



”Excerpt from “Shifting Plains”

She kept peering at his back. There had been a little bit of teasing from the other men when he had emerged from the trader wagon only to climb up onto its bench and take up the reins, but Kodan had endured it stoically. What he wanted—or rather, needed—was enough time to begin his campaign of seducing Tava Ell Var into accepting her heritage, her need to live with her people on the Shifting Plains. But first, he had to break the silence between them. The way she kept leaning back and twisting a little, sneaking peeks at his back, gave him an opening.

“I take it you heard what happened?” he asked when she did it for the tenth or

so time.

She quickly faced forward, hands in her lap, and nodded.

Kodan wondered if she would make some comment, or ask a question. When she didn't, he wondered why not. A Shifterai woman might have known he would recover from the wound since it hadn't killed him instantly, but she also would have asked questions, or at least given her opinion. *But that is how my people are raised*, he realized. *It's not just Shifterai ways she has to learn; I have to learn something of the people who raised her, the Mornai, to know better how to deal with her. More than the basics one needs to know for trading among them without giving insult or slight . . . at least, in a normal village.*

"I was very angry last night," he confessed, making her glance at him. "But I calmed myself down and reminded myself to think before I acted. The Shifterai tend to be a bit more passionate than the River folk. Possibly because, in shaping ourselves as beasts, echoing and copying them to blend in with nature, we learn the instincts and impulses of those beasts. For my own people, what that boy did would be understandable; he was upset, and he attacked on impulse."

That got a reaction from the young woman at his side. She gasped softly.

"*Understandable?*"

"Understanding is *not* the same as forgiving," Kodan reminded her. "But it seemed to me the Alders were more shocked by him attacking me in public, than

by him attacking at all. Both of our cultures frown upon attacking someone from behind, of course, but the other differences are still there. Perhaps you could enlighten me on why this is so?”

“Mornai men are supposed to exhibit self-control, in public. To be . . . figures of authority and to be worthy of being a figure of authority,” she explained.

“And the women, in public?” he asked her, guiding the enclosed wagon up the switchback road that would take them up toward the Plains. The road was rutted more from weather than from use, and the late trader’s cart wasn’t sprung like a Plains cart; it rattled uncomfortably over the lumps of earth and rock.

“Women are to be obedient. And quiet.”

Kodan glanced at her, amused. “Now, why do I get the feeling that you are inclined toward neither of those things?”

She blushed and ducked her head.

“Let me tell you about the Shifterai way,” he said, still smiling. “Because I think you will need time to get over the shock before actually experiencing it. We are *not* the Mornai. I suspect we are a lot less serious and sober than the Valley folk you’re used to seeing. *All* of us have opinions, both men and women. And the women in particular like to air theirs. Since half our population are shapeshifters, with the ability to increase muscle strength, grow claws or sharpen teeth, our *physical* self-control is very important. But in their wisdom, our ancestors knew

that our inner energy had to be expressed somehow.

“So we tend to be vocal. Exaggeration and excess are discouraged, of course, since that leads to the temptation of acting physically as well as verbally. And talking just to hear your own voice is considered an annoyance just as it would be in any kingdom,” he added, guiding the mares pulling the brightly painted wagon carefully around the next bend in the road. “But it is more unusual for a Shifterai to keep quiet than it is for them to speak. Man *or* woman. Since you didn’t grow up among my people, I thought you should know this. You will *want* to ask a lot of questions, and not hesitate to ask them. Provided the person you are asking is not overly busy, of course. Common sense is highly valued, on the Plains.”

He realized after both of them stayed silent for several seconds that his last comment sounded like an end to the conversation between them. Before he could think of something else to say, she ventured a question.

“Was the wound a . . . a bad one?”

“If I weren’t a *multerai*, yes, it would have been bad.” His back itched at the memory, though the flesh itself had healed. His ribs and muscles were still tender, since the Mornai youth had struck with enough force to break bone, but the wound itself was gone. “It might have been fatal for a non-shifter, too, since I did get a little blood in my lungs. But I have plenty of experience shifting my wounds in the middle of battle. Part of our training in learning to use our power is learning how to

heal our injuries. We start with little ones, little cuts on our hands and arms, and all of it carefully supervised so that the weakest among us are not injured beyond our capacity to shift away.”

“Oh.” She stared down at her hands, as if contemplating deliberately injuring them to learn such a skill.

It was the best opening he would have. A quick glance showed the other wagons strung out along the tree-lined road, and the outriders picking their way through the underbrush far enough away to give the two of them an illusion of privacy. Not visual privacy, but enough distance to let them have a private conversation. Provided he kept his voice low, just in case anyone was straining with shapeshifted hearing to listen to the two of them.

“Regarding what happened the other day . . . I know it was you.”

She jumped and stared at him, her green eyes wide.