

The tingling sensation was her first clue that something was off.

Glancing around, Shantra tried to figure out what was causing the strange sensation. Walking towards her brother's office was a normal occurrence. She did it every day. So why was it weird now...what felt so wrong today? Something must be going on, she thought and looked around, trying to determine what could be causing the sudden tension.

But as she passed by, the servants were walking about their business as usual, the administrative staff hurried from office to office or clicked away at their computers, always busy, always looking as if a crisis were about to erupt. As far as she could tell, everything seemed normal.

So why did she feel as if...as if...

Shantra shook her head, thinking she was being ridiculous. Nothing was wrong. She was simply imagining a tension because...well, perhaps because she was lonely. Her sister, Ciala, had left the palace after marrying a few months ago. Her sisters-in-law, Mia and Raven, were wonderful, but nothing could really take the place of a sister. She and Ciala had gone through so much together, but Ciala was in her own home now, even expecting her first child!

She forced her feet to move forward, dismissing the imagined tension. Nothing was wrong and she was just being silly, trying to find something to worry about since everything was going so well lately. She smiled as she thought of her spring line of dresses. She'd been working on the designs for months now, wanting to get them right, needing to top last season's incredible success. This season would have to be better, more amazing than the last, she told herself. Maybe she should adjust the collar on the silver dress. And the green pants that matched that green silk, perhaps if she heightened the waist slightly, it would look more elegant. Thinking of the black cocktail dress, the way it draped over....

Oh my!

Shantra almost stumbled, catching the handle of the door only moments before she made a fool of herself and fell flat on her face.

He couldn't be real, she told herself. Impossible! No man could look that...whew! The muscles and brawn. The man was packed with muscles!

Shantra couldn't say that the enormous looking man was handsome. Nope, with a jaw that hard and eyes flashing like the razor edge of a blade in her direction, this man was definitely not handsome. Harsh. Rugged. Brutal even. All perfectly good adjectives to describe the man staring back at her.

The man standing in her brother's office was possibly the most...appealing man she'd ever seen in her life. The scar on his cheek and the chiseled facial features could only be described as raw, powerful – terrifying! Compelling, she thought as her body froze. And melted. Heat! Those sharp eyes captured her and froze her in place but there was a heat that flared out from that look that she'd never experienced before.

Her trembling hand gripped the doorknob to balance herself and she had a short reprieve as the man's eyes moved from hers down to her hand, which was holding on the knob as if her life depended on it. Her own eyes moved down to her hand, pulled by the force of his look, then back up and she was once more a prisoner of those dark, compelling eyes.

He was perhaps ten feet away from her but he had her under his power even from that distance. She wanted to step back, to retreat, but his eyes wouldn't allow that.

She breathed a sigh of relief when his eyes moved, but that reprieve was short lived. His eyes only moved lower, shifting down her body. She couldn't believe what was happening to her! Men did not affect her in this way! Men were the annoying gnats that buzzed through her life, trying to get her attention, only to be thwarted because they were pointless and annoying, getting in the way of her concentration.

But there was no denying the tightness in her breasts when his eyes stopped and stared. And she couldn't slow her breathing down as his gaze continued to heat up her body.

When his eyes moved back to hers, there was a higher level of heat, intensity, in that look. A part of her wanted to shrink back from that look, her body feeling like he'd just caressed her even from ten feet away. Trembling, she told her feet to back away, to retreat. But nothing happened. She stood there, her eyes taking him in even as his own did the same.

She should feel violated after his perusal. She should be angry that his gaze had sharpened on her breasts. She knew that she should speak up and put him in his place, but the appropriate set-down wouldn't form in her mind.

She could not handle this man! He was too intense, too fired up. But another part of her was drawn to him in a way that she didn't understand. She wanted to run away while, at the same time, step closer. She was the moth that knew the flame was dangerous but wanted to be closer to the heat regardless.

"I apologize for the delay," another voice called out.

Shantra jerked away, looking down at the floor as her oldest brother, Ramzi, came back into his office holding a thick file folder. He stopped when he saw her and Shantra immediately tried to step back out of his office.

