

FORBIDDEN
by Candace Kade

Chapter 1: Arada Oasis

Capria unstrapped two circular blades from her waistband. She was almost to the top of the dune when she caught sight of the first flash of black. It was only a slight rippling in the air, then gone.

But she knew better.

She dropped the rug she was carrying on the dusty path. Her blades twirled gracefully in her hands.

Endless desert surrounded her. In the distance, the barely risen sun bathed the jagged mountains in hues of deep purple and lilac. A warm wind whipped particles of sand into her face. Capria wanted to close her eyes against the sting but knew it would be a death sentence.

Several birds chirped energetically, unseen from within patches of scraggly brush. Then their tune stopped abruptly. Capria's muscles tightened.

Something black streaked out of a bush.

With a flick of her wrist, her throwing disk went flying. It lodged into the scales of the snake before it could reach her.

The serpent screeched—an eerie high-pitched wail. Dark plumes of smoke rose from its scales as it writhed and twisted, wrapping around her blade.

Capria withdrew another throwing disk then remained perfectly still. Waiting.

A moment later, a second moving mass hurled itself at her.

Capria released the other blade and struck the snake in the head. With a hiss, it recoiled, swaying drunkenly then collapsing.

“How do you like a taste of your own medicine?” Capria spat but she averted her eyes as the snake wailed and began to smoke.

She waited a moment longer for the poison to take its toll. Once she was sure there were no more snakes, she cautiously approached. Kicking the one closest to her to ensure it was dead, she bent down and retrieved her blade.

She withdrew a vial, grabbed the snake by the head and forced its mouth open. Carefully, she inserted the fangs into the container and forced it to bite down. A sickly pea green venom

dribbled out of its mouth and into the vial.

“Stupid Vipers.” She wiped her blade clean of crimson blood. “If it weren’t for the King, we wouldn’t even have them,” she muttered.

These were not snakes born from nature but dark magic. Carrying throwing disks had become a necessity for everyone living in Arada because of them.

Unnaturally fast. Highly intelligent. No cure if bitten.

Capria hoisted the carpet back onto her shoulders. Bits of sand fell off, tickling her skin. After climbing several more dunes she reached her destination.

A white domed building came into view. A few scraggly palm trees surrounded it, before giving way to endless desert. Although big enough to house the entire population of their small town, it was only the residence of the wealthiest merchant.

Capria passed a white washed door set in an impressive spired entryway. She made her way past pearl white tiled walls and to a much smaller side entrance. A man clocked in armor and with a belt with a curved sword stood at attention.

Upon her arrival, he rang a bell then opened the door and ushered her inside. “They’ll be with you soon.”

The door shut behind her.

Capria blinked. She was standing in a shaded grand entryway with a marble fountain, lounging couches lining the circular side walls, and several marble tables. But what caught her attention was how blindingly white everything was. From the rocks in the fountain, to the pillows on the couch, to the lattice above—everything was pure white.

With a thud, the carpet dropped to the ground. She strapped her blades back on her waist. Somehow, they always felt more natural in her hands than that cursed weaving comb.

She eyed her latest creation with loathing. The delicate, multi-colored rug, lay in a heap on the costly white marble floor. At least today’s delivery afforded her an escape from the prison of her weaving loom.

The space around her was empty and still. Warm sunlight filtered through the lattice. Her only companion was a white wolf. It sat regally guarding the entryway to the estate, hardly moving. Its beady black eyes watching curiously as Capria wiped sweat from her brow.

It smelled of sage and a sweet flower. Capria noticed several of the marble tables had fresh bouquets of sage and bright yellow Wildfire flowers.

She took a seat on a panel filled with silk embroidered pillows to wait. The fabric was still cool from the night and hadn't been warmed yet by the rising sun. Capria let out a sigh as she sank into them. Withdrawing her canteen, she sipped on cold, camel's milk chai while she waited.

The wolf stood from its position next to the door. It took a tentative step toward her, head lowered, hackles raised, eyes fixed intently on her.

Capria froze.

The wolf crept toward her. She slowly withdrew two of her circular throwing knives. She stood tensely, watching the wolf creep closer.

