Well," replied Revar grimly, "we seem to have a lot of that."

That said, he settled in beside his father and waited with him.

* * * *

Inside the city, new plots were indeed being hatched against Velos. But the leadership of the Captain of the Guard was sorely missed. The man who had replaced him moved with extreme caution now as he went about his plans. If there was even a hint that he was for restoring Queen Escallitani to the throne, he knew he would be executed immediately. So, as Erone surmised, the plot moved slowly. But the people were beginning to feel the effects of the siege. Food was already running low and tempers were becoming short.

* * * *

Back in the Shadrani village, Calli kept herself as busy as she could. She had still been grieving over the loss of Jala when she had received news of Solte's death. The double blow had almost undone her. She relied heavily on Mathena during this painful time and the older woman was proving to be a tower of strength for her.

In an effort to cope, Calli focused on the healing craft Jala had taught her. Daily, she went about helping Tebba with illness and complaints. In the evenings, she sought the company of Mathena. But it was three weeks into the siege that her world blew apart.

* * * *

Calli and Mathena were sitting around the hearth fire in the main room of the royal house of Gemen when there was a frenzied commotion at the door, and Vajra was announced.

Clearly unwell, the girl entered looking like a wraith. Her hands shook and her voice quavered as she bowed quickly to Mathena, and then took a seat on the floor, as was her custom.

"My lady," she began.

Both Mathena and Calli leaned forward to hear better, her voice was so hushed.

"You must call the warriors home," she rasped.

"What is it child?"

"The-the monsters from the sky," came the reply, "they are coming."

Then the shean slumped over and fell to a dead faint on the floor.

* * * *

Erone was growing weary of the siege. He had received no word from inside the city and wondered if all those who would fight for their queen had been discovered and executed. Too many times, he himself had been inside those walls and he knew they offered no solace to anyone who opposed their threat. He paced like a caged animal as he waited for some news.

The night was suddenly alive with the sound of approaching hooves. Within seconds of the sound, a young Shadrani female burst into the camp and flew off her horse and directly to his side.

"My lord," she gasped, "your mother sends word for you to return to the village."

Erone took her arm to steady her; she was drained and shaken after riding at a killing pace to bring the news.

"Catch your breath," he said calmly, while his warriors began to gather round.

"Vajra has had another vision," the rider said after a few moments. "She said there is no time to spare, the enemies from the sky are coming!"

This brought a round of hushed comments. Erone ignored the feeling of alarm that crawled up his spine. He had only moments to decide his next move. If he left now, the Sorisi would be free to gather together and mass their numbers against him. But if Vajra was right, his fight with the Sorisi would be the last thing on his mind.

A shean was not a thing to ignore.

He raised his voice and called to his warriors, "Break camp! We ride home!"

* * * *

If they had not left off the siege when they did, the outcome would have been far worse for the Shadrani, but as it was, they were in the forest, en route to the village when the first strike hit. Behind them, ear-splitting explosions rattled the night and they pulled up and turned back to see what had caused such a chilling sound. Above the trees, where the walls of Soris had stood, there was now only a broken skeleton of the huge structure. All around, the sky was glowing red with an unnatural fire and the thunderous roar of bombardment continued.

"Great Tsandis," Erone breathed. Around him, his warriors turned to each other and exchanged shocked looks. It was the first time he had ever seen naked fear on their faces.

"Ride!" he shouted as he spurred his great war-horse on. As one, the warriors spun and followed.

* * * *

Calli struggled with the wave of weakness that threatened her. She had to hang on. She had to be conscious when Erone arrived, had to tell him where the children were hidden. Everywhere in the village, the smell of death and fire permeated the night.

Vajra had been right; the enemy from the sky had come.

And monsters, they certainly were.

Calli shuddered as she remembered her first sight of them. Scaly and dark, with merciless yellow eyes, the things had appeared out of nowhere.

Her terror had almost undone her.

The first explosions had rocked the night and then they had simply been there. With the warriors away, there was no one to stop them and the village had been caught totally defenseless. The beasts seemed to enjoy using their vicious, curved swords on anything live that crossed their path.

Calli had stood at the window with Mathena and watched helplessly while the creatures appeared and began to wreck havoc on the Shadrani village. Neither she nor Mathena had time to even think before the things were suddenly on the second floor and had burst into the room where the two women stood. Watching them in their deadly approach, Calli felt her fear dissolve and an acceptance of the inevitable take hold of her heart.

She knew she was about to die.

Mathena, knowing the same, took her short sword from its scabbard and attacked without heed.

They cut her down without missing a stride.

Calli stood her ground as they stepped over the dead woman and advanced on her. The lead creature lifted his sword and Calli closed her eyes against the strike. But then a guttural command stopped the fatal blow.

Her eyes flew open to see what she assumed was their leader entering the room and move toward her. He stood close, examining her as if she were some science project. Then he roared at her, causing her to quail backward in spite of her resolve. He frowned, then reached inside his clothing and pulled something out. Calli couldn't see what it was, swallowed up inside the big paw of the thing. He held her fast and forced something cold and metallic onto her ear. Calli started when he next spoke, for she could suddenly understand what he was saying. Still, the words were chilling and cruel.

"Where are the young ones?"

Calli felt a wave of relief that she and Mathena had decided to take Vajra at her word and sent the children away to hide before the creatures had even arrived. Now she stood before this frightening thing and shook her head. She had to make this look good.

He twisted her arm cruelly as he dragged her outside and threw her to the

ground.

"Where are the young ones?" he shouted again. When Calli again refused to answer, he kicked her hard in the side. She cried out in pain but kept her lips pressed tightly together. It wasn't until the creature had beaten her for several more minutes that Calli finally gave up the information he sought. "They are hidden," she lied, cowering, "in a valley near the mountains." She pointed the way.

As the creature looked in the direction she had indicated, Calli had the first chance to look around her.

All she could see was terrible death and destruction. Everywhere around her, the bodies of Shadrani she knew and had cared for lay dead or dying. Briefly, she wondered why they had not killed her immediately as well.

Her question was answered when they dragged a young woman forward. The leader studied the girl with interest for a few moments. Then he shouted in their ugly tongue, "She is not the one. But bring her. Perhaps she will do if we cannot find the other."

They are looking for someone.

But who? Why?

Then they led the young woman off in the direction Calli had indicated as she lay there and watched helplessly. Before the leader moved to follow, he leaned down and stabbed Calli through the chest.

Bent on his dark purpose, he left her there to die.

* * * *

Even before they rode into the devastation of their village, the Shadrani warriors knew to expect the worst. The smell of fire and death had greeted them along the road. But even thus prepared, the shock and pain was devastating.

Erone spotted Calli immediately and was off his horse and at her side before the animal had come to a halt. Revlar, Lira and Habda were right behind him. Raesa saw the carnage and had only one thing on her mind. She raced inside the house to find Cera.

"My lord," Calli said, smiling feebly, "you are a welcome sight."

Tears ran freely down the faces of Revlar and Lira, but Erone bit back the emotion that threatened to tear him apart.

"My lady," he said gently, "you must not speak, but rest now."

She grasped his arm and looked earnestly into his eyes. "I will have much time for rest soon, my love."

Knowing she spoke the terrible truth, Erone merely held her and stroked her face.

"The children," she whispered, "the creatures are after the children."

Habda's heart quailed at the words. His son's young face flashed in his mind as he exchanged a worried glance with Pashar.

"Where are the children, my lady?" he asked gently.

"We hid them in the caves near the water."

"Mother," Revlar begged, "please do not speak any more. You must stay calm."

Younger, less cynical, he refused to accept what was before his eyes.

"No dear," she answered him. "You must save the children." Then she looked up again at Erone, took his hand and placed the foreign earpiece into it. "One of the creatures put this on me. Wear it around your ear, and you will be able to understand them." Then she pointed the way they had gone. "I told them the children were in the valley that lies beyond the trees."

Erone hugged her to him and kissed her gently. "Ever my clever Calli," he whispered.

She looked up at him, love shining openly in her eyes. "Ever my love," she replied, then lay back in his arms, breathing her last breath.

Tears now ran freely down the face of the King of Gemen. Beside him, his son sobbed out his pain while Danae held him. Lira reached out in a final goodbye to touch the face of the woman who had been more than a mother to her.

Moments later, they stood at the sight of Raesa coming out of the great house, her own face wet with tears, and Cera, lifeless, in her arms. "Mother is dead inside," she sobbed. Then she dropped to her knees as Danae rushed to her side.

Erone's heart shattered again, the pain so terrible that he felt a momentary wish to end it all there, to draw his long knife and turn it on himself. All around him, he heard cries of shock and pain as the returning warriors discovered the remains of their loved ones.

There was no one left alive in the village.

But the children-the children were still safe.

He shook his head to clear away the dreadful grief that threatened to undo him in the hour of his greatest challenge. Calli was right, the children had to be saved. They had listened to Vajra and had built and stocked the boats and the young ones needed to get away in them. He would see to it.

His last act as king.

"Habda," he said, turning to the great Shadrani who was now sobbing like a child at the loss of Calli. "Gather the warriors once more."

At the sound of command from his king, Habda pulled himself together. "Yes, my lord."

Erone then turned to his son, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Revar, you and the other young warriors must go the caves, take the children, and get away in the boats.

Revar turned a look of horror on his father.

"And what of you?"

Erone's eyes gleamed with the hatred that now blazed in him for these creatures that had destroyed his love and his world.

"My warriors and I will see that you have time to escape."

Revar was about to protest again, when the slight pressure from his father's hand stopped him.

"No, my son," Erone said softly, "do not argue." He reached up and removed the amulet from his neck, placing it around his son's. "You will now be king. The future of our people is in your hands."

"Father," Revar whispered, "I cannot leave you."

Erone pulled him roughly into his embrace. "You must, my son. When you think of your mother and me, know that you have always been the joy in our lives."

Then he stepped back. "Go now. Time is not our friend tonight."

Revar straightened and somehow found the strength to turn away from his father. Then he called to Danae to gather the young warriors.

* * * *

Riding with the fury of hell, the older Shadrani warriors sped after the enemy. Calli had sent the creatures in exactly the opposite direction of where the children were.

We may yet save them, Erone thought as they thundered through the darkness. This thought was the only one he would allow, the only thing that mattered any more.

His plan formed, he waited until they were deep inside the forest, and then signaled to his warriors to pull up. They dismounted and gathered around their king.

"We know they have come this way," he said pointing to their tracks. "And we know that this is their only way back."

They would set a trap, he told them.

Erone had never faced such an enemy before, had no idea whether any of it would work, but he could not fathom any living thing that did not fear fire.

As it was, the creatures were already returning from their pointless search and were about to unknowingly catch the Shadrani by surprise. But the young, brave girl they had taken with them saved them at the last minute.

With her keen Shadrani instincts, she sensed her people nearby and sought to warn them of the danger.