"I'm sorry," she gasped, feeling like the heat was increasing. Or maybe that was just the ridiculous, childish blush that bloomed over her cheeks. "I didn't mean to interrupt you."

Ramzi looked down at his baby sister with an odd look. "You're fine. Did you need something?" he asked.

Shantra shook her head. "No. I'm..." she looked around but she couldn't remember what she'd stopped by his office to discuss. "I'll just be on my way."

"Shantra," his reproving voice stopped her desperate retreat.

Shantra stopped but the trembling increased. She knew what her brother was going to do and her eyes pleaded with him silently to not do it. "I really am in a hurry," she almost whispered.

Of course her oldest brother ignored her almost silent plea. "Let me introduce you to my guest," he said, putting a hand to her elbow as he urged her forward for the introductions. "This is my youngest sister, Princess Shantra Samara. Shantra, this is Sheik Laithir del Hassam of Piora."

Shantra could feel the tremors in her body as the man's name was revealed. Of course, she thought. This would be him. That man. Now that she had his name, she remembered pictures of him but he had been out of the press for the past five years. Not him, of course,

because he was a powerful ruler, but there had not been any new pictures of Sheik del Hassam after, well, after the tragic event.

Realizing that she was still staring rudely at the man, she jerked out of her silly, frozen state and stepped forward, praying that he wouldn't recognize her trembling for the intense awareness of him as a man. Hopefully, he would just think she was shy. Which she wasn't! Normally, she was eager to meet guests, enjoying the company of even the most ornery diplomat or aide.

It was just this man, she thought as her brainwaves pinged around in her head, making her feel more flustered.

Remembering her manners, she blinked and focused on the man in front of her, not allowing herself to act the ditz. Her brothers already thought she was flighty and superfluous. For some reason, she didn't want this man to walk away with that same perception of her as a person.

Squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin, she looked back at the man as calmly as her trembling body would allow. "It is an honor," she said. She knew she should extend her arm, shake the man's hand. But she couldn't do it! Not with this man! Oh goodness, she wanted to run and hide!

But that was cowardly, she told herself. She had to face him no matter how powerfully he affected her. Just extend her hand, offer a brief, polite greeting and pull back. Then calmly step out of Ramzi's office and...run.

Shantra stepped forward but her feet felt odd, as if they were...floating. Looking up at the man, she realized that he seemed more than a foot taller than she was, but he was most likely only about three inches over six feet. All of her brothers were about the same height but somehow, this man's size made her feel small, vulnerable.

She wasn't small! She wasn't vulnerable either! She was creative and strong! She knew how to take care of herself, and had her own income that she had used to help grow her business.

Of course, these men knew nothing of her work and they never would. It was her secret world, her life, which she controlled and managed without their masculine condescension. As she extended her hand towards the man, she told herself over and over again that she was strong, that she wasn't afraid of anything!

But then his strong fingers closed over hers and heat shot up through her arm, startling her. She tried to pull back, her eyes flashing up to his, but his grip tightened around her fingers and she was once again trapped, once again vulnerable.

The man's eyes flashed and his fingers curled around her smaller hand, trapping her and intensifying her trembling. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Princess Shantra. I haven't heard a great deal about you. You must be one of Kilar's best kept secrets."

Her brother laughed softly, oblivious to the increasing tension between the other two people. "Shantra could never be described as quiet, but she isn't one of those women that craves the night life or the spotlight."

The stranger's features didn't move in any way, but there was a sense that he was smiling at her for some reason. She was fascinated by his eyes and she stared into their dark depths and

realized that there was a band of yellow around the outside of the dark iris. But even those fascinating irises weren't completely black, or dark brown. Somehow that yellow band made him...no, there was no way that she could say that this man was soft. Not in any way was he soft. His shoulders were broad and the hand holding hers was rough, almost as if the man worked in construction or something like that. Her heartbeat accelerated even more with that discovery, although why rough hands would do that, she had no idea.

She took a deep breath and stepped back, relieved when he released her hand.