With a furrowed brow, she lowered herself to the floor. She set her blades down and slowly, extended her hand.

The wolf stopped.

"I'm not a threat," she said soothingly. The wolf's ears perked up, as if in understanding.

"See, I'm shorter than you," Capria assured it.

The wolf stretched its neck to sniff her hand then slowly padded closer. Its fur returned flat against its neck. It hesitated, then plopped onto the ground next to her, resting its head in her lap.

Capria's eyes widened in surprise. "Well alright then." She smiled. If mother could see her now. This errand was turning out to be much more fun than she'd anticipated.

Gently, she stroked the wiry fur on the creature's head and neck.

The wolf's ears perked up a second before the slap, slap, slap of sandals reached her own ears.

A man with weathered darkened skin and a white linen tunic that swayed gracefully around him approached. The thick, metal band around his neck was partially melded with his flesh. Capria surveyed the pattern of the band, two thin and three thick.

He stopped abruptly and watched Capria and the wolf with amusement. "I see your *nekas* marks us both as Artisans." He fingered the metallic band around his throat. "And yet, you possess the rare gift of calling to animals?"

"No. Just the *gift*," she said the word with spite, "of weaving, unfortunately."

The man's bushy eyebrows furrowed. "And yet you have Fury nestled in your lap like a baby at the breast," he mused. "Normally the foul dog rips apart half our delivery men."

As if to confirm this, the wolf lifted its head from her lap and growled at the man.

Capria shrugged. "He's harmless enough."

"Tell that to the last man I had to carry to the healer." The man paused. "I assume you're here for a message?"

Capria shook her head and motioned at the rug. "A delivery."

"You carried the carpet all this way?" The man's eyebrows shot up. "Alone?"

"No. The vipers did." Capria retorted. When the man looked confused, she sighed. "Yes, me."

The man gave her an odd look then surveyed the room, stopping at the rug carelessly lying on the floor. He raised a brow skeptically. "I heard you were the best weaver in Arada."

Capria tilted her chin. "Then you are well informed."

"And this is the state of your wares?" He pointed at the carpet.

"Presentation has nothing to do with quality."

"Let's hope." The man continued staring.

"If I wanted to fold things," Capria crossed her arms over her chest. "I'd work in a palace setting plates and turning napkins into swans." She extended a hand. "My pay?"

The man's eyes flickered to the bare tops of her hand then gave a knowing nod. "No wonder the poor girl isn't married yet." He said this just loud enough for Capria to hear.

Capria's cheeks reddened at the jab. "My pay?"

The man frowned but reached into the folds of his cloak, withdrawing a small pouch of coin. He tossed it to her.

Capria caught it one-handed. With a final pat to the wolf, and a swig of her chai, she left.

Once she passed through the arched sun-bleached doorway, heat beat down on her. It radiated from every surface, the sand, the few cacti and scrawny shrubs lining the path, even the air. Her tanned skin absorbed it easily enough but her throat quickly went dry. She took another drink of her chai. It was already growing warm.

At least this time, she wasn't carrying a rug on her back. Capria rolled her shoulders and kept both of her blades at the ready. As she reached the top of the sand dune, she paused.

Below, packed adobe houses stretched out, golden in the warm rays of the sun. Narrow sandy roads weaved in and out through the city, confused in their destination. On the rooftops, women collected brightly colored laundry and hung festive lanterns. Black and grey whiffs of

smoke drifted out of the chimneys.

Beyond the houses to the south, rose the jagged Dahn Dunes. In all directions, sand, rock, and small thorny brush stretched as far as the eye could see. Only toward the North, did the sand turn to thorny brush and a thin tree-line.

Capria made her way quickly through the town. She didn't sheath her blades until she was all the way at the center in an open-air market.

Today, the vegetable and meat vendors packed up their stalls early. A bone-thin chicken flapped its wings and squawked, sending scrawny feathers flying as its owner moved its cage. The few remaining bruised vegetables were tossed into large sacks and secured on the backs of camels. Several shoppers collected their purchases of dried dates and figs as the market emptied.