"Shadrani beware!" she shouted, before a knife flashed in the darkness, slicing through her throat and killing her instantly.

Erone signaled, and immediately, the forest was alight with small bush fire that illuminated the enemy in their tracks. Now that the dreadful things could be seen, the night was filled with the deadly swish of arrows as Raesa and her females let loose from the trees.

Hsar, leader of the invading Gulka forces saw that his troops had been caught unprepared and were being cut down. He commanded them to take cover. Then he cursed the ignorant confidence that had led him to take on this mission without the backup of his ship. He had engaged the vessel only to destroy the Sorisi, not wanting to chance the possibility, remote as it was, that they would join forces with the Shadrani against the invaders. Then he had sent it off to re-join the battle they had left to come here.

He had been so sure the mission on Daleer would be short and easy. The Shadrani were primitive, he had said, and would pose no threat.

But now they were actually suffering losses. He shouted out his new orders, trying to get his troops back on track.

His Master would not be pleased.

Erone, wearing the device that Calli had given him, heard the orders given and understood the disarray that had fallen on his enemy.

Silently blessing his lost love, he rode along the line of defense.

"Raesa!" he called, "Bring your archers down from the trees. We are going to fire the forest."

* * * *

Loading the last of the children into the boats, Revar turned to Danae.

"Are you all right?"

Danae swallowed, looking into the vast darkness. It was bad enough facing the sea in the daylight, but at night...

"No," he replied softly, "but I will deal with it."

That said, he helped Revar shove the boat further into the water before they climbed onboard.

Revar had chosen from among the best of his warriors to captain the other boats. Since they had spent so many hours learning to sail, he knew exactly who should take command. Already, they were making headway and in spite of the situation, he found himself beginning to hope that his father's desperate plan would actually work.

"Look!" someone shouted. They all turned to see the raging flames that engulfed the forest that was once their home.

"They are firing the trees," Revar breathed.

Silence fell as the young Shadrani sailed on; looking back on the lives they had known disappearing into the night on the dark smoke.

* * * *

The fire did not stop the Gulka, but it did produce an effect that was almost as devastating.

Rage.

Hsar cursed in his guttural tongue when the troops dissolved in mass hysteria and charged the Shadrani line. He watched helplessly as his army disintegrated into chaos. Some of them burst into flames when they roared through the fire to reach their foe, but some of them got through. For the first time, Shadrani and Gulka swords met. For the first time, blood was shed on both sides. And the more blood, the more the madness overtook the Gulka.

On and on Erone fought, Habda at his side. Each time Hsar roared an order, Erone heard and understood. It gave him the edge he needed to continue to hold them back.

But the Shadrani were forced back inexorably by the onslaught of the Gulka and the ferocity of the fire. They were buying desperately needed time, but even

the strongest among them was tiring against the sheer number of this dreadful foe.

How far will they have gone? Is it enough time? These thoughts tortured Erone's mind as he fought on. But then the questions fled his mind as he watched his sister fall and disappear in a mass of hacking Gulka. His own pain and rage flared and he attacked with renewed strength. The Shadrani, ever attuned to their king and leader, drew strength from his passion and the fight intensified.

* * * *

Revar and Danae turned from their perusal of the dark sea as Lira climbed up from below decks.

"How are the children?" Revar asked.

"They are mostly asleep," she replied. "Or pretending to be so as to ease our worry." She joined them at the rail and looked up at the sky. "It is so quiet out here," she said.

Danae shuddered. "It is unnatural."

Revar managed a small smile. "Never mind, Danae," he said. "Wherever we are, we are away from the creatures for now. And that is what my father wanted." They fell silent again at the mention of Erone.

"They are all so brave," Lira rasped finally. "I am so proud to be Shadrani tonight."

"Yes," Revar replied quietly. "We must all be doubly proud to be Shadrani from this night forward."

* * * *

Smoke burned his lungs and he fought like a demon possessed. Erone had no idea that he was frightening even the Gulka with his ferocity.

Suddenly, he looked around him and realized how depleted his forces were.

Alternating between striking and retreating, they were slowly being cut down even as they were being pushed back toward the village. Unbidden, a longing to die beside Calli took hold of his heart.

"To the village," he ordered, knowing his son had made good his escape. "We will die among our own."

The remaining Shadrani took to their mounts and thundered away, leaving a surprised horde of Gulka behind them.

They set up their last line of defense in front of the House of Gemen. When the Gulka burst from the trees, the Shadrani were ready, but not under any illusions that they could stop them. Once again, the clash of swords rang out in the night and the Shadrani gradually weakened.

Then, the Gulka finally surrounded them through sheer numbers. Their leader ordered his men to a halt. There were seven Shadrani warriors left, and they stood, side by side up against the west wall of the royal dwelling and awaited the enemy's next move.

Erone watched warily as the leader of his foe studied him. The creature growled when he finally saw the device on Erone's ear.

"So," he spat, "that is how you read my thoughts. I should have killed that female more slowly."

Murderous hatred flashed in Erone's eyes as he struggled against the desperate urge to send this creature to hell.

But he held his ground.

"Where are the young ones?" the Gulka demanded.

"Somewhere you will never find them," Erone snarled.

Hsar gestured to his men, and Pashar was overtaken and dragged forward, though not without several more Gulka being killed.

It took all Habda's remaining will to restrain himself as a long knife was placed at the throat of his life-mate.

Then, without warning, the knife flicked downward, opening an ugly slice

across Pashar's chest. He gritted his teeth to stave off the pain, but Habda roared like a wounded lion.

"Tell me where they are!"

Erone's eyes continued to spit blue fire. He remained silent.

Hsar went to work in earnest this time, slicing at Pashar until he screamed in pain.

Habda lost control.

Charging forward, he reached for Pashar, but in his madness, stepped into the ready blade of Hsar's dagger. He felt the killing blow, but took strength from the plea in his life-mate's eyes, and with his last ounce of strength, stripped the long knife from his belt and threw it, with unerring accuracy, directly into Pashar's heart.

Silence fell as the Gulka tried to assimilate this strange behavior. But in the silence, the Shadrani knew that Pashar's fate awaited all of them. As one, they came to the understanding and knew what had to be done.

Erone stood and watched Habda, his lifelong friend and protector, die next to Pashar. He could feel no more pain, no more sadness, only a numbing calm.

Turning, he exchanged a look with his remaining troops. Silently, they saluted him, a slight nod of the head in respect.

Then, they turned their weapons on themselves.

Erone alone waited. There was only one desire left in his heart and he meant to achieve it before he died. As he'd guessed, the mass suicide startled the Gulka. They surged back in fear at the madness, and in the confusion, Erone moved quickly.

Hsar never saw it coming, had not understood the determination and steel that a Shadrani warrior harbored. And now he never would.

Erone's eyes glowed with satisfaction as his knife found its mark. Then the glow simmered to peaceful acceptance when the remaining Gulka leapt forward and cut him to the ground. As he fell, he prayed that his son had truly escaped. His last thought was of Calli and a small smile graced his lips when he realized he would soon be with her.

He died only a few yards from his beloved.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Life began to settle down once more in the Ste. Claire household. Shanna did not go back to classes. Mack enrolled her in a special school much like the one her father had attended. He had been unsure about the decision at first, but the change in Shanna convinced him that he had done the right thing.

It was a new beginning for her and with it she developed a new attitude toward life. Her logical mind finally reasoned that it wasn't the problems in your life that defined you; it was how you handled them that did. So she stopped worrying about what people thought about her. She even began to make friends. She would no longer allow people to torment her and, as perverse as human nature is, once they knew she didn't care, they stopped trying. Although she could not help a certain contempt for people in general, she had made her peace with society.

About the time that Shanna's world began to make some kind of sense, Dallas' was falling apart. His graduation was only a month away and he was not looking forward to it.

The anxiety he felt was not due to worry over how he would take care of himself once he went out on his own again. He knew he was a survivor. It was his feelings for Mackenzie that were driving him crazy.

If only the man would let down his guard. Dallas would settle for just having Mack ask him to stay, anything that would indicate he cared.

Anything at all.

* * * *

Enticed by the warm evening air, Mack opted to take his cognac out into the

garden instead of relaxing in the den as was his habit. Treading cautiously, Dallas followed him out. Mack was not in a good mood.

"Nice night," the boy ventured.

"Yes," came the terse reply.

An uncomfortable silence followed. Dallas broke it impatiently.

"Look, Mackenzie, what's wrong with you today. I mean, have I done something to make you mad or what?"

"It's not important."

"What's not important?"

"I told you Dallas-it doesn't matter."

"It matters to me if you're going to treat me like this."

"Like what!" Mack snapped angrily.

"Christ... you really are ticked off."

Mack clenched his teeth in exasperation.

"I heard some things today that bothered me," he said, making an effort to curb his annoyance. "I have no right to feel the way I do or to dictate how you should live your life. It's my problem, I'll work it out."

Dallas studied the older man, and then glanced away. A frown crossed his features as his eyes narrowed and focused on Mack once more. "What did you hear?"

Mack shook his head to dismiss the question.

Dallas would not let it go.

"It's about the guys I've been sleeping with, isn't it?"

Mack blanched, the answer given in the uncomfortable response.

"What do you expect me to do?" Dallas said, now becoming angry himself. "You know it's you I want, Mack. But you made it clear that's never going to happen." Pain and frustration rang in his voice. "What the hell do you expect me to do?"

Wanting nothing more than to not have this conversation, Mack attempted to walk away.

Dallas blocked his retreat.

"Please, Mackenzie," He searched the older man's eyes. "I don't want those other men, not really... I just want you."

Mack was finding it hard to breathe. The boy's nearness was too much tonight. Their eyes held and gave away more than either of them knew. Mackenzie sensed the subtle shift of their bodies as they slowly drew together.

"No... damn it, no," he murmured. His protestations were silenced when Dallas caught him in a gentle kiss that, despite himself, he returned willingly.

He was about to let go, to surrender, to throw away all his fear and resolve when his mind suddenly flashed back to a night long ago.

It had been Dominic then.

Reeling with self-condemnation, Mackenzie shoved the boy away and struggled to catch his breath.

Dallas searched his face, and then recoiled at the harsh rebuttal.

"If you want to get laid, Dallas, you can just keep finding men out there who are willing to oblige you. But I am not here to cater to your sexual appetite!"

* * * *

Dallas decided to avoid Mackenzie after the incident. Spurned and hurt, he made it his mission to steer clear of the older man. As the days passed, the tension in the house grew tangible and unavoidable, prompting Shanna to approach Dallas about it.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Nothing. Mack's just being a martyr, that's all."

"Oh," she said, knowingly.

Nothing seemed to escape her keen observation. There was no need to talk about it, she merely gave Dallas a supportive hug and left him alone with his musing. He blessed her for her understanding.

* * * *

A few weeks later, Mack again came home in a foul mood. He headed straight for the den and poured himself a generous splash of brandy as he fumed over the luncheon conversation that had ruined his day.

He had met Jerry for lunch. As usual, the conversation turned to Dallas. The doctor seemed to love to twist the knife where the young man was concerned. "How is he these days, Mack," Jerry had said, smiling. "I do miss those weekly check-ups."

Mack had been in no mood for the banter. "He's fine, I suppose," he had muttered.

"Oh, I've heard he's more than fine! From what I understand, he's a steamy little number and he's cutting quite a swath through the community, let me tell you."

Mack had abruptly changed the subject, but he had lost his appetite, and had not recovered all day from the black mood he'd fallen into.

Later, walking past the den, Dallas sensed the disapproval spilling out of the room. He knew it was directed at him. He was tempted to go in and confront the man, but then thought better of it as he remembered the pain of his last rejection.

In an effort to keep his mind off his troubles, Dallas went to his room, picked up his father's book, and settled in to read the last of the story of the Shadrani.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Revar looked out over the large blue expanse of water and felt despair threaten to swallow him. There had been no breeze for two days and the vessels were barely inching through the water, moved only by the sweat of the Shadrani as they worked the wooden oars. His heart longed for land; his feet itched to stand upon the solid foundation he had known all his life. But there was no land anywhere in sight and they were lost and almost motionless on the large body of water.

At first the Shadrani had issued a sigh of relief at the calm water. Many of them had been felled by terrible bouts of sickness from the motion of the sea. Danae, especially, had been so ill that Revar had actually been worried he would not survive. But the wind had finally abated and the crew had regained some color and mobility.

Now, however, they were stuck, not moving nearly fast enough to suit the young king. He did a quick calculation in his head regarding the amount of food and water they had stored. He was sure now it wouldn't be enough. But how could they have known what would have been right? How could they have known anything about traveling at sea so long, since none of them had ever before done such a thing? His lips formed a thin line as he looked down into the water passing below the bow of the vessel.

"We must find land soon," said Danae, coming up behind him.

Grimly, Revar nodded. "I was just thinking the same thing." He turned to face his mate. "You are looking a bit better today."

Danae shook his head. "I do not ever want to be that sick again in my life!" he said. "Do me a favor and throw me overboard if it happens."

In spite of the situation, Revar smiled a little. Danae could usually make him laugh. But there had been very little laughter from anyone since they had set sail on that dreadful night.

Had it only been three days ago?

At least they seemed to have outrun the creatures from the sky. Vajra had been quiet since then, no help to Revar regarding them, where they were, if they were following. The young girl had fallen into a deep depression. It was almost as if she felt responsible for what had happened, that somehow, her insight had brought the thing about.

Revar felt his heart go out to her. But he couldn't help her. It seemed he couldn't help anyone, not even himself. His grief and loss crippled him in his private moments. It was only his pride and training that kept him going, that and knowing his parents had been counting on him. That made him even more miserable as he looked out at the vast expanse of water and felt his helplessness like a suffocating dark cloud over him.

"I'll not throw you overboard, Danae," he replied finally. "I am too selfish to go through this alone."

Now it was Danae's turn to smile. He placed a hand on Revar's shoulder and looked into his eyes. "We will find land soon," he said reassuringly. "I cannot believe that Tsandis would forsake us now, not after bringing us this far."

Releasing a long breath, Revar nodded. But he was not convinced of the value of Danae's words.

Where had their god been four days ago?

* * * *

The Gulka gathered into a large circle and knelt on the ground.

"We have been all over this accursed forest and they are nowhere to be found," one of them griped.

Khabba, the new leader, threw him a dangerous look. "They can't have just disappeared," he hissed. "Bacura will have our hides if we don't find the young pair he wants."

"Where else can we look?" continued the griper. "The only place they could have gone is into the sea."

Khabba shook his ugly head. "They wouldn't go there. Our intelligence made that very clear."

"And our intelligence has been so helpful," came the scathing reply. "Like the fact that we didn't need any weapons but our swords to subdue these creatures."

"How were we to know they would turn out to be so fierce?" spat Khabba. "The ship will return for us soon, and then we will be able to locate them."

"We should have just done that in the first place," snarled another of the men. "But Hsar had to have his fun."

"And he paid for it," Khabba reminded him. "Now I am in charge and we will put an end to this and just grab them all. Let the Collector find his pair from among them himself."

* * * *

The storm struck unexpectedly. All around the sturdy boats, waters began to swell and the winds howled like banshees released from captivity. Aboard the vessels, Shadrani were heaving sails and tying off rope, fighting to stay afloat in the sudden maelstrom that engulfed them. Soon after the wind struck, driving rain began to pelt mercilessly.

Revar, working near Danae, felt his heart quail at the fury of the elements. No Shadrani should be bobbing about like this on the unpredictable waters, his mind reasoned. He threw a sideways glance at his companion.

Despite Danae's terror of the water, or perhaps because of it, he worked determinedly alongside his mate. Only the tight, clenched jaw gave away his real feelings.

Further down the deck, Lira slaved away, trying, as they all were, to keep her footing while the ship shimmied and bucked on the roiling waves. Once, she fell down and Revar felt his heart stop until the blond head again emerged, now more determined than ever to continue her task.

A short while later, Revar began to genuinely fear that they would not survive the storm. They had already lost sight of the other ships in the blinding rain and he fought the near panic that threatened at the very real possibility that, even should they outlast the gale, they may be permanently separated

from each other.

Then, as if in answer to his fears, the wind picked up even more. The rolling of the ship became so intense that some of the ropes began to strain and then snap. Without warning, pieces of cargo broke free of their fetters and crashed along the deck, narrowly missing some of the Shadrani as they flew overboard and into the sea.

"Keep your eyes open!" Revar shouted, but might have saved his breath as the wind whipped the words out of his mouth and devoured them before they had traveled a foot.

He tried to make his way forward but lost his footing and fell to the deck with a hard thump. Immediately, he felt strong hands on him, hauling him up.

"Great Tsandis!" Danae shouted. "Have a care, Revar!"

"We have to get everyone below," Revar cried.

Nodding, Danae moved with him, slowly; hand over hand along the rail, issuing the order to those they could along the way. Revar searched for Lira's blond head but could not find it where he had last seen it. He called out to her, but again found his words snatched from him.

* * * *

Lira hung over the side of the vessel, her long legs twined around the rigging to keep her from going over. In the tight grip of her hands, she held one arm of the Shadrani she had watched go over the side.

Looking down into the face she had seen so many times over her in their secret place in the forest, she renewed her efforts to pull him back on board through strength alone.

"Let me go Lira," he shouted against the storm. "You will be pulled over yourself!"

"I'll not let you die, Bonn," she screamed back. But sudden knowledge came to her on the wind. She had always known that Bonn loved her. He had risked everything to be with her, his very life itself. Now she knew that she could not save him. Not without help, for her strength was quickly fading and he could gain no foothold to climb back aboard.

Suddenly, she felt the welcome pull of two pairs of strong arms. Lira let a sob of relief escape her as Revar and Danae combined their strength with hers to pull the beleaguered, exhausted Bonn onto the deck once more.

* * * *

The barrel came out of nowhere.

It broke free and struck Danae with such force that it knocked him unconscious and sent him overboard. Revar was looking at him, and then he was just gone.

Without even thinking, Revar dove off the ship after him. Lira was close enough to witness the entire thing. She stopped only long enough to alert Bonn and fasten a rope around her waist before she dove in herself.

Revar found Danae quickly. His beloved was still unconscious and sinking like a stone in the cold water. Frantically, Revar hauled him to the surface and struggled to hold his head above the water. But it only then occurred to him that he had probably killed them both. There was no way he was going to be able to keep this up for long. Fear and remorse gripped his heart as he fought the waves and clung to Danae.

Then, as if from a long distance, he heard his name. He cried out in answer and miraculously, a few moments later, saw a familiar blond head swimming toward him.

Lira had taken his father's "folly" to heart. While so many other Shadrani were complaining about the idea of crossing the wide sea, Lira had spent hours becoming as strong in the water as she was on land. As he watched her swim up and help him fasten the line to Danae, it occurred to Revar that her devotion to his father had just saved their lives.

At that moment, he felt he had never loved her more.

She yanked on the rope, signaling to Bonn and two other Shadrani on deck to begin pulling the trio back toward the ship. It was slow going; they coughed and sputtered as the waves broke over them. Both Lira and Revlar found it twice as difficult, struggling as they were to keep Danae from sinking. But slowly, steadily, they were moving on.

Then, just as they were nearing the hull of the vessel, Revlar lost his grip on the rope. It was one of those moments that should never happen, had no reason to happen, but in the frenzy of the moment, did happen. The water had made the hemp so slick that his hand simply slipped as he fought to keep Danae's head above the waves.

Lira felt him go.

"Revlar!" she screamed, and reached out quickly in a desperate attempt to get him back. In the process, she lost her own grip on the slick rope.

The violence of the seas took her under for a moment and she felt a frisson of panic as the waves closed over her. Kicking with all her might, she surfaced in time to see the ship receding into the darkness of the driving rain. It would do no good to cry out, she knew.

Twirling about in the heaving surf, she searched for Revlar. But all she could see was wave after wave coming at her as she struggled to stay afloat in the assault.

After only a few minutes more in the cold water, she knew she was in real trouble. The chill was quickly sapping her strength and Lira knew it was simply a matter of moments before she would give in to the lure of the depths and sink into oblivion. She realized she would never see her love again and the thought made her wish she had told him of her feelings. Hopeless and pitiful as they were, she wished at that moment that he had at least known. Now she would never have the chance to tell him.

This was the last thought that crossed her mind as she felt the dark seas begin to close over her. She sank beneath the waves and never felt the strong arms that reached in to pull her out.

Revlar struggled with his last remaining strength to drag Lira up onto the large barrel that he had found in the storm. Only when she was aboard his small craft and he had lashed her to him with his belt, did he allow the darkness to overtake him.

* * * *

Revlar stirred and opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was sand, white sand that stretched for miles along a thundering seashore. The sound of the surf shook him a little and his memory flashed with the picture of the disastrous night he had just lived through.

His body aching, he lifted himself up onto his elbows and looked over to see Lira lying beside him on the sand, her eyes closed, motionless. He leaned over her and, with a tug of relief, saw the unmistakable rise and fall of her breast.

She was alive.

Then he struggled to his feet and looked around him. The sand stretched for about sixty feet up the shore and then turned into lush, dark forest. His heart lurched with pain as it reminded him of the place he had fled, and the parents he had lost.

He shook himself, unwilling to give in to the grief. Nor would he allow thoughts of Danae to immobilize him. The only thing that mattered now was that Lira and he were still alive.

He did a quick inventory. His skinning knife had somehow survived the storm, but that was all he had left save the clothes that still managed to cling to his body.

Kneeling down beside Lira, he checked her condition. She had not fared as well as he. She had no weapons left at all and had even lost her boots in the disaster.

She moaned as he touched her, stirred, and opened her eyes. Confusion and then

shock blazed in their blue depths before she sputtered and sat up quickly. "Revar!" she cried. "How? Where?" He held up a hand to stop her. "Easy Lira. All I can tell you is how we got here." He pointed to the barrel that lay a few yards from them. "I managed to swim to that, find you, and pull you out of the water. Then I guess we just drifted here." He looked around him. "The one thing I cannot tell you is where we are." "But the ships-the others-" He shook his head, not trusting himself to speak. Still staring at him, Lira sat back and suddenly burst into tears. Revar was so astonished by it that he actually stood and took a step back. "Great Tsandis, Lira!" he said. But after a moment, he knelt again and took her into his arms. Soon, he too felt the tears that trickled down his face. He bent his dark head and gave in, finally, to the grief that had fractured his heart.

* * * *

"We have located them!" The cry came as a welcome relief for Khabba. He knew his life would be forfeit if he failed in his mission. Lord Bacura had a tendency to eviscerate-literally, and on the spot-those who disappointed him. "Where?" The engineer pointed to the blue screen that had scanned the remaining land for signs of life. "How did they get there?" Khabba wondered aloud. But it was obvious now that at least some of the Shadrani had taken to the sea in spite of all the intelligence saying they would never do it. "And you're sure they are the ones?" The engineer nodded as he checked the genetic signals once more. "It is them." "Any others with them?" A few more minutes studying the screen and a shake of the head came as a reply. "Just the two." Khabba's grin was savage and satisfied. The gods had certainly smiled on him today. Now that he had found the breeding pair, he would bath in the master's gratitude. Bacura himself would be arriving in a few days to oversee the destruction of the planet. The master wouldn't miss that sight. No matter how many times he had witnessed it, Khabba knew that his lord thrilled to the spectacle. "Bring them up," he commanded. "What about others who may have survived? Should I scan the rest of the planet?" Khabba shrugged his massive shoulders. "No matter," he replied, "they will all die in the holocaust once Lord Bacura arrives."

* * * *

Revar and Lira knelt over the fire, coaxing the stubborn kindling to catch. The sun was waning and they knew the night would be chilly with little shelter to protect them. Neither of them had mentioned their situation or the fate of their fellow Shadrani since they had cried out their pain on the beach earlier that day. A brief exploration of their surroundings had shown them little difference from their own home, but they had heard strange sounds coming from the brush and had been disinclined to forage too far into the mysterious forest. Together, they had managed to put up a quick lean-to, and they rested under it now, watching the fire build. They sat in silence, each nursing their pain in their own way. "What will become of us?" Lira asked finally. Revar turned to look at her.

And his vision blurred.

At first he thought he was still suffering from the effects of ingesting too much seawater. But as he continued to focus on Lira, he knew something else was happening... something frightening.

He saw her face register shock and heard her call his name before the world turned into a swirling, nauseating cauldron. He blacked out for a few moments. When he awoke, the first thing he saw was the face of the Gulka, Khabba, leaning over him.

* * * *

Danae continued to scan the horizon. Most of the other Shadrani on the ship had long since abandoned hope that they would even find Revlar or Lira, let alone find them alive.

But Danae refused to give up.

Bonn came up behind him and rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. He too, had been relentlessly searching the blue depths for any sign of the lost two. Although he could never show it, his heart broke at the thought of losing Lira, she had been his world for so long. Loyal Shadrani that he was, he also keenly felt the loss of their young king and suffered deep empathy for Danae. "They are asking what to do about the rations," he said.

Danae continued to stare ahead. He didn't give a damn about the rations at the moment. All he cared about, all he wanted to focus on, was finding Revlar. But inside, the voices of his ancestors nagged at him. With Revlar gone from the ships, he was now in command. If Revlar had perished, he was the last of the House of Gemen. The thought made him even more miserable. He dropped his head into his hands in a gesture of despair. Bonn stood silently, waiting for him to compose himself.

"We must decide what is the least we can survive on, and begin to parcel that out daily," Danae said finally. "Can I count on you to oversee that?"

Bonn nodded solemnly. "Yes, my lord."

Suddenly, there was a commotion behind them. They turned to see a young female race toward them.

"It is Vajra, my lord," she cried. "She is having another vision. Come quickly!"

Danae hurried down into the hold and came to the side of the girl. She was in a bad state, almost frothing at the mouth and tossing violently. He knelt and stroked her head, calming her.

"Tell me Vajra. What do see?"

The child's face was so pale that it alarmed him.

She grabbed the front of his tunic. "Help is coming to you-you must not fear it."

"Help? From where?"

The girl did not answer.

"Oh, but my lord, it will not end here," she whispered. Then her voice all but disappeared. "Our people... death... destruction... slavery..." She breathed a gasp of air and then went rigid. Danae knew that she could no longer hear him, was no longer aware of her surroundings. He could do nothing but wait and see if she said anything further.

Just as he was about to give up and go back on deck, she spoke one more time, her voice sounding hollow and far away.

"The lost king... he will be returned to us from afar. But the wait... the wait will be long. He will unite us in victory. The hand of the forgotten one shall set us free."

* * * *

Lira looked up and watched Revlar, who in spite of his chains, paced like a trapped animal. The room that held them was cold, strange, and smelled dreadful. It was like no other room they had ever seen before. It seemed to

pulse with a life of its own and the presence that clung to the very walls gave her a reflexive shudder. If she was so inclined, Lira would have thought it a place of dark magic, so odd did her surroundings seem to her. One thing was clear, they were in some kind of dungeon.

Over the past hours, they had learned little about their captors or their impending fate. They knew they were on some kind of ship, but the thought that they were somewhere in the skies above Daleer had been too much for them to fathom. At least at first. However, the longer they sat, the more they examined the strange room and the creatures that had captured them, the more they began to think that anything was possible.

Once they had been subdued and shackled, they had been placed in this room and left alone. Revlar had finally lost his patience and had shouted himself hoarse, demanding they be told what was happening. Now he merely paced, his anger and frustration raging.

"Revar," Lira said, "you will wear yourself out."

He whirled on her. "What would you have me do?" he bit, "sit and wait quietly like a nice little prisoner?"

She grimaced. That seemed exactly what she was doing. "I am not waiting nicely, Revlar," she replied evenly. "I am every bit as angry as you are, but do you not think it would be better to conserve your energy in case you get a chance to use it?"

He stopped then and looked at her. A sad smile crossed his face and he flung himself down beside her.

"You are right, Lira." He drew both hands through his hair. "If they would just tell us what they know about the others. Even that much."

But they expected little from their captors. It seemed the creatures were waiting for something, but they gave no indication what that might be.

The sound of the door creaking open brought them both to their feet.

Two Gulka entered, the first, they recognized as the same one who had ordered them locked up. Revlar had to fight himself to keep from attacking the creature in spite of his restraints.

The other seemed more subservient and carried a foul-smelling tray that he placed on the table before them.

The familiar Gulka watched silently while the other turned and left. Then he pointed to the tray.

"Fascha," he said, making a hand to mouth gesture.

Revar and Lira understood he was indicating that it was food. They eyed the offering suspiciously. They were going to have to be a lot hungrier than they were right now to even consider eating it.

Then the Gulka took two small objects out of his belt and threw them toward the Shadrani. Pointing to a similar one on his ear, he motioned that they attach them the same way.

Revar and Lira exchanged glances, and then did as requested. Suddenly, the Gulka was talking and they understood every word.

"My name is Khabba," he began. "And I am commander of this troop of Gulka. You are now prisoners of the Lord Bacura."

"Why?" Revlar demanded.

"Because he wishes it so."

"What does he want with us?" Lira pressed.

Khabba showed a toothy and unpleasant smile. "I will leave that up to him to explain. Now," he continued, "you will be kept healthy and will not be ill-treated and in return, I expect you to behave yourselves."

Revar lunged at him.

Even in chains, he was a formidable threat and was rewarded with the quick look of fear that crossed the Gulka's face as he took a step back. There was no need of course, Revlar couldn't have reached him.

"We have no intention of behaving ourselves or doing anything you want us to," Revlar snarled. "So you may as well either kill us or set us free."

Khabba's face grew dark with anger. He took a quick step forward and struck Revlar with such force that the Shadrani reeled backward and hit the floor. But

before Khabba could move again, he had a blond harridan standing between him and the object of his anger. Lira's eyes spit blue fire at him, so menacing that the Gulka felt his anger evaporate. Once again, he took a step back. "You creatures will soon learn," he hissed. "My lord Bacura does not tolerate anything but obedience." Then as he turned to leave, his cruel nature inspired him to add, "and it will be a pleasure to see you witness your world and all you love destroyed when he arrives."

* * * *

Some of the younger Shadrani children were falling ill. Danae looked out over the endless waters and felt his hopes die. He had lost everyone he had ever loved and now he stood powerless to save his own people. They had already buried one of their number at sea.

The first to die had been Vajra, and the blow had come heavy upon all of them to watch the slight body slipping into the dark waters.

Danae continued to search the horizon for any sign of the other ships. But there was nothing, nothing but vast, empty water. Then his mind flashed on the last time he had seen his beloved.

Revar had fallen during the storm and Danae had helped him up. Then he could remember nothing. He had been told that he had almost drowned before the Shadrani on the ship had managed to haul him back onto the deck after Revar and Lira went in after him.

He shut his eyes against the thought and leaned against the rigging.

Revar was gone.

He had maintained hope for as long as he could, but the heavy, insistent truth had pounded at him until he had accepted it in a wash of anguish alone on his watch the night before.

He had sobbed his heart out, cried until his head ached with it, and then he had wiped his eyes and steeled himself to focus on his people and how he could possibly save them. Now as he stood on the bow of the ship, he quailed at his own helplessness.

As he gazed into middle space, he saw the air shimmer and bend, and then suddenly before him on the deck, stood a being of intense light and beauty. He was tall and thin and his hair, skin and eyes were white. Danae stared, openmouthed, taking a wary step back.

"Please do not be afraid," the creature said in perfect Shadrani. "We have come to save you."

Danae continued to gape, unable to assimilate the picture before him. He remained silent, shocked into immobility by the strange sight.

"I am from a race of beings called Teberean," the visitor continued, "and we are the mortal enemies of the one who has attacked your people."

Danae felt his pulse race.

Was this the help that Vajra promised?

His initial fear lessened as hope lit his heart.

"Who?" he rasped, "who has attacked us?"

"It is the Collector, Lord Bacura," came the reply. "But, please, there will be time for that later. You must ready your people to come."

"Come where?"

"To our vessel that awaits you."

Danae's eyes narrowed at this. Perhaps they were in dire straits but that didn't mean he was just going to accept what this strange being was saying.

"Why should I believe you?"

The creature sighed and nodded. "Why should you, indeed," he said. "But I am afraid there is no time to comfort or assure you."

Then he raised a hand and touched the amulet that hung around his neck.

The next thing Danae saw was a large room that was white and pulsing with a strange glow, as if the light came from within the walls themselves. His mind registered first disbelief and then joy as he glanced around him and realized that the surviving Shadrani from all the ships were there as well. Suddenly,

there were happy shouts of relief as they came together, hugging each other and laughing amid tears of gladness.

But there was no word of either Revlar or Lira. In fact, the Shadrani from the other ships were shocked and saddened to hear of their loss. Their reunion was bittersweet and short-lived, for, once they had become reacquainted, the large doors at one end of the room slid open and several creatures walked in. They were all much like the one whom Danae had seen on his ship and he turned with interest to see what the odd beings had to say.

"First, know that you are safe," said one of them, and as he spoke, Danae realized it was, indeed, the one he had seen on his ship. "We only apologize that we could not save all of you."

At this, the Shadrani all began talking at once, asking questions, demanding to know what had caused the terrible fate that had befallen them. The tall Teberean raised a hand gently. "All your questions will be answered," he said. "But you must let us tell you in our own way." His comrades began to distribute small devices to the adult Shadrani. "These are translators," he explained, "we will tell the tale in our own language." Then he pointed toward the children. "It is not a story for young ears."

Danae turned to his people and indicated that they sit. Quietly, they obeyed. Then, as one, they turned to the creature that stood before them, anxious to learn what had caused their disaster.

"My name is Quaras," the creature began. "And the tale begins many centuries ago."

Quaras began by giving his listeners a very rudimentary explanation about the vastness of the universe and describing to them that there were thousands upon thousands of worlds out there, and millions upon millions of beings.

The Shadrani listened patiently, but it was plain that they were both awed and skeptical about the lesson they were receiving. Still, they sat quietly and gave the creature their attention, because anything was hard to dismiss considering recent events.

Danae himself heard the truth in the words and felt wonder touch his heart at the vast amount of knowledge that he must lack.

"You have been targeted and attacked by Lord Bacura, the Collector," Quaras said. "He is a notoriously evil creature that comes from an ancient tribe of imagers called Vhareans. These imagers are comprised of a form of energy, not a solid body as you are accustomed to, and are capable of-ah-" he searched for a way to describe DNA replicating to these primitive people, "copying the image of any living thing and portraying themselves as that thing."

The Shadrani looked at each other with wonder at the words.

"The Vhareans are cruel and vicious by nature," Quaras continued. "As children, one of their favorite methods of play is to take the shape of some animal on their planet and then torment another of its kind using that form." He shook his head sadly. "But Lord Bacura was the worst. During his youth, he developed a passion for collecting species on his planet. It did not take him long to realize that the more rare the species, the more precious it was to his collection. Then, his dark nature led him to the conclusion that the rarest of all would be a creature that was one of a kind. Of course, no such thing existed." He breathed a deep sigh. "So Bacura began to make it so himself. After he had captured a creature that interested him, he would simply destroy all others like it, and therefore own the only one of its kind in existence."

He stopped then, noting the revulsion in the eyes of his audience. The Shadrani had a reverence for life and held sacred the living creatures that had shared their forest home.

They were having difficulty assimilating this kind of evil.

And there was so much more.

Quaras spoke again. "Bacura's race and ours had, for years, been involved in a devastating, senseless war. Both sides vied against each other in a competition to develop newer and more effective star vessels and weapons of mass destruction. It was only the fact that each side had similar weapons that

kept the war at a standstill." He sighed heavily. "It is not a particularly proud part of our history.

"However," he continued, "the Vhareans finally produced the ultimate weapon-a gigantic ship that is practically self-healing and is capable of destroying entire planets."

He stopped at the gasp that arose from the Shadrani.

"Entire worlds?" Danae asked.

He was answered with a nod before the Talerean continued.

"Because he came from a privileged family, Lord Bacura knew about the new invention. While the politicians were busy debating what to do with it, the Collector, with the aid of some loyal followers, stole the ship and proceeded to eliminate both his own world and ours."

Once again, Quaras stopped as the Shadrani erupted with outrage. He allowed them to react for a moment, knowing how difficult the tale was for them to digest.

"We here on this ship are scientists and researchers, not warriors," he said.

"That is the only reason we survived. We were away on an extended mission when the holocaust occurred. The Collector did not know of our survival, at least not at first.

"It quickly became our fear that Bacura had escalated his evil even further. His destruction of his own world convinced us that somewhere along the way, he had developed a strange obsession to be the only one of his kind in the universe.

"Our fears were quickly realized, and more. Soon he began to scour the universe, gathering the darkest forces he could find and drawing them under his banner, so that he could continue his passion unhindered. You saw the work of his most loyal subjects, the Gulka, on your own planet.

Danae felt his anger flair. "But why?" he blurted. "Why attack us?"

Quaras raised a hand, his face a mask of sympathy. "Because he wishes to collect your species."

Danae frowned, shaking his head, not understanding.

"He has expanded his collecting to a galactic level. It is now his cruel obsession and his sole motivation, as far as we can tell. He searches out and investigates emerging species, finding those that interest him. Then he studies them, undetected, until he finds a suitable couple that he intends to mate to produce one offspring." He hesitated before continuing. "Once he has chosen, he takes the couple, then destroys the planet and all others of that species."

Danae stared at him. "I do not understand."

The weight of the explanation was heavy on Quaras' tongue.

"Once the child is conceived and grown to a certain size within the womb, it is harvested for his collection and kept on display in a chamber on his ship." This brought a new gasp of outrage.

"And the parents?" Danae probed, horrified.

"The parents are killed as soon as that process is over."

There was momentary silence as the Shadrani struggled to absorb this ugliness.

"But why?" Danae pressed. "Why would he collect dead babies?"

"They are not dead, Danae. He has the technology to keep them alive indefinitely."

This drew an even greater response from his audience. There were few species alive that valued and worshipped their offspring as did the Shadrani.

"And, like him," Danae added finally, "they are the only ones of their kind."

"You are quick to understand," Quaras replied. "It is rumored that he has hundreds of species in his collection. We have spent many years now fighting him, trying to thwart his plans whenever possible."

Danae's face grew taut as he drew the natural conclusion.

"Then, he means to destroy our world."

"He does."

"But, we must stop him," Danae said urgently. "There may be others still alive there."

"Others? Who?"

Danae hesitated in his reply. As much as he desired Revar to be alive, he knew the chances were slim.

"Revar and Lira," Bonn answered for him. "Our prince and one of our warriors." Quaras' face darkened at this. "And is this warrior female?"

Bonn nodded, confused at the question. But Danae had followed the logic. He began shaking his head, denying.

"No," he whispered, "they may yet be safe somewhere on Daleer."

Quaras looked at him kindly. "I am sorry, Danae," he replied, gesturing around him. "But here you see all the living that were left on the planet."

Danae felt tears threaten at that. "Then," he whispered, "you think this Collector has taken them?"

"I cannot say for certain."

"But," Danae finished darkly, "if he does destroy Daleer, we will know that he has them, because he would not do so until he finds his mating pair."

Quaras nodded. "I am afraid so," he said. "But at least there is some good news."

Danae's face was white with pain. "What is that?" he murmured.

"If he destroys the planet, he will also think he has destroyed all of you."

* * * *

Revar shivered in his cell, nursing his hatred. He was going to kill this Lord Bacura if it was the last thing he did. And if this creature was indeed capable of destroying all of Daleer, then Revar had to kill him soon.

In a perverse way, he was looking forward to meeting him, watching him, looking for weakness, anything that could be used against him. He had noted little weakness in the Gulka so far, but he was sure it must be there.

He turned to study Lira. She was holding up well. Her training was helping, he knew, but she had always been strong. He approached and sat beside her on the rough bed.

"It will be good to know what this Lord Bacura wants of us," she said. "And to find out more about him."

"Exactly my thoughts."

"And to find a way out of here."

Revar smiled sadly. "If there is a way out, we will find it."

Any further comment was eclipsed by the sound of their cell door sliding open. They turned as one to see who had come. For a full minute, the door stood open and they waited, unsure, growing more apprehensive at each passing second.

Then, finally, a figure emerged. They both drew back at the sight of the large creature. They could see no features; he was draped with a dark cloak and hood that covered his face and dropped off the ends of his hands. But they felt the menace nonetheless. When he spoke, the timbre of his voice made their blood run cold.

"I am Bacura," he said simply, then said no more, but approached them slowly as if studying them intently. Even though they could not take their eyes off the figure in front of them, they were both aware that Khabba had also entered the room and now stood at the door with a smug expression on his face.

"Are these not the ones you wanted, my lord?" the Gulka said.

"Hmmm," the figure replied. "Yes, they are perfect specimens."

Revar stepped up, his manner defiant. "I demand that you free us."

His words caused the figure to freeze momentarily. Khabba chuckled darkly. "I told you they were behaving badly."

"That will stop."

That said, the figure reached out in a movement too fast for even Shadrani eyes and grasped Revar's arm. Revar felt the breath expelled from his lungs at the intense pain that hammered through his body. Gasping in agony, he would have fallen to his knees if not for the strong grip that held him.

"Stop!" Lira shouted, and mounted an attack. But she had not gone one step before she came up against a solid barrier that she could neither see nor

understand. With his mind, Bacura had put up an energy wall around her. Khabba laughed cruelly at the look on her face. Beneath the cloak, Bacura smiled. He was currently replicating the Tchari that he had collected years ago. It was this ability that had drawn him to the Tchari species in the first place. This ability to throw and direct energy. As a Vharean, Bacura could throw energy himself, but the Tchari way was more primitive, more savage. He loved to use it, loved the feeling of base power it gave him. Finally, Bacura released the two Shadrani. Revar dropped to the ground and Lira sprang to his side. "That is only a slight taste," Bacura hissed, "of the pain I am capable of inflicting." The Shadrani looked up at him with hatred etched clearly on their features. "What do you want from us?" Revar bit. "I can be reasonable," Bacura said, "all I wish is for you to produce a child for me." The look of horror that crossed the two faces before him gave little hope that this request would be easily accomplished. Bacura waved a hand. "Yes, yes," he continued. "I know that you do not normally indulge in child-making unless it is sanctioned by your society, but-" He leaned forward to make his point, "-you are a long way from your people now." Revar and Lira continued to stare at him wordlessly, their shock still evident on their faces. "If you do this with little trouble, you will be treated well." Revar recovered his voice. "And if we refuse?" The ominous quiet that followed filled the small room with a promise of brutality. "You will not refuse," Bacura finished. Then he turned to leave, addressing Khabba as he did. "I wish them to start immediately. See to it." Khabba waited until the ominous Bacura had left the room, then turned to the couple. "You heard him." Lira laughed out loud. "You are joking!" Revar's face closed in defiance. "We are not going to do this." "You will," Khabba promised, "sooner or later. You might as well make it sooner and avoid a lot of pain." Revar set his jaw and glowered at the Gulka. "I do not care how much pain you inflict upon me, I will not do this."

* * * *

The next day, Lira and Revar, still heavily chained, stood in the central command of the huge, unnatural ship and gasped with outrage and horror as they watched their world collapse in upon itself and then explode on the large screen in front of them. In their devastation, they shed tears among the cheering and shouts of delight that came from the Gulka around them. Only Bacura remained silent, seeming to relish the sight with a kind of perverse intensity that made hatred flare even more deeply in Revar's heart. The Shadrani had been brought up from their prison to watch this, to see what kind of force they were defying. To break their will, Revar thought. But also simply because their captor was that cruel. Grief pounded as he watched the screen, certain he had just witnessed the last of his people die. Danae. The thought speared his heart although he fought against it. He couldn't allow himself to feel that kind of pain. What he had to do was nurse his hatred. Lira too, knew that she had just witnessed the demise of everyone and everything she had loved. The deed left her numb, silent, moved beyond words

to a world composed only of grief and thoughts of vengeance. She turned to Revar, the tears still fresh on her face.

"We will fight him," she bit.

Revar's eyes flashed with intensity. "I will kill him," he vowed. "I will find a way."

They clung to that, forgotten momentarily in the celebration that continued around them.

* * * *

Danae sat back and ran a hand through his dark hair. As he closed his eyes and pondered the fantastic happenings of the last week, he was interrupted by the gentle touch of Quaras.

"I am sorry to disturb you," the Teberean said, "and even more sorry at my news."

Danae stood up quickie. "What is it?"

"Bacura has destroyed your planet."

Danae felt the now familiar grip of grief around his heart. His head reeled with the thought that his world, his Daleer, no longer existed. It seemed too much to believe, let alone bear.

"Could you not stop him?" he asked miserably.

Quaras shook his head. "Nothing can stop him."

Danae squeezed his eyes shut. "And Revar?" he whispered.

"Yes," Quaras answered, "Bacura has him, and your warrior, Lira. We found the trail of their gene shift-" He raised a hand, knowing the Shadrani did not understand. "Let me just say that we know they have been taken by his forces." Danae looked up into Quaras' face. "We must rescue them," he said fervently, "please, help me find a way."

Quaras looked at him a long moment before answering. "I know that you have been through a terrible ordeal. Prince Danae. But now, you are the leader of your people and it is time you faced the reality of the situation.

"There is no possibility of recovering your friends from Bacura. None whatsoever. And if you were to chance it, all you would succeed in doing is turning his attention on you." At Danae's frown, he continued. "For now, Bacura thinks he has destroyed all other Shadrani. This gives you a chance to take your people and find a new world, start a new life somewhere, without fear that he will pursue you to finish the job.

"So, I ask you, young prince," Quaras said finally, "are you willing to jeopardize all remaining Shadrani for the sake of one?"

Danae covered his face with his hands.

Quaras didn't receive a reply. He hadn't expected one. He leaned forward and placed a comforting hand on Danae's shoulder, then turned and silently left him.

* * * *

Khabba stormed into the cell and glared at the Shadrani prisoners, his yellow, reptilian eyes spitting fire.

"You have not mated with this female once!" he snarled.

"Nor will I!" Revar bit back at him.

The enraged Gulka raised a hand to strike him, but the blow was stayed by the dark voice that came from the doorway.

"Have you not yet discovered a way to get what you want from these creatures?" Khabba's face could not quite mask his fear as he turned to his master.

"He has been beaten and starved," he blustered, "and yet he remains defiant." Then he drew himself up. "But I will find a way."

Bacura raised a hand to halt the Gulka's tirade, then came forward himself. He stopped before Revar.

The young warrior felt his heart quake at the memory of the pain he had experienced at the hands of this creature. He wasn't sure he could withstand

much of that kind of pain.

"Well then," Bacura said, "perhaps you should leave it to me."

"I assure you, Lord Bacura, I can--"

"You can do nothing!" Bacura shouted. "You Gulka have little imagination and even less finesse. Now leave us."

Once the beast was gone, Bacura continued to study Revar. He took in the cold hatred in the silver eyes and noted the tension in the body.

Ready to fight, he thought, perhaps die.

"Passion," he said. "That is was one of the things that drew me to your people in the first place--your passion." He stopped then and looked at Lira. Her blue eyes mirrored what he had seen in Revar's. "But that is not important. What is important is this child."

"Why?" Lira demanded. "What do you want with a Shadrani child?"

He advanced on her. "That is not your concern."

Revar did not want the brutal creature anywhere near Lira. "Of course it is our concern," he snapped in an effort to turn his attention. "It would be our child."

As he'd hoped, Bacura turned his unwanted focus on him.

"You Shadrani are overly sentimental about your offspring."

Now it was Lira's turn to worry. She did not want to see Revar attacked as he had been the other day.

"By whose estimation?" she challenged.

Again, Bacura turned on her. "The only one that counts," he answered darkly.

"Mine."

"That does not count at all to me."

Revar cursed under his breath as he saw the large creature take a threatening step toward Lira. "Leave her out of this," he snarled in warning.

Bacura stopped. He turned and regarded the Shadrani male curiously before focusing back on Lira.

"Ahh," he said smugly. "Now I see."

The next thing Lira knew, she was writhing with pain, not even managing the breath to cry out as Bacura grasped her throat. She felt her world melt into agony and terror. Revar was frozen to the spot as she had been days before, his face showing his blind outrage at being held helpless.

When the Collector released her, Lira fell in a heap on the floor.

"Khabba," Bacura said, "the dense, imperceptive Gulka that he is, has been torturing the wrong one."

* * * *

"We cannot do this," Lira whispered.

Revar's eyes were filled with regret when he turned them on her. Bacura had been systematically terrorizing her for three days, and each day, the level of pain had intensified.

"You cannot survive many more of his attacks, Lira."

She looked away from him.

"Tell me I am wrong," Revar pleaded. "Tell me that you can take this torture day after day."

Closing her eyes, she shook her head. "I do not know," she whispered. "Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive. He targets you because he knows I cannot stand by and watch you suffer." His lips formed a thin line. "In truth," he added, "it is my weakness that has caused this."

She did not voice her quick rebuttal but allowed him to do this, knowing he needed to take the burden.

"Perhaps," she offered dismally, "we will be lucky and there will be no child."

He smiled sadly. "I never thought I would hope for such a thing." Then he touched her softly. "Do not be afraid, Lira. I will be gentle and quick about it."

Her heart pounding in her chest, Lira lay back on the paltry bed and allowed the man she loved with all her heart to leave his seed inside her.

* * * *

"Are the results certain?" Bacura asked.

His chief physician nodded enthusiastically. "She is pregnant."

"And it is male?"

"Yes."

Bacura smiled smugly. All of his specimens were male, if there was gender involved. He had little use for females of any species.

"Prepare to harvest." Then he stopped himself. "Wait," he said. "Tell me what you know about this ability Shadrani males have, this shadra. How do they do it?"

The physician shrugged. "It is a mystery to me."

Bacura pondered this as an idea formed in his head.

From the first time he had discovered the Shadrani, this peculiar manifestation of sexual power had fascinated him. Could he experience this passion?

"Hold off on the harvest," he said.

* * * *

The inner chamber bounced with light. It was his refuge, his place, his nest. Bacura threw off the cloak he wore and stepped into the resting sanctuary. The Tchari body disappeared.

Reverting back to his original form of energy, he felt the weight of the physical body lift. It hadn't taken him long to program the chamber to send him the new DNA.

Within minutes, he would become Shadrani.

Then he would visit his prisoners and see what would come of it.

Anticipating the promise of new sensation, he opened himself up to the flow of data. He hadn't looked forward to something this much for a very, very, long time.

* * * *

This time, Lira knew she was pregnant. With a hope bordering on desperation, she prayed that her captors had missed it, even though she had been poked and prodded on a regular basis since she and Revar had started the mating process. She had not yet told Revar. Although she convinced herself this was because she didn't want to worry him, in her heart, she knew it was because she didn't want the physical relationship to stop.

And it would.

As soon as he found out the task had been completed, he would never touch her again in that way.

In spite of his Sorisi half, he was pure Shadrani when it came to sex. But she had reveled in the pleasure she had stolen in their joining, all the while being careful not to show too much and repulse him.

It had been difficult.

She looked over at him as he rested on his cot. I wonder just how shocked he would be should I tell him that I love him, she mused.

She shook her head sadly, reality biting its way into her mind. Perhaps she would never tell him about her feelings, but she would have to tell him about the child. It was his right to know.

"Revar," she said, "are you awake?"

"Yes, Lira."

She pressed her lips together. "I have news."

He turned to her. "What is it?"

Looking down, she studied her hands a moment, and then decided to just come

out with it. "I am pregnant."

The look on Revlar's face was a painful mixture of joy chased immediately with fear.

"Are you certain?"

She nodded.

Anything else that may have been said was lost as the sound of the cell door opening drew their attention.

Lira stood quickly and Revlar sat up on his cot, and then gained his feet. They remained rooted to the spot, their mouths agape at the sight that greeted them.

Walking into the room was one of the most beautiful Shadrani males they had ever seen. Revlar stood, transfixed by the presence. It was Lira who finally spoke.

"Who are you?"

The voice that replied was silky and seductive. "I am Shadrani, like you."

Revar finally found his voice. "But, how can that be? Where did you come from?"

Bacura smiled. He could tell how eager they were to believe.

"That is not important," he said. Walking over to Revlar, he watched, with keen interest, the affect he was having on the young warrior. "Do you wish to touch me?"

Revar frowned. Something was wrong here. He didn't understand what, but every Shadrani instinct he had was on full alert and warning him. "I am mated to another," he answered crisply.

Bacura smiled. "But I understand your mate is no longer, so what does it matter?"

Revar knew no Shadrani would act so carelessly with one who had just lost a life-mate. He took a step back.

"I think you are not what you seem," he whispered, apprehension tickling his heart.

Bacura knew his deception was up. He chuckled. "You are too quick for me."

"Who are you and what do you want?" Lira demanded.

Bacura turned and looked into her eyes. As she stared back, fear tore at her when she realized the truth. "It is him," she breathed, "it is Bacura."

Revar's eyes mirrored her fear. "It cannot be. How?"

But his question hung unanswered while the figure before him turned and fixed him with a deadly stare from beautiful silver eyes.

"I wish you to give me your shadra," Bacura said. "And I thought you would be more-amenable-to it, if I had this form."

Horried and frightened, Revlar backed away. "I will not give you my shadra," he breathed.

The smile that twisted Bacura's face was pure evil.

"Yes," he promised. "Oh, yes, you will."

* * * *

Revar did give his shadra. The terrible pain that Bacura inflicted on him worked finally to break down his fierce resistance. When all was over, a chalice of warm blood was forced down his throat and he was left to sleep off the effects.

Lira, forced to witness the entire ugly event, sat now and fretted over him. What could she say when he awoke? She knew that he would feel violated in a way she could hardly understand. She placed a protective hand over her abdomen and for the first time wondered if there was a way she could prevent this child from coming into existence.

It was a terrible thought, but what kind of horrible life would it face?

Revar stirred and opened his eyes. It took him a few seconds to focus and when he did, Lira heard a painful sound escape his throat before he again squeezed his eyes shut and rolled away from her.

"Do not look at me," he choked.

Lira reached out and touched his hair gently.
"Revar," she whispered gently. "There was nothing you could do."
She received no reply. So she sat where she was and continued to stroke his hair silently, willing him to master his emotions, hating the creature that had done this to him with every fiber of her Shadrani being.

* * * *

Bacura sat in his ready room and took another sip of Zaquendian brandy. He savored the feel of it as it slid down his throat and warmed his stomach. Then he studied his hands, turning them over and marveling at how good this physical body felt.

He had been greedily exploring all of his senses since he had taken on this new form. But none of it, not the food, nor the well-aged liquor, nor any of the various indulgences and emotions he had recently experienced had been half as stimulating as this thing called shadra. He smiled darkly as he re-lived the first shock of pleasure that had seared through him. Never in his considerable years had he even imagined such a thing.

It was clear that the female wasn't necessary for the male to produce this effect. So he would harvest shortly, and do away with her. But the male... he might keep him a while longer.

He stood and walked to the mirror that hung on the opposite wall. The face that stared back at him was very like the captured Shadrani's. He lifted a hand and touched the high cheekbones, the full mouth, and the slightly slanted eyes. Then he smiled again at his own cleverness.

The Shadrani prisoners would never guess that he was the image of the son they would never know. How could such primitive people understand genetics? How could they possibly digest that he was replicating their son using DNA that had been extracted from the fetus inside the female during her last examination.

He studied his new reflection and grinned.

* * * *

The stars outside the vast window twinkled with the promise of new hope. But Danae could not feel it. He only felt strangely disconnected and numb. His life had become a waking nightmare. Other-worldly beings and enemies were difficult enough to assimilate without adding the loss of almost everything he knew and loved.

But he had a decision to make.

Behind him, he knew, Quaras waited patiently, waited for his final word. He had come to trust and value these new allies. They had been kind and forthcoming, understanding and sympathetic. He knew that whatever he decided, they would do their best to accommodate him and his people.

But he was stalling. It was obvious what had to be done, had been obvious from the first. He closed his eyes and summoned the face of his dead uncle. What would Erone do? The answer was clear. Even at the prospect of leaving his own son, Erone would lead his people away to safety.

It was his duty, the only choice he had.

Pressing his lips together and quelling the voice shouting inside his head, he turned.

"Quaras," he said bleakly, "tell me of these other worlds you know where we might find a home once more."

* * * *

Revar steeled himself as he heard the doors to the cell begin to slide open. He knew it would be Bacura, again in the Shadrani form, come to force his shadra from him. The cruel being had come back every day since the first wrenching incident.

He did not need to look at Lira to know that her face was going white with dread for him. She had been his rock through this, the only thing that had kept him sane.

But something was different this time. Bacura entered with two of his medical team and gestured toward Lira. Revlar felt his heart lurch with fear for her.

"Wait!" he cried, stepping up to block them. "What do you want with her?"

The Collector lowered his head and smiled unpleasantly. "Your female is pregnant."

Revar nodded. "She told me."

Then Bacura came forward and ran a hand fondly through the Shadrani's dark hair. Revlar fought to keep from pulling away, knowing now that any resistance only added to the pain. Hatred bubbled dangerously in his chest.

"What do you want with her?" he repeated.

"She is unimportant now," came the silky reply. "There is nothing more she can do for me."

Revar felt his blood chill as his worst fears began taking shape. "But the child," he said in a hopeless ploy to buy time. "I thought you wanted the child."

Bacura chuckled darkly. "It is not necessary that she live for me to have the child." He grinned at Revlar's confusion. "I am afraid, my pet, that it is time to eliminate her."

In desperation, Revlar lunged for the creature's throat but wound up with nothing more than a fist full of air as the Collector melted away only to materialize yards to his right.

Bacura laughed openly at the astonishment that played upon both Shadrani faces before it was replaced once more by cold hatred.

The Gulka moved in to take her.

"Wait!" Revlar cried.

The creatures stopped, throwing Bacura a questioning look. The Collector studied his captive, toying with him, enjoying the feeling of mastery it gave him.

Revar's mind raced. What could he do to stop this? He looked over at Lira and saw that she was afraid, but ready to die. Her eyes signaled it to him. If only he had something to offer, something to buy her life. Then the answer came to him suddenly, painfully.

"Let her live," he said, "and I will give you my shadra freely."

Lira's sharp cry of outrage died in the silence that followed the offer. Then Bacura smiled again.

"But I can take your shadra any time I want. I believe I have already proven that."

Revar felt both his color and his shame rise at the comment.

"Yes," he breathed, "you can. But it is not full shadra. What you have experienced is half what I am capable of." He noted the interest that flashed in the silver eyes before he added, "you can never force all my shadra out of me, and it has to be given freely."

Bacura, now deadly serious, focused all his attention on the young warrior.

"You are telling me that if I let this female live, you will not fight me any longer, and this stimulation will be even greater?"

"Yes," Revlar whispered, "that is what I am telling you."

"No!" Lira shouted. "Do not do this, Revlar!"

But the two ignored her, Bacura because she was of no more consequence than the furniture, and Revlar because he couldn't bear to hear her.

Then, the Collector nodded slowly. "If what you say is true," he said, "then she will be allowed to continue. But," he added, "she is still due for an examination."

With that, he again signaled the Gulka to take her, wanting the harvest to go ahead in any case. Lira struggled and threw Revlar a beseeching look before disappearing out the door.

"Now, my pet," Bacura said, stepping forward.

Revar lifted a hand and moved back.

"Not until she has returned safely."

A dark eyebrow lifted and, despite himself, Revar couldn't help but note again, how beautiful was the figure before him.

Then Bacura backed off, turned and left without another word.

* * * *

Lira returned a while later. Though she was groggy, she seemed undamaged. She told Revar that she did not remember what had happened to her, but that she believed they hadn't harmed her.

Revar barely had time to convince himself of her words before Bacura appeared in their cell.

"I believe you owe me something," he purred.

Lira stifled a whimper of protest, but Revar, never one to go back on his word, stood and faced his enemy. Although his head and heart pounded with revulsion at what he was about to do, he closed his eyes, pressed his hands together, and summoned shadra.

* * * *

"We may have to accept the possibility that we will never leave this place," Revar said.

Lira looked up at him, noting the dark smudges under his eyes. "We must find a way," she insisted. "How much longer can you manifest shadra against your will?"

Revar hung his head, not answering.

"He rips it from you, even when you give it willingly," she entreated. "I know it is painful for you."

"Please, Lira, let us not speak about it."

"How can I not, Revar? The strain is showing on you."

"It is my strain."

"It is not just your strain," she bit. "Do you think it is easy for me to sit here and watch what he does to you?"

He turned away uncomfortably.

"Oh, I know," she continued. "I know how it eats at you, knowing I am witness to your degradation. But how can you believe that I am not suffering also, how can you not understand?"

She bit off, knowing that if she said more, she would give away too much.

Clenching her fists, she turned her face to the wall.

Revar approached and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I am sorry, Lira," he said softly. "I know this has all been terrible for you as well."

In spite of her resolve, Lira turned and threw herself into his arms. Then she cried out her despair.

She cried because she knew, as he did, that they were trapped and would never be free again.

She cried because she knew that even if by some miracle they did escape, there was nowhere for them to go.

She cried because she knew she could never tell the one she loved with all her heart about her feelings, because she was too much a coward to risk truly losing him.

* * * *

Bacura wore a path in the floor in his room. He could not recall ever feeling this way. The passion that he had experienced, the pleasure, was beyond astonishing. He stopped, once again examining his reflection.

It was not unusual for him to take the form of one of his collection. And no matter which one it was, it was a thrill for him to know that at that time, he was the only one of its kind in the universe.

Like Bacura himself, his collection was unique.
But these Shadrani... these creatures surprised him.
The fetus had been harvested, but this time, he would keep the parents alive for a while. When they discovered that she was no longer pregnant, he would tell them some tale about the child aborting itself.
He chuckled. They will probably be relieved. But he couldn't allow them to live too long. Just enough for him to use up the male... long enough to gorge himself with this sensation of shadra.
Just until he became bored with it.
He smiled at his reflection in the large mirror.
He liked being Shadrani.
Yes, he liked being Shadrani very much.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dallas closed the book and leaned back. It was an odd way to end the story. Not an ending at all, really. As if the writer had somehow been interrupted in the middle of the telling and had never managed to get back to it. Trust his father to leave him only one thing, and that to be a strange book with an even stranger story.
But at least his mind had been taken away from his troubles. And he was tired. He snuggled down into bed and was asleep with minutes.

* * * *

A few days later, his graduation day dawned bright and clear. Mack and Shanna threw a huge party for him, inviting the many friends he had made in the time he had stayed with them.
It would have been a perfect day if not for the pain tugging at Dallas' heart and the strained politeness between Mack and him. Dallas' mood darkened even further when he realized that the man hadn't even bothered to get him a graduation gift.
The party went on till morning. When the last guest had left, Shanna tramped off sleepily to bed, leaving Dallas and Mackenzie alone.
Dallas shifted uncomfortably as they stood together in the intimacy of the den. It was the first time he'd been alone with Mackenzie since his painful rejection at the man's hands.
Mack studied him. "I suppose you think I'm acting like an ass because I didn't give you a present for your graduation."
Dallas looked up. "The thought had crossed my mind."
Mackenzie's smile was a sad one. "I do have a gift for you," he said. "I was just... saving it." He walked over to the bar and then looked at the boy expectantly. "Anyway, don't you think it's time we cleared the air?"
Dallas responded cautiously to his honesty, nodding silently. He watched as Mackenzie poured out the ubiquitous cognac then accepted the glass that was offered him. They raised a silent toast, and then settled onto the sofa.
"So, today's the day," Mack said quietly.
"Yeah," Dallas replied, playing with the stem of his glass. "You're not going to try to talk me into staying, are you?"
"No, Dallas... no, I'm not."
The boy's gaze dropped to the floor.
Mack scrutinized the golden liquid swirling in his glass. "I do want you to stay."
Dallas looked up, not able to disguise the hope in his heart.
Mack met his eyes briefly, and then looked away. His voice sounded weary when he spoke.
"I will miss you. You're the only person I've ever confided in about the family." He stopped, drawing in a breath. Then he seemed to hesitate a moment, took another long drink, and finally turned a level gaze on the young man before him. "I know you think I have been hiding something from you, Dallas,"

he said. "And you've been right all along."
The boy felt his heart skip. He blinked, swallowed, and waited for the rest of it.
Mackenzie's face was a mask of regret. "The thing that bothers me the most is your mother," he said miserably. "I tried to warn her, but I was too late."
Dallas shook his head. "I don't understand?"
"I had been keeping an eye on her over the years and I'd had a report from one of my sources that she might be in danger."
Green eyes flashed with question. "Danger? From what?"
"From Dominic," Mackenzie said painfully, "I can't prove it, but I think he might have been the one who killed your mother."
The boy's face flattened with shock. "Dominic?" he sputtered in disbelief.
"Why would he want to kill my mother? Why?"
"Because she had something he wanted."
Dallas blinked in confusion. "My mother had nothing!" he cried. "What could he have wanted?"
Mackenzie let the question hang in the air, not wanting to say the words, knowing he had to.
"His son," he answered finally.
Then he fell silent for a moment, waiting for the boy to assimilate this terrible information before he spoke again.
"You always suspected that your mother's history with your father had something to do with her death and I'm afraid you were right about that too. Now struggling as the words worked their way into his stunned brain, Dallas just gaped at him, and then rose to his feet.
"Dominic!" he cried. "You are telling me that Dominic is my father?"
Mackenzie nodded, his eyes shining with sympathy.
Dallas shook his head, his eyes reflecting denial. "No! My father's dead-my mother told me."
"As for your mother," Mackenzie continued gently, "Sarah was her middle name. She went by her real name, Diedre, when I knew her." He waited again for the pieces to fall together for the boy. "She was the girl I told you about-the one Dominic stole from me. I told you I never saw her again after I found her with him that day so many years ago, and I didn't. But she did call me when she found out she was pregnant. Then she fled the country, determined that Dominic would never find out. She also took her mother's maiden name, Devlin, in order to hide her identity.
"We decided it would be best if your father remained 'dead' until you were old enough to handle the whole story," he added. "Don't be angry at her deception, Dallas. She would have done anything short of murder to keep you from Dominic."
Dallas' face darkened at that.
"I sent her money when she'd let me." Mack continued. "She needed help, raising you alone. I know she had a hard time, but she would never accept anything for herself."
Dallas finally stopped protesting and just stood there, staring off into space, trying to accept the inevitable. "I wondered where the money came from sometimes."
"It's rightfully yours, Dallas. It's part of your inheritance. The rest is legally yours now that you're sixteen."
The young man shook his head. "No... no... this is too much."
Mackenzie rose and pulled an envelope from the drawer of his desk. "I thought I'd have difficulty convincing you," he said sadly, then offered the document. "Here. It's your birth certificate."
Dallas looked at the document warily, as if it was capable of delivering a fatal bite. But finally, he accepted it. Sitting down, he fumbled with the envelope, hesitated, then drew out the paper and looked at it. He quickly found the information he sought.
FATHER: Dominic Ste. Claire.
His eyes squeezed shut as the paper slipped out of his hand and fluttered to

the floor.

Mack reached down and picked it up, putting it away again before sitting down beside the stricken boy.

When Dallas asked the next question, his voice was hushed and far away.

"The book," he said. "My book. It was Dominic's?"

Mackenzie nodded. "It was that book he almost killed me over when we were children," he said. "I don't know why, but it was the only thing he cared about, the only thing he treasured." A wave of guilt washed over him. "I stole it from him."

Dallas frowned at him. "You stole it? Why?"

"To send it to your mother, for protection. It was important enough to Dominic that we figured she could use it as a bargaining chip, should he ever find out about you."

"Well," Dallas said bitterly, "she never got the chance, did she?"

"I'm so sorry," Mack said fervently. "I wish I could offer you a better choice for a father."

"How about Dracula?" Dallas replied, borrowing a bit of Shanna's black humor.

"Oh... my god." He turned back to look at Mackenzie. "Shanna."

"She's your sister," Mack said, nodding hopefully. "Well, she's only a half-sister, but still..."

Dallas' mind reeled with this, but all the pieces were beginning to fall into place.

"That's why I had to get you to stay," Mackenzie continued. "This is your home. You belong here. We may not be your choice, but we are your family."

Dallas frowned, the shreds of information still clicking in his mind. "Marius was my grandfather," he said unwillingly. "And Arianna-"

"-is your grandmother," Mack finished for him. "That's the reason she attacked you. You see," he hesitated, "you do strongly resemble your father."

"Great." Dallas said bitterly. Then he turned slowly to face Mack again as a look of realization crossed his face.

"That's why," he said emphatically. "That's why you won't get involved with me, isn't it? Because Dominic is my father. What is it, are you afraid I'll turn out to be like him?"

Mack shrank from the accusation in the boy's eyes.

"No! For god's sake, Dallas, I don't believe that. But you're right, it is because of him."

He struggled for the words to explain and fought, unsuccessfully, to keep the frustration from his voice. "Look, I don't know what Dominic is up to. It drives me crazy not knowing when or if he'll ever turn up on my doorstep so I have a security system on this place that would make the President jealous! And sometimes, we get creepy phone calls. Lots of people get them, I know, and it's probably nothing, but I always think it's him. So I'm always changing my phone number. That's why the number you brought with you didn't work."

"Then, after your mother died and you disappeared, I was expecting him to follow you." He threw up his hands in exasperation, "but after all this time... nothing! But think about it Dallas. If he did come back... if he did come back... imagine how he would react to me sleeping with his son!"

"Please understand," he finished hopelessly, "I am supposed to be protecting Shanna and the Ste. Claire legacy. I can't afford to give him any more ammunition to use against me."

Dallas felt bitter disappointment sweep over him as he listened to the man, knowing he could not argue against Mack's logic. His features clouded with the pain of truth that was still struggling for a foothold in his mind.

Dominic Ste. Claire was his father!

A strong shudder of self-rejection coursed through him. How well he understood Shanna's struggle now. And it was so much worse for her.

Mack drew him from his dark thoughts when he held out a small package. "It's your graduation gift."

A few moments later, the Ste. Claire ring gleamed up at Dallas from beneath the wrapping.

The final testament to his heritage.

* * * *

Mack chewed nervously at his lower lip as he watched Dallas and Shanna in the garden the next day. Dallas had wanted to tell her the news that he was her brother. He couldn't even wait until after breakfast, but had directed her out the back door as soon as she came downstairs. Mack could see them clearly from where he stood at the French doors in the den.

Suddenly Shanna's face registered a look of astonishment that quickly turned into pure joy. Relief etched a broad grin on Mack's face as he watched the young girl leap into her brother's arms, raining kisses on his cheeks and forehead.

Then she took Dallas' arm and dragged him back to the house. She was fairly hopping with excitement when she faced Mackenzie. "Oh Mack," she said, "he's my brother, really my brother!"

Suddenly her face clouded, doubt darkening her clear blue eyes as she looked up into Dallas' face. "I'm so sorry," she said quietly, putting her hand to her mouth. "You know, that... he's your father."

Dallas shrugged. "Well," he said, "if he wasn't my father then I wouldn't be your brother, now would I?"

Shanna's smile returned in full force. "I always wanted you to be my real brother, and now you are. Well," she continued recklessly, "I guess you're only my half-brother, but in this family, that doesn't really matter much."

Dallas tried not to smile too much at that, knowing how uncomfortable Mackenzie would be with it. The man was still struggling with Shanna's particular brand of humor.

The girl noticed her uncle's hesitation and went to him, scooping up his hand, trying to get him to join with her in lightening up the moment.

"Just think," she said, grinning mischievously, "of the money we could save on family reunions. Anybody else would have to go to a lot of expense because of all the relatives they'd have to invite, you know, uncles, brother, fathers. Us-we'd only have to invite one guy!"

In spite of himself, Dallas was giggling helplessly by now.

Finally, Mack closed his eyes and began to chuckle. He felt a great weight lift off his shoulders as he did.

It was done.

All of the closely guarded secrets were out now.

Dallas was the last.

* * * *

That night, Dallas felt as if he had been through an emotional marathon by the time he climbed into bed. He was just reaching for the switch on the lamp beside his bed when his eyes rested on the graduation gift that Mackenzie had given him. It was sitting on his bedside table, still in its package. Dallas had wanted to wait until Shanna was told the truth before he put it on.

The ring winked up at him in the dull light from the lamp. Reaching into the box, he took it out and slipped it onto his finger.

A cold shudder raced down his spine as he gazed at the dark red stone. The color of fine wine. The color of blood.

Dallas frowned, wondering over the truths he'd learned last night. The truth about his heritage and his family, the truth about his father.

Dominic Ste. Claire.

A stone cold killer.

Then his thoughts fell on his father's strange book. He looked over and saw it sitting benignly on the table next to the now empty gift package. Dallas picked it up, looking at it with new eyes. The sweet and moving tale of the Shadrani seemed inconsistent with Dominic's black nature.

Why had his father treasured it?

Gently, Dallas rubbed a hand over the book's dark surface, as if the gesture would force it to give up its secrets. He remembered the hopeful prophecy that Vajra, the shean, had uttered:

"The hand of the forgotten one shall set us free."

He closed his eyes and sighed.

If only real life were that simple.

Epilogue

The High Council of the Shadrani sat as one behind the heavy wooden table. The meeting chamber was silent except for the sounds of chairs scraping the floors as they positioned themselves. Only one remained standing, and he was Caidon, direct descendant of Danae of the House of Gemen.

His task today was both exciting and frightening and he struggled to contain his emotions as he faced the ruling elite of his people.

"There has been another sighting of Bacura," he announced.

This brought forth a round of sounds ranging from outrage, to annoyance, to mirth.

"And where is he this time?" asked Tulas, the Healer, "somewhere in the Nebula of Zurtan? Or I would guess maybe the rings of Delibri?"

An outburst of laughter followed these improbable musings.

Caidon let them laugh.

If he were right in his beliefs, there would be little enough to laugh about soon.

"He is on the planet called Earth."

No laughter this time, only sounds of disbelief. Caidon held up a hand to halt the noise.

"This is not the first report we have had of him there."

Tulas dismissed the statement with a shake of his elegant head. "But we know that Bacura has found nothing of interest to collect in that species," he insisted. "He has already passed them over. The planet has been avoided by any enlightened species, known to still be in a delicate and rather barbaric time of development."

"That is just it," Caidon replied, "I do not believe it is Bacura."

The rooms fell eerily silent as the weight of the words fell and were slowly absorbed by the Council.

When Tulas finally spoke, his voice trembled with emotion.

"What is being done?" he whispered.

"I am sending someone."

The End

About this Title

This eBook was created using ReaderWorks™! Publisher, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information on ReaderWorks, visit us on the Web at "www.readerworks.com"

This file was created with BookDesigner program
bookdesigner@the-ebook.org

11/2/2008

LRS to LRF parser v.0.9; Mikhail Sharonov, 2006; msh-tools.com/ebook/