Her brain wasn't functioning properly, she thought. Her brother was talking about something, although she had no idea what that might be, his words muffled as she tried to recover from the intensity of this stranger's touch.

And then there was silence. She looked up and realized that both men were looking down at her expectantly. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

Shantra knew that her brother was trying hard not to roll his eyes. "I was asking if you could take Mia's place tonight for dinner. She still hasn't recovered yet."

Shantra nodded her head, intensely relieved for a change of subject. Anything to get her out of this man's presence, she told herself. "Of course. I'll help in any way I can," she told her brother. Mia was Ramzi's wife and had just delivered their daughter, an adorable baby girl with a head of thick, dark hair. She was a week old and already Ramzi was spoiling his little daughter. Shantra's two nephews were pretty excited about having a little sister too.

"It's settled then," Ramzi said and Shantra took that as her cue to escape. "If there's anything else Mia needs, just let me know," she said and walked towards the doorway.

And then it hit her. Dinner?

She spun around, aware of Ramzi talking about some sort of tariff agreement. But her brother was looking down at the papers in the file folder while the other man...he was staring right back at her. Once again, his features hadn't changed, but there was triumph in his look.

That crazy trembling increased and she reached behind her, fumbling with the doorknob. It took her several tries and she even stumbled over her feet because the man held her gaze.

Shantra groaned silently as she exited with the least amount of grace possible. She couldn't believe it when she actually walked into the wall instead of the open doorway. A loud "oomph" stopped her brother's conversation and she felt both men's eyes on her. "Sorry," she whispered and struggled to find the open area so she could leave.

It felt like an eternity before she was finally on the other side of the doorway, door closed and breathing relative freedom. Goodness, she'd never felt like that before. Never! No man had the right to do that to her! She was strong and creative; she was a good businesswoman! Why had she let a man affect her like that?

She was leaning her head back against the wall, trying to get herself back under control. If she'd been more aware of her surroundings, she would have sensed her other brothers walking towards her. But she hadn't, and her first realization that she was still looking foolish was when she heard, "What in the world is wrong with you?"

Shantra opened her eyes and realized that both of her brothers were staring down at her. Turk, the second oldest and Minister of Defense, was standing next to Rais, the third brother and

Minister of Finance. Both of them had papers in their hands and both looked like they were ready to take her to the palace clinic for a psychological evaluation.

She stammered out something, hopefully an excuse, but the words weren't meaningful in any way. Couldn't something go right today? She pushed away from the wall and took a deep breath. "Um...just...uh...leaving."

Rais lifted an eyebrow. "Doesn't look like you're leaving. Looks like you're leaning against the doorway like a ragdoll."

She glared up at her brothers. "Go away," she muttered, trying to move around them, but they were big men and the ancient hallways of the palace weren't wide enough for both Turk and Rais to stand shoulder to shoulder. She pushed against Rais, but he only chuckled.

"We're going into Ramzi's office, if you'd just step out of the way."

Turk stopped her by grabbing onto her upper arm while he looked down into her flushed features. "Why are you looking so red?" he asked, putting a hand to her forehead. "Are you sick? Maybe you should go see Raven and get checked out. You look flushed."

Shantra put both of her hands to her cheeks, flustered by their awareness of her blush. "No. I'm fine," she told him firmly.

She slipped between her big brothers and hurried down the hallway, praying that they wouldn't walk into that office and talk about how she'd looked flushed. The other man would know exactly what was wrong. He'd love that he'd done this to her!

Shantra almost ran back to her office where she slammed the door. Hard. Furious with herself for looking like a fool. "Stumbling?!" she exclaimed, disgusted with herself for acting like a clown. "Can't even walk! Good grief! He probably thinks I'm an idiot!"

"Who thinks you're an idiot? And where did you stumble?" a kind voice said from the corner of her office.

Shantra spun around and spotted Joline, her best friend, sister-in-law and business partner, in the corner of her office. She had her laptop on her knees and her fingers poised over the keys.

"Oh!" she gasped, putting a hand over her chest because her heart felt like it had just stopped. "I didn't know you would be in here."