She squinted as the blinding rays of the sun reflected off the *nekas* of the people passing her. The thick silver bands hung around the collarbone. Everyone wore one. A *nekas* was the symbol of life and was as much a part of the body as the heart, lungs, or brain. It determined a person's talents, skills, and abilities.

Capria would never forget when she got hers. The sting of it mocked her every day.

Once worn, a *nekas* slowly combined with the flesh on the neck as a person grew older. It would eventually disappear entirely under the skin, leaving behind a metallic tint. The *nekas* could only be removed at death. It was the first part of the body to stop functioning.

She remembered when Rueben, the baker's son had been bitten by a Mitoke. The village doctor had tried to save him but there was nothing that could be done. Once the skin around Rueben's *nekas* started turning black, everyone knew it was over. His *nekas* slipped off shortly after. He didn't live to see dinner.

Capria's pace slowed as she passed several stores; the dye shop filled with hundreds of brilliantly colored strings, the bakery, giving off an irresistible aroma, and the sizzling kabob vendor. Capria stared longingly at the lamb kabobs, her mouth-watering. She fingered the pouch of coin in her tattered pockets. It would have to last for the next two months. With a sigh, she kept walking.

"Moon Festival blessing!" Several villagers called out as she passed. Their normally grim expressions were replaced by rare smiles.

Capria repeated the phrase back.

After walking past the gauntlet of stores, she took a sharp right onto a nearly deserted

street. Particles of sand swept toward her on a hot, dry wind, sending her light cotton dress billowing behind her thin figure. She quickened her pace; as usual she had become distracted by the bustling village.

She stopped at the Smith's shop. Clanging iron and the hammering of metal rang out from within.

"Shay!" she yelled. "Time to go."

A moment later, the metal stilled and a tall young man with black hair emerged. His arms, roped with muscle, spoke of many hours wielding a smith's hammer and tongs. His bronze three-threaded *nekas* glistened with sweat.

Capria's eyes fell to the three parallel scratch lines that made her brother's *nekas* unusual. The implanted *nekas* was already beginning to grow into his skin in certain areas. Despite this, she could still clearly see the imperfection.

Shay grinned, his smile stretching to his high cheekbones and contrasting against his sharp jawline. His jaw and cheekbones were similar to her own. Because of their closeness in age, people sometimes wondered if they were twins. Capria had always thought this was ridiculous as she was more than a foot shorter than him, and had a much darker complexion.

Sometimes Capria wished she was more like her brother—content with her place in the world.

Shay stood with his chest inflated. "Do you need my brawn to help you carry something home?"

Most people took him too seriously. Capria rolled her eyes. "Like I need a smithy's brains to help with anything." With a grin, she poked him in the chest.

"Oof." He resumed his normal posture.

A group of boys gathered around a lizard fight stopped their cheering when they noticed Shay. "Hey, its scar neck!" One of them shouted.

"When are you going to fix your broken *nekas*?" Another one taunted.

Shay's face hardened and he turned to Capria. "Last one home does dishes?"

"You're on."

They took off running.

Capria kept up for a while but then Shay put on a burst of speed.

Changing tactics, she took a sharp left down an alley behind a row of houses. As she

rounded the corner, she ran straight into someone.

Both Capria and the man crashed to the ground, a cloud of sand and dust enveloping them.

Capria hopped to her feet. “So sorry! I didn’t see—”

Her words died on her tongue as her eyes caught up with the rest of her. The stranger was tan like the locals, but much taller. He wore all brown with strange blocks of mustard yellow. There were strange armored pads on his arms and legs too. Sweat dripped down his bald head as he stared at her.

His eyes! Capria unconsciously took a step back, they were black and green.

She’d heard some people from the far north had eyes of this color but she’d always wondered if it was true. Everyone she’d ever known had hazel eyes.

The man’s neck bulged with muscle. “I’m looking for someone,” he said. His voice was surprisingly soft, almost musical in nature, but his accent was foreign. “Someone with a *nekas* that is...unusual”

A chill ran down Capria’s spine.

In one swift movement, a cold blade pressed against her neck. “Think you could help?”