Joline's eyes widened. "We had a meeting scheduled to start fifteen minutes ago," she told her friend.

Joline had come to the palace for a meeting about eighteen months ago and run into Rais, her younger brother. The sparks that had ignited when the two of them had met had been intense, even after she'd warned Rais to stay away from Joline. But there wasn't really any way to stop Rais, or any of her brothers for that matter, when they wanted something. And Rais had wanted Joline. After a crazy courtship, Rais had finally won her friend's heart, convinced her that there weren't any obstacles big enough to stand in their way and the two of them had been deliriously, nauseatingly happy ever since. If Joline weren't such a good friend, Shantra might even be jealous of Joline's happiness. Fortunately, her friend was expecting their first child in a couple of months and Shantra was too excited to be an aunt again so the jealousy was tempered by an eagerness to meet her future niece or nephew.

Snapping back to an awareness of the present, pulling her mind away from the man with the yellow-rimmed eyes, she looked around and tried to figure out what was happening. “Meeting,” Shantra whispered, still trying to figure out what day it was. “Meeting?”

Joline laughed. “Yes. We were going to conference in Keith and discuss next season’s new line?” she reminded Shantra.

“Woman, you’re losing it,” a male voice said from the computer on Joline’s lap. “Jo, is she all flushed and flustered?” The male voice was from their third partner, Keith, who was in Paris right now at the fashion shows. Even Keith had found the love of his life in a man named Dennis, and now both of her friends were trying hard to find a man for Shantra.

“I’m not,” Shantra immediately stated and turned away, pretending to look on her desk for something but all she did was mess up the neatly stacked papers.

“She is,” Joline replied with a laugh.

“Who is the lucky man?” Keith asked.

Joline set the laptop down on the triangular table they’d found for just this kind of meeting. The corners allowed the three of them to talk even when one of them was in another city.

“I’m not flushed,” Shantra told both of them firmly as she grabbed her designs and notes, coming over to the table. “I just hurried down the hallway for this meeting.”

Keith laughed. “You mean the meeting that you forgot we were having?” he teased.

Shantra sighed. “We have things to do,” she grumbled. “Let’s get to it.”

Joline tapped her finger against the side of her jaw. “I think Rais mentioned something about a meeting this morning. It was supposed to be an important one, now that I think about it.”

Shantra rolled her eyes. “You guys talk?” she asked, giving her friend a look that disagreed.

“My!” Keith stepped in. “I heard that catty remark. And I have to agree with you, Shantra dear. Joline and her man do tend to spend an embarrassing amount of time doing naughty things but...”

“Moving on!” Shantra exclaimed. “I don’t want to have that image of my brother in my mind, please!” she begged, covering her eyes.

“Oh, you’re just jealous,” Keith laughed. “Since you’re the only one among us that isn’t getting any kind of satisfaction...”

Shantra threw her hands up in the air when Joline laughed. “This is ridiculous,” she snapped. “The fabrics you sent last week were...”

“Oh my,” Joline interrupted. She’d picked up her phone, obviously pulling up her husband’s itinerary for the day. “Keith, look up this guy’s name,” she said. “Sheik Laithir del Hassam of Piora.”

Shantra’s mouth fell open. “How did you...” then it hit her. The meeting!

“Rais told me about the meeting this morning,” she explained. “I just remembered the man’s name.”

Keith's whistle came through the speakers loud and clear. "Damn, woman! You fall for the tough guys, don't you?" Keith said, obviously looking at a picture of the man as well. "Wait, isn't he married?" He looked into the monitor. "You can't fall for a married man, Shantra."

Joline shook her head, looking at an image of the sheik in question on her phone. "No, his wife died. About five years ago," she went on, reading quickly through the information.

"His marital state is none of my business," Shantra tried to interrupt, irritated by their innuendoes, even though they might be true. Not that she was going to admit that to either Joline or Keith. They wouldn't let the subject go, and this was one man she really couldn't allow to haunt her mind. Especially the way he was haunting it right at the current moment. Nope, she had to release this man and focus on